

“Deeply moving depictions of family life and the progression of alcoholism and its effects—as well as a fascinating take on the afterlife we all will face.”

—*G. Miki Hayden, New York Times-plauded Edgar winner*

“Excellent handling of a dysfunctional family actually coming full circle. The topic of life after death puts an intriguing spin on this story. Captivating!”

—*Victoria Christopher-Murray, author of Truth Be Told, and Sinners & Saints, plus many other titles:*
<http://www.victoriachristophermurray.com/>

“Roni Teson is a gifted storyteller who brings to life a hardened alcoholic with the same grace and honesty she employs in writing about an angel. Her timing is flawless—Heaven or Hell is a page-turner. I didn’t want it to end!”

—*Karen Coccioli, Author of The Yellow Braid.*

“This was absolutely phenomenal! I did cry and figured the end would be heartbreaking, but I ended up smiling as I read it. Wonderful story!”

—*Diana Cox, www.novelproofreading.com.*

HEAVEN

OR

HELL

A Novel by

RONI TESON



Copyright © 2012 Roni Teson

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

ISBN: 978-1-4525-5498-3 (sc)

ISBN: 978-1-4525-5499-0 (hc)

ISBN: 978-1-4525-5497-6 (e)

Balboa Press books may be ordered through booksellers or by contacting:

Balboa Press

A Division of Hay House

1663 Liberty Drive

Bloomington, IN 47403

www.balboapress.com

1-(877) 407-4847

Because of the dynamic nature of the Internet, any web addresses or links contained in this book may have changed since publication and may no longer be valid. The views expressed in this work are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher, and the publisher hereby disclaims any responsibility for them.

The author of this book does not dispense medical advice or prescribe the use of any technique as a form of treatment for physical, emotional, or medical problems without the advice of a physician, either directly or indirectly. The intent of the author is only to offer information of a general nature to help you in your quest for emotional and spiritual well-being. In the event you use any of the information in this book for yourself, which is your constitutional right, the author and the publisher assume no responsibility for your actions.

Any people depicted in stock imagery provided by Thinkstock are models, and such images are being used for illustrative purposes only.

Certain stock imagery © Thinkstock.

Printed in the United States of America

Balboa Press rev. date: 6/30/2012

For Katie and Izabella

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

The endeavor of writing a book can be quite overwhelming, as I learned. Much more than the creative thought process is involved in pulling together the pages of a novel. It is with much gratitude that I acknowledge the following people: G. Miki Hayden, my editor and mentor. Victoria Christopher, my dear friend and coach. Karen Coccioli, my best cheerleader, and a most talented author. Diana Cox, for her detailed proofreading. Shauna Gerber, my first reader, and the many other readers who provided much brilliant feedback. And the myriad of other folks who've touched my life during this writing process. I thank you all.

CHAPTER I

JOE OBSERVED HIS BODY FROM ABOVE. He was totally confused because only moments earlier he and Father Benjamin had entered Skid Row in search of the General. They were walking side by side, Joe with his cane and the father chatting endlessly at him. Then suddenly Joe seemed to be disembodied, somehow floating over the top of his body watching the drama unfold.

The priest held his cell phone up to his ear, and Joe heard the other end of the call as if it were he who was on the phone, and not Father Benjamin.

“Nine-one-one, what’s your emergency?”

“This is Father Benjamin,” the man blurted out. Then the next few sentences rolled off his tongue as one complete word with several syllables. “He’s not breathing. We’re out at Washington and Fourteenth, close to the parish where we work.”

“Okay, sir ... Take a deep breath, please.” The phone crackled in Joe’s ear. “What’s the address? Are you outside?” a woman asked.

“Yes, at the base of Skid Row. There isn’t an address. Send an ambulance.” Father Benjamin dropped the phone and began pumping Joe’s chest.

“Sir, sir ... Are you there?” Joe heard the miniature voice yell up from the gutter where the phone lay.

He watched in disbelief as Father Benjamin breathed air into his mouth, pumped on his chest, and scooped up the cell phone in one swift sweep. The muck from the street splattered on the priest’s cheek as he put the phone to his ear. “Yes, yes, I’m sorry. He’s not breathing and please know that this is not a normal call from this area. I’m a priest and he’s an addiction counselor. Please send somebody now—Washington and Fourteenth.” Beads of sweat covered the father’s brow.

The priest knelt over Joe’s body while the homeless in the area went about their business as usual, paying no mind to the man and his patient. One old guy stepped over Joe’s legs without a glance, another man eyed Joe’s cane, and a woman lit a cigarette stub from the wrong side while she sat down on the curb to the right of Joe’s feet.

Father Benjamin, in turn, ignored the folks on the street while he worked persistently on the body—Joe’s body. And to Joe’s amazement, from somewhere above his body, he continued to watch his own chest move with the air his friend, the priest, provided.

The man pounded on Joe’s chest. “Breathe, damn it.”

Father Benjamin then wiped his forehead with the back of his hand while he quickly viewed the surrounding area. He seemed to be searching for help, and Joe felt sorry for him as he couldn’t see a single capable person in the vicinity.

After the priest swung his head back down to breathe again—once, twice—for his friend, finally Joe coughed and gasped for air. And at that moment, the floating feeling came to an end.

Joe somehow landed flat on his back, startled at his new vantage point. He was now in the scene he'd been viewing from a distance seconds earlier, and he was looking up into the face of Father Benjamin—strange.

Did that just happen? Joe thought to himself. *Did I just die?*

“Oh, thank God you're breathing.” The priest slumped down on the sidewalk.

“You better have breasts or at the very least a good reason to be kissing me.” Joe gagged and spit, and somehow managed to lift his left eyebrow while he chuckled a little.

“Sorry, just a collar.” Father Benjamin motioned toward his neck.

“What's that crap on your cheek. Don't put that near me.” Joe coughed and laughed a little again, all the while leaving one eye open. While he struggled to breathe, the salty taste of blood entered his mouth.

The priest ignored Joe's comments. He wiped his phone on his pants and quickly punched in some numbers.

“Aaay, you're not so immaculate now, are you, Father.” Joe motioned with his head toward the father's now dirty pants and shirt. Oh, how he enjoyed teasing the priest about his manicured hands and perfectly pressed pants.

But Father Benjamin frowned at Joe and focused on the call he was making. This time, Joe only heard one side of the conversation, and the seriousness of the incident finally occurred to him.

“Yes, this is Father Benjamin, again. I've got the same emergency at Fourteenth and Washington. One of our counselors is down, and I called you over five minutes ago. Where's the ambulance?” he demanded.

Joe closed his eyes. He was so tired now ... If he could just sleep for a second ...

“Where are they? I’ve got him breathing, but it’s shallow.” The priest raised his voice to a volume loud enough to rouse Joe from his lethargy.

“No. No.” Joe tried to sit up and immediately fell back to the sidewalk.

“Stay down, please.” With the phone held to his own chest, the priest put his hand on Joe and held him down, then spoke to Joe as he would to a child. “You’re going to the hospital this time. You’re not going to joke your way out of this.”

“We’ve gotta find the General,” Joe slurred. His head was heavy, and his body refused to follow his commands.

The father turned away from Joe and talked into the phone. “He’s slurring now, and not too coherent. No! The man hasn’t been drinking. He’s an alcoholism counselor. As I said before, this isn’t a normal call from around here.”

Joe on some level understood the priest’s motive for being so pushy. His friend normally wasn’t so rude. But over the years Skid Row had become one of the most unpleasant areas in Los Angeles for police and emergency personnel to work. Unfortunately, things had become even worse lately, and it could take up to an hour or more to get help into the area.

When Joe coughed up blood, Father Benjamin rolled him on his side. “Come on, come on. What’s taking so long? He’s coughing up blood now.”

Joe’s head pounded, and his lungs burned as he gulped for air and watched Father Benjamin snap his phone shut and stuff it in his pocket.

The priest ran toward the street when the sound of a distant siren began to grow stronger. “Here, here,” Joe heard the priest yell from the middle of the road where he stood waving his arms frantically at the ambulance. Then Joe must’ve dozed off or

something because instantly it seemed as if two men jumped out of the vehicle.

A scruffy old bag man walked off with Joe's cane, the same man who'd been eyeing the cane previously.

"Unbelievable." The priest ran to Joe's side yelling, "Hey, you with the cane."

"Leave it." Joe grabbed Father Benjamin's pant leg. "He's going to use it more than I will. We both know what's next for me." Joe closed his eyes and released his friend's leg.

"Okay. As you wish." The priest turned to the emergency crew and spoke in an efficient, professional manner. "This is Juan Joseph Torres. He's a counselor at the parish. We were only here for a few minutes when he passed out. He has advanced stage cirrhosis of the liver. He's been sober over five years, and up until a few minutes ago, he used a cane to get around. I gave him mouth-to-mouth because he wasn't breathing. It took a few minutes to resuscitate him."

"Okay, Father. Thank you." The emergency worker looked so young—as if he were still in high school.

He turned to Joe and spoke loudly while enunciating every syllable. "Mr. Torres, can you answer a few questions?"

The bigger, quiet one put an oxygen mask on Joe and set up a monitor. He kept busy working on Joe while the young one spoke.

"Sure," Joe answered through the oxygen mask.

"My name is Nick. How old are you, Mr. Torres?" The young one held his pen poised on his clipboard.

"Sixty-six."

"What's the date, today?" he continued in a loud voice.

"I'm not deaf, Nick. I can hear you," Joe snapped. "It's Tuesday, September 10."

"Who's the president?"

“Lee something or other.” Joe’s eyes fluttered.

“Are you with me, Mr. Torres?” Joe felt someone push on his cheeks.

“Yes, yes.” His eyes flicked open in response to the pressure. “Easy, please.”

Nick whispered something to his big co-worker and turned back to Joe, who had just shut his eyes again. “Okay, I prefer it when you’re sassy with me. But I can work with this in-and-out stuff. We’re taking you to Memorial.”

Joe opened his eyes and scowled. “Again, kid, you don’t need to yell. I can hear you.”

“The toxins in your body are causing some of this, but we need a doctor to look at you.”

Joe was quickly moved into the ambulance. Father Benjamin jumped in beside him, and with sirens blaring, they drove to the closest hospital. Joe was aware of the fact that both emergency workers, the young one and the big one, thought he was about to die. He felt as though he *was* dying, in reality. He knew he even looked dead already—a skinny shrunken body with a puffed out stomach and yellow skin.

He sensed the two paramedics wanted off this duty as soon as possible.

After only minutes they arrived at Memorial Hospital and he was whisked into the emergency room, where a second round of technicians stabilized him.

Tubes, lines, and monitors were attached all over his body. He was admitted into the hospital with discussions of a hospice if necessary. Simply put, if he made it through the week, they were going to move him out of the hospital and into an extended care facility to await his demise.

“Father, I have a favor to ask of you.” Joe lay perfectly still in his hospital bed and stared up at the ceiling when he spoke.

“Anything, anything at all,” answered the priest.

“I want to see my daughter before I die.”

The priest stood in silence and gaped at Joe with his mouth partially dropped.

“What the heck are you staring at?” Joe raised his voice as loud as he could, which seemed to be just above a whisper. “I would have said the F word there if you weren’t a priest,” he then mumbled.

“Well, they said you were going to hallucinate ... and I ... well, a daughter?” The priest hesitated.

“No, I’m not making this up. I have a daughter,” Joe croaked.

“What are you talking about? I’ve known you for years. You don’t have a daughter.” Father Benjamin shook his head and seemed to snicker.

“Well, there are some things, my friend, that you just don’t know.” Joe raised his brow. “I’m sorry.”

The nurse entered the room. “Is it time now, Mr. Torres?”

“No, Willa. Thank you, though. I need an hour here.”

“An hour’s a long time to go with that pain,” she said.

“I know. I need to be clear minded for my friend.” Joe motioned his head to the right. The nurse’s eyes followed, and she jumped when she saw the priest.

“Oh, my. I’m sorry, Father. I didn’t know you were here.” She held her hand up to her necklace and spun back around to Joe as she backed out of the room. “I’ll check on you in a bit.”

“What was that?” the priest asked.

“I asked her to wait on the pain medicine. I want to talk to you and I need to be clear—because I need your help.”

The priest walked to the foot of Joe’s bed and stood there with a bewildered look on his face. “What’s going on, Juan?”

q
u
i
t
t
e
r

"My daughter has a son, and he's about fifteen. I've never met the boy." Joe's breathing became labored.

"Juan, you're like a brother to me. Why wouldn't I know this?" the priest pleaded.

"Well, for one, Father, it never came up. Think about what we do all day long ..." A tear fell down Joe's cheek.

"I'm sorry. I don't understand." Father Benjamin shook his head again. "I think I don't know you."

"Well, unfortunately, this isn't about you," Joe snapped at the priest. A rush of blood pounded through his head. He hadn't meant to jump all over the man. In fact, the rush of energy he'd had at that moment seemed to be depleted now. His vision blurred and his eyes grew heavy.

Father Benjamin frowned. "Okay, Juan. I'm sorry. You're right. I'm listening."

Joe's voice cracked and he somehow managed to hold his eyes open. "I didn't handle things so well, back then." Tears streamed down his face.

The room was silent for a while except for the sounds of the medical apparatus.

"I didn't hide this from you. We never talked about my younger years much. Think about it ..." muttered Joe.

Father Benjamin adjusted his collar. "Okay, I'm listening."

"I just want to talk to her, if nothing else to at least give her closure. I've been wanting to do this for the last five years. I've got to talk to her." Joe held back the details of why he needed to see his daughter. Some things weren't meant to be known by everyone. Besides, he was fully aware the priest wouldn't believe his story or the important business he had to complete with Teresa. No, this matter was best left within the family.

"Will you at least help my daughter?" Joe whispered.

The whirs and beeps of the hospital echoed in Joe's ears as he waited for what seemed like hours for the priest to answer.

Father Benjamin appeared to be having some type of an internal struggle. The man took a long time to finally exhale and then respond. "Yes. I will help your daughter."

The priest then frowned and focused on a spot at the foot of the bed just in front of where he stood. "I'm thinking your family doesn't know you go by the name Juan, now, correct?"

"No, but it shouldn't matter in the long run. My name is Juan. I still think of myself as Joe, anyway." The space between his ears felt like mush. He was so tired now, he couldn't think straight. He didn't understand why the priest was fighting him on this topic, and seemingly focused on all the wrong things.

What did his name matter, anyway? His life was over. He'd never thought of himself as Juan—that was just fiction. Now, Joe—well, that guy was brutal reality. Thinking back to the time he'd decided to change his name to Juan Torres and completely drop his middle name "Joe"—the name he'd used his entire life—he really couldn't remember why. He did know if people called him Juan they'd probably only seen his—later in life—saintly side, the part of him that felt like pure fiction. If they thought of him as Joe most likely what they thought was bad. Maybe that was the reason.

"Father, all I'm asking is that I see my daughter before I die. If you can't get through to her, contact my sister, Jessie," Joe whispered with his last bit of energy. His eyelids weighed heavily on his face as he gave in to his exhaustion.

The priest was trying to tell him something, but he didn't understand. His mind turned off as his body went to sleep.

CHAPTER 2

TERESA'S HEART FLUTTERED. WHO'D HAVE THOUGHT the smell of soap mixed with a tad bit of bleach could make someone so happy? Her nostrils tingled a little as she inhaled through her nose and enjoyed the moment. Something about the whole process of cleaning soothed her soul to its very core. Last night she'd scrubbed her entire bathroom well into the morning hours leaving no area untouched.

With her body braced against the edge of the bathroom counter and her hip pushed into the tile, Teresa moved her face up to within inches of the mirror—then she frowned. Her forefinger pulled at the newest wrinkle around her left eye, but she decided to ignore the aging process or half-hoped she could simply cover it up since it would never go away. So she dipped her brush into the pale mineral powder and moved the bristles slowly across her cheek, then around the corner of her eye.

Fog covered the mirror as she exhaled and thought about her real age. She felt as if last week weren't her real fortieth birthday because parts of her life seemed to be missing.

Where did my twenties go? Teresa wondered. *And then my thirties ... I must've cleaned them away.* She chuckled nervously.

It was true that in years gone by Teresa had spent too many hours trying to wash away her tears with a scrub brush in one hand and a bucket of sudsy water in the other. Probably not normal activity for a young, healthy woman, but a habit she'd developed over time.

Odd that she'd think of all that today. It'd been years since she'd let herself dwell on the nightmare of her past. Especially reaching so close to the dark time, a period when she'd lost ... everyone. A shiver of remembrance shot up her spine. Teresa closed her eyes and very deliberately pushed back those thoughts, down into the hidden recesses of her mind. For years she'd managed to keep those heartbreaking times away from her life of today, far from the world she'd created for herself and her son.

She stepped away from the mirror and took a deep breath, but didn't notice the brush slip from her hand until she heard the clanking sound when it landed on the bathroom floor. Her head spun as she bent over to pick up the brush. She stood up too fast. Dizzy, she grabbed the counter to regain her balance.

"No more," Teresa scolded her reflection. And soon, as she'd done so many times before, she forced a happy face and focused on the present, leaving the past where it belonged, in the past.

"Mom, what are you doing?" JJ shouted from the hallway. "We're going to be late."

She had to hand it to him—the kid had excellent timing, and this certainly was a welcome interruption.

She smiled at the thought of her son, JJ, a typical teenager. Nothing abnormal happening with him. In fact, he'd informed Teresa on more than one occasion that when he had his own place he was going to throw his clothes around and sit on the living

room furniture. “I just don’t get having a room we can’t use,” JJ had told her over and over again.

Teresa thought about her pretty, nearly perfect room and for a single second she even considered lifting the boundary, but then—no.

“I’ll be there in a second,” Teresa yelled to her son.

She flipped her wrist around to look at her watch. God, if they didn’t leave in the next few minutes they’d be hung up in Los Angeles traffic, and late for both school and work. What had gotten into her? Nostalgia wasn’t usually a part of her life. Hurrying now, her hands seemed to lose all coordination as she fumbled through her jewelry box trying to find earrings. She finally settled on a pair of silver hoop dazzlers.

“Mooooooooommmmm ...” A loud singing, whining sound came from JJ’s mouth and carried throughout the house all the way into Teresa’s bathroom.

“Okay, hold on,” she yelled toward her son.

She brushed the final touches of powder across her cheek, dropped her makeup bag in the drawer, and slammed it shut. Her earrings snapped into place easily as she trotted to the front door where she found JJ with his backpack slung over his left shoulder, his right hand busy text messaging.

“Let’s go, JJ.” Teresa in a panic grabbed JJ’s shoulders and spun him around. She pushed him out the front door toward the car. “Move it. The longer we take, the longer the drive will take.”

“Hey, I’ve been waiting for you.” JJ stumbled down the sidewalk balancing his backpack while he continued to send out a greeting to whatever friend.

“When you start driving in a few months, you’ll understand.” Teresa closed and locked the front door, jogged to the driver’s side, pressed the *open* button on her car key, and within a second was in

the driver's seat ready to go. JJ was still standing outside the car, with the door open, focused on a text message.

"Get in. We need to go, now," Teresa snapped.

"Okay, okay." JJ landed in the passenger seat.

Aunt Jessie's words came immediately to mind—"That boy is a true product of his generation, helpless without a remote control, a calculator, and a mom to drive him to school." Teresa dismissed her aunt's voice, checked the mirrors, started the car, and moved through the neighborhood.

Her heart pounded rapidly over the last-minute rush. "Cross your fingers and say a prayer to the traffic gods," she requested.

She pulled her seatbelt across her lap while she drove.

"Jeez, Mom, you're supposed to do that before you step on it." JJ talked while he tapped out another text message on his phone.

"That's rude to be constantly on the phone texting." Teresa pointed at JJ and his phone. "Why don't you put it away for a while, JJ? You don't do that in class, do you?"

"Mom, both hands, please. I want to live to my sixteenth birthday," JJ said. "Everybody texts in class."

"John Joseph Reynolds—the teachers let you?" Teresa demanded.

"They don't know." JJ laughed. "I'm good at hiding it—most of the kids are."

Teresa made a mental note to deal with JJ's texting later; she shook her head and focused on the road.

She was relieved to find only the first bell ringing when they arrived at Grant High School. A fast commute on the freeway in the morning was rare in Southern California, and she felt as if the world had magically opened up to aid in this on-time arrival. Teresa sighed and relaxed a bit.

“It’s a good sign.” Teresa’s voice rose a pitch as she clapped her hands. “We made it, and now it’s going to be a good day.”

“It’s always a good day, Mom.” JJ leaned over and kissed Teresa on the cheek, a practice he had never been ashamed of. “I’ll try and find a ride home after school. See you later, alligator.”

Teresa watched her son, amazed at how like an adult JJ appeared, yet how like a child he behaved. In a moment, JJ jumped into the middle of a group of teens, many of whom he’d been friends with since kindergarten. He slapped knuckles and giggled like an overgrown infant. As Teresa watched, JJ’s long legs lost all of the athletic agility she’d witnessed only seconds before. “Goofy” appeared to have taken over his body.

He swatted at the dark curly locks that covered his eyes and rested slightly above his shoulders. *Time for a haircut*, Teresa thought. She pulled away from the curb and felt a sense of calm roll over her body. In this aspect of her life, at least, she knew she’d done well.

Teresa thought about work while she maneuvered through traffic. It’d been almost a decade since she’d opened The Soap Store and had become her own boss. Soap, of all things. An appropriate product for a clean lifestyle. “Natural cleaning products for the body, the house, and industry.” What a thrill for her, owning soap products and selling cleanliness. Uncle Joe, her friend Rita, and a few others thought she was insane for taking on such a huge risk. “So specialized ...” Rita had said. Teresa hadn’t talked to Rita since. Not one of them understood Teresa’s passion for cleanliness. But her Aunt Jessie, full of endless faith, had loaned Teresa the seed money for the store. She’d always been Teresa’s biggest fan.

It was a disappointment to Teresa that The Soap Store didn’t take off as she’d anticipated, but she’d managed to make it work anyway. She didn’t want Rita coming back around and saying, “I told you so.”

When Teresa allowed herself to think about it, she didn't understand how she'd managed to stay in business for so long. She had even paid back her aunt, in full and with interest. Thank goodness for the Internet, which had been the best thing for her store, and lately produced more than enough revenue to make up for the loss of foot traffic at the mall. She might not be driving a Mercedes Benz, but Teresa had been a good provider for her son. Certainly better than her ex-husband with his never-seen child support checks.

Deep in thought, Teresa almost drove past the entrance to the mall where the soap store was located. She frowned when she turned her car into the parking lot and spotted a beat-up old sedan parked over the line, invading her favorite spot. Her hands squeezed the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white, and she drove past that vehicle toward the back of the lot, where she chose a corner space and parked diagonally to avoid door dings. Teresa's car might be slightly aged but it was in excellent condition and she intended to keep it that way.

After she pulled her bag out of the back seat, Teresa wiped the door handle clean and dabbed at a spot on the side of her car. Clean as clean could be, it left her with a feeling of satisfaction until she looked around the lot. The asphalt was lined with pieces of trash—again. She'd have to call the landlord and get him out here to straighten up this mess. Barney's Pub must've had another busy weekend. The bar was located on the other side of the parking lot, not attached to the neighborhood strip mall where Teresa's soap store was located, but close enough to create disorder for the entire retail area.

A typical Monday.

Teresa walked the distance to the back door of her store with her keys in hand. She moved into the building quickly and heard the alarm beep as she ran to the keypad and punched in the code.

q
u
i
t
t
e
r

Inside, she felt for the light switch along the wall in the dark back room and flipped the light on. Her heart fell to her toes.

Clutter everywhere. Shipping labels, boxes, and orders unfilled. The place looked as if it'd been ransacked. Her part-time help must've been in a hurry over the weekend.

A light blinked on the answering machine that sat on the desk in the corner of her makeshift office. For the moment, she ignored the chaos and walked through the room toward the machine, where she hit the play button on the antiquated device. The mechanical voice said, "You have three messages."

Beep. "I'm looking for Teresa. It's Sunday evening. My name is Father Benjamin. Please call me back at (310) 548-1100."

Beep. "Hello, Teresa, are you there?" Teresa laughed at the sound of Aunt Jessie's voice. For someone seemingly so young at sixty-two, the woman sure had a hard time with technology.

Beep. "Teresa, call me. These darn machines. Why isn't your cell phone on?"

Teresa pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and pushed the call log button—three missed calls. It was unusual for her aunt to call her on all her phones. She picked up the landline and dialed her Aunt Jessie's number.

"Hello." Her Aunt Jessie had refused to get caller ID or call waiting on her phone service. If Teresa hadn't insisted, she'd still be using a rotary dial.

"Aunt Jessie?" Teresa spoke. "It's me, Teresa. What's going on?"

"Teresito. My baby, hello." Teresa's aunt had a habit of yelling at the phone. "I want to talk to you. I need to see you."

A rush of blood fell to the bottom of Teresa's feet. The woman was like a mother to her. If anything happened to her aunt, Teresa didn't know what she'd do.

“What’s going on, Aunt Jessie?” Teresa’s heart pounded in her ears.

“It’s about your father. Why don’t you step out for a while and come over to my house? I’ll explain,” she responded.

“My father?” Teresa’s head began to ache. She squeezed her jaw shut and felt her cheek muscles flex—her breathing sped up. “What’s going on? It’s been years ...”

“Please, come over. I tried to catch you on your way to work so you wouldn’t have to backtrack. But you didn’t answer your phone.”

“Is that bastard finally dead?” The words flew from Teresa’s mouth.

“No, he’s not dead.” Her aunt sighed. “I need to explain.”

“Okay, Auntie.” Teresa put her hand on her forehead and exhaled. “Let me tie up some loose ends here, and I’ll be right over.”

“I’ll put on the coffee and see you in a little while, then,” her Aunt Jessie said. “Oh, and Teresa ... mind your potty mouth.”

The sound of dial tone filled Teresa’s ear. She set the phone back in its cradle, walked to the front of the store, and stared out the window. She hadn’t seen her dad in over twenty years. Her last remembrances of him were awful and framed by that period of time she’d like to leave forgotten altogether.

The worst moment in her life was when her dad disappeared during her mother’s final days, a memory she hadn’t allowed herself to think about in ages. Oh, how she missed her mom. Her body constricted as she squeezed her hands shut and let the weight of her fists dangle at her side. Teresa closed her eyes, allowing a single tear to fall while her thoughts carried her back to the place she’d avoided for so many years.

She’d sat with her mom hour after hour, holding the cool washcloth on her mother’s forehead while the cancer and

the chemo wreaked havoc on the poor woman's frail body. Her mother remained continually awash with sweat, and hallucinating. Without an okay from the hospice nurse—who was gone for the night—the doctors wouldn't prescribe any more pain medicine.

Teresa, at eighteen years of age and having recently buried her only sister, sat alone comforting her dying mother. She'd kept back the tears for her mother's sake, and she'd repeatedly lied about her father hurrying on his way home.

She left her mom's side for a quick second to make a frantic call to her Aunt Jessie. Teresa told Jessie her dad had gone to work as usual that morning but hadn't shown up at the factory where she'd been trying to reach him all day long. Her aunt said Teresa shouldn't call the police, that Jessie would look for him at the bars he frequented. Teresa's aunt knew exactly where she would find her older brother.

A few hours later, Aunt Jessie arrived at the house with puffy red eyes and a ripped sleeve. She'd said Teresa's dad was okay, and that he'd be home soon, but she refused to discuss the matter further. After that, Teresa and her Aunt Jessie had sat together with her mother until they both had fallen asleep sitting upright in the chairs next to her mother's bed.

Then the following morning, Teresa found her dad in the front yard. He lay in a pile of vomit and smelled like a latrine. God only knew how he'd gotten home since the driveway was empty, and his car wasn't parked on the street. Teresa had forgotten what was so important that morning that her aunt had to leave, but she remembered her aunt's anger toward Teresa's father. Teresa was given strict instructions to leave him in the yard.

"He's alive. Let him wake up in his own filth." And as her Aunt Jessie spoke, she stepped around her brother's limp body and spat on him. "And don't help him into the house. He needs to find himself in this mess. Maybe he'll snap out of it."

Now, thinking of that day so many years later, Teresa felt wetness run across her cheeks. She went to the mirror on the back wall of her store and examined her red eyes. Then she pulled the window cleaner from under the counter, put on her rubber gloves, and scrubbed the mirror. The energy he took ... Just thinking about her father brought heaviness into her world along with the old feelings that she hated.

After a few minutes, she put down the cleaning fluid and pulled off her gloves. Teresa looked at her teeth in the mirror. Her investment in braces years before had paid off. She touched up her hair and wiped the streaks off her face.

What could be happening with her father now?

Shaking away thoughts of the past, Teresa moved to the cupboard in the front of the store and pulled out the Rolodex. Her fingers found the Ks for Kelly's number (she never used last names because she couldn't remember them). Kelly, her best part-timer, picked up after a single ring. Yes, she'd gladly open, clean up, and handle the day, "... no problem."

As Teresa walked to her car, she stared down the dirty sedan in her parking place, as if it were a live human being who had kidnapped her firstborn. She snapped out of it when she realized how silly she was being. It was just a car. Teresa shook her head and chuckled to herself. "Stop it," she whispered. The owner of that sedan was probably a patron of Barney's Pub. The vehicle had most likely spent a night or two in the lot. It was better parked here than driven, though, if its owner had been drinking.

While Teresa drove toward Sepulveda Boulevard, her past continued to flood through her mind—more of the darkness. The accident that had taken her sister's life came back like a tidal wave. Teresa's grip tightened on the steering wheel.

She bent over her dash and looked up toward the sky. “What is this?” she asked, half expecting the sky to open up and swallow the car, with her in it.

She rubbed her left leg—remnants from the accident so many years ago. But she couldn’t be too ungrateful because the physical damage Teresa had sustained was minimal compared to Angela’s fate. A hit and run that the police, her mother, her aunt, her uncle, and, annoyingly enough—considering his own fate—her father, agreed had been caused by a drunk driver.

Witnesses claimed the car weaved in and out of traffic about two minutes before the accident. A dark sedan was the only description the police had to go on, and they never found the person who had run down Teresa and Angela.

Her entire body trembled while she thought about the past, and she forced herself back into the present. She loosened her grip on the steering wheel as she drove into the small community where her aunt lived. The neighborhood wasn’t as safe as it used to be, or as pleasantly middle class.

When the homes were built way back in the sixties, the small, three-bedroom bungalows must’ve looked identical or showed some type of continuity. Now, the styles and colors of the homes presented quite a mixed bag. Teresa thought that many of these folks either couldn’t afford the upkeep on their homes, or simply didn’t care. On one side of the street, in front of a house in need of painting, a yellow lawn was overrun with weeds. Next to that home sat a perfectly manicured yard surrounded by a white picket fence—the house displaying a recent addition of bars on the windows.

At her aunt’s usually perfectly tended place, surprisingly, gardening gloves and tools lay scattered across the well-clipped grass. Teresa parked her car in the driveway and moved quickly

up the front steps where Aunt Jessie yanked the door open at Teresa's first knock.

"Teresita, honey, come in." Her aunt had aged well over the years. She power-walked every day and went to the gym a few times a week and it showed.

"Auntie Jessie, have you been in the garden this morning?" Teresa pointed toward the tools.

"Oh my. I forgot to bring those in last night. The phone rang and I ... Teresa, I'm getting too old to deal with this crap." She seemed almost on the verge of tears.

"What's going on, Auntie?"

Teresa's Aunt Jessie marched out to the front yard, her large, blue housecoat floating around her skinny body. She picked up the tools and the gloves and dropped the items in a storage box that posed as a tree stump. Then she gestured to Teresa to follow her back into the house. "Come inside. Let's have some coffee and talk."

Teresa loved the smell of the home's interior, a cleaning-fluid scent mixed with coffee that her aunt still made in an ancient percolator—a mechanism Teresa's great-grandmother had passed down. Her aunt often reminded Teresa that one day she'd be the proud owner of this wonderful machine.

"One day, Teresita, this fine machine will be yours." Aunt Jessie now rubbed the side of the percolator and winked.

Teresa laughed. "I was just thinking you'd say that. It smells so good, Auntie. But I'd rather have you in my life."

Her aunt set the coffee cups on the table. "Come and sit down. We need to talk."

"Okay, what's so important you called me away from work today? I'm a big girl already, so tell it like it is." Teresa sat at the familiar round table with the chipped Formica top. She chose the same chair she used to sit in for hours studying for finals and

writing papers. Teresa was lucky. Her aunt had let her move in after her mother had died. All through college and for a while after, they shared the house.

“That’s right. My mija is in her forties now. I can’t believe it.”

“What’s going on with Joe Torres, Auntie?” Teresa reached across the table and put her hand on her aunt’s.

“I got this call last night from a man, a priest. I thought to myself, I don’t know a Father Benjamin.” Aunt Jessie paused and took a sip of her coffee.

“I had a message from him as well,” Teresa said, surprised.

“Oh, he’s trying to reach you all right. But I’m glad he didn’t. I’d like to be the one to tell you instead. I’ll just cut to the chase. Your father is dying, and he wants to see you.”

Teresa swallowed and resisted the urge to jump up and clean the sink.

“I thought he was dead. In fact, I hoped he was dead after what he did.” A wave of emotions welled up in her throat. “How does a grown man leave his teenage daughter twice, and then disappear forever? First at Angela’s funeral and then mom’s ...” She pulled a tissue out of her bag and dabbed at her eyes, shocked at how affected she was by the thought of her father.

“What about what I want? What about what I needed years ago? What about what you needed?” Teresa’s voice rippled as she tried to maintain control.

She stared at the coat closet across the living room where the vacuum was stored, fighting her desire to pull out the machine and vacuum the house.

“Mija, I’m here.” Her aunt put her hand on Teresa’s chin and turned the younger woman’s face toward her—seemingly for the purpose of eye contact. “Take a deep breath,” her aunt advised.

And then Aunt Jessie stood up and moved to Teresa's side putting her arm across Teresa's shoulders and sliding down beside her. Her aunt then squeezed Teresa's torso and rocked with her gently to the ticking of the clock.

"You know, my father, your granddad, had the same problem. He drank himself to death," Aunt Jessie said a minute later.

"What's Joe dying of?" Teresa asked, returning to the moment.

"That's another thing, Mija, he's using his first name now, Juan. The priest told me it was symbolic to Joe, your dad—well, I guess, Juan, now. He believes it's the only way he can stay sober, by using a different name. Sort of like a new identity." Teresa's aunt rolled her eyes.

"Auntie, wasn't he wonderful before my mom got sick? Or is my memory messed up?" Teresa asked.

"No, you've got it partially right. He was wonderful at times, but Joe had his moments. I guess you could say he was haunted, like his father." Her aunt moved back to her place at the table, across from Teresa.

"What?" Teresa sat up straight. "He had a problem before Mom got sick?"

"Oh, yes. I thought you knew. Your mother and he had split up for a short while when you and Angela were little. She was a strong woman, your mom." Aunt Jessie took a deep breath. "Your mom's ultimatum worked, until your dad blew up over the stress of the tragedies."

Teresa tried to recall those years, memories she'd worked so hard for so long to erase completely. "Oh God, he must've been going to meetings a few times a week. I remember that now." She put her hand up to her mouth. "He seemed to be so strong back then."

“Your mother was the strength behind the man, and he openly admitted it too. His honesty was a part of his charm. Oh, your father had charisma.” Her aunt smiled.

“Remember the Torres family reunion, when I was twelve or so? Dad had put up streamers in the back yard and flags in the front yard. He manned the grill out in the back of our house. The men and the women, all of them wanted to be around him there. His jokes, his smile.” Teresa felt her jaw loosen as she recalled the earlier days with her father.

He hadn’t always been a drunk. For years her dad had been a good family man. When Teresa and her sister, Angela, were little, they waited on the front porch for their dad to get home from work. How they both loved their wonderful daddy.

At one point in her childhood, she did the math with her friends—Teresa’s parents were married the longest and seemed the happiest of all the couples around them. Many of her friends were growing up in single-parent homes, and most of those girls wanted to be at Teresa’s house on weekends. Her dad was the life of the party, and her beautiful mother knew how to cook and always took care of any guest. Teresa’s memories were of a home filled with love, until her mother’s cancer diagnosis. Their lives seemed to unravel from that point forward.

“Well, his liver’s shot,” Aunt Jessie blurted out, interrupting Teresa’s short stroll down memory lane. “The priest said your father’s years of alcohol abuse have caught up with him.

“I tried so hard, Auntie, to create a family like the one I thought I had as a child. My version was parents who loved each other, and I wanted a house full of children ...” Teresa tore at the tissue in her hand. “I failed miserably, didn’t I?”

“No, no. Never say that.” Her aunt took her hands. “You’ve raised a wonderful son, who adores you. Mija, look at your store

as well. You're a big success. I don't want to hear you speak like that anymore."

"I swore I'd never let him hurt me, ever again. I'm not sure how to handle this. Did you say five years? He's been sober ..."
Teresa's head pounded. She pushed down the emotions that tried to engulf her, memories of the bleak, lonely time—such a heavy feeling of despair. Teresa squeezed both of her eyes shut.

"Yes. He's been living in the maintenance quarters at St. Augustine's on Third Street for almost the last five years. He's like a saint to the people there. In fact, the priest had no idea your dad had a family until Joe went into the hospital."

Her Aunt Jessie stared in her coffee cup for a couple of seconds and then continued. "The father wants both of us to come by the church first. Before we see your dad ... if we see your dad. Though, I don't know how I'm going to call Joe, Juan."

They sat in silence, Teresa's energy already depleted, yet another sign that Juan Joseph Torres was around if only in spirit. But the past was the past, Teresa reminded herself as she rocked her body back and forth. She looked at the floor and thought about the bucket her aunt kept under the sink, and then she dismissed her irrational desire to mop.

"Well, Auntie, I'm not sure I want to see my selfish dad. He couldn't pull it together at the worst possible time when Mama and Angela died. And now that he's dying he wants his family around him?" Teresa's cheeks filled with heat.

"Yes, I know, Mija." Her aunt touched Teresa's arm and spoke in a soothing voice. "It doesn't have to be about him. It could be about you. We're all hurt over what happened during that time."

With no warning or reason, Teresa's insides suddenly filled with warmth, and her anger fell away. It was a feeling she'd had before, and always at the oddest moments in her life, but never close enough to the surface for her to quite retain the memory.

A sensation of overwhelming softness which began in the core of her being and then spread slowly like a glow-light throughout her body.

It was odd to feel such delight during what seemed to be the most distressing periods of her life. She hoped the sensation was a sign from her mother, but as always, as quickly as the feeling arose, it disappeared. She touched her stomach for a moment, almost forgetting why, and dismissed the warm impression from seconds ago as just her imagination.

CHAPTER 3

ANGEL PUT AN ARM AROUND TERESA while she sat with the two women. She hadn't known Teresa'd had a sister or that her father was still alive. All of these years and no mention of either in the presence of Angel.

"Sometimes I think Mom is around," Teresa said.

"I have to believe she is," Teresa's aunt answered.

"I can feel something, though I can't really explain it."

"I have an idea, Teresita. Why don't you go with me to see Father Benjamin? No commitment to anything else." Teresa's aunt looked hopeful.

Angel nodded at this idea and wished Teresa could see her sitting right here. She'd encourage Teresa to deal with this unfinished business, which she'd always sensed around the woman. How Angel wanted to be heard by these two women who had no knowledge of her existence.

"For some odd reason I'm open to that," answered Teresa. "It's like something Mom and Angela would've wanted. At least test the waters, so to speak. I'll go with you."

Teresa's aunt jumped up. "I'll get ready now, and call Father Benjamin."

Angel sat with Teresa as she pulled a cell phone out of her pocket and dialed the store. "Kelly? Good. I'm glad you made it in. Thank you."

Teresa smoothed out her left eyebrow while she spoke. "I might be gone the rest of the day. Call me if you need me. I'm not sure what happened in that back room but I know you'll take care of it." Teresa paused for a moment, "All right, we'll talk later. Thank you, again."

Angel had little understanding of her purpose in the living, breathing lives of Teresa and her son, or Teresa's Aunt Jessie. What she did know was that she'd been watching Teresa and her family for many years. At first, she tried to speak to Teresa and anyone who'd listen. Why she continually came back to see Teresa, with no interaction, day after day, was a mystery she hadn't resolved. Of course, she'd simply been drawn to do what she did.

Not a single one of them heard Angel or responded to her. Still, Angel did feel some comfort from being around Teresa, and for a while, she'd prepared to be born into this family. Teresa went through the pregnancy by herself, after Greg had left. Angel believed she'd been sent early to be around her new mother, and she was looking forward to being in the flesh again. Then, JJ arrived.

After his birth, Angel had no explanation for her way of life. She thought she was some type of ghost or something else non-worldly, since occasionally, when she wasn't watching over Teresa, but staying up in the clouds, some folks could actually see her. She preferred to keep to herself though, and her only means of back and forth communication continued to be her two pups.

The pups were a godsend, and perhaps literally. Belle came first. If they'd been alive and breathing, and not the doggie

ghosts Angel thought they were, Belle would weigh in at about three pounds and Kail would be about five pounds, tops. Neither looked real, yet both seemed more real than all of Angel's other surroundings.

The talking part of her pups' existence had at first seemed difficult for Angel to accept. The day she met Belle she'd stopped at the park to enjoy the grass. Angel was flat on her back, basking in the sun, when she heard someone speak. Because rarely did anyone talk to her, she ignored the voice. Angel understood at this point she was 'see through'; she didn't exist in the world, although some part of her knew that she used to be a part of it all. The longer she remained in this 'limbo' state, she realized, the more she forgot about what it was like to be in the flesh. Angel hadn't determined yet if this was heaven or hell, though she hoped it was neither.

"Why do you think they make the dogs stay on leashes?" Angel saw Belle and saw her mouth move, but she dismissed it because she thought the words weren't meant for her ears.

"I said, why do you think they make the dogs wear leashes?" Angel heard the question again and looked up. A cream colored, petite Pomeranian, with short hair and an overbite was standing within two inches of her face. Looking her straight in the eye, in fact.

"Can you see me?" Angel whispered.

"Yes, I'm talking to you." The little thing responded.

"About the leashes?" Angel asked.

"Yes, I want to know."

"So they won't bite each other, or scare the people in the park. Can you see me?" Angel asked again.

"Yes. I said I could see you. My name is Belle."

"Belle, that's a nice name. My name is Angel. How are you able to talk?" Angel wasn't sure why, but this didn't seem right.

“Probably for the same reason I can see you,” Belle answered.

“Where did you come from?” Angel asked.

“I was following my family until they got another pet. They seem okay now.”

“Did you die? Are we ghosts?”

“Well, aren’t you an angel?” Belle asked.

“I don’t think so,” answered Angel. She thought about it for a while and had considered all the ins and outs. “I have no special powers and I’ve never been to heaven, at least I hope not. I don’t even know who I was when I was on earth. Although, I think I was somebody. The only thing I can figure is that I’m stuck.”

“I think I am too.” The small dog’s eyebrows lifted in some show of emotion.

“It’s like I’m in between places,” Angel said. “And I really can’t remember how long I’ve been here. My life now is real, but not really real.”

“Yes.” Belle nodded.

From that day forward Angel shared her cloud with pretty little Belle. As soft as a bed, and peacefully away from the world below, the cloud served as their escape.

The two spent their days apart, out in the world, but when they tired, usually at night, they met on that special cloud, to rest. Wherever the cloud may have floated to in the meantime, Angel and Belle always found their way back.

Then one day Belle brought home Kail, and they became a family of three. Angel loved her girls, and for some reason it was easy for her to trust the pups. Angel’s trust issues were with the few unknown people who somehow managed to see her when nobody else could. It didn’t happen often, but when it did, Angel moved her little family as far away as possible.

Belle and Kail would be interested in this newest twist to Teresa's life, though Angel couldn't leave quite yet to catch the girls up on these thought-provoking happenings. She wanted to be around for the upcoming visit. For years she'd watched Teresa simply exist. If what the women now were talking about had actually happened—the accident, the cancer, and all the rest—it explained a lot of the emptiness in Teresa's life. And probably why Teresa, like Angel, avoided people, or relationships.

A while back, Angel told Teresa to get a dog—her life would be a lot less lonely; at least that was what Angel had discovered for herself. Since Teresa never heard her, Angel had tried to visit Teresa's dreams, and in waking moments she whispered in Teresa's ear. Eventually, Angel had managed to guide Teresa toward a pet store where Teresa looked for a while at the puppies. But Angel's plans hadn't worked out, because in the end, Teresa left the store empty handed.

Now, Angel decided to stay close to Teresa and be with her when she met the priest. She also intended to visit Teresa's dad, regardless of whatever decision Teresa made. Angel was curious about this man and wanted to learn more.

q
u
i
t
t
e
r

CHAPTER 4

THE WAITING AREA AT THE CHURCH office smelled musty. A graffiti laden, three-legged desk had been balanced in the corner, and Jessie sat on one of four plastic, wobbly chairs scattered randomly about the room. Next to the second, double door entry, a bulletin board was propped up against the wall on the cheap laminate floor. The words 'Sober Living Program' were posted across the top.

It took Jessie a moment to recognize her brother's face. A picture of Joe had been pinned to the middle of the board. A few more wrinkles and some gray hair, but she knew it was Joe. And from where she sat, it appeared he'd aged well. The alcohol must've preserved his skin.

Remaining seated, Jessie stifled her desire to walk over and see the picture close-up, for fear of Teresa also seeing the photo. Jessie believed it was too much, too soon. The poor girl needed a moment or so to catch her breath. It'd been less than an hour since she'd learned of her father's being alive and his request to see her.

Jessie watched Teresa scan the small lobby from the entryway and quietly sighed as her niece's eyes lit up in recognition of the man in the picture. Because Teresa rarely missed a thing, she'd tuned into that photo within seconds. And without pause, she went directly to the board and knelt down to look. Her voice echoed in the room as she read out loud, "Juan Torres, founder of the Sober Living Program."

Jessie walked over and placed her hand on her niece's shoulder as she squatted down next to her.

"He looks the same, only older," Jessie said, and they both studied the photo. Behind them, a clock ticked on the wall.

"It's like a time warp," her niece said as she stared at the photo.

"I really didn't want you to see it," Jessie told Teresa. "I thought you'd need more time."

"Oh, Tia, I'm not so sure I want to be here. My dad makes me so angry."

"I know." Jessie stood and returned to her chair. She patted the chair next to her. "Sit down, Teresita."

"I always thought he'd died and that is why we never heard from him. I made up my mind he was dead. It hurt less that way, or at least that's what I thought." Teresa stared at the floor as she sat down. "I don't know what to think, now."

"We take it a step at a time." Jessie took her niece's hand in her own as she thought back to the night, long ago, when she tried to bring Joe home.

Jessie went to Joe's favorite bar on Lexington Street, because she knew he'd be there. She shook her head now, trying not to think about the horrible incident in the parking lot. The bar was in a rough neighborhood. She wouldn't have gone to the bar or been in that part of town, had it not been for her brother's indiscretions.

The son of a bitch had refused to return with her. He'd called her every name imaginable, including the "C" word.

Jessie had told him about what the men in the parking lot did to her, and Joe laughed at her. He'd told her to go home. "This is a man's place. You have no business being here," Joe went on and on ... And what was she doing in this part of town anyway? Women didn't belong here. He'd said she'd gotten what she deserved, and then physically pushed her out the door.

Up until the moment that had happened, she'd never seen her brother behave in that manner. Jessie wouldn't have believed it, had it not happened to her. Afterward, when they found him passed out in the front yard, she'd hoped and prayed he'd snap out of it. Jessie thought he'd hit rock bottom then. In retrospect, she didn't know if she'd been naïve, or simply stupid. Her father—Joe's father—had drunk himself to death. It was in their blood, a part of their history. Why hadn't she done more to stop her brother?

Jessie's stomach went into spasms at the sound of approaching footsteps. The double doors flung wide open, and she immediately sat upright and at attention. Posture had been her biggest issue with the nuns in grade school, and her head began playing those terrible old tapes. She straightened her shirt with her hands and checked her niece with a quick sideways glance.

Teresa always looked like perfection. She wore tailored suits and the finest silk blouses. Jessie was very proud of her niece, in fact. The girl, well ... the forty-year-old woman, had been through more in her years of life than most people would ever have to go through in several lifetimes, and she'd handled it all with remarkable courage.

"Father Benjamin?" Jessie's knees cracked as she stood and moved toward the man. She felt like a child being sent to the principal's office. The many years she attended a Catholic school had instilled a fear in her of religious authority.

The priest went directly over to Jessie. "I'm sorry I'm late." He revealed a set of flawless white teeth and piercing blue eyes as he reached out to shake Jessie's hand. "I'm Father Benjamin."

"Hello Father, I'm Jessie and this is my niece, Teresa." Jessie heard a stranger's high-pitched voice come out of her mouth. Her left hand fluttered at her thigh while she stretched out her right hand to accept the priest's handshake.

Father Benjamin took her hand in both of his and looked at her. When he finally turned to address Teresa, Jessie let out a silent sigh of relief. She felt as if the priest's eyes had penetrated her soul and somehow learned more about her than she knew of herself.

"Come with me into my office, please." He motioned with his arm and led them back through the doors into a long stretch of hallway. Jessie's throat tightened. Perspiration broke out across her upper lip, and her limbs began to shake. In this brief second the walls seemed to close in around her.

She moved double-time to keep up with Father Benjamin, and thank goodness for this distraction. The closed-in feeling was quickly forgotten with her efforts to stay right behind him. The building was much larger than it appeared, but the priest obviously knew all of its ins and outs intimately. He moved quickly down the hall making several turns without hesitation. Jessie hoped she and Teresa wouldn't have to find their way out on their own.

"This office, right here." He pushed open the final door within a long maze of stark white halls. A large wooden desk filled one side of the office, and with a mismatch of colors a visitor seating area filled the other half of the space. Jessie was touched by the lack of decor rather than dismayed by it. The father seemed to truly have a calling here.

As he sat in an overstuffed chair across from the couch the women had settled on, the priest spoke again. "I'm sorry we meet

q
u
i
t
t
e
r

under these unhappy circumstances.” With manicured hands, polished patent leather shoes, and his priest collar rising from a black, freshly dry-cleaned shirt, the priest looked impeccable.

“I think we’re a little unclear about the circumstances,” snapped Teresa.

“Well, unfortunately, the outlook isn’t good. Your dad, Juan, was admitted to Memorial Hospital. His liver isn’t functioning,” explained the priest. “It’s one of the reasons he cleaned up five years ago. They discovered the cirrhosis when he’d had a gallstone attack.”

Jessie swallowed and quietly asked, “Does he know you called us?”

“He requested it.” Father Benjamin rested his arms on his legs and tilted his body toward the women, while he continued in a soft tone. “I’m sure this is hard. From what I’ve been told, you haven’t seen or heard from him in many years.”

Jessie reached for a tissue from a box on a table to her right. “Oh, Mija, I’m sorry. I was going to be strong for you,” she said as the tears started in earnest.

Teresa put her hand out and grabbed Jessie’s other hand. “It’s okay, Auntie. His behavior was bad to all of us.” She took a deep breath and turned toward the priest in indignation. “If he’s been clean for over five years, why no attempt to contact us during all that time?”

“I think he wanted to contact you. I hope he has an opportunity to explain to you personally. He told me days turned into months, and months turned into years. He’d had bouts of staying clean and working over the last twenty years.” The priest sat upright as he spoke in a more formal voice, “I’m not sure how this will sound, but in his mind he had one more chance to be around his family and not disappoint. He claims every time he got near the point of reentering your lives, he broke under the pressure.”

They all sat quietly for a few minutes, then Jessie stood and deposited her wet tissue into the wastebasket. Heat filled her cheeks as rage took over. "Father, what do we make of this? He abandoned his wife during her darkest hour and left his daughter to fend for herself after she was in a car accident that killed her sister, his other daughter. He refused to accept help. We spent the first several years after his disappearance trying to find him."

Jessie's heart pounded. She licked her lips and continued, "Every birthday, graduation, wedding, and holiday were excruciating to live through the eyes of his beautiful daughter he'd abandoned."

Jessie paused and looked at her niece. "She didn't say it, but I know she silently waited for him to reappear. And then one day, all of us quietly accepted his death. We'd heard the house had been foreclosed, and we all grew tired of worrying about Joe. His cousins, uncles, aunts, and his daughter—all of us—we were done."

Father Benjamin raised his hand and shook his head left to right, "I understand." He looked at Teresa.

"How can you understand? Did your father leave you?" Teresa made no attempt to hide the fury in her voice. "And I'm not sure what I want to do now. I may opt to go back to my life untouched and treat my dad as he was to me yesterday, dead."

The priest nodded and continued to maintain eye contact with Teresa.

"You know, Father, my dad has a specialty of bringing drama with him everywhere he goes. I can't help but think ..." Teresa looked down and swallowed. She then lifted her head and met the priest's eyes. With her cheeks red and the vein across her forehead bulging, she continued as Jessie, trying to control her sobs, reached for yet another several tissues from the box. She'd always wanted to shield Teresa from this precise pain.

“Where was he when his wife lay dying asking for him, over and over again?” Teresa demanded. “Why should we be there for him now that he is dying? Selfish, selfish man.”

Father Benjamin stood and paced back and forth for a few seconds. He stopped in front of the women and nervously rubbed his chin as he spoke. “I can tell you about Juan’s most recent five years. Juan has lived in the maintenance quarters. He’s been employed as the church’s maintenance man the entire time. Over the last few decades, however, he’d somehow managed to take some college course work.”

The priest cleared his throat. “This put him in a position to finish a college degree when he first arrived at our center. Juan then became a licensed counselor. He’s been one of our most successful addiction counselors. He also founded the Sober Living Program, which has helped so many souls.”

Then the father knelt down to the eye level of the seated women. “I know Juan isn’t any saint. But, the man also continued to work as the church maintenance person while acting as a counselor. His time has been spent with the outreach programs, with his groups, on skid Row finding missing sober lifers and always, always reaching out to others.”

Father Benjamin stood up, turned around, and slightly above a whisper he said, “I had a better understanding of why he seemed so selfless, when he finally told me his family story.”

“As a part of the Twelve Step Program, don’t most people make amends to those they’ve hurt?” Teresa asked. Jessie noticed the moisture beneath her niece’s eyes.

“Yes, it’s considered a critical element to maintaining a clean lifestyle.” Father Benjamin sighed.

“How could he counsel people when his own house wasn’t in order?” Teresa asked.

“A question to ask your dad, if you decide to see him.” The priest rubbed the back of his hand across his forehead and frowned. He then looked up, and to Jessie it appeared he forced a smile.

With a deep breath, the priest continued, “I’d like to show you his living quarters and where he has worked for the last five years. Would you like to see it?”

“I’m not so sure I want to spend any more time here,” Teresa answered. “What about you, Aunt Jessie?” she appealed.

For whatever reason, Jessie had a need to know more about her brother’s life, and she felt that maybe Teresa should come and see as well. “Well, we’re here, so let’s take a quick peek,” Jessie suggested. Then she turned to Father Benjamin, “How long will it take?”

“Just a few minutes, his office is down the hall and his living quarters are in the next building,” Father Benjamin answered.

q
u
t
t
e
r