



AnnaPolis

***SUMMERS***

Linda Heavner Gerald

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Published by Lime Pie Publishing  
Port St. Joe, Florida 32457

*SelfPubBookCovers.com/Asha*

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Published in the United States of America

ISBN:

# DEDICATION

*Stella Thompson, you are the most genuine person whom I have ever known. Thank you for your friendship. We have enough memories to last a lifetime!*

To you, dear student, who suffers from bullying, *hang in there!* Talk about it. You may be surprised to learn how many have suffered at the hands of a bully. It passes.

*Don't let the mean people win!*

Linda Heavner Gerald

AnnaPolis Summers

PROLOGUE

Great bolts of silver electricity discharge from the black summer sky as the thunder shakes the very ground where I race in terror. Why I run in this storm is not clear? Even though it is a hot night, the rain feels cold. Am I in shock? A jagged streak of light strikes so closely that I fall to the ground.

Now, I am paralyzed by anxiety. Soaked with the penetrating pins of sharp, beating rain, I cower onto my beloved beach. As the lightning again streaks across the sky with an accompanying ferocious boom, I turn to see my beautiful, ancestral beach home turn into a blaze of fire. This bungalow is not just my home, the significance of this cottage is paramount in my mind and heart. It represents my struggle as a young woman to live with the pain forced upon me by others. My bravery, in my fight for self-understanding, is expressed in this beach house. Not just the stinging rain hits my face, but tears of horrendous pain fill my eyes. How could this happen?

As I watch my home on the beach burn quickly, since the rain has now subsided and the structure is old, I think of how my parents, Herbert and Abigail Polis, stood by me in my worst days. They were always there with hugs and kisses; they surrounded me with love and understanding. After the battle of my life, they gave me this little house as a place to heal from the war that I had endured. Many wars consumed my energy as I fought throughout the long years of maturation; this is true for everyone. The realization that no one gets a “free ride” comes earlier for some than others. Still, I have managed to keep my humor.

Middle school was the worst. Those were gut wrenching times! What happened to kindness and manners back then? Even my best friends struggled against me.

“No, please God, not my home!” I yell into the night air.

“Anna, wake up Honey. It is only a nightmare. I am here beside you. All is well.”



Looking into eyes, the color of dark embers, a smile kisses my lips. When I met him over eighteen years ago, I thought this handsome stranger was the most beautiful man that I had ever met. He is more good-looking now that I understand the essence of him. His ebony hair tumbles into those large, black eyes. His beard is scratchy from not shaving yesterday. He is gorgeous! The love of my life shelters me in strong arms of devotion. He, too, has always stood by me in the three major fights of my past thirty-five years.

“Go back to sleep. All is well.”

Yes, it is at last but not always. I snuggle again under the gauzy, white sheet which caresses us. My eyes take in the security of my room. The walls are lilac and bright white trim with filmy, satiny white sheers covering the many windows. During the day, this room is alive with color and light. I love this old house. I did much of the work here myself. These walls, I painted the pretty lilac and white colors.

Now that I understand the horror was only a nightmare; I breathe the salty air which

streams into the room from the open windows. The surf from the ocean pounds at my beloved beach. A silver moon smiles innocently at me. No storms rage outside, not tonight, but they remain in my mind. Apparently, the nightmare has dredged up old memories which refuse to die. Just as a live bomb must be detonated, I must inactivate those monsters in my head. They are as pieces of shrapnel which inflict great pain.

My mind travels reluctantly back to the summer of pain and the awakening that my perfect life wasn't perfect. I don't want to go to the dark places again, but my thoughts refuse to obey. The nightmare has conjured old emotions that remain raw even now.

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The summer of my thirteenth year, while I was in middle school, started my first battle with angry, hateful people. Does anyone ever forget the pain of bullying? I haven't. It seems like only yesterday that I, Anna Polis, learned the severity of hateful words and hurtful labels. I tried to ignore what they said but couldn't. I only pretended not to care. One time should have been enough but not for me. There were two other episodes

of meanness lurking as I matured into the woman of today.

My childhood was idyllic at least in the beginning. Dad surrounded us with every luxury. Ellie, our maid, was like another mother to me. She is still. Due to three loving people to guide me, I can laugh now about what I endured. My sense of humor and wit spurs me on each day. You must find happiness to survive the days of darkness. It became easy for me to compartmentalize my mind. It is called survival!

Savannah, my hometown, remains tucked into a recess of my heart which makes me smile. My heart and mind contain many compartments. I refer to these as “happy places.” Savannah, this home, even Annapolis, all of these sites, now bring me joy.

This coastal town continues to hold a piece of my heart even though I have moved away to another love by the coast. When I am away from my hometown, I miss the noble woman of a city. I know that Savannah is a woman because she has the name of a southern belle. She bursts with the fragrance

of the sea, flowers, and freshness. As a young girl, I once stood on my balcony and breathed so deeply that my lungs hurt from over-expansion, but I didn't mind. The delicious fragrances, which overtook my senses, caused dizziness. I clutched the wrought iron rail to my balcony and thanked God that I was born in the South.

The light in Savannah is unlike any other place. Have you ever been to my hometown? You must visit her. You will refuse ever to leave.

Savannah is a unique town. Her architecture flows with romance. Old, southern homes of soft, lazy colors cause weariness to depart the eyes of the beholder.

Immediately, everyone desires to walk her wards and look at the old Gothic Revival homes. Gorgeous gardens beckon with deep emotion, so much that many trespassers perform acts which are totally unlike their usual behavior. Then, they are smitten with apologies.

“I don't know what possessed me to climb that six foot wrought iron fence. Honestly, I

am not a pervert or a peeping Tom.”

My hometown bestows forgiveness and acceptance. Smiles await the interloper who only wanted to smell the wisteria and sit on the charming bench among the honeysuckle and butterflies of that walled fence. No charges will the trespasser face because even after generations of such behavior, we understand. Our town is a mystic place, a *Garden of Enchantment*.

My school, inside of this city of kooky people, was private. It was one of the most prestigious in the area. Although it sported wealthy brats, it was one of the best academies in the land! There was no bullying at my beloved institution. I can now say this because if there was ever a candidate to be abused, it was I. Yet, I always felt as if I was loved and accepted by classmates who should have been judgmental and unkind. How blessed was I? You see, this city was Savannah.

The Polis name received great respect in our chosen town of Savannah. My childhood

home was large. Mom filled it with antiques of museum quality. I didn't get all of the fuss which she made. Personally, I liked some of my friend's small homes; they felt livable. Abbey loved grandness, probably because she experienced poverty as a youngster.

Herbert adored his Swan 45, *Honey*; Dad loved that sailboat more than me when I was a kid. I truly believe this. The personalities which shaped my younger years were extreme. I know this gave me the ability to endure confusion later.

The life of a wealthy kid in a coastal town revolved around boating. Most weekends, we spent on *Honey*. Those were great times. Summers, we spent in Annapolis. I loved both places. They were Sister Cities, but Savannah holds my heart even now. Annapolis holds my father's love. Abigail doesn't care. She loves peace.

Boating remains vital to my coastal life even today. My husband and I enjoy sailing. Dad gave his beloved *Honey* to us years ago. Sailing became too much work for my par-

ents. The word “sailor” is more than enjoying a sport; it is a way of life. If you are one, you understand.

Sailing is not complete without a certain book. I refer to *Chapman*. There are two very different schools of sailors. Some just enjoy the sport while others are fanatics. My dad, Herbert Polis, was a fanatic. He descended from a long line of sailing maniacs. In his book, there was only one way to enjoy what should have been relaxing and fun; be a perfectionist. I’m not kidding.

He lived by *Chapman* while "enjoying" sailing. Have you ever looked at an edition of *Chapman Piloting: Seamanship and Small Boat Handling*? The long name should tell you something. It is a long book. I have not only looked at it, but I have also held it and read it cover to cover at least three times in my life. I’m not referring to a fast read. Oh, no, this book is a hard copy with six hundred and fifty-six pages of demanding information on everything a sailor needs to know. I’m talking from tying knots to what to do in a serious emergency. It saved my best

friend's life on one occasion. The book has been printed several times, now offering sixty-seven editions. It is blue, big, and mean.

My punishment as a child for misbehaving was, "Go read *Chapman*, right now Anna, or go tie a Bowline knot fifteen times as quickly as is humanly possible."

Good old Chapman helped me nail that, "*Up through the rabbit hole, round the big tree; down through the rabbit hole and off goes he.*"

This little rhyme was my favorite mnemonic.

Then I was told which pages to consult in THE book if my assignment was to read. A test always followed. When good ole Dad determined that either I had not read the book or that I had not retained "vital information," I was sent again to digest and think about the importance of what I had read.

Yes, I have read it so many times that I am an expert on sailing and everything nautical.



Dad and I spent a long, hot summer as he taught me each of the knots required to be an accomplished boatsman. I can now tie most any knot with grace and speed especially the ancient and essential Bowline which is easy to tie and untie. That same summer, Dad spent long hours demonstrating how to lasso a piling. This skill required practice to master the act. Something with which *Chapman* couldn't assist me. I know this may sound ridiculous, but when you come barreling into a boat slip with the wind behind you and the current moving in the same direction, it can become difficult for a fast moving vessel without a lot of control to do so gracefully. In fact, one may take out the boat unlucky enough to be a neighbor or the piling which is there to protect both vessels. I, Anna Polis, practiced the skill to perfection. Although Dad and I did take out our share of expensive boats; it came with the territory.

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Tonight, sleepiness pulls at my mind, but I'm on a roll so to speak. No pun intended with the sailing stuff. So many joyful summer memories grab at me.

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Memories of Dad working on my boating skills so that we wouldn't embarrass ourselves. There are some places like Annapolis that you would want to leave because you would be ashamed if you came in sideways.

One particular day stands out in my mind. I always laugh. It had been a long day. Way too much sun and heat had caused exhaustion plus we smelled pretty bad. I felt like asking if I could fly back home. Ellie thought that we weren't aware that she invited her family from Guatemala each summer after we left. We knew. Her entire family enjoyed our home and pool. Probably, they tried to clean everything but we knew. The lovely home, which we loved, was a wreck many times when we returned early. Dad almost had a heart attack on several occasions. He yelled at our poor maid. We were "wealthy but frugal," he declared. Only the wealthy get this. Herbert spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on yachts but would squabble over the dinner bill.

"We need to respect the things that I worked hard to obtain," he had screamed at scared

Ellie as she cowered behind the stack of used pink plastic cups from her family now stacked on the kitchen counter.

I remember thinking that staying with Ellie and the Guatemalans as they enjoyed the pool seemed better than stuck on a hot boat as we entered one of the most prestigious marinas on the Intracoastal. Dad was grumpy already on the day long ago when we shamed ourselves. I noticed that all of the boat owners, in the vicinity of our assigned slip, held boat hooks in their hands as we entered the prestigious marina. That is not a good sign. Looks of anger attested to the fact that they were ready to assault us if the “cowgirl” (Dad’s term for me to lasso a piling to save our boat) failed. Not only did I fail, but we also hit the piling, and the beautiful Camper Nicholson moored beside us. The distraught owner, Mr. Ruffin, ran toward us in tears. I heard a lot of expletives, but I will never forget witnessing a grown man standing there in front of God and all the people who bowed in shame at the “disgraced family” who “destroyed” the marina. For days, no one spoke to us. The dock master would snicker each time he saw us. It

was pretty awful. Finally, I couldn't take the abuse anymore,

“Look, we are qualified yachters. I have personally read *Chapman* twenty-three times. My dad is a fanatic. The wind worked against us. Man, it was awful. My father instantly paid all damages and provided his insurance card to Mr. Ruffin who by the way finally stopped crying after three days. Please forgive us. It was an accident.”

I looked most contrite as I lowered my head. People turned and walked away. I think that they realized that no one had ever read the illustriously mentioned book twenty-three times, so I was now labeled a “terrible boatsman” and “liar.” At least, I stopped the snickering. We couldn't wait to get away from the anger which assaulted us. Ah, boating in Annapolis, what can I say?

Today, I have a copy of *Chapman* in my office, bedroom, study, and my sailing boat. There's just something about it. Once you understand the importance of what the book is all about; it is undeniably brilliant. I always pick that book up with such love and respect. Dad requests burial with a copy

clined in his blue, withered hands. All of this demonstrates how happy we once had been as a family. As I look back, those were the days of innocence before the Vanderclifts and the days of abuse for me began.

Time aboard *Honey* wasn't all glamor. Once, we suffered a gas leak on one of our boats; it took two days for Dad and Mom to have it checked out. In the meantime, I suffered from trouble breathing and severe headaches. Extreme nausea prevented me from eating a bite for several days. The leak had occurred in the forward berth where I resided. All of this because Dad didn't want to interrupt our plans to meet friends in St. Michaels. That was Herbert's second favorite city on earth. When they finally believed me about the leak, I declared that I was almost dead. You see why boating isn't necessarily easy?

Each summer season, we closed the house as we exited for our Sailing Adventures. We stored all of our memories in a large, navy, leather-bound book with gold letters boldly declaring these words:

*SAILING ADVENTURES.*

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This evening, I lovingly hold that journal in my hands. The pages have yellowed and the color faded, but it remains precious to me. Randomly, I open the old book. The page which presents itself is of me standing on *Honey*. I grimace. Was I that homely? Lovingly, I outline the girl with my finger. Her long, stringy hair hangs over eyes shielded by thick, unattractive glasses. At least, the ugly hair covered my face which displayed large, red zits. My bulbous nose appeared deformed due to the fat size which covered half of my face.

People describe me today as beautiful. Long, brown hair with glowing dark eyes greet me each day from my mirror. Beautiful? Me? Golden skin the color of molasses is pleasing. The pleasure of living by my beloved ocean produces the change from the pasty, white skin which covers my frame. Walking each day by the sea keeps me thin and agile. As I breathe the salty air and watch God's handiwork, I remain young and focused. Even my fat nose seems attractive as it now blends perfectly with the size of my face.

Work does not frighten me; I love to paint the walls inside my bungalow as well as work in my gardens by the pounding surf. Each day, I witness the miracles of sun rise and set; perfect formations of bulky, brown pelicans, never falter as they dip toward me. They show their white bellies in pride as they fly overhead; seagulls laugh wickedly as the sun bounces from their brilliant white against the dark blue sky; the colors change daily in the waters of deepest blue or green, it varies constantly. All of this dynamic scenery keeps me well. Without the sea, I would die.

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As a young girl, I hated arriving in a swanky marina with the beautiful, young people strutting around because I knew that I wasn't gorgeous and they wouldn't show interest in me. No matter what Dad said. Those beautiful young people formed arrogant cliches. I hated them. I wasn't exactly the "babe" in the string bikini which attracted the hunk on the next boat. In fact, when we pulled into a marina, and the neighboring boat kids drifted over to check out the most

beautiful boat just arriving, I was not the beauty they expected. I would have attempted to wow them with my high IQ, but they did not allow me the time. As I stumbled out of the cabin, I usually hit my head and fell over my feet since my eyes hurt from the sun. Immediately, I returned below to replace my thick, bottle lenses with my sort-of-attractive designer sunglasses which was a step up for me. Still, as I emerged squinting into the sun with a broad smile hoping that someone like me was in the crowd, I was amazed as the entire group walked away still talking to each other as if I was nothing. I was nothing. That's the way that I felt until school began and I assumed my position as President of the Student Body and Editor of the school newspaper which was named *Brainstorm*. When it came to brains, I excelled. Any other activity, I fell far behind everyone else in my school except my best friend, Matie.

My best friend, in this institution of higher learning, was even more of a candidate for bullying than I. Madison Connelly, Matie was like me in many ways but the exact opposite of me in others. When I first met her,



I thought that she was younger than me. It occurred to me that she must be in the wrong class. That was back in first grade. I looked into eyes of green and teeth which were yellowed and bucked. Yep, she may have been uglier than me. Between the two of us, we definitely stole the award for “*Least Desirable in the Looks Department*” of our entire school. Maybe this is the reason that we became best friends? I felt sorry for this tiny, slip of a girl with chocolate brown hair the color of, you know, and eyes to match. There was no shine at all from her hair or eyes. Only a dullness met my gaze. She was the most disgusting piece of God’s creation. I’m sure that she thought the same of me. Our faults only knitted our union with compassion and love. In no time at all, she followed me around the darkened halls. You may think of me as mean, I was back then. A spoiled brat, who baited those whom I loved, but changed after I experienced being the butt of vicious jokes.

Fondly, I recall the first time that Matie came to my home for a sleepover. I had told my parents that I was friends with the most beautiful girl at school. Baiting my parents

at that time made me feel somehow superior to them. Mom began immediately to make plans for my debutante days and deemed that Matie would be my *Maid-of-Honor* someday when I married. Big dreams abounded in the Polis home.

I ushered my friend into the Polis Mansion. Those were not my words. That was what the kids at school called my home. Proudly, I led her into the kitchen. Ellie almost dropped the cookie jar when she turned. For several days, I had told my family about this friend of beauty and style. What waited was one ugly kid dressed in a wool skirt although it was still warm on that fall day which shined down upon us. On her head, she wore a shameful hat of red wool with long matted braids. Matie was always cold. What a sight! Ellie screamed.

“Ellie, this is my best friend, Matie. Isn’t she lovely?”

When Matie smiled, those big ole teeth that were as yellow as corn pulled your eyes. Ellie gave me a mean look because she knew that Mom would be disappointed and no one

was allowed to disappoint my mother, not in "her" mansion.

Finally, the magic moment rang in as Mom bounced into the room with her elegant "house" dress and pearls while a large, straw *Kaminski* covered her perfect, alabaster face. "Well, hello, you must be Matie. Aren't you a sight for sore eyes?"

Mom nailed that one. Matie extended her bony hand, and my mother kissed it gently. Disappointment overcame me. I really thought that I finally would defeat Mom that she would lose her soft Southern demeanor but no. Mom treated my friend just like she was the most lovely girl in the world. I even had to look again to see if Madison had changed somehow. Nope, she sat there still ugly to the core. At that moment, some bond grew between Madison Connelly and Abigail Hawthorne Polis. This bond was so strong that all of the teenage years of trials and temptations could not sever it. Sometimes, I considered that Mom might have loved her as much as she loved me.

At dinner that night, Herbert James Polis glanced at my friend with a shocked look but continued to talk about himself and his day. Each evening meal began with Dad's outline of his day. Every important event, he related in painstaking detail. Finally, Mom shared her fascinating events of new flower blooms on her award-winning roses or the latest Garden Club banter.

We all loved her *Daughters of the American Revolution* meeting days the most. The last Wednesday of each month, Mom faithfully attended those precious luncheons. Abby was loyal in her attendance. She had been since before I was born. Without a doubt, someday I will gather, at the dining room inside of a beautiful hotel for over two hours, as a member of the most prominent group of women in the United States of America. This organization of outstanding women first met in 1890 and today headquarters in Washington, DC.

Just knowing that my membership is sealed provides such a comfort because it is not easy to join this illustrious group. At that time, the last Wednesday of the month, gave me an inside to the goings-on in this unique

ensemble. Dad and I looked forward as Mom began. It was always the same.

“This country is going to Hell in a hand basket. The kids today don’t even know who Jefferson was. My Patriot would roll over in his grave if he saw the disrespect in today’s world! Well, thanks to the fine women of the *DAR*, they can’t say that we did not share the word. The schools should be ashamed!” Shortly after that, Mom lowered her voice as if she was sharing her deepest secret. Many of the women at the meetings were old; now, I respect my elders. Abigail Polis made sure of that, but the stories were hilarious. Dad and I pledged never to laugh out loud because Mom would have become furious.

“Mrs. Thompson fell off her chair today. That poor dear, she was just in such a hurry to nab the last Macadamia cookie on the platter and reached too far. Today was also the occasion for Mrs. Beck to recite her family history. We all do love to hear the story about the Beck clan. She has told the same story now over fourteen times, but we never tire of it.”

Mom then looked into the space surrounding her and sighed heavily. Most likely, she remembered Mrs. Beck's story for the fourteenth time.

Dad kicked me gently under the table. I learned not to look at him. Once, I did look into the large glasses covering his darkened brown eyes and laughed out loud. I'll never forget the look of betrayal from Abigail. Dad and I could not stop laughing. We knew that we were in grave danger of upsetting Mom, but it was impossible to stop. I got out of the dilemma by coughing violently. Mom forgot about the disrespectful laughter in her efforts to perform the Heimlich Maneuver and save my life.

Matie came over each last Wednesday just to hear the misadventures of her Mom who was not just a member but Regent of that group.

“Today, Mrs. Connelly told the cutest story about her little girl; what a precious child she is.”

Mom seemed to forget that Matie was “Mrs. Connelly’s little girl.”

It was all amusing and entertaining. That was until it became my turn to share my events of the day.

“Nothing happened today of any importance.”

I was born shy.

I honestly mumbled as I looked down at my lap. How could I possibly share my bland day after Mom’s hilarious sharing of the *DAR* meeting? It was not in my nature to discuss my feelings. They were MINE, right?

They tried to force me to partake, but I always refused. Matie would finally speak up. I was an introvert; she was the opposite. My best friend talked so much that Dad finally left the table in exasperation. That was good because then the women shared the details of our day. I loved my family and my best friend. Shoot, I loved life!

My life may sound perfect but is anyone’s really? Summers of a "rich kid" were not that great, believe me. If you weren't involved in activities each moment of the day,

you were not performing up to par. That was the one good thing about sailing. I sat alone in a corner of the boat with a good book or daydreamed once we were underway. No one demanded anything from me, unlike friends whose parents pushed them to exhaustion all summer season with tennis lessons, computer classes, and *Creative Arts*. By the time school began, they were thankful for a break while I craved a challenge. Boredom had rewards.

Now that I am an author, of mediocre reputation, I can point to those times as the beginning of my creative abilities. While Dad and Mom wowed their friends with the most skilled sailing ability among their group and possession of the nicest boat, they left me alone to doodle on my sketches or write. I'm still publishing some of the stuff that I wrote as a teenager. The old work is kind of cool.

This senseless whiling away summer hours might sound great to you if you held a job at a fast food place all summer season in high school. Maybe you had to make money to contribute to the family budget just to stay afloat? I know my whining sounds superfi-



cial and shallow. I get it. Don't get me wrong, plenty of people suffered worse than me. Still, don't become too upset with the wealthier kids, we bore our piece of Hell. It wasn't easy being "nothing."

Weeks after school began, when I was expected to be the nerd which I seemed destined to become, performing at A-level created a dilemma for me. How does one go from being and doing nothing important to the expectation of Valedictorian? Not easy, I can tell you. Herbert had big plans for his only child of exceptional intellect who bore the name of such an outstanding city as Annapolis.

Never could I have withstood the embarrassment inflicted upon me if not for my family and friends. I called my group of friends, "My Circle of Friends." Let me explain:

### *MY CIRCLE OF FRIENDS*

"Anna, you need a *Circle of Friends*. I could never have made it through middle school without mine. In fact, I still have the same group except for Mary Higgins who has

passed away and Joan Barkley who divorced her husband. Then, she began trying to steal all of ours. We have labeled that disgraceful wench as an ‘outcast.’ Still, everyone needs a *Circle of Friends*. Men and women need these rocks in their lives on whom they can depend.”

Words of wisdom shared with me by my Mom when I was eight years old. Immediately, I excused myself to my room where I sat down with a pen and pad to draft my circle.

I have already shared my love of Matie, but I also had four others. When one was not available, in the time of need, I went down the list until I found someone with whom I could cry or laugh. Sometimes, when things were really out of control, we called each other and silently waited. When we felt better, we hung up. It was almost as if we were capable of reading each other’s mind. This group of girls remained steady friends even when we left for college. Maybe the girls chose different paths, but we remained close. Even today, at the ripe old age of thirty-two, I have the same Circle except for one person. I try to forget her most of the

time.

Martha Bissel was one of my group. Martha was always at home. Once, I thought that she was shy, but I discovered that she was intellectually superior to everyone else in the world. Her intellect meant that Ms. Bissel became easily bored with most people, not shy. This girl may have fallen a little short in the looks department, which was not a big deal because Martha was only interested in being the best friend on the entire planet to me. Imagine how fortunate I was to have a person who truly put me before anyone else. Martha was my “Go to person.”

When everyone else attended school sports or dances, my friend stayed in her room and read. It appeared that she waited by the phone. Always ready to give me sound advice or help me see the truth. It was she that blew the cover on one of the most painful parts of my life. I refused to believe that one of my Circle could betray me. All of the others told me that I was paranoid but silently, Martha watched. When she confronted me with the truth, I hated her. For months we were alienated until I witnessed the lying bitch, so sorry for the use of profanity, who

tried to destroy me. I'm jumping ahead years in my story. Maybe none of the guys were interested in my friend, but Martha rose like cream to the top of all of us.

Candace Mayfield was superior in the looks department. She had an amazing ability to pull her wardrobe into that of a fashion icon. We all stood amazed by her uncanny design talents. Candace also had the best teeth. They were so straight that she was the only one who avoided braces even though we told ourselves that we were fortunate to be able to wear them. This girl didn't need them. In fact, she was born almost perfect. Intelligent, funny, beautiful, head cheerleader, poised, a great actress in Drama, the list was non-ending. Her only fault was that she had a little mean streak. We all tried hard to be perfect but not Candace. She used to say that we weren't supposed to be angelic. God didn't expect that until we became angels in Heaven. Therefore, she delighted in the downfall of her friends. Now, she never did anything to cause us harm, but the sweetest smile spread across her angelic face when any of us suffered distress. It became apparent that she lived for us to fall into

”The Gutter-of-Despair.” Martha was there to pull us out, but Candace loved to watch us squirm in our mire. Forgiving her for this flaw was easy because one of us did something so unforgivable that it is still painful to this day. Even Candace didn’t smile on that horrid day when I realized that one of us was a liar.

Last, but not least in my Circle, shined Agatha. Maybe she was the most constant. Matie was a drama queen. Martha always looked for deceit. Candace loved it when we faltered, but Agatha remained entirely reliable in each situation. Her family moved to Savannah from Great Britain, so we loved to hear her mastery of the English language. Our teachers honestly respected her because she corrected them on their incorrect use of English. That was her only liability. Her speech was that of an adult, but her mind stayed on our level. How strange to hear Shakespeare sound like an idiot, you understand, one of us.

Agatha was shorter than all the others but extremely well-endowed if you know what I mean. I think that she wore a bra at the age

of two. I'm not sure of this, but she joined our group at the age of seven, and she already wore a trainer bra. All of my friends were so jealous of her sizable chest that we stuffed our slips with toilet paper. Of course, the padding fell out as we walked the halls which created all sorts of rumors about us. The boys loved her. I use to hit her in the chest just to see her boobs wobble. It amazed me to think that someday, I would also have those strange, fleshy mounds of lushness perched on my skinny chest. Many nights, I remained awake well into the wee hours of the evening worrying that I may be the only woman in the world who did not need a bra.

Please remember that you should not worry about issues which may never present themselves in the future. That problem never happened. Today, I like my figure much more than that of Agatha. I turned out fine and so will you.

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I laugh as I study a picture of Agatha and me back in our thirteenth year. Is that innocent girl really me?

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## SARABETH WHEELER

At my school, SaraBeth Wheeler was the girl that everyone would love to hate. The problem was that we couldn't. She was perfect in every way. No kidding, she had it all. Out of all of my *Circle of Friends*, she was the poorest. Everyone, except SaraBeth, lived in mega mansions. SaraBeth lived in a one-story home on the edge of my life which bordered the incredibly beautiful Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist. Most of my friends lived within a few blocks of this shrine. SaraBeth Wheeler lived many blocks south of this bastion of history and saints. Her home could have easily fitted into the back of mine. I'm not bragging. Sadly, this is true. Shouldn't this have shaken her confidence? Well, it didn't! Apparently, she didn't realize that one should be impressed by the shameful wealth of others. When I went to her home, which wasn't often, I was embarrassed for her. Still, she acted like she was "*Queen of the World.*" I should have felt sorry for her but returning home, I wondered what it was that I didn't have when I

had everything that money could buy.

SaraBeth was the most shining girl on this planet. She stood taller than all of the other girls. Her hair felt soft and very blond. The largest, bluest eyes in the world looked at me with the answer to every question. You see, not only was this girl beautiful but also most astute. We all had much more; yet, she possessed all of the answers. SaraBeth also had another unique trait. The lovely Ms. Wheeler appeared incredibly kind. My group of friends discussed many times her uncanny way of being nice to everyone. For the longest time, I studied her. It became my strongest desire to understand what she possessed that I did not. One day, while visiting her home, I asked her.

“I knew that you questioned my happiness. I will share with you the answer in one word, Jesus.”

Filled with shock and wondering what she meant, I waited.

“You see, I’m sure that you know Him and that He dominates your life, but do you live for Him? You must live for Him each day. Do you read your Bible and pray? You



must.”

Happiness filled my young, flat breast which mostly had not developed. When I returned home, I removed my Bible from the shelf and dusted it. Reverently, I opened the great book. I started reading the *23rd Psalm*. Then, I got on my knees and prayed. After days of this, a remarkable peace flooded into my being. Calmness surrounded me. SaraBeth Wheeler changed my life. I told Matie all about it. We read our Bible together for years. When my Mom noticed us doing this, she asked to join. Then Dad became a part of our *"Love God 101 Class."*

All that I can say is that SaraBeth Wheeler might have been a Saint. She changed lives.

Another thing that SaraBeth did for Matie and me was braces. She was the first of our group who proudly displayed them. Somehow, even they looked elegant on her. Already, her teeth were shiny white while ours were yellowed and dull. Quickly, after her display of metal, we all joined the club. Not to wear braces became a sign that you were destined for ugly, crooked teeth. All of this because SaraBeth Wheeler was not afraid to

be different. There was one thing about our illustrious leader, how did she afford to dress so well? I've heard, I don't mean to gossip for that is a sin, the Wheelers received assistance in paying their daughter's tuition. So how could they afford designer clothes for the perfect girl? Once again, SaraBeth made us all feel inferior. It seemed that her trove of impressive threads came from a wealthy cousin. I guessed the richer relative could not assist with tuition but gladly donated the leftovers from their kid's closet. Shame filled me because I would refuse to wear hand-me-downs but not she. SaraBeth wore them with pride. She commented once that if the country shared clothes with each other, then no one would be denied a warm coat. Since we lived in Savannah and it didn't get cold very often, I failed to see the relevance to this statement.

I never saw S. B., what we called her behind her back, not look perfect. On the soccer field, when we all were sweaty and stinky, she paraded by floating on a cloud of French soap which seemed to cover her. Her blond-streaked, perfect hair was never out of place. I would have loved to hate her, but how

could you hate someone who loved Jesus so much? I felt afraid not to love her. Yes, SaraBeth Wheeler was an intricate part of my existence. That is until the summer of my betrayal.

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The deep breathing of my husband calms me as I think of SaraBeth Wheeler. It was she who influenced my life more than any other “friend.” This memory shuts down my thoughts. My mind refuses to visit her tonight.

Later in the evening, I rise from my place in bed. My handsome husband looks peaceful. How much pain did I cause him at one time? Now, I try to make him happy each day. As I wrap myself in a thin cover, I walk downstairs. The moonlight streams in golden slats through the shutters. Outside, the water looks like silk without the blustery waves of winter. Fall of the year is upon us. Another glorious summer has passed with tales of fishing, kayaking, sailing, and swimming. Although we love summers, my favorite time is fall. The feeling of change is thick in the salty air. Those old memories stored

deep in the recesses of my mind are allowed to show. Maybe that is the reason that I engage in these childhood thoughts at this time. Can I smell the cold, windy days which waits for us?

As I stare outside, reflections of all young people who face taunts from mean kids make me sad. Do the bullies understand what they are doing? They have no right to inflict pain. I wish that I could huddle their victims into my arms. Each of them would become mine. I understand, you see. How can I comfort you? How can I help?

It is difficult to admit that someone is making your life Hell. If parents become involved, does it become worse? I had such understanding folks as a young person. Eventually, I confided to them. In my case, I had to do this.

No, I will allow those old memories of mine to surface tonight even if it means staying up until morning. I must confront the pain. Partly, I do it to support those who must suffer alone. Here is more of my story:

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## EARLY SUMMER DAYS

Ah, Annapolis summer days, how I remember you! When I awakened to the smell of Wisteria-Laced breaths, I knew that our boating days would soon be upon us. Long, hot, tedious days of bobbing in the water without a breeze. Short tempered days of sweating and hoping to avoid the yells of my beloved parents because even Saints swear when the heat is terrific, and the breeze refuses to soothe. Yes, you may witness a beautiful boat tearing through the water with a young, attractive couple smiling from tanned, perfect faces but trust me, that is an illusion. More likely is the stinky smell of sweat mixed with the occasional gasoline poot of the boat. Yes, sailing is not glamorous unless you have a crew to do all the work. Even beautiful Abby had her days. In her younger days, Abby would stand on the bow of our boat like a goddess. Her tanned honey skin would glisten with perspiration and the French suntan lotion which she loved. Her pouted lips, filled with Botox, sported the current, palest *Lancomé* lipstick while her gorgeous locks were perfectly pinned under her St. Bart's white cap

lined in nautical blue. Captains on passing yachts turned to see the beauty on the bow. Dad would stand like a statue at the helm. The smile on his face as he reviewed the perfect sailing vessel, usually a Swan 45, would be shielded by a large, fabric hat. Our Captain and First Mate looked like movie stars.

Pride consumed him as he took in his domain. I, Anna Polis, sat hunkered down in the corner of the stern of the vessel. My only hope was that neither of those mentioned above would yell instructions to the “boat nothing.” That never happened until we were well on our way. Constantly, “Anna quickly, you jump onto the dock. Anna, you be prepared to come about! Anna hard a lee!”

Such was my day until we were out of harm's way. Then, no one bothered me. I sat with my stringy hair in my eyes while I picked at a zit on my face. I loved to squeeze the thick, yellow goo out of one of the small pimples which covered my face and neck. Then I would lick it if I thought one of the perfect people watched me. Why?

I don't know. Probably, I wanted to enforce the fact that I couldn't possibly be their offspring. Maybe then, they wouldn't plan such elaborate, unreachable goals for my future. If they thought that I was some alien, perhaps they would allow me to flounder in my world.

Such was our summers until my thirteenth. Looking back, I can't recall the morning that we set off to Annapolis on that blustery season. I do remember that the wind was pretty fierce so that we were able to sail all the way to Charleston, SC which was roughly around one hundred miles from Savannah in a single day of sailing. It was the most perfect day that one could encounter on the sea. The wind meant that we kept moving all day without sweltering in the heat.

We all knew what waited for us once we arrived in Annapolis. Long, hot, humid days of sweating.

The reason that the heat became such an issue for Mom and me was that Dad was hardcore. He refused modern "frills" such as air conditioning. Yes, we the Polis family, on our fancy yacht with the lovely Abby and

ugly Anna, were forced to sweat like slaves. Only on windy days could we receive a reprieve from the elements. Factor into that the fact that as we made our way north, we passed through marinas where the first thing provided to the newly arriving boaters was a fly swat. We knew once we received the green plastic monstrosity that mosquitoes the size of large baking potatoes waited for us as the day turned to twilight. Since we couldn't close the boat, like other sailors in the present century with air conditioning, we were forced to deal with open hatches. This situation didn't just allow the horrible invaders; those openings seemed to draw the angry pests in droves. Hatches became funnels for nasty, stinging insects with "death carrying potential." Throughout the night, I heard screams from the tortured softness of my mom as she yelled in horror at the hell forced upon us. Still, the next morning, even though her pillow case remained covered in specks of blood, she ascended the stairs from her berth to the brightness of a new day with grace and beauty. She never looked undone.



I had discovered that if I turned the small fan, the only source of electrical indulgence for comfort which Dad allowed, onto my face, at least I was able to fend off the beasts. Then I simply had the bright red, current zits to frame my horse of a face without the added red marks from the tiny, hateful creatures.

As we entered Charleston Harbor, on that thirteenth summer of my life, we were amazed at the beauty of the entrance to this fair city. We never tired of her beauty. Charleston is a soul-sister of Savannah and Annapolis. Those three port cities were very much alike. I love all of them. For one thing, the people are friendly. Secondly, they encompass the immense beauty of exquisite architecture and history. Thirdly, and most importantly, they proudly display some of the best restaurants in the world. I loved succulent oysters, crabs, and shrimp. Most of our summer meals revolved around such delicious morsels. It was a way of making up to ourselves for the torturous day that we had just experienced, thanks to Dad.

I remember that particular night in Charleston as if it was yesterday. The beginning of Hades for me had begun. Mom, Dad, and I were enjoying fresh seafood at Magnolias. We had berthed our boat, *Honey*, at the Charleston Municipal Marina. After just cramming the largest possible oyster into my mouth, as I swallowed a huge gulp of sweet tea, He walked over to our table with his parents. Standing before us was the perfect family. His parents were spitting images of mine in that they offered perfection. Norris Vanderclift and Susan Bailey Montgomery Vanderclift stood before us with the only child, Stockard Kyle Vanderclift. The big difference between my family and the Vanderclifts was that their child was perfect just like them. The first thing that I thought was the wish that he wasn't so handsome. With a union between their son, Adonis, and the ugly Polis daughter, we would have made an odd couple. This union was not meant to be. He was perfect, and I was far from it. Standing before me was my dream man. Kyle stood at six foot two inches. He had blond hair, the kind that catches the sun and blinds you with brilliance. Blue eyes, the color of the Adriatic Sea, looked at me in utter dis-

gust. I felt as though he was embarrassed being seen talking to the likes of me.

Sure, he would have been fine if it were my parents but throw me into the equation and I blew the perfect picture apart. I was aware that I had probably always created embarrassment for my parents but never cared until that moment.

Mr. Vanderclift kept talking totally unaware of the looks of discomfort from his son.

“Norris Vanderclift here, pleasant to see you again Herbert. This is the lovely wife, Abby, is it? Well, you two are a picture for sore eyes.”

It did not hurt my feelings that no one mentioned me. Why would they? How did I end up at the table with the beautiful ones? It was easier just to overlook me. Maybe the Vanderclifts thought that I was some long lost relative who no one could remember so by avoiding the subject, no embarrassment resulted from them forgetting to introduce me. I don't know, but it truly did not matter. As I chewed my super succulent oyster, juice kept squirting from my mouth because I had also swallowed a large gulp of sweet

tea. Only Kyle appeared to notice my rudeness because the moisture from my mouth landed square on his Ralph Lauren blue-striped shirt in a greasy streak. He looked from it to me with disgust. While our parents basked in their intellectual conversation about the hazards of traveling up the Intra-coastal Waterway versus staying out in the open, he wet his handkerchief in my glass of ice water and wiped the spot from his shirt or at least tried. His actions only set the stain. His eyes shot glances of hatred at me. Immediately, I “sailed” in my mind to the future: I would be the most dedicated wife to this spoiled, bad boy. Maybe I would never dazzle his friends with my beauty, but I would love this man. I, Anna Polis, would clean and iron his clothes. No household help could touch his articles of clothing! I must be the one to ensure that my Adonis sparkled everywhere his size twelve and a half-sized foot journeyed.

*We would be the golden couple just like our parents. Annapolis would shelter our perfect family. The Vanderclift family would occupy the oldest, grandest home in Annapolis.*

“Are you deaf? I asked you if you attend my

school? Have I seen you with some mousey girl? Perhaps it wasn't you?"

I looked lovingly into the eyes of my future husband with adoration while he grimaced at me. It seemed that the likes of me hurt his baby blues.

"No, that would be my best friend Matie and me. She is mousy looking and I, well, I am me."

He did not smile. Those few words resulted in his family seeing me for the first time. Embarrassedly, they quickly walked away. The ugly duckling had escaped from her captivity to the peering eyes of society. What a recoiling moment this must have presented my parents. They looked at each other with shock. So, my folk's shining friends were aware that the offspring of the beloved Polis couple was not beautiful. Heck, not only was she not beautiful, she was downright ugly. It was not a shock to me. It was the truth. Still, the dream began at that moment. Someday, somehow, I must attain the status of existence in the life of none other than Kyle Vanderclift. All of this is important. It shows my innocence.

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Tonight, I gaze at one of the pictures which I still have of Kyle. Most of them, I burned years ago in a fit of rage. The boy smiling from the wrinkled photo appears happy. He looks kind. He was not. Let me explain:

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### WE MEET AGAIN

The uncanny way that the Polis and Vanderclift families kept crossing paths could only mean that Anna Polis and Stockard Kyle Vanderclift were destined to marry someday far in the future. What else could it mean?

Now, I spent my days buried in a teenage fantasy of our romantic lives together. Yes, Stockard Kyle and Anna would build a life of halcyon dreams. Whenever our parents waved to each other, across the crowded floor of some deluxe dining room there in Annapolis, I would bravely face my love. His disdain for me did not dampen my exuberance for him. No, it only emboldened me to smile broadly with my secret. He was destined to be mine.

The Polis family spent two lazy days

strolling around the Battery and enjoying the best dining rooms in Charleston. The third morning, Dad decided that we would chug up the Intracoastal Waterway the rest of the distance to Annapolis. This route was much safer than going outside in the ocean although the arrival time became longer and the time spent sweltering in the heat each day as we motored instead of sailed grew. I didn't mind. Life was now sustainable because of my beautiful dreams of dear Kyle.

“Anna, what in this world is wrong with you? Do you hear my instructions to you? Sailing requires focus and deep concentration. Please join the ranks of the living. You mope around like a love-struck zombie! Perhaps you need to read a few chapters of *Chapman?*”

*Dearest Herbert, if only you knew; your daughter has met the man of her dreams. Her destiny awaits because of this incredible sailing adventure! I love you, Dad! Thank you for forcing me on this ship of torture.* Early, on that third day of our sojourn to the “*City of True Sailors,*” we left before dawn. Herbert always insisted that we must leave at daybreak to make the most of the daylight

hours. Abby shined even at such an ungodly hour. Her flowing dark hair was pinned up under her nautical cap. I wore my pajamas to the horror of Dad.

“Anna, no real sailor wears such articles of clothing! Please dress immediately in shorts, cute top, and Sperry Topsiders! You are embarrassing your mother and me!”

What else was new? Just at that moment, who should we pass but the Vanderclift family? Mom and Dad waved gaily as the dream family of Vanderclifts was able to limp forward barely. Most likely, they experienced boat problems. To my chagrin, I threw love kisses to dear Kyle who looked at me as though I was insane. Immediately, I regretted my actions. What in the world possessed me to act like that? How immature was I? Now, I would be embarrassed to see him again which would inevitably occur in Annapolis. After all, we would share that place of sailing perfection for the entire summer as friends of both families arrived and departed. Such encounters would be unbearable now. Why had I acted as though he cared for me? I had allowed my dreams to overcome common sense. How would I now



cope? I had made a horrible blunder. The unexplainable feeling that I somehow knew Kyle was preposterous. Why did something about him feel familiar as though he was a good friend? Immediately, I realized the enormity of my mistake.

No more did I smile with contentment in the face of *Captain Ahab*. That was my term of endearment for Dad while aboard our boat. Again, I cowered in the stern of the yacht. Now, I sat in humiliation with the thought that Kyle's father would tell my dad that I threw love kisses to his son. My parents, would decide after spending hours, days, weeks discussing my actions that I was indeed insane and I would be sent to an institution to wile away my life in regret for my silliness. Probably, the Psychiatrist would insist that I read the entire *Chapman* for the rest of my life. Always, I would wonder if the dream that I felt for a brief moment may have come to fruition if I had not committed the ridiculous action. Who throws love kisses to any man? Certainly, not a man who hates you.

“Anna, for the last time, go below and change. The Vanderclifts must have thought

us insane. Did you see their son? Kyle knows the pride of sailing. Why must you embarrass us?”

If only he knew the degree of humiliation, I had cast over us. My silly action of blowing love kisses to a boy who found me disgusting had just thrown my family into a different realm. The Vanderclifts would now avoid us as long as I was part of the picture. Even worse, they would look at me with smirks as they realized that the “misfit” was in love with their handsome son. Kyle probably now dated the perfect Candace in a well-hidden love affair back at school. In fact, I believed that I saw the two talking together once. Wait till the rest of the school heard that my friend, Candace, stole the heart of the irresistible Kyle Vanderclift. The two of them would laugh at me each time they passed me in the halls. The horror of what I had done grew into monstrous thoughts such as those.

Many days later, we boldly entered the Municipal Docks of Annapolis, our home away from home for yet another summer. We began this tradition when I was seven years old. The past seasons were uneventful, but I

was about to experience the pain which only a Middle Schooler can know.

Many of you, who have experienced actual bullying, will think me futile and weak. I am. Remember that I lived in a protected bubble. Real life, meanness, and nasty games had just opened itself for me. Sure, I read about the horrors of being abused by bullies, but I had never experienced it, not until then. Hell on earth had just begun for the likes of little old, innocent me.

For the rest of my days, I would wipe a tear from my eye at the thought of the degradation which was about to be rained upon me because of one crazy act. Soon, I would no longer be the innocent girl with rose-colored, coke-bottle glasses. In my mind, branded on my forehead with a hot poker the red word, *REJECTION*, reached deep into my psyche. No one else could witness the dark lines etched into the fiber of my brain. Only Kyle and the Ultimate Betrayer would remember the events which changed me forever.

Abby and Herbert could not have withstood the horror that I was about to experience. I

would try not to burden them with my Hell. Maybe, many other young people could understand but not my perfect parents. Those incredible specimens could never identify with the likes of me. Sleek bodies of exact proportions with shiny hair and teeth may not enter my world. I refused to invite them because they could never understand. It may appear trivial, to the people who inflicted my pain, but it was not at all a light-hearted occurrence to me! It hurt deeply. It deformed my spirit that day and for years to come. The meanness of others created paranoia for me. I would not wish such an experience on another person.

My pain, I carried alone for a long time. Years would pass before I was able to free myself from the valley of depression and humiliation. For a brief time that summer, I remained unchanged by the actions of others, but the abyss of a gnawing beast waited for me.

Each of us experiences our crossing from innocence to adulthood. I am sure that many could never understand to what I refer. Only the kids that are labeled “different, nerds,

creeps, losers,” we know. We hide our hurt carefully. It is not shareable. If we tried to describe the darkness of our experiences, it could not have occurred. These hurts are too real, too raw. No amount of tears or recantations can erase those deep scars. So why go there? My pain was something that only I could bear. My dear parents could not help me, I thought at that time. I didn't want them to try because then I would lose something important of whom I was becoming. Those scars became my *Red Badge of Courage*. Only if you are one of us, do you understand.

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“Red Badge of Courage, “ I say the words out loud. How did I come up with all of this? My wit as a child still impresses me.

“Stop putting it off, Anna. You must go there.”

I refer to the pain of the past. Reluctantly, I move forward in my thoughts:

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## THE PAIN STARTS

It all started innocently enough. The Vanderclifts passed by our boat at the dock about a week later. I sat reading on the stern. Dread overcame me when I faced the smiles of the family of sharks. I knew that Kyle had told them about my blowing kisses at him. The laughter, which they shared, shamed me. Humbly, I lowered my eyes. Perhaps, they would just let it be, but I could tell from the glee that they projected on me, they would not. They knew. Also, they understood that I had not told my parents. Kyle realized now that I was madly in love with him. He was a mean-spirited person, and so were his parents. I clearly saw them at that moment. All of the smiles and gushiness covered grotesque, hateful spirits. I waited as a small fish freezes in the face of a nasty shark. The realization that I was now captive to their games made me wish that I could rush back to Ellie and her Guatemalan family. Bobbing in my pool on the brightly colored plastic floats, which Ellie's family brought each summer, would not be a bad way to spend this season. Possibly, I could avoid the drink cans and potato chip bags which soiled the

once clear water as I maneuvered the place that I loved. Instead, now I entered into the deceitful games of the rich and successful. Skillfully, I avoided eye contact with those monsters.

“Well, look, Kyle, there is Anna Polis. Doesn’t she look lovely today?”

Kyle studied me with amusement.

“Yes, Father, she is the most gorgeous woman on earth. I’m sure that we will marry someday. I can hardly wait to share our marital bed.”

Laughter erupted from the men and to my amazement, his mother. She seemed to enjoy seeing me struggle with the dawning that I was not up to their caliber. They were beautiful, and I was not.

Dad innocently heard the laughter and popped out of the deck below.

“Ah, the Vanderclifts, nice of you to stop. I see you are enjoying the wit of my lovely daughter, Anna.”

Poor Dad, he had no idea.

Kyle extended his hand to Dad.

“Yes, sir, Anna is beautiful. Who knows, maybe our futures may be entwined.”

Give me a break! Did he read Shakespeare each night? Even I could see the irony of his words. Poor Dad had no idea.

“What is this Kyle? Are you interested in my daughter? Yes, she is exceptional, but you are just too young to set your sights upon her. You, young people, need to experience many loves before you decide to join your lives together although nothing would please me more.”

I felt nauseous. I smiled weakly. Dad turned to me with pride. He must see me differently than everyone else on earth, especially the Vanderclift family. They drew the line at that moment. I could no longer afford to let the current carry me floating along. I must use my wits and protect my parents from the cruelty which those people planned for us. Maybe Kyle's family didn't even plan anything. I'm sure that I was not so important that they would spend much time considering me. No, I was a joke for them. Something to be toyed with as a cat toys with a mouse before going for the kill. This description may sound dramatic but trust me; I



could not bear seeing my sweet parents become the butt of jokes at the Savannah Yacht Club. What was I supposed to do?

It was at that moment when I began The Transformation. Before this, I always considered “Mean” people were those different from myself. Now, I realized that friends and neighbors, just like me, could possess a streak of meanness. The fact that they may enjoy causing hurt and distress was a new entity to me. My school protected me in a bubble of sorts. Even though I had no interest in social connections, outside of my *Circle of Friends*, now I realized that I owed it to my parents to present someone of whom they could radiate pride. The change in Anna Polis had now begun. With no idea where this was going: I only was aware that I did have some power over my station in life as a labeled “loser.”

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I laugh softly at this memory. The moon outside is radiant just like that night in my thoughts.

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That evening, as we enjoyed dinner at Middleton Tavern, I shyly asked Mom if her offer for a trip to the dermatologist still existed. You would have thought that I had offered her my kidney as she died from a renal disease. Happiness radiated. The next morning, she called a local office and scheduled my appointment as though it was an urgent matter. They agreed to work me in that same afternoon. As she and I walked to the office, just around the block from the marina, I asked if it would be possible for me to hire a personal trainer. Believe me when I explain that tears ran from her eyes in copious amounts. She looked embarrassed at her loss of control. Those things meant more than I ever realized to my folks. We stopped dead in our tracks causing the man behind me, who was talking on his phone, to step on my foot. Nothing mattered more to me than the joy I saw in Mom's eyes. What had been wrong with me previously? Was I so selfish that I didn't realize the embarrassment which I inflicted on Mom and Dad? My saintly parents would never admit it, but they had

always carried my lack of interest in my appearance with a steadfast love. Now, it was apparent that my *Red Badge of Courage* may be facing the Vanderclifts but Abby and Herbert's struggle had been me. The only daughter had not met her end of the bargain.

I'm referring to being born into wealth and privilege. My parents had owned it from the beginning of their lives; I had not.

The next morning, I arose earlier than usual and sprayed the salt spray off the boat. This action was something which Dad did each day. We could have had our own personal crew, but Mom and Herbert were private and refused to deal with all of the demands and drama of a group of strangers surrounding them each day. They gladly did little things to keep the boat pristine. Mom had a cleaning lady come each morning to assist her for a few hours. Now, I would be Dad's assistant.

When he walked out onto the boat, he appeared pale and shaken.

“Anna, what is all of this? You are like a different person. Have you and Kyle eloped?”

I felt myself grip the side of the boat. “Dad, there is no Kyle and me. Don’t you get it? They were kidding you.”

“Anna, that is absurd. Why would a family like the Vanderclifts do such a thing? That seems a little mean if you ask me.”

“Now, you have it. Those people are mean, Dad. Please trust me on this.”

He prepared to argue, Abby stuck her head out, “Herbert, I think that you need to trust your daughter. She is trying so hard. Let’s just admit that she is growing up and defer a little to her sensibilities.” Mom resolved the matter. I, Anna Polis, was now an adult. My family welcomed me into a new role; my life changed at that moment. My parents realized that I finally understand the importance of ap-

pearances in the world of privilege. Forever, I would be grateful that they agreed to listen to my perspective on the Vanderclift family. The three of us would need to bond for the cruel jokes which would soon assault us.

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There was a point when I believed that I would succumb to the ravages inside my heart and mind, but God brought me here to this cottage for healing. Here, I breathe the salty air as I write. My books are famous locally. People stare at me as if I possess a unique talent when I shop or dine. I do not. Writing is a gift from God. Does He feel guilty for all that I endured reaching this point of success and well-being? I smile at the thought. It is easy to continue; these are magical thoughts:

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## MY TRANSFORMATION

Never in my young life had I worked so hard as I did once my transformation be-

gan. Gratitude to my parents flooded my heart. When the threat, posed by the Vanderclift family, rose to my consciousness, I realized that my family was vital to my world. Yes, they may be old-fashioned and corny, but they were mine. My love for them rose to the top of my mind as a cork rises to the top of the water. I would do anything to protect these people with a broad streak of naivety. Abby and Herbert did not possess a bad bone in their spoiled bodies. I would not allow a group of mean-spirited, rich brats to hurt or embarrass them. In my social network, the threat of embarrassment rated higher than physical abuse. Once the rumors began, there was no pulling them back into the bag. It would have crushed my dad to hear his only daughter referred to in jest or made to look as if she was unstable. Heck, everyone who knows a Middle Schooler knows someone who is unstable, but no parent wants it to be their child.

Each morning, I arose earlier than past

years and washed the entire vessel of the salt buildup from the night before. I also walked alone all around the town of Annapolis. The beauty of this sailing town was inspiring. History penetrated each street and so many of the old, stately buildings that one couldn't help but contemplate our Founding Fathers and the brilliance which they possessed. The people here were kind and proud of their town. It remained easy to recall this particular day in my history because it was Bastille Day. I can almost feel the fresh, salty air blowing my hair into my eyes from fair Annapolis.

*Bastille Day*, July 14, is France's National Day of Independence. The storming of the Bastille in 1789 was a day that was taken seriously by the local Francophiles in Annapolis, and there were many of them. This important event in the French Revolution stirred something in every heart that realized the pain which so many suffered across the French countryside. To quote a true statesman of France,

In the debate leading up to the adoption of the holiday, Henri Martin, chairman of the French Senate, addressed that chamber on 29 June 1880:

*Do not forget that behind this 14 July, where the victory of the new era over the ancien régime was bought by fighting, do not forget that after the day of 14 July 1789, there was the day of 14 July 1790 ... This [latter] day cannot be blamed for having shed a drop of blood, for having divided the country. It was the consecration of the unity of France ... If some of you might have scruples against the first 14 July, they certainly hold none against the second. Whatever difference which might part us, something hovers over them, it is the great images of national unity, which we all desire, for which we would all stand, willing to die if necessary.*

—Henri Martin, Chairman of the Sénat, 1880



Events such as those should have stirred the breast of every person regardless of their nationality! They did mine. I loved being in Annapolis on that particular day. Although there were great celebrations throughout America such as New York, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and Milwaukee; Annapolis did a stirring job of reminding residents of the importance of standing up for fairness. I showed off my mastery of the French language by refusing to relate any word unless it was French. Abby and Herbert did possess the same ability so for one week in each year, we dusted off our French and enjoyed the beauty of such a flowing dialect.

All over Annapolis, we celebrated this event. Restaurants and dining halls across the town offered a special fare for the week. People drank too much and partied more than they should without even understanding the importance of the date, but the Polis family compassionately re-

membered. Yes, we “got it” and prayed for each country that suffered abuses.

This love for *Bastille Day* resembled a thread in my mind which highlighted the Hell of betrayal which waited for me, just like so many suffered in France long ago. You see, I was about to feel the subjugation of my own abuse. One good thing that occurred in the summer of my thirteenth year, during Bastille celebrations, was my discovery of a unique shop. Tucked away into the more ornate businesses of downtown Annapolis, I found a store that sold old comic books. Yes, I, Anna Polis became enamored with comic books. Much to the chagrin of Herbert who yelled, “Only a fool would pass a good couple of hours reading that cheap degradation of the English language!”

Really?

Once I began my collection of those prized trophies, he could not shame me into recanting my love for the paper

backed beauties. No longer did I read the classics or even the latest Murder or Mystery novel. Instead, I read with gusto, the old comics of the past. When my parents discovered the amount of money my new hobby required, they became furious with me. It was all to no avail. I refused to relinquish my fascination with the *Super Heroes*.

An older man ran the shop. He was most kind to me. He understood my determination to read those fascinating articles despite my parent's howls. Looking back, I realized that a part of it might have been that I was freed from the thoughts of the Vanderclifts when I entered the haven of delights offered by that simple shop. I replaced the idea of Kyle with *Super Marvel*. Those simple books allowed me total relaxation, without the cumbersome task of remembering a litany of characters which the author introduced just to show his mastery of the fine art of writing, as so many authors do today. This peace greet-

ed my battered nerves.

I arrived a little early one morning to my retreat. The owner was late that particular day, but sometimes he opened late. After waiting a while, I walked around the block. As I returned, the door opened, so I meandered inside. A boy with the same features of Matie looked at me from beneath his large, horn-rimmed glasses. His dark hair appeared to be unwashed and matted, just like my dear friend. Excitement overcame me. This bizarre kid must be related to the Connelly family.

“Excuse me. Are you related to Matie?”

He appeared dumbfounded.

“No, I am a man, so I am not related to Matie.”

Apparently, this “man” had been hounded by classmates because he was very feminine; hence, his sensitivity at my innocent statement.

“I believe that you can be a man and still be related to a woman or girl.”

His calling Matie, a woman, was a big stretch. Her chest was worse than mine in the developmental stages. At least my chest didn't cave inward.

“Oh, good point, you scored!”

Big, ole yellow teeth greeted me from behind two tiny slits of lips as he gave me the “high” sign. The person before me was one ugly boy. Right up there in the ranks of Matie and me. It was love or pity at first sight.

“Hey, you're the kid that comes most days and buys so many comics? Uncle Louie says that you have single-handedly saved his business. The family would like to thank you.”

“Oh, so you are related to the classy old guy who runs this joint? Cool.”

We smiled at each with an instant likeness.

“Hey, listen, my best friend Matie arrives tomorrow. You want to hang with us?”

He stuck his large, over-sized hand into my face.

“Louie Preston Moreau, it is a pleasure to meet you.”

He blushed.

“Ah, a Frenchman in this week of Bastille celebrations, how apropos!”

That meeting changed my life. Now, I had a friend in the fair town of Annapolis. Maybe the Vanderclifts thought of me as inferior, but soon, Matie, Louie, and I would be a three-some. Just let them try to berate me now. At least I wouldn't suffer alone.

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Lovingly, I remove a photo of dear Louie from my weathered old book. Several of the yellowed pages fall from the broken binding. Dear Louie remains a beloved member of not only my past but present. How could I have survived without the

skinny kid who loved me? He and Matie were my saviors. Let me explain:

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### MATIE'S ARRIVAL

The year was 1990. It was a glorious morning filled with the intoxicating smells of the Chesapeake Bay. Waking up each morning in that place was truly a blessing of unparalleled excellence. I loved it! Life seemed ideal, but then thoughts of the Vanderclift family sneaked into my perfect world. The uncertainty of not knowing when I would see them kept me in constant stress. Maybe it would have been better to know that I would be forced to see Kyle each day. I don't know. The only sure thing for me was that as time passed, I disliked him and his smiling family of sharks less and less.

Each month of this, my thirteenth summer, Mom, and Dad allowed me to invite three of my friends to join us for one en-

tire week onboard the beautiful *Honey*. The thoughts of dazzling my friends with my sailing skills excited me. My family and I had perfected the art of sailing this fine craft. We worked together with ease and made it look easy.

My oldest and dearest friend would join me first. Matie had been sailing with us a few times but only for short sails. She always became sea sick which I had hidden from Dad so that he would allow me to invite her for a week in the summer. Not to worry, we would ensure that her week with us was safe and enjoyable! I couldn't wait for that skinny kid to join the Polis family on their magnificent sailing yacht. A slight exaggeration, I realize since we didn't even have air conditioning, but the boat was beautiful.

I, Anna Polis, had now lost a total of five pounds due to my boat work, walks around the town each day, my personal trainer, and refusing to stuff my mouth with the delicious fare which waited for



me in the finest dining rooms of Annapolis. What I discovered was that as I ate less, I wanted less. Pushing back from the table, although still difficult, became easier with the passing of time. This tremendous feat brought smiles not only to me but Mom and Dad looked as if they had swallowed the goldfish or at least a couple of succulent oysters fresh from the Bay.

We had enjoyed our time on the boat in Annapolis for several weeks when the time came for Matie to arrive. It was Sunday, July 15, 1990. As soon as the local Methodist church completed its service, we rushed back to the boat. This date was a memorable day for a couple of reasons. Matie was flying alone for the first time in her young life. Her parents arranged a direct flight from Savannah to Annapolis so that would not be a problem. Although Herbert rented a car for the summer, my best friend insisted that she was capable of taking a taxi from the airport in Baltimore where she had planned

on arriving. The distance was only twenty-four miles, but I questioned if she was savvy enough to read the signs, hail a taxi, and perform all of the tasks this required. My friend was highly intellectual but didn't have lots of street smarts. I, on the other hand, fancied myself with the possession of both.

As soon as church ended, we rushed back to the boat. Although we missed our usual Sunday lunch at Middleton Tavern, Matie was worth the sacrifice. Dad planned an excellent itinerary of overnight sails to Saint Michaels, Oxford, and as far as Solomon's Island. I dreamed of seeing my friend's face when they poured buckets of Blue Crabs on the newspaper that would cover the table at one of Solomon's excellent dining spots.

After quickly digesting a peanut butter sandwich covered in creamy butter, hey, I am still Anna Polis, I am not *that* dedicated. I didn't go crazy with the diet. I grabbed *Chapman* and waited. Dad paced

back and forth on the dock. Mom sat watching me for some reason which made me wonder if she knew that my best friend was about to die in a plane crash. Why would she sit and stare at me? When I couldn't take it any longer, I exploded.

"Mom, please, go do something! Take a walk even if it is stifling today. Why are you staring at me with such intensity? Have I done something wrong?"

"Oh, my darling, I am proud of you and Matie. I remember the summer when I flew alone to join Herbert aboard his first boat, *Katie*. She was his first love, you know. He had a terrible time getting over that one! Katie was beautiful and loved Herbert very much."

*TMI!* I had never heard any of this.

"Well, I was nervous. Of course, I was much older than darling Matie. She is awfully young to set out alone on this massive adventure. Even though you appear to be calm, I'm sure that inside, you are a

wreck. So many things could happen to Mrs. Connelly's little girl. I always worry about pedophiles. They are out there, you know. Well, the chances of the plane crashing are not *that* great, but what if they have to land in a different city and that little girl is forced to make some difficult decisions? I mean, it is possible that they may need to spend the night in an unknown place. How will she select the hotel and arrange all of that? I hope that her parents have sent a credit card with her. These things have been bothering me, but you and your father seemed to be sure that, 'all would be well.' I'm merely saying that a lot can happen to such an innocent, sweet, little girl."

I looked at Abby in desperation. Why had she not mentioned these things until right now? Perspiration covered my body not because it was hot enough to fry an egg on the pavement and we did not have air conditioning, but because so much could happen to my best friend, Mrs. Connelly's

little girl.

"Dad, isn't she really late now?"

He looked a little panicked.

"Ah, yes, she is a little."

"Like, how much?"

"Over three hours, almost four to be exact."

We all looked at each other in horror. At that very moment, who should stroll past the boat with smiles of fake joy? Yes, the Vanderclifts showed at that second. This moment was not the time for their inquisition.

"Hello, delightful Polis family and you, dear Anna. Why did you rush from the church this morning? Anna, your boyfriend, wants to ask you a question. Go ahead, son."

"Yes, Father, you are right. Anna, would you care to walk around town with me?"

The shark family smiled at each other entertainingly. Their act was a great ploy. For one thing, no sane person would,

"Stroll around Annapolis in this heat." For another, I may have just lost my best friend. I wasn't about to leave the boat.

"That is such a lovely invitation even though the last time that I checked, the temperature was over one hundred degrees. Still, what a perfect time to take a little walk."

I smiled innocently.

It never became clear to me how I could banter and challenge the Vanderclifts without Herbert and Abby understanding that it was not as it seemed. Kyle thrust his ugly, white, perfect teeth at me in a smirk.

"Dear Anna, your family is the only people on the planet not to have air conditioning. Perhaps you should bring your family into the correct century."

"Right now, Dearest Kyle, I am waiting for the most beautiful girl in the world to arrive. One of my many "hot" girlfriends from the Academy is spending a week

with me. If you will excuse me, I need to check with the airport. She is a little late."

Nonchalantly, I strolled away but not before turning to see the look of shock from the Shark Family. Yes, I trumped them.

They quickly walked away.

Dad rushed below board on the boat and spent over an hour trying to track down Matie. He discovered that her plane landed without any problems, but where was she? To make a horrible story short, she arrived at 7 pm much later that evening looking shell-shocked. Somehow, she had told the taxi driver that my dad lived at the Naval Institute, so much for the intellect of my dearest. No one ever told her that. Yes, he attended the Naval Academy, but he had never lived there as an officer. The driver and Matie spent the afternoon driving around the Naval Academy's campus. She knocked on every door which was kind enough to open to a stranger. The driver of the unfortunate cab looked as if he had been crying as he had

attempted to keep his charge safe from harm all afternoon. Eventually, she remembered that I had said, “Municipal Marina not Naval Academy.” Is there even the slightest similarity in those statements?

"Anna, I saw some really great looking men. Wow, you have surrounded yourself with all of those studs this entire time? These days are exciting; maybe we can meet some of those ‘hot’ guys?"

Something happens when fatigue assaults the travel-worn. The mind stops working. As I looked at my friend with unwashed hair and yellow teeth covered in wire, I felt sad for both of us.

"Madison, you must phone your parents at once. They are beside themselves. You are very late in arriving. We have been on the phone with them for the past several hours!"



Mom's voice sounded tired. They were such great parents to put up with all of our drama.

Mattie and I finally looked at each other and screamed as loudly as humanly possible. Then, I grabbed her one piece of luggage, and we rushed aboard our boat. At least my friend knew how to pack lightly. I had instructed her that she should bring only one piece of foldable luggage on board due to a lack of storage space. Her rating just skyrocketed in my book from "idiot" to the "smartest friend on the planet." Our screams brought smiles from Mom and Dad. They were accustomed to this yelling each time we saw each other even if it had only been a few hours.

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Laughingly, I take a break from my "walk down memory lane." Pouring a glass of wine, I carry it back to the sofa which remains bathed in the silvery light of the

full moon. A picture falls from the journal.

“Matie! You are uglier than I remembered!”

Loudly, I laugh. My friend would not mind. We are realists, the truth about such trivial things no longer hurts. My mind jumps ahead to her arrival aboard *Honey* so many years ago:

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#### MY WEEK WITH MATIE

Later that evening as we bunked down for the night, I whispered. It seemed like months that we had been apart. She was exhausted, so we retired while there was still daylight.

”SaraBeth is acting all weird. She won't talk with any of us about what's bothering her. Maybe you can pry it from her perfect, pink tattooed lips when it is her turn to spend a week on this dream boat.”

Matie waved her skinny hand around the beautiful vessel.

"Matie, I'll admit this is a gorgeous boat but did I tell you that it doesn't have air conditioning?"

This innocent lie produced shame since I realized that my failure to relay this simple fact stemmed from fear that none of my friends may choose to join me.

"What? No air conditioning, in this heat? Are you joking? I may need to cut this trip short. Mom mentioned something about needing me to come home in about three days. Yes, I definitely remember something about a family emergency. A horrible incident waits for me in just a few days. Man, that really sucks. I'm sorry. Well, we'll just have to make the most of the time that we have together." My friend refused to look me in the eyes. Matie always said that statement. She heard it from some movie, "It sucks."

Her behavior was disappointing to me. I had cleaned the forward berth before her arrival and worked hard to make everything perfect. Now, she messed up the beginning of our sailing trip and planned to hold me accountable for the fact that my dad was a die-hard sailor from the fifteenth century.

"Matie, I know better. We talked with your Mom several times today. There are no plans for you to return early. In fact, they mentioned that they are going to open up your mountain house while you are with us. I'm shocked that you would lie to me. You know how much this trip means to me. You will have to bear the suffering with your own *Red Badge of Courage*."

She looked panicked as her skin appeared blanched and covered in heavy perspiration. Her paleness was shocking.

I continued talking to her, pouring out my heart the way that best friends do. Finally,

I had worked my way to the situation with the Vanderclift family. Painstakingly, I detailed everything that had occurred to me. I could hear Matie breathing heavily, so I assumed that she was feeling my pain over the entire mess.

"So, anyway, how do we make them go away? I have considered hiring a hit-man, but that may be overreacting. What do you think?"

Silence greeted my piqued interest in her reaction.

"Matie, this is crucial to me. Now is not the time to withdraw your support. Matie?"

Her quietness in this desperate situation could only mean that she was disappointed in me for the way that I had handled all of this. Possibly, I had created the problem. Matie liked to blame me for every disaster.

"Look, this is pretty heavy stuff. We have plenty of time to discuss it. Like an entire

week since you will not be leaving early. Right?"

Matie again remained silent. She was beginning to annoy me.

"Okay. I didn't mean to brush off your earlier statement about SaraBeth Wheeler. What has she done? The beauty queen isn't talking to our Circle? I can probably get her to relinquish the facts once she is on this boat; although I am not making much progress with you."

Matie was now snoring. I understood that she must be exhausted and probably suffering from heat stroke. Quietly, I arose and turned out her little light which was attached to the teak boards above the bed. I also turned her fan onto high. The poor kid was about to be welcomed into the life of none other than Anna Polis.

Early the next morning, I arose at my usual time. Quickly, I sprayed the salt spray off of the boat and began my sprint (slight exaggeration) around the town. When I arrived back at *Honey*, everyone

was dressed and waiting. They all stood on the dock holding a cup of coffee and smiling sweetly at me.

*Captain Ahab* explained that we needed to get underway. He had decided to take the longest leg of our trip at the beginning. Hastily, I untied all lines and pushed us off. Matie squealed and applauded. Her enthusiasm was a little embarrassing since this is the most essential of required sailing moves. It is a little hard to “sail away” with the lines tied and the boat sitting at the dock. Once we were underway, the wind was behind us and the sun shined gently on our faces since it remained quite early. It surprised me that Dad had not enforced his rule about a hearty breakfast before we began.

As though reading my mind, Dad looked a little sick as he explained, “We were waiting for you to get our usual breakfast before we set off, but Matie said that she cannot eat at such an ungodly hour. I tried to pry the coffee from her hands when she

also explained that she gets deathly sea sick. She told us that you knew this? Why would you invite someone who gets ‘deathly seasick?’”

I had managed to hide this simple fact from the prying eyes of *Captain Ahad* and his gorgeous side-kick.

“This day will not go well. You know the size of some of the swells on the Chesapeake especially when it storms. Honestly, Anna, this is not funny.”

I did realize the folly of my actions, but I loved Matie and wanted her to experience all the benefits that sailing can bring to one's life. It actually changes you. People who understand sailing are different from those who do not. We sailors can think quicker and make instantaneous decisions. We must.

"You go down there and get her to eat a bagel. I went to the local bakery while we waited for you. I would have preferred



that we had gotten an earlier start, but here we are."

He waved around at the darkness surrounding us as though it was already noon. *Captain Ahab* was alive and well today.

Briskly, I walked down below and returned with a cuppa for myself and a bagel for Mom, Matie, and me. Mom grabbed hers because she knew that to avoid seasickness, you needed a bland food substance lining the stomach. We all refused to give up our coffee even though the acidity was not good for the gut. I was the only one of us who had never experienced the agony of seasickness.

Quietly, I sat down and began to watch Matie for signs of the dreaded companion of so many seafaring people. For a while, Matie dominated the conversation. Then, I noticed that she became mute. When she began to close her eyes, I knew. It was

coming.

"Ah, Matie, you need to."

"Wow, I'm sleepy. I'll just go below and take a quick nap. Let me know what I miss. Later!"

She managed a quick smile and stood to go below. Before her arrival, I received instruction from the Captain to explain to each of my friends the schedule for the next day and what he expected in various situations. I had failed to do this because I had more important things to discuss and Matie had her own agenda which was sleep due to extreme exhaustion last night. That was the reason that Matie refused breakfast; she did not understand the rules because I had failed to do as Dad instructed. He wasn't aware of this little fact. I felt awful for my mistakes because they may be fatal on a sailboat.

While I quickly began to explain things to my friend who should have read *Chapman*, Matie stood to excuse herself. Probably, she did not want us to witness her

barfing all over herself and the sparkling teak decks. At that moment, Dad yelled, "*Hard alee.*"

This morsel of knowledge had also not been shared by yours truly to my unsuspecting friend last night. Matie had no idea what Dad's words meant. Now, this is a serious breach. Not only is it possible to be injured, but a knock overboard often results. This action could be deadly.

As my friend rushed to reach the ladder to throw up her guts, Dad turned the wheel to the opposite direction. This change, of course, caused the boom holding the mainsail to swing across the boat. Mom and I ducked because we read THE book. Poor Matie did not understand the meaning of those famous words: "*Hard alee.*" Innocently, she looked at me with huge eyes as if to say, *Why are you guys ducking while I'm standing alone here?*

To my horror, the boom hit her hard while it carried her up into the air and over the

side of the boat. Her frail arms held onto the quick moving boom. Her face appeared panicked. This situation is one of the worst things that can happen on a sailing vessel. The captain must be extremely fast at that moment. I knew the drill.

"Anna, you do not take your eyes off of Matie. Do you see her?"

By now, I was crying. Possibly, I just killed my best friend. I know that this sounds ludicrous, but I could see the Vanderclifts sitting at my trial with their smirks as they detailed my ineffectiveness in life to the jury.

"Dad, I see her. Matie's small, but she is a good swimmer."

"Good, that may save her. See the size of those waves? Don't take your eyes off of her, Anna."

Mom began to cry with me. She rushed to my side as our eyes swept the water trying to hold my friend in our gaze. Matie was visible one minute but not the next.

At least, the sun was casting some light. If it had remained dark, then it would have been impossible to find her dark head. Dad was amazing. He came about quickly and headed right to the poor, drowning Matie. Mom threw the life ring to her, but at that moment, I did what I had always been told never to do. I dived into the waters. Now, there were two people overboard. Dad was using expletives which I had never heard from him. I grabbed my struggling friend with one hand and the life ring with the other. Dad came close with the boat so that Mom easily pulled us to the side of the vessel. In moments, Dad used the boat hook to pull the life saver and us up the side of *Honey*.

To my amazement, Matie began to laugh. "Wow, that was awesome Mr. Polis." My family looked at me, and I shook my head. There was no explanation for her words. I did not see her sustain a head injury, but that was the only excuse which

could result in those ridiculous statements.

"How did you do that? I'm no longer seasick. In fact, I feel great. That experience rejuvenated me completely. Could we possibly do it again later? I mean just hitting the water so hard seemed to knock the nausea right out of me. You are some Captain. I guess that is the reason that Anna refers to you as *Captain Ahab*? Yep, you are!"

Dad gave me a look that would take the words right out of most people's mouths, but I was elated. He understood my connotation for the use of *Captain Ahab*. All that mattered to me, at that moment, was that Matie would live. She never grasped the seriousness of what just happened.

"Anna, you go right now. Go below and explain to Matie the things that she will need to stay safe. Did you give her the drill and show her all of the vital equipment and details earlier?"

"No, sir, we didn't last night. She was too

tired to receive instructions. I figured that we could do all of that today. I'm sorry, Dad. What just happened was my fault. I take the blame. Please forgive me."

When I began to cry, Matie looked horrified. The idiot finally got it. This episode wasn't a game. My dad would never cause a large flying board to hit a skinny kid or anyone in the chest. This action could have ended very badly.

"God!"

Dad said HIS name solemnly. We all ran to the back of the boat to thank God for saving us. Dad taught me long ago always to say, "Thanks to God."

This moment was a major time to be grateful. Dad prayed. We all hugged Mrs. Connelly's little girl. Carefully, I began to detail all of the instructions which I should have given my water-logged friend on her arrival. Matie's sailing adventure had not begun the way that I had hoped.

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Sweet memories of days long ago, those particular times are especially dear to me because they bordered the Hell which would come soon. Quietly, I walk to an old bureau of drawers and remove another old journal. Following is the letter that I wrote to Madison back in the summer of 1990:

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SOLOMONS, ST. MICHAELS, and OXFORD

*Matie, my dear friend, what a glorious summer we shared that first year of boating together. Looking back, I hug myself when I remember seeing your sun-stained face as we entered southern Calvert County, Maryland. You rushed to the bow of the vessel with my mom. The two of you*



*hugged as if you were Mother and Daughter. Dad took my hand and smiled. Already, you had become a decent sailor especially impressive was the fact that you could have died because of my slackness. Never did you remind me that I failed you. Your constant smile removed the glum of the horrible Vanderclifts from my mind. The dread of seeing them evaporated quickly.*

*It was a glorious time for long bike rides, lazy summer dinners of buckets of blue crabs poured onto newspaper-covered heavy, old wooden tables. You squealed with delight as the bounty sparkled in the sun.*

*Dad said that we were only about an hour and a half from Washington. Next season, we plan on taking the boat up the Potomac into the Nation's Capital. It is something on which we both can dream and plan.*

*Many evenings, we took the Riverwalk boardwalk along the Patuxent River. I believe that's when my family knew that you were one of us. Dad fell in love with your wit and charm that very summer. Mom, well, she always loved you.*

*The sculptures in the Annmarie Gardens and Sculpture Park wooed us. Maybe that is what created the desire for you to become a sculptor of extraordinary talent? We may never know for sure, but you did begin your journey as an artist when you returned home. Today, when I read of your fame or see your work in well-heeled shops, I think that I should receive part of the credit. I'm just saying.*

*Honey received rave reviews from everyone who passed her in the marina in Annapolis while she bobbed gently in her slip. All of the money which Dad had spent for her pristine condition more than paid for itself as so many sailors praised her. It is one thing for a passer-by to comment on the beauty of a boat, but if*

*that person is a member of the sailing community; it is a joy.*

*I don't think that I ever saw Herbert and Abigail so relaxed. You and I followed them around the town as they held hands and laughed softly over a secret which only they knew. I found myself on those peaceful, summer days dreaming again that I walked with my husband, Kyle, and that he loved me as Dad loved the perfect Abigail. That would never be, but for the longest time, the dream refused to die. Then Kyle killed every iota of feeling which I possessed for him.*

*After two remarkable days of fun, Dad announced that it was time to visit St. Michaels. True to form, you protested that it couldn't be as perfect as Solomons, Maryland. We all laughed since you had yet to visit that sanctuary of sailors, St. Michaels. You knew what you liked or disliked without visiting that spot but often changed your mind. Oxford still was only*

*a name to you.*

*The morning that we pulled away from the dock, it was you who untied the lines and threw them with perfect precision into my waiting hands. I recall that Mom and Dad glowed with pride that their daughter was actually enjoying sailing. It was because of you, dearest Matie, that I experienced a joy on the boat which I had never known.*

*The sky looked like green pea soup as we motored away from the marina. It surprised me that Dad would leave in such conditions. Usually, he would not. He matter-of-factly explained that the sun would burn the fog away. It didn't. Instead, the conditions worsened. Looking back, I realize that is one of the few sailing mistakes that Herbert ever made aboard Honey.*

*We continued moving north toward our beloved village. Compromised visibility accompanied our journey. Once again,*

*you were unaware of the danger in which we had placed ourselves as we motored up the Chesapeake Bay unable to see well. Not only was the Bay filled with sailing and motor boats, but large tankers and barges slowly plowed the waters. Those massive ships were difficult to stop and impossible to do so quickly. One little mistake and we could have found ourselves crushed. Finally, another boater radioed that we were in danger and needed to pull over. At that moment, the fog lifted and we saw a gigantic barge bearing down on us. It was dreadful. Mrs. Connelly's little girl failed to register the danger which was just as well.*

*Proving my point that you are a fickle girl, you laughed with glee as we entered the marina in the old town of St. Michaels, Maryland. Located in Talbot County, it is a legend with sailors. Then, you exclaimed that you loved it there the most. Do you recall that as soon as we tied up to the dock, Mom and Dad left for*

*cocktails with the Gainers a few boats away? You and I were happy to have space to ourselves as we sunbathed. Suddenly, the foulest language ever heard assaulted our innocent ears (okay, we heard worse from the dreaded Michael Dudley back at the Academy). After several minutes, I couldn't take anymore.*

*"That's it! I don't know if that is the dreaded Michael Dudley. It doesn't sound like him, but I'm going over to that boat and tell whoever it is to knock it off. Matie, does that sound like Michael to you?"*

*Silence suddenly graced our disgraced ears but not for long. When the barrage of cursing began again, I couldn't take it. I jumped off the boat charging the new vessel tied next to us. Just our luck that a cursing sailor should receive the slip next to the Polis boat.*

*"Look here, I don't know who you are unless you are Michael Dudley, a fellow*

*student at the Academy, but you need to curb the cursing. There are small children two slips over, so knock it off!"*

*"Bitch, you bitch. You're ugly! Go away. Go away."*

*Much worse language filled the blue skies around us. I lay down on the dock and laughed at the giant, scarlet McCam shackled to a bar on his cage. The big guy looked at me with innocence. Apparently, his owner found this despicable display of foul language funny. I had to admit that the McCam was beautiful. You came over to see what caused my hysterical laughter. Then you met my new friend, Mickey. His owner, Mr. Hayes, was the nicest man ever. It never made sense to me, but he offered no explanations about the coarse language, and we never asked.*

*Voted as one of the Ten Best Coastal Towns in America by USA Today, St. Michaels did steal your heart; it had ours already. Kayaking, biking, shopping, and*

*eating kept us busy and full. That historic town and harbor from the 1600s reminded us of the thousands of souls who found peace and refreshment there throughout countless generations. Many of the homes dated back that far as well. Each evening, you insisted that we stroll down the streets lined with giant, old trees which shielded us from the sun. Watching the families enjoy the end of the day with each other, and their friends on their front porches, we felt as if we were a part of their lives. The delicious ice cream cone which ended our day made it even more delightful. Oh, we hated to leave those porches which beckoned to us as well as the kindness of the residents. Our time was limited. So much to see and great excursions waited elsewhere. We should have asked you to stay for two weeks instead of only one but didn't know how quickly you would adjust. Already, we had spent five of our days. There was only one day left for Oxford.*



*Visiting Oxford, for me at that time, was a step back into the coastal towns which lined our diverse eastern coast. Oxford was one of the oldest cities in America.*

*"This is it! Out of all of the dreamy sea-side places, this is it for me."*

*Mom, Dad, and I only looked at each other with delight. Your happy comments filled the hot, sunny day.*

*I walked to the bow with you and Mom as we entered the small village. This quaint town was such an easy, unfettered place. We headed immediately, upon securing Honey at the dock, to the Robert Morris Inn which was our favorite place to dine. Everyone knew us and welcomed our return. I found myself thinking of Kyle and his despicable family. Why did they hate me so much? I had never felt such dislike. Mostly, everyone that I had ever met seemed welcoming. I pondered those thoughts as you strolled around the old restaurant.*

*"I forgot my purse. I'll just rush back to the boat and grab it. Won't be but a minute."*

*Innocently, you smiled at us.*

*Mom, Dad, and I looked at each other. They did not like for me to leave by myself on our sailing jaunts. For some reason, no one bothered to suggest that you remain with us. You didn't really need anything. Dad bought all of your meals. Your purse would be okay. We seldom even locked the boat.*

*"Matie, why do you need your purse?"*

*Mom asked innocently.*

*Slowly, you and I had begun a metamorphosis from the ugly ducklings of the past. It was extremely slow, believe me. We weren't even aware of it!*

*"I need my lipstick. See that handsome guy over there?"*

*You nodded with your head to the back of the room. I saw him.*

*"Well, he keeps looking at me. I need my lipstick."*

*Honestly, I hadn't noticed that you were wearing gloss on your tiny, undefined lips. I sure had not seen that handsome boy looking at you. My family only smiled. This revelation that you had begun primping was such a surprise that we did not stop you as you left the room. After about forty minutes, I became suspicious.*

*"Dad, shouldn't she be back?"*

*Mom and Dad were enjoying visiting with old friends, so they had not noticed the time. Laughing and living it up, they barely heard me. More time passed. As Dad prepared to order our dinner, he finally noticed your absence.*

*"Anna, where is Matie?"*

*"Dad, she's been gone for an hour. She said that she was going back to the boat, but she's been gone for such a long time." Suddenly, Matie, your newly established*

*sailing record crumbled. We recalled an earlier mishap and the uncanny length of time that we waited for you to arrive at the boat. The lesson to this tale was that we should never have allowed you to leave without one of us. What were we thinking?*

*"Don't worry, honey; we are in Oxford. What bad can happen to her here? I'll be right back."*

*Dad smiled bravely.*

*Mom and I looked feebly at each other. Mrs. Murphy, one of Mom's DAR buddies, entered the restaurant. They hugged and began to swap stories. Slowly, another thirty minutes passed into eternity. Mom and Mrs. Murphy were going on about changes in the national DAR. I was bored out of my head. Even the Vanderclifts would be a welcome sight (that is another slight exaggeration). Nausea began to creep over me. I put my head on the table. No one noticed because all of the patrons were happily visiting tables of people that*

*they didn't know. Due to the proximity to Washington, DC, you might see anyone here. Suddenly, who should softly approach but Dad and the prodigal sailor? Now, I was angry with you, Matie, and your stunts.*

*"Where have you been? Do you realize that you have ruined our dinner?"*

*I stood close to you to bring home my point.*

*"Huh? What? I got lost. I walked so far in the wrong direction that it took your dad a long time to find me."*

*Your smile was hard to resist.*

*"Yep! She walked about a mile in the wrong direction. I found her sitting on a dock watching the sunset."*

*Mom was feeling no pain as she basked in the light of old friends.*

*"Anna, you don't bully your friend! She is here now. That is all that matters."*

*Funny, for the rest of my life, I remem-*

*bered, "She is here now. That is what counts."*

A statement that remains genuine and one which I shall never forget.

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Lovingly, I now hold the old journal of memories to my heart. Dear Matie, I still love you, even more now. My mind trudges backward once again:

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### MARTHA'S ARRIVAL

Several days later, Louie and I sat in the stern of the boat under a large canopy which Dad finally hung to allow us some semblance of protection from the elements. We sipped our smoothies from the local ice cream shop and gazed at our *Super Marvel* comic books without reading them.

“Now why is your dad so upset with you? I mean, man, he seems angry.”

“Naw, he isn’t. You see, I was supposed to be allowed to invite three of my friends over the course of this summer in Annapolis. He specifically instructed that they were to visit one girl for one week per month. Well, no one could come until the middle of July. They all had commitments with their families. Like, what was I supposed to do? Besides, Matie asked me to let her be the first so that she could go back and look really cool since she had already visited our boat. That way, she would look important. Matie always seems to complicate things!”

I glanced over at my current best friend, Louie.

“Matie, ah, Matie, you are the love of my life. You know that we will marry someday?”

He said this to the air in front of him as if she was there.

“You do understand that for the rest of my life on earth, I will owe you a massive

debt for introducing us? Do you know if she is Jewish? I mean, my family will not hold it against her if she isn't. Maybe she will want to convert?"

"Louie, these are pretty big questions. I do know that she is not Jewish. Matie is a Christian. She would never give up Jesus. So, I guess the answer is that she would never convert. The problem may be if you have children. I'm pretty sure that each of you will want them raised in your own faith, so that looks like a rather insurmountable problem."

I weakly smiled as I realized that I had bought into his ridiculous dream.

"Are you insane? That beautiful girl and I will not let anything overcome our love. This vow is a solemn promise to you, the woman who brought us together."

Feeling a little nauseous from these "solemn promises," I only shook my head.

"Look Louie, the two of you met on the



morning of her last day here in Annapolis. By the time evening fell, it truly was a beautiful night, you and Matie swore your love and devotion to each other. How does this happen? Think about it; you don't really know each other."

Louie didn't speak for a long time. I began to panic because if he told Matie that something which I said had made him "see the light," she would hate me.

Finally, he spoke.

"I do realize this looks strange to most people. I mean someone like you, a sophisticated, gorgeous, well-developed woman could have any number of men. I have seen Kyle Vanderclift sniffing around you. Are you seeing him?"

Before I could answer, he continued. "Look, Anna, how many chances do you think exist for Matie and me? Sure to me, she hung the moon and stars, but I don't kid myself. The two of us are in our own world. When I refer to you as beautiful,

well, you know that you are. Whereas, when I refer to her as such, it is because I love her madly. She is beautiful in my eyes. God made her for my eyes only.”

I thought of James Bond. Did they make comic books about Bond?

It really was a relief that Louie was the one to broach the Kyle subject. Suddenly, words began to pour from deep in my heart. I couldn't stop the onslaught of tears. Starting at the first meeting to the way that the shark family slinked around me, I embarrassedly told my new, best friend everything. It was humiliating because he was the first “man” who ever said that I was beautiful. Shame caused unending tears. Dad walked out at one point as Louie held my hands. I thought that my new best friend, Louie, cried a few times with me. Poor Herbert ran back into the boat. He appeared shocked. What now?

Louie pledged that he would stand with me against the bullies. He softly told me

that I was not alone. Finally, his parents called him on his cell phone home for dinner. He was such an easy fellow to love. Matie was blessed. Right on cue, Abby walked toward me with a snarly look.

“Your father would like a few words with you before we go to dinner.”

Just at that moment, Kyle walked toward the boat. I couldn't believe that he came by himself without his smiling parents to protect him.

“Good evening, Mrs. Polis, may I speak to this lovely creature?”

The jerk was looking at me as if he cared. He should have been an actor.

“Dearest Kyle, of course, you may. We were just getting ready for dinner. Would you?”

She looked at me. I shook my head in terror. If she thought that I would go to dinner with this maniac, she was very wrong. Instead, she snarled again and walked

away. Okay, this was it. We had crossed the “red line in the sand” except that I would act. You see, I could only take so much of being stuck with my parents every moment. The togetherness was becoming a little much. I’m sure that they felt the same. All of the closeness was weighing on all of us. I couldn’t wait for Martha to arrive. Then, I could have a little solace from their constant interruptions in my life.

“Anna, my parents and I saw that wretched girl and the boy that was just here. Are they an indication of the type of people with whom you enjoy associating? If they are, we are shocked. I have asked you several times to accompany me for walks and other things, but you always refuse. Don’t tell me that you prefer the likes of those characters to a man such as me, a real man.”

He smiled as he pointed to the earlier space where Louie had sat.

I wanted to barf all over his perfectly ironed Brunello Cucinelli slim fitting shirt. He looked like a movie star. Just looking at him made me all hot and bothered. I couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. Never in my life had I experienced this feeling. I hoped that I wasn't getting sick before Martha arrived. "Kyle, you are not the real man. Louie is real. Matie is real. You are shallow and mean-spirited. Besides, you don't even like me so why the games? Can't we just be 'two ships passing quietly in the night'? I don't want to spar with you and those smiling parents."

Now, I pointed into the air.

"Are you insulting my parents? How dare you?"

Sparks flew from his eyes.

"Kyle, I'm not insulting anyone. I want peace, just peace."

I smiled and batted my eyelashes. What was wrong with me? My face was flushed

and hot every time that I looked into those pools of baby blues.

Kyle looked deeply into my eyes. I melted. Then, he turned and walked away. He must realize the spell which he cast over women. Even mom had stated that he was the second best looking man she ever saw. Herbert was the first.

Tired from all of the emotional banter, I carefully rose from the cushion in the back of the boat and stumbled toward the side.

“Not so quickly, young lady! We need to discuss those two men who are vying for your affections. I vote for Kyle. There is not a comparison between that scrappy kid, Louie, and the likes of a gentleman such as Kyle Vanderclift. Are you crazy girl? Any girl on this earth, plus her parents, would die to be loved by him. He cares for you; it is evident.”

Herbert now stood before me. Didn't these people think that I had any smarts? The entire day, everyone had told me

what to think, feel, and how to act. I was sick of it.

“Dad, you are so wrong about this. I would choose Louie Moreau over that shallow, self-serving person.”

I pointed to the space where Kyle had stood earlier. We all appeared insane as we randomly pointed into the air. Maybe the heat had fried our brains?

“When will you accept the fact that he isn’t interested in me? I am nothing to him. You said it, every girl wants him, and so do her parents. Why would he choose an overweight, almost blind girl with bad skin?”

Dad looked shocked.

“Dearest Anna, you need to look in the mirror. Your skin glows with health, and it is kissed by the sun. You have lost ten pounds now and need new clothes since the old ones seem to hang on you. Mom was just saying that she wants to take you and Martha shopping as a reward to you

for your hard work. Anna, you are truly beautiful.”

Could it be? Matie had stated over, and over that, I had changed. I also saw a change in my skinny friend. I had lost weight; she had filled out. Her chest was developing little boobs; I also had. We were both changing. She could see it in me. I could see it in her, but neither of us noticed the change in ourselves.

“Anna, stop crying and follow me.”

Like a zombie, I followed Herbert down below. He led me to the berth he shared with Abby. He held me in front of her full-length mirror, and he smiled.

“Anna, you look at yourself.”

“Yeah, okay, I’ve gotten a little prettier.”

I returned his smile.

“No, you haven’t gotten a ‘little prettier.’ You are beautiful. Look, I want you to look at yourself. Don’t be afraid of the woman who is staring back at you. It



must happen. You are no longer a little girl, and that is as it should be. You must embrace this lovely creature and take care of her. Show her respect and make sure that everyone else does. If someone fails to honor you, then you just move on. Learn to expect only the best.”

Dad appeared blurred as tears filled my eyes. Later, those words came to mind whenever I felt insecure. At that time, I didn't want to grow into a young woman. I liked my ugly self. That person, I understood.

For the first time this summer, I looked at myself. Recently, I pulled my dark locks away from my face. My skin appeared clear and radiant from the sun and special medication that the dermatologist prescribed. The most shocking thing was that I had a figure. I possessed a rather impressive body. My clothes hung on me because of the weight that I had lost, but I looked great. It hit me that I needed to wear a light lipstick and a little mascara.

Why not play up my assets? I had worked hard to attain this look. Even Kyle seemed to be attracted to me or was he just playing games?

Just at that moment, a familiar voice softly said, “Anna, you are beautiful.”

I turned to see my dear Martha standing in the doorway. She had gained a little more weight. Her hair was cut much too short. Her mom must have tried to help her appearance, but there wasn’t much to be done. It wasn’t meanness which caused me to think those words but honest affection from me, her friend.

Then it occurred to me that I did have a choice. I could be beautiful with just a little more effort. Martha would never be. I fell into her arms of kindness. We both cried. Often, I have wondered if she cried for the loss of her friend, Anna, the “ugly duckling” or the fact that I had changed; she could not. We had crossed another mark drawn in the sand. No longer did we share the “ugly duckling thing.” For the

longest time, we held each other and cried.

Martha explained that Mom had called her right after Matie left and asked her to come early. Martha's parents were gracious enough to allow her to change the ticket. Unlike Matie, Martha arrived without the fanfare and drama. I thought just "simple, without frills" Martha; who was the best friend in the entire world. How blessed I felt at that moment. A *Circle of Friends* had bonded to each other because we thought of ourselves as losers. Yes, Candace and SaraBeth were gorgeous; I always wondered why they hung with the likes of us? Still, Matie and I had crossed into their world. Dearest Martha was left behind. This realization made me cling to her with fear. We were all changing. What would this create for each of us and our Circle?

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Again, I pull the old, worn journal to my chest as I read the letter which I wrote to Martha copied in my treasured book:

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## TIME WITH MARTHA

*Even today, many years later, I think back on my days with you, dear Martha. How did my mom know that I needed you, my dear friend? The odd thing is that I did finally embrace my newly found womanhood just as Dad suggested, but in doing so, I changed in such a profound way. The childish bond between my mom and me altered. Sure, I still adored her but in a different way. As much as I hate to admit, there was now a feeling of competition. I found myself looking for fault in everything that she did and said. Such behavior was repulsive to me, but it was as though I couldn't control my rudeness. Dad would look at me with surprise. He was taken aback as much as I. Dearest Abby was a rock. Never did she ask me why the*

*change or never did she "take me on." She remained the same. It was as though she understood. After all, she was the one who invited you to arrive earlier than planned because she understood my struggle with womanhood.*

*Instead of playing cards with Abby on the stern in the evenings, now, Martha, you and I walked all over Annapolis and returned much later than I would if I had been alone. Then, the two of us played cards until late in the night. I'm sure that our laughter upset the peace of many besides Herbert and Abby's sleep, but no one complained. Maybe it does take a village to raise a child because I needed so much nourishing at that delicate time in my life.*

*Another unusual thing that occurred, you will never believe this: Kyle fell in love with you, Martha. I would never have thought this possible. After his comments about Matie and Louie, I figured he would hate you, but he was drawn to you*

*like metal to a magnet. It wasn't a romantic love; it was a deep friendship between the two of you. You appeared to understand Kyle and accept his meanness. You understood him. How could someone so kind befriend someone so shallow and mean?*

*We were an odd group. The four of us became inseparable. Kyle; Louie; you, Martha; and yours truly became close. Evenings now found us accompanying Dad and Mom to dinner. Then the four of us would walk all over the city together. The funny thing is that without planning it when we were just walking around, you and Kyle had your heads together while Louie and I followed laughing and hugging. However, whenever we entered restaurants or theaters, Kyle and I appeared the couple while you and Louie held hands. It was not at all planned but extremely odd.*

*Those were such special times for me as I crossed the boundary from child to*

*woman. Remember how surprised you and I were that my parents even allowed me to invite Kyle and Louie to accompany us to Solomons? The two boys slept in the main saloon. Maybe it crowded things for us, but it remained divine.*

*"Anna, I don't see how this will work. Honey is not big enough for two single girls and two single boys. What about your bathroom? You only have one. Won't this be a little inconvenient? The situation could prove disastrous."*

*I begged and pleaded until Dad recanted. You and I had decided that we couldn't bear sailing without Kyle and Louie.*

*On a dark summer's morning, long before the sun rose in the early July sky, Dad motored Honey down the Chesapeake to Solomons. Everyone had been there numerous times except you, Martha. The entire day was without theatrics, unlike Matie's experience. You calmly enjoyed the elements without the seasickness and*

*other escapades of Matie. We tied at the dock, and then the four of us took our bikes out for a ride. The boys used my parent's bikes while you used the extra one which always accompanied us on the boat. It was unbelievable to witness the change in Kyle! Now, he seemed peaceful and pleasant to everyone. I'll bet that the shark family would not have recognized the only son whom they adored. What was it about you, Martha? Everyone appeared to love you even though you withdrew into yourself most of the time.*

*We rode all over Solomons on the bikes. One morning, Dad took us all to a little restaurant which he loved. The six of us enjoyed his favorite breakfast, cream beef on toast. Do you recall that?*

*It was enjoyable watching how differently my friends reacted to the same circumstances. Time with Matie was different from time with you even though we did many of the same things. The day which began in the same way, took a different*



*turn as you made choices and suggestions for the day.*

*One thing was the same; everyone loved the buckets of blue crabs which we dumped on the wrinkled newspaper covering the old tables. Together, we laughed away hours of beautiful sunsets. The next day, we arose early with laughter at the gorgeous sunrise. Most of those kids had never experienced the beauty of a sunrise. They expressed shock that the sunrise could be as breathtaking as the red ball at night which fell from the sky in splendor. I, Anna Polis, daughter of Herbert, Captain Ahab, the sailor, already knew this heavenly sight.*

*After two days, we headed toward St. Michaels. Many boaters enjoyed setting-off fireworks there. Dad always wanted to watch them. The Bay would fill with vessels of all types. Large, small, sailing and motor boats packed the space for the display of fireworks. Because of our early departure, we arrived in the Bay of St.*

*Michaels early enough to claim the perfect spot to anchor. After we had secured the boat, we all piled into the dingy to pick our lunch place. Mom and Dad now let the four of us sit together as we ordered our meal and laughed loudly over the day's events. I had never been this happy. Often, I found Kyle staring at me with a big smile. He genuinely cared for me. I was sure of this. Was it something that you had said to him or would his feelings have happened without your visit? Who knows?*

*The only drama occurred that evening as we all prepared for the explosions in the sky. A large yacht anchored beside us. There were so many boats that maneuvering between them was a chore. Plus the dingy for their boat was large. The captain asked if one of the "kids" would take our smaller boat to pick up his attorney. He explained that they were "way north in a red boat." The four of us decided that Louie should be the one to go. Can you*

*believe that we ever thought that Louie was poor? The Captain offered one hundred dollars if we would agree. Louie was the one who needed the cash, we thought. He set off as we laughingly said, "How many red boats can be here?"*

*Wrong! Poor Louie, the minutes ticked past without his return. Dad paced Honey even the people on the next boat looked concerned.*

*"I don't know what happened. My friends say the kid hasn't arrived yet. Apparently, there isn't a sign of him. I am very sorry. This entire episode is my fault. I should never have asked a kid to do this."*

*Words from the boat owner who radioed his friend, the attorney, who may have caused the demise of my dearest Louie.*

*My mind was saying that we should have let Kyle go, but I didn't say anything.*

*"Hey guys, I hate to do this to you, but do you mind if I get someone else to go pick up my friend? Dinner is ready and getting*

*cold. We are sorry for the kid, but he'll be okay."*

*His big smile and encouragement did not soothe our worry. The cavalier attitude, which the Captain of the fancy yacht displayed, made me angry. Many bad things could have happened to our Louie. We may never find him in all of the madness. I had imagined him being held prisoner on some foreign, dirty boat.*

*The fireworks penetrated the night, but we all searched the water for the dingy. Night had descended. Mom began to cry. It was a nightmare. You, Martha, remained calm. You were the rock for us all. Softly, you spoke prayers of encouragement for our lost friend. Suddenly, the boat began to rock. Up over the side climbed an ashen-colored Louie. He appeared exhausted. His hands were shaking. All of us, even Kyle, hugged him in relief. We waited for his explanation. Had someone abused or hurt him? Something was very wrong.*

*"Well, I'm happy to be back. You guys can't imagine the number of vessels out there. By the way, Martha, there were hundreds of red yachts. How was I supposed to know which one with the vague directions he gave?"*

*Louie pointed at the large boat beside us where the happy occupants were eating and drinking. Apparently, they quickly forgot about Louie.*

*It was apparent that he felt embarrassed. We didn't know quite what to say to comfort him. All of a sudden, a strange head popped over the side of our boat as a stranger caused it to "rock and roll" once again. Do you recall all of this?*

*"Which one is the kid that tried to find me?"*

*Obviously, this was the attorney who caused the mayhem.*

*With a broad smile, he held up a hundred dollar bill. The smile on Louie's face said it all. No more comforting was needed.*

*We only spent one night in St. Michaels before moving to Oxford. You had hated the noise and commotion there, and Louie was glad not to be reminded of his failure. We ate dinner each night at the Robert Morris Inn while the soothing pace of by-gone days obliterated previous stress. After your departure, Martha, which was easy and without drama, I sat alone in the bow of the boat. What would happen now with Kyle and me? Had this entire change in him been some reaction to a trait which he saw in you? You must have reminded him of someone. Maybe it was you that he desired to spend time with, not me. The answer to this situation would prove to be disastrous.*

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Now, I must stop to brace myself. Where my mind was going would be difficult. Time was running out for me before I must dive into the painful part of my past.

Taking a deep breath, I look again at the light from the silver moon.

*You are in a good place, Anna. It is time to lay the pain aside. Duncan needs you.*

Just at that moment, the love of my life staggers into the room. He joins me by the silver-lighted window. Lovingly, he wraps big, strong arms around me. The silver light shines into his eyes of deepest brown and onto his shiny hair of ebony. He is beautiful. Sadly, I remember a time when I returned the engagement ring which I proudly wear each day now. My selfish proclamation that I, “Didn’t need him anymore” had broken his heart. What a lie, I suffered each day until he stood before me later with a smile and a friend. Out of all of the blessings of my life. He is the greatest.

“Anna, darling, please return to our bed. What are you doing down here in the early morning hours alone?”

He flashes the smile which only he possesses. The light reflects from his perfect teeth.

“Burying ghosts!”

“You did that a long time ago.”

“Not really! I have tried to hide the pain. After all of these years, I do realize the futility of holding onto it, but I can’t seem to let it go. For some reason, now, I believe that I can. For ever how long this takes, I must relive those days of betrayal. If I stay up the rest of the night, I will sleep all day tomorrow. Unlimited sleep is the benefit of marrying a successful man.”

“Then, I’ll sit right here beside you, for moral support, you understand.”

“Nope, I’ve got to do this alone. You have a busy day tomorrow. Thank you, but only I can do this.”



Morosely, he nods and heads toward our bed. As he reaches the top of the stairs, he stops once more and smiles.

How did I ever get him as my husband?

“Thank you, God. You are amazing.”

Now, I continue my journey into the Hell of the past which refuses to abandon my tormented mind:

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## SARABETH WHEELER

The dreamy summer days were running out for us. Only enough time remained for SaraBeth’s visit; then, my family needed to start the trek from Annapolis back to Savannah which would require a good week to ten days. Dread filled me with the thoughts of returning to my boring life at the Academy. What would happen to my relationship with Kyle? How about Louie? I loved both of them in different ways.

Kyle and I were in the comic shop with Louie. We were helping stock the shelves. This season was the best summer that Louie's uncle ever had in sales at his shop. It seemed that Louie had added a great deal to the base of customers. The kid was knowledgeable and very likable. Now, Louie's uncle pressured him to take over the shop instead of attending college. When my friend told me the amount of money that he and his uncle made in the small establishment, it floored me. Obviously, I wasn't the only person who enjoyed reading comics. Louie felt torn between continuing making money or fulfilling his dream of becoming an attorney and practicing in Annapolis. Kyle and I watched our friend struggle with the decision. It was evident to me; he should let his uncle continue running the shop until he graduated. Then, Louie could decide, but the idea of easy money and barely working seemed to be a draw for our dearest friend.

As I watched Louie and Kyle stand on top

of the counter by the cash register and jump as far as they could without knocking the closest stand of books onto the floor, I considered how pathetic they both were. We, girls, are so much more mature than the immature boys. Still, I was enjoying myself so much that time passed way too quickly. When I realized the hour, I ran out of the shop without an explanation. I headed as quickly as possible in the traffic back to *Honey*.

Abby stood on the bow of the boat covering her eyes with her hand. I could tell that she was upset by her stance. When I jumped aboard, she erupted.

“Anna, where have you been? Your dad had to leave to pick up YOUR friend, alone. How is that going to look to Sarah Beth that you invited her but didn’t respect her enough to come to the airport? She will think you rude and uncaring. Your father was not happy! Next year, maybe you will be allowed only one friend. Apparently, these girls don’t mean

that much to you now that you have Louie and Kyle.”

She glared at me and went below.

My other two friends had been considerate enough to take a taxi from Baltimore to Annapolis but not SaraBeth. She always had been “high maintenance” even though her background was modest. I sighed loudly. This entertaining stuff was becoming a little much. Over two hours passed. This episode resembled Matie’s arrival. Drama surrounded us yet again. Poor Dad, it was unfair of me. My pledge to make my parents proud seemed to be remiss. Another thirty minutes passed. I perspired intensely from the heat. Great, it would have to be one of the hottest days of summer when the “Queen of Drama” arrived.

Dad had rented a car for us, but we barely had driven it because we used the boat or walked everywhere. SaraBeth’s selfishness forced him to drive to Baltimore in

the heat and deal with the aggravation of the airport. At least, I had asked her to travel lightly.

Just as I nodded off to sleep, I heard the melodious Southern drawl of my dear friend.

Earlier, I had sent the same letter to all three girls. Martha and Matie honored my request to travel lightly and bring only one storable bag. To my shock, I looked down the boardwalk to see Dad and another man struggle with five huge, hard pieces of luggage. They were gigantic and heavy. Again, I sighed. She would not ever receive an invitation back to our boat!

Her attire also surprised me. My instructions had been carefully laid out. All you needed were cool tops, shorts, and boat shoes. This trip was not the time to be the label for *Vogue*. She walked down the dock between the two men, who struggled with her overpacked luggage, on this dis-

gustingly hot day. This beautiful, fresh woman looked like a model of perfection and grace. SaraBeth's porcelain, alabaster skin looked ridiculous against the rest of us who bore the elements from the harshness of the sun. Even though we all tried to protect ourselves, it was impossible with this amount of intense sunlight, not to turn brown. The Queen walked stylishly in her hand-me-downs of the finest heels and strapless white dress on the market. Her large sun hat of black straw with a giant white bow looked beautiful but silly. I shook my head in desperation as I walked toward her with my biggest smile.

“Wow, SaraBeth, that is a great deal of heavy, hard luggage. I'm not sure where we will put it all. Did you not receive my letter?”

I frowned.

“Yes, of course, I received the silly old letter! Don't you recall? You made us re-

ply that we got those boring old instructions. What do you mean that you don't have room to store my stuff? Just look at this big ole boat. It is so, large. Oh, Mr. Polis, I love your yacht. Will you let me drive it some? Maybe I can 'Come on it.' Isn't that a boat term? See, I've done my homework. I read a little of that big, old, blue book called, now what was it? Chap-pies?"

She smiled innocently. The other man looked at her as if she made sense. Dad looked like a cartoon character as his eyes were spinning in his head. I couldn't imagine being shut up with her in the car all of that time as they drove from the airport in Baltimore back to Annapolis.

"What happened that it took so long, Dad? Mom and I were getting worried."

Poor Dad staggered over the side of the boat as the other man looked dreamily at SaraBeth. Then the kind stranger passed all five of her rather overstuffed bags to

Dad who presented him with a hundred dollar bill. The man gladly snatched it from Dad's hand and hugged SaraBeth a little too tightly.

My friend, who was accustomed to hugs from the members of the opposite sex, only smiled displaying her perfect teeth. Abby stumbled out of her cave from a long nap looking a little confused at all the luggage lining our once clear deck. "What is all of this?"

"Mom, please welcome Dear SaraBeth. All of this is her luggage."

I waved my hand to demonstrate the number of pieces.

Loudly, Mom sighed. Dad fell onto the cushion of the stern covered in perspiration and groaned.

"I believe that I have a hernia. I'm not sure how we are going to get home. We may need to leave the boat here and fly back to Savannah. I'll pay a captain to



bring the boat home later.”

I can't say that his words disappointed me. Already, I dreaded the long trip home in this heat. Still, it made me angry that because of my selfish friend, we may need to change our plans. Dad loved that trip back home even if Mom and I dreaded the thought.

SaraBeth stood there in the center of her luggage with a million-dollar smile. She looked so beautiful and cool. The rest of us were drenched in sweat with our hair standing up, even Abby. As ridiculous as SaraBeth appeared, dressed in her heels and strapless dress, she looked beautiful. I hated her. No more feeling as if I couldn't hate her because she was so good, and kind, and loved Jesus. No, I hated her. That was a fact.

Then, who should appear? You've got it. Kyle and Louie came laughing up to the boat. When they saw HER, they stopped their ridiculous banter and stared.

"Wow, you are more beautiful than Matie."

Stupid Louie fell under the spell of the "blonde bomber."

"Well, of course, I am more beautiful than little ole Matie. Is she beautiful? I never thought so."

The blond bomber batted her baby blues for effect.

Another set of baby-blues seemed glued to her chest which had grown considerably in one summer. Matie and I now sported boobs, but SaraBeth's looked like Dolly Parton sized perched on her alabaster chest. How could that happen? How could her breasts have increased in size so drastically? What had happened to generous, sweet, innocent SaraBeth? Mom and I looked at each other. This time together was going to be a long and miserable week if something didn't change.

"SaraBeth, these are my two new friends, Louie and Kyle. Guys, meet SaraBeth Wheeler."

Looking like *Dumb and Dumber*, they salivated on themselves. I felt sorry for the idiot men. Abby just turned on her heel and walked away.

"Dinner at 7 pm tonight for those who want to join us at Middleton Tavern."

She stumbled down the ladder back to her nap. Dad's groans brought her back as she assisted him to his bed. Mom rolled her eyes at me.

"Well, you must be Matie's boyfriend, Louie. Aren't you the handsome one?"

SaraBeth hugged him a little too tightly as her gigantic chest plunged into his skinny frame.

Louie's legs almost gave way. He had probably never had anyone play him before. Kyle smiled wisely. You see, Kyle and I knew what SaraBeth was doing. Her

ploy to make Louie look like her love interest should have created a longing from Kyle for her attentions. Kyle was a player. He knew.

"Okay then. I believe that I'll catch a nap in the air conditioning. See you a little before seven, Anna. I'll see you later, Louie and Miss Wheeler."

Kyle kissed her hand. SaraBeth melted. I knew. She was hooked on him. Poor Louie stood there with no clue of what just transpired. The week of games had begun.

"What did that darling Kyle mean? 'Our yacht has air conditioning.'"

She smiled broadly.

"Sorry, SaraBeth, we do not have air conditioning. I failed to include that morsel of knowledge in my letter. Since you did not abide by anything that I said; I guess it doesn't matter."

"What? Of course, it matters. How will I

continue to look stunning in this awful old heat? Ugh! I want to go home. No one wants me to stay."

SaraBeth looked at poor Louie.

"I want you, SaraBeth. I mean, I want you to stay. You can come to my house. We have air conditioning. My parents will assure your comfort."

"Really? Well, that is just lovely. Anna, will your dad carry my luggage to Mr. Louie's house? We can't expect this handsome man to do it alone. Not that he couldn't do it with all of those big ole muscles."

I thought that I might barf on her beautiful, perfectly ironed, white dress. When did Louie spout muscles? Probably about the same time that SaraBeth grew those rather massive breasts. Her tightly fitting dress barely covered them. Plus, you could see through it. What had happened to my friend? I was only gone a few months. What other changes waited for me back at school? I watched as SaraBeth

dialed her parents for permission to stay with Louie.

## SARABETH AND LOUIE

Instead of a nightmare of a week, it turned out to be lots of fun. SaraBeth's parents had no problem with her staying at the Moreau family home after they called Louie's parents. My parents watched her walk away with someone who was a complete stranger to her and over the threshold of another complete group of strangers; none of whom we had ever met. It was utterly bizarre, but welcome to my life and those I called "friends."

Later that evening, the handsome couple arrived at Middleton wrapped in each other's arms laughing. When SaraBeth looked at Kyle seated beside me, she got THAT look. I knew it well. My handsome dinner companion caused many women's legs to almost buckle which was odd since she also appeared to be enamored with Louie Moreau; the kid with skinny

arms and big, ole, yellow, bucked teeth. His appearance had not changed although all of my friends had changed except Martha.

It seems that Matie hit the jackpot with her new love. According to SaraBeth, the Moreau home wasn't a home but a castle. Their private butler fell for her act and wished to wait on her, "Hand and foot." Nothing that she desired was off limits. Louie's prestigious family was not so easily impressed but were kind to her. Imagine my feelings when I learned that I too could have lived with the Moreau family those past few months in absolute luxury, but of course, Dad would never have allowed me.

SaraBeth held my family hostage all evening as she described the extreme wealth of none other than one of my best friends, Louie Moreau. I always thought that he needed money or that he "barely got by." Apparently, the comic book shop was a guise for his uncle's boredom, noth-

ing more. The fact that Louie turned it into a cash cow should have alerted me to the scrappy kid's virtues.

Louie ended up not letting Matie or me down. Later in the week, as SaraBeth talked with a group of strange guys on the dock about "her sailing boat" which also turned out to be *Honey*, Louie told me that he fell for the beauty of the blond bomber, but that was all. He confessed that all of his life, he dreamed of having a girl like SaraBeth accompany him all around but would never trade, "Our Matie" for the likes of SaraBeth Wheeler.

"Really, Anna, could you think that I am so fickle? When I say that I remain dedicated to Matie, I mean those words. I am in love with her. We will be married and do great things together. One of which will be having a house full of beautiful children."



The beautiful children thing seemed like a stretch to me at that time, but they ended up doing all of the above.

Kyle also did not disappoint me. Our relationship deepened despite SaraBeth's useless attempts to prevent it. Some men were not as shallow and stupid as I had earlier thought, at least not those two. They were right-on with their assumptions and delivered pristine performances as they made SaraBeth feel as if she was "Queen of their Hearts" while remaining faithful to all of those for whom they had real feelings.

Dad's back recovered by the end of the day, so we decided to set sail early for St. Michaels the next morning. We would wait to be sure that he was better before making additional plans to sail to Solomons. Kyle and I were sitting on the deck enjoying a cup of coffee.

“Kyle, you are a nerd. They will never make it on time. I'll bet you that SaraBeth has never arisen this early in her modest

background life. I know that Louie will regret ever inviting her inside his home. She is making them all miserable.”

Suddenly, soft southern laughter ricocheted down the dock. There came the dynamic duo at 5 a.m. strolling together happily. How did Louie accomplish that? He never explained. A smile would always be my answer.

SaraBeth had managed to deliver. Never did she become sea-sick or grumpy with the heat during her week with us. Just as she never appeared to sweat or look disheveled. She obviously should have been Abby's little girl instead of me. They always say that Southern women don't sweat; they glisten. They never met me. I'm the one with large rings of sweat stains surrounding my armpits. What was I to do?

When we arrived at St. Michaels, SaraBeth said a most intelligent thing.

"Mr. Polis, why don't we just stay here? I love it. Let's save Solomons and Oxford for the future."

Her innocent sweet smile only backed up my earlier feelings for this girl. The kid was not only beautiful but very smart.

Why had my family jumped through hoops running back and forth, up and down the Waterway? It made more sense to enjoy one fair town at a time. Enjoy we did! St. Michaels wowed us all five of the days that we stayed there.

By now, Kyle and Louie had become the best of friends. SaraBeth and I heard their quiet laughter slide under our door at night. Our little fans could not obliterate their glee. The blond girl with blue eyes loved *Honey* and sailing. Maybe, because she could retire to the Moreau mansion upon our return, while I was forced to suffer because of "dear ole Dad."

Gladly, we took my friend on "the" tour. SaraBeth experienced all of the things

that we did before with Matie and Martha. She was much easier than we earlier thought to entertain. Her favorite thing was sitting on the dock each evening at sunset. Everyone would describe what they saw in the marshmallow clouds which displayed God's handiwork. Sometimes, we would quietly pray for blessing and favor from the Creator. Quietly, she touched us all profoundly, and we felt blessed that God had joined us with this remarkable creature.

Her time to exit us arrived much too quickly. I think that I saw a tear in Louie's eye as he brought her to the boat to say goodbye. His chauffeur was going to drive her to the airport. The same one, who on her arrival picked up her five large suitcases after she left with Louie for her stay at the Moreau mansion. Thanks to Henry, the Moreau chauffeur, who spared Dad's back as well as his sensibilities by not having to face the airport crunch. Dad could remain in his dream world, *Honey*.

For the rest of our days, the four of us: Mom, Dad, Louie, and I would discuss the magical spell of the lovely and gracious SaraBeth on board *Honey*. Later on, those treasured memories were almost destroyed by what occurred.

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“Well, that wasn’t so bad.”

I say this to myself realizing that was a good memory.

*Just wait, Anna; the rest about her is not pretty.*

I stare at the silver moon outside on the beach of my peaceful cottage.

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## BACK TO REALITY

Even today, so many years later, when I find myself tied in knots over some seemingly impossible situation: Firstly, I pray and turn it over to God. Secondly, I try to

remember the Intracoastal Waterway and THAT path from Annapolis south to Savannah. Is there anything more diverse and beautiful? I can't recall it!

We left at five am as I pushed us away from the Municipal Marina in Annapolis with a mixture of joy and sorrow. When you are thirteen, the anticipation of another school year can't help but produce excitement even if you hate school. Hope springs eternal, I guess. No matter how bad the year before may have been, the possibility that this new one may bring undeserved popularity and better grades is hopeful.

This summer, I had crossed the threshold from a little girl to a young woman. Not only that, I changed from being a "loser" and the *ugliest girl at the Academy*, well, besides Matie who also changed. Now, we were labeled "Beautiful Women." Was it so? Would the kids at school suddenly realize the change? I could only hope. Hadn't I received the verdict from Mom

and Dad? Okay, that doesn't count but how about SaraBeth and Louie as well as even Kyle? Speaking of Kyle, we departed each other on that last night with a teary show of goodbyes and promises that we would be inseparable with the new school year. Wait until my Circle and other friends witnessed me walking the illustrious halls with my "hunk" of a boyfriend? Would they believe it? No! I didn't even think that it was possible myself. When I contemplated holding HIS hand as we kissed quickly before my next class, I found my palms sweaty and a nauseous feeling overtaking me. Also last night, Kyle kissed me for the first time. It was sudden. I mean, he pointed over towards Middleton Tavern, and as I turned, not seeing whatever it had been, he planted one on me. Right on the lips, it came. Weakness flooded over me. I'm not exaggerating, my knees buckled and I almost fell until I felt his strong arms gently shielding me. I have always heard that you never forget the first kiss. This one

was much more than unforgettable. The kiss was sincere and very romantic. I knew at that moment; we were destined to be wed someday in the future. It was back to dreams of becoming Mrs. Kyle Vanderclift with the passel of perfect kids following me. Those children would be the most beautiful in the world. Out of the six perfect specimens: three would be blond with blue eyes and three would be dark with shiny black hair and brown eyes that framed happy faces who were drenched in love and security because they had parents who adored each other.

"Anna, I said did you notice the Anhinga fly past? Where are you this morning? Ah, could it be that the arms of none other than the handsome Kyle Vanderclift hold you yet today? I witnessed that kiss last night. That was some kiss, hey?" Mom and Dad laughed as if they orchestrated the entire scene. They weren't peeking into my privacy, but Dad had come to keep *Honey* from bumping into the dock



due to a change in wind direction. It seemed that as he stepped up from down below, Kyle and I lovingly pulled away from that juicy smack on the lips which I just kept recalling! Did it happen? I felt as if I was in shock with the recurring memory. School just couldn't start soon enough. As much as I suddenly looked forward to the trek back to Savannah, I couldn't wait to be home and walking the halls of the Academy with "My Hunk!"

"Yes, Dad, the Anhinga was gorgeous." That bird made me recall the summer when I must have been about nine years old. Dad had given me rowing lessons in the dinghy. I had equated that experience with how it felt to be able to drive for the first time. When Mom and Dad let me row the dinghy alone from the dock over to the shops in St. Michaels, I failed to heed their warnings. I felt invincible, so I rowed farther than instructed because I was Anna Polis, "Queen of the Dinghy!" I rowed close to a marsh where a sign tow-

ered in the water. Atop that sign, on which I can't recall the wording, sat an enormous nest. It turned out to be a home of Anhingas who loved to live there. In the rather overbuilt nest, which spilled over the depth of the piling, there resided a group of babies. Heed my warning, please: *Do not ever row your dinghy close to those giant, peaceful bugers* (my Urban Dictionary again). They turn into raging bullies when their young are pulling on them all day. Just as our parents can become out of control after a day with their brood, those guys become raging maniacs. I heard not only the shouts of Mom and Dad but complete strangers yelling that I was *too close!* "Get out at once. Girl, what is wrong with you?"

I looked up to see a giant bird with the wingspan of a football field looking down at me. Her eyes seemed to be red with anger. At any moment, she was coming to visit me, and it wouldn't be for tea. I hauled it away with such speed that her

thoughts of retaliation quickly were withdrawn. That was not a smart move, I can tell you.

At that moment, Kyle invaded my thoughts. Matie confided last night, on one of our many phone conversations, that she suffered from the same invasion of her very body by Louie Moreau. When I told her about the vast wealth she would inherit someday from the newly labeled “handsome” Mr. Moreau, she couldn't believe her ears.

"You mean, our Louie is loaded? Wow, who would have think?"

Right. Who would have conceived that the two of us would begin this school year with boyfriends? Matie's long distance relationship seemed romantic and exciting. My ability to look into those baby blues of Kyle made me long for that first school day which was now a little over a week away. Dad would need to put the "pedal to the metal" to get us home in

time. I wasn't worried. My Dad could do it.

The weather, on those steamy August days, while we sojourned deeper into our beloved south, was perfect. The wind rose early each morning and lasted all day.

This blessing allowed us to do some serious sailing before we passed the cramped quarters of Norfolk and the bastions of massive ships. They were interesting to behold, but after a few days of freely sailing, as if we were in the deep ocean, it seemed confining to be in those tight quarters.

There was nothing like feeling the wind behind you when it popped the sails and made them full. All of us spent the days picking out gorgeous vessels of mainly Hinckleys and Swans as well as Camper Nicholson beauties. We all huddled together on the bow and pointed at them.

North Carolina made us want to bow our heads in gratitude for the beauty she offered as we passed her massive waters.

Deep sounds, such as Pamlico, could never be forgotten. Just as unforgettable was the mighty Cape Fear and the problems that arose as we found that the markers changed at Carolina Beach from a man-made cut into the river. Suddenly, the water was shallow in various areas. It certainly woke up the sailor, from the ambience of relaxation of the past days, into the need to remain focused. It was here that the old standby *Walter Cronkite's Guide to the Intracoastal Waterway* was vital.

I kept the old Bible of the Waterway in my hands most days as we traveled this ribbon of ever-changing water. Cronkite included each marker in the book written by the man who was often "On Assignment" the name of his beauty of a yacht. Dad would not have ventured so confidently if I were not by his side with the treasure of information from which marina to stay in, and great restaurants of the

area, as well as important boating guides, thanks to Mr. Cronkite.

South Carolina, especially after Myrtle Beach, offered long, lazy turns into meandering waters graced by towering, old trees draped in Spanish Moss. Long strands of the moss cascaded, spilling over the ancient artifacts of trees. Early in the morning, as the steam rose from the water, I could swear (not that I would) that I saw a fairy or mermaid dip under the waters. In the evenings, the scene appeared eerie and downright scary. I thought of *Deliverance on the Water*. No kidding, it was so frightening that even Dad admitted that he felt something strange.

Much too quickly, we found ourselves close to Savannah and home.

Dad yelled, "God!" We assembled in the back of *Honey* to hug each other as we offered thanks to the God of the Universe. This year, Mom and I hugged as we realized that things would never be the same

for us again. In one summer, I seemed to change into a young woman with a handsome boyfriend. My parents said that they were proud of me. I could see it on their faces. No longer was I Anna, the zit covered girl who stumbled over her feet. Thanks to the dermatologist and optometrists of Annapolis, I now had clear vision and skin plus I wore contact lenses. The personal trainer, who became a good friend, claimed credit for the waist which I now proudly sported and my love, Kyle, took charge of the smile which kissed the lips that he loved. Oh, life was good! I thought.

Life was about to change.

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As I wrap the cover around me, I shiver. This reaction is due to emotion, not the temperature.

*Here it comes, Anna. Can you handle it?*

I look toward the bedroom upstairs and the reprieve it offers. Regretfully, I shake my head.

*Anna, you keep going. Don't wimp out again. You MUST do this!*

Without thinking, I look down at my hands; they are dramatically shaking. A tear runs down my face. They told me not to force these thoughts but I must:

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THE SHOCKER!

Dad cut things close that season. Mom and I barely had time to shop for new clothes for my womanly new figure and purchase school supplies. Excitement pounded in my almost fully developed, new chest.

*Oh, my darling Kyle, we can finally spend days together again! I can't wait.*

I know I almost gag at myself but remember, I was in love!  
The night before classes began the next



day, I could barely sleep. I pictured the same scenario which filled my thoughts for weeks: *When I arrived at the Academy, Kyle would be waiting patiently on the steps. He would grab me with anticipation. Unable to control his passion, he would kiss me with love and adoration. All of the other girls would whisper, "Look, Anna Polis has stolen the heart of Kyle Vanderclift, what a lucky girl she is!"*

Inside, they would hate me because I was now beautiful and desirable. If Kyle Vanderclift loved me, what else was there with which to concern myself? Everyone would love me, right?

The next morning, Mrs. Connelly's little girl and I rode to class with Matie's mom. I would have preferred that Mom took me but didn't want to confuse the schedule since it was Matie's turn to provide transportation. Matie blabbed all the way about Louie and their plans for the upcoming summer. It seemed that since

SaraBeth had such an enjoyable time staying with the Moreaus that Mrs. Connelly was going to allow her daughter to remain with Louie's family for a few weeks. I could just see my parents letting me stay with Kyle. They would be sure that we would meet on the stairs or that I might sneak him into the large, upholstered bed which waited in the guest room of the wealthy Vanderclifts or so I imagined.

*Please Matie, just shut up. Your incessant talking is making me crazy. What if Kyle doesn't love me anymore? I will die or break down into a crying heap. Oh, Dear God, please let him love me, please. Let him be waiting to hold me again.*

Those thoughts made me clasp my hands. Perspiration covered my chest and face. My eyes scanned the steps for a sign of Kyle, but so many students congregated there that I was unable to sight him.

Without even thanking Mrs. Connelly for the ride or waiting for Matie, I ran up the stairs. My heart pounded in my ears. Was I having a heart attack or stroke? It seemed that everyone was looking at me. Did they know something that I didn't?

"Anna, what has happened? You look beautiful. How could you change so much in one summer? The tan looks incredible on you."

*Shut up. Just be quiet. I must find Kyle. He has to be here somewhere.*

The first bell rang angrily and loudly. The rude sounds shattered my thoughts. Quickly, everyone walked away in small groups.

"Anna, what is wrong with you? You look as if you are crazed. What has happened to you? Are you okay?"

Matie appeared genuinely concerned.

"Mom is worried and asked me to see if you need her?"

Matie's voice sounded muffled and far away.

At that moment, the rain came in long, torrential sheets. Quickly, I was soaked. My body just stood there. I tried to move but could not. Matie remained by my side. She was also soaked but continued to shake my shoulders gently. I thought that I might die.

Soon, Mrs. Connelly stood with us. I could feel her guiding me into the car. Matie held me protectively. Nothing or no one could reach me. I couldn't talk, cry, or scream. I could only stare ahead into space. Matie began to cry as her mom spoke soothingly to us. I kept thinking of how hard I tried to look especially beautiful today. For what? HE didn't come.

The thoughts had surfaced in my mind days ago that Kyle should have phoned me. I hate to admit it, but I did try to call him. The message that his phone was disconnected seemed to be incorrect. I as-

sumed that he wrote down his number wrong. Now, what was I to conclude? Thoughts hijacked my mind that maybe a mass killer had shot all of the Vanderclifts and they lay in pools of blood in their massive home by Saint John's Parrish. Perhaps it was a robbery, and all of their valuables stolen.

*I will stand by his grave dressed in black for days refusing to seek solace from the elements. It would be impossible for me to eat or drink anything.*

My eyes looked down at my hands now clutched into fists. Without meaning, my hands spread open and began to shake. I could not make them stop. Coldness flooded my body. Blood swirled in my ears. Sounds seemed muted and my vision blurred. I could hear Matie gently continue her crying.

"Mom, what's wrong with her? What will happen to my friend? I can't live without Anna. I must phone Louie at once."

"Matie, Anna will be fine. We are at her house now. I hope her parents are still here."

Gently with so much love, Mrs. Connelly guided me up the stairs of my home. The rain continued in hard, beating sheets. We were all drenched. Mom opened the door. She still wore her pajamas. A large smile covered her face. Earlier, I could hear her playful banter with my dad as we approached. The door opened widely. Her face seemed to be right in mine. Her screams felt preposterous. What did she know? Dad appeared. Repeatedly, he spoke my name, but I just couldn't respond. I wanted so badly to cry or scream, but I was unable. Then, he slapped me rather hard. That seemed to free something in my very soul. Tears flooded my eyes. The shaking which consumed me increased.

"Dad, I'm cold. May I please have a blanket? Do you know where he is? Dad, where is he?"

"Honey, who? Where is who?"  
Were they insane? Did they not know  
who HE was?

Their ignorant statements made me feel  
angry. I couldn't understand how they  
could not know what I meant which  
added to the severe emotions overcoming  
me.

"Kyle! Dad where is Kyle? There is no  
one else. I must find him!"

My mind kept thinking: *What is wrong  
with me? I can't live without Kyle.*

A part of me felt as if I was broken, now,  
beyond repair.

Calmly, Dad took charge. Relief swept  
over me that someone knew what to do.  
He knew how to save me.

"Abby, please phone 9-1-1. Tell them that  
we have someone in shock."

His voice sounded reasonable, calm, and  
peaceful. He talked as if he was dealing  
with small children. That is the way that I

felt like a young child. Abby calmed, as well as did the Connelly women. I felt myself smile.

"God, I'm in your hands. Help me, Jesus."

Dad held my hand.

"That's correct honey; you are not alone."

Gently, those around me lifted prayers for my well-being. I no longer felt abandoned as before. My greatest fear was that Kyle had done this to me on purpose. Such a realization worked itself into my psyche. I found myself not wanting to believe it but considered that my earlier impressions of him were correct. He hated me and wanted to hurt me. Now, I knew that the love which surrounded me would guide me through the next days as I was forced to deal with all of this pain.

They transported me to the local hospital where the nurses started intravenous fluids mixed with a heavy sedative. Waves of relief from the pain carried me into clouds of protection. I remember thinking



that I didn't ever want to go back to the agony of life. Things were easier in this gentle stupor surrounding me. Never had I felt such peace, ecstasy. Kyle's memory slipped into the past. He was no longer important to me; he didn't matter. If these strangers could provide such protection, I didn't need him anymore.

Dr. Weinstein's brilliance assured me. Weeks passed. It seemed that mostly I slept surrounded in softness. I saw angels smiling at me. Mom and Dad's voices reminded me continually that I was loved and needed. Matie visited daily with funny stories about the latest school scandal. It seemed that Candace and SaraBeth were at odds over who was the best-looking. Such nonsense was what I needed. I desired to return to my bubble at the Academy. Kyle would never hurt me again. Days later, I rose early one morning and showered by myself. My hair was finally clean although I hated the hospital shampoo. Yes, I was better.

Mom arrived earlier than usual. She hit me in the face with her elbow as she hugged me closely. I realized that I was incapable of feeling pain. Numbness still surrounded me, but that was good. The dullness which gently rocked me was what I needed to cope.

*Slowly, Anna, you can do this. Things are the same as they were before you met him.*

*This situation is real. Kyle was not.*

"Anna, I have news of Kyle."

My knees buckled gently. I made it to the bed before collapsing. Could I not have just a few days before confronted with HIS name? I smiled.

"Good, what is it?"

"Louie said that he had called Kyle for weeks. He only received the same generic message which you experienced about "the number being disconnected." Your dad hired a private detective. Anna, honey, it seems that his father has taken a government position. We think that he is

an Ambassador or some such thing. I believe that Kyle was unable to phone you. Probably, the government agents rushed him into the darkness. What I'm attempting to say is that this may not be his fault. Do you understand? Maybe he could not phone you because they prevented it. You must consider that this occurred. Does this make it easier for you?"

"Yes."

I smiled because Kyle Vanderclift was a nonentity in my world. He no longer mattered. I didn't care what happened to him. Probably, those absurd statements were an attempt by my family to provide hope to me amidst the fear which flooded my heart. I prayed that I would never have to face Kyle again. What Mom just said did not make sense. If they lied to protect me, I didn't care.

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All of these things are the reason that everyone now worries about my past trauma. What if my reliving those horrendous thoughts throws me into another state of emotional break down like what happened long ago? My life is too perfect to change. The doctors warned me not to do this.

“Anna, you must let this go now. Don’t keep thinking about past events. It is over and done. Move forward with your life.”

Still, there is a feeling deep in my heart that if I go through the sequence one more time, I can lay it all side. I can only hope. My psychiatrist told me that one day, I could face those things but I must be sure before I relive them.

“Please, God, let this be the end of those unsavory characters.”

I pray that I am now strong enough that I am incapable of another breakdown. Fear-

fully, I return in my mind to those days long ago:

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## YOU CAN'T KEEP A GOOD GIRL DOWN

A week after my discharge from the hospital, for a "nervous breakdown" (that was not the official diagnosis, but there isn't any need to mix words), I began school again feeling numb, and that life was surreal. Those feelings were a good thing. I would be lying if I didn't admit that I was nervous about the reception waiting for me at school. The word "terrified" would be more descriptive. Let's face it, there was still a stigma to mental illness, and I had totally crashed in front of God and all of my classmates. It was impossible not to imagine the rumors going around the Academy.

"Have you seen Anna Polis? She is now quite the beauty, but she fell in love with Stockard Kyle Vanderclift. Can you imag-

ine the nerve of her thinking that HE would be interested in HER?"

Then the mean girls would put their heads together and gossip. I had never witnessed such behavior at my school, but in my mind, it would happen. Maybe the boys would yell, "Slut!" as I walked down the halls. The mean girls would bombard me with labels: *unstable, crazy, fragile, etc.*

Just the same, Matie would remain by my side. Only she phoned each day to check on me. I wondered why no one else in my Circle had called? Probably, they didn't desire any association with me. That was all right. Life was no longer so dramatic to me as before. Things felt more level than ever in my life. It seemed as though I could handle anything. Maybe the new meds caused this strange euphoria? When you are dumped in a public way and humiliated by your first love, not much else can hurt.

"Anyway, nobody's talking about you; in-

stead, everybody is talking about SaraBeth Wheeler and her gigantic knockers. The word is that her parents paid for a boob job. I thought that they were so poor?"

Matie rambled as only she could.

"Really, Matie, that is gutter talk."

"I know, but that's what Louie said last night. I was wondering, how does Louie know so much about breasts? He seems to possess lots of knowledge about the subject. Although, he says that he prefers yours and mine much more than those big ole fake things of SaraBeth."

"Matie, guys come into the world with knowledge of breasts even though they don't own any. Watch any man around a woman who exposes her breasts. The idiots can't keep their eyes off of them even if the subject of their stares doesn't have a chest to show. They are just disgusting! I hate men except for Dad and Louie and Mr. Connelly."

"Yeah! Me too, what good are they anyway?"

We both laughed gaily.

I couldn't wait to see my friends. My hope was that they were still my friends. It concerned me that none of the Circle had phoned. Each day, I asked Mom if anyone called but she replied, "Never anyone but Matie and Louie."

Then, Abby smiled sadly.

It was just as well, once I started classes, it would be difficult to catch up, so I needed to focus on my studies. At least, that's what I told myself.

Mom acted all weird the day before I resumed my "normal" life. It was doubtful that I would ever be classified as that again. She was on the phone constantly and would hang up suddenly when I entered the room. Probably, she was as nervous as me that someone would hurt my feelings or be mean to me and I would lose it again. My stomach was tied in



knots when I went to bed, and my hands were wet with perspiration.

“Jesus, please help me!”

Overwhelmed with terror, that was the only thing that I could say. Fear descended, what if I returned to the catatonic-like state which I previously suffered?

Later, instead of being racked with doubt and fear, I slept like a baby. Jesus does answer prayers. The next morning, I felt completely calm. Mom was a nervous wreck. She kept checking my forehead to be sure that I wasn't freezing as I did before. She drove me to school after we picked up Matie. None of the others of my Circle wanted to ride with us. That was a downer! Most likely, they refused to associate with a loser like me. One who lost it on the school steps because Kyle Vanderclift had dumped me. I guess, embarrassment should have prevented me from smiling so confidently, but if Jesus was with me, well, what else did I need?

Matie kept smiling and patting my hands like I was some older woman going for admission to an old age home.

"Good grief, Matie, I'm fine. Don't worry about me. I promise not to fall apart regardless of whatever happens. You and Mom need to chill. It may be the two of you who receive admission for strokes."

I smiled brightly. Mom and Matie looked at each in doubt.

The ride to school lasted forever. Finally, I closed the door of Mom's Cadillac and waved a confident goodbye. Matie and I walked into the darkness which penetrated the school halls. My confidence wavered a little. Lowering my head, I decided to appear contrite and humble for my earlier behavior. Following Matie, I walked into my first class without raising my head.

"Surprise, Anna! Welcome back. We missed you."

Shrill, girly screams assaulted my ears. The entire class applauded me. Smiles from my friends greeted me. The whole Circle dressed in my favorite color, red. Someone monogrammed their shirts, "WE LOVE YOU ANNA."

SaraBeth Wheeler's chest looked enormous. I remember feeling sorry for her because she looked proud of her new body. Those embroidered words appeared minuscule spread across her ample breasts. We all enjoyed cake and punch. Life seemed as I earlier feared that it might never again, calm.

"We should spike the punch!"

Martha smiled broadly.

"Yeah right, you talk big Martha."

She hugged me tightly. Yes, Jesus heard my prayer. Things were back to normal. Stockard Kyle Vanderclift was truly a thing of the past.

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The sound of Duncan coughing upstairs draws me back to the present. Closer and closer my mind edges toward the worst times. I wish that I had allowed Duncan to sit here with me on this night of remembrances.

“Duncan, I need you,” softly I whisper into the salty night air. My mind says, *At least, this next thought is happy:*

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## MY FIRST MIDDLE SCHOOL DANCE

Matie, Candy, SaraBeth, Martha, Agatha, and I crowded into Agatha’s mother’s Lexus. We couldn’t wait until we had our driver’s license and could drive ourselves, but we weren’t quite old enough yet.

Most of the girls had hit the Magie Noire button a little too strongly. We all wore the same fragrance. Lancome’s scent was the current one until we used it all and then we would change to a new perfume.

From the smells surrounding me, we should run out pretty quickly. Our goal was to discover a “special” fragrance that would remain “ours” forever. We had already tried twelve scents in less than six months. Maybe we were using too much? "Girls, I'm going to have to put the window down. Someone has on way too much fragrance. I can't breathe. You need to remember 'less is more.'"

Mrs. Miller smiled sweetly.

"No! You can't do that. Please, don't lower the window. I just paid to have my hair styled!"

SaraBeth screamed.

Mrs. Miller relented and continued trying to breathe although I was having a hard time as well.

"Oh, my, I'm very nervous. How do I look? Louie hasn't seen me since the summer."

Mattie patted her long, silky locks which were shiny and smooth.

Louie Moreau was flying in for a long weekend. He would be staying with the Connellys. I stared at Matie while she pulled on her dress and applied more lip gloss and yes, another spray of *Magie Noire*. I thought that I might pass out. Matie had turned into a beauty. She would give Candace and SaraBeth a run for the Homecoming Queen, for sure, in our Senior year. We all had assumed that SaraBeth would be the winner and Candy would be the runner-up. Now, Matie had a great chance of being the winner.

"Matie, want me to tell you how I got through my nervous breakdown?"

I lowered my voice to nearly a whisper. It was easier to talk about it, rather than trying to hide it. Just about every girl in school confided in me that she was "having a breakdown." So many needed to know what I experienced and how I had recovered. Matie looked at me with big

eyes. Her white teeth now shined as she smiled, revealing perfectly straight teeth. We had our braces removed at about the same time. Our group felt pleased with the outcome. Good ole SaraBeth Wheeler helped us all. Matie nodded a “yes.”

“Please, Anna, I can’t control my nerves. I need help.”

“Jesus, please help me. That's all you need to say.”

I patted her hand.

“Wow? Just Jesus, please help me?”

Matie sounded doubtful.

I nodded.

“Jesus, please help me. I need him to love me still.”

Her eyes glowed softly with tears in the corners. Yes, I understood the feeling of desperation. Your first love creates doubt for most girls. Trying not to think of the rat, Kyle, I held her hands.

"Now, don't cry or you will ruin your makeup. You look beautiful."

Again I patted her hands as I remembered the time that she drove me insane doing the same thing to me as she continually patted my hands.

Finally, we arrived at the Academy. Everyone hates for Agatha's mother to drive. She travels at about 30 miles per hour the entire way. Her refusal to drive faster is followed by, "I have valuable cargo in my car. It would kill me if anything happened to one of you."

Her sweet smile always melted my heart. As I walked beside Matie, I felt her shivering with excitement and maybe a little fear.

"Matie, it will be okay. You need to relax."

Out of nowhere, the most handsome boy grabbed my slip of a friend and spun her around in circles. It took me several seconds to recognize Louie. He had grown



about three inches and developed muscles. His big ole yellow-corn teeth now smiled revealing braces. Just the same, he was gorgeous. I envied Matie. Maybe I should have chosen Louie instead of Kyle? Then, I would have the best looking guy at the dance tonight plus a fortune waiting for me someday after we were married.

"Well, you girls are a sight for sore eyes. SaraBeth, if your chest gets any bigger, well, you're going to explode!"

Everyone laughed with joy. Louie grabbed me and hugged me tightly. He also hugged SaraBeth. His hold on her appeared a little longer. I guess he felt her heavily endowed chest sticking into his overly developed pecs. They smiled at each other as if they shared a secret.

Louie and Matie danced together as if auditioning for *Dancing with the Stars*. How did they learn those moves? She was the envy of all the girls. Later, she confided that they danced a little in Annapolis on

her last night. I didn't recall that, but Kyle had dominated my attention back then. Briefly, I longed for Kyle. The tears waivered up in my eyes. I dabbed them with my hand. Wiping my face with my hand was not lady-like, but I didn't want anyone to notice. Most of all, I would never want Matie and Louie to think that they caused me to feel uncomfortable or sad in their company. Although Matie was a hit, the other guys hated Louie. He took turns dancing with the Circle. We were, after all, the best looking girls in attendance. I'm not bragging because we were. Louie came to me as the band sang, *Lady in Red*. He knew that was my favorite color and song. He held me tenderly as though I may break.

"So, Lady in Red, how are you? Have you heard from him?"

He pulled back and looked me in the eyes. I could smell a faint hint of an expensive men's cologne but was unable to

define it. Louie should give the girls instructions on how to apply fragrance.

“No, I have not heard anything. Have you? Please, be honest. I can take it.”

He smiled as he gently shook his head.

"You must know that he genuinely cared for you. I can speak for him because he talked about you all of the time. His intention was for the two of you to attend the same university. His plans included inviting you to fraternity dances and parties. He made a lot of plans for you. I know that he cared. There is no doubt of it. You must believe me. I have tried everything to find him. It is as though he fell off the face of the earth. I don't know what happened, but I know that it isn't good. He would never leave you like this.”

Without warning, my legs seemed to give way beneath me. Grabbing onto Louie, I felt grateful that he had filled out. Strong arms enveloped me. He prevented the

others from seeing me come undone once again.

"Anna, should we sit down?"

He started to guide me to some chairs in the corner. The Circle stood there eating snacks.

"Please, don't do that. Louie, I fight each day to hold it together. Believe me; I miss Kyle. Living my life without him is hard. Appearing to be stronger than I am is necessary to keep so many from worrying about me. Mom, Dad, Matie, they worry so much."

"You've got that right. Matie talks about you all of the time. Why don't you call me sometime? I won't reveal anything that we discuss. Maybe having someone far away would help you talk more freely. I wanted to ask, how did you recover from such a drastic event? I don't know that I could carry on without Matie."

He looked sadly into my eyes.

"You wouldn't understand."

"Please, Anna, tell me. What did you do besides the psych stuff and meds?"

"You only say, 'Jesus Help Me.' I know that you don't know Him as I do, but I think that He would hear you just the same."

Louie held me carefully.

"If anything ever happens to Matie, I'm coming for you, Anna."

He kissed me quickly and softly. That was the first time since my breakdown that I truly smiled.

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Gaily, I laugh now. There exist many happy times mixed with the pain in my mind. I had forgotten so much of this in my quest to "lay it all aside."

"Louie, Matie, I love you."

Again, I speak to the quiet, dark air streaming into the silvery room.

They are happily married now with three children. We frequently visit whenever their schedules allow.

As I clutch the old journal, another photo falls. A picture of a beautiful girl in a red dress. Quietly, I sing the song, *Lady in Red*.

“Louie, I will phone you and Matie tomorrow. You must visit us. It has been too long. Out of all my friends, you are the most cherished!”

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### *MY CIRCLE OF FRIENDS STANDS*

Friendships are like beautiful flowers; they need fertilizer. Now, I’m not saying that you should present them with a tray of, you know, poop. However, that is what we often do. Most of us aren’t nearly nurturing enough to be good friends. I certainly wasn’t. There were many other middle school dances but none as authentic as that first one. Even though my best

friend's boyfriend told me that he possessed feelings for me at that first dance; his words brought me back to life. Matie witnessed that kiss, but she never mentioned it. Always after that, when I turned to see her watching me intently or caught her gazing deeply into my eyes, I wondered if she knew that Louie wasn't kidding over that embrace and a quick peck on my lips? Maybe I should have been ashamed of myself, but it brought life back that another man cared for me and risked someone whom he loved to let me know this.

The *Circle of Friends* remained as our group entered High School at the Academy. SaraBeth excelled in acting. No other Thalian could pack them into the theater like she. It didn't hurt that she always won the leading roles which required her to wear a tight top.

Rows of rowdy boys lined the first few sections, but when the "blond bomber" walked onto the stage, you could hear a

pin drop. Yes, SaraBeth had talent and big ole boobs. Such virtues attracted a large audience which raised money for the Drama Club.

Candace's beauty shined on the cheerleading team. Eventually, she became Head of ten screaming, incredibly talented women who flaunted their beauty shamelessly. SaraBeth may pack them into the auditorium, but Candy brought fathers, sons, and baby boys flocking to sports events. Our cheerleaders were innovative and did more than yell. They had the moves and risked their lives to impress us. Some of the girls sustained nasty falls and injuries to be a part of that fab group.

Agatha excelled in basketball. It amazed me that she could deliver the ball down the court with her huge breasts which jived and bounced in all directions. Certainly, that feat filled the bleachers in the gymnasium for all of our games. Do you see a pattern here? All of us used our talents to reach our goals. So what if our



most vital talent was beauty? Our choices required other skills as well. It wasn't that we were shameless; it was that we were pragmatic.

My choice did not have any association with beauty, at least that's what I told myself. I, Anna Polis, loved to run. I discovered my Sophomore year, when the others fulfilled their talents on the stage, gym floor, and auditorium, that I belonged on the track field. Running gave me inspiration. The action cleared the cobwebs from my mind. Most mornings, especially in the summer, I arose at dawn to run before class even began. Mom took me to school in my shorts. Then I showered in the gym and dressed for the school day there. My actions weren't in search of recognition or even for funds from a scholarship. Instead, I found something that I loved which forced me to develop self-discipline. A virtue which I would need to become a good writer.

Quite by accident, I found that I was quick. I watched some movie about running. It inspired me so much that I decided to try it. All of my friends possessed gifts of various talents. They loved the after-school challenges. I felt a little left out. I asked Mom to take me back to school on a cold winter's day. She did. I wore a flimsy pair of shorts so that I would need to get the ole blood pumping in order not to freeze. The track coach just happened to be out on the field. I didn't know that he was there, honest. When I completed my jaunt, he approached.

"Girlie," he called all the girls that.

"You are pretty fast. Okay, you caught my eye. Sure, I realize that the purpose of that incredible run was to do just that. You are on the team. Show up for practice when it begins this fall. I have never witnessed someone as brazen as you."

He smiled broadly and strutted away.

First of all, I had never seen him in my life. My run had nothing to do with "catching his eye."

Secondly, how could I know that he would be on the field? It was freezing. Besides, what was he doing there? Anyway, I didn't mind the label "brazen." After all, I accepted my best friend's boyfriend's kiss and his pledge that if anything happened to his relationship with my dearest friend, he was "coming for me." That's rather brazen, don't you agree? It was almost whorish of me. Right? Forever after that, Coach Jones called me "Braze." Only the two of us knew to what he referred. That title should have made me feel cheap and compromising, but I thought of it as a compliment to my dedication.

You may be asking, "What was Matie's talent? What happened to her?"

She used her gifts and brains to propel her into her chosen field. One in which she

could participate long after her knees, voice, coordination, and boobs failed. Matie became a famous and talented artist. Her paintings grace art galleries all over the world. Sculptures of fragility wake up the artist in hundreds maybe thousands of people who never dreamed of picking up a brush or mixing paints on a palette. Her skill and talent only improved with age. I always said that out of the Circle, she was the most creative. She captured the heart of Louie Moreau, didn't she?

Through all the battles which young women wage in the silence of their hearts and minds, perhaps none is as strong or as violent as the firm push of competition. Yes, it is helpful. This powerful urge drives us all to greatness, but when fueled by great beauty, it can destroy. Our Circle's almost undoing came because of intense competition over none other than the title of Homecoming Queen.

I know that you are disappointed in us.

Such a statement displays pettiness and pure unadulterated shallowness. Who remembers the Homecoming Queen? Answer: everyone does but does it matter?

SaraBeth and Candace always assumed that they would walk off the field as Queen and First Runner-Up. Neither of the girls ever anticipated that Agatha, Matie, and yours truly would blossom so charmingly into stiff competition. When they found that we were all running against them, it was not a pleasant sight.

I didn't leave Martha out of this dialogue intentionally. True to form, she studied intently while we all divested our skills into less critical areas. The one who stood silently in the background. That person who studied, nurtured her friends, waited by the phone, and diplomatically stepped into our battles. Martha became a famous plastic surgeon. Maybe she did not possess great beauty as we did, but her talent was giving confidence to countless women who desired to correct the

crooked nose or hooded eyes which God gave them. Her ability to skillfully alter the beauty of those who suffered from complexes of inferiority was a pure gift to others. How many women never forgot her name because she changed their lives?

I would like to think that my books made a difference. Perhaps something that seemed mediocre to most readers struck the right chord with a person who used my words and did something great. Let me innocently add that my Martha “brought home the bacon.” In other words, she accumulated a fortune. That large bank account provided a "pretty boy" husband who followed her around like a puppy, when you hold the purse strings and security then stability reigns at home.

Yes, indeed, beauty almost undid a childhood of nurturing and love among six young women. I'll lay out the sad scenario:

“Agatha, are you telling me that you are considering running for Homecoming Queen? Isn't that cute, SaraBeth?”

Candy giggled loudly.

Agatha was driving her red Audi home late one night from a Friday night Girl's Night Out. Yes, we finally all had our driver's license and shiny, new cars compliments of our parents. There was a new, intense competition developing among us. It was not very pretty.

"Well, like, it's a free country, right?" SaraBeth had a way with words. SaraBeth's eyes scanned our faces in the back seat as though democracy may have been replaced by communism suddenly and she wasn't sure.

"Now, SaraBeth, you don't pick on Agatha. I think it's cute that she has such confidence in herself. You and I will pick her up from the field after she suffers utter defeat. We have always known that one of us, I mean, you or me, would be

the Queen. Hasn't that been the plan since we were wee kids? Yes, I believe that it has."

Candy's kind smile seemed out of place. Maybe that is when the spark ignited under our group. Why should one of them assume that they were the prettiest?

"Mirror, Mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of us all?"

Everyone, even Agatha, turned to look at me.

"Sugar, Agatha, keep your eyes on the road. You are not that great of a driver on a good day but especially at night." Agatha had turned to look at me with the others and almost ran off an embankment.

I was shaking.

Silence filled the car. Smoke seemed to explode from the ears of the lovely Sarah-Beth. Her look of betrayal and disappointment didn't bother me at all. What made those two believe that they had this unalienable right of being crowned



Homecoming Queen of the Academy without a proper fight?

"Yes, sir, it was always my intention to run for that noble cause."

This comment from me brought another snicker.

"You? Anna, you were a fat, zit covered, coke bottle wearing girl who sweated too much. Who would ever consider that one such as you might win the crown *Most Beautiful? Maybe Ugliest?* I'm just saying."

Candy refused to look me in the eyes.

My, weren't we becoming brutal and unkind? Candy's words only drove home the point that all of us had changed from the ugly ducklings into rather pretty young women. Shoot, we weren't pretty; we were the most beautiful of the entire school. Okay, Candace and SaraBeth Wheeler were always beauties but so what?

"Now, girls," Matie jumped into the debate.

"Why don't we let the kids at school decide for us? I think that each of us, excluding Martha, only because she is nobler than shallow little us, should throw our crown into the ring so to speak. I challenge everyone in this car for the title of *Most Beautiful Girl in the History of Our School.*"

There was no such title, but Homecoming Queen covered it. At that moment, The War of Beauty was on. It would not be honest, fair, or without brutality. Such a silly act almost destroyed us. Each of our parents tried to dissuade us from this pointless battle.

"Anna, that is beneath you. You are taking a chance of losing these precious friends. Remember, it was I who encouraged you to establish this group. Shouldn't you back out and be the coach? What good will this do any of you? It isn't like it can

propel your career; unless you desire to be a competitor in beauty contests all your life. Let's face it; beauty is a fickle thing while friendships last forever. Right?"

Abby had aged a great deal since my disastrous undoing that day long ago in middle school. The irony is that as she made this inspiring statement, the bandages from her second face-lift still lay in the trash can of her new Aesthetic Surgeon. Ah, the irony of words of wisdom.

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Mom has aged now. There is no interest in face lifts and cosmetic surgery. She and Dad suffer from the effects of old age, but they carry on with dignity. How will I face the time when they too will leave me?

My mind switches from girlish memories of the past to my parents but not for long.

Without meaning, my high school friends hold me hostage:

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LET THE BRUTALITIES BEGIN!

I believe that some people come through Middle School without scars, but most of us carry the pain for the rest of our lives. We may make jokes about our experiences, but deep underneath it all lies some degree of pain. Delicate years of crossing the boundary from child to adult create confusion and anxiety for most. How many of the anxiety attacks which plague adults find the beginning in those nasty, early years? When we begin to learn that all is not as it seems and that even friends are not always honest, it is a rude awakening from the storybook life that our parents pretended.

What started as a challenge, sort of a joke, developed into a war. Yes, we remained friends for the rest of our lives except for one. One of the Circle was a fraud, a liar.

When she slipped up, and her true colors surfaced, she was beyond redemption, at least for me. I tried because I believed that Jesus would have me forgive her but as yet, I am unable. Still, I pray each day that I will obtain the ability to forgive which is, I believe, the greatest of human virtues.

The Homecoming Queen, what a silly, frivolous event, it almost ruined the friendship of six, lovely girls. Martha sat on my bed watching me labor over posters to hang around the school. I had already established my website which was entitled: *Anna Polis for Homecoming Queen*. I know if this is any indication of the quality of my efforts: I should lose. At that point, I tried to be above board, but we had not yet dipped into the mire. Our campaigns would be dirtier than the Presidential campaigns of Donald J. Trump and Hilary Clinton. This tidbit may be hard to believe, but it is true. "What do you think, Martha, is this pic-

ture of Matie too mean? I shouldn't post it, should I?"

"Let me see. Wow, did Matie look like this? She was horrid. I don't remember her teeth being so big and yellow. Did her front teeth buck out like that? My, this is sad. No, I wouldn't post that. It would cause hurt feelings."

Martha shook her head. Obviously, this was the beginning of the campaign when things just started to take a different direction. We had not realized the depth of depravity that we were about to reach to win a stupid competition which was meaningless and out of control.

"Anna, you guys are annoying now. All that each of you do is work on THE campaign. Why? I don't get it."

"I know. Can't say that I 'get it' either but I apparently caused this rush to win the crown, so I can hardly withdraw my bid for it. Can I?"

"I suppose not."

Martha went back to check my website for new posts. She had requested the ability to remain as Switzerland. A neutral force in the raging war around her. I doubted if she could do it, but if any of us could, it would be Martha.

"I've got to go. Oh, my, I definitely need to go."

Since she quickly shut down my computer, I knew it wasn't good. I walked to it and turned it onto my site. Posted there was an old photo of me. Did I look that bad? It seemed impossible. To my horror, I faced a picture of me with angry, red zits all over my face. My yellow, crooked teeth smiled from a horrendous big, red slash across my pale face. Large glasses blocked my eyes. I was just plain fat! If I thought Matie looked bad, well, I was as bad or worse.

"Physician heal thyself," I mumbled.

"What was that? Anna, I'm sorry. Who would do that?"

"I know who, it was Matie, oh well."

I pressed the POST key on my computer.

POST!

"There, Matie, take that! Let's see how that makes her feel when Louie remembers how butt ugly she once was." Martha looked shocked. Quickly, I rummaged through my old photos. A picture of the radiant SaraBeth Wheeler, when her chest was average compared to one today of her grotesque chest baggage, ought to shame her just in case she was the one who posted that disgraceful one of me.

POST!

Then, I discovered one of Agatha when she was a chubby kid. Her cheeks looked like a chipmunk. It was funny, not insulting because there were no bad images of her in all of my trove of memories.

POST!

Angrily, I pushed through my photo



books trying to find the worst picture of Candy possible. There it was! I fell back onto the bed as I laughed hysterically. The beautiful Candace, just look! Martha picked it up. She was looking more and more uncomfortable as if she may become dirty from my presence. I knew that I was out of control and not behaving as a Christian, but I felt so much anger spewing out of me.

I promised Candy that I threw that one away but was glad that I kept it. If it were she, who posted that disgusting photo of me, then she would regret her actions.

"Anna, you are assuming that each of your friends did this."

She pointed to my web page.

"You may never know who the villain was. Shouldn't you wait? Is there any need to hurt all of your friends? I don't understand this obsession with winning. You guys are going to end up hating each other!"

I looked at Martha and smiled. I held a photo of Candy as she dropped a towel about two years ago. It didn't reveal that much, but her top was bare.

POST!

"Anna, you can't take it back. You are going to be sorry. That was nasty."

My cell rang at that moment.

"Hi Candy, what? You're kidding. Why do you think that I did it? Maybe I gave the picture to someone else or something.

Okay, I did post it, but you can't see anything but your tiny breasts, and they look fine, maybe a little saggy. Certainly better than SaraBeth's! Candy? Are you there?"

Martha looked horrified.

"I guess we were disconnected."

I smiled.

"You know good and well that you weren't disconnected. Candace hung up on you. I've got to go. This campaign is too disgusting to watch."

She stood to leave.

"Good grief, Martha I can tell that you aren't an athlete. A little healthy competition is good for the soul."

"Anna, you can spin this any way that you like, but this is not healthy. You are going to take it too far, and there is no going back. I've got to go."

Panic assaulted me.

"Martha, you're still my friend, aren't you? Are you going to Matie's now and help her?"

I couldn't bear thinking that she may hate me.

Sadly, she sauntered toward me. Lovingly she hugged me as I smelled Magie Noire. My favorite perfume was on the Endangered List because everywhere I turned, I breathed the once delightful French fragrance. All of my Circle adopted it with a heavy hand on the atomizer.

"Don't you know that I will always love you the most? Yes, I love each of our

friends, but it was you who started our group. It was you who gave me one of the best summers of my life. You, Anna, are the high point of my life. I live vicariously through you, but I'm asking you again to give this up. Anna, you are more delicate than the others. I realize that you may think you can handle the consequences, but it may be impossible for you to face the results. Please, let it go. We can enjoy our lives as the others destroy each other. What do you say?"

She held out her hand. I refused it. Deep in my heart, I knew. Martha was right. She always was.

"Nope, no can do."

The door closed behind her.

## THE CONTEST CONTINUES

Even though our friendship felt strained, Matie and I remained friends.

"Wow, only one week until Homecoming! Can you believe it? Each time I think about it, I just become so nervous. Do

you, Anna? I would love to win and see Louie's face. You know?"

Accustomed to Matie's constant rambling, I managed to tune her out most of the time.

"Umm? What? I'm sorry, Matie. What did you say?"

"What's wrong Anna? You seem preoccupied."

"YEAH! It's only a week away. I'm nervous."

Matie smiled.

"Anyway, I won't be at school tomorrow. I told you this earlier, but you haven't been yourself lately. Mom and I are flying to New York to pick up my gown for the Homecoming Court. If only that crown fits my head."

Mattie smiled again.

"Where did you get your dress? May I see it?"

I wasn't about to let her see mine until I

saw hers. All of us were paranoid.

“Matie, I’ve already told you. When you show me yours, I’ll show you mine. What color is yours?”

“I’ve already told you when I see yours; I’ll show you mine.”

We both laughed. Lately, it felt as if we remained friends, but something was missing.

“Anyway, I’ve got to go. See ya.”

Matie hesitated by the door to my room then shut it quietly. Mom and Dad had gone to dinner with SaraBeth’s parents, so I was alone except for Ellie who had the night off. She was in her little apartment behind our home. The main house seemed eerily quiet. I walked out into the hall. I loved this house; it was the only home that I had ever known except for the sailboat, *Honey*.

The rain was blowing against the windows. A branch of a tree, located too close to the house, scratched against the shutter.

Lovingly, I strolled through our home as I touched various pieces of furniture. Thoughts of Kyle flooded my mind. Without thinking, I sat down in a window seat and covered myself with a blanket. An odd feeling descended upon me. It was an ominous feeling like something important was about to happen. At that moment, the phone's shrill ring interrupted my silence.

"Hello?" I was tired and sleepy.

"Anna? Hey, it's SaraBeth. You know, SaraBeth Wheeler."

"Okay. You know, SaraBeth Wheeler, we've only been friends for like all our lives. Why are you acting weird? You know what, I'm sleepy. Don't explain; I'm on my way to bed."

I should have known then that something wasn't right.

"Look, Anna, I'm feeling lonely. Will you come over to my house? Our parents are

out together, so I figured you might feel alone too?"

She sounded desperate that I feel alone.

"Nope, I seldom feel lonely. There is no one with whom I desire to spend time."

"Anna, please, it is important. I need to talk with you. Please."

She sounded desperate, and it was a little early for bed, so I agreed to run over to her house. This "run" would take me a good thirty minutes one way. The Wheelers lived clear across town from us.

The rain was horrible. It came in long, nasty sheets on the car. I remember thinking that I should have stayed home as I maneuvered the darkened streets. Soft lights finally beckoned the entrance to the little box house which SaraBeth called "home."

Feeling slightly annoyed, at her insistence, I climbed three short stairs to her door. Already the unrelenting rain drenched me.



"Thanks for coming. Oh, it's horrible out there."

I thought: No kidding, who asks a friend to visit on a night like this?

"Anna, you are going to be happy that you came. Someone is waiting for you in my bedroom. You have all the privacy that you could ever want. I've got to go over to Martha's."

Sympathetically, she looked at me and closed the door.

All of this was very weird but intriguing. I walked to the door and opened it with a degree of fear. Probably all of the Circle waited for a special time together. It had been so long since we had fun, at least since the Homecoming Fiasco! The little pink room was dark without a light. Something was wrong. I entered with caution. A shadow stood at the darkened window.

"Hello, is anyone there?"

I wandered into the room. The floor-

boards creaked with my weight. The shadow was that of a man. I was sure of it. When the figure turned, even though there was little light, I could see a magnificent head of blond hair. Something grabbed in my stomach; a small groan escaped from my mouth. It was Him. Before I heard his voice, I smelled a scent from long ago. It was Kyle. The smell of pine woods and fresh air caused a longing in my soul.

“Anna, please come here. Oh!”

I felt his arms encircle me into the heavenly fragrance of long ago. Nothing mattered. He had returned to me. My body began to shake, and a coldness overtook me just as it had when I broke down years ago. Tears flooded my eyes. He was here. My love had returned to my arms. Nothing mattered to me except that he was here. We would never part again. Dreams of marriage and children flooded my mind. I laughed with joy. Kyle kissed me over and over. Penetrating kisses of long-

ing and desire. My face felt wet. I returned the passion. I felt his body shaking against mine. Only hunger surrounded us. Hunger for fulfillment from each other's bodies.

We made love hard and passionately. This night was my first time at making love. I was happy that it was Kyle, my true love. After a short wait, he lovingly held me, and we had sex again slowly with grave concern for each other. At one point, I thought that I heard a sound coming from the corner of the room, but I was unfamiliar with the house so figured it was the wind again. Kyle wouldn't allow me to turn my head to look at the corner where the sound originated. He lovingly held my face in his hands.

Finally, I tore myself from his arms. I felt exhaustion ebbing over me. Staggering, I felt elated just knowing that he was home. *Never would we be separated again.*  
"Anna, please don't go. Let's make love

again. It has been so long since I held you.”

He groaned.

I hesitated.

"Sure, I understand. You go on home and rest; I'll phone tomorrow.”

His voice sounded disappointed that I was leaving him. There was much to say. Indeed, I should have received an explanation as to where he had been and why he never bothered to contact me. What was wrong with me? Still, I left because the only thing that mattered was that he had returned.

As I thought back, a little later that night, his lack of explanation as to what happened to him seemed strange, but at the time, I wanted to be alone and digest everything that had just occurred. Again, I staggered to the door.

"You had better call me immediately when I arrive home!"

I called to him over my right shoulder.

He laughed good-naturedly.

"Will do!"

He yelled back.

I ran from the house and into the rain without even covering myself.

*Kyle is back in my life!*

All the pain would finally come to an end. My beautiful dreams were back on track. Kyle would be my escort for the Homecoming Court. My life, my very existence, was back on track!

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For a brief moment, my thoughts return sadly to Kyle. Firmly, I pull them away to less intense memories. Remembering my Circle, I smile. Quickly, laughter replaces the sadness.

“Girls, how did we remain friends? “

I say this to the quiet air of the old Polis home. Clawing through my treasure cove of letters and photos, I search for a special one. There stood Agatha, Candace, Sara-Beth, Matie and me. We shined as young queens. Truly, there was something special about us.

I hate the word “bully,” but it’s time to recognize that in some ways, I was partly to blame for the onslaught of betrayal which sailed me. Sadly, I wrap my arms around my body and give myself a hug on this night of painful remembrances.

*Anna, you are going to need more than a hug to continue:*

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**BETRAYAL!**

All through the night, I awakened drenched in bliss! God heard my prayer; Kyle was back in my life. I possessed no more feelings of inadequacy or betrayal; he did love me. Certainly, his return

meant that he and I would be a couple, a team. My undoing on the school steps now was atoned. Something kept nagging at me though throughout that night. My mind was in denial. It refused to register the obvious.

*Better to leave it alone and get a good night's sleep,* I told myself.

I would be forced to deal with IT tomorrow.

I remember waking THAT morning with a long, cat-like stretch. Kyle's woodsy scent surrounded me still. I hoped that Mom didn't come to my room. She would recognize that unique smell. They remained out late last night so she probably wouldn't come into my room this morning. What was wrong? Something kept pulling at my mind; it would not leave me alone, but my psyche refused to deal with it. It must be a vastly negative thought. Confusedly, I arose. I shook my head as though such an action may remove the

scales of doubt. That didn't help. After my shower, I dressed in my favorite red dress and flats. We no longer were required to wear uniforms in our Senior year which pleased all of the girls.

As I opened the door to my room, it hit me.

*If Kyle adored me so deeply, why didn't he phone last night? He should have checked on me to be sure that I arrived home safely after he made love to me for the first time. The roads last night were dangerous and dark because many of the lights were out.*

Again, I shook my head.

*He Loves Me! Get over the plague of insecurity.*

My mind refused to confront the truth.

Mom appeared distracted.

"Did you have fun last night, Mom?"



She groaned as she swallowed a large gulp of coffee.

“Yes, although SaraBeth's Mom sure acted strangely. She barely talked and kept looking at her watch. Michael appeared to be out of sorts as well.” Michael was SaraBeth's step-father. He had raised her from a little girl.

My smile was unable to hide.

"Have you heard something about the Homecoming Court? You look as if you swallowed the canary.”

Mom held her head.

"I have some news for you, but I'm about to be late for school. See ya this afternoon.”

Pecking her on the cheek, she groaned again. Abby frequently suffered from migraines.

Traffic was backed up. I'd be late. Now, I groaned. As I parked, I re-checked the time. I had just a minute or two to make it on time to class. It was against my nature

to be late for anything. I closed the door and affectionately rubbed my new car. It was a brand new, bright red BMW named, Toto, for the dog in the Wizard of Oz movie. I ran toward the steps. Great, the kids still congregated on the front hill, so I guessed I had made it in time. Taking a deep breath, I slowed down to a slower pace.

Immediately, I knew. Something was very wrong. No one would look at me. I walked toward the Circle. Even my best friends looked at me sadly or were those looks of discomfort?

"Got to go."

They all walked away. A few of my guy friends blushed as I approached them.

*No one will look at me.*

They just turned away. Now what? All of a sudden, SaraBeth walked toward me.

"Well, look who showed up! I'm surprised that you felt like 'coming,' Anna, Baby?"

She rubbed up against me in a naughty way. Everyone burst out laughing. As I entered the school, all of the kids looked at their cell phones, then at me, and snickered or laughed loudly. I felt tears welling in my eyes. Whatever this involved, I knew that SaraBeth was behind it. Slowly, I walked toward the Ladies Room. I almost made it before Mrs. Barrett, one of the School Counselors, called me to accompany her to her office.

"Anna, you need to sit down."

Her look was stern, but I thought I saw compassion as well. My body began to shake. This news was not going to be good.

"Anna, I want you to look at something and tell me if it this is you? I can't be sure. Please take a few deep breaths."

She smiled a little.

After locating something on her cell phone, she handed it to me with a look of

apprehension. In my mind, I figured that Kyle had perished in a car accident.

*They need me to identify the body.* Unlikely, but the only thing that made sense.

"Oh, no, this picture can't be. Please tell me; this is a joke. Please."

"Anna, it isn't a joke. Is this you?"

I nodded in disbelief. Who would have done this? It was apparent; Kyle and SaraBeth did this jointly. From the angle and the way that he looked at the camera; he knew what was happening. Then, I recalled hearing a sound in the room last night. Kyle covered my eyes with his hand which seemed strange, but I had never had sex before. I thought maybe such an action was acceptable. Referring to that act as "making love" was a misnomer. There was no love in his actions. Hateful, vengeful, deceitful and an act of betrayal but no love. My eyes refused to lift from the scene on the phone. They even recorded the words which were

worse to me than the scene.

"Come on, Anna, Baby. Ah, you are good. I know this can't be your first. You are a pro."

It was shameful and disgusting. To think that Kyle was performing an act of love was almost funny, but I couldn't laugh. Streams of tears ran down my cheeks.

"Anna, I'll ask you again. Is that you?"  
"Yes!"

I felt like a child who has done a nasty deed but then forced to take ownership.

"Do you know who recorded this?"

"I have suspicions but no proof."

"I see. Is that man Kyle Vanderclift?"

"Umm."

I nodded slowly.

"Where did this happen?"

"It was at SaraBeth's home."

Again, she sadly shook her head.

"Well, we can assume that Ms. Wheeler

has some explaining to do. We will have this removed at once. Do you want me to phone your Mom?"

Poor Abby, once again she must arrive in a panic because of my actions. My tears now fell for Abby and Herbert as well as myself.

"Mrs. Barrett, please don't remove it. The entire school has seen it by now. It won't do any good."

Loudly, I sniffled as she handed me a mound of tissue.

"Anna, we are going to remove this act of meanness and take care of this. We don't want you to worry. We will punish those responsible. I promise. Go home and get some rest."

She put her arm around me as we walked together. Her nod at one of the assistants was probably "the okay" for them to call my Mom. As she held my hand, a few of my friends walked over.

"Anna, we know what happened. Don't worry. Your friends still love you. We will not forgive those who support Her."

They implied SaraBeth Wheeler. Mrs. Barrett rose from her seat.

"So, you know who did this?"

The three kids nodded.

"Do you know why?"

They looked at me and nodded "Yes."

"She was afraid that Anna would win the Homecoming crown. SaraBeth is not accustomed to losing."

Mrs. Barrett walked with the kids toward her office. Once again, their voices felt muffled by the blood in my ears. I thought of the large checks my parents gave to the school and wondered if less fortunate students would receive the same support as I just had. Mrs. Barrett was questioning them all the way down the hall to her office. The door closed. Mom pulled up to the front door. We only lived

a few minutes away. Outside, the rain would not relent.

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“Duncan.”

Just saying his name makes me smile on this silvery night. Does he know that he saved me from the clutches of even more trauma? Sure, he does. We have discussed all of this often. Still, what I did to him breaks my heart even after all of the years:

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#### DUNCAN DEVOS DAVENPORT

As soon as I closed the door to Mom’s car, the rain stopped. Beautiful streaks of sunlight smiled upon us instead of depressing sheets of rain. At that moment, I believe that God told me not to worry. I would survive even this. Mom smiled. *Here we go again.*



Abby reached for my hand as she squeezed it gently.

"Should we head for the hospital? How are you feeling, Honey?"

Gently, she placed a moist hand on my forehead. Her fears were that I was having another breakup or breakdown; who knew the proper terms?

"Nope, I'm all right, Mom. You've heard what happened?"

Her eyes remained glued to the road just like the kids this morning who refused to look at me. Her head nodded a "Yes."

"Did you see the video?"

Again, she only nodded that she had.

"Pretty awful?"

"Anna, what's horrible is that Kyle and SaraBeth would do this to you. We all know that you had strong feelings for that boy. You sure called that one right. Back when your poor Dad thought the Vanderclifts hung the moon and stars, well, you

were right."

Now, it was I who nodded agreement.

"Anyway, Louie called your dad earlier. Matie has been phoning from New York since you left for school. Louie wants your father to hire an investigator. That boy has all sorts of connections not just in Annapolis but also Washington, D. C. as well. You know that he desires to be a Prosecutor? Well, anyway, the future Attorney General has been researching the Vanderclifts and SaraBeth's mother all morning. He seems to have discovered some fascinating things. Your dad has already got someone on this."

"Are you guys crazy? What good will this do? I'm dirt at the Academy. I'll end my time there in disgrace. I'll resign from the Homecoming Court as soon as I get my nerve back to return. My only wish is that I could go off to college right away."

"Anna, this is out of your hands. Herbert has already acted. You know that we can't change his mind. Just let Louie and your

Father work."

Funny that my future was partly in the hands of Louie, but I trusted him as much as I did my family. We arrived home to a ringing phone. It never stopped. My feelings sky-rocketed as person after person at the Academy called.

"I think that they are disgusting pieces of blah, blah, blah."

The expletives describing Kyle and SaraBeth were shocking. It dawned on me that my reputation had been trashed, but friends were climbing out of the woodwork. Yeah, you've got it. My chances of being the Queen just rose astronomically while the despicable SaraBeth's had plummeted. It wasn't that the crown meant that much, it was that people understood. I felt vindicated before they announced the winner of the dumb contest. A large smile spread across my face. Abby looked confused. Most likely, she considered that I might be losing it again. By bedtime, I was exhausted from an-

swering the recurring rings from the phone.

"Hey, Mom, I think that I'll go to school tomorrow. I'm no longer nervous."

Relief flooded the tired face of dear Abby which was crossed by lines of worry most likely caused by yours truly. Her smile looked hopeful. That day was Tuesday. Friday evening at halftime, on the football field, the new Queen would wear the crown. For the first time since I threw my crown into the ring, so to speak, I felt hopeful.

My arrival at school the next day met with hugs, kisses, and pats on the back. Matie rode with me, so I was not alone. Dad seemed to be held up in his office at home working on the Vanderclift family. I had barely seen him in the past twenty-four hours.

"Things have taken quite a turn. No one will believe the truth about that horrible family. I knew the moment that I met

them that they were wrong. They were not good enough for my 'little girl.'"

This news flash was not as I remembered it, but the tide had turned in my direction, so I wasn't going to nitpick things. It had always been difficult for Dad to admit when he was wrong. I thought back to the way that he fell all over the Vanderclits as though they were rock stars. You got to love my Dad. He made those statements later in the evening.

That day, as Matie and I walked up the steps, to my shock, there stood SaraBeth Wheeler. Her eyes were hugely swollen and blue. I guessed that she suffered from deep morose or was it from being discovered to be a bad apple? I had never seen her look this haggard, certainly, not like a candidate for the Homecoming Queen. She was no longer important to me. Finally, I let her and Kyle go, or so I had thought. My guess was the Headmaster expelled her from the Academy. Conse-

quently, it did surprise me that she waited for me there.

"Look, Anna, I take full responsibility for my actions. Okay? I hope that we are still friends. Okay? You've got to forgive me. I made a bad mistake. We all do these things. Okay?"

"Get out of our way, SaraBeth. You have some nerve."

Matie was half the size of that Amazon, but my little pal was fearless.

"You shut up, Matie. No one is talking to you."

I walked right up to that, never mind, I refused to use bad words to describe her. I looked her in the eyes. Then I bumped her with my shoulder and walked right past her. From that moment until today, I haven't uttered a word to her. There was nothing more to say.

Never in my life had I felt the love and support shown to me that fateful day.

Many times, I cried to think that I had so much love surrounding me at the Academy

"Don't worry about that, never you mind; she will get what's coming to her. We'll make sure."

Comments followed my path the next day at the Academy as I walked down the inner passages.

Matie squeezed my hand while we traveled down the long, dark halls together.

"You're the most popular girl in school now, Anna. You are a shoo-in for the Homecoming Queen if it is still important to you!"

"You darn tooting, it's important."

We smiled.

That evening, Dad finally showed up in my presence ready to look me in the eyes. I had thought that he was too embarrassed or ashamed to look at me again but not my dad.

"Things have been set in motion. I can't discuss it yet, but let me say that the Vanderclifts are about to fall and fall hard. You will never believe what I have found on Kyle and his father."

Now, I felt sorry for them. Those characters had never seen the wrath of Herbert James Polis. Come to think about it; I had never seen any wrath spew from my dad until then.

Just as I took a rather large bite of the salmon dish which Ellie had expertly prepared, it was my favorite, she called me to the phone.

"A boy is calling for you, Miss Anna."

Ellie extended the phone as she made "goo-goo" eyes at me.

I sat down with a loud thump on the stool at the counter. My knees felt weak. Was it possible for me to deal with Kyle now? I had needed more time before I had to deal with him. I couldn't talk.



"Anna? Anna? This is Duncan Devos Davenport. Do you remember me?"  
Why do rich boys always give you their entire name? Of course, I recalled him. The handsome hunk graduated last year. "Demon Devos" was one year older than me. The incredible feats which the quarterback accomplished on the football field were legendary in our hallowed halls. He now attended Duke University in North Carolina. Not only was "The Demon" brilliant, with a solid future but he was also so handsome that it hurt.

"Hello Duncan Devos Davenport, this is Anna, just plain, Anna. Yes, I believe that I recall you. Duncan, I think that you graduated last year, but I don't know what happened to you."

Never again would I throw myself at another man. Make them work for my hand. I remembered Dad's words about making sure that I was respected if only I had heeded his warning. That attribute, respect, I still deserved although I had made

a real mess of things for now. The road to redemption lay ahead.

"Yes, I did graduate last year. Hey, listen, I go to Duke University now and plan on returning at the end of the week to Savannah and the Academy. I saw the videos of you. You looked splendid."

There was a pause as he mumbled at his stupid words. Was he referring to my performance in the *Kyle Videos*? Watching someone being used and betrayed did not make them look "splendid." I said nothing.

"Well, not splendid in that position, I mean, you are beautiful, and I have always wanted to ask you out. Not because you are easy or anything."

Again, silence as he slapped himself violently about the face and chest.

"Look, I'm calling because, if you don't already have an escort for the Homecoming Court, I would be honored to walk you down that field. You are amazing. My

little sister, Dee, you wouldn't know her. She says that you have handled this unfortunate episode with decorum. You are my kind of girl. The fact that you are, ah, sexy doesn't hurt."

Poor Duncan, he sure did not possess a skill with words.

"Duncan, my Dad was going to escort me. I don't want to disappoint him. Can I call you back after I speak with him?"

As I hung up the phone, Herbert looked at me questioningly.

"I thought that Louie was supposed to escort you and Matie? You never asked me, although it sure sounds nice."

"Dad, no one asks their father to escort them for Homecoming Queen. Louie is going to escort both of us which is also a little weird. I don't think any guy has ever walked two girls down the Homecoming field, but I'm different. Now, I would die to have Duncan Davenport escort me." Mom and Dad looked at each other then

back to me.

"I guess that I will call him and tell him, yes. Will that make me look easy and compromising?"

They laughed.

Later, that evening, I phoned Matie and Louie with the news.

"Are you serious? Duncan Devos Davenport is a legend. He was Quarterback of the team last year. Are you sure, it isn't some gag? I mean, I don't want you to be disappointed and hurt again."

"Gee, Matie, thanks for the vote of confidence. We did talk a little. I made sure that it was he."

"Great news, I wasn't excited about poor Louie having to escort both of us out there. How would we have done that?"

I had no idea but was thrilled that Louie seemed relieved. We planned to go to the game as a foursome and then have dinner out at the best restaurant in Savannah,

The Olde Pink House. Louie would make reservations which meant that he would pick up the check. Life returned to being good! Who needed Stockard Kyle Vanderclift?

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Happiness floods my heart. Louie and Matie bounce to the forefront of my mind. I remember her crown:

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### THE QUEEN IS CROWNED

Standing before my mirror, I smiled. The changes surprised even me. No longer chubby but a graceful woman peered back at me from the mirror. Her figure wasn't that of a mere girl but a lovely, young lady with grace and style. My gown shocked me. It appeared more agreeable in the store, but here at home, it seemed tawdry. Yes, I chose red for my dress because that was my favorite color. However, the glitter looked cheap. The fit of it

seemed very tight. Did the neckline plunge too much? There was an abundance of cleavage showing.

Panic descended on me. Would I be an embarrassment to Duncan and Matie? Would Louie look at me with eyes of shame? I should have picked a dress that wasn't so tight or one without the plunging neckline. What happened to my principles? Had I compromised everything for that one night with Kyle?

Immediately, I phoned Martha. "I need you."

The line went dead. In only a matter of minutes, the door to my room opened. My friend stood there in a flowing tunic and long slacks.

"Anna, you need to know that you are correct in your suspicions of SaraBeth. It has been my desire to explain this to you for some time. She came to my home once during the time in suspect. Her actions appeared most strange. There is something wrong with that girl. I don't

think that her dad is her dad. I mean, she kept saying something about the truth and her father. Her actions were bizarre. I have never told you this because, well, we know what she did. Anyway, she hates you for having the ‘perfect life.’ I’m not sure why she fixated on you, but all of her disappointment and hurt, she channeled into rage. All of her pent-up emotion, SaraBeth directed at you.”

Martha reached over and squeezed my hand with her gentle touch. I longed to explain everything that had happened in detail, but this was not the place. This evening was one of long anticipation. My talk with Martha must wait till another time. As if reading my thoughts, she stood.

“You hold your head high. Remember that SaraBeth must hate you because she sees you as her biggest threat. Don’t let her win. You are the champion, Anna. No, you do not look tawdry. You are the most beautiful woman that I have ever seen.

You, my friend, are an angel!”

Martha kissed my cheek and closed the door.

I felt anger that Martha was just now telling me all of this about SaraBeth. She should have confided in me weeks ago!

Some time passed until slowly, the door opened again. A real angel floated into the room. She dressed in a simple flowing white dress; this petite cherub pulled her long, dark tresses off of her face with tiny pins of pink rose buds. I was the fallen woman; she was the purest of that fair sex. One was untouched by the lying hands of a man. The other had the reputation of a “slut.”

"Anna, well look at you. You look, um grown up.”

Matie glowed.

I wanted to run away just as Louie poked his dark head into the room.

"Is it okay if I enter? Your mom said that



you would throw me out if it weren't appropriate. Is it? I mean, is it appropriate that I enter? Wow, look at you. Anna, you look smashing. Oh, my, I mean you are hot!"

Fear consumed me. What had I done? Already, I had a bad reputation. Why had I played into the hands of those who considered me an "easy woman?"

"It's too much, isn't it? I mean with the swooping neckline and the sparkly beads. Is it too tight?"

The angelic couple looked at me with surprise.

"Are you insane? You look fantastic. Why are you saying such things? You must realize that you look awesome."

Mom and Dad entered.

Why not get the world's response?

I sighed.

"I know. My dress is awfully bright,

shiny, tight, and exposes too much of my chest. Right?"

Dad took my hands.

"Dearest Princess, you are the most beautiful girl in the world. No one can hold a candle to you. Remember what I told you about expecting respect? You haven't compromised. We all make mistakes. It's just that they posted yours for everyone to see. You've got to move on from that. Trust me. Duncan Devos Davenport is going to salivate when he sees you. You have nothing to fear or of which to be ashamed."

I believed him and breathed deeply for the first time all evening although my tight dress made it a little difficult.

The plan was that Louie and Matie would arrive early. When Duncan came, we would take pictures and wait for the limo. Dad paid for a stretch one for this evening. Slowly, the time passed. Duncan was thirty minutes late when it dawned on

me that this could be more of SaraBeth's handiwork. Just as I considered undressing and staying at home, a white Porsche drove quickly into the driveway. I looked out the window. He took my breath away. He had grown several inches and was filled out. Duncan looked like a Marine. He had not been part of another sinister plot to destroy me.

Turning to Matie and Louie, I glowed. "He's here!"

We meandered down the stairs as though Duncan's arrival was an afterthought. I opened the door with a bored look.

"Is it that time already? We were just discussing our summer on the yacht in Annapolis. Do come inside."

Mom gasped when he entered. If I ever thought the rat Kyle was handsome; I was wrong. This man was beyond anything I had ever seen. Maybe, he resembled a young Robert Redford but taller. He was the *Great Gatsby* personified.

He kissed me gently on the cheek and smiled.

"You must receive the title of Homecoming Queen or something is wrong with the entire lot. You are the most beautiful woman in the world, Anna."

He kissed my hand. I introduced him to Louie and Matie. They all hit it off well. Mom had instructed Ellie to prepare light refreshments. We congregated in the kitchen for a few minutes. The limousine arrived a little late.

"Let's go. I'm afraid that I will back out if we don't."

Matie nodded. She had turned pale. Louie carefully observed her.

"Matie, you are okay?"

He whispered.

"Louie, I wanted to win the crown so that you would be proud, but I don't have a chance with Anna. She will win."

Tears softly dropped from her brown eyes.

Louie smiled as he looked at Mom who handed him a package wrapped in layers of pink. Matie's eyes glowed.

"This is for me?"

Louie nodded. Matie ripped the exquisite paper from the box. Gingerly, she lifted a small tiara.

"You are already crowned. Don't wear it if it seems too much but remember that you are and will always be my Queen."

Matie smiled as Louie placed it on her head. She hugged him so firmly that she hit Duncan in the eye with her hand. We all laughed. Louie adjusted it on her child-like head. She was the most beautiful girl that I had ever seen. They had been kind to me, but Matie was truly gorgeous.

Matie and I wore long coats so that no one could see our dresses. When we arrived at the field, a large crowd already had amassed. We found seats in the back.

Girls were staring at Duncan. Pride consumed me. It was the longest couple of hours until half-time. Mr. Wyrick proclaimed that the, "Homecoming Court should assemble." The faculty had announced news of the candidates earlier in the week. Slowly, Matie and I walked onto the field. Agatha looked lovely in a pink chiffon dress with matching heels. Candace stole the show in a baby blue gown that clung perfectly to her shapely body. Everyone was perfect. I felt proud to be in the company of such a fabulous group of women. Then I saw them. Standing to the side, away from everyone else, proudly stood Kyle and SaraBeth Wheeler. I felt my blood pressure soar. I staggered into Duncan who looked confused. Kyle looked at me with contempt. SaraBeth giggled uncontrollably.

"My, my, SaraBeth, just look who showed. Duncan Davenport, you must be slumming?"

Kyle gloated.

Duncan walked slowly to him and hit him square in the jaw. It was a quick jab that most people didn't notice.

"Keep your trashy mouth closed, Vanderbilt before I do some permanent damage."

Duncan's words rang through the night. I wanted to hug him but smiled innocently at SaraBeth. I must admit that she looked gorgeous. Her dress of palest orange shimmered like a concoction of sherbet. Her long blond hair, she piled on top of her head in soft ringlets. We all stared at her. For the first time in days, I considered the title was hers. This evil person deserved expulsion. Why was she here? I looked at Matie who watched me carefully. Gently, she shook her head. As if to say: *she doesn't have a chance of winning against you.* I smiled.

Someone that I didn't know lined us up in random order. I was at the back of the

line. Who should that person place in front of Duncan and me but Kyle and SaraBeth? She kept patting her hair and pulling at her gown. I realized that she was insecure. This revelation gave me a newfound confidence.

The Rolling Stones came blaring over the speakers. I couldn't understand a word of their song. The blood rushed so loudly in my ears. Duncan said something, but I only shook my head. He held my hand softly as though he understood.

"Now, let's get to the moment for which we have all been waiting. Second runner-up is Lorie Smith who is escorted by Rich Simmons."

At that moment, I became aware that there were many more contestants than my Circle. Never had I considered that someone else might win.

"First runner-up goes to Madison Connelly who is escorted by Louie Moreau."

Finally, I felt able to hear. The announcer



talked about Matie and all of her accomplishments. I guessed that he did the same thing for Lorie Smith, but I was unable to hear. All of a sudden, most of the student body stood.

"Anna. Anna. Anna."

They yelled my name over and over. Tears streamed down my cheeks. I didn't care about my makeup. In fact, I no longer cared if I won. Hearing the support from my classmates meant more to me than any crown. Duncan beamed down at me. All was right with the world. Instead of being laughed at and berated, I felt redeemed.

"Your new Homecoming Queen is."

I clung to the arm of Duncan. Softly, he squeezed my hand.

"Anna Polis is the winner. Anna Polis, please step forward for your crown."

The crowd went wild. That's all that I heard for several minutes. As we all paraded off the field, another announcement

rang through the night: "SaraBeth Wheeler and Kyle Vanderclift, please do not leave."

Two policemen walked forward and escorted SaraBeth and Kyle away. We never knew what happened. Monday at school, the word was that school officials expelled them. Years passed before I would ever be confronted by her again. I never saw Kyle for the rest of my days.

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*Thank you, Duncan, for popping Kyle. He deserved it more than anyone that I know except for the next foe which assaulted me.*

Without thinking, I rub my stomach.

Preparing myself for another foe, I pray for strength and boldness:

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THE MOST POPULAR GIRL AT SCHOOL

The school pulled SaraBeth from our lives; I can't say that I was sad. In fact, I was giddy that I didn't have to face her sneaking around trying to hurt me any longer. The day after my smashing debut as Homecoming Queen, Duncan called early in the morning.

"Anna, Are you busy today? I have to drive back to Duke early tomorrow morning. Will you spend the day with me?"

Last night swirled in my mind. I would never forget the way Duncan rushed to defend me against the nasty words of Kyle. The warmth of his hand, as he shielded mine, made me feel small and in dire need of protection. For many years, I had dreamed that Kyle might be the man of my dreams. Now, I realized that there would be many men; maybe I would decide that having no man was easier for me. They did have a way of messing things up. Then, my heart entered this discussion. Thoughts of Herbert and Abby made me dream for a relationship like

they enjoyed. Not to have that particular partner at the end of a long day or trying event would prove to be lonely and unhappy for me because I had witnessed actual love from my parents. Naturally, I desired a piece of it.

Duncan arrived at nine a.m. My parents had already left for the mall. Something about this man gave me such peace. There was no need to feel perfect like Dad seemed to demand. No, in Duncan's presence, I could make mistakes. He already knew the worst one I had ever made. Such a gaff in my decorum relaxed my expectations for myself and the ones that I transferred onto him.

I opened the door feeling light inside. It was a relief after weeks of pain caused by the shame which surrounded me those past few months. I could easily smile again.

"Hello, beautiful."

His smile buoyed me beyond normal feel-

ings. We sat at the table and watched a squirrel run over the top of the fence. Nothing was off limits to us. Laughingly, I felt as if I could tell him anything and he would understand. Affectionately, he asked me questions about my relationship with Kyle and SaraBeth. He found it difficult to comprehend why they hated me so much. He also struggled with why Kyle would set me up for such a fall? None of it made sense to him. Nor did it to me. I told him Martha's feelings about the situation from our brief discussion on Friday. He nodded agreement.

"There is more to this story. I feel it. Don't you?"

Looks of concern confronted me.

"No, not really, those two were always strange. Kyle, early on, seemed to detest me. Everything changed when Martha arrived. She brought out the best in him. He appeared to relax when he was in her presence."

Duncan explained that he wanted to be-

come a Psychiatrist especially dealing with Alzheimers Disease. He said that his Dad battled the disease at an early age.

The depth of Duncan's compassion touched something deep inside me. I longed to understand this man.

"You should come to Duke. Don't you want to be a writer? They have some great classes there. You can help me with my papers."

We laughed. It felt like all we did was laugh and kiss.

"I've never considered Duke, but maybe I will."

Such a decision would please my parents.

"Anna, I can honestly tell you, I know that due to the pain you have suffered, this will be hard for you to believe, but there is something here bigger than both of us. What I feel makes me want to run to the top of St. John's and shout, 'I love Anna Polis!'"

The day passed quickly. I didn't want it to

end. We went to the parish of St. John's. I fell asleep on a bench as the wind gently increased. The breeze whipped around me, but I had suffered from the inability to sleep for such a long time. Suddenly, something awakened me. Duncan was gone. Night peeped around the darkened corner. I sat up in fear and doubt. Would I always expect lies and deceit from the lips of my future lovers after my dreadful experiences with Kyle?

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“Duncan, I can handle this stroll down ‘memory lane.’ You arrived on the scene at the perfect time in my past. Your arrival made it easier for me to continue dealing with the deceivers.”

I whisper this to the darkness surrounding me on this silver night.

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"I LOVE ANNA POLIS!"

Over and over the phrase filled the air at

St. John's Parish on that day long ago. I stood until his arms pulled me onto the ground. Maybe I would learn not to expect deceit after all, at least not from him. Duncan drove me home. Parting felt fearful to me. Maybe I would never see him again? I hung onto him with embarrassment.

As I watched him back up slowly from the driveway, I knew that this man just decided my future. Mom and Dad had gone to dinner. Ellie prepared a small roast with vegetables for me. Slowly, I climbed the stairs to my room.

So many of my friends knew their choice of University, but I had struggled. A gigantic decision now faced me. My grade point average was excellent. If I maintained my pace, I would be Valedictorian of my class. Most likely, I could pick my choice of Higher Learning. Why had I never considered Duke?

Mom and Dad entered. They pecked my cheek and retreated. We all were over-



come with tiredness from the ordeal forced upon me by SaraBeth Wheeler and Stockard Kyle Vanderclift. Even their names made me feel ill. As I held my stomach, the phone rang.

"Hello, Beautiful. What ya doing?"

"Applying to Duke, how do you like that?"

No sounds passed for the longest time. The line went dead. Duncan was one of the Circle, and he didn't even know. Tomorrow, I would phone Martha. Now, I needed sleep.

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"I love Duncan Devos."

I say it softly to the salty air which surrounds me so as not to awaken my husband asleep upstairs.

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## MOM AND DAD'S DREAM

At the Academy, there was only one

Valedictorian. I believed that my parents dragged me to every graduation at the Academy since the day that I was born. Maybe, Abby took me while I was in the womb? This personification of "the perfect student" was their dream for me. Many may have dubbed my election as the Homecoming Queen as "cute" or "darling" but come on, what does it accomplish? That I was the prettiest girl in the school at that moment? What about in a year? Did that title accomplish anything besides making me look shallow and silly? I don't know. I was proud of my school for electing me. In this case, it appeared to show that the students at my school cared about stopping bullying for if there was ever a case of abuse, I must have represented it. Can you imagine walking down the halls of higher learning holding your head high when almost every person, student, and teacher, has seen your private parts? Well, I did it. It was not easy. Every day, that's what I did. It was not that I was on a campaign to win

each award possible at school, but my selection, as Valedictorian, would give my parents such pride. I would have preferred not to feel as if I was the overwhelming winner of *The Slut Award*. The slander which I bore would follow me for years. My mind zoomed to my future as a writer: *I would have a big book deal. I'm talking hundreds of thousands of dollars. The trendy publisher would be a good-looking man dressed in a Brooks Brothers dark blue jacket. His hip glasses were black and thick. Sparkling teeth shined through large lips which may have been Botoxed earlier in preparation for my interview. His beard was short; it was incredibly flattering to this intellectual, young executive. As I walked into his office, he stood. He dressed in designer jeans with his navy jacket. This guy appeared cool. I, Anna Polis, floated into the Fifth Avenue pad which was so high that I grabbed my stomach for a second. I didn't want to become sick, not now, even though butterflies filled my stomach. My*

*wispy, red dress matched the super high stiletto Louboutins. I gracefully patted down my billowing dress so that the air conditioning, from the vents around the window, was unable to blow it over my head in Marilyn Monroe fashion. I smiled because I knew this book would put me “over the top.” I now was close to Best-Seller status because this was the Publisher everyone wanted. Did my election to the Homecoming Queen help? No, of course not but my selection as Valedictorian had.*

*"Hello, Ms. Anna Polis, welcome to New York. Are your accommodations comfortable enough?"*

*He smiled broadly.*

*“Why, yes, thank you so much, Mr. Hughes, I have always preferred the Carlyle.” There was an awkward moment as we each wondered if we were married to the wrong partner. I thought of Duncan working from home so that one of us was always there for our three small children.*

*Mr. Hughes considered Mrs. Hughes who was currently enjoying a River Cruise in Europe. We struggled to maintain decorum. He motioned for me to sit. I staggered to the chair.*

*We looked deeply into each other's eyes. "I can't remove the image of you and that man, what was his name? Giles?"*

*He smiled.*

*"No, that would be Kyle. I haven't seen him in ages. He is the past."*

*I waved my hand in the air. I batted my tattooed eyelashes for effect.*

*"Good, that man was so beneath you."*

*This statement created an awkward moment as I think back to the video which I assumed he was describing.*

*"Yes, I believe that he was beneath me."*

Long story short, I persuaded him to publish my book even though I knew that he thought of me as easy. Each time we met, he would consider my earlier actions

when I believed that Kyle loved me and I threw my virginity to him. Would the feelings of disgrace and humiliation ever leave me? Maybe not, my redemption in that awkward moment was the simple statement:

*"I also was selected as Valedictorian of my class. I ended the forty five-minute dialogue on that proud day to a standing ovation. That speech today is a legend."*

Mr. Hughes' opinion of me changed in a heartbeat. I'm not only a slut; I am a super intellectual one. This scenario presented a different picture.

Each year of my academic life, I did my best so that someday, I would be able to lay the honor of Valedictorian at the feet of my deserving parents. Now, the importance of my award loomed higher than ever before. My conversation from the podium to my classmates could change my life. Did I still need to redeem myself to my friends? No, my classmates had al-

ready done that for me. That superlative, I received as a gift from my classmates. They bestowed it on a girl who was treated shamefully. My honor was a gift to the greatest parents in the world. Not many kids caused their folks the pain and embarrassment which I continually piled on mine. All the years that I tried to embarrass them or baited them because it made me feel superior, now made me feel sick.

When you attend an Academy, with the smartest people in that state, it's hard to maintain the highest grade point average and participate in various clubs and activities. My running track had changed my life as it forced me to sacrifice diet, sleep, and other actions, but I gleaned so much from developing the ability to manage my schedule so that I found time to do what I loved. This sacrifice would help me to write some great books because I would be able to prioritize my time.

“Anna, when will they announce the Valedictorian? Aren't you running out of

time.”

Mom looked a little nervous.

Those words caused my stomach to churn. Each day, I thought that I would finally be able to put this behind me. If only the powers that be could decide, then we could all relax. I heard that there were several very close candidates and that they struggled with a choice. Maybe today? They must decide at some point!

At least the Circle could finally drive ourselves to school. We were probably the last group of students to do that. The other kids had begun to tease us about riding with our folks when we had brand new cars, but it was hard to stop the tradition.

"When will they announce the Valedictorian? I sure hope that I am the one. If it is not me, surely it will be you, Anna."

Matie smiled.

"Aw, thanks, Matie."



False modesty was transparent.

During the first class, everyone seemed charged. A buzz traveled around the halls that there was about to be an announcement. Matie turned to me with shining eyes. She reached over and clasped my rather wet palm.

"Listen up, Senior class; we have an announcement of concern for most of you. Our new Valedictorian for the Senior class is."

The suspense was killing me. Mr. Newton's words sounded muffled. Everyone turned to look at me. Did I win? I wasn't sure. To my amazement, all of my classmates stood as they applauded while continuing to stare at me with large smiles.

"Yes, Anna Polis, congratulations for a great deal of hard work. We are confident that your speech will be an inspiration and challenge to each of us. Again, congratulations, Anna Polis, you are a shining example."

I guessed that he had already forgotten the smashing video of Kyle and me. Yes, indeed, I was “some shining example.”

"Speech, speech!" They all turned to me. I waved my hand in the air at them.

"Yes, I will deliver a speech on that day of days. I only hope that I can challenge some of the brightest and most gifted minds in this great country. May God Bless the United States of America and each of you, my dear classmates.”

Thunderous applause greeted my ears. Dad would be proud of the “United States of American” phase. Did anyone have a greater life than I, Anna Polis?

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The old book, which I lovingly hold, is delicate. Carefully, I locate the speech which I delivered long ago. Somehow, it doesn't appear brilliant today. Back then, I thought that I was destined to be a great

speaker, not a writer. Funny how God has different plans for us.

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## THE TRUTH AT LAST

Matie acted all weird the rest of the day. She followed me around with goo-goo eyes. Was she turning gay or something? I couldn't understand her. As I drove home, she kept messing with my hair. Just before I turned into my driveway, she sprayed me with Magie Noire, not that I needed it. Just her fragrance was strong enough to stop a horse from breathing, but I was developing a tolerance for it after all of these months of smelling my Circle.

No one mentioned SaraBeth Wheeler anymore. She ranked as a thing of the past. I ripped Kyle long ago from my mind. Only the handsome, to die for, Duncan Devos Davenport was welcomed in my world.

“Look, Matie, you can tell me anything,

but I need to know, are you some sort of closet gay or something?”

She was coming home to study with me which meant that we would lie on the floor and talk about the most important two things on this earth: Louie and Duncan, not in that order.

“What? Are you insane? You know that I am not gay. Why would you ask such a dumb thing?”

The house was dark as we entered, so I assumed that no one was home, Ellie and Mom would be in the kitchen. After unlocking the door, I turned to look at my friend. Suddenly, she pushed me into the room: “Surprise, Anna! Congratulations for your honor! We are proud of you, Anna!”

My small group of friends and my parents stood in the foyer. Ellie screamed and jumped up and down like a middle schooler. She pushed me into the kitchen before I could even speak with my guests. The most beautiful cake that I ever saw

sat proudly displayed on the counter. It was a white cake with red icing. I know that we were taking the red thing too far, but this was a special celebration. A girl in a cap and gown stood alone on top of the cake. She clasped her right hand tightly together and looked up at the sky. The meaning escaped me. I said nothing. Gently, I hugged Ellie. It hit me at that moment; just as I crossed the threshold from little girl to woman a few summers back, I was now crossing the plateau from home, safety, and familiarity into the world of dorms, aloneness, and a different life. Soon, I would leave this home, which I loved deeply, for an unknown future. Such thoughts made me want to rush into the arms of that man and woman standing there beside my Circle of Friends. It occurred to me that I may be the only woman on earth who was unable to leave my parents for college. Pushing these thoughts from my mind, I hugged my family against my chest. Tears of joy from Mom, Dad, and me were

mixed as we clung to each other.

"You are almost there, Anna. Only this last summer at home with us before you leave for college. Will you have time for one more visit to Annapolis aboard *Honey* before you leave us?"

Dad whispered into my ear while he looked sadly almost fearfully into my eyes.

"Are you kidding? Nothing could keep me from being aboard *Honey* with the people that I love most in the world."

I realized that I had put off making a choice of university. All of my friends had their acceptance, but I was unable to proceed. Duncan's words suggesting Duke had catapulted me into action. Agatha, Matie, Martha, Candace and I hugged. College days waited, but we had one more summer before we embarked on plans that only each one of us knew.

Those were exciting times but filled with a little fear as well. The celebration only lasted about an hour before they all de-

parted. I was thankful that no one demanded a speech. I was speechless. Mom slowly closed the door. Ellie excused herself to her apartment. This action always meant that the Polis family were going to have "a little talk."

We entered the kitchen and sat down at the table.

"Anna, I have information. We need to talk."

Of course, I knew who it involved. This talk was a long time coming.

"The Detective called this morning. I have all of the facts on the Vanderclifts. It may change the way that you feel about those two young kids."

He looked saddened by the news.

"Dad, I doubt if anything could change my mind about SaraBeth Wheeler and Stockard Kyle Vanderclift."

I sat there with my arms defiantly crossed over my chest. Mom gently patted my

shoulder.

"Does Mom already know?"

That seemed like a dumb thing to say.

Was I angry at Mom for the news that I was about to hear? I felt silly.

"Yes, of course, your mother knows.

Anna, we don't want to upset you. This day is a happy day. These next months are some of the most special of your life as acceptances from colleges start to arrive.

We know that you are excited and just want to get on with your life. Would you rather just leave it alone and not discuss it? The decision is entirely up to you. We are prepared to do whatever you want."

Time seemed to stand still. I didn't know what I wanted. It would be great just to get on with the celebration of life. Enough sadness and tears had passed. Still, I needed the conclusion, the *Rest of the Story*. Dad spoke no words for the longest time. The ticking of the ancestral Grandfather clock in the upstairs hall was the only sound. I just nodded for him to con-



tinue.

"We received Detective Green's conclusion four days ago, but I couldn't talk about it then. This info is pretty heavy stuff."

He took a deep breath.

"As we all have known since we met the Wheelers, Michael is not SaraBeth's real father. He is her step-father."

I nodded. This fact was not exactly earth shattering news. I yawned boldly to show that I wasn't intimidated by whatever he was about to recite.

"It seems that SaraBeth Wheeler is SaraBeth Vanderclift. You see, SaraBeth and Kyle are sister and brother."

This news made no sense. I began to laugh.

"Obviously, the great Detective has misinformation. Dad, I was around them. They couldn't fake it. The two of them did

not know of any relationship when they were on *Honey*."

Methodically, as if he had rehearsed it a dozen times, Dad explained that Kyle and SaraBeth did not know that they were related at that point. When they were able to spend time onboard *Honey*, they sensed something wasn't right. After they had returned to Savannah, they began to spend time together. As they talked, many similarities in their history became apparent. While my father spoke, I realized that the two kids did look so much alike that it should have been evident. Why had none of us ever seen it before? This information also explained the comfortable feeling which I felt for Kyle when we first met. Part of his attraction was that he reminded me of one of my dearest friends.

"So SaraBeth Wheeler is SaraBeth Vanderclift? "

Dad nodded "Yes."

He continued by explaining that Norris Vanderclift had a long affair with SaraBeth's mom right under everyone's nose. It lasted for years. Somehow, he was able to deceive everyone. The man had two families. His wife only found out about two years earlier when she saw her husband and his mistress at a traffic light. I could only imagine the scandal and hurt that Mrs. Vanderclift had suffered. She stayed with the dirty cheater for reasons which only she understood.

"This is pretty awful, but why would SaraBeth, one of my best friends and Kyle, the boy that I loved, want to hurt me?"

Dad shook his head sadly.

"That, we may never know. You would need to visit the two and talk with each one for only Kyle and SaraBeth can provide you those answers. I wish that I could provide complete closure for you, but it appears that Kyle felt angry and deceived by both of his parents. His sympa-

thies lied with SaraBeth and the fact that they had so much while she lived in that tiny cracker box of a home. Mr. Vanderclift was the wealthy relative who took care of her. I guess that he also provided her fancy clothes.”

Dad looked at me to see if I followed all of this. I didn't. The only way to describe the feeling that now surrounded me was stunned. This revelation made no sense. How did someone have two families in Savannah and get away with it?

“Do you remember that we had dinner with SaraBeth's parents on the evening that SaraBeth and Kyle deceived you? I thought they seemed nervous. Well, they knew what Kyle and SaraBeth planned. They didn't even attempt to stop it. They all hated our family that much.”

Mom looked ill just having to recite this revelation.

I retired to my room. As I sat down on my bed; my eyes took in all that I loved. This

pink room was my fortress. How would I solve all of the mysteries of my life in a dorm room? Would the noise even allow me to think there? I was scared. Life was confusing as it often made no sense. My days as a little girl looked most appealing. My hand trembled as I reached for the light and turned it off. Pulling my legs into my chest, I lay in the fetal position and slept.

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Tonight, I again assume the fetal position on the sofa highlighted in the light of the moon. The hour is late; it is almost morning.

*You are almost there. Don't stop now Anna!*

My thoughts charge forward with confusion:

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## GRADUATION DAY

“Wake-up, America! A new day has dawned. Your leaders stand before you; a new and brave generation who face you with love for this great land and desire to accomplish what is best for her.”

Silence filled the great room. My speech lasted for eighteen minutes. All of the students, faculty, and guests must have been poker players. I found it impossible to read them. Did they love it or was that deep silence embarrassment for the speaker which resulted in this incredibly awkward feeling for me? Couldn't just one person applaud? I, Anna Polis, would have turned cartwheels from the room if I received only one favorable response at that awkward moment. Silently, I stood at the podium with a big smile feeling like a big fool. Suddenly, one person stood with a smile and greeted my ending with a nice, solid clap. Then another, and another, until the entire crowd stood. I received a rousing standing ovation. The kids

looked proud. That was what I wanted; their pride not only in the Academy but also in the speaker who humbly stood before them. Hopefully, some may remember a few of my words for at least the summer. It seemed impossible that I could have worked any harder on my parting message for them.

The Circle was going out for Thai food with our parents as soon as the ceremony ended. This meal would be one of our last outings together. Now began the split which we had all dreaded for the entire last year of school. Agatha was moving back to London for her college days.

Upon graduating from the University College of London, her plan was to come back to the U. S., but I wondered if she would. Martha was attending Johns Hopkins School of Medicine where she designed to excel in Cosmetic Surgery.

Candace would fulfill her dream of becoming a dentist. She would be attending the University of California at Los Angeles School of Dentistry. Matie planned on

fulfilling her dreams of studying Art and Design with Louie as he studied Law at Yale University in New Haven. Just as they looked forward to sharing their college days together, so did Duncan and I. Thrilled to have gained acceptance at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, nothing pleased me more than the thought of studying with Duncan. Excitement filled my heart with the thoughts of each day spent beside the handsome Duncan as I learned how to become a great author. I planned on helping him with his papers in return for his protection from “all the hunks” whom he believed would stalk me. Sounded like a fair trade because no other man had even entered my mind since we met. How could they? Duncan Davenport was everything I ever dreamed of finding. Most of all, he had erased the horrors of Kyle and SaraBeth from my mind. Seldom did I think of them. When I did, it was with sadness and disappointment for them. What happened to sweet SaraBeth? At one time, I be-



lieved that she was the kindest, most perfect woman on earth. Sometimes, I felt a pang of guilt as I couldn't help but wonder if I had done something which had spurred her hatred for me? It was hard to fathom the pain which she bore because of the selfish Mr. Vanderclift. Yet, Kyle's mother remained with him. We saw them out occasionally at dinner; they smiled and waved across the room although he never approached my family.

Each of my Circle had extensive plans for their final summer before University days so they would not be joining us aboard *Honey* this year. Since my thirteenth year, they rotated summers with my family in our beloved Annapolis. Matie always stayed with Louie since that first time for most of the summer, so she was usually part of our excursions on the boat. Dad loved Louie Moreau like a son. He had also developed strong feelings for *my* Duncan. The six of us had enjoyed many

wonderful times together for the past six months.

Three days after graduation: Dad, Mom, Duncan, and I sailed away from Savannah toward our mecca of Annapolis. This summer was a special time for us. Matie and Louie were going to drive to his home and join us on the boat when we arrived there. Plans were made for a peaceful final summer before the "kids" parted ways from each other and their families. I can say that our sojourn from Savannah up north was perfect. The wind blew just about every day, so Dad took a chance and went out into the ocean. It was heavenly. Now that Duncan was part of the crew, Dad appeared more relaxed, and he desired to brave the elements. Mom and I could sit together and enjoy the sun, salt, and sky. What glorious memories we shared at that particular time in our lives. Dad and Duncan even did most of the cooking on the grill which suited Mom and me. Cooking wasn't our thing at all.

Duncan appeared to excel at everything. My dreams now included him raising our kids while I wrote my best sellers inside my large studio behind the house. We would live in Savannah only blocks from my parents. Half the time, during that summer of high expectations, I appeared in a stupor. Mom and Dad considered it excitement at attending Duke, but it was mostly dreams of being a wife and mother. That always glowed most favorably in my mind even more than my love for writing.

Sure enough, when we arrived at the docks in Annapolis, Matie and Louie were sitting there. His parents had purchased two matching Blunt Scooters for them.

The Moreau family loved Matie. She enjoyed the welcome they bestowed on her into their fold with love and grace. I envied her. Dread filled my soul whenever I considered meeting the Davenport family. They were successful and extremely

wealthy, but they were old school Savannah residents which meant that they were very proper. My folks did not stress tradition that much. They expected good manners, and etiquette was essential, but they were not hardcore about such things. Although Herbert's mother was strict about social rules, Dad was not, if someone did not have perfect table manners but at least tried, then Dad appreciated that, and he gave them an "A" for effort.

We frequently saw the Davenports at the Savannah Yacht Club, but they never invited us over for drinks. A smile, nod, and wave were about all that we received. I wasn't sure if they even knew that Duncan and I dated. Seldom did he mention his folks. This little tidbit was the only thing that made me wonder about our future. Matie and Louie already appeared to be married even though I knew for a fact that they would not have sex until after their marriage. This goal was a moral virtue which was most important to each of them.

With my past reputation, it surprised me that Duncan never pushed me. We came close a few times, but both of us pulled away. I'm not sure why. I dreamed of wearing a white gown even though, traditionally, I would have looked foolish. The entire state now knew about my debacle with Kyle. Thoughts passed through my mind that maybe the Davenports were aware that their son was in love with a tarnished woman. I frequently prayed:

*Dear God, please let them accept me. I want our lives to be as perfect as Louie's and Matie's future.*

God was back in my life again. I don't know when I excluded him. What made SaraBeth fall from grace? I only knew that I needed Him to guide me for the rest of my life. When I forgot Him: bad things happened.

Something caused me to arise earlier than usual one morning. The boat was anchored at St. Michaels in about the same

spot where we watched fireworks together so long ago. I tiptoed up on deck past Duncan who slept soundly in the Main Salon.

“Morning, Dad!”

Herbert had brought the coffee maker up onto the deck and enjoyed a brimming cup of dark roast coffee. He stood and poured me a cup. Now was the time to broach the subject which had caused me wonder since the day that the family celebrated with the beautiful cake from Ellie.

"Dad, you remember that figure on top of the cake Ellie made after my Valedictorian speech? Did the statue on top have some significance? I always felt there was a message in it but couldn't figure it out. Remember, the graduate had her right hand clasped and looked up to the heavens?"

Dad had aged greatly in the past years. I realized that he wouldn't be able to sail

*Honey* much longer without help. Seeing my parents age shocked me. I couldn't imagine them confined inside their home. Dad smiled so sweetly at me.

"I was surprised that you didn't question me about that long before now."

He reached out his hand and helped me sit down. We whispered so as not to bother the others. Sounds penetrated deeper as they reflected off the water. He smiled broadly at me. Still, there was sadness to our activities this final season before my departure for college.

"Isaiah 41:13."

"What Dad?"

"Do you even read your Bible anymore, Anna? Do you recall when SaraBeth encouraged you to read your scriptures? You were faithful. You even caused Matie, Mom, and me to join you. What happened to that girl? She seemed so happy and content."

I shook my head morosely.

"I don't know."

What had happened to that girl? It wasn't that I had lost my faith. Nothing could make that happen. I loved God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. They were an intricate part of my life.

For the longest time, I tried to remember the cause of my departure from closeness with God. I missed Him. Sadly, I looked at my father. He was the wisest man on this earth, at least to me.

"I think it happened when I became involved with Kyle. Yes, I'm pretty sure that is the time."

"Do you think that God tried to tell you that union was not the one for you? That maybe you wanted to be in love so much that you rushed things by taking them into YOUR hands and forcing them?"

"Yes, I do believe that. During my time with Kyle, I felt surrounded by chaos and fear. My nerves were on edge. I wasn't



happy. I was afraid, Dad."

Dad looked deeply into my eyes with sadness before he spoke.

"Isaiah 41:13 from the King James Bible says: *For I the LORD thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee.*"

Dad looked deeply into my eyes.

"The figurine on that cake was a reminder that if you hold onto God by your right hand, you never need to fear. He will help you. You experienced so much turmoil and fear because you forgot Him, Anna."

Yes, of course, he was right.

"Thank you. I will never let go of His hand; I promise you and HIM that much."

"Anna, you know, Duncan may not be the promise for you. You can't make things happen. You must 'let go and let God.'"

"I realize that Dad, and I do promise."

I did let go of things after that. If only I had listened to my father earlier, I would never have thrown myself at Kyle.

Duncan and I became closer during the summer. I invited him to read the Bible and pray with us. He did so gladly. His prayers appeared heartfelt and sincere. This union was the relationship of which I dreamed during my childhood. God surely sent Duncan Devos Davenport to me.

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As in a trance, I now walk to a book case in the back of the room. Under the shelves, inside a heavy door are stored all of our yearbooks from high school and university days. I grab the book from our Freshman year. The one from Duke and continue my walk down “memory lane.”

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## DUKE UNIVERSITY

Duncan and I enjoyed a small picnic of bread, cheese, and olives as we lay in the

grass on a warm spring morning at our beloved campus of Duke University. We were well into our Junior year. I shivered a little even though the sun was bright and the day beautiful.

"What can I do to make you happier, Anna? You know you are my girl."

He often said these words "You know, you are my girl."

Honestly, I wasn't feeling great. Just a little tired but I couldn't seem to shake the feeling. I smiled.

"Just love me, Duncan; there is nothing more to be done for me."

He kissed me gently on the lips.

For over two and a half years, we shared every possible moment that we could. It was as though we feared that something might try to separate us.

"Promise me that nothing can ever come between us."

I held onto his hand.

A small tear glistened on my cheek. I re-

alized that I was being melodramatic, but couldn't stop the emotions that tried to surface on that perfect day. I don't know why I struggled with my feelings. There was no reason.

"Anna, you know that I plan for us to marry when we graduate. Immediately upon your graduation but I'll need another eight years, so I'll expect at least one baby from you during my struggles with the Med program here. 'Keep them barefoot and pregnant is the way to a happy marriage,' Dad says."

Duncan laughed gleefully. Then, he kissed me again.

"No problem," I said as I pulled him over beside me.

We spent the rest of our hour together just looking into each other's eyes. I know that we were sickening, but we loved each other. It was difficult not to touch. We planned on meeting Matie and Louie in

Seaside Beach, Florida for Spring Break in one week. We were all so excited.

Although Duncan and I were committed to our studies, we found plenty of time to be together. We both loved Duke. His idea that I join him there was brilliant.

We weren't officially engaged yet but determined to marry as soon as conditions allowed it.

I had spent each Christmas with his parents in Savannah, as we floated between his parents' home and mine, each of those blessed seasons. I loved his folks. They loved me. My fear that they wouldn't accept me was another fear which I had indulged without ever accomplishing anything. I'm telling you, don't fret about things: they have a way of working out for the best despite your worries.

Duke University was a beautiful campus. It encompassed eight thousand five hundred forty-seven acres. All this, they divided into four main areas: East, West,

Central, and the Medical Center. I spent so much time walking around the Medical Center with Duncan that I began to think that I belonged there. He dreamed of starting his Medical career soon. With a total of two hundred fifty-four buildings, there was plenty to see on that gorgeous campus which began as a research center by the Methodists and Quakers. Duke had a total enrollment of 14,832 competitive and hard-working students. Thrilled that I gained acceptance into a program which only accepted about 10.4% of the applicants, I felt blessed and special. Durham provided a haven for the pride of that city. Duke had stood right there in the same spot since 1892 when they moved it from Trinity, a city close in proximity to Durham. Founded in 1838, in rural Randolph County, the original college grew impressively. I had read the history of the university and found it fascinating.

Duncan had classes the rest of the day. I had little homework that afternoon so decided to go back to the dorm for a nap.

Instantly, I fell asleep when my head hit the pillow. The ringing of the phone awakened me.

"Hello?"

"Anna, where are you? I'm waiting for you outside the cafeteria. You better hurry on over before all the food is gone."

He laughed merrily.

"Um, I think that I'll take a rain check. I'm so tired and sleepy. I guess that I haven't been sleeping great lately. That paper, which is due soon, hangs over me, but I can't seem to get a jump on it. Anyway, I'll catch you tomorrow. Love you, Bye."

Quickly, I hung up the phone so that he wouldn't try to entice me to come out.

The spring day had turned chilly. All I wanted to do was snuggle back into my bed and sleep.

Jenna, my roommate was gone for two weeks. She attended some writer's convention which appeared to be a waste of time to me, so I didn't accompany her.

The dorm was eerily quiet. Peace was unusual at this period of the early evening, so I decided to enjoy it.

Noise in the hall awakened me. When I looked at the clock, I couldn't believe it. I had slept through my first class which was an early one. The first classes interested me because I didn't mind arising early unlike most students. Such an action was an advantage of being a sailor. You became accustomed to "hitting the decks" before most people were up when you loved to sail. Another great benefit, to this desire for early classes, was fewer students attended.

I jumped into the shower to rush for my next session. I just couldn't afford to be late. Although I was a good student and worked hard, these categories were involved. Writing well did not come easily. Never before was I aware of all that my chosen profession required. There was much more than mere writing. Mastering the English language in depth was most



important. Here, I was taught the correct techniques for telling a story, but I also had to learn about Editing, Publishing, Marketing so many more things that at times, my head swam. Sure, my profession wasn't nearly as difficult as Medicine, but it was much more involved than I earlier realized. Occasionally, I missed home so much. I longed to return to the Polis home. Mom, Dad, and Ellie told me often how much they missed me, but they sure seemed to enjoy themselves. Ellie began to accompany them to Annapolis in the summer. Dad said she was a great help. I guessed she did a better job than I had done as Fifth Mate? Whenever I went home, they had so many funny tales of their mishaps aboard my beloved *Honey*. It had been impossible for me to join them in over two years. Every couple of nights, I phoned Mom, and then Matie. I couldn't have held it together without hearing their voices.

Jenna and I had done a little overseas time with our studies. Duke allowed us to do that. I had enjoyed studying writing in London with my new best friend, Jenna. We visited Agatha while we were there. She was in love with a guy named Harry. He resembled Prince Harry with his red hair. My friend had lost lots of weight. She glowed. I could tell that they were happy. Already she had changed her plans of ever returning to the United States to live. Instead, the couple longed for a small flat with a baby. They talked about marriage upon graduation as did Matie and Louie.

Martha loved Johns Hopkins. Her medical career was right on track. She had finally been able to spend time with Duncan over the last Christmas break. The two had a great deal in common and liked to talk with their heads together about medical things that the rest of us couldn't understand.

Candace also seemed giddy with her

choice of career. Her love of Dentistry surprised me. This girl carried antiseptic spray in her purse everywhere that she went. Somehow, the thought of her burying her head inside of someone's mouth with gum disease and bad breath did not click in my mind, but she enjoyed her studies. As yet, she had not met anyone whom she treasured. There was still plenty of time.

Panic, as I faced being tardy, prevented me from grabbing a jacket. I, Anna Polis, hated to be late. It was against my very nature. The coolness hit me square in the face as I bolted out of the door of my residence hall. My next class was way across campus. I would never make it in time. I charged fiercely ahead in the wind with a look of fear. Would the professor disgrace me? He had a way of doing that if someone dared to be late for his class. Out of nowhere, a lanky guy rode his bike toward me.

"Hey, you okay?"

I stopped to understand him.

"Yeah, I'm late for class. Why do you ask?"

I had never seen this guy before. He must live in the dorm beside me.

"Well, you look like you are in a panic. Why don't you take my bike? I have completed everything for today. This time is a light day for me with my class schedule. Instead, I've got a ton of studying, so I won't need the bike until tomorrow morning. Just bring it back to those bike stands over there. The lock and key are there on the handlebars in that bag."

He smiled and pointed to a black bag which was attached to his bike. Then he nodded his head toward several stainless stands of bikes.

"Are you sure? I mean, you don't even know me?"

"Nope, I don't, but you are one of us, aren't you? I'm just saying you are a Duke Girl, right?"

I smiled as I realized that because of the kindness of a stranger; I would not miss another class. My eyes looked at him with deep gratitude. As I rode toward the building which had seemed so far away earlier, I took a deep breath. Yes, I Anna Polis, was a Duke Girl!

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*Okay, Anna here comes the other attacker. Maybe the worst one because the first, Kyle and SaraBeth, brought you to Duncan. This one separated you for too long.*

Tears collect in my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. Maybe I should.

Slowly, the thought forms that I should phone Dr. Charles. Maybe I should ask him if I can force these thoughts? They told me to “let it go.”

I can't:

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## NOT A CLUE!

Time seemed to fly past as we enjoyed those special days. College was the time to catch your breath, dream, work hard, and set goals for the future. My future was bright. What more could I ever desire? I had it all!

Spring Break was divine. Matie had cut her hair in the cutest bob. She looked adorable. Louie no longer was the kid who sported long hair. The buzz cut worked on the handsome Mr. Moreau. He worked out at the gym each morning. His arms looked like those of Sean Penn.

Seaside Beach was “to die for.” Even I had to admit that as much as I wanted the others to meet us at the boat and sail during our break, this was wonderful. We slept late each morning which was easy for me. I was always tired. The boys shared one room and Matie and I each had our private one with bath.

The cottage was gorgeous. Decorated in “beachy colors” of pale silver, turquoise,

and lilac; peace flooded our souls. We didn't need a car. It was easy to fall out of bed and stroll to a local coffee shop for a Latte. Restaurants packed the square. We rode bikes everywhere in the area. Matie and I discovered yoga. I felt lean and mean, but there was this nagging feeling that something wasn't right. I guessed that things were too perfect. Yes, we also rented a small boat. We frequently enjoyed my beloved sport of sailing.

We loved sunsets at *Buds and Alleys*, the premier restaurant. Together, we sat on the rooftop which provided the most beautiful sunsets in the world.

“I'm telling you the name of this restaurant represents the owner's pets, not the owners!”

Frequently, we held in-depth intellectual discussions such as this.

The four of us had everything at our fingertips. As couples, we windsurfed, skateboarded, and ate. Matie and I took a

long walk to our yoga class each morning and back to the cottage. Then we ate. The choices were unlimited.

Much too quickly, we were back at the grind with our studies. One more year for Matie and me but the guys had many more years before they graduated.

Already Duncan and I planned our Christmas break since time would not stand still for us. It was important to make plans way ahead of the actual event or be left behind.

As we drove back to Savannah for our time with family, during this blessed season, Duncan talked much more than usual. He appeared nervous. It was probably my imagination. Our Christmas time with my parents passed without event. Mom and Dad looked great. Then, it was time to spend one week with the Davenport family.

Christmas Eve was my favorite time of the year. Not because of presents and all



that the world had created, but with thoughts of the real meaning. We attended late candlelight service at the Davenport family church. The night was unusually cold for that time of year. Duncan and I huddled together as we walked to the car from the church.

“Anna, I have a gift that I would like for you to open tonight. It’s not anything special, but you have been hinting for some time that you would like it.”

He smiled sweetly.

“Okay, I’m always ready to open a gift. You know that.”

I pushed him to give myself a lead to the car. Running as quickly as possible, I still couldn’t out run him.

Not only was Duncan acting bizarre this evening, but his parents kept looking at us as though they knew a secret. They weren't smiling, so I began to feel nervous. Had they only recently discovered that I was a slut and they wanted the only

son to dump me for a virgin? My hands began to perspire as I considered any number of reasons that they may not desire our relationship to continue.

Duncan and I followed the older Davenport couple inside of the lovely home which they built years ago. His mother immediately went to the living room and turned on the Christmas tree. My mom loved to "deck the halls, " but Duncan's mom hired an interior decorator who put everyone in town to shame. The tree was massive with so many decorations that I sat stunned beside it. Duncan handed me a small box. My hands trembled. Could it be? I never expected an engagement ring this soon. The package glowed in shining, thick gold paper with a small pink ribbon of shiny cloth. I looked at him with surprise. Was it a cruel joke? After Kyle, I always thought that everything was a mean hoax. Carefully, I removed the papers so that I could save them forever. Before I opened the box, I looked at Mr. and

Mrs. Davenport. Not a clue did I glean about what waited.

There sparkling in a satin box was a gorgeous set of diamond earrings. Desperately, I attempted to hide my disappointment. They were elegant.

"Anna, those earrings have been in our family for generations. They are a gift from Mr. Davenport and myself to you, Darling. We want you to enjoy them. Now, don't you keep them in that box! They are insured and ready to be worn."

Her gigantic smile was warm.

Tears filled my eyes. The Davenports were much kinder than I had ever dreamed. It was that they were so staunch and proper without any spontaneity which made me feel uncomfortable. I never knew quite what to do while in their presence. Unsure of myself, I strolled toward them. As I kissed and hugged each, Duncan softly said: "My gift is also in the box."

He was mistaken. Nothing else remained in the tiny box. I quickly put the earrings in my ears and walked to the mirror which hung over the fireplace. The flames cast a mirage of light on the large diamonds. What a sight to behold; I, Anna Polis, had received my first precious jewelry. Herbert thought such things frivolous and unnecessary due to his frugal nature.

I looked into the eyes of Duncan. Unable to decipher the emotion. I gently shook my head.

"Darling, there is nothing else there."

I handed the box to him so that he could see. Smiling, he took it from me. Carefully, he lifted the satiny lid and handed it back. The ring seemed huge as it filled the space. It was a whopper. I couldn't wear that ring on a daily basis. Robbery at knifepoint, even at Duke, was a possibility.

"Anna, that was my great, great-grand-mother Etta's ring. Again, it is insured."

His mother's voice again.

I turned to see Duncan on one knee. He took my hand. I wasn't sure if it was just a large ring or engagement ring. Lovingly, he slipped the ring onto my finger. The platinum band was a little large for my hand.

"Dearest Anna, my girl, the love of my life, nothing can keep us apart. I choose you to be mine forever. With such humbleness and excitement, I want to ask: Anna Polis will you marry me as soon as we graduate and will you give me a child as soon as possible? I don't want you to become bored with so many hours on your hands as I work for my degree as a Psychiatrist. Will you be mine to have and to hold forever?"

Mr. Davenport blew his nose loudly. Both of the Davenports were crying.

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In the present, I cry. The tears fall slowly, softly now as I remember that frosty night so long ago.

*Anna, you have done it. You are almost free.*

These words of encouragement, I whisper to myself. Sadly, my eyes survey the ring which hugs my finger. This ring means more than most engagement rings. My ring represents life:

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### THIS CAN'T BE

The next day, Duncan and his dad planned a morning together playing racket ball. His mom invited me to lunch at the Club, but I wanted Mom and Dad to see my engagement ring. I drove quickly home. Their laughter resounded from inside as I walked up to the door. Mom met me when she heard the key.

How did she know? Her eyes went automatically to my finger.

“Herbert, you just look at this! Oh my! Her-

bert, you look at this! Ellie, you get in here!" The running of their steps made me smile. Eagerly, everyone pulled on my finger. I thought that they might break it.

Herbert kept blowing his nose. It sounded just like Mr. Davenport. Great, our baby would go through life making loud, screeching noises just like an elephant. I only hoped that our first child would be a boy. I already knew that he would.

Like old times. We shared a cup of coffee and nibbled one of Ellie's delicious cinnamon buns. Ellie kept looking at me funny. Mom had made a hair appointment, so she was on her way out the door. Dad had some emergency on *Honey*. Ellie and I sat alone.

"Miss Anna, you okay?"

"Ellie, the man of my dreams just asked me to marry him as he gave me this."

I held up the massive diamond.

"Yes, I'm all right."

I wasn't. Something strange was going on with my female parts. My stomach looked bloated although I had lost even more weight lately. I felt tired and irritable. Also, I

had some unexplained bleeding between my periods. It was weird, but I figured related to stress. Wasn't everything related to stress?

"Miss Anna, you got circles under your eyes. I'm telling you that you are not well. You go right now and call Dr. Charles."

Dr. Charles had been my doctor since I outgrew my pediatrician. He always treated my family well. Ellie's words made me admit that as much as I wanted to deny it, things weren't right with me. Ellie picked up the phone and dialed the number to my doctor.

"I need Dr. Charles. No, it is not okay for him to call later. This caller is Ellie. What you mean you don't know me. Yes, you do. I'm calling for Ms. Anna. She's not well."

Carefully, I walked to the phone. Numbness overcame me. I knew that I had a problem. Why had I put this off? Probably it was because I didn't know who to see at the University. Now, I arrived to familiarity and shelter at my home. Dr. Charles would see me and make me well. Ellie handed me the phone. Patiently, I waited. Ellie looked scared. I smiled confidently at her.



Several minutes passed until the voice of a man whom I loved answered my call. He sounded calm. My hands drastically shook. "Anna, it's nice to hear your voice. I hope that you are calling just to catch me up on your latest news!"

I could only have wished. Still, I did tell the doctor about Duncan. He knew the Davenport family well. He was also their physician. I didn't know that. We chatted on about our families for a while.

"I have a problem."

Painstakingly, I listed all of my symptoms: bloating of my abdomen, bleeding between periods, tiredness, pressure and pain in my stomach and a few other things.

"I won't bore you with it. Sorry to bother you. I'm sure that it isn't anything, right? Well, great talking with you. I'll call again. Bye, Dr. Charles."

"Anna, you get to my office right now. We can do several tests. I want you to go to the hospital as well for a few diagnostics which

I can't perform here. I have a free hour. Come now."

The phone went dead. I smiled.

"Dr. Charles said it was nothing. It is no big deal."

I lied.

"Miss Anna, I heard his voice through the phone. I'm going with you. Let's go."

She grabbed me and marched me out to my car. We drove without speaking. When I parked, I turned to her.

"Ellie, I have a bad feeling about this. Whatever they say, you must promise not to tell Mom until I'm ready. This entire episode will not end well."

Ellie dabbed a Kleenex at her eyes and silently nodded agreement.

The whole day passed. Duncan kept calling. Mom called, but I did not return a call. Dr. Charles was methodical in his examination. I spent hours at the hospital as well. Darkness began to ascend as I waited at the office of a doctor who had loved me for over thirteen years.

When he walked in the door, I knew. My assumptions were correct.

"Do you want to wait until all the tests are completed or do you want my diagnosis now? It could be incorrect, just remember this is not entirely conclusive. Never would I jump ahead with a diagnosis before all the tests are received, but I know you, young lady. You will probably worry yourself to death."

Most likely, he referred to the Kyle incident and the fact that I had a nervous breakdown back then. Everyone must still think of me as "delicate." I would never shake that diagnosis.

"When are you to return to Duke?"

"I don't know. I mean, it isn't as important as correcting this. Am I going to die?"

"Anna, I never sugarcoat things, you know that. From my findings, I believe that we are battling cervical cancer. It is the most common form of that cancer which is good. There are more difficult cancers to treat, but we have excellent results treating Endometrial Cancer. I'll be with you each step of the way as will your family and that handsome

Davenport boy. Take courage, Anna."  
Weakling that I was, I collapsed onto the floor.

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Almost in a trance, I rise from the floor. Not only did I fall onto the floor long ago but tonight I also fell. The thoughts are too real:

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#### MY BATTLE WITH ANOTHER FOE

Darkness penetrated the sky those many years ago. As I looked up into the heavens, I noticed the most beautiful sunset of my life. The sky was golden as in a dream. It would not have surprised me to see angels floating up through the streams of light. The message to me was "Life goes on."  
"Life goes on!"

I repeated the words to Ellie who drove the car so slowly that by the time we arrived home, it would be tomorrow.  
"Yes, that's right, Ms. Anna. Life goes on. You are going to be just fine."  
Already, I had removed the brilliant ring

from Duncan. My finger looked empty, ordinary. I lovingly rubbed the space.

"Miss Anna, please reconsider this crazy decision to break up the engagement with Mr. Duncan. It is not right for you not to give him a choice. What if he wants to marry you anyway?"

"Ellie, there is lots of room for input from you, Mom, and Dad about my treatment and all other options, but the area of my relationship with Duncan is off limits. End of discussion. Do you understand?"

Ellie's sobs were starting to annoy me. I understood. This thing that threw us all for a spin was called *life*. Things happen. God never promised his children that because we were Christians, life wouldn't hurt us. It did and it would. I was all right with this turn of events. In fact, if I had my way, I would have taken Ellie to Baltimore to wait the two weeks before my treatment started. Bringing Mom and Dad into yet another of my battles seemed downright cruel, but Ellie had convinced me that it would devastate them to leave them out of the loop on this critical issue.

Dr. Charles was excellent. He recommended that I receive my care at Johns Hopkins which was renowned for cancer treatment with the most innovative techniques available at that time. Already, I received admission at the famed institution in only two weeks. How did Dr. Charles accomplish that? What I wanted was for Mom to allow Ellie and me to face this together. Mom appeared old and more fragile to me. Most likely, her fragility was due to my dramas. I wished that I could go back to the thirteenth summer of my life and remove all of the pitfalls of which I had found myself falling prey. I disliked Kyle and SaraBeth more now than earlier for the pain they cost not just me but Mom and Dad as well.

Ellie raised the garage with the button. We entered the living room. Mom and Dad sat on the sofa watching television. They both stood as we approached.

"Anna, what's going on? You must realize the fear that has gripped us this entire day. You are to call your fiancé right now. He is beside himself."

I explained that I would call Duncan, but I needed to talk with them first.

"Anna, did you lose the ring?"

Mom looked shocked.

"This is awful. So you lost the ring, and you and Ellie have been searching for it all day? Just tell us where it happened. Dad will get someone on it tonight."

Sadly, she squeezed my hand.

"Honey, you look shell-shocked. It will be okay. We will face this together: you, Dad, Duncan, and I. I'm sure that Duncan and the Davenports will understand the loss of the ring. This little loss is not the end of the world."

Mom squeezed my hand and smiled.

Ellie ran from the room in tears. I wanted to follow her. Instead, I slowly sat down. I reached for the remote and turned the tube off.

"Listen, Mom and Dad: this is the hardest thing that I have ever had to tell anyone in my life. The second hardest will be to tell Duncan that I have called off our engage-

ment.”

Mom gasped. Dad stood.

"Has that dirty rat hurt you? Is he seeing someone else? Well, we'll just see about this. No one hurts my little girl and doesn't hear from me.”

I shuddered not from these events but with the thought of the fury which must have descended on SaraBeth and the rat, Kyle. Never had I considered what they must have endured from my dad.

"I'm just going to say it. No one has hurt me. This fight is a battle between Endometrial or Cervical cancer and me. I found out today from Dr. Charles. Already, my treatment has been mapped out, and I plan to arrive at Johns Hopkins to begin treatment in two weeks. I will not be returning to Duke for completion of my studies. My marriage and engagement to Duncan are also off. I shall direct all of my focus and strength at the monster growing in my stomach. This statement may sound preposterous, but I'm glad to be able to face this. Many months now, I have dealt with abdominal pain and pressure as well as other things. Tiredness



faces me each day. My body rages with tension. It is time to face this beast and eradicate it."

Then I explained fantastic Dr. Charles and the way he put my health over his personal plans. He considered my emotional and mental fragility by taking care of this quickly. I felt equipped with all of the pertinent facts and ready to fight.

"Now, I want you to know that I would like to be allowed to enter the hospital and fight this with Ellie by my side. She would be happy to do this if you agree. The only other thing that needs doing, before I phone Duncan, is that I discuss all of my options with you. There is a possibility that I may not need a hysterectomy, but I have decided to go for the most radical of treatments. I want to have a complete hysterectomy because I don't want to fight this thing ever again. Life is short. It is precious. My writing and trips aboard *Honey* call to me. There is no more time for me to enter hospitals and fight this beast. Let's get it over and beat it."

Silence invaded the house. Once again, the only sound was the steady ticking of the big

clock up the stairs. It surprised me that there was no outburst of emotion. Mom and Dad looked at each other and then back at me with calmness. They impressed me; this reaction was not what I thought would happen.

"Okay. Now, Anna, I have one thing to ask of you. I believe that your Mom and I understand where you are coming from on all of this. However, please wait until the morning to discuss all of this with Duncan. Just call him and let him know that you are safe."

"You know, Dad, I appreciate your idea, but that seems much harder. I feel that just as I decided to take away any hope that you and Mom have for grandchildren, it is better to face this and be honest. Why put off the inevitable? I will not marry Duncan Davenport. Although there is a way that I may have children with a new technique of fertility preservation, I'm not interested. Duncan needs a healthy wife by his side. Not someone who is forced to face each day with dread and fear. This subject is not open for further discussion. Sorry."

They sadly nodded consent.

"Right now, the grandchildren thing doesn't

seem necessary. I agree. Let's kill the monster at all costs. We are with you in all of this. Please do not deny us the privilege of fighting beside you. Why don't we consider this battle as an adventure? We are all aware that God is in control of everything. This event would not have happened if he hadn't given his consent. He is after all God. We will face this as a family with Him in control."

I had never been so proud of them. Before I made the dreaded call to Duncan, I explained that over 50,000 women each year faced the same news which I just had. The specialists believed that my cancer was in the early stages which made it highly treatable. I also told them that there were less invasive techniques than my choice. However, I chose the most aggressive because I wanted the most favorable results. Johns Hopkins used a groundbreaking procedure of infrared fluorescent imaging to help find possible cancerous lymph nodes which might ordinarily go undetected with most treatments. This step would help stop the spread and recurrence of the malignancy. Also available

there was counseling and support which I desired.

"Wow, that's my girl!"

Dad patted me on the shoulder.

*Wow, these are my folks!*

I squeezed his hand.

An eruption of tears alerted us that Ellie stood in the kitchen listening to everything.

"Ellie, you get in here."

She ran into the room. We did a group hug and then prayed to the Creator of the Universe for wisdom and guidance.

"Now, you go call that young man. I don't think this will be over."

Dad looked at me hopefully.

"Dad, it's all over."

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Crying intensely, back in the present, which is a good thing, I lie on the floor and pull my legs into a fetal position once again. Reliving those memories hurts almost as badly as the actual experience.

Duncan coughs again upstairs. Does he feel my pain as he sleeps:

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DUNCAN, MY LOVE

The ringing of the phone, as it connected the line between Duncan and me, sounded extraordinarily loud. Alone, I sat in the darkness with my door closed. I guessed that Herbert and Abby had gone to bed long ago. Ellie, I also hoped, would be asleep. I couldn't take her listening outside my door and crying. What waited for me required my action and mine alone; no one else could do it for me.

"Hello. Who is this? It is very late."

"Mrs. Davenport, Hello, this is Anna."

Loud, shrill yelling hurt my ears.

"Duncan, it is she. It is Anna. Hurry!"

"You listen here, young lady, now, no more of this silliness. Do you understand? We know of your condition and how fragile you are because of your mental breakdown, but you must realize that we are all in this together. We are a family; you, Duncan, your family, and ours as we wait for the precious

child that you youngsters will give us. You need to know.”

“Anna?”

It was Duncan. I could hear the click of his mom’s line. He sounded calm and loving as always. The words of Mrs. Davenport had shaken me a little. It surprised me that she was that fond of me. I did not interpret her statement as that of being mean but full of love and concern for us all. She had thought, I guessed, that I was afraid that the Davenports had discovered my “secret” about the nervous breakdown. If only it could be that simple. A real family of Davenport and Polis was no longer possible. Duncan waited patiently. He said nothing.

“Duncan, this is, whoa, it is hard.”

“Anna, Are you dumping me?”

He laughed gently. In his mind, such a scenario was impossible.

“Duncan, I found out today that I have cervical cancer. We detected it while it is early. The outcome should be okay. However, I have decided to be very aggressive with this monster which grows where our child should be growing. I hate it, Duncan. I hate

this mess more than the one made by Kyle and SaraBeth. Not only has it robbed me of you and our dreams, but also I will now be barren. So, I have also been robbed of our precious child. I only wanted one.”

I almost broke down but held it together as I continued.

“There are procedures today that may allow me to have a child at a later time, but I am not interested. I feel that it is in my best interest to focus on myself. Duke is no longer a part of my dream either. My intention is to kill this beast. Then, I’ll take my chances with my writing career. There are cases where an author turns out a best-seller without even completing writing classes. I hope that is me. For now, I’ll be in the hospital until the doctors send me home. It is impossible for me to think of you. You know me, I’d be confident that you were seeing someone else. I couldn’t bear it. With all of my heart, soul, and breath, I am sorry. You were my dream, just as I was yours, but this is where it must stop. It would have ended someday; it’s just much sooner than we thought.”

I breathed deeply. Whatever happened in my

life, I could handle it because I had just done the hardest thing in my existence.

I waited.

He sighed. Then he spoke so gently.

“Anna, this is a terrible mistake. Let me put my medical career on hold and join you and your family. If you think that you can end our love, you are wrong. I refuse to leave. Please, Anna, do you love me so little that you would even consider that cancer could end my adoration of you? Do you believe that a life without children would upset me so much that I would be unhappy with you? If you do, you do not know me. Please let me be with you now and forever.”

“I can’t.”

The tears started softly. I don’t think that Duncan knew that I was crying.

“Then let me make one simple request. Surely, you owe me this: Let’s make plans to call each other on this same date in one year. That is a long time. At that point, the battle will be over, the cancer eradicated. Then you can think more clearly. Is it a deal? Exactly in one year, we will talk.”



“Please.”

“No, goodbye Duncan, I hope that you meet someone worthy of you. A girl capable of providing you and your parents with a passel of children. I love you. I will always love you, but we must end it here.”

“Goodbye, my love.”

There, all decisions completed. Relief spread over me. Now, I could concentrate on the fight of my life. With God’s help, I would win.

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*Okay, Anna, get up off of the floor. God showed his faithfulness way back then, and he is with you today.*

Lovingly, I stroll around my cottage which I know so well.

“Thank you, God; this place is a blessing to me from you.”

I look outside to the silvery sky and smile.

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## LIFE GOES ON

I won't lie to you. My fight with the beast was tough. It would not be my desire that anyone should have to face it, yet so many of us do. Some win the battle; many do not. My parents and I felt pretty sure that I had beaten the odds. The doctors encouraged me to live my life with confidence and boldness. Such a task was not easy when the threat faced me each day that the battle may have to be resumed. God helped me. He was there through the long hours at night in the hospital. Those creepy moments in the darkness when quietness penetrated the dense air. Who suffered in the room next to mine? Many strange sounds and smells surrounded me as I encountered terrifying thoughts in that fearful dungeon, the hospital.

I watched my parents attempt to be brave for my sake. He, God, gave me strength. The battle seemed over at last. Eventually, I returned home. Duncan had honored my wishes. There were no calls or letters from him or his parents. I felt grateful to them. Ending my relationship with Duke also was over and easy to finish. I did not regret stopping my studies. During my stay at Johns Hop-

kins, I researched other authors only to discover that many had not completed university or received specialized training. They were able to write best-selling novels and achieve great success. I stood encouraged and sure that I had made the right choice.

Now, I faced each day with the question: What do I do with myself? Apparently, I needed to get on with things and create a life. It was not right for me to live at home. My parents needed a normal existence just like all of their friends. It was typical for the child to leave the nest. My parents needed that time in their lives though they denied it.

One day, as I sat by the pool, it hit me. Mom and Dad owned several rental homes. Maybe they would allow me to live in one for a while or maybe forever; they wouldn't mind. Dad enjoyed saying that he was "frugal" which meant that he was extremely tight. Although he was generous when it came to family outings, he often reminded me that I was wealthy in my own right. I did possess a substantial trust fund. In other words, "Use your money." That was okay with me. Later in the day, I brought up the

subject. Dad mentioned that he thought my idea splendid and I could have my pick. There were two empty homes at this time without renters. He encouraged me to visit each and make a choice.

The first place that I visited was a small flat there in Savannah. It was lovely. Back on one of the squares, it was old and needed some work. Mom had explained that many of the homes needed attention, but they had let things slip lately. I assumed that she meant because they spent so much of their time with me in my battle to fight cancer. She told me that they would love for me to take one of the houses out of the rental pool and make any necessary improvements.

This small flat would work fine. I walked around the neighborhood. Things were a little run down. It was okay, but this was not exactly the way I imagined living the rest of my life. I almost settled for it. At the last minute, I decided to check on the other available unit.

Dad needed to check his journals again. It made me sad to watch the decline in my parents. They both suffered from a loss of

not only energy but compromised memories. "Ah, now I remember. Yes, this used to be a beauty. Do you recall the summers that we spent at Jekyll? You just loved that little old cottage there on the beach. Don't you remember? The place is old. No one has rented it in a very long time. I don't recall the last time that Mom and I went there. The beach is not exactly our cup of tea any longer. Why don't you visit it? I doubt you would want to move so far out of Savannah, but you may enjoy living there. I would love for you to take it off of our hands. I'll give you an unlimited budget just to fix it the way that you want and make it desirable again."

Fantastic, they must want their lives back. Dad was talking about giving me this house.

"I could kick myself for letting it go. No telling the decay that it has endured. I hope that no squatters have moved in there."

He looked at me sadly. His suggestion sounded desirable to me. I needed space from my folks, and they needed to be away from me even though they would refuse to admit it.

Bright and early the next morning, I put the top down on my car and left before anyone else arose. The drive from Savannah to Jekyll always delighted me. My parents had been taking me there since I could remember. We always rented a place. I had no recollection that we ever owned a home at Jekyll.

The pleasant drive of only one hour and twenty minutes allowed me to clear my head. I began to feel as though I had resumed living. A new excitement filled my heart. It would be a lie if I didn't admit that I thought of Duncan regularly. I began my day with a prayer for him and ended with the same thoughts. My prayer wasn't that he might contact me, but that he remained well and happy. I loved him so dearly that I also prayed that he could meet someone else who was worthy of his love. I smiled for the first time in a very long time. I tried my best to remember the little cottage at the beach, but it must have been quite a while back. There were no recollections.

As soon as I saw the waters of the beautiful Jekyll Island, Georgia, my heart soared. Why hadn't I considered coming here to heal

before? Dad's directions were not accurate. He kept referring to the "old Polis beach cottage." Exactly how old was this place? I think that I must have driven the entire barrier island which was eight miles in length, at least a dozen times. I tired of trying to decipher Dad's map and directions. Finally locating a small store, I parked and went inside.

The day was heavenly. A gentle east wind blew into my face. I wore a little pink hat everywhere since the loss of most of my hair. When I entered the business, I looked into a mirror hanging on the wall. I barely recognized myself. No longer did I wear makeup or primp. It seemed pointless with no hair. My skin looked like porcelain. The whiteness appeared grotesque on this bright, sunny day. I still looked very ill. My hands began to shake. Just that small walk from my car made my legs tremble. Had I rushed things in my attempts to be "normal" again?

An older man smiled at me sympathetically. I returned it.  
"Good Morning."

I tried to sound calm.

"Morning, Mam."

I must look old. No one had ever called me that before.

Nervously, the proprietor kept trying to look under my hat. I asked if he could read Dad's map. He tried.

"Can't say that makes any darn sense at all. I've lived here all my life, and that map is either old or whoever drew this has never been here."

The proprietor waved the map in the air.

I hadn't considered that. Maybe my inability to remember the cottage was because there wasn't such a thing. Perhaps Dad was confused, or maybe Mom and Dad were sick of having me around and sent me on a wild-goose chase. I smiled.

"Well, have you ever heard of 'the old Polis family cottage?'"

He smiled broadly.

"My goodness, no one goes out there hardly anymore. Some developer tried to buy it a



while back, but old man Polis wouldn't talk with him. That thing sits on some expensive real estate. The land is worth a fortune. The house is probably worthless.”

He walked outside. I followed.

As he squinted into the sun, he began to spout directions which were a little difficult to follow. I had to ask him to repeat them. Like most people, in my life at that time, he appeared to want me to leave. I guessed that he didn't want to look at me anymore. I understood. It never dawned on me how unattractive I now had become. Quickly, I thanked him and got back into my car. My hands continued to shake. My first encounter with civilization since my cancer had not gone well. Plus, I felt weak and tired. Still, I went in the direction which I thought he described.

Suddenly, overcome with fatigue and a little scared, I pulled off the road to catch my breath. In front of me was a little dirt road. A sign which was old and weathered pointed down a small path: *Polis Mansion*, it declared in barely decipherable, faded words. Wow, I was excited with life again. *Polis*

*Mansion*, good old Dad and everyone else had teased me. What awaited surely was a gorgeous home on the beach, not a simple cottage. Elaborate comfort waited to soothe my weary bones.

I imagined thick white duvets filled with feathers to warm me on cold, windy nights. Long, delicate, white sheer curtains would fill the massive windows which would face the ocean. Architectural Digest beauty paraded in my mind. In fact, I had a few of those magazines in the back seat for reading maybe tonight?

Slowly, I drove the dusty old road. Things were dry; we had not experienced rain for several weeks. I grumbled, dust now covered my shiny ride. There stood a large fence before me with a gate. Again, I muttered to myself. Dad had forgotten to give me the key because a big, rusty, old lock hung on it. Slowly, I walked to it. The ancient device wasn't locked. Surely, the Polis Mansion needed a paved road and decent gate? This drive would be my first improvement, I thought. Dust filled my nose and eyes.

The distance was probably a quarter of a mile drive before reaching my destination. The wind picked up just as I ended my trip. I heard the sound of roaring water which appeared angry due to the increase in wind speed. Leaving the security of my car, I walked toward the waves covered in thick, white foam. Standing between me and the dark water sat a large dune with beautiful, long, brown sea oats bowing in the wind. It was majestic! I swallowed and closed my eyes.

“Please, Lord, help me that I can spend the night here. It doesn't seem possible for me to continue. I am exhausted.”

I turned away from the raging surf towards the west. There stood a small cottage of about 1,700 square feet. Yes, it was indeed old and a little run-down, but it immediately stole my heart. I continued to tremble but walked toward it. Could this be? It was not a mansion, but I wouldn't trade it for any estate in this world. It was perfect.

Following the sandy path, I removed my shoes. The sand was warm and soft between my toes. Occasionally, drops of moisture

from the ocean sprayed on my face which caused the sand beneath me to feel cool and moist. I can't describe the joy. This old home was my gift from God because it was everything I could ever want. An old wooden sign had almost blown away through the years. Barely remaining attached to the post, I pulled it off without effort. *Polis Mansion*, I laughed happily. Someone in my past was quite the jokester.

Two large rocking chairs in dire need of paint knocked against the house. Large scrape marks had marred the wood in that location, but it would be necessary to paint the entire place at once. I sat down in one of the old chairs.

When I awakened, it was almost dark. That rest was needed for me to continue my quest. I removed a large key ring with all sorts of keys on it. I sighed. Slowly, I approached the door. It was a heavy, large one with an old pane of beveled glass. Lovingly, I touched it. Longing to know my ancestors, I had never even considered them until now. I tried two of the keys before finding the correct one.

Darkness was close outside. Inside, blackness faced me. With trembling hands, I switched on the lights. It would be impossible for me to continue my quest tonight. I might be forced to sleep here without lights if they failed to work. Thoughts of bats sweeping toward me made me protect my face. Instantly, one light came on as well as one of the porch lights. That was good.

What greeted me was more than I could have dreamed. Quaint hardwood floors scratched by generations of Polis children remained beautiful. A large fireplace covered in tabby pulled my eyes. The hearth appeared recently swept, but it had held years of fires. The blackened surface of it pulled at me. Lovingly, I touched it. Now, standing in the center of a large room, I could take in the scene.

The entire front of the house, which faced the ocean, was filled with huge, thick windows. They contained beveled glass. Shreds of sheer curtains hung sadly. The furniture, covered in white sheets, eerily resembled ghosts. To the side of the room was the kitchen. Someone must have remodeled it at some point. Although not exactly modern,

the room had a charm of its own and was usable. Happiness gave me the energy to continue my search.

There were only two large bedrooms on this floor. One on each side of the house. Tucked in the back of each room was a private bath which also had received some renovations. They too were usable and appealed to me. Somehow, I found the strength to walk up the creaky, old stairs. What greeted me was something from my dreams.

This third bedroom would be mine. The walls glowed with a faint lilac color. As I opened the French doors out into the darkness, the wind whipped into the room. The fragrance of the ocean filled my nostrils as did salt spray. Stepping onto the balcony, I gazed at the mighty Atlantic ocean in all of her splendor! I made it to another rocker; there were three before my legs gave way. I slept all night in that chair without a single bat to disturb me.

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*Old girl, you did it! You are here now. The past meets the present. You are 'home free.'*

Lovingly, I touch the white sofa which once was covered with cloths. It had resembled a ghost:

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### THE OLD POLIS MANSION

My eyes opened suddenly just as the darkness shattered the new day's light. Quietly, I watched the sun began ascending into the eastern sky. The color formed quickly. The display took my breath away. Without words, I watched God paint the sky with pink and blue streaks until the sun bounced back in the position that it claimed.

I felt paralyzed by the beauty which absorbed the heavens. Then I noticed a strange thing. One of several, on that day of beginnings, a soft blanket of palest blue covered me. Odd, I could not recall arising during the night and obtaining it. Shaking my head, as though such action may force recollection, did no good. Not a memory existed concerning such an action; just as I could not recall ever seeing this cottage. Had the cancer drugs destroyed parts of my mind? I

wasn't sure.

Slowly, I arose after partaking in the miracle of sunrise. For such is a miracle to those who know what to look for from God. I just stood there facing a sunrise and the Atlantic ocean which today was quiet and smooth. Could it be? Would I be able to see this each day? The dynamic sky and sea which would never be the same in the course of two consecutive days?

“God, why do you love me so much?”

I whispered.

I remembered the prayer the night before I discovered the news about my cancer. Asking him the same question as I looked at the sparkle of my engagement ring. Without a doubt, despite my having cancer, I knew: He loved me with a love that only He understood.

"Why me?"

This question was asked gratefully with love. Slowly, I walked into the cottage. I faced many bags which I had carried in the trunk of the car from Savannah. No memory, once again, could I obtain in my “brain-file” about carrying them inside. This fact was



stranger than strange. A new type of energy flooded over me. It was an intense desire to live. This will was stronger than I had ever experienced. Hard as I fought to beat what grew in my abdomen, this was a wish to experience as many sunrises and sunsets as possible here, right here, in my Gift from God. That was it! I would change the name of my little cottage from *Old Polis Mansion* to *Gift from God*. This revelation inspired me to search every inch of my new home. I would start with this room. My intention was to inspect every iota of my newfound territory. If only I could have a cup of coffee; realizing that my energy would be brief due to the ravages of the beast. It seemed urgent that I work quickly, but if only I could have a cup of java.

My legs refused to move. There couldn't be food in this house. Still, I almost ran down the stairs. I noticed a coffee maker sitting on the back of the counter. Of course, I would not have seen it last night. Exhaustion had prevented me from seeing much then. Even this morning, I had trouble remembering my actions from the evening before. As I walked to the cabinets, it surprised me as I opened a

door of one that everything was so fresh. The paint may be old and worn outside, but proudly displayed inside the cupboards were shiny dishes which seemed brand new. Four cute Dunkin Donuts coffee cups sat lined up straight in a row on cabinet lining which appeared new as well. Smiling with delight, I opened the old refrigerator. Yes, it was old, but it belonged in this home. The roaring of the old motor didn't purr like a new one, but it roared loudly with age. I treasured it, roar and all! Could this be? Milk and a few groceries waited. A container of fresh cream created a small scream from me.

As I continued to search the old doors which were faded and worn, I decided my approach to the renovations.

“I will only replace what is vital. I shall retain the old fridge and all other things that function. Their age only increases their beauty to me.”

My words sounded wise.

"What?"

Now, I talk to myself? Great, I had read that people who live alone do that, but I had only lived alone for less than twenty-four hours.

The realization made me look up to the ceiling.

"I know that I'm not alone. Thank You for being with me on this journey!"

Sitting boldly within the third door was a large bag of Dunkin Donuts coffee beans. My favorite: French Roast Bold Beans seemed to smile at me. Wonderful, they were unground beans just as I preferred, but what were the chances of a grinder? I would say the chances were excellent. A small, white device gleamed in the sun.

I began my first day, in my new home, on the front porch with a large cup of delicious coffee lightly flavored with fresh cream. Someone had also bought a flaky croissant, probably from the local bakery, just for me. I relished each bite as the soft kiss of easterly wind continued to brush my face. The ocean flowed smoothly looking like a blanket of diamonds. Sadly, for just a moment, I considered my beautiful engagement ring which I had forced Ellie to return to Duncan what now seemed ages ago. I refused to be sad when so many blessings had rained upon me.

"Thank you for the coffee."

I raised the cup to heaven, but a man's voice behind me answered.

"Well, you are welcome. It was my pleasure."

Speedily, I jumped from my chair pouring the delightful contents of my elixir all over my clothes. A handsome, young male stranger stood in my doorway.

"I'll scream if you come one step closer."

Of course, I looked ridiculous aiming my cup as though it was a gun at the trespasser. He only smiled.

"Hello, Anna, I am Jason Turnbull, your neighbor. My wife, Katie, and our three girls live here on the island."

"Turnbull? The Turnbolls?"

There's one thing about the wealthy, if a serial killer faced us as he told his name, we would recognize it if he was from a famous family.

"Yes, I guess. The Turnbolls of the Real Estate dynasty?"

He wasn't nearly as funny as he thought.

Still, his words provided comfort.

"Anna, I received a call a few days ago from your family. My property caretaker, Amos, has looked after this cottage and land for over twenty years. His father before him and the one before him held that honor. This place is a legend."

He didn't wave his hand at the house but the property.

"I grew up playing in this cottage and those powerful waves. Did you think that Herbert, I mean Mr. Polis, would allow you to travel that distance in your condition without providing for your safety and convenience?"

Again his bright smile.

Without asking, he plopped into one of the empty rockers and began to rock as though he owned the house. I carefully sat down beside him as I attempted not to spill any more of the coffee. He quickly stood as I was sitting and left. How strange? Just as I got comfortable, he returned with a matching cup of coffee.

"I started the second cup for each of us."

Great, we were both frugal just like Dad. I would never prepare more than I needed.

"Waste not; want not."

He nodded to me.

We smiled at each other. Two wealthy people with frugal backgrounds.

"Our fathers have been friends, darn good friends, all of their lives. This place has been in your family for generations. Herbert never cared for it. I guess that it wasn't posh enough? I don't know. You're gonna love my Katie and my three girls: Kailey, Kendra, and Klara."

"I can't wait to meet them!"

"Great, they'll be here in just a little while." I had plans for this day. They were precious to me. Still, what was I to do? I nodded as though this was my plan. Jason, Mr. Turnbull, went on to explain that he had a large crew of men who worked for him. My dad had already instructed him to begin work as soon as I decided where I wanted to start on the house.

"I know every beam and nail in this place. So many times, Katie and I tried to buy this house, but your dad refused to sell. It never made sense to me what he planned on doing with all this acreage. Did you know that this

little house sits on some of the most expensive real estate in the gracious state of Georgia? Yes, sir, it does.”

"I'm not interested in selling. I plan on living right here for the rest of my life! Forget trying to persuade me. No amount of money will change my mind."

I tried to cross my arms but spilled more of my coffee.

"You are no doubt your father's daughter. I promise never to mention it again. I was only trying to do your dad a favor."

"Right and I was born yesterday. I know all about you slick real estate brokers."

"Well, I'm a little more than just a broker. I have the largest building company in Georgia."

*Ah, modesty, that's a good trait.*

My new friend took a large gulp of coffee.

We bumped our coffee cups together. Then, we laughed. A life's friendship began. I had already considered the perils of living out there alone so far from neighbors. Jason and his family helped put that fear to rest. He immediately told me that there existed a su-

perb security alarm monitored by local authorities. It was already installed in the house. All my anxieties were alleviated by the information he provided.

"Your dad requested the installation about four months ago. Did you know?"

"No, I didn't but am not surprised."

A tear glided down my cheek as a muscular arm squeezed my hand.

"I know, believe me, I know."

There was a story here but not now. I didn't want to hear it yet from my new friend. Dad never ceased to amaze me at his generous out-pouring of love. My new day and a new beginning in *God's Gift* had started. For the rest of my life, I treasured the fact that Dad had planned this turn-over of one of his prized possessions to me, Anna Polis. I loved my dad. Shoot, I loved my life.

The rest of that day passed as Katie, and her three daughters stole my heart. They worked hard, helping me to remove the sheets from the furniture.



*God's Gift* came with a housekeeper who would report now each day to assist me. She also came on this day of new beginnings. Irene worked harder than anyone that I ever saw. Ellie was not exactly a fast worker, but Irene could accomplish more in eight hours than Ellie had in a week.

As they pulled the sheets off the furniture, it was as though I picked out each piece. Not fancy antiques but lovely, thick, functional pieces. The dining table was an old, massive farm table which could easily seat twelve. I might need all of this room if the Turnbull family continued to grow. The sofas, covered in faded blue and white chintz, matched all of the rugs, and even the ancient, old blue and white dishes, containing chips and cracks, were color coordinated perfectly.

"Welcome home, Anna. My family is at your beckon-call. We are delighted to have you join our family."

"Thank you."

That was all that I could manage to utter, but my happy face said much more.

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“Kendra, you are my child. I ended up with everything that I ever wanted, even a child. You are supposed to drop by later today. Duncan and I have a surprise for you!”

The light begins to break through the darkness.

*Dearest Kendra, yes, you remain mine:*

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MY CHILD?

Maybe I would never have a child of my own, but God gave me the closest thing. Kendra, the Turnbull's middle daughter, belonged to my heart. Never had I known the closeness of a child's love. Now, I experienced it almost daily. Kendra was ten years old. She would be a great beauty. Her long, golden blonde hair fell loosely around her small shoulders. The long, willowy figure belonged to a model, but this girl had it all. Her brilliance was apparent, but she also possessed a love of the Fine Arts. Her desire to be a writer fell hand in hand with my wish of the same. Kendra also possessed the talent of a great artist. Which would she choose? The girl had told me that her desire

was to do both. Of course, she couldn't know the challenges of both. I only smiled.

The angel-child now spent half of her week with me. Four days, out of the seven, she spent the night with me. Immediately, she claimed the downstairs room on the opposite side of the cottage from my upstairs room.

Slowly, her clothes filled the bureau and closet. "Her" bathroom filled with girly pink curlers, toothbrush, and toiletries. I loved her deeply. Each Saturday that she had free, we painted together. It was she that taught me how to use a disposable plate for a palette and how to mix colors. She accompanied me to a local art store to purchase easel, brushes, and canvasses. I treasured our time together. Already, I loved her.

We stood beside the massive dune in front of *God's Gift* on a cloudy Saturday morning. She was supposed to attend a writer's class but decided that she preferred painting with me. I smiled as she rambled about her goal to write a "best-seller" novel before she was twenty-five.

"That's a lofty goal, before the age of twenty-five, wow, you will be an old woman."

"I know that's why I keep pushing you to start writing. You are running out of time."

She smiled.

"Right you are."

I thought of my battle with cancer and how right-on she was. My hesitation to write was that I found it difficult to begin. My studio graced the second bedroom downstairs across from Kendra's. My easel sat on one side, and my computer sat on a large old desk in the other. So far, I only seemed to use the artist side. The author side remained untouched. Each morning, I walked to the large, ancient desk and sat down, but nothing happened. Was this writer's block? Could it be possible to have it before I even started to write? The thought scared me.

Kendra suddenly dabbed a small circle of blue onto my canvas. As she pointed at it, she laughed softly.

"What's this? Do you think that dabbling on my canvas is funny?"

"Ah, Mama Two," that's what she called me.

"When you see a blue dot, like that, you'll know that painting is my dedication to you. For all of my life, even after I am a famous artist, periodically, I will dedicate a picture to you. When you see the blue dot, you will recognize that it is yours."

I hugged her gratefully. The Turnbull family had brought much joy to me. Katie invited me over at least twice a week for a family feast of simple, fresh food even though she knew her kindness would never receive reciprocation. I hated to cook plus I worked on *God's Gift* from morning till night. My energy level was almost back to normal, but I credited long walks with Kendra on the beach most days for my rapid improvement. In the beginning, when I felt tired, she forced me to walk. It would have been much easier to curl up with a good book, but I went because it was Kendra who begged. Now, I couldn't wait for her to return from school so that we could talk and walk together. I loved the beach deeply.

"Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that you **HAVE** to write. I have told all of the locals, and the kids at school that you are a famous author with another best-selling novel on the

way. How long can I put off the book for you? You must do what you feel God has sent you to do. It doesn't matter if you are a 'Best-Seller' author but at least produce a book."

Her large blue eyes betrayed her frustration. "Anyway, I'll be over tomorrow to read the first chapter. So get to work."

"Don't you think that I've tried? I probably have writer's block."

"I mean, can you have writer's block if you have never written before? That's so cool, anyway, I'll tell them that you now have writer's block."

Her sweet smile made me want to produce a book for her. She was right. Maybe I should lower my lofty expectations from a "New York Time's Best-Seller" to just a book.

"Well, how should I obtain a publisher? That's not easy; I hear."

"Of course it is. Mostly, every author now publishes his own work. You can do it. Maybe the procedure is complicated, but you can do it."

Kendra turned and began to walk back to-

wards our house.

"I've got to run. Mom made me promise to come home early for church tonight. See ya tomorrow, Mom Two."

She turned and left me standing alone on a clear night. Already the stars filled the sky on this late fall evening. My eyes scanned the constellations looking for a familiar one. I hugged myself because the air had turned chilly. Tonight, I would have the first fire of the season. I couldn't wait. Katie had sent a large container of chili over with Kendra, so I felt set for the evening. It made me happy that I could spend the night alone in my beautiful cottage. Jason Turnbull had been true to his word. His crew began work on my little house quickly after I moved into my new home. They followed my instructions with every detail done to perfection. I studied the house as the moon glowed above. I had to pinch myself to believe this was Anna Polis' home. How lovely *God's Gift* looked with the moon and stars shining above her new metal roof. The new in-your-face bright white paint wouldn't fade in the intense sunlight. The front door was painted

a bright red with matching red shutters. I loved it.

"Cottage in Red" I sang the words to *Lady in Red*.

As soon as I entered, I started a gentle fire. The chili smelled delicious. Pouring myself a large glass of my favorite wine, I said the blessing, and began to eat. Thoughts of a book pulled at my mind. I remembered hearing that most authors write about what they know. Many even write about personal experiences. Now, about what or whom could I write? I thought about the two rats SaraBeth Wheeler and Kyle Vanderclift. No, I didn't want to write anything sad or depressing? What about Duncan? No, that would be too difficult emotionally for me. Then the one person who everyone loved came to my mind. I would write my first book about Herbert Polis. Yes, my dad would comprise my first story. It would be his story of love and absolute devotion to his family. I didn't care if it sold a single copy. This novel was my gift to a man who devoted his life to my Mom and me.

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The light slowly peeks into the darkened skies. Gaily, my steps reflect my mood. Just as the darkness is forced from the new day, I now force the old pain and darkness from my mind. The doctors told me that I would know when I was ready to deal with things. It has taken a long time, too long, but I am free.

“Thank God, I am free at last.”

Standing before my cases of books, I remove my first novel. With deep emotion and reverence, I clutch it to my breast:

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*THE HOUSE AT THE END OF THE ROAD*

Everything made sense. I began to write as soon as Dad came to my mind. He and Mom would be elated. This novel was my gift to them. After I had eaten my chili and washed the dishes, I carried my wine to the studio. For the first time, I felt excitement at the prospect of writing a book. No longer did I feel intimidated or unsure. As soon as I sat down, I prayed for guidance.

“Please, bless this work, Dear Father. Just help me that I can help someone else. If it sells great, but if someone finds joy, peace, or best of all YOU, it is worth the hours.”

When I put my fingers to the keys, the words poured out of my heart. It seemed impossible for me to keep up with the action in my mind. My fingers raced across the keyboard. Without a doubt, I knew that I was doing what God wanted me to do.

As I wrote; I laughed, cried, got angry, and rejoiced at the life of a great man. Herbert James Polis remained my hero all of my life. Now, I had a way of giving back, just a little. All night, I worked. Never did I feel tired or without words. They wouldn't stop. Briefly the next morning, I stopped for a cup of coffee and pastry but only briefly. The phone rang several times, but I didn't stop to answer it. By the end of the day, I realized that I was going to finish my entire book by the end of the week if I could be left alone to write. It wasn't that I meant to be selfish; it was a fear that if I stopped, the words might also dry up. As the phrases continued to come to my mind, nothing could stop me. All day, I had written. When Kendra

knocked on the door, even she couldn't separate me from my work.

Eventually, I began to slow down from lack of energy. I needed food. Reluctantly, I left my post. Even when I completed it, the book would require editing and then publishing. I had no idea how to publish a book but hoped that Kendra had a secret.

There was an old casserole from Katie. It had been in the fridge all summer, but that was my only choice. Happily, I squeezed my arms,

"I, Anna Polis, am an author. Think of it. You have accomplished your dream. Insurmountable problems couldn't stand in your way!"

Never had I known this sort of pride. Definitely, I must return phone calls, but all that I desired was to write. I talked with Dad and Kendra.

"You'll never believe it. I am writing. My hands are unable to keep up with the words rolling out of my head. It is the most incredible feeling of my life."

"Better than sex?"

"Kendra? Where do you come up with these things? Anyway, I wondered if you actually know anything about publishing?"

"Mama Two, how could I? I am only a kid, right? Since you won't discuss sex with me, I can't tell you such things either."

She pouted.

"You need to refer any such questions to your Mom One."

I shook my head at the insolence of this child.

"Mom One is yelling at me. Got to go.

Google it. Bye!"

The line went dead which pleased me. My desire was to do what I loved most, write. Write, I did! My light burned all through the night. By the morning, I collected a stack of pages for my first manuscript. The story was great, I thought. I used *God's Gift* to tell our story.

My first book was entitled: *The House at the End of the Road*. Lovingly, I related the Polis family and their adventures. It reeked with humor which was my story with a

twist. It was possible to suffer unimaginable pain but relate it with a sense of humor, I found.

I may have never written a book before, but I had read plenty, and my life had been a series of battles.

As I sadly told the betrayal by SaraBeth and Kyle, I cried. At some point in my writing, I decided to include them. They, after all, were most important in my story.

When I wrote about sailing on *Honey*, Ellie, and all my friends; I laughed. Soon, it occurred to me that this book was a catharsis for me. Through my writing, I healed by obtaining closure from several traumatic events. The book ended up not at all what I had thought as I began to write. The pages possessed a mind of their own or was this God's mind?

Two weeks later, I stumbled from my cave. I had written the small book in two weeks. Now, I had to edit it and then have a professional go over it. Eventually, I would discover how to publish it. Who knew maybe I could have a book signing someday?

Kendra had left me alone to complete my manuscript. I missed her greatly but loved the fact that she cared for my desires. Few people would have been that gracious. Once I showered and washed my hair, I called her. "The book is done. No, I'm not kidding. Well, it is rather small, but I don't care. I have told the story. It doesn't matter to me if it sells. What is important to me is my parents' face when I hand it to them! Yes, please come over tonight. I want you to read it."

After soaking in my tub, as I tried to relax, I was aware of the tiredness and stiffness that grabbed me. Well, at least I was the cleanest woman on the island. A good night's sleep, I would welcome. It seemed strange not to be writing. In no time, car lights flashed into my window.

A gentle knock on the door shook me back to the present. Kendra bounced into the room with a fire in her eyes.

"Where is it? I'm not going to be a good girl. If it is lousy, I'll tell you."

I handed the manuscript to her with an unsure feeling. What if it was lousy? I couldn't imagine wasting two weeks. Still, I felt

somewhat confident that it was good. I watched her face as she read. Late in the night, I awakened to darkness. At some point, she placed the manuscript on my desk and retired. How long had she read? I must have slept for hours.

Bright sunlight flooded into the room. Stumbling into the kitchen, I felt angry that I hadn't prepared breakfast for Kendra. I noticed that she had poured a glass of orange juice and eaten part of a piece of toast. That was typical. Good, maybe this meant that she could fix her own breakfast now. I hated to cook. Then I noticed a note posted on my board.

"Mama Two, I adored *The House at the End of the Road*. When do I get to meet your folks? I can't wait. I'll bet they will be thrilled to learn that you are a best-selling author because that is what you will become. Maybe Dad can get a book signing set up at a few shops here on the island. Can I sit with you as you sign books? Cool!"

I, Anna Polis, once again had everything!

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Today, book signings are common for me. I can't believe that I worried over what to wear:

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## MY BOOK SIGNING

Kendra and I stood before my mirror.

"What do authors wear to a book signing? What should I wear?"

"There's no rhyme or reason, I guess. Wear what is comfortable or beautiful or what makes you look intelligent. How would I know? This book signing is my first. I'm only a kid. Have you never been to a book signing? Wow, how weird."

My friend was not easing the butterflies which filled my stomach. Not only had Jason Turnbull set up a book signing, but he also had scheduled four in one month. Honestly, I had never attended a book signing. Without an idea what to do, this should be interesting.

I kept telling myself that this would be "a piece of cake."

After what I had endured, how difficult would a book signing be for me? Self-pub-



lishing my first book had been simple enough. I was on my way!

Finally, Kendra selected a simple dark blue dress and heels. I added a set of pearls which she insisted was "way too much frou-frou."

Jason, Katie, and all three girls drove me to a local bookstore. They stayed for the required two hours. After the first thirty minutes had passed, I realized that no one was coming.

"Oh, well, let's go home. It is no big deal."

Katie pushed me back into the chair.

"You said two hours, so that's what's required. You are not leaving."

She crossed her arms and stood by the door like a guard. Slowly, people entered and walked to my table. They read the synopsis on the cover. I will never forget the lady who bought my first book. I would have given it to Mrs. George if she had wanted.

Another, and another book sold. I looked at Kendra with surprise. Before long, streams of people entered and a line formed. Could this be? I couldn't take my eyes off of my mission of not messing up a single book.

My eyes watched the hands of the person who gave the book to me. Preoccupation with my book signing prevented me from looking up at the face.

"How should I sign this?"

A man held the book out to me.

"Why don't you just sign it, Love forever to the love of my life, Duncan?"

Something caught in my throat. My eyes were unable to look into those of my fan. My hands began to shake. Of course, I knew his voice.

Kendra helped me stand, but I couldn't look at him. Jason held me steady with his strong arms.

"Anna, Duncan and I are college friends. We've been friends all of our lives; I knew from the beginning of our meeting about your relationship with him. You see, it wasn't just your father who asked me to look after you. It was also Duncan. Why do you avoid him? At least, you should hear him out."

He pointed to a coffee shop in the back of the store. It was almost closing time. My

book signing had gone way over time. At last, I lifted my eyes. Duncan had barely changed. A few extra lines creased his eyes due to studying too much and probably the grief that I had caused him. Together, we walked to a table and sat down. The Turn-bull's carried my remaining books out to their car. Jason approached us.

“Anna, Do you mind if I take the kids home? They are exhausted.”

Carefully, I looked at Duncan.

"Do you mind taking me home?"

He smiled.

"What do you think?"

We all laughed. I began to relax. This evening was the night of all nights. Not only one dream had been realized, but standing before me was the love of my life.

Time flew. Finally, we were asked to leave. Things were just as they were before cancer ravaged my body and life. Slowly, Duncan drove as I directed him. The night was cloudy and cold. As he turned the curve to *God's Gift*, he clutched my left hand. My

heart beat so loudly that I could barely hear his words above the angry roar of the surf.

"Anna, this cottage is just as I imagined. I wanted to bring your parents tonight. They have heard about the book, but I don't think that they know the storyline. They thought that it was more important that the two of us talk together."

Of course, they would have thought of what was best for me.

I dreamed of handing the book to Dad.

Duncan parked the car and pulled me into his arms.

"Do you have any idea how desperately I love you?"

"Yes."

I looked into eyes that had been those of my defender and protector. My earlier actions now appeared vain and absurd. How could I know his feelings about not having children? Kendra felt like my daughter. The joy that I felt spending time with her was sufficient. Now, I had the gift of writing. This thing was not a pastime; it was my passion. I trea-

sured it much as I would have treasured a child.

"Are you sure that you don't want to have a family? You see, I love you so much that I want you to have what you need. If I can't provide it, I want you to find the one who can. Do you understand?"

He must clearly grasp my love for him.

"I understand. Can you accept the fact that children are not *that* important to me? My career will be consuming. The concern which drove me in college was that you might be unhappy spending so much time alone. I thought the only way to fill empty hours was a family. Now, you have your writing. In a way, I guess that takes the place of a child."

"Duncan, it does. You know that I am not a homemaker. Our children would probably have starved. Why did we try so hard to make each other meet our own expectations? I am sorry that I prevented our union due to my selfishness. Now, I do understand that it was my insecurity which prevented me from accepting your proposal."

He kissed me tenderly as though I might break. I had missed him with all of my heart. The shaking began in my hands, and the tears poured down my face. Duncan reached into his pocket for a handkerchief. What he placed in my hand was hard. I held the object up to inspect it. There was faint light on this dark evening but just enough glow to catch a familiar twinkle. My ring smiled at me from my outstretched hand. This man, who could have chosen anyone, picked me. After the pain which I caused him, he waited solidly for me. Despite the fact that I couldn't bear his child, he still wanted me. The object that I loved, he now presented to me. Lovingly, he slipped it onto my finger. This ring, which once was too large, had been resized perfectly to fit my finger. "How did you know that I would say yes?"

"I had it resized the day after you sent it back to me with Ellie. That ring will only fit one finger. I knew it would happen because your Ellie said you would marry me someday. You said once that no one knew you better than Ellie."

We walked into *God's Gift* as I explained the

meaning of the title to Duncan. He held my hands.

"Anna, I love it here. Any chance that we could live here by the ocean?"

Earlier, I had dreamed of living here with this man who stood before me.

He smiled. Did he read my mind?

"You bet. I guess wealthy people have mental problems too. There are plenty of those here on Jekyll."

Hysterically, we laughed as we fell into each other's arms.

Together, we have created a life of joy in our little cottage. My husband helps many suffering people with his psychiatric knowledge. I hope that my readers enjoy my books and that I help them in my way. *The House at the End of the Road* was the one that gave back to others. What we had received was a *Gift from God*.

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This morning's sunrise is beyond words. The blues and pinks mingle strangely. There is no redness in the sun.

Suddenly, his arms enfold me.

“Are you free?”

“Yes. Finally.”

“Are you up to calling the Moreaus and inviting them for a late night sail this evening? You call them. I’ll set it up with Kendra. Tonight is a cause for celebration. I want those whom I love the most to surround me.”

Duncan smiles.

Loudly, he yells into this brilliant new day,  
“I LOVE ANNA POLIS!”

Over and over, like a madman, he yells the words of old. Together, we enter a new age for us. The age of freedom from the old pain. Without warning, the doorbell rings. We look at each other. Duncan slowly opens the door. We both consider who would visit this early? Kendra stands before us. Of course, only she would do something this strange.

“Hey, guys, it has been a long time since we went sailing. Are you up for it?”



AnnaPolis Summers

We gently pull her into our arms.

OTHER WORKS FROM THIS AUTHOR:

Beaufort Betrayal

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Sins Of Summer

Murdered Twice

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Claire's House

I Am Red

AnnaPolis Summers

Murder In Fairhope

## Murder In Fairhope

### CHAPTER ONE: BAILEY BARKER

Immediately upon graduation from college, with a degree in nursing, I joined the Air Force as a Registered Nurse. My stint in the Air Force surpassed my original goal of fulfilling only the minimum requirement of time. My passion while there grew each day for a job which I loved more than I dreamed possible. My thought upon joining was that I would use my time invested in military service as a means of developing discipline and resolve.

My parents were both driven and focused. I, however, was lazy and spacey. It surprised me when I found it impossible to walk away after the mandatory two years. Instead, I retired from service after twenty years. Most likely, I would not have left then, but my mother died at the same time that I was up for re-enlistment. Demands of settling her estate became my focus, so I retired from my job as Captain in service to my great country.

It was a sad day when I left. The surprise party, which my friends threw for me, did not erase the feelings of moroseness and a little fear over what I

would do now with my life. At the young age of forty-two, having obtained the status of an officer, my life had revolved around the demands of caring for my patients as well as serving in a noble field. Nothing else in the world seemed appealing after years of feeling important and respected while serving my country. Still, I owed it to my mother to make sure that all of her affairs were in order. Clarissa's estate was vast and involved. As an only child, there was no one else to make critical decisions over her several properties and a significant amount of funds held in a sizable trust.

My plane landed on a beautiful spring day in Mobile, Alabama. It was impossible for me not to wear my uniform despite the unseasonably warm afternoon. When I served, I bemoaned wearing the dark blue each morning. Now, I refused to wear anything else. I had become married to my job. Purposefully, I left my home on Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama very early on that bright morning, for my new home in Fairhope, Alabama. My Mother, Clarissa, had purchased this massive estate upon the death of my Father, Clarence Barker.

“Bailey, I may as well live like a queen. Your Father was miserly for all of my life. Better that I enjoy the money than leaving it to you to squander.”

I guess she had forgotten that I was a Captain in the Air Force not the immature child of yesteryear. Clarence had built a large factory of table linens from a tiny cottage to a sprawling compound. He was famous in our town of Charleston, SC.

As a child, I dreamed of breaking away from the demands of being Bailey Barker, child of wealth and privilege, to Captain Bailey Barker. The nursing degree was merely a way of establishing myself and gaining entrance into a world of measured decorum. Dreams of becoming an officer drove me to excel in school and later in college. Working as a nurse was not my dream but provided me the means of quickly obtaining status as an officer in the Air Force. As time passed, I discovered that taking care of the wounded veterans in my care was an honorable and sincere career. Suddenly, the status of officer diminished in my mind, and my job as Registered Nurse provided the catalyst of joy and purpose for each day.

As I now walked across the field in Mobile, I wondered if I had made a mistake.

*Well, Capt. Barker, what will you do now?*

Instantly, I pulled my shoulders backed and practically marched across the open area as I stared straight ahead. How did one stop being a soldier?

It seemed that my adult life was spent making crucial decisions and facing demanding schedules.

As I crossed the open field, thoughts of Clarissa clouded my mind. Mother and I always had a love/hate sort of relationship. I had only visited her grand home in Fairhope one time long ago. Her lifestyle struck me as vain and wasted after I had stared into eyes which had suffered so intently for the country that the U. S. soldiers risked everything to defend. Without considering my choice, I now found myself in the same boat where she ended her time on this earth. The lavish life of Clarissa Barker silently passed to her only child. I was no better than the woman whom I had criticized for so long.

The bright red Mustang convertible sat in the rental lot all shiny and appealing. I felt a smile spread across my face as I approached it.

*What is it like to waste a day?* I wondered.

Soon enough, I would discover the pampered life of none other than Clarissa Barker. The sadness which overcame me as I drove out of the rental car lot surprised me. Never had my mother and I been close or connected. Clarissa appeared fastidious and cold. Come to think of it; those words now summed me up pretty well. Stunned, at the sudden

realization that I had become the person whom I had always detested, I shook my head in disgust.

My plan was to drive from Mobile to the awaiting mansion in Fairhope. I was now freed from a life of demands and restrictions. As the sun continued to climb in the dark blue sky that matched the color of my jacket, I put the top back and enjoyed the wind in my face. Time flew past as if sand blowing in the air! Soon, I removed the pins from my raven hair as I shook my long locks free of confinement. Finally, I could experience a freedom that I had never known. Confidently, I reached for the volume of the radio. *Cool Rock Classics* from a by-gone era filled the air. All was perfect in my new world. Maybe my decision was not a bad one?

Thoughts of my newly opened world of retirement continued to soar past. All worrisome thoughts evaporated from my mind as stress and demands of a past life blew away in the wind. I looked forward to lounging by the rich, blue waters of the pristine pool which nestled behind the large estate. Clarissa's horses waited to carry me on long rides through the acres of brilliant green pastureland. My Mother and I were about the same size. She had always been meticulous in her wardrobe. Now, I could strut around dressed as a queen just as my mom had always done. I had never experienced pampering with facials and massages. Professional hands did not frequently style my dark tresses.

Usually, it draped around my face, or I pulled it back without thoughts to how perfect it appeared. Glancing at my fingers, I realized that my hands and feet never glowed with bright red polish and perfectly clipped cuticles. Ah, the life of wealth and freedom awaited for the once spoiled child who changed while serving her country with noble sacrifice.

My past life dominated my mind. My earliest recollection was Dad holding me as I rode my miniature white pony at a childish birthday party. *How old was I?* Maybe about four or five, I guess.

Suddenly, I laughed out loud as Hall and Oates cooed from the radio. Mom was wrong about Dad being a miser. Nothing was further from the truth. Lavish lifestyles surrounded Clarissa and me during Dad's life. Nothing was off-limits from our selfish demands. Clarence just didn't approve of sprawling homes with a large staff. Yes, Clarissa had done a little cooking over the years, but basically, Petra did most of the housework and preparation of our food. Mother was a fanatic bridge player and fund-raiser for just about every charity in town. Poor Dad only went to all of the events because Mom needed a chaperone. Once they arrived, she floated off to be with her many friends while he suffered alone by the bar; he usually got potted but ended up enjoying himself. When we arrived home, he met with the disdain of Clarissa



for “embarrassing her by getting drunk.” The same scenario played out all through my childhood.

Dad and I learned a long time ago that there was no pleasing the selfish demands of the woman whom we both adored. Yes, Mom was a complicated woman. Her beauty caused all of us to suffer her rebukes. Just being in her presence brought us great joy despite her frequent criticisms of us. Don’t get me wrong, she could be very kind and gracious, but usually, it was in the presence of someone whom she tried to impress. Mom was a superficial person. All of my life, I tried to be her exact opposite. Now, I had accepted all that she left me; it was a large amount of stuff! *Would this change me?* I couldn’t fathom what waited.

Dad, well, he was wonderful! There wasn’t a mean bone in his skinny body. The voluptuous woman, dressed to kill in her flowing gowns with twinkling jewels, accompanied by the thin man who appeared nervous and out-of-place usually dressed in a dark gray suit. They were opposites but adored each other with a strange sort of love.

My love-life did not exist. A few guys asked me out in high school but never any serious romance. Still, I dreamed of having a man like my father follow me around with looks of adoration while I

floated spotlessly attired into the room. Such thoughts filled my head.

Soon enough, I turned off Interstate 10 into the outlying area of Fairhope, Alabama. For some reason, I passed the small road to Clarissa's house and continued into the little town. Fairhope is like a miniature Palm Beach in that everything is pristine and perfect. Mounds of red and pink flowers greet you from measured spots around the groomed village as well as each shining storefront. Private boutiques display beautiful antiques and expensive clothes. Beckoning restaurants attract with delicious aromas of Italian delights. There is a lovely French bakery to add to the heavy smell locals enjoy all during the day. A one-of-a-kind bookstore delights patrons by adding wine and cappuccinos. Fairhope, Alabama is a village of great wealth.

Since I was unsure if Petra knew of my arrival, I decided to eat a bite before I went "home." Those words sounded fake and foreign. This place where I was destined to live had never been home to me. No one could ever replace Clarissa in the house that she had named *Sunny*. That word also described her. A tall, blonde woman with striking emerald-green eyes, she pulled her long platinum hair away from her face with brilliant combs and hair pins. Her beauty was legendary.

Dad was also tall but dark. I must have inherited his looks. My long hair was as dark as his, and my eyes of ebony were just like the eyes of the man whom I loved more than any man on earth.

My arrival on a Wednesday was scheduled on purpose. Traffic downtown appeared sparse. Good, I wouldn't have a problem getting a seat for lunch. Quickly, I spied a beautiful Italian dining spot. *Maybe that was where Mother dined frequently?* How could I know? The added pleasure of seating outside was what I desired. If this were a weekend day, a different scenario would have awaited. Tourists loved this place. Even in the winter, people booked all the hotel rooms and getting a reservation in the better restaurants could prove difficult. Call it impossible to reserve a room at one of the hotels in the warmer months. Many people found this the perfect place to schedule weddings and receptions. Yes, I had just retired to the idyllic Southern, small town.

Excitement finally surrounded me. *Could I be stepping into the rather large and beautiful shoes of Clarissa Barker?* Apparently, it was so.

“Miss, I asked if you are ready to order?”

A handsome young man peered with interest at me. I shook my troubled head as if trying to remove the creepy webs from my mind.

“I believe that I would love the pasta.”

Before he could walk away, I began to ramble with useless information. Patiently, the waiter stood before me with a smile. When I realized my impromptu gushing, I blushed. *What had just occurred?*

“Are you visiting here? Don’t worry; I get this reaction all of the time. It is a beautiful place. Where are you staying?”

I felt foolish. Gushing is not something that an Air Force officer usually does. I shook my head as a sign for him to leave but I had opened the door into my private world. He refused to go. I sighed loudly.

“No, I’m not visiting. I have moved here recently.” I smiled only a little hoping that he would accept that as enough small talk. My waiter did not get my body language. He continued to stand in the same spot with the same ridiculous smile as he held an empty tray extended into my space.

“Where?”

He was beginning to annoy me.

“I live at *Sunny*.” My wide grin was an act of sarcasm, but he bought it as genuine. How could he

possibly not understand that I wished him to go? I figured he would think that *Sunny* was the name of a street or maybe a condo complex.

“Really? *Sunny* is such a gorgeous place. You must be Clarissa’s daughter, Bailey? Wow! You don’t look anything like her. Clarissa Barker was the most beautiful woman in town. We all loved her. Why did you never visit her? You know, your actions caused her pain. She referred to you so often. I’m sure Oliver will be happy to have your company. He and Clarissa were quite the item if you don’t mind my saying.” His smile grated on me.

My gushing happiness began to evaporate.

“What did you say? Who is Oliver?”

“You must be kidding. Oliver Greene, you know, the famous author? You do know who Oliver Greene is, don’t you? Do you want me to list all of his books for you?”

Of course, I knew who the great author, Oliver Greene was! I wasn’t totally without culture. Who had time to read while being deployed and serving their country? Still, I knew the name.

“Why would Mr. Greene be happy to have my company? I don’t know him personally.”

“Well, your mother sure did. I mean ‘know him personally.’ He was her lover. They have been together since she first arrived here.” The smile grew larger in my face. I thought of knocking the tray from his grubby hands.

Now, he walked away as if bothered that I didn’t know all of this. Before leaving, he shot me an irritated look.

Alone, I waited for the waiter, who knew more about my Mother than I did, to reappear. As he approached, he looked at me with a puzzled stare. The pasta which I ordered smelled divine. It had been hours since I had eaten. Greg, the waiter, also brought a large glass of cold water with several lemons on the side. My appetite had been flushed away with the news of Oliver Greene.

“Look, I will be living in *Sunny* now. My mother bought that house just after the death of my father, Clarence. I think that you must be wrong with your timeline?” I asked that as a question.

“Oh, no, I’m not wrong. I remember well the day that she arrived. Mr. Greene showed up the next week. Immediately after that most of the town enjoyed large parties at their beautiful estate, those two people were the talk of the area. We sure hope that you continue the soirees. I haven’t seen Oliver much anymore. Maybe you can encourage him

back here for dinner? He is such a wonderful man. The two of them had a knack for making everyone welcomed in their lives.” The fake smile begged to be removed, but I was too shocked by Greg’s information to react.

Welcome to the world of, Clarissa, my mother; Oliver, her lover, and Bailey Barker, your’s truly.

## CHAPTER TWO: *SUNNY*

As you might imagine, after the news from the local waiter, my drive to *Sunny* was not so sunny. I passed the simple county road to Clarissa’s home as my thoughts tried to make sense of this latest revelation. After I had turned around and headed in the right direction, I calmed down. Why should I be nervous? Maybe it was the great Oliver Greene who should take heart. After all, I held the deed to the house where he lived without his having contributed a cent to the upkeep. All of that was about to change. Today, Mr. Greene would receive “walking papers” to vacate his home for over five years. *He doesn’t understand how relentless an officer in the U. S. Air Force can be*, I told myself.

A smile caressed my lips as the sun did my face. Life was good again. There was no reason to hesitate in my new world of the rich and famous. Effortlessly, I turned into the spacious drive of Mom’s grand home. The driveway was covered in

beautiful, bright pavers of green. The massive red brick house with dark green shutters stood as a beacon to wealth and privilege. Everything which Clarissa did was calculated and perfect. Each room inside the grand structure was staged just right according to my faded memory of the interior of this lavish home which admittedly, I had only witnessed once. Never did she over-decorate or under; only perfection was good enough for my mom. I wondered about Mr. Greene. How perfect was he?

When I saw the house, I lost my breath. It was unlike anything that I had ever seen. The sloping slate roof glistened in the sun. There were no words to describe the structure which sprawled in front of me. Grandiose was not grand enough. I parked the bright red convertible and sighed.

“Clarissa, now what have you done?”

I walked to the door with another sigh. It was locked, so I rang the bell. Moments passed. I studied the massive mahogany doors with a brass lions head door-knocker. It seemed like an eternity. What if Mr. Greene had changed the locks and bolted the doors? Slowly, I began to perspire as I waited. Again, I pressed the bronzed door bell as the melodious chimes filled the air for the second time. The footsteps which finally greeted me were small, dainty ones. Petra opened the door with a look of surprise.



“Miss Bailey?” This statement was posed as a question. *Who else did she expect*, I wondered? Mom’s attorney, Mr. Lattimer, was supposed to have contacted all concerned parties about my arrival on this day of new beginnings. I wondered if that covered Oliver Greene.

“Petra?” I wanted her to feel as small and unimportant as she just made me. My question was posed to set the stage for the impressive arrival of the prodigal child.

“Didn’t Mr. Lattimer contact you? He was supposed to let you know of my arrival. I apologize for the inconvenience.” I sighed.

With a smile, I walked past my mother’s maid of thirty years. Petra had worked for my parents in Charleston. She knew our family well. The small, Mexican woman followed me with a dish towel wiping her hands. I remembered that she always carried a dish towel and wiped her hands. A few times, I noticed that she also rubbed her nose but what the heck?

“Yes! Mr. Lattimer did call us, but I forgot to write the date down. Doody also forgot.” Her answer was nervous and unsure.

I figured “Doody” was none other than the great author.

“Who is Doody?” I wouldn’t let either of them off easily.

“Well, I should let Doody tell you. Would you like to bring your bag inside?” Without emotion, she pointed to my shiny red car which appeared small in the driveway.

Again, I sighed audibly and walked out to the car as Petra walked to the back of the house. Doody was probably writing somewhere as he ate MY food and drank MY wine. Again, the infamous sigh from puckered lips greeted my strained ears as I struggled to hear sounds of my house guest.

Shouldn’t Petra or the great Oliver Greene have carried my bag inside? *No big deal*, I sighed yet again.

When I entered the house with my luggage, I heard laughter from the kitchen. Entering the bright, spacious room with high-dollar, stainless-steel commercial appliances, I noticed three dark, young women huddled together. They dressed in white uniforms just like Petra’s.

“Hello, who are you?” They only glared at me.

“Look, I’m the owner. You can speak with me. Who are you?” They laughed and walked away tightly huddled together. What was going on? *Was I the owner?* I began to question why I was here.

Just then, I heard a golf cart flying up close to the kitchen window. It landed with a screeching stop. Mesmerized, I watched as the most handsome older man descended. The stranger was a merry-looking man with white hair and mustache. He dressed in a dark linen jacket with a perfectly ironed white shirt; his accompanying cream linen slacks grabbed my attention. This handsome stranger was a dandy. The pipe which he clinched in his teeth made his image perfect; he WAS perfect. No wonder Clarissa had fallen for him. My heart fluttered as I watched him extend his hand toward Petra while he assisted her from the cart. A modern gentleman helped her down with great care. She batted her eyelashes at him with a coy smile. Then, he flashed her the brightest, most genuine smile. His white teeth shined in the afternoon light. I melted as I watched only inches away from the window.

The two entered the house with joyful laughter. They walked into the kitchen as best friends without a trace of employer/employee status. They teased each other and laughed softly. I smiled. Much to my dismay, I liked this handsome and apparently kind individual who stood before me with a twinkle in his eye. I extended my hand, but this

friendly person would not accept that behavior. Instead, he sauntered toward me with a big hug. The fragrance which scooped me up soothed my confused spirit. What was that scent? Sandalwood, he smiled like rich sandalwood which happened to be my favorite scent. I could have stood there in his embrace smelling him forever. Mixed with the pleasing aroma was a slight trace of tobacco. When Clarence smoked his pipe, so long ago, I loved that smell. An indescribable feeling overtook me. It was as if this man represented everything that I missed. The care of a real nurturer; the smell of tobacco from a long-ago pipe of my father; the scent of sandalwood which I adored. It almost seemed staged but how could this stranger know such things? Why should he care?

Finally, he pulled away from me. I reached toward him as a child who does not want Santa Claus to leave her childish embrace. The handsome man smiled. We didn't speak for the longest time. Instead, our eyes communicated a feeling which said, "We are on the same page. There is no need to be at odds."

I understood at that moment; he was a *real* nurturer. All of my life, I found myself surrounded by cold, reserved individuals. First in my childhood with Clarissa and Clarence, then in the military; now, I stood before the persona of a man who cared. *Never; will I let him leave. He must remain*

*close to me.* I had just completed a one hundred eighty degree turn in my thinking.

I blushed with the realization that I did not even know this man. Suddenly, peace floated over me. I looked into eyes of baby-blue. I realized that he was older than the image he presented. He was not a sexual threat to me. His embrace created a need for another. We smiled.

“Well, hello, Captain Barker. It is a pleasure to meet you finally. Your mother frequently talked about you. I will be packing my things soon. Don’t worry; I will remove myself from the guest cottage.” He looked deeply into my eyes. He was sincere.

“There’s a guest cottage? I didn’t know. There is no need to be in a rush. It isn’t like you were here, in the same house. Please don’t leave yet.” I sounded desperate. It seemed that he had read my earlier thoughts. I blushed again. This statement was not what I had intended to say. What happened to the officer in me? I knew the answer.

With that thought, the officer bolted alive inside me. “Petra, who were the three women dressed in white? I thought that you were the only employee here?”

Petra continued to stare at the man. Her infatuation was apparent. She explained that Clarissa had hired a full staff to care for the massive house and guest cottage before her untimely death to a brief bout of cancer. There was also a Butler and crew outside. How could my Mom possibly afford all of this? Dad left her well-off but come on, not to this extent. Where was the butler when I arrived and was forced to carry my luggage inside? No problem, maybe he was needed by the handsome man standing in front of me. I smiled yet again.

“Captain Barker, I am Oliver Greene. It is a pleasure to meet you finally.” I blushed. In my eagerness to show my ownership, I failed to introduce myself to him. There was no need for my fanatic behavior. Now that I had met him, my entire perception of things involving him changed. Oliver Greene was a real man. One who was kind and fair, I was sure of it.

Oliver spent the remainder of the day with me. He showed me around the entire house. It was odd for this stranger to lead me around explaining the workings of my home. As he guided me to the master bedroom, I was confident that I caught him staring at the great bed which was elegantly covered in the finest of silk duvets. A fluted canopy flowed from the wall at the head cascading down to the floor. Mr. Greene stared sadly at the flowing, blue ensemble. Had he and my mother spent long

hours passionately embraced? My mind easily entered there with longing to understand the relationship which they shared. I envied Mother as never before. Shamefully, I shook my head. Was nothing sacred?

Periodically during the day, Petra would follow Oliver and me around as a puppy follows her owner. Yes, this Oliver Greene was a magnet to women.

The entire day, we enjoyed together. At last, around 7 pm, he stood reluctantly and looked into my eyes.

“I need for you to understand, more than anything on this earth, I loved Clarissa. She loved your father, don’t ever doubt that. I never meant to downplay their relationship. Although I enjoy living here in Fairhope, I will leave whenever you say. Later, I’ll explain the financial side to our arrangement. For now, let’s just get acquainted and enjoy these moments. Is that acceptable to you?”

His words stunned me. I thought that we had decided that I didn’t expect him to leave suddenly. More than that, I no longer desired his departure at all. To the contrary, I relished having him around. All of this felt surreal to me. It was as though I watched myself and could not stop what was occurring. What had happened to the “great” Captain Barker? The strong-spirited registered nurse who

quickly shouted orders? My friends would have been surprised by my placid actions. I surprised myself!

“That’s fine, Oliver.” I looked into his eyes with a school girl’s naïveté. He must think of me as foolish.

For a brief moment, our eyes met. The handsome man’s stare penetrated the awkwardness of the moment.

“Clarissa and I always showered about this time of the evening. We met at 7 pm for cocktails and then always enjoyed dinner together at 8 pm. Are these hours acceptable? I have instructed Petra to follow your instructions.”

His smile melted any chance of disagreement from me. Although the stranger was directing the owner, I didn’t object. I considered that I had always dined at 5 pm and seldom enjoyed an official “cocktail hour.” Usually, I met a few friends on the base for a beer and grabbed a quick bite before heading back to my lonely apartment. Air Force hours required early retiring in order to arise sharp and ready for a long, full day.

I said nothing. A mere nod of my head satisfied his inquiry. Silently, he departed for the small guest cottage behind the pool. It suddenly dawned on me



that during his tour, he never included that piece of property which I owned. Well, tomorrow was another day. I smiled when I realized that I had tomorrow with Oliver to plan.

After I completed a long, hot shower, I stood before the closet in awe. How could one woman own so many gorgeous clothes? Each outfit was more beautiful than the next. She arranged her wardrobe by colors. Slacks and blouses were mixed with long gowns and shorter dresses but always by color. I had never considered such an arrangement. In fact, my wardrobe had no organization at all. It was a mess of uniforms and civilian clothes in no particular order. Those things weren't important to me as a soldier even though I appeared concise and orderly in my military behavior.

Choosing an outfit presented me with a dilemma. Of course, Oliver would be aware that I wore my mother's clothes. What would he think of that? Suddenly, his opinion of me mattered deeply.

Foolishly, I stood there as I inspected each outfit. I felt like a child in a candy store with unlimited money. Each of the delicious concoctions could be mine at any time. A smile covered my lips.

Without warning, I began to perspire and shake uncontrollably. My thoughts of the present evapo-

rated as the fear which often overcame me now claimed me once again.

*I stood alone in THAT spot. The heat was unbearable. Lights flashed all around me. Adrenaline pumped in massive amounts into my tired body. I considered throwing myself into the balls of hell which exploded around me. Then all of this agony could end. Instead, I ran forward into the exploding flashes and sounds. My men were groaning. All would be for naught if I did not save them. Instinctively, I threw myself over two of my soldiers. The ground shook mightily.*

Just as suddenly, I became aware of my present status. I now stood before the bright colors of wealth and security. My hands continued to shake. The perspiration which earlier soaked my face and body began to calm in the pleasant temperature of the room. The hell of my thoughts dissipated. I stood frozen in that spot with vague memories of another time. Another place where I worked fearlessly for my country, but I had been afraid. I worked beside foreigners whom I did not know. I did not trust them but knew that I must to survive. Quickly, I had learned the art of survival. It must happen quickly, almost instinctively. The only thing that brought me comfort during my hellish ordeal was the thought of my beautiful mother, Clarissa.

Those frightening thoughts were shoved into the recesses of my dark mind. How many suppressed memories lurked there? How many times had I been deployed into Hell? I could no longer remember. Such thoughts made me tired.

Slowly, I walked to the shower with the realization that something was very wrong with me. I was a Captain in the United States Air Force. My behavior was not correct. These wimping thoughts of reliving my pain were not allowed. Long nights of remembering the faces and cries of my men were over. It was over; Hell could no longer touch me. I smiled as the cold waters flowed over me. The smells of perspiration evaporated under the purple scented soap of the beautiful Clarissa.

Later, I descended the stairs dressed in a flowing, full-length, white caftan. Layers of soft, shimmering gauze caressed my body. The gown contained threads of twinkling gold. I felt like an angel. Never before had I felt as if I floated. On my feet were shimmering sandals of gold. Atop my head was a golden turban. When I first put it on, I laughed. *How foolish*, I had thought, but I lived now in the life of Clarissa. Anything that I desired was possible. This fact was my new world. I knew that I must escape from the nightmare which surrounded my mind. Anything to keep the obsessive thoughts from draining my energy and spirit. Sometimes it felt as if the maniacal passion in my head would

destroy me. It was imperative that I fight this pain or risk destruction. If dressing in ridiculous clothes, the cost of which could feed many people, maintained my sanity, so be it!

There he stood. The elegant Mr. Greene waited for me at the foot of the stairs. I was late. The soldier in me became angry. Words from long ago yelled into the air: *You must always be on time. A good soldier is never late. Drop on the ground, soldier! You give me two hundred push ups, right now.*

Laughing, I realized that I had almost fallen onto the stairs in a prostrate position to give my Sergeant the necessary penance for my tardiness. *You are free! You are free! You are free!* Maybe only words but they released a drug in my body which stopped the tremors and all the accompanying pain.

“Oliver, I am very sorry to be late. This sort of behavior is highly unlike me. I guess the change in my status from soldier to civilian enticed me to sleep a little longer.” He looked shocked.

“You aren’t late. No, you are right on time.” He looked at his watch.

“No, I am seven minutes late. Please don’t patronize me.”

The words sounded like a harsh rebuke. Like an officer talking to someone beneath him who has broken a rule. I sighed loudly. My eyes drifted to the face of the famous author. He appeared confused and maybe worried.

Oliver swept me into a gigantic hug. Scents of sandalwood carried me away. Safety enveloped me. No one could hurt me, not now, not ever, as long as He was near. A nurturer stood before me. Someone on whom I could rely. I was certain. It became imperative that a soldier trust his instincts or he would die. I trusted mine.

The handsome Mr. Greene escorted me into the library. A small fire knocked the chill off the air. Early spring nights served to remind me that summer had not yet arrived. I shivered slightly. He gently rubbed my arms. I almost cried. That was my injured arm. The left one still carried a few shards of metal. The rubbing motion released a burning feeling deep in my arm. It was as though I could feel the metal deposited into my body. I despised the pain. I smiled instead.

Together we sat in front of the fire. Oliver prepared two martinis. I had never drunk one, but I had watched a few Bond movies.

“Gin or vodka?”

“Gin.”

He smiled and raised his glass.

“Bond would not approve.” I returned the smile. We laughed carelessly.

My handsome houseguest entertained me for over an hour with stories of his travels. Where had he not voyaged? It surprised me to learn that he also fought for our country in the Air Force. He only mentioned it. There was no discussion as any good soldier who has seen active duty knows. Grateful that he did not question me about my experience as Captain, I sat quietly transported by his current story to Kenya.

“I have always longed to visit Africa.”

“You should. It is magnificent.” The silver mustache on his upper lip attracted my eyes. It was perfectly manicured. I longed to kiss those lips. Shamelessly, I stared at his full lips.

As a good writer, he shifted from suspense and allure to light-heartedness without apparent effort. Now, we walked the streets of French Morocco. I could hear the prayer chant in the background. Brightly colored silks and heavy spices captivated my senses. The smells of Sandalwood were replaced by scents of Rosemary, Thyme, and Saf-

fron. He was good. I would read his works. Surely, Clarissa had his books on display in the library? My eyes scanned the hundreds of books.

“Miss Bailey? I asked if you are ready for dinner? Please? The food will be cold if you don’t come soon.” A dark woman whom I did not know stood by my chair with a quizzical look.

Strong, reliable arms pulled me from the sofa and wrapped around me. I felt small and alone covered in the scent of rich sandalwood once again.