

Time to Spread My Wings

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Ch. 1

It was the summer of 1995; I remember it like it was yesterday. I was sixteen at the time, searching for answers that never came, and to this day have not come.

I was staying at my friend Anita Peterson's house. She wasn't my best friend, but it didn't matter, anything to get out of the house.

See, my family is what you would call extremely abnormal.

Anyway, while I was there Anita put a cigarette in my purse, she said I should try it. All my life I thought people who smoked were slowly committing suicide. But, I was at the end of my rope, besides, there was nothing left worth living for.

When I got home that day, I ran up to my bathroom, turned on the faucet, and sat down on the floor. I slowly took the cigarette out of my funny looking brown purse. I

sat there looking at it for a moment. How had I gotten this far? Where did it go wrong?

Oh I remember. I wasn't the perfect little Christian daughter my parents wanted.

Without a second thought I lit it, and smoked what would be my first cigarette of many.

I was really surprised at the result. Instead of the high daze I was expecting, the experience was calming. I can only describe it as one of those times when you're really busy and you have a 1500-word report on antisestablishmentarism. And it's due the next morning at first hour. You haven't started yet, and your computer is being really stupid and slow, and your mom has decided that you are all going out to dinner as a family. You tell her that you have homework but she makes you go anyway.

On the way home from the restaurant, where your brother acted like an uncivilized animal, you get stuck behind a train that leaves you sitting there for ten minutes with your loud crazy family.

All that, your mind is going crazy, and then you get a break. For one minute everything is still, and you breathe. At that moment the relief and stillness you are feeling is exactly how it felt.

After I was finished, I sprayed fabreeze for about ten minutes, and then burned my Macintosh candle, which by the way is the best smelling candle on earth.

I went to my room and turned on the cd Anita had burned for me. And of course it wasn't the stupid Christian music they wanted, and they let me know that.

It had only been playing for three minutes when there was a loud harsh knock on my door.

"Amber, give me the cd" my dad yelled.

I opened the door, "No! It's Anita's."

"Anita listens to this garbage?"

"Ya dad, Anita listens to this garbage." I said rolling my eyes.

"Don't get a lip with me." "Give me the cd."

"Dad! It's Anita's!"

"Well, I will give it to her father to return to her."

"Why?" I shouted.

"Because I said so."

I gave him the cd, trying my hardest to not break it as I shoved it harshly into his hand.

I slammed the door behind him.

Why was he so stupid? Why should I have to listen to his music? The music he chose to listen to? It's not fair.

I sat down on the floor and looked around the room. Pictures hanging on the walls reminded me of life before my family started to fall apart. Reminded me of what my life was like just three short years ago. They had to go. My happy little life was no longer existent. It was in the past, and there would be no going back to it.

I got up. It was about time for a change. It was time to be true and fair to myself.

I ran downstairs and got as many boxes as I could get my hands on. And that afternoon, I put all the things of my life into those boxes. My trophies, pictures, memories... and that day, I put myself in a box. Not literally, but very close. I made a promise that day, that I would stay true to myself and myself only. I would never feel love again, or give love. And that day I began to become what eventually put me where I am today.

My name is Amber Richie. I am 22 years old and I have lung cancer.

I am all alone in this world. My dad kicked me out of the house when I was sixteen after I became pregnant.

The baby? She died 4 years ago. How did she die? That is the saddest part.

See, one night I was at a bar with Anita, the friend who had helped me become everything I wanted to be. And being the good mother I was, I couldn't take my little baby into the bar with me. No, that wouldn't be right. I left her in the car.

That night while trying to drive home drunk, I crashed and hit another car head on. My sweet little baby died. She was my world.

Her name was Faith, because she gave me a faith, that I could do more with my life, than the nothing that was expected.

Now I sit here, hoping that the cancer will overcome my body, and relieve me of this life I no longer laugh in, this life that has done nothing but tear me down.

I stared out the window. Why couldn't my life have turned out like all the successful doctors and nurses around me? Why did I have to be born into a psycho family, and lose my baby? Why was I one of the people who got cancer? I mean when I was a little girl, I never dreamed of dying before I ever had my wedding. And even if I did get the chance before I died, I never imagined not having

my daddy there to walk me down the isle. This life I was living certainly was not the fairy tale I had dreamed of as a little girl.

"Amber?"

I turned around to see Dr. Kennedy.

"Well, we have the results back and there not good."

"That all depends on who you are, and what your opinion of life is?" I said looking the other way.

"I don't understand" he said "you're so young; you have so much to live for."

"Just tell me." I said quickly.

"You have 5 months."

Show no emotion. Show no emotion, kept playing over and over in my mind.

"Good."

Dr. Kennedy left.

About the same time he was walking out, an older man came in the room with a lovely bouquet of tulips.

"You have the wrong room" I said, knowing that no one could have known I was here, and there was no one to really care.

This is Amber Richie, 36B?"

I sat up. Who could they be from? There was a little card attached to them that read, "Dear Amber, I heard you were in the hospital so I thought I would let you know that I was praying for you. I got these I know there your favorite." Love, Jack Stevenson.

Jack! I had gone to high school with Jack. He was my older brother's best friend. But how could he have possibly known, about the tulips? And even if I did tell him, how could he remember, it was years ago. I sat there looking at the red and yellow bouquet of nicely arranged tulips.

When I looked up there was a tall man, with blonde hair and blue eyes standing besides my door smiling.

"Do I know you?" I asked.

"I see you got your tulips."

"Jack!" "How did you know I was here?"

"Oh I have my sources." He said giving me a wink.

Who were his sources?

"How have you been?" he asked.

"Good." I said. What else could I say?

"You?"

He began to tell me about where he worked.

As he spoke I could not help but wonder if he knew how my family was doing. He was in contact with them. Would it really hurt to ask? I could finally find out all the questions I had been storing up for all these years. No. I couldn't show that I cared.

But without any control, a question slipped out of my mouth.

"How is my family?"

A sudden regret crept over my body.

He stared at me for a second with a rather puzzled look.

"You don't know?"

"Know what?" I asked now rather alarmed.

"You better save your questions for your brother."

"What? Is he coming here?"

"No. But he can."

"I have his number if you want, I can--"

"No!" I said quickly.

"I mean, I just want you to tell me."

Jack sat down slowly on the chair beside my bed.

"I'm sorry Amber, I thought you already knew."

"Your mama..." he stopped.

"She what?" I said now sitting up and impatiently waiting to hear his news.

"Well she had an accident."

"She killed herself just about three months ago."

I sat back. The news came as a shock to me. Well not entirely, it was probably father's fault. He always tried to push his stupid religion on us, and always made us feel like we weren't enough, as if he was better than us.

He probably drove her crazy, with all his silly notions on right and wrong.

"I'm sorry Amber."

Once again, show no emotion, show no emotion played over in my mind.

"I think you best be leaving now."

He got up slowly, "Amber, Katie misses you" he said just as he was about to walk out of the room.

Katie was my little sister. She was only seven when I left. I had hardly thought of her since.

I felt bad for her, mother leaving her alone with daddy. The miserable life she was left in, and unwillingly born into, without any say.

"Jack!"

His head popped back into the room.

"Thank you."

He smiled as he disappeared.

Christianity seemed so stupid. Alls it really was, was a group of people who spent their days sitting around judging anyone who did not have the same exact beliefs as them and anyone who dared to get in their way. They seemed like such judgmental people. In the little church that I had been to, I was taught of a Jesus who showed love and a God with unending forgiveness and grace to everyone. A God who spent his time with prostitutes and thieves. If all this was true, then why didn't these "Christians" spend there time loving each other and helping others find the God they so called served. Why didn't they show the same forgiveness that their God showed them, and the same love and mercy that was so undeservingly given to them.

Ch. 2

That week I went back to work, and did not tell anyone about what was going on. I didn't want their sympathy.

I worked at a law office in New York, as a legal secretary for a very prestigious lawyer.

Every time an invitation to a party or a drink after work would come up I would say no. I would spend the remainder of my life alone.

I didn't need friends, and I certainly didn't need people caring about me.

But, there was one offer I couldn't say no to. A lawyer in the offices named Rachel Queens had invited

me to go on a trip to Holland with her and her younger sister.

I had always wanted to go to Holland. And this was the perfect opportunity. We would be leaving around the time my doctors had estimated my death, and I could just kill myself there.

I didn't know Rachel very well, which in my mind was better. Me dying would not affect her all that much. But at the same time... would it be wrong? Well it wouldn't matter at that point because I would be gone, and I wouldn't have to explain myself to anyone.

I agreed to go. She was so excited. An unexpected friendship began to arise over the next few weeks, before the trip. It wasn't like we were best friends and shared every detail of every secret with each other, just casual friends. And even though casual isn't great, it was a lot for me. I had been friendless and alone for quite some time now.

When the morning of the trip finally came, I was nervous beyond words. Did I have everything taken care of? Was I really ready to go on this trip and never come back? And what would happen to Charlie?

Charlie was my faithful golden retriever that had been through everything with me. If you could call a dog friend, he would be one. But he was just a dog. And he would get a new home. Maybe even with a happy family that had a little girl, who would love him and play with him. Someone who would appreciate him.

I couldn't just leave him. I had to know he would be taken care of by good people.

But who could I call? There was no one. I couldn't ask Rachel, she would suspect something. And then a name came to mind that seemed just right. I quickly went over to the phone and dialed the number.

"Hello."

"Hello, Jack, this is Amber."

"Well hi Amber, how are you?" Jack said in an eager voice.

"I'm alright, look, I'm going out of town, and I need someone to take care of Charlie." I said.

"Well you can start off by telling me who *Charlie* is." He said laughing.

"Oh, right he is my dog." "Can you watch him?"

He didn't say anything for a second.

"Please Jack, it would mean a lot to me."

"Alright." He said.

We made the arrangements for Jack to come by everyday and feed Charlie, and take him for a walk. A walk was more than I ever did. But Charlie deserved it.

Now, that Charlie was taken care of, I had one last thing to do.

I had to go to Saint Catherine's. It was the church down the road from my apartment. I wasn't a religious person, but I felt an urge to pray.

When I got there, I knelt down in front of the altar. It had been a long time since I prayed, led alone thought about God. I didn't know what to say.

Just then a woman dressed in rather plain clothes, came down besides me, and put her hand on my shoulder.

"Can I help you my dear?" she said in a quiet friendly voice.

"Oh, Im sorry." I said getting up.

"Why?" she said.

Her warm smile, and kind eyes, showed me that I was welcomed.

"I'm going out of the country on a trip, and I wanted to pray." I said

"Oh I see." She said.

"But, I haven't prayed for along time now." "And Im not sure I know how."

"She held my hand in hers and said, "It is easy just tell him what is on your heart."

I closed my eyes; I still wasn't sure what to say. What if I said the wrong

words, and she thinks something. Was I acknowledging there was a God? And I believed he actually had anything to do with my life.

I looked at my watch; I stood up, "Im late." I said quickly.

"What?" she said rising to her feet.

"Im sorry." I said as I began to leave.

What was I doing? I got my bags out of my apartment and headed to the airport. Rachel had said to meet her and her sister at the Starbucks in the airport. I got the fifteen minutes early. Hoping to enjoy a nice hot white mocha latte before they got there.

But they were already there.

"Amber!" said Rachel as she waved at me. "Amber, this is Cheryl."

I reached my hand out, expecting that she would shake my hand, but she didn't. Instead I was embraced in a hug.

"Hi Amber!" "Rachel has told me so much about you, im so excited to get to know you.

"Hi.'" I said, not sure what I had just go myself into. The girls helped me take my bags to the drop off. As we walked I listened to them talk, and observed that they talked as though they were best friends.

When we were seated on the plain, I sat by the window, and Cheryl sat in the middle leaving Rachel to sit in the aisle seat.

Cheryl turned to me "So do you have any sisters?" she asked smiling.

Cheryl had a bubbly friendly nature to her, and from the minute I had met her, there was not a moment that she stopped smiling.

"Well, I have a younger sister." I said looking down at my hands.

"Are you good friends with her?"

before I could answer Rachel interrupted "Cheryl don't be so nosy."

"What is wrong with asking her about her sister?"

She looked at me curiously still smiling.

"No, not really, the last time I saw her, she was just six years old."

"Wow!" she said. "She is a lot younger than you."

"No, not really." I said. "She is sixteen now."

Her stare was confused, "But surely you have talked to her."

"No, I really haven't." I said slightly embarrassed,

She seemed like one of those people whose life was perfect, she had it all together and nothing in her life had ever gone wrong, she had never lost a friend, never been made fun of..

"Why not?" she asked slowly, and I could tell carefully.

Should I tell her my story, was I ready to tell it?

"Amber?"

I looked up. She needed an explanation. But then again, just because she needed one didn't mean I had to give her one, I didn't have to answer to anyone but myself.

"I got kicked out of my home when I was sixteen."

Did I really just say that? Did I really just tell her that?

"Why?" she said, as she put her hand on mine.

I had done it now; there was no way I could get out of it. I could always lie. No. There was no reason why I couldn't tell her. I was successful now, and that was in the past.

"I got pregnant." I said.

"Oh Amber." "Im so sorry."

Show no emotion. Show no emotion.

"Oh its fine." "I would have left anyway."

"What happened to the baby?" she said her eyes showing genuine care.

"She died." I said.

And that was the end of the conversation. Cheryl turned and stared off into space. She didn't ask anymore about it, and I was glad. I wasn't ready to tell anymore.

My thoughts went back to Katie. I wonder how she is doing. I felt bad now, thinking about her living alone with daddy. He probably made it hell for her. I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

When I woke up that plane was landing. I was so excited. We got off the plane, got our backs and went outside. Rachel had called a cab to take us to Landinger's.

Landinger's was the bed n' breakfast we were staying at.

When we had got in the cab, Rachel began to tell me about all the places she wanted to show me.

"How many times have you been here?" I asked looking at them.

"We have come here every spring, since Cheryl's senior year in high school."

"So that would be five times." threw in Cheryl.

"Oh my word." I said. Quite amazed they had the time and money to take a trip like this as much as they had.

"We have got to introduce Amber to Shane." said Cheryl looking at Rachel.

She gasped, "That would be so perfect."

"Who's Shane?" I asked a little worried now.

"Shane is our brother." said Cheryl.

"Your brother?"

"Ya, he is a youth past--"

"A pastor?" I interrupted

'Ya." said Rachel looking at me.

I suddenly realized I was sitting by two, Jesus preaching, bible hugging Christians. I was in for it now.

Just then we pulled into the driveway of Landinger's.

We got out of the car. The driver helped us with our bags, Rachel paid him. We stood there looking at the beautiful house that stood in front of us. I looked around amazed at the atmosphere around me. It was ten times prettier than I had ever imagined.

Flowers stood beautifully in colorful gardens all around me, and a tall tree stood in the center of the yard. It seemed so inspirational. I breathed in the fresh air.

"Are you ready girls?" asked Rachel.

This was all so perfect. I would never leave. Maybe not even kill myself, I would simply stay here, and enjoy this till I died.

I looked down, when Cheryl put my hand in hers. Both sisters holding my hands on either side of me. We began to walk forward, and a sudden sense of peace came over me. As a smile came over my face.

Ch. 3

We walked into the bed n' breakfast and right away were greeted by a short woman, who wore her hair back in a loose bun.

"Girls!" she said waving her hands in excitement.

"Miss Landinger!" Rachel put down her bags and gave the woman a hug.

"This is Amber." She said looking back at me.

"Oh yes." She said reaching over to shake my hand.

"The girls told me they would be bringing someone along with them."

I smiled. She seemed very friendly, and sincere.

"I have just the perfect room for you." she said.

"Thank you." I said as I looked around the room.

"Well let's get you girls settled in." she said
picking up my bags.

We followed her upstairs, where she led me to my room
first. The house was so lovely and kept so nice and clean.
She did a very good job.

When I walked into my room, I couldn't believe how
perfect it was. It was better than I had imagined.

She opened the window, "I hope it will do." She said
looking at me.

"It's perfect." I said still in shock of how
perfect it really was.

"If you need anything you know where I am." She shut
the door behind her.

I went over and looked out the window. I could never
describe the splendor of the scenery. There was a pond,
and beautifully kept flowers. The green grass was cut and
the fresh air, I was inhaling brought a smile to my face.

Just then there was a knock on my door.

"Come in." I called.

"Hey Amber, do you have a minute to talk?" asked
Cheryl.

"Sure." What's up?" I said sitting down on the bed.

"Well, when we were on the plane, you said that your baby died." She said as she sat down beside me. "And I just was wondering if you felt comfortable talking about it." She said looking at me.

What did I say? I knew I owed her an explanation, but still. Was I ready to give her that explanation?

"It's fine if you don't." she said.

"No. I can tell you." I said.

What was I saying? I couldn't tell her. My stomach began to knot up as I waited for her question. I knew it would be "how did your baby die?" but it wasn't.

"What was your baby's name?" she asked looking at me sympathetically.

A look I had been trying to avoid.

"Her name was Faith." I said looking at the ground.

"That is a beautiful name." she said.

She looked at me, but I didn't understand her stare.

"Tell me about her." She said.

I didn't really know that much to say, she was only one. It wasn't like I could say, she was hilarious and loved to play with Barbie dolls, and was a talkative one.

"There isn't much to say." I said.

"What was her favorite color?" she asked.

Why was she asking me this? I began to feel annoyed.

"I don't know." I said getting up. "But I'm gonna unpack my stuff now.

"I'm so sorry." She said as she rose to her feet. "I didn't mean to pry."

"No its fine." I said smiling at her.

"Alright, well before I forget, Rachel said to tell you that we will be eating lunch at a casual place." "So dress casual I guess." She said laughing.

She closed the door behind her.

I laid down on the bed. What was her favorite color? She didn't live long enough to have a favorite color. Because of me she never got the chance to have a favorite color.

I began to feel bad. I got up and opened my suitcase and dug through it, till I found a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. I looked in the mirror. I looked pretty grabby but it was casual.

The restaurant we went to was a small diner. It served a lot of American dishes. I went safe and got a cheeseburger plain. Rachel and Cheryl talked and talked about their plans for the week. I still couldn't believe they had taken this trip as many of times as they had.

"So Amber, there is this farm we want to visit tomorrow." said Rachel.

"You don't have to go with us, you can do your own exploring, but we would love for you to come." said Cheryl.

"Sure." I said as I took a sip of my coke.

"Good." said Rachel.

"It is just a pretty sight that is open for tourist to look at." said Cheryl. "It's very inspirational."

"Well Im sure I will love it." I said.

I looked at the people around me. The people who had obviously lived here. This was their home. Wouldn't it be amazing to live in a place like this?

When we got home, I went to my room, and stayed there the rest of the night. I was tired and didn't feel the need to spend an evening listening to the sisters talk about the most random things, and friends I did not know.

Instead I got out a book I had borrowed from the library downstairs, and spent the remainder of the evening reading. There was a fireplace in my room, which made for a cozy time. After a while, I began to watch the fire in front of me. Its flame was bright and hot against my face. The sound of the wood crackling was so peaceful.

As I lay there, my mind went into deep thought of Katie. I wish I could know how she was doing. Show her that there is something ahead, that there is a whole world out there, that would agree that dad's notions and ideas about Christianity weren't all there was to believe, let her know she wasn't the only person who disagreed with him, and she most defiantly wasn't crazy. Then I wondered if she agreed with him. How could she? All that he preached was so wrong? He himself was hypocritical to it. I fell asleep there.

When I woke up the next morning I decided to go see, what time the girls were going to this farm. Ugh. I had just realized I had agreed to go to a *farm*. This was not my idea of a fun beautiful sight to visit. But I decided to give it a chance.

I walked down to Rachel's room and knocked on the door. What if she was still asleep I thought? The door opened slowly.

"Amber?" she said.

"Hi." Im so sorry if I woke you up, I just wanted to know when you were planning on going to the farm?" I asked quietly.

"Oh. Uhm we can go whenever Cheryl is ready," she said.

"Alright. Do you want me to go ask her?" I asked.

"Sure," said Rachel.

As I walked down towards Cheryl's room I began to feel guilty for the way I had pushed her away last night. It wasn't like she knew what she was asking.

I knocked on her door quietly. She didn't answer. I waited for a minute. Maybe she was asleep. I knocked again. Still no answer.

I went back down to Rachel's room, and knocked on the door. It took a minute for her to answer.

"I went down there to ask her, and she didn't answer," I said.

"Oh," she said. "Let me call her."

As I waited I looked around her simple room. It was painted dark red with paintings by Van Gogh spread across the walls. The view outside her window wasn't anything great just a tall and obviously old oak tree. That was it.

"Amber, Cheryl left a message on my phone. She's already at the farm."

"Oh," I said.

"So we can leave whenever you are ready," Rachel replied.

"Oh okay, well I'm ready." I said.

"Okay, let me just get my jacket."

When we got outside, I asked Rachel if she wanted me to call a cab. She told me no, that it was a beautiful day, and we could walk.

"I wonder what time Cheryl left." I asked as we walked down the dirt road.

"Oh probably really early. She loves going down to the fields. They inspire her," she said.

"To do what," I asked.

"Oh, she writes," Rachel said.

"I didn't know that." I said as I stopped to tie my shoes.

"Ya." "She started writing when her son died."

"What," I said.

"Her son died of leukemia last summer." "He was four at the time."

"Wow. I didn't know." I said.

I felt bad now. Really bad. What if she was trying to help me? What if she was seeking help? How could I do that to her? How could I ever bring it up again? I myself wasn't ready to talk about Faith and that was years ago. She lost her son last year. Well it wasn't like she killed her son. But at the same time I wonder how it would be different to watch your son suffer. I mean to watch him die. I suddenly felt sick.

"Amber. Look!" Rachel said. A big smile came over her face. There it is."

I looked up to see fields and fields of tulips. Every color, red, yellow, pink, purple... it was so beautiful. When she said farm I pictures horses and fields of corn. Maybe even a nasty pig or cow or something. But I was wrong. It was a tulip farm. My heart began to beat an octave faster.

"Ready?" asked Rachel.

I just looked at her. "Ready." I said. The smile on my face was brighter than ever. This would be the most perfect day ever.

Ch.4

I followed Rachel on a dirt path that weaved through a field of red tulips. It was so beautiful. When we finally reached Cheryl we found her sitting on a patch of grass that overlooked a field of mixed colored tulips. She was writing in a journal.

"Hey," said Rachel as she sat down beside Cheryl.

"I figured out the perfect ending to the chapter I was working on." She said as she put the journal down.

"Good!" said Rachel as she gave her a pat on the back.

"What are you writing?" I asked.

"Oh just some short stories" "nothing to great."

She said shrugging her shoulders.

Rachel stood up, "Im gonna go say hi to Mr.Frinkle."

"Alright." said Cheryl.

Now was the opportune time to talk to Cheryl. But what did I say? What could I say? She had lost her child just like me. Once again the same questions popped up in my mind. What if last night she was trying to be comforting to me? What if she was seeking comfort?

"Amber" "I want to tell you something," she said looking at the grass in her hands.

"What?" I asked.

"I have a son," she said.

Oh good. She brought it up. That was such a relief. I had to act like I didn't know anything.

"Ya?" "Where is he staying?" I asked.

She hesitated, "At Shane's house." She smiled, "He just loves going over there."

"Oh." I said looking over at a lady bug that was crawling around on a blade of grass.

Why was she lying to me? Maybe if I told her the truth about my little girl, she would feel more comfortable talking about her little boy.

"What is his name?" I asked.

"It's Josh." She said looking at me. Her look was hard, and I sensed she was numb to what she was saying. She honestly believed her son was still alive. I felt sick for her.

"How old is he?" I asked.

She looked at me with eyes that spoke words of hate and hurt, burdens were surely pulling her down. Perhaps she realized what she was saying was silly.

"He is four," she said. A smile came to her face. "He likes playing with trucks and he loves soccer."

Suddenly I really did feel sick. She was talking about him as if he was real and living. It seemed a little creepish to me.

"Well, I'm sure he misses you." I said.

That was a mistake. What if Rachel told her I knew, than she would know I knew and she would think I was shady. She would think I was being nosy. But then again, she did ask me questions about my daughter. If it was nosy for me it was nosy for her, and if she had a problem with that, she would be a hypocrite. Then again, she

"Ya," she said.

She stood up. "Let's go down to see Mr. Frinkle," she said is a Christian.

"Sure," I said.

I followed her. She didn't speak to me. I wondered how it was different losing a child who had actually lived long enough to have a favorite color. A child who had a personality and their own personal quirks.

"Rachel," shouted Cheryl.

"Hey girls," yelled Rachel from the dock she was standing on. She wave to us.

"Amber this is Mr.Frinkle," said Cheryl.

The man that stood in front me was an older man, his hair was balding and what was left of it shined off gray.

I grabbed onto his hand and shook it without ceasing "This is a beautiful place you have here." I said still shaking his hand.

"Well thank you," he said. His teeth were yellow and incredibly crooked but he seemed very nice.

"Rachel was just telling me Cheryl was bringing a friend along," he said.

I smiled. I loved tulips. This reminded me of the beautiful bouquet of tulips Jack had brought me when I was in the hospital.

"Well I know Im ready to eat," said Rachel.

"Alright," Cheryl said as she put down the wooden bear she had been admiring.

I followed the girls to a little room inside the house. It was a good size room, I was sure it was built to be the living room. There were little tables scattered all around the room, and on each table was a vase with freshly cut tulips and daisies in it.

We seated ourselves at a little table beside the window on the far side of the room. I was surprised that these people opened up their home to strangers.

I looked at the menu carefully. There were soups and sandwiches for the most part, and a few other things like shepherd's pie, and meatloaf.

"Who cooks the food here?" I asked looking at Rachel.

Her eyes got big, "Mr.Frinkle's wife."

"And his nieces," thru in Cheryl.

"Wow," "Are they busy?" I asked.

"Well it's not like they have hundreds of people everyday, but they get their fair share," said Rachel.

"I think Im gonna get the grilled cheese and tomato soup," I said as I shut the menu.

Both of the sisters got potato soup. The girl that came over to our table was young, sixteen maybe, her hair was light brown and pulled back into a pony tale.

After she had written our orders down and had disappeared, I turned to Rachel and asked who the girl was.

"That is Riley," "She is Mr.Frinkle's grand daughter," she said.

I felt bad for her. The pay couldn't be that good, if she even got paid at all.

"Can you tell me more about this place?" I asked directing my question to either sister.

"Well, Mr.Frinkle inherited the farm from his grandfather," she said.

"So what all do they have available here?" I asked.

"Well in the winter they always let people go ice skating on there pond, and of course the diner is always open everyday, accept for Sundays that is, and they have horses, and the fields of course, they have the shops, it's

just a place to come and enjoy at your own expspense, you can control the amount you spend ya know," she said.

Just then the food came. It smelt so delicious.

I started to take a bight out of the grilled cheese when I noticed both the sisters were holding hands and both were reaching for mine. I put my hands in theirs and bowed my head. Like I already said, I most defiantly wasn't a religious person, but after all that the sisters had shown me today, this wonderful world they had brought me into, I though I could do it out of respect for them.

Rachel closed her eyes as she prayed "Dear Lord, thank you so much for the wonderful meal you have set before us, thank you for the hands that prepared it, continue to bless the Frinkles and their land, and thank you for Amber and her willingness to join us on this adventure, bless this food to our bodies and help us to never lose sight of you, in your name, amen."

Her prayer made the butterflies in my stomach rise. I bit into the sandwich. The cheese had melted perfectly on the bread, and when I dipped the next bite into the warm tomato soup that sat in front of me steam still rising out of it, I felt very satisfied.

"So Amber tell us some more about you," said Rachel.

"There is not much to tell," I said as I set my drink down.

"What are your hobbies?" she asked.

"I don't have time for hobbies," I said.

"How do you not have time for hobbies?" asked Cheryl.

"I just have spent all my time working and if Im not working Im studying" I said.

"Studying what?" I asked.

"Oh just like research, nothing to great," I said.

After a while of dull conversation we got up and headed back to the fields.

Rachel went back to the house.

"Hey Amber if you want you can borrow my paints," said Cheryl.

"But I don't know anything about it," I said looking at her frantically.

"No Amber, It will be find, once you start and get use to the brushes, it will just flow," she said. "Please just try it."

I took the bag of paints and an unused white board. She left me after we had found what she called an "inspirational spot" and said she would be back in an hour.

The thought of being alone there for an hour was not only a little scary but at the same time it sounded like it could be very peaceful.

I got out the paints and stared at the field in front of me. It was beautiful. I got the brush and began to paint. It was hard at first but after a while I found myself really enjoying what I was doing. As I painted I thought of the heaven I knew was in the sky. I thought of my little Faith up there, dancing with angels. I wrote down my thoughts just as Cheryl had encouraged me to do, when I was finished. The painting didn't look that bad. It wasn't a Picasso but it was perfect, because I had done it. It was the most lively thing I had created in years and it had more thought in it than I had ever put in anything, ever. I spent the rest of the time laying there thinking upon how beautiful the sky was.

Ch. 5

When Cheryl got back we headed back to Landinger's. She didn't ask to see what I had done, and I have to admit I was relieved for that, after all she did have experience and this was my first time.

Once we got there I saw that Miss Landinger was talking to other guest, so I waited on the couch till she was finished. I needed a vase for the flowers.

"Hello Amber," she said as she walked toward the couch.

I got up quickly, "Hi, I was wondering if you had a vase," I said looking down at the basket of flowers.

She smiled, "Did you go to the Frinkle's farm?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Oh isn't it just lovely," she said as she picked up the basket.

"Yes, I liked it very much," I said as I followed her.

"Well Im glad you came to ask me," she said.

I followed her into what was obviously the kitchen. Right away I spotted a tall woman who had long black hair, her roots were turning grey and she did not look as happy as Miss Landinger.

"Polly, this is Amber she is a guest here," said Miss Landinger.

She didn't say anything, but instead stared at me.

"Polly she needs a vase, she went to visit Frinkle's farm," she said.

"I don't think I have one to give her," she said.

She picked up her knife and continued chopping the vegetables in front of her slowly.

"Polly!" Miss Landinger's tone was one that I had not yet heard from the quiet woman and I didn't blame her.

This Polly was being rather difficult especially to the woman in charge of her.

Miss Landinger walked over to a shelf opened it and pulled down a large glass vase.

"Will this do?" she asked holding it up.

"Yes," I said.

I noticed that the shelf was full of vases of all different sizes. Why did Polly say she didn't have any?

"Polly this is my kitchen and you will treat me and my guest with respect," said Miss Landinger.

"This is my kitchen," Polly said looking at her.

Miss Landinger didn't say anything, just gave her a dark stare.

Without another word she turned and walked out.

"Polly," I said hesitantly. "Polly?"

She looked up at me still holding the knife in her hand.

"Why is it your kitchen?" she asked.

"This is my kitchen," she said.

"But this is Miss Landinger's home," I said.

She clutched the knife tighter in her hand.

"Do you mean because you do the cooking?" I asked trying to understand.

Just then Miss Landinger walked in, "Come Amber," she said.

I left the kitchen slowly, Miss Landinger following me close behind.

"Im sorry about Polly," she said.

"No its fine," I said smiling.

"She has been her since my father was here and I can't let her go," she said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"My father took her in when she needed a home, in return for her service and he befriended her, and I promised I would let her stay as long as she needed," she explained.

"Oh," I said.

"Well I have to get back to work," she said.

I started to walk up the staers when I realized I had left the vase in the kitchen. I hurried to the kitchen in hopes that it was still where I left it.

When I got there Polly was gone. But the vase was sitting on the counter with a note attached. The note

read, "*This is my kitchen*" This message brought chills up my spine.

I quickly grabbed the vase and headed up to my room. In my room, I put the vase of tulips on the little night stand beside my bed.

It had been a long day. I got out the little journal I had written in earlier and read the words. Cheryl was right, it really was better than the actual painting.

I should've been a writer, their lives are so easy. It's not like they have to struggle with clients or slave on the computer. All they have to do is wander nomadically until they are inspired, they write down their thoughts and keep going. It would be an inspirational relaxing and painless job.

There's still time I thought. Then my thoughts were stopped by a haunting realization I didn't have time.

I had been have such a good time, I hadn't even thought about the cancer. Suddenly the beautiful words were meaningless to me. I had been letting myself have a good time. On the one hand it had been really nice, and on the other hand how had I let it get that far. I had had some pretty deep conversations with Rachel, even Cheryl.

I fell asleep thinking about how whatever I did for the next few weeks would be meaningless.

"Amber?"

I woke up to Rachel. She began to scratch my back. I didn't like that. I sat up.

"Dinner is ready, we aren't going out, but the dinner here is real good," she said.

"Im not sure," I said.

"Please come down, Miss Landinger would take it offensively," she said.

"Can you not just tell her I feel sick?" I asked.

She smiled, "I could, but she would come and make a huge fuss about you and call her doctor."

I rolled my eyes, "Okay I'll be right down," I said.

"Good," she said smiling.

After she left I put on a pair of black slacks and a cute top. I wasn't sure if it was casual, but I knew that if it wasn't casual and I came down casual that would be a lot worse than the situation flip flopped.

I walked into the dining room, to see all the other guest that had come dressed formal as well. That was a relief.

I sat down by Cheryl. "It's really quiet," I said whispering.

She smiled and nodded. Just then Miss Landinger came in and stood at the head of the table.

"I would just like to say that I am so happy to have you all here, and I would like to invite you to join me in a prayer," she said smiling.

"Dear Heavenly Father, Thank you for these guest thank for their safe travels, please bless those who are not fortunate enough to be sitting in a warm home surrounded by loving friends, please bless this food to our bodies, Amen"

She sat down, and immediately six girls all wearing the same black dress, came into the dining room each carrying a plate. Each girl set the plate down in front of a guest.

"Hello, I am Sadie, if there is anything you need tonight just ring this," she handed me a bell. I noticed that each guest had a bell now.

"Thank you, but how can you tell if I'm the one ringing?" I asked.

"Each bell has a different sound, and I have memorized what my bell sounds like," she said smiling.

That was pretty intense I thought.

Just then Cheryl grabbed my arm, "Look Amber, there is Riley," she said.

Riley was Mr. Frinkle's granddaughter and the same girl who had served us at Frinkle's Farm.

"She works a lot," I said.

"She probably is saving up for college," said Rachel.

The food looked great. It was steak, potatoes, and asparagus. As we ate, I got to know Cheryl a little better.

"Did Polly make this?" I asked Cheryl.

She put her fork down and stood up, Amber follow me," she said.

"What?" I asked. I got up and followed her to the front room.

"Do not talk about Polly," she said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because if your gonna come back that is something you will have to learn sooner or later, Polly is not someone you need to get to know," she said,

"I don't understand?"

"Amber just don't," she said.

Just then Rachel came over, "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing, Amber just had a question for me," said Cheryl smiling.

Why did she lie to Rachel?

"Oh, well maybe we should get back in there, we can all talk later," she said as she gave me a wink.

Cheryl looked at me, "Just forget Polly, Im sure you won't see her while you're here," she said.

"I already did see her," I said.

"When?" she asked.

"Earlier today, what's the big deal?" I asked,

"Polly is a little crazy, and she causes problems," she said.

That was a weak excuse but by now we really needed to get back in.

I sat down. The little old lady beside me smiled.

"Is this your first visit to Landinger's?" she asked.

"Yes," I said as I took a bite out of the warm apple pie that sat in front of me.

"Oh well I'm Eva Davis," she said.

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"I live about five minutes down the road from here," she said.

I assumed she was from out of the country.

"So you're not a guest?" I asked.

"No dear, I come every night for dinner though," she said.

"I was friends with Frank, Ruth and Polly's father," she said.

"Ruth and Polly?" I asked.

"They own the place," she said.

"Miss Landinger you mean?"

"Well I don't call her Miss Landinger, but Ruth runs the rooms and the scheduling, and Polly works in the kitchen," she said,

"Polly and Ruth are sisters?" I asked.

"Yes," she said smiling.

The news was certainly a shock to me. They were sisters?

"Are you enjoying yourself so far?" she asked.

"Yes, yes I am," I said.

"Eva?" I asked, "Do you know Polly and Ruth very well?"

"Oh yes, I know everything about them, I'm practically family," she said.

How could I find more out without Cheryl crawling up my back?

"Say would you like to come by tomorrow for some tea, I'll show you some pictures of the girls and their father," she added.

"I would like that," I said.

She wrote her address down on a napkin for me, and we planned to meet at noon.

When we got up to the room I told Cheryl that I was sorry for being nosy about Polly earlier, and I realized it was none of my business.

She was very surprised and I could tell very relieved that I had said that.

Rachel, Cheryl and I watched Hope Floats in Rachel's room, before we all adjourned for the evening.

I went to bed that night with a headache, but I was very eager to meet with Eva Davis tomorrow.

That morning when I woke up There was a note on the floor in front of my door, it was from Rachel saying hat her and Cheryl were going out on a tour and I could do my own exploring, they would be back about four.

This was perfect, now I wouldn't have too deal with Cheryl. I got dressed and went downstairs to see if breakfast was still being served. And to my luck it was.

I sat down at an empty seat and right away studied the menu. The menu had things just like any other restaurant would have for breakfast.

When the girl came out to take my order down, to my surprise it was Riley.

"Good morning, have you decided what you would like to order?" she asked.

"Ya, I want just to pancakes plain, with a side of bacon," I said.

"Alright, and what to drink?" she asked.

"Just coffee, dark" "Do you remember me?" I asked.

"Im afraid not, have I served you before?" she asked sympathetically.

"Yes, but not here." I said smiling.

"Oh you mean at Frinkle's?" she asked.

"Yes," "Do you ever take a break?" I asked.

She laughed, "Well there is not much else to do other than work around here."

"Do you not like your grandfather' farm?" "I thought it was a lot of fun!"

"Im sure it is when you don't live there, but I grew up there, and I have done everything a hundred times," she said sighing.

I had never thought about that.

"Well I will go get your order in," she said.

While I waited for the food, I continued reading the book I had checked out. After a while I could smell the bacon. I sat there and sipped my coffee. This was really the perfect place to live. The food was free, the atmosphere was friendly, and for the most part the people seemed sincere.

But at the same time, I wouldn't want to get the feeling Riley seemed to have, of being stuck with nothing to do but work.

Just then Riley came in the dining room and sat a plate of pancakes and bacon in front of me. It was still hot and when I put the butter on top of the pancakes it melted right away.

"Do you get tips?" I asked Riley.

"Oh no!" she said, "Miss Landinger doesn't let us except tips."

"Well here, don't tell her," I whispered as I slipped Riley fifteen euros.

"But I can't," she said.

"It's from Frinkle's, I forgot to tip you," I said smiling.

"Thank you," she said.

Once I was finished eating, I used the phone in the front room to call a tab.

"Amber," I looked back to see Miss Landinger walking towards me.

"Good morning," I said to her.

"Good morning, where you head off to?" she asked.

"Just doing some exploring," I said.

"Oh well have fun," she said.

I went outside and waited for the cab on a bench. After it arrived I told him the direction Eva had given me.

The ride was quick but that was okay because being in that cab made me feel dirty.

When the cab stopped I stepped out to see a tall white house with dark shutters. I smiled as I walked toward the door. Before I knocked on the door I straightened my dress out. It was white with little light blue flowers on it, and I wore a sweater, the same color of blue to crown it.

I gave the door three hard knocks. It opened slowly.

"Hello dear," Eva said as she out her hand out indicating it was alright to come in.

"Good morning," I said stepping in.

"I'm so glad you came to visit me," she paused, "Forgive me dear, but could you remind me your name," she asked still smiling.

"Amber," I said as I looked around the room.

"Yes, yes it is," she motioned to the couch.

I sat down. "Would you like some tea dear?" she asked.

"Oh no, I just finished breakfast at Landinger's, but thank you," I said.

"You wanted me to tell you about Frank," she stared.

"Well you could also tell me about Polly and Ruth," I interrupted.

"Of course, but first let me ask, are you sure you don't want some tea?"

"No, really I'm fine."

"Well Frank grew up on the land; we went to the same school, so I knew him ever since I can remember."

I was having a hard time listening to Eva talk for the aroma of fresh apple pie filled the air and was very distracting.

"And when I was fifteen he married Catherine Winston,"

"Miss Eva," I interrupted, "What is the age difference between Polly and Ruth?" I asked.

"Well, let me think" she said as she put her tea cup on the table.

"I know!" she said smiling, "Miss Ruth was just six," she said proudly.

She was a lot older than I had expected.

"Six?" I repeated. "How long ago did their father, Frank I mean die?"

"Frank died when Miss Ruth was just fifteen, she had to take over the land then," Miss Eva said.

A puzzled expression came over her face.

"I never did understand why she sent Polly away."

"She sent Polly away?" I asked. "I don't understand."

"Well when Frank died, Miss Ruth sent Polly to live in America with their Uncle and Aunt, and she didn't come back till just two summers ago," she said.

She was gone for nearly thirty years? None of this made sense, and honestly it was none of my business but it seemed like there was some big mystery to all of this.

"Well anyway," she said, "Polly and Ruth are both here, and doing well." "Forgive me, but was there any specific thing you wanted to know?" she asked.

"No, I just thought it would be fun to hear about the owners, and their stories," I said giving her a smile.

"I'm sure, they could tell you a lot more, and well maybe not Polly as much, she is a little slow." She said in an explaining tone.

"Well I should be getting back, but thank you for your help," I said as I stood up.

Miss Eva walked me to the door, where she handed me a brown box.

"This is just something I made to thank you for coming by," she said smiling at me.

I took the box and thanked her and got into the cab. In the cab I opened the box to find a warm apple pie. A smile came to my face.

When I got to Landinger's I went to my room and took a nap. I had decided to drop what I felt was a big mystery. It really was none of my business.

When the girls got back, Rachel took a nap. I thought I could try talking to Cheryl again.

When I invited her to come to my room, and I explained that I had gone out and done my own exploring, and had bought an apple pie, and I was willing to share, she accepted my invitation.

When she got there, I called down to the kitchen, and ordered some vanilla ice cream.

As I sat there and listened to Cheryl tell me about all the sights they had seen, I chomped away at the apple pie, it was so good.

After she was finished and there was nothing else to say, I took a giant leap of faith and said something that my stomach told me not to and my heart pushed me into.

"Rachel told me about your son."

"Oh," she said looking down.

"Listen Cheryl, I don't know how to help you, but I'm ready to tell you my story, if you can forgive me for being so snappy and quick last time you tried to talk about this,"

She smiled, "Amber, it's fine, I want to hear your story."

I swallowed; I had never spoke these words out loud. True that I had practiced them over and over again in my head, I had never uttered the words.

"My parents kicked me out of the house when I was in high school when they found out I was pregnant. I never knew the father, and I had one friend. Her name was Anita. Anita was my biggest influence, I did whatever she suggested, and one of those things included smoking,"

Cheryl scrunched her nose.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Smoking is such a dirty habit," she said now laughing.

"I know, believe me I know,"

"Sorry you can keep going," she said.

"Well one night, Anita and I decided to go bar hopping. I left Faith, my daughter, in the car. I couldn't take her inside that would make me a bad parent."

I felt my eyes begin to fill up. "I tried to drive home that night drunk," Just then the tears began to stream down m face.

Cheryl put her hand on mine.

"I hit another car head on,"

I couldn't finish. Cheryl leaned over and embraced me in a hug. I had not been hugged in along time, and for once I truly truly felt cared about it. And I was okay with it. It wasn't as scary and hard as I had always pictured it.

"She died, and it was my fault," I managed to choke out still crying.

"No Amber, no it wasn't," she said.

Her words were not comforting because I was convinced. After all it made since. If I had not gone to the bar that night, and if I didn't leave her in the car, if I hadn't of even put her in the car, she would still be alive. I began to feel sick.

"Amber, I know that even though my Josh, never got to see five, God took him for a reason,"

She was talking about God. That was one thing I didn't want to hear.

I nodded, I know but it's still hard.

I didn't know. And I didn't see how anyone could trust a God who would take their child from them, led alone allow them to suffer.

But I didn't want a speech.

"Well I better get back to my room now, Rachel will be back soon."

She gave me one last hug before she left.

My heart felt like it was breaking. This was not something I enjoyed doing, but I knew that it was probably a good thing for me to talk about.

I never wanted to forget this talk. I got out a journal and began to write down what had happened, and how I felt. My thoughts seemed to blur as my mind went to the night after the crash. I was in the hospital, and I didn't

even ask about Faith. The first thing I asked was about the damage.

Not only did the doctors break my heart that day with the news of losing Faith, but they also informed me that a teenage girl had been killed as a result. It was a girl who was sitting in the passenger's seat of the car I had hit.

I felt like crying. But the tears wouldn't come. I went to bed that night, my mind trying hard to forget. But it didn't. I dreamed of the people who had been affected by the loss of that girl.

Ch. 7

The next morning, after breakfast Rachel and I took a cab down to the Van Gough museum.

"You really like Van Gough, don't you?" I said, as I remembered the walls in her room, decorated with copies of Van Gough paintings spread across the walls.

"Yes, yes I do,"

"Do you have a favorite of his paintings?"

"Oh that is hard, but I would say if I had to choose, I would pick Starry Night,"

I nodded.

We walked the hallways of the museum silent. There were benches scattered throughout the hallways in between paintings.

My mind was still stuck on that poor girl's family. I wanted to share my sympathy with them, but they probably would not accept it. They probably would speak hateful words to me.

I couldn't blame them. I had killed their daughter. It wasn't like it was on purpose.

I wanted to know more about her. I wanted to know her name.

"Are you okay?" asked Rachel.

"Ya," I said.

I was never gonna get the chance to hear her name, or apologize to her family.

The cancer.

Don't get me wrong, I loved the trip, and I had grown to love the sisters, but I came her for a reason and there was no reason I shouldn't do what I came to do.

"Hey Rachel?"

"Ya?"

"Say there is a person, that I have hurt," I hesitated, "And I can't confront them face to face, but I know I need to tell them that I'm sorry, what could I do?"

She stopped walking, "Well I have definitely been there, I mean we all have. The best thing you can do, in my experience, is write them a letter."

She sat down on a bench.

"Don't be too scattered in it, like don't repeat things over and over again. Make it simple and to the point, but make it kind and very thoughtful, from the heart,"

This was good advice. I didn't know her name though. That wouldn't be a problem though; I could just call my lawyer.

"Thanks Rachel," I said.

We got up and continued to walk around the museum for another hour or so.

After we had seen all that we wanted to see, we headed to Frinkle's farm, where we ate lunch.

I was excited to go to Frinkle's, it was a nice place.

I looked around for Riley but I didn't see her. Another girl served us that day, her name was Jessie and I was told she was Riley's cousin.

Once again, the service was great. And when Rachel stepped away from the table, to talk to Mrs. Frinkle, I used that opportunity to call Wayne, my lawyer.

He was very helpful. He told me that the girl's name was Lilly Jenson and her parents, Steven and Marie lived in Maine. He gave me their address and phone number.

When we got home that afternoon, I bought a stationary from the little gift shop. I sat in the library, desperately trying to write. After a half an hour the only words on the paper were *Dear Mr. and Mrs. Jenson.*

What could I say? I remembered Rachel's advice, *don't be too scattered, don't repeat things, keep it simple, but make it thoughtful.*

"I know this is probably off in timing, but it is something I have been trying to do for years..." I began to write.

"I wanted o tell you that no matter what I say I understand, that my words will never be enough, but Iam sorry, for the part I had in taking your daughter's life. I was the driver in the wreck that night, and I still regret my choices that influenced the accident. In the

wreck I too lost someone very close to me, I do not expect to receive forgiveness or words of reconciliation but I want you to know, that I care for you and I understand the pain of your loss, sincerely Amber Richie."

I folded the letter up and stuck it in an envelope.

After I wrote the address on it, I gave it to Miss Landinger, to mail at her earliest convenience.

That afternoon it rained, so we stayed at Landinger's. It was the first day, I felt bored. The sisters stayed in their rooms and rested. As for me, I went to the kitchen to see if Polly was there.

To my luck she was.

"Hey Polly," I said looking at her.

She put her spoon down and stared at me.

"I just wanted to thank you for all the good cooking you have done,"

She didn't say anything, but the dull expression on her face continued to beam out at me.

"I tried your blackberry cobbler, it was so good, and I was thinking you could share your recipe with me,"

She smiled, "That my blackberry cobber."

I nodded, "yes, it was very good!"

"I make you blackberry cobber."

"No, no thank you, I just wanted to talk to you," I said.

Her smile faded.

I quickly changed my response, "I would love some."

She ran over to the fridge and pulled out a bowl of fresh blackberries. As she worked I listened to her talk about her pet bird Alexander.

She seemed to love the bird like it was a real person, and to me this was weird but it was fine for her.

"So Ruth is your sister," I said looking at her.

"No!" she shouted at me.

I got up. "No!" "No Wuth!" she shouted again.

"Im sorry Polly," I said.

Just then Miss Landinger walked into the room.

"Miss Richie!" she said in a firm voice.

"I must ask you to leave the kitchen."

I looked at Polly; tears were rolling down her face.

"Im sorry," I tried to offer my apology to Miss Landinger.

She followed me out. Her fists were clinched.

"I will ask you to not go to the kitchen anymore, if you need something you may ring down to the front desk, but do not call the kitchen, and do not talk to Polly."

Before I could say anything she turned and walked the other way.

A week went by, and I tried my hardest to avoid Miss Landinger. Who could blame me? Even though it was her place, she didn't need to get so mad. After all, I miss a paying customer.

The first time we spoke, was when she gave me a letter. It was from the Jenson's. I hadn't expected them to reply.

I took the letter to my room, and asked Rachel to read it with me.

She didn't know what it was about, but she knew the situation, from what I had asked her earlier.

I sat there looking at it. She put her hand on my shoulder.

I smiled, "I can do this,"

I opened the letter, *"Dear Miss Richie, We wanted to thank you for writing to us; it took a lot of courage. We hold no bitterness against you, and we want you to experience the grace that we have also experienced in our lives from our Lord Jesus, we have left the following track in our note, please read it."*

I smiled at Rachel, "They forgave me,"

"Of course they forgave you," she said smiling.

I left the track in the envelope.

I felt so relieved to be given their kind words and have the knowledge of their forgiveness.

Rachel and I sat there and talked about Rachel's high school years. She shared with me her experiences of having people be mad with her, and there were several examples.

I was happy to know I wasn't the only one in the world who had done things. But when hearing hers I couldn't help but think mine were worse.

The words in that letter brought a sense of relief to me and I finally felt a sense of peace.

Ch. 8

The next day we all went to a pottery class the Frinkle's Farm was giving. Mr. Frinkle wife was the one instructing the class. It was nice to finally meet her.

I sat next to Rachel, it was relaxing, but me being the perfectionist that I am, I took longer and quickly fell behind.

At first I thought the clay mixture was gross, it was very wet.

"Amber! Hurry!" exclaimed Rachel looking at my messy creation.

I smiled, "Im trying, but I want it to be just right."

When we were finished, we set our pots out to dry.

We then went to the dining room where we were served lunch. And because it was a prepaid after noon, we had already paid for the lunch, and our menu that day had two options, spaghetti with *man size meatballs*, or chicken with a side of mixed vegetables.

I was really looking forward to the same delicious grilled cheese and tomato soup, but it was fine. I chose the spaghetti.

"Do you like Frinkle's or Landinger's more?" Cheryl asked.

"Well that's hard, because I really enjoy my room, but I love Frinkle's."

"Next time we come, if you want to come again that is, and if you like Frinkle's better, they have a little hotel here, I mean you have to make reservation but it's really nice, you just have to pay for more things," said Rachel.

"Pay for what?"

"Well you have to pay for anything you eat, and just any other activities that aren't free,"

"That's not that bad," I said as I took a sip of my lemonade.

Just then, our waitress walked in with our food. It wasn't Riley, and as I looked around the room, I couldn't find her. Maybe she was at one her many other jobs. She was a hard worker.

By now I knew that if I was gonna eat with the girls, I was gonna pray for my food.

"Amber, would you mind saying the blessing?"

Her question came at me fast. I couldn't say no, and even though I wanted to the word sure slipped off of my tongue before I could catch it.

They bowed their heads.

"Dear Lord, uhm thank you for this trip, and thank for this meal and ugh the people who prepared it, amen."

I watched the girls unfold their napkins waiting for one of them to tell me my prayers weren't good, I knew that one would common on the fact I didn't know how to pray.

Neither said a word, they just plowed into their food.

"Is there something wrong with your food?"

"Oh no, I was just thinking," I said as I picked up my fork.

The spaghetti wasn't as disappointing as I had thought.

"What a great place this is, how did you guys find it?"

"Oh we just googled fun places to visit in Holland," said Rachel.

I nodded. As I looked around the room, watching the people around me talk and eat, I wondered what their lives were like. Each of them had a story of their own. It wasn't necessarily full of despair and losses, but they all had lives.

Some were Americans, others lived in the area. I wondered what had attracted them to take this pottery class.

"So Amber how is your pot coming?" asked Cheryl laughing.

"It's going good, it was a little hard at first, but I think I did okay."

"Well this is a new one for us too, and I don't think I did very well."

I smiled as I thought back to the mess I had named my pot.

After lunch we headed back to the little room, where the pots were now dry enough to paint or decorate as we liked. It was almost like an elementary art project no, in the sense that people around me were hot gluing feathers to their pots. What I once thought were lovely creations now were looking more like the kind of creations a little kid brought home with them from school. I had to take my time, and I had to make it perfect.

I picked up a carving knife and began to carve a design into the pot. At first I didn't have a pattern to follow, or even a design in mind, I just let the knife make its own design. I didn't want paint. I didn't need feathers. When I was finished my pot had an indescribable design on it. The lines on it almost looked like wheat, they were wavy, giving the feeling that the lines were flowing yet they were still. I was pleased.

Cheryl was one of the last people to be done, which Rachel said wasn't surprising.

Now the pots were to be judged, and no one who had made a pot could be in the room, so Mrs. Frinkle directed to a little sitting room across from the dining room. It

was a simple room, but welcoming. We all scattered around the room, for what the girls called "Friend Making". I sat down beside a girl who was obviously very young.

"Hi, I am Amber," I said as I extended my hand towards her.

"I'm Katie,"

"Who are you here with?" I asked looking around the room.

"I was supposed to come with my mom, but she had a meeting."

"So you came by yourself?"

"Ya, we live just a couple minutes away, but I guess you not suppose to tell strangers where you live."

I smiled, "Ya, your right."

"So did you enjoy the pottery class?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I really hope I win," she said, "That way my mom can be proud of me."

I hadn't really cared about winning; I just liked getting to create it.

"Well I'm sure you did great, and I'm sure she'll be proud of it, even if you don't win."

"No, I really have to win it for her."

She stood up, "Thanks for talking."

"Ya," I said smiling.

I had always thought of people who wanted to win so desperately as silly, they even annoyed me at times. Growing up, sports weren't about winning; it was about the experience of playing. I never played the same sport twice. If this summer I played soccer then next summer I would play softball, and if the summer after that the only sport I hadn't tried yet was golfing I would try it. But on those teams, if anyone ever gave me a tough time about not scoring, or we have to win, I would get so annoyed! And when we lost that final basketball game and the little girl began crying I just wanted to explode.

But this was a different kind of wanting to win. One I had really never seen. This little girl wanted to win for her mom. She felt like without winning her mom would be proud. All parents are proud. Like I said before, kids bring home artwork, and the natural response from the parents is *you're the next Picasso*.

For some reason or another, this little girl felt that the pot itself was any good without the title first place.

Just then a tall lady walked in the room and whispered something in

Mrs. Frinkle's ear.

She stood up, "The pots have been judged!"

She sounded as excited as some of the creators around me.

"Third place goes to pot number twenty six,"

I heard a woman having a cow, as she raced to the front by Mrs. Frinkle where she was handed her pot with a blue ribbon.

I looked around the room, for the little girl. I spotted her sitting on a couch clutching onto the arm tightly, her knuckles turning white, now in eagerness.

"Second," she continued goes to number 34,"

Her smiled faded. And another creator, this one tall and very skinny, but rather nervous reluctantly walked toward the front of the room, looking embarrassed.

"As for first place, the judges noted its uniqueness and simplicity, number 11."

That was my number. No way. My heart began to race in excitement, and I quickly forgot about the little girl.

I walked to the front of the room, where Mrs. Frinkle handed me a little trophy.

"Very good job dear."

I walked to where Rachel was sitting, she smiled,
"good job Amber!"

She laughed, "And you thought you would do
terrible."

"Well I guess not."

"Let me see it."

"Uhm, Im not sure about that."

She grabbed it out of my hands, "Amber! This is
fabulous!"

I blushed, "Ya I know."

Just then that little girl walked past me. The girl!

I ran towards her.

"Wait!"

She turned around, "What?"

Her little face looked so sad.

"Can I see your pot please?"

She took off her book bag and pulled out
another one of those feathery glittery messes. I smiled.

"Look, I know this sounds silly, but seeing yours,
I think the judges mad a mistake."

She looked at me puzzled. I showed her mine. I was sure to a little girl it would look plain and boring and not worth first place.

I was right.

"Oh my."

"I know," "So maybe, you could take the trophy," I said.

She didn't hesitate, "Oh yes!" "I think that would be very good!"

She gave me a hug. I felt nice handing her the trophy.

I had the pot itself to remind me of today.

"What is your name?"

I looked up. "My name is Amber."

"Thank you Miss Amber, this means more than you could imagine."

She put the trophy in the bag and quickly left.

I took the pot and followed Rachel and Cheryl outside, where a cab was waiting for us.

"Thank you for suggesting this," I said.

Rachel laughed, "It was fun!"

Today went a lot to me. In all the things we had done on this trip. I sat down and I did something. This pot would

one day be in the hands of another. Maybe not anyone
important. But I wondered who would ever get the chance to
see this piece of art. For that was what it truly was. A
piece of art. My piece of art.

Ch. 9

It was the last day of the trip. Something in me was excited to go back, and perhaps live life in a new aspect and the other part of me was full of fear and doubt.

I went down to breakfast by myself, and ordered *The Netherland Specialty*, which was simply cheese, bread and ham. It didn't seem like a breakfast food, but it's what people here ate. I ate really fast hoping that the sooner I was finished I could go out and enjoy my last day.

I left a tip on the table and quickly headed up stairs.

As I walked up the stairs my mind began to race with ideas for what we could do everything we still needed to do.

I knocked on Rachel's door.

"Hey Amber."

"Hey," "I was wondering, what are the plans for today?"

She opened her door wider, "Here come on in,"

"Well our plane leaves at ten tonight, so you need to have all your stuff packed before we do anything."

"Okay, so how long do you think it will take you to get all packed up?"

"Oh I don't know, I have a headache, and I was planning on just resting today."

"But it's our last day here," I said bummed.

"I know, but there will be more trips,"

I looked around her room. She kept it pretty neat.

"I know that tonight we are going out for dinner, then coming back and getting our stuff,"

"Okay, well I guess I'll go see what Cheryl is doing,"

"Oh she was up early this morning, and is out at Frinkle's doing a little writing,"

I sighed, "Okay."

"Im sorry Amber," she said.

I smiled, "No, its fine."

I walked out the door and headed back to my room. I decided it would be smart to get all my stuff packed up now.

As I sat there folding my clothes I remembered all the adventures I had in each.

Once everything was put away. I took the vase I had been reusing throughout the trip down to the kitchen. Polly was there cooking.

"Polly,"

She looked up quickly.

"Thank you for letting me use the vase,"

As she walked toward me her eyes were fixed on my bracelet.

I looked down at it.

"Here," I said as I extended the vase towards her.

"Welcome," she stammered.

In a normal circumstance I would have taken off the bracelet and handed it to her and wished her all the best of luck, but I couldn't. This was my mom's bracelet; it was all I had left of not only her, but my family.

I looked down at the silver charm bracelet. Each charm had a specific meaning. A meaning that once important to my mom was now important to me.

There was an apple tree, which I knew was symbolizing the apple tree she we had in the back yard, the one she read to me under everyday, there was praying hands, her Christianity meant the world to her, those hands represented her faith. There was a little cow, which made me smile every time I would look at it, for it reminded me of my mother's great love of cows.

Just then Polly said, "I borrow bracelet,"

No. She couldn't take it. I looked back down, my eyes caught glance of a little chain that said joy. Mom had always taught us that Joy came from putting Jesus first, others next, and you (meaning me) last.

I wasn't really into the Christian stuff, but I knew that mom would have given Polly the bracelet; I knew that she would have seen it as just a silly bracelet that she could buy new.

I took it off, almost numb by all the doubts in my mind and without a chance to change my mind, I handed it to her.

Her eyes lit up, "Oh thank you!"

Her voice sounded like a little girl. But the sparkle I saw in her eyes, took away all the doubt in my mind, this was what I wanted.

“Thank you for all your good cooking,”

“Wait,” she said as she ran over and opened a drawer on the little desk in the corner of the room.

She scrimmaged around for a minute and then suddenly stopped. She turned to me and smiled. She walked towards me with a proud expression on her face; she had something clinched tightly in her hand. She lifted my hand and put something inside. I looked down to see a bracelet, it was on a piece of string, and had seven beads on them: gold, black, red, white, green, blue and clear. It looked like something she had made herself. But obviously the bracelet meant something to her.

I smiled, “Thank you,”

She began to cook something.

I walked out, I felt something in my heart, a feeling I hadn't experienced, but it felt good, I took the bracelet and put it in my purse.

I spent the afternoon at Frinkle's just walking around the fields, thinking about life. I breathed in the fresh air. Life seemed so perfect. But obviously in order to

live like this everyday I would have to have some *money* saved.

Just then I heard my name.

"Amber!"

I turned to see Cheryl walking towards me.

"Hey!"

"What are you doing?"

"Just walking around, enjoying the rest of the time,"

"Ya, well I was about ready to give Shane a call, would you care to join me?"

"What?" I said laughing.

"Well you are gonna meet him when we get back, and I have told him a lot about you,"

Oh great. She told him a lot about me. What was there to tell?

"I don't know, you don't think it's a little weird talking to someone you don't know on the phone,"

"But that's just it, he does know you."

"I guess it couldn't hurt."

She smiled. She picked up her phone and started to dial.

"Are you sure this isn't weird?"

She shook her head. "Shane? Hey,"

I sat down beside her. This was weird. We aren't in junior high.

"Ya,"

I looked around me, we weren't by any tulip fields, it was more like woods.

"Hey guess what?" "Amber is with me," "Ya."

"Amber he wants to talk to you," she said pushing the phone towards my hand.

"What?" "No!"

"Amber!"

I took the phone hesitantly, "Hello?"

"Amber!" "I've heard so much about you, and of course everything I've heard I've heard twice,"

I smiled. Suddenly I felt butterflies rising up in my stomach.

"Hello?"

I through the phone to Cheryl.

"Oh, okay, bye love you!"

She hung up. "Well we probably should head back, I haven't started to pack yet!" she said laughing.

I decided to stay a little bit longer. As I walked around admiring the beautiful tulips around me a thousand

thoughts filled my mind. Just then I remembered something. Something big.

My whole intent of this trip was to come and die. The dying should be taking place now. But how could I? After getting to know Rachel and Cheryl, I had finely felt happy. How could I hurt them after all their kindness to me? And being honest with myself... I don't want to die. I want continue enjoying these trips and who knows what else I have been missing out on.

I sat down. What was I doing? The same question I had asked myself years ago, how had I let it get this far? I know where that got me last time I asked myself that question. I ended up a messed up teenage girl with a baby, and lung cancer. The cancer. Could I even really go back and enjoy the rest of my time. I didn't want cancer to hold me back, so why would I let something that was so far in the past?

I began to feel confused and I didn't like this. I got up and quickly headed back.

When I got there Rachel said she felt better, and she said that she would love to go to De Eemhof. It was a city about an hour away from Holland that had lots of restaurants and things to do.

It was four now, and we had to get ready, go on this hour long drive, spend an hour or more there, and then get in the car for another hour, and have all our stuff ready to go to the airport and leave by ten.

I don't really like long drives, but Rachel wanted to do this, and really sounded like fun.

Once we were all ready, we called a taxi, and were on our way.

"So how did you like the trip overall?" asked Rachel.

I smiled, "Well..."

"Oh Rachel, you always ask the most boring questions," interrupted Cheryl.

"What was your favorite part of the trip?" she asked.

"Oh I really loved all of it,"

Honestly, the optimism they had given me was the best part, but when sharing these things, what could I say? I know.

"I love tulips, I always have, so it was really nice to get to go in the fields, and I really loved when we got the baskets and picked the tulips."

Rachel smiled and nodded.

"Well good, I always get something out of these trips," Cheryl said.

"And what did you get out of it this time?" asked Rachel.

"Oh, well I really enjoyed getting to know Mr. Frinkle a little better.

"Was there anything that you didn't like?" Cheryl asked, directing her question to me.

"Uhm, not really."

"Cheryl! Do you remember that one time, when..."

I looked out the window. It was nice out, cool but not enough to make someone cold. I fell asleep listening to the girls talk about everything you can imagine.

"Amber!"

I woke up to see Rachel laughing, "We're here!"

I got up at a place called Center Parcs, it was really nice. The restaurant we went to was really nice. I felt a little under dressed which was really embarrassing for me. But Rachel assured me it was fine, and I wasn't alone, because her and Cheryl both were dressed just as casually as me.

We had been at the restaurant for only fifteen minutes when something happened that would forever change

my life. Something that was not expected and played perfecting time in this fairytale. See all the fairytales end with... and they all lived happily ever after. I knew from the beginning that mine wouldn't, and my assumption was right.

As I sat there looking at the people around me, enjoying watching Cheryl and Rachel laugh with people they had known briefly, I ran into someone who I knew. Someone I knew well. This person knew my weaknesses, they knew my fears and they knew how to get under my skin. Unfortunately I didn't know how to not listen to them.

"Amber?"

I turned around to see Anita. My heart stopped. I felt sick right away.

What was she doing here?

"Anita?"

"Hi!" she chimed loudly.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

I was almost to numb to answer her, "Im here on a trip with some friends."

"Oh, well Im here on a business trip," she said smiling.

I picked up my purse, "Well it was really nice to see..."

"Amber, how have you been?"

"Alright," I sighed.

"Really?" she said laughing, "If I were you I would be miserable."

"Can I get you a drink?"

"No, I don't drink anymore."

"What?" she said shaking her head, "No, no let me get you a drink."

"Anita, I don't drink!"

"Alright, no need to get snappy," "Well I don't quite understand how you're a. fine and b. you don't drink." "If I woke up every morning knowing I was responsible for the loss of two people, one of them being my daughter, I would have some problems."

My heart began to race, as I tried to hold back the tears.

"Amber really, a drink or two will not make you an alcoholic," "Speaking of, do you remember Danny? Well he is like a total bum, anytime he gets money it goes straight to his next drink..."

I tried to drown out her voice, the gossip, and drinking and guilt she was trying to pour on me was making me sick.

"Anyways, well I wouldn't be surprised if you had little drinking problem yourself, I mean really, how do you deal?"

"Anita, really I don't drink, I haven't in along time."

I realized something. I hadn't had anything alcoholic since the night of the crash. I smiled. Well that was an accomplishment.

"No tell me!" "How do you deal?"

I couldn't take it anymore.

"How is it my fault those people died? I mean really? I wasn't even the one driving?"

She stopped and gave me a look, that obviously said, you poor pathetic little girl.

"Honey, are you really trying to play that game?"
"You know it's your fault." "You let a drunk man drive your car with a little girl in the backseat." "You might not have been the driver, but why was Faye in the car?"

That was a question I had been asking myself for a long time.

"Well, my group is leaving, give me a call when you get back, we should get drinks or something," she said jokingly.

I suddenly felt overwhelmed with guilt once again.

What was I doing? I had no right to live. There should be a little girl in this world that could have been adopted by a great family that could have

dressed her up and given her a world of things I would have never imagined being able to provide. I should've been the one to die. Why was I here?

I went to the bathroom, and sat down on the floor in a stall.

I began to cry. Not just a tear or two. I had a hard cry. It was always my philosophy that you could never know how truly hurt you were until you had a good cry. And as I sat there, I realized I was nothing, I wasn't worth anything and I didn't deserve to live and there was no reason to live.

"Amber?" I heard a soft voice.

I whipped my eyes quickly.

"Ya?"

"Are you okay?"

"Ya, I just ate a little too much, I don't feel good."

"Can I come in?"

It was Cheryl.

I couldn't let her see my like this. I stood up and wiped off my eyes.

As I slowly opened the door I felt my eyes begin to tear up yet again.

"What's wrong?" she asked in a sympathetic voice.

I tried to explain that I was fine, but no words came out of my mouth.

I couldn't hold back the tears any longer, my eyes so full everything looking now blurry.

"I ran into an old friend, if you could call her that."

She smiled, "Oh these are tears of joy,"

I shook my head.

"No." "Not at all, she made me feel responsible for Faith, and took away all the joy you and Cheryl have gave me,"

"And now I realize I don't deserve to live, I don't deserve to be here experiencing the great trip and having fun, I should be punished I deserve death. The worst imaginable death possible." By now I was sitting on the floor.

Rachel sat down beside me. She didn't say anything.

I heard her take a breathe.

"Amber, I hurt for you I really do but at the same time what you told me, how you feel," she hesitated, "how you feel like you're at a point of helplessness, it thrills me."

What? It thrills her. My look obviously shouted what I was thinking.

"See, I have your solution."

What was she saying, she has my solution? I have my solution. The only solution.

"We all deserve death, I know that I am most defiantly not perfect, I have hurt so many people," "You may see a conservative Christian book worm but at one time, I denied Christ, my family, I wanted nothing to do with God, or anyone that called themselves a Christian. They all seemed like... like hypocrites to me. I had seen so many

of these so called Christians walking around hugging there Bibles, but act differently than what they were

preaching. And instead of going to a youth group where I knew there would be people watching me looking to see if I dressed modestly enough, listening to hear me slip up and say a bad word, just sitting around waiting for people to judge I would go hangout with Edith and Kacey. They were my friends that loved and accepted me, who encouraged me to do whatever I wanted as long as I was happy," she sighed, "Edith committed suicide our junior year of high school, it was an accidental overdose. Cheryl tried to tell me that it was God's will, that he had a plan but I didn't understand how a God could let this happen to someone he apparently loved. But my sister, God bless her soul she never gave up on me, every Wednesday she would beg me to go to youth group with her. One day I decided I would go, it was her birthday and I knew it meant a lot to her, and I that it would go by quickly."

By now I had stopped crying. I knew what was coming.. God loves you and he offers peace and everything will be okay if I believe it.

"Well I went and I sat there and watched young people my age, lifted their hands toward the sky singing about a God of love and compassion. A God I felt they had made up in their heads. After all, to me it had seemed I had never seen this God. He had never made an attempt to show me compassion. After the singing, a man named Jared Craig came and spoke. To my surprise he didn't talk about the loving compassionate God. He talked about me. He talked about my friends and the people in my school. His message was that when we have tried all there is to try, when we have fallen to our knees unaware of our future certain we are alone, when we are friendless and the world despises us, there is a God who wants to be our friend. He shared the story of Christ death, but not as a salvation message. He said that there were two crosses next to Christ. And on one cross there was a man who had robbed people and killed people, and that day he said, this is the son of God, and Jesus spoke to him saying, surely this very day you will be in paradise," she swallowed, "Amber, I know that some Christians do not live up to what they preach

about, I know you feel like you are undeserving, but it is when we come to the place of helplessness he is there to pick us up and give us the sense of security it is then that we can realized he will never fail us. No matter who on this earth does, all we need his Christ and his forgiveness is everlasting. I gave my life to Christ that night, and he has never let go. And Iam one hundred percent certain he will never fail me."

"What about when Cheryl lost her son?" "Was it not hurtful for you to see your sister in that pain?"

"God does not give me anything I cannot handle, and yes it was excruciating, but he was by my side the whole way through, and he put a peace in my heart, and a comfort beyond any comfort imaginable."

I looked down, "Rachel, I can't do it alone, I know, and I believe but I don't deserve it,"

She smiled, "Does anyone?"

We talked for another half hour until Cheryl came in; it was there in that bathroom that I gave my life to Christ. I knew that I couldn't handle the burdens and heart ache the world throws my way, and I knew that I didn't want my life to end I wanted to face the world and help people who had gone through the same pain.

On the bus ride, I shared my whole story with the girls, and together we prayed that I would have the confidence to go home to my dad, to tell him that I was sorry for leaving I was sorry for the pain I knew I had caused. I wanted his forgiveness.

This wouldn't be easy but I knew it had to be done.

As I sat on the plane looking out the window I felt the knot in my stomach growing.

I had not talken to him since I was sixteen. It had been nearly ten years. What if he shut the door on my face? What if he didn't accept my apology what if it was too late.

We were an hour away from landing, I closed my eyes as I began to fall asleep nervously awaiting what was ahead for me.

Ch. 10

When we landed my heart was racing. We had already bought the plane ticket to Hershey, and it took off an hour after our plane arrived.

"Amber, I know this feels scary but this is really good, and I know he is gonna forgive you," said Rachel.

I wish I had her confidence. My dad was never one to forgive. I mean, he would say he did, but he would make you feel terrible. I already felt terrible, and I knew that this was one of the worst things I had ever done to him.

Why couldn't I follow his rules, I mean sure I didn't have to agree with him, but why couldn't I just keep my mouth shut and disagree in my head?

Why did I have to yell at him, and blame him? He was a big part of the reason I felt so bad about myself half the time, but seriously? Why did I put all the blame on him? Why didn't I take a minute to call in four years? These four years felt like twenty years. They felt like forever.

I nodded. The girls waited around with me, till it was time to go.

It hadn't been silent for a while till Cheryl's phone rang.

"Hello? Ya, sure."

"Guess what," she said putting her phone down, "Shane is coming to pick us up, he said he is finding his way to the Starbucks now."

I choked on my coffee. Why did I need another person watching me?

It felt like Rachel and Cheryl were a lot of people all ready, and I certainly did not need an audience watching me shake as I awaited this step in my adventure.

And Shane? It seemed like they were trying to set us up, all the times she tried to get me to talk to him on the phone, how badly they wanted us to meet. Well they got their wish; we still had forty minutes till I had to go.

Just then, a tall athletic looking guy approached us waving his hands, Cheryl ran and jumped up embracing him in a hug.

He was your typical blonde hair blue eyed strong athletic stud.

I closed my eyes and took a breath. I did not need a guy in my life right now making things more difficult, but seriously he was beautiful.

And then it happened. Our eyes met. Oh my gosh! It felt like someone had taken all the air from my lungs. My heart began to race faster.

He extended his hand toward me, "You must be Amber," he smiled.

"Ya."

He laughed, "Well it's nice to finally meet you.

I took a sip of my coffee.

"Shane! I saw the cutest beagle!"

"Heidi Winter's family got two beagle puppies, I was thinking about getting one from the same family they got their's from, but I don't know."

"You should!"

"We'll see."

"So Amber did you like Holland?"

"Ya, ya I did."

"Good, Rachel and Cheryl go all the time, they have tried for years to get me to come but I just don't see the point in going to the same place a hundred times."

"Well I know I would go again."

"Maybe I'll try it next time."

We sat there, all of us telling him about the trip and our experiences, mostly the girls. I listened and watched mostly.

Shane was funny, Shane was nice. Shane was a pastor. I being a new Christian and being excited to straighten out my life, and finally having a purpose for life saw the whole Pastor thing as amazing.

Then it happened. They called my flight to board.

I stood up quickly. My heart began to race harder than ever.

I wasn't ready. I didn't have the right words. What if he wasn't home? Maybe I should wait.

I turned and looked at the girls.

Just then Shane took my hand, "hey can I have a minute alone with Amber."

What was he doing? I looked down at our hands and back up at him.

Seriously, what was he doing?

They nodded; both sisters smiled and gave me a hug, and affirmingly encouraged me that everything would be fine.

I turned and looked at Shane.

"Amber, I want to pray with you,"

Suddenly I felt relieved.

"Ya."

"Dear Lord, thank you for Amber, thank you for bringing her and Rachel together, and this trip, and everything that took place, Lord we pray that you will open Amber's father's ears to what she has to say, help Amber to have a sense of peace, as she takes those steps, give her the words to speak, put your hands on this family," he opened his eyes.

"Amber, I want to be your friend, I don't know why but I know that God has a plan for you in our lives, ours being me and my sisters."

I didn't know what to say. But I knew I agreed.

He gave me a hug. I didn't want to let go.

"Thank you," I said turning.

I got onto the plane, so many thoughts flying through my mind. Not only of the oncoming storm I was facing, but Shane's words.

I pulled a piece of paper out of my bag and tried to write out what I wanted to say to my dad.

I couldn't think of anything.

There was one point, nothing to juice it up, it was simple. Alls I needed to say was that I was sorry.

I looked at the woman sitting by me. She was heavier set, with dark skin. She was reading a book called *A Gift of Grace*, I wondered if it was a Christian book. The only possible gift of grace I could imagine was the gift I recently accepted.

I wanted to ask, maybe even read it. But I couldn't get the nerve to ask her about it. Unlike thirty years ago it isn't safe to talk to people you don't know. Not saying

she is a dangerous person, she looked friendly, but people just don't talk to people.

It would be nice to know...

"Excuse me, would you recommend reading that book?"

She smiled, "Oh yes! It is very good."

"Who is it by?"

"Amy Clipston, actually I am connected to her through a friend, if you would like you can take this copy."

"No, its fine," I said smiling.

"No really, I insist."

"Alright, thank you."

I hesitantly took the book. She seemed nice.

"I'm Edith."

"Amber."

"Are you visiting Baltimore or do you live there?"

"Oh, I am actually from Hershey, but Baltimore is one of the closest Airports. It's about a one and a half hour drive from the airport."

She nodded, "Hershey is a lot of fun, I have taken my grandkids to the Hershey Factory several times."

"I'm actually just visiting my dad."

"Oh I see, do you visit often?"

"No," I laughed, "This is the first time in several years."

"He must be thrilled!"

"Well, not exactly..."

She looked confused, and her eyes were saying explain.

"He doesn't know I'm surprising him."

"Oh how delightful! There is nothing more a parent loves than to have their children come home after not seeing them for a long time."

"I'm not sure how it will go."

"I'm sure, he will be ecstatic."

"I left home when I was sixteen, I haven't really talked to him since then, and I am going to apologize."

She looked down at her hands, "Amber, I had a daughter, Becky, she too left home when she was young, it was hard. But I forgave her the day she left, the instant really," she sat there twittling her thumbs.

I didn't say anything.

"How do you know he won't throw his arms around you and welcome you in the door?"

"Because that's not the way my dad is."

She looked at me hard, "Amber if you are going to *his* home to apologize to *him*, you better understand *it is all about*

him. You need to humble yourself and be at the sense you are begging his forgiveness. Walk into it, knowing that you're not just asking you truly are begging. Because if you go in, thinking well he isn't the type to forgive and he is just some old whatever, you better bet that this trip was worthless."

I took her words in like a starved dog.

"If you still think he is in the wrong you cannot receive forgiveness."

"I know I was wrong, but still, I don't think he will see me as deserving of his forgiveness."

She shook her head slowly, "Well I'm sorry if that's true, we all deserve forgiveness."

I told her about my trip and how the girls had led me to Christ, which she was very delighted in. She was also a Christian. She encouraged me that even if I didn't receive his forgiveness I had a forgiveness that was more rewarding and more satisfactory.

When the plane landed I said good bye to Edith, and thanked her for her advice.

I called a cab. As I waited for the cab I grew impatient. The cabs in Holland were so much faster!

It finally came. I got in and pulled the address out of my wallet.

Once I was situated a sudden sense of tired came over me.

I spent the first hour or so in complete dread of what I was headed to.

I decided to occupy my mind and time by reading the book Edith gave me.

When I opened it up, I noticed she had an address label on the front inside cover.

I turned it over and read the summary. It was about a woman named Rachel who took in her two nieces after her brother was killed in a car wreck.

The wreck reminded me of my wreck. How I had taken my daughter's life. My head began to feel heavy as the frustration of not remember her name grew stronger. I put the book down and looked out the window. My stomach began to knot up. After a while it came to me, Faith.

The car came to a stop.

"Ma'am that will be two fifty."

I picked up my wallet, there was only two one hundreds and a one.

I couldn't handle anymore, I began to cry.

He looked back at me.

"I only have two hundred and one," I sobbed.

He rolled his eyes, "Look you will need to call someone."

"I don't have anyone to call."

He stared at me.

"You don't got nobody here you can call?"

"No,"

"Alright," he said as he put his hand out.

"Oh thank you!" I said as I pulled the money out of my wallet.

"Thank you, thank you so much!"

I opened the door, I don't know how, but someday someone is going to do something really great for you," I stopped for a second, "God is gonna bless you."

He rolled his eyes, "Ya, ya."

I stepped out of the cab. The house looked the same. The garden was obviously dead and not well taken care of, but that was something mom always did.

I walked towards the door. I stopped in front of it. I couldn't do this. My back began to tighten.

I took a deep breath as I lifted my hand to knock, the tightness in back grew up towards my neck, my heart raced fast then ever as my fist got closer to the door.

Just then the door swung open.

There stood three teenage girls, looking at me like *where did you come from.*

"Can I help you?" asked one of the girls.

It must be Katie I thought.

"Hi."

She looked at me like I was dumb.

"Oh, uhm is Mr. Richie home?"

"Nope sorry, but I'm sure whatever your selling he isn't interested in."

Wow. For being in this family she had some attitude to her. I smiled at what she said, whatever you're selling..

"Im not selling anything, Im here to talk to him."

"Sorry, like I said-he's not here."

"Katie please."

All three girls' eyes shot towards me.

"How do you know my name?" her voice went up.

Oh great.

"Harris!"

She stared at me frantically.

Harris? Why would Harris be here? Harris was my younger brother. But not young enough to be at home. Jack was Harris's friend.

Just then the door opened up wider,

"Hello..."

We both stood there staring at each other.

"Katie go to practice."

She looked up at him, obviously feeling the tension.

"Alright."

Katie and the other two girls walked away.

She glanced back at us one more time before they disappeared.

"What do you want Amber?"

"I need to talk to dad."

"He isn't here, and I don't think that is a good idea."

"Harris! Please."

He stared at me.

"Why?"

I swallowed, "I just need to talk to him, it's important."

He crossed his arms.

"Look Amber, you can wait here, but I don't think it's a good idea."

He walked away, leaving the door open.

I stepped into the house slowly.

It still smelled like apples. No piece of furniture had been moved. I sat down on the couch.

I waited. And I waited.

Harris didn't talk to me, I hardly even saw him.

I never realized that in leaving I had possibly hurt Harris as well, but the thought began to pop up in my mind.

I began to feel dizzy with remorse.

When I left he was just the annoying fourteen year old brother. I hardly even noticed him. And really, I hardly thought of him since then.

I looked around the room. There were pictures of Katie, she obviously played soccer. I stood up quickly after noticing something that made me mad. Really mad.

In all the family pictures, I was gone. It wasn't like they cut me out. They had taken it somewhere and got me photo shopped out.

The picture of the Alaskan cruise we took as a family when I was eight, I was no longer in the picture.

Mom would never do this.

Just then the front door opened and Katie walked in.
She was dirty.

"Why are you here?" she asked in a somewhat
snobbish voice.

"Im waiting for your dad."

"Right."

Her dirty blonde hair was held back in a lose bun on
top of her head.

"So you play soccer?"

"Ya, I do."

"Look Im not trying to be nosy, but what do you want
from my dad?"

I sighed, "We just have some things to discuss."

I heard the kitchen door open. Katie and I both
looked at each other.

She stood up quickly and ran to the kitchen.

This was not how I wanted it to happen.

"Dad there's a woman that's been waiting all day to
talk to you in the living room."

"What?"

His voice was deep. It felt nice to hear his voice,
but at the same time very frightening.

As he entered the room, Katie following close behind I rose to my feet.

He looked at me. His smile faded.

"Get out of my house."

"No, please."

"Get out of my house Amber."

Katie's expression didn't change. I would think after hearing about a sister, and never meeting her, and realizing it was me, she would have some expression other than what she had.

"Out!"

"I'll go, but I have to say something first, please dad."

And there it was. Her expression changed.

"What! Why did she call you dad?"

He looked at her and back at me.

"She doesn't know who I am?"

"Well why should she?"

I began to cry, "Are you serious?"

I shook my head, "I came to tell you I am sorry."

"Well it's a little late for sorry now isn't it?"

"Dad, *I am sorry.*"

"Well what do you want?"

"I want your forgiveness."

"Forgiveness? Well I guess you're out of luck."

What could I say? I picked up my bag.

"Dad! Who is that?"

"Katie, not now."

"Dad!"

"Go to your room Katie."

She ran up the stairs and slammed her door.

"Get out Amber, and do me a favor and don't come back in ten years, don't come back at all."

With every word my heart felt like a dagger was being jabbed into it.

I turned and walked out the door.

I had no where to go, and of course to my luck, I had no service.

I wasn't as shocked because I had prepared myself, but then the thought came up in my mind about what Edith had said... You can't prepare to be denied.

I went to a neighbor's house, and asked to barrow a phone. Once I finally got a neighbor to trust me enough to use their phone I called a cab. Like I said before, you just don't know who you can trust these days.

As I waited for the cab to come, I stood there trying my hardest to remember the loved I had from m heavenly father. It began to rain. Perfect right?

When the cab finally came I got in it, gave him the direction to a hotel near the airport, then I layed down, and cried. I cried hard. Why couldn't dad be more like Edith was to her daughter?

I fell asleep to the sound of the rain and the beat of my heart.

Ch.11

When I finally got to the hotel, I used the phone in my room to call the airport and get a ticket for the next morning.

Then I got myself settle. I took a shower, and finished the crying.

And once I was already for bed, I got the phone and called Rachel.

I explained what happened and she expressed her disappointment for me. But reassured me that God was a father that would forgive me every time I ever made a mistake, and his love was like healing waters.

After we said good bye, I went to sleep.

When I woke up I looked at my clock, it was only three. I couldn't go back to sleep. I had finally met Katie for the first time, and it would be the last. I wanted to be able to talk to

her. Not just... I am Amber, Im the sister you have never heard of. I wanted to be able to talk about boys, and how obviously frustrating our dad, that *we both share*, is. I mean, the way he sent her to her room. He should have explained to her who I was, and why he was hiding me from her. Why was he? That was so immature. Getting me taken out of all the family pictures. Making it as if I didn't ever exist.

I must have really hurt him. I could see how. But really?

I wanted to talk to someone, but I didn't know anyone I could wake up at three in the morning.

I tried thinking really hard. The only person I could think of was Shane. But I didn't know why. I hardly knew him. He just seemed like the type of person that would have no problem being woken up by a silly girl like me who just wanted to pour all her thoughts and frustrations on him.

I sighed knowing that I would end up calling him.

I dialed his number and layed down on my stomach. It began to ring. My stomach felt like hundreds of butterflies were overtaking it.

"Hello?"

I didn't answer.

"Hello?"

"Shane?"

"Ya?"

"This is Amber."

"Hi."

"Uhm look, I know it's late, like really late, but uhm I just need to..."

"Talk?"

"Ya."

"Sure."

"It's not too late?"

"No. No your fine."

I told him about my dad not forgiving me, and Katie not knowing me, the pictures and all of what started as hurt was now being harbored as frustrations.

We talked for nearly four hours. Not about my family the whole time. Eventually the topic changed, and by the end of the conversation we were talking about the perfect steak.

Anyways, after the conversation I really felt like I had got to know him better.

I slept the whole way back. After all I did talk on the phone for the good majority of the night.

I woke up to the bumpy landing of the plane and the voice of the stewardess saying, please fasten your seatbelts for landing.

"SSS..."

I looked at the seat across from me, where a little boy about four sat making a sss... sound.

It was so annoying. It continued. Now sick and frustrated I wanted so badly to act as his parent and tell him to stop. Why couldn't his mom? I looked over to see her, she was typing on a computer, dressed in a suit, and obviously not interested in her

son beside her. She looked as if she was the type of mom that was a workaholic.

I felt bad for him. What poor kids this generation has. The kids seem to be more and more neglected. First the girl at the pottery class and now this little boy. Children, especially children that young, needed parents that were dedicated to them, they needed attention. And this little boy looked like he had little of it.

The plane landed and I got off, now excited to see Rachel. She was supposed to meet me at the gate. But as I looked around there was no sign of Rachel.

I walked to the luggage area. I stood there waiting for my suitcase. It wouldn't be too hard to find, it was pink. As in bright pink. It was pretty hideous, but I wanted something that would be easy to find, so I could leave airports more quickly.

As a kid I hated taking my classic black suitcase, like everyone else, and having them lose it, or someone else take it.

Pink was perfect.

Once I had my suitcase, I walked over to a payphone where I called a cab.

It wasn't long before I was walking onto the elevator of my apartment headed toward my floor.

It was a relief to be home. I hadn't been there in months and it was about time.

To my surprise when I opened the door, I saw the mail, stack neatly on the dining room table, and the house seemed to be cleaner than what I left it.

I walked over to the phone. I only had three messages which didn't surprise me. There weren't a hundred friends and family members to call.

I played the messages. All of them were from Jack. Charlie! Every one, asking for me to get Charlie when I got back. I never told him when I was coming back.

I picked up the phone and dialed his number.

"Jack?"

"Amber?"

"Ya, hi..." I hesitated.

"This was a lot longer than I thought it would be. I hope your gonna pay me well."

Pay him? Ugh! I had to pay him for all the dog food, and taking care of Charlie for the past two months!

"Of course! When can you drop him off?"

"Tonight at six."

"Alright."

"You can pay me by cooking me dinner."

"What? I can't cook!" I said.

He laughed, "Well you better learn how in the next two hours."

I sighed.

"Then again, I don't want to be stuck eating something bad..."

"Hey! I'll do it."

"Huh, I could go for a good Italian dinner."

"Fine, I'll see you at six then," I hung up.

What on earth was I doing, I couldn't cook. I didn't even have the talent to boil noodles.

I ran over to my computer and googled Italian dishes. These were the things that came up: Risotto, baked Pasta, Lasagna, Spaghetti with meatballs, and Italian flatbread.

Lasagna shouldn't be that hard. Then again, the noodles were bigger than the noodles I already couldn't boil.

No. I could take a challenge.

I printed off the recipe they had for lasagna, grabbed my shoes and headed to the grocery store.

There was so much to get. Along with the noodles, hamburger, pasta sauce, tomatoes, and parmesan cheese, I had to get all the sides, including salad, green beans and fresh fruit. This was getting pricey.

When I got to the checkout the lady was really sweet.

"You in a hurry?"

"Ya, my friend is coming over for dinner, and I've never cooked before."

"And your gonna cook lasagna on your first time cooking?"

"Ya, why not?"

"This must be some man."

I shook my head, "No, he is just a friend."

She nodded, "Right honey, good luck."

I picked up the bags and headed to my car.

It was nice to be able to drive for once. It had been a long time.

I got home, and began cooking. I wanted everything to be perfect. But unfortunately this was hard. The check put woman was right. I didn't quit though. The hard part was putting it together.

Once it was finished and in the oven, I set up the table all nice and pretty. I put out my plates that I had only used a few times. There was no real point in using them, I normally ordered in, or got take out.

I looked at the clock; I had half an hour till Jack got here. I took a quick shower.

When I opened my closet door to get dressed, I felt wonderful. There were all my clothes. I missed them. I know it was silly. But try to imagine not opening your closet door for nearly two months, and then opening it to see, your beautiful shoes and dresses, and clothes. I was the type of person that only bought shoes I was absolutely in love with.

I picked out a little white dress with red flowers on it. It was fun cooking dinner and getting dressed up for a change.

When I walked into the living room I could smell the lasagna. It smelt good. I twirled in my dress. I felt pretty and accomplished. When my twirling ended I came to a stop seeing Jack sitting on the couch smiling.

I quickly straightened myself.

"I saved your lasagna," he said still smiling.

My eyes shot over to the oven.

"When I came in the timer was going off."

"Where's Charlie?"

"That's a nice greeting," he said standing up.

I smiled, "Sorry," I reached out my hand to shake his.

"He is over here."

I followed him over to the door, where a big dog kennel sat.

I looked at him with a blank questioning expression.

"You didn't have a kennel for him, so I bought one."

I walked over and opened the door.

"Charlie!" I said eagerly.

"But don't worry, it was on me."

I turned to Jack, "Ready to eat?"

"Are you ready?" he said laughing.

I walked over to the table.

"Help yourself."

When we had both filled our plates, with the lasagna, salad, green beans and fruit, Jack picked up his fork and cut into his piece.

"Wait!"

He looked up, "What's wrong?"

I hesitated, "We need to pray."

He put his fork down and closed his eyes.

I was surprised, I expected him to object.

Now smiling, I bowed my head and blessed the food.

"Can I take the first bite please?"

He started laughing really hard.

"What? It's my first time and I want to make sure its good."

"Alright, alright."

As I picked up my fork, I inhaled the wonderful scents before me.

I bit into it.

"Well?" Jack said.

I smiled.

He picked up his fork and tried it.

"I am very impressed."

I told him about the trip, leaving out the family part. He was really interested in Frinkle's. It was fun talking to him.

He shared with me his experiences with Charlie. He took him walking everyday. That was more than I ever did.

Just then my doorbell rang.

"Hold on," I got up and walked over to the door.

There stood Shane holding a bouquet of red roses.

"Hi!" I said.

"Hey thought I would just come see how you were doing."

"Oh come on in."

"Jack this is Shane, Shane this is Jack."

Jack stood up, as Shane looked at the table.

"I cooked Shane-I mean Jack dinner for watching my dog, Charlie while I was gone."

The guys shook hands still silent.

Why did this feel awkward?

"Well there is plenty if you want to join us..."

"Please do," Jack added.

Shane shook his head, "No it's alright. I can see your doing just fine."

I walked over to the covered and pulled out a vase.

"Are you sure?"

"Ya."

My stomach felt funny as I walked him to the door.

"Bye Jack."

He turned and looked at me.

"No."

"No what?"

"No my name is Shane, not Jack."

His hard tone hit me like a brick.

"Right, sorry."

"Bye Amber."

"Are you sure you won't stay?"

He looked at his feet, "Ya, night Amber."

It wasn't like we were a couple. It wasn't like he was my boyfriend. Why did this feel so wrong? Why did it seem not right having him walk out that door.

I closed the door, and slowly walked back to the dining room.

"Sorry about that."

"How do you know Shane?"

I sat down, "He is the brother of the girls I went to Holland with."

"Huh."

We sat there eating quietly. I looked around the room. It was nice to be home.

"So when do you and Steve meet?"

"Shane?"

"Oh right Shane, when did you meet?"

I put down my fork, "Well I guess yesterday."

"Yesterday?"

"Well ya..."

He looked at me funny.

"We've talked on the phone," I said in defense.

"And how long have you loved him?"

"What?"

"The way you were looking at him, it was obviously."

I swallowed. I don't love Shane. I couldn't.

"Saying you were right, which your not," I laughed, "How obvious was it?"

He smiled. "Amber, it was pretty apparent."

I was no longer hungry. My thoughts began o wrap around this. I couldn't love him. I mean, I could defiantly be his friend. But before I can love anyone again, I need to know my dad still loves me.

Just then the song *The Hamster dance* began to play quietly.

It was Jack's cell phone ring.

I began to laugh hysterically at this.

As he talked on the phone I remembered back to the last time I heard this song was at a church camp I went to with my best friend Laura.

After being awoken every morning for a week by this song, hatred had grown for it.

Laura. I wondered how she was doing. We had grown apart in junior high.

Laura was a quiet, smart Christian girl. We stopped talking when the guy I had a crush on, returned the feelings.

That was a mistake. Silly high school relationships were not worth best friends.

Especially this friend. She had been such a big part of my life. She was the most loyal uplifting good friend a person could have. And I threw it away on a boy.

"Amber?"

I looked up.

"Hey this was delicious but I have to go."

I stood up, "well thank you for being the first to try my cooking," I smiled.

He winked, "If ya ever need anything else just give me a call."

I walked Jack to the door, where he said one last good bye to Charlie.

After he left, I sat down on the couch where I was quickly joined by Charlie.

There was so much I wanted to fix in my life. So many people I wanted to help.

I picked up the phone and called Shane.

"Shane?" I held the phone tightly in my hands. "Hi it's Amber," I looked at my duck shaped feet, "I'm sorry, I didn't know you were gonna stop by," I smiled, "thanks."

I sat there and listened to Shane talk about Sharon, a girl in the youth group he had been praying for.

This was what I wanted to do! I wanted to help people like Sharon. I wanted to show them God's grace, through the testimony of my life.

"Shane?" "Could I help in the youth group sometime?" I smiled when he enthusiastically said yes.

It was settled next Wednesday; he would pick me up on his way to church.

When we were finished I went to my room, and pulled out my box of nail polish. The box was pink with colored polka dots spread across it.

I hadn't painted my nails in so long!

The selection consisted of dark reds, and neutral colors.

I wanted bright. I wanted green.

I grabbed my wallet and went to the Wal-Mart down the street from my apartment.

There were so many colors to choose from. I picked the brightest green I could find.

I went back to my apartment and turned on some happy music, and twirled.

Life was good. I couldn't wait to getting everything right.

Ch. 12

Over the next 6 months, I spent most of my days helping Shane with the youth group. And if I wasn't doing that, I was going out with him.

The affects of the cancer were growing stronger, and everyday I felt weaker. A sense of tired overtook my body, I constantly had headaches, and it seemed like I had passed out a hundred times a week.

Although my love for Shane grew stronger, I became more aware that the chances for us to go on were slimming.

It was a cool morning; I was sitting on my patio watching the sunrise. It was an amazing picture to observe.

I imagined the God who created them, and the splendor of his dwelling place. What could be more magnificent? But yet I couldn't picture a sight prettier than this?

I went inside and got ready for Shane. He was taking me to a Bible Study that the church was hosting. The speaker was Beth Moore.

I had never gone to anything like this. But from what I heard they were the best.

She had written many books and bible studies, one being *When godly people do ungodly Things*.

This was a Bible Study, the sophomore girls in the youth group had been doing.

Even though, I was learning the Bible myself, and practically a child to this new faith, I was blessed with the opportunity to be a mentor to these girls.

Already in these six months, through my testimony God brought nine girls to their knees in complete and total surrender of their lives.

One of those girls was Sharon. This overjoyed Shane. The Bible study was great.

Once I was ready, I got my Bible that was sitting on my bed stand and plopped down on the couch.

I loved flippin through the delicate pages, searching for new verses, and even reading them again in different versions to get a new outlook on them.

I turned to Jeremiah 29, the verse read, "For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you plans to give you a hope and a future."

Just then Shane walked in. By now he didn't have to knock.

I stood up, "Shane read this."

His voice was deep, "For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not harm you plans to give you a hope and a future," he nodded.

"Isn't it amazing?"

"It is. What does it mean to you?"

"Well, he knows the plans, which means he created them right?"

He nodded.

I went on, "So I can rest assure that, he isn't trying to harm me with whatever comes my way, he has a plan and it says to give me hope for a future."

"Ya..."

"But it has already happened, like he had a plan for me here, and he gave me a hope and here I am in what was once the future, and I know I am safe."

"I have a verse to share with you later, but we are gonna be late."

We headed to the church. There were a lot of people there. More than what came to the church regularly.

I sat down beside an older woman. After about ten minutes Pastor Gillette welcomed everyone, and thanked them for coming, then introduced Beth.

She was taller, her hair was short. Her thick accent kept me listening. Knowing this would be an all day thing, I was glad her voice wasn't the same monotone voice, I heard every Sunday.

She started out with her testimony, she was born at an army base in Wisconsin during a thunderstorm, grew up in Arkansas. Her father managed the local cinema, where her and her four sisters all had jobs. Beth's job was handing out samples of popcorn and soda.

It was at the movie theatre Beth became enthralled with stories, she loved hearing them writing them and telling them.

Her favorite story was that of Jesus and his love for her.

When Beth was eighteen she felt God calling her to the ministry.

She was married and had two daughters. As a young mother she spent time speaking at luncheons and retreats.

Beth's message that day was about forgiveness. I really enjoyed having it brought out from a strong believer's point of view, especially the words of God.

I knew about the forgiveness he offered me. But I had never contemplated the forgiveness for the people I hated.

The scripture we were looking at was Matthew 5:43-48.

It talked about love for enemies, praying for people who persecuted you. Anita. I needed to pray for Anita. If God could save me, God could save Anita.

How badly I wanted to know where she was at. But unfortunately when I saw her that night, I was so focused on my pain, and hurt by her words, that I didn't pay attention to where she was living or who she was with.

When we were finished there, I was very pleased with Beth's message, and excited for my next chance to hear her speak.

That night, Shane and I went to Starbucks, where he shared with me the verse from earlier. It was *Psalms 37:4*, "*Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.*"

And at Starbucks that night, in my weak and tired body my heart came alive with excitement.

I was sitting there, sharing with Shane my fear of dying, but readiness to meet this Savior who had drawn me out of the despair this world had offered me.

He got up and kneeled down in front of my seat.

My heart began to race. He took my cold hands in his, and said "Amber, I want to spend every minute for the rest of your life with you."

I began to cry.

He couldn't do this. I didn't have much time left. I couldn't break his heart by dying. If we could only stay friends it would save him double the heart ache.

"Amber Richie I love you."

He reached in his pocket and pulled out a little red box.

I was puzzled. He was preparing this? I thought it was because I told him I was dying and he was scared of losing me.

He opened the box. There in that teeny tiny box, was a gold ring with one diamond.

He put it on my finger and said, "Amber I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you, will you marry me?"

We got married that weekend, it wasn't big. And to my disappointment, my daddy didn't walk me down that isle. We were married by a judge. Both Cheryl and Rachel were there. It wasn't a church which I knew meant a lot to Shane, but we didn't have time.

Right after, we took a flight to Holland, where Miss Landinger had a room waiting for us. We didn't even check in. We went straight to Frinkle's farm.

It was cloudy. We layed down beside a bed of red tulips. I looked up at Shane, he just smiled. Tears began to roll down his cheeks.

I smiled, the sunset was beautiful.

And I closed my eyes, and it was there, surrounded by tulips, in the arms of Shane I went to meet my Abba father.

