NOT YET

A Story of Hope, of Light, of the Graciousness of God —
and How He Rebuilds Our Lives

A MEMOIR

ANGELA DUSTINE MARTINI

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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version (KJV)
of the Bible.

"The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms."

— Deuteronomy 33:27 (KJV)

DEDICATION

For the One Who Said "Not Yet"

"We love him, because he first loved us." — 1 John 4:19 (KJV)

First and foremost, this book is dedicated to God — who looked at a woman who had signed her own ending and said, *Not yet.* Thank You for my second chance: for the mercy that found me, the grace that carried me, and the hands that have never let me go. Everything rebuilt in these pages was rebuilt by You.

To my family — my mom and dad, Maureen and Ed; my sister Mona; my brothers Eddie, Remington, and John; my children, Kayla, David, and Breanna; my grandchildren; and Jesse, my best friend since I was thirteen, who is family in every way that matters. Thank you for never giving up on me, even when I gave you every reason to. I am grateful for this second chance to do things differently — to be present, to be here, to be the woman, mother, and grandmother you always believed

I could be. I hope and pray I am here for many more years, making good memories and loving memories with all of you.

And to Dorothy Black, who loved a little foster girl like her own and always told her she should write a book — Dorothy, here it is.



The sign on my wall at home.

MY TESTIMONY

My Walk with Christ

I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior at twelve years old. I was a little girl, but my faith was real — I knew He loved me, and I opened the door of my heart and let Him in.

"Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me."

Revelation 3:20 (KJV)

But I walked away from Him down a very rough, bad path — years of addiction, bad choices, and darkness. The truth is: He never walked away from me. *I* walked away from *Him*. Through it all, He stayed right there — waiting, watching, loving me still.

On January 29, 2025, I lay in a medical coma for seven days. When God woke me up, He was right there waiting. He took my hand — and "neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand" (John 10:28 KJV) — and He has guided me every day since.

Today I am a new creature in Christ — and He wants to be *your own personal Savior* too. If you walked away like I did, come home right now. Here is how:

HOW TO ACCEPT JESUS AS YOUR LORD AND SAVIOR

1. Admit — Tell God you are a sinner and ask Him to forgive you. "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

2. Believe — Believe Jesus died for your sins and rose again. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." (Acts 16:31)

3. Confess — Confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe God raised Him from the dead (Romans 10:9).

4. Receive — Ask Him into your heart, and mean it with everything in you. "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:13)

"Dear Jesus, I am a sinner. I believe You died for my sins and rose again. I confess You as my Lord. Come into my heart, forgive me, and make me new. In Jesus' name, Amen."

Welcome home — heaven is rejoicing over you. (Luke 15:7)

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PROLOGUE

The Quiet Darkness

"If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there." — Psalm 139:8 (KJV)

There are two photographs of me in a hospital bed, taken in the winter of 2025. They are hard to look at. I keep them anyway, because they tell the truth about where this story starts: a woman on life support, in a coma, with the people who loved her gathered around a bed she was never supposed to wake up in. In one of them, a man is standing at my bedside. That is Jesse — my best friend since I was thirteen years old, a friend I love like a brother. He was standing watch over a woman who had signed papers saying not to bother. Hold on to him. He has been standing beside me, in one way or another, for most of my life — and this book will show you where that started.

When those pictures were taken, I had hoped my story would end there. I need you to understand that, because everything in this book hangs on it. At that time in my life, ending was not something I feared. It was something I had

arranged.

There is a kind of quiet that is not peace.

I know, because I lived in it. By the winter of 2025, my body was giving out on me — sickness on top of sickness, diabetes wearing me down, years of damage collecting their debt all at once. I was sick. I was a drug addict. And underneath all of it was the thing I could barely say out loud: I hated myself. I hated how I looked. I hated who I had become. I did not have any strength left in me, and I wanted my story to end.

So I did the paperwork of giving up. I changed my health-care directive to say it plainly: Do Not Resuscitate. Do not provide life support. If my heart stopped, let it stop. If my breath failed, let it fail. I had lost all hope, and I signed my name to that hopelessness like it was the last true thing I owned.

On January 29, 2025, my boyfriend Brandon found me unresponsive. Brandon had been in my life for fourteen years. That day, he was the one who walked in and found me — the one God sent through the door at exactly the right hour, though neither of us knew it yet.

What happened next is the reason this book exists — because what happened next was not my plan at all. At the hospital, my directive never reached my bedside. Somewhere between the ambulance and the ICU, my name had been recorded wrong, and the papers that would have told the doctors to let me go never made it to the people working to keep me alive. So they did everything. Tubes. Machines. Life support — the very thing I had refused on paper.

People have called it a clerical error. I call it something else. That was God intervening. That was God saying: *Not yet.* That was God saying it wasn't my time, and He had things for me to do. I believe that God makes that decision when it's our time to go — not us, not anyone else. It's up to God when it's our time. I had signed my own ending, and He overruled it.

David wrote, a long time before there were hospitals, that even if he made his bed in hell, God would be there. I had made my bed in an ICU, with paperwork that said let her go, and a heart that had stopped believing there was any reason to stay. And He was there anyway. Not angry. Not finished with me. There — in the room, in the machines, in a misspelled name on a chart — with a plan for my life that my despair did not get a vote in. If you have made your bed in a dark place of your own, I need you to hear this before we go one page further: there is no bed you can make where He is not willing to come and find you.

For days I lay in the quiet darkness of a coma, neither here nor gone, while my family gathered around that bed. I can only imagine the thoughts and feelings that went through the people who love me, having to see me that way, not knowing if they would ever see me awake again or if I was gone for good. My children especially. I still work at trying to let go of the guilt I have for putting them through what I did — for the fact that it was my own doing that put me in that bed. But I am grateful beyond words that they love me, and that our relationships have been rebuilt, and that they never gave up on me. They prayed. They pushed the doctors not to give up on waking me, because they felt I was trying to wake up. They

held hope for me when I had none left to hold. Not my mom, not my dad, not my sister, not my brothers, not my kids, not my granddaughter — nobody who loved me gave up on me. They held hope, and they loved me through the darkest moments of my life.

And then, on the morning of February 5, 2025, I opened my eyes.

The first face I saw was my sister Mona's.

I cannot describe that moment without telling you what rose up in me all at once: I felt love. I felt hope again. I felt joy again. And I felt a need — a need to do things different, a need to reach people before they found themselves where I was. God filled me with light again, and with love, with patience, and with a desire to find a way to reach as many people as I can — to guide them and support them and meet them where they are at, and try to hold their hand and walk with them.

February 5th. Thirty-six years earlier, on February 5, 1989, a twelve-year-old girl had knelt down and asked Jesus into her heart. The same date. It still gives me goosebumps. God remembered that date even when I had forgotten He was keeping it — through all the years I walked away from Him. He never left. I was the one who walked away. And on the anniversary of the day I first came to Him, He brought me back to life. Our God is an amazing God.

I did not wake up healed. I woke up to a heart attack that very day, with Brandon there beside me, helping me through it, not knowing if I was going to make it. I woke up to blood thinners. And when the hospital learned that I had taken pills wanting to die, I woke up to a suicide watch — someone in my

room, twenty-four hours a day. Which was nice, but it was hard. I woke up to a body that had to relearn nearly everything.

But I woke up. And waking up was the beginning of God rebuilding my life. God gave me the strength. God gives me the strength every day. He helps heal my body, heal my mind, give me hope, be my solid foundation. I build my foundation on the promises of God — physical, mental, spiritual, emotional. The chains were broken. The pillars are rebuilt. And now I just have to keep them balanced, through Christ who strengthens me.

I have learned something about quiet, on this side of it. The quiet I used to live in was the quiet of giving up. But there is another quiet — the quiet time where we can listen to Him speak to us, in the way He speaks to us. If we seek Him, we will find Him. Same silence. Different God-sized difference. One quiet nearly buried me. The other one is where He rebuilds me, a day at a time.

This is the whole story. It starts long before the hospital, with a little girl in a cast and a garden full of baby's breath, and it runs through the foster home and detention cells and delivery rooms and a long, slow slide into the dark — the disappointments, the letdowns, the hurt, the pain, the agony of it — all the way to a hospital bed, a wrong name, and a God who said no to my ending. And it does not stop at the waking. It goes on into the chains and bonds being broken, a life no longer bound to addiction, a woman living a different life now — free. I have a passion and a fire in me to reach out and help other people see that it can be done — that there is hope.

Never to lose hope. With God, all things are possible. That is why I have to keep going. That is why I have to keep trying. That is why I have to keep sharing my story: so that others who have lost hope can maybe feel that hope again, and know that it's not too late.

So if you are holding this book because your own story feels finished, I am asking you to borrow my hope until you have some of your own. As long as we're alive, it's not too late. It's not too late to change. It's not too late for things to get better. It's not too late to feel happiness. And if we can keep helping each other up that way — if we keep holding hands — we can reach so many people. Not just here in Minnesota. Everywhere.

God said *not yet* to me. He may be saying it to you too.

A Poem for This Chapter

There is a quiet that is not peace —
I lived in it.
My body was giving out piece by piece,
and I had no strength left to want anything except an ending.
So I signed the papers:
Do not resuscitate. Do not provide life support.
Let it stop.
Two photographs keep the proof of that winter —
a woman on machines, a friend standing watch at her bed,
a story that should have ended in that room.
It didn't. God hadn't signed.

CHAPTER 1

First Light

"For thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well." — Psalm 139:13–14 (KJV)

I was born on March 10, 1977, to a mother who was seventeen years old and already carrying more life than most people twice her age.

My mother had met my biological father in a group home somewhere in northern Minnesota — two young people in a hard place, reaching for each other the way hurting people do. Whatever they were to each other, it did not last. By the time I arrived, they were no longer in contact, and he would not be part of my story. I grew up with limited contact with my biological family, and almost none at all with his side. For a long time, that absence was just a fact of my life, like the weather. Only later did I understand how much of my story was shaped by the people who were not there — and by the ones God sent in their place.

My mother had lived a rough young life of her own, and she was addicted to drugs. So I want you to picture my first light honestly: a teenage girl, barely more than a child herself, holding a baby she loved in a life that was already coming apart around her. She was, in every way that matters for this story, a girl trying to survive while raising a baby at the same time.

I do not tell you that to shame her. I tell you because this book is about what God rebuilds, and He rebuilds honest things. My mother loved me in the ways she was able. But addiction is a thief with no respect for love. It does not knock, and it does not ask who is holding the baby. Before I was old enough to remember much of anything, it became clear that I could not stay where I was.

I know that thief personally now, in a way I wish I didn't. I know what it does to a house from the inside: how it takes a person who loves her children and slowly moves her out of her own life, one craving at a time, until the children are being raised by somebody's absence. I know how it lies — how it tells a mother she will get it together tomorrow, and tells her that every day for years. I know the shame that comes after, and how the shame itself becomes another reason to use. So when I look back at the seventeen-year-old girl who had me, I am not looking at a villain. I am looking at the first person in my story that addiction ever robbed. It robbed her of raising me. It robbed me of being raised by her. And for a lot of years, it very nearly robbed us of each other for good. God had other plans for that, too — but they would take decades, and a daughter who had to fall into the same pit before she could understand the girl who fell into it first.

One of the truest things I know — I say it to people in recovery all the time — is this: recovery isn't just about getting sober. It's about healing the trauma underneath, changing how you live, and rebuilding your life on a stronger foundation. My mother had trauma underneath. So did I. Underneath is where addiction lives, in the unhealed places, in the pain nobody helped us carry. A seventeen-year-old girl with a rough life and a new baby did not stand much of a chance against what was underneath her — not without help, and help is not what her life had given her. I say that not to excuse the years that followed, but to tell the truth about them. Truth is where rebuilding starts. It would take me forty-nine years, a coma, and a miracle to learn how to look at my own beginning this way. I am still learning. But this is where my story starts: not with a bad mother, not with a ruined baby — with two lives God loved, in a hard place, and a foundation He intended to rebuild for both of us.

Here is something I did not understand until I was grown and had stood in her shoes myself: my mother was seventeen when she had me, and I was seventeen when I had my first baby. I know what it is to be a scared young mother in over her head. I know it from the inside. Whatever judgment I might once have carried toward the girl my mother was, life — and God — have taught me to set it down. I have learned not to be so quick to judge people. Everyone is in their own situation, with their own struggles and challenges, and most of us are doing the best we can with a heart that is already broken in places nobody can see.

Before any of that could be sorted out, though, there was my foot.

I was born with a left foot that would not have carried me through life. As a baby I had three surgeries on it — three times under the knife before I had words for what was happening — because without them, the doctors said, I would never have been able to walk. Three surgeries. I have thought about that number a lot. Before I could talk, before I could choose anything at all, my little body had already been through more repair work than some people see in a lifetime. I spent those first years in a cast, in pain I cannot remember and my family cannot forget.

Think about what a cast means for a baby. It means being carried everywhere. It means somebody else's arms are your transportation, somebody else's hands are your bath and your comfort and your whole way of getting through the day. A baby in a cast cannot get to anything she wants. Everything she needs has to be brought to her by love. I did not have the words for that then, and I did not have the theology for it either, but I have both now: I started my life completely dependent on being carried — and, if I am honest, I have never really outgrown it. The seasons changed. The cast came off. But again and again, in the years ahead, I would find myself unable to carry my own life, and again and again somebody's hands — and underneath them, God's — would pick me up and carry me anyway.

And the walking itself? The doctors were right about what those surgeries bought me. They bought me a life of walking — and what a life of walking it turned out to be. I would walk

to school a happy little girl and walk home from a different one. I would walk away from home as a teenager, and walk a canoe overland between Canadian lakes. I would walk into courtrooms and out of a clinic, walk into treatment and out of a hospital. One day I would even walk out of a coma's shadow and back into my children's lives. None of that walking happens without three operations on a baby who never knew they were done for her. Somebody fought for my future before I had one. I try to remember that, now that fighting for other people's futures is my whole life.

I have pictures of that season: a tiny girl with a cast, getting her baths in the kitchen sink, because that was the only way to keep the cast dry. Somebody took those pictures. I want you to notice that, because I have learned to. In the middle of a beginning that was, by any measure, falling apart — a teenage mother, an absent father, a baby in surgery after surgery — somebody thought that little girl in the sink was worth photographing. Somebody kept those pictures safe across decades, through moves and losses and everything that came after, so that a forty-nine-year-old woman could hold them one day and see, with her own eyes, that she had been cherished in the middle of the mess. A photograph is a small thing. But it is evidence. And the evidence of my first years says: she was watched over. She was handled with care. She mattered to somebody, every single day of it. I love those pictures now. A little girl in a sink, splashing, somebody's hands keeping her safe in the water. I did not know it then, but hands keeping me safe when I could not keep myself — that was going to be a theme of my whole life. It would be true in

the foster home and hospital rooms, in a canoe in Canada and in an ICU, forty-some years later, when hands I could not see in the dark were the only reason I am here to write this.

There is a verse I have come to love for this part of my story, the one standing at the top of this chapter. David says God covered him in his mother's womb — that he was fearfully and wonderfully made. I used to wonder how that could be true of a baby born with a foot that did not work, to a mother who could not keep her, in a life that started with surgeries and separation. Now I think I had it backwards. The wonder was never that my beginning was tidy. The wonder is that God was in it. He knew me — all of me, the broken foot and the broken road ahead — before I took my first breath, and He did not count any of it as a reason to look away. He formed me, He covered me, and when the people around me could not carry me, He started quietly arranging the ones who could.

It took me most of my life to be able to say that without flinching. I spent years nitpicking myself — every flaw, every failure, every thing I had done and everything that had been done to me — as if a life could be argued out of its worth. I am learning, even now, a better way: loving myself and accepting myself the way I believe God does. Not because the hard parts were good. They were not good. But because the little girl in the sink was wonderfully made, and so was the woman she became, and the same hands that covered her then are covering her now. If you are reading this with a beginning anything like mine — born into somebody else's storm, marked early by other people's pain — hear me: your beginning explains a lot,

but it does not get the final word. Mine didn't. Yours won't either.

Because here is what happened when I was about three years old: I went to live with Dorothy and Mike Black, in Golden Valley, Minnesota, on Manor Drive. I walked to the park a lot from that house, and hung out with the neighborhood kids I went to school with — the first ordinary days of my life, and I remember them as good.

A three-year-old does not choose any of that. She does not pack a bag or sign a form or understand why the house is changing. Adults decided — because adults had to — and a little girl in the middle of her own small life was carried from one world into another. I have made my peace with how that happened, and I have made it the same way I have made peace with most of my story: I would not change anything about my life, because then I wouldn't be who I am. That house I was carried into would give me some of the best years of my childhood. The woman in it would become one of the great loves of my life. And I did not know it yet, but I was about to learn what a solid home felt like — and to meet a woman who would tell me, over and over, that one day I should write a book.



Me at about three, with my mom — she was about twenty.

A Poem for This Chapter

These are the days, these are the years where we are formed —
before we know a thing is forming.
A mother of seventeen, already drowning,
held me as long as she could.
Three surgeries on a baby's foot:
a cast, and baths in the kitchen sink,
so that one day I would walk.
I didn't know then that walking
would be the whole story of my life —
carried first, then crawling back,
then standing, held up by hands I couldn't see.

CHAPTER 2

The Seimon Girl

"For thou art my hope, O Lord GOD: thou art my trust from my youth." — Psalm 71:5 (KJV)

When I was about three years old, I went to live with Dorothy and Mike Black.

If you only remember two names from this chapter, remember theirs. Dorothy and Mike were my foster parents, and I will spend the rest of my life being grateful that God put me in their house. They are both gone now — Mike passed about thirty years ago, around the time my oldest daughter was born, and Dorothy only a few short years ago. I still feel the pain of losing her every single day. She had a huge impact on my life and on who I am today.

And Dorothy always told me I should write a book. So here I am, doing it now. I just wish she could be here to read it. Hopefully she is watching over me from heaven, happy that I finally decided to do this.

The Black house was a solid home. We had real meals. We celebrated holidays, all of them, like they mattered — because

to Dorothy and Mike, they did. I was allowed to be artistic, to express myself, to be me. It was an encouraging, inspiring place to be a kid: the kind of house where a little girl's efforts got noticed, and her imagination got room. I helped Dorothy wrap presents. I helped Mike with his art projects — Mike was a photographer, which is why there are tons of pictures of me growing up, pictures of me painting things, pictures of a little girl who was clearly, thoroughly loved. I have come to believe those photographs are one of the great gifts of my childhood. Plenty of children in foster care grow up with no proof of their early years at all. I have a childhood I can hold in my hands. Mike's camera saw to that — a man quietly documenting a foster daughter's life like it was worth documenting, because to him, it was. They gave me more love than I could have ever asked for, and they made sure I felt good about who I was.

I was not the only child Dorothy and Mike had taken in. They had adopted two babies before me, from two different families: Marty, and Holly, who was older than Marty by some years. But they were not children in that house alongside me — Marty was seventeen years older than I was, already a grown man, and in those years he was off running around with my own mother, in the drug life she was living. He would end up on drugs and in a life of crime — the same road I would eventually follow myself, a different substance but pretty much the same life. I did not understand any of that then. Marty was just a grown man who came and went, part of a grown-up world I had no map for. Only later could I see the shape of it: the same thief that had taken my mother out of my childhood had taken Dorothy and Mike's son too, and it

would come for me in my turn. Addiction does not respect a good house. But here is the other side of that coin, and it matters just as much: a good house is not wasted, even on a child who later loses her way. What Dorothy and Mike built into me in those years went underground during the worst of my life, but it did not die. Seeds don't die in winter. They wait. Holly was already out of the house by then too.

Marty was not the exception in my family. He was closer to the rule.

I always called him uncle Marty. He was my foster brother — Dorothy and Mike's adopted son — but "uncle" was the name that fit the place he held in my little world: a grown man who came and went with the weather of the drug life. What I did not know as a child, and only learned in pieces later, is that Marty had been fighting heroin since he was fifteen years old. Fifteen. He fought it, on and off, for the rest of his life — he was still fighting it until shortly before he died. When I picture the road I later walked, I have to picture his footprints already on it, years ahead of mine.

And it was not just Marty, and it was not just my mother. My biological father was an alcoholic. My stepdad, Ed, had his own struggles with addiction in those years — and so did a lot of his family, people who were not related to me by blood but who were simply my family, because I grew up with them and theirs were the faces around me. On my mom's side, a couple of her brothers had problems with addiction too. It was everywhere in the world I came from: in the houses I lived in, in the blood I carry, in the family I was handed. Addiction was the climate of my childhood long before it was ever the storm

of my own life.

I do not tell you that to make excuses for the woman I became. I had my own choices, and I made them, and the later chapters of this book will not flinch from them. I tell you because a child does not choose the air she grows up breathing — and because when people ask how addiction got such a hold on me, the honest answer starts long before I ever picked anything up. It starts with a family tree whose branches were bent by it on every side.

Some of my happiest small memories belong to Holly.

When I was little — four, five, maybe six years old — my foster sister would pick me up and take me to her bowling alley in Sauk Centre. She would sit me right up at the bar and order me a Shirley Temple, and I thought I was the coolest little girl in the world, perched up there with my fancy drink and its cherries. They tasted so good. To this day, a cherry in a glass can take me straight back to that counter.

Holly spoiled me every way she knew how. She dressed me up in pretty, fluffy, ruffly dresses, with ruffle-butt underwear and tights underneath — cute as could be. She treated me like her own little doll, and I loved every minute of it. That is what a big sister's love looked like in our house: dresses, cherries, and being shown off like I was somebody precious.

Holly passed away last year — suddenly, unexpectedly — while I was still new in recovery. Losing her was hard in a way I am still learning how to carry. But grief has not taken those afternoons from me. When I picture her now, I do not picture goodbye. I picture a little girl in a ruffly dress, up at the bar with her Shirley Temple, feeling pretty cool — and a big sister

smiling at her like she was the best thing in the room.

Our neighbors were Jim and Rose Abendroth, and their basement was a child's paradise, full of toys. Rose had cats, and she had a beautiful garden I loved to watch her work in, the way I watched Dorothy in hers. Rose made rhubarb pie, which I never did try — I always thought it sounded gross. Dorothy's garden was full of beautiful flowers. She always loved baby's breath; I remember that — and it is my favorite flower to this day. And she grew chives, which I would take by the handful and eat. I cannot even imagine how bad my breath smelled. They still loved me.

Gardens have stayed with me my whole life because of those two women. There is something about a woman working in dirt she has tended for years — patient, unhurried, believing in things she planted that she cannot yet see — that preaches to me now. Dorothy was growing more than flowers in that yard. She was growing a little girl the same way: with steady hands, on purpose, in the faith that what she planted would bloom in its season. Some of it took forty years to come up. She would not be surprised. Gardeners never are.

School, in those years, was easy and happy. I got good grades. I never got in trouble. I was a loved child in a stable home, and it showed.

I want to stop here a moment, before the story turns, and say plainly what those years were: they were my first proof that a home can be a foundation. I did not have the words for it then, but my little life stood on something solid, and I thrived the way children do when the ground under them holds. Decades later, after I had lived on every kind of crumbling

ground there is, I would come back to this memory when I started dreaming about a home for women in recovery — a place where a woman who has completed treatment can land on stable ground and rebuild her life. I knew what to build, because Dorothy and Mike had built it around me first. Four pillars. Stable ground. New life. The motto came much later. The meaning of it, I learned in their house.

Then, when I was about eight years old, my mother took me back to live with her.

She and my stepdad, Ed, were still using drugs, and that would continue for about the next four years. In those years I was used to being able to run and do whatever I wanted, because my parents were getting high and were not paying much attention to what I was doing. Then they got into a solid church. They got saved. They got sober. And everything changed: life got strict. I was not allowed to run and do the things I had once done, and at the time I thought they were being horrible parents.

Now I know better. They could finally see clearly — they could see the dangers that were out there, and they did not want anything bad to happen to me. I complained about chores and dishes; I cried about them and threw fits. But at forty-nine years old, I am grateful my parents taught me those things. They taught me respect. They taught me manners. They taught me rules, and how to take care of my own place, and how to be independent. I spent so much time angry and bitter at them for it. As an adult I am just grateful they cared enough to teach me. There is a lesson in that I hand to people in recovery now, because I lived both sides of it: the rules that

feel like punishment to a child can be the very shape that love takes when parents finally get their sight back. My parents did not tighten the rules because they had stopped loving me. They tightened them because, sober at last, they could see exactly how much they stood to lose.

And Ed — Ed has been in my life since I was about five years old, and when I was fourteen he adopted me, legally, in every way that counts. I do not usually tell people he is my stepdad, because it does not really matter: he is my dad. He is the one who has been a father to me.

I was seven when my sister was born. Ramona Ruth — we called her Peach Fuzz, because she had little wispy strawberry-blonde hair, just the cutest little sweet pea you could ever imagine. I was excited to be a big sister. Remember her name, and remember that nickname. That wisp of a baby would grow up into the sister whose face was the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes in 2025 — Mona, standing over my hospital bed, proof that God had been braiding my beginning and my second beginning together all along. Then came Eddie — Edward Remon Junior, born in the fall of 1987, the year the Twins won the World Series. He even came home from the hospital with a Homer Hanky. After Eddie came Remington, and then John, and our family kept growing the way families do.

Around us as we grew was a wider family, too — mostly my dad Ed's family and my mom's. My grandma Sharon. My aunt Barb and my aunt Allison. My uncles Steve and Vince. And far away in Kansas, my great-grandparents — Grandma Hann and Grandpa Hann, as we called them — who made the

best biscuits and gravy I have ever had in my life. I did not get to know all of these people the way a child in one unbroken home might have. My childhood came in pieces, in different houses, and some of my family I know best as bright fragments: a basement full of toys, a garden, a plate of biscuits and gravy in Kansas. But fragments are not nothing. Put together, they are the people who were there — the cloud of family around a little girl whose life could have been completely unrooted, and wasn't.

In February of 1989, in the middle of all of it, a twelve-year-old girl knelt down and asked Jesus into her heart. That was me. I prayed, and I meant it. The Bible has a way of describing what happened to me that day that I did not learn until much later: *old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.* I did not know then what that date would come to mean. I would not understand it for thirty-six years — until another February 5th, in a hospital room, opening my eyes to my sister's face, and realizing that God had been keeping that appointment the whole time. He had my trust from my youth, just like the verse at the top of this chapter says.

I wish I could tell you that the girl who knelt down that day walked straight and steady from then on. The next chapter will not let me tell you that. What I can tell you — what it took me almost four decades to learn — is that when I walked away from God, He did not walk away from me. I was the one who left. He stayed. Through every year this book is about to walk you through, He stayed: in detention cells and delivery rooms, in bars and courtrooms and a coma, keeping a date a

twelve-year-old girl made with Him on her knees. A child cannot understand a love like that. She just receives it, the way she received Dorothy's meals and Mike's photographs and Holly's dresses — as a gift she did not earn, from hands that loved her before she knew how to ask. It started here. Everything else in my life, the falling and the rising both, happened in the light of it.



My brother John in front, our grandpa on my mom's side, and Remington in the back — when the boys were little.



Me, reading with Dorothy.



Dorothy, painted when she was young.

A Poem for This Chapter

At Dorothy's table I learned what home tastes like.
Baby's breath in her garden,
chives eaten straight from the dirt by the handful,
presents I helped her wrap, a camera always finding me.
Holly sat me up at the bar with a Shirley Temple, extra cherries,
and dolled me up in ruffles like I was somebody's treasure.
And one February night I knelt down, twelve years old,
and asked Jesus into my heart.
I did not know that date would come back for me —
February 5th, written on my life twice.

CHAPTER 3

Best Friends and Teen Years

"Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up." — Ecclesiastes 4:9–10 (KJV)

Through sixth grade, I was the kid teachers point to. Good grades. Good behavior awards. Never in trouble. If you had shown my sixth-grade teachers a picture of my seventh-grade year, they would not have believed it was the same girl.

Seventh grade meant a new school, and a new school meant starting over with nobody. The friends I had grown up with in grade school were not there. And when you are twelve or thirteen and aching to belong somewhere, the crowd that opens its arms to you matters more than almost anything. The crowd that accepted me skipped school, smoked weed, and drank. I want to be careful here, because it would be easy to blame those kids, and it would not be honest. They did not

drag me anywhere. I was a shy girl carrying more pain than I had words for, and that crowd offered me the two things I wanted most: a place to belong, and a way to not feel what I felt. I walked in with my eyes open and my heart hungry. That combination will take a young person almost anywhere.

Right away, that was my life. I remember sitting in class drinking alcohol with a friend of mine named Shannon. We got called to the office because we smelled like liquor, and we got suspended. At home I hid everything I could, because I knew a whooping waited if my parents found out — and I never did like getting whoopings.

But I need to back up, because the drinking did not start in that classroom. It started when I was thirteen, at April Anason's house, with brandy and Kool-Aid — my first drunk. I was hooked, and I want to tell you plainly what hooked me, because it was not the taste. Alcohol let me escape: the pain, the memories, the trauma, the abandonment I carried around and could not name. It gave a shy girl confidence she did not have on her own. For a kid who felt too much and belonged nowhere, a drink was a door out of her own skin. Of course I kept walking through it. I drank all through my teens, and it caused me problems I could not count then and can barely count now.

The weed came with the crowd. It was never a good experience for me — it made me paranoid, and I would black out, and still I smoked it, because acceptance mattered more to me than how I felt. There was acid at thirteen and fourteen. I huffed rubber cement. I started smoking cigarettes at thirteen, too — a habit I would carry for about thirty-five years, all the

way until February 2026, when a rebuilt woman finally put them down for good. Looking back, the substances were almost beside the point. I was a girl trying on every escape hatch she could find, and each one worked just long enough to make the next one easier to try.

But hiding it all did not slow it down. I kept skipping school. I kept smoking weed. I had boyfriends. And then I ran away from home, which meant I was not in school at all. They could not put out a warrant for me for running away, but they could — and did — put out warrants for truancy. Between the ages of thirteen and fifteen, I was in the juvenile detention center a total of thirteen times.

Thirteen times. I want you to sit with that number the way I have had to. That is not a statistic; that is a little girl sleeping in a cell over and over while everyone who loved her wondered where the good-grades girl had gone.

Here is what I understand now that I could not have understood then: detention could punish the running, but it could not heal what I was running from. Every adult in that system could see the behavior. Almost nobody could see the pain underneath it — the abandonment, the trauma, the shyness, the things I will tell you about before this chapter ends. I am not angry at them for it. Most of them were doing their jobs the only way they knew how. But I carry it as a lesson into every room I work in today: behavior is a language. A kid in a cell thirteen times is saying something, in the only words she has. Somebody has to learn to listen for what the behavior is saying, or the cell just becomes a revolving door — and I ought to know, because for three years it was mine.

Somewhere in those same years — from the time I was thirteen — there was one steady person: Jesse, my best friend. We met when I was thirteen, and he has been my friend ever since — the kind of friend you love like a brother, because that is what he became. In a season when almost every hand I reached for pulled me further down, Jesse's friendship was one of the few things that was simply good. Hold on to his name. He will be standing beside a hospital bed one day, in a chapter neither of us could have imagined.

From detention I was sent to a correctional boot camp called Saint Croix Camp. It was a three-month program. I ran away right before I was supposed to graduate — so I got to start the whole program over, and my three months became six.

And here is the strange mercy of my story: I am glad I ran. If I had graduated the first time, my expedition would have been a hike in the Black Hills. Because I started over, I got sent to Atikokan, in Canada, on a canoe expedition — lake after lake of water so crystal clear you could see all the way to the bottom, like they were filled with fresh spring water. Canoeing was not so bad. Portaging the canoe — carrying it overland between lakes — was brutal work, and I was pretty small at the time. But I came out of there stronger than I had ever been in my life.

Saint Croix taught me things I still carry. We learned sign language. We learned to mow lawns and bale hay and clean out horse stalls. We did a thing called solo, where we stayed out in the woods for two nights and three days with only the survival skills they had taught us: build your own shelter, start

your own fire, cook your own food. I remember writing a long letter to my mom then, apologizing. I was scared. It may have been the first honest letter I ever wrote. There is something about being alone in the woods with nothing but what you can build and cook and carry that strips a person down to the truth. I had been running from everybody, including myself. In the woods, there was nobody left to run from. It didn't fix me — I had a long way still to fall — but it proved something to me that my later life would need: I was stronger than I knew, and I could survive being alone with myself. I just had to learn it the hard way, more than once.

After camp came a group home up north in Effie, Minnesota, for nine months, and Bigfork High School. When I got out, I was basically emancipated — the judge said I could live on my own at sixteen. There were programs in Minneapolis that helped me get my driver's license and my GED, and a job as an intern at the Hennepin County Government Center, in Vital Records. I learned a lot there. I was sixteen years old, on my own, with a GED and a government internship, and I had come through detention and boot camp and a group home to get there.

From the outside, you could almost tell it as a success story: the runaway who straightened out, earned her GED, and landed a government internship before she was old enough to vote. And I want to honor that, because the people in those programs helped me, and the strength Saint Croix built in me was real. But a paper recovery is not the same as a healed heart. Underneath the license and the GED and the good report, the unhealed things were still exactly where I had left them — still

loaded, still driving. A girl can fix her circumstances and still be broken in the places circumstances can't reach. I know, because I was about to spend years proving it.

There is one more thing I have to tell you about these years, and I have prayed about how to tell it, because it belongs underneath so much of what came after.

When I was a child, I was sexually abused by a man named Ronnie — the brother of Sharon Binkley, a friend of my mother's; Ronnie was her friend too. It happened on trips up to their cabin. I am not going to write the details here; they are not the point, and they are not something I will put on display. But I will not leave it out either, because leaving it out would leave a hole in the truth of my life. Growing up, I used to wonder why I knew so much about sex — things a child should not know. As an adult, I saw a picture of how he looked back then, and it all came flooding back. For a moment, I was angry at my mom — how could she let me go somewhere with people who could hurt me? The anger did not last, and God has healed a lot of that hurt and helped me forgive, which I will say more about in this book. But I can see now what it set in motion: I lost my virginity young, and I spent years looking for attention, acceptance, and love through sex — trying to get from people what had been taken from me, in the only currency I had been taught I had.

I tell you that not for pity. I tell you because somebody reading this book is carrying a version of that same secret, and has been carrying it alone for years, and I need her to know: it was not your fault, it does not get to write the rest of your story, and those wounds can heal. Mine are healing. It took

time, and it took God, and it took finally telling the truth out loud. But they can heal.

The verse at the top of this chapter talks about two being better than one — because when one falls, the other lifts him up. I fell a lot in these years. I fell so often, and so publicly, that the falling became my reputation: the runaway, the truant, the girl in the cell. What the reputation leaves out is the lifting. My parents, newly sober, kept setting rules I hated because they were trying to lift me back onto ground they had only just found themselves. And Jesse — Jesse just stayed. Through the crowd and the cells and the camp and all of it, he stayed my friend. Woe to the one who is alone when he falls, the verse says. I was reckless, and I was wounded, and I was running as hard as I could — but I was never, not once, completely alone. God kept putting a fellow beside me. It would be years before I learned to stop running long enough to be lifted. But the hands were there the whole time. One pair of them belonged to a boy I met at thirteen, who turned out to be a lifter of the fallen for life.

So that was the girl who turned sixteen, legally on her own, diploma-equivalent in hand, standing at the edge of her adult life: saved at twelve and running hard in the other direction; strong enough to survive the woods and too hurt to survive her own heart; with a best friend who would outlast nearly everything, and a road ahead that would test us both. I did not know any of that. I just knew I was free, and grown, and ready. God help me, I had no idea what ready meant.

A Poem for This Chapter

Thirteen, and already running.
Detention thirteen times over;
brandy and Kool-Aid burning a shy girl brave.
They sent me into the woods to teach me:
two nights alone, my own shelter, my own fire —
and I came out stronger than I'd ever been.
Lakes in Canada so clear you could see straight to the bottom;
I could see everything except where I was headed.
But one thing from those years never ran:
a boy named Jesse, my friend since thirteen,
who has been lifting me up ever since.

CHAPTER 4

Wife, Mom, Holding On

"Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward." — Psalm 127:3 (KJV)

By the time I was sixteen, I had already lived more life than some people live in thirty years. I had survived being taken from my mother, being loved back to life by Dorothy and Mike, being handed back again. I had run away, sat in detention cells, walked out of a boot camp stronger than I had ever been, lived in a group home, and been set loose by a judge to make it on my own. I had a GED, a driver's license, and an internship at the Hennepin County Government Center, in Vital Records, where I learned a great deal. I had every reason to believe the hardest chapters were behind me.

They were not. I was about to become a mother — and I was about to learn that becoming a mother and being ready to be one are two very different things.

I met Jeromy when I was about sixteen. He is Kayla's father. I want to tell this part plainly, the way I have promised myself I would tell everything in this book, because shame

grows in the dark and dies in the light. That relationship was abusive. Jeromy would hit me. He was a lot bigger than I was, and I was scared of him — scared in the way that changes how you move through your own house, how you choose your words, how you breathe. And I resented him. I resented him for hitting me and for treating me the way he did, and resentment and fear are a heavy pair of chains to wear while you are trying to start a life.

We were together about two and a half years. In the middle of it, on December 5, 1994, my daughter Kayla was born. I was seventeen years old — a child holding a child. Whatever else that season was, she was the good in it. She was mine, and I loved her with everything a scared seventeen-year-old heart had.

When Kayla was around one year old, Jeromy and I broke up. I was glad when it finally ended — I will not pretend otherwise — but what came next has hurt my heart ever since. He took Kayla to Florida to live with him. My baby girl went to the other end of the country, and over the years that followed, I did not have much contact with her. I did not get to watch her grow up the way a mother is supposed to. I missed the years. That still hurts my heart, and I do not expect it ever to stop hurting entirely.

But hear me on this, because it is one of the truest things in this book: I have not given up on her. I have not given up on us. I know a relationship can be rebuilt, because I have watched God rebuild one already — my daughter Breanna's relationship with me was strained for years, and He has mended it. What He did there, He can do anywhere. So I keep

hoping, and I keep praying, and I keep the door open. That is what mothers do. That is what faith does.

Then I met Clint.

When I met Clint, I was absolutely head over heels in love. He was the most gorgeous man I had ever laid eyes on. He had my heart — all of it, from the very beginning. We married, and we stayed married for ten years, and we had two children together.

David was born on the Fourth of July, 1997 — ten pounds and a quarter of an ounce, twenty-two inches long. A big baby. My belly was enormous with him, and when he finally arrived, on Independence Day of all days, he was worth every inch of it. I was twenty years old, and I remember thinking that a boy born on the Fourth of July was born to be free and loud and celebrated.

David was only four weeks old when I became pregnant with Breanna.

Four weeks. I want you to sit with that for a moment the way I have had to. I had a newborn in my arms, a body that had barely begun to recover, a marriage that was already rocky, and a life that was about to get harder in ways I could not yet see. Breanna was born on May 8, 1998 — eight pounds, my beautiful girl. And at her birth, I hemorrhaged. The bleeding was serious enough that I was told it was probably smart not to have any more children after her. I was not ready to have another baby. I was having a hard time — a harder time than I could say out loud to anyone. Some of what follows this chapter is the sound of a woman who was drowning quietly, in plain sight, with a baby on each hip.

Because here is the truth about those years: our marriage was very rocky. I did not trust Clint, and I believe he lied to me a lot. He cheated. And I cheated — I will not write a book about honesty and then leave my own name off the list. We were not treating each other right. We were doing bad things to each other, and I resented him for his part in it. I gained a lot of weight in those years and did not feel good about myself, and in the middle of my not feeling good about myself, he told me no one would ever want me. That sentence lived in my head for a long time. It also ended up not being true — but at the time, I believed it, and a woman who believes she is unwanted does not fight very hard for her own life.

I will say this too, because it is just as true: I feel bad for all the hurt I put him through. I was not very nice either. Forgiveness, when it finally came to my life, did not come with a scorecard. I do not get to hold his sins against him and call mine by softer names. God did not let me do that, and this book will not do it either.

Underneath all of it, I had a drinking problem. I know I did, for sure. I would drink all the time — trying to drown out the pain, trying to escape from the pain. That is what alcohol was for me from the time I was thirteen years old: an escape hatch. From pain. From memories. From trauma and abandonment and my own crushing shyness. In the Clint years, the escape hatch became a daily door I walked through, and every time I walked through it, I left my children on the other side of it.

My kids suffered. I am not going to dress that up. They did not get the mom they should have had — the mom who

should have been present and available, helping them with things, being by their side, reading the bedtime stories, helping with the homework, just sitting down and being there. I was absent a lot. I would take off and go to the bar. To this day, the hardest thing I struggle with is wishing I had been a better mom. I wish I could go back. I cannot. That time is gone, and no amount of guilt will buy one hour of it back. What I can do — what I am doing — is be here now: available, present, proof in the flesh that a person can change. Our relationships are better now. I hold on to that like a rope.

And in the middle of that same season, I was fighting for my freedom, too — because the law had caught up with me. From about the time I was nineteen and pregnant with David, I was fighting three felony cases at once: a burglary case in Ramsey County, a felony credit-card case in Hennepin County, and a burglary case in Anoka County. I was convicted of all three. By the time I actually served the time — about two months in the Anoka County workhouse, then about two months of house arrest — David was already born and I was pregnant with Breanna. Think about that picture, because I have thought about it plenty: a young mother with a newborn at home, doing workhouse time, then coming home to a house-arrest monitor — and then going into labor with her daughter still wearing that ankle monitor, lying in a hospital trying to get it cut off her ankle so she could give birth.

That was my life. Wife. Mom. Felon. All at the same time, all before I was old enough to rent a car.

Before I close this chapter, there is something else from those years that I need to tell you, gently and truthfully, because this book hides nothing and because somebody reading it needs to know she is not the only one.

Right before I became pregnant with David, I put myself in a bad situation with a friend, and I was raped by two men. I did what we tell women to do: I tried to stand up for myself. I tried to go through the court hearings. And his family threatened me and frightened me, and I backed off. I carried that for decades. About two years ago, a detective from Hennepin County reached out to ask if I wanted to pursue retrying the case. I said no. I was still using drugs at the time, and I remembered how much it had affected me the first time, and I was not ready to go through it again. I am at peace with that decision. I tell it here for one reason: so that the woman reading this who backed off, or never reported, or was not believed, knows that her story does not disqualify her from healing. It never did.

And I need to tell you about a waiting room, because it changed everything.

Pregnant with Breanna, overwhelmed and not ready, I made an appointment at an abortion clinic. Clint dropped me off. I will never forget the look on his face — he was very sad. He did not want me to do it, but I had my mind made up. I went inside. I went through all of the tests. I was ready to have the procedure done. I was sitting in the waiting room when I decided to go down and have a cigarette. And down there, having that cigarette, something in me told me to walk away and not do it. So I listened to that voice. And I walked away.

Clint was very happy that I did not go through with it. And to this day, so am I. I cannot imagine my life or my world without Breanna — or any of my kids, for that matter. I love them more than anything. They are my whole world. Sometimes I feel like the reason my heart beats is because they exist in my world.

I will tell you the whole truth here, because partial truth is just a lie with better manners: that waiting room was not the only one. In total, I had eleven abortions in my life. The first was with one of Jeromy's children, after Kayla. The others were during my ten years with Clint. One of those pregnancies was twins. That is another thing I carry a lot of guilt about. I know it was wrong. Every time, that decision killed me a little. It broke a piece of me. It made my heart ache, because those are children that should have been born. I finally chose a better form of birth control so that I would never again be put in the position to make that decision — because I did not want to lose another piece of myself that way.

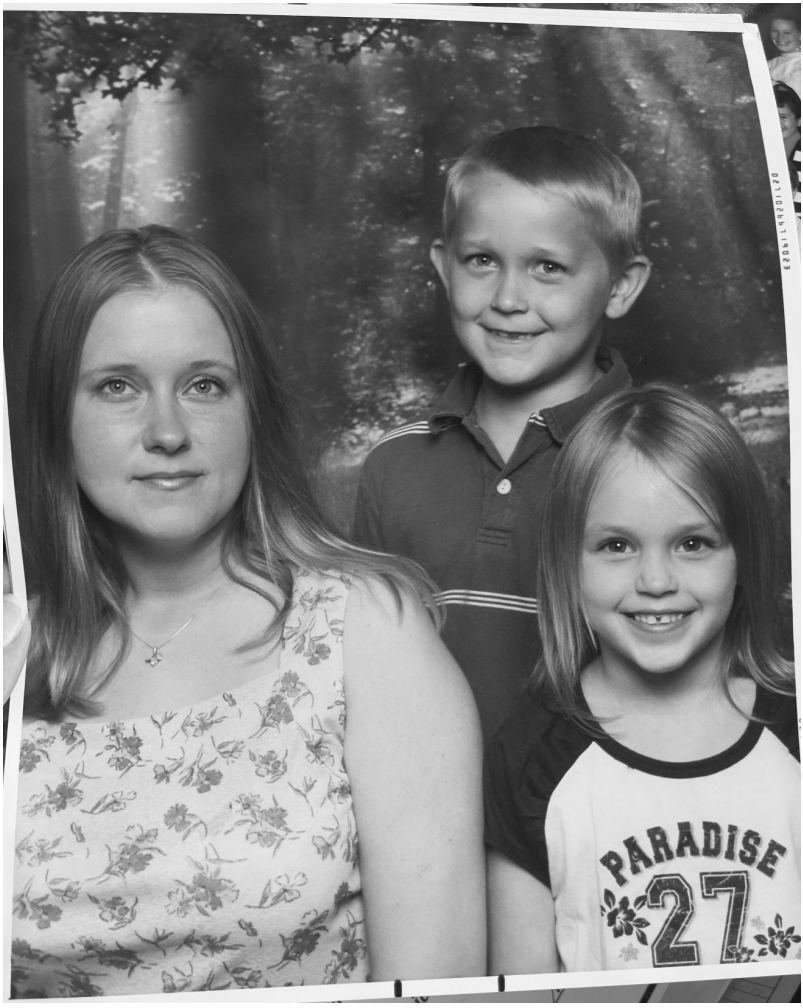
Here is where I have landed with God about it, and I will say it in my own words: that is between me and God. I have prayed for forgiveness, and I believe He has forgiven me. It does not change the fact that I did it. What it changes is everything about how I stand next to the woman who is where I was. I know the pain of being pregnant and scared and not ready, not knowing how you would possibly be able to do it. I know it from the inside. So if that is you — if you are sitting in a waiting room, in every sense of that word — I am not here to shame you. Shame never saved anybody. I am here to say: I know that room. Listen for the voice. And know that there is a

life on the other side of walking out of it that you cannot imagine yet, because I am living it.

I was holding on in those years — to a marriage, to my babies, to a life that kept slipping through my hands like water. I did not know it then, but holding on was about to become letting go. And letting go, for me, was about to take a long, long time.



David and Breanna, when they were little.



Me, with David and Breanna.



David and Breanna.



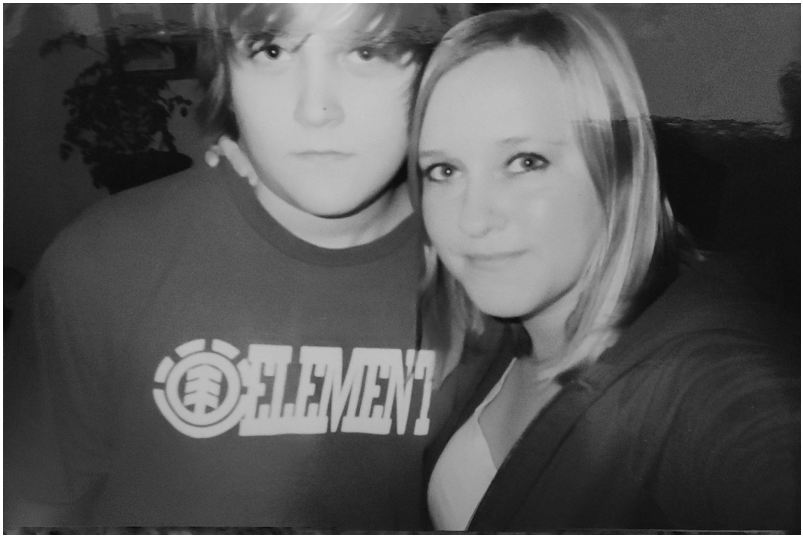
David, playing high school football in Fridley.



Kayla and David.



David and Breanna.



Me, with David.



Me, holding David.



Me, with David and Breanna.



Clint, holding baby David.



My 'Momma' tattoo — David's and Breanna's names, under the cherubs.

A Poem for This Chapter

I held my babies before I knew how to hold my own life.
Kayla at seventeen — a child holding a child.
A monitor on my ankle in the delivery room;
a hemorrhage; a heart that beat, I swear,
because they existed in my world.
Once, in a clinic waiting room, something in me said *walk away* —
and I walked, and my daughter is here because I listened.
But the stories I never read, the nights I wasn't there —
gifts where my presence should have been.
I can't get those years back.
I can only show up now, every day, and stay.

CHAPTER 5

Walking Away

"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." — Isaiah 53:6 (KJV)

I got divorced when I was twenty-nine years old.

The same year, my parents went through their divorce too.

It was a pretty rough year. A pretty rocky year. There was a lot going on at once, for everybody — and I have learned that pain does not like to travel alone. It brings its whole family. A marriage ending in one house, a marriage ending in another, children watching the ground shift under both. 2006 was the year the map of my family got redrawn, and none of us got to hold the pen.

I want to be careful here, and I want to be fair, because this chapter is not an indictment. Ten years of marriage do not fit into a paragraph of blame, and even if they did, I would not write that paragraph. I told you in the last chapter what those years were: no trust, lies, cheating on both sides, two people not treating each other right. I told you I gained weight and

felt bad about myself and believed, for a while, that no one would ever want me. I told you I drank to escape the pain. All of that is true. And so is this: when the marriage ended, I did not walk away from a villain. I walked away from a man I had loved head over heels — the most gorgeous man I had ever laid eyes on, the father of my son and my daughter — and the walking away broke something in me even though the staying was breaking things too.

That is the thing nobody tells you about divorce. You can be sure, and still grieve. You can know it has to end, and still hear the door close in your sleep for years.

Divorce rearranges children, too, and I will not skip that part. When I think about what my kids went through in those years, the leaving is what I carry. I left. I did not see them the way a mother should see her children — not enough, not present, not there. And for a long time I tried to fill the holes my absence made with gifts and material things, as if a present could stand in for a presence. It cannot. Children do not keep the toys; they keep the empty chair. I know that now in a way I cannot unknow. It is still one of the hardest things I struggle with — wishing I would have been a better mom, wishing I could go back and be the one who was simply, reliably *there*. I cannot go back. But the reason this book exists is that going back is not the only direction a life can move. I am here now. I am available now. I am present now, and our relationships are better for it, and every day of it is a day I do not take for granted.

And my parents' divorce — I want to say something about that too, because it belongs in this year of endings. My mother

and my dad, Ed — the man who came into my life when I was about five and adopted me when I was fourteen, the man who *is* my dad in every way that matters — their marriage ended the same year mine did. This was the couple who had gotten saved together, gotten sober together, rebuilt a strict and steady home together. I had spent my teenage years resenting their rules and their church and their watchfulness, and my adult years becoming grateful for all of it. Watching their marriage end while mine was ending felt like the ground giving way twice. Two households. Two families splitting their furniture and their holidays and their futures. I do not write about their divorce to tell their story — their story is theirs. I write it because 2006 taught me something I have never forgotten: nobody's healing is finished just because it started. People can be saved and sober and still break. And people can break, and still be loved, and still be family. My mom and dad are family to me to this day. All of it — the strict years, the grateful years, the broken year — is part of one long story, and I am in no position to throw away any of the pages.

So there I was: twenty-nine years old, divorced, three children, a felony record, a drinking history, and a whole lot of years behind me that I could not undo. If you had asked me then what came next, I would not have had an answer. I did not have a plan. I had momentum, and momentum is not a plan — it is just the direction you are already rolling.

I have had twenty years now to think about Clint, and I want to tell you where I have landed, because it did not come easy and it did not come fast.

To this day, I care deeply about Clint. He means a lot to me. I will always love him, and he will always be family. That is not a sentence I say to sound gracious. It is a sentence I say because it is true, and because I have decided that the truth gets the last word in my life, not the bitterness.

And here is the part that breaks my heart now: I watch him struggle with the same struggles I had with addiction. I have watched him lose everything to it — the same disease, the same thief, the same long taking. There was a time in my life when watching an ex-husband fall might have felt like a score settling itself. That time is gone. What I feel now is grief. I know exactly where he is standing, because I stood there. I know what the floor of that pit feels like under your feet. And I just hope and pray that he will find his way — that God will find him, pick him up, and bring him back close to God, the way He did for me.

I do not hope bad things for the people from my hardest chapters. I pray for them. I want good for them. That is what forgiveness learned to look like in my life — not pretending it did not hurt, because it did; not pretending people were who they were not, because they were; but refusing to carry the resentment one more mile. Resentment is a heavy thing to haul through a life. God healed a lot of the hurt in me and helped me forgive, and forgiveness turned out to be less about setting other people free and more about setting down a weight I was never built to carry.

You can forgive a person and still know they cannot be part of your life. You can pray for somebody every day and never sit at a table with them again. Those two things are not enemies.

For me, they are the same road: I wish Clint well, I pray for his rescue, and I walk my own road — the one God rebuilt under my feet.

There is a philosophy I have come to live by, and this is the chapter where it belongs, because this is the chapter about the life I walked away from: I don't think I would change anything about my life. Not the addiction. Not the things that happened to me. Not the struggles I have had. Because if I changed them, I would not be who I am. To really understand people — to empathize, to put myself in someone else's shoes — it was necessary for me to go through the things I went through. They made me stronger. They taught me things. They made me not so quick to judge people, because everybody is in their own situation, with their own struggles and their own challenges. I have gotten a lot better at loving myself and accepting myself, instead of nitpicking every little thing.

I believe those wounds can heal. I do not mean they disappear — anybody who has lived knows better than that. I mean they can stop running your life. There is always a chance while we're alive. We can always change things. We can always build our relationship back with God and have that closeness with God that heals all wounds — and it gives us strength beyond our understanding, and peace beyond our understanding. I did not have that peace in 2006. I barely had a pulse on some days. But I am telling you from the far side of it: the woman who walked out of that marriage with nothing but momentum and a record was not walking alone, even when she was too hurt and too angry to know it. The

Shepherd does not lose sheep just because the sheep have wandered into a divorce court. He goes after them. It took me years to turn around and see that He had been coming after me the whole time.

I do not say that lightly, and I do not say it about anyone else's pain — only mine. I am not grateful for abuse, and I am not grateful for addiction, and I would not hand either one to another living soul. But I am grateful for who God built out of the rubble. There is a difference, and the difference matters. I can look at the whole road now — every wrong turn, every closed door, every waiting room — and see a road that led somewhere. That does not make the road good. It makes the God who walked it with me good.

Walking away, I have learned, is not one moment. It is a thousand of them. I walked away from that clinic waiting room, once, on a cigarette break, listening to a voice I could not name. I walked away from a marriage I had given ten years to. In the years after the divorce, I would find out how many more things there were to walk away from — and how hard it is to walk away from the one thing that has always promised to make the pain stop.

Because in 2006, what was in front of me was not yet freedom. What was in front of me was a woman divorced at twenty-nine, with three children, a felony record, and a drinking history — and a drug that was about to become the center of everything.

I had walked away from a marriage. I had not yet walked away from the thing that was killing me.

One last thing about that verse at the top of this chapter, because it took me years to hear the whole of it. *All we like sheep have gone astray* — that part I could have underlined in 2006. I knew about going astray. But the verse does not end there, and neither did I. *And the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.* The reason I can pray for Clint instead of cursing him, the reason I can own my own sins in these pages without hiding from them, is that every bit of it — his, mine, ours — was carried by Somebody else a long time ago. Forgiveness is not a feeling I manufactured out of being a nice person. It is a debt I know was paid, being passed along by a woman who is no longer willing to hold anybody else's account open — not even my ex-husband's. Not even my own.

That took another thirteen years. And it nearly finished the job first.

A Poem for This Chapter

Twenty-nine, and signing a different kind of papers.
The same year my parents' marriage ended, mine did too —
pain travels in families.
I didn't walk away from a villain.
I walked away from the most gorgeous man I'd ever seen,
the father of my son and my daughter,
and that door closed in my sleep for years.
We had both gone astray — stubborn sheep, lost.
Now I pray for him as he loses everything to the same disease,
because a debt that was paid for me isn't mine to collect.

CHAPTER 6

The Spiral

"Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin." — John 8:34 (KJV)

I quit a good job.

That is where this chapter honestly begins. People imagine addiction only moves into houses that are already falling down, but that is not true. Addiction will happily move into a working life — a good job, a paycheck, a woman holding it together by her fingernails — and pull it apart piece by piece, quietly, the way water gets into a foundation.

I was doing Valium, and other benzos along with it, along with meth, along with alcohol. Pills to come down, meth to go up, drinking the way I had been drinking since I was thirteen — to escape. Escape the pain. Escape the memories, the trauma, the abandonment. Escape the noise in my own head. If there was a door marked *out*, I took it, every time, no matter where it actually led.

But I have to tell you how that pile got built, because it did not come on me all at once, and it did not start the year my

marriage ended. For years after the divorce, the only drug in my life was the alcohol — the same drinking I had done since I was thirteen. I had never taken a narcotic pain pill. I had never touched a hard drug. People hear my story and assume the drugs were always there. They were not. The door opened later, and it opened with a prescription.

I was about thirty-three years old when I got an infection, and the doctors prescribed me pain medication — oxycodone, Vicodin, pills like that. Medicine, with my name on the bottle. And I got addicted to it so fast it still amazes me. A year, a year and a half, I was on those pills — and by the end of them, something in me had been woken up that did not go back to sleep.

After the pills came mephedrone — a drug they sold as "plant food," shipped in from China. And from there I started experimenting, the way you do once the first door is open and every door after it looks smaller: cocaine. Heroin. Bath salts. K2. I was looking for the one that would do what the pills had done, and then some.

Meth was the one that did it. I was about thirty-four, thirty-five years old when meth took hold of me, and it did not let go until I was forty-eight. Thirteen years. The pills opened the door. The experimenting walked me through it. And meth moved in and stayed.

Then my heart started acting up.

Even that did not stop me — not all of me. But it stopped parts of me, and I want to give those parts their due, because they were the first honest steps I took, even if I took them sideways. I quit drinking. My sobriety from alcohol held — it

has held for fourteen years now, and I do not say that as a boast; I say it as a woman who knows exactly what it cost and exactly Who carried me through the nights I wanted to go back. I quit the benzos, too. Two of the three chains came off.

The third one stayed. I continued to do meth for thirteen years.

Thirteen years. 2012 to 2025 — nearly a third of my life, handed over a year at a time to a drug I hated. And I did hate it, at first. In the beginning, I would write poems about my hatred for meth, about how evil I thought it was. I could see it clearly. I could name it. I wrote about it the way you write about an enemy you intend to beat.

And then I just let that evil consume me. I grew to be comfortable with it. I welcomed it. That is the sentence I have to write, and I will not soften it: I welcomed it. The drug I had written poems against became the thing I organized my life around. If you want to understand addiction, understand that — it does not always drag you away kicking and screaming. Sometimes you write poems about the monster, and then one day you realize you have been setting a place for it at your own table, and you cannot remember when that started.

Let me tell you who I became in those thirteen years. I became a liar. A thief. A manipulator. Someone who I did not know anymore — someone I disliked very strongly. The behaviors were not who I really was, but they were who I was being, day after day, year after year, and there is a particular kind of pain that comes from living against your own morals and beliefs. It hurts you. It affects you in a negative way that goes down to the bone. You know the truth about yourself —

you were raised to know it, some part of you never forgot it — and you watch yourself violate it anyway, and the gap between who you are and who you are being becomes the heaviest thing you carry. Heavier than the record. Heavier than the debt. You carry it into every room.

The decline was not dramatic. That is another lie people believe — that a life falls apart all at once, in one big crash you could point to. Mine eroded. I did not spend my money right. I would go gamble instead of paying my bills. I would leave myself in situations where I did not know what I was going to do — always struggling, always behind, always one shut-off notice from the dark. And then the power would get turned off, and I would be in the dark, literally, wondering how a woman with a job history and a GED and good sense had ended up sitting in a house with no lights.

I did not have money to buy food, so I would steal food. I did not care at that time what I needed; if I needed it, I would steal it. Hear how flat that sounds. That is how it felt — flat, ordinary, the new normal of a life in decline. Stealing became a chore, like laundry. You do not recognize the bottom while you are sliding toward it because the slide makes every new low feel like just another Tuesday.

I am fortunate that I did not end up in prison, because the things I did definitely should have had me there. I thought I was good at what I did, so I would not get caught. I ended up getting caught quite a few times. Arrogance is a poor lookout. The record grew: multiple theft charges. Felony theft tool charges. And behind those, from my younger years, the disorderly conduct charges and the assault charges from

fighting — because I was very violent, and very angry, back then. Pain makes some people quiet. It made me dangerous, including to myself. I was angry at my life, angry at my choices, angry at a world I felt had dealt me a bad hand — and anger, like everything else I could not face, got poured into the nearest available vessel, which was usually whoever was standing closest.

Before I go any further, I want to stop and look at the two chains that did come off, because they matter more than they might seem to in a chapter about the one that stayed. When my heart started acting up, I quit drinking, and I quit the benzos. A lot of people would call that a partial victory, and I have learned to call it something else: proof of life. Even at my most lost, some part of me was still responding to the truth. My body sent up a flare — *my heart is acting up* — and some part of me, the part the drugs never fully got, answered it. I could not yet quit the thing that was killing me slowest, but I quit the things that were killing me fastest, and I held those quits for fourteen years, through everything that followed. If you are reading this in the middle of your own partial victory — sober from one thing, still chained to another, ashamed that your freedom came in pieces — hear me: pieces are how it comes. God does not despise a partial obedience. He builds on it. The woman who could let go of alcohol and benzos was not a failure standing next to the woman still using meth. She was the same woman, and the free parts of her were the foothold the rest of her would one day climb from.

And the gambling deserves its own sentence, because it looks different from the outside than it felt from the inside.

Gambling was not greed. I was not in those places dreaming of riches. I was in them the way I was at the bar, the way I was in every escape hatch since I was thirteen: trying to be somewhere else, inside a noise loud enough to drown out my own head, chasing a feeling of *maybe this time something good happens to me* that my real life had stopped offering. The bills went unpaid while I fed that maybe. The power went off while I fed that maybe. Addiction is a many-roomed house, and every room charges rent.

There is another thing about those years that I need to say, because people who have never lived inside addiction do not understand it, and people who have lived inside it understand it so well they think they are the only ones. Living that life is traumatic in itself. Not just the things that happen to you — the people you encounter, the situations you put yourself in, the rooms you wake up in — but the slow trauma of being at war with yourself. Every day I knew the difference between right and wrong. I had been raised, twice over, by people who taught me better: Dorothy and Mike with their solid, loving home, and my mom and dad with their strict, sober, church-going one. The values were in me. They never left. And so every theft had an audience of one who knew exactly what it was. Every lie had a witness. That is why I say the gap was the heaviest thing I carried. A person who truly did not care would have had an easier time of it. I cared the whole way down. I just could not stop.

Long before I ever read it in a Bible, I was living proof of something the apostle Paul wrote two thousand years ago. Paul knew this war from the inside, and he wrote it down

plainer than anyone before or since: *"For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I." — Romans 7:15*

Read that again, slowly, because that is the chain I was wearing. What I *would* do — stay clean, pay the bill, tell the truth, be present for my children — that I did not do. What I *hated* — the using, the lying, the stealing, the woman in the mirror I could not stand to look at — that I did. Every day, for thirteen years. That was not a woman who lacked information; I knew better the whole way down. That was a woman at war with herself, losing the same battle on schedule. If you have ever sworn at eight in the morning that today would be different and found yourself using by noon, you do not need me to translate Romans 7 for you. You have a translation of your own, written in your own life. And here is what Paul's honesty means to me now: if the apostle knew that war, then the war was never proof that God had left me. A woman who had stopped fighting would not have grieved every loss. I grieved mine daily — and the grieving was proof that some part of me was still alive in there, still His, still fighting.

And time — I have to tell you about time. Thirteen years is most of a child's growing up. It is birthdays and school years and holidays, whole seasons of the people I loved, passing in a house I was not present in even when I was standing in it. Meth does not only steal your money and your health. It steals your *years*, and it does it so quietly that you do not notice the theft until you look back and find whole decades thinned out to a handful of memories, most of them ones you would give

anything to trade. When I count what those years cost, I do not start with the dollars. I start with the days. The days are the currency everything else is priced in.

Here is the strange arithmetic of it, though: the same thirteen years that took so much also taught me things I could not have learned any other way. I know what that life is from the inside now — not from a textbook, not from a sermon illustration, from the inside. I know what a person in that decline is actually thinking at 3 a.m. I know why she steals the food and skips the bill and writes the poems and uses anyway. And because I know, I cannot look down on her. Not ever. When God finally lifted me out, He did not hand me a platform to judge from. He handed me a memory, and a responsibility. You will see, later in this book, what He did with both.

I do not write any of this for shock. I write it because somebody reading this book is living in exactly that decline right now. You are doing the math of which bill to skip. You are telling yourself you are too smart to get caught. You are writing your own poems, in your own way, about how much you hate the thing you keep welcoming back. Friend, I was you. Every version of you. The one who quit the good job. The one who stole the food. The one who sat in the dark house. The one who hated what she saw in the mirror and used again anyway, because using was the only tool she had left.

Here is what is on the other side of that math: it does not stop on its own. Thirteen years taught me that. It did not taper off. It did not get bored with me and leave. It only stops when

something stops it — and in my case, what finally stopped it nearly killed me. That part of the story is coming. For now, hold on to the shape of this chapter, because it is the shape of the whole disease: a good job quit, a heart acting up, two chains off and one chain on, poems written against a drug and then a welcome mat put out for it, bills unpaid, power off, food stolen, charges stacking — a life narrowing down, year by year, to a smaller and smaller room.

The verse at the top of this chapter calls it what it is. *Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin.* I was a servant. I served that drug faithfully for thirteen years — showed up for it, sacrificed for it, lied for it, stole for it. Servants do not get to be surprised when the master takes everything. Mine took my money, my record, my credit, my health, my years with my children, and very nearly took my name off the list of the living.

Nearly. Keep that word. We are going to need it.



A Poem for This Chapter

In the beginning I wrote poems about it —
how I hated meth, how evil it was.
Then I let the evil move in.
Thirteen years I served it:
lied for it, stole for it, gambled the light bill for it,
stole food when there was nothing left to steal but food.
I became someone I didn't know,
someone I disliked very strongly.

A servant doesn't get to be surprised
when the master takes everything.
It took nearly everything.
Nearly — keep that word.

CHAPTER 7

Doors Closing

"I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it." — Revelation 3:8 (KJV)

A felony record does not just follow you. It goes ahead of you and locks doors before you arrive.

That is what I learned in the years when the spiral slowed enough for me to try, now and then, to climb out of it. I would try to get a job — denied. I would try to get housing — denied. Denied for all of them, over and over, the record arriving in the room before I did, answering questions I was never asked out loud. And every denial cost me more than the opportunity. I lost a lot of money on application fees — money I did not have, spent for the privilege of being told no. Rejection has a cover charge when you are poor, and I paid it again and again.

I would feel rejected. I would feel like: *why bother?* I had destroyed my life.

My credit told the same story in numbers. I had destroyed it, thoroughly and personally: every time I could get a credit

card, I would max it out and not pay it, so I racked up a lot of debt — a paper trail of promises I had made in better moments and broken in worse ones. Between the record ahead of me and the debt behind me, there did not seem to be any direction left that was not a wall.

I want to preach to that sentence — *why bother* — for a moment, because it is the sentence addiction most wants you to say. Addiction does not only want your money and your health. It wants your *bother*. It wants you to stop applying, stop asking, stop knocking, because a woman who stops knocking will eventually sit down in front of the closed doors and make a home there. Every denial felt like proof. Every lost application fee felt like the world grading my life and handing it back with an F on it.

But hear me: a closed door is not a verdict on your worth. It is information about a season. The door to that apartment was closed. The door to that job was closed. Those doors were real, and they were closed, and they were not the whole building. Seasons change — I did not know how to believe that then, so I will believe it out loud for the both of us now. Look at the verse standing at the top of this chapter. Men closed doors on me that I could not open. God was already setting one open that no man could shut. I just could not see it yet, because I was standing with my face pressed against the locked ones.

Let me stay with the housing for a moment, because of all the doors, that one cut the deepest. A home is not a luxury item in a life like mine was. It is the floor everything else stands on. Try to get clean without an address. Try to keep a job

without a shower, or sleep without a door that locks, or store your medications, or receive your mail, or prove to anyone — an employer, a court, a landlord — that you are a stable person who can be trusted with things. I knew all of that from the inside, and I would still fill out the application, and pay the fee I could not afford to lose, and wait for the answer I already knew. There is a special tiredness that comes from hoping on schedule like that — hoping just long enough to be denied, resting just long enough to hope again. It wears a person down to the nub. It wore me down.

And work — I want to be fair to the woman I was then, because she did try. The record made it difficult, not impossible in theory, and I chased the theory until it exhausted me. Every rejection letter agreed with the voice in my head, and the voice in my head agreed with the drug: *see? This is who you are. This is all you are. Why bother.* It took me years to learn that three liars agreeing with each other does not make a truth. But in those years, I believed them, and belief is a kind of obedience. I obeyed the lie by lowering my eyes, by lowering my expectations, by lowering myself — smaller and smaller, until the life I was living fit the size the lie had assigned it.

Meanwhile, the other set of doors — the ones inside my own body — were closing too, and more quietly.

Years of meth do a body no favors, and I had given it years. I had diabetes. I had sickness upon sickness. And long before those years, my heart had already spoken up once — back in the benzo days, it started acting up, and that warning was part of why the drinking and the pills stopped when they did. The

body keeps its own record, and unlike the courts and the credit bureaus, it does not accept appeals. It just accumulates. Every year of the spiral is written somewhere in the flesh: in the heart that had already faltered, in the blood sugar, in the exhaustion that sleep did not fix. People would look at me in those years and see a woman who would not get her life together. What they could not see was how much machinery was failing under the surface just to keep me upright. I do not say that to excuse a single decision. I say it because it is true, and because somebody reading this is being judged right now — by a landlord, an employer, maybe her own children — on the visible evidence alone, while carrying a body and a history nobody in the room can see. My body was giving out, piece by piece, system by system, in ways I could feel but not fix. And in 2020, COVID took my sense of smell and taste. Food went flat. The world went flat with it — you do not realize how much of living is flavor and scent until both are gone, and eating becomes just refueling a machine you hate. I would not get those senses fully back for five years. Not until I came out of a coma — but I am ahead of the story again.

A person can adapt to almost anything, and that is not always a mercy. I adapted to the denials. I adapted to the debt. I adapted to a body quietly failing. I adapted to flat food and dark rooms and the math of which bill to skip. What I could not adapt to — what no amount of time ever made bearable — was the woman in the mirror.

Because underneath the closing doors was the closing heart. I hated myself. I hated who I had become. I hated how I looked. I had no strength left in me, and no hope in me, and I

want to be precise about what hopelessness actually is, because people use the word too lightly. Hopelessness is not sadness. Sadness still wants something. Hopelessness is the moment wanting itself shuts down — when you stop applying, stop asking, stop picturing a future with yourself in it. And a person who hates herself, who has stopped wanting, does not fight very hard to live.

I have had time, since then, to think about what a record really is. A record is a true story told by people who only saw part of it. Every line on mine was accurate — I am not one of those people who will tell you the charges were a misunderstanding — and yet the whole of it was a lie, because it left out everything the paperwork could not hold. It could not hold the girl in Dorothy's garden, or the teenager who portaged a canoe through Canadian lakes and came out stronger than she had ever been, or the mother who walked out of a clinic waiting room because a voice told her to. It could not hold a single one of my reasons, and it could not hold a single one of my prayers. It held dates, and counties, and dispositions. That is all a record is: the worst facts, filed neatly, with none of the person attached. And here is what I know now that I did not know when the doors were closing: people will hand you that file your whole life and call it your name. Employers did it. Landlords did it. I did it to myself, in the mirror, on the worst nights. But God never did. He has a file on me too — He knows things the counties never charged me with — and He still calls me by a different name than the record does. He calls me His. If the only name you have been called lately is the one on your paperwork, I am here to tell you

there is another name, and it was yours before the first charge was ever filed, and no court on earth has the jurisdiction to take it off you.

If you are in that place while you read this — face pressed to a locked door, application money gone, body tired, heart closed — I need you to hear this from a woman who has stood exactly there: the closed doors are not the end of your story. They were not the end of mine, and mine were closed by my own hand as much as anyone's. There is an open door with your name on the far side of this season. You may not be able to see it. I could not see mine either. It was there anyway.

If your hope is gone — not dented, gone — then borrow some. I mean that literally, the way you would borrow a cup of sugar from a neighbor. Mine is on the counter. There were years when every hopeful thing in my life was borrowed: borrowed from a God I was barely speaking to, borrowed from the memory of people who had once believed I was worth something. Borrowing hope is not cheating. It is how hope survives its own winters — carried by other hands until yours are strong enough to hold it again. Take mine for this chapter. By the end of this book, I mean to hand it back to you with interest.

God does some of His best work in the years that look like nothing but walls.

What I did not know, in the closing years, was how close I was to the bottom of the basement — or that at the bottom of the basement, of all places, I was going to find out whose hands had been underneath me the entire time.

A Poem for This Chapter

My record walked into every room before I did
and locked the doors from the inside.
Denied for the job. Denied for the home.
Application money I didn't have,
paid again and again for the privilege of *no*.
Every card maxed, every promise broken,
credit in ruins, life in ruins: *why bother?*
I bothered on borrowed hope —
carried in other people's hands
through the years that looked like nothing but walls.
God does some of His best work in those years.

CHAPTER 8

Rock Bottom Has a Basement

"The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit." — Psalm 34:18 (KJV)

People talk about rock bottom like it is a floor. It is not. Rock bottom has a basement, and I found it.

The basement is below the stealing and the shut-off notices and the closed doors. People can see those floors; they have windows. Somebody can still knock, still call, still hand you an application or a sandwich or a second chance. The basement is the place below all of that — the place where you stop asking for help, because you have stopped believing you are worth helping. Nobody knocks down there. You have to go down alone, and I did.

Let me tell you what I brought down there with me. I was sick — a body giving out in pieces, diabetes, years of damage I had done with my own hands and could not undo with them. I was addicted — thirteen years of meth behind me and no reason in the world to believe year fourteen would be any

different. And the heaviest thing I carried down those stairs: I hated myself. I hated who I had become. I hated how I looked. I had lost all hope, and I did not have any strength left in me. Not the strength to quit. Not the strength to try. Not even, some days, the strength to want to.

I want to tell you how a woman gets to the basement, because nobody is born there and nobody teleports there. She gets there one closed door at a time. One denial. One shut-off notice. One year of a drug she hates and cannot leave. One look in the mirror. The basement is not a place you choose, the first time. It is a place you *arrive*, the way a river arrives at the bottom of a hill — by following the only course left open to it. By the time I got there, I had been flowing downhill for so long that stopping had stopped occurring to me. That is the truth about the bottom of my life: it did not feel dramatic from inside it. It felt quiet. It felt, in the worst way, like relief — like finally setting down something too heavy to carry, without ever asking myself whether the thing I was setting down was my own life.

And so I did the paperwork of giving up.

I changed my health-care directive. I made it say, plainly, in the language those documents use: Do Not Resuscitate. Do not provide life support. If my heart stopped, let it stop. If my breath failed, let it fail. No machines. No heroics. No one was to pull me back from an edge I had walked to on purpose.

I need you to understand what that signature was, because I have heard people describe decisions like mine in soft words, and soft words would be a lie about what God rescued me from. That signature was a woman arranging her own ending and calling it a medical preference. I had lost all hope, and I

signed my name to that hopelessness like it was the last true thing I owned. I did not want to die dramatically. I just did not want to be. There is a difference between those two things, and if you know the difference, you know it in your bones, and I am sorry that you do.

There is a girl I think about, when I think about the basement. She is twelve years old. On February 5, 1989, she got down on her knees and asked Jesus into her heart, and meant it with everything a twelve-year-old has — which is to say, completely. I walked away from God over the years that followed. Let me say that the way it actually was: He never left. *I* walked away. Step by step, choice by choice, bar by bar, year by year, I walked away from the God that little girl had run to. And He — this is the part I could not have preached to you from the basement, and can barely write now without stopping to breathe — He let me walk, and He never once moved. The distance was all mine. Every inch of it. When I finally ran out of road, out of doors, out of hope and strength and self-respect, I turned around in the dark of that basement expecting to find Him as far away as I had left Him. He was close enough to whisper *not yet* and be heard.

What I could not see from the basement — what I could not have seen, with my face turned so determinedly toward the floor — was everyone my ending would have walked through on its way out. My children. Adults, yes, but a mother's ending does not ask her children's permission or check their ages. It would have reached them in a hospital corridor, the way it has reached so many families I know: standing around a bed, learning that the woman in it had arranged not to be saved, knowing it was her own doing that

put her there. My grandchildren, who would have grown up knowing me as a story instead of a grandma. I think about that now — about the memories that exist today because one signature failed to do what it was written to do. The kindergarten mornings. The ordinary, golden, unremarkable days of being *known* by the little people who come after you. All of it hung on the edge of that paperwork, and I never weighed a single ounce of it. That is not a condemnation of the woman I was. It is a measurement of how dark the basement is. In the basement, you cannot see the faces. You can only see the floor.

And here is what undoes me, twenty months later, every time I let myself look at it directly: I was never actually alone down there. The verse at the top of this chapter says the LORD is *nigh* — near — to the brokenhearted. Not near to the cleaned-up. Not near to the ones who got it together and filled out the right forms in the right spirit. Near to the brokenhearted. Near to the contrite — the crushed ones, the sorry ones, the ones whose signatures were still wet on the worst decisions of their lives. I made my bed in the lowest place I knew how to reach, and Scripture had already told me, centuries before I was born, Who would be there when I arrived. I just could not hear Him yet. The basement has terrible acoustics for hope. But He was not shouting from the top of the stairs. He was *nigh*. Right there. Close enough that when the time came — when a name got written wrong on a hospital form, in another chapter of this book — His one word could reach me without raising its voice at all.

Some of you reading this have signed something like it, in your hearts if not on paper. You have made your arrangements

with despair. You have decided the story is over and you are just waiting for the paperwork to catch up. I am not going to argue with you, and I am not going to shame you — I have been exactly where you are sitting, and I know that arguments bounce off that door and shame just adds weight to it. I am only going to tell you what I did not know in the basement, and I am going to tell it to you straight:

My times were never in my hands.

Not when I signed the directive. Not ever. I thought I was the author of my ending because I was holding the pen. But a signature is only as powerful as the authority behind it, and there is an authority above every form I will ever sign. A woman can write her own ending in triplicate, file it with the proper offices, make it as legal as the law allows — and God can still speak one word over her that outranks all of it.

I did not know that word yet. I would not hear it until I woke up in a hospital bed, in another chapter, on February 5, 2025 — a date God had circled thirty-six years before, on February 5, 1989, the day He saved me. But the word was already true in the basement, in the dark, over a woman who could not have repeated it back to you if her life depended on it — which, as it happens, it did.

Not.

Yet.

People ask me sometimes — gently, the way you ask about a scar — what it felt like, down there. I have searched for the honest answer, and it is not the answer people expect. It did not feel like screaming. It felt like *settling*. Like a house settling onto a bad foundation, a quarter-inch at a time, so slowly that no single day could be blamed for it. My world had shrunk to

the size of my sickness and my addiction and my shame, and inside that small world, giving up did not feel like a decision at all. It felt like the weather. The directive was just the day I wrote the weather down. I tell you that because I want you to stop waiting to *feel* like somebody who is in danger. I never did. Nobody in the basement feels dramatic. We feel tired. We feel flat. We feel finished, in the quiet, reasonable voice of a person signing a form — and that is exactly what makes the basement so deadly. It does not announce itself. It files paperwork.

And I want to say one more thing about the woman who signed it, because I have made my peace with her and I will not let anyone — including the earlier drafts of me — treat her like a stranger. She was not wicked. She was not even, in her own mind, rebellious. She was a woman who had been hurt early and often, who had hurt others in her turn, who had been denied at every counter she approached, whose body was quitting and whose heart had quit before it. She believed the story was over because every visible fact confirmed it. If you met her, you would not meet a villain. You would meet somebody's mother, somebody's daughter, somebody's sister, at the end of her strength. God did not rescue a project. He rescued *her* — that specific woman, with that specific signature, in that specific winter of her life. That is the kind of rescuing He does. It is the only kind there is.

That is the whole Gospel for people like me, in two words. The basement is real. The signature is real. The sickness and the addiction and the self-hatred are real, and I will never pretend otherwise in this book. But none of them — not all of them stacked together, not the whole weight of my record and

my ruin — none of them got the final say. The final say belongs to a God who looks at a woman at the bottom of her own basement, with her ending signed and filed, and says the words she could not say for herself: *thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.*

An expected end. He had one for me the whole time. I just had to live long enough — no. I just had to be *kept* long enough to reach it.

"For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end." — Jeremiah 29:11 (KJV)

A Poem for This Chapter

Rock bottom is not a floor. It has a basement.
Down below the stealing and the shut-off notices,
below where anybody knocks,
there's a room where you stop asking for help
because you've stopped believing you're worth it.
I carried my sickness down there, and my hatred of myself,
and I signed my ending in my own hand:
do not resuscitate.
But over my signature, Another voice filed His own word:
thoughts of peace, and not of evil —
an expected end I couldn't see from the basement.

CHAPTER 9

January 29, 2025: Found

"I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the LORD." — Psalm 118:17 (KJV)

"He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings." — Psalm 40:2 (KJV)

I cannot tell you how I was found from inside my own memory, because I was not there for it. That is the strange truth at the center of a coma story: I was the emergency, not the witness. Everything in this chapter happened around a woman who could not see it, hear it, or help it along. What I know, I know because I was told — by the man who found me, by the family who gathered, by the people who worked on me. And I know the rest the way a person knows the weather passed over her house while she slept: by what it left behind.

So let me start with what led to that day, because January 29, 2025, did not come out of nowhere. It came at the end of a long going-down.

My body was giving out. That is the plainest way I know to say it. I was sick in more ways than I could count — many sicknesses, one on top of another, and diabetes wearing me down from the inside. I had caught COVID again not long before, in a body that had never really gotten back what the first round took in 2020, when my senses of smell and taste went away and stayed away. Underneath all of it was the addiction: thirteen years of methamphetamine, after the alcohol and the pills I had already walked away from when my heart started acting up. I had quit the drinking. I had quit the benzos. But I had held on to the meth, and the meth had held on to me, and by January of 2025 there was not much left of the woman I used to be.

Let me tell you how the diabetes came to light, because it shows how sick I was — and for how long — before that January day.

For a long time I had wondered why I felt as bad as I did. I had no energy. None. I could sleep a full night's sleep, wake up, and fall asleep in the bathtub. Get out of the tub and fall asleep sitting up on the couch. There was no way to keep my eyes open. No amount of drugs could do it — and I had plenty of drugs in me. No amount of caffeinated coffee could do it. Nothing could. I was exhausted all the way down to the bone. There were other symptoms too, ones I won't go into detail about here — but they were concerning enough that I finally did something I almost never did. I went to a doctor.

That is how I found out I was a type 2 diabetic. My A1C was 8.7. Now, 8.7 isn't insanely high, as those numbers go — but it was high enough that they wanted to put me on medication for it. And along with the diabetes came a second

word in the same season: fatty liver disease. My liver enzyme levels were not good, and a scan of my liver showed there was an issue there too. My body was failing me in writing now, on lab reports a person could hold in her hand.

And here is what settled on me when I heard it. Not fear, exactly. Depression. I still remember the depression that settled in once I found out. I was already a woman whose whole day went like this: do drugs, do things to support the habit, and try to find more drugs. That was the rotation, start to finish. I was far from being able to take care of myself in any healthy manner at all. And now a doctor was telling me my body needed real, daily care — from the one person least able to give it.

They offered me the medication, and I declined it. I told them I would do it with diet and exercise. I want to be careful with that, and I will say more about it later in this book: that was my choice, made for my own reasons, and it is not advice I am handing to anyone else. But there it is — a woman deep in addiction, who could not keep her eyes open through a bath, promising a doctor she would fix her blood sugar with discipline she did not have.

And somehow — I still shake my head at this — I started. At first I restricted myself from a lot of things, mostly because I was too scared to eat anything. What I did eat, I kept simple: baked chicken, broccoli, asparagus. I drank water. That was nearly the whole menu for a while. In time I learned how to have a healthier balance — watching my carbohydrates and my sugar and still actually feeding myself. I did not do it perfectly, and I did not do it in a straight line, and I was still using the whole while. But even in the middle of the addiction,

some stubborn part of me had begun fighting for the body I was destroying. I did not know it then. I know it now: that fight mattered.

And under the sickness and the addiction was the thing I have already told you about, the thing waiting in the basement of the last chapter: I had lost all hope. I had changed my health-care directive to say, in writing, that if my body finally gave out, nobody should stop it from going. Do Not Resuscitate. Do not provide life support. I did not just feel finished. I had done the paperwork for it.

On January 29, my body did what I had arranged for it to be allowed to do. I took pills wanting to die — the hospital would learn that later, from what they found and what they knew — and I went down, alone, the way I had planned to go: quietly, and for good.

Except I was not as alone as I thought I was.

Brandon was my boyfriend. He had been in my life for fourteen years — long enough to know my silences, long enough to know when something was wrong in a way that went past words. On January 29, 2025, Brandon found me unresponsive — and he called for paramedics to come get me. That call is part of why I am alive.

Fourteen years is a long time to know a person. Brandon had not met the cleaned-up version of me. He had known me through the years the addiction was eating my life — the lies, the chaos, the woman I had become and did not want to be. He knew all of it, and he was still in my life, and on the one day it mattered most, he was the one who came through the door. I have thought about that a lot since. We spend so much of our addicted lives believing we have burned every bridge and

used up every person's last bit of love for us. Sometimes that is even true. But sometimes there is somebody who stays — not because we earned the staying, but because love, real love, does not keep the kind of accounts we think it does. Brandon's fourteen years put him in that doorway on January 29. Whatever else that day was, it was also this: proof that I had not succeeded in making myself unlovable, though I had surely tried.

Sit with that word for a minute. *Found.*

In the Bible, God is always finding people who could not find their way back. The shepherd leaves the ninety and nine and goes after the one lost sheep until he finds it. The woman lights a candle and sweeps the whole house for one lost coin. The father watches the road for a son who is not even sorry yet, just hungry and coming home. Finding is not a small thing in Scripture. It is almost the whole story, told over and over: somebody loved, somebody lost, somebody who would not stop looking.

I could not find myself. I want to be honest about that. I was not lost the way a person is lost on a trail, hoping for a rescue. I had stopped looking for the way back. I had signed papers saying there was no way back and nobody should build one. So heaven and earth did the finding without me. God did it the way He so often does — not with lightning, but with a person. He sent a man who loved me through the door at the right hour.

I should tell you plainly what I do not know about that day, because a testimony ought to be careful with the truth. I do not know the hour-by-hour of it. I do not know what the room looked like when Brandon found me, or what was said

over me, or the order anything happened in. People have filled in pieces for me, a little at a time, the way you hand somebody a photograph of an event they slept through. I have learned to hold those pieces gently and not pretend they are memories. They are not memories. They are gifts from the people who were awake when I was not.

But here is what I do know, and I know it the way you know your own name. I know that I went down intending to stay down. I know that somebody found me in time. I know that I was carried into a hospital and worked on like a woman worth saving, on the very day I had made sure the world knew I did not think I was. And I know that when a person is found at the exact hour she most needed finding, after fourteen years of being loved by the man who found her and forty-seven years of being carried by a God who never once lost track of her, "luck" is too small a word for what happened.

What happened next, I know only in pieces I was told afterward. Help came. I was taken to the hospital. I was put on life support — a ventilator breathing for a woman who had written down that she did not want to be breathed for. I have two photographs from those days. In one of them you can see the machines doing the living for me. In the other, my best friend Jesse — my friend since I was thirteen years old, the one I love like a brother — is standing at my bedside, looking down at me, not knowing if he would ever see me awake again. It is hard to look at those pictures, even now. I have sat with them a long time. But the story does not end there, and neither did I.

Here is something I did not understand until later, and it has never left me since: while all of that was happening, the

paperwork said *let her go* — and the paperwork never arrived. The hospital had gotten my name wrong, and because of that simple error, my directive — my own signed ending — never reached my bedside. The team working on me never saw it. So they did everything. All of it. I am going to take a whole chapter for that mistake, because it deserves one. For now, just let it stand here at the edge of this one: on the worst day of my life, a wrong name stood between me and the end I had chosen, and I believe with everything in me that it was not an accident.

I think about the people who arrived at that hospital. My family. My children. I can only imagine the thoughts and feelings that went through the hearts of the people who love me when they had to see me that way — tubes and machines and a woman who looked gone — not knowing if they would ever see me awake again, or if I was gone for good. My children especially. That is a weight I still carry, and I will tell you about it before this book is done. But underneath the weight there is this: they came. They did not give up on me. Not my mom, not my dad, not my sister, not my brothers, not my kids, not my granddaughter — not one of the people who loved me wrote me off in that room. I had given up on myself in writing. They refused the signature.

When I read Psalm 40 now, I do not read it like it is about somebody else. *He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings.* A pit is not a place you climb out of. That is the thing about a pit — the walls are the point. You do not establish your own goings from the bottom of one. Somebody reaches down. On January 29, 2025, the reaching started: through a

boyfriend who walked in, through a family who gathered, through a hospital team working on a woman whose name they had wrong, through a God who had already decided that the pit was not where my story stopped.

There is a verse at the top of this chapter, and I want you to see what it became in my life. *I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the LORD.* When that was written, it was a song of somebody who had come through trouble. When I first read it with new eyes, it landed on me like a job description. Not die — that part was God's department, and He had already handled it. Live — that part was going to be mine, one day at a time, for the rest of my life. And declare the works of the LORD — that is this book. That is why a woman who used to hide everything is telling you everything. The declaring is not bragging. It is reporting. I am reporting what was done for me on a day I could do nothing, by a God who did not wait for me to deserve it and a family who did not wait for me to ask.

And notice the order in Psalm 40, because the order is the story of my life since: He brought me up out of the pit *first*. The feet on the rock came after. The established goings came after that. God did not stand at the top of the pit and hand me instructions for climbing. He came down into the miry clay — the sickness, the addiction, the shame, the signed papers — and He lifted. Everything I have built since stands on the fact that the lifting was not my doing. I was found before I was anything else. Found, and carried, and only then — slowly, over months you will read about — set on my feet.

If you love somebody who is lost right now, I want you to hear this from the woman in the bed: do not underestimate

the day you walk through their door. Do not talk yourself out of checking. Do not decide for them that it is too late, that they are too far gone, that they would not want you to come. I did not want to be found. I had paperwork against it. And being found is the reason there is a book in your hands instead of an ending nobody got to read.

Check on your people. The day you find them may be the day everything turns — even if, like me, they sleep through the turning, and have to be told about it later by the people who loved them enough to be there.

One more thing about that date, and then we will go into the dark with the next chapter. January 29, 2025 was supposed to be my death date. I had chosen it, in every way a person can choose such a thing without knowing she is choosing it. Instead, it became the first day of my recovery — the day I count everything from, the way other people count from a birthday. I did not get sober that day in any way I participated in; I was unconscious, and other people did the participating. But the counting starts there, because that is the day God reached into the pit. Everything since — every meeting, every hard morning, every rebuilt thing — is numbered from the day I was found.



The hospital, January–February 2025.

A Poem for This Chapter

I was not there for my own rescue.
I was the emergency, not the witness.
A friend of fourteen years found me,
and hands I never saw refused to let the pit keep me.
That date is written on my skin now —
sober since 1.29.25 —
not because I climbed out, but because I was carried.
I shall not die, but live:
the counting of my life starts at the day I was found.

CHAPTER 10

The Coma

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." — Psalm 23:4 (KJV)

People ask me what the coma was like, and I understand why they ask. It is the part of the story nobody can picture. A woman goes into a hospital bed in January and comes out of herself in February, and in between there is a week the calendar kept and she did not. What was it like in there? Where was I?

The honest answer is: I do not know where I was. I know where my body was. My body was in an intensive care unit, on a ventilator, being tended around the clock by people in full respiratory suits. My body was worked on, medicated, monitored, catheterized, turned and checked and kept alive by a small army of strangers and machines. But me — the part of me that is telling you this story — I have only fragments. Impressions. Weather from a country I visited in my sleep.

Let me give you the fragments exactly as I have them, because I will not dress them up into more than they are. I

believe a testimony loses its power the minute it starts performing.

I remember — somewhat — a catheter being placed. I remember pain. And I remember surfacing with the feeling that something bad had happened to me, a feeling with no details attached to it, just the alarm of it. I have thought about that fragment a lot. My mind could not tell me what was wrong. My body knew something was. There is a kind of knowing that lives below memory, and mine was trying to report: *something happened here. Something was done to this body while you were gone.* It was not wrong. A great deal was done to my body while I was gone — all of it to save it. But a woman waking in pieces, in pain, with strangers' hands having been everywhere her care required, does not sort that out quickly, and I did not. I carried that fragment for a while before I could set it in its place: not a violation, but a rescue my mind had only caught the edge of.

I remember brief awakenings — if you can call them that. Moments when the surface of the medication thinned and something in me rose a little way toward the light, looked around, and could not make sense of what it saw. Because what it saw was *aliens*.

I have told people this and watched them not know whether to laugh or go quiet, so let me just say it plainly: I saw aliens. Tall figures around my bed, sealed into suits, faces hidden behind the gear of the ICU — the respiratory protection the staff wore to care for patients like me. My brain, soaked in high doses of pain medication, surfacing for seconds at a time into a bright, humming room full of suited figures, did the best it could with what it had. The mind will

invent a story before it will accept a blank, and mine invented visitors. It was only later, when I was told about the suits, that the aliens took their masks off and became what they had been all along: nurses and doctors and respiratory staff, people doing their jobs over a woman who could not thank them.

Seven days. That is what the calendar says: found on January 29, awake on February 5, and a week of my life in between that belongs to everyone but me. People tell me things about that week the way you describe a trip to somebody who stayed home. I nod, and I piece it together, and I am grateful — but I will not pretend the week is mine. It is a hole in my own story, and I have had to make peace with the hole. Here is what making peace with it looks like: I stopped needing to have been present for my own rescue. A drowning person does not get to complain that she missed the sight of the rope. The week is missing from my memory, but it is not missing from my life, because other people carried it for me — every hour of it, every decision of it — and then handed it back to me, piece by piece, when I could hold it. If your story has a hole in it too — days the addiction took, days the illness took, days you simply were not present for your own life — hear me: a hole is not the end of a story. Sometimes the hole is where the love of other people shows most clearly, because they were there, holding your place in the world, when you could not hold it yourself.

I laugh about it now, a little. But I do not laugh at that woman in the bed. She was doing her best with a broken instrument, and everything she saw, she saw through pain and drugs and a body that was failing her. If you have ever sat with somebody coming out of heavy medication — saying strange

things, frightened of ordinary things — be patient with the picture their mind hands them. It is not lying to them on purpose. It is translating.

And underneath the fragments, there is a part of the coma I did not experience at all, but that I have been told about, and it may be the most important part: I was not alone in that room, and I was not unspoken-for.

My family was there. And they were not passive about it. Some of my family pushed the staff to let me wake up — pushed, in the way people who love you push when they believe something the charts are not saying. They felt I was trying to wake up. They felt I was in there, pushing back toward the surface from underneath, and they said so, and they kept saying so. Picture that, because I have, many times: the medical reality on one side — an unresponsive addict with a ruined body and a directive that said let her go — and on the other side, a family standing in a hospital insisting that the woman in the bed was still fighting, still present, still worth waiting on.

They were right. I do not say that as a figure of speech. Somewhere under all of that medication, in the fragments and the surfacing and the aliens, something in me was holding on — or, to say it the way I believe it, Someone was holding on to me, and my family could feel the holding even when I could not.

My children saw me in that bed. I was not awake for it, and I am almost glad I was not — glad for me, I mean, in the most selfish way, because I do not know how I would have carried their faces in the moment. I have carried them since. A mother is supposed to be the safe place. I had made myself the

emergency instead — the phone call, the hospital, the sight nobody can unsee. When I think about that week now, the grief of it is not mostly about what happened to my body. It is about the people who had to stand and look at what my choices had finally done, and who loved me anyway, right there, in the looking. They did not wait for me to be awake and sorry and cleaned up to love me. They loved me unconscious, unresponsive, and — on paper — unwanted by the very system keeping me alive. If you want to know what love looks like when it is not getting anything back, it looks like a family at a bedside in the ICU.

Jesse was there. My best friend since I was thirteen years old — the boy who became the man who has lifted me up every time I have fallen since we were kids. There is a photograph of him standing at my bedside in that room, and of the two hospital pictures I have, that is the one that undoes me. I can only imagine the thoughts and feelings that went through his mind, standing there — through the minds and hearts of all of them — having to see me that way, not knowing if they would ever see me awake again or if I was gone for good. He stood there anyway. That is what the photograph is really a picture of: not a woman in a bed, but the loyalty of the people around the bed. *Thou art with me,* the psalm says. I used to read that as God being with me in some invisible, far-off way. In that room, God's *with me* had faces. It had my family's stubbornness. It had Jesse, standing.

Here is the theology of the coma, the thing I did not understand until I was far on the other side of it. In that bed, I was completely helpless. I could not pray my way out — I could not pray at all. I could not work my way out, promise

my way out, or repent my way out. I could not even *want* my way out; wanting requires a person to be home, and I was not home. Everything that saved me in that week was done *for* me, by other hands: the boyfriend who found me, the family who advocated for me — who pushed and insisted and believed out loud — the staff who treated a nameless-enough woman like a life, and over all of it, the God who had already overruled my signature on the matter.

That is what grace actually is, and the coma taught it to me better than any sermon ever had. Grace does not wait for you to be able. It does not stand at the edge of your life asking you to meet it halfway. It comes while you are unable — while you are, in every practical sense, gone — and it does the whole work itself, and it lets you wake up later and find out what it did.

The psalm talks about a rod and a staff — the shepherd's tools. I have learned a little about those since. The staff is for guiding the sheep that wander; the rod is for fighting off what comes to take them. I was beyond guiding that week. I could not be led, corrected, or comforted in any way I could receive. What I needed was the rod — something standing between me and the thing that had come to take me. And that is exactly what I got: a family that would not leave, a friend who stood his post, a medical team that treated me as worth the fight, and a Shepherd who never once put the rod down. When you cannot be guided, you can still be guarded. I was both lost and kept, at the same time, and if you had asked the woman in the bed to explain how, she could not have. The explaining is my job now, from over here. The guarding was His, from over there.

I walked through the valley of the shadow of death that week. I did not walk it bravely, or knowingly, or even consciously — I mostly did not walk it at all; I was carried through it, the way the cover of this book shows, in hands bigger than the valley. *I will fear no evil: for thou art with me.* I did not feel Him there. Feelings were not available to me. But the psalm does not say I will *feel* no evil because I sense His presence. It says I will fear no evil because He *is* with me — a fact, not a feeling, and facts do not need my consciousness to be true. He was with me in the dark I cannot remember. He is with you in yours, whether or not you can feel it yet. Hold on to the fact. The feelings catch up later. Mine did.

And if you are the one sitting at a bedside like that tonight — if you are the family member, the friend, the one standing where Jesse stood — I want to tell you what your standing there is worth, from the far side of it. You may feel useless. You may feel like the machines are doing everything and you are doing nothing, just taking up a chair, just watching a chest rise because a machine tells it to. You are not doing nothing. You are the evidence, standing in the room, that the person in the bed is a *person* — loved, named, expected back. My family spoke for me when I could not speak. They believed things about me that the paperwork denied. I am alive in a story they refused to stop telling about me while I was silent. Never underestimate a chair pulled up beside a bed. It might be the most powerful seat in the hospital.



Jesse at my bedside — my best friend since I was thirteen.

A Poem for This Chapter

I don't know where I was that week.
My body lay in intensive care,
tended by strangers in suits like visitors from another world —
aliens, I called them, surfacing through the medicine.
Pain, a catheter, an alarm with no story attached.
Around my bed: chairs pulled close,
a family arguing with the silence,
pushing the world to let me wake.
Never underestimate a chair beside a bed.
They spoke for me when I could not speak —
and somewhere under all that mercy, I stayed.

CHAPTER 11

Not Yet

"My times are in thy hand." — Psalm 31:15 (KJV)

"Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness." — Isaiah 41:10 (KJV)

Let me set the hospital's mistake in front of you plainly, because it is the hinge of my whole life, and it deserves to be told without decoration first.

When I was brought into the hospital on January 29, 2025, my name was recorded wrong. Somewhere between the woman found unresponsive and the woman in the ICU bed, Angela Martini became somebody slightly else on paper. And because the name was wrong, the document attached to my right name never made the trip to my bedside. That document was my health-care directive — the one I had changed, in my darkest season, to say: Do Not Resuscitate. Do not provide life support.

So the team treating me never saw it. They did not weigh it, or debate it, or set it aside. As far as the people at my bedside knew, I was a patient like any other patient, and they did everything medicine knows how to do. Life support. The ventilator. All of it — the very things I had refused, in writing, with my own hand.

Some people would call that a system failure. I call it the most important clerical error in history — mine, anyway.

I want to be careful here, because I am not telling you this story so you will think paperwork does not matter, or that directives are a bad idea, or that a family should ever have to wonder whose wishes governed a hospital bed. I am telling you what happened to *me*, and what I believe about what happened to me. And what I believe is this, in my own words, the way I have said it since I understood it:

That error was God intervening. That was God saying *not yet*. That was God saying it wasn't my time and He had things for me to do. I believe that God makes that decision when it's our time to go — not us, not anyone else. It's up to God when it's our time.

Not us. Sit with those two words a while, because they rearranged my whole understanding of my life. I had believed — I had *arranged* my life around believing — that the decision was mine. My body, my suffering, my signature, my end. I was not dramatic about it. I was administrative about it. I had done the forms. And God, without consulting me, without waiting for me to feel differently, without a single sign that I deserved the interruption, simply overruled the forms. He did it the way He seems to do so many things in my life:

quietly, through ordinary human machinery — a name written wrong by a stranger who never knew what their mistake would mean.

People sometimes ask me, carefully, the way you ask a question you are not sure you should: *what if they had gotten your name right?* I understand the question. I have asked it myself, in the small hours, more than once. If the name had been right, the directive would have traveled with it. The team would have seen what I had directed. And a woman who went down on January 29 wanting to die would very likely have been allowed to do it, with every form in order and nobody at fault.

I do not flinch from that. I think a testimony that flinches from the truth has no strength in it. Yes — the thread was that thin. My entire life, and everything that has come since, hung on one wrong name on one hospital record. And I will tell you what I have made of that thinness, because I have had to make something of it: I do not believe God is careless with thin threads. I believe He works through them on purpose. A burning bush is an ordinary shrub. A manger is an animal's feed box. A name spelled wrong by a tired stranger is exactly the size of tool God has always liked to use. He did not need to stop the sun for me. He needed one letter out of place.

I have thought about this for a long time now, and what moves me most is the timing of God's mercy. He did not wait for me to repent of the directive first. There was no moment where I lay in that bed and thought better of it — I could not think at all. He did not wait for me to get sober. I was as deep in addiction that week as I had ever been; it is part of why I was

in the bed. He did not wait for me to get stable, or worthy, or promising. There was nothing in me that week to recommend me, even to myself. And still: *not yet.*

If you have ever believed that God helps the people who have it together — that He steps in once we have cleaned up enough to be worth stepping in for — I am asking you to look at my chart. A dying addict's own paperwork, overruled by heaven, through a typo. That is not a reward. That is grace with its sleeves rolled up. He came for me at my most unlovely, in the one week of my life when I contributed absolutely nothing to my own rescue, and He has been patiently showing me ever since that this is simply how He loves. Not: *get better and I will come.* But: *I came; now get better — I will help you.*

My times are in thy hand. Four words, and then a period, like the matter is closed. David wrote that in a psalm, and I do not think I ever truly believed it until a hospital proved it to me. My times — not just the big times, the birthday and the death day, but *all* the times: the foster home and the detention cells and the delivery rooms and the years I wasted and the week I do not remember — were in His hand the whole time I thought they were in mine. My signature was never the authority I believed it was. I only held a pen. He held the times.

Read the other verse at the top of this chapter slowly, the way I had to learn to read it — as a hospital record of a different kind. *Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my*

righteousness. Count the promises. *I am with thee* — in the room I cannot remember, He was. *I will strengthen thee* — a body that could not strengthen itself, strengthened. *I will help thee* — help arriving through hands I did not hire and cannot repay. *I will uphold thee* — underneath the whole apparatus of the ICU, underneath the ventilator and the tubes and the bed itself, something was upholding the upholders. And notice whose righteousness does the upholding: *His*, not mine. The woman in that bed had no righteousness of her own to be upheld with. She had a directive and a drug problem and a ruined heart. He upheld her with *His* right hand anyway, and He did not ask the paperwork's permission.

There is a tenderness in that I did not expect. Because if my times were in His hand even then — in the basement, in the addiction, in the week of the coma — then there was never a version of my life where God had stepped away and left me to the paperwork. I walked away from Him, years before, and I have said so honestly in this book. He never walked away from me. The wrong name at the hospital is how I found out.

And He said one more thing in that overruling, though I did not hear it until much later: *He had things for me to do.* Not yet is not just a reprieve. A reprieve says, *you may go on living.* Not yet says, *you are not finished — there is work with your name on it, the right name, written in a place no hospital error can reach.* When I first understood that I had been kept alive by a mistake that was not a mistake, I had no idea what the work was. I was a woman in a hospital bed with a suicide watch outside her door and a heart that had already failed once that week. The things He had for me to do were not visible

from that bed. They unfolded the way everything in this story unfolds: one ordinary day at a time, treatment and work and family and the slow rebuilding of a person. But they were real before I could see them. That is how it usually is. God does not hand you the blueprint when He hands you back your life. He hands you the life, and the assignments arrive as you heal. If you are alive today in circumstances you did not choose and cannot explain, consider that the explanation may be an assignment you have not been shown yet. I was.

His plans for me were older than my despair — thirty-six years older, to be exact, though I did not know that until I woke up, and that is the next chapter's story. For now, let me leave you with the question this one leaves me with, the question I would ask you if we were sitting across a table:

I sign papers differently now. That may sound like a small thing to carry out of a coma, but it is not small to me. I have held a pen over intake forms and work papers and all the ordinary documents of a rebuilt life, and every so often my hand slows down, because I remember that the most consequential signature of my life was the one God declined to honor. I am not afraid of paperwork anymore. I am just properly respectful of its limits. A form can only say what a person wants on the day she signs it. It cannot see the future. It cannot measure grace. It cannot predict that a woman who signs *let me go* in one winter will be standing in her own kitchen in another winter, grateful past words for the failure of her own instructions. If your past self signed some things — in despair, in addiction, in a season when you could not see a foot in front of you — I want you to know that your past self does

not get the final word. She got a word. She did not get the last one. God keeps that for Himself.

What might God be quietly overruling in your life right now — some ending you have signed, some conclusion you have filed away as finished — that you have mistaken for the end?

You signed it. I know. I signed mine too. But your times are in His hand, and His hand has a way of losing the paperwork on purpose.

Not yet, He said over me. Two words, and my whole life since has been lived inside them. Not yet means there is a later. It means the story has more pages than the ones I tried to close it with. It means a woman can be at the absolute end of herself — out of hope, out of strength, out of arguments — and still be only in the middle, because the Author was nowhere near finished and does not take dictation from His characters about when their stories end. I am in the middle still. So, I would guess, are you.

He may be saying it over you right now, in some way too quiet and too ordinary for you to have noticed — a wrong name, a delayed form, a door that will not close. Listen for it. It is the sound my whole life makes now.

A Poem for This Chapter

Somewhere between the woman they found
and the woman in the bed,
my name got written wrong.
So my own signed ending never reached my bedside —

and they gave me the breath I had refused,
the machine, the medicine, all of it.
Call it a clerical error. I call it God,
overruling my signature with two words:
Not yet.
My times were never in my hand.
They were in His.

CHAPTER 12

February 5, 2025: Waking Up

"It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness." — Lamentations 3:22–23 (KJV)

"For his anger endureth but a moment; in his favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." — Psalm 30:5 (KJV)

"My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever." — Psalm 73:26 (KJV)

"Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." — John 11:25–26 (KJV)

I opened my eyes on February 5, 2025.

The first face I saw was my sister Mona's.

I have told that sentence to people and watched what it does to them, so let me tell you what it did to me, the woman it happened to. I came up out of a darkness I still cannot describe, and the first thing the world handed back to me was a face I had known my whole life. Not a stranger. Not a ceiling, though I am sure there was one. My sister. To wake up February 5th in that hospital and be able to see my sister's face — the first face I had seen since I was put into that coma — I felt love. I felt hope again. I felt joy again. I felt a need, right there in the bed, to do things different — a need to reach people before they found themselves where I had been.

Hold those feelings up against where I had been a week before, because the contrast is the miracle, more than the waking itself. A week before, I had hated myself. I had hated how I looked and who I had become, and I had arranged my paperwork so that the story would end — *I* had hoped the story would end there. Those were the last feelings I took down into the dark with me: hatred of myself, exhaustion, a wish to be finished. And the first feelings I was handed on the way back up were love, hope, and joy, and a purpose. God did not ease me back into the world through some neutral doorway. He handed me the exact opposites of everything I had drowned in, all at once, in my sister's face.

Now, the date. Because I did not know what day it was when I woke up — and heaven, it turns out, had been keeping an appointment.

February 5, 2025. Thirty-six years earlier — February 5, 1989 — a twelve-year-old girl got on her knees and prayed and asked Jesus into her heart. I was that girl. I had been saved that

day, in every real sense of the word, and then I had spent most of the thirty-six years since walking away from the God who saved me — through the detention cells and the courtrooms and the delivery rooms and the long meth years — while He, the whole time, never walked away from me. And on the thirty-sixth anniversary of the day I gave Him my heart, He gave me back my life. On the very date. It still gives me goosebumps to say it. Thirty-six years, and He brought me back to consciousness on the one day of the year that proved He had never forgotten the girl on her knees — as if to say: *I remember her. I have always remembered her. Now live like her again.*

I wish I could tell you that waking up was a movie scene — soft light, swelling music, a woman sitting up clear-eyed and changed. It was not a movie scene. Let me tell you what else happened on February 5, 2025.

The very day I woke up, I had a heart attack.

My heart — the flesh one, the one that had started acting up in the years of pills and drinking, the one that had carried a methamphetamine addiction for thirteen years — my heart failed me on my first day back. Brandon was there with me. He helped me through it, this man who had found me a week earlier, still at my side for the next worst moment. I did not know if I was going to make it. I had survived the thing I did to myself, and now my own body was making its argument, and for a while that day it was a genuine question which way it would go.

Somewhere in the middle of it — my heart failing, Brandon at my side — I asked him to turn on some Christian

music for me. I needed something to listen to besides the sound of my own fear. He turned it on, and the song that came on was "Praise You in This Storm" by Casting Crowns.

I remember thinking: *Lord, that is crazy.* Of all the songs in the world, that was the one that came on over my hospital bed while my heart was failing — a song about praising God in the middle of the storm, playing for a woman who did not know if she was going to remain here, or if she had woken up just to die anyway. And here is the part I cannot explain away: I did it. In that bed, in that storm, not knowing how the day would end, I praised Him. Not because I was sure I would live — I wasn't. Not because the fear had left me — it hadn't. I praised Him because He was the One who had brought me back, and whatever He decided next, He was still God, and I was still His. I had to praise Him in that storm, at that moment. So I did.

There is a verse at the top of this chapter that I did not choose for decoration: *My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.* I have a heart that failed — medically, measurably, on a hospital's records, on the happiest worst day of my life. And I have learned that the strength of my heart was never going to be the strength of my heart. It is Him. On the day my heart failed, His did not. That is not a metaphor to me. That is a medical summary and a testimony in the same sentence.

I was put on blood thinners — constant blood thinners, part of the new arithmetic of my life. And there was one more thing the hospital did when it learned the whole truth about how I had come to be there. When they learned that I had

wanted to die — that I had taken pills to end my life — I was placed on suicide watch. Someone was in my room twenty-four hours a day. Watching. It was nice, in a way, to never be alone — and it was hard, in a way I did not have words for yet. The woman who had done everything she could to leave the world was now the most watched person in the building, guarded around the clock against her own worst day.

Let them watch, I say now. What they were watching was a resurrection with monitors on. But I will not pretend it was easy to be watched, and I will not pretend the woman being watched felt resurrected. She felt fragile, and frightened, and sore, and confused, and — this is the part nobody puts on the poster — she still had to decide, in that bed, under that watch, whether she actually wanted the life she had been handed back. God had overruled my paperwork. He had not overruled my will. The will had to come around on its own, and it did — slowly, in that room, with my sister's face in my memory and Brandon at my side and strangers taking shifts to keep me safe from myself. Day by day, I started wanting to be here. I want to be honest that it was a process and not a thunderbolt, because if you are waiting for the thunderbolt, you may miss the quiet process that is already happening in you.

Coming fully out of the coma took time. Real time. I was not back all at once; I emerged, the way a person comes up through deep water in stages. And as I came fully out, something small and enormous returned to me — something I had not had since 2020.

My senses of smell and taste came back.

COVID had taken them in 2020, five years before, and I had simply lived without them the way you live without anything you have given up on: food was fuel, air was air, the world was flat and I had forgotten it could be otherwise. And then, as I emerged from the coma, they returned. The world had flavor again — in every sense, and I mean that almost literally. Food tasted like food. Air smelled like air. I was a woman relearning her own life sense by sense, system by system, and every recovered piece of it felt like a personal gift, hand-delivered. I have wondered since whether God timed it that way on purpose — whether He was saying that the life He was handing back would not be a gray, tasteless survival, but a life with flavor in it. I do not know. I only know what came back, and when it came back. What I can tell you is that I notice taste now. I notice smell. I do not take a single sense for granted, because I have lived without them — and I have lived without nearly everything else, too.

Now I have to tell you the part of waking up that still costs me something to say, because you cannot tell this story honestly without it. My children had seen me in that bed. They had stood where Jesse stood and looked at their mother — unconscious, machined, gone-looking — knowing the whole time that it was my own doing that put me there. The way I was living. The fact that I had given up. That I would have left them without a mom.

I carry guilt about that. I have carried it since I was strong enough to understand it, and I still work at letting go of it. They are adults, my children. They have their own lives, their own struggles, and they did not ask to be handed that week as

part of their story with me. And my grandchildren are not adults. I want to be a grandma to them. I want them to know me, to learn things from me, to make memories with me — things that would never have happened if God had decided it was my time to go. Every memory I get to make now is a memory that was not supposed to exist. I am grateful every day that He didn't let me go. *Every* day. Gratitude like that is not a feeling I have to work up. It is just the weather of my life now.

And here is what steadies the guilt when it rises: they love me. Our relationships have been rebuilt. They never gave up on me — not my children, not my mom or my dad, not my sister, not my brothers, not my granddaughter, not one of the people who loved me through the darkest moments of my life. The guilt is real, and I do not wave it away. But it does not get to narrate this chapter. Love does.

There is a framed print on my wall at home, and I want to end this chapter with it. It says the words Jesus spoke to Martha at her brother's grave: *I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.* Lazarus came out of a tomb after four days, and the whole world has read about it since. I came out of a coma after seven, and my whole world is whoever is holding this book. I am not comparing myself to a Bible story. I am telling you that the words on my wall stopped being decoration the week they described my life. The resurrection is not only something that happened to other people, in another century, that we read about on Sundays. Sometimes it happens in an ICU in Minnesota, to a woman with a wrong name on her chart,

while her sister waits to be the first face she sees.

Somewhere in those first days — in between the monitors and the watch and the slow work of coming back into my own body — I started to understand what had actually happened to me, and it was bigger than surviving. God gave me the strength. That is the simplest way I know to say it, and I have learned not to improve on it. He gives me the strength *every* day — it was not a one-time delivery in a hospital room. He helps heal my body. He heals my mind. He gives me hope and He is my solid foundation — the foundation I now build my whole life on: physical, mental, spiritual, emotional. The chains were broken in that hospital in a way thirteen years of trying on my own had never broken them. The pillars — the parts of a life that hold a person up — were going to have to be rebuilt, and the chapters ahead are about that rebuilding. But the foundation was laid in that bed, by hands other than mine, while I was deciding whether I wanted it.

And with the strength came the fire. I cannot tell you the exact hour it started, but it started in that hospital, not later, not once I was impressive or qualified: a passion to reach out and help other people see that it can be done — that there is hope, that they must never lose hope. I had been the woman in the bed that everybody had to watch. I knew exactly where that road ends because I had been to the end of it. And I knew, before I knew almost anything else about my new life, that I would spend it trying to stand in that road for other people — to reach them *before* they found themselves where I had been. If we seek Him, we will find Him. I had found that out the hard way, in the hardest place. I have never once been tempted

to keep it to myself.

Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning. My night lasted longer than a night. It lasted years — thirteen of them on meth, and a lifetime before that of running. But the verse does not say the night is short. It says joy comes in the morning, and it does not ask the night's permission or its length. My morning was February 5, 2025. It came with a heart attack and a suicide watch and blood thinners and a body I had to learn all over again, and it was still — it *is* still — joy. Because joy was never going to be the absence of hard things. Joy was the face of my sister, and the appointment God kept, and a life handed back with flavor in it. Joy was coming, the whole night long. If you are in the night part right now, hear the woman from the morning side: it comes.



"I am the resurrection, and the life." The print that hangs on my wall at home.



Me, with Blaze and Minnie, when I first came home from the hospital.

A Poem for This Chapter

I opened my eyes on the fifth of February,
and the first face the world gave back to me was Mona's —
my sister, known my whole life long.
Thirty-six years before, on that same date,
a twelve-year-old knelt and was saved.
God keeps His appointments.
That day my heart failed, and was held;
they watched me around the clock so I wouldn't finish what I'd started;
and even my senses came home — taste and smell, gone for years, returned.
Weeping may endure for a night.
Mine did. Joy came in the morning.

CHAPTER 13

The Long Way Back

"Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things." — 1 Corinthians 13:7 (KJV)

"And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten." — Joel 2:25 (KJV)

Recovery is not the miracle montage people imagine. The miracle is the waking. The recovery is a thousand ordinary days after it — days nobody photographs, days that look, from the outside, like nothing at all. A woman gets up. A woman goes to treatment. A woman applies for a job she is not sure she can hold. A woman cries in her kitchen and does not use over it. That is what the long way back is actually made of, and I have come to love those unphotographed days, because every one of them is a day the old story said I would never have.

When I got out of the hospital, I put myself into an intensive outpatient treatment program. Notice the words *I put myself*. Nobody court-ordered me into that season; nobody had to. The woman who had to be watched around the clock so she would not finish what she started had become

a woman who walked herself into treatment and did the work. I completed the program — about five months of it. I would go to meetings on occasion after that, but I felt stable, and I poured my focus where it needed to go: into getting better jobs and rebuilding the practical structure of a life.

I have a saying I give to people now, when they are standing where I stood, wondering if a life can actually be rebuilt from the ground I was on. I tell them: *give yourself one short season to put yourself first. Heal what hurts, rebuild your foundation — and the rest of your life can change.* I do not say that as a slogan. I say it as a woman who lived it almost to the letter. Those five months of treatment were my short season. I had spent years putting everything and everyone — the drug most of all — ahead of my own healing. In that season, finally, the order reversed: treatment first, meetings when I needed them, rest, prayer, the slow reassembly of a person. If you are reading this in your own wreckage and wondering whether you are allowed to stop and heal before you fix everything else — you are allowed. You are *urged*. Everything I have built since was built by a woman who took one short season to be rebuilt herself. The season is not a delay in your life. It is the foundation pour. Nothing stands without it.

So let me tell you about the climb, because the climb is unglamorous and it is the whole point.

I started at a Holiday gas station, part-time. There is no small work in early recovery — there is only honest work and the other kind, and I had done the other kind for years. A part-time job at a gas station, held by a woman nearly fifty years old with a felony record and a fresh coma in her recent past, may not look like much on paper. It looked like

everything to me. It was mine. It was legal. I showed up for it, and it showed up for me, in the form of a paycheck and a reason to be somewhere and a self I could start respecting again.

From there I went to Lily of the Valley, as a direct service provider doing in-home care — going into people's homes to help them with the daily living they could not manage alone. Think about that for a moment, because I have, often. The woman who could not take care of herself — who had to be found, and watched, and rebuilt — was now being trusted inside other people's homes, to care for *them*. That is not a career move. That is a verdict reversed. Somebody has to be very steady to do that work well, and every visit I made was quiet proof that steadiness was growing in me, whether or not I could see it on the days I felt shaky.

Then came Nothing But Hemp, where I delivered THC beverages and gummies to private homes and liquor stores around the Twin Cities. People sometimes raise an eyebrow at that job on my list, and I understand, so let me say what I have always said about it: they were really good to me. An employer who treats you with decency when your record gives them every excuse not to — that matters more than the product on the truck. I was a woman rebuilding a work history out of almost nothing, and that job was honest miles and honest pay and people who were kind. I will not be embarrassed about a single rung of a ladder that held my weight.

The next rung was the one closest to my heart up to that point: I became a recovery advocate at a new women's residential chemical-health treatment program — working with women in treatment, women where I had been. I loved

that job. I loved it the way you love the first place that lets you turn your worst years into somebody else's help. But there was friction I could not smooth out: they gave me a hard time about creating sober activities for the women, and I could not share my passion and interact the way I wanted to. I do not write that with bitterness. I write it because it taught me something I needed for everything that came after: the fire in me was not a problem to be managed. It was a compass. When a place could not make room for it, the answer was not to shrink the fire. The answer was to keep climbing toward the place that could. There is a job after that one — the one I hold now — and it has its own chapter in this book, because it changed more than my schedule. For now, just know the ladder kept going up.

Grief climbed with me. I wish I could tell you that recovery meant the losses stopped, but that is not the world any of us live in. My foster sister Holly — the one who used to take me to her bowling alley when I was little, sit me up at the bar with a Shirley Temple full of cherries, and dress me in ruffly dresses like a doll — Holly died suddenly in 2025, in my early recovery. Suddenly, and unexpectedly, the way the worst phone calls always are. Dorothy, who raised me in those good years, was already gone. So were others — my ex-father-in-law Rick, Clint's cousin Chad, my friends Adam and Brian and Danny, my cousin Jacques and his dad, my uncles, and more names than this chapter can hold.

I had to grieve Holly *sober*. I had never really done grief that way before — grief without anesthesia, grief you sit in the middle of and feel at full strength. I found ways to cope with the grief and the loss and to work through it, and I am still

finding ways. She died while I was still new at being alive again, and there were days the two things — the new life and the sudden loss — felt like more than one heart should have to hold at once. But I held them, and I stayed, and I did not use. I am still learning to deal with the losses. Grief does not retire. You just get stronger at carrying it without letting it drive — and stronger, I have learned, does not mean it stops being heavy. It means your arms learn the weight.

The verse at the top of this chapter about bearing and believing and hoping and enduring — that is the famous love chapter, and people usually read it at weddings. I read it now and think of my family in the ICU. *Beareth all things* — they bore the sight of me in that bed. *Believeth all things, hopeth all things* — they believed and hoped for me in the one week I could do neither for myself, and they have gone on believing and hoping on the ordinary days since, when there was no crisis to justify it, just a woman rebuilding slowly. *Endureth all things* — love that outlasts a thirteen-year meth addiction and a suicide attempt and a coma is not a feeling. It is an endurance event. I am loved by people with that kind of stamina, and everything I have rebuilt stands on ground they held for me first.

There is something else about my family I need to say in this chapter, because it belongs to the story of the long way back as much as my own climbing does. I did not come from a family untouched by addiction — I came from a family marked by it on every side, the way I told you at the beginning of this book: my mother, my father, my stepdad and his people, my uncles, uncle Marty with his heroin. And it did not skip my own generation, either. Some of my siblings used

substances, too. One of them fought a pretty powerful addiction and overcame it — but it took a long time, years of it, before the victory held. I am not going to name names here. Those are their stories, and they belong to them to tell or to keep.

Here is the part that fills me with gratitude every time I think of it: to my knowledge, most of the people I am talking about — if not all of them — have gotten sober and remained sober. The family that addiction ran through like a river is, one hard-won life at a time, becoming a family that recovery runs through. I do not say that lightly. I know what it cost every one of them, because I know what it cost me.

And then there are my children. Two of my children have not struggled with addiction, and I thank God for that more than I can say. But my oldest daughter has. Kayla dealt with a powerful opioid addiction — heroin. The same kind of chain her uncle wore. The same kind her mother wore, in a different form. And Kayla has overcome it. Let that sit a moment, because I have sat with it often: the chain that ran down through my family, generation after generation, met a daughter who broke it — and a mother who broke it — and it is breaking still. That is what restoration actually looks like. Not one woman in a hospital bed deciding to live. A whole family, one soul at a time, deciding the story does not have to end the way it started.

Along the way, I learned the disciplines that hold a rebuilt life together, and I offer them to you the way they were given to me — not as theory, but as load-bearing walls. Sleep, and guarding it like it matters, because it does. Prayer, and a close relationship with God — quiet time where I can listen to Him

speak to me in the way He speaks to me. Hydration. Exercise. Caring for myself mentally and emotionally, on purpose, not when I get around to it. Boundaries — not allowing people to push me around, mistreat me, disrespect me, or use me; standing up for myself, finally, after a lifetime of not knowing I was allowed to. Healthy relationships. Doing the right things when nobody is watching. Being an example to my children and my grandchildren. Balance — with work, and with the busyness of life, which will eat a recovery whole if you let it. Quality time with my family, and making memories on purpose. An organized, clean home instead of the chaos I used to live in. And leaving the old behaviors where God buried them: the gambling, the stealing, the breaking of laws — the whole machinery of the old life — replaced, day by day, with being law-abiding, truthful, honest. A woman of good character. I am not describing a poster. I am describing Tuesdays. Mine.

And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten. I have read that promise both ways, and I have settled on this: God does not restore the years by giving them back. They are gone, and I do not pretend otherwise — the years with my children I cannot redo, the years Holly is not here for, the years the locust ate down to the stem. He restores them by making the years that remain worth more than the years that were taken — fuller, richer, so thick with purpose and people and ordinary holy days that the arithmetic stops working in sorrow's favor. I cannot have the thirteen years back. I would not trade the ones I am living now for them. That is restoration — not rewinding, but outweighing.

If you are early in your own long way back — if your days right now are treatment and applications and grief and dishes, and none of it feels like a testimony yet — I want you to hear this from somebody further down the same road: there is always a chance while we are alive. We can always change things. We can always build our relationship back with God and have that closeness with Him that heals all wounds — because I believe those wounds *can* heal; I am not hoping it in the abstract, I am reporting it — and it gives us strength beyond our understanding, and peace beyond our understanding. The ordinary days are not the waiting room of your new life. They are your new life, arriving at the speed of faithfulness. Do not despise them. I did the time in the gas station and the delivery truck and the grief, and I would not trade those days now, because they are the proof — to me, on the days I need proof — that the woman in the hospital bed was not the end of anything. She was the beginning, doing her beginning the only way beginnings ever get done: one day, one rung, one small kept promise at a time.

None of it happened by accident, and none of it happened all at once. It happened the way pillars go up: one at a time, stood up straight, and balanced against the others. The next chapter is about those pillars — the four of them, and how I learned to build a life on them that would not fall down.



Jesus carrying the lamb — painted by my sister-in-law's mother. It hangs in my home.



My son David with my niece Evelyn.



Dad and Remington in the kitchen.



Dad, with Remington's dog, Nari.



My brother Eddie with Evelyn.



My mom (far right), today.



My daughter Breanna with my granddaughter Rei Aura.



My daughter Breanna.



My daughter Kayla.



My daughter Kayla.





My daughter Kayla.



My grandson.

My sister Mona with our nephew Remington.



Mona's Japanese Chins — Miko, Haru, Yoshi, and Poki.



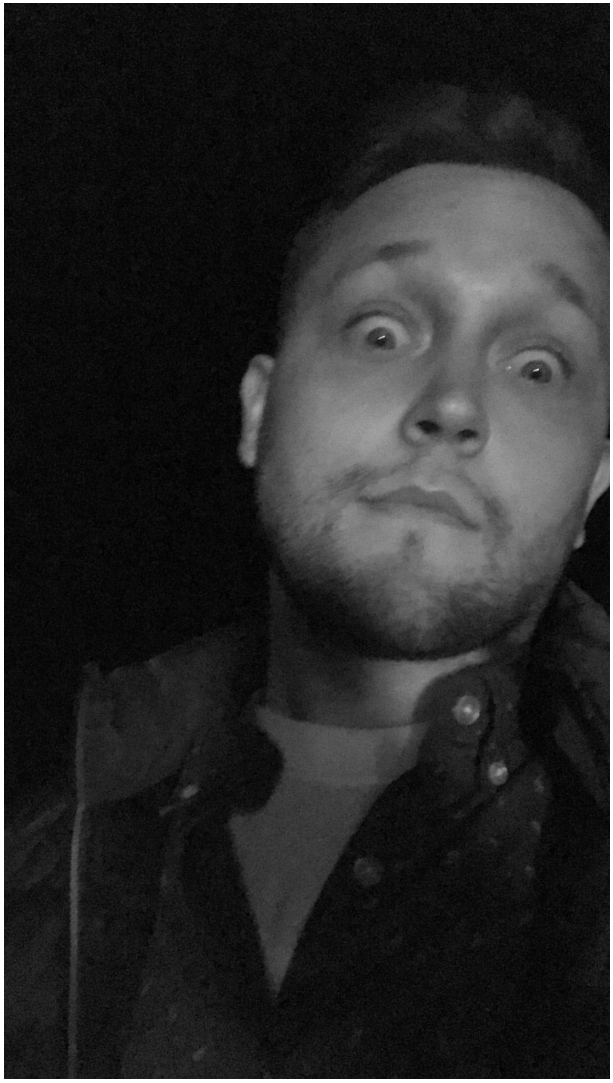
My brother John.



Clint, with Breanna and David.



My brother John (left) with my son David.



My son David.



My sister Mona, with my dad Ed.



Dad, with Remington on his wedding day.



My brother John.



David, Eddie, Yuki, Evelyn, and John — with family.



David, Mackenzie, Mona, and John.



Brandon.





My son David with my granddaughter Rei Aura.



My granddaughter Rei Aura.



My daughter Breanna with my granddaughter Rei Aura.



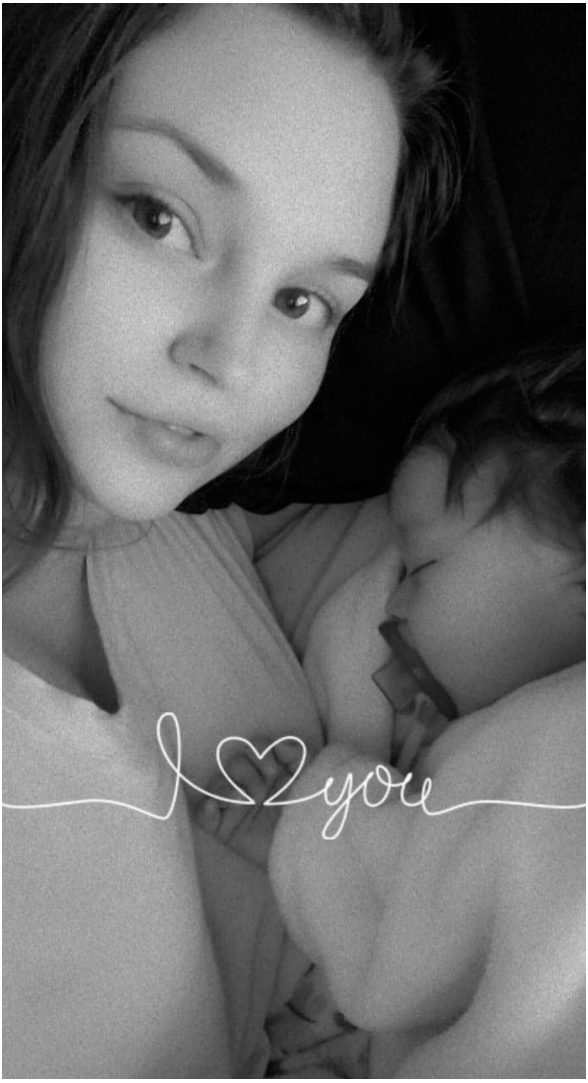
My granddaughter Rei Aura, with her mom, Breanna.



My son David with my granddaughter Rei Aura, as a baby.



My daughter Breanna with my granddaughter Rei Aura.



My daughter Breanna with my granddaughter Rei Aura.



Family, all together.



My son David with his wife, Kassandra.



David with Kassandra.



David and Kassandra, at their wedding.



David and Kassandra, with me.



At David's wedding, November 2024 — Breanna giving the toast, with me, David, and Kassandra. I was already very sick, just months before the hospital.



David and Kassandra, cutting their wedding cake.



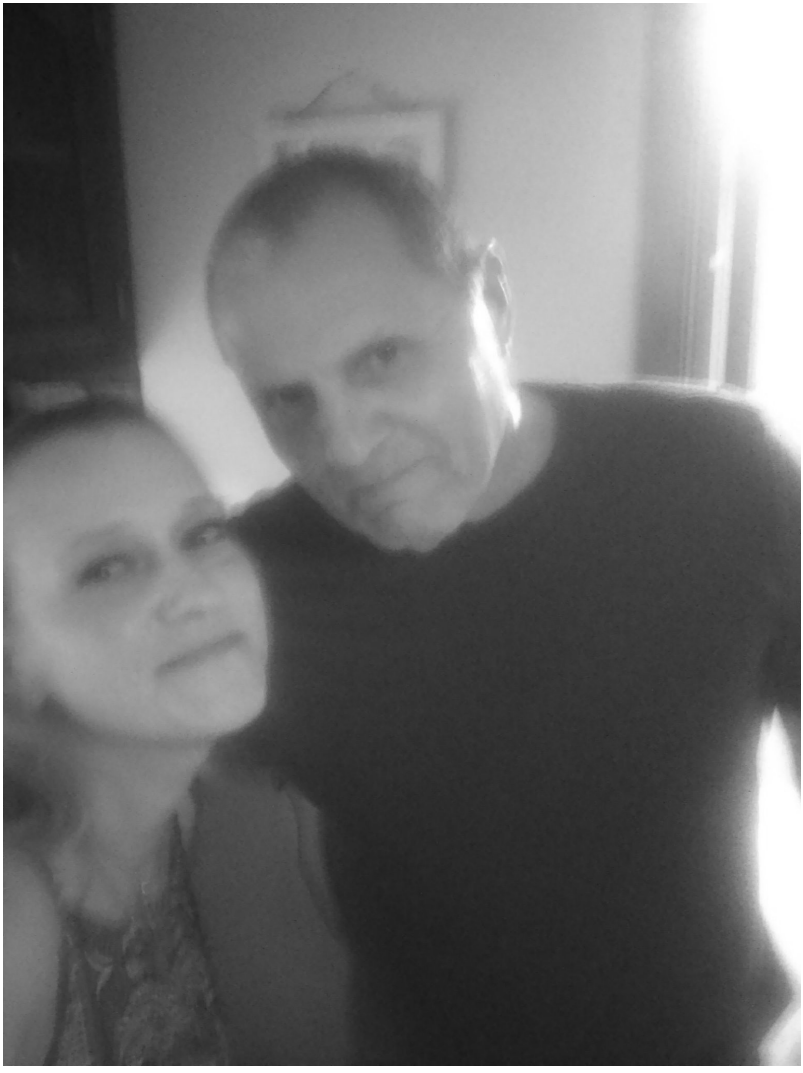
Family, two months after I came home from the hospital.



David and Kassandra.



David and John.



Me, with my dad.

A Poem for This Chapter

Nobody photographs the long way back.
A woman gets up. A woman walks herself into treatment —
no court order, her own two feet —
and stays five months, and finishes.
Then the ladder: a gas station counter,
other people's homes to care for, deliveries across the Twin Cities,
rung by rung, kept promise by kept promise.
It doesn't look like a miracle from the outside.
It looks like Tuesday.
But every ordinary day is a day the old story said I'd never have —
the years the locust ate, handed back one at a time.

THEN — AND NOW

What God Has Done

THEN — the winter of 2025

- Found unresponsive on January 29, 2025 — in a coma, on life support, with a Do Not Resuscitate order I had signed myself.
- A heart attack the day I woke up.
- Diabetes out of control — my A1C had climbed to 8.7.
- Thirteen years of methamphetamine, and pills before that. My body was giving out.
- No sense of smell or taste for five years.
- Smoking for thirty-five years.
- Hopeless. I hated who I had become, and I wanted my story to end.

NOW — the fall of 2026

- A1C down to 5.95.
- Blood pressure back in the normal range.
- Blood sugar steady, checked and logged.

- Clean and sober — twenty months from meth, fourteen years from alcohol.
- Quit smoking in February 2026.
- Walking every day. Sleeping through the night in my own bed.
- Working, writing books, and building a home for women like me.

I am grateful every day that He didn't let me go.

CHAPTER 14

Rebuilding the Pillars

"I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." — Philippians 4:13 (KJV)

"I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, LORD, only makest me dwell in safety." — Psalm 4:8 (KJV)

"For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." — 2 Timothy 1:7 (KJV)

When God rebuilds a life, He does not do it with one miracle and a pat on the back. He rebuilds the way you rebuild a house: foundation first, then pillar by pillar, until the structure can hold weight again.

I know, because that is the pattern of my last twenty months. God broke the chains of addiction — that was His work, and I will give Him the glory for it as long as I have breath. But a broken chain is not the same thing as a rebuilt life. After the chains came off, there was a woman standing in the middle of a lot of wreckage, and the wreckage had to be cleared, and something solid had to be built where the ruin had been. He did that too — but He did it the slow way, the

daily way, pillar by pillar. I build my foundation on the promises of God — physical, mental, emotional, spiritual. Body, mind, heart, and spirit. Those are the four pillars of my life now, and everything I am building stands on them.

Let me show you each one, because maybe you are standing in your own wreckage today, and you need to know that a life can be this organized on the other side of addiction — not perfect, but held up.

The Body. For years, my body was the last thing I cared for and the first thing I spent. By the end, it was giving out on me — sickness on top of sickness, diabetes, a heart that had started acting up long before it stopped the day I woke up. I treated my body like it was disposable, and it nearly believed me.

Now I care for it like it belongs to somebody. I protect my sleep, because I have learned that a rested body is part of a sober life — I lay me down in peace and sleep, and that is not laziness, that is trust: *thou, LORD, only makest me dwell in safety.* I drink my water. I move my body. I take my medicines as prescribed — all of them, on time. And in February of 2026, I quit smoking, after about thirty-five years of it. I had smoked since I was thirteen years old — a habit older than some of my friendships — and I laid it down for good. Thirty-five years. If you had told the woman in that hospital bed that within a year she would lay down cigarettes for good, she would have laughed at you, if she'd had the strength to laugh. The body pillar is not vanity. It is gratitude, practiced daily, for the body God handed back to me when He didn't have to.

Let me give you the numbers, because the numbers tell this pillar's story plainer than I can. Then: my A1C was 8.7. My

blood pressure ran about 160 over 90 on average, and the bottom number was higher than that most of the time. My resting heart rate sat up in the 80s and 90s. My liver enzymes were not good, and the scan said the same.

Now: when my A1C was checked in June of 2026, it was 5.95. My liver levels have gone back to normal. My blood pressure readings through this fall have run from 98 to 123 over 62 to 85, and my resting heart rate sits in the low-to-mid 60s. I still work at it every day — cardio worked into most of my daily routine, care with what I eat — and when my A1C is rechecked in December, I am hoping for even more positive news.

I do take medications for my heart — metoprolol, lisinopril, and atorvastatin — and I take them exactly as prescribed, every day. With my numbers dropping more and more, my doctor is considering taking me off of them. But hear me carefully on this, because it matters: that is not something that should ever be done without your doctor's guidance. If you come off medications like these suddenly, you can have a rebound effect, where your blood pressure and your pulse shoot right back up. I am not advising anyone to stop taking medications, and I am not advising anyone to refuse medications that are recommended to them. Back when I was diagnosed, I chose not to take the diabetes medication and to try diet and exercise instead — I chose that, and I have said it plainly in this book. That doesn't mean it will work for everyone. It doesn't mean it should be anyone else's choice. It was mine.

And here is what I believe about how it all happened — the sugar coming down, the liver made right, the heart settling into a slower, steadier beat. I did my part: the meals, the miles, the medicine taken on time. But most of the healing, if not all of it, came from prayer — and from God's healing hands. The same hands that would not let me go in that hospital have been rebuilding this pillar ever since.

The Mind. Addiction had my thoughts running wild for years — lies on a loop, shame on repeat, every worst thought treated like it was the truth. A renewed mind does not happen by accident. I stopped letting my thoughts run wherever they wanted and started checking them against truth — God's truth, and the plain facts of the life He has given me back. *For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.* A sound mind. I claim that verse like a deed to property. When fear shows up talking like it owns the house, I answer it: fear is not from God, and it does not get to make my decisions. I have learned to care for myself mentally — to notice when my thinking starts sliding back into the old grooves, and to haul it back to what is true.

The Heart. Here is something I say everywhere I go, and I want it in this book exactly the way I say it: recovery isn't just about getting sober. It's about healing the trauma underneath, changing how you live, and rebuilding your life on a stronger foundation. Getting sober is the first step. The real work is healing, rebuilding, and learning to live on stable ground.

The heart is where the trauma underneath lives. So now I tend my emotions instead of stuffing them or obeying them. I name what I feel. I pray through it. Feelings are real, but they

are weather, not orders — they pass over a house that is built solid, and they do not get to tear it down. Living the addicted life hurt me in a way I am still learning to say out loud: it hurts us, and affects us in a negative way, to live against our own morals and beliefs — doing things that aren't who we really are, day after day, until we can't stand the sight of ourselves. Healing the heart means I don't have to live against myself anymore. The woman inside and the life outside finally match.

The Spirit. This pillar holds the other three. Time with God, every day, non-negotiable — quiet time where I listen to Him speak to me in the way He speaks to me, and praise Him for all that He does and all that He provides. If we seek Him, we will find Him. I have found that to be true on the best days of my recovery and on the hardest ones, and the hardest ones are exactly when the pillar proves what it can hold.

Here is the truth underneath all four: God gives me the strength every day. He helps heal my body, heal my mind, give me hope, and be my solid foundation. Not one of these pillars stands on my willpower. I ran on willpower for years, and willpower was the first thing addiction ate. These pillars stand because every day I hand the whole structure back to the One who is building it. And this is what I have learned about that closeness with God: it heals all wounds, and it gives us strength beyond our understanding, and peace beyond our understanding. Not strength I can explain. Not peace that makes sense on paper. Beyond understanding — His, poured into a life that used to have neither.

Rebuilding the pillars also changed how I let people treat me. In the addiction years I had become someone who lied and

manipulated — and also someone who could be pushed around, mistreated, disrespected, and used, because deep down I didn't believe I deserved better. A sound mind and a tended heart set boundaries. I have learned to stand up for myself — kindly, honestly, and without apology — and to build healthy relationships with people who treat me the way God says I am worth being treated. Boundaries are not walls to keep love out. They are the fence lines that keep the pillars standing.

And if you are early in this — if your pillars are still lying in the rubble — hear the other thing I tell people, because I lived it: give yourself one short season to put yourself first. Heal what hurts, rebuild your foundation — and the rest of your life can change. One short season. That is what treatment was for me, and what the months after it were: a season where getting well was the whole job. You are not being selfish. You are pouring a foundation. Everything else in your life is going to stand on it.

If you want to know what the pillars look like with their sleeves rolled up, it looks like an ordinary day. I wake up and I give the day to God before the day gets its hands on me. I eat like a woman who plans to live. I move my body, I drink my water, I take my medicines. When a lying thought shows up — and they still show up — I check it against the truth instead of letting it move in. When a hard feeling rises, I name it and pray through it instead of feeding it or fleeing it. I do my work heartily. I come home to a house that is clean and ordered instead of chaos, because I learned that chaos outside becomes chaos inside. And at night I lay me down in peace and sleep, in

a body that is cared for, with a mind that has been told the truth, a heart that has been tended, and a spirit that has been fed. That is not a glamorous day. It is a *held-up* day. Twenty months of held-up days is how a ruin becomes a residence.

I have also learned how the pillars talk to each other. Let the body go — skip the sleep, skip the care — and the mind starts lying by noon. Let the thoughts run wild and the heart floods next. And underneath every lean is usually the same root: the spirit pillar got crowded out by a busy day. So I don't wait for a collapse to make repairs. I check the pillars the way you'd walk around a house you love, looking for what needs attention while it's still a small fix. That is the difference between the old me and the new me. The old me waited for the whole structure to fall before she admitted anything was wrong. The new me maintains. In the last twenty months, I paid off my debt. All of it — the wreckage of maxed-out cards and unpaid years, the credit I had destroyed one desperate purchase at a time. I paid it with the same hands that once stole food to survive. I was approved for a home loan — a sentence that would have been science fiction to the woman who used to be denied every apartment she applied for. And then, with a clear head, I decided on purpose to wait on the house, and bought a dependable car instead — my 2023 RAV4 — because stable transportation protects the job that pays for everything. Do you hear that? That is strategy. That is a woman thinking three moves ahead about her own life. Addiction had stolen that woman. Recovery gave her back. That is what *I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me* looks like with its work clothes on: not a

slogan, a spreadsheet — bills paid, plans made, decisions weighed by a sound mind in a settled heart.

Now let me tell you the two convictions that hold this whole chapter — this whole book — together.

The first is this: Recover loudly. I love that saying, and I'll tell you what it means to me. Share your story. Let your recovery be known, so others who are suffering silently in the grips of addiction can have hope — and hold on to your hope when they don't have hope of their own — so they can see that it is possible, get strength from it, and start to rebuild their own solid foundation. I suffered silently for years. Silence nearly killed me. So now I am loud — not for attention, but so that somebody sitting in the dark can hear a voice from the other side of it and think, *if God did it for her...* That is why I have to keep going. That is why I have to keep trying. That is why I have to keep sharing my story — so that others who have lost hope can maybe feel that hope again, and know that it's not too late.

The second is its twin: find your purpose and your meaning. When you start living life with intention, doing things selflessly to help improve the lives of others, it gives you purpose. It gives you meaning. It gives you another day and another reason to stay strong. Service work is powerful because it gives you strength while giving others strength. They do not have to be family or friends. They do not even have to be someone you have met. They could be someone sitting quietly, trying to find their way — and maybe your words and your hope can reach them, and let them feel the love you got to feel along the way, from the people who didn't

give up on you.

That is what this book is. That is what my work is. That is what the rest of my life is.

And I will tell you one more thing about pillars, because I learned it by living it: they are not poured once and forgotten. A pillar you neglect will lean. The chapters after this one are about the keeping — the daily, ordinary, unglamorous work of holding these four pillars balanced. But the building itself? The building is the miracle I get to point at and say: God did that. With these hands. In this lifetime. Starting from a hospital bed and a signed piece of paper that said *let her go*.

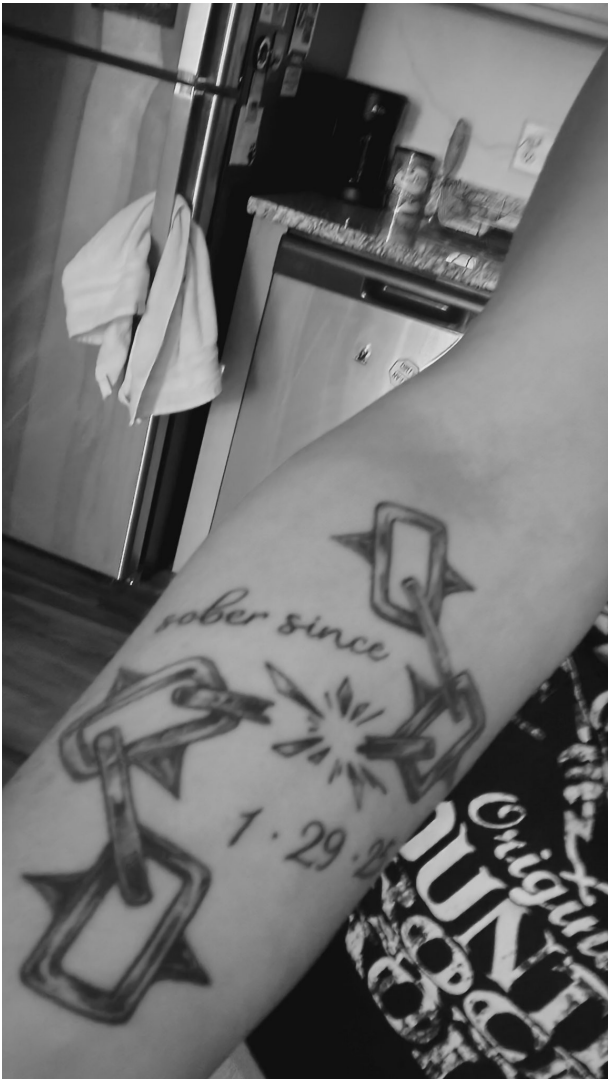
Four pillars. Stable ground. New life. And underneath all of it, the only foundation that has ever held me: Jesus Christ, and the promises of God.



Me, today.



Me, in the car.



'Sober since 1.29.25' — the chain, breaking, on my right forearm.

A Poem for This Chapter

A broken chain is not a rebuilt life.
After the wreckage, God built the slow way:
a foundation on His promises,
then pillar by pillar — Body. Mind. Heart. Spirit.
Sleep like it matters, because it does.
A sound mind, guarded.
A heart learning peace.
A spirit that stays close to the One who held me.
Built my foundation on the promises of God —
now it's the frame of my life.
What's written on my arm is Sober since 1-29-2025,
in broken chains I never have to wear again.
Four pillars. Stable ground. New life.

CHAPTER 15

A New Name for a New Life

"And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men." — Colossians 3:23 (KJV)

For most of my life, my name came with a file.

Say my name in the wrong office and up it would come: the record, the charges, the years. I was denied for housing. I was denied for employment. I paid application money I didn't have, for doors that were never going to open, and walked away asking myself why I even bothered. When doors close on you that many times, you start to believe the file is the person. I believed it. I believed my name was the worst thing about me.

God gave me a new life, and with it, He is giving my name back — washed, rebuilt, and put to work. This chapter is about that work: what my hands do now, and who they do it for.

When I got out of the hospital, I put myself into an intensive outpatient treatment program, and I completed it — about five months of showing up, doing the work, and letting people help me get steady. I kept going to meetings for a while after that, and then I poured my focus where it belonged: into building a working life, one honest rung at a time.

Let me walk you through the climb, because every rung taught me something, and none of them were beneath me.

I worked part-time at a gas station — humble hours, real money, earned clean. I did in-home care work, helping people with the daily tasks of living, in the places where they actually live — the unglamorous, holy work of showing up in somebody's kitchen and somebody's hard morning and being useful there. I did delivery work around the Twin Cities, driving routes to homes and stores, and people were good to me along the way — a kindness I do not forget.

I want to pause on those rungs for a second, because somebody reading this is ashamed of their rung. Don't be. There is no honest work that is small work when it's done heartily, as to the Lord. A shift is a shift. A route is a route. A stranger's dishes washed with dignity in their own home is ministry if you do it like it matters — and it matters. God rebuilt my working life the same way He rebuilt everything else: not by dropping me at the top of a ladder, but by teaching me to climb one honest rung at a time and not despise any of them. Then I worked supporting women in a residential treatment program, and I loved that work with my whole heart — but I hit a ceiling there. They gave me a hard time about creating sober activities for the women to do — imagine

that, being corrected for trying to give recovering women something joyful to fill the hours that used to be filled with using. My passion is creating things that give people in recovery joy and momentum, and that passion didn't have room to breathe. I could not share what I had in the way I knew it needed to be shared.

I tell you that because somebody reading this is standing at a ceiling right now, wondering if it means they're finished. It doesn't. It means God is still moving you toward the place where your whole story — all of it, even the parts in the file — becomes the qualification instead of the disqualification.

Today, my work is in re-entry. I help men rebuild their lives after prison. I want you to sit with that a moment. The woman who labored in a hospital with an ankle monitor on, who was convicted in three counties, who knows the inside of a workhouse and the weight of a record — that woman now spends her days handing other people the next true thing. I have sat exactly where the men I help are sitting: in facilities, in courtrooms, in waiting rooms, wondering if anybody would ever hand them a real chance. I know what it is to need someone to meet you where you are and walk with you a ways. So that is what I do. I do it heartily, as to the Lord — because it was never really about an employer or a paycheck. It is a calling, and I answer it every day with gratitude.

I have a passion and a fire in me to reach out and help other people see that it can be done — that there is hope. Never to lose hope. With God all things are possible. I want to reach people and guide them and support them and meet them where they are at, and hold their hand and walk with them a

ways. That is not a job description. That is the shape of the rest of my life.

And here is why somebody like me can do this work in a way a textbook never could: I cannot be shocked, and I cannot be fooled, and I cannot look down. There is no rock bottom a man can describe to me that I have to imagine. I have lived in the country he is describing. When I tell him it is possible to come back — that the chains can break, that the record is not the end of the story, that God is not finished with him — I am not quoting a pamphlet. I am a witness. Peer support works because hope is contagious when it has a face, and mine is a face that has been where he is.

That word — *peer* — matters to me. I am not standing above the people I help, and I am not standing apart from them. I am a peer because my life had to be rebuilt from the ground up too. The credential didn't make me somebody new; it recognized somebody God had already remade. There is a difference between reading about the valley and having walked through it with the shadow on your own shoulders. The people I work with can tell the difference in about thirty seconds. So can I. It's why I don't have to perform hope for them. I just have to show up, one more day, living proof in work clothes.

And here is the date I will never get over. On January 29, 2026, I was certified as a Certified Peer Recovery Specialist — a credential that says, in official ink, that my lived experience is worth something to people who are trying to live through what I lived through. January 29. Exactly one year to the day after I was found unresponsive — January 29, 2025, the day

somebody found me and I began, though I didn't know it yet, to come back. One year apart. The same date. I did not plan that. I could not have planned that. That is God's handwriting, and I tear up every time I see it.

And I wrote books. In twenty months, I wrote books — because recovering loudly is easier when you can hand somebody a chapter at 2 a.m.

Unyielding Grace is my testimony — the story of coming through: the addiction, the coma, the God who said *not yet*. I wrote it for the person who believes they have gone too far and done too much to ever be reached. You haven't. I am the proof, and the book is my witness.

Rebuilding the Pillars: Breaking the Chains is about the rebuilding itself — how a life comes back together on God's foundation, pillar by pillar, when the chains are broken but the structure is still down.

The Balanced Path: A Holistic Compass for Lifelong Recovery is for the whole-person work of staying well — because getting sober is the first step, and the real work is healing, rebuilding, and learning to live on stable ground, in your body, your mind, your heart, and your spirit, all of it held in balance.

The Four Pillars series is a ninety-day journey in three books — *Laying the Foundation*, *Raising the Pillars*, and *Standing Strong* — a day-by-day foundation for someone starting the rebuild, the same honest, steady work I had to do, laid out one day at a time so nobody has to wonder what to do next.

And *Rebuilding the Man* I wrote for the men coming home from prison — the men I work with, whose road I know from the inside. It began as a workbook, and it has grown into a full reading edition too, because some men need a book that talks to them straight instead of one that hands them homework. It exists because a man sitting in a re-entry house at midnight deserves a book that speaks to him like his life is worth rebuilding. Because it is.

Each one of those books exists because somebody specific needed it, and I refused to let them sit in the dark I used to live in.

And then there is the book you are holding — *Not Yet* itself, my whole story, the one Dorothy told me to write before almost anyone believed there would be a story worth the telling. I wrote it last because it needed the others finished first: I had to live the ending before I could write the beginning honestly. If you have read it to this page, you already know whose it is. It's for the one who signed the papers on their own life. Friend, put the pen down. God has a different draft.

And here is the beautiful mathematics of it: a book can sit quietly in a room I will never enter, with a person I will never meet, at the exact hour they need it. I learned a long time ago that the people we reach don't have to be family or friends, or even someone we have met. They could be someone sitting quietly, trying to find their way — and maybe my words and my hope can reach them there. Every book I write is a chair pulled up beside a stranger at 2 a.m. I may never know your name, friend. But I wrote it like I knew your night.

So here is my new name, and I will say it plainly: I am Angela. I am a woman who was counted out — by systems, by circumstances, and for a long time by herself — and who now holds a credential, a calling, and a stack of books with her name on them, all of it aimed at one thing: helping the next person up. The file is still a fact. It is just not the headline anymore. The headline is what God did with the woman in the file.

It reminds me of something God has always done. In the Bible, when He gets ready to do a new thing in a person's life, He doesn't just hand them a new assignment — sometimes He gives them a new name to go with it, because the old one doesn't fit where they're going. Nobody handed me a certificate with a different name on it. But I am not who I was, and everybody who meets me now meets the new woman first. The old Angela's name was a warning. The new Angela's name is an introduction — to a God who rebuilds people and then sends them back for the others.

If your name comes with a file too, hear me: that file is not your name. *Whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord* — and watch Him give you work that your past can't disqualify you from, because your past is exactly what He built it for.

A Poem for This Chapter

For most of my life my name came with a file.
Say it in the wrong office and up it came:
the record, the charges, the years.
Now my name comes with a calling.

The hands that once stole, now serve;
the story that once disqualified me
is the very thing that qualifies me
to sit with someone still suffering.
I work heartily, as unto the Lord,
and He sends me back —
back for the ones still where I was,
carrying a light I did not light myself.

CHAPTER 16

The Cats Who Waited

"A righteous man regardeth the life of his beast." — Proverbs 12:10 (KJV)

"Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father." — Matthew 10:29 (KJV)

No rebuilding story of mine is complete without the cats.

Their story starts with their mother. Boots was my son David's cat. Boots went missing once, and when she was found, she was injured — blind in one eye, walking in circles, hurt in her head. David worked long hours and wasn't sure she would make it, and he asked me to take her in and care for her. So I did.

And to my surprise, Boots was pregnant.

She had three beautiful kittens: Blaze, Minnie, and Houdini. An injured cat, taken in by a woman who was not doing well herself, got through it and brought three new lives into the world in my home. I have had those boys since the very first day they were born — before their eyes were open,

before they could do anything but eat and sleep and be warm. People talk about the family you choose. These three were chosen for me, dropped into my life by a hurt cat who needed help, and they became family the ordinary way: by being there, every day, while life happened.

Here is the part I tell carefully, because it matters to me that it's told right. In that season, I was still using drugs. I was not doing well. I had a hard enough time taking care of myself, let alone four cats. And so I did the one responsible thing addiction left me able to do: I found Boots a home — someone who had the time and the ability to be around for her and care for her the way she deserved. I made sure Boots landed somewhere cared for. Even then. Even at my worst, when I was failing at almost everything, somewhere underneath all of it the woman who loves was still alive, and she made sure that cat was safe. I hold onto that. It tells me God never let the real me go all the way under.

The kittens stayed with me. And they stayed through everything that came after — the worst years, the chaos, the decline, all of it — small warm living things who did not know or care what their person had done that day, only that she was theirs.

I need to tell you what that meant, because it's the heart of this chapter. An animal's love doesn't keep accounts. Minnie and Houdini and Blaze never once weighed the woman who fed them against the woman the police reports described. They knew one thing: I was theirs, and they were mine. Looking back, I believe God left me those three little witnesses on purpose — creatures who loved me at the exact pitch of

love I could not give myself, in the years when I hated how I looked and hated who I had become. They were a small, daily reminder that I was still a person who could be loved. Even at my lowest, I could get down on the floor with them, and for a few minutes the world was only as big as three kittens and the woman trying, in the middle of her mess, to keep them warm.

And they were still there when the worst week of my life came — when I was found unresponsive and carried into a coma, and my house stood quiet and my life hung by a thread I couldn't even feel. They waited. That's what animals do: they wait at the door of a life that has stopped, not knowing if it's coming back. Mine came back.

Blaze — my boy — died in October 2025.

He had a urinary blockage, the kind that kills a cat fast if it isn't fixed. The surgery to save him would have cost five or six thousand dollars, and I had no way to come up with that. So I sold the car I had at the time to pay for a procedure that could save him. I want to say that plainly: I sold my car for my cat, and I would do it again. The procedure was done that night. And the next day, he blocked again.

I had to let him go. He was euthanized, and I had him cremated, and I have missed him every single day since. I miss him in the ordinary moments — that's where grief lives, not in the big anniversaries. A quiet house has his name in it. A day that goes fine still has a Blaze-shaped space in it somewhere. I don't say that to be sad on the page. I say it because love that real doesn't stop being real when the one you love is gone, and anybody who has lost someone — fur or skin — deserves to hear a woman in a recovery book say so without

embarrassment: he counted. He still counts.

People who have never loved an animal through their darkest years will not understand why a cat is in this book's chapter of grief. People who have will not need me to explain. *Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father.* I believe that about Blaze. He did not fall without the Father seeing. He mattered to God, and he mattered to me, and grief is just what love costs when it loses its address. I pay it gladly for the years he gave me.

And I will tell you one thing about that grief that belongs in a recovery book: I grieved Blaze sober. In the old life, pain was a reason — pain was the doorway everything bad walked through. This time I felt all of it, undiluted, and I stayed. I cried and I stayed. I missed him and I stayed. That may sound like a small thing. It is not. Feeling a real loss all the way through, with clear eyes and a held-together life, is one of the proofs of the rebuilding that nobody puts on a certificate. My heart works now — which means it can break now, and mend, and keep beating.

Minnie and Houdini are still with me — brothers, four years old. Minnie is the tabby-and-white with the green eyes; Houdini is his long-haired brother. They are my emotional support animals, and I don't use that phrase lightly, because they earn the title daily.

They greet me at the door when I come home. They cuddle with me. And here is the thing that still amazes me: they seem to know when I am sad — before I say a word, sometimes before I know it myself — and they come and snuggle closer. They are talkative boys, both of them, carrying on

conversations with me in the kitchen like small furry people with opinions. Cats become family. They're by your side. They love you unconditionally. My house sounds like life because of them.

I don't think people outside this life always understand what it means that my house *sounds like life*. I have known the other kind of quiet — the quiet of a house where a woman is disappearing, the quiet I woke up from in a hospital room, the quiet of the week this whole book turns on. Now my mornings have opinions in them. My evenings have company in them. When I talk, somebody answers — in cat, admittedly, but he answers. A house with two talkative brothers in it cannot pretend to be empty, and a woman greeted at her own door cannot pretend to be unloved. They are part of how God keeps telling me, in the ordinary hours, that I am home and I am His and I am not alone in either fact.

Caring for them is also, if I'm honest, one of my disciplines. There is a version of me that could barely keep herself fed. Feeding them well, keeping their world clean and safe and calm, noticing when one of them is off and doing something about it — that is the body-and-heart work of recovery wearing a small, furry uniform. Every day I keep them, I am keeping a promise the old me couldn't have kept. Every day they thrive, they are evidence.

When I think about what "home" means now — clean, ordered, peaceful, loved-in — there are two tabby brothers right in the middle of it. They waited for me through the worst of it. Nobody told them to. Nobody could have promised them it would get better. They just stayed, the way

animals do, loving a person who was in no shape to deserve it — and on the other side of it, they got the best of me. They get the sober me, the present me, the me who comes home on time and fills the bowl and talks back when they talk to me.

Waiting is a holy thing. I know that now, because I have been waited for — by my family, who didn't give up on me; by my children, who loved me through the darkest moments of my life; by God, who never left even when I walked away from Him for years. And by two cats and their brother, in a quiet house, who treated my return like it was the most natural thing in the world. If you are still in the waiting part of somebody's story — or somebody is in the waiting part of yours — don't underestimate it. Waiting, done in love, is not nothing. Sometimes waiting is the whole bridge the other one walks back across.

A righteous man regardeth the life of his beast. I regard their lives as a trust. Caring for them — feeding them, keeping them safe, keeping them healthy, loving them on purpose — is part of my rebuilding, as surely as the paid-off debt and the books. It is proof, measured out in small daily kindnesses, that I am not who I was. The woman who once could barely keep herself alive now keeps two little lives thriving, and grieves the third like the family he was.

There is one more thing they taught me, and then I'll let them have the last word the way they always do at home — by being in the middle of everything. Minnie and Houdini loved me in the years when I could not tell you one reason anybody should. They didn't love the improved version. There wasn't one yet. They loved the woman as she was, on the floor of a life

that was falling down around all of us. That is the closest thing on this earth to the way God loved me in those same years — not waiting for me to get better before He called me His, not keeping His distance until I was presentable. Just there. Just staying. Just loving a person who had given Him every reason to walk out the door, and who instead found Him — and two tabby brothers — waiting on the other side of the door when she finally came home to herself.

He was. They are. Family.

And it all started with a hurt cat that somebody bothered to help. I have thought about that more than once, in the quiet, because it is my own story in miniature: a wounded creature, taken in when she couldn't make it on her own, who brought new life into the world under the roof of the one who took her in. God did that for me — took in a hurt woman who couldn't make it on her own, and brought life out of her that nobody saw coming. Boots, Blaze, Minnie, Houdini, and me. Taken in, every one of us. Home, every one of us. That's not a bad summary of this whole book, come to think of it. That's not a bad summary of grace.





Minnie.





Minnie, at home.

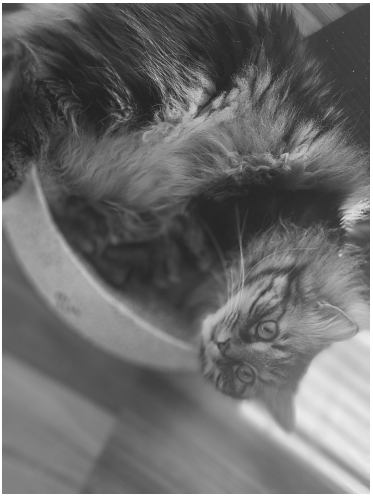




Houdini.

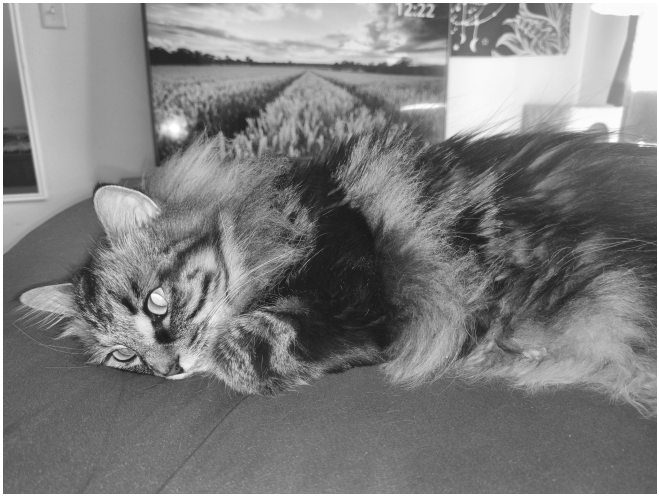


Houdini, at home.





Houdini, in his scratcher bowl.





Houdini at home.



Houdini, asleep.



Brandon, with Blaze.



Houdini and Blaze, before Blaze passed away.

A Poem for This Chapter

An injured cat came into my life, blind in one eye, walking in circles,
and left three kittens in it:
Blaze, Minnie, Houdini, mine from their very first day.
They loved the woman as she was,
not some improved version that didn't exist yet.
Blaze is gone now — I sold my car trying to save him,
and I miss him every single day.
Not one sparrow falls without the Father. Not one.
Minnie and Houdini still meet me at the door,
still press close when I'm sad.
Some wait for us on the other side of the door
longer than we ever waited for ourselves.

CHAPTER 17

Building a Home for Women Like Me

"The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound." — Isaiah 61:1 (KJV)

"Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God." — 2 Corinthians 1:3–4 (KJV)

Here is the vision, plainly, the way I would tell it across a kitchen table:

Pillars of Grace Healing Home will be a supportive sober home for women rebuilding their lives after addiction treatment — a safe, structured, grace-filled home in the Twin Cities suburbs of Minnesota, where a woman who has

completed treatment can land on stable ground and rebuild her life.

I did not dream this up in a boardroom. I dreamed it up as a woman who once needed exactly this door to be open, and found it closed.

Let me tell you what I know about closed doors, because the home starts there. In my addiction years, I was denied for housing more times than I can count. A record will do that. Application money I didn't have, gone. Rejection after rejection, until "why bother" starts to sound like wisdom. A woman in that place doesn't stop needing a door. She stops knocking. And a woman who has just finished treatment — clean, hopeful, terrified — who runs into that same wall of closed doors has somewhere terrible to fall back to, and everybody in recovery knows what it is. I am building Pillars of Grace Healing Home so that for some women, at the exact moment it matters most, there is a door in Minnesota that opens.

And let me tell you about the name, because the name is the whole theology of the place. *Grace.* Not "Second Chance House." Not "Straighten Up and Fly Right." Grace — the thing that was given to me when I had earned the opposite. A home with grace in its name is a home where no woman will be shamed for the road that brought her to the door. We will know her road. Some of us will have walked it in the same shoes. In that house, a woman's past is information, never ammunition. We build up. We affirm. We strengthen. We heal. That is not softness — ask anybody who has ever tried to stay sober in a house full of shame which one works. Shame

never rebuilt a single life. Grace built mine.

Let me tell you what I know about the woman this home is for, because I have been her. She has done the brave part — she went to treatment, she finished it, she got sober. And now she is standing at the most dangerous doorway in recovery: the one between treatment and the rest of her life. On one side of it, structure, support, people watching over her. On the other side, the same streets, the same phone numbers, the same pain she was using to escape — and very often, no safe address to write on the discharge papers. That doorway is where women get lost. I know. I have stood in it with my own bags in my hands, in my own years, and felt how cold the wind is that blows through it.

Pillars of Grace Healing Home is my answer to that doorway. Everything I build into it is an answer to a night I lived.

It is built on the four pillars, because everything true about my recovery is true about the home I want to give other women. Body: a woman lands in a place where she can rest — real sleep, real food, a calm and ordered house, the space to care for the body addiction spent. Mind: room to think new thoughts — to check the old lies against the truth, in peace, with people around her who speak life instead of shame. Heart: a grace-filled house, where the trauma underneath the addiction can be faced gently, at her pace, without anybody tearing her down — only building up, only affirming, only healing. Spirit: a home founded on the promises of God, where faith is welcomed and a woman can rebuild her closeness with Him, because I believe with everything in me

that He is the foundation that lasting recovery stands on.

There will be structure — a home like this needs it, and women coming out of treatment are steadier with it — and there will be a presence in the house holding that structure, so that nobody is doing the hardest year of her life unwatched-over and alone. And the teaching and encouragement in that house will come from people who have lived it. Not theory. Testimony. The same kind of hard-won, hope-carrying truth that fills this book.

Picture a day in that house, the way I picture it. A woman wakes up in a safe bed, in a quiet room, in a body that slept — maybe the first real sleep of her new life. She starts her day gathered instead of scattered, with time to be quiet with God if she wants it. She lives her hours inside a rhythm that holds her while her own rhythm is still healing: honest structure, honest work on herself, honest rest. She is spoken to like a person of worth, because she is one. She tells her story in that house when she's ready — out loud, to people who nod instead of flinch — and something in her unclenches, maybe for the first time. And one night she realizes she has gone a whole day without white-knuckling it. Then a week of those days. Then she is helping the newer woman find the coffee and find her courage, both. That is the house. That is the whole vision, and it never stops moving me, because every piece of it is a piece of what I needed and mostly didn't get — gathered, at last, under one roof, on purpose, for her.

And let me be plain about one thing, because honesty is a pillar too, even if it's not one of the four: we do not offer therapy, and we are not licensed therapists. We will encourage

every woman in that home to have a therapist, and we will build a home where she can do her healing work in peace — but we will never pretend to be what we are not. A home's job is to be a home: safe, structured, loving, and true.

I am not building this alone. Two women I trust stand with me on the founding board — Sheila Lockler and Sharice McMorris — women who have trained and prepared alongside me and who carry this vision in their own hearts. A house like this should be built the way it will be run: by people who love the women coming, before the women ever arrive.

Now let me tell you why I believe — not hope, *believe* — that this home will do what I say it will do. *Blessed be God... the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.* Read that again slowly. The comfort God gave me in my tribulation was never meant to stop with me. It was seed corn. Every night I spent in the life, every closed door, every hospital hour — God comforted me in all of it, and the comfort has an assignment: it goes, next, to the woman in the trouble I came out of. That is not a business plan. That is a Bible verse with my name in the margin.

And let me say the quiet part about the word *Healing* in our name, because it is the difference between a roof and a home. Any landlord can offer a woman a roof. Housing is a roof. A *healing home* is a place built around the belief that those wounds can heal — the trauma underneath the addiction, the living-against-your-own-morals wound, the shame wound, the grief wound. I want my journey to be one

of encouragement for people — strengthening, and healing — and I want that house to be the same thing with walls. A woman does not have to be torn down to be rebuilt in that house. She will be built up, affirmed, told the truth in love, and given the time and the covering to become who she actually is. I know the difference between being warehoused and being healed. This is a healing home.

And the comfort won't stop at our door, because comfort never does. Here's what I see, down the road: a woman lands in that house with her bags and her shaking hands. She heals. She stands. And then — because this is how God has always run His economy — *she* becomes the comfort for the next woman. The woman who was comforted in her tribulation comforts the one in hers. Some of the hands that will hold that house up in ten years are hands that are shaking tonight, and neither of us knows their names yet. That is not a hope I invented. That is 2 Corinthians, and my own life is the first exhibit.

And Isaiah said it before either of us: He anoints people to preach good tidings to the meek, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound. I have been the brokenhearted. I have been bound. Somebody is going to proclaim liberty in a house in Minnesota to women who think their story is over — and by the grace of God, it is going to be us.

And if you are neither the builder nor — yet — the woman in the bed, but someone who loves a woman like her: pray for this house. Pray for the women who will land there, by name if

you know one and by faith if you don't. Houses like this are built twice — once in prayer, and once in lumber — and the prayer version goes up first and holds the other one. I know, because my whole rebuilt life was prayed up before it was built up, by people who loved a woman most people had stopped expecting anything from. Be that person for somebody. It is not a small ministry. It might be the whole bridge.

So if you are one of those women — reading this in treatment somewhere, or in a hospital bed, or in a house that isn't safe, wondering if there is any place in this world being prepared with you in mind — I am talking to you now. Hold on. We are building it for you. There is a bed being made ready with your name unknown but your story understood. Your name is not on it yet because we haven't met — but the woman who is building that house has been exactly where you are, and she is not building it for strangers. She is building it for the woman she used to be, which means she is building it for you.

Recover with us. Come home to stable ground. Four pillars are going up in Minnesota, and there is room under that roof for your new life.

A Poem for This Chapter

I'm building a house for the woman I used to be.
A bed is being made ready —
your name isn't on it yet, because we haven't met,
but your story is understood here.
I know about closed doors; mine stands open.

The comfort I received, I mean to pass hand to hand,
the way it was passed to me.
Four pillars going up in Minnesota:
a place to land on stable ground
and rebuild a life, one honest day at a time.
Hold on. We're building it for you.

CHAPTER 18

Keeping Them Balanced

"He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" — Micah 6:8 (KJV)

"Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity." — 1 Timothy 4:12 (KJV)

A rebuilt life is not a finished life. Pillars need keeping, or they lean.

That is the honest truth I live inside now, at forty-nine years old, with twenty months of recovery under my feet: the miracle got me standing, but maintenance keeps me standing. Nobody warns you about this part in the beginning, because in the beginning you're just trying to survive. So let me warn you lovingly: getting free and staying free are two different assignments, and the second one is daily. Here is my maintenance list — the one I actually live by.

I protect my sleep. A rested body is a protected mind, and I learned the hard way what exhaustion does to my thinking. I

take my medications as prescribed — all of them, on time. That's not a small thing for a woman who once took pills to die. Taking them right, every day, is me voting for my own life in a small daily way. I drink my water and move my body. Simple things. Pillar things. I pray and take quiet time with God whether I feel like it or not — because feelings are weather, not orders, and my spirit doesn't get fed by accident. I keep my home clean and organized, because I learned that chaos outside becomes chaos inside, and I will not live in chaos anymore — not in my house, and not in my head.

I keep boundaries, and I stand up for myself — kindly, honestly, without apology. I do not allow people to push me around, mistreat me, disrespect me, or use me. The old Angela thought love meant absorbing anything. The new Angela knows that a pillar that lets everything lean on it at any angle is a pillar that falls, and takes the house with it.

I keep my life honest in the small print. The old behaviors that came with addiction — the gambling, the stealing, the law-breaking, the lying as a way of life — did not get to keep their rooms in my house. I am law-abiding. I am truthful. I tell the truth when a lie would be easier, and there are days a lie would be *much* easier. Character isn't built in the big moments. It's built in the receipts, the returned phone calls, the promises kept when nobody would know. I guard mine like it cost something, because it did — it cost me everything I lost and everything God handed back.

I balance the work with the rest. My work gives me purpose — I won't pretend it doesn't feed me. But a pillar-poured life can tip over into busyness just like it tipped

into chaos, and I have learned to watch for it. The work matters. The rest keeps me able to do the work. I make time for my family on purpose — quality time, making memories, being *in* the room and not just near it. Some days, balance means doing the whole list. Some days it means doing the few non-negotiables — God, my medicines, my rest — and having grace for the rest. Both days count. Both days are the pillars standing.

And I guard my heart with forgiveness. This one is not natural, and it is not optional — not if I want to stay free. I have learned to forgive people, even the ones who can't be in my life anymore, even the ones whose part in my story still aches to tell. Forgiving doesn't mean they get access. Some relationships stay closed because they're toxic, and that is wisdom, not bitterness. It means I pray for them. I want good things for them. I never hope bad things for them. I refuse to carry the burden of resentment, because resentment is a chain, and I have had enough of chains to last me several lifetimes. God healed a lot of my hurt, and He helped me forgive — and a heart that isn't dragging resentment around is a heart with room in it for joy.

That goes for forgiving myself, too — or at least, for answering guilt with the truth when it comes knocking, because it still knocks.

The hardest thing I still struggle with is wishing I had been a better mom. I will not pretend otherwise in my own book. I wish I would have been there — reading the bedtime stories, cuddling my babies, helping with the homework, just sitting down and being present. I wish I hadn't tried to replace the

time I wasn't spending with gifts and material things. That time is gone, and I can't go back and change those things. I still carry guilt about what my children went through seeing me in that hospital bed, knowing it was my own doing that put me there — that I had given up, and would have left them without a mom.

But here is the truth I answer the guilt with: I cannot go back. I can only be present now. And I am. I am available. I show up. And I did not rebuild these relationships alone, because the people in them never gave up on me — not my mom, not my dad, not my sister, not my brothers, not my kids, not my granddaughter, not all the people who love me. They held hope and they loved me through the darkest moments of my life. When I think about keeping the pillars balanced, I think about that: some of the weight of my life is carried by people who refused to put me down. My job is to be worth carrying now — present, honest, here — and to carry them right back whenever it's my turn. Our relationships are better now — rebuilt, like everything else God has touched — and I am happy for that in a way that has no words big enough. My daughter Kayla is in Florida with her children, my granddaughter Jasmine and my baby grandson; I don't get to talk with her as much as my heart wants, and I hope and pray she keeps her life on track — and I have not given up on us, not for one day. My son David is in Texas, building his life. And my daughter Breanna — our relationship was strained for years, and God has definitely mended it. Mended. That is His word for what He does with torn things, and He has done it in my own family, in my own lifetime, where I can see it.

And now there are grandchildren. Rei Aura just started kindergarten — five years old, at the very beginning of everything. I want to be a grandma to my grandchildren. I want them to know me, to learn things from me, to share and make memories with me. Those memories would never have happened if God had decided it was my time to go. *I'm grateful every day that He didn't let me go.*

And I practice gratitude like it's my job, because some days it is. I am grateful every day that He didn't let me go — I don't say that once a year on the anniversary; I say it in the ordinary Tuesdays. Gratitude is a balance weight. Guilt pulls a heart one way; shame pulls it the other; gratitude sets it plumb. When I count mercies on purpose — the breath in my body, the children in my life, the granddaughter in kindergarten, the cats at the door, the work in my hands — I am not being cheerful. I am doing maintenance on the heart pillar with the best tool I own.

And underneath the whole list is the deepest balance of all, and it isn't something I *do*. It's Someone I rest in. I keep the pillars; I do not carry the house. The house is carried — *I* am carried — by hands stronger than mine, and on the days when my keeping is clumsy and my balance is off, the foundation does not move, because the foundation was never me. It is Christ who strengthens me. My part is the daily tending. His part is everything else.

So my balance, in the end, looks like Micah said it would: do justly — live honest, law-abiding, truthful, a woman of good character in the small print of an ordinary day. Love mercy — forgive freely, encourage loudly, comfort the way I

was comforted. And walk humbly with thy God — because the woman writing this book knows exactly whose hands she is standing in, and they are not her own.

One more thing balance is *not*, and I want it said before this book closes: balance is not perfection, and it is not a performance. I do not keep these pillars balanced to look like a success story. There are hard days in this new life — days my body is tired, days the guilt knocks louder, days the grief for the people and the years I lost sits down at my table uninvited. Balance doesn't mean those days don't come. It means they don't get the deed to the house. On the hard days I come back to the list, I tell the truth about where I am, I lean on God and on the people who love me, and I let the day be a hard day without letting it be a going-back day. That, too, is keeping them balanced.

And to my children and grandchildren, and to anyone watching a life like mine from the outside, wondering if a person can really change: *be thou an example* — that is the assignment I accept. An example isn't a person who never fell. An example is a person the young ones can watch *living* — in word, in how I talk; in conversation, in how I treat people; in charity, in how I love; in spirit, in faith, in purity of purpose. Rei Aura is five. She will not remember a thing about my worst years unless somebody tells her. What she will remember is her grandma — present, funny, safe, in the front row of her life, pointing her at the God who held her. That is the example I intend to be, for her and for every grandchild and great-grandchild God still has in the story. The generations after me will not inherit my addiction. They will inherit my

testimony. I have seen to the first part by God's grace; this book is me seeing to the second.

I keep them balanced through Christ who strengthens me. That was true the day I woke up. It is true this morning. And by His grace, it will be true for every morning He still has written for me — I hope there are many, many more, full of the people I love, making the good memories I almost missed.

What hasn't killed me has made me stronger. My struggles and my pain have made me more motivated and more determined to reach people who are hurting — and to not let them hurt alone. So if anything, it is all a blessing. I wouldn't change anything about my life, because then I wouldn't be who I am. I am grateful to God every day for the lessons I have gotten to learn in my time here on earth. I wouldn't be able to understand people, or relate to them, or empathize with them, if I hadn't gone through the hard things I have. And I guess sometimes we have to go through those hard things alone — so that we'll reach for God, so we'll lean on Him, and we'll realize that we need to build our foundation on the promises of God.

And one thing I will never do is look at another struggling person from above, as if my sobriety made me taller than them. It didn't. This sobriety — today's clear-eyed, steady, ordinary day of it — is not something I achieved and now own. It is a gift, handed to me fresh by God this morning, the same as it was handed to me yesterday, the same as it will have to be handed to me tomorrow. A gift can't make you proud of yourself. It can only make you grateful — and tender toward the person still waiting for theirs.

So I meet people where they are. Not where I wish they were. Not where they "should" be by now. Where they *are* — in the treatment center, in the courtroom hallway, in the kitchen at 3 a.m. I take their hand, and I help them up, and I keep hold while they find their footing, until they are standing on stable ground themselves. And then I get to watch them find what I found: true joy. Real happiness. A life lived fully instead of survived. And when they're strong enough, they turn around and reach back for the next hand. The lifted become the lifters. That's how this spreads — hand to hand to hand, everywhere it can go — carrying encouragement, and light, and hope, through faith in Jesus Christ.

And why do I believe a story told out loud can carry that kind of power? Because it is how faith itself arrives: *"So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." — Romans 10:17* Somebody has to say it for somebody else to hear it. Somebody said it to me. What follows here is me saying it to you — His promises, in His own words, the ground I stand on.

And let me tell you where I believe sin actually starts, because it is not where most people point. Sin is doubting God. At the root of every chain I ever wore was a moment where I did not believe Him — did not believe He would provide, did not believe He would stay, did not believe His way was better than the escape I was reaching for. The Bible says it in one short clause that explains my whole thirteen years: *"...for whatsoever is not of faith is sin." — Romans 14:23* Everything I did outside of trusting Him was sin — not just the drugs and the stealing, but the doubting underneath them.

Which means faith is not a decoration on this recovery. Faith is the opposite motion of everything that destroyed me. Trusting Him — today, in the ordinary, in the hard — is the ground itself. That is why the promises come next. I do not read them as poetry. I stand on them.

THE PROMISES OF GOD

"For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us."
— 2 Corinthians 1:20

"For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end."
— Jeremiah 29:11

"And the LORD, he it is that doth go before thee; he will be with thee, he will not fail thee, neither forsake thee: fear not, neither be dismayed."
— Deuteronomy 31:8

"Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest."
— Joshua 1:9

"Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my

righteousness."

— Isaiah 41:10

"But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."

— Isaiah 40:31

"When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee."

— Isaiah 43:2

"The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit."

— Psalm 34:18

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

— Psalm 46:1

"Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and he shall sustain thee: he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved."

— Psalm 55:22

"He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honour him."

— Psalm 91:15

"I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the LORD."

— Psalm 118:17

"Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths."
— Proverbs 3:5–6

"It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness."
— Lamentations 3:22–23

"And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpiller, and the palmerworm, my great army which I sent among you."
— Joel 2:25

"The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing."
— Zephaniah 3:17

"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."
— Matthew 11:28

"Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."
— John 14:27

"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."
— Romans 8:28

"But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus."

— Philippians 4:19

"I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee."

— Hebrews 13:5

"Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you."

— 1 Peter 5:7

"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him."

— James 1:5

"Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust."

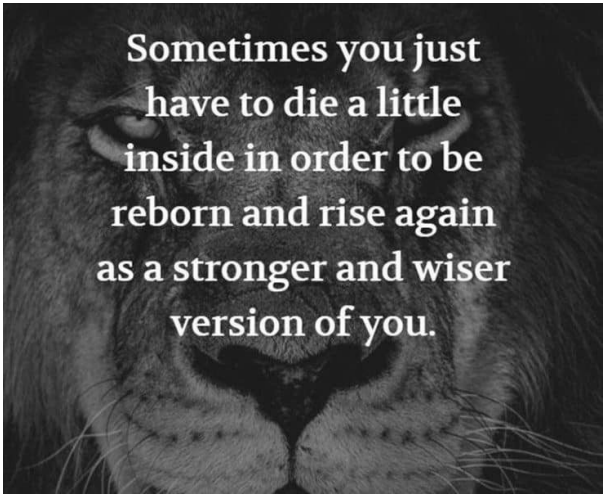
— 2 Peter 1:4

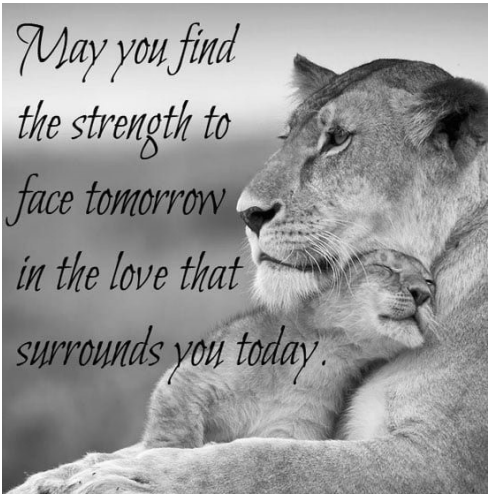


The print my dad gave me.



Family, gathered in Austin, Texas.





Two sayings I hold onto.


Angela Martini
when you choose pease
it comes with a lot of
goodbye

Me.

ANGELA MARTINI

Words I Live By

"Recovery isn't just about getting sober. It's about healing the trauma underneath, changing how you live, and rebuilding your life on a stronger foundation."

— Angela Martini

"Give yourself one short season to put yourself first. Heal what hurts, rebuild your foundation — and the rest of your life can change."

— Angela Martini

"Getting sober is the first step. The real work is healing, rebuilding, and learning to live on stable ground."

— Angela Martini

"That error was God intervening. That was God saying not yet. That was God saying it wasn't my time and He had things for me to do."

— Angela Martini

"Choosing peace comes with a lot of goodbyes."

— Angela Martini

"As long as we're alive, it's not too late."

— Angela Martini

A Poem for This Chapter

Getting free and staying free are two different assignments —
the second one is daily.
So I guard my sleep the way it guards my mind.
I take my medicine right, every day —
a small daily vote for my own life,
from a woman who once took pills to end it.
I drink my water, I walk my walk,
I make the memories I almost missed —
grandchildren who will know my face, my laugh, my God.
I'm grateful every day that He didn't let me go.
I keep them balanced through Christ who strengthens me.

EPILOGUE

As Long As You're Alive

"If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed." — John 8:36 (KJV)

"Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost." — Romans 15:13 (KJV)

I had signed the papers to be let go.

God said: *Not yet.*

Everything since February 5, 2025, has been His handwriting over my signature. The treatment, completed. The debts, paid. The credential with the date that still makes me cry. The books. The cats, purring in a clean, quiet house. The home for women that exists so far in vision and prayer and hard work, getting closer all the time. The daughter whose heart God mended back to mine. The granddaughter who started kindergarten this fall, who will grow up knowing her grandma's face, her grandma's laugh, her grandma's God.

God filled me with light again — with love, with patience, and with a desire to find a way to reach as many people as I

can. I didn't come back from that hospital room to live a small, quiet, careful life. I came back with a fire in me. Everything in these pages since the coma — every pillar, every book, every plan — is just that fire, finding its way out of me and toward somebody who is still cold.

People ask me sometimes — not in words, but in the way they look at my story — whether I would change it. The addiction. The record. The hospital bed. Here is my honest answer, and then I'll let you go: I don't think I would change anything about my life, because then I wouldn't be who I am. To really understand, to empathize, to put myself in someone's shoes, it was necessary to go through the things I have. They made me stronger. They taught me things. They made me not so quick to judge people — because everyone's in their own situation, with their own struggles and challenges. I have gotten better at loving myself and accepting myself, too, instead of nitpicking every little thing. The scars are not my shame anymore. They are my credentials. They are how I can sit with you in yours.

And you — I have been writing to you this whole book, even when I was telling my own story. You know who you are. You're the one who picked this up in a treatment center, or a jail cell, or a hospital room, or a kitchen at 3 a.m. with your hands shaking. You're the one who believes your paperwork is the last word — that the file, the record, the diagnosis, the DNR of your own hope has already decided how your story ends.

Maybe you're the woman in treatment right now, doing the bravest arithmetic of your life. Maybe you're the man

coming home, wondering if anyone will ever hand you a real chance. Maybe you're the mom who thinks she's lost her children for good — I need you to hear this part from me personally: I thought that too, in a hospital bed, with the guilt sitting on my chest like a stone. God mended things I had pronounced dead. Stay at the table. Keep showing up. Let Him work.

Whoever you are, wherever you're reading this: you are not reading the story of a woman who was better than you. You are reading the story of a woman who was *gone* — and got carried back. There is no category of "too far" in it anywhere. I checked the whole book before I handed it to you. It's not there.

Hear me, from the far side of the bed I almost died in:

As long as we're alive, it's not too late.

Not too late to get sober. Not too late to apologize, or forgive, or begin. Not too late to build your relationship back with God and have that closeness with Him that heals all wounds — the closeness that gives strength beyond your understanding, and peace beyond your understanding. Those wounds you are carrying? Those wounds *can* heal. I am not telling you what I read somewhere. I am telling you what He did in a woman who had signed her own ending.

Your paperwork does not outrank His word. He broke my chains — the ones addiction forged, the ones shame welded, the one I wear broken on my forearm to remind me — and *if the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.* Free indeed. Not free-ish. Not free on probation. Indeed.

So this is my charge to you, and then my blessing over you:

Recover loudly, friend. Let your life get noisy with hope. Share your story so the next silent sufferer can hold onto it. Find your purpose in lifting somebody else. Build your foundation on the promises of God — body, mind, heart, and spirit — and keep your pillars balanced, one honest day at a time.

And picture this, because it's the picture I want to leave in your hands: all of us, holding each other up. If we keep helping each other up, if we keep holding hands, we can reach so many — not just in my Minnesota, but around the globe, everywhere there's a kitchen at 3 a.m. and a person in it who thinks it's over. Your hand is somebody's rope someday. Mine was somebody's, because somebody's was mine. That's the whole economy of hope, and there's a place in it with your name on it.

And when you cannot hold yourself up — because those days come, even now, even for me — remember whose hands are underneath you. Underneath are the everlasting arms. They held a woman the paperwork said to let go of, and they have not set her down since.

They held me. They are holding you now.

When I chose the words for this book's cover, I called it a story of hope, of light, of the graciousness of God, and how He rebuilds our lives. I want to leave those words with you, because they are the whole book in one breath. *Hope* — because the God of hope is not finished with you. *Light* — because He filled a woman in a dark room with it, and He is not stingy with it. *The graciousness of God* — because none of this was earned, and all of it was given. And *how He rebuilds*

our lives — present tense, friend. He is still rebuilding mine. He will rebuild yours, one pillar, one promise, one morning at a time, for as long as you're alive.

And you are alive. That's the whole point. That's the title of this book, and now it's the charge over your life:

Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope.

Abound in it. There's plenty. I checked — from the bottom of the pit, all the way up here in the light.

One last thing, and it's a prayer, because people prayed me here and it's my turn: *Lord, for the one holding this book with shaking hands — be to them what You were to me. Be the hand underneath. Be the voice that says "not yet" over every paper that says "finished." Give them one short season, one true friend, one open door, and the strength for one honest day at a time. And when their story turns — and it will — let them be as loud about it as I have tried to be, so the next one can find the way by the sound. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Not yet, friend. Not yet. You're still here. So build.

— Angela Dustine Martini

If You're Where I Was

Friend, if you're holding this book in the place I was — sick of yourself, sick in your body, so far down that you've started signing your own ending — let me sit beside you a minute, because I know that chair. I sat in it. I had lost all hope. I hated who I had become, and I did the paperwork of giving up: I changed my directive and told the world, if my heart stops, let it stop.

And then the hospital got my name wrong — and because of that one "mistake," the life support I had refused is the reason I'm here to write this to you. That was God saying *not yet.* God makes that decision when it's our time to go. Not us. Not anyone else. Him.

So hear me: as long as you're alive, it is not over. I am not a woman who read about rock bottom in a book somewhere. I lived in its basement. I was the liar, the thief, the addict, the absent mom — and God rebuilt that woman anyway, one honest day at a time. If He can do it with me, He can do it with you. I don't think I would change anything about my life, because then I wouldn't be who I am — and the same God who carried me is offering you the same hands.

You don't have to fix it all tonight. Getting sober is the first step. The real work is healing, rebuilding, and learning to live on stable ground. Start there. Just don't sign your ending. Your story has a "not yet" in it too — I believe that with everything in me, and until you can believe it for yourself, you can borrow my belief. I share my story out loud so that people suffering in silence can hold on to hope and rebuild their own foundation.

I am grateful every day that He didn't let me go. Let me be grateful, one day soon, that He didn't let you go either.

God has spared my life, and He didn't stop there. He has enriched it, guided it, strengthened it, and healed it. He gave me life — and then He gave me a new one: changed, rebuilt, and fulfilled. He has blessed me, encouraged me, and provided everything I need. He has done so many things for my life — more than I could ever count.

He's been my foundation, my solid foundation in my life. He's mended my life. He's given purpose to my life. He's given meaning to my life. He's completely turned my life around. He's healed my mind, my body, my spirit, my heart, my everything.

The things he's done in my life are nothing short of miracles. I can't even count the times I have felt his presence, I have felt his guidance, I felt his wisdom, his encouragement, his love, his kindness, his mercy — I felt it all. My heart is overflowing right now with praise to him and his unyielding grace, his undying love. There are no words. I was just sitting thinking today how my life was in complete shambles, my life was totally destroyed. I had zero hope left, zero motivation to live. I didn't care where I was, I just didn't want to be here anymore — and he took all that pain away, he took the agony away, he mended every aspect of my life. He's a gracious, merciful, loving God, and I feel his love and care for me every day in my life.

I want my words to come through and to be able to soak into people's souls and hearts that are hurting out there. I want it to soak into people who are believers whose lives aren't in shambles. I want every person who reads these words to understand that with God anything is possible. The things that we could never imagine being, he can make, he can create, he can make real — he can do anything. We just have to fully trust in him, give our lives over to him, follow his lead.

A Poem for This Chapter

I had signed the papers to be let go.
God wrote over my signature: *Not yet.*
So here is my charge, from the morning side of the valley:
Recover loudly.
Tell it where people suffering in silence can hear —
your hope may be the rope somebody else holds
until their own hands are strong.
As long as you're alive, it's not too late:
not too late to change, to heal, to be happy.
Underneath are the everlasting arms.
They held me. They are holding you now.
Not yet, friend. You're still here. So build.

TO ALL WHO READ THIS

If you have read my story, you know I believe this with everything in me: lives can transform. They can change. They can heal. They can become amazing — not tidy, not perfect, but new. I am living proof of it. But I would not be telling you the whole truth if I stopped there, because my life did not change because I finally tried harder. It changed because I gave my life over to Jesus Christ and accepted Him as my personal Lord and Savior. He is the foundation everything else in this book is built on. So before this book closes, let me walk you through the most important thing I know: how to be born again.

First, why we need saving at all. The Bible says, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). All — every one of us. Sin is not just the big, obvious things. It is everything in us that falls short of God's holiness, and it separates us from Him. And it carries a cost: "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Wages are what we earn. A gift is what we could never earn — and that is what God offers.

Here is the wonder of it: God did not wait for us to clean ourselves up first. "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). And He did it for the whole world: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Whosoever. That word includes you, exactly as you are, right where you are sitting.

This is why Jesus said what He said to a religious man who came to Him at night: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Born again does not mean turning over a new leaf or joining a religion. It means God gives you a brand-new life from the inside out — "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

So how do you receive it? It is simpler than we make it, and the Bible lays it out plainly: "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Romans 10:9–10). And the promise could not be wider: "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Romans 10:13). Salvation is not something you earn — "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9). You come as a sinner who needs a Savior, and you receive Him by faith: "But as many as received him, to them

gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name" (John 1:12).

And He is not far away, waiting to see if you'll measure up. He is close, and He is knocking: "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20). All you have to do is open the door.

If you are ready — if you believe Jesus died for your sins and rose again, and you want to give your life to Him — you can pray, right now, in your own words. If it helps to have words to follow, pray something like this, and mean it from your heart:

"Lord Jesus, I believe You are the Son of God. I believe You died on the cross for my sins and that God raised You from the dead. I know I am a sinner, and I am sorry. Please forgive me. I turn from my old life, and I give my life to You. Come into my heart. Be my Lord and my Savior. Make me new, and help me live for You from this day forward. In Jesus' name, Amen."

If you prayed that and meant it, heaven rejoices over you today — and so do I. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). When I was twelve years old, someone sat with me and prayed with me, and I meant it with all my heart. I have never forgotten that day. Now you have a day like that of your own.

Here is where to begin: tell somebody what you have done — a pastor, a believing friend, anyone who will rejoice with you. Find a Bible-believing church and get connected; you were never meant to walk this out alone. Start reading in the

Gospel of John, a little every day, and talk to God in prayer the way you'd talk to someone who loves you — because you are. And when questions come, or hard days come, remember: the same God who saved you will keep you. He didn't let me go. He won't let you go either.

— Angela



Smoke on the Water: Alien Edition — the family comic I created.



'Window Shopping' — me and Sharice, the way I imagine us.



'The Adventures of Angela and Sharice.'

FOR MY CHILDREN

The Little Things — For My Kids

There are things about me my kids might not know — not the big story, just their mom. So here they are, in one place, for Kayla, David, and Breanna, and for the grandchildren who will one day wonder who Grandma really was.

My favorite color is turquoise. My favorite number used to be seven. Now it's 444. People who follow angel numbers say 444 is a sign of protection and stability — that your angels are near, that you're on the right path, and that the foundation you're building is solid. Four: the number of foundations. I did not choose that number by accident, and when I learned what it meant, I laughed out loud. Of course. Of course my number is the foundation number. Four pillars. Stable ground. God has a sense of humor, and He has been leaving me that number like a note on the counter: *what you're building is solid, daughter. Keep going.*

My favorite season is summer, and my favorite month is July — David's month, as it happens. But I love the fall too, for the leaves: I could watch the colors change all day and

never get tired of it. Change can be beautiful. I am proof, and so is every tree in Minnesota.

I love Middle Eastern food. Tabbouleh and hummus — I could eat them every day, and some weeks I nearly do. My drink is an iced decaf coffee with half and half.

One of my favorite shows is *The Why Files*, on YouTube, hosted by AJ Gentile — a show that digs into mysteries, UFOs, ancient history, and unexplained things, asking questions with a skeptical mind and a sense of humor (and a wisecracking goldfish named Hecklefish, who might be my favorite co-host on television). I have always been curious about the strange and the unexplained. And I love *America's Got Talent*, for the purest reason: I love watching people succeed. I love their smiles when the crowd stands up. I love seeing a gift somebody carried quietly for years finally performed in front of a huge audience. I always feel like I would have too much fear to do that myself — stand up there, exposed, and offer the world my one gift, knowing they might not clap.

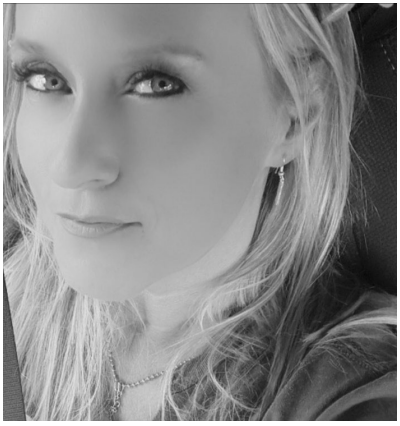
And then I remember: I do it every week. My stage is a small room — up to five men rebuilding their lives, and me, teaching for the first time, with my PowerPoints and my worksheets and my story. No golden buzzer. No crowd. Maybe I did find my stage. Maybe the audience was never supposed to be huge. Maybe it was supposed to be the one person in the room who needed to hear it.

That may be you, reading this. So from my stage to yours: your gift is worth offering. Offer it. Offer it scared. Offer it anyway.

ABOUT

About the Author

Angela D. Martini writes from lived experience. After years of addiction, she was found unresponsive in January 2025 and woke from a coma determined to rebuild her life on a new foundation. Today she is the founder of Pillars of Grace Healing Home, a healing home for women in recovery being built in Minnesota, and she works in re-entry services, helping men rebuild their lives after prison. Her books — including her testimony, Unyielding Grace, and the Four Pillars 90-day workbook series — offer readers the same honest, day-by-day tools she used herself. Four pillars. Stable ground. New life.



STAY CONNECTED

Connect With Angela

Thank you for reading my story. Here's where to find me, my books, and the work God is building:

Watch — Pillars of Grace Healing Home on YouTube
My testimony, encouragement, and daily Shorts for the road back.

Read — All of Angela's Books on Amazon
NOT YET, Unyielding Grace, and the Four Pillars workbooks.

Shop — Stable Ground by Angela Martini
Faith-and-recovery shirts and gifts — every design carries a true story.

Visit — Pillars of Grace Healing Home
The healing home for women in recovery we're building in Minnesota.

See the Vision — Programs & the Home We're Building
The Four Pillars program and the home taking shape, room by room.