

Chapter Four

Last Chance

For the next few months, the atmosphere in our house was tense. Mom jumped on every opportunity to start a fight with me. I felt like a private in the military. I had to be on my toes in case a test or inspection popped up: Bed made? Clothes put away? Room tidy? And God forbid I wasn't ready!

I suppose I deserved it. After all, I knew what it was like to have my privacy invaded. Mom was so paranoid that Cam and I were up to something, she listened in on our telephone conversations, invited herself to hang out with us and our friends – and she read my diary, too.

Admittedly, half of the tension stemmed from my own anger. I was angry that I didn't understand her illness or know how to help. And angry at her unpredictable behavior, at our family and her friends who saw everything but did nothing,

and at myself for staying silent. I felt trapped – helpless.

Mom and I seemed to struggle with similar feelings, and we both fought the same unseen assailant – her illness. The only difference was that I wanted to square off with it and she wouldn't acknowledge it. Our refusal to see each other's side caused enormous eruptions.

At breakfast one morning, Mom primped and fussed in front of the mirror while Cam and I tried to force down a bowl of gray, lumpy, half-cooked oatmeal. She had an interview, and we were taking too long to eat breakfast.

"C'mon, you guys, I have to be there in fifteen minutes," she said while plucking her eyebrows. "What's taking you so long?"

Poor Cam tried his best to shovel it in. He was never the fastest eater at the best of times or the best of meals. Grandma used to tell him he was "slower than molasses in January." I think he did it on purpose, as his own way of rebelling.

"Take it easy, Mom. He's doing his best."

"And what's wrong with your breakfast? It's exactly the same as his."

I shrugged. "Not hungry, I guess."

The truth was I didn't feel well. I'd been up all the night before. I trained myself to wake up at the slightest noise so I'd always know what went on in our house. I knew when my mom left, or if anyone showed up at our house, and I knew when she arrived home.

Mom threw her hairbrush in front of my bowl. "Just eat." She stood beside me, waiting for me to spoon some food in.

"No," I said.

"Excuse me?"

"I said no."

"I heard what you said, Tam."

"Then why did you ask what I said?"

She slammed her hand down on the table. My spoon rattled against my bowl. "Don't push me, Little Girl. Not today."

I looked up at her without expression. She had way too much eye makeup on. "I'm not hungry, Mom. I'll just take an apple for recess."

"No, you won't," she said. "You'll eat your breakfast."

My eyes narrowed. "Make me."

Whack!

She slapped me with the back of her hand. My nose popped and poured blood. Cam shoved huge spoonfuls of oatmeal into his mouth. I ran from the table with my hand filling with blood, footsteps thundering behind me.

I sat on the bathroom floor, reaching for Kleenex after Kleenex, trying to stop the geyser pouring out of my nose. Blood saturated one sheet before I could reach for another. Mom stood in the doorway for a few seconds just staring at me. Then she rushed to the sink and soaked a washcloth with cold water.

"Here, let's put this on your nose," she said.

I pushed her hand away. "Get away from me."

She clicked her tongue and rolled her eyes. "You're fine. It's just a nosebleed. It was an accident."

She'd spanked me before. Once she broke a wooden spoon on my bum because Cam and I

drew on our bedroom wall with crayons. When we were younger, though, she was always more of a yellor than a hitter. That day it was different. The way she hit me was from pure anger.

I threw the washcloth at her. It left a wet mark on the front of her blue satiny blouse. She screeched. "Look what you did!" She smacked the back of my head to emphasize each word. Blood droplets splattered on the tiles and my clothes.

"Oh God, Tam. I...I have to change. Clean up, okay? I'll drive you guys to school on the way to my interview. Maybe we'll go somewhere nice for supper. Sound good?"

I didn't answer her. After fifteen more minutes, my nose finally stopped bleeding. As I cleaned the floor, Cam walked in. He stared at me with innocence I wished I still had.

"You should'a just eaten the oatmeal, Tam," he said, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Why do you do that stuff when you know what'll happen?"

I pulled his left hand out of his pocket and tugged him downstairs. Mom waited for us in the car. She was late for her interview. In the rush to clean the bathroom, I'd forgotten to change my clothes. It was okay though because not one person at school asked me why I had blood on my clothes.



As I walked home from school I thought about how good our mother could be. When I'd had trouble at school with bullies, she marched right into the principal's office and demanded

justice for me. When I had nightmares, if she was there, she rushed in to ease me through them. I even remember times where she starved herself so Cam and I had enough to eat. So, *why*, I wondered, *why did she act like she did earlier that morning if she loved us so much?*

While I shuffled up the sidewalk, I prayed that I hadn't ruined Mom's chances at her interview. As the screen door slammed behind me, she stuck her head around the corner from the living room and said, "Come on in, Sunshine. I have good news."

She had amnesia about the morning.

Fine with me.

When I got into the living room, Cam was already there. Mom had brought home some new hockey cards for him which he gleefully browsed through. His cheeks were stuffed with the pink bubble gum that came tucked into the card packages. I laughed at him. I couldn't help it – he looked like a chipmunk.

He gave me a goofy smile and pink spit dribbled out of the side of his mouth. A smile spread across my face. I burst into laughter. Tears streamed down my cheeks. Mom turned around to see what was so funny. Cam laughed so hard he accidentally spit the enormous pink wad out onto the carpet. That sent Mom into laughing hysterics.

For a brief moment, things seemed so normal. Those were times I clung to. They gave me hope for the possibility of change. I sniffed, cringing because my nose was still swollen and tender, then wiped my eyes.

Mom let out one more snort. "Wow. Anyway, I was telling Cam just before you came in that we should go to Grapes for dinner. Would you like that? Anything you want."

"Really?" I said. "Can we afford it?"

She ran her fingers through her long black hair, flipping the ends up so she could pick off a few split ends. "Well, I didn't get the job. But I did sign on four new students! That makes 35 now. I think we'll be okay. We should be doing this sort of thing more often – at least once a week. Just the three of us. Besides, we also have something special to celebrate."

I'd almost forgotten that it was my tenth birthday. I worried about how hard she tried to assure me everything was okay. But I figured *why cut her down when she tried?*

"Sounds great!" I remembered my clothes. "Just let me change, okay? It'll just take a few minutes."

Mom disappeared into the kitchen. "Go ahead, Birthday Girl. We'll have about an hour anyway. I'll call for a reservation."

I ran up the stairs. I was so excited! It would be the first time in a long time that we were going out for supper to a place where our meals wouldn't come with a big yellow "M" on the wrappers.

Just the three of us.

My heart filled with hope. Maybe things would be different now. Maybe we just needed to hit a skid to make us realize how much we needed to have time to bond again.

I showered, got into my best jeans and t-shirt, and brushed my hair. I ran back downstairs to see Cam re-organizing his hockey cards in front of *Get Smart* on the television. My smile disappeared when I saw Mom with a glass of wine – filled to the brim – in her hand. My heart sank.

But then I figured, *oh well*. Grandpa always had a drink when he came home from work – before he retired. *Things would be fine*, I thought. *She wouldn't let anything bad happen today. Not on my birthday. One drink wouldn't hurt.*

She lit up a cigarette then asked, "Would you like some?"

I was confused. "I don't smoke. That's disgusting."

Mom laughed, blowing smoke out of the side of her mouth. "Not the cigarette, silly. Would you like your own little glass of wine? It's okay if you do. It's Mateus."

"Uhm...no thanks," I said. "I'll just have Coke at the restaurant."

That was new. She'd never asked if I wanted my own glass of something before. I mean, Cam and I snuck tastes of beer or whatever was around from the bottles or glasses at her parties, but that was it.

She shrugged. "Okay. What about you, Cam? Would you like some wine?"

Cam looked up at her, then at me. I didn't give him the chance to answer. "Mom, he's only seven. Besides, he doesn't like wine."

"It's okay, Tam." Cam smiled.

"No it isn't, Cam." I looked right into his eyes. His smile faded.

Mom chugged the rose liquid like it was icy cold water on a hot summer day. "Fine with me. Let's go, guys. This'll be fun."

I figured one glass of wine wouldn't affect her driving as long as she didn't have any more. I eased as we talked about what we planned to order. Mom said we could have anything we wanted on the menu. To make it fun, she made a rule we had to order something we'd never tried before.

We were seated in a booth by the window near the back of the restaurant. In those days, there were no "Smoking" or "Nonsmoking" sections. I guess if you didn't want to inhale other people's smoke you simply asked to be moved.

As we reviewed the menus, our waiter came to introduce himself. "Good evening folks, I'm Cam. I'll be your waiter for this evening. Can I get you anything from the bar?"

Cam the Waiter looked like one of those guys from California. He had unkempt sun-streaked blonde hair that fluttered around his shoulders. His skin was bronzed and made his blue eyes glow. And his teeth were unnaturally white – they reminded me of little squares of Chiclets gum. Mom liked him, though. Her right eyebrow rose when she looked at him. I slumped back in the booth, folding my arms over my chest.

"Isn't that cool?" she said. "His name is Cam, too?"

Giggles.

Yuck. I rolled my eyes. "Yeah. What are the odds finding another guy named Cam?"

She shot me a "shut-up" look, then took a cigarette out and put it between her pursed lips. Waiter Cam whipped out a mini bright yellow lighter from his shirt pocket – the buttons undone to his pecs, of course – and sparked it in front of Mom's face. She looked at him from the corner of her eye, cupping her hand over his, and brought it to her cigarette.

Oh geez. I wanted Waiter Cam to go away.

Mom puffed smoke out while she spoke. "Well, Cam, I'd like a Rusty Nail. It's my daughter's tenth birthday today, and I'm sure she'd love a Shirley Temple. Wouldn't ya, Honey?"

I didn't want a stupid baby drink. "I'll have a Coke, please. No ice."

"Well, happy birthday!" said Waiter Cam. "I'll bring your drinks right away."

Two Rusty Nails and a carafe and a half of wine later, my birthday dinner turned into a total disaster and a scene way too mature for kids. Several other staff members hung out at our table, including the manager, and Waiter Cam spent more time at our table than anyone else's. In fact, he served us for a few hours then sat at our booth when he got off his shift. But not before getting everyone around our table – including the few people still left in the restaurant – to sing "Happy Birthday" to me. I sat through the awful singing then shoved my plate in front of my brother. There was nothing worse than being sung to, off key and over-the-top loud, by a bunch of strangers.

When Mom and Waiter Cam started ordering double Rusty Nails, I decided Cam and I needed to make our escape. I leaned over to Cam, who'd been enjoying my free birthday cake, and said, "C'mon. We're outta here."

He looked at our mother and nodded.

"She'll come home later, Cam," I said, stuffing his arms into his jacket sleeves. "I promise."

I grabbed Mom's purse, took out her key ring, then slid out of the booth with Cam's hand in mine.

She stopped mid-laugh. "Where ya goin'? Aren't you having fun?"

"Not anymore." I said.

The table went silent. Everyone looked at Mom. She cleared her throat, "Cam here can sing and play guitar."

I shook my head. "Great. Our Cam is tired and I'm taking him home. I have the keys."

She took a long drag from her cigarette then stuffed the tips of her fingers into her hair. Waiter Cam tried smoothing things over. He knelt down so we were at eye level. His breath was sour. "Hey, look. If you stick around a bit longer, I can give you all a drive home. Would that be okay?"

"No, it wouldn't be okay, Cam," I said. "My brother and I are walking. Thanks for the dinner, Mom."

I supposed I'd said something funny because laughter exploded as we walked away from the table. I turned to see our mother sitting in Waiter Cam's lap with her arms wrapped around his neck. My eyes burned with tears.

Fortunately, we only lived about three blocks from the restaurant – that’s why we’d always chosen it. It was dark, but our area was well lit and active, so I knew we were safe. I’d stopped calling Grandpa when things like that happened. The result would have been the same: he’d get us, we’d stay with them a couple of nights then we’d go right back to Mom. Why bother upsetting them?

I put Cam in his bed, got into my pajamas, then listened.

Silence.

There was no way I was going to fall asleep until I knew Mom was back home. As mad as I was at her, I also worried. When she got really drunk, it was as if she lost all care about what happened to herself or us. I tried stopping the drinks from coming. I’d even begged Waiter Cam not to bring her any more.

I wondered if something happened at her interview that she didn’t tell us about. The more I thought about how I’d just left her at the restaurant, the guiltier I felt. Just as I was about to throw my clothes back on and run back to get her, I heard the front door open.

I got out of bed and heard male mumblings as I got to the top of the stairs. My heart raced. My hands were ice cold. I leaned over the wall to see Waiter Cam helping Mom walk to the basement door.

At least she came home. But I didn’t fall asleep until I heard the front door shut again, heard his car drive away, then heard Mom go up

to her room. As I drifted off, I heard her muffled snuffles.

Happy birthday to me.



We missed church the next morning. Grandma didn't even call to find out where we were. Cam and I sat on the floor watching cartoons in our pajamas with a cookie jar full of chocolate chip cookies between us. The doorbell rang. Forgetting I was still in my pajamas and, I'm sure, with chocolate all over my face, I answered the door to see a girl about my age.

"Hi there," she said. "I'm here for my piano lesson. I'm new and Janet said I could come today."

I knew there was no way our mother was in any shape to teach. If she'd come down hung over, that would have been the first and last lesson for her new student.

"Oh, geez," I said, crossing my arms over my stomach. "My Mom is real sick. We went out last night for dinner and she ate something bad, I think. The doctor came over and everything! I'm sorry I didn't call you, but I didn't know she had a new student. Can you call my Mom tomorrow and arrange another lesson? I'm sure she'll make extra time."

"Yeah, sure," she said. "I'll tell my Mom. Thanks. It's okay – it'll give me a chance to practice a bit more before I play for her. I hear she's pretty good."

It was nice to know that people out there still appreciated her musical abilities. "Yeah. She's really good – one of the best."

An hour after the girl left, the phone rang. I wasn't sure whether to answer it in case it was my grandparents. It was my Uncle Craig. He didn't sound happy. "Hey, Tam. Missed you guys in church this morning. So, where's your Mom? She okay?"

Great. I had to lie again – to my uncle of all people. "Yeah. She's just sick."

He forced a chuckle. "Sick, huh? Where is she, Tammer?"

"She's upstairs, sleeping," I said.

His voice didn't sound as convinced as Mom's new student's did. "I'm coming over there." He hung up without saying goodbye.

I grabbed a cookie out of Cam's hand just before he put it in his mouth and threw it back into the cookie jar.

"Hey! That's mine!" he said.

I turned off the television. "Forget about that! Uncle Craig is coming over. Quick! Get dressed and wash your face."

Cam and I scrambled. Just as we got back downstairs, Uncle Craig stormed into our townhouse. Uncle Craig is six-foot four, so we made sure to move if we were in his path. His face was stern, his walk was hurried, and his cheeks were flushed.

"Where's your Mom?" he asked, snapping his gum.

I nodded upstairs. He stomped up the stairs three at a time – impressive in flip-flops – and barged into her room. We heard the conversation from downstairs.

"Janet? Janet? Wake up. You reek like booze."

She groaned in response.

"Look, I know I said I wouldn't give you any money but I sent you these new students to help you out and then you go out and get loaded. I got a call from my friend saying she hoped you recovered from your food poisoning. Food poisoning my ass! Janet!"

Still no response.

"Don't ask me for anything again," Uncle Craig said. "I won't help you when you do this crap."

He slammed Mom's bedroom door then stomped back down the stairs. We ran to the couch. Uncle Craig stood with his hands on his hips staring at us. He sighed. "Get your shoes on. We'll go to the zoo."

God Bless Uncle Craig.