

One

SEARCHING

... TO THE HUNGRY, EVEN WHAT IS BITTER TASTES SWEET.

Proverbs 27:7

Thirteen

Derrick sat in the office chair beside my bed and watched me sleep. I never heard him walk into my room that morning. He was sort of stealthy, like that. Long and lanky, with a swift, quiet gait. I didn't know he was there until he yanked the covers off me. I shot up, ready to fight, but relaxed when I realized it was him. He was leaning over the bed, and I could smell the fruity scent of his Let's Jam hair gel. His hair was trimmed into a neat fade. The top was long, combed back into perfect waves.

'What are you doing?' I grumbled, pulling the covers back over my head.

'The side door was open.'

'I know.'

'You know, you really shouldn't leave it open like that.'

He wasn't the first person to say that. My Daddy Russ, the stepfather that raised me, said the same thing when I was eight. It was during the lecture he gave me after a man broke in and nearly beat my mother to death. I saw her after she was discharged from the hospital, and she was ashamed to be seen. Her lips were nearly black and had been stitched back onto her bruised and swollen face. My father dragged me down the long hallway from her bedroom to the side door for a lesson.

Scars and Stilettoes

'You see this? This is how he got in! I don't know why your mother insists on leaving every goddamn door and window in this house open!' my dad hollered. I think he blamed himself for not being home to protect her, that night. Powerlessness and fear can make a person angry.

Five years later, my Daddy Russ had long since moved out. We still left the side door open. And the windows. I know it doesn't make sense, but that's kind of the way my family works. We also left our car doors unlocked – no matter how many times a homeless man slept in it, or the radio got stolen. My mom said that if someone was going to break in, she'd rather not have to replace the radio *and* fix a broken window.

I guess Derrick's family didn't adopt the same philosophy, because he too complained about the side door being left open.

'It's already noon. Why are you still in bed? And where's your mom?' he said, pulling the covers back off me.

'Geez! Leave me aloooooone! She's in Canada.'

'Canada?' He looked at me, bewildered. 'When did that happen?'

'After Nathaniel left. She went to meet him. She's only supposed to be gone a couple of weeks.' The book of food stamps my mother left me wouldn't last that long, even if I only used them to buy tortillas and butter. I was going to have to start stealing food from the liquor store down the street, pretty soon.

'For real? Are you serious?' His pubescent voice rose and cracked at the end of his sentence.

'I don't care. I like it better with her gone. Plus, MaSyh's coming down to stay with me, so I won't have to take care of Noah by myself.' MaSyh (named after the Maasai Tribe in Africa) was the closest thing to a sister I had. We met when we were two years old and had been inseparable since.

I stood up, stretched, and took in the warm ocean air.

Derrick followed me to the bathroom.

'Harm, seriously. Who is watching you guys?'

'No one. Daddy Russ stops by after work sometimes.'

Derrick stood in the doorway to the bathroom, trying to make sense of it all. Out of habit, he ran his finger along the collar of his crisp white T-shirt to straighten out any creases or wrinkles.

'Come on, get out. I have to pee,' I whined, before nudging him out of the door and pushing it shut.

All Derrick knew was that Nathaniel was the weird boyfriend my mother met at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting. With all the eccentric people we met at those meetings, in some ways life got even more colorful after she got sober.

Nathaniel looked like David Carradine in *Kung Fu* and he walked around our house doing his fancy karate moves like some kind of mysterious, nunchuck-carrying hero. He did fan kicks across my face, barely missing my nose, and randomly placed my brother in headlocks, telling him, 'I could kill you right now if I wanted to.' Derrick didn't like him, because he was pompous and annoying. I didn't like him, because he was worse than those things. Every time he came into my room at night – professing his attraction, rubbing his hands along my body, trying to kiss me – the anger in me festered. I wanted to grab him by the hair and punch him in the mouth. Instead, I lay there, stiff and fearful, begging for him to leave me alone.

That stiffening feeling was familiar to me. Throughout my life, I'd been sexually abused by several people, both men and women. I was exposed to pornography at the age of three by a male relative. 'Stay still. Go to sleep,' I remember him saying. The pink fleshy images on the television screen were burned into my mind.

Staying still and pretending I was asleep was the very

Scars and Stilettos

defensive tactic I used the first time it happened. I was five years old, and two women, family friends, said we were going to have a slumber party. The idea seemed fun, until they undressed and told me to take off my pajamas. Hard as I tried, I could not erase the events that followed from my mind. The next morning, we all ate eggs Benedict and drank Sunny Delight as though nothing happened.

The next time, I was about seven. The boy was older than me, and had already threatened to smash my fingers in a vice grip unless I did what he said. So when he told me to take my panties off, I listened. I thought that he would hurt me if I didn't. I believed that there must be something inherently wrong with me that kept attracting those situations. It was as if there was something dirty about me that drew these people and their perversion.

I hated Nathaniel. I hated the way his breath smelled like sour milk, and the way his nostrils made a whistling sound when he breathed. I was relieved he was finally gone. The truth is, I didn't mind my mom being gone, either, even if it meant I had to take care of my eight-year-old brother Noah. I was glad to have the freedom.

When I stepped out of the bathroom, Derrick was still standing in the hallway. His arms were folded across his chest, and he looked around, as though he was assessing his surroundings and getting ready to take charge; like he had been waiting for an opportunity to do so.

'This place is a mess,' he said, peering over my shoulder into the bathroom.

'Yeah. What's new?' I said, kicking a balled-up sock down the hall. The place was always a mess.

'There are a million cats pissing all over your mom's bedroom. The dishes look like they haven't been done for weeks.

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And this bathroom is disgusting! It's just nasty.' He made a face, like he just smelled a waft of something horrible.

'It's not my fault that two of the cats had kittens at the same time. They're too little to use the litter box.' There were 17 of them, in total.

He paused, and looked at me like I was going to have to come up with a better excuse than that.

'What do you want me to do about it? The house is always like this,' I reasoned.

He stepped into the tiny bathroom where the sink, toilet and tub were all crammed against each other. A person could stand up from using the toilet and bend over to wash their hands without having to take a step. Derrick peered into the toilet bowl, which was covered with a pinkish orange film. There were old cotton balls, hairballs, and crumpled toilet paper on the white tile floor. Mildew and rust lined the toilet, bathtub and sink.

Derrick's face was all scrunched and twisted, as if he had been holding his breath in a sewage tank. His big brown eyes pinched together at the corners and he took a swift step back, out of the bathroom.

'You know you have to clean it. You can't live like this.'

'It's my house. I can live how I want to.' I enjoyed being able to say this to someone.

'Do you really *want* to live like this?'

I looked at the bathroom and considered his question. It really was pretty gross.

I thought of Pippi Longstocking. How she got to live by herself with a monkey and tied scrub brushes to her feet to wash the floor. Slipping and sliding in the suds looked like so much fun. I always wanted to be like her and live on my own. Carefree and independent. But I don't think her floors had furry, toxic growth like my bathroom did.

Derrick wasn't going to let up. And I didn't much enjoy the dirt, either. That's why I spent most of my time locked away in the converted service porch I slept in. There was hardly enough room for my twin mattress, but at least the place was clean.

'Fine. We can clean,' I submitted.

'We. There's no we in this. This isn't my house.' Derrick walked away, leaving me to my duties.

I poked my head into the bedroom where Noah was still sleeping to enlist his help.

'Noah, it's time to wake up. We have to clean up this house,' I barked. I gave the orders, but I knew it would be at least half an hour before he would finally roll out of bed. He was a hard sleeper and woke up about as fast as a sloth runs a marathon.

Then I stomped off into the kitchen, where I had to destroy a spider's web to get to the cleanser under the sink. I dumped Comet all over the sink and tub; after about 20 minutes of pushing a sponge around, I grew tired of cleaning and joined Derrick in the living room, where he was watching television.

'Are you finished?'

'Yeah.' I certainly *wanted* to be finished.

'Let's see.'

I followed him back to the bathroom to inspect my work. Before he even stepped inside, he whipped around and looked at me as if I had lost my mind.

'Seriously? You're done? You think this is clean? You're going to have to do better than that.'

He went to the kitchen and brought back gloves, a bucket and some bleach.

'Here, fill this up with hot water and let's put some bleach in there. Hasn't anyone ever taught you how to clean a bathroom?'

The truth is, nobody had. He sat in the doorway and guided

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me through the process. After an hour of scrubbing and rinsing and scrubbing and rinsing, the tiles were more white than green and the toilet actually looked as if you could sit on it without contracting a virus. I was proud of my work. And I wasn't bothered that Derrick didn't help me. I was thankful that he cared. He cared about whether or not my bathroom was clean and he cared enough to take the time to show me how to clean it.

The truth is, I never liked having a dirty bathroom. Like everything else in my life that was dirty or embarrassing, I learned to live with it. And, when necessary, I pretended it wasn't there. When friends came to visit, I never pointed out the dirt and apologized, as some people would. I just held my breath and hoped that somehow – some way – they wouldn't notice. Derrick was the first person to point out the dirt. And he showed me how to get rid of it. I felt thankful; indebted, even.

Fifteen

The light from the street lamps on Pico Boulevard dissipated into the thick ocean air, creating an orange fog. My mother's van came to a stop near the liquor store, and I held the stare of a homeless man gripping the crumpled paper bag containing his drink. The whites of his eyes shone like yellow moons against his midnight skin.

'We're right by Derrick's house.' My head whipped around to see where my mother was pointing.

'We are?' Though we had driven down this street on countless occasions, everything seemed new in light of this information.

'How do you know?' I turned and looked at my mother skeptically. In the three years I had known him, Derrick had