

*Forgiving
the Unforgivable*

*To my brother Chuck and my sister Chris, who
can say with me:*

*“Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by
doing good.”*

Romans 12:21

Kitty Chappell

I Can Forgive
If I Want To



Vocatio Publishers
Phoenix, Arizona

Copyright © 2008 by VOCATIO

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without the prior written permission of the publisher. To request the rights please write:

Vocatio Publishers
3841 E. Chandler Blvd, Suite # 106-106
Phoenix, AZ 85048, USA
e-mail: ceo@vocatio.us
www.vocatio.us

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the “New Living Translation Holy Bible.” New Living Translation copyright © 1996 by Tyndale Charitable Trust. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers.

This book was formerly published under the title of *Sins of a Father—Forgiving the Unforgivable*.

ISBN 978-0-9792342-3-1

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments7

Introduction 11

PART ONE

Chapter One: Sins of a Father..... 17

Chapter Two: The Unsuspecting Bride 30

Chapter Three: The Bitter Fruits
of Frustration 44

Chapter Four: The Escape 58

Chapter Five: The Fateful Decision..... 80

Chapter Six: The Painful Path 96

Chapter Seven: Don't Ask Me to Forgive!..... 111

Chapter Eight: Love’s Bumpy Road	128
Chapter Nine: God’s Mysterious Ways	140
Chapter Ten: Had Our Father Really Changed?	150

PART TWO

Chapter Eleven: Changing My Self-Image	165
Chapter Twelve: God Gives Life, We Build Character	179
Chapter Thirteen: A Mighty Counselor	190
Chapter Fourteen: Letting Go.....	204
Chapter Fifteen: A Three-Step Process	227
Chapter Sixteen: Step One—Forgiveness	242
Chapter Seventeen: Step Two—Accountability	248
Chapter Eighteen: Step Three—Gratitude	259
Chapter Nineteen: Joy In Hard Times.....	273

Acknowledgements



Each of us is an artist. Our thoughts, words, and actions are the brush strokes used to help paint not only our self-image, but those of others. I thank God for the trustworthy artists in my life, friends and relatives who through the years have applied warm-colored words of encouragement and praise, layer by layer, upon the canvas of my mind—a craft executed in love.

I am grateful for the godly ministers, Sunday school teachers, and fellow Christians in my life who “walked their talk,” leaving golden footprints across my mind.

I thank God for one exceptional artist—my ever-praying maternal grandmother. Her glowing words of affirmation in my dark environment made me feel I had value, regardless of my performance. In the early years of my mind, she faithfully placed diamond-studded Scriptures into its every nook and cranny, then covered

them with prayer. They lay there, ready to shine with the brilliance of understanding when the light of Christ flooded my soul at the age of fourteen.

I thank God also for the negative strokes, the black and blue bruises on my soul, the razor sharp edges of actions and remarks that cut to the core of my mind's canvas, letting the bright red from my wounds bleed through. Without the penetration of ugly-colored experiences, there would have been no crimson to seep through and blend with the darker colors to form God's perfect color of purple compassion.

I am grateful that nothing is wasted in God's economy. He has helped me to use the brush strokes of good and evil alike, friends and foes, to help paint my character into a self-image worth viewing—that of a joyful overcomer.

Special, heartwarming thanks go to the dear ones listed below:

Joan Englander—The reporter who first wrote my story in her Ojai, California, newspaper column in 1982. Meeting her was divinely orchestrated—a meeting that set into motion a chain of events that is still at work.

Gerry King—My sweet friend and area representative for Stonecroft Ministries. After she read Joan's article, she encouraged me to become a speaker to Christian Women's Clubs and After-Five Christian Women's Business and Profes-

sional Groups. As a result, for more than twenty-five years I have shared the good news with thousands of women throughout the U.S. that they, too, can become overcomers.

Betty Arthurs—a fellow writer, as well as other dear friends in the Tuesday’s Children Christian Writer’s Group. With fear and trepidation I handed Betty my first chapter (the only one I had written) for her “absolutely honest” opinion. Had there been even the slightest sign of negative body language on her part, another layer of doubt would have been added to my already fearful mind that this book would be boring—and I probably would have shelved the idea. But her spontaneous response of “This is awesome!” splashed bright strokes of hope in my heart, and so I continued.

Etta Mae Pickens—My fiercest prayer warrior. At just the right moments, when I felt like giving up, the phone would ring and I’d hear her sweet voice reminding me that she was praying for me every day.

Shawna Bedal—I appreciate so much Shawna’s invaluable help with Scripture research.

New Hope Publishers—who published the original edition of this book under the title of *Sins of a Father, Forgiving the Unforgivable*. I am forever indebted to them.

Vocatio Publishers—President and CEO Piotr Waclawik’s enthusiasm in publishing this

updated version is contagious. I am eternally grateful for his faith in this book and its message.

Pat Harris—My dearest friend of many years (I can't tell you how many because she swears she's not that old) has been my strongest supporter.

Jerry Chappell, My Late Husband—For forty-seven wonderful years he was my greatest admirer and supporter. I am thankful he didn't leave me during the writing of the first edition of this book—and grateful for his patience which was sorely tried at times. Once he ventured into my office, despite its warning sign that read, "Disaster Area," and timidly asked, "Honey, are you ever going to the store again?"

Introduction



Who hasn't been hurt by someone, somewhere, at some time? Who hasn't felt the sting of injustice, the emptiness of rejection, and the soul-gnawing presence of hate and resentment?

While not every individual has experienced abuse in the strongest sense of the word, each of us has felt abused and mistreated and has succumbed to self-pity at one time or another. But beware! Self-pity is the stuff that the victim mentality is made of. If allowed to ferment, age, and grow, self-pity can create a prison in which its victims suffer damage far greater than that inflicted by any perpetrator—a prison that fosters bitterness, not betterment.

This book is about surviving and overcoming. There are millions of survivors, but few overcomers. What is the difference between a survivor and an overcomer? Survivors live through their heartbreaking circumstances but never get beyond their pain. They live but they are not alive.

They remain trapped in their victimhood, blaming others for their problems. Some robe themselves in self-pity and drag their hurts behind them like dirty, tattered security blankets—defying anyone to step on them. Others blast fiery charges of hate into innocent bystanders—either with words or with bullets. And at the end of the day, they curse their misery as they stare blankly through the bars of a prison fashioned by their own flawed thinking. They do not see the key hanging by their window—the key to freedom.

Overcomers have also survived heartbreak and pain, but they have discovered the key within their grasp and use it wisely. They unlock the doors of their past and use its stumbling blocks as stepping stones to freedom. They exchange their tattered robes of self-pity for clean and practical garments of accountability. They walk in strength and grace. They rejoice in the fresh air of their freedom and the sunrise of their joy, for they know that neither heartache nor tragedy will ever again hold them prisoner.

While this book contains heartache, horror, and disappointment, it is about hope and overcoming. It was not written by a group of detached observers of pain, or by a professional panel who discussed and debated theories as to how those who have been deeply wounded should deal with their pain. Nor is it a “somebody done me wrong

but I survived anyway” book. It is a story of God’s power and grace.

This book was written by an individual who was born into an environment of violence, experienced the pain of abuse and the ravages of rage and resentment, yet emerged not as a mere survivor, but as a victorious overcomer.

As a speaker to women’s groups for over twenty-five years, it became increasingly clear to the author that most of us need help in letting go of our hurts. We need assistance in developing accountability to God and man if ever we hope to overcome our pain and become all God intends us to be—and deep in our hearts, we long to be.

Part One



Sins of a Father



The two caskets stood side by side on their stands. One, laden with flowers, proclaimed from its satin banner, “Our beloved mother and sister.” My stepmother. The second bore no banner. Just a single red rose, a solitary symbol of remembrance for my father.

Heavy with grief and guilt, I wept silently, thoughts churning. *Have I failed again? Could I have prevented this? Should I have shot him long ago as I had planned? If I had, none of this would have happened.*



Dad had always been violent. My earliest memories were of him beating my mother as I cringed in a corner. Holding my hands over my ears did not shut out her screams.

My brother Charles was born when I was three years old, and our sister Christine when I was seven. I quickly assumed the mother role, not only for my siblings, but also for our young mother, a mere fifteen years older than I.

As a toddler, Charles often crawled out of his cot during the night and sleepwalked toward the front door. In wide-eyed terror, whimpering like a frightened puppy, he clawed at it with quick dog-like strokes—futile attempts of a tiny boy subconsciously trying to escape his environment.

It was my responsibility to get Charles back onto his cot quickly, since Mom feared any movement on her part might awaken Dad. But sometimes I slept too soundly and failed to reach him in time. Angered by his disruption of sleep, Dad would bound out of bed, grab Chuck's frail body, and beat him with a leather belt, mumbling, "I'll teach the little to wake me up!"

"Clyde, please don't, he's just a baby," Mother cried out, grabbing at Dad's arms.

"Shut up, Esther! Stay out of this!"

"But he doesn't know what he's doing. He's sleepwalking," Mom begged.

"Then this will wake him up!" Dad snarled.

Mom's attempts to intervene always ended the same. She was knocked to the floor where she lay frozen in fear. She knew further attempts to help Charles would result in Dad beating him even harder. I flinched as I heard the thick leath-

er strap slapping against Charles' frail, bony frame. His screams pierced the stillness of the night and stabbed my heart with deeper guilt.

I lay there motionless, afraid to breathe. Once I heard the rhythmic sound of Dad's deep breathing, I crept to Charles' cot and stroked his wet face. My tears blended with his as I whispered, "I'm sorry I didn't wake up in time."



"Happy birthday, honey. You are now a teenager!" Mother announced with a smile, eyes glowing with pride. "Make a wish and blow out your candles."

I stared at the double-layer chocolate cake covered with fluffy white frosting. Pink flowers with tiny green leaves danced around its sides, while thirteen pale green candles, placed evenly around the cake top, guarded the flowers below. *Happy Birthday, Kitty*, the center of the cake greeted in cherry pink script letters with tiny matching flowers dotting every i.

"It is so beautiful, Mom, thank you."

Birthdays were special to our mother. Never had she missed baking us our favorite cake, and as far back as I could remember she had encouraged us to invite our friends over for a party. But not this time.

I closed my eyes and made my wish.

I wish my father were dead!

As special as turning thirteen was for me, I had declined a party at the last minute because I didn't want Mom to be embarrassed. Her right eye was swollen and black, with prominent bruises on her right jaw. I knew she would lie to cover up for Dad, and I couldn't stomach that.

Despite Mother's gaiety, the scene was somber. I glanced at Charles, whom we now called Chuck, hunched over the table, head bowed, resting on his knuckles, elbows rigid. I couldn't tell if his eyes were closed or if he was just staring at the patterns on the oilcloth. To my left sat six-year old Chris, golden hair shining (she had given it extra brushes for this special occasion). Her eyes danced as she eyed the cake, eagerly waiting for me to cut the first slice, knowing she would get the next piece. Like a graceful butterfly, she waved her delicate arms, fanning the smoking candles before Mother and I gathered them onto a saucer.

Dad's place was empty. He had stormed from the table earlier, following his usual threats of punishment. He took advantage of meal times, when we were all together, to reprimand us of any misdeeds, perceived or real. Who could eat after receiving a pronouncement of the punishment that would be forthcoming once the meal was over? Birthdays were no exception.

“Hmmm, hmmm, it is so good! This is your best cake yet, Mom!” I exulted, glancing toward Chuck. I smacked loudly as I licked frosting from my fingers, and placed the first moist slice onto my plate. I watched for Chuck’s reaction since I knew chocolate was also his favorite. He lifted his head slowly and fixed his gaze on the edible vision beckoning from the center of the table. By the time I had placed an extra thick slice on his plate, the sparkle had returned to his sad blue eyes.



Dad’s cruelty, and inconsistency in showing it, confused us. While he appeared to love some of our pets, he would without apparent provocation kill others.

Late one Saturday afternoon I arrived home from babysitting all day for a neighbor down the street. The delicious aroma of frying chicken bombarded my hungry senses as I opened the door. “Yum, that smells so good!” I called out to Mom as I walked into the kitchen. Mom didn’t turn and welcome me with her usual smile, nor did she answer. She just stood there at the stove, her back to me, rigid.

“Mom? What’s the matter?”

Finally she turned a tear-streaked face to me and said, blinking hard, “Your little sister needs you.”

“Why? What’s wrong?” Mom chewed her bottom lip, as if to keep from crying, and nodded toward Chris’s room.

For a moment, I stood outside her door, listening to the soft sobs on the other side.

“Honey, it’s me,” I said, pushing the door open gently. Chris sat on the floor with her head in her arms on the side of her bed. She wore her favorite ruffled pinafore, the one that was so tedious to iron. She always tried, however, not to dirty it. I was surprised, when she jumped up, to see long streaks of dark red stains splashed across its front.

Is that blood? My heart pounded.

“What happened, honey, are you hurt?”

Suddenly Chris threw her arms around me, hugging me hard. Her body shook as she sobbed into my hair, “My Henrietta is dead!”

Oh, no. Not her favorite little pet!

A friend of the family had given each of us a dyed “Easter chick” the previous spring. They were the cutest, cuddliest creatures we had ever seen. Pink, blue, and orange fluff balls of joy that brightened our days. Chris immediately named her chick Henrietta, and they became inseparable. A month later, Chris proudly demonstrated how she had trained Henrietta to come on demand. Each day, after arriving home from school, Chris rushed to the back door, threw it open, and called out, “Henrietta! Come, girl.”

Henrietta always came quickly and rubbed her feathered face against Chris's ankles, weaving excitedly in and out between them, until Chris scooped her up in her arms and they rubbed their faces together.

"Only the soul of a child can understand the deep love bond between a pet and the heart that cherishes it," I had written in my diary that day. "All creatures respond to love and every child needs the opportunity to express love."

I thought of how Chris had poured all the pent-up love she carried for Father, who would never return it, upon a small creature who always returned it in full. "My Henrietta," she often murmured in joy, stroking the satiny red feathers of her beloved pet, holding her close to her face. Henrietta, with closed eyes, obviously enjoyed those moments, for she never struggled to escape. It was with reluctance that she let Chris place her in the coop with the other two pet chickens at sundown where she would be safe for the night.

"What happened?" I asked, pushing Chris away enough so I could see her face.

I was unprepared for her response. Chris's eyes narrowed. Through clenched teeth and trembling lips she hissed, "Daddy killed her." She started shaking as the pent-up pain spilled from her overloaded heart. "He killed all of them, our pets. Yours, Chuck's, and my Henrietta! And he made me watch! He wouldn't let me leave."

Oh, no! How could he!

Tears trickled onto Chris's hair as I held her close, both of us trembling. "I'm so sorry, honey," I cried, holding her tightly. But she needed to talk. She had to verbalize her story of horror.

"I went outside to let Henrietta out so I could play with her, but Daddy was already there, standing by the coop. He said he was waiting for me. Told me to stay where I was, that he wanted me to watch something. Then he grabbed Blossom, your pet chicken, yanked her out of the cage, and closed the door. He held her up high and began wringing her neck. I started crying. I turned to run back inside, but he yelled, 'You stay right where you are. Don't you move!' Blossom was flopping around on the ground, dying, when he reached in and grabbed Chuck's chicken. When he did the same thing to Bessie, I knew he was saving my Henrietta for last."

Chris broke into loud sobs as she relived her tragic experience. I held her tightly, but there was no stopping her avalanche of pain. Its momentum pushed her headlong into the path of her story.

"I started screaming, 'Daddy, please don't hurt Henrietta!' But he wouldn't stop. I knew Henrietta was scared— she'd just watched her sisters die! And she was flapping her wings trying to get out of the cage. I didn't want to watch Henrietta die, too, but when I turned Daddy yelled again, 'You move one step and I'll beat you

within an inch of your life!’ He reached into the back of the cage and grabbed Henrietta by the head. One of her wings got caught on the side of the opening, and she squawked. I knew it hurt her, but Daddy just yanked harder until she was out. He jerked her up and down by the head, swinging her around and around, moving closer and closer to me so I had to watch. Then he threw her to the ground so hard that her little neck broke completely off. Blood spurted everywhere, even on my dress.”

My heart ached and my throat burned from trying not to cry. *Poor little Chris—and she is so frightened at the sight of blood!*

“I started screaming louder but Daddy wouldn’t let me move. ‘Shut up!’ he yelled, ‘And don’t close your eyes. It’s not good for you kids to get so attached to things. So you watch!’ Then he just stood there, smiling, while Henrietta’s body kept flopping all around. I saw her little head lying in the grass, eyes still open, as if she had to watch too. I jumped when her body brushed against my legs, and Daddy laughed. I kept jumping around, stomping the ground hard, and trying to get the blood off me. I wanted to die. And Daddy just laughed harder!”

Emotionally spent, Chris buried her face in my chest and sobbed quietly, her breath catching every so often. I sat on the side of the bed with Chris huddled in my lap, my arms wrapped

around her. I rocked her side to side in stoic silence. What could I say that could ease her intense pain?

Suddenly, fresh horror intruded my numb heart as a new realization pummeled my mind. *Oh, no! No wonder Mom was upset! Mom, who nurtures every injured wild bird we drag in back to health, and who loves anything with feathers on it, was forced by Dad to prepare and cook our pets! How terrible for her! And how will we ever get through the evening meal!*

A deathly pall hung over the supper table as we picked at our food. Only our father seemed to relish every bite, smacking loudly, slurping the grease from his fingers. Not even with threat of a beating would Chris touch the piece of chicken set before her. To distract Dad's wary eyes from her every movement, the rest of us ripped our meat apart, spreading it around on our plates with exaggerated motion, but not eating it. We nibbled at our vegetables while Chris moved her fork slowly through her mashed potatoes and separated her green beans.

Fortunately, Dad didn't notice that Chris wasn't eating.

Chris was finally allowed to leave the table when she started to throw up. As she ran for the bathroom, Dad called loudly after her, "This is the best chicken dinner I ever ate!" Then he laughed. I had experienced hate for my father

prior to this, but nothing prepared me for the repulsion that seared my soul. While Dad pushed a pile of bones onto a side plate, I placed my hands quickly out of sight under the table where they doubled into tight fists. Inwardly, I screamed in rage, *How I hate you, Father. Some day I'm going to kill you!*



By the time I was 14, hate for my father was full-blown. I felt trapped and helpless. I often awoke exhausted from recurring nightmares in which my hands were tied behind my back and I was ordered to do something. “But I can’t, my hands are tied!” I cried out. Nameless voices kept demanding that I do simple tasks that I couldn’t do because my hands were tied. Many times I was awakened by my groans and heard my voice pleading, “But I can’t, I can’t.” I dreaded going to sleep.

I finally realized that no matter how much I wanted to, I could not protect my family. Though I daydreamed of ways for us to escape, I knew it was impossible. Dad had warned us, “Don’t you go mouthing off to anyone about things that’s none of their business, or I’ll put you all out of your misery.”

Dad felt secure in our small Texas town where he was well liked. “No jury would ever con-

vict me,” he bragged. “I’d just plead temporary insanity.” No one, including my closest friends, suspected the truth. They had no idea of the heartache we experienced behind the closed doors of our rose-covered house and well-trimmed lawn. To them, I was just an ordinary happy-go-lucky teenager with no worries other than what clothes to wear or which boy to date.

So picture-perfect did our lives appear that some of my friends expressed open envy. “You are so lucky, Kitty!” a classmate remarked one day. “Your mother is young and pretty, fun to be around, and your dad is the most handsome man I know—such gorgeous blue eyes and wavy brown hair. I am so envious! I wish I were you.”

“Don’t ever wish you were someone else,” I said brusquely, taking her by the shoulders and shaking her. “Be thankful you are who you are and for the life you live.” She looked at me strangely as tears filled my eyes before I turned and quickly walked away.

I hid my fear and hate carefully behind my smile and sense of humor, but I knew I couldn’t live this way much longer. Something had to be done. But what? What choices did I have?

I was born during the mid-1930s and grew up in a time when our nation still reeled from the effects of the Great Depression. There were no shelters for battered women and children, and no agencies to provide financial aid or free legal

counsel. The prevailing attitude of abused women at that time was the one expressed by my mother when she said, “Decent people don’t air their dirty laundry in front of others.”

Besides, what could an outsider do? We were on our own.

I was frustrated. I sought reasons for my father’s abusive behavior, but none were apparent. He wasn’t an alcoholic who would go on a binge and mistreat us, for he rarely drank. The few occasions I recalled his coming home tipsy from too many beers, he was so docile we weren’t afraid of him. I found myself wishing he would drink more.

I also found myself wondering why my mother married him, and especially at such a young age. Very soon I would learn the answers, but they would only fuel my desire to do away with my father.

CHAPTER TWO

The Unsuspecting Bride



One weekend following my fourteenth birthday, Mom and I were in the back yard trimming dead flowers from her prized bearded iris plants. The late afternoon sun highlighted the translucent petals and turned them into brilliant splashes of color. Deep purple, blue, amber, and bright golden hues filled the air with their sweet fragrance as a sudden playful breeze blew across the yard.

“Mom, why did you marry Dad when you were so young?” I asked, moving the bucket closer to her so she could deposit her pile of trimmings.

She didn’t answer.

“Your mom and dad were great parents, and you got along well with your brothers and sister. I know you were poor because of Grandpa’s crippled arm, and it must have been hard to go from place to place working crops, but you were

happy. Why would you want to leave your parents and marry at the age of fourteen? I wouldn't dream of getting married now."

Still no answer.

"And why would Granny let you?"

Mom straightened up from her bent position, leaned backward on her knees, rubbed her back, and began answering my questions.

"I was introduced to Clyde right after we moved to Oklahoma, and he started coming over and talking to me. He was a handsome, confident eighteen year old, and I was flattered. Here was this catch-of-the-town showing an interest in me, a shy girl who had barely turned fourteen."

"What do you mean, catch-of-the-town?"

"Well, that's what everybody called him. And I'd seen how other girls hovered around him. Your granny wouldn't let him date me, said I was too young, but he kept coming over. He was charming and relentless in his efforts to convince your granny that she should let us date. She finally told him he could go to church with us if he wanted to and sit next to me, but he still couldn't take me out alone on a date. Our family never missed a church service and pretty soon neither did Clyde."

"Well, if Granny wouldn't even let you date him at fourteen, how did you end up marrying him at that age?"

Mom fell silent. With furrowed brows she sought the right words for her explanation. I snipped some dead blossoms from the plants further out into the bed and waited.

I heard Chuck and Chris laughing with their friends next door. *I love to hear them laugh*, I thought. *They certainly don't get to do a lot of that here. As much as we love each other, seems like all we kids do is argue.* The thought bothered me, for I was older and I felt I should set a better example. But I just couldn't help myself sometimes, and that made me feel even more irritable.

My legs were stiff. As I rose to stretch, a mockingbird flew over my head, loudly warning me not to venture near the chinaberry tree where she nested.

"Mom?" I finally asked, picking up my snippers and kneeling again into the flowerbed.

"This may sound strange," she said, reaching for a tall iris, "but I didn't know I was getting married."

I whirled to face her, mouth open, eyes wide. Before I could respond, she added, "That is, not until we all stood before the justice of the peace."

"You're kidding! How on earth could you not know you were getting married?"

We both rose to a sitting position. Mom smoothed her skirt out on the grass, tired of it being tucked between her legs, and said, "I didn't know it at the time, but Clyde had told your

granny that he wanted to marry me. He said we were so madly in love that if she and your grandpa didn't sign for me and allow us to get married, then we would elope. He said he wasn't sure of where we would go next, nor when your granny and grandpa would see us again."

"You would do that? Just elope, not knowing if or when you'd see your parents again?"

"Of course not. As I said, I didn't know he had told Mom that."

"I don't understand. Why on earth would Granny let him bully her that way? She would stand up to the devil himself! And why would she agree to something as important as your marriage without even discussing it with you?"

"I guess your dad was so smooth and convincing— had all the plans made, even bought me a new dress, though it was much too big for me—that your granny assumed I was in on it and that was what I wanted. All of her lady neighbors had been raving about how great Clyde was, telling her, 'Mrs. Watson, that young Clyde sure would be a fine catch for little Esther. Handsome, hardworking, and everybody loves him. Why, any mother in this town would give her right arm to have him for a son-in-law!' "

"But you were so young!"

"Lots of teenage girls married back then, and with their parents' blessings. I think the main reason your granny let me get married, though,

was because my older sister, your Aunt Martha, was giving them fits. She went through a sudden rebellious spell, just went wild—drinking, partying, staying out all night with disreputable guys. It was during that time, when my parents were totally distracted and beside themselves with worry about Martha, that Clyde told them we were getting married in a week.”

“But didn’t Granny even talk with you about it?”

“It all happened so fast and so many things were going on—Martha’s rebellion, them trying to work the crops. I think she assumed it was a done deal and so they just went along with it. And, maybe deep inside, they thought I’d be safe if I married a nice young man. One thing I know for sure is that your granny has grieved herself almost sick ever since for letting me get married.”

Poor Granny. How many times have I heard her say to me, “Till my dyin’ day I’ll never forgive myself for letting little Esther marry your father!” But how could she know he was such a rotten apple?

“So, how did it happen? When did you finally realize you were getting married?”

“When your dad gave me the new dress, which he’d said was okay with your granny for me to keep, and which I didn’t know would be my wedding dress. He said it was for me to wear on a special occasion very soon, when we would

take an all-day trip to the county seat. He said he wanted me to wear it then and look pretty for him. In those days, wedding dresses were rarely the white, fluffy things girls wear now—we just wore the prettiest dress we had. So this could have been any special-occasion dress.

“I remember how excited I was when the following Saturday we all piled into your Uncle Vernon’s old Ford coupe, your dad and I sitting in the rumble seat, and drove to town. It was only when the county clerk started asking questions that I realized we were there for my wedding.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“By that time I was absolutely nuts about your father, and I thought, ‘Well, I love him, so why not?’ ”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “Mom, I don’t care how much you thought you loved him, why would you marry someone who would deceive your parents and keep you in the dark about your own wedding? Especially someone so mean that he would knock you around?”

“At that time I didn’t know he had deceived them. And it suddenly all seemed very romantic to me. Like my knight in shining armor who chose me out of all the young maidens in the village and loved me so much that he’d surprise me this way and whisk me off into the sunset on his white horse. Besides, he never appeared mean. He was always mannerly and thoughtful to all of

us. I didn't know how he really was. And I'd never seen any of the men in our families beat up their wives and children, so why would I even think that a man would do such a thing? I just figured we'd live happily ever after."

"So, when was the first time he hit you?"

"We'd been married about a month. One day while your dad was gone, I was sweeping the wooden floor in our kitchen, happy to be a wife cleaning her own little place, when I noticed a loose board. With childlike curiosity I lifted the end of it and peered below. It was dark down there, but when my eyes finally adjusted, I saw a number of bottles filled with brown-colored liquid lying in rows on the ground. I was really excited! This was a mystery and I couldn't wait to share it with my new husband.

"As soon as he got home, I took him by the hand and danced him into the kitchen, saying 'I want to show you something.' I knelt over and eagerly pulled up the board. 'Look at what I found! What's in those bottles and what do you think they're doing there?'

"Clyde didn't move. Just stared at me. His piercing blue eyes turned cold. Suddenly, he doubled up his fist and knocked me backwards onto the floor. I was horrified and confused. This was the man I loved and who loved me. Why was my knight, who was supposed to protect me, acting this way? My right jaw ached, already

puffy. *Something is terribly wrong!* I thought. ‘But wha . . .’ I started to ask. Before I could get the words out, he hit me again. I started screaming and sobbing and he just hit me harder.

“ ‘Don’t you ever ask me about those bottles again! And don’t go telling anyone about them. This will teach you to not go poking your nose into things that are private, that are none of your business! If I want you to know something, I’ll tell you.’ Then he just walked out the front door and left me there in a huddle, bleeding and crying. As if he didn’t even care.”

I realized I had been holding my breath, mesmerized by the painful words falling from my mother’s lips. I let out a long sad sigh. *What a horrible experience for a new little bride! What a terrible way to learn that your husband is not the person you thought he was. My poor little mommy.* “I’m so sorry,” I said, the words catching in my throat as I reached out and pulled her close. Our tears mingled as we clung together.

The lump of pain was so large in my throat that I thought I would gag. Finally, when I could speak, I asked, “Why didn’t you leave Dad once you found out what he was like? It would have been easier before we children were born.”

Mom wiped the long raven strands of hair from the sides of her face where they had been plastered by tears. Her cameo skin was flawless except for the remnants of a fading bruise on the lower right

side of her face. *She is so beautiful! And so gentle. She looks like a queen, the same Queen Esther in the Bible she was named after. No wonder Dad picked her out of all the others.* My heart ached to think of all she had endured. Her large hazel eyes softened as they looked into mine.

“I didn’t leave because I loved him. He wasn’t mean to me all the time. You know, just like he isn’t mean to us all the time now. Quite often he is pleasant, even jokes with us and takes us places. Remember that doll bed and furniture set he hand-carved for you for Christmas when you were little? He worked so hard on it and painted it that perfect shade of blue that you like.”

I remember. I loved that set and treasured it for years. Until he smashed it to pieces!

“It’s just that we don’t know what is going to set him off, nor when. So we live in fear. Back then, he was more loving and did nice things for me, especially after he beat me up. I knew that it was only when I asked him about something that I wasn’t supposed to, or did something he didn’t like, that he would beat me. At first, I didn’t think I deserved his mistreatment, but as time wore on I thought if I would just try harder and be a better wife, he would outgrow what I thought was just a youthful temper.”

“Isn’t it strange how Dad is always trying to ‘teach’ somebody something by beating them up?” I interrupted. “I remember the story you

told me of how when we lived in Arkansas, Dad hit a man in the head with a pole ax and he almost died. Dad accused him of stealing fish from his trot-line. No wonder the poor man carried a gun for months afterward, once he recovered! I still can't believe that judge only fined Dad \$25 for 'disturbing the peace' when he appeared in court. Disturbing the peace, my eye! That man would be dead had the other men not grabbed Dad's arms and held him."

"Yes, your father still brags about how lucky he was that the judge happened to know the other man and had a grudge against him."

No wonder Dad thinks he can get away with anything, even murder.

"For your sake, Mom, I wish you could have left Dad before we kids were born. It's not that I'm sorry I was born. As bad as things are sometimes, I love being alive and am thankful that I exist. There is so much beauty in this world, beauty that you have taught me to appreciate, Mom. I shudder to think of missing out on life."

"You almost did," she said sadly.

"What do you mean?"

"Your dad never really wanted me to have a baby—said he didn't want the responsibility. He beat me up several times hoping I would abort you, but thank God I didn't. After you were born he got to thinking how he'd like a son so when I was pregnant with Chuck he didn't beat

me up, hoping for a boy. After Chuck was born he didn't want any more kids so he beat me up every time I got pregnant and caused me to miscarry. But thank God I carried Chris until she was born.

"When Chris was little your dad became very upset when I got pregnant again. When his beatings didn't cause me to miscarry he made an appointment with an out-of-town doctor to do an abortion. But I was so terrified I miscarried in the doctor's office while waiting my turn."

Speechless with shock at all the pain she had gone through, I could only stare in disbelief. To ease the suffocating ache in my throat, I looked away as tears trickled down my face.

"But I really did try to get away from him, honey."

"What do you mean, try?"

"Those bottles that I saw under the kitchen floor were filled with illegal whiskey. Your daddy's mom had set him and his older and younger brothers up in an illegal moonshine business. Oklahoma was a dry state, and their still produced enough corn liquor to supply most of the county, including many in the local sheriff's department. They also supplied the booze for the local bawdy house, which their mom helped run. As you know, their mom supported their family following Clyde's father's mysterious death when he was only three."

I had often wondered about my paternal grandfather's death, but learned early not to ask. Mom had warned us that the price of our curiosity could be very costly. There was a mystery about Dad's side of the family that intrigued me. There seemed to be tons of relatives on my mother's side of the family—so many cousins that I'd not even met them all. But not on my father's side. Dad's family appeared to consist of only his two brothers, their wives and children, and Dad's mom—and her succession of either husbands or live-ins. *Dad has to have other relatives*, I often thought. *But why won't he talk about them?*

As always, when the truth is missing, there is a proliferation of rumors. From one paternal cousin we heard that Dad's grandfather had been hanged as a horse thief. From another, it was rumored that my father had been named after the infamous Clyde Barrow, who was a distant renegade uncle of some sorts.

"So, when did you try to leave Dad? And why couldn't you?"

"I'm getting to that part. My mother found out about the illegal still while I was carrying you. Your dad didn't want to be bothered with me because I was so sick during my pregnancy, so he dumped me on your granny and grandpa. They were thrilled to have me with them, where they knew you and I would be safe, away your father's beatings.

“Clyde did pride himself, however, on being a responsible person when it came to paying his debts. Just as he still does. Just before you were to be born, he paid a local doctor in advance to deliver you. He then left on a hunting trip feeling pretty good about himself. We learned later that the doctor’s medical license had been revoked for drunken malpractice. Since Clyde had paid him in a case of moonshine, the ‘doctor’ showed up drunk. Your granny assisted him, but when he started to yank your umbilical cord out instead of cutting it, she pushed him aside and forced him to leave. Grabbing some scissors, she cut the cord herself and finished taking care of both of us. Had she not taken over, who knows what might have happened.

“Immediately after you were born, your granny called the revenuers, who came and destroyed the still. Your dad and his older brother were sent to prison for a year, but their youngest brother didn’t have to go since he was so young.

“You and I stayed at home with my folks while your father was in prison. I was worried sick, but thank goodness nobody ever learned your granny was the one who called the Feds. I decided that I was going to leave your father after he got out of prison. When he finally showed up, I was scared to death, but I told him I wanted a divorce.”

My pulse quickened as I imagined the scene. “What did Dad say?”

“Nothing. He was quiet for a minute and just grinned that grin of his. ‘That’s okay, honey,’ he finally said with a sneer. ‘You can have a divorce, but I’m keeping the baby.’”

“I was surprised and wondered why he now suddenly wanted the responsibility of a baby, especially since I knew he liked the ladies. But when I objected, he just laughed and said, ‘I have friends in the sheriff’s department who owe me favors. They’ll swear that you are an unfit mother, that you slept with them all the time I was gone, and believe me, I *will* get the baby. So go ahead and divorce me if you want to.’ Then he leaned back and laughed.”

I can just see him! I didn’t think I could hate him any more, but now I do! I thought. My anger quickly turned into guilt, however. Oh, my! It was Mom’s love for me, her baby, that held her as Dad’s captive. Had it not been for me she would be free. I’ve got to do something to help! But what?

My mind raced toward the thoughts I had been entertaining for weeks. Now they were doubly fueled. *Dad is not going to keep on winning! The next time he starts beating Mom and threatening us with his gun, I will somehow get it and shoot him! So help me, God!*

The Bitter Fruits of Frustration



The pressure swelled within me. I knew what I had to do—but shoot my own father? Could I really do that? *I've got to look for another way out.* For several months I considered various options.

I could try to convince our mother to take us children and leave. That was a most unlikely option. We knew that if we fled to sympathetic relatives for refuge, our father would find us, and their lives as well as ours would be endangered.

I could call the police and have my father arrested. From experience, I knew that option would be an exercise in futility. When I was eleven years old, I had snuck to a neighbor's house one night and called the police but our terrified mother refused to press charges. Even if she had, they couldn't keep him in jail forever.

I could run away from home. I could just leave, but I feared that my newfound freedom

might lead to a worse prison. I had heard horrible stories about runaways. I feared I might become another child of the street—one of the many who are sucked into oblivion through crime, addiction, or prostitution, since I wouldn't be able to adequately support myself. And yet, didn't I deserve a chance at life? What hope did I have at home? Nothing there was going to change, except get worse. If I left, I might be a lucky runaway.

I could marry as early as possible. I seriously considered this, but seeing firsthand the negative results of a teen marriage, I did not want to repeat my mother's mistake. Because Mom married when she was fourteen and I was born when she was fifteen, she was forced to stay in her abusive marriage. If I followed in her footsteps, I would be destined to repeat history and the cycle of abuse would likely continue. But didn't I deserve a chance for happiness? Maybe a better candidate than my dad would come along and my marriage might be a good one.

I could remain at home. My home situation would not likely improve, but by staying, I could at least give my siblings and mother my love and moral support. I also would not expose myself to worse unknown dangers. While providing no quick fix for my pain, this choice might be my best, considering my list of poor options. But to stay home and remain miserable seemed unthinkable.

I could eliminate the source of my problem. From time to time I heard or read about individuals who were acquitted for shooting someone in self-defense. *Maybe I wouldn't be convicted either*, I thought. *Surely the courts would understand that I was only defending my family.* But what if I were convicted? I feared I couldn't handle prison. And yet, wasn't there a chance I might be acquitted?

I could commit suicide. I was a likely candidate. Not only was I unhappy and afraid, I was tired of my heavy burden of responsibility. And those recurring dreams of helplessness were getting worse. I fought frequent bouts of depression and carried the added weight of low self-esteem. I was a failure. It was obvious I couldn't protect or rescue my mom and siblings. And if we were to somehow escape from Dad, how would I provide for them? I believed my father when he told me I was ugly and stupid and that I would never amount to anything. If I was so worthless that even my own father recognized it, what hope did I have for a happy future? Life just didn't seem to offer much.

Which option should I choose? Did I really have a choice or was I just a pawn in the game of life?

A CHOICE IS MADE

One day I read a newspaper article that reported the acquittal of a teenage boy who had shot and killed his father during an attack upon the mother.

Good for him! I thought. *That father got exactly what he deserved.* I laid the paper down, but I couldn't get the article out of my mind. *Surely a jury wouldn't convict me, either, for defending my family if I shot my father. But even if it did, so what? At least Mom and the kids would be free.*

But each time I imagined how I might grab the gun from him, I was plagued by fears. *What if during his next attack I can't get the gun? If I were able to wrestle it from him, could I really force myself to take aim at him and deliberately pull the trigger? What if I attempted and failed? He'll kill us all!*

But my greatest fear was that I might succeed.

I was so tenderhearted, it pained me to see a dead mouse in a trap. I rescued countless injured birds that had fallen from their nests and took them to the loving hands of my mother who, after nursing them to health, set them free. For years I grieved after Dad's sleep was disturbed one night by the whining of our dog's puppies; he brutally killed them. Following a search the next

morning, I stumbled upon their bloody bodies strewn among the weeds.

What is the matter with me? It hurts me to see a dead animal; how can I even think of killing my own father, no matter how terrible he is? But I am my family's only hope, I argued. If I don't do something, who will?

One night my heart cried out to a God I had heard about from Granny—but I wasn't even sure he actually existed. Granny seemed to have a lot of faith in Him and I was desperate. *God, if You're as powerful as Granny says, I prayed, then why don't You do something? Why do You allow my dad to be so mean to us?*

From the depths of my anguished soul I pleaded, *If You really do exist, please help me. I didn't ask to be born into this situation. I'm supposed to do something, but I don't know what. When Chuck and Chris are terrified as Mom is being beaten, I try to keep them quiet so Dad won't get more upset. I tell them that everything will be okay, but I know it won't. After Dad leaves and slams the door, I hold Mom close and tell her how sorry I am that she is hurt. I can't fix this problem, God. It's too big and I'm too small. But if You won't do something, I guess I'll have to.*

I wept bitter tears into my pillow and decided, *God's not real, anyway. How could He care?*

At an age when most teenagers look forward to a happy future with joyful anticipation, I wait-

ed for my dad's next attack—the perfect provocation for me to shoot him.

A NEW DIRECTION

One Sunday afternoon shortly after my prayer, my Uncle Paul stopped by and asked, “Kitty, would you like to go to church with us this evening?”

“Dad says religion is a crutch for weaklings, so I don't think he'll let me,” I answered. “But I'd like to.”

“Why don't you ask him? He might.”

For some strange reason, I found myself really wanting to go, pleading silently as I went to ask permission. *God, if religion is just a crutch then I must qualify, because I feel like I'm falling apart. I really need something to lean on.*

Surprisingly, Dad let me go.

I sat spellbound by the message I heard that night. The minister spoke of how each of us lives under the penalty of death. He said that we are hopelessly and helplessly trapped as prisoners in a world that is terminally polluted with sin—sin that resulted from Adam and Eve's wrong choice in the Garden of Eden. He then spoke of a loving God who provided a way for us to escape—a way that offered freedom instead of bondage, victory instead of defeat, and love instead of hate.

I longed for freedom and how I craved the love of a father! *But how could God love me? I wondered. I don't deserve any of these good things since I am so worthless. My earthly father doesn't love me, how can I expect a perfect God to love me? Especially since I have these evil thoughts in my heart.*

But the speaker stressed the heavenly Father's love, His goodness, and how He could be trusted to keep His word. He held up his tattered black Bible and read from it John 3:16—"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."

As he spoke, a strange thing happened. He suddenly stopped and, pointing his finger it seemed as though straight at me, declared in a loud voice, "And 'whosoever' has to include you, because God is not a liar!"

I was stunned. *It must be true*, I reasoned. *A God this loving wouldn't deliberately leave someone out, so His invitation has to include me!*

The best part was it didn't matter that I didn't deserve it, for the minister went on to explain that God's love and forgiveness is a gift. Through Christ, His Son, God was offering love, not judgment; forgiveness, not condemnation. He offered life because He had conquered death through the cross and resurrection. I didn't understand

all that I heard, but a tiny spark of hope began to glimmer.

I had no time to go on a worldwide theological search for spiritual truths. Time was running out. I had to make a decision. *I can choose to pursue the path to kill my father, I thought, or I can choose the door opening before me and trust God with my life.*

As I weighed my choices, the minister explained that to accept God, I had to interact with Him in a personal way. “You don’t just try to keep a set of rules in hopes of impressing God into loving you; God already loves you.”

Then he added, “All of the great religions of the world tell us that we should try to reach God by living good and honest lives, loving our enemies, and forgiving those who wrong us. Their books tell us what we should do, but they don’t tell us *how* to do it. They just give us more rules.

“Christianity, based on the Holy Bible, is different,” he explained. “It’s not a religion—though sadly some Christians treat it like it is—by just counting how many times they go to church and how much money they give. But that’s just like keeping more rules. Becoming a Christian is all about having a relationship with the one and only living God. A God who doesn’t ask us to try to reach Him through our own feeble efforts—He knows we can’t. It is through Christ that God

reaches down to us on our level, right where we are, regardless of our condition, and invites us to Him.

“You see,” he went on, “we are changed after we accept Christ, for it is only then that we have the power to become all that God created us to be. Not before.”

My mind raced with excitement. *If I don't have to clean up my act in order to be accepted by God, then maybe there is a chance for me. This is my only hope!* I decided, bowing my head. From the depths of my soul came the admission, *I need You, God. I want You in my life. It's hard for me to believe that all of these things could be true, but I don't have anywhere else to go. Please forgive me and help me to become what You want me to be.*

It was actually more of a pleading than anything, for I could not put into words the needs of my soul. But it didn't matter. God, who hears the faintest cry of the weakest heart, heard mine and answered its longings. Very softly and gently His love entered my heart and life, and a miracle took place. The heavy burden that I had carried was lifted and, for the first time in my life, I was free.

Little did I know how much the choice I made that evening would impact my entire life. But this choice did not come with a free pass from pain. And the pain I had experienced before was nothing compared to what lay ahead!

SO WHERE ARE THE ROSES?

God never promised us a rose garden. He did promise us, however, strength and power to function within a bitter and thorny environment.

Sometimes, God doesn't change our circumstances, He changes us in our circumstances.

—Carla Killough McClafferty,
Forgiving God

I returned home that night to the same circumstances, the same danger, and the same heartaches. Nothing there had changed. But I had. Through Christ I was a new person, a child of God, whom He had promised to love and strengthen. I didn't know then how much I would need God's love and strength, for the situation at home not only didn't improve, it worsened. But for the moment I had a breather. A lull before the storm.

Dad allowed me to attend church only a few times after that, but I prayed and studied the Bible the pastor gave me. I grew stronger, and my attitude began to change, but I needed to be with other Christians. There was so much in the Bible I didn't understand. I had so many questions but there was no one to ask. Granny could

have answered them, but she lived too far away. Uncle Paul moved out of town, and I had no way to attend church, even if Dad had let me.

Lord, I really need to go to church. I'm getting depressed again, and I feel like I'm fighting a losing battle with my flare-ups of hate.

When I was sixteen, some young people invited me to their church and, to my surprise, Dad let me attend. I joined the church and was baptized. Although I still couldn't attend as often as I wanted, I was allowed to go on Sunday mornings. I began to blossom spiritually as I was nurtured in the loving atmosphere of the church and fellow Christians.

I found the more I responded to God's Word and strove to live by it, the stronger I grew. Anger still flared, as was natural, especially during Dad's brutal outbursts, but it didn't consume me.

Though my father's episodes seemed to be lessening in frequency, I noticed a new subtlety on his part. After beating my mother, he would often verbalize his reasons. "Your mother nags me too much." "I've had a bad day." Or, "It's because you kids upset me." There was always some excuse.

What's with his excuses? I wondered. I suspected he longed for the younger ones' affection and didn't want them to be afraid of him. He probably felt it was too late to fool me, for I had seen too much of his brutality, but he might be

able to convince Chuck and Chris that he wasn't responsible for his actions.

Something else bothered me. His violent episodes appeared to coincide with the times I was gone, and this became an added burden for me. As a teenager I needed outside activities, but because I felt responsible for the family's safety, I worried all the time I was gone. This new perception led me to unexpected bursts of hate and resentment that I feared would destroy me. Many nights I fell into a fitful sleep, praying, "Lord, I know I'm supposed to pray for my enemies, but it's hard when the enemy is my own father."

One night just before graduation, I returned home from a church service to find Dad beating Mom with his gun. I remember it clearly—it was a Colt 45 on a 38 frame. *Oh, no, Lord! What triggered him this time?* I ran to Mother's side and pushed myself between them.

Suddenly I felt the cold steel muzzle of his gun jam hard into my temple. My heart raced, pounding wildly against the Bible I clutched close to my chest.

"One of these days I'm going to blow your head off. I'm sick and tired of your interfering," my father said evenly, without emotion. His steel blue eyes bored into mine.

Suddenly, an inner voice from deep within me said, *Now is your chance. Why don't you just*

wrestle the gun from his hand and shoot him? He isn't getting any better, he's only getting worse. Things will never change. Just grab the gun and get it over with.

I stood still, barely breathing. The thoughts continued, seductive in their rationale. *Surely God would understand. After all, how much does He expect you to endure? Why don't you just do what you planned to do years ago?*

Suddenly, I recalled some words I had recently read: "Don't be afraid of those who want to kill you. They can only kill your body; they cannot touch your soul. Fear only God, who can destroy both your soul and your body in hell" (Matthew 10:28), and "Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will uphold you with my victorious right hand" (Isaiah 41:10).

The tempter's voice sneered, *Yeah, just like He's helping you right now, with a gun pointed to your head! That's helping?*

Another Scripture sprang to mind: "For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope" (Jeremiah 29:11). *Please help me, Lord! I want to believe Your words and trust this situation to You!*

Staring unflinchingly into the eyes of my father, I said softly, "If that's what you want to do,

Dad, go ahead and pull the trigger. I'm ready to die. I'll just go to heaven and be where you can't hurt me anymore. But remember this, some day you will stand before God and be held accountable for your actions." I said this firmly, but with respect.

He saw no fear in my eyes, but for the first time I saw a glimmer of what looked like fear in his. He lowered the gun and never again threatened me in that way.



On graduation night I numbly walked across the stage and accepted my diploma. For years, Mom had looked forward to my high school graduation ceremony, but my dad had beaten her so badly she couldn't attend. Chuck, my only family supporter in attendance, gave me a hug before we quickly left. I couldn't bear to stay and watch the happy families around me.

But even worse pain was yet to come.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Escape



The fall following my high school graduation, I began my first full-time job as a secretary in an elementary school near our home. I loved the students and adored the principal, a petite, dynamic woman just under five feet tall. Mrs. Watts commanded loving respect from everyone, even children taller than she.

That first year was wonderful. Though we continued to tiptoe around our volcano at home, there weren't too many violent eruptions. I began dating the local junior high football coach and life was good—as good as it could be. But not for long.

Very early one morning, several days before my nineteenth birthday, Dad began beating Mother and I intervened. Pushing myself between him and Mom, I asked softly, “Dad, if you are so miserable with us, why don't you just leave?”

“No one will ever make me leave my house,” he snarled. “You leave,” and he punched me in the face. Mom lunged for the phone. For the first time she called the police. After knocking me to the floor, Dad tried to wrestle the phone from her, but not before her screams for the police were heard by the operator.

A LINE IS DRAWN

This time Mother planned to press charges. She had drawn a line in the sand, regardless of the consequences, for life or death; we could no longer live this way.

The officers came, handcuffed Dad, and took him to jail. Our hearts pounded as we rushed to the courthouse. We had been instructed to be there at 8:30 a.m. if we wanted to press formal charges. *Maybe this is the beginning of our freedom*, I hoped. But hope turned to horror when we arrived shortly after 8:00 and learned that Dad had been released. The one who had threatened to kill us if we ever reported him now waited at home for us.

My heart raced and my palms were sticky. I opened my mouth, but there was nothing I could say in response to the clerk. I whirled around, facing Mom and the children. Mom’s shoulders suddenly sagged. Her eyes, wide in

terror, stared at me like a frightened fawn as her face crumpled. Chris began sobbing silently as she buried her face into Mom's arm, clinging to her. Chuck's pale face showed no emotion, but his fists were doubled at his sides.

My mind, foggy with fear, went blank. What could I do for our little family? The line that Mom had so courageously drawn was now full circle and we were trapped within it. *Lord, what can we do?*

We couldn't go to neighbors. We couldn't go to Granny's house—it was hours away. Besides, that was one of the first places he would look. There was no way out. We were doomed.

Suddenly the fog cleared. *The church! That's the only safe place.*

I herded everyone into the car and then quickly drove to the church. Dr. Hope, our pastor, sat stunned as we explained our situation. He listened to us and prayed with us. He never left our side. He drove us to the courthouse, where we filed assault and battery charges against Dad. He recommended an attorney and then drove us to his office, where Mom filed for a divorce. We stayed at the church most of that day where we felt safe and secure.

Mom called a next-door neighbor and apprised her of the situation. "I saw the police car," Mrs. Shaw said, "when they brought your dad back to the house. Then later, I saw the police

car return and take Clyde away again in handcuffs.”

We breathed easier and felt it was safe for us to return home. At least for a while.



Dad had time to think in jail, and to assess his situation. He was in a tough spot. His private treatment of us was now on public record. He knew that Mother would have no problem getting a divorce. She would likely be awarded the house along with monthly child support. His plan to use temporary insanity as a plea for killing us was less plausible than ever.

Three months prior to this, Mom had made her decision to accept Christ as her personal Savior and had been baptized. Dad had noticed a change in her, just as he had noticed the change in me following my spiritual choice years earlier.

Now it was his turn to make a spiritual decision. But there was one major difference: Behind his “choice” lay an ulterior motive. He most likely recalled a statement Mom had made that if ever they were separated, the only way they could get back together was if he were a new person spiritually.

Dad called Dr. Hope and asked him and some of the church deacons to come and pray

with him, saying he wanted to become a Christian. They went, talked with him, prayed with him, and read Scriptures. After a long discussion, Dad prayed a wonderful “prayer of repentance.”

As a result of his “conversion,” we dropped all charges and Dad returned home. He went before the church, gave a splashy testimony as to how he had been changed by God, and this charismatic new convert was baptized. The church rejoiced, for a sinner had come home.

And indeed he had! Two weeks later he was beating Mom again. We were more miserable than ever, for we knew we’d been conned—and so had the church. But they didn’t know it. Yet.

During an Independence Day family outing at a public park, while my parents were on a walk, my dad again attacked our mother. We heard her screams. We ran toward her as she stumbled out of a wooded section, blood streaming down her face. She gasped out her story of how Dad had become angry and beaten her on the side of the head with a rock. People gathered around, staring helplessly, as I tried to wipe the blood from Mom’s face. Dad quickly strode into view.

He smiled warmly at everyone and stated calmly, “She is hysterical, poor thing. Fell and hit her head on a rock.” Relief spread across the faces of some of the men nearest us when Dad

lifted Mom up by the waist and said gently, "Here, sweetheart, it's okay." Believing my father's story relieved the onlookers of any responsibility in this situation. But we children knew the truth, and it wasn't okay.

A sense of urgency pounded within me. *We have to get away from him soon, but how?*

Several days later, Mom asked Dad if she could take us children and go to visit her sister in San Francisco for a few weeks to recuperate. Dad was quiet for a moment, mentally chewing on the idea. Finally he agreed, but said we children had to remain. Mom blanched and looked out the window, brows knitted in deep concentration. I thought she was going to change her mind, but she said, "Okay."

Our home wasn't the same without our good-natured and cheery mother, but we were relieved that she was safe away from Dad. For the moment. We didn't know of her plans to stay longer than she had told our dad, nor that she was forming a plan of escape.

One evening the phone rang and Dad answered. He talked for a while, then hung up and announced, "That was your mom. She has decided to stay in California. Says she doesn't love you kids anymore and wants to get on with her life."

Chris began to cry and Chuck's face crumpled.

I whispered as Dad left the room, “Don’t believe a word of what he says—Mother does love us. She would never leave us.”

We learned later that Dad had often called Mom, telling her to stay in California, stating we children didn’t love her, that we would be happier without her, and that if she knew what was good for her she wouldn’t return home.

THE DECISION: GO OR STAY?

A week later, I began my second year as school secretary. There was much to do to prepare for the onslaught of excited school children, but Mrs. Watts and I somehow accomplished it.

Early in the morning, one day before school was to start, the school phone rang. It was my mother. Thinking she was still in California, I said excitedly, “Hi, Mom!” But something was strange. She was whispering.

“Kitty, I’m home. Your Aunt Martha and Cousin Abner drove me here and will help us go back to California. This is our only chance to get away from your dad. Check Chris out of her classroom there, drive to Chuck’s school, check him out, and come home immediately. I’m already packing.”

Stunned, I cradled the phone in its stand. Mrs. Watts stared at my pale face. “What’s

wrong?” Even as I explained to her what was happening, I struggled within. Mrs. Watts was one of the few people who knew about my home situation. She was also one of the few who knew the real cause of the bruises that sometimes appeared on my face. She often hugged me, saying, “I love you like my own daughter.”

Suddenly, I stood at a crossroads that required another important choice. Should I leave or stay? I had grown very fond of Jim, the coach I was dating. There were definite romantic possibilities. He was a strong but gentle young man who cared for me deeply. I felt secure with him. I loved Mrs. Watts and I loved my job, especially the children there. How could I leave them all so abruptly, without warning or explanation?

But how would Mom, Chuck, and Chris make it without me? They couldn’t support themselves. Mom, with only a fourth-grade education, didn’t even know how to drive. Dad would surely find them, and I wouldn’t be there to protect them.

If I stayed, I knew Dad would find me. Not only would my life be in danger but also the lives of anyone who helped me. What was I to do? Fierce pain pierced my heart as it was yanked in opposite directions. Suddenly, I was aware of someone calling my name.

“Kitty, listen to me. Please don’t go. You’re too young to have such a responsibility. You can

stay with me. Besides, you can't help them anymore. Maybe your father will see that it's all over once they're in California and he won't follow them. He'll just give up."

Love glowed in her tear-filled eyes as Mrs. Watts took me by the shoulders and shook me gently. "You deserve a chance to be happy, so stay and live your own life. We'll get legal help to see that your father doesn't bother you. Don't go."

Lord, I pleaded inwardly, please help me. I don't know what to do. I don't have time to reason out all the advantages and disadvantages of my options.

The room wasn't cold, but I started shaking. Somewhere in the deep recesses of my storm-tossed mind, icy winds of confusion whirled in darkness, chilling me to the core. I stood there, frozen in the cold reality of my emotional turbulence. From somewhere, a soft light formed a tiny spot deep within the center of my soul—a warm, calm, and quiet spot that seemed to pulsate as it enlarged. Its center revealed the choice I must make.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Watts," I stammered. "I must go. Please forgive me for leaving you at a time when you need me the most. How will you find a replacement on such short notice? And then there's Jim. It will break his heart that I left without saying goodbye. Would you please ex-

plain everything to him? I can't let anyone know where we are going. Not even you. We can't let my father find us!"

She lifted her head, and holding it high in determination she said, "Don't worry, I will take care of everything." Her breath caught as she gave me a long, hard hug and said, "I understand why you have to do what you are doing. I love you. You will be in my prayers constantly."

Heart pounding, I gathered up Chris and Chuck and rushed home.

Everything was in chaos there. Mother and Aunt Martha were tossing things into bags while Cousin Abner pushed items into the trunk of my aunt's car.

Comprehension of the scene around me paralyzed me with fear. *What if Dad catches us as we are trying to leave? I glanced fearfully at the driveway. Why can't I think clearly? How do I choose what to take from all of my possessions when space is so limited?*

"Kitty, grab your things and put them into these pillowcases," Mom commanded, tossing them to me. "They will pack easier. Put them in our car trunk; your aunt's is almost full." After poking as much as we could into every available space, we jumped into the two cars and sped off, pursued only by our terror.

"Head for Granny's house," Mom said. "We've got to take her with us. That's the first place your

dad will look, and she'll be in danger." Grandpa had died years earlier from cancer and Granny had remarried. Mom felt Dad was no threat to our step-grandpa.

After the three-hour trip to Hatfield, Arkansas, we picked up Granny and headed straight for California. Fear pushed us farther and faster with every mile. I looked in the rear-view mirror constantly, expecting to see my dad barreling down upon us. Other than for gas and quick pit stops and bites to eat, we fled nonstop to Needles, California, where we collapsed in a motel.

UNCLE JOHN'S HOUSE

The next morning we drove to Delhi, California, to my great uncle John's tiny house, where we were welcomed with open and loving arms. We had never met Uncle John, but we quickly fell in love with this man whose heart was twice as big as the meager abode he lovingly shared with us. We thanked God that he wholeheartedly sheltered our bedraggled, frightened family, quite possibly at the risk of his own life. Though we slept on pallets and our quarters were cramped, we were happy because we were free. At least for a while.

Uncle John was Granny's oldest brother, a widower with an irresistible sense of humor.

“Honey,” he said, holding up a can of beans our first evening there, “don’t ever eat pork and beans.”

“Why not?” I asked, wide-eyed.

“Because you’ll go blind.”

“Why would eating pork and beans cause me to go blind?” I asked, walking perfectly into his trap.

“Because,” he answered, eyes twinkling, “you’ll go blind looking for the pork.”

He then showed us two square little boards, which he described as ant killers. “How on earth can those little boards kill ants?” I asked.

“I’ll show you,” he said, picking up a board. “You take an ant, place him on this here board like this. Then you take the other board and whack him real hard. Kills the ant every time.”

He cooked cornbread in a big iron skillet, serving up thick slices with glasses of cold milk. We felt right at home.



I put in applications everywhere for secretarial work, and we did whatever we could to help put food on the table. We picked up walnuts and harvested grapes in the local vineyards. For a time I worked at an almond-processing plant. Three elderly ladies and I sat in front of two conveyor belts where we sorted the almond nut-

meats from the shells coming toward us on one belt and tossed them onto the other belt. I sat at the head of the assembly line and was the first one for the cracked almonds to reach. The women were pleasant and I enjoyed their light-hearted conversation. I was quick and worked hard, but soon the job became boring. My only challenge was to see how fast I could work.

“Child, you should slow down a little. You’re working too hard,” the lady next to me cautioned. The other two ladies chimed in and agreed.

I replied, with a quick toss of my long blond hair, “Oh, I don’t mind,” and reached in front of her for a missed nutmeat. “I like working hard. It makes the time go by faster.”

Then the foreman cautioned me to slow down. “You don’t have to work so hard, Kitty. There are three other ladies.” Pleased by all of this kind attention, I only worked faster.

“I can’t believe how nice everyone is there,” I announced to everyone during supper one evening. “They actually worry about me working too hard!”

Thus, I was devastated when I received a “pink slip” with my next paycheck. Fighting back tears, I stammered “But why? I’ve been a hard worker.” *Besides, I really need this job!* I screamed inside. The foreman just shrugged and thanked me for the time I had worked there. Later, I put the clues together and figured out why.

The other ladies had worked there faithfully for years, and they must have felt threatened, besides being bored. I did the work of several people, which left little for them to do. Despite all of their strong hints, I had refused to slow down. The foreman knew that with my youthful energy and ambition, I would leave this minimum wage job for a better-paying one as soon as I could (and he was right). He must have concluded that it was wiser to let one worker go now than to later look for four new ones.

OUR SHORT-LIVED HAVEN

Meanwhile, back in Texas, Dad had sweet-talked an elderly neighbor into telling him she had noted California license plates on one of the cars we left in. Dad assumed we had fled to the town of Taft, where my mom's youngest brother Paul lived. This was the same uncle who had taken me to church that eventful night years earlier where I made the choice that changed my life's journey forever.

Dad sent mail to Mom via Uncle Paul, knowing it would be forwarded. At first, Dad tried threats. "If you know what's good for you, you'll get back here with Chuck and Chris. I'm getting tired of this nonsense," his letters warned.

When he received no response after sending a number of letters, he changed his tactics. He tried appealing to mother's soft side. "I really need my sweet little wife and children. I miss you so much...I am terribly lonely." Mom continued to ignore his letters.

I found work at the *Turlock Daily Journal*, a few miles away, as a proofreader. Mom, who sewed beautifully, applied for a position as housekeeper and seamstress for a Turlock physician and family. After interviewing her, Dr. and Mrs. Collins introduced her to their children, who liked her immediately. She was hired, but they wanted personal references. Mom gave them the names and addresses of close friends back in Texas whom we trusted. At the top of the list was our pastor's name. "If we can't trust our pastor, who can we trust?" Mom commented as she folded the list and put it into an envelope for her new employer. I agreed. But we were both wrong.

Dad was furious because Mom had gotten away from him despite his threats. He was even angrier because she refused to return. He had lost control of her, and that was unforgivable.

We had no way of knowing it at that time, but Dad really had a heyday at church after we "abandoned" him. Our sudden departure had provided the perfect springboard for his lies. Dad

wept bitter tears before the new pastor, Chad Termilian. (Dr. Hope had retired and Pastor Termilian had moved into his position.) Dad told everyone at church who would listen about his mistreatment by a deranged wife who had poisoned the minds of his precious children against him—a wife whom he still loved with all of his heart and wanted back despite her wrong actions. Though he had tried to be a perfect father, he said, especially after becoming a Christian, he must have somehow failed God.

Dad was very convincing. After receiving a reference request from Dr. Collins, Pastor Termilian wrote back that mother was so mentally and emotionally incompetent that he could not recommend her for employment. Fortunately, Mom had already established credibility with the Collins' family who found her to be an efficient, responsible, and gentle woman of integrity. They simply did not believe the pastor and gave his letter to Mom.

We were shocked, heartbroken, and confused by our former assistant pastor's response.

"Why would Pastor Termilian say something so terrible, Mom?" I cried.

Mother, more angry than tearful, said through clenched teeth, "I suspect Clyde got to him with his conning personality."

"But he knew us just as well as Dr. Hope did. I was president of the Young Women's Auxiliary

for a whole year. I was a leader in Sunday school, I sang in the choir, as did you shortly after you joined the church, long before Dad's sudden jail-house conversion. He knew how Dr. Hope hid us out at the church most of that day when Dad was put in jail. He knew our entire situation." I stood there, shaking my head in puzzlement, tears ready to spill.

"I know," Mother said sadly and walked away. His stab of betrayal plunged deep into her heart, as it did mine.

We had no way of knowing that Dad was experiencing anything other than anger from a wounded ego of a rejected husband and father who was trying to gain sympathy from the friends of his rebellious wife. Only much later did we realize he was laying the foundation for a diabolical plan. And what better people could he have in his corner than kind and trusting God-fearing people?



Shortly afterwards, we excitedly moved into an inexpensive apartment near downtown Turlock. Granny had already returned to her home in Arkansas.

Dad began another barrage of letters, again changing his tactics. "I'm very ill. My ulcers are acting up again, but the doctors aren't sure

exactly what's wrong...I'm terribly sick...might even die."

"Good!" Mom said, "I hope he does!"

Determined to obtain a response from Mother, Dad sought yet another direction and aimed straight at the most vulnerable part of her heart: the spiritual spot. Mom, not yet developed in spiritual wisdom and discernment, was quickly impressed by anything that smacked of spirituality. Thus, Dad hit the bull's-eye when after several weeks of silence, he wrote that he had "really gotten religion" and was "really changed."

And yet, who of the wisest and most mature Christians wouldn't be impressed by sentences such as, "I will regret for the rest of my life all the pain I have caused you and the children. I don't blame you for not believing me since I betrayed you with my lies before—when I said I was a new person spiritually but I wasn't. I admit it. I lied because I didn't want to face jail another day. And I'm sorry about the letter from the pastor. I think he just misunderstood some of the things I said, but I'll clear it up. Honey, I really am changed. You see, this is what it has taken for God to get my attention.

"Just think about it, I have no reason to lie now. I've already lost the most precious things on earth to me. I know you and the kids won't come back to me, because you don't believe me.

And I don't blame you. I wouldn't believe me, either! I deserve my misery, but you and the kids don't deserve to be miserable—struggling all alone out there—you being so frail and having to work so hard. You deserve better.”

Fatigued and weary from overwork and financial struggles, Mom finally succumbed to his persuasion, and gave him our address and phone number. Dad called often and finally Mom agreed to take the children and return to Texas with him during his upcoming Christmas vacation.

“Mom, please don't go back,” I begged. “I'm not convinced that he has changed.”

“How can you say that? Where is your faith? Don't you trust God anymore?” she asked, shaking her head in disappointment. As do many of us, Mom had difficulty assessing the fine line between faith and presumption.

“Yes. Of course, I still trust God,” I said emphatically. “It's Dad I don't trust.”

“You can't see into his heart. You're not God.”

“That's true, Mom. But God does give us common sense. He tells us to be cautious in our dealings with others, to be wary.” Then I quoted a verse from Jesus' own words: “Look, I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. Be wary as snakes and harmless as doves” (Matthew 10:16).

“But, honey, you read his letters. And you talked to him on the phone just like I did. He apologized to you too. Didn’t he say he wanted to spend the rest of his life making it up to me and you kids for all the pain he had caused us? Didn’t he say he wanted you to go on to college and not have to worry about anybody but yourself for a change? That’s the main reason he said he didn’t want you to come back with us—so you could get on with your life.” Her eyes pleaded for understanding. “Don’t those words evidence a changed heart?”

“I’ll admit that Dad’s words sound good, Mom,” I said with a sigh, “but that’s all they are—words. His words alone aren’t evidence of anything, other than verbal attempts to get you to do what he wants, which is to go back to him. Remember the last time we trusted his words?”

“But he’s never sounded like this before. He’s obviously a broken and miserable man.”

“I know, Mom,” I sympathized, patting her shoulder. “Since we can’t see the motive behind a person’s words, it is difficult to know when someone is telling the truth. But isn’t that all the more reason we need to exercise caution? If we are rushed by words, don’t we run the risk of making another wrong choice?”

Despite my strong arguments with Mom, I began to experience my own doubts.

Why should I doubt Dad's spiritual change? I know that there is no one beyond the reach of God's love. No one can do anything so bad that God won't hear an honest prayer from that person and change him. Didn't I myself make a dramatic about-face? Didn't I choose a spiritual course that turned me around completely? While struggling with the idea of shooting my own father, I deliberately made the choice to ask Christ into my life and to help me become the kind of person God created me to be. Why is it so unthinkable that Dad could also make that choice?

Despite my inner arguments, a knot grew in the pit of my stomach. *I just wish Mom wouldn't rush into this.*

But it was no use; her mind was made up. Was it because she actually believed Dad's promises, or was it because she wanted or needed to believe them? I'd heard her crying softly at night, and I marveled at this tiny bundle of strength—a little more than 100 pounds of it—and the courage she had shown. She constantly fought emotional fatigue and exhaustion, but she tried to present a cheerful attitude for us children. I knew she worried about me and my future. She voiced no hope for my attending college as long as I was burdened with financial responsibilities for my family.

She also worried about Chuck, in his teens, and Chris, now eleven. They needed a father and

a stable home life with adequate food and clothing. Despite his abuse, Dad had always been a hard worker and a good provider. If he were really changed, would she not be morally wrong to stay away from him and subject her children to further deprivation? Sadly, our choices are too often made based upon our wants and our needs rather than upon wisdom.

I, too, wanted to believe Dad. It would be a relief for me if he *were* changed. Then Mom could take the children back to their home, their roots, and their childhood friends without fear. I could return to work, save my money, and start college the following fall. I could finally pursue my personal dreams.

But deep in my heart, I was bothered by a heavy and familiar sense of foreboding. One that I recognized only too well. One that was always right.