



5TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

THE
SUN
STILL
Shines

HOW A BRAIN TUMOR HELPED ME SEE THE LIGHT
JODI ORGILL BROWN

Awards and Praise for *The Sun Still Shines*

2016 Gold Quill Award 2014 International Storymakers Contest Winner

“Every once in a while we encounter an individual whose story changes us, powerfully and permanently. This is the case with Jodi Orgill Brown. Her perspective, perseverance, and resilience are inspiring. A remarkable story!”

~Shawn Moon, CEO, Zerorez

“Powerful. Touching. Real. Hard to put down. If you want to read a story that will inspire you, this is it!”

~ Lori Conger, survivor of the Cokeville, Wyoming bombing

“Moving, from the first page to the last. A true testament of the power of the human spirit to consciously choose joy in the face of even the darkest circumstances.”

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“This riveting journey from a mom’s early-morning jog to being completely incapacitated and unrecognizably frightening to her children is an unforgettable read. It is an inspiration to all those who have suffered debilitation, and it is insightful and encouraging to those of us who haven’t experienced such trauma. Jodi faced her trials with courage and fortitude, giving us all a road map to a happier, more positive life filled with gratitude and love.”

~ Christy Monson, LMFT, author, *Becoming Free, A Woman’s Guide to Internal Strength*

“The author uses amazing descriptions and great language to share a real experience in an intriguing, engaging, authentic way. I was moved emotionally and feel honored to have taken this journey.”

~ Tamara Hart Heiner, author of *Inevitable*, *Perilous*, and *Altercation*

“I found it courageous of Jodi to share her experience in such a raw fashion. The reader is taken through a journey of love, loss, hope beyond recognition, suffering, and the silver lining in the little things... the impossible made into the possible.”

~ Jade Phoenix, Goodreads reviewer

“One of my top reads of all time! A wonderful and inspiring saga of one woman's battle with a frightening and real life and death experience.”

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“This book is absolutely inspirational, powerful enough to motivate you to act.”

~ Tammy Holdeman, freelance writer and blogger

"If you haven't heard Jodi's miraculous story you are missing out. I read it straight through in about 4 hours. Such an emotional story of overcoming a brain tumor, followed by a spinal fluid leak and facial paralysis. Jodi bares her soul and doesn't hold back any of the details that show both sides of our medical system - both the inhuman mechanics as well as the miraculous healers. After reading her journey I feel more prepared to respond when a family member is going through a trial - what questions to ask, who to ignore, what to speak up about. A spiritual feast that makes you appreciate every little blessing you unknowingly enjoy."

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"I don't think I have ever read and cried over anything more!"

~ K. Brebes, founder, Creative Solutions

"Powerful insights in this book! It will be a source of help and comfort for those going through similar experiences, and will enrich readers who appreciate learning from hard-won lessons."

~ Cindy Conlin, humanitarian

"An inspirational story about a woman who took on a brain tumor and won."

 ~ Emirates Woman magazine, May 2013

"According to the comedian Brian Regan, if you're at a party and you try to talk about having two wisdom teeth pulled, the people who've had four wisdom teeth pulled will loudly interrupt to tell their story, and your story will always take a back seat. With her brain tumor, three brain surgeries, her brush with death, and her lasting side effects, Jodi Brown's story trumps most of the sickness and recovery stories I've heard. I'm sure there must be people out there who have suffered as much or more, but most of them are no longer alive. Jodi has touched the void and has come back from the edge to tell us a riveting tale of illness, endurance, love, and regeneration. Her story should give hope to anyone who suffers. Personally, I'm glad she's still here, and I hope she's able to stay around for a long time for her family, friends, and readers. As long as she and her book are here, the sun still shines for all of us."

~ The Ghost Writer, Amazon.com reviewer

"Touching story about a very brave and tough lady, who just never gave up on life."

~ James Bell Sr., Goodreads reviewer

"I read and reread and savored it! It was deeply moving and a delightful read."

~ Nina Johns, mother of a brain tumor patient

"This story of survival, strength, support and love is truly inspiring. I marveled at her will to survive against all the odds and at her strength of character in never wanting to dwell on the negatives she faced. A MUST READ."

~Margaret Crowther, Amazon.com UK reviewer

"It grabbed me from the beginning and didn't let me go until the end."

~ 2014 Storymakers First Chapter Contest Award

Other Books by Jodi Orgill Brown

RISE ABOVE DEPRESSION

Encouragement and Tips from Those Who Do It Everyday

The 12 Days of Más Christ

Scriptural Based Celebrations of the Savior

IMPERFECT PAUL E.

The Shocking Disappearance
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How a Brain Tumor Helped Me See the Light

Jodi Orgill Brown

*For Dad and Mom, for teaching me the true
meaning of unconditional love*

*For Trenden, Lindi, Casen, and Daven,
my top four reasons for sticking around*

*And,
For Tolan, my wiser, braver other half,
for savoring our journey every day,
and for never giving up on us*

Chapter 1

Crossing the Threshold

“Leaving the old, both worlds at once they view,
that stand upon the threshold of the new.”

~Edmund Waller

Summer 2008 – Winter 2009

I am a wimp.

My eyes focused on the path before me as I tried to steady my feet from their faltering course. Brittany, my friend, confidant, and jogging partner glided over the road. I knew my awkward limbs were no match for her elongated, lean legs or the smooth, mechanical, train-like motion of her arms. Even her ponytail swished from side to side in perfect rhythm with her body. Yet she ran beside me no matter how slow my pace, so my commitment was to Brittany, not the run.

The defeated monologue in my head resigned me again to failure. I hated the notion anyone can run.

I searched for the running Zen my friends spoke of, but we never met. So I ran for less consequential reasons—to exercise and to be with my friend. All summer, at six a.m., our feet drummed the sidewalks before the blistering sun rose and while the grass still smelled of fresh dew. The corner streetlight provided the perfect spot to for us to meet, greet, and stretch. It was there, at our starting point, that I secretly began counting down the minutes until each run ended.

During every jog, my head pounded, and the world spun around me. I could not fathom why otherwise sane people enjoyed the

internal tornadoes brought about by the supposedly benign sport of running. It didn't occur to me that maybe the experience differed for others. Excuses for not running during our run became part of my repertoire. I spouted studies about the benefits of interval training and intermittent breaks, and each time Brittany accepted my suggestion to walk or rest. If she saw through my rationalizations, she never said. My beautiful friend just smiled and sailed alongside me.

One balmy September morning, we said our goodbyes and, as usual, I walked the remaining block home then stumbled up the stairs into my house. I nearly collided with my husband Tolan on his way out the door.

"How was your run?"

"I've been going three times a week for five months and I still hate it." My breathing hadn't slowed, and my words came out choppy. "Honestly, I feel terrible when I run. It makes me dizzy and lightheaded."

Tolan chuckled. "Sweetie, everyone feels crappy when they run. You just have to push through it." He leaned in and kissed my forehead, but pulled away as his arm brushed against my sweaty body. "I better run if I'm going to beat the traffic." He laughed again. "Have a good day."

Six long weeks later, I breathed a sigh of relief when the first big winter storm blew in and dumped five inches of fluffy white powder on the ground. No more jogging outside, and no more pretending to be a runner. The die-hards kept it up, donning earmuffs, scarves and gloves as their feet pounded the two-foot sidewalk paths carved through the Utah snow. My nose dripped and my cheeks burned at the mere thought.

The days slowed, lengthened by the absence of warmth and the sun's retreating light. Every dizzy spell drained the normalcy from my life. Something built within me, like a rising thermometer indicating a fever. I knelt on my bedroom floor before Christmas, wrapping Thomas the Tank Engine trains for my toddler, Daven. The room started spiraling around me, the motion so strong I had to lie on the carpet to regain balance. The twirling sensation resumed when I stood. I began to worry in earnest. The incident marked the fifth debilitating spell in only four days. The questions stacked like the boxes I needed to wrap. What caused the dizzy spells? Why were they growing more frequent and intense? Could others tell something was

wrong? The holiday came, but the answers didn't arrive in colorfully decorated packages topped with bows.

In January I heard a neighbor describe the dizzy spells she experienced from an inner ear infection. I visited my doctor and nudged him for the same verdict.

"While infections in the middle ear are relatively easy to diagnose, inner ear infections are more difficult to identify. Still, an inner ear infection is the most likely scenario for a young and otherwise healthy person like yourself. Be patient. It can take a few months to heal," advised the doctor.

Relieved to receive the answer I wanted, I tried to hunker down for a long winter's nap. Tolan encouraged me to take it easy, so cereal replaced a few homemade dinners and I rested when my toddler did. I consolidated big kid homework time and arranged carpools for soccer and piano.

At work I hid in my office and sat alone at lunch, rather than networking. I had a new position, which meant I was still learning names, faces, and the organization itself. My career as a professional nonprofit fundraiser normally filled me with intrinsic satisfaction—I liked knowing I was helping people in need. But burning headaches cut my conversations short and stacks of paperwork eclipsed my joy of giving to others. I sat quietly through long meetings, and then popped ibuprofen pills before I hurried to get the kids. Still, the headaches intensified.

I scheduled another face-to-face with the doctor in February. "You are young and otherwise healthy," he stated again. "The headaches are likely tension migraines from stress."

Between four children, work, home and church duties, I concurred with his diagnosis. But when my children blossomed along with the early daffodils, I remained dormant. Each day after getting my kids off to school, I settled down with Daven for story time. We nestled into the couch and combed through the pages of his favorite books. I recited the words to *Curious George* from memory, so I could close my eyes and keep the vertigo at bay.

At the end of March, my family sang and I blew out candles in the shape of the number thirty-three; the normalcy of my simple life further dissipated with the small flames. None of my careful precautions stopped the rooms from spinning. Moving walls forced me to grip the banister for every marathon down the hall. Pressure

built in my head until I thought I would topple. The humming of the refrigerator rang constantly in my ear, adding to the disruptions in my routine, but then I realized the sound wasn't coming from the kitchen.

For weeks, Tolan called from the office, multiple times a day, just to check on me. Early in April, he walked into the kitchen after work and stared me in the face.

"How are you today?"^[SEP] I avoided his eyes. "Not good."^[SEP]

"Something is wrong with you, Jodi!"^[SEP] The strain in his voice made my insides churn. He'd never spoken to me in such an impatient tone. I kept my head down and instinctively picked at my nails. Tolan put his hand under my chin and tilted my face up.

"It's time we find out what is going on. I don't care that you've been to the doctor twice already. You need to go back again, and this time, we are not going to stop until we know."

The calendar filled with appointments, tests and blood draws. Lobbies and cubicle-sized exam rooms captured my time and held it hostage for hours every week, increasing the headaches, but not the answers.

A week after an appointment with my family physician and another round of tests, the phone rang, and the caller ID read Herefordshire Clinic, so I quickly picked up.

"Ms. Brown, this is Jill, from Dr. Obayashi's office. I wanted to let you know the results of your blood tests came back normal. Everything looks good."

As much as I wanted to believe the news, I knew I couldn't.

"Everything is not good, Jill. Something is wrong. I need you to ask the doctor what we do next."

Her pause told me she understood my insistence. "Okay. Hold one minute, please."

Jill returned to the line. "Mrs. Brown, Dr. Obayashi said the next step is an MRI of your brain. We called McKay-Dee Hospital. You are on the schedule for April twenty-seventh. They will call with the details before your appointment."

"Good," I exhaled. "Thank you."

The phone clicked off. I attempted to retreat to my room, but I made it only a few feet before vertigo forced me to grab the railing. Collapsing onto the floor, I crawled back into the office and called the hospital.

“McKay-Dee imaging, this is Anne.”

“Anne, my name is Jodi Brown. I have an appointment in a couple of weeks for an MRI of my brain—but,” the words stumbled like my steps, “I’m not good. I can’t wait that long.”

All sounds stopped. When Anne spoke again, she whispered, as though telling me a secret. “If you can be here at six-thirty tomorrow morning, I can have the tech work you in before our normally-scheduled patients.”

“I’ll be there.”

April 10, 2009

The monstrous machine swallowed my body; the clanking and erratic vibrations rattled me to the core.

Why did they even bother with the radio? That’s a marketing tactic if ever I saw one. Far from comforting me with music, the bulky headphones barely muffled the clattering of the MRI equipment.

Trying to occupy my mind during the twenty-five minute test was akin to waiting in line for the restroom; no matter what else I tried to think about, only one thing captured my thoughts. When Kim, the radiology tech, finally unhooked the restraint that imprisoned my head, I thanked her for the chance to spend the morning in a claustrophobic box. She grinned.

“Your doctor will call in a few days.” Her parting words proved false. Kim tracked me down in the locker room a few minutes later.

“Good, you are still here,” she blurted. “Since you are the first patient of the day, the radiologist saw your images live—and he thinks he sees a little something. Would you be able to stay for another scan so he can get a better look?”

I stood motionless. Kim hesitated, and then gestured for me to follow her into a glass-encased office at the back of the room.

“Normally I don’t do this, but I think you’ll understand if you see for yourself,” she said as she pulled up the digital images. She pointed to one specific location. “Here is what he is looking at, a little spot outside the right auditory canal.”

I had never seen a brain scan before. Strange shapes and lines littered the fuzzy image that meant nothing to me. Unsure what to

look for, I stared at the monitor. But then, it came into focus—clearly something was there.

Take two. After she injected dye into my veins, the exam table slid back into the imaging tunnel. A strange calm and unexpected relief flooded me. A spot on my brain—it made sense. I knew something was wrong; the feeling had built for months. The news reassured me that I wasn't crazy. Perhaps it meant a fix to the problem so I could return to normal life.

Half an hour later, the jackhammering and muffled music stopped, and the machine spat me out of its gut. The scene replayed as it had earlier. Kim released the restraints and pulled me to a sitting position, and then she crouched until we were eye level.

"There is definitely something there. Go home and call your doctor immediately." Her tone chased away the relief and determination I'd experienced only moments earlier.

We stared at each other, no longer strangers. Her eyes watered as I stood, and she drew me into a hug. "Good luck to you."

She spoke only those four words, but said so much more. I gathered my purse and jacket and turned toward the exit. Looking back, I uttered, "Thanks." Then I stepped into the blinding light of the hospital.

I put my hand on the wall and stood statuesque in the lobby. *How did I get a spot in my brain? What does it mean? Can I do this?*

The traffic in the hospital rushed by. It appeared everyone had a green light but me.

Though I wanted to burst into the radiologist's office, I stayed static at the crossroad. The healthcare system didn't work that way; my doctor would have to tell me what the report said.

My dear friend and former hospital co-worker, Noellee, saw me, still frozen in the hall. She ushered me into her office and I spilled a few details, probably more than I should have.

"Oh, my gosh," she said as she covered her mouth with her hand. "Maybe you should sit down."

I looked at my watch and told her I needed to get home. Always a mother bird, she steadied me and then walked me to my car.

"Are you sure you can drive home? Let me take you, Jodi. You look pale." She gave me an I'm-worried-about-you look and prepared to swoop in, if needed.

"I'm okay to drive, but thanks."

She hugged me, tighter than usual. I got in the car, and she waved as I drove out of the parking lot.

The six-mile drive home required the mental energy for six-hundred miles. A thousand questions ran through my mind—most of all, how I would tell Tolan.

I was still analyzing the options several minutes later when I pressed the garage door button and pulled in. Tolan, normally at work by then, had stayed home with our kids during my early morning appointment. The door into the house opened, and Tolan poked his head out and greeted me with his ever optimistic, cheesy grin. Gray strands speckled his wavy coffee-colored hair, which had receded a few inches since our wedding day. But to me, he was more attractive than ever.

Still on autopilot, I removed the key. I sat for a few moments before I climbed out of the SUV and met him on the steps.

“How did it go? Took long enough. I thought you’d be home hours ago.”

I avoided his eyes. “We need to talk.”

The sound of my heartbeat drowned my footsteps. He held the door open, and then followed me into the kitchen. I could hear the kids’ giggles in the room upstairs. Tolan and I stood together, the normalcy of the setting in stark contrast to the weight of my news. I took a deep breath and let it out.

“Something is there—a spot—on my brain.”

His lips moved, but he didn’t speak. He looked at me, as if searching for clues, then found his words.

“What is the spot? Is it a tumor? Can it be treated? What do we do next? Have you talked to the doctor?”

Ever the engineer, he wanted answers, a solution to the problem. But the only knowledge I had was one spot—and the alarmed look in Kim’s eyes.

“No, I haven’t talked to him. The tech told me to call when I got home.”

He grabbed the phone and handed it to me. Tolan stood stationary as I circled the kitchen. “The doctor is with a patient,” the receptionist said, “can I give him a message?”^[L]_[SEP] I pictured a scribbled note stuck in a file at the clinic, but I left a message anyway, ending with, “Have Dr. Obayashi call me as soon as possible.” She agreed.

Tolan’s chest puffed and his back straightened before he

wrapped me in his arms and let me cry on his shoulder.

The unknown is worse than knowing. You cannot win a battle when you don't know the opponent.

Several minutes passed, but I stayed in Tolan's arms because there was nothing else I could do. The phone rang, and he looked at the number. "It's your mom." He handed me the phone and left the room.

"Hi, Jo. I haven't talked to you in a couple of days. How are things going?"

I hadn't told anyone about the appointment; it had all happened too fast. I paused and tried to find the words.

"Mom, I went to the hospital this morning. I had an MRI to see why I keep getting these headaches." The line went silent. "The radiologist saw something on the scan, a spot on my brain. We don't know what it means. I'm still waiting to talk to the doctor. But what I do know isn't good." A sob escaped my throat.

"Everything is going to be okay, Jo." Mother-mode kicked in. I could hear it in her tone. "We need to have faith that it will all work out."

She spoke reassuring words, but I didn't want to hear them. I didn't think she could assure me of anything until we knew what we were facing. At that moment, her guarantees held empty promises. I cut the conversation short and hurried a goodbye with the excuse to free the phone line.

Tolan returned, his eyes ever on me. He stood tall and appeared grounded and strong. He's never had a poker face, so, either he'd become a better actor or he was more solid than I realized. For a few moments, neither of us spoke a word. He stepped closer and embraced me again.

"I'm sure it's going to be okay. Let's just wait until we hear from the doctor."

Some wild animal inside me wanted to roar. Everyone kept saying it was going to be okay—but they hadn't seen the spot or heard Kim's words.

After the third phone call to the clinic, my body broke into tremors. Of course the doctor was busy with patients; it was the middle of a workday—he was where he should be. Except, at that moment, I needed him more.

I needed him, not only to call, but also to tell me I was going to be all right. I didn't want the words from Mom, or even from Tolan, but from someone who knew. Until the assurance came from him, nothing else mattered.

The answers didn't come fast enough. Tolan couldn't wait at home all day. "Call me when you hear anything. I'll be back soon, but I need to go in to work for at least a few hours."

Anger welled up inside me as I watched him drive away. My life hung in the balance, and my husband was going to work. He doesn't get it. This could change everything.

The garage door creaked closed until the last inches of outside light disappeared. Footsteps pounded above and I realized I hadn't even seen the kids in the thirty minutes I'd been home. I turned and went back inside to check on the little ones.

My four young kids danced and played upstairs, happy to be on spring break and out of school. Lindi, at seven years old, loved being a little mom. She led four-year-old Casen and toddling two-year-old Daven around in circles, and they giggled to the ground as London Bridge was falling down. Trenden, the oldest at almost ten years, watched the game from the couch, and then steam-rolled the group where they lay on the carpet.

The house was still full of people, but I felt empty.

The squeals grew louder when Trenden tickle-tortured his siblings on the floor. They frolicked carelessly, oblivious that my world—our world—was falling like the bridge. Part of me was glad they didn't know. I didn't want to interrupt their fun, but I couldn't help but wonder what might happen to their carefree lives.

Will I still be able to play Memory with Daven and drive toy tractors with Casen? Trenden and Lindi can make beds and pop toast, but they are too young to take charge. I can't disappear. I have to be strong.

Laughter filled the house as I slipped into the oasis in our backyard. Like a tiger in a zoo, I paced the manicured yard and hoped the splashing waterfall would drown my sobs.

The backyard fence caged me in. I wanted to believe I would wake the next day, care for my family and succor my community. But

how would I ever care for others if I couldn't care for myself? I searched for an escape.

Brittany, my running partner, came to mind. I pressed speed dial and held the phone to my left ear, a habit I'd formed when I spent hours bouncing babies on my hip. Left-hipped babies and left-side phones freed my right hand for making bottles, stirring, pouring, or cleaning. The pattern stayed no matter how large my babies grew.

Brittany answered, and I busied my right hand pulling weeds as I broke the news. Her audible gasp foreshadowed the reaction I expected from others.

My friend's sobs joined mine. The sound of her crying pained me. She asked the same questions Tolan and I had asked, to which we had no answers. She, too, reassured me before we hung up, and the tiger returned to pacing.

Time was the infiltrating enemy attacking my mind. The more minutes that passed, the more I needed my doctor to tame my runaway thoughts.

Finally the phone rang. I hopped to my feet when I recognized his Japanese accent. I hoped my favorite family physician would weight the scales in my favor.

"Mrs. Brown, I just don't know what to say. I am looking at the radiologist's report, and it appears there is a tumor or mass between the right auditory canal and the brainstem . . ."

The words came faster than I could digest them, so I scribbled as much as I could:

Glioma
Schwannoma
8mm^[L]_[SEP]
Auditory canal^[L]_[SEP]
7th Cranial Nerve
8th Cranial Nerve
Acoustic Neuroma

Dr. Obayashi finished by saying he would make some calls and let me know what came next. I hung up and ran to Google the unfamiliar terms. The results of the Internet search made me gasp.

Brain Cancer^[1]
How to Diagnose Multiple Sclerosis
Brain Tumor Survival Rates
Traumatic Brain Injury Association
Living with Cancer

All the information online increased my sense of dread. The more pages I clicked, the more confined I felt. The probability of returning to normal life seemed frighteningly low. Heaviness settled on me as I read the grim facts.

Brain tumors are diagnosed in one out of every 28,000 people. Symptoms indicate tumor growth or change. Some brain tumors are noncancerous (benign), and some brain tumors are cancerous (malignant). Most malignant brain tumors and brain cancers have spread from tumors elsewhere in the body to the skull.

No, no, no, please, no!

Tumors can either destroy tissue or cause problems because of the pressure the tumor puts on the brain.

The description matched my scenario perfectly. I grabbed the arm of the chair. Google caught me in its formidable worldwide web.

What will happen if I get worse? I can barely function now. Will I end up bedridden? How will I take care of little Daven? How will Tolan manage work and family? Who's going to make Trenden's lunch and do Lindi's hair? What about Casen's preschool? And carpool, soccer, and piano lessons?

The unanswered questions streamed endlessly. I reached the phone and called Tolan, who picked up on the first ring. I recapped what the doctor said, and although he'd only been at work for three hours, Tolan went to the parking lot and got in his car as we talked.

On that same Friday afternoon of Easter weekend, the doctor's receptionist called back. "We've made arrangements for you to see a neurosurgeon on Monday," she said.

"This Monday?" I questioned. "In three days?"

“Yes, he rearranged his schedule so he can see you in the morning.”

“Rearranged his schedule—to see me?”

A long silence paused the conversation. “Yes. Dr. Obayashi called him personally and explained the situation.”

The situation? I sensed there was something they were not telling me.

It can take months for an appointment with the right doctor, and weeks to receive test results. *Unless*. Unless conditions are ominous, and then time moves faster than the mind can comprehend.

A new door opened in my life, and I had no choice but to walk into the unknown. Only one thing I knew for certain: crossing the threshold meant no going back. I had no control—and that was the part that scared me the most.

My normal beautiful life dissipated with every passing moment.

When Tolan arrived home, I recited the few additional details about the appointment. He didn’t say a word. For once, his face didn’t betray what he was thinking. I didn’t know if he was solving the problem in his mind or trying to hide his fears. He put his arms around me, and for the third time that day, he let me cry on his shoulder.

No words of prayer soared to heaven from my mouth that night. For the first time in my life, I had no idea what to say to God.

Chapter 2

Into the Unknown

“I don’t know what is behind the curtain;
only that I need to find out.”

~ Richard Paul Evans

The family gathering the following day had been calendared for weeks; our attendance was never in question. Dozens of my extended family sat quietly when we entered the church for the baptism, a religious rite-of-passage that called for reverence. Only Mom had heard the news from me, but I knew the room held many informed loved ones. I expected the quiet, but not the stares. A few avoided me altogether, but most couldn’t take their eyes off me, all while displaying sad, *I’m so sorry, I can’t believe this is happening* looks.

Grandma Ketchum’s face appeared more intense than the rest. She leapt to her feet, walked over and hugged me, followed by Grandpa Ketchum.

“We’re praying for you,” she whispered. I thanked them.

The stares confirmed what I’d already determined: I was not the same person as I’d been the morning before.

After the baptism, we relaxed together and celebrated the occasion. We talked politics, news, school, and Easter. Conversations were had about every topic under the sun, except one. But even the unspoken words seemed to taint the experience.

My sister Tami doesn’t hug—not normally—but she hugged me that day.

As Tolan and I drove home, he quieted the children with headphones and a movie. I closed my eyes, in hopes of shutting out

the vertigo, and settled in for the drive.

A strange noise came from the driver's side of the car. At first it sounded like sniffing, then more like crying.

I'd seen Tolan cry, but only once, when his grandmother passed away a few years earlier. Some people deem him callous or insensitive, but the reality is he keeps his feelings inside and in check. But when I heard the broken sighs and muffled whimpers, I opened my eyes—and his tears confirmed it.

I reached over and laid my hand on top of his, where it rested on his leg.

“What are you thinking?” I asked softly.

He wiped his eyes and took a slow breath, clearly not wanting to say his thoughts aloud. “I was thinking about how hard it must have been for my Grandpa Pringle to go home from the hospital and tell his kids their mother had died.”

I was not prepared to hear that. His grandmother passed away from breast cancer when her children were still young—he likely pondered if his family would suffer the same fate.

“That is not going to happen! You will not have to do that!” I cried out.

With all my soul I wanted to believe what I said. I could not accept any other possibility. But I guessed Tolan had to go there, to begin to deal with the unknown ahead.

We didn't talk the rest of the drive.

My mom, known as Grandma Oreo to our family because the little ones couldn't pronounce Orgill, followed us home that night. Mom lived three thousand miles away, but had been in town for the baptism. Without hesitation, she moved into our home that weekend, to do whatever needed to be done.

On Easter morning, Grandma Oreo woke early and hid treat-filled eggs so the little ones could still enjoy the day. She handed them baskets and ushered them out the door. Four little bodies scampered about the yard looking for pastel-colored treasures. Their squeals indicated when they hit the jackpot. Trenden and Lindi sang with the children's choir at church. The songs and uplifting messages rang in my ears, but didn't permeate my soul as I'd hoped.

That evening we went to Tolan's parents' home for dinner. My mother-in-law, Kay, cooked a feast and gave the kids her signature treat, See's Chocolate Bordeaux eggs. The grandmas ensured Easter's success.

At the close of the day, we gathered our young family into the living room. The children were high on candy, and Casen and Daven seemed ready to erupt. Tolan hushed them and waited before he imparted the news. He used kid language to break it down to the simplest form: Mom is sick, and a lump in her brain is causing the problem.

Silence fell momentarily, and I searched the faces of my children for their reactions. I doubted if the little boys understood any of what he'd said.

"Is that why you guys have been crying so much?" Trenden asked quietly.

"Yes. I guess you noticed all the tears, huh?" I said. ^[1]_{SEP}

"Kinda hard not to," he replied. ^[1]_{SEP}

"We don't know what's going to happen, so it's been a little scary," Tolan said. "But tomorrow we'll take Mom to another doctor to see how to fix the problem. It will all be okay." He did a good job of sounding positive.

Tolan's parents came to our house after the talk. Across the room, my mom visited with Kay. Larry and Kay were no strangers to health challenges such as cancer, which made them far wiser than us. I had no idea of how Tolan broke the news to his parents; it was an exchange I was glad I didn't hear.

Thank heaven for grandmas and grandpas whose presence lightened the mood and settled some of the tension in the air.

By the end of the weekend, Tolan and I had quickly become "experts" on brain tumors. We researched every possibility we could think of, and the Internet featured thousands of people who survived brain tumors. So despite our initial fears, we independently arrived at a similar conclusion: most brain tumors appeared manageable. With that assumption, we built a case for optimism and hope.

Before we went to bed that night, Tolan took my hand. "We can do this. I read a case online where the patient had surgery to remove

the tumor and was back at work just a few weeks later,” he said. “Maybe surgery is exactly what we need. You could wake up with no more headaches, dizzy spells, vertigo, or ringing in your ears. Maybe it’s the answer we’ve been looking for.”

I pondered his words. “Yes, maybe this is the answer that will get us back to life.”

On the day of our first appointment, jitters emerged through my feet. I scurried around the house, but remained upbeat. We were going to find answers. Just as we were walking out the door, the phone rang. The caller stated my appointment was canceled due to a medical emergency.

On an ordinary day, that would have been merely an inconvenience, but the appointment had promised escape from the tiger cage, and instead, the door slammed shut in my face. I broke. My buoyant, positive feelings scattered, and I retreated to my room. To them, the rescheduled appointment was simply routine; to me, the prolonged wait foreshadowed devastation.

Chapter 3

The Abyss

“Life’s gonna kick you in the butt.
That’s what it does.”
~ Richelle Goodrich

April 14, 2009

“Tumors and masses in most of the body are described in grades, one through four, four being widespread with rampant growth, life threatening and likely fatal. In the brain, everything is considered potentially life threatening, so it becomes all about location, location, location.”

“Unfortunately, Mrs. Brown, your tumor is in a very bad location.”

The doctor’s words trapped us behind the door of the small exam room and sent rocks crashing all around.

“Can you operate? Or do radiation or chemo to shrink the tumor? Can we biopsy to find out more?”

As fast as questions popped into my mind, they came out of my mouth. The neurosurgeon replied that surgery was too risky because of the proximity to the brainstem. Radiation could activate sedentary tumors, chancing a benign tumor turning deadly. A biopsy would be as dicey as surgery. Chemo was only an option for identified, cancerous, treatable tumors.

The boulders fell with each answer and blocked every escape.

Tolan, known for being short on tact, heavy on sarcasm and passionate (to a fault) about even his loosely-held opinions, cut to the

chase. "If this were your wife or daughter, what would you do?"

Silence.

More than thirty seconds passed before the doctor replied. "I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, but I wouldn't touch you with a ten-foot pole. Too risky."

The knockout punch slammed my hopes. My eyes sought my husband's, but he looked just as terrified, so I stared at the floor. *What does he mean? Nothing they can do? What will happen to me? What about Tolan—and the kids? This can't be happening!*

"I will take your case to the Cancer Board, a group of specialists who take on all the hard cases. Maybe they will know what to do."

No answers. More waiting.

We left the doctor's office and walked into the hall. My legs started to buckle. Tolan's grasp held me tightly, but no words of consolation came from my husband's lips. The tearful soap-opera scene, complete with curious onlookers, imitated sights I'd witnessed when I'd worked as a fundraiser at that very hospital, but until then, I'd never starred in one.

As we drove home, I realized I had only known one person with a brain tumor. My coworker and friend, Carol, had married Steve shortly before I met her more than ten years earlier. By the time they found Steve's tumor, it already covered several regions of his brain. First like a trickle, then a stream, it spread over the healthy tissue, drowning all chance of function or hope. He plunged from healthy and active to bedridden and unaware. Steve's funeral coincided with my eldest son's first day of kindergarten. I sat graveside and watched as Carol buried her husband.

She stayed seated after the memorial service, staring at the casket. I waited a few feet away among the tombstones on the lawn. When my phone suddenly rang, I turned away, afraid to disrupt Carol in her grief. I glanced at my watch, 12:30 p.m.

The woman on the phone spoke in a harried voice, asking if I were Trenden's mom. A quick shiver raced down my back. No one had picked Trenden up from school. I was at the funeral and his ride hadn't arrived, so he was left to stand alone on the sidewalk after the other students had gone. I called Tolan at work and pressed him to

get there as fast as he could.

Staring at Carol, sadness washed over me. I cried for my nervous little boy, and then I cried for Taylor, Carol's little boy, whose daddy would never again pick him up from school. I hated Steve's tumor—hated that it had taken him, changed Carol's life, left Taylor without a father, and left Trenden, alone and forgotten at school.

As we pulled up to the house, I hoped my outcome would not be like Steve's.

Mom bombarded me with questions. I responded as best as I could, but I needed to be alone. The facts overwhelmed me. An inoperable tumor was growing near my brainstem, and there were no options to treat it.

The devastation hit with hurricane force. I didn't know if I should be mad, fearful, crazy, brave, or a bit of each. But if I were going to be mad, I didn't know who to be mad at—except God. Don't think that will help.

It seemed two very real but opposing forces were at work—both hoping their argument proved more persuasive than their foe's. Like the devil and angel atop opposite shoulders, one murmured messages of fear and defeat, the other whispered words of hope and perseverance. This was not my first meeting with the messengers; I recognized them from past encounters.

"Don't panic. Trust in His plan." I heard the words, but only in my mind; they came from the one I knew to be my Guide.

As a child, I first thought of my Guide as a guardian angel, but as I grew, he became my personal North Star. Some might say the reflections came from my conscience, intuition, or from having a moral compass, but my experience proved him more tangible than that. He trademarked himself through sudden moments of inspiration and gentle nudges in the right direction. When I approached danger, his warning steered me back on course. His voice echoed familiar and comforting. He starred as my personal Jiminy Cricket.

I met my Guide in early childhood, playing in the woods with

my friends. Carelessly running near a hillside's edge, I couldn't see danger, only freedom and fun. As I scampered along the ledge, the dirt gave way beneath my feet. First I slipped, and then tumbled down the steep embankment. Panic seized me.

But then he came. "Reach out your right hand—grab on." The voice spoke, and I obeyed.

My hand gripped a thicket of brush. The woody sticks poking out of the dirt were just big enough to hold my diminutive frame. I jerked to a stop and hung still until I inched back up the steep hill. Void of injury or serious harm, I started playing again within minutes. I only got a few scratches and would not have died from a drop off the ridge, but that day I knew some higher force chaperoned me to safety. From then on, I recognized the Guide—he never strayed far. When I listened, my journey progressed; when I ignored his whispered petitions, I stumbled.

The differences between my Guide and his adversary separated them like a canyon, wide and deep. I didn't have a name for the other one, but he brought gloom and despair. He was not menacing enough to be a demon, so I imagined he was a spirit of darkness; an angel only because he was unseen, not because he was good. Whatever form he took, it was a dark force.

He usually spoke quietly, uttering phrases like, "That's not fair," and "it's too hard." That day, as I sat in my room, he hollered in my head, more forcefully than ever before. "This is the end—you won't make it. Just give up now."

I pushed the dark voice out of my mind the only way I knew how, by replacing his words with others. The music I turned on calmed me with uplifting words. I didn't know what to believe at that moment, but I knew I couldn't give up before the battle had even begun. The cancer specialists would tell us the next steps; we would wait until then.

The song ended. I wiped the tears from my eyes, took a deep breath, and went to read with the little boys.

The information jumbled in my mind, and I struggled to know

where my time and attention should be spent. No matter how much inner turmoil I experienced, I knew there were a few things I had to focus on. Most of our world, including my neighbors and church friends, were oblivious to my life-threatening health issues. But once word got out, the spark would ignite and spread.

I picked up the phone and called Randy, my friend and church leader. Old enough to be my father, his mustached face, broad smile and gentle eyes always welcomed me. We worked together as volunteer leaders of the teenage girls in our congregation.

“Hi Jodi.” Warmth sounded in his voice. “How’s my girl?” He greeted me the same as he had every time for the previous two years.

I don’t know exactly what I said, but if words could bruise, they blackened Randy.

“What do we need to do?” he asked, trying to contain his emotion.

“The girls—I’ve got to tell the girls, before they hear it from someone else,” I sniffed.

“I’ll take care of it.” His voice cracked. “The youth have a game tonight. I’ll have them all come over to your house afterwards, about eight o’clock. Will that work?”

“Yes, Randy, thank you,” I stammered.

We hung up, and I contemplated what I would say to the young women coming to my house. Ages twelve to eighteen, these were my girls. We’d spent countless hours together—camping, playing, in lessons at church, and sitting in my hot tub on their dateless Friday nights. The more time I spent with them, the more I loved them.

That night, the room of giggling girls was almost more than I could take. Jaymee, Brittnie, Emilie, Lisa, Megan, Hayden, Jalena, Lindsay, Hydee, Wendy, Jessica, Jeanette, Brenda, Janene, and Amber filled every inch of open space. I hardly knew how to break that kind of news. They chirped away, their conversations sing-songy and carefree. But I knew they understood the fragility of life; they’d watched Nancy, their previous beloved leader, fight and eventually lose her battle with breast cancer. Somehow I had to show them life was more than a series of tragedies, but I didn’t know if I believed that myself.

I started speaking before I knew what I was going to say. Considering the emotional day, my words sounded calm, and I hoped, believable. The bare facts emerged, and lips started quivering, tears dropping. No one spoke.

Too many unexplainable episodes in life had solidified my belief that divine powers are real. That night I asked the teenage girls to pray and fast to help make a miracle for me. Fasting—going without food—serves a larger purpose than the physical effects of just starving oneself. The participant abstains from eating and drinking and focuses all energy and thought toward God, or a specific cause. It requires devotion, as well as willpower. I'd fasted many times in my life, but I had never asked anyone to make such a sacrifice on my behalf. All of the young women solemnly agreed.

In a spontaneous transformation, they became my leaders. One by one, each girl approached and hugged me. Not ordinary embraces, these heartfelt sentiments overflowed with love and tears. The girls left me encouraged and inspired, akin to the sandman filling me with pleasant dreams. And for that night, I believed them. I would gratefully brave the battle, rallying strength from my allies; together we would fight, and win.

A day could not get any longer. The words from the doctor hung in the back of my mind, but I tried to focus on the positive energy that lingered in the air after the girls left.

Tolan and I said goodnight to my mom, who'd thankfully already tucked the kids in bed, and we retired to our room. The normal routine took over, and I was grateful for something I didn't have to think about. We crawled onto our bed and met in the middle, facing each other. He propped himself up with one arm and stared at me.

"I hope we never have a day like this one again. I guess it can only get better from here. Once the doctor takes your scans to the Cancer Board, I'm sure we will have answers."

His dark brown eyes penetrated mine. As he spoke, I caught glimpses of his almost-straight bottom teeth. I admired his striking

features, as I had when I'd first met him years before. Emotion welled inside and I wanted to watch him forever, to memorize every line and bend of his face and store it in a vault so I'd always have it—no matter what happened.

I closed my eyes and inhaled. The scent of his cologne rushed through me and I saw his face perfectly, already imprinted in my mind—the gentle arc of his forehead, the contour of his jaw, the steep slope of his nose, the curve of his cheeks and the way his lips thinned when he smiled. Without opening my eyes or touching his face, I felt the stubbles of black hair in the faint shadow of a beard he wore by day's end.

All my senses drank Tolan in, and then I opened my eyes to see him again.

“What was that?” he asked. ^[L]_[SEP]

“I was picturing you in my head.” ^[L]_[SEP]

“In the picture, was I more handsome, with more hair, than the live version?” ^[L]_[SEP]

He always tried to make me laugh—it didn't always work, but I had a greater appreciation for the fact that he still tried. ^[L]_[SEP]

I didn't want to cry, to ruin the normal, yet perfect, moment. He put his hand on the back of my neck and pulled my face to his. Our lips met in a gentle kiss. Tolan leaned my head back until it rested on the pillow.

“It isn't going to end like this, you know.” ^[L]_[SEP]

“What do you mean?” I asked. ^[L]_[SEP]

“When we got married, we said it was forever, and I meant it, but I still want you here, now. This is going to work—it has to, because we have too much life left to live, and we are going to do it together.”

He wrapped his arms around me and rolled me onto my side, until I fit neatly in the contours of his body. We lay there, curled together, as close as we could possibly be. Lying in the safe embrace of his arms, I forced myself to believe him.

Chapter 4

Wildfire

“A lie can travel halfway around the world
while the truth is putting on its shoes.”

~ Mark Twain

The next morning, the phone rang over and over as details of my condition spread through the neighborhood. Bad news, I discovered, travels as fast as any lie. Friends called and expressed love, concern and offers of help. I started to feel part of something bigger than myself. More than a club or group, I was a member of a pack. Friends and family joined the pack to surround me, protect me and see me through the hard times. Dozens of visitors stopped by, brought meals, cards, and notes of sympathy. They overwhelmed me with love.

All packs possess leaders and followers. Some simply obey, but a few step forward and do more; Debbie Rhoads was one who surged ahead.

Our friendship started years earlier. Our husbands, roommates in college, set up our first vacation together, a cruise in the Hawaiian Islands. After ten days of hiding lava rocks in each other's packs, accidentally running red lights, snorkeling with cheap gear, and sunning on the beach, we'd cemented our friendship. The boys lucked out—Debbie and I were notes in the same chord. Since then we'd enjoyed hundreds of hours together vacationing and at family barbecues and outings.

Tolan wanted her to hear the news firsthand, not through the

grapevine. He called and told Debbie the hard truth. A few minutes later, she called me, and we cried together on the phone. Like me, she didn't know what to do. So Debbie did the only thing she could think of. She got in her car and drove over an hour just to give me a hug.

"Oh Jodi, I could hardly see the road through my tears. This doesn't seem possible. I wish there were something I could do."

Her feelings resonated with mine: everything spiraling out of our control.

"Brandon and I will do anything we can to help you, Tolan, and the kids. I just love you. I'm so sorry." She set down a basket of goodies she'd brought for the family, and we cried in each other's arms.

The fact that *she just came* will always stay with me.

The pack boasted benefits. More than just teaming up to find food, pack animals are social creatures—without each other, they die. Rather than a pack of wolves or dogs, mine was a pack of angels. They came to my side and never strayed, always close by when we needed something, anything, from meals to rides to hugs and prayers. They changed my life.

Just days after our meeting, the neurosurgeon called and reported the Cancer Board had reviewed my scans, symptoms, and proposed diagnosis. A team of the best neurosurgeons, oncologists, neurologists, and radiologists from the entire healthcare system concurred with the original conclusion: they could do nothing to help me.

This can't be real. What do we do now? Am I—going to die?

The rockslide of news buried me alive. It seemed no answers—or hope—remained. The devil on my shoulder shouted again, and I gave in to his rants.

Things changed. I hid in my room, under blankets and behind closed doors. Tolan didn't smile as often, nor did I. We didn't talk to each other as much, either. Perhaps we weren't sure of what to say.

After he'd spent hours on the computer researching, Tolan blurted, "We just have to keep looking." He became consumed with "what next" and "where do we go from here?" I used to think he spent forever when he researched cars, snowboards, and vacation options, but those paled in comparison to the time he searched for

someone who could help us.

Our news went viral. My parents sent messages to loved ones throughout the country. Friends and strangers answered their pleas for help with love, suggestions, comfort, and well wishes. Others' prayers kept us going as we sank into a new reality.

Friends inquired at the Mayo Clinic, Johns Hopkins, and other renowned medical centers, and rushed the MRI scans to leading specialists. My head was being examined around the world.

It's funny who emerges from your past when they believe it could be their last chance to surface. You are never more loved than when mortality stares you in the face.

Half of my world was falling apart, but the other half was filling up. My email inbox flooded with messages, as did our mailbox. The doorbell rang multiple times a day, and every cookie, note, and balloon pumped us with gratitude. The care, compassion, and love buoyed us when we would have otherwise drowned.

One such advocate approached Tolan, just days after the news became public.

Tolan and Cris had become friends after working together for a couple of years. When Cris approached, Tolan said he could see concern etched on her face.

"Forgive me for intruding in your family business," Cris said, extending her arm toward Tolan. "I heard about your wife—I am so sorry."

Tolan acknowledged his thanks.

"My husband and I are best friends with a neurosurgeon at the University of Utah. I think he's the one your wife needs to see. You don't have to—but I called, and he said he is willing to see her on Friday, during his lunch break."

Surprised by the actions his colleague had already taken, Tolan rejoiced at another option. He listened to Cris describe her neurosurgeon friend, a man who took no pleasure in titles, only in the chance to help. Tolan accepted her offer. He called me, and then phoned the office and confirmed the appointment for two days later.

She never said, "Let me know if you need anything." Angels don't ask, they just do.

April 17, 2009<sup>[L]
[SEP]</sup>

University of Utah Medical Center

Dr. Couldwell chaired the neurosurgery department and had a three-month wait for appointments, but because of Cris, we'd gotten in after only two days.

After fifteen minutes of asking family history and health questions, he stopped and just looked at the images on the screen in front of him. He stared at the MRI scans for several minutes.

I twisted my hands and bounced my legs, waiting for him to speak. His gaze never left the monitor. "I think I can do this."

Tolan and I exchanged glances, astonished and hopeful. Dr. Couldwell's methodical approach indicated that neurosurgeons need more than education—they require confidence and courage to do what no one else dares. Dr. Couldwell practiced in New York and California before coming to Utah. He was lured to Salt Lake with grant money to test "operating on parts of the brain previously thought to be inoperable." I held my breath that this doctor could be the answer.

"I want to admit you to the hospital so we can run tests and find out what this is. It will take too long on an outpatient basis. We can't wait."

His decision thrust the medical machine into gear; people in scrubs hurried in. Dr. Couldwell spoke a series of instructions to his team, and then told us he would return shortly.

Tolan turned to me, his eyes bright but his mouth tight-lipped. "Wow, that was quite the parade. Guess we need to bring you back to the hospital soon."

"Tolan, did you hear what he said? He doesn't want us to come back; he is admitting me today. Now."

"Now?"<sup>[L]
[SEP]</sup>

We stared at each other, unsure of what would come next. <sup>[L]
[SEP]</sup>

"I don't have anything with me—and my mom is expecting us back," I realized.

"I'll call your mom, drive home, and get your things. Your mom will understand, especially if it means we'll get answers faster. I can be back in a few hours."

He got up, but his body didn't look like it moved as fast as his mind.

"Love you. Good luck. See you in awhile." He walked out the door as a nurse entered with a stack of admission papers.

"Okay, love you," I called as he sped into the hall.

Chapter 5

Testing the Limits

“Don’t know how I kept going.
You just do. You have to, so you do.”
~ Elizabeth Wein

April 17, 2009

“We need to find out if the tumor is primary or secondary: Did it start in your brain or spread from somewhere else? The only way to do that is to check. It’s an MRI, like you had before, but this time we will scan your entire body.” Dr. Couldwell’s words were definitive, and like it or not, another MRI was ordered.

In my elementary school, there were two kinds of know-it-all students. The first were the loud, hand-always-raised kids, but the second, the quiet, focused ones, actually knew all the answers. I observed Dr. Couldwell’s meticulous manner and knew he was the second type—the man to call on for the hard questions.

He left so I could change into a faded gown, probably washed a thousand times and worn a thousand times by a thousand different people. I tried not to think about it. I draped myself in the large sheet with armholes, but couldn’t tell which side was the front. I guessed and secured the ties that didn’t close the flimsy fabric nearly enough to hide me.

I walked with a nurse to the imaging room, knowing what was in store. Arm and leg straps joined a head restraint, trapping my entire body as the scanner performed its normal clicks, bumps and jolts. All I could move were my fingers and toes.

The only consolation for the torture was the radio, louder and clearer in this machine than the one I'd been in before; I could actually hear the music in the background.

The mirror above my head allowed me to see outside of the cylindrical coffin, but the four-inch static view of the technician room did little to relieve the stress.

Open. Close. Open. Close. My hands acted as my physical outlet for movement, but it wasn't enough. I wanted Hulk strength to break the bands and free myself of the prison. I'd never thought I was claustrophobic, but after more than an hour with my whole body encased in the 30-inch tube, my nerves trembled along with my hands.

Get me out! I can't stay in here another minute.

Then the storm from the machine stopped. Silence, at last.

"Jodi, we've finished the preliminary tests, but I would like to get a few in-depth images while you're in there. Is that okay?"

No, please, no.

"How long will it take?" I groaned. ^[SEP]

"Another thirty minutes." ^[SEP] A sob escaped my throat and tears dripped, but I couldn't wipe them away.

"I can't, I'm sorry, I just can't do this anymore. You have to get me out."

"You're doing great, you are," the tech encouraged. "Each scan takes eight to twelve minutes. Can you do one last image, just twelve more minutes?"

Twelve minutes. Three songs. Can I do three more songs?

"Jodi, can you hear me? Can you do one or two more tests?"

"Twelve minutes," I cried, "then I'm done." ^[SEP]

I tensed and relaxed all the muscles in my body to curb the restlessness. Then I scooted down on the table to settle into a new awkward position. I held a last gulp of air in my lungs before the distress began again.

"Okay, here we go," the tech signaled as the machine buzzed back to life.

The headphones clicked on, and the first few notes of the music sounded. I stopped breathing for a moment. Billy Joel's song "This is

the 'Time" started playing; I wasn't sure if I would laugh or cry. If I had a soundtrack for my life, this song would have been the number one single. The dimly lit tube transformed as my eyes closed and the music carried me far away from the hospital.

Jerusalem, May 1996

The light streamed through the floor-to-ceiling arched windows, illuminating the classroom and reminding us we were in the Holy Land, a land of light beyond the sun. I wasn't the only jittery one. The girl next to me was biting her nails, chipping off the bright red polish that had been untouched moments earlier. A tall guy with an athletic build and too-perfect hair laughed nervously and high-fived his neighbor. Hushed conversations took place in small huddles throughout the room. An older gentleman with snow white hair and a big smile on his face entered the room; in unison, a crowd of chairs and figures turned to the front.

Grinning, I scanned the room, remembering my mom's advice at orientation: "Have fun and check out all the boys." My dad encouraged me to "lose myself in the culture and find my place with God." I intended to do both.

The man at the head of the class started to speak; I turned forward in attention. That was the first time I noticed him, sitting in front of me.

Poor guy, I've heard of a receding hairline, but never starting in the back of the head! The gal who marries him will be plagued by that bad hair for years.

The hairless part of his head made me stifle a chuckle. I realized making fun of his hair (or lack thereof) was ironic, since I personally suffered from hair attention deficit disorder, otherwise known as hair experimentation syndrome. My long straight blonde hair had been chopped shoulder-length, permed with a light wave, and low-lighted for easy maintenance on the trip abroad. I'd had plenty of hair disasters just in the previous year; pictures of me with gray, green, and ash-brown hair stood as proof. And I hadn't yet forgiven my sister, Kristi, for the accidental poodle perm incident of 1989. Still,

this guy's reverse balding beat all my fiascos and let me laugh away my jitters.

The teacher welcomed the group, and then turned a few moments over to the class for eager introductions. There were forty of us, American students in a university classroom in Jerusalem. The athlete, a high-school-quarterback-star-turned-college-sophomore, was "psyched" to be there. The nail biter had just finished her freshman year studying English and had never before left the state of her birth. And the tall guy with the bad hair, well, he gave himself a graduation gift and decided to do a semester abroad before starting his first job in the real world a few months later.

Graduated. More mature than most of these guys. Too bad he's got the hair thing going on.

The cluster of faces then stared at me. I popped out of my chair but couldn't think of any particulars interesting enough to announce to the group, so I gave the facts.

"I'm Jodi Orgill. I grew up in Virginia, but now my family lives in Utah. I just finished my junior year and I am majoring in public relations."

One awkward situation down, dozens more to go.

By midday, we were out of class, and the professors encouraged us to gain a real education on the streets of Old City Jerusalem. My new roommates became my sightseeing buddies, and we ventured together into unknown territory.

The weathered cobblestone streets bustled with vendors, shopkeepers, locals, tourists, and those on religious pilgrimage. Tall stonewalls surrounded the four sections of the Old City, the Jewish Quarter, Armenian Quarter, Muslim Quarter and Christian Quarter. Hefty rock gates stood as the only entrances to the city within a city.

Damascus Gate gained my favor. The main entrance into the City hosted hundreds of sellers, ready to serve and bargain with the thousands of people who streamed in and out each day. As we neared the stone walls, aromas of bread and spices wafted through the air, piquing my taste buds, instantly making my mouth water.

The *tels*, we learned, were more than dirt hills; they were earth and grass-covered knolls sitting atop ruins of homes, towns and cities

of once great glory. Passing by, you could see only a few stones, yet the broken remnants represented lives as real as my own. The great Israeli city Tel Aviv, the “hill of spring,” took on new meaning as I realized the civilizations that lay under its feet.

The foreign sights, smells, and sounds captivated me. The dark-haired men, women and children captured my heart as quickly as did their homeland.

“Come in, come in. You need shekels for shopping today?”

The moneychanger, Aladdin (Ala-deen), learned names quickly. He loved the American students and always gave us a good rate and a smile in exchange for our business. On his shop walls were years’ worth of letters from past students, whose names and faces he still recalled. Down the street, shopkeeper Omar’s hands were worn, but he gently turned olive wood logs into nativities and decorations, exact in every cut.

“You like wood case for your Bible? Maybe a statue of Je-sus for you’ mother?”

The businessman knew his clients well and catered to their wants, but his tender care of the wood revealed the salesman was a true master within. I bought five nativity sets, his skill and love of the wood evident in each.

Beautiful children dotted the landscape. One little girl, with curly hair matted to her head, spoke softer than the others. She put her hand out like the rest and repeated, “Shekel, shekel,” probably hundreds of times each day. Her eyes mirrored a beautiful soul.

Generations of families had marked their lives similarly, begging, doing business on a handshake, bargaining for every shekel, and carving lives like wood. For them, it was not a vacation or semester abroad, it was life.

Memories of my comfort-filled home hinted of excess. With each day, sight, and new life I encountered, my world seemed to turn outward; objects and people around me came into focus.

I remembered the graduate from the first day of class, when I’d laughed at the back of his head, but it took me over a month to *really see him*, and by then, I was changed.

Standing in awe at the base of Mt. Sinai in Egypt, we prepared

for a night hike to the summit, the only way to survive the desert's blazing heat. Atop the peak, we would watch the sun rise, the very same mount where Moses had seen the burning bush and conversed with God. The jagged rocks before us looked imported to our planet.

We formed a large circle and he stood next to me, as all one hundred and sixty students from our university program sang songs of praise and shared hopeful devotions for our journey. We didn't exchange words, we just moved in time to the poetry of the lyrics and music.

Extending arms around our neighbors, we offered thanks and a heavenward petition for safety.

When the graduate fitted his arm around mine, his hand settling gently on my bicep, electricity pulsed through my body and hit me with a small shockwave. I glanced at him but saw only the shadow of his face against the setting sun. The shade masked his features, just as the mountain peaks masked the climb ahead. His hand lingered on my shoulder for a moment after the close of the supplication, but even then I couldn't imagine how my whole life would change because of the touch of his hand.

The machine jolted, and I jumped. My mind flashed back to the present. The Billy Joel song had ended, and my Middle East oasis disappeared with it.

How long has it been? It must be almost time.

The MRI scanner paused and I hoped it was over, but seconds later, the roadwork sounds started again. I willed my mind back to the warmth, the light and the faraway lands.

The desert wind hit my face. The weight on my shoulders and back lightened. Surprised, I looked around in time to see a sizable-framed guy, with a black shirt and hair to match, fling my backpack over his shoulder and launch up the hill.

"Skinny, helpless white girl. Looks like you were an easy target, Jodi." My friend Kimberly tossed her head back and giggled. "Lucky girl, wish it would happen to me!"

The pack and the offender disappeared in the sea of foreign trekkers walking up the holy mountain. Just when he vanished into the crowd, his face registered in my mind, Chris. I knew he was from our university group, but I hadn't met him yet.

A hundred yards up the path, the perpetrator's face broke into a grin. His eyes caught mine and he took off again.

Nice! Chris is carrying my backpack up the mountain. Kimberly's right, I am lucky tonight.

The culprit and his friends were notorious for plucking packs off unsuspecting female students; the guys made a good impression with a little act of service and forced a second meeting with their incredulous victims.

Without the pack, my pace quickened.

Hundreds of hikers separated into groups, spread all over the mountain. My group middled the pack, but another group of students had started only five minutes earlier.

"Come on, Kim, let's catch up to the next group, they should be just ahead!"

"Ha, easy for you to say. You probably feel light as a feather. No thanks, I'll stay with this crowd and meet you and your backpack hero at the top. Try not to get engaged before you reach it."

Kind as his little gesture was, I had no interest in Chris—my thoughts were on the steep hillside in front of me. Breathing and climbing got easier, and soon I passed the leader of my group and began to jog to the next. My moderate pace did not last long; the burn caught in my legs and slowed my stride.

Hundreds of yards up the dirt trail, the turn of the path found me alone and surrounded by darkness. I could see neither the group ahead nor the one behind. Instinctively, I grabbed for the flashlight in my pack, but caught only the sleeve of my shirt. My supplies were in my bag. No light or water.

The blackness worried me, and I decelerated further. Thousands of people hiked the mountain, yet few sounds echoed in the distance. Isolation tricked my mind, and fear crept into my thoughts.

Voices argued in my head—my Guide and the dark spirit. The foes faced off in silent battle in the Egyptian night. The dark force

sent chills down my spine. I tried to silence his speech. The Guide urged me forward. I heard his voice and knew I had to act or I would stumble.

Then they both stopped. Waiting for me to choose. Choose to run back down the trail to comfort and security, or walk forward through the blackness by myself. The choice seemed obvious. Though I preferred the relative safety and comfort of the group below, some mountains can only be conquered alone, in the dark.

Listening to the last of my Guide's whispers, I chose to talk myself up every inch of the mountain.

Jodi, you're not really alone. Just keep walking. Don't stop.

My muscles wearied, but I pushed on, prodded by my Guide's instruction. The route steepened, forcing me to rest in between each physical push up the path. The mountain peak seemed farther with every bend of the trail, and my doubts grew.

The dark angel on my shoulder pressed me to quit and succumb to the gloom. The fiend's silent tirade grew louder with each moment. He seemed intent on testing my determination and faith in myself.

I wondered how long I'd been climbing. The summit had to be close. My eyes looked heavenward. *Please, just help me find someone. I can't keep going alone.*

One switchback gave way to another, and the dark force gained ground. Finally, providence interceded: a long stairway indicated salvation was close. After seven hundred and fifty steps, I would be at the top. No stopping this close.

At base camp just hours earlier, tales of the staircase had unsettled me. I wondered how difficult the steps would be after hours of hiking the steep terrain. Reality turned out only marginally better—trudging up the stairway became a full body activity.

The veil of darkness started to lift. No longer in the shadows of the mountain passes, the steps turned from black to gray to brown. Laughter floated in the air; I was almost there.

A final turn of the staircase and the throng of students at the summit swallowed me into their midst. The solitary journey ended. I saw Erika, Christina, and several others, and then I spotted Chris,

and my pack on his back.

Sunrise lit the horizon and chased the blackness away. The light illuminated hundreds of miles of celestial peaks, which sparkled like jewels on a crown. The dark spirit had gone, but a strange feeling crept into my stomach. It was not the last time I would face that foe.

The great mount had protected hundreds of sojourners that morning. The six-foot graduate arrived like the rest of us, but he slipped into the swarm without drawing my attention.

Twenty-four hours and a thousand miles later, in Amman, Jordan, he appeared at the threshold of my hotel room. I opened the door, shocked to see him standing there, alone.

Shadows no longer veiled his face as they had when he'd stood next to me at the bottom of the mountain. I caught my breath as I realized he was quite handsome. His short dark-chocolate hair was combed neatly to temper the light waves at his temples and around his ears. With olive skin and dark brown eyes, he could've blended in with the Middle Eastern natives. He looked foreign. Distinguished. Memorable. I wondered why I hadn't noticed him since that first day in class.

The graduate's name was Tolan Brown.^[1]^[SEP]My whole being coursed with energy at the sound of his voice.

"Ever seen Amman before?" he inquired with a casual grin. "We are only in Jordan for one night. Now's our chance." He raised his brow, waiting for a response.

Something in his expression grabbed me and wouldn't let go. Unlike many of the guys I'd met, he was calm and comforting, not anxious or over-the-top.

My eyes stared for a second too long. I still hadn't answered.

What is it about him? He's different.

"I guess it is now or never—tomorrow will be too late." Something about the this-is-our-only-chance offer persuaded me. I smiled and hoped for the best.

Invitation accepted.

Amman was alive, but restrained. Tanks rumbled down the streets, reminders we were far from Kansas. The clean and organized city astounded me, but it wasn't the location that held my attention.

“I haven’t tried to keep up with the reading assignments. Why would I spend time sitting in my room, reading about history, when I could be in the Old City seeing it?” Tolan said matter-of-factly.

Every word he said resonated with me. His philosophy didn’t seem to apply just to the university semester.

Turned out, Tolan’s long-ago bad hair was just a botched haircut, by his father, who got carried away with clippers. Engineering degree in hand, the start of his first real job neared. With freedom still under his reign, he had boarded a plane bound for a distant land and personal discovery.

The conversation flowed effortlessly. We talked about everything—and nothing at all. The topics changed from our homes and families, to the unique sights and sounds of ancient lands.

“You know the model they showed us, of Jerusalem after the Babylonian siege...?”

He actually recalled and understood the hours’ worth of material the tour guides spouted. His detailed descriptions of places and events seemed alive, and I wondered how they appeared in his mind.

We stopped by a recognizable American restaurant, thrilled to order a pizza. He interacted with foreign businessmen as if they were old friends. He laughed easily, but not at the same things everyone else laughed at.

The food fell short of our expectations, but the adventure did not. The more time we spent together, the longer our fingers intertwined, the harder I fell.

He didn’t wait for happiness; he savored the journey of *real* life, every day.

It only took three days before I knew I would marry Tolan Brown. Even before the ring slid on my finger, we were a perfect fit.

The MRI still held me hostage, but the words of the ballad that became our song continued to comfort me long after they faded on the radio.

“This is the time to remember, but it will not last forever. These are the days to hold on to, but we won’t although we’ll want to. This is the time, but time is

gonna change...”

Memories streamed through my mind, and I thought about how much that trip changed and guided my life. The semester abroad in the Holy Land led me to love. But the Middle East also opened my eyes to human suffering, corruption, and horrible living conditions.

Amidst the wonders of the world in Egypt, we traveled through the dirt-covered streets and waded through pools of urine. We unknowingly drank bacteria-filled water, which caused our bowels to cramp and ache. We watched children bathe with cattle in the Nile River, a body of water so contaminated, our leaders told us not to touch it—not even with our feet.

On the paradoxically clean streets of Jordan, soldiers patrolled, threatening anyone who appeared to step out of line. Two tanks of military personnel stopped a group of American students less than a block from where I stood. Frightened college kids put their hands in the air and tried to back away, only to have the soldiers jump from the tanks and confiscate their cameras. It seemed they wanted to curtail any unauthorized images from escaping the country.

I wondered which people were more free—those who lived in the filth or those who cowered in the cleanliness. When I had boarded the plane for Israel, I was well into my university studies. I’d always desired a career that would make a difference and afford me the opportunity to have a family. I didn’t want to be trapped in the rat race and forget the real meaning of life. But when I witnessed the conditions in Egypt and Jordan, I became more determined to do something good in the world, something for others.

I arrived home from the Holy Land with a new goal: to work for a hospital or a nonprofit, an organization with a purpose to help others.

Tolan and I married just four months after we returned to the States. He worked in the real world and I continued my university studies. Our daily destinations were nearly ninety miles apart, so we split the difference and lived in the middle until I finished school. We rented small apartments in crummy neighborhoods until I graduated, and then we bought a little starter home.

Just eighteen months later, I left my public relations job at a

high-tech company to start a career as a professional fundraiser for a nonprofit hospital system. For ten years I worked with people around the country, raising money for programs that could indeed change lives, if not the world. During the early years of my career, I gave birth to Trenden and soon realized one of the best ways to change an ever-declining world was to teach my children to be good, moral, people who loved easily.

As I had planned, I scaled back in my job to be home with my children. My career became secondary. I worked at home during nap times and often carried babes in arms to meetings at the hospital. Tolan stayed by my side the whole way.

Time certainly had changed, just as our song had predicted. But despite the recent events and even the fact that I was lying in an MRI scanner, I was grateful for every moment and knew I wouldn't change a thing.

The jerking machine stopped and jolted me back to reality. *I made it!*

The motorized exam table moved out of the tunnel. My arms and hands shook as I waited to be free of the claustrophobic tube that caged me for almost a hundred minutes. I survived the last terrible minutes because my mind whirled me thousands of miles away.

When the MRI exchanged places with a new machine for more tests, my head dropped.

The neurosurgery residents raced around in ant-like fashion, filling infinite clipboards with the answers I had already given ten times before, each wanting the whole story for themselves. It was a teaching hospital. That meant the best doctors, but also hundreds of curious newbies who were sure to learn a lot from my "unusual case."

The entire day I'd been stuck—to a needle, a bed, or a machine. I longed to escape, but I wanted answers more, so I stayed. At eight-thirty pm, a CNA finally pushed me in a wheelchair toward my room for the weekend. Tears fell, and I heaved uncontrollable sobs.

We arrived to a crowd huddled in room 521. I jerked up straight and wiped my face at the sight of my family. Tolan had brought the children to visit, along with supplies for my stay. Trenden saw me, then turned to Tolan before looking back at me. The kids knew Mommy was sick, but my wheel-chaired body and tear-stained face likely woke them to a new reality.

My whole world revolved around my family, but at that moment, I could hardly bear the scene. Expectant little faces stared at me, and I attempted to pull myself together for their sake. Trenden's normal gregarious chatter quieted. He understood more than we were telling him. Lindi touched my hand, and then backed away. Casen and Daven waited until I climbed into bed, then they jumped aboard to cuddle.

Tolan's eyes were perhaps the biggest, and most telling, of all. Without exchanging words, he understood the visit must be brief. They left my overnight bag on the counter and the kids made sure I knew my toothbrush was inside.

"Give Mom hugs, then we have to go," Tolan announced. [SEP]

"But we just got here," Casen insisted.

"Everyone who obeys without fussing gets ice cream when we get home." Tolan, ever the marketing expert, charmed them into submission.

Little bodies ambled forward and extended loving arms around me. Their squeezes comforted me, but I relaxed only when my tears fell privately again. The tumor diagnosis was only days old, but already it had stolen my normal, beloved life.

At nine p.m., I rolled over to sleep. But that was not what the doctor ordered. A senior resident, almost a real, full-fledged doctor, entered—for the third time. He'd bugged me from his first hands-on-hips stance and I-know-what-I'm-talking-about speech, an attempt to compensate for his nasal voice, short stature and balding head. Earlier in the day he'd questioned me for fifteen minutes, and then declared I had Multiple Sclerosis (MS)—and asserted I should be glad for an MS diagnosis and not a brain tumor.

The shock had ripped through me like shrapnel. Other residents hit me with two more diagnoses before Dr. Couldwell advised me

not to listen to the almost-doctors. If only I'd known that at the start of the day. Eager, freshly-studied residents watched vigilantly for a chance to demonstrate mastery that would distinguish them from their peers. A few spouted every idea that popped into their minds as if not knowing when not to speak. Outside of the watch of their professor's eye, they tested their theories on patients, perhaps unaware of the impact on unsuspecting patients and families. My emotions rode a rollercoaster the whole day, thanks to the unanticipated events and a few zealous residents who shared their vast knowledge with me.

The assuming resident's baldhead mirrored his bedside manner: sparse and unconvincing. One more test, he insisted, then I could sleep. He put on gloves and pulled out a needle nearly the length of my arm.

"With this I can extract spinal fluid to assist in the diagnosis process," he declared.

Not this arrogant jerk. Don't touch me. Get out of my room—leave me alone! I yelled and yelled, but he never heard the words in my head.

I abandoned my silent fight and imitated the image he showed me. Curled into an unnatural position, I gripped a pillow while he inserted the needle into my spine. Fluid drained into clear sacks, to be tested for diseases and conditions associated with brain tumors. The procedure lasted fewer than twenty minutes, but moments after, a headache drilled in. I begged for sleep. A nurse gave me water to wash down several medications, and then the room fell quiet and dark. In the minutes before I fell asleep, I pleaded there would be no sequel to the event.

Chapter 6

Surrounded

“But if these years have taught me anything
it is this: you can never run away. Not ever.
The only way out is in.”
~ Junot Diaz

April 21, 2009

Three days had passed since my hospital release—with no relief from the new headaches pounding my head. Our appointment with Dr. Couldwell lasted three days. I returned home Sunday as a sick patient.

Stacie, a friend and nurse, came when she heard the news. She marched into the living room and seated herself on the floor by the couch where I rested.

“Two weeks ago I was planning a charity golf tournament. Now I’m barely functioning. I just want to press rewind on life,” I said.

“We never know when life will change,” Stacie replied.

Her Cross-Fit workouts reflected her personality: intense in exercise and life. Stacie makes things happen, nothing passive about her. She heard my symptoms and assumed immediately a spinal fluid leak created the latest headaches. A blood patch, a simple surgical procedure to seal the spinal tap puncture wound, should solve the problem.

With Stacie still kneeling on the floor, the doorbell rang and my pack grew. Kathryn, also a nurse and friend, agreed with Stacie’s diagnosis. The two didn’t know each other, but they put their heads together on my behalf. Kathryn phoned a doctor, explained the situation and arranged for the patch procedure. At six p.m. they set miracles in motion.

The next morning, Mom wheeled me to the surgical floor of the hospital. My friends had called in favors and gotten babysitters. They made everything happen.

The situation at the hospital resembled no other. The procedure had not been authorized by my insurance, and no doctor had given orders for surgery. Yet the doctor, Kathryn's colleague, did not hesitate. In an unused operating suite, he helped me lie face down on the surgical table. He and a nurse readied the tools.

"Doctor, we are here to perform a blood patch on Jodi Brown. Do you concur?" the nurse asked.

"Yes," he replied. "We better write this down somewhere. Get me a paper to sign."

The operating room nurse handed the surgeon a paper and pen, and he scribbled his name and returned them to his assistant.

"What do you want me to do with this?" the nurse asked, holding the signed paper. "The computer doesn't even show she's here."

"Hold onto it—for now. You can give it to me later. I'll keep it, just in case."

The nurse's face didn't reveal his personal thoughts. He simply complied, folded the paper and placed it in his pocket. He then prepped me, rubbing my back with cleansing wipes and alcohol.

The throbbing blared in my head akin to a car alarm stuck in panic mode. I wondered if you could pass out from pain. Everything in the expansive room, except the floor, was metal—tables, instruments and light fixtures. Easy to clean. Sterile. Only the four of us, Mom sitting on a nearby chair, occupied the suite. Dim lights reflected off the shiny equipment, creating a haunted effect with the shadows. The darkened room cocooned me from the aches inside.

"We are so grateful for your help," Mom said, for the second time in just a few minutes.

The doctor knelt down and looked into my eyes. "We're ready to begin, okay?"^[SEP]

"K."^[SEP]A needle pierced my skin, and a local anesthetic deadened the midsection of my back. I felt pressure, but no real pain as they patched the spinal fluid leak. Several minutes into the procedure, liberating calm soothed my head as the blood coagulated in the dura of my spine.

The surgeon finished the procedure in less than half an hour. Without a recovery room scheduled, he and the nurse arranged a

place in the O.R., covered me with blankets, and took turns by my side. I laid on the makeshift bed recuperating for two hours, our presence still secret from the hospital bustle.

"I didn't know little miracles like this could even happen these days," Mom said as she held my hand.

Her words echoed my sentiments.

"Can I give you a hug?" I asked the doctor as I stood for the first time in five days.

He stretched out his arms—the answer I'd hoped for. "Thank you. I don't know what else to say."^{SEP}

"Are you feeling better now?" he asked, releasing me.

"Yes, so much better."

"Then we did the right thing." He patted my shoulder, turned and waved as he walked into the office on the other side of the O.R.

Mom held onto my arm as we walked out of the hospital.

On the car ride home, a radio announcer confirmed a report that Michael Jackson had died earlier that day. Shocked by the news, songs from my youth played, first on the radio, then in my mind. For days, I'd focused all my strength on surviving the pain. *Billy Jean* was a welcome departure.

Balloons and signs greeted us outside our home. But the party wasn't for me, but for my youngest son, Daven. His birthday arrived without asking us if it was convenient, and caught me totally unprepared.

Mom slipped away and returned with a big "Happy Birthday Daven" decorated chocolate cake. Kathryn arrived with a cotton candy machine, which attracted neighborhood children by the sight and smell alone. Neighbors partied our yard with more balloons, and kids from the cul-de-sac showed up right on time, desperately needed gifts for the birthday boy and his mother in their hands.

Though I hadn't purchased a single present or sent one invitation, youngsters and parents alike celebrated Daven's second birthday in our front yard. He may not have understood exactly what happened, but he knew he was loved. When the festivities were over, the families wandered home, but left us food and treats.

Kathryn packed her cotton candy machine in the car. She came first and left last.

There was no doubt she'd organized the party. And it was no

coincidence she had been the one who'd called the doctor and arranged for the blood patch procedure. She didn't just know doctors because she was a nurse; she was also a patient. And she went from being their colleague to being their patient in the middle of a shift at work.

Half a decade earlier, while her fellow nurses and doctors were in the operating room, Kathryn stepped out of the O.R. and into the hall. Something felt off; her heart was beating irregularly. When the doctor realized she'd been gone a little too long, he sent someone to check on her. They found Kathryn lying on the floor, unconscious.

Her friends quickly rushed to her aid and called for help. But no matter how long they pumped her chest, she wouldn't wake up.

"If they hadn't been my dear friends, they probably would have called it much earlier, but I don't think any of them could stand the thought of having me die on their watch. They didn't want to give up on me," Kathryn told me.

She lived through the ordeal, but not by much. When her heart finally beat again, the doctors believed she would be gone again in a short time. They figured the time without oxygen and the trauma to her body meant she had only enough time left for her family to say goodbye.

Kathryn's husband brought their baby girl and Kathryn's other young children to the hospital, in the middle of the night, to say good-bye to their mother.

"No one really had any reason to hope that I would ever recover. They thought I wouldn't make it until the next morning."

But she did. And she made it to the next day, and the next, until her body slowly started functioning again. The injury was extensive and her heartbeat still irregular—but she'd survived a full-blown cardiac arrest.

Some damage was permanent; others took years to repair. She tired easily afterwards and wasn't able to exercise, hike, or even jog to the corner—a little trip like that could be her last.

And yet, Kathryn's heart—the one in her soul—wasn't damaged at all. Her weak heart made her strong. I guessed that was why Kathryn was everywhere, doing everything for others.

That is why she is here—she knows just how precious life is.

"You need anything else?" she asked as she closed the back of her SUV.

I shook my head. "No, we're good. And Kathryn—thank you."

“Oh, you’re welcome—it was no big deal. Every little one should have a birthday party.” She smiled and waved as she drove off.

The pack of angels, led by the queen herself, rescued me again.

The hospital still looked and smelled new, though the facility was seven years old. As I walked to the Imaging Department to pick up a CD of my MRI scans, my mind filled with memories from the years I’d worked there, instead of all my recent trips. I remembered the VIP celebration just before the medical center opened to the public. For years the fundraising staff worked with community members and businesses to raise the money for the much-needed new facility. The \$16 million we were tasked with raising was less than ten percent of the cost of the hospital, but it was no trivial amount, especially for a relatively small community like ours.

At the VIP event, my boss, mentor and friend, Joey, called me to the podium and thanked me for my work on the campaign. Fully nine months pregnant with my second child, I ambled through the large crowd, accepted my flowers, and blushed at the applause.

“A big ‘thank you’ to Jodi for all her hard work. She has gone above and beyond in her efforts to create public awareness and help raise funds for the hospital. In fact, you all know that she is expecting a baby any time. But she is still here working, even though she is dilated to five centimeters right now! She is glad several among us tonight are doctors—she could be the hospital’s first patient!” Joey had laughed and the crowd cheered at the announcement; I wanted to duck off the stage, walk past my seat and straight out the door.

But Joey had been right—to a degree. Nothing but birth or death would have kept me from the gathering that night. It represented years of personal investment and thousands of work hours, but I’d loved every minute. I did believe the new hospital would transform healthcare in our community, and so I’d asked hundreds of people to donate to build it. Joey led the charge, and I side kicked.

My contractions gained strength right after the event ended. By the next afternoon, they timed at just a few minutes apart, so I called Tolan at work. We trafficked the busiest street in town, desperate to get to the hospital. Tolan off-roaded to get us around cars stopped at

a light. The drivers likely assumed him crazy, but as contractions hit me, I became a willing accomplice to his questionable maneuvers. Minutes later, I was “pushing” when the doctor walked in the Labor and Delivery room and caught my baby girl. Despite the celebrations for the facility, the new hospital wouldn’t open for a few more days. Lindi’s birth was our personal finale with the old McKay-Dee Hospital.

I arrived at the Imaging Department waiting room—and back to present day. Every doctor we talked to wanted full-resolution copies of the MRI images, so I collected them.

After my pickup, I made a quick decision and turned left into Radiation Oncology.

“Is Paul Weight in today?”

“You’re in luck. He’s here, and not even on the phone. Go on back.”

I walked in, and Paul turned toward me. “Well, if it isn’t Jodi Brown!”

He gave me a huge toothy grin and literally bounded out of his seat. His enthusiasm was his most endearing quality. Paul seemed to live on an invisible trampoline, and I had never been happier to join him. As the head of the cancer radiation therapy department, he’d teamed up with me for fundraising efforts. But more than colleagues, we were dear friends.

We chatted for a few moments before I got down to business. If anyone would have advice, or know whom we should go to, Paul would.

“The tumor is between the right auditory canal and the brainstem. Because of the location, the neurosurgeon said it is inoperable.”

Paul’s eyes bulged before he said anything. He was an expert at this—if he was anxious, I should be, too.

“Neurosurgeon—which one? Dr. Summers, upstairs?”

I nodded.

“Gamma Knife. Did he say they’re going to use Gamma Knife?”

“He didn’t tell us about Gamma Knife. I don’t know what that is.”

Paul leaned in and put his hands on his knees, showing the

concentration of an athlete before a big game.

“It is a form of radiosurgery that focuses tiny beams of radiation to kill tumors. It is often safer than brain surgery. Sometimes Gamma Knife is an option when surgery isn’t.”

Relief wet my forehead like a cool sponge. “I knew I was coming to the right person. You have all the answers.”

“Not all of them.”

The break from my worries didn’t last long.

“Wait, is Gamma Knife normal radiation? He didn’t think radiation was an option because the tumor type is unknown. Does that make sense?”

Paul returned to his athlete look, unusually silent for a moment.

“Radiation works on cancerous tumors or other malignant cells,” he explained. “It is dangerous to radiate benign masses, because of the possible destruction of healthy tissue, and the chance of triggering radiation-related cancers. And benign tumors don’t respond to radiation treatment. So Dr. Summers is right; if you don’t know what it is, you can’t use radiation.”

“He did say something like that. So, benign cells can turn cancerous if they are radiated?”

“That is a simplistic explanation, but yes.”

The back and forth questions continued in a water-balloon toss fashion, both of us careful not to burst the bubble.

More than thirty minutes passed before the receptionist appeared at the door. “Your one-thirty appointment is here.”

He nodded and I stood.

“Jodi, this is going to be a long, hard road. You’ve got to be ready for it.” A stoic expression replaced his normal, cartoon demeanor.

“I’m doing everything I know how to, Paul.”

“I know you are. Please take care—and let me know what you find out. If it’s okay with you, I’ll talk to Dr. Summers and make some calls to see if I have any leads on this end.”

“Thank you, my friend.”

Paul’s larger-than-life figure neared, and I reached up to hug him again. After several moments, he released me, and I grabbed my

purse and CD and turned away. I felt the weight of his stare as I walked into the hall. My most optimistic friend hadn't pumped me full of his conquer-the-world attitude and buoyancy for life. That made my stomach turn.

When Tolan got home, I replayed the conversation.

"Well, we know we have good people on our side. If Paul thinks of anything that will help, he'll let us know," Tolan said.

"Yes, he will." I knew that was true.

I couldn't get the exchange with Paul to exit my brain. Before bed, Dad called for the daily update, and I repeated the event.

"Don't let that get you down, Jo. Anyone who knows you knows that you are going into this with everything you've got, and you're going to come out of it the same way."

A moment passed before it hit me. "That's just it, Dad—Paul does know me."

I thought of myself as a glass-half-full person, and despite all the bad news of the week, I still believed we'd find a solution and I'd be back to normal in no time. Did Paul doubt that? He'd info-dumped more facts than I could digest, yet he'd held back, too. I could only imagine what he didn't say.

The doorbell rang, and a huge cookie bouquet arrived from my Orgill cousins. The vibrant, tempting delivery quickly disappeared into little mouths, but the impact lingered longer. Our home felt like a train station, with people coming and going at all hours, bringing parcels of various sizes. Our phones and email inboxes filled with calls and notes. We could not possibly communicate with everyone who was worried or wanted to help.

A blog answered the dilemma.

Step-by-step tutorials walked me through the process of creating a real-time virtual bulletin board. If anyone needed a miracle to survive, I knew I did, so we launched the aptly named, "A Miracle For Jodi Brown" blog. (www.amiracleforjodibrown.blogspot.com). Almost as soon as the site went live, comments and messages poured in, channeling hope, new friends, and strength directly to me.

The blog published all the details of our condition and needs to our family and friends, but it also made our lives public. The more commotion, the more Tolan retreated. He liked privacy—and despite the helpfulness of the blog, it invaded his personal space. The balance beam of our lives narrowed by the minute.

One afternoon, Annette, my neighbor and dear friend sat by my bed as I rested.

“I am numb. I feel nothing at all, then everything at once—the pressure, the fear, the unknown,” I muttered.

“What are you going to do?”

“The doctors still don’t know what it is, so we don’t know where to go from here. I am not mad, I just don’t know where I stand. My whole life and all my relationships have changed—and I am in control of almost nothing.”

“Oh, Jodi, I am so sorry. I can’t —” She didn’t know what to say either, so she put her arm around my shoulder, and we just cried.

Annette and I had been pregnant at the same time, and our youngest boys were born exactly three weeks apart. Suddenly I faced the possibility that she would be able to raise her little boy and I—

The prospects pulled me apart. I realized only one person could put me back together. Three weeks after I stopped praying, I grabbed my journal and wrote my thoughts:

May 4, 2009

I have decided that today is the day. I am sick of feeling out of control, sad and out of touch with the Lord. I may not understand all I am going through, but I can make the best of the situation. Today I want to start living—no matter how much time I have.

Today I am finally ready to seek the Lord again, ask for health and strength, and even miracles. The truth is, the miracles have been coming since word of my condition started getting out. That is what has kept me, and the family, going when I’ve felt I didn’t have it in me to face one more day.

I closed the journal and set it on my dresser. Then I knelt at my

bedside and resurrected my conversations with God.

Chapter 7

Jumping In

“Courage stands halfway between cowardice
and rashness, one of which is a lack,
the other an excess of courage.”
~ Plutarch

May 7, 2009

“The good news is, you are young, active, and healthy, so the likely prospect is for a full recovery.”

Tolan and I sat in the exam room of another specialist’s office. Dr. Shelton appeared distinguished with wavy salt-n-pepper hair, wire-rimmed glasses and a closed smile. He spoke with a drawl, Texas, I guessed. Chief of head and neck surgery, he seemed cautious but confident. Dr. Couldwell recommended him as a surgery partner so they could tag-team the tricky procedure to remove the tumor. The two were colleagues, experts and friends.

The decision was made.

After three weeks of tests, hospital stays, endless appointments and hundreds of questions, surgery was set for the following week. My personal dictionary filled daily with brain-tumor related terminology. I tried to manage all the information, but the task overwhelmed me.

“As with any procedure, there are possible risks and side effects.” Dr. Shelton said, handing Tolán a brochure of the surgery’s potential hazards.

Most common side effects from craniotomy:

Risk of hearing loss +/- 5%^{[L][SEP]}
Risk of facial paralysis +/- 10%^{[L][SEP]}
Increased dizziness and imbalance (more so than at present)
+/- 30%^{[L][SEP]}
Increased ringing in ears +/- 10%
Post-op infections +/- 10%^{[L][SEP]}
Risk of death +/- 1-2%^{[L][SEP]}

Other potential side effects:
Spinal fluid leak^{[L][SEP]}
Stroke

Sheesh. That is quite the list. My pulse quickened as we contemplated the plans for surgery and the possible complications. Tolan squeezed my hand, and I could feel slippery sweat accumulating between our intertwined fingers.

The doctor left us alone. I looked at the daunting list and dismissed it.

“It doesn’t seem like we have a choice,” Tolan said.

“I agree. Surgery is our only viable option. The tumor is the challenge. After everything that has happened so far, I just can’t believe any of *that* is in store for us.”

The confidence in my voice surprised me, yet I believed each word.

The next days passed quicker than vacation days, and slower than the week before Christmas. There was much to do and too much to think about. The more I thought, the less I did.

Mom side-kicked as my personal and health assistant. She helped me plan all the scheduling details for my hospitalization, and she was a sounding board for my fears and feelings. The calendar we prepared included preschool and elementary school pickup times, daily practices and games, and the contact information for all the friends who volunteered to help during the week with carpools, meals, and rides. She took me to more appointments, and we tried to prepare ourselves for what was to come.

The surgery date loomed only days away, but we’d been encouraged to get other expert opinions before undergoing the risky

procedure. One specialist after another provided second, third, fourth opinions and more, and spewed opinions as facts. In another local doctor's office, Mom took laborious notes from the specialist's verbal report. This doctor took a ten-second glance at my scans and declared, "I've seen three other cases just like this in the last year. You have an acoustic neuroma..."

That was when I tuned out. The complete surety and superiority in his voice told me everything I needed to know. For the rest of his monologue, I sat silent.

When the physician left the room, Mom turned to me.

"Wow, that was good information. I hope I got it all down because I'll never remember everything he said."

"You don't need to remember it, Mom. He was wrong—everything he said was wrong. Dr. Couldwell went through all of this with me in the hospital. He gave me all the reasons why my tumor isn't a schwannoma or an acoustic neuroma. He said anyone who diagnosed it as such, like some of his residents-in-training, were relying purely on textbook information and not practice."

"What do you mean, Jo?"

I couldn't explain all the things Dr. Couldwell told me; I only knew the feeling I had inside. In less than a month, I'd been examined and diagnosed by more than a dozen doctors, neurosurgeons, ENTs, neuro-ENTs, and neurologists.

Medical school didn't bullet point my resume, but I believed Dr. Couldwell and trusted his plan.

I turned to Mom and attempted to clarify the two conflicting doctors' messages. To her credit, Mom didn't need further description of the situation. Once she understood the gist of my words, she laid her notebook at her side. Though new to the world of neurosurgeons, she trusted me and she trusted God. If I knew whom to listen to, she did too.

My moment of clarity turned to concern.

What about the other patients who come in here each day? What if they believe everything he says without question? His youth, good looks, self-confidence, and title deem him an authority, but this time, I know he is wrong. What happens to those who don't know that?

The course prescribed by our two chosen doctors was the right path. Though I knew little else, that fact burned in me.

Surgery was scheduled to last four to five hours. The procedure would be completed using a mid-fosa approach, beginning at the right ear and making a large question mark-shaped incision on my head. The plan included a stay in the Neuro Intensive Care Unit at the University of Utah Medical Center for one to two days, followed by another three to four days in the Neuro Acute Care Unit, for a total hospital stay of four to six days. Post-craniotomy protocol dictated that I would not be released until the incision healed and I could walk on my own.

At home, we discussed the basics with our young family. After relaying simple facts, Tolan explained that the site of the tumor removal could not be left “empty” in the brain, so the team planned to take fat from my stomach (in a procedure similar to liposuction) to fill in the open space in my brain. Using all the humor we could muster, we joked with the kids—who decided my new nickname should be “Fat Head.” We laughed and told our children about the many friends and family members who lovingly stepped forward as volunteers to give up their “fat” to put in my head. Relieved at the positive turn in the conversation, each of them came up with other funny names that would apply to Mommy after surgery. “Metal Head” and “Baldy” also made the list. Laughter comforted us, even when we were scared for the future.

We juggled the pre-surgery days like acrobats. Trenden’s tenth birthday celebration came just four days before my operation. The previous month had aged him—already he seemed older, more mature and emotionally burdened. All I wanted for his birthday was for him to just be a kid, to enjoy his day. He and his friends rollerbladed around the rink, jumped on giant inflatable obstacle courses and ate pizza, but his face showed his heart was not in it. A lump formed in my throat. I knew that would not be the last time his life revolved around my own.

Night settled on the birthday party and the sun rose on Mother’s

Day. Trying to savor the days with my family while preparing for the unknown sent us from one emotional day into the next. My counters filled with beautiful flower arrangements, far more than normal for the day honoring mothers.

The phone rang, and an older gentleman from my church congregation greeted me. He said, “Happy Mother’s Day,” before falling silent.

“Before you have surgery, I wanted to tell you something.” He paused again, heightening my curiosity. “Ms. Brown, no matter what happens, don’t let it shake your faith.”

“When I was young and life got hard, I thought God didn’t care about me, so I turned away.” His voice broke. “It took years, most of my life, for me to find my way back. All that time, I could have had His help, but I chose to punish myself by pushing God out of my life. Don’t make the mistake I made.”

He spoke for a few more minutes, and then I thanked him and hung up.

Think I’ve learned that lesson. Even unanswered prayers are better than silent nights. I walked out of the room and tried to put the call from the strange old man out of my mind.

Tolan’s parents hosted us for a joint Mother’s Day dinner and birthday celebration for Trenden. He opened presents, and then Kay and I took turns with our Mother’s Day gifts. The usual oohs and ahs accompanied each unwrapped box.

Tolan handed me the final present, packaged in aluminum foil—his signature gift-wrap. I smiled and thought of all the reasons he’d once given me for using foil.

“It’s shiny, decorative, heavy-duty, and you don’t need tape,” Tolan had recited.

Long thin box. Jewelry-sized. I raised my eyebrows for a few seconds and wondered what prize lay inside.

I lifted the top and gasped at the treasure on the cottony bed in the box.

“I took it in and got the stones replaced,” Tolan said. His eyes

seemed to be searching my face for a reaction.

The gold pendant that hung from the necklace had only been mine for a few months. I'd inherited it after my Grandma Lisenbee passed away a few months earlier. I'd lived with her my freshman year in high school, cementing the bond we'd always shared. When I saw the priceless treasure, I felt guilty for the thoughts I'd originally had. The pendant had lived in Grandma's small jewelry box for years.

Absent gems blackened the once-golden locket like missing teeth. The frozen hands of a small clock inside showed tarnish and disrepair. Dad rejoiced that each of his daughters inherited one of his mother's keepsakes, but I couldn't remember even seeing her wear it. To me, the pendant looked like old costume jewelry from a second-hand store.

Staring at the polished gold ornament in my hands, complete with a beautiful chain, shiny new stones and a working clock, I was embarrassed at my previous evaluation of the pendant.

"Turn it over." Tolan's hand reached over mine, too anxious to wait for me to do it.

Engraved words read, "Vearis Lisenbee, 1917-2009."

I wrapped my arms around his neck. "Thank you," I said into his shoulder. "I love it!"

"I thought you could wear it when you go to your doctors' appointments, so she can always be with you," he whispered into my ear. For weeks, earthly angels had gotten me through every challenge and unforeseen situation, from spontaneous surgery to carpool substitutions to a great birthday party bash. Seeing my grandmother's name on the elegant piece of jewelry was a poignant reminder from my husband that heavenly angels watched out for us, too.

For a moment, I was on top of the world, not because my prospects had improved, but because I had everything—and everyone—I needed to get me through whatever was coming.

The day before surgery, I lay in the dreaded MRI machine again. The doctors wanted a precise view of the tumor, where it was, and how much it had grown (or shrunk—I had been on steroid therapy

in hopes of shrinking the tumor) so they could create a precise path from my skull directly to the mass in my brain.

In three weeks, I'd seen or consulted with more than 25 doctors throughout the country and across multiple health systems.

Many of these doctors gave me no promise for the future, while a few spouted over-confident and unqualified assurances.

Though I quickly learned the grim facts of the situation, I never really thought I was going to die—I believed I was simply the underdog. Any other thought pricked too deep. When my mind started going *there*, the downward spiral whirl-pooled and threatened to suck me in. My trust rested in God, and in my team of doctors, who I hoped would have dead aim removing my tumor.

If I had known then what some of those doctors were saying, or heard the rumors going around town, I'd have been swallowed up for sure. It was a good thing I didn't hear the private conversations, the cries behind closed doors, or the forgone conclusions that surgery day would be my last. No one told me they thought I would die. No one declared this to my parents; most certainly not their friend, a neurologist, who told colleagues, "She is a goner, for sure."

These words, fears, and tears never made it to me. They stayed tucked away in exam rooms, on medical charts, and in rooms far from my own. Instead, my friends surrounded me at every moment, giving me hope and faith. That is why I got up day after day and declared I was going to win the war.

Ignorance truly is bliss—this I know.

The unlikely duo of ignorance and naive optimism protected me. The night before surgery, I didn't want to think of anything related to tumors. I knew it could be my last chance, for a while, to celebrate and enjoy life, and I intended to do just that.

Before Mother's Day, I'd called my brother-in-law and my dad and told them my plan for a girls' night at the spa. My sister Kristi was still in Hawaii, but Mom and my sister Tami were close enough for an evening of pampering and fun, sponsored by their husbands. We arrived at the high-end spa and changed into plush robes. We sipped tea, laughed and waited. One by one, massage therapists took each of us back to a room for the first of our treatments, a 90-minute

massage. A tall man with broad shoulders called my name, then walked me to a room.

“My name is Jared. I see you have been to Mindful Women Spa before. Is there anything specific you’d like for your massage this evening?”

“Well, Jared, when you work on me, you’ll notice the gnarly knots in my back. I’d love if you could loosen me up a bit. I’m having surgery in the morning so tonight I just need to relax.”

“Okay, Jodi, I am happy to do that. What kind of surgery are you having? Is there anything I need to be aware of when I am working?”

I responded fast. “I am having brain surgery in hopes of removing a tumor on my brainstem.”

His body froze and his eyes shifted, but then Jared straightened his stance to near military form. “I will do everything I can to help you, Jodi.”

He left the room so I could situate myself on the massage table. When he returned, he turned the lights low and played new-age music in the background. He rubbed lotion into his hands and laid them gently on my back. I sank into the cushion and let Jared work all my anxiety out on the table. By the time his hands returned to a resting position, I was nearly asleep. He stepped back from the table.

“Jodi, we are finished.” He waited until I turned my head and met his gaze. “I hope that helped. Thank you for coming tonight.”

“Thank you, Jared. I can’t tell you how much I needed that. You have a gift. Thank you for sharing it with me. That was the best massage I’ve ever had.”

A wide grin crossed his face. “It was my honor. And, good luck tomorrow. I will be thinking about you.”

He bowed and left the room.

I slipped back into my robe and met my mom and sister, where we were seated high on elevated recliner chairs. Three young ladies entered to begin our pedicures. Tami joked, as usual, and Mom and I chuckled in response. In minutes we relaxed in a room of new friends. Tami’s nail tech asked if there was a special reason for our night out together, and Tami didn’t hesitate to tell her the truth. The

elephant in the room took center stage again.

One of the girls bit her lip, and then asked, "Are you scared?"

"Yes. Who wouldn't be? But, I know everything is going to be okay." I'd given this answer before. "I'll have to wear awful hospital gowns for the next few days, but at least I can choose what to wear on my toes!"

With that comment, the techs smiled and grabbed the tray of colors, stickers, and enhancements for us to select from. I wondered if I should be a little crazy and go bold, but in the end, I picked out a beautiful burgundy polish for the nails and miniature white flowers with glittering gems to accent. *Me to a tee.*

I stared at the cute designs on my nails and realized I wouldn't be able to choose what came next in my life so easily. After months of symptoms had spun my life out of control, I silently promised to stay positive, no matter what surgery day held in store. Above all else, I knew I didn't want anything to make me lose myself.

The lovely night closed all too quickly. As Tami prepared to drive home, she stood by her car door and turned to me.

"It's going to work, I just know it. I'll visit in a few days and we'll make plans for you to come to my house and get hair extensions when you are out of the hospital. Then you won't even be bald. My friend said she'd do it for you, free of charge. We'll have another girls' day. Maybe not as relaxing as tonight, but it will be good, I promise."

"Love ya, Jo," she said, then she leaned over and gave me an awkward but heartfelt hug.

"Wow, thanks," I teased.

"Well, it may not happen again for a while, so you better write about it in your journal."

We laughed before she drove away.

Tolan embraced me the minute Mom and I walked through the door. The kids were all in their jammies, playing in the front room. It seemed they'd been waiting for us. We told them all about our fun night, and held an impromptu pep rally in our living room. Then I hugged each of my little ones and tucked them into bed. My lips brushed their foreheads and I whispered that I would see them soon.

I closed the bedroom door behind me as I left the last room. Only then did the tears fall.

My mind was nowhere near sleep. I puttered around the house packing miscellaneous things and re-checking the lists, schedules and calendars I'd made for the five days I'd be in the hospital. I ate a slice of fruit tart pie, my favorite treat, which my neighbors Eric and Cami brought over during my spa night. I consumed the perfect last meal before my required fast.

Just before midnight, Tolan plopped into our bedroom chair. "You ready for bed yet?"

On a normal evening, I would have dropped from sheer exhaustion, but *that* night, I did not want to go to sleep. Part of me believed if I just kept moving, kept going, morning wouldn't come. Tolan knew better.

"You may be able to sleep all day, but I need to be awake enough to drive you to the hospital at five a.m. Let's get some rest."

I stopped tinkering and exhaled, and my whole body shuddered. "Okay."

"Come here," he said.

My husband doubled as my shrink and he knew, more than anyone, why I didn't want to go to bed. I walked over and sat down on his lap.

Tolan wrapped his arms around me; I turned and laid my head on his shoulder. We stayed in that position for several minutes, neither of us saying a word. My chest heaved, and occasional gasps escaped my throat.

"I love you, Jodi Orgill Brown," he said. "By this time tomorrow, it will all be over, and in a few days you'll be back at home and here in my arms."

He kissed my head, then my lips, and we crawled into bed.

Chapter 8

All Sales Final

“Just when I think I have learned the
way to live, life changes.”
~ Hugh Prather

May 13, 2009

I hung my head over the porcelain bowl and waited for the final convulsions. Strands of long blonde hair brushed the side of my face and stuck to the cold sweat on my cheek. The trembling in my limbs paused just long enough to expunge the last remaining bodily fluids. Wiping my mouth, I leaned against the wall for support; tears mingled with the saliva that dripped from my chin.

My stomach churned with bats more than butterflies. I wished they'd scare the fear out of me. The thought of doctors cutting open my brain made me heave again.

Thinking happy thoughts no longer did the trick. My naïve ignorance from days before had long since fled, overtaken by the realization of what lay ahead.

Hundreds of friends and family members had already showered me with well wishes, good karma, kismet, and luck. Many more would send thoughts to heaven on my behalf that day, probably even the odd old man on the phone. Still, I cried.

Praying was not the problem; I'd often poured out my heart for those I loved. But my new situation made me unsure of *what to ask for*. Most of the doctors had written me off, given me a death sentence rather than hope. God knew this. Could I be so bold as to

ask for a miracle? The old man on the phone had said not to lose my faith, but he'd said nothing about having enough to make a miracle.

Doubts about God had rarely entered my mind during my thirty- three years. I had seen the touch of the Lord's hand in my life too many times to question whether He existed. He is known by different names to different people; Abba, Yahweh, Elah, Allah, Elohim, and Jesus Christ are just a few. No, I did not question His presence, only His path for me. If I dared ask God for a miracle and didn't receive it, would it be because I didn't have enough faith, or because it was God's will? Whisperings from my Guide told me everything would be okay; whether or not God and I had the same definition of "okay" remained to be seen.

The clock read 4:38 a.m.—even after the extended time hugging the toilet and showering, the morning was still waking. Few sounds or movement came from beyond the walls of our home. I thought about the day ahead, but I didn't even know what I hoped for.

Prayer had never been so complicated or tears so simple.

Tolan flipped on the lights in the garage and ran ahead to open the car door. Mom held onto me as we walked out to the car. Carefully stepping down the stairs, I glanced ahead of me and saw bright blue letters. I smelled the wood as I neared the enormous painted plywood sign.

"Good luck, Jodi. We love you and are praying for you."

The sign was covered in notes and well wishes, though there wasn't time to read them all. The tears flowed again. Friends and neighbors from miles around had ensured that the last thing I felt as I left home was love.

The unknown was overwhelming. The questions were too many and the answers all indefinite. No amount of planning, psyching, meditating, or calming had prepared me to look mortality in the face and step into the darkness of surgery day.

Please let him get here in time! I need to see him. They can't take me back until he's here. I have to tell him, I need to say—

My father's flight from Hawaii landed at the Salt Lake City

airport within minutes of my scheduled surgery. Tolan stood by my side, as did my mom, who hadn't left our home since the day after I was diagnosed. But Dad had to work, which kept him three thousand miles away. By eight a.m. my day was already four hours old. My insides still churned like a sailor's first day at sea, but there was nothing left to empty from my body. The vertigo that nearly swallowed me on the long car ride to the hospital threatened to engulf me again. Worse still, the reality of saying goodbye to the most important people in my world threatened to drown me before the sleepy juice could save me.

The morning had already been hard enough as I kissed each of my four little ones while they slept in their beds.

Trenden was old enough to understand the gist of it—but lying in his bed that morning, he was relaxed. I hoped it would stay that way through the long day of unknowns. Lindi's dreams hid any concerns her face might otherwise have shown. My little guys, Casen and Daven, snoozed, it seemed, without a care in the world.

Dear Father, no matter what happens, please take care of my children. Let them know how much I love them, how much I still want to be their mother!

There was no time for my lips to linger, or my tears would wake the beauties. Mom's eyes found mine, jerking me back to the present. No matter how much I wanted to be home getting my kids ready for school, I was in the hospital, waiting for the world to end. The clock screamed that time was running out. Dad still hadn't arrived.

I turned my head and looked out the door, safe from the stares of those I loved. I couldn't look into their faces and pretend it was okay.

Another few minutes passed in silence.

"There's Von!" Tolan exclaimed as he looked out the window toward the parking lot.

I glanced skyward and closed my eyes.

Within minutes, Dad was outside my door, stopping only to shake the hands of those who would soon hold my life in theirs. The room seemed to lighten the instant he walked in. Never mind the thoughts of what lay ahead, his smile was a permanent fixture on his face.

“Hi-ya, Jo,” he said with a comforting grin as he gave me a whole-hearted embrace. His nickname for me had never sounded so wonderful.

Suddenly, there was nothing I needed to say. His eyes told me he already knew the thoughts of my heart. His presence put me at peace, the final signal that it was time to begin. At that point, I could do nothing more. I was in God’s hands.

Mom looked into my eyes before leaning down for a last hug and kiss on my forehead. She caressed my hand as she held it in hers. Dozens of memories from the previous days flew through my mind: her fingers running through my hair, sitting beside me on the bed, pushing my wheelchair out of the hospital, and lovingly cooking, cleaning, and playing with my children. My 5’6” frame exceeded hers by four inches, yet she was a giant to me. Despite my being a full-grown woman, she was still my mother.

Tolan was last. The man who effortlessly but definitively became my other half stared at me with big brown eyes that spoke pure love to my heart. Then his lips touched mine for a brief moment. I leaned into his warmth, embracing the security I felt only in his arms.

Just hold me! Promise me it won’t be the last time! The words screamed in my head, but I couldn’t say them out loud; his shoulders already carried the weight of the world. My tears wet his shirt. He let go, and I lay back onto the inclined mattress.

As the resident started to wheel my bed into the operating room, the sheet fell off my right foot, and I saw the white flowers shining amidst the deep burgundy on my toes. I remembered my promise from the night before, and vowed again to stay positive, and stay me.

Before we rounded the final corner, I turned my head towards my loved ones and gave a last smile and wave.

The operating room was humming with activity. Noises from all directions competed for my attention; the beeps, hums and shushes of machines sank behind the forceful tick of the large clock on the wall. The residents buzzed around the room like worker bees, anxious to begin. I saw furtive grins on faces, denoting their interest and anticipation. My face did not mirror theirs, but we had one thing in common: we were ready to begin.

Anesthesia. Sleep. A nice long nap. These ideas were the only safe thoughts in my mind.

Despite not eating or drinking anything since the previous night, I felt the cramping in my stomach and thought I might vomit again. My whole body trembled beneath the white sheet covering me. A nurse brought over a warm blanket, but it did not stop me from shaking. It was not cold that caused me to shiver.

The neurosurgery resident smiled faintly, patted my shoulder and gently took my arm—it was time. The gleam of the needle caught my attention, and I closed my eyes.

With the I.V. in place, tingling drops of anesthesia entered my veins; cool relief at last.

Chapter 9

The Return

“I wake up every day and I think,
‘I’m breathing! It’s a good day.’”
~ Eve Ensler

Where am I? I blinked and looked around the dimly lit room.
Tolan. Oh, I Am Alive!

Fading in and out of consciousness for what seemed like hours, I grasped only a few basic details. Tolan sat by the bed, holding my hand. The alertness in his eyes showed he was watching over me, as were my parents. People in white coats and scrubs peered at me from all directions.

The long sleep had taken me far away from my cares, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to return yet, so I let the anesthesia lure me back to sleep again.

“Hi sweetie,” Tolan whispered as he rubbed my arm. The way he looked at me made me think this wasn’t our first greeting. Was it déjà vu, or had we done this before?

“You really awake this time?” he asked.

I glanced around the room and saw a blurry vision of my parents staring at me with comforting smiles.

“Think so,” I said. ^[L]_{SEP}

Dad jumped in, as always with a buoy in hand. “Good news, Jo. Dr. Couldwell told us 85% of the tumor was successfully removed! He hopes the rest will calcify and disintegrate in time.”

The words didn’t sink in. I was still trying to camera-zoom focus

on the faces in front of me.

“The mass was sent to a lab for testing, but he thought it looked good, not cancerous. We should know more in a few days.”

I tried to smile at the news though my attempt felt weak.

Anesthesia blurred time, but blurry was good. Every minute of wakefulness increased the pain. *Just sleep.* Short visits with Tolan and my parents broke up the long periods of slumber. I welcomed their familiar faces at every revival, but I didn’t want to sit up or talk—even the simplest gesture shot pain through my head.

Dad told me the surgery took much longer than expected. He didn’t say it, but I knew that meant all my loved ones had many hours of worry and uncertainty. He said the doctors believed they removed most of the tumor, and he gave me a thumbs-up sign to emphasize the good news. The report lulled me into a safety net, and I hoped when I woke again, I could focus on healing and get back to my life.

Mealtime clued me in to a new reality. Pain anchored me to the pillow. The weight and strength of it increased when I lifted my head, so I lay flat and Mom spoon-fed me. I tried to open my mouth, but it wouldn’t obey the commands from my brain. No matter what I did, my lips wouldn’t part enough for the round end of the spoon to fit inside. She scooped a bite onto the handle end, but the second the food landed on my tongue, it spilled out of my lips and onto my hospital gown.

No one had told me I’d revert to spoon-feeding after surgery. I decided the anesthesia still had hold on my body.

After several minutes, we gave up on the food, and Mom cleaned up the mess I’d made. I rolled onto my left side to rest. I lay in the only position that kept pressure off the large incision sprawled across the right half of my head.

The doctor’s voice made me jump. *Why didn’t I hear him come in?*

I turned my head toward the door and saw Mom, Dad, and Tolan all staring at Dr. Couldwell. They nodded almost in unison as he spoke.

The doctor looked right at me and smiled. “Glad to see you

awake and more alert.”^[11:58P]

I realized he’d probably been talking to my family for a few minutes.

“Sorry, I didn’t hear you come in,” I admitted.

“That’s okay. Just checking in to see how you’re doing. I understand you are still in quite a bit of pain, which is unfortunately pretty normal. We’ll stay on top of the medications, and you’ll start feeling better in a couple of days.

I looked over your charts and the nurses’ notes. So far everything looks good. I’ll be back when the clinic closes to check on you again.”

Dr. Couldwell exited the room, and my anxiety entered. I’d already woken several times and knew I was *okay*, but a new thought came to my mind, and I had to test my theory.

I pressed my fingers to my face. I tried to close my eyes and clear away the haze, but my right eye wouldn’t shut. Several seconds passed, and still my vision hadn’t focused. The burning in my eye was uncomfortable, scratchy and raw. Without grasping it, I’d been waiting for cool tears to moisten the dry surface, but none came.

My pulse increased, and I inhaled sharply. Three faces turned toward mine.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Tolan glanced at my parents and then scooted closer. He rested his hand on my arm. “Are you okay?”

“I’m not sure. Is something wrong with my face?” I touched my cheek again. “What don’t I know?”

“Sweetie, the doctors said your nerves were damaged during the surgery. The right side of your face isn’t working.”

Track horses raced across my mind, the lead horse carrying my suspicions from moments before.

“They don’t want you to worry—the paralysis should only last a few days or weeks, and then you will be back to normal. Dr. Couldwell said the nerves looked good.” Tolan wore a brave mask, and I desperately wanted to believe him.

“Why didn’t Dr. Couldwell tell me?”

“He did. He came in earlier and talked to all of us, but I don’t

think you were really coherent then.”

Paralysis?

“The nerves look good? So why the paralysis—what does that mean?” I mumbled.

“From what I understand, it means they look good for recovery,” Tolan reiterated.

So this is temporary. I guess I can do anything for a few weeks.

“The paralysis affects your right eye, too. That’s why it doesn’t close. You’ve been sleeping with it open, so it’s probably dry and irritated.” Tolan’s tone sounded reassuring, but his words killed the effect.

“What about my ear? I can hear you, but I didn’t hear Dr. Couldwell come in.”

“We noticed you haven’t responded when you are on your left side, probably because you can’t hear much out of your right ear. The doctors weren’t sure, but with the path they had to cut to get to the tumor, they warned us that you may have lost hearing in that ear.”

The combination of all the news ripped through me like an explosion, sending shockwaves in every direction. For a moment, I couldn’t separate dreams from reality.

Oh, dear God, help me get through this. The first few words of my plea to heaven stopped me in my tracks. There were many things I still needed to say to God.

Thank you, dear Father, for my life! For preserving me and giving me a second chance. I am so grateful for my family—to see their faces again. And—

I halted again as another realization hit—I was alive, but I had no idea of what was in store for me, or my family.

A dark-haired CNA escorted me, and my I.V. tower companion, to the bathroom.

“If you need anything, just press this button,” she said, pointing to a switch on the wall. “I will be waiting right outside the door, just in case.”

I pulled the privacy curtain around me and braced myself for

what I would see.

But the preparation was not enough. Shock jolted through me at the sight in the mirror. The right half of my face appeared inanimate—my eye opened wide and glossy, my mouth hanging open with my lips drooping at the end, and my cheek sagging.

I was grateful bandages still covered my head. One surprise was enough. I turned my head from side to side to further examine the details of this mask I couldn't take off. It could be an interesting few weeks until the nerves returned.

Purposefully looking away from the mirror, I grabbed the toothbrush, smeared it with paste and started brushing, the same way I had my entire life, but this time with different results. Like a shot of Novocain had deadened my control, my mouth drooled lather all over my chin and gown. My reflection hinted at what facial paralysis actually meant.

I shifted my weight to lean closer to the sink, but I tipped to the right, nearly losing my balance, physically and mentally. The CNA knocked on the door before I could steady myself. When she peeked her head in and asked if I needed help, neither of us could deny the facts. She grabbed my waist, and brought her other arm around to my shoulder, and then chaperoned me the twelve feet to my bed.

The covers sheltered my body, but not my mind. *I'm still me*, I reminded myself. An unsettling feeling started in the pit of my stomach. Though I tried to convince myself otherwise, I felt like some of my identity had been excavated along with the mass, replaced by a vague look alike. When, or if, the *real* me would ever return was a mystery. I hoped she would come back—soon.

The first two days passed like a long, dark ice age where I lay trapped, never fully thawing from the comatose state. Heavy sedatives and painkillers relieved the pressure in my head and forced frequent bouts of slumber. Each time I woke to see if sleep had liberated me from the pain.

At eight-thirty on Friday morning, the room hummed with activity. Half a dozen residents stood with clipboards in hand. They

parted like the Red Sea as Dr. Couldwell stepped in.

“Good morning, Jodi. We are going to take the bandages off today. How do you feel about that?”

I believed I was more ready for that than I was for the paralysis, but I took a heavy, slow breath and replied, “Nervous.”

“That’s pretty normal. After we finish patient rounds, I’ll return to remove the bandages, and we’ll get a good look. It will be okay.” His voice was upbeat.

I nodded, trying to convince myself he was right.

“For now, tell me how you are feeling while I look at your chart.”

“My head hurts all the time,” I admitted, embarrassed at the sets of notes being taken. What else could I expect after brain surgery?

“The nurse said my medication is maxed out, so I am trying to stay flat and still to keep it from getting worse.”

“Wish I could tell you there won’t be any more pain, but all patients report it is part of the recovery process,” he said. He finished looking over the charts before he led the parade out the door.

Dad and Tolan both arrived at the hospital by mid-morning. Dr. Couldwell returned a few hours later, shadowed by his right-hand resident. The thin Asian man seemed sharp but quiet, more ready to observe than to take charge. I guessed that Dr. Couldwell’s calm, quiet manner made it easy for residents to learn from him. But I didn’t doubt that when a situation called for it, the modest doctor transformed into a confident quarterback.

The two greeted us and started preparations. After they gathered the needed supplies, Dr. Couldwell rolled a stool to my bed. “Here we go.”

The tape tugged at the tender skin on my head, and I grimaced.

“Sorry, the first part is always the hardest.” He went back to work. “There, now that the corner is up, I can use this handy liquid to remove the tape so it doesn’t pull as much.” Dr. Couldwell poured drops of a cool fluid on my head and smoothed it down the incision with a long Q-tip.

I imagined him pouring Goo Gone on my head.

He used pencil-sized tweezers to remove the large bandage. “Is

that pulling too much?”

“No, it’s better now,” I answered. Whatever it was, it worked; the rest of the tape pulled off easily, with fewer frowns on my part.

He leaned closer, wiped the skin with a cotton ball, and stared at my head.

“The scar is healing nicely. You will be sore enough that you won’t want to sleep on your right side for at least two months. But you should return to a normal routine after. Do you want to take a look?” He turned toward the tray of tools, and I saw a large hand mirror.

Before I made any decisions, I looked at Tolan for a sign. His lips were tight, not quite in a grin, but not a frown either; stoic. He said nothing. He was inspecting.

What if I don't like what I see? Do I want Dr. Couldwell here for that?

“I think I’ll wait a little while to check it out. I’ll take your word on it for now,” I replied.

Tolan nodded. “How long until you’ll take the staples out?”

“The staples will stay in for a few more days. We like to give them a full week so the incision seals before they come out.”

Dad, Tolan, and I were all okay with his answer. He’d mentioned timeframes before surgery, but it was a whole different story when it was reality.

Dad and Dr. Couldwell chatted and then shook hands, and Dad waved as the doctor and head resident left the room. He and Tolan acted as my advocates, even when I was awake.

Tolan seated himself by me on the bed. “Well, how are you, really?”

“That depends, I guess. How bad is it?”

“The scar is longer and the staples are bigger than I expected. You’re not gonna like it, but it’s not too bad.”

I couldn’t tell if he was trying to prepare me for the worst or just taking it all in himself. He grabbed the mirror.

“You ready?” ^[L]_[SEP]

“No, I don’t think so. Give me a few more minutes,” I insisted.

Dad grabbed the camera. “Maybe it will be easier for you to see it on a little screen than in a big mirror,” he suggested.

I liked the idea. Before I went into the hospital, I'd told Tolan to take pictures of everything to document our brain-tumor journey. I hoped one day I'd look back at the photos and see how far I'd come. In that moment, viewing my scar on a two-inch camera screen seemed a better option than a mirror. Dad snapped a photo, glanced at it, then handed me the camera.

I looked at the tiny image. The giant scar turned in the shape of a backwards question mark. The skin had been cut from in front of my ear, the incision curving up until it reached an inch from the peak of my skull. The photo was clear, but small, so the patches of dried blood were not so disturbing. Below my ear, I could see the word "yes" written in marker, the hospital's safeguard to make sure the incision was made on the correct side.

I gasped. "How many staples are there?" The question popped out of my mouth too fast to disguise my shock.

"Well, I haven't counted. The staples are bigger than I expected, so there aren't as many as I thought there would be," Tolan said, getting closer to inspect.

"Don't know what I was expecting, but I don't think this was it. I thought they'd only shave a small section of my head. And I didn't think the incision would be so big," I explained, hoping my voice wasn't too shaky.

I couldn't stop looking at the picture. But I didn't break down or even cry. I stared and analyzed—and still couldn't believe it was me.

"You ready for this?" Dad asked. He spoke almost the minute I woke up from my afternoon nap.

Tolan had gone, back to work, I suspected, and Mom occupied the seat he'd been in before I went to sleep.

"I'm going to read the comments on the blog. There are already hundreds of notes—from friends, family, and even strangers who've heard about you. This is pretty incredible."

"Let's hear them," I said groggily.

"Get your beauty rest my friend. Sleep like a princess. Hope your recovery is swift, but the

prayers on your behalf WILL continue either way!
Love to you!!! Brittany”

“I never thought I’d actually miss my morning runs, but I think I will, or at least my running buddy.”

“I bet,” Mom agreed.

“Here is one from Carol Liptrot,” Dad said.

I couldn’t think about Carol without thinking about Steve. He’d been gone for five years, and I wondered if she was reliving his brain-tumor ordeal through mine.

“Thank you for so many updates. We care so much. I think you look great Jodi! I know the pain and other discomforts will slowly improve and you will feel a little better each day. I am so thankful for the doctors being guided in their surgery and that they were able to accomplish so much. Sleep and rest. Things will be better soon. Love you!
Carol Liptrot & Family.”

“Okay, here’s the next one, from Annette.”

“Those are some tough pictures to look at, and it makes all of us appreciate what you all are going through. We are so happy to hear she is doing well. Thank you so much for the updates. You don’t know how much we all appreciate it. We are thinking of all of your family and keeping you in our prayers. Love, Annette.”

“Pictures? You posted the pictures on the blog?”^{[L] [SEP]}

“Yes, hope that’s all right. I thought everyone would understand things a little more once they saw the photos,” Dad said.^{[L] [SEP]} I nodded my okay. It made sense, and I’d been the one who told my family to take lots of pictures, but I wondered what my friends and family would think when they saw the new me. “Here’s one from Cathy.”

“Jodi and family, I’m so glad to hear you’re doing well. You look great. I can’t wait to talk to you in person and tell you that I am having a little GIRL! Our thoughts and prayers are with you always. Love, Cathy and family.”

“A girl! I’m so excited for Cathy and Doug! That is great news, I’m so glad she told me!”

I could hardly think of my good friends without smelling the aroma of freshly baked bread, one of Cathy’s signature talents. We considered ourselves fortunate any time she treated us to a fresh nine-grain or honey whole-wheat loaf. On a really lucky day, a small tub of fresh strawberry jam accompanied the hot soft bread. I knew she regularly shared her home-baked goodness with families in the neighborhood—she thrived on helping others, which explained something else.

“Hmm, so Annette says the pictures are tough to look at, but Cathy thinks I look great. I suspect that is because Cathy is a nurse. She’s probably used to treating patients like me. Annette—and I—may not be as used to such sights.”

“Makes sense to me,” Dad said. “Personally, I have to agree with both of them. It’s a tough situation, but I still think you look great, Jo, I really do.”

I understood parents’ love for their children, but the sincere tone in my father’s voice took *unconditional* to a new level for me.

“Alrighty, this one is from Martin Merx. Now remind me who that is? I recognize his name,” Dad said.

“Tolan’s cousin, Kayleen and Bill’s son.”

“Oh, that’s right. Here goes.”

“I had facial paralysis for 3 weeks...ugh (Bell’s palsy). It’s annoying more than anything. Be patient with it Jodi. That nerve takes a lot of time to rejuvenate. You’ll get used to biting your lip when you eat :)”

“That’s right! I’d forgotten about that. Martin probably knows what I’m going through better than anyone. Maybe I ought to ask him for advice. His Bell’s Palsy sounded just like this.”

“Might not be a bad idea. Okay, here’s the next one, from Wendie.”

“Wendie Jeffries?” Mom asked. [TSEP]

“Yep. But now she is Wendie Johnston,” Dad replied.

"I am glad that things went as well as they did and that they were able to remove so much of the tumor. I have been reading all of the updates and will continue to pray for a speedy recovery from this surgery. Please give Jodi a hug from me and tell her we are praying for her in Virginia!! Lots of love to you all!"

Growing up, if I could have chosen a third sister, it would have been Wendie. She was the best girlfriend I ever had. In the cruel years filled with teenage angst, she was my BFF, shopping buddy, and friend for every dateless Friday night. Her note was just what I needed.

The words of each message played through my mind again. It wasn't just close friends who reached out; the list included kindergarten companions, high school buddies, college roommates, family friends, colleagues, and dozens of strangers who'd happened onto the blog. Nearly every person said they were praying for me. That seemed like a lot of petitions to God on my behalf. I sat up a little in bed and attempted to smile; I wanted to be worthy of the kind pleas and hope.

Chapter 10

Companions

“Good company in a journey makes
the way seem shorter.”
~ Izaak Walton

May 15, 2009

The curtains by the door parted. “Jo, you have a visitor,” Mom announced.

“Debbie! Come in.” I motioned.

The effect of seeing her was a caffeine shot for my soul. Though she didn’t need to visit to prove her friendship, I suspected friendship premeditated her decision.

The last time I’d seen her she’d shown up at my house, right after my diagnosis, just to give me a hug. Debbie had a medicinal effect on me, pumping me with endorphins that masked the pain.

She leaned to embrace me.

“You better rest while you have the chance. I promise I’ll take it easy on you in Sun Valley, but I don’t know if the kids will do the same.”

The favorite vacation destination could be healing, too. Just hearing the name lifted me even higher.

“Sun Valley sounds like a good alternative to the hospital,” Dad piped in. “If Debbie is taking care of you, I know you’ll be in good hands.”

“Maybe we can con Tolan and Brandon into taking the kids to the pool so we can have a girls night. It’s about time, we’ve only talked about it for five years!” Debbie chuckled.

“Don’t worry, I promise to be good and rest, but I’m not going

to miss the candy store. Who would pass up on overpriced chocolate and sour gummy worms?" I laughed.

"Hmm, if there's overpriced chocolate, or chocolate of any kind, I just may have to accompany you on this trip!" Mom said.

"There are overpriced massages, too, which is why we always talk about it, but never end up actually getting one," Debbie said.

Hundreds of recollections cluttered my mind. I smiled at the images of picnics, hikes, biking, sleigh rides, fires, movies, pinochle, Red Fish Lake, and almost-massages. On our first trip together to Sun Valley more than ten years earlier, Debbie and I had spit into Drano crystals, supposedly a predictor of the sex of our babies. We were due only a month apart. The Drano test said she was having a boy and I was having a girl. Wrong—on both counts.

But everything was right about Debbie. She leaned over and hugged me again.

"You are amazing, Jodi—you always have been, but now you're outdoing even yourself." She kissed my forehead, and then picked up her purse.

"Love you, Deb. Thanks for the visit," I said.

"Yes, thanks for stopping by," Mom said as Debbie walked out the door. Mom turned to me, her face bright and smiley. "Well, that was nice of Debbie."

"That is Debbie—thoughtful and giving. She is always an upper for me."

I paused for a moment. "But I don't feel amazing."^[L SEP]

"What do you mean?" Mom asked.^[L SEP]

"Debbie said I am amazing. Several people have said that lately.

But I don't feel amazing. I'm just trying to get through this."^[L SEP]

"Yes, but there are many ways you could get through it. The fact that you are choosing to be positive and keep smiling inspires lots of people," Mom said.^[L SEP]

"And I'm sure it reminds them that their own lives aren't so bad, either," Dad added. "Facing problems with faith and optimism makes for a pretty powerful combination—and you're doing both."

I still didn't feel amazing, but I decided they were right—being positive is a choice, and with my newly acquired facial paralysis, that decision could be critical for me.

It was Friday afternoon. I wondered what I would be doing if I were home. The kids would likely be playing outside, enjoying the

warmth of burgeoning summer days. I'd probably be sitting on my front porch, watching the chaos or visiting with my neighbors. Then it hit me—that night my neighbors wouldn't be just casually chatting in the cul-de-sac, they would be preparing.

“Dad, will you put a post on the blog for me?”^{[L] [SEP]}

“Of course, Jo, what do you want me to say?”^{[L] [SEP]}

“Please wish all my runner friends good luck—tomorrow is the Ogden Marathon.”^{[L] [SEP]}

I pictured the beautiful canyon my friends Heidi, Heather, and Shawn (all siblings from a super-active family) would be jogging the next morning. Half the neighborhood would be racing, and not just the Carrigan family. Though I didn't envy the actual run, I wished I could be there with them. Thoughts of my friends pushing the limits of their physical bodies made me think maybe I could do the same.

With my husband and parents taking turns visiting me in the hospital, my only other wish was to see my sweet children. Friday night couldn't arrive soon enough. Both exciting anticipation and trepidation for their visit coursed through me.

Dad and Mom left to take a much-needed break. I sat alone in my room, waiting for my little ones to arrive.

My whole body stirred with restlessness. Still uncomfortable sitting up, I turned from my back to my side trying to get comfy for their arrival. I readied myself to show them that I was alive and grateful to still be their mother!

The usually rambunctious group tiptoed into the room.

“Hi guys!” I blurted. “I'm so glad to see you! Come give me hugs!”

The two oldest smiled but walked slowly to my bedside. Then lively, kind little Casen ran over and embraced me. When he let go, he stood next to Trenden and Lindi, all of them just a few feet from me, but they felt miles away.

Daven, my two-year-old blue-eyed towhead and youngest son, stayed back, holding on to Tolan's leg. A minute later, he climbed onto the windowsill, away from my bed. When Tolan tried again to inch him over, he wouldn't look at me. His body shrank away. I reached out to him, but he tightened and froze. He didn't touch me. He seemed too afraid to hug me. With the right half of my head

shaven and covered in staples, my eye large and glossy, and my mouth drooping, I supposed my face held little resemblance to the mother he knew.

Can't he tell it's me?

If I were hidden from their sight, I would have cried a river. To my sweet two-year-old boy, I probably appeared more movie-like than real.

I was sure Tolan had warned them about my appearance; he hadn't told me so, but I knew he would want to make it as easy on the children as possible. But their reactions confirmed the truth: words couldn't change the live scene in front of them.

"I love you, little D. I'm so glad to see you!" I said from across the room.

Tolan carried him over and lifted him onto the bed. I gave Daven a quick unreturned hug and let him free himself from me. I tried not to break down as he toddled away.

One by one, Tolan ushered them toward me. "Go ahead, Trenden."

Trenden stepped forward; his face echoing the concern he must have felt. He seemed to know my situation was not better. Old enough to hear the whispers on the phone and to understand the talk of the adults, his expression said he knew I was not coming home yet.

"You doing okay, Mom? Does your head hurt from the surgery and staples?" His question was honest and insightful. He seemed worried about his momma.

"I'm okay, buddy. The hardest part is being away from you guys," I said, poking him so he could see my playful side again. He leaned over and put his arms around me.

"Thanks, Trenden. I love you," I whispered. "I sure miss you. Dad says you're fasting and praying for me."

"Yeah, I am." He smiled weakly.

"I appreciate you, bud, more than you know," I said as I hugged him again. He still looked like a fourth-place finisher.

Casen, at four years old, opened up the most, but his questions showed his apprehension.

"Did it hurt when they put the staples in your head?"^[SEP]

"No, I was asleep, so I didn't feel a thing!"^[SEP]

"That's good, cause it looks like it woulda hurt if you were

awake.”^{[L] [SEP]}

“Probably so, Mr. C., I bet you’re right.”^{[L] [SEP]}

“How do you eat when your mouth is so crooked?”^{[L] [SEP]}

“I’m doing the best I can, but it sure is weird. I put food in my mouth and it falls right back out.” I answered honestly, but lightheartedly.

“It’s like when Daven was little and we gave him baby food. He got more of it on his clothes than down his throat. Do you remember that?”

“Yeah, I ‘member.” He grinned. “Your eye is really big. Can you close it when you go to sleep?”

“Well, Case, it isn’t working too well, that’s for sure.”^{[L] [SEP]}

“Maybe you could tape it shut,” he suggested.

“That’s a good idea. The nurse mentioned that. I will have to try it.”^{[L] [SEP]}

“We have tape at home. I could bring some next time,” he offered. I couldn’t help but smile at my brave little boy who knew I was still me.

“Why do I have to sit on this side so you can hear me? Did they cut your ear? It looks pretty okay.”^{[L] [SEP]}

His honesty refreshed me. No holding questions in, he was asking.

“They did cut my ear, but not on the outside, on the inside. So it looks okay, but I can’t hear out of it anymore. Kinda crazy, huh?” I replied, as gently as possible.

“Uh-huh. You sure are a metal head, Mom,” he said, staring at my scar again.

“Yeah, but I’m the coolest metal head around, right?”^{[L] [SEP]}

“Yep.” He leaned closer and squeezed me tight.

“Love you, Mr. C. I’m so glad you came to visit. I miss you, little dude.” It had never been so true.

“Miss you, too. Grandma Brown didn’t make the toast like you do. She put on more butter and forgot the honey.” Tolan and I chuckled.

“Well, she knows now,” I responded.

Casen grinned at me and seemed content with all the answers to his questions.

Lindi’s shoulder-length brown waves were unkempt and hung in her face. She had grabbed a chair and sat stoically by my bedside;

with Tolan's urging, she softly brushed what was left of my hair. At seven years old, she was in between a big kid and a little kid, but her brave face looked forced.

"That feels so good, sweetie. We knew they would shave some of my head, but we didn't practice any styles that would work with only half a head of hair," I said, hoping to make her laugh.

She leaned over and gave me a hug, but didn't speak. Her eyes were glassy, as though her mind was far away. She rarely looked into my face, but she stayed right by my bed.

She later told me my appearance had frightened her so much she had nightmares where she couldn't find me because she didn't recognize my face. It was no wonder she didn't want to look at me that first day.

One by one, they each got a little more comfortable exploring in the room. They found gloves in the drawers, a notepad and pen on the side table, and strange-shaped bins everywhere. They looked out the window and talked to each other about the "U" on the mountain and the helicopter that flew overhead. I tried to join in their conversations, but they still shied away from me, except Casen. Daven never left Tolan's side.

I'd dreamed about their visit and waited for three long, painful days. But my body and head burned with each passing second. I was exhausted.

It had been thirty minutes.

"Well, get ready, we're gonna go home, guys. Tell Mom good-bye, and we'll go get some dinner before we drive back." Tolan was a good in-charge guy.

He lifted Daven onto the bed. When I hugged him, he turned his face from mine, but he did return my hug before Tolan lowered him. Lindi put her hand on my shoulder and leaned into me.

"I miss you, Mom," she whispered.

"Miss you, too, Lindi Lou." ^{L.T.}~~SEP~~ Trender gave me another hug, and then waved as he turned to go.

"Love you," he said.

Casen was the last of the kids to leave me. "I will try to 'member the tape next time, Mom—for your eye."

"Thanks. I love your face, Mr. C. What would I do without you?" I whispered.

He shrugged his shoulders and broke into a big grin.

“Hang in there, hon,” Tolan said. “It will be easier for them on the next round. I love you. We’ll be back tomorrow.”

I nodded and tried to hold the emotions in. In seconds, they were gone, and the room was empty.

My insides ached. I lowered the bed back to a flat position, grabbed a pillow, and tried to muffle my sobs.

I didn’t know what I had expected, but that wasn’t it.

Instead of soothing my fears and mending my heart, the visit from my children knocked me down again. No matter what we’d talked about before surgery—we were not prepared for reality.

Chapter 11

United

“Resilience is accepting your new reality, even if it’s less good than the one you had before. You can fight it, you can do nothing but scream about what you’ve lost, or you can accept that and try to put together something that’s good.”

~ Elizabeth Edwards

Saturday morning brought little change in the hospital routine. The light flipped on at four a.m., as usual, but I opened my eyes to an unfamiliar face. It was a rude awakening from a crummy night’s sleep.

“I’m here to draw your blood,” he said flatly.^[L]^[SEP]

“I don’t get weekends off?” I kidded.

“Nope, and neither do I,” the stranger replied.^[L]^[SEP]

“Do the doctors still do rounds on Saturdays?”^[L]^[SEP]

“Usually it’s the residents on the weekends, but sometimes the doctors show up. Just depends,” he said.

He wasn’t super friendly, but at least he knew the answers. After the pin pokes were over, I slept for a few more hours.^[L]^[SEP] When the residents showed up, I was not surprised to see an unidentified doctor leading the group. They asked the same questions they asked on other days and performed the same little neurological tests.^[L]^[SEP]

“Follow my finger with your eyes,” he said. “Good, how many fingers am I holding up?”

“Two.”

“Have you noticed any changes in your vision or pain?”

I supposed the assessments and questions benchmarked my

progress, but it was day four, and the twice-a-day routine had gotten old. Judging from the way they scrawled my responses and then walked out of the room, I had passed their tests.

The nurse entered next and prepped me for a shot in my abdomen, the injection I needed up to four times every day to keep my body from having seizures. The dense medicine that plunged into me always left a mark, a four-millimeter circle decorated my skin after each dose. No one told me how long the pink scars would last, but with each, my stomach further resembled a connect-the-dots puzzle. When the last scrubs-clad worker left, my surroundings quieted. Without all the weekday workers scurrying around, the hospital stilled to a gentle hum. A perfect chance to rest.

Being down wasn't an option when Tami was around, not even after brain surgery. My younger sister showed up with our brother, Scott, for a most welcome surprise visit.

"Yay, come in, come in," I said as I saw their faces. Four years younger than me, with long dark hair, a thin frame, and tanned skin, Tami looked more like a model than a mother of four.

Scott and I, in stark contrast to Tami, looked like siblings. His build was much larger than mine and his military training had given him broader shoulders and a thick physique, but his hair color and smile matched mine.

The room bustled with life the minute they entered.

"Hey Jode," Scott said as he leaned over and wrapped his arms around me.

I needed all the embraces I could get.

"Well, how are ya?" Tami asked, in the same tone she would use on any normal day.

That was part of why I loved Tami—and needed her—so much. She acted like life was normal even when it wasn't. She didn't panic, whine or complain about situations; she faced them with courage, smiles, and faith. She left me notes on the blog every day, with crazy messages just to make me smile.

"I love you more than my vacuum," and "I love you more than

The Cheesecake Factory,” were some of my favorite posts. For those who knew Tami, they knew what a compliment it was to be on the list of her favorites. Sisterly love is one thing, but it only goes so far when compared to freshly vacuumed floors, Firecracker Salmon Rolls and Chicken Club sandwiches. I was honored to make the grade.

Seeing her was even better than hearing Dad read me her funny notes on the blog.

Then Suzy’s smiling face appeared at the door—another wonderful surprise. Suzy had been our neighbor when we moved to Utah, and she just fit with our family in every way. She was Tami’s best friend, and we considered her as another Orgill sister.

The three of them sat with me and chatted about all sorts of non-hospital topics. The more abstract the topic, the better. The conversation was light and fun, and when we did get around to medical chatter, they kept it upbeat.

“Well, at least you get to sleep in a cool hospital bed. You gotta love pressing that button and going up and down,” Tami teased. “I used to love the old hospital bed at Grandma Lisenbee’s house. I’ve always wanted one of those.”

Suzy was a nurse at the neighboring children’s hospital, so she promised to visit often. I replied that her happy dimpled cheeks were always welcome. Her job at Primary Children’s Medical Center also meant she knew the inside scoop on how things worked and what to do for action and fun in the hospital.

“Come on, Suzy, maybe Jo would feel a little better if you spiked her I.V. Give her the hard stuff—lemonade!” Tami suggested.

Suzy laughed and shook her head.

“The kids usually prefer distraction, so I’m better at making balloon characters out of latex gloves,” she chimed. “I also know where they stash the snacks, you know, the airplane-sized bags of chips and pretzels. I will bring over the goods—all you have to do is say the word.”

We all thought lemonade and a bag of chips sounded pretty good.

“You will NOT still be here at Halloween,” Suzy ordered, “but

you'd get a kick out of my costume. I am the best-dressed witch on the floor. My neon striped tights are always envied."

"By the nurses or the patients?" I asked.

"Oh, I know the children love them, but the nurses are totally jealous. Not sure if they wear costumes here. I bet my hospital is way more fun."

Secretly I was glad we weren't at Suzy's hospital. I'd rather be the pincushion than watch my children get poked and prodded.

They talked, I listened, we all laughed. As wonderful as it was to be with Scott and Tami, it made my heart ache all the more for my other four siblings, all of whom were three thousand miles away in Hawaii. I was used to not seeing my brothers and sisters on a regular basis. But lying in the hospital made me miss them more than usual. I realized how much of their lives I missed out on, and hoped I would have the chance to catch up.

Suzy took a picture of me with Tami and Scott on either side of my bed. We weren't a perfect family, but we loved each other nonetheless. When Suzy, Scott, and Tami left, some of the joy stayed with me.

Only twenty hours had passed since their first outing to the hospital, but I decided to make some changes before my most important little visitors came again.

Instead of my big glossy eye, which only heightened my children's awareness that something was wrong, I donned a dark "pirate patch" to cover the unsettling appearance. Enlisting the help of the hospital staff, we made the room as child-friendly as possible. The kind medical attendants brought drinks, snacks, latex gloves (for balloons) and extra dry erase markers so the kids could write on the white board in my room.

Whether I was just more prepared for them or they were more prepared for me, I'll never know.

"Hi, Mom," the little voices exclaimed in unison as they walked in the room.

My mom followed them in, with Tolan at the back. Trenden,

Lindi and Casen came right up to the bed. Daven hesitated, and then joined the others a moment later. With my husband and four children at my bedside, I was whole.

“I forgot the tape for your eye, Mom,” Casen blurted.

“It’s okay, buddy. The nurses found some here at the hospital for me to try,” I replied. “I’ll let you know how it works.”

He nodded.

Mom lifted Daven onto the bed. I pulled him into my arms and rested my cheek against his. It seemed he was still unsure, but he stayed in my grasp. He and Casen wanted to ride on the hospital bed, so Casen hopped up and pressed the button to lower the bed. They rode on my bed, and then ate the food off my tray. Their excitement at the little adventures thrilled me—anything to make them more comfortable so they knew I was still Mom and they were safe and loved with me. After an hour, seven restless bodies were too much for the small room, so Mom took the kids home. Tolan encouraged me to sleep and ventured off in search of food.

He returned full but fidgety.

“I know you’ve had visitors all day, but you’ve still been stuck in the room. I’ve only been at the hospital an hour and I’m ready to get out. Let’s go.”

The spin in a wheelchair around the unit provided the change of scenery I needed. The long halls were capped at either end by double doors that required code cards for entrance. Outside the gates, windows lined the walkways, showing the mountains falling into shadow. We remained only a football field away from my room, but the adventure rejuvenated my body and soul.

We turned the final corner back, and Tolan pressed the button to get onto the Neuro floor. He pushed me down the hall and back to my room. I heard few sounds, other than the beeps and ticks of machines. Most rooms were dark and quiet, though a few emitted voices from televisions.

The lack of visitors in the Neuro Acute Care Unit disturbed me.

I wondered how long my hospital neighbors had been guests at the establishment. The need for quiet and sterile space was obvious, but I questioned how the patients felt, alone in a less-than-welcoming

environment.

As we exited the wheelchair ride, I felt thankful for regular visitors and the small floral shop in my room.

My dad loves to tell the story of my first grade year in elementary school when he and my mom walked by the classroom and found me sitting at the teacher's desk.

"Where's Mrs. Lofdahl?" Mom asked.

"She had to run an errand; she left me in charge," I replied.

They'd laughed, probably in shock, but they also knew I liked to be in charge.

Tolan learned the same lesson years later. After we were married, he worked full-time and attended school to earn an MBA. When he finished, I returned to college for a master's degree. When we decided to have a second child, the obsessive-compulsive monster in me wanted to plan it out, simply add it to the calendar.

"Okay, the best time to have a baby is in between semesters," I said, pointing at the calendar. "Between terms would give me time to be home with the baby, get settled and into a routine before school starts again."

Tolan looked at me with raised brows and a half-smile, but still he said nothing. Perhaps he was thinking how ridiculous I sounded or how some things in life can't be controlled, but whatever he thought, he kept it to himself.

When I finally had our sweet little girl, long after I'd planned, it was the middle of a semester, but my baby needed me, and that bumped all scheduled events. Lindi taught me I couldn't always be in control.

I snapped back to the present, looked around and realized the brain tumor forced me, yet again, to accept some things in life were clearly not on my terms.

Tolan helped me back to bed and kissed me before he left.

A light knock sounded on the door, and Dr. Shelton stepped in. I was surprised to see him on a Saturday evening.

"How are you feeling tonight?" he asked.

My explanation must have sounded normal because he made notes on a chart, but his face showed nothing unusual.

“Pain isn’t easing up at all yet?” His eyebrows rose at the question.

“No, it doesn’t seem to be getting any better.”^{[L¹] [SEP]}

“I can change your pain medication. We can see if that helps.”^{[L¹] [SEP]}

I nodded and thanked him, hoping it would help. “One more thing—” I blurted, doubtful if I should even bring it up. His head turned back to me, and his eyes met mine. “My nose runs whenever I sit up.”

“Does your pain increase when you sit up?” he asked.

I mentally reviewed the previous days. “Yes.”^{[L¹] [SEP]}

“What happens when you lie back down?”^{[L¹] [SEP]}

“The pain decreases, but doesn’t go away.”

“And the fluid—does it stop dripping?” he asked.^{[L¹] [SEP]}

“No, it trickles down my throat.”^{[L¹] [SEP]}

The description of the process brought the taste into my mouth. I told him the drippy liquid was salty, like Gatorade without any flavor.

“Sit up, let’s see what happens,” Dr. Shelton said as he crouched next to my bed. He put his hand on my back and gently sat me up.

I waited for the pain to arrive with its normal clock-like precision. Within seconds, fluid dripped from my nose. He used a tissue to catch the drops, and then grabbed a small flask from the drawer by the bed. Several millimeters of the watery substance filled the tube before my headache spiked to a new level.

“We are going to test this, but I am pretty sure it is spinal fluid,” he stated.

My eyes opened wide. *A spinal fluid leak. No, not again.*

“Did the nurses tell you about spinal fluid leaks?” he questioned.

“No, but I had one a few weeks ago, after a spinal tap. It took a blood patch procedure to fix it.” Just remembering the event made me cringe.

He flipped through the pages of my folder. “Was the procedure done here?”

“No, it was at McKay-Dee, about five or six days after the spinal

tap. They contacted medical records here to get information on the site where the needle was inserted, but it wasn't even in the computer yet, so they did the surgery without it." I told him all I could remember about the incident.

Dr. Shelton took copious notes, filling the bottom of a page and turning it to the back.

"I hope this doesn't mean you are prone to leaks, but the fluid in the flask may indicate otherwise. Post-surgery leaks occur in less than 10% of patients. But, if it's happened to you before, I'm betting that is causing the extreme pain.

"It takes a few days, but leaks usually seal on their own. If it is a leak, we'll need to keep you here until it seals. I'm leaving soon and I won't be in tomorrow, but as soon as we have the results, I'll have someone let you know. I promise, we'll get you an answer soon. Hang in there."

The nurse walked in the room and he told her the news before they exited simultaneously. I heard the computer keys tapping at the nurses' station, right outside my room.

Let that be the orders for new painkillers!

With the room empty, I reclined the bed until I was horizontal again. Streaks of doubt smeared my mind like muddy windshield wipers.

The results didn't take long. Dr. Shelton returned less than an hour later.

"The test came back positive. It is cerebrospinal fluid, or CSF. The clear fluid surrounds the brain and acts as a cushion or buffer for the cortex. If a leak causes the pressure to drop, when the patient sits up, the fluid flows down the spine, robbing the brain of the cushion effect. It generates debilitating headaches. The body usually heals itself, but there are other options we can take if needed. Hopefully the leak seals on its own in another day or two. In the meantime, I've instructed the nurses to increase your dosage of pain medication. And, as you've already discovered, you'll be more comfortable if you stay lying down."

"What happens if it doesn't seal on its own?" I asked.

"Well, I wish I could say a simple blood patch would do the

trick, but with a leak coming from the brain, it isn't that simple. If it doesn't seal, we will manually close it, though surgery is rarely required. Hang tight. Let's give your body time to heal itself."

My resolve turned to oatmeal. I hoped he was right and my body would repair itself.

He turned to go. "I'll call in tomorrow, and I'll be back Monday morning to see how you're doing. I'm sure this is discouraging, but give it a few days. It'll be okay," he reassured me.

The door closed, shutting me in alone. The first leak had required surgery; I hoped for a better outcome the second time.

Though surgeons enlisted numerous precautions to protect my brain functions and nerves, I experienced facial paralysis, hearing loss, and a spinal fluid leak. Nearly all of the major side effects—short of death.

Chapter 12

Lifted

“Patience is not simply the ability to wait—
it’s how we behave while we’re waiting.”

~ Joyce Meyer

May 17, 2009

Sunday was quiet. I lay in bed alone with my thoughts much of the day.

Late in the afternoon, I heard chatter in the hall, a light knock, and then four strangers entered. The two men and two women, clearly couples, looked at me and smiled. The dark-haired man spoke up.

“We are here in the hospital visiting patients. Is it okay if we stay for a minute?”

“Sure,” I responded.^[1]_{SEP}

Their attire resembled the Sunday dress of churchgoers.^[1]_{SEP}

“We are students at the University of Utah. I’m Kevin,” the first said, and then slipped his arm around the woman next to him. “And this is my wife, Laney. With us are Jen and Dean. On Sundays we come visit patients, just to say hello, bring a little uplifting message, and see if we can do anything to help.”

Laney spoke next. “Can we read you a story of hope this afternoon?” she asked. Her brown hair was pulled into a loose bun, displaying dangling silver earrings.

“Sure.”

Laney read a beautiful short story and offered to leave the

periodical for further reading. I accepted.

“So you come here every week, just to visit strangers?” I prodded.

“About every other week. We take turns with some other friends in our church,” Dean said. “Is there anything we can do for you today?”

“I think you’ve already done it,” I responded. “It’s been pretty slow here today. Everyone is at home, with their families, I suppose.”

“Where is your family—I mean, where are you from?” Jen inquired.

My first answer was short, but one question lead to another and in minutes, the four strangers had heard my story. The women teared up.

“I’m hoping next week I can be home with my family,” I finished.

“We can come back and check on you later this week,” Laney said.

“Thank you, I’d like that,” I admitted.

They left the magazine on my tray table and waved as they exited the room.

“Thank you for sharing your time with us today. You’ve made me realize how much I have to be grateful for,” Laney added. “God bless you.”

“You, as well,” I said.

The guests demonstrated true charity, without all the hellfire and brimstone of a pulpit sermon.

Nausea had moved in after surgery and crowded out my appetite. But the look of Sunday dinner trumped my expectations. Perhaps my appetite was returning.

I buttered the roll and carefully took a bite. The clumsiness of my mouth shocked me. I then abandoned the idea of drinking from a cup (a straw proved a little better), but chewing food was a new adventure. Without the muscles to do the work, I couldn’t navigate the food in between my teeth to bite. Chunks of food got caught in my cheek and the trough around my gums. Instead of eating, I gagged as the bits of fluffy white roll lolled near the back of my throat, still unchewed. My tongue forced the food back up, and I

attempted again. After several efforts, I had only a few successful bites. The roll smelled heavenly, but neither the process nor the taste matched.

Switching menu items, I scooped a slice of what appeared to be peaches and tried again. Gag. Choke. Spit.

An Albert Einstein quote popped into my mind. “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

On the next round, I cut a green bean into small pieces *before* I put it in my mouth. I held the right side of my mouth closed and tried again to chew.

Better. Not perfect, but better. The beans tasted awful, but the process was improved.

I ditched solid foods without attempting the ham. It looked okay, but I was afraid meat would be too hard to chew before swallowing. A giant vanilla milkshake shone as the best option. But to my disappointment, my mouth couldn’t close around the straw tight enough to suck the thick mixture from the cup. I could suck up liquid, but the dense shake proved too much for my droopy lips. I wiped the peach juice off my spoon, filled it with milkshake and slipped it into my mouth.

As it had when my mother helped me, most of it spilled back out, over my lips and onto my chin. Even with varied approaches, insanity approached quickly.

Since none of it tasted good anyway, I left the entire meal, minus a few bites, on the tray and pushed the sliding table aside. Part of me wanted to find a punching bag. The logical side of me decided more practice, at the next meal, would be a better option.

The nurse came in an hour later, looked at the tray, and stared at me with accusing eyes.

“You really should try to eat something.” She chided me like a child.

“I can’t keep the food in my mouth—or eat without choking. And, everything tastes funny.” When the words came out, I sounded childish, too.

“When you say the food tastes funny, do you mean all of the

food, or something in particular?” she asked. This time her eyes were probing instead of scolding.

“Honestly, all of it. Looked good, but tasted terrible. I thought I was hungry, but the whole experience frustrated me.” Total honesty.

“Hmm, okay.” She jotted something on the chart she carried around, and then looked back at me. “Can you at least drink some water or juice for me? We don’t want you to get dehydrated. Your I.V. has been giving you nourishment since surgery, but it’s really better for you to get it through your food.”

Her Mother Hen voice irritated me. *I’m not that sick—am I?*

Monday morning, two women entered with their arms full of supplies. Their dark hair and skin and similar mannerisms suggested they were related. The first spoke with a heavy Mexican accent.

“Hi, Ms. Jodi. My name is Marcela, and this is my sister Celeste. We are here to bathe you.”

Few things in life are more invigorating and awakening to the mind and soul than a hot shower. I longed for the simple chance to stand and let water splash down my body while steam enveloped me. The morning I first emerged from the fog of surgery, I showered sitting on a stool. But since then, my days and nights had passed in a horizontal state. That meant the only real alternative to a shower was a sponge bath. As much as I wanted a hot shower, I loathed the idea of a sponge bath.

I tried to genie-wish myself away, to no avail.

The sisters readied towels, washcloths, and wipes. They first wiped my arms, then my shoulders and neck, working in beautiful symmetry. It took several minutes before I could appreciate their tender touch. The wipe of my brow, washing of my body, and the gentle drying of my limbs required enormous amounts of trust and care from those performing the acts. A huge part of me did not want them touching my most intimate and private parts, and yet, I needed them, like a newborn needs the touch of a loving mother.

Marcela washed my belly in a circular motion with a soft warm cloth while Celeste massaged the age and decay off my fingers and hand.

They patted me dry and then covered my arms with heated towels.

I shut my eyes as the wet cloths neared my hips and midsection, dreading the humiliation that would surely come. But the ladies continued washing, kindly and gently, careful not to embarrass me during the process. They rubbed my legs and feet, and the spa treatment ended with a lotion massage. The warmth soaked deep into me and cleansed my soul as much as my body.

“Thank you for taking such tender care of me,” I said. I looked at Celeste, whose face split into a wide grin. “I am so grateful—I know it can’t always be an easy job, but I appreciate that you treated me with respect and care.”

“Oh, Ms. Jodi,” Marcela said, “we just want to help you get better. We know we are blessed to work together in this job, to help nice ladies feel clean and, well, like themselves again.”

Tears came to my eyes. These ladies held no status at the hospital—but they had great stature, and that was more important.

The phone rang. The area code showed 808, a Hawaii number I recognized as my sister’s. Some days my father answered the calls before my eyes opened, but that afternoon Dad scooted the table close so I could reach it.

“Hey, Jo. How are you feeling?”

Kristi’s petite frame and dark shoulder-length hair appeared in my mind the second I heard her unmistakable voice. She was the oldest of the Orgill children, and I was next in line. As sisters with birthdays under two years apart, we spent much of our young lives together. Sometimes we adored each other and other times couldn’t stand each other, but we shared a room and had no choice except to make it work. Even after we stopped sharing a room, we continued to share much of life.

“I’ve been worried about you, hon. How are you?” The concern echoed in her voice.

“Today I’m—actually, I’m okay. I’ve gotta tell you about this morning, Kris,” I said, and proceeded to give an account of the visitors who treated me to a sponge bath.

“Oh, that is incredible Jo, it makes me want to cry. What a beautiful story,” she said.

“It only takes a small act to turn *hard* into hope,” I replied.

“You are right, sweetie! Oh, I wish I were there. I just want to see you, sit by your bed, or even babysit your kids. I feel helpless from here,” she cried.

Kristi had said it over and over again—she wanted to find a way to fly to Utah to come help. But my residence came with twenty--hour medical helpers, and the truth was, there wasn’t anything she could really do for me. That broke her heart, and I heard the hurt every time we talked.

“Just keep checking in and posting notes on the blog. Those two things help more than you know,” I tried to convince her.

“Yeah, but it is so hard to be so far away. I don’t even know what is going on most of the time until there is a new post. Hundreds of your blog followers find out before I do,” she cried. “You’ve always been the brave one, the one who helped me, but I’m your big sister, and now I just want to be there for you.”

We were stuck, three thousand miles apart.

“Imagine us together taking a walk to Temple Beach. Maybe, if I can get out of here in time, I can still come for graduation, and we can go on the walk together,” I proposed.

The likelihood that my family would be in Hawaii in a few short weeks looked more and more like a long shot, but we still hoped.

“You won’t be up for much when you get here, but I don’t care if we don’t do anything but visit on the couch. I just miss you,” she said.

“I know, Kris, me too.”<sup>[L]
[SEP]</sup>

Kristi’s call reminded me that there were many times in life when we want to be *there*, to help those we love, but we simply can’t. Mom and Dad had told me about all the people who volunteered to leave their own families to come and help us. Kristi represented all whose hearts were with me, even though they were not.

The spinal fluid leak meant I wouldn’t be going home on time. The realization hit hard. If not for the phone calls and visits, it would have

been worse. My mom and Tolan's mom, Kay, rotated watching the kids at our house. When she was not on duty, Mom was with me. On her shifts, she was not just present, she was doing something for me.

"Can I rub your shoulders, Jo?" She'd been massaging my dad's shoulders for years, and she'd gotten pretty good at it; my tightened muscles released and relaxed.

I wished her hands could keep going forever, but I didn't want to wear her out.

While Mom alternated between the hospital and house, Dad stayed. It seemed he was always there, sitting by my bed.

My father, a CEO and one of the busiest people I know, left his world so he could live in mine. Whenever I opened my eyes, he greeted me with a big smile on his face. "Hi-ya, Jo," left his lips, followed by, "how are ya feeling?"

He had sat in a similar setting three months earlier, when his mother, my Grandma Lisenbee, slowly slipped away over the course of a cold January week. He'd flown into town to say good-bye and appreciated the chance to tend to her as she held on to life. After a week by her bedside, she passed away in the middle of the night while he slept in a chair a few feet away. He wanted to be holding her hand when she died, but I don't think she would have ever gone while her hand was safely tucked in his.

For Dad's sake, as well as my own, I hoped to see his face a lot more before I saw hers again. My heart ached when Grandma died, but in that moment, staring at Dad, I knew I needed her as my heavenly guardian more than my earthly grandmother. It was selfish, but true. I wondered how hard it must be on him. He would say leaving his work and home was nothing—he was where he needed to be. But I knew the realities and demands. For him, staying with me meant telecommuting across the Pacific Ocean.

Tolan visited every day during his lunch break and then again after work. He stayed as long as he could, sometimes for thirty minutes, other times for several hours. He and Dad kept each other company. In and out of painful, feverish periods of rest, I was lousy company, and I knew it.

When visitors entered, I tried to play hostess rather than patient.

I inched up in bed and focused on the guests rather than my pain.

Heidi and Annette's visit made it easy to find reasons to smile. The back-door neighbors acted like sisters. They sat by my bedside as if we were together in my backyard.

"We read the blog every day," Heidi said.

"Lots of times every day—" Annette interrupted. [SEP]

"Your dad is doing a great job of keeping everyone updated. His posts are detailed and always positive," Heidi continued.

"But we needed to come see you for ourselves," Annette picked up where Heidi stopped.

Heidi leaned closer. "How are you doing? Really. Are you okay?"

I figured this question would come from every visitor. Being there in person gave them rights to ask hard questions and get real answers, not just optimism.

"Most of the time, I'm okay. When the pain is too much, I have the nurse crank up the meds. If those are maxed out, I try to find a happy place in my head—meditate on the beach somewhere in Hawaii. The painkillers, anti-seizure drugs, and other medications make me really out of it, so I sleep a ton. For now, I'm okay with that."

"What about your face—can you feel anything?" Annette asked.

"It's strange because sensation is decreased on the whole right side. I can feel a little, but I can't move it at all. I tell myself to close my eye or pucker my lips, and nothing happens. It's like the wires are cut."

"Is it frustrating?" Heidi asked. "It drives me crazy when I go to the dentist and my mouth is numb for a few hours—I can't imagine dealing with it on half of your face."

"I drool brushing my teeth, eating, drinking, even just sitting. It's annoying, but hopefully it will only last a few weeks. My eye and ear frustrate me as much as my mouth, though," I responded.

"Can you see at all?" Heidi asked.

"I guess I could see, if the conditions were right. But not blinking leaves my eye dry and irritated, and I don't produce tears to compensate. I've heard those commercials for drops for dry eyes, but I did not get it before. Tears lubricate the eye and blinking clears out debris. My sight is technically there, but the cornea is scratched and

constantly covered in a film of dirt, so all I see is haze.”

“Geez, Jode, it’s one thing after another. The blog said you lost your hearing, too?” Heidi asked what was really on her mind, and I was glad.

“The hearing in my right ear is gone. Of course, you know a thing or two about that.”

“Yeah, well, I was hoping you’d be spared from that one.”

Heidi battled a tumor that left her deaf in one ear. She adjusted and her other ear compensated, but I knew she still missed out on conversations.

“I guess the hardest part is I feel like I have a blind side. I don’t hear people approaching from my right side, and I don’t see them either. It is a little unnerving to roll over and find someone standing next to my bed. Makes me feel—vulnerable.”

Annette and Heidi exchanged a glance.

“Okay, we’ve talked all about my face,” I said, “but neither of you has admitted that the shaved head and droopy face is an enviable look, right?”

“Oh, Jodi,” Annette started in, “the fact that you are alive is pretty much a miracle. I think you look great.”

If laughs could be sarcastic, mine would have been. “I look that bad, huh?” I teased.

“No, you look like you’ve been through something traumatic, which you have. My girls cried when they saw the pictures online, we all did. But the good part is—you are still smiling and beautiful, so you are still you.”

“Really, it isn’t too terrible,” I said. “Everyone here treats me like this is normal, so I act like it is.”

“Are you writing all of this down? In a journal or something?” Heidi asked.

“The anti-seizure meds make my hands shake so badly, I couldn’t write a thank-you card. I guess it’s a good thing Tolan and my dad are keeping track of things on the blog. Of course, they are recording the days from their perspectives, not mine. But maybe that is good, for now. “

It felt liberating to be open with them. My world was all within

the Neuro Unit bubble, so real questions from friends helped me process the experience.

Heidi and Annette handed me a colorful gift bag and scooted back in their chairs. They were in sync. Time to go.

“Thank you for coming to visit. If it weren’t for my dad, it would be pretty lonely here. I hope you can at least stay and eat in Salt Lake since you’re here. Find a tasty spot and enjoy a meal for me, too.”

“We’ll do it,” Heidi said.

They each hugged me and then walked out the door. The bag held pajamas that appeared comfy and ready to be worn. I looked around the sterile, neutral room and realized any place could be beautiful when filled with friends.

Two groups stopped by each morning, Dr. Couldwell and his team of neurosurgery residents, and Dr. Shelton’s neuro-ENT residents.

“Your chart says you aren’t eating much. Your food intake is very low, as is your output.” Dr. Shelton’s statement was matter-of-fact and less accusatory than the nurse’s.

My output—glad that’s recorded. Bet the nurses love being on output duty.

“Is it an appetite issue or a taste issue?”

“Even when I’m hungry nothing tastes good. Everything tastes off.” I wondered if I sounded silly.

“That is called dysgeusia, and unfortunately it is sometimes part of facial paralysis,” he said. “With total facial paralysis, some people lose all taste. Yours, it appears, is distorted. The taste receptors are essentially paralyzed, too, so your senses, made by chemical processes, don’t translate the tastes of the food properly.”

“Distorted is a kind description,” I replied. “When I eat, none of it even tastes—well, like food. Whether food is sweet or sour, bitter or buttery, everything tastes eerily the same, kinda earthy, like minerals or metals. I could be spooning a milkshake into my mouth or attempting to chew ham, and the net taste is about the same. You’re telling me that’s normal?”

“Well, each patient experiences dysgeusia differently. The

metallic taste is common. Some describe it as sucking on pennies.”

“Eating is such a chore with my mouth not functioning. And because food doesn’t taste good, the whole process seems pointless and frustrating.”

“That is understandable. But I.V.s are only meant to be temporary. They are artificial sustenance. You will get stronger faster if you get your nutrients from food.”

I nodded. “How long will the disgeusia last?” I hoped for a good answer.

“Hard to say. It depends on how quickly your nerves recover. I manage all the hospital’s patients with facial paralysis—for some it only takes a few days, for others, a few weeks. But it can be a year or more. Dr. Couldwell said the nerves looked good, so we expect a full recovery.”

A year or more!

Perhaps they’d said it to each other, or maybe even to my family, but no one had told me the paralysis could possibly last for so long. I struggled to digest the information.

He inquired about a few more issues, the spinal fluid leak, and subsequent spinal headaches, and said again to give it more time.

The six-day schedule I left at home began to seem woefully inadequate.

Dr. Shelton left, and I thought about the possibility of paralysis lasting for a year. The dryness and itching in my eye drove me crazy. Eye patches, makeshift weights, and tape had done little to relieve the constant irritation. My deaf ear left me vulnerable. I answered questions I thought had been asked, instead of the ones I’d actually been asked. Every scenario spun me round and dropped me in a different place.

But my taste buds? Tolan and I were foodies, not dining snobs, but we enjoyed the flavors and taste combinations of savory dishes. We were fortunate to live in an ethnically diverse area, where there was no shortage of foreign fares to tempt our salivary glands. We regularly craved chicken tikka masala, curry, naan and mango lassies, freshly made salsa, ceviche, guacamole and chicken flautas, stacked beef enchiladas, garlic bread and spinach calzones, and massaman curry,

spring rolls, bento boxes, and sushi. On 25th Street in Ogden, and the surrounding downtown district, we were regulars at Indian, Mexican, Italian, Japanese, Thai, and sushi restaurants. We simply loved good food. But with facial paralysis, eating became utilitarian at best.

Years before, as a freshman in college, I swallowed a pill without drinking any water. The pill lodged in my throat, disintegrated, and burned a hole in my esophagus. It required surgery and a several-week recovery that included daily numbing my throat so I could eat small amounts of baby food, yogurt, pudding, and other soft foods. The jars of bland baby food seemed a harsh punishment for the thoughtless mistake. But disgeusia and the idea of tasteless or earthy-tasting food imposed a sentence for a crime I didn't commit.

I grabbed the covers and rolled onto my left side, hopeful a rest would restart my brain. As I tugged at the blanket, it came untucked from the bottom of the bed. My toes peeked out, the deep burgundy color still bright and polished, the flowers still blooming. The memories from the girls' spa night surged into my mind, along with my personal promise to be positive, grateful—and not lose myself.

Choosing to see the good, even in the midst of tragedy, frustration or heartache, had always parted the clouds and let the rays of sun stream into my life.

I reminded myself I was still in control—at least of my own thoughts and actions. The negatives and what-ifs fled, and I tucked the covers under my legs for a better view of my sparkling toes.

A heavy musical knock sounded on the door. My next-door neighbors, Cami and Brian, peeked their heads in before they stepped through the door. Light brown shoulder length hair and a big smile trademarked Cami. The contractors for our housing development doubled as our first friends in the neighborhood.

"Come in," I said.

Dad hopped up and gave the chair to Cami. Brian grabbed another seat, and they inched nearer my bed.

"For as much as you're paying for this place, you better have one hundred channels and twenty-four-hour room service." Brian

jumped in, his sarcastic sense of humor normal and relaxed.

My crooked smile didn't do them justice. Cami turned to me. "Jodi, how are you?"^[SEP]

"Well, I'd rather be home, but I'm okay."^[SEP]

"What she really means," Dad chimed in, "is she is doing pretty well considering the headaches are pretty awful, but staying flat in bed twenty-three point five hours of the day is just as bad."

My guests shook their heads. A practiced communicator, Dad knew how to say the hard truth. I wanted to play hostess; his comment was a stark reminder that none of us were there to be entertained.

"Hopefully you are racking up major reward points in this joint—this should earn you a vacation getaway, at least."

Brian could always be counted on to lighten the mood. His comment paved the way for more normal talk, about the neighborhood and kids. Dad snapped a picture of us as they sat by my bed.

"We better be going," Cami said when the conversation came to a natural pause. "You are amazing, Jodi. I can't believe you still have a smile on your face with everything you're going through."

"Having friends here makes me want to smile, so thank you," I replied.

"Hang in there," Brian said. "Make sure to cash in on that vacation you're earning."

My friends hugged me and walked out the door. "A little act of friendship goes a long way, huh, Jo," Dad said.

My feelings exactly. I pictured children running around and riding bikes in our cul-de-sac. The most important things in life aren't things at all.

Chapter 13

Buoy

“Doing the right thing for someone else was like
a tonic for me; it was like some magic
ointment that made a wound disappear.”^[17]_[SEP]

~ Susie Bright

The door creaked open and dim lights shone overhead, signaling another early start to the hospital day. Any feelings of frustration or anxiety that had crept into my mind during the night exited when Tyson entered the room.

A young twenty-something guy with dirty blonde hair as twisted as curly fries, Tyson earned his way through college as a phlebotomist, a needle man. His weekday four a.m. visits marked each night's end. Unlike the weekend guy, who never wore a smile, Tyson's friendly face greeted me day after day. Of all the doctors, nurses and specialists in the hospital, only Tyson's blood draws never hurt. When he slid the needle into my arm, he treated me like a baby he was trying not to wake—quiet and gentle.

“Good morning, Jodi, how are you today?” he whispered the words, a better wake-up-call than an alarm clock.

Within the first week of my stay, his face became a familiar, welcome sight. Instead of dreading the pin-poke and blood draw, a grin cracked my sleepy face each morning when the lights hummed on.

Some days I was too sick for chitchat. On those mornings, his presence was more important than usual. Though the blood he drew would indicate my condition to the doctors, my personal indicator

beeped results long before daily tests confirmed my struggles. During those moments, Tyson stood as a symbol of hope for better days. We never talked about his ultimate plans for life, but I knew that whatever he chose, he would make a difference.

Tyson's tender care compelled me not to feel sorry for myself, but to be grateful.

When he left my room that morning, my mind began to fill invisible notebook pages with the good things in my life.

- Phone calls from my kids [SEP]
- Dad bringing a chick flick to watch [SEP]
- Care packages from friends [SEP]
- Neighbors who made treats for my family
- An evening surprise visit from Mark [SEP]
- Well wishes on the blog [SEP]
- The mystery man who mowed our lawn [SEP]
- Gentle nurses [SEP]
- Dreams of home [SEP]
- Hospital visitors [SEP]
- Mom rubbing my back [SEP]
- Tolan putting lotion on my dry legs [SEP]
- Reading the newspaper [SEP]
- Fragrant flowers in my room [SEP]
- Soccer carpool moms [SEP]
- Prayers offered by strangers [SEP]

The list got longer every day. I quickly learned I could impact my health and attitude with gratitude. [SEP]

*** [SEP]

As a patient at a teaching hospital, I learned that doctors and residents do rounds early in the morning and mid-evening because they are in clinic all day; this knowledge made Dr. Couldwell's midday stopover intriguing. [SEP] Tolan had just removed my food tray when Dr. Couldwell entered the room. [SEP]

"Hi Jodi," he greeted me, and then nodded to Tolan and my

dad. "I'm glad you're all here. I have some news for you. The pathology results on your tumor came back."

Dad looked at me, held his breath, and looked back at Dr. Couldwell.

"Good news is the tumor is benign. The mass we tested is not cancerous."

"Well, I'd say that's great news!" Dad cheered. "All right, Jo-Doe, this is just what we've been hoping for." He patted my arm.

I lifted my fists high in the air for the celebration. The kind doctor paused for our victory dance, but remained still, as if waiting to begin again.

"Is there other news?" I asked.

"While the mass is not malignant, it is still a mystery. The tissue does not match anything on record, so we still don't know what exactly it is, or how it may behave in the future." He paused.

"My best guess is based on a similar experience several years ago. The patient acquired an illness while traveling abroad and later developed a mass of tissue not unlike yours. Though the pathology is indeterminate, I suspect your immune system produced additional cells to engage the invading germs, and the tumor is excess tissue left from the battle."

"You mean you think Jodi got a disease and her body fought it off?" Tolan clarified.

He nodded. "Maybe. The growth was slow, likely over a number of years, so it is possible that she contracted an infection when you spent time overseas. There are many germs in third world countries that locals tolerate, but westerners do not. Rivers and lakes are full of them. You probably remember that from the Nile. Local children play in the water every day, but foreigners get ill from merely touching it."

Until that moment, I'd forgotten he knew about our travels abroad. The personal history questionnaire from early in the diagnosis process returned to my mind.

"Does that mean the tumor has been growing for more than twelve years?" Dad questioned.

"We have no way to know for sure. But it is certainly possible

that the mass grew in response to foreign cells that endangered her body. Whether that occurred twelve years ago or two isn't clear, but my sense is several years, at least."

Dr. Couldwell finished with us and left. Tolan, Dad, and I looked at each other in amazement. Most of the news excited us, but the mystery left us reeling.

I wondered if Dr. Couldwell's theories had hatched after first learning my foreign history.

My mind filled with memories of filthy riverbeds, dirty bathroom tile floors, even sewage seeping into the Red Sea. We'd been warned not to drink the water in Egypt and I'd been careful to obey, but I'd showered in it and waded through it, as had thousands of other tourists and visitors. I spent the afternoon analyzing, but finally concluded that we would probably never really know.

The doctors were getting impatient. So was I. The spinal fluid leak was not sealing, a repair the body often makes on its own, usually within a few days. We hit the week mark after surgery and they decided a lumbar drain was the next step.

A familiar resident entered my room and immediately, I knew what was coming. A similar long needle had punctured my back weeks earlier to test my spinal fluid for diseases in the brain. It had caused a leak in my spine. With the leak in the brain, the needle would be placed into the spine and left there, acting as a valve so the doctors could regulate the flow of spinal fluid, in hopes of encouraging the body to seal the leak itself.

The process of curling my body reminded me of getting an epidural. Once the dreaded needle slid into my spine, the resident covered it with gauze and taped it to my back. A long tube and a clear collection sack hung from the needle. When the doctor opened the valve, fluid would drip into the bag. The change in spinal pressure would tell the body a leak needed to be repaired. When the valve was closed, the fluid flow would return to normal. At normal levels, fluid would not drip from my nose, or throat, and the debilitating spinal headaches would disappear.

The needle and tubes taped to the right side of my body forced me to stay on my left side all the time. Even rolling onto my back shot pain through me, so I reverted to the fetal position for nearly twenty-four hours a day.

Tolan again joined me at lunchtime. He walked straight to my bedside when he arrived.

“Hi, hon. I need to tell you something. I got a call from Trenden’s teacher yesterday after I got home.”

His abrupt greeting surprised me, and I sat up as my mother senses kicked into gear. “What’s wrong?”

“He isn’t eating lunch at school.”^{[L] [SEP]}

“He’s not eating?”^{[L] [SEP]}

“No, his teacher said he hasn’t eaten for days. The first time she just thought he wasn’t hungry, or maybe he’d forgotten his lunch, so she asked if he wanted to get a school lunch, but he said he was fine. Then she noticed he didn’t eat all week.”

“All week? Is he sick?”

“That’s what she wondered, so she asked if he was okay. He said yes, so she asked why he wasn’t eating.” Tolan paused. “He told her he was fasting, for his mom, who was in the hospital with a brain tumor.”

“Oh my gosh. He’s still fasting for me? Who told him to do that?”

“No one did. When he came home from school I talked to him. It was his idea. He fasts through breakfast and lunch, eats dinner and starts again the next day. I don’t think any adult would ask that of a kid his age, especially not for so long.”

“I told him what he was doing was great, but he shouldn’t do it *every* day. Do you know what he said to that?”

“What?”^{[L] [SEP]}

“He said, ‘But I want to—I am fasting to help Mom.’”^{[L] [SEP]}

Tears welled in my eyes.

“He sure loves his mom.”^{[L] [SEP]}

“I love him, too. He amazes me. He’s handling it like a young

man, not a kid. Seems he is growing up fast right now—wish I were there to see it.”

“You may not be there to see it, but you are the reason for it. He’s learning some important lessons right now and putting aside his own feelings and comfort in hopes of benefiting his mom. Pretty powerful.”

I marveled at the changes taking place in my little family. The kids had already experienced so much trauma. I wanted to spare them from any more, but the selfless act of my fourth-grade son made me realize not all the effects of my tumor were bad.

A few hours after Tolan left, a man in scrubs walked into my room and grinned as if he knew me. Most residents weren’t so friendly.

“How’s the patient today?”

The lightly-freckled face in front of me smiled and I prepared to answer the normal flurry of questions.

“You ready to come back to Riverdale and watch the munchkins run around the neighborhood until dark?”

Only after he spoke did I recognize my good friend; I’d never seen him dressed in scrubs from toes up, his blond hair sticking out of the blue stretchy cap on his head.

“Eric.” I greeted him and inched up in bed. “Hey, neighbor.”

He’d caught me at a good moment. Alone, but not lonely, I’d been doing the only thing I ever seemed to do: rest.

“You here for a procedure?” I asked.

“Yep, yep, been in surgery all morning. Just finished up and thought I’d come say hi before I head home.”

Eric wasn’t a hospital employee, he was a medical rep, but his badge must have displayed all the right stats, because he seemed perfectly at ease in the unit. He gave me the updates and neighborhood news, most of which was really love and well wishes from my kind friends.

“You’re the talk of the town,” he said. “Everywhere we go, people are talking and asking about you. It’s gonna make me pretty popular to go home and give a personal update.” He laughed.

“Wish I had some dirt to give you—something to really get people talking,” I teased.

We chatted for a few more minutes, keeping it light and fun. When he left, I sent him off with hellos for neighborhood friends.

“Take care.” He waved, saluted me, and walked out of the room.

A smile lingered on my face, and I wondered how I got so lucky. My sister-in-law said in her neighborhood in Boston, everyone kept to themselves and scurried around with their eyes straight ahead. I never realized what a blessing it was to be part of a community that cared.

The bright flowers across the room seemed to bloom in agreement.

Chapter 14

Miles Away

“Courage doesn’t always roar. Sometimes
courage is the quiet voice at the end of
the day saying, ^I_{SEP} “I will try again tomorrow.””

~ Mary Anne Radmacher

May 22, 2009

The bell rang on the last day of school, and visions of celebrations filled my mind.

Children poured out the school doors and onto the blacktop, their bright faces bubbling with anticipation. Friends scrawled phone numbers and promises of summer parties on yearbook pages, then passed the cherished books on to the next student in line. The picture sheets filled with crazy memories, hopes, and dreams for the next year. Then an alarm sounded, and exuberant cheers filled the air. Hundreds flocked to the field for the ceremonial spraying by the Riverdale Fire Department. Water gushed from the hoses as little bodies dashed in and out of the stream. The wetter, the better.

I imagined my young ones enjoying the festivities, elated with the watery rite of passage. They were right where they should be. I was not.

Dad’s laptop distracted me and allowed me to pass some time online. Neighbors posted notes on my blog, telling me how well Lindi had performed her piano piece in the year-end talent show. They cheered for her and chanted her name after her big finish.

I hadn’t even known she was playing in the talent show. I

wondered who helped her get ready. It certainly hadn't been me.

Soccer practices and games continued as planned. Trenden got rides with neighborhood friends. Their families picked him up with the carpool and cheered when he did well, as though that was how it had always been.

Neighbors and friends delivered homemade bread, treats, and meals to our home two or three days every week. Pasta, chicken, and cheesy potatoes, the kids' favorite dishes, became regular entrees on our family dinner table. Decorated cookie bouquets arrived and were devoured in minutes. I heard they were beautiful—and delicious.

Grandma Orgill and Grandma Brown mothered my children daily. Tolan and I marveled at the time and sacrifice of our moms. Parenthood does not end at high school graduation, and no one proved this more lovingly than our mothers. They took care of all the needs of the family, adopting routines and accommodating schedules. My tight-knit neighborhood developed into their second home. Breakfast, reading, laundry, cleaning, jobs, and playtime all happened under the watchful eyes of the grandmas.

It's been said it takes a village to raise a child—we found it takes a community to nurture a family in need. Tolan was in the middle of everything, orchestrating the balancing act between work, home, and the hospital. Meanwhile, I was stuck, juggling nothing, missing everything. Emotions switched on and off in me like lights. Lindi took swim lessons with a friend, and I didn't know about it. The kids went on play dates and babysitters watched them at home whenever needed. People showed up at the doorstep at all times of the day and evening to check in or drop off a little something to help the youngsters make it through another day.

How gratitude and frustration live in the same heart puzzled me, but they both resided in me simultaneously. I had planned the first days of my hospitalization so life would go on without me, but that was supposed to be a temporary solution.

My mouth hurt, and I realized I'd been grinding my teeth.

My kids deserve amusement parks, waterslides and popsicles—but I should be there!

Pictures arrived in Tolan's inbox, and he showed me how well

they were doing, how much fun they were having. The sight made me smile and then cry.

For years we'd left on summer vacation just hours after the kids got out of school. We'd journeyed with Debbie and Brandon's family to Sun Valley for Memorial Day weekend. That weekend, Tolan and I read their texts and looked at pictures of where we wanted to be. Our friends reported they sat in the condo retreat and thought of us. We sat in the hospital and thought of them. Sympathetic to our plight, they brought back treats for our children from the candy store we normally visited together. The kids should have been grateful, but instead were disappointed; it wasn't the candy they usually got, which emphasized how they had missed out on something they loved.

When the sun set, I imagined that all the exhausted and dirty little bodies collapsed into bed and slept. Though I couldn't tuck them in, I trusted they felt loved and comforted—because the village had taken them in.

I rolled over in bed, knowing that my heart slept fifty miles away from my body.

Chapter 15

The Sun

“Darkness cannot drive out
darkness: only light can do that.”
~ Martin Luther King, Jr.

May 25, 2009

The thirteen days passed like a hundred. Dark, cloudy skies poured spring rains—but instead of growing and blooming, I lay dormant. The spinal fluid leak imprisoned me, and restlessness grew inside.

Tolan came on his lunch hour, as usual, and just like he did nearly every other day, he stayed much longer than an hour, for which I was grateful.

“Hey, look what I’ve got!” he said. ^[L]_{SEP}I turned toward the sound of his voice and saw a wheelchair. “Hop in, we’re getting out of here!” He came to the bed, sat me up, and then lifted me into the chair. The I.V. tower on wheels still pushed fluid through my veins, even as I dragged it from the room.

“Your head okay?” he asked. ^[L]_{SEP}

“So far,” I responded. “Where are we going?” ^[L]_{SEP}

“Out. Anywhere but here.” ^[L]_{SEP}We strolled leisurely through the hospital corridors like mice navigating a maze. When we got bored, we got on the elevator and started again on another floor.

The smell of grease and salty fries hit me as we rounded the corner. Tolán visited the cafeteria often, but it was my first trip.

“Want to go in and get something?” ^[L]_{SEP}Getting lunch felt as

exotic as a trip to the Holy Land.

“No, I don’t think so.”

I wanted to get lunch and feel normal, but two things stopped me. One, food didn’t taste good. Two, the cafeteria was for everyone, not just patients. I had yet to find the courage to expose myself to strangers who would see me in my new form.

As we rolled past the cafeteria, something else caught my senses more than the aroma in the air. At the end of the hallway, a man opened a door. And light poured in.

Sunlight!

Tolan stole furtive glances and pushed me toward the door like escaping convicts.

“Are we allowed to do this?” I asked.

“Who cares? We’re going!”

Tolan moved faster, focused and intense.

We neared the door; I wondered if a security guard was going to stop us at the last second. My heart raced like a teenager skipping school. I longed to escape.

As we rode through the doorway, the small wheels of the I.V. tower caught on the metal doorframe, nearly undoing our planned hooky time. Tolan grabbed the tower and hoisted it so we cleared the exit.

My pulse sped as I processed reality outside of the hospital. A beautiful warm ray of light hit my face. The bright beams of sun showered down like stars falling from heaven. I had to catch my breath.

“You haven’t been outside in two weeks. How does it feel?” Tolan asked.

I breathed slowly to let the warmth and light soak into my being.

“Wonderful,” I said as I exhaled.

“The air is so fresh and clean—it doesn’t smell like a hospital.” The crispness of the air cleansed me from the weeks of suffocation.

Vibrant green grass, shrubs, and trees lived just feet away. The change in scenery brought clarity to my mind.

Above the rain and behind the clouds, the sun still shines.

With the paralysis, my eye couldn’t dilate to adjust for the light,

so the brightness eclipsed my sight and blinded me for a few moments. I basked in the sun anyway. The simple grandeur of the moment captivated me.

Tolan and I sat outside as the wind blew and the sun warmed our skin. Finally, the beep of the I.V. monitor broke our trance.

Glancing at the flashing red numbers on the screen, I sighed. “We better go.”

He wheeled me back inside, and the door thudded closed. With the light gone, shadows darkened the halls. The fresh air faded, replaced by the sterile ammonia hospital scent.

The joyride spiked my temperature and another spinal headache, a steep price, but I paid it gladly. The hour with my best friend in the sunshine remedied any costs.

I would never again take sunlight for granted.

Chapter 16

Trickle

“Verse is not written, it is bled; Out of the poet’s
abstract head. Words drip the poem on the page;
Out of his grief, delight and rage.”

~ Paul Engle

May 26, 2009

The doctors concurred it was time to see if the spinal fluid leak had sealed. The needle from the lumbar drain remained firmly in place in my back, but the resident closed the valve so no fluid released into the bag. Closing the valve acted as a test on my body; without the fluid being pulled from my spine, my body would have to regulate itself. A leak in the brain can’t be seen, so the only indications would be the headaches—and whether or not the fluid continued to drip from my body. My on-and-off-again fever was also an indicator, so once it stabilized and the hole sealed, I could go home!

The additional days in the hospital had been painful and long, probably even longer for my family. Going home would mean the passing of the storm. Home was pure sunshine.

I could not contain my excitement at the thought of leaving. By the next day, my fever subsided, furthering my giddiness. A new bouquet arrived, brightly colored blooms of paper flowers, inscribed with love notes and well wishes. The hundreds of notes, from friends at church, formed a beautiful arrangement of un-wilting love. I hoped to say thanks in person soon.

Waiting to make sure the leak sealed required patience I could hardly muster. The only way we would know for sure was to do a final drip test in the morning. As long as fluid didn't leak from my nose, I could go home. My legs squirmed and my fingers wriggled, anxious to be useful again.

Sleep finally came on what I hoped would be my last night in the hospital.

I woke to use the restroom in the middle of the night. Delirious but awake, I used the I.V. tower as a crutch and hobbled to the toilet. My head lifted upright for the first time since the drain was closed—and a few small drops dripped out of my nose.

No! It can't be! ^[SEP]*The leak sealed! I know the leak was fixed!* ^[SEP]

I dabbed my nose with a tissue. ^[SEP]

If I don't tell anyone, I can still go home tomorrow. No one has to know. I won't say anything, and they'll let me leave.

Black thunderclouds loomed over my reality as I hobbled back to my bed. The headaches had never left. No matter who else I could fool, I had to admit the truth to myself. Reluctantly, I called the night nurse and explained my discovery.

No going home tomorrow.

Suddenly, the lights flashed on and five doctors and residents crowded in the room. The nurse had relayed the news—unbelieving, the entire staff on duty came, at two a.m., to see for themselves.

I knew the routine. I pushed myself onto my elbows, sat up and leaned my head forward. As anticipated, the first few drops turned into a steady flow of fluid.

A resident I didn't recognize collected the fluid in a flask. The one in charge said they would have it tested, but the truth had already dripped out of me. The leak had not sealed.

Dr. Shelton had said if the leak didn't seal on its own, another brain surgery would be needed.

The storm broke loose. I collapsed to my bed, rolled onto my stomach and buried my head in the pillow.

The sun is still shining, I told myself. *I can't give up now.*

I turned toward the clock; the bright glowing light showed 2:38 a.m., but I called Tolan anyway. I'd had enough of the residents and

nurses. I needed *him*.

After the sleepiness in his voice wore off, he asked me again.

“Are you sure?”^[SEP]

“Yes.”^[SEP]

I hung up the phone and stared at the ceiling. Tolan’s voice told me he wasn’t prepared for more combat any more than I was. Doubt crept into my mind. I didn’t know how much longer I could fight a battle I didn’t know how to win.

Sixteen long days in the hospital had already passed, but we arrived back at square one. Only one option remained: surgery number two.

The neurosurgeons were attending an out-of-state conference, which prevented a close surgery date. The procedure was scheduled for June 2, still days away. I felt stuck.

My neighbor, Belinda, paid me a surprise visit one evening. She walked in with a tray of four large Jamba Juice drinks—sunshine in a cup.

“Well, hello my friend.”

I smiled at the greeting in her thick English accent I’d heard so many times before.

“I brought you a little treat. We weren’t sure which flavor you like, so we bought them all. That way you can choose.”

Belinda recited the list of smoothie flavors. I chose an orange and berry drink; she unwrapped a straw and gave me the cup.

“Thank you, Belinda. I can’t believe you drove all the way here to bring me a Jamba.”

“I didn’t drive all the way here to bring you a smoothie, I came to visit my friend. The treat was just a little something to help make your night a bit better.”

I sucked a little smoothie through the straw. It was messy and dripped from my lips, but the icy drink soothed my mouth. Still, I felt a little guilty taking it, knowing the gift was a sacrifice for a family with six children.

“What in the world are you going to do with all the extra smoothies?”

“Well, Kelly is in the car with the children, so I told them they could share the rest.”

“They are out in the car now?”

“Yes, but don’t worry, they knew when we left that they wouldn’t be able to come in. They are fine in the car.”

“Belinda, I didn’t know they were waiting in the car! You’d better run, don’t keep them waiting any longer on my behalf.”

“They wanted to come. Kymi and Kenya said to tell you hello. We check your progress every day.”

The round trip totaled more than a hundred miles, but they came, just to bring me a pick-me-up and a warm greeting. I thanked my friend again and hugged her before I shooed her out the door to rejoin her family.

After she left, I sent a text message to her. “Thank you, thank you for the delicious treat. You made my night. Give your family my love.”

She responded immediately. “As soon as I got into the car, the kids asked if you liked the Jamba Juice. I told them you loved it. They clapped and cheered, then we passed around the extras.”

One smoothie for me, three for her whole family to share. I don’t remember what flavor smoothie Belinda left me. I can’t recall if I liked the taste of it on my tongue. But I will always remember the sacrifice, love, and friendship delivered along with sixteen ounces of fruit juice.

During most days, Dad remained faithfully by my bedside, despite the deferred surgery. He never mentioned that he should be getting back to his job or the rest of the family in Hawaii. He just smiled and helped me pass the time.

“Hi-ya, Jo!” Dad’s smile one morning told me he was up to something.

“Hey. What’s going on?”

“I just thought you could use a little lift today.” His grin grew ever wider as he put his things down on the table and grabbed items from his bag. He took out an old cassette tape player and plugged it

in, then fiddled with the buttons and sat down in the most comfortable chair in the room.

“Are you ready?”

His cheeks glowed and his eyes shone so bright, I thought the sun might burst out from within him. I didn’t know what little surprise he had planned, but I was ready to find out. ^[SEP]

“Yes, sir-ee, I am ready.” ^[SEP]

Dad pressed the play button, and static started in the background. Laughing voices sounded far away. On the tape, a female cleared her voice. I waited for the show to begin.

“Here we go.”

I immediately recognized the voice; it was my sister, Kristi. “Now, I’ll ask you a question, and you just tell me whatever comes to your mind. Okay?”

“Okay, just don’t ask me anything I won’t know the answer to.” Grandma Lisenbee’s unmistakable voice rang through the old tape player.

The moment I heard her, wonderful warmth filled my chest. I wanted to cheer, laugh and cry all at the same time.

“Where were you born?” Kristi asked.

“I was born in Grantsville, Utah, June 22, 1917,” Grandma started.

I looked at Dad, amazed. “Where did you find them?”

He paused the recording to answer me. “Jo, I must have looked for these tapes a hundred times; I was sick thinking we had lost the recordings of Grandma’s history. But, today, well, today I think she just wanted you to know she is still here for you.”

Heat radiated in my chest and warmed my soul. A few years earlier, Kristi had recorded her conversations with Grandma and then transcribed her history. But the tapes had long since disappeared, and we all believed they were lost forever. The resurrection of the missing cassettes seemed like a miracle—just the miracle I needed to keep going.

The whole day Dad and I sat together and listened to Grandma tell stories from her youth. We laughed and cried in unison as her voice traveled from heaven into my room.

Before dinner, Dad’s phone rang. I’d been resting, so he took

the call and went into the hall. When he returned, I opened my eyes and met his gaze.

“Brettster says to tell you hello and that he is praying for you,” Dad said. “He is, of course, joined by the rest of the family in Utah, and at least half of Laie and BYU Hawaii. Good folks, all of them.”

He nodded and smiled. Brett arrived as the finale of the Orgill clan. He was only two years old when I went off to college. I knew Brett only slightly better than the neighborhood children I babysat until he accompanied us on a family vacation when he was twelve. He acted more like a big brother than an uncle to my kids, which they loved. Dirt biking, running and football were a huge part of his life. Brett could catch a football while flying three feet in the air and getting knocked over by a guy twice his size. Amazed me every time.

His big heart, steady values, and unwavering faith made him a strong man, which is better than a strong player any day.

The detailed messages Dad relayed from loved ones made it seem like people were always at the hospital. But I thought Tolan was actually with me more than he should be. I couldn’t understand how he could be at the hospital so much when he also needed to split his time between work and at home. He visited with me, updated me on the kids and neighborhood, and even rubbed my dry legs with lotion. He sat by me and worked on his computer, made calls and read.

Then the call came.

Getting up from the chair by my bed, Tolan mouthed the words, “It’s Dave, the CEO.”

My heart dropped. He walked out of the room and into the hallway. He’d spent so much time with me at the hospital; I feared it had caught up with him.

Butterflies flitted all over in my stomach as I waited for his return. I dreaded the possibility that he would lose his job and we’d have no insurance.

Several minutes later, he walked back in, but I couldn’t read the expression on his face.

His brow furrowed, and his voice cracked as he started to speak.

“That was Dave,” he said again. “I can’t believe it.”^{[L] [SEP]}

“What?” I begged.^{[L] [SEP]}

“He said, ‘Tolan, I just heard about your wife. Sorry I didn’t know earlier. I just want to tell you there is nothing at work that is as important as you being with Jodi. Don’t worry about what’s going on here. You need to be with your family. Come in when you can, but do not worry about your job. We will take care of things here. You take care of things there.’”

A lump caught in my throat.

The scenario trumped even my highest hopes. Tolan didn’t say it out loud, but the relief washed over him; one less thing to worry about. With his job secure, he could focus on his family.

The kiss on my forehead woke me.

“I’m heading home to go check on everyone and give your mom a break,” Tolan said. He looked across the room and nodded. “Your dad is sticking around, so you’ll still have company. But if you’re tired, go back to sleep. Love you.”

“Bye, love you, too,” I replied. ^[L]_{SEP}

I watched as my heart walked out the door.

“Anything I can do for ya, Jo?” Dad asked.

The phrase represented more than a simple question; it was his personal motto. He asked it often, and always meant it. If a need existed, Dad truly wanted to help.

I shook my head. “I’m okay, just going to rest some more.” ^[L]_{SEP}

“I’ll be right here if you need me.” ^[L]_{SEP}

Pain medication flowed through my veins and the grogginess dulled my aches, but I didn’t like seeing life through a dirty window. People get addicted to the kinds of narcotics pumped into my body 24/7 during my hospital stay, but I couldn’t imagine why anyone would want to live life that way.

A few hours later, I woke again. This time, Mom sat next to Dad by the window.

“Hey sweetie, how are you feeling?” ^[L]_{SEP} Mom asked.

It took me a few minutes to evaluate.

“I think I’m okay.” ^[L]_{SEP}

“Do you want to get out of your room? Dad says you’ve been

stuck in here for a while.”^[SEP]

“Yeah, that sounds good.”^[SEP]

Mom got me ready while Dad hunted down a wheelchair, and they loaded me in.^[SEP] The hospital doubled as a construction zone, with the entrance, parking structures and some floors, including the Neuro Unit, under remodel. That didn’t stop our stroll through the facility. We strode through the long hallways and around several units and clinics. The hospital scenery lacked luster, but the company made up the difference.

Their attitudes were contagious. From the moment Mom heard about my diagnosis, she started preparing for a miracle.

“It’s going to be okay. I feel like everything is going to be all right,” she’d said. No hesitation or doubt showed in her voice.

Dad’s words always showed his can-do personality.

“Are you having a great day today?” was his customary greeting. Since I’d been in the hospital, he adapted it to, “Hope you are doing well today.”

When he wasn’t sitting in the room with me, he called to make sure I was okay. The first call usually rang around eight a.m., on his way to the hospital.

“Can I bring you anything, Jo?” he’d ask. “Does any fresh fruit sound good—maybe blueberries or strawberries? I can bring some magazines if you want to read.”

With every inquiry, he extended an offer meant to help me feel better.

We stopped by a window, and Dad took a picture of Mom and me, and then they switched spots. Dad squatted down to be level with me in the wheelchair, gave a big thumbs-up sign, and smiled for the camera.

The journey continued onward, yet I couldn’t help but notice the people who stared at me as we wandered by. Strangers’ eyes focused on me, until I tried to meet their gaze, then they looked away and pretended they hadn’t seen me at all. I attempted to smile, to have a little interaction—but too often, I didn’t get the chance.

We rounded the final corner back to the room, and back into my safety bubble. To Mom, Dad, and my loved ones, I was still me. I wondered who—or what—I was to everyone else.

Chapter 17

Demons and Angels

“He is a man of courage who does not run away, but remains at his post and fights against the enemy.”

~ Socrates

May 28, 2009

He wanted to kill me—I knew *that* from the moment he slipped into my room. This was no devil’s assistant, no inexperienced messenger sent to spook me. The malevolent spirit desired nothing more than my demise. I could not see his form, though a dusky mist seemed to stream in under the door.

My enemy did not face me and challenge me to a fair fight. He did not grab a knife to stab me, use rope or his hands to strangle me; the evil presence wrapped like a boa constrictor, squeezing the hope out of me. His movements were practiced. With each breath, his grasp tightened. His every attempt was targeted to destroy me. I looked for a glimpse of my adversary, but his body was invisible, the only outward sign of his existence the mist that dimmed the light in the room.

“It’s over. Give up now.”

Shouting through the silence, his words encircled me like a stadium. Jeers and taunts hurled at me from every direction. He was nowhere and everywhere at once.

My Guide was absent from the room. I was alone against the enemy. I struggled, not for breath, but for the conviction to live. The battle raged on, first for seconds, then minutes. My opponent forced the warmth from my heart and the will from my soul.

He attempted every ploy and scheme to take me, to make me

give up. We both knew if he took my mind, my body would follow. I would die, not from a brain tumor, but from hopelessness.

I called silently to God, pleading for rescue.

Light emptied from the room, until the mid-day sun became only a shadow. My hands shook as a force gripped my body. Awake and alert, I scanned the room in vain—this was no dream, yet my enemy remained unseen. My breathing raced to keep pace with the unnerving pounding in my chest.

Dear God, please help me. Make him leave. Please!

The hidden demon sought to crush my spirit and drag me down to hell. I shook under the intensity of its control. I never knew dark powers could be so tangible, so physical.

Desolation crushed my chest—the breath slipped out of me. My utter destruction neared. I sent petitions heavenward and prepared for a final showdown with my killer. The serpent twisted tighter.

I can't breathe! He's going to win. Without even the strength to look up, I said my last plea. *Please. Save me!*

Then—the crushing stopped. The dark spirit uncoiled from around me, and the mist fell to the floor. Air filled my lungs, and light brightened the room.

Invisible like the demon, I did not see my rescuer's face, though I sensed his presence. Whether my Guide or an angel defeated my foe, I did not know.

I collapsed into the fetal position and closed my eyes. Without the unseen guardian, I would have lost the duel.

God answered the anxious calls of an ordinary woman.

No visible guests visited all day. Perhaps that is why the serpent chose that day to creep in—he knew no one would hear my struggles.

Lucky for me, the fiend could not overpower the truth my parents had reinforced daily since my childhood: You never have to walk alone. Help is always there when you ask.

The day after the devil's serpent slithered out of my room, a friend stopped by to visit; she left me a copy of a book entitled, *If Life Were Easy, It Wouldn't Be Hard*. I laughed at the truth of the title. The recent uninvited guest reminded me there were levels of hard that I couldn't begin to comprehend.

That's life, isn't it—it's not supposed to be easy. Guess I'm right on track.

Chapter 18

Suspect

“We must be known to be understood.”^{[L] [SEP]}

~ Jodi Brown

Koby peeked around the corner. His warm eyes shone through his wire-rimmed glasses, and he smiled when he saw me. Dad hadn't arrived yet, so it had been too quiet. He was a welcome sight.

Koby and Tolan had been roommates in college a hundred years earlier, before marriage, kids and real life. As a pharmacist, he'd been working at the neighboring hospital less than a mile away. His presence proved an opportune diversion.

“They giving you the good stuff in that I.V.?”^{[L] [SEP]}

“I'm sure you could give me better,” I teased.

Despite the darkness of my previous guest, Koby perked me up with his no-nonsense personality and positive attitude. We chatted for several minutes about nothing and everything.

Just then a lady with shoulder-length auburn hair entered. I didn't recognize her, but she wore a hospital badge atop her cream-colored blouse. She gave a tight-lipped grin, which didn't look sincere.

Koby raised one eyebrow, and his face told me he got the same, uneasy vibe as I did.

“Jodi Brown?” she asked.^{[L] [SEP]}

“Yes.”^{[L] [SEP]}

“Tell me about the pills you've been pocketing.” She folded her arms and stared, waiting for an answer.

“What? What does that mean? What is pocketing pills?” I asked. I had no idea what she was talking about, but I didn't like the look

she wore on her face. A defensive wall formed around me.

“I’ve had reports that you aren’t taking your pills, that you remove them from your tray but don’t take them—that you are purposefully trying to extend your stay here.”

Her words punched me with a near knockout blow. My normal calm fled, replaced by a fight-or-flight response.

“WHAT? You think I want to be here? You think I am choosing this?” My voice grew louder and more intense as I spoke. “Are you kidding? I have four children at home that someone else is caring for! I planned to be in the hospital for five days, and now it has been almost three weeks. My surgery caused a spinal fluid leak and facial paralysis. I struggle swallowing my pills because my face doesn’t work and I nearly choke on every dose.”

Trust. Trust was the difference between the stranger who stood accusing me and the friend who sat next to me.

“Have you ever tried taking pure salt pills? Add those nasty things to the other four to six pills they bring in every few hours? Try. See if you can gag one down. I can barely control my mouth enough to swallow regular pills. Then they bring in these monster salt tablets, and you wonder why it’s hard for me?” My outrage grew with every word I said.

“Sometimes I retch them up then swallow again—but I am taking the dang pills!” Heat flushed in my face and neck.

“Who? Who said I was pocketing pills? Which nurse filed that report?”

“I’m not at liberty to say,” she stammered.

“Not at liberty? So someone can accuse me of making myself sick and stealing from the hospital, but you won’t even tell me who filed the report?” I sat up higher in bed and leaned toward the stranger. “Well, you can make sure of one thing. Make sure that nurse is never assigned to my care again. Ever. Anyone who would accuse me of that clearly didn’t take enough time to know anything about me and why I am here! I’m here because I am trying to live—to go home to my family. You tell that to the nurse, and put it in the report!”

The woman’s cheeks reddened. “Well, thanks for your time. I

will record this and come back later to follow up.” She met my eyes, and her face softened even more. She knew the truth. She’d walked in accusing me, but walked out understanding me.

She left Koby and me alone again. Tears glossed my eyes. I took deep breaths to catch some air and calm my nerves.

“Whoa. Sorry about that, Jodi. Can’t believe she came in and talked to you like that,” Koby said in a near whisper.

“You’ve probably dealt with that stuff before. It is new to me,” I said, attempting to reign in my emotions.

“Yeah, I’ve heard of patients who pocket pills, but I have never confronted one. Makes me realize it’s not an accusation to take lightly, though. Sorry.”

“Thanks.” I nodded, still trying to shake it off. But inside, it stung.

Koby stayed for a few more minutes before he looked at his watch and said he needed to get back to work. I thanked him for coming, and he gave me a hug. Half my face smiled, and I hoped it was convincing.

When he left, I let my guard down and succumbed to the tears. I ached on the inside—not from pain—but from insult. Shivers electrified my body, and I wanted to crawl under the covers to hide from the world.

These people don’t know me. And worse yet, some of them don’t care. I’m barely even a person to them; I’m just a job, a case number or report to file.

I wondered who’d made the accusation. Memorial Day and the start of summer mixed up schedules, and I’d had three new nurses in two days.

One of the nurses who doesn’t know me accused me. That must be it. The others—I thought we’d become friends. Will they believe me or the chart?

For over an hour I tried to convince myself I hadn’t done anything to give the nurses the wrong impression. Finally, I quit the internal fight and tried to rest.

I couldn’t wait for Dr. Couldwell to get back in town. He could operate, seal the leak, and then I could go home and be me again.

“You ready for Friday night at the movies?” Dad dangled a shrink-wrapped DVD of *Mall Cop*. “I thought a little humor would do us both some good.”

The soundtrack behind the action kept me singing along, despite the sometimes-ridiculous plot. Dad’s whole body bounced as he chuckled at the one-liners and slapstick moments. His laugh made me laugh. The unrealistic but hilarious light-hearted tale fit the bill for an entertaining evening in.

An Eddie Money song played as the end credits rolled. Dad gathered his bag but waited to eject the DVD until the last notes sounded.

“Love you, Jo.” He leaned over and kissed my forehead. “Anything I can do for you before I go?”

“No, this was just what I needed. Think I’m good now.” I beamed. Waiting was a bit easier that night.

The next afternoon, high-pitched giggles in the hall alerted me to guests. Emilie walked in, mahogany locks draping down her back, elongating her tall, model-like frame. Her dentist-white, perfect smile lit her whole face. Lovely Lisa followed, with blonde streaks highlighting her long hair and stylish outfit.

My church girls!

Wendy, Lisa’s mom, shadowed close behind. The three hurried over and gave me heartfelt hugs. They grabbed the chairs and dragged them closer to my bed.

In the five weeks since the meeting in my living room, life had spun our worlds in different directions.

Lisa’s gaze darted from the monitors to the oxygen machine, to the I.V. tower, then back to me. Her mom, usually quiet, broke the ice.

“We sure miss you at church, especially the girls. Everyone reads your blog. We’re all thinking about you. Are you okay today?”

My head ached and my soul longed for home, but that was not the message I wanted to give my beautiful young visitors.

“I’m okay.” I nodded, hoping they believed the words. “Today

I've mostly just slept."

Stillness lingered. We needed a change of subject. I leaned forward with as much enthusiasm as I could muster. "So, tell me about the end of school. You're both seniors now!"

"Oh, my gosh, I still can't believe it," Lisa said.

The smile spread on her face as she jumped into the details. Her playful grin could be innocent or mischievous. I learned that lesson in a river at girls' camp when she lured me close, only to drench every inch of me.

"My classes for next year are gonna be so hard, but some of them are just dumb. I am soooooo ready to finish high school. The guys are so immature," she lamented.

"Yeah, they are," Emilie joined in. "College guys will be so much better."

Despite the adolescent angst in their voices, it warmed my heart that they could still talk to me.

The conversation went on for thirty minutes, with playful banter between the girls and wise words of advice and reality sprinkled here and there by Wendy. I encouraged the chat by begging for details and asking more questions. Wendy tapped Lisa on the shoulder.

"We better be going," she said. "If we hurry, we can grab a snack for the road." Many years of mothering had fine-tuned her intuition.

A flurry of hugs and goodbyes followed. A bit of sunshine escaped when they exited.

Heather, the nurse's aide, entered the room and took my vitals. "Looks like that was a fun group of guests," she said, waiting for the machine to get a reading. "Ahh, your temperature is up again. I'll tell the nurse, but we probably need to treat that. I'll be back in a few."

Despite the fever, my gratitude list increased again. The young women who came to visit cared more about me than their own comfort.

Who is the teacher now?

Chapter 19

Pinned

“My mind became uncertain and began to wander.”

~ Jodi Brown

The wrestling match began when the sun went down. Exhaustion gripped first, flipped me upside down and pinned me against the night. Pain grabbed hold and wouldn't let go, tag teaming with despair to assure victory.

The spinal fluid leak and the on-again-off-again fevers created restless days and endless nights. That evening, the ache in my head was worse than usual.

Throbbing pressure lunged in and caught me in its clutch. Floundering under the weight, I tapped out the only way I knew how. I pressed the small button, and a saintly referee appeared at my bedside.

The night nurse with round pink cheeks and wavy russet hair appeared at my corner with words of encouragement. But she informed me the medications were maxed—no time-outs left.

Choking on tears, I sobbed, “I'm done. I can't do this anymore.”

But she did not give up on me so easily. Brenda took my hand as aches racked my body. Minutes ticked on, and agony threatened to consume me. But Brenda held tight and didn't let go.

An hour passed, and still the silent saint stood by my bed. With one hand, she caressed my arm and stroked my head. With the other, she held my left hand and never let go. She did not smile, but the corners of her mouth were turned up and her eyes met mine at every glance.

Time slipped slowly away, and desperation with it. I hurt in ways

I could not describe to Brenda. Pain played the vigilant opponent, always there, watching for my weaknesses, ready to attack. But that night, my rival did not win. Brenda didn't leave until the match ended. The physical torment remained, but the desperation fled.

Brenda's silent support saved me when my own strength did not.

By the time the first rays of light peaked through my window, I realized again that angels do not always wear wings or flowing white robes. Sometimes they appear as wrestling coaches or nurses in green scrubs.

During my weeks in the hospital, Brenda was my nurse for only one shift, a fact I do not attribute to coincidence.

The following day, sleep overshadowed all else. After the doctors' rounds that morning, my CNA came into the room. Heather's short brown hair, full face and bright smile shined often. She offered both comfort and kindness.

"I had a—bad night. Today, I just need to sleep," I explained.

"Okay, I'll see what I can do to help," she replied.

She closed the blinds and clicked off the lights. In the darkened room I closed my eyes, free of the previous night's attack.

The late afternoon sun hid on the other side of the valley. By the time I woke up, I could only see the moving light and growing shadows on the mountain. I'd missed the morning and most of the afternoon.

Hungry, I pulled the rolling table near to pick at the food on the tray. A message blinked on my phone: Missed Call from Brandon Orgill.

Brandon. I grinned at the thought of my brother. Anxious to hear his voice, I listened to the voicemail.

"Yo, Jo. What's up? Just wanted to see how you are doing. You'd think I would know, but honestly, no one around here seems to know anything we don't read on the blog. Just thought I'd call and tell ya I love ya and you're beautiful."

His words pinned a huge grin like a donkey tail on my face. "Oh,

Michael just walked in,” he said, referring to our younger brother.

The scene played in my head. Brandon stood in the kitchen, wearing board shorts and a long T-shirt, with a green smoothie in one hand and his un-smart phone in the other. Michael entered from the hall, looking to grab the rest of the green drink from the blender, and Brandon motioned toward the phone as he spoke.

“Wanna say anything on the message to Jo?” Brandon asked.

“Uh, yeah. Hi,” Michael spit out, “hope you get feeling better.” In my mind’s eye, Michael’s blond waves looked naturally windblown and unkempt, like he was always headed to the beach, or just returned.

“Anything else?” Brandon pressed. ^[SEP]

“Nope,” Michael said. ^[SEP]

“Okay, well, that’s it for now. Mike and I are heading to Castle, so I’ll try ya later or check in with Dad to see how you’re doing. Love ya, Jo.”

The message clicked off and I pressed number nine on the phone keypad. Save.

Heading to the beach. Of course.

Fourth in the family, Brandon junioried me by nine years. He loved words, reading and writing them, as did I. He tutored others, in everything from math to body surfing. Brandon’s easy-going nature made people comfortable with him. Best of all, though, Brandon made me feel loved. Whenever I walked into a room, he yelled my name, ran over, picked me up, and bear-hugged me. Some would call that crazy, but Brandon possessed a knack for elevating people to pedestal level. His voice reminded me of how much I missed him.

Michael, the next brother in line, was only five years old when I left for college. As he grew, I admired him for his commitment and self-discipline. Within a few years, his dedication to piano began paying off. At age eleven, he went on a multi-country tour and played for dignitaries throughout the world.

When my family moved to Hawaii after I was married, Michael discovered the ocean. He added a love of surfing to his repertoire. He spent as many hours practicing the piano as paddling on his surfboard. But Michael was never a man of many words. His soul

played through the piano keys and he conversed with the waves. The few words on voicemail were signature Michael.

I replayed the message from my brothers and their voices filled the room. Just for a minute, they were with me.

Charles Dickens got it right. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...” While foolishness and ignorance abounded, I experienced the best of times, amidst the worst. Friends and strangers accessorized my troubles with kindness and fashioned a beautiful ensemble.

The gratitude tally grew:

- Aunts who brought love—and Olive Garden for dinner
- Jeanette and Brenda’s visit [L][SEP]
- Daily texts from my girls [L][SEP]
- Thoughtful cousins who came by with books and chocolates [L][SEP]
- Hawaiian friends who sent aloha across the miles [L][SEP]
- Purple flowers [L][SEP]
- Dry erase markers and smiley faces on the white board [L][SEP]
- Clean sheets [L][SEP]
- The *Harry and David* package from my childhood friend, Michelle [L][SEP]
- CDs of melodious music [L][SEP]
- Brittanie’s sweet letter [L][SEP]
- Housecleaning staff who made my room clean and fresh
- My selfless mother who lived at my house and cared for my family [L][SEP]
- The friendly blonde female resident [L][SEP]
- Tamee’s gift of a journal [L][SEP]
- A mountain view from my window [L][SEP]
- Nurses who became my friends [L][SEP]
- Kelly’s homemade cookies and fresh strawberries [L][SEP]
- A visit from Randy and Bishop Aurich [L][SEP]
- Aunt Deanne and Uncle Steve who stayed after visiting hours were over [L][SEP]

- Low-pain days ^[L]_[SEP]
- Walks out of the Neuro Unit ^[L]_[SEP]
- A bathroom only 10 feet from my bed ^[L]_[SEP]
- Tolan skipping lunch to be with me

Background music and clean bedding had never been amenities to me before, just routine. I wondered how many little conveniences and acts of love I'd missed acknowledging over time, and promised myself to do better at *seeing*.

Chapter 20

Continental Divide

“Some gulfs are too wide to cross by bridge;
Those require a leap of faith.”
~ Jodi Brown

May 28, 2009

The light at one a.m. interrupted my dreams of home. I could feel the light before I opened my eyes.

The man didn't look familiar; he wasn't one of my regular nurses. I couldn't imagine why he entered in the middle of the night.

“Ms. Brown,” he said, “the doctors are concerned because your sodium level is low. They instructed us to give you a sodium infusion.”

“Okay,” I replied, yawning.

Another unknown man in scrubs came into my room with a cart of supplies. He approached me while the first guy fiddled with items on the cart.

“So, I hate to say it, but this isn't going to be fun. We are going to inject sodium into your veins, to regulate your levels, but it is gritty and thick—so we can't put it into your I.V. We have to use this,” the guy grabbed a giant syringe akin to a turkey baster. “I've heard from other patients that it's not just the needle that hurts. The sodium stings, so you will feel intense heat in your arm.”

“Lovely,” I replied. “Just what I wanted.”

Used to similar drills, I turned my arm and pumped my fist so

they could find a vein. The point pierced my skin—the prick worse than expected, and much worse than a normal syringe.

“Shoot,” he said as he grabbed a bandage and pressed it against my arm. “That vein blew. I’m gonna have to do it again.”

He cleaned another spot and pricked me again. ^[L-]_[SEP]

“Dang,” the needle man said. “Blew another one.” ^[L-]_[SEP]

I forced myself to breathe to stay calm.

“Sorry, this is a large gauge needle, and you have a small arm and tiny veins. Last try, I promise,” he said as he applied another bandage.

He moved the antiseptic cloth and wiped farther down my arm. The coolness caused goose bumps over my body. My skin broke under the pressure of the syringe; he closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Three strikes—I’m out. Sorry.” He stepped away from the bed and lowered his gaze.

I clenched my teeth and the muscles throughout my body tightened. Three Band-Aids covered the pincushion on my right arm.

The next anonymous man at bat looked right at me, his eyes peering into mine.

“I’ll do my best. Sorry about this.” ^[L-]_[SEP] I nodded.

The puncture was slower this time, at a different angle, but the result was the same. ^[L-]_[SEP]

“Damn.” The word came, not from the guy holding the needle, but from the other nurse who’d already struck out. ^[L-]_[SEP]

I was running out of veins—and patience. ^[L-]_[SEP]

“Okay, guys, I know you’re doing your job, but I’m not playing this game all night. You can train on someone else. Last time. Period.” I looked at each of them so they knew I meant it; both nodded.

The syringe in hand, the nurse let out a long, slow breath. “Make another fist for me.”

I didn’t breathe. This time the needle slid into my arm. Whew. He pressed the head of the syringe and pushed the thick solution through. The sodium hit my veins, at first with a hot prickly sensation. But the heat didn’t stop—it rose at liftoff speed. The

irritation spread from the middle of my forearm, into my hand and up into the shoulder. Within seconds, fire seared through my entire arm.

“Ahhh.” I moaned and bit my lip.

“It’s burning,” he stated more than asked. [L] [SEP]

Tears slipped from my eye. [L] [SEP] “How long does it take?” [L] [SEP]

“I have to empty this entire syringe.” He motioned at the pointer sticking out of my arm. “The sodium solution is dense, so I have to go slowly, or your vein could still burst.”

After more than a minute, the giant plunger still appeared full. I turned my head, cried out loud, and started to shake.

“Hold still! You gotta hold still,” he urged. Nowhere to go—no escape. [L] [SEP] The blaze intensified and radiated into my chest. The sweltering heat threatened to burst through my skin. [L] [SEP]

“The sodium is all in....n-now.” He finished and slipped the syringe out of my arm. When the last clumps of sodium pushed through, I checked the clock. More than an hour had passed since the first pinprick, nearly ninety minutes since I’d been jolted out of sleep.

“It’s over,” I moaned.

“Well, the heat may still last awhile, maybe another hour or more,” he said.

“An hour?” A huff charged out of my chest. [L] [SEP]

“For some people it’s that long,” syringe man number one said.

The two young men gathered the supplies and used rags and put everything back in place. Several minutes later, they left for good.

The nightmare ended, but the ghost burn still haunted me. The fire extinguished about three-thirty in the morning. Just as I drifted off to sleep, a CNA entered the room to check my vitals, followed by the regular phlebotomist who came to do the daily blood draw just thirty minutes later. [L] [SEP]

At six a.m., the night shift finished. The day nurse entered my room and brought with her three sodium tablets, along with four other medications for me to take.

“Enough of the salt! I am going to be sick,” I said.

The nurse insisted the tablets were still on my list of prescriptions.

“I can’t take them, not right now,” I replied.

I took the rest of the pills, but left the giant doses of salt in their paper cup. She carried them out when she left the room.

By the time Dad called to check on me at eight a.m., I had neared my breaking point. I explained the whole night ordeal over the phone. When he arrived, he took one look at me and walked to the nurses' station to inquire about the sodium infusion.

"I checked her file, and the chart doesn't show who ordered the sodium infusion. The nurse manager from the night shift didn't know either. I can find out and let you know," she said.

No answers. We never discovered who ordered the nighttime infusion—or what information the order was based on.

Dad seemed frustrated that day, an unusual state considering his normal calm and composed demeanor. The unanswered questions, endless pins, pokes and procedures seemed to weigh heavily on both of us.

He opened his laptop and tried to get some work done while I rested.

"You still here?" I asked as I awoke a few hours later. ^[L]_{SEP}

"Of course. Where else would I be?" ^[L]_{SEP}

No fire—or sodium—could burn away the feeling that pounded in my heart when I looked at him. *Where else would he be*, I wondered. He was wanted everywhere, but he stayed with me.

"Are you ready to forget about sodium infusions?" ^[L]_{SEP}

I nodded.

"Alrighty, there are dozens more comments on your blog since I wrote about your all-night salt adventure. These ought to make you smile," he said, smiling already.

He read a few and laughed out loud before going on.

"This one's from Pam, that I used to work with," he could hardly keep a straight face.

"Oh my goodness. Forget waterboarding terrorists. Give them sodium infusions. Jodi, honestly you have to be a saint. I would be screaming and clobbering people, and maybe I

would even spit and call them very bad names. It's true. Ask your dad. God love you, get well."

"Sodium infusions for terrorists—that may be the best idea I've heard in a long time!" I laughed. It sounded so funny when he read it.

"Here's one from Brittany. Sounds like she was here last night?" he asked. [L] [SEP]

"Was that just last night? Sheesh, I almost forgot."

"OK so I left you last night thinking you were going to get a restful night sleep. I am so sorry that didn't happen and even more sorry for what you had to endure with all the sodium intakes. Do they not think sleep is important for you, or what? Hang in there my friend and I pray for a better day/night today! Get some rest IF that is possible :)"

He finished Brittany's note and his laughter filled the room again, turning his cheeks red.

"Oh, I love this one, and I think you will, too. It's from Annette," he said, trying to contain his amusement.

"Jodi, as I thought about you today, I have thought of a few positive things that have come out of this whole experience:

1. You haven't had to plan dinner. [L] [SEP]
2. You have been able live on the East Bench of Salt Lake.
3. No house cleaning! [L] [SEP]
4. Your question-mark scar would make a great costume of *The Riddler*. [L] [SEP]
5. Hospital ice chips. (The Best.) [L] [SEP]
6. You haven't had to wake up and think, "Hmmm, what should I wear [L] [SEP] today?" [L] [SEP]
7. You are lucky enough to know what a sodium infusion is (most of us [L] [SEP] don't). [L] [SEP]
8. You've realized how many people love and care for you.
9. You have seen miracles. [L] [SEP]
10. Testimonies have grown because of your

experience. [L] [SEP]

I love you Jodi, and I hope you are smiling. Love,
Annette”

Annette was right, the comment made me smile. The kind notes and heartfelt comments kept coming. Friends rode along with me through the frustrations and battles.

By evening, Dad and I fared better than we had that morning. Tolan left work early and joined us.

“We’ve been stuck in this room all day. Let’s go for a walk. You up for it?” Dad asked.

“Yep.”

“Okay, you think you can walk for a minute, or should we get you a wheelchair?

“Walk. At least until my head gets bad. I’ve hardly moved all day.”

Just as we readied to walk out the door, Suzy stuck her head in. Still in scrubs from her shift at the neighboring children’s hospital, she popped in to say hello.

“Wanna walk with us, Suzy Q?” I asked. [L] [SEP]

“I sure do!” [L] [SEP] She turned right around, and we left the Neuro Unit.

Arms locked with Dad on my right and Tolan on my left, I felt like Dorothy, venturing to Oz with her faithful companions by her side. Suzy walked next to Dad and dragged my I.V. tower along.

The journey progressed slowly, with no singing or dancing to the Emerald City, but the company and activity wakened my body.

“Let’s go to the bridge and walk over to the other hospital. Maybe that cafeteria has different food,” Dad suggested.

“Yes, they do! I can tell you which are the best treats.” Suzy’s grin said she might indulge in a treat herself.

We crossed the lengthy bridge. Tolan grabbed the handle of the double door at the end, but an alarm beeped, and the door didn’t move.

“Huh, wonder if the bridge is only open during business hours,” he said.

“Oh, shoot, I don’t have my badge,” Suzy said. “It would open

the door.”

“Well, we’ll have to go back and get a milkshake, I guess,” Dad said. “Does a milkshake sound good to you, Jo?”

“Sounds great.” I lied. My paralyzed taste buds despised dairy, but if Dad needed a milkshake, I would join him.

Back at the other end of the bridge, Dad took his turn to open the door. The same noise sounded and the door didn’t budge.

“You gotta be kidding me?” Dad laughed. “So we could open the door to get on the bridge, but not off?”

The walk halted for a minute, and I leaned against the glass walls of the corridor. Dad started making distress calls on his cell. Tolan, Suzy, and I chatted during the wait. Between calls, Dad snapped a few pictures, so I posed against the glass in my sexy hospital gown, holding onto the I.V. tower.

“Looking good, Jo,” Dad laughed. “Okay, I’m going to try the nurses’ station again.”

I sat on the floor and leaned back to prevent an explosion in my head.

“Well, no one is answering at the nurses’ station or at the main neuro line,” Dad said.

“Shift change, that’s why I just got off work,” Suzy said. “Could take a while before everyone gets their orders for the night.”

Dad shook his head and scoffed. “Geez. Alrighty, I guess we’ll all have a seat and enjoy the view until we can get back in.”

And so we did—until my I.V. tower beeped. Suzy looked at the screen on the machine.

“Battery’s almost dead. These don’t last very long when they aren’t plugged in.”

Dad dialed numbers on his phone again. I hoped it wasn’t 911. Tolan stood up and I thought he was going to bang on the door, but he walked in the wrong direction.

“Here it is.” Tolan pointed low on the wall. “I knew I saw an outlet.”

I didn’t know how he noticed an outlet in the hall, but I also didn’t understand how he always knew which way was north (even inside a building). His brain clearly worked differently than mine.

We migrated to the outlet, and Suzy plugged in the machine. Dad didn't sit; he paced the hall and kept trying different numbers. The invisible glass wall created a perfect view of the mountain peak to the east and the Salt Lake Valley to the west.

"Well, hello!" Dad spoke into the phone. "It's great to reach a live person. My name is Von Orgill and my daughter, Jodi Brown, is a patient on the neuro floor. We went on a walk and somehow we are now trapped on the bridge between the two hospitals. We got in, but couldn't get out. Her I.V. machine is dying, and we need someone to come rescue us."

I wish I could have seen the look on the phone operator's face.

"Hey, thank you very much. We appreciate it!" Dad exclaimed, and then turned to us. "Okay, a nurse is coming."

"Well, we won't forget this walk," Tolan said.

As incredible as the view was, the scenario seemed even more so. The humor of it hit us, and we laughed as we waited on the floor. Ten minutes later, a nurse opened the door, and we journeyed back to Kansas. The sodium infusion melted into memory, but the bridge escapade would last a lifetime.

We'd learned a number of things since the children's first visits to the hospital. The smells, sights, and sounds of the Neuro Unit were not as welcoming as Labor and Delivery, the only other area of the hospital my children had ever visited. Unlike visiting Mommy after having a baby, no newborn prize awaited. Patients in the Neuro Unit wore bandages and scars instead of diapers. The extreme quiet could terrify anyone. Creative parent mode kicked in.

Saturday evening, I called the CNA to warn her of the coming attraction.

"Mom, Mom, we brought popcorn and a movie!" Casen squealed as he ran. He hopped on my bed and hugged me.

The rest followed, and even Daven crawled up and laid his head on my chest. I'd never been so happy to be sandwiched between my boys.

Tolan took the microwavable popcorn and promised to return

with movie-ready treats. Trenden loaded the DVD into the player, and then closed the blinds to dim the light. Tolan arrived just in time for the opening music.

We squished together for family movie night. Popcorn disappeared at a record speed and soda refills (normally not available in the Brown home) kept the kids stocked and stoked. Daven and Casen crawled on and off the bed, but always returned to my lap.

When the cartoon ended, the room rivaled a theater after the feature show—buttery popcorn smeared on every surface, sticky soda on the floor, and the bright faces of six happy customers. What a glorious mess!

“I love your face,” I whispered as my sweet ones each hugged me goodbye. That night I meant the words perhaps more than ever before.

The crowd dispersed. I lowered my bed and rolled over until something poked my side. Popcorn kernels—popped and unpopped—reminded me that I was the luckiest woman alive.

The quiet Sunday morning brightened when the University of Utah students stopped by to visit. They asked for an update on my condition and shared a message.

“This quote is from Melody Beattie,” Laney said. “‘Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend.’ I’d never heard that quote before, but I loved it. Thought you might, too.”

She was right. I loved it, and added the four visitors to my gratitude list. I hoped every patient enjoyed such caring visitors. The young couples offered to pray for me and my upcoming surgery.

“Absolutely. I’d be honored,” I replied to the strangers who’d become my friends.

May 31, 2009

Dr. Couldwell startled me when he entered my room Sunday evening. He wasn't scheduled to return until Monday.

"There's no need to wait until Tuesday. Let's move ahead and prepare for surgery tomorrow."

That's one day sooner that I'll be able to go home!

He methodically flipped through my chart and talked to the nurses. His careful actions reminded me of the words he'd spoken to me on the phone the week after my diagnosis.

"We are in this together now. I am going to help you get through it. I am not going to leave you alone."

His face showed his promise remained intact. So many doctors had given up, but he persevered. His presence meant progress and hope. Dr. Couldwell and Dr. Shelton were unassuming, caring and genuine. Though I knew them only as doctors, I loved them for the peace they gave my family.

The surgery would take place in steps. The stages included harvesting fat from my thigh and stomach, and later using the tissue to fill in the holes in my brain—the holes where spinal fluid may have been leaking out. Tolan and I compared the process to waxing skis, smoothing all of the dings with the heavy wax. The fat collection methods were sure to leave scars and create additional pain, but if it sealed the leak, it would be worth it.

The new plan provided welcome relief from the waiting. I called home with the news.

That night Dad phoned in and read me some of the blog comments to buoy me for the big surgery day ahead.

"Here's a short one from Suzy."

"I love you so much Jodi. I'll be able to come to rub your legs next week—and I'll bring my badge, just in case."

I think you should take her up on that offer," Dad laughed. "Ah, here's one you won't want to miss."

"Jodi, hon, your VA pals are still praying and watching out for you. Keep on going...it may seem like two steps forward, one step back right now,

but soon you will be WALKING. FORWARD. OUT. OF. THAT. HOSPITAL. Much love to you and your family. Stephanie Thornton-Grant”

Her name evoked powerful emotions from my childhood. Virginia had been my home during most of my growing up years. From preschool through tenth grade, my days were spent in the still-rural hills of Northern Virginia, an oasis from the hustle and bustle of the nation’s capital. The town of Warrenton ingrained itself into every part of my being, as did my friends from childhood.

The sweltering, humid summer days meant long hours at the pool and retreats in the woods behind my house. I was one of the guys in my neighborhood full of boys. That was okay with me because it meant riding at the bike jumps, jumping on the trampoline, trips to 7-Eleven, building forts forest, and midnight escapades with the guys. Together the adventures crafted the backstory of my youth. We did dumb things kids couldn’t get away with now, all in the name of fun. Our lives intertwined a thousand times and created a million memories.

My Virginia friends pulled their weight in keeping me positive. The note from Stephanie had whisked me away from the hospital and back into a world where I was safe, secure, and one of the gang.

“Your Warrenton friends are really on this weekend. Your mom said you got another care package from Tamee Sutherland yesterday. I’ll bring it tomorrow so you can have a pick-me-up after surgery,” Dad said.

Tamee Sutherland. In my cruel junior high school years, most of my friends, including Tamee, abandoned me one summer because I unknowingly liked the same boy another girl crushed on. The coup d’état occurred quietly, behind closed doors. Not so much of a hint escaped their mouths. The discovery came when I called one of my best friends—and heard a pool party in the background. A party I hadn’t been invited to. Confusion set in first, followed quickly by hurt and anger. At the time, my crush crime had not been announced to me. I didn’t know why I suddenly had no friends; I only knew that everything in my young world changed in an instant.

Boys rarely involved themselves in such petty discords, but even

some of my guy friends chose the popular girl's side. I hadn't asked them to choose me—I had thought we were all on the same side.

When school started, I found myself utterly alone and friendless, and fairly clueless as to why. At cheerleading, the girls practiced with their backs to me. At lunch, I sat alone. At home, I cried and begged my mother to let me switch schools. The torture was too great. My mother possessed more sense than me and said I was staying put.

Days into the new school year, I noticed I was not the only one dining alone. So, I sat myself next to the new girl with the coffee-colored, slightly frizzy hair. Her bright intellect and jovial personality drew me to her. Together, we attracted and sought out others. Soon, friends surrounded me again, and the teenage angst lessened.

My guy friends quickly returned, having no real knowledge of why they left in the first place. The girls, however, didn't speak to me or even look my direction for months. Then there was Tamee.

The piece of notebook paper covered in blue ink arrived in my locker. I undid the near-origami folds and saw hand-written scrawls covering the page. Details poured out, and I read them over and over again, always focusing on the first line, "I am sorry," and the last, "Please forgive me."

Sunday school teachers sermoned about forgiveness, but it had never been tangible to me. Of course my mom made me sit in a room with my sisters until we could stop fighting, apologize and forgive each other—but that was scripted, Tamee's apology was real, and so were the effects.

Our bond grew as she invited me to activities and parties. We hung out at school and on weekends, which led to years of genuine, sweet, passed-the-test friendship.

"I am still amazed by Tamee—and everyone," I said to Dad. "I feel like I have to get better—for them."

"And you will, Jo, you will," he said.

Dad couldn't see my watery eyes through the phone line, but he didn't need to. His own tears joined mine and together they mingled with our memories of the town and people we loved, half a continent away.

Chapter 21

The Purpose of My Path

“At some point in time, we all have to choose whether our wounds will define us, or refine us.”

~ Jodi Brown

June 1, 2009

A searing heat sliced through my head as if lightning had struck. My eyes shot open.

Too much pain. I shouldn't be awake yet. The procedure must not be over. Oh my gosh, close your eyes, close your eyes! Go back to sleep.

“Jodi. Jodi.” Hushed voices urged me to wake. Anesthesia still tingled in my veins. Rest was the only answer for the weight on my eyelids and the burning in my skull.

Minutes and hours seemed interchangeable. I woke again, the overhead lights dim.

A huddle of people stood at the other end of the room. A nurse in blue scrubs was talking. Her lips moved fast and she pointed toward me. She wore a ponytail, but wisps of hair fell around her face. Her eyes looked puffy, like she was ready for a long shift to end. Her nods and hand gestures made me think she was updating my family on my condition. I listened—but heard only garbled sounds.

A bolt pierced my brain, and my muscles tensed under the sheets.

Panicked, I searched the room for Tolan. He was there. He was always there. His brown eyes found mine. He hurried to my side and held my hand, but even his touch didn't provide the relief I needed.

Something must be wrong. The meds shouldn't have worn off already. I blinked again and forced the blurriness away. Focus.

My mind raced through the catalog of memories from my first brain surgery, searching for what was out of place. The oxygen machine beat softly like a rhythmic drum, and when accompanied by the steady *beep, beep, beep* of the heart-rate monitor, the harmony was not only tolerant, but comforting. The smell of ammonia stung my nose—sterile, but strong. Bright green numbers flashed my vitals on a screen near my bed. Cords dangled from the I.V. tower, twisted in a mass of confusion, rushing fluids into my body. It was all familiar. Everything but the excruciating pain.

A hand gently rubbed my leg. Her dark hair, small frame, and huge smile greeted me. *Mom*. Dad neared my bed, seeming larger than life. I saw their expectant expressions—I supposed they wanted to know if I was okay. Instead of responding, I turned away and tried to shut out the world.

“My head,” was all I managed to utter.

Had the doctors pounded spikes into my skull? One more crash of the mallet until my head split.

“Hi sweetie. You really hurting?” Tolan asked.

I nodded, grateful for the declaration I didn’t have to make. He turned to the nurse who was writing on a clipboard.

“She’s awake and in a lot of pain. Can you get her something fast?”

They exchanged brief words, and she left.

“Hold on for a few more minutes. It will get better soon, Jo.” Dad’s words soothed and reassured me.

Mom pulled at the matted hairs stuck to my face. Half a head of hair still left plenty of strands to get tangled during hours of medicated unconsciousness.

With each passing minute, the agony increased. Tolan disappeared from the room. I could easily visualize him pressing the nurse to hurry the process along.

The restrained sounds of the Neuro Intensive Care Unit grew louder and more intense. Voices amplified, and low whispers became high-pitched sentences with question-mark endings.

Tolan returned, flushed with his brow furrowed. Something was definitely wrong.

He spoke to my parents but did not include me in the conversation. He glanced my way, but only motioned to my figure in the bed. Then Mom and Dad scurried out.

He approached, and I begged Tolán for answers.

“Your surgery didn’t finish until late, and the docs have gone home for the night, but no one input medication orders into the computer before they left.” He paused. “The nurses know you need pain killer, but they can’t give it to you without a prescription from a doctor.”

“What time is it now?”

“Just after eight. We’re still working on it. Sorry.” Tolán squeezed my hand.

Tears trickled down my face as my family continued to plead for my relief. The staff could not override the system. Desperate calls were placed to the doctor, but still I waited, hour after hour.

Heat seemed to radiate from Tolán as he tried repeatedly to get anyone to right the wrong in the system. Mom’s face wrinkled, her hands frequently brushing my forehead and stroking my cheeks. Dad stayed calm but insistent as he vanished from the room every few minutes.

By the time the nurses brought the prescription, nearly four hours had passed since I’d first woken from surgery. The critical care nurse walked into the room with unwanted instructions.

“I know you want to stay, but the unit is normally closed to visitors at this time of night. Now that Jodi has meds, she will be fine. And you have to go,” she explained.

“Can we at least stay until we know she is okay?” Mom petitioned the nurse.

She shook her head. “Hospital rules. Sorry.”

She said she was sorry, but she didn’t look it. She turned and walked out of the room, her large frame and heavy steps emphasizing that she was a rule enforcer.

Tolán’s face tightened. ^[L]_{SEP}

“I’m not leaving. I don’t care what she says,” he declared.

My parents seemed unsure of what to do. Mom had planned to stay the night with me, but the nurse clearly denied her wish. They began gathering their belongings.

“We love you, Jo. We’ll be praying for you constantly. If anything happens, or you need anything, call my cell,” Dad said.

They took turns leaning over the bedrail to hug me. I wanted to assure them I was okay, but I couldn’t yet. They waved as they left.

Tolan’s determination kicked in, and he moved quickly through the room. He grabbed the few items he’d brought for the long day of waiting and piled them into his laptop bag.

The nurse’s feet shuffled outside the door. Tolán grabbed his bag and stepped quietly behind the floor-length privacy curtain that split the room in half. I glanced around, but there were no visible signs that Tolán hid in the room.

In seconds, the nurse reentered. She walked to the bed and watched the blood pressure cuff on my left arm inflate. She recorded the results, turned and walked past the end of the bed.

She grabbed the curtain’s edge and pulled it across the ceiling track until it hit the wall.

“You have to go. Now.” She stared him down. “I’ll call security if I have to.”

I could see the rise and fall of Tolán’s chest. He narrowed his eyes and gave her a look I’d never seen. His internal debate etched on his face. He wasn’t known to be a rule follower, especially when the rules didn’t make sense. But the nurse’s beady eyes, square shoulders, and hands on hips told us she wasn’t wavering.

Tolán picked up his bag and walked to me.

“I tried,” he whispered. “I won’t be gone long. I’ll be back first thing in the morning.” He held my hand and kissed my forehead. “Hopefully *the boss* will be gone by then. Sorry you feel so crummy. I love you.”

His shoulders sagged as he walked out of the room, defeated. I wanted to yell at the nurse for turning him away, but I did nothing.

She walked around and checked various monitors and cords. Satisfied, she went toward the door.

“You should get some relief soon. I’m going on break, so my

replacement will check on you in a while. If you need anything, you know what to do.” She pointed to the three emergency call buttons near my bed.

When the medication streamed through my veins, reprieve began, pulling me away from the brink of madness. I lay in bed, mentally and physically scarred, but rest eluding me.

Without warning, my body jumped, jolted by a horrible sound coming from down the hall. A young man howled as though his life were being stripped away. It started suddenly; like he’d been wheeled through the doors of an emergency room, but it did not end suddenly.

Silence is deafening in the critical care unit, but silence surpasses screams.

His shrieks pitched and moaned, a boat creaking through a fatal storm. His anguish cried out constantly, with no more than a breath’s break in between. I imagined his body arching, seized with pain. I tried to picture something else, anything else, but the eerie screeches chased all other thoughts away.

As much as my own pain haunted me, these terrifying sobs shook me even more.

Despite the urgency of my situation only ninety minutes earlier, no one came to check on me. I pressed the call button and waited, but my calls went unanswered. Without a response, I continued to push the button again and again. A woman in green scrubs finally appeared.

“Are you okay?” she inquired, breathless.

“I was doing better when the meds kicked in. But—then the screaming started,” I admitted. I asked what horrifying scene unfolded outside my door.

She tucked her wavy cherry hair behind her ear and breathed a long, heavy sigh.

“Let’s just say—it was a beautiful night for a motorcycle ride, but *some* people choose not to wear helmets.”

My eyes grew wide at her response.

“If you are alright, I need to get back to help,” she said. ^[SEP]

I nodded.

Those were the only words I ever heard on the topic. The rest of the night, I lay awake and listened to the screams as doctors raked rubble and rocks from his brain.

The dark age passed, and the yelling finally stopped. The quiet haunted me more than the screams.

Despite a second dose of medications, sleep continued to elude me. Each clock tick aroused a greater sense of anticipation. How would the stranger feel when he realized a simple choice nearly cost him his life? Or would he even live long enough to regret his decision?

The cruel reality of choice.

My heart rate machine beeped faster. Tears welled up, the dam about to burst. Weeks of frustration, of fighting for life, spilled out in waves of sobs. The night dragged on and dragged me with it. My mind held me hostage until finally I gave up fighting the insomnia. I laced my hands at my chest and just prayed he would live.

Chapter 22

No Way Back

“I’ve journeyed farther down the road than I ever thought I would. I’ve seen things I never thought I’d see. Can’t turn around now, even if I wanted to.”

~ Jodi Brown

The second brain surgery did not magically end my life and death struggle as I had hoped. But the haunting night transformed my built-up frustration and pain into purpose. The motorcyclist reminded me that all actions have consequences, many times unintended ones. I decided to be more deliberate with my decisions—starting with my health.

Sadly, my body missed the memo. No physical change mimicked my mental one. No matter how much I willed my body, I did not improve.

We waited again to see if the cerebrospinal fluid leak sealed successfully. My family hoped, and the doctors predicted the procedure had remedied the problem.

A doctor opened the lumbar drain again to track the fluid output. Interpreting data on the daily outtake would determine whether fluid still leaked in my brain.

Waiting hurt.

Dad had long since formed a routine. Each day after he arrived, at lunch, and then again before he left, he read me the notes from the blog. In between, he worked on his laptop and watched over me. That day, I needed the messages more than usual.

“Wow, Jodi. You just continue along, tougher than ever. One thing I noticed is how incredibly beautiful you still are through all of this. It’s wonderful to see the love you have for your children (photos of you with them made me cry) and the beautiful smile that you continue to share. You are an inspiration to me. Actually, you’ve been an inspiration to my whole family. Hang in there, my friend! We will continue to keep you in our prayers and hope that things continue to heal properly. – Michelle Bocchino”

I pictured her beautiful family and tried to sit up a little for Michelle.

“Oh, here’s a good one!” The love and excitement came through in Dad’s sing-songy voice.

“Jodi, don’t ever doubt how AMAZING you are! You truly are beautiful inside and out. The Davis family is continuing to pray and fast for your family and you. We love you! Keep on looking forward to a bright and happy future--this will pass! LOVE YOU! Cami Davis”

“I don’t feel amazing right now, but Cami would never lie.” I grinned at Dad.

By day’s end, chunky fluid spewed from my mouth and nose until nausea medication quelled the waves of retching. But that didn’t calm my head. A piercing agony pounded in my skull.

After a full workday by my side, Dad left for the night. Tolan arrived shortly after Dad departed; they had a good system. He first stood by my bed, and then sat, and finally he lay in the recliner. No one in the acute care unit kicked him out, so he stayed with me through much of that terrible night. He held my hand, ran his fingers through my hair and rubbed my back, but sadly, he could do nothing to cure me. He left sometime before I woke the next morning.

“Hi, hon. I’m on my way to work. Is your dad there yet?” he asked.

With only a few hours of highly interrupted sleep, I couldn’t imagine how he still managed to go to work.

“Not yet, but he called and said he’s on his way. Mom is coming

with him.”

“Good. I’m glad they will be with you.

I left between one-thirty and two a.m. I can never sleep in hospitals. I finally gave up and went home. Are you any better today?”

I could not lie—not to Tolan. “No, you’re not,” he said.

The hospital telephone rang, an infrequent occurrence since most people called my cell.

“Hello.”

“Hey, Jodi,” the caller said, his accent a unique blend of southern drawl and eastern education.

I recognized his deep voice and deliberate speech from his first word.

“This is Brad.”

He drew out the *a*, as usual, so his name sounded like *Braad*, more than Brad. I smiled at that.

“Who is it?” Mom inquired, her eyebrows drawn in suspicion. “It’s Brad—Brad White.”^{[L] [SEP]}

I clarified to differentiate between him and my cousin Brad, as my excitement was great at hearing from either.^{[L] [SEP]}

“Hi, how are you?” The words rushed from my mouth.^{[L] [SEP]}

“Me?” he chuckled, “how are you?”^{[L] [SEP]}

I pictured Brad as if he stood in front of me. Tall with broad shoulders, he modeled the same smoky brown hair he’d had since kindergarten, though it’d gone through varying lengths and styles over the years. He’d grown it out the minute we graduated high school—something he hadn’t done earlier out of obedience and respect for his parents. His ponytail outlasted roommates, girlfriends, apartments and other phases of life. But in the vision in my room, his short hair fell haphazardly across his forehead. He looked handsome without trying because he was Brad—and never pretended to be anyone else.

Different as night and day, Brad and I became close when everyone in elementary school cliqued. When junior high threatened

to separate all of us, we sorted through the crowds and the new kids and fought to stay friends. By high school, we cemented our friendship. Brad starred as my first date, my prom date, my confidant and best friend. We shared a locker and hung out after Friday night football games, as long as neither of us was dating someone else at that moment. Our relationship was natural and easy, yet complex.

“I’ve been reading the blog. Man, sounds like you’ve been through hell already. I think if I were there, I’d have busted you out by now,” he declared.

“If you come bust me out, I might just leave.”

He laughed and so did I. The chitchat continued until a natural pause in the conversation. We hesitated, and I knew why. Time had a way of passing too quickly and it could be years before we spoke again. Amongst our goodbyes, we uttered promises we knew we wouldn’t keep.

One phone call. Ten minutes. Enough time to give me hope for the day.

Despair reeked.

The acrid aroma stemmed from a combination of sterile cleaners and latex gloves mixed with open wounds, sweat, and urine. Worse than normal hospital smells, despair was both undeniable and unforgettable. Daily mopping and changing sheets didn’t make a difference when the diagnosis was despair. No amount of washing could remove the pungent odors of lost hope.

The mannequins occupying the rooms of despair stared at the TV or at blank hospital walls for hours on end. Their faces didn’t change, even when the show did.

Tolan pushed my wheelchair past an open door, and I witnessed despair’s treachery firsthand. Mummy bandages coiled her head, like mine, but no living emotion showed in her eyes or face. I knew that emptiness. I’d had to leave the world and dive into myself at times, just to survive—but I imagined my experience didn’t look like hers. I watched her for several days, looking in every time I passed. Did her solitude cause the despair, or did the despair drive guests away?

My large family's strong social network meant many guests visited as tribute to my parents more than me. But my Neuro Unit neighbor remained alone. Whether it was because of proximity or circumstance was unclear, but as I waved and smiled at her, her eyes turned away, and a negative feeling hit me in the chest. She invited no kindness, even from a fellow sufferer.

The longer I was hospitalized, the more instances of despair I saw. When I looked in these rooms, my gut ached. I passed them again and again, but never stopped.

The next morning, a tall girl with long brown hair pulled into a stringy ponytail tromped toward my bed.

"I'm here to shower you," she announced. ^[SEP]

She hadn't even told me her name. ^[SEP]

"You can't get me up—my head!" ^[SEP]

"I know, the nurse manager brought over a shower bed to use."

A man in scrubs appeared and pushed a thin foam and plastic mattress on wheels into the room. Together they lifted me onto the cool, slick surface, and then the girl taped plastic bags over the I.V.s stringing from my arm. The man rolled the shower bed and the girl dragged the I.V. tower alongside. We entered a large bathing room—not a bathroom. There was no toilet, only a large bathtub and gangly pipes with a variety of showerheads. The cold tiled room sent goose bumps popping up over my body.

The man left and closed the door. The ponytailed girl turned on the faucet, and water sprayed through a long hose and out the showerhead. She let the water hit the wall as she unsnapped my gown and tossed it to the floor. Next she went to the bottom of the bed and tugged my underwear down my legs and into a bag.

I lay naked on the plastic bed, shivering.

Without a word, or even a towel so I could cover myself, she grabbed the hose and sprayed. The water streamed only enough to shower a little of me at a time, yet my whole body lay exposed. I shuddered in the cool air. Her mechanical movements made me feel as if I were no more than a car at a car wash.

My dignity spiraled down the drain with the rushing water. I wanted to curl up in a ball, to cover and protect myself, but I didn't. Instead I shut my eyes and tried to ward off the humiliation and splashing water. Too weak to move, or even talk, I just lay there and quivered. She hung up the water hose, grabbed a stick with a loofah on the end, and pumped foamy soap out of a bottle and dripped it onto my bare skin. She pushed the soap around with the loofah brush, never personally touching me in the process.

She sprayed me again, and the water streamed off my torso, then she aimed the hose at my hips and legs.

All the humanity I had left washed away with my tears and the cold water.

I folded my arms over my chest. "Ca-can I get a towel?"

She stopped, and a *humph* escaped her mouth. She dropped the hose and crossed the room, grabbed a single towel, walked back, and tossed it at me. I took the towel and tried to wrap the upper half of my body. Cool water pooled under my back, but at least part of me was covered.

A few minutes later the water stopped, and she dried her own hands, then got another towel for me. I attempted to maneuver the towel around the rest of my body, but the I.V. tethered me in place. She grabbed the towel, unfolded it and laid it over me.

The door opened, and the same man walked in and pushed the bed to my room. He helped her lift my toweled body to the bed, and he left again. The girl closed the door and grabbed my underwear from a drawer. I was still trying to dry off when she slid the clothes on over my wet limbs. I hurried to dry my torso so my gown wouldn't also be wet. She peeled the tape and plastic bags off my I.V. and then snapped the gown around my neck. It may as well have been a noose.

The process took about fifteen minutes, and the girl said nothing from the time she announced she was going to shower me. She tromped out just as she came. My soaking hair drenched the pillow. My underclothing stuck to me. The bedding had been changed and I scooted underneath, but still shivered inside the covers. Without my dignity, I was nothing.

“Can we weigh her?” Mom asked the nurse. “She is looking tinier every day, and she wasn’t big to begin with.”

“Yes, of course.”

I glanced at my body. Bones pushed through my thin skin, creating gaunt hands. No wonder she worried.

The nurse reset the scale on the side of the bed. I didn’t even have to move to get an answer. “Hmm, she’s dropped below 100 pounds. That’s not good.”

My mom shook her head. Clearly she had already known. The nurse increased the I.V. fluids to keep me from dehydrating.

“If the leak is sealed, you’ll be able to go home within a few days.”

The doctor’s words from a week earlier reverberated in my mind, taunting me.

I tried to focus on willing my body to heal the spinal fluid leak, but I had no energy left to apply to the task. Something stirred within me, beyond the leak, which zapped me of any remaining strength.

Pain highways branched from my head into my neck and shoulders. Muscles hardened in place, stiffening like a corpse. When the doctors did their rounds, I listed my new symptoms. Almost hourly the catalog grew.

Tolan took his shift at my bedside. Dr. Shelton checked on me and told him to watch for spinal meningitis—a dangerous possibility after tinkering with the brain. Tolan asked what indicators to look for. As the doctor ticked off the list, I shuddered.

After Dr. Shelton left, I rifled through the list again.

“Tolan, I have spinal meningitis. That’s what it is. Has to be,” I whispered. Anything more required too much energy. “You have to tell them.”

By the doctor’s next visit, half my body was rigid. A slow progression of death disengaged my muscles and organs.

I breathed relief when the doctors tested for spinal meningitis. The test usually requires a spinal tap, but with a lumbar drain already in place, a simple fluid sample was sent to the lab.

Finally, an easy test. I silently begged for a positive result. At least then, the enemy would be known.

Another day heightened the nausea and tightened my limbs.

The energetic blonde female resident entered. She grinned, but with only half a smile.

“Well, the good news is you don’t have spinal meningitis. That one is a bugger, so we can be glad about that.”

I closed my eyes, waiting for the waves to drown me. [SEP]

“Okay, so what’s the bad news?” Tolan asked [SEP]

“We still don’t know the cause of all the additional symptoms. It could be her body’s way of cocooning itself after surgery and the weeks of leaks, but her symptoms are unusual for that, even extreme.

“However, Dr. Shelton and Dr. Couldwell agree that we should start a course of triple antibiotics—right now. These heavy, powerful meds treat meningitis, but hopefully they will also treat the cause of Jodi’s symptoms. Dr. Couldwell would tell you himself, but he is in clinic all day. He wanted to get these started, and he’ll check in later.”

She walked out of the room to set the new course of action. Tolan stared at me, lips pursed.

“No spinal meningitis. I guess we just have to let the antibiotics do their job and hope they work,” he said. “Sorry. I know you want answers. I wish I had them.”

Chapter 23

At Odds

“Everyone needs a savior sometime.”^{f l }}_{SEP}

~ Jodi Brown

Survivor. The word had captured my attention as I’d flipped through the magazine years earlier. A photo of a bald woman wearing a pink pin on her chalk-white blouse revealed the story. Breast Cancer. I read the article and landed again on that singular term. Survivor.

Without knowing why, my mind had left the glossy pages in my hand and traveled far away. A full daydream filled my thoughts. Pushing my way through thick brush, I cleared a path until I came to a suitable spot. Using a walking stick I’d found along the way, I hacked at small branches until they fell to the ground. I wove shelter walls and a sleeping mat out of gangly green twigs and rods.

The mossy wetness on one side of the tree denoted north. I built my lean-to on the opposite side to take advantage of the sun. Wild grasses padded the stick mattress atop the dirt. When I was hungry, I trekked to a nearby stream and caught crawdads. The exoskeletons cracked as I jerked them back in my hands. The meat was meager, but the creek overflowed with critters. The mountain spring water quenched my thirst and cleansed my hands and body. In the dream, I conquered every challenge I faced. If I were lost or abandoned in a forest, I would survive.

Maybe it was because I grew up in the woods, but every time I thought about strength and endurance, I imagined trying to outlast the elements. The popular reality television show likely enhanced the

childhood scenario in my mind, solidifying that idea. Survival meant maximizing your brain and your body. In all of my dreams, I'd been strong enough to make it.

But in the hospital, I learned the truth: ^{L}_{SEP}You can't become a survivor until you have to survive. ^{L}_{SEP}

Lying in bed, my eyes shut and body still, that awareness settled in my chest. The quiet of the present enveloped me and I longed to be in the woods, eavesdropping on the chirping crickets, the twittering robins and the buzzing dragonflies and mosquitoes. I yearned to feel the crunch of dried leaves and twigs beneath my feet and smell the soil, the life, even the decay. The trees reaching toward heaven meant that I could never be that lost, for I was still amidst God's creations. In the forest, I knew I could live.

My own battle for life unrolled far differently than those I played out in my mind. In my dreams, I'd had control—at least some. There, in the Neuro Unit, I turned into a practice dummy for poking, prodding and experimenting. Life, and all its decisions, seemed out of my hands.

The thought occurred to me that I was just a prop. One room. One bed. One patient. If I were not in that bed, another body would be. The goal was to help me, but only so I could move out and someone else could move in.

No, I am not invisible.

The only differentiation between my room and every other room in the massive facility was a hand-written label on the door.

BROWN.

Dad posted it on the door of any room I occupied. Not exactly a welcome sign, it still surpassed the other doors with just numbers. It symbolized that life existed beyond the doorway. The paper reminded me I was still alive, even barely.

Surviving was not so simple after all.

A voice sounded in my mind. "Remember, you can't have a miracle if you don't need a miracle."

My Guide.

The difference between being a survivor and being a miracle is that a miracle means someone else does the saving. Perhaps I needed

to be both.

On Thursday, three days after my second craniotomy, a neurosurgery resident turned the lumbar drain off again. The closed position would force my body to regulate itself, and we'd know if the leak had sealed.

If successful, I'd be able to elevate my head and move into a sitting position. The wait was on.

Tolan left work early to be with me when the doctor came. Dr. Couldwell arrived at the end of the business day. The pain gripped me—I couldn't sit, so he gently rolled me to my side for the usual spinal fluid leak test. I think we all held our breath for half a minute, as we waited—and hoped—to see nothing.

I knew before they did. The fluid flowed through my nasal cavity before it dripped out my nose.

Dr. Couldwell shook his head. He excused himself and walked into the hall, carrying the wet tissue as evidence of the disappointment.

My shoulders and chest heaved and moans arose through my cries. The movement sent additional shockwaves through my body, but the distress overpowered the pain. Little could be said, so Tolán just crawled on top of the blankets and held me in his arms. My cries cycled from sobs to whimpers for over an hour. He stayed strong enough to hold both of us together while our world fell apart.

Tears washed away some of the frustrations, anger, disbelief and hopelessness. My fear, however, remained in a deep reservoir inside.

Dr. Couldwell returned and showed a pursed grin at the sight of Tolán next to me in bed. He let out a long breath before he started.

"The presence of fluid could mean the build-up of CSF in the nasal cavity before the surgery hasn't had a chance to leak out yet." He looked right at me. "Since you've been on your back since the procedure, the liquid may not have been able to escape."

He glanced toward the floor then turned to Tolán. "However, there is a good chance the leak continues. The only sure way to solve this is to surgically plug the Eustachian tube, either by going through the ear or the nose. At Jodi's young age, going through the ear isn't a great option—it would permanently cut off hearing in that ear."

Tolan tightened his grip around my shoulders.

“Going through the nose has fewer potential side effects, but it is still an experimental procedure, and there is only one person trained to even try,” Dr. Couldwell explained.

“But would that seal the leak—for good?” Tolan pressed.

“Either option should seal the leak. It is now about weighing the potential risks. Of course, my hope is that the leak seals on its own. There is still a chance surgery won’t be needed. Only once in my career have we had to seal the Eustachian tube to plug a leak.”

Just as Dr. Couldwell finished explaining the procedure and possibilities, Dr. Shelton walked in.

“I heard the news,” he stated.

News traveled fast in the hospital. Tolan affirmed his statement with a nod. “Dr. Couldwell explained the Eustachian tube procedures to us.”

“My colleague, Dr. Richard Orlandi—he’s the one who would likely perform surgery through the nose, if it gets to that point. He’s the only surgeon in the country who’s successfully completed this new, less invasive method to seal the Eustachian tube,” Dr. Shelton explained. “If it comes down to surgery—well, let’s just say you’d be one in a million, Jodi.”

“So you’re telling me I’m not normal?” I said with the best sarcasm I could offer.

“Normal doesn’t begin to describe you.” Dr. Shelton smiled.

“*I’ve* been trying to tell you that for years.” Tolan winked at me and squeezed my shoulder.

Whatever normal was, I had to admit, I wasn’t it.

Dad heard the results over the phone. He’d been packing to leave for Hawaii. Both my mother and brother were graduating from college, so he planned to go back for the weekend celebration, with the hope that our next meeting would be in the comforts of my home.

Mom did not return to Hawaii for her own graduation. Even after she’d put off finishing her education for thirty years to raise her family, spent hours on research papers, juggled student and family

life, she didn't fly home to don the cap and gown and walk in the processional ceremony. The rest of our family gathered across the sea for the commencement she chose not to attend. Guilt settled in my chest. Mom settled in at my bedside.

Caressing my hand, she took over the roles of primary caregiver, head nurse, and information specialist. With Kay, my kind mother-in-law, at home with the children, my mother readied to stay with me through the continuing challenge.

"This is where I want to be, Jodi. I am glad to be graduating, I am proud of myself for finishing, but that is just school."

Tears slipped down my face. Warmth radiated inside me. Safe in her care, guilt at bay, I tried to sleep away a new onset of queasiness and pain.

On Friday, Mom stayed with me while Tolan spent the day with the kids. His company hosted its annual party at a local amusement park, and we all knew they could use a day of normalcy and fun.

The longer I lay there, the less I wanted to be awake. My body wandered on a different track than my mind. Consciousness required more energy than I had. Sleep and medication won.

Dr. Couldwell had checked on me earlier in the day and Mom had reported the nausea and increase on my pain scale. When he returned with his resident assistant, they entered quietly, checked the lumbar drain and studied the charts and monitors.

"Are you feeling any better? Have your symptoms calmed?" the doctor inquired.

"No," I whispered, still half asleep.

He moved a stool near my bedside and sat down, close to my head.

"Here, let's have you turn and make sure nothing drips out."

He placed his hands on my shoulder and head to help me turn for the simple test. Searing pain sliced through my head, neck, and shoulder.

"DON'T!" I yelled as my eyes shot open. "Don't touch my head!"

My muscles tensed, bracing my head. I exerted all of my strength in my plea.

Dr. Couldwell jerked back, his mouth open a bit, though he remained calm. The resident was less practiced at hiding his emotions. Both wore stunned expressions and flushed cheeks.

"I'm sorry," Dr. Couldwell said. "Clearly that is uncomfortable for you. We'll wait on the test for now."

He got up from the bed and jotted something down. [SEP]

"I think she's getting worse," Mom said. [SEP]

"Yes, I'm not sure why the antibiotics aren't doing their job. We are still looking into other possibilities, but we don't have any answers yet. I will let you know if anything comes up. Please alert me to the same."

Mom nodded she would.

Soft whimpers escaped me, so I averted my eyes from the doorway. Mom knelt close and caressed my head.

"I'm so sorry, Jo," she said. "I wish I could do something."

She fought back tears; I heard it in her voice. I was not the only one who was suffering. Until that moment, she seemed stalwart in her belief that everything would be okay. But facing her, I noticed her shoulders had dropped and her body slumped. Her inner strength was waning.

Quiet settled into the room until the heaving started again. Mom grabbed the plastic tub, but I couldn't even sit up. I turned my head enough to deposit at least half the vomit in the bucket. After the lurches stopped, Mom exchanged the plastic tub for a warm washcloth. She wiped my mouth and forehead, and then tried to comb my hair.

"I'll call a nurse to shower you to get the vomit out of your hair and gown."

"No," I moaned.

She rinsed the cloth and started again. Her breathing became more audible every minute.

Worn out from the late night at the amusement park, Tolan stayed home with the kids on Saturday, trying to be a family.

Mom stayed the night on the foldout chair in the room. To my

knowledge, she didn't step out of the room once. I slept under the watchful eye of my protector.

Familiar voices sounded right next to me. I slept with an eye patch on my right eye, but even my left eye would not open. I had no energy to speak. My brain rushed to decipher what was happening, and my focus turned to the sounds in the room. I imagined the faces until a clear picture appeared in my mind.

Brandi sat close to my bed, talking to my mom. They discussed me but didn't speak to me. The weight in my chest and on my eyes was too heavy to push off.

They visited for several minutes. Mom asked Brandi how she was doing, how her twin girls were.

"The girls are great," Brandi whispered. She hesitated before responding. "They are growing so fast. They are best friends, but definitely have individual personalities. Brooklyn is smaller and darker; she looks just like Abbey did."

Abbey. Brandi's angel Abbey.

When I heard Abbey's name, I wondered if I would meet her soon in heaven.

Part of me longed to hug Brandi and show my gratitude for her visit. I visualized her blonde hair and contagious smile as she spoke. Their chat continued and I realized I wasn't really there with them.

The voices faded. I retreated inside my body and hoped the confusion would pass.

Minutes—or hours—passed. My mind woke again. I struggled to open my eyes but couldn't.

"Mom, are you there?"

Papers ruffled and a hand rested on top of mine, through the blanket on my bed.

"I'm right here, sweetie. Are you okay?"

I didn't know how to answer. The stiffness had traveled down from my shoulders and into my arms and sides. Massages and gentle rubs no longer helped; the pain went too deep.

Inside my body was shutting down and hardening—rigor mortis. It confused me; I thought that didn't happen until after you died.

But those were things I could not say to my mom. ^[T]_[SEP]

“Do you need anything, Jo?”^[1]_{SEP}

“No.”^[1]_{SEP}

Neither of us spoke again. Her hand moved to my hair and forehead. She took cool cloths and wiped my brow. Either I was sweating or I had a fever—I suspected the latter. Her presence calmed my heart long enough to drift back into oblivion.

Sometime later, she patted my hand and whispered, “Jo, hon, can you hear me?”

I grunted the affirmative.

“I’m going home to Orem to shower and rest up. I’ll be back tomorrow, okay?”

“Time is it?” I choked.

“Getting late, about ten-thirty. You’ve slept a lot today—that’s good, hopefully it means the antibiotics are working, helping your body heal,” she reassured me. “So, I’ll see you tomorrow, probably early afternoon. Love you.”

“You, too,” I replied.

I thought I heard her blow me a kiss as she left.

Chapter 24

The Beyond

“Every man must do two things alone; ^{first} he must do
his own believing and his own dying.”

~Martin Luther

June 7, 2009

Sunday I awoke, and my eyes actually opened. The room appeared distant, as if I were behind a camera. I sensed a disconnect. Where I had once been totally aware of every machine, beep and prick, I no longer felt involved. My body remained in the picture, yet I was behind the lens at the same time.

The weekend guy walked in and drew more blood than usual. I watched vial after vial fill until an entire tray of my blood was neatly packed and labeled, ready for the lab. I didn't even feel the needle poke my arm.

Next came the nurse, who prepped me for an anti-seizure shot in my abdomen. Not my favorite injection. After so many weeks of shots, faded pink circles about four millimeters around had created train tracks across the whole front of my stomach. My boys could have raced Hot Wheels side-by-side over the extensive path.

“We’re running out of room on your tiny tummy here, so I’m gonna roll you over a bit so we can start on your side,” the nurse informed me. “These work best in certain locations, so we need to stay with your midsection. Sorry, I’ve heard these shots are thick and painful, but they seem to be doing their job, so we need to keep at it.”

I didn't answer, but she pushed my hip up without any

movement to my head. She found a fresh spot on my side and plunged me with the poison.

She called it medication, but I knew it was toxic, too—otherwise the other hundred marks would have gone away.

The needle forced the gel solution into me, but I suffered no pain. My body felt increasingly empty, as if the meds and I.V.s were sucking the life out of me instead of into me.

She gently laid me back down and tucked the sheets around my shoulders, arms, and legs.

“Oh, your sheets are wet.” She grabbed the covers from the bottom of the bed and lifted them all at once.

“I’m so sorry, Jodi, I wish one of us had noticed sooner—your catheter broke and leaked all over the bed. I’ll hurry and get someone in here to help me clean you up and change your sheets.”

The nurse left the room and returned with a familiar CNA. Minutes later new sheets tucked under my body, yet I remained frozen.

I hadn’t even noticed the wetness on my legs and bed.

The morning blurred by. No Mom, no Dad, no Tolan. No university student visitors. No guests at all. It was better that way. I just needed to be alone.

Hours passed. I became acutely aware of my internal system but more detached from my surroundings. As if examining my body under a microscope, I saw every rush of blood after my heart pumped and pushed life-saving antibiotics through miles of vein and artery highways. The triple-antibiotic treatment flowed through me, but it seemed everything got lost between two hives of activity—my head and my heart—where all focus appeared intense at simply keeping me alive.

Will my heart stop first? Or will my brain finally power down—tell my body it’s over and all the systems will shut off at once?

Through all these thoughts, my lungs filled and emptied repeatedly, though the process seemed labored and slow.

I heard Tolan and Mom talking to each other as they entered the room, so I forced my eyes open.

At the foot of my bed stood a new I.V. tower, with cords

stringing into both feet. I looked to my right and saw another tower, my usual, still chained to my arm. A glance to my left showed yet another, the tubes running into my left arm.

The four towers trapped me on every side. I hadn't been conscious when the nurse attached small hoses to my arm and feet, but the medical scenario echoed what I felt inside. I was dying.

In the last twenty-four hours, I'd vomited on my hair, chest and gown, had catheters break and laid in my own urine. But these facts seemed the least of anyone's concerns. Since my mother's offer to wash my hair, no one had ordered, asked or even offered to bathe me. I was dry, but far from clean. The indifference to my outward physical demise spoke as another sign.

Nausea rumbled my gut and shooting pain traveled from my head to the rigid pathways in my body.

I turned my head to the edge of the bed—Mom dropped her purse and grabbed a plastic pail just in time to catch the only thing left in my body to come out—medicated fluid and chunks of pills.

When the heaving stopped, my head went back to my pillow and I tried to right myself. Tolan sat down and took a package out of his bag. The smile on his face looked like a faded mask, but his voice was upbeat. "You've got mail!"

He tore the wrapping off the box and lifted each item so I could see the contents. A bag of dried mangos emerged first, followed by a box of chocolate-covered macadamia nuts. Then he pulled out a plastic case.

"Looks like a video. Let's watch it," he said.

He opened the armoire doors that hid the DVD player and inserted the disc. The sounds of *aloha* filled the room as videos of swaying palm trees filled the screen.

"Aloha from your *obana* at the Polynesian Cultural Center," called the group of costumed dancers on the screen. They held a large sign that read, "Get well soon, Jodi!"

I'd been retreating deep into my body for days, but the sights and sounds of the islands pulled me out of my inner trance. My father's job as the CEO of the Polynesian Cultural Center (PCC) meant Hawaii was more than a tourist stop for us—it was a second

home. My parents' house on Naniloa Loop, right across from the PCC and just a quarter mile from the beach, was Grandma and Grandpa Orgill's house to my children, the only home they had ever known for their grandparents. To them, the PCC starred as the biggest, most spectacular playground they could ever ask for. The beautiful giving Polynesian people, the spirit of *aloha* and the smell of salty ocean water lapping against the sandy beaches of Oahu had become part of us. Hawaii represented a place of welcome, love and family.

Mom pointed to our dear friend on the screen. One after another, the faces and voices of people we loved appeared before our eyes.

"*Bula-vinaca* from Fiji. We love you, Jodi! Get well soon!" The eyes of the dark-skinned Fijians shone brightly as their beautiful spirits lit up the television.

"*Talofa*, Jodi. Love and best wishes from the islands of Samoa." I recognized the Samoan Chief as he waved into the camera and flashed his incredible, friendly smile. Dancers, servers, custodial workers, tour guides, and grounds keepers surrounded him, all holding signs and well wishes.

I looked at Tolan, his eyes transfixed on the screen. His hand repeatedly dipped into the bag of dried mangos. He saw me stare and answered the question I didn't ask.

"I'm only going to eat a few. Dried mangos are my favorite. Do you want some?"

"No." A small chuckle escaped my throat, the first moment of joy I'd felt in days. I realized for a moment how good it felt to see him happy. His pleasure, even the tiniest bit, lifted me. I turned back to the TV and watched scenes of love unfold to the sounds of the Hawaiian version of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow."

The timing of the package's arrival could not have been coincidence. At one of my darkest moments, it hit me again that the sun was still shining somewhere.

Purple pansies, Easter lilies, butter and snow colored daisies, and

rosy alstroemerias decorated my room. The last time I'd seen so many flowers had been at my grandmother's funeral.

Despite living in a tropical sanctuary, respite receded as an ocean tide. Quiet pervaded the halls and corridors surrounding my room. Few bodies passed my door and fewer entered. Aloha faded, and I retreated farther inside myself.

The body I inhabited no longer felt like mine. My systems continued to disconnect from my awareness and control. They seemed to shut down, one at a time, leaving only a worn shell.

So this is what it feels like to die.

I did not give up. I simply realized it was no longer my choice. For months, I had done everything anyone told me to do. I trusted the doctors, agreed to every test, submitted my body to every poke and procedure—and waited for results.

Tolan and Mom stayed by my side. Mom made hushed phone calls with a worried look on her face. The phone in room 504 rang. I supposed word of my deteriorating condition had spread to my family, all of whom were gathered in Hawaii, where we should have been. Tolani had cancelled our tickets when we realized our little family would not be able to make the grand trip, no matter how big the celebration. Mom held the phone up to my ear.

"Jo, I know it's hard," Tami said, "but promise me you'll keep fighting. Be s-strong." Her voice cracked.

In Tami's dreams, I hadn't been strong enough. In her dreams, I didn't live to keep fighting. She and my sister, Kristi, both dreamt of my death, though neither wanted to admit or talk about it. They still hoped their nightmares were not visions. I wondered how they had known before me.

I groaned into the phone, so Tami would know I was there, but for the first time, I did not make any promises.

"We need you. Your family needs you—your kids need their mother. Please, Jo, hang on," she pleaded.

I could hear the desperation in her voice, even from 3,000 miles away.

"Don't know if I can, Tam." I knew her fears were becoming reality—but it was no longer my fight to win.

My family will all be an ocean away when it happens. They won't see me until it is too late.

The strange symptoms continued to bore into my brain and spread through my body. Two nurses came in with a bedpan and asked me to sit up a little—it had been too long since I'd had a bowel movement. With one on each side of me, they tried to sit me up so my legs hung over the edge of the bed. The very movement made me collapse onto the bed.

"Sorry," I moaned. "Can't do it."

The kind nurse with the frizzy auburn hair laid me back down and covered me up. Then she lifted my backside and slid the pan under my bottom.

"See if you can try," she pleaded.

I knew it was no use. If I pushed my body in any way, it would push back and the game would be over.

The metal pan stayed under my bottom for over an hour, straining my back as I attempted to hold myself in position.

Just as I had known, nothing changed.

The nurse returned, removed the bedpan and tucked my gown back under my body. My humanity left faster each minute. Diminished to a rag doll, dressed, undressed, and positioned by every person in scrubs that entered the room.

The quiet in my head grew louder, and the growing buzz in the room dimmed.

When Dad's call came, Mom's face paled. She glanced at me with a heartbroken but loving smile and left the room. When he'd gone home for my brother's graduation only a few days earlier, we'd both hoped I'd be out of the hospital by the time he returned. Mom returned a moment later and handed me the phone.

Dad spoke slower and lower than usual. He reminded me that my Grandma Lisenbee watched over me. Then he said, "I'm leaving here soon, catching the red eye flight. I'll see you in the morning, Jo."

When I heard his plans, my mind drifted back to a humid

summer day in 1981. In a moment of near panic, Dad scanned the surface of the pond looking for the familiar pink cheeks, brown eyes and blonde hair playing happily in the water. What he saw frightened him beyond his greatest imagination. He did not see the big smile of his little girl, laughing and splashing in the pond; he saw only a few locks of golden hair floating on top of the water. As he ran from his spot on the shore, hoping and praying to get there in time, he saw the top of her tiny head bobbing up and down, but never high enough for his young daughter to get any air.

He ran to the edge and jumped into the water, half-swimming, half-running to her. Everyone around him seemed oblivious to his panic and her disappearance. He trudged through the murky water, stirring up mud and debris. He swam around dozens of others playing in the pond. The 4th of July party celebration ended and the battle started.

When he finally reached the spot, he reached under the water and pulled her head and body up, pleading aloud for her to breathe.

Coughing up a mouthful of water, she grabbed his arm, scared but alive.

I'd heard the story a few times before; each told with my father's profound, tearful gratitude that I'd lived through the terrifying event years earlier.

As I listened to Dad on the phone in the hospital, I realized the outcome of his race to save my life would not end the same way. He wanted to grab me out of the water and see the life come back into my face again, but *this* time, he would be too late. The next morning he would see my body, but I would be gone.

"Hang in there, Jo, I love you. I'll see you in a few hours," he said.

All I could say to the first man in my life was, "I love you. Know that I love you."

Tears ran down Mom's face. Dad said goodbye; she placed the phone on the table, and then laid her hand in mine. She caressed my palm, wiped my head and whispered to hang on.

My mother sat next to me, but I lay fading from life, far from my own children. Images of Trenden, Lindi, Casen, and Daven

engrossed my mind. When I'd last seen them, we'd snuggled together watching an animated movie in my room. After they'd left, I found popcorn in nooks of the bed for days. But in that moment, I didn't know if they sat quietly reading books with Grandma Brown, or if they were running around the living room like they did the day when London Bridge came crashing down on us. I only knew I would not get to say goodbye, nor would they. I wouldn't get to hold them in my arms, kiss their foreheads or whisper, "I love your face," one last time.

Two months earlier, Tolan had cried in the car, wondering how, decades before, his Grandpa Pringle had delivered the news of his wife's death to their children. I'd told him then that it wouldn't happen to us. I was wrong.

I didn't want to envision the scene when Tolan had to break the news.

The irony hit me that perhaps death would serve as my final lesson in learning I couldn't control life.

Air crept into my lungs through my nose, but I couldn't get enough to fill my chest. I didn't see angels or Grandma Lisenbee coming to greet me, but surely, the end was near.

Suddenly, all fear of death fled my mind. Dying would soothe away my troubles, as long as I knew I had really lived.

I pictured my children, Dad, and siblings next to Tolan and Mom at my bedside. Some languages and cultures feature many forms of the word love. I needed all of them to encompass the feelings of my heart.

I've loved deeply and unconditionally. Surely I have lived deeply, too.

Mom's words woke me from my thoughts. "Hold on—we'll get through this."

Who was she trying to convince?

Mom smiled, patted my hand, and placed it gently in Tolan's. Then she walked out. Even from the hallway I heard her loud exhale and gasp for air.

I don't remember any words Tolan said to me. He may have spoken, or perhaps he sat in silence. Bloodshot eyes matched his sallow face. The grief would be his. The regret from leaving him

would be mine. Forever.

Even in my sadness, I could not squeeze tears from an empty canteen.

“I love you. Know that I love you. Just know that I love you.”

The phrase I uttered to my father minutes before held the only words with meaning in that moment. I repeated the expression hundreds of times, though only a few were vocal. How could loving someone hurt so much?

Please. He must understand—I’m not choosing to leave him.

Whether my heart sped up or slowed down, I could no longer tell. But whatever happened inside signaled me that only seconds remained. I had nothing left to give. The fight was over.

It seemed a contradiction that I was ready to go, yet not ready to leave.

I never thought it would end this way.

Tolan still held my hand—he didn’t know it was time. I guessed if he knew, he’d have climbed onto the bed and held me in his arms.

With my last remaining strength, I squeezed Tolan’s hand. He squeezed back.

I let out a long shallow breath.

Dear God, I am ready now. I can let go.

Then I sucked in a small gulp of air, held my breath and waited.

A giant swell of heat engulfed me as if large powerful arms wrapped around and enveloped my whole being. Not heat—love. Light descended on me as sunbeams falling from heaven.

I leaned in and accepted the security and strength of the divine embrace. All else left my mind.

Forever. I want to feel this love forever.

My body stayed earthbound, Tolan’s hand still holding mine—but the pain, questions, and worry faded. Contentment, light, and tenderness overcame my crippled body.

The air left my chest, my final act of life.

It is going to be okay.

Peace.

Chapter 25

Time

“All we have to decide is what to do with
the time that is given us.”
~ J.R.R. Tolkien

A shudder awakened my body, and the shivers from the fever seeped back in. The light, love, and peace departed.

My breathing increased, and panic set in. I tried to find the peace again—

Instead I saw little Daven’s face, his intense sapphire eyes stared at me, and giggles poured from his grinning mouth. His tiny voice muffled any words, but the sounds were enough.

“Fight, Jodi, Fight! Daven needs his mom!”

The Guide.

The instant I opened my eyes, Daven’s face flickered away, and pain rushed into every crevice of my being. I yearned for the warmth, but Tolan’s face begged me not to give in.

A sudden determination welled in my heart.

I am not leaving you—I am not giving up! Daven must know his mother. I need to live—for my family!

I groaned, very aware of the difference between dying peacefully and living painfully. Tolan tightened his grip on my hand as if to say, “Hold on”.

Without a knock, the door to my room opened; someone new arrived. Tolan’s father, Larry, and his grandfather, George Pringle, entered. Grandpa Pringle had just flown in from California and they came directly to the hospital.

Grandpa Pringle? Did I know he was coming? Is he here to help Tolan tell the kids when I —

The future wavered, my mind no longer sure.

Hushed words passed between small groups in the room. Within moments, hands heaved my head and Grandpa Pringle began.

“Jodi Orgill Brown.” His voice rang clear and strong. His prayer on my behalf lasted a few minutes, but I only recall one phrase, “This night will be your lowest point; from this time forward your body, will begin to heal.”

The prayer ended, and a group of neurosurgery residents congregated. One of them, an unfamiliar face, chatted with Tolan and then suggested a test for an uncommon condition that can result from brain surgery. They wheeled me to a CT imaging room and slid a board under my back. I stiffened in the process, afraid any movement would send me further spiraling. But as they moved me onto the gurney, the board slid my entire body nearly effortlessly from one location to the other, with little movement to my body or head.

The CT machine scanned my brain and within moments, the radiologist and the residents discovered the culprit.

The perpetrator was pnueumocephalus, a rare, often fatal, complication from brain surgery. Intracranial pneumocephalus is defined simply as the presence of gas or air in the cranial cavity.

The spinal fluid that leaked from my brain did not travel a one-way road. An open route allowed fluid out—and air in.

In the Neuro Intensive Care Unit, strangers pushed needles into my feet. A nurse masked my face and pumped cool air into my lungs—but more importantly, into my brain.

Pure oxygen. The simple treatment for pneumocephalus rivaled the simple definition. But no one treated the condition as routine.

The rush of I.V.s and the air blowing into my face overwhelmed me. How much time passed since I’d been wrapped in the warmth? I longed to return to the light and end the hurt. Dying seemed so much easier—serene and comfortable. Living required facing the agony of every movement and every minute.

Heavy medications pushed into my veins and forced me to give in.

The next morning, I sensed a greater connection to my body—which meant pain, but not death. Perhaps we’d won the fight.

I didn’t remember them leaving, but Tolan and Mom were nowhere in sight. The faces whizzing around no longer creased with alarm as they had the night before.

Dr. Couldwell walked to my bedside, pulled the mask off my face, and looked me in the eyes. “Enough of the mask for now. After twelve hours of pure oxygen, you should feel pain relief from what I hear was an exciting night. Your vitals are coming back up. So how are you?”

I waited for my mind to perform a swift recon mission to check my systems.

“A little better,” I replied.

“Better is good. We aren’t going to wait any longer. You are stable enough for surgery so you’re on the schedule with Dr. Orlandi for this afternoon. It’s time to seal this leak and get you fixed.”

Steady voice. Confident and sure.

As much as I didn’t want a third brain surgery, it was time to live again.

Chapter 26

Hole or Whole

“We don’t see things as they are;
we see them as we are.”

~ Anais Nin

June 8, 2009

Dr. Orlandi loomed over me larger than life. He carried his own ambiance, which made me like and trust him. He knew me long before we met in person. The team of specialists had decided the experimental procedure through the nose provided the best option. Timing was critical. And Dr. Orlandi offered the greatest chance for success.

While I slept through the anesthesia-induced nap, the doctor found and then mended the holes in my brain using a seamstress needle-and-thread method, an approach he helped pioneer. Mine was only the fourth procedure of its kind ever completed.

Dad arrived back in town before surgery ended, his trip home cut short. Mom’s worried phone call the night before prompted his quick return. I don’t know what thoughts ruled his mind during the six-hour flight, but I was grateful his little girl hadn’t slipped under the water for good. He again took his place at the foot of my bed.

That night should have been a chance for my body to begin the recovery process, but someone must have forgotten to tell the medical staff. Three different times before sunup, at two-thirty, four, and six am, phlebotomists came in and drew vials of blood—nine in all. None of the bloodsuckers knew what necessitated the night

draws. I could only wonder.

Dawn rose, and my spirits soared with it. The need for sleep was ever present, but for the first time in a week, a different sensation hit me: hunger.

“Okay, Jo-doe, we’ve got some cream of wheat for you. Doesn’t that sound good?” Dad laughed as he handed me the bowl.

It did sound good—soothing. I spooned the hot cereal into my mouth and attempted to keep it from dripping down my chin. As expected, the cereal did not taste normal, and my empty stomach protested even the smallest bits of food. But even the feeling of hunger was progress.

We passed the time moving me—again. My move to room 510 made the eighth room I’d occupied in my twenty-eight days in the hospital. Whether the move triggered the headache or not, I didn’t know, but after riding in the bed to the new room, I tried to settle back down to calm my head.

“Sorry you’re feeling crummy again. Want me to get the nurse and see if you can have more pain killer?” Dad asked as he unloaded my belongings from a cart.

“No, it’s okay. This is more of a throbbing headache, which still isn’t fun, but I don’t think it’s a spinal headache. I can handle this one.”

“Well, that’s great news.”

Headaches may not be great news to some people, but I knew what he meant. If the spinal leak really sealed with the third surgery, there were many reasons to celebrate.

I drifted off to sleep and woke an hour later feeling dry. Drainage filled my nose, which meant I could only breathe through my mouth. My lips cracked, and my throat was parched.

“Water,” I whispered.

Dad jumped up from the chair and brought me a mug of water and ice.

I took a few gulps full of the cool liquid, only to vomit it back up moments later, along with the cream of wheat from earlier.

“I guess living on meds for a week wreaks havoc on your stomach,” Dad said. “We better ease you back into this.”

No more water, or cereal. Only the I.V. diet seemed to work.

Mom came to visit, and she and Dad took turns wetting my lips with a small sponge. They gave me small ice chips every few minutes, but we were careful not to try too much at once.

I'd done the same thing just months earlier when my Grandma Lisenbee was in her final days. She no longer ate any food then, only soaked her lips and sucked on ice chips. Sucking on the ice chips, I realized I had empathy for Grandma in ways I never could have before.

"Here, the doctor would like you to try this Ensure drink. He thinks it may stay down a little better than food."

I nodded my okay, and the CNA handed me the vanilla-flavored drink, packed with protein and vitamins. She left a stock of them, in different flavors, and encouraged me to drink as many as I could throughout the day.

Many times I had pleaded with my sweet grandmother to drink a little Ensure so her depleted body would gain strength. The tables had really turned.

The tiny straw was tricky, but I used the left side of my mouth and drank a few sips of the chalky fluid.

I gagged it and ruefully thought about how much I missed Grandma—and how sorry I was I'd made her drink the Ensure.

"Water, I need water," I insisted. ^[SEP]

"You sure that's a good idea, Jo?" Mom asked. ^[SEP]

I didn't care if it was a good idea or not. If I was going to drink chalk, I wanted something to wash it down. Mom handed me a full water jug and I slowly drank enough water to rinse the residue in my mouth. Almost two hours later, I finally finished the entire six-ounce can.

By evening, the Ensure came up and once it started, I could not stop throwing up. When the marathon ended, I was wiped out.

The headaches struck again, with full force. Talking, movement and drinking were reduced to zero.

Dad stayed as long as he could, but my condition didn't improve. He left late, but Mom stayed. The look on her face told me she wasn't going to go until she knew I was okay. I vomited and dry heaved much of the night, but when I woke the next morning, she was still there. Sometime during the night she'd moved from the

chair to the couch to sleep.

Watching her, I wondered how Mom and Dad felt spending so many hours sitting in the hospital. I supposed it was harder on them than me. While I slept and had medications to dull my pain and senses, they were alert and aware of every moment and every setback.

I knew I would do the same for my children, but no one ever plans to spend an entire month in a medical center. I hoped the setbacks were over for now.

To my dismay, the new day brought new symptoms. The muscles in my neck tightened with painful spasms. Dad arrived early in the day and alternated ice packs and heating pads to try and reduce the seizures in my neck and shoulders.

Dr. Shelton checked on me and seemed concerned by my condition.

“We’re taking you off all the antibiotics now,” he said.

I noticed he was speaking to me again, instead of to my dad about me.

“They are likely contributing to the nausea. Hopefully you won’t need them any longer. What you do need is nutrition and rest to regain your strength to go home.”

The news relieved me. The three powerful antibiotics had in fact wreaked as much havoc on my body as they did good.

It had been days since I’d seen my children. I knew why—I didn’t want them to see me so sick, and I imagined Tolan felt the same way. They had been close to my heart when I was dying, but I realized they probably didn’t know that.

I called home, and Tolan’s mom, Kay, answered the phone. I don’t know why that surprised me, with Tolan at work and Mom with me, I should’ve figured she would be there, but it hadn’t occurred to me. I wondered how many times she had taken care of my family without me knowing. That likely meant others had done the same thing.

“Hi, it’s Jodi.”^[L1 SEP]

“Well, my goodness, it’s good to hear your voice. How are you?”

“Tired. And really missing the kiddos.”^[L1 SEP]

“I can imagine that. They’ve been asking when they can come

visit, but Tolan and I thought we'd give you another day or two. When I was in the hospital, I didn't want visitors. I just wanted to get out of there, not spend my time trying to entertain guests."

Though I knew exactly what she meant, I was grateful I'd had so much company. The visits created wonderful distractions from the pain and boredom of life in the hospital. I hadn't seen many people in the past few days; if they came, I wasn't aware.

Kay continued, "And I think your parents actually told people not to come—just to let you rest."

"That makes sense. I wouldn't be good company now anyway," I replied. I hadn't thought about it, but it explained why I'd had so few guests over the past days.

"Are the kids home? Can I say hi?"

"Trenden is out playing and Daven is down for a nap, but Lindi and Casen are here. Let me get them for you."

A moment later I heard a little voice in the background. [L] [SEP]

"Hi, Mom." [L] [SEP]

"Hello, Mr. Casen. How are you doing, buddy?" [L] [SEP]

"Good. But I miss you. Is your eye getting better?" [L] [SEP]

"Well, it's not better yet, but Grandma Orgill brought me some more little beanbags to help hold it closed." [L] [SEP]

"Yeah, we helped her make them. We put rice inside one of them and pennies in another!" [L] [SEP]

I laughed, grateful to talk to my little guy. He told me about riding his big wheel and summer adventures in the neighborhood.

"Love you, Mom. Lindi wants to talk now." [L] [SEP]

"Love your face, C." I heard little noises in the background as the phone switched hands. [L] [SEP]

"Hi, Mom. Are you coming home now?" Lindi asked. [L] [SEP]

"Hi, sweetie. Well, not yet, but hopefully soon. We think the latest surgery fixed the problem, so now I just have to get a little stronger and healthier, then I can come home."

"Has it been a year yet?" [L] [SEP]

"Has what been a year?" [L] [SEP]

"Since you've been in the hospital. Has it been a year yet?" [L] [SEP]

She thought I'd been gone a year? My heart nearly skipped a beat.

[L]
[SEP]

“No, not a year, but it has been a month, a really long month, right?” [L]
[SEP]

“Yeah. The girls from church came over and planted flowers a long time ago and now they are growing outside and you haven’t even seen them yet. Dad is letting me help water them so they don’t die before you come home.”

“Thank you, Lindi. I’m sure you are doing a great job. I’m ready to leave the hospital, but I’m not quite well enough to come home yet. Does that make sense?”

“I guess so.”

Our conversation gave me new insight on what my hospital experience had been like for my children. I think we’d all taken motherhood for granted before. I doubted we would again.

“Tell everyone I said hello. And thank Grandma Brown for taking such good care of you.”

“I will. Love you, Mom. I hope you really can come home soon.”

“Me, too. Love you. Bye.”

I spent the afternoon imagining all the activities I would do at home with my children. Mom stayed on the foldout bed most of the day and left early in the evening.

The night nurse came in, scribbled down numbers from my monitors, and put the chart back on the wheeled cart. She grabbed an ice cup and left it on my tray.

“I’ll be back in soon to change your I.V. bag and check on you. If you need anything before then, just call,” she said with a smile.

The ice chips were my favorite kind—the pebble-sized pieces that worked perfectly for sucking or biting. I put one in my mouth and just let it dissolve on my dry tongue. The terrible taste and dryness in my mouth seemed to melt along with the ice.

For more than a week, I’d been so lost in my body, I’d almost forgotten the routines of life. Eat. Drink. Brush. Shower. Bathroom.

When was the last time I got up to brush my teeth—or go to the bathroom?

Physical needs dominated my thoughts. The monitor beeped, and green jagged lines climbed the screen in a pattern fit to exhaust any hiker. The blood pressure cuff hummed as it filled its lungs, held

its breath around my arm, and then swooshed out the air after the reading. Same as always. Then I saw the large empty I.V. bag hanging from the bar by one loop, reminiscent of a child trying to hold onto the monkey bars.

A quick hand to my stomach confirmed that the entire days' worth of I.V.s were dammed inside my bladder.

I grabbed the nurse call button and pressed. The normal two-minute wait dragged, and I was sure the barrier was about to give.

Press.

People always told me you only need to push a crosswalk sign once to alert the system that a pedestrian is waiting. That never stopped me from pressing it over and over again, willing the light to change faster. This was no different.

Press.

The intensity grew within. I wanted to get up, but I hadn't been upright for days. I could not do it on my own.

Press. Press. Press.

The inevitability hit me about the same time the urine warmed my legs, and then sank into my sheets. I wasn't sure if I wanted to swear or cry.

Frustrated, I pressed the button again and waited for rescue. The nurse entered a minute later.

"The bed is soaked—I, I wet myself. No one came and I couldn't get up," I said like a child apologizing for having an accident.

"Oh, I'm sure some of the tubes were just leaking, hon. It's fine." Her face appeared normal and unconcerned.

"Tubes leaking?"

"You've been using catheters and bedpans for days now, sweetie, remember? One of the catheter tubes probably just came loose."

Does she really believe that—or is she trying to spare me the humiliation of lying in my own urine?

She left the room and returned with clean linens and a CNA to help with the changing process.

"Well, you were right. I checked the chart. Someone removed the catheter yesterday afternoon after it leaked and broke, but they forgot to mention that on the shift change." Her face showed

remorse before she said it. “Sorry.”

I didn’t know if I should be more or less embarrassed knowing I was right.

The two ladies lifted me onto a plastic table, wheeled in for the purpose, and quickly changed my bedding, sheets and pillowcases.

“I know it hurts, but we’re going to lean you up to wash you off.”

The first lady held me forward while the second used a wet cloth and dry towel to wipe down my back. Then I was down on my back, and they lifted my hips and legs and repeated the process. Minutes later, I was freshly gowned and back on my bed.

“There, that should be better—all dry now.”

The CNA left the nurse to tuck all the tubes and wires back into place, and then she too left the room.

The compassionate nurses helped me immediately upon discovering the situation. I tried to convince myself it was okay, but reality blared. My body was not my own.

Day twenty-nine started better than the previous days. I inclined the bed and lay in a slightly vertical position for more than thirty minutes. Without the antibiotics, my stomach settled, and I craved something more than I.V. fluids. Dad gladly ordered whatever sounded good.

Tolan arrived late in the morning, earlier than normal. No matter what frustrations he felt, he never showed them to me. I knew my husband was not a perfect man, but he amazed me.

I pushed myself upright, lifted by a surge of energy. Tolan grinned mischievously and climbed on the bed next to me.

“Move, move,” I said. ^[]_{SEP}

Tolan looked surprised, almost hurt. “You’re sitting on my I.V.,” I blurted. ^[]_{SEP}

He turned and saw the clear plastic tube behind his back. He scooted over and I rearranged the tubes and wires until we untangled. Tolan leaned back onto the headrest, put his arm around me and nestled me to his chest—at last together again.

Dad grabbed his camera and snapped a picture. I’d told my

family from the start to document the event, but I had no idea the stay would create so many photo ops.

Tolan held me while I rested. Though we were as different as night and day, at the very core, we both wanted the same things. With my head safely on his chest, I realized real love means accepting all the differences. Our polar opposite approaches to life meant we were constantly compromising, an area where we both had room for improvement, but I hoped we had plenty of time left together to work on it.

He stayed next to me for almost an hour. His arm around me spoke louder than any words we said.

***[L]
[SEP]

“You ready to try eating again?” the nurse asked.

“Yes, hopefully I can keep it down this time.” I remembered the last time I’d eaten and I wanted to be cautious.

We started with a little Ensure, then a few grapes and berries an hour later. Then I ate a yogurt and managed to keep everything down. My taste hadn’t returned, but at least my appetite had.

“This is great, Jo. This is exactly the progress we want to see! Hooray for raspberries and yogurt,” Dad cheered.

The nurse, Kristy, reported the good news to the doctors and came back a few hours later.

“Okay, since you are keeping a little food down, Dr. Couldwell wants me to stop the I.V. fluids and have you start getting nourishment through food again. We’ll give you painkiller pills from here on out. I’m leaving the line in, just in case, but you’ll be on your own for food.”

The announcement displayed another sign of progress.

I took an afternoon nap while Dad tapped away on his laptop by the window.

“Well, hi-ya, Jo” he said when I woke. “You’ve been out for a long time, and you looked more peaceful resting than I’ve seen in weeks. How are you feeling?”

“Good. Better. Feeling better,” I answered.

“When you were sleeping, I posted the picture of you and Tolan

cuddling on the bed. You've gotten tons of comments on the blog in response to that one. You ready?"

I nodded, and Dad started reading.

"I'm so happy to hear your small but encouraging progress. I haven't written in a long time, but I've been keeping up with your ups and downs and hoping and praying for you and your family. Every time I get low about this that and the other and I check in with you and think, wow, that lady is fighting and having such faith—I need to do better. I need to have more courage. So, thank you for your good example. May the progress continue. - Dorothea (btw-pronounced Dor-taya)"

"Now who is that again?" Dad asked.

"A friend of a friend. I've never met her, but she has really reached out to me, on the blog and email. Strange that people I don't even know are rooting for me."

"Yes, but it's wonderful. Okay, let's keep reading. Here is one from Brandon and Debbie Rhoads."

"Everyone needs a good snuggle once in a while. That seems to fix a lot of things and makes everything just a little bit better. Glad to see things are slowly improving! It's so exciting for us to hear that you are maybe getting just a little relief from the serious suffering you've been experiencing for the last month. It's funny, but when you feel better we feel better. We love you and hope great things continue today! Love, The Rhoads"

The sentiment described my feelings as a parent: when my children were good, so was I. When they were sick, I hurt with them.

Dad finished the blog notes with one from my cousin.

"Uncle Von, I really smiled while reading this post... much more so than any other! I laughed about Tolan hopping into bed, and was so happy to know that Jodi loved having him there. The 'small signs of

progress' are BIG signs of improvement, and I'm impressed (as always) with Jodi's strength, faith and commitment. What an example she has been throughout all of this! WE LOVE YOU, JODI... and are praying for your continued strength. ((HUG)) If anyone can do this, YOU CAN. Hang in there, darlin'! With love, Susan O.R."

I smiled when dad showed me all the capital letters, exclamation marks, and smiley faces scattered on the page.

"This is the best part of the day, hearing the comments on the blog," I said. "Do you think they know they are willing me to get better? I love them, even the ones I don't know."

Together we marveled at the goodness of strangers and loved ones. It was the perfect end to the day.

Chemicals could no longer mask the taint in the air. Looking down at my gown and body, I conceded I was a big part of the problem. Weeks in bed had taken their toll. A shower topped my priority list.

A young twenty-something guy walked into my room. He had olive skin and dark hair just past his shoulders. He went to the white board, changed the date and wrote his name, Lucas, on the board under "CNA on shift."

Female CNAs cared for me for a month, but the moment I could finally bathe again, I had a guy. Ironical.

He approached and took my vitals.

"Lucas, is Heather working today? Or Kristy? Can you see if one of them has time to wash my hair this morning?"

A shower would have been heavenly, but considering the situation, I thought I'd better not press too much.

"I know they are busy, but it has been days, so I was hoping someone could help me."

Yes, I'm desperate.

His dark eyes met mine, and he said, "I can wash your hair. Give me a few minutes. I'll come back after I check on my other patients."

"Oh, okay, thanks," I replied.

Not the answer I wanted. I wanted one of the girls I trusted. I wanted a girl.

I sighed and waited for him to finish. The truth was, I wanted to go home and take a bath—all by myself! Frustration mounted, with little I could do.

Half an hour later, Lucas returned with towels and a stack of black garbage bags. He moved the garbage can to the head of the bed, opened all the black bags, and placed a slew of product bottles nearby.

“It takes a little while to get it set up, but it should work.” His voice was soft and kind.

He helped me scoot to the bottom of the bed, and he covered the pillows in garbage bags draped into the trash bin. Then he stepped out of the room and came back with a cart holding several pitchers of water and steaming towels.

“Okay, slide up and lay your head as close to the top of the pillow as is comfortable. Let out a deep breath—try to relax, if you can,” he urged.

I grabbed a special eye patch to make sure soapy water didn’t fall into my eye. Once situated, I moved into place, exhaled and closed my other eye.

Lucas’s hands brushed the hair off my forehead, back onto my head. He poured warm water right at my hairline, so it trickled through my hair, hit the black waterslide, and landed in the trashcan below. The right half of my head had thousands of little hairs that were starting to grow back in, and he was careful to make sure the water ran through the forest of new hair, as well as the long locks on the other side.

My pulse slowed as the heated water ran over my hair and scalp. With a little music, I decided it could almost be a spa.

Once all my hair was wet, he poured the shampoo into his hand and worked it through my hair and onto my head. Lucas was careful not to touch my scar, but he gently massaged my scalp, along with my hair.

He could have dumped the shampoo on and rinsed it off in sixty seconds, but instead, his hands worked slowly and gently for the next half hour, first with the shampoo and then the conditioner. The young stranger ran his fingers through my hair and let the warm water splash all over my head before falling into the tiny lake below.

His simple yet profound act of kindness rejuvenated me.

Lucas combed through the tresses of hair before he gathered the supplies from around my pillow and bed.

“Thank you,” I mumbled, knowing the words were inadequate. “I truly appreciate it.”

“Sorry I can’t stay, but I can come back if you need anything,” he replied.

“It’s okay, go ahead. That was wonderful. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He smiled and left. After that shift, I never saw Lucas again.

I said silent words of thanks for the gentle touch of a stranger’s hand. Lucas held no status in the hospital, but he was a man of great stature, and that was far more important.

Dr. Couldwell entered and asked me to perform the usual test. He helped me to a sitting position, I leaned my head forward, and together, we waited. Seconds passed and nothing happened. He looked at me and half-smiled. A minute passed and nothing happened. We waited until two minutes had ticked away—and no spinal fluid leaked out of my nose!

Euphoria filled me until my spirit seemed bigger than my body. Suddenly I became restless. It was time to prepare to go home.

Dr. Couldwell appeared almost as excited. For the first time in weeks, his smile stretched across his face, and his eyes shone bright with hope.

When Dad arrived, I surprised us both by sitting up in bed, chatting, and surfing the Internet on his laptop. This time, I read the blog comments to him.

“Jodi, you have made me appreciate every warm shower I take, every bite that I eat and every minute with my girls. Thank you so much for your strength and for helping us all to realize how important these little blessings are in our lives. You’re doing great - hope things keep going in the right direction. Love, Cami Sanders”

I read the words and continued to soar. Scanning through the

next several notes energized me further; I kept reading.

“Dad, listen to this one, from Tolan’s sister, Mindy.” I’d already read it to myself, but I knew he’d love it, too.

“Hello SUPER HERO, how are those brain enhancements coming along? I know you really will be the stronger for it all. I tried calling your room after the second surgery when I thought things were on the up. I didn’t realize they had moved you back to the ICU. A friendly man answered the phone—I couldn’t tell from the hello if it was Tolan or your Dad. I said, “Hi, this is Mindy.” “Hi Mindy,” came back the happy voice. I could tell though I didn’t know the voice and he had no idea who Mindy was. Probably should have chit chatted with the patient a bit to brighten his day. I look forward to talking with you when you are feeling stronger.

Kynlee keeps making you things she wants me to mail, mystery-sealed envelopes. I know one of them has some pennies in there she felt the need to give. They might make their way to Riverdale for entertainment. Get home soon! We all love you! Mindy”

The encouragement kept coming. I read and laughed and read again.

“Roses are red, violets are blue, sugar is sweet and so are you. (Now I am sure you have heard this next part, but it totally fits you right now, in a funny make-you-laugh way.) But the roses are withered, the violets are all dead (can’t expect them to stay alive after 30 days for heaven’s sake) the sugar is lumpy and so is your head.

(I bet you have never had this lumpy of a head before.) Isn’t that just perfectly fitting right now?! Don’t laugh too hard, I would feel awful if what I said caused additional pains. I don’t think you are superwoman anymore...She-Ra is better. She has super fabulous powers and strength. She even has what looks like a big blonde wig, which will kind of be you after you get extensions? ;-) I love you

more than my vacuum! (Ooh man that is a good one, can you imagine my hideous carpet without my vacuum.)

Love Your Guts—Tam (For any non-family member that may read my comments, please know I am not an insensitive random person that says crazy things. I am Jodi's sister who knows her very well...and they say laughter is the best medicine. All posts are meant in good fun to lighten Jodi's mood and let her know I am here and thinking about her 24/7)...whew now that is cleared up."

Dad and I stopped laughing and I watched him wipe the tears from his eyes. For the first time in weeks, we cried tears of joy. The sight of my dad, laughing until he cried, boosted me even higher. Far more than a village watched and supported me through every up and down.

Chapter 27

Resolve

“Courage is the most important of all the virtues
because without courage, you can’t practice any
other virtue consistently.”

~ Maya Angelou

My fingers tapped on my tray table when the nurse entered my room. The restlessness overflowed from my body and spilled out onto everything and everyone around me. For thirty days, I lay in my hospital bed, dutifully doing whatever I was told, which often meant doing nothing at all. I endured a burning sodium infusion in the middle of the night, accusations that I was hiding instead of taking my pills, and numerous blown veins and pin pricks at the hands of less-experienced staff. Since my diagnosis, I’d felt I could do little to help myself get better—I was dependent on doctors, nurses, specialists, and everyone else to fix me. Obediently, I’d followed every command with military-like precision; too vulnerable not to obey, yet powerless to do anything else.

Forcing the feelings of helplessness from my mind, I promised myself to take control. The pneumocephalus and third surgery had changed me. Although still barely able to move, I determined to walk out of hell and into the world on my own two feet.

No longer a dummy to practice on, I stopped looking to others to tell me what to do. *Be your own best advocate. Speak up.*

The nurse gazed at my chart, recorded my vitals and prepared my room for bedtime. Content I didn’t need anything else, she prepared to

leave.

“I’ll be back in to check on you and get your vitals in three to four hours.”

No! I yelled in my head, but soon found the words coming from my mouth.

“No—I don’t want anyone coming in during the night anymore. If I am ever going to be strong enough to go home, I need sleep, which I can’t get when I am woken up every few hours.”

She tilted her head and narrowed her eyes.

“If I need anything, I will call you.” I punctuated the statement with a definitive head nod.

“Okay.” She paused. “I’ll check with Jaime and make a note for the day-shift shift nurse.”

“Would you please turn off the light as you go?”

“Of course,” she said as she clicked the switch and exited the room.

My eyes adjusted to the dark, and I saw life clearly. Part of me didn’t understand why the realization had taken so long. I’d lain for a month, childlike, trusting that everyone else knew what was best for me. I believed if I obeyed and endured, I would get better.

Thirty days. It took me that long to learn that nobody knows what is happening in my body as well as I do.

One-size-fits-all doesn’t exist in a hospital any more than in a clothing store. Protocols may protect the patient masses, but I finally realized I had choices and I had to follow my gut.

“Hello, Jodi.”

Grandma Ketchum’s familiar voice greeted me before I opened my eyes. My mom’s mother and father walked in, straight to my bedside.

Grandma’s petite frame hadn’t changed, even as she aged. Her chin-length mahogany hair still rolled gently and neatly, the same way I remembered it my whole life. Grandpa was grayer and a little heavier than in my youth, but he looked about the same, too. I’d seen pictures of him as a young man, nearly an Elvis Presley double, tall

and thin with perfect wavy short brown hair. The sight of them filled me with warm memories.

“We’ve wanted to come for weeks, but for a while we couldn’t, and then you were so up and down, we were afraid of disturbing you. It’s so good to finally see you in person,” she said. “Sorry we couldn’t visit before.” Grandma always apologized—not just to me, but to everyone. Most of the time I didn’t think she had anything to apologize for, but perhaps it had become a habit, an endearing one, at that.

“Well, how are ya, Jo?” Grandpa’s voice boomed. [L] [SEP]

“I’m okay. How are you?” [L] [SEP]

“Mean and ornery, about like normal.” [L] [SEP]

“Well, I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

I played along. Grandpa’s teasing was his signature, as much as Grandma’s apologizing was hers. They were married in 1951, and in my thirty-three years, I could hardly remember seeing one of them without the other.

Grandma leaned in and inspected my incision scar. [L] [SEP]

“The scar looks good. I think it’s healing well.” [L] [SEP] Grandma spoke more to herself than to me, as though she’d conducted a medical exam and simply reported her findings. [L] [SEP]

The nurse came in, and Grandma introduced herself and began bragging about me. [L] [SEP]

“You are lucky to take care of this one. They don’t come any better than Jodi. Even with all she’s been through in the last month, she’s still smiling. Always has been an angel.”

I laughed and wondered if the nurse thought my new I’m-not-taking-crap-from-anyone attitude made me saintly.

Grandma and Grandpa visited with me until the sun hid behind the mountains.

“We better get going. Neither Grandpa nor I like to drive on the freeway in the dark.”

“Oh, Mona, I’m fine driving,” Grandpa piped in, one of his few moments in the conversation.

“Yes, but you don’t see as well as you used to, and it’s getting late.” Their back-and-forth banter was another endearing feature.

“Well, I guess we gotta go, Ms. Jodi,” he said. “I want you to know that I love ya and I’m praying for ya,” Grandpa choked out the words, “you are my hero.”

He reached his big arms around me and hugged me tightly. “We’ll see you again soon.”

“Love you, too, Grandpa.”^{SEP}

“I know ya do.”

Grandma nudged him out of the way and took her turn.

“I just can’t believe all you’ve been through. But I really think the worst is over. You’re going to get better now. Mark and Darlene, Doug and his family, David and Teresa, they all send their love. Tova and Danny are following the blog, and we are going to have a family party to celebrate when you get out of here.” She hugged me and kissed my forehead.

“It’s a deal,” I agreed. “Love you, thanks for coming.”

The room quieted after they left, but I could hear Grandma’s voice all the way down the hall. Only after they exited the big double doors did the unit go silent again.

“As soon as you are strong enough, you can go home.” Dr. Shelton stood taller, his grin broader than I’d seen in weeks.

Five days after my third brain surgery, the doctors were confident that my spinal fluid leak had finally sealed. After multiple false hopes, the possibility of healing—and home—were motivating and humbling.

The nurse checked in after the evening shift change. She was new to me.

“Hi hon, I’m Shauna, and I’ll be taking care of you this evening. I know the Neuro Unit can be intimidating, but don’t you worry about a thing, darlin’, I’ll be right here.”

Shauna walked around my room and checked everything. She tucked the covers neatly under my legs, straightened the books on the table, threw away cracker wrappers from lunch, and closed the drawer of the TV stand.

Her mannerisms reminded me of a nanny instead of a nurse.

“Chart says you’ve been in here quite a while. I bet with a little more work, we can get ya ready to go home.” She sang the words in a child-like tune.

The nurse hummed and danced-in-place as she checked my vitals. She was probably a competent caregiver who doubled as a great 80s music night dance buddy, but at that moment, I needed a coach, not a cheerleader.

After she left I called the nurse manager’s station. Jaime answered.

“Jaime, this is Jodi Brown. I’d like a different nurse. Shauna and I aren’t in sync tonight.”

“Is everything okay?” he asked.

“Yes. She seems like a nice person, but I’m so close—I, I just need someone else.”

“Okay. I’m glad you let me know. Give me a few minutes, and I’ll switch the schedule. If you need anything else, please tell me,” he said.

“Will do. And Jaime—thanks.”^{[L I] SEP}

“No problem.”^{[L I] SEP}

Satisfied with myself, I ate another cracker and left the wrapper on my bedside table.

Regaining control tested me. I determined to fight with everything in me, but the scale read ninety-one pounds. My body resembled a photocopy of myself, one that had been shrunk to 80% the size of the original. I’d lost over 20 pounds in eight weeks. Even with my focus on family and home, the reality of near constant vomiting, persistent headaches, dizzy spells, and weakness convinced me I was still a very sick person.

My sluggish feet shuffled over the floor as I tried to walk—my sister said I reminded her of our ninety-one-year-old grandma before she died.

The muscles in my body had atrophied during my weeks in bed. The therapists came to my room with increased frequency and renewed attention. Several times each day, I practiced walking the

halls, doing a couple of loops at a time to increase my strength. Forcing myself up and down, even a few stairs required all my physical and mental energy.

“The more you practice, the easier it will become,” chided the physical therapist. I could have given the same speech to Lindi, sitting at the piano. The theory behind the therapy—muscles only strengthen when stretched—encouraged me to push myself.

After so much idleness, the activity was exhausting. I thought if the physical therapists didn’t leave me alone for a while, I’d never rest enough to walk on my own. And the walks and stair exercises triggered headaches and more time in bed, but I convinced myself I needed to be home to really get better. ^[11]_{SEP}

By the end of the week, we kicked my recovery into high gear. I pictured every exercise as taking me one step closer to home. I forced myself to eat small portions of food. Every time the physical therapists came, I worked harder than the last time and pushed myself to regain some strength. In between meals and therapies, I rested as much as possible. Tolan and Dad were my best therapists, escorting me around the Neuro Unit over and over again.

Friday a resident came in to remove my lumbar drain. I feared the needle had taken residence in my back. Akin to pulling out stitches, the six-inch spike prickled my spine as he pulled it out. Without it, I could recline on my back again, a tiny victory on the road to freedom.

By Sunday night, exactly one week from my near-death experience, the doctors said if all checked out, I could be released in the morning. After half a dozen false starts, I dared not get my expectations too high, but the anticipation bubbled up inside me.

Maybe this really is the last night.

Dad posted it on the blog—again. He and Tolan had both announced it before, but perhaps the time had come.

Comments flooded the blog post. Dad’s excitement grew as he read each one aloud.

“Here’s one from cousin Nicki,” Dad said.

“Nichole,” my mom corrected. “She goes by Nichole most of the time now.”

“What?” Dad laughed out loud; I supposed it had nothing to do with the name, but more to do with the fact that the tone in our conversations had taken a drastic, upward turn.

“All right then, here is a comment from Nicki, or Nichole Giles,” he chuckled.

“Holy cow! You look great. After all your surgeries and complications, I’m shocked to see you looking so good. This is a true testament to your inner strength. How good it must feel to be able to cuddle with your honey. Keep going, keep moving, and when you’re in pain, remember that moments like that make everything worth it. Quote of the day: ‘Anyone can give up, it’s the easiest thing in the world to do. But to hold it together when everyone else would understand if you fell apart, that’s true strength.’”

“Sometimes I think it would be easier to fall apart,” I stated flatly, “but then you guys would have to pick up all the pieces again.”

Mom and Dad both chuckled. I smiled and then got serious.

“You know, I haven’t really been close to Nicki—I mean Nichole—for several years now, not since high school. Even then, she was always closer to Kristi. But she came to see me a couple of times—so did Deanne and Steve! I don’t think I can ever make them understand how much it means to me.”

“Well, more proof of a great family. Here’s a note from the Orgill side of the family,” Dad said, emphasizing the difference in the way the East coast Orgills and the Midwestern Orgills pronounced our names.

“Dustin says he is sure the reason you are getting better is because of the chocolate-covered cherries he brought. He’ll bring you more, now or later, if you want them.”

Mom piped up. “Chocolate-covered cherries? I’d have tried those if I’d known you had them!”

I just smiled.

Dad continued, “Oh, I talked to your uncle Ef yesterday, too. He and Lois wanted to visit, but we told everyone to let you rest, just

to make sure you're ready to go home. Brad wanted to come, too, but we told all of them the same thing. They send their love and said they are anxious to see you again, at home and healthy!"

He stopped talking for a moment, and my mind marveled at the beauty of family and unconditional love.

Dad finished up with one last comment.

"WAY TO GO JODI!!! Keep it up!!! I am so happy to see you feeling better! Maybe tomorrow will be the day that you can be homeward bound, I hope so!!! Know that you continue to be in my thoughts and prayers!!! Love ya, Kelly Flint"

When he read the words "homeward bound," Dad's crow's feet appeared above a contented, but exhausted smile.

"Hey, did you ever finish all the strawberries and cookies Kelly brought you? I could use a big chocolate chip cookie right about now," he said.

"I think we all could," Mom agreed.

We were all catching the fever, not the rising temperature, but the actual real possibility that home was close.

Chapter 28

Homeward Bound

“Smile, breathe and go slowly.”^[1]_[SEP]

~ Thich Nhat Hanh

June 15, 2009

After the I.V. came out, I looked down and realized for the first time in thirty-five days, I wasn't tethered to anything, not a single needle or tube strung from my body.

“How does that feel?” the nurse asked.

“Like freedom,” I responded.

Dad arrived and took my arm as we slowly walked around the Neuro Unit for the last time. We stopped at a bulletin board that featured the names and photos of all the nurses and CNAs on the floor. I recognized nearly all of them. Some I considered guardians, and others I called friends. Dad snapped pictures, so I'd always remember them—the ones who healed me with their compassionate care, and the few who taught me painfully how a person should never be treated.

Though Dad sat near me for most of my hospital days, that morning he stayed for just a short time. He carefully escorted me back to my room, took a final photo, and then he left the hospital for good. He drove to my house and, with my mother, prepared for the homecoming.

I baby-stepped to the bathroom. There I sat on a stool for my first unaided shower in a month. I'd been exposed, in every sense of the word, my body, mind and soul—bare. I pulled the curtain closed around me and cherished the hot water flowing from my shoulders to my toes. The deep red polish wasn't even cracked. Like me, it had been miraculously preserved. *I am still me.*

The bag in the closet contained traces of my old life. My clothes seemed a hundred years old, but still a welcome change from indiscreet, ugly hospital gowns. Even my old wardrobe restored a part of my new freedom.

No nurses or CNAs entered my room. Perhaps I'd already been taken off of their duties.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I tapped my feet and drummed my hands on my legs in rhythm. Not to the beat of music, but as an exit for my nerves. My bags rested next to me, in the spot where I'd normally lay. The jet setter was ready to leave.

Tolan walked in a short time later and found me still on the bed's edge. He scooted the bags and sat, and then put his arm around me.

"You ready?"

His question encompassed a thousand others.

"Absolutely," I replied. ^[T]_[SEP]

The checkout nurse entered, and we began the long process of leaving the hospital. We signed release papers and she loaded him up with instructions, medications, emergency phone numbers, and bags of supplies and ointments. Tolán filled cart after cart of gifts, but I stopped him from taking the flowers. I asked the nurse to find the flowers new homes in the Neuro Unit. She agreed.

The transfer girl brought a wheelchair, and I seated myself for my final ride. Tolán ran ahead of us to get the car. No doctors or nurses escorted us out. The proud part of me wanted to cheer as I left, but there was no one to share in my triumph. They had rightfully moved on to the next patient. None of the people we passed seemed to notice. The moment was anti-climactic—I was victorious, but alone and apprehensive at the same time. After all it had taken to get out of the hospital, I thought I'd leave as a conquering hero.

The wheelchair stopped in front of the building. Tolan pulled up and carefully helped me into the car, ready to drive home from the hospital, this time with his wife by his side. [L
SEP]

Tolan drove slower, more cautiously than normal. Since he secretly believed himself to be a racecar driver, I appreciated his restraint. He reached over and gave me an eye patch to protect my bad eye from the sunlight streaming through the window. Knowing my increased distaste for hospital food, he pulled up to a Greek restaurant drive-thru and ordered me a gyro for the ride home. I ate and dripped cucumber sauce from my mouth for half the commute.

Nearly an hour later, the car slowed for the turn into our neighborhood. My heart leapt with delight at the sight of huge welcome home banners along the road. One sign hung from, and nearly covered, an enormous tractor. As I choked up and smiled, wonderful shouts of, “Welcome home, Jodi!” echoed from my Jamba Juice friends, waving wildly on the corner lot.

We rounded the final turn and I caught a glimpse of our home. Posters, signs, ribbons, and balloons decorated the house and yard. And dozens of cheering, arm-waving family members and friends awaited on the lawn.

As I opened the car door, my sister, Tami, helped me out and then placed her arm behind my back, a strong support that literally protected me and kept me on my feet.

My young children reached me as soon as I was up. They wrapped themselves around my neck, arms and legs.

I am home.

Trenden released me from the embrace, but his eyes stayed on me for hours. Lindi abandoned her normal guarded touch and hugged me repeatedly—then she trailed me, never more than a few feet from my side. When Casen had me all to himself, my tough-guy squeezed me with a pop-your-head-off hug, my favorite kind. Little Daven threw his arms around my neck, then pulled back the elastic on my eye patch and plucked the patch off my face. He stretched the cord and placed it over his eye. A perfect homecoming.

A grand welcome wagon met my every step. One by one, the

young women who'd fasted and prayed for me, greeted me with open arms and toothy smiles. Emilie and Lisa hugged me, as they had in the hospital weeks before. Tears of joy, not worry, streamed from our eyes.

I scanned the yard and realized every face I saw meant the world to me. They'd been my neighbors and friends for years, but suddenly they were more than that—they were my champions. I walked amongst the crowd and hugged each person who welcomed me home.

"It's good to have you home," Mom said as we finally entered the house.

I realized my home had been her home for several months, too. She was the mother to my children in my absence. She saw them off on their last day of school, and kept them busy during their first weeks of summer vacation. She knew their schedules, favorite meals and stories, and she carried the weight of keeping my little ones happy and occupied to ease the separation. *Six days. I thought I'd be gone six days.* So much had changed since I'd walked out of the house.

Dad was crying before the words came out of his mouth. "Love you, Jo."

He didn't need to say more. I knew—he'd shown me every day for twenty-eight days. His strong arms engulfed me, and we stood together and cried.

My sister Kristi called from Hawaii, and we celebrated with tears. She'd wanted to come—the hospital stay had been hard on her, too, thousands of miles away, unable to do anything to help. Her wonderful and kind offers lingered, but our house was full and we didn't even know yet what we needed. The time would come for us to embrace and reunite, but that day would have to wait.

When the hubbub quieted, my family circled together in the backyard and continued the celebration.

A few miles west of my home lays the Ogden Airport. On calm days, with mild winds, a familiar sound reverberates in the sky. In ideal conditions, the sound repeats every thirty minutes, to the point where I know it by heart. The whirl and hum of the engine plays like a soundtrack above the town. Minutes after the small cloud-white

plane soars out of sight, another sound whooshes into the air. Parachutes and their passengers fall silently, at least from ground-level perspective, that is, until a focused flier yanks a cord and transforms a giant pocketed handkerchief into a fabric life preserver. When the first chute opens, I always gaze skyward to watch up to a dozen ants, falling to the earth. One by one, the distinct whistle gives way to a colorful burst that first hangs, and then floats to the ground.

When the new view of life overtakes a soul, an occasional exuberant voice bursts in the air. “Woo-hooo!”

Home at last, fluffy cumulus clouds blanketed the sky above me, and all I wanted to do was shout for the world to hear.

The excitement died down and the adrenaline high wore off. Tami helped me inside and I curled up on the couch. Tolan, who’d quietly stood close by and observed the day, crawled behind me and fitted himself perfectly along my form. Dad covered us with a blanket and took a picture of us as we slept, together again, at home.

Chapter 29

Still Enough

“Arise. You will arrive as you are.”^[L]_[SEP]
~ Jodi Brown

June 21, 2009

Familiar voices and laugh tracks from the TV made their way into my in-laws' front room. The take-charge wife ordered her sidekick husband around and scoffed at his meager attempts to make dinner and care for the kids. She showed the muscle; he provided comic relief. I'd always laughed at the show, but at that moment, I was struck with gratitude for all the real men around me, men who were strong and brave and loving and tender.

Father's Day presented an opportunity to thank my heroes. My dad had already left; a few days after my release, he'd flown home to Hawaii to resume his own life. I tried to tell him how just his presence helped save me, but I didn't know if he could really understand. With Dad gone, my plans were to celebrate the day quietly with Tolan, Larry, and Grandpa Pringle.

Sunday afternoon we encircled the dining room, ate and exchanged gifts. I didn't have presents for the amazing men in my life, only love.

But with a fever and nausea reigning supreme again in my body, I didn't know if they could feel my love. I asked Tolan to give me a blessing; I needed reassurance from above.

Tolan's hands, gently laying on my head, seemed a conduit for God's hands to reach down from heaven.

The words of the prayer reminded me that my life had been preserved, but my job was to stay positive, and to stay in the ring to keep fighting the good fight.

This, too, shall pass.

As much as it felt like forever, I was reminded the battle would not last forever, and I that I was never alone.

Other, unexpected words of the prayer stayed in my mind, “You still have much to learn, and much to teach.”

More to learn? I hoped I would have the strength to keep adding morals to my life story.

Teach? What am I supposed to teach – and to whom?

“It’s 101.8,” Mom announced as she read the thermometer. “Oh, Jo, I wish I could make it all go away. Stay in bed and I’ll bring you a little soup.”

Another day, another fever. I sank into my memory foam mattress and wondered when life would get back to normal. In the hospital, a little nurse call button resided on every bed, and when I pressed that little button, a rescuer came to my room with relief. A little something in my I.V. or a few more pills to ease the suffering. Mom came and went more often than any nurse, but no magic pill or medication flowed in my veins to make it better.

Friends visited and brought meals and gifts daily. My condition on homecoming day fooled many into thinking I was better. My good friend from the Philippines brought home-cooked platters of food that resembled art more than meals. She carried in the last dish, filled to the brim with a variety of fruit in a heavy cream sauce.

“We have to fatten you up, girlfriend! You were too skinny before you got sick, but now there’s nothing left of you. This should help.”

After the neighbor chef left, we dished all the plates full, and food still covered the platters. The kids, who already liked Vener’s cooking, devoured the meal. I picked at the food, but couldn’t get past the disappointment and mess of eating. The flavors I once loved stung my tongue. The sweet cream, fruit and rich meat tasted eerily

similar, earthy, like strong mineral supplements.

From then on, Mom introduced foods one at a time, in small portions. The infantile process discouraged both of us. A cup of yogurt held no more appeal than a piece of fish, a carrot or an apple. Paralyzed taste buds ruined them all.

“I’d always thought it would be fun to have to gain weight,” Mom said after another unsuccessful meal attempt, “but not this way.”

“No, this isn’t quite how I imagined mealtime,” I admitted.

Even the tiniest taste of greasy food sent me into the bathroom with stomach convulsions. It was as if my system had forgotten how to digest food. The pleasure and sociality of eating turned into a task.

“As much as I hated I.V.s, they were a convenient alternative to eating.”

Mom’s shoulders dropped and she sat down next to me on the backyard lounge. “We’ll just have to take smaller baby steps.”

During all the waiting, surgeries, medications, and tests in the hospital, I’d thought I would be *well* by the time I was released.

Dreaded bath time in the hospital proved just as challenging at home. I climbed in on my own, but bathing myself proved more than I could manage. Mom stayed outside the door and came in when I needed her. She always cared for me with a tender touch, but some things I longed to do on my own.

“Lean your head back and I’ll rinse your hair.”

I obeyed, but kept one hand covering my eye. Afterwards she handed me a towel and lifted me to my feet. The process had taken fifty minutes and all of my energy. I lay near the edge while she dried my hair. Then I rolled over and went back to sleep, at ten-thirty in the morning.

The spinning and drilling in my head didn’t stop when I left the hospital. Sleep was the only way to power through. But my kids had waited over a month for me to come home and be Mom again.

“Let’s watch a show,” Casen said as he crawled next to me on the bed.

“Okay, you choose.” I propped my pillow and sat up.

He sorted through the stack of DVDs, looking at the picture on each cover. He ran his fingers across the words; though he couldn’t yet read, he knew every title.

“Star Wars, Episode One,” he announced. No surprise.

The familiar *da, da, daa, dum* melody played, effectively luring other Star Wars fans into the room.

The music alerted Lindi that I was awake, and she took residence next to me. Never a talkative little girl, she’d seemed especially quiet since I’d been home. Her little shadow followed me everywhere I went. I’d disappeared from her life, but when I returned, she didn’t let me out of her sight for long.

Daven wandered in next. He climbed onto the cedar chest and then ambled onto the bed. He didn’t seem the least bit upset that both of mommy’s sides were already taken, he simply toddled across the bed and plopped into my lap.

Trenden appeared after the movie started. On the screen, young Anakin Skywalker fiddled with tools, trying to fix a droid. He reminded me a lot of Trenden, who was good with his hands and tools. Trenden scanned the room and sat to my right, next to Casen on the outside of the mattress. ^[11]_{SEP}

The unplanned movie day injected me with endorphins more powerful than any medication. No matter all the things I couldn’t do, my children just wanted to be with me. To them, even if I was broken, I was still enough.

Hospital visits and doctor appointments still ruled the calendar. Mom stayed with the kids, so my father-in-law, Larry, volunteered to be my driver. In only a few weeks, he’d already proven a faithful chauffeur and companion. He asked just the right questions, which indicated he listened intently to the doctors and me. That morning, we drove to the eye center where Tolan would meet us for the appointment with my newest doctor, an oculoplastic surgeon.

My dry, scratched, film-covered eye needed a solution. Mom had made a series of small beanbags to weigh down my eyelid so we could tape it closed. Every time she came for a hospital visit, she

delivered a new version. Beanbag 1.0 lacked the weight to do the trick. Version 2.0 was heavier, but too large. Version 3.0 settled on my eyelid and did a decent job of shutting the eye. That didn't stop her from perfecting her invention with two more varieties. Weighted with rice and pennies, her tiny creations brought needed relief—but they acted as only temporary solutions.

Dr. Shelton sent us to Dr. Kim, a specialist who could implant a gold weight into my eyelid to help it close.

“The process is fairly simple. The eye is measured and the weight is curved to match the shape. The gold piece is surgically inserted into the middle of the lid to provide maximum closure and protection.”

Dr. Kim's confident tone assured me, and made me wonder how long he had been practicing. His youthful dark hair, skin, and Asian ancestry hid his age well, but I suspected he neared my age.

“Right now your cheek is drooping so much your eye is at risk, not just from the lack of closure, but from the lack of pressure holding your eyeball in place. During the procedure, I will need to suture the outside corner and insert a collagen implant under your eye to hold everything together. This will also tighten the right side.” His explanation made sense and gave me hope.

“Do you have any questions for me?”

Tolan turned to me, then back to the doctor. “What are the possible side effects?”

Larry, Tolan and I knew the reason behind the question. After thirty-five days of the worst side effects possible, we learned it was better to prepare ourselves.

“Allergic reactions to the implants or sutures are the most common. The gold doesn't usually cause a problem, but the other materials can. Anesthesia is the biggest risk, but it looks like Jodi has plenty of experience with that. Of course, there will be some bruising, swelling and recovery time, but in comparison to brain surgery, this should be easy.”

He brushed his fingers through the long hair near his face. Habit or uncertainty?

He said all the right things, and we hoped his estimation proved

true. A nurse gave us the surgery packet and scheduled the procedure for two days later.

After the three previous experiences, I decided the required twelve-hour fast in preparation for surgery was a good idea. Less to throw up, before and after. But with the procedure late in the afternoon, my stomach ached, and I wanted to fill the hole in my belly.

"I think I'm almost as nervous now as I was for brain surgery," I admitted to Tolan. "Now I know I'm susceptible to side effects."

"Let's hope not this time."

The clock hands couldn't move fast enough for me. Anxiety made me nearly burst out of my body. The O.R. nurse appeared at last.

"Everything will be okay." Tolan rubbed my arm and kissed me on the way to the O.R.

The anesthesiologist introduced himself and prepped me. "I'm going to take good care of you, but you won't be completely out. Dr. Kim wants you awake so he can get a proper fitting with the weight."

"You can't just knock me out and wake me when it's over?"^[SEP]He chuckled, but I was serious. ^[SEP]

"No, but you will be heavily sedated so you won't feel anything."

"Okay. Let's get this over with."

He poked the needle into my arm, and the familiar tingling spread through my body until my mind slipped into oblivion.

The anesthesiologist nailed it. Though I was technically awake, the sedation didn't really wear off until the next morning.

"Hey, sweetie, I have to leave for work soon. I'm glad you woke up so I can see how you're doing," Tolan said. "Let's take a look at your eye."

I sat up and wiped the sleepies out of my good eye and turned to him. He put his hand under my chin and tipped my head toward the light.

"It looks pretty good. Do you remember anything the doctor said last night?"

“Nope.”

“Well, we knew you had lost weight, but apparently, you surprised Dr. Kim because your eyeball and eyelid don’t even touch. He said that is very unusual and happens when people lose a lot of weight under extreme circumstances. Of course, we know that is the case with you.”

“You don’t say?” My skeletal arms and legs proved that.

“He said your eyes are very sunken in and so even with the surgery, the lids don’t close all the way. He hopes that when you put on weight, your eyes will close from corner to corner.

“Normally the gold bar is not visible, but the doctor said it may be on you, at least for a while. We won’t really know until the swelling goes down.”

“So you’re an expert on gold weights now, too, huh?”

“Brain tumors, craniotomies, gold bars, I pretty much know it all,” he said. “Your mom is here and will be in to check on you soon. She already fed the kids. I waited around to see you, but now I gotta run. Hey, I don’t want to break you in half, so try to eat a little today to put a little meat on your bones.”

I agreed, and he walked out the door. Another recovery had begun.

“You are not going to Girls Camp,” Randy stated.

“Yes, I am,” I insisted.

“Jodi, I don’t think it’s a good idea. You just had surgery on your eye and you haven’t even recovered from your hospital stay yet. It is too much for you right now. Please, my friend. Don’t be so stubborn on this one.”

My church leader and friend was pressuring me in every way he could think of, but I couldn’t not go. The girls and I had planned camp together; we needed to be there together.

I pursed my lips as best I could and stared at Randy.

“You’re gonna do it anyways, aren’t you?” he asked, though he already knew the answer.

“Yes, Randy. I will be fine. I need to be with the girls.” I gave

him my answer, and it was definitive.

He let out a long sigh. "Okay, well maybe you can go up with Janene."

After all his arguing against it, I loved that he volunteered his wife to take me to camp.

Between his arguments and Tolan's concerns, I finally compromised and agreed to stay only for a few hours. I'd have dinner at camp with the girls, visit, and return home.

Janene picked me up right on time and we arrived at the campsite an hour later.

Lisa and Emilie were the first to reach the car. Emilie opened my door and both girls beamed as they leaned in to greet me. They'd worn those smiles when they sat by my bedside in the hospital, and when they'd hugged me at my homecoming. Emilie gently took my right arm and lifted me out of the car. Lisa held fast to my left arm and together they escorted me to the campground. The uneven and rocky path caught my feet and I stumbled forward until nearly the full weight of my body was carried down the trail by the two seventeen-year-old girls.

I righted myself just as we got to the campsite, nestled neatly amongst hundreds of towering trees and protective bushes. The fire pit sat in the center of camp, surrounded by picnic tables and camp chairs bearing identifying t-shirts and water bottles. The girls accompanied me to a chair and I seated myself for the evening.

The excited whispers spread quickly and filled the air with a tangible hum. Tent doors unzipped and dusty teenagers emerged. High-pitched squeals preceded a hurried gathering to my chair.

One by one, all the girls who promised to fast, pray and make a miracle for me embraced me and welcomed me to camp. We had come full circle and they, indeed, participated in the miracle.

Chapter 30

Rude Awakening

“Treat everyone with politeness, even those who are rude to you – not because they are nice, but because you are.”

~ Unknown

July 2009

“What the—?” The stranger’s words didn’t give away anything his actions hadn’t already shown.

On my first trip back into the real world, Mom and I ventured to a drugstore to get needed supplies for my eye. I clutched the cart to steady myself as we walked in. A young man, probably in his early twenties, strode out. He looked up just as he passed, did a double take, and then turned to stare. His face told me all I needed to know.

Nothing had prepared me for the reaction of foreign faces: the glares, mothers hushing inquisitive children, the rude laughter, and offensive gestures. These strangers stared, but they never saw me.

The days dawdled, but the weeks fled. My life, it seemed, could not be predicted.

“Sleep is critical for the brain to recover from trauma. Plan to sleep for nine to eleven hours each night for the first two to four years of recovery.”

I read the recommendation in a book about brain trauma. The advice sounded ridiculous, but personal experience testified it was true. Sleep ruled my nights, and often my days.

Tasks that should have taken an hour—fixing a meal or doing a load of laundry—took an entire day.

Several times a week, Mom and I walked at the park so I could regain strength. Eating, drinking, walking, and talking all required enormous focus. The difficulty of establishing a new schedule surpassed expectations. Yet each day I found myself anxious to get back to life. Mom cared for the kids and house, often while I rested and watched. But the more I watched, the more restless I grew. Despite her selfless, loving actions, I obsessed over one thought: I should be doing this for myself.

Mom sensed it, too, as if we'd been transported back in time to the semester I got married. I had moved home for a few months before the wedding, but tension tugged at us—proof it was time to be on my own again.

We set a date for Mom's departure and counted down the days.

"You gonna be okay on your own, Jo?" Mom asked. ^[T]_{SEP}

"I don't know. I look at everything you are doing, and I know I can't do it all. But I also know I can't lay around and watch you do it either."

She nodded. "Just don't overdo it. You don't need to serve gourmet meals or keep a spotless house. You need to let some things go. And that's okay."

I'd heard the speech before, but she was absolutely right. In my *before* life I'd been a perfectionist. If I was going to survive my *after* life, slow, steady and "good enough" would have to become my mottos.

Her July departure date arrived before we were ready. Mom was not only family, she had become part of the neighborhood and church congregation. Friends wrote her notes and cards for our bittersweet farewell celebration.

"Trenden, you keep bein' your mom's right-hand man," she said as she hugged him goodbye. He nodded and agreed.

She turned to Lindi. "Next time I come for a visit, we'll finish making that outfit for you, Miss Lindi Lou. You're gonna be a big helper to your mom, too, right?"

"Uh huh," came Lindi's reply.

“Be Grandma’s best boy, Casen,” she whispered in his ear; he gave her a thumbs-up sign.

She scooped Daven in her arms and buried her head in his little neck. “Be a good boy for momma, little D.”

When it was my turn, she looked right at me. “Love you, Jo. Take care of yourself. Let the kids help and don’t do too much. Annette, Cami, and Heidi said they’ll help, so call them if you need anything. Remember, it can all wait.”

She’d said it before, but we both needed to hear it one last time.

Thoughts swirled in my mind, but I couldn’t put them together when I tried to speak.

“Thank you, Mom, for taking care of my family—and me—for everything. I love you.” My words seemed inadequate at best.

We all escorted Grandma Oreo to her car. With the last bag tucked in the trunk, we exchanged a final hug, and she got in. She waved, and the kids waved wildly back at her, chasing the car as she drove down the street.

It was an end—but also a beginning.

We left on vacation to the family cabin in Montana soon after Mom left our home. For a few days, time slowed. The couch by the picture window in the living room doubled as my reading nook and nap spot. Lounging on the wooden dock, overlooking my favorite lake, I soaked in the sun, the breeze, and the wonderful sounds of life. I listened to the kids splash on the shore, the buzz of the motorboat, waves gently lapping against the shore, birds singing in the trees, insects zooming over the water, and the wispy wind whistling in the background—the soundtrack for life at the cabin. In the perfect little mountain hideaway, I was safe from the world.

The week in the woods conjured up old memories and new thoughts. I came to some tenuous conclusions.

Survivor is a duplicitous word. For outsiders, the word means conqueror and victor. For those that share the title, it means something else altogether. For some, it means death knocked on their door and they answered with a fight. For me, the battle had already dragged on and I accepted what those around me had not: death was not a bad option.

If you have lived a good life, the hardest part in accepting death lies in knowing those you love don't want you to die. They will be the ones to suffer when the sufferer finds relief.

Living can be a difficult state of life.

Thoughts and conversations swirled in my mind as I gazed at the lake and tried to process my new situation.

A woman at church had said, "You are so much more than a brain tumor survivor".

I'd already heard that speech. People told me not to let my tumor define me, and then they described me as the very thing they claimed didn't define me.

Day after day, I tried not to be just a brain tumor survivor, but sometimes no amount of disguising could hide the truth. When my body hit a wall, my face drooped, my mouth dripped and dizzy spells knocked me off balance, I became one thing—a brain tumor survivor.

People I'd known for years, and those I barely knew at all, showed renewed interest in me. The new badge of life I wore attracted attention like bees to honey. But the way others reacted to me had changed; they looked at me with either respect or sorrow, or some combination of the two.

Before our trip to the cabin, a neighborhood acquaintance, near my age, invited me for a visit. As she also shared the survivor tag, hers for cancer, I'd believed we'd talk and celebrate life together. She hugged me quickly and ushered me in. But no small talk ensued.

"Are you going to sue that doctor of yours? If an a-hole physician paralyzed my face, I would take him down. Those pompous jerks think they are invincible, God's gift to the world, all because they have a few letters after their names," she said.

Shocked by her comment, I hesitated in my reply. "Didn't occur to me to sue anyone. I think the doctors did the best they could—and they saved my life."

"But look how they left you. You just supposed to go back to life, like nothing ever happened? Right. At my last checkup appoint-

ment, my doc put me on new meds. He probably didn't think twice about it. Well, I took those and puked all night, nearly ended up in the E.R. When I called the next morning, all he said was, 'That's an unusual response. Let's try something else.' Next prescription he put me on hurt my throat so bad, I could hardly swallow without choking. That man doesn't give a damn about me, that's for sure."

The uncomfortable, hour-long encounter took the wind out of my sails. She had not wanted to congratulate or celebrate with me; she wanted a partner in commiseration.

The varied responses to my condition perplexed me. *What good does it do to wallow or blame?*

My neighborhood acquaintance may have beaten cancer, but hers was not a life I wanted to emulate.

At the grocery store weeks later, another interaction caught me off-guard.

I hadn't seen the girl from church since we'd moved years earlier, but word had spread through the congregation and she knew more about me than expected.

"It must be so hard," she said. "You've endured so much, but I don't know how you face each day when your body doesn't cooperate. I couldn't do it."

The sentiment no longer surprised me, but I still stumbled through the conversation as I carefully formed a reply.

"I don't have a choice of whether to face each day. I wake up in the morning the same as you do. But I am learning that though my body may be imperfect, but my life doesn't have to be. I can sulk, or I can find wonder in the beautiful mess. I can survive, or I can LIVE. And living is better than surviving any day."

Dozens of similar conversations converged and left me with a singular thought.

Bitter or better? I get to choose how I am going to come out of this.

The escape to the mountains cleansed my soul.

I'd started a new job just weeks before my diagnosis. Management wasn't required to hold my position, but they did.

Fundraising allowed for flexible hours, and I already knew I could do much of the work at home. Still, the time for my return approached faster than expected—or maybe my recovery was slower than expected. The return date on the calendar became my goal, a place and purpose for me to venture back into the world. I rejoiced in the time to adjust before the big day.

The end of the summer signaled the start of the school year and my *after* life.

When the alarm buzzed on the first day of school, I couldn't snooze. The outfits were laid out, the backpacks packed, and lunches stood by in the fridge. School forced me back on duty. With the big kids off to school, I re-entered the world, often with the little boys by my side. Surrounded by them, I felt braver than going it alone.

One September day, the three of us sat in a restaurant eating lunch. I turned when I heard raucous laughter. Three construction workers in orange vests dined together, their arms and faces tanned and dirty. They pointed at me and imitated the food falling from my mouth as I struggled to eat. I froze and my appetite left; I gathered the boys and fled the restaurant.

"Why are we leaving? I didn't even finish my taco," Casen asked as we hurried off. I had no idea what to tell my young son.

In the car, tears formed as I banged the steering wheel with my hands, and then caught sight of the men, still laughing and watching through the window. My pulse raced faster than the car as we sped out of the parking lot.

"You okay, Mom?" Casen asked.

Through the rear-view mirror I saw his eyes widen and his forehead wrinkle. If he'd been a few years older, if he'd comprehended my hurt, Casen would have stood up for me, that protective part of his personality already showed. But at four, he was unaware of the incident that had just occurred. Simple cries turned to heaves and I glanced at him again.

"I'm not feeling so well, buddy. It's time for preschool, so I'm gonna drop you off and go home to rest."

"Good idea. You'll feel better if you rest," came his wise advice.

I nodded, glad his years blinded him from knowing how cruel

the world could be.

Throughout the day I replayed the restaurant scenario a hundred times. Only then did I think of possible replies.

Real mature, boys, topped the list as the kindest response. In some mental reruns I broke into a full-fledged survivor story, shaming them and walking away victorious. But every re-creation of the day's events ended with me remembering what really happened—and vowing there would be no repeat.

A few weeks later, Annette took Daven and me to lunch. Our boys ate chicken and fries and played with toys while we visited. I still wore my patch, to protect and moisten my eye, but used napkins to cover my mouth as I ate, just in case. Pieces of food fell in the trough between my teeth and my cheek, but I was careful not to drop any from my mouth.

The boys played and emptied their milkshakes as we conversed. An older gentleman with dirty gray hair and an unshaven face approached. Annette's back was to him, but I faced him, so I smiled as he neared. That's when he stopped, right across from me.

"Why are you wearing your Halloween costume so early in the season?"

Annette's eyes bulged, and she turned to face the man.

I studied him but couldn't discern if he was mentally unstable, or just a jerk. A disgusted cough preceded my reply. "It's not a costume. I wear this face all the time. Excuse us while we finish."

I turned, and the stranger sauntered away.

"Is he for real?" Annette blurted. "I can't believe that. You told me, but I just didn't think people were really like that. I had no idea. I am so sorry, Jodi."

I let out a deep breath. *There is enough good in the world for everyone. He cannot bring me down if I don't let him.*

My eyes stayed dry and my resolve grew. His words stung, but I finished lunch with my friend. She wanted to punch him, and I wanted to scream, but we didn't reward him with another look.

That night I told Tolan the story. His face tightened and he shook his head as I vented my frustrations. Then we brainstormed a dozen comebacks, just in case of a *next time*.

No matter how many zingers we devised, I wondered if it really mattered. Were some people really so blind as not to see beyond the physical body? To judge based on the cover and not the content? That day, I mourned for all they were missing.

Only a few weeks had passed since my reflection time at the cabin. I thought I had chosen then to become better, not bitter. But the barrage of ugly exchanges served as a punch to the gut.

Daily interactions left me teetering on the edge of breakdown. My breathing intensified and a lump caught in my throat as I replayed the scenes, and it left me feeling vulnerable, like prey to a predator.

Weekly Sunday School lessons since early childhood made me more than familiar with the phrase from the New Testament, “Choose you this day whom ye will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord”. But in the following days, the words from the Bible prophet took on new meaning.

Choose you this day. Choose you *this* day. Choose you **this** day. The calendar on the wall began to fill as I mentally gave myself the choice *this* day. And *this* day. And *this* day. The phrase was not a one-time invitation, but a daily declaration of decision!

Better or bitter, victim or vanquisher, Halloween-masker or heroine survivor—the choice of *who I am* is mine to make, every single day.

Chapter 31

Facing Reality

“We must let go of the life we have planned,
so as to accept the one that is waiting for us.”

~ Joseph Campbell

September 2009

Long blonde locks parted to form the world’s largest comb-over. The woman in the mirror caricatured me with distorted, droopy, out of proportion but familiar features. No matter the angle, the obvious stared back: I was changed.

Each day I better grasped the precious reality of life and my time on earth. The neurosurgeons had meticulously excavated my tumor, carving out the invading lump while trying to protect delicate brain tissue and nerves. The mass was gone, but the facial paralysis, side effects and scars remained, reminders of my second chance at life.

Facial paralysis prevents movement of more than forty muscles innervated by the facial nerves. I learned chewing is more of a choreographed dance than a modest up and down movement. The eyelids don’t just blink; they protect the eye and squeegee the fluid off, forcing it down a drain. Kissing, sipping, smiling, eating, and retaining fluids are complex processes. Without working muscles, these functions stop. Grade six paralysis meant total immobility of the entire right side of my face.

In my *before* life, I sometimes wondered what it would feel like to be paralyzed, but I didn’t actually want to find out. It’s odd, but

paralysis doesn't feel like anything. No matter how much I thought about moving my face, no matter how many signals I sent, nothing happened. The nerves did not relay my messages.

For years I worked with my girls at church, teaching them their inherent value has nothing to do with fashion model looks; integrity, goodness, charity, and compassion trump any physical trait. My *after* life tested my beliefs in a whole new way.

I tried to smile over and over again, but the harder I tried, the more distorted I appeared, one half of my face buoyant and cheerful, the other half droopy and misshapen. The only way to appear normal was not to smile, to hold my lips close, but not touching.

Tilting and turning my head side to side, I examined the invisible mask I wore.

It looked more normal, but not like me. I could deal with the patch or surgery, but I didn't know if I could forever face the world without my smile.

A therapist explained that mixed emotions are normal.

"Accepting facial paralysis is like grieving for a loved one. You have to mourn the life that is over while being grateful for the life that continues," she said.

"Your face is the most personal part of who you are; it is the only uniform you wear *every day*. Your face is the way you tell someone how you feel without saying anything. You are perfectly normal for missing your old life. It's okay to lament what you've lost."

Her advice stung with truth. I didn't ask for a new life, yet I was grateful at the same time. The hospital had been my bubble. Friendly faces greeted me daily; even Tyson, the phlebotomist, rooted for me. They didn't laugh at me, point, stare, or whisper. The isolation from the world had convinced me I wasn't that different. Everything would be okay. The therapist's words also convinced me, I needed to mourn my past to embrace my future.

Pirate life suited Jack Sparrow, Elizabeth Swann, and Will Turner, so I supposed it was good enough for me. The itch and

irritation to my eye was constant—the weight helped, but didn't allow full closure as I'd hoped. Most days, I opted to be a pirate.

Donning the pirate patch broadcast my face to the public. Even if they didn't say anything, they saw—and wondered. But unlike a practiced pirate, I felt vulnerable with every step. My feet moved slower, and I tried to surround myself with a layer of protection. But at times, even those protecting me got hurt.

"Oh," Lindi exclaimed as she jumped back.

I looked over and saw that I'd hit her in the face—again. Never on purpose, the occurrence was still too frequent. Without peripheral vision and depth perception in my right eye, I constantly missed my targets and hit the unsuspecting. Sadly, Lindi often took the brunt of my inaccuracy.

Tears dripped from my eye. "I'm so sorry, honey!"

A bloody cut marked the fourth time that my fingernail had scratched her when I had been trying to reach past her.

"It's okay, Mom, I'm fine. I know you didn't mean to do it." She spoke without hesitation. Despite the streak of blood across her head, her face reassured me, but my cheeks burned with frustration and sorrow.

A few days later, the phone rang. The caller ID indicated it was my friend, Stacie. She had saved me once, months before, and our relationship strengthened more with each interaction. She was the one who had figured out I had a spinal fluid leak after my initial hospital stay.

"Hey, how are things going?" she asked.

It surprised me to hear so much happiness in her voice, despite all she'd experienced in the previous few years. After being married to her best friend for ten years, she'd lost her husband to suicide.

She told me that when she found him, her first horrified thought had been, "He finally did it." I admired how she picked up the pieces of her life, rearranged them, and put together a new, beautiful puzzle. She made a new life for herself because she didn't give in to sorrow, doubt, or consequences of his actions. She did not become a victim, she became a giant. Many would have crawled under a rock—

Stacie started lifting the rocks instead, moving the huge boulders out of the way and making a new path for herself and her kids.

My mind clicked to the present and Stacie's voice on the other end of the phone.

"I'm okay, I guess," I stuttered.

"Liar, you are not. Sucks, doesn't it."

Chuckling a little from her directness, I replied, "Yes, sometimes."

We related to each other in a way we never could before. Where there had been neighborly kindness, a new connection had grown, friendship beyond words and gestures. At the heart of it all was pain. She knew pain, knew how to relate to others, and knew how to fight back.

"So, I read the blog. Your eye is goopy, filled with junk, and even the gold weight isn't enough to help it close."

"That pretty much sums it up," I admitted.

"No, it doesn't! That only sums up your eye. There's a ton more crap than that!"

Only Stacie could say it that way.

"You're getting it all wrong. Your eye patch isn't a scab; it is a badge of honor! Own it! Don't just wear a patch, bedazzle it—make it yours. You're a survivor, be proud of it!" Her voice peaked as the sentence concluded.

"Choose," the Guide quietly reminded me.

Half laughing, half crying, I agreed she was right.

"You are still beautiful, and your patch can be beautiful, too. Bejewel it so the whole world will know you aren't afraid of life! It doesn't take away from who you are, it is an awesome extension of who you are!"

"Girl, you gotta do this. Life bites sometimes, but you still get to point the direction you're going. So start going up again."

She was my own personal coach, fan club, and therapist. Stacie spoke, not from a naïve sense of optimism, but from dirty, hard, sucks-to-go-through experience.

"You're right, it's time to embrace my inner pirate."

"Hell yeah! I wanna see pictures of it on the blog when you're

done,” she said.

Bedazzling the patches turned into a family event. The nurse had handed me a bag full of black patches the day I checked out—I didn’t know until later that I’d be charged \$19.99 for each—but the supply allowed the crew to join the action. Lindi’s jewel gun starred in the event. We spent a couple of hours selecting, arranging, and gluing the jewels onto the patches. When we finished, we were not a group of misfits, we were a band of pirates.

I wore my new patch for all my waking hours. A store clerk nodded her approval and said, “Nice patch. Very artistic.”

Little bits of encouragement pushed me to keep trying. But some days, even a decorated badge of honor didn’t cut it. That’s when Stacie stepped in again, this time in person. She hadn’t called to tell me she was coming or checked to see if I was home. She showed up and smiled at me as she pushed her way through the door, armed with a baseball bat, a chair, and a marker.

“You ready for this?” she asked. “It’s time, Jodi. Take control again.”

Stacie always grabbed life by the horns, even when the bull ran straight for her. She set the metal folding chair in front of me and drew three concentric circles: a target.

“What are you most sick and tired of? What drives you crazy more than anything else?”

Stumbling over my words, I stared wide-eyed at my friend. “Come on, what is it? Headaches? Drooling?”^[L]_{SEP}

Without waiting for my response, she took a black Sharpie and started writing on the chair, filling the space in and around the target with familiar, painful words.

Drippy lips. Goober eye. Restless limbs. Dizzy spells. Rashes.

“Your turn,” she said, handing me a marker and pointing to the chair. “Let it all out, here.”

Tumor. Crooked face. Metal head. Back aches. Headaches. Drooling. Memory loss. Slurred speech. Metal mouth. Naughty nose. Hearing loss. Sleeplessness. Hair loss.

The fire in her eyes shone with passion. When the list was complete, she carried the metal chair outside and handed me the aluminum bat.

“Swing,” she instructed. “Smash it!”

I swung the bat and landed a first hit. A metallic ring reverberated into the air, empowering the next, harder swing. Each time the metal bat connected with the chair, the force in my body grew stronger. Frustrations, rage, disappointments, and fears exited the tips of my fingers, and energy seared the bat like a lightning rod.

When the beating ended, Stacie carried the chair into my basement and leaned it against a concrete wall.

“Every time you get frustrated with all your body is not doing, come look at the chair and remember who is in control.”

She exited as quickly as she came. Her reminder sparked me to take my life back again.

My first day back at work coincided with a company-wide staff meeting; as director of fundraising, it was my job to launch an employee giving campaign. Having started the job just before my diagnosis, I didn’t know most of the hundreds of employees, nor how they would react to me.

The executive director handed me the microphone and I stepped to the podium. I’d practiced the speech, but I still wasn’t sure what was actually going to come out of my mouth.

“I am here today to present you with a unique opportunity to change lives, not for strangers thousands of miles away, but for the local clients you help every day.”

The speech continued, and I explained the new donation fund to benefit the community. The words dripped from my mouth, not smooth, but deliberate. As I spoke, my soul seemed to leap out of my body. The real me, the person who had always looked out for others, stopped worrying about how others looked at me. *Choose.*

“Six months ago, a brain tumor changed my life. A planned five-day hospital stay turned into a five-week stay with three major brain surgeries. For much of this time, I was completely bedridden, living

on I.V. fluids—and hope.”

Nearly four hundred people filled the auditorium, but not a sound could be heard except the hum of the microphone in my hand.

“Whether you believe in Karma, God, or anything else, one thing I learned, or perhaps was reminded of, is that one minute you can be on the giving side of life, and the next you can be on the receiving. I have been on the giving end for thirty-three years, but since my illness, I’ve been reliant on others for everything; to take care of my children, make meals, do laundry, clean my house, drive me to appointments, care for and even bathe me.”^[1]_[SEP]

The strangers in front of me momentarily transformed into the hundreds of family, friends, neighbors, and online supporters who’d helped me through the previous six months. I choked back tears as I realized if all *my* angels were gathered together, the auditorium would be filled to capacity.

“I have a second chance at life, and I’m grateful to work again. It feels good to have enough strength to help someone else! Join me in creating a second chance for others by donating to the fund.”

Nothing. The hall was still. I turned slowly. Anxiety crept in as my eyes met the faces of a few people on the front row.

“Life can change in an instant. Please, take advantage of being on the giving end and make a difference *today* because you never know what tomorrow holds. Thank you.”

I stepped out from behind the podium and smiled. I did it.

The silence in the room was not deafening, it was defining. I looked at the audience again and realized I was not only changed, but changing. My protective shell began to crack; I pushed a few pieces away and stood tall and proud.

Perhaps the best way to impact the world was simply to change *myself* for the better.

Through the shadows, I saw a man stand in the second row. He started clapping, and within seconds, the applause grew louder. The dark auditorium infused with light, and I saw the entire audience stand, clapping, whistling, and staring—at me. The faces that gazed into mine held no ridicule or pity, because I held none for myself. The tearful eyes and small smiles showed approval—of me, just the way I am.

Chapter 32

Hawaiian Sunshine

“Peace is a journey of a thousand miles and it must
be taken one step at a time.”

~ Lyndon B. Johnson

December 2011

We arrived in the land of Aloha after midnight, our Christmas gift to our family. Tolan insisted on the vacation; Mom insisted on the month.

“You need to rest and let your body heal. It’s hard to do at home, but here, you have no commitments. You don’t even have to cook. And if the kids wake up before you do, I can take care of them while you sleep. Do this for yourself and your family.”

A perfect sales pitch.

So, for the sake of continued recovery, I rested on the beach, mesmerized by the ocean. More than two years had passed since the start of my second life.

Just five months after leaving the hospital, most of my original symptoms, dizzy spells, vertigo, ringing in the ear, and migraine-like headaches, returned in force. In a consultation with Dr. Couldwell, he said the tumor had likely pressed on my nerves long enough to cause permanent damage. The symptoms may never go away; they only retreated temporarily because of a combination of powerful, but short-term, anti-seizure medications.

The facial paralysis we had hoped would last only a few weeks or months, still held my face hostage. When the disadvantages of the

gold weight outweighed the advantages, we traveled to see a surgeon in California for another unconventional procedure, one that surgically implanted a metal spring into a muscle in my eyelid to help me blink. Improvement, but still not as good as God's creation. The section around my eye was also reconstructed, my skin lifted and tucked to give the appearance of symmetry.

The loss of hearing in my right ear continued to cause inconvenience and occasional embarrassment, but proved more manageable than some of the other remaining side effects. I still practiced chewing and eating, and my skills continue to develop. Limited use of a few muscles returned when the nerves finally reignited their spark. My smile broadened and even I could see intermittent glimpses of *me* again.

Some days I fared well; other days were kick-you-when-you're-down hard. I tried and failed, and tried and failed, to resume normal life. Learning to compromise with my body showed the only promise for the future. When I reached my goals, I inched my way to the next milestone. When I missed my goals, I adjusted my expectations and started again. With every defeat came gratitude for an imperfect life.

I sat in the hot sand and reminisced on my progress over the previous two years. My family and health trumped my priority list, but my job fundraising for the needs of the community also fulfilled me. My cog remained small, but I helped turn the wheel of change for the good people around me.

An unplanned speaking career took root in my struggles. At every conference or meeting, I encountered incredible people who fought seemingly impossible challenges but faced them head on. We cheered for each other and related in ways only comrades can. If something about my journey inspired even one person to persevere during hard times, it was all worth it.

My personal take away from the dozens of different speeches was always the same: Despite the hardships of my new life, I wouldn't change a thing. Sharing my story also reminded me that perhaps I *could* change the world, even just one life at a time.

A few weeks into our vacation, we headed to the beach for adventure. Tolan pointed to our destination, a small island a few hundred yards off the coast.

Goat Island is a beautiful little tropical preserve just off Malakahana on Oahu's east shore. An aerial view of the island shows a long narrow land with limbs like arms and legs jutting out in five directions. The isle beckons locals and tourists to rest on its perfect crescent-shaped beach or trek through the colorful shrubbery to the cliff on the far side. Despite its closeness to land, the crossing could be easy or treacherous, depending on the day. In calm seas and low tide, the passage was a pleasant walk across the coral reef. At high tide or in rough waves, only ocean-experienced swimmers or boarders dared make the trip. The darkened sky indicated we might have chosen a precarious day for our journey.

No stranger to storms, Tolan insisted we go anyway.

"I don't wanna do it—I'm gonna drown." Casen's eyes widened at the sight of the tossing waves.

Tolan looked directly at him. "You are not going to drown. You are going to be fine, Casen. You can lay on the boogie board, and I will hold the rope the whole time. You can float to Goat Island!"

My little boy didn't look convinced, but Tolan heaved him on and pushed the board forward. Even in the ocean, Tolan was steady. With only one board, Casen was the only floater; the rest of us would have to walk or swim. Trenden followed his cousin Cory and my brother, Brandon, who carried Daven on his shoulders. Lindi and I planned to navigate the underwater path together on foot.

The boys forged into the water and quickly moved several yards in front of us. We girls ventured in more cautiously than the others; grateful that their movements mapped the course we would take.

Cory's head bobbed and he splashed into the water. Brandon shouted, "Hole on the left."

No sooner had he said the words than my foot fell into a gap in the coral. My little companion steadied me, and we pushed on. Her turn was next. Lindi stepped forward, and her whole body lunged headfirst toward the waves. Instinctively, my right arm tightened and I pulled my shoulder upward, lifting her torso out of the water.

“You okay?” I blurted. She nodded.

Rain began falling, wetting the only dry spots we had left—our heads and faces. The clouds hung dark and low in the sky, and the waves started breaking harder and faster. I glanced back and saw we were halfway between the two shores. No fast escape. No easy route to land.

Pressured by the rain and clouds, I held firmly to Lindi and urged our legs to carry us faster. Efforts to run resulted in a slow-motion standing crawl through the waves.

We approached the sandy shore and a last raindrop landed like a tear on my cheek. The shower stopped before it really started. Encouraged by the return of shallow water, we raised our legs and dashed through the choppy water until we landed safely.

As if on cue, the clouds parted, and a single ray of light grew until sunbeams shone and covered the little island.

For the next hour, the kids buried each other in sand and then splashed into the water to clean off. Brandon spotted an intact seashell, and little bodies raced in every direction to find more ocean treasures.

I discovered a little trail headed off the beach to a narrow path. The sandy soil gave way to plant-covered ground and then to volcanic rock as I neared the edge of the small island. I gasped in awe at the sight from the bluff. The views in every direction left me breathless. Looking back to land, the beauty of the trees, sand, and waves combined into a masterful creation. The gentle breeze created a natural dialogue for the live art. The reef—covered by ocean—shielded the inlet pass and guarded her beauty and charm.

To the south and east, white-capped peaks rose and fell as far as my eyes could see. Uninterrupted by the world, the waves rolled in as they had for thousands of years, not scheduled, but sure and melodic. The waves likely started on the other side of the planet, then swayed, lulled, tumbled across the miles, and finally crashed onto the beach.

If the waves hadn't come so far, they probably wouldn't seem as magnificent.

Then I turned back and saw the most beautiful sight of all. My four small children scampered in and out of the water, chasing each

other and their companions. Tolan rested on the beach, observing and cheering. He caught my gaze, lifted his hand, and waved. I straightened, smiled, and returned the wave.

In spite of all of the things I would struggle with in the years to come, continued facial paralysis, daily migraine-intense headaches, multiple eye surgeries, and near constant dizzy spells, I marveled at the scene on the beach and knew it was all worth it. My husband still had his wife and my children still had their mother.

I seated myself on a rock near the ledge, surrounded by perfection, and tried to slow time.

Like the waves, we had come far since those long, hard days in the hospital. What many called strength, we called family survival.

For my part, I simply woke each morning and fought to make it through another day. Moving forward was the only way. Whether that made me courageous or brave was for others to determine. I just tried to get home.

The breeze blew a long hair into my bad eye. I gently pulled the strand away and pressed my eye closed—a persistent reminder of reality.

Choose.

Lush vegetation had grown between the cracks in the rocks, the hard and the soft mingling together in a beautiful contradiction. Life itself often seemed like a paradox; at least my life did. As much as I didn't want squalls, the storms showered love and helped me grow.

Gloomy clouds loomed in the distance, so I turned my head back toward the light. *I suppose there will always be storms, but behind the clouds, the sun still shines.* I closed my eye, leaned back, and basked in the sunlight as it shone on my face.

Epilogue

A Decade Refined

“The best gift is life. Live in the present.”
~ Jodi Brown

September 2020

I first saw the woman with yard-stick long ash brown hair at a Delta gate at LAX International Airport. Both of us arrived in airline-issued wheelchairs, waiting to board our flight to Salt Lake. We didn't exchange words, only glances. The gate attendant announced pre-board and indicated the two of us could start down the jetway. She carefully arose, pushed her wheelchair away, and started to stagger toward the plane. We entered the jetway hall, and as if on a conveyor belt, she slid her left hand slowly along the wall to steady her unstable walk. Every time she put weight on her prosthetic leg, her body tilted to the right and her left hand pressed harder on the wall.

Because of surgery on my leg just days earlier, I used the long handle of my wheeled carry-on luggage as a crutch, and limped toward the plane, just a few feet behind her.

The woman, about 15 years my senior, turned her head toward me and said, “Whew, if I'd known how long this jetway was, I'd have stayed in the wheelchair!”

My agreement came out as a laugh as we made our way slowly through the corridor.

Halfway down the second ramp, she turned to me again. "You know, when people can't see my prosthetic leg, I get accused of

acting drunk or being mentally ill. It's just better if I wear shorts, so they see why I'm going slow."

"Oh, that's awful," I said, hoping she felt the weight of my pain for her.

We'd sat just a few feet away from each other in the terminal, and I had noticed her clothing, and thought it odd for an aging woman to wear short shorts, especially with a prosthetic leg. But, understanding hit me immediately upon hearing her explanation. Sadly, I knew most people would never hear the 20-second history lesson I received. They would likely judge her without knowing, just as I had only minutes earlier.

Reserve quick judgment. You never know the whole story. Please, God, help me act on this.

After making our way through the small aisle of the plane, we each got to our seats early and had plenty of room for luggage, one of the unexpected benefits of airline travel during the pandemic.

Traveling alone, even after surgery, was easy in comparison to the many trips I took with my four children. To have no one to think about besides myself still unnerved me; perhaps that was why I regularly scanned hallways, aisles, and rows in search of passengers in need, especially little passengers. For years, I packed snacks, Benadryl, wet wipes, spare clothes, and toys in shopping-spree sized totes, so I'd be prepared for any situation. With my parents in Hawaii for most of my children's childhoods, the kids got lots of practice waiting in airports, eating airline food (in the days when they served food), and laughing silently while they watched movies. If given the choice, I'd choose the craziness of family travel over the freedom and convenience of solo travel.

Once settled in my window seat, I turned on the screen in the seat in front of me and picked up where I left off two weeks earlier, with just 30 minutes left of a documentary on *Soul Surfer*, Bethany Hamilton.

The plane filled with passengers and took off, but I was glued to the 9-inch screen. Perhaps because I started watching it while traveling to have surgery, her messages of hope, endurance, perseverance, and sheer determination stayed with me. The show, aptly titled

Unstoppable, featured Bethany's life long before a tiger shark bit off her arm while surfing. And, the movie covered the events of her life long after she got back on a surfboard; but the attack was the underlying hinge.

She's like me. Her life is separated into two parts: before and after. No matter what else comes, our stories are forever changed by "the event" that split each of our lives.

When the show finished, I thought of all the footage of heartache, drama, triumph, loss, sacrifice, and love that Bethany experienced in real life. With grit and grace, she gave thanks to God.

What would my "after" movie look like?

Only in Adam Sandler movies could characters fast-forward or rewind 10 years in an instant. And, though I didn't want to revisit all of the moments of the previous decade, simultaneously, I rejoiced that I didn't miss them.

As I sat comfortably 30,000 feet above the earth, I closed my eyes and put together scenes of the movie reel of my *after* story.

2010

- Attempting to figure out what-the-heck-comes-next in my new life. Balancing feelings of hope and gratitude with equally strong feelings of anxiety and mourning.
- Creating memories and strengthening relationships at a four-generation reunion at the Brown family cabin on Hebgen Lake, Montana. And then, weeks later, gathering together again, for Grandpa Pringle's funeral, and feeling blessed that some of his final days were those we celebrated together on the lake.
- Fearing that the migraines, balance issues, and extreme myalgia meant my tumor was growing back. Later learning the MRI showed no tumor growth, but revealed likely permanent nerve damage that caused the ongoing symptoms. And then crying for weeks.

2011

- Casen's daily prayers that "Mom's brain will start working again," followed by the realization that

despite my continued issues, his prayers were being answered.

- Family cruise to the Mexican Riviera with Tolan's parents and our friends, the Rhoads. Eating more food in one week than we thought humanly possible.
- Trying to take control of my life by taking control of my body, ie. becoming a fitness fanatic and a push-up queen (and surprising my hubby with a video of the journey — go to my YouTube page to check it out).
- Realizing that if I push my body too hard, my “new” body pushes back. (No video, just months of bed and down time.)

2012

- Braving my “new normal” fears and heading to the mountains for a day of skiing with the family. Enjoying the delight of watching my kids zoom by, stop suddenly, and then wait for mom to catch up. And, then spending an hour in the snow, paralyzed with anxiety, staring down a steep mountain slope, unable to convince myself to move forward. (When I finally reached the lodge, I drank a large hot chocolate to avert a meltdown, and accepted that the family would be skiing without me.)
- Sitting frozen in the parking lot, ugly sobbing, outside the mortuary before going in to see my dear friend, John Clarke, at the viewing for his wife, Shelley, who died of brain cancer. Learning that survivor's guilt lives on, and I can't explain or justify why I am still here, and other beloved warriors are not.
- Waving and walking away as my “baby”, Daven, sat in a little chair at a little table for his first day of kindergarten, knowing from that moment on, my children were no longer my own.

2013

- Our farewell trip to Laie, Hawaii, as the community said goodbye to my parents, after 13+ years leading the Polynesian Cultural Center, before their move back

to the mainland. (And subsequently learning and loving what it means to celebrate like a Polynesian.)

- Quitting my nonprofit job and leaving my safety net so I could take better care of myself and my family (and finally go to my therapies and doctor's appointments).
- Attending weekly writers' group meetings, and going through hundreds of pages of red-penned edits and critiques as I wrote my story. (And later ditching 125 pages and hours of work to change from a self-help format to a creative narrative format. Maybe with some convincing, I'll share the original version someday.)

2014

- A police officer helping me onto an airplane in preparation to fly to California for emergency surgery after the spring in my eyelid broke and gouged my eyeball with every blink. (Followed by three subsequent trips to L.A. for surgeries to clean out a staph infection I got during the first emergency procedure.)

Theme of the year: ~~Everything that can go wrong will go wrong.~~ You can't have a miracle if you don't need a miracle.

(And you won't make friends with the infectious disease specialists unless you have a reason to visit them.)

- Winning my first major writing award, meeting with agents who were interested in my story, and then crossing my fingers, holding my breath, and praying for publication of my book.
- Summer "school" teaching a writing class to Lindi and her girlfriends. Reward for participation: A trip to a writers' conference with three giggly girls who stayed up way too late for a brain-fogged mom. Additional perk: Cute giggly girls getting to meet and attend a class by the author of one of their favorite book series (with pics to prove it). Taking the "kitchen sink"

challenge and consuming enough ice cream to make any normal person ill for days.

2015

- Starting my own business as a professional speaker, author, and nonprofit consultant.
- Working with two therapists to learn pain management techniques, balance tactics, and coping skills.
- Riding the highs and lows of book publishing: hundreds of hours of tedious hard writing work, followed by hope, submission, back door and side window contacts, editing, rejection, changing plans, more editing, marketing classes, cover design woes, and finally pressing “send”.
- Celebrating the release of *The Sun Still Shines*, and waiting impatiently to see if people would buy, read, and like it.

2016

- Crying out to God in prayer for remembrance and respite, and then, just minutes later, receiving a phone call from my getter-done-girl hero, Jeannie, who stayed up all night reading my book and then called, in tears, to say she loved me. Knowing, yet again, that God heard my prayers and answered through an angel.
- My shock and delight at winning the "Gold Quill" award for *The Sun Still Shines*, but leaving the awards ceremony early because I had a date with Lindi, my mom, and sister.
- Receiving a clear, but unwanted, prompting that I should write a book on a topic I did not want to talk about. And then accepting the heavenly invitation because God showed me that surviving depression comes down to one thing:

de**PRESS**ION

- Escaping to Alcatraz and San Francisco to commemorate 20 years of marriage to Tolan. Walking hand-in-hand next to the streetcars, seemingly going uphill both ways.

2017

- Little kids turning big, and mom and dad learning that parenting means just loving your children, regardless of their decisions—not trying to control their decisions.
- Adventuring with Trenden, the two of us alone in the Arizona wilderness, followed immediately by a family trip to New York City, adventuring with nearly every person on the planet. Learning to appreciate the unique aspects of both solitude and extreme togetherness.
- Spending three days in the car with my dad, driving my cute Casen and a friend to a sports camp in the-middle-of-nowhere, California. Feeling lucky and spoiled with so much of my dad's time for myself. (And issuing prayers of thanks when a bus full of tourists from China found Dad's cell phone at the top of Kolob Canyon.)

2018

- Exploring Europe on a Mother-Daughter trip with Lindi to Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, with day trips to France and Germany. Panicking when I lost my phone (and I.D. and credit cards), just hours before we were scheduled to leave Venice. And dropping to my knees in gratitude after Lindi stayed calm, used her head, and led us back to the hotel room where she knew my phone was plugged in to the charger.

Never had I imagined I'd be able to take an adventurous trip with just the two of us, "alone" together, navigating unfamiliar places and cultures. I loved the rush of empowerment, and the bonding with my girl.

- Filming the short video, *You are Beautiful*, as a message to the world about outer beauty, inner strength, and self-acceptance. (And attending the film premiere, feeling overwhelmed by love, support, and applause. And for once, watching my hubby get to be in the spotlight as the audience wanted to hear and see more of HIM! Loved it.)

2019

- Scoring bargain tickets for the family to Paris and London for spring break. Visiting Notre Dame on my birthday (just days before it burned nearly to the ground), and climbing the Tower of Eiffel on its 130th birthday. Touring the catacombs underground, and e-scootering above ground. Meeting my high school friends at London Bridge, and marveling that just yesterday we were the kids having the adventures.
- Cheering at Daven's awards program as he graduated from elementary school and prepared for junior high.

The imagined movie scenes caused me to reflect, silently laugh, cry in sorrow, and clap for joy—until the calendar landed on May, 2019.

For 10 years, I'd imagined that when I hit my craniotomy "anniversary", my second chance at life, I would feel like a conqueror, a hero returning from battle. In all of my dreams from the previous decade, I was sure my life and body would be returned to their former glorious state—and I would be well.

Those tiny boxes on the calendar meant *years* had passed—and some parts of life remained eerily the same. Though I knew the movie scenes I chose didn't show it, the devastation of hitting that mark had engulfed me like a hurricane. A true documentary of my life would have to include dozens of days in bed, that accumulated to months of time. Huge emotional swings, unlike anything in my *before* life, made me feel stuck on an undesired amusement park ride that never ended. New fears and anxieties appeared where before there had been stability. Everyday activities, from riding in the car to watching my kids play on the monkey bars, spiked angst that sometimes prevented me from functioning. No one wanted to watch that on any screen.

"Brain Tumor Survivor" is a badge I never planned to wear. When thrust into hell, I just tried to claw my way out of the darkness. But life never returned to "normal", even after the staples came out, the scars healed, and the hair grew back. Remnant tumor tissue *still* pressed on my nerves, paralysis *still* imprisoned my face, and changes in spinal fluid flow *still* caused migraines, balance issues, extreme

fatigue, and intense pain. And I no longer held the naivety to believe it would change, or that I'd be able to conquer the world with a good attitude and some old fashion getter-done-girl optimism.

After all the miracles of surviving, I felt I no longer had the right to be discouraged. But I was. Indeed, the storms of my *after* life kept me spiraling in a funnel of frustration.

During one long May day, I voiced my thoughts to my sister.

"Jo, you could stay in bed every day, and no one would question your motivation for a minute. But, instead, you keep trying." Kristi said. "You could feel sorry for yourself, be mad at God, hide from the world, or stop living. Instead, you embrace your imperfections—and you keep going."

Her gentle words reached into both my heart and mind.

Kristi paused. "And I'm proud of you."

My I-feel-sorry-for-myself rant stopped. In that moment, I remembered that she, and so many others, had trials as big as, or bigger than my own. And each of us has to choose *this* day what our focal point will be: positivity or pain.

I got off the phone and paced my yard. So, ten long years later, what had changed?

The revelations dripped like honey into my mind.

Ever so slowly, I started to understand that *living* well is much more than *feeling* well. First-hand experience bore witness to me that the body is an astonishing and complex creation, with abilities that cannot be imitated with even the greatest technology. Though the "fixes" of man saved my life, they do not equal the divine human design of my *before* life.

I realized that you don't overcome trauma or adversity—you endure it—and take baby steps forward in the process. Mental health, like physical, needs time for wounds to heal. No magic pill or special formula removes the slow repair of stitching life back together. And a gash never closes perfectly.

Thinking back, I finally recognized the stages of healing. The first unstable steps require 99% grit, but when you make a commitment and SHOW UP (for yourself, for your healing, for your

family), it becomes easier to do the next time. And, showing up consistently leads to progress.

Day after day, I still showed up! And that was exactly Kristi's point.

After revisiting 2019, I exhaled a long, heavy breath. I had a few minutes left before the plane descended into the Salt Lake Valley, just enough time for a few more scenes in my movie.

2020

- Booking the biggest speaking year of my career, right before a worldwide pandemic cancelled everything.
- Discovering new hobbies during the pandemic shutdown, and cherishing extra hours with Lindi during her last year at home. Realizing I am a master artist when I use a paint-by-numbers kit.
- Going on a houseboat for the first time in 30 years, and then realizing that dizzy spells and microburst storms = migraine, nausea, and vomiting for mom, but just more fun for the kids.
- Filming a one-take 12-minute video on the importance of recognizing that every person is "Divine by Design", and riding the wave of craze and praise when the video went viral. (See the video on my YouTube channel under the "Guest Appearances" tab.)
- Grabbing the reins and changing course—and heading to California.

I laughed to myself when I got to the last scene, though I knew it was far from the last. Just two weeks separated me from my family, but a decade of long-awaited change transpired in the meantime. A surgical renovation.

Though facial therapy exercises had strengthened a few of my facial muscles, years of muscle and nerve entropy resulted in skin and tissue sliding down and pooling at the bottom of my face. And, more critically,

the deterioration deterred my attempts to hold food in my mouth, chew, and swallow, which meant less coordination, and more choking.

Strangely, during the COVID-19 pandemic and shutdown of 2020, potential solutions started popping up on my screens. Perhaps I was spending more time online, or maybe the Instagram algorithms homed in on my needs, but I began seeing posts and videos about surgery from The Facial Paralysis Institute.

As I followed the posts, I realized I'd seen similar videos before, and had even called once. From my initial call in 2016, I estimated it would cost a few thousand dollars, and a few days, to go for a consultation. However, fast-forward to 2020, and the same doctor, in Southern California, was seeing patients for consultations – virtually.

And thus, the terrible shutdown alerted me to a great opportunity. Tolan and I met virtually with specialty facial surgeon, Dr. Babak Azizzadeh, and discovered I was a good candidate for surgical nerve repair.

We rejoiced at the prospect of progress, and made plans. But when I saw the cost quote for the out-of-state, out-of-network surgery, my stomach lurched, and tears fell.

I debated with myself for weeks, and finally decided to move forward, only to dispute my resolve and melt down again.

Tolan, ever my rock, didn't wait to see who won my internal argument. He simply started the paperwork to take equity out of our home by refinancing the mortgage.

When my emotions again got the better of me, he said, "Jodi, this is what money is for. Nothing could be a more worthwhile investment than improving your quality of life."

My hero. My advocate. My other half. My husband.

As if reading my worried mind, a friend surprised me and started a GoFundMe campaign to help with the costs of surgery and travel. In a little over one month, family, friends, and strangers donated \$15,000—which came with a much higher emotional payoff.

So, with my sister, Tami, as my escort, fun-maker, and caregiver, I flew to California, during the craziness of 2020. The two Orgill girls biked the Venice Beach boardwalk, dined at The Cheesecake Factory, and paraded the streets of Beverly Hills, as much as COVID allowed.

Friends treated us to salmon and shrimp on the barbecue, and extended family members stopped by our Airbnb to visit.

Because of the pandemic, I Uber-ed to the surgery center and faced the day alone. But after all the emotional ups and downs to get there, no fear remained. Perfect calm settled in me, even as I waited for the doctor to arrive and for anesthesia to tingle my veins.

Dr. Azizzadeh entered the building right by the room where I waited. Instead of jitters and last-minute questions, we engaged in meaningful dialogue, and he even shared stories of his early childhood when he fled with his family to the United States. He had one chance and one bag to start his new life—and he chose books over clothes. My heart skipped a beat. He lived with *before* and *after*, too, and he spent every minute of his new life changing lives for the better.

With that, I no longer felt just calm, I was filled with peace; and I was ready to proceed.

After the procedure, Dr. Azizzadeh called Tami with the good news that everything had gone “perfectly”. He surgically removed a nine-inch nerve that extended from my mid-calf to my foot, and sewed it to the end of a promising nerve on the left (normal) side of my face. If the connection proves successful, the new section of nerve will bond to the original, and create one long nerve that swoops from my left cheekbone, across my upper lip, and to the top of my right cheek bone.

The nerve procedure was the first in a two-part process. The second surgery, tentatively schedule for Spring 2021, will be a gracilis muscle transfer, which requires harvesting a muscle from my inner thigh, and then implanting it in my cheek, along with accompanying arteries and veins. Though the second half of the process is more complicated and risky, if the transfer works, the new nerve should power the muscle, and improve functionality and symmetry in my face.

For five days after surgery, Tami thankfully organized and controlled everything. She slept on the floor next to my bed and kept tabs on my condition, then woke me during the night to give me medication. Though I couldn’t truly eat, she blended protein smoothies, mashed potatoes, and Ensure-d me full of calories.

Tami turned recovery time into a girls' week, and we binged Victorian-era chick flicks and conversation between appointments. With practiced confidence, she changed bandages, checked my surgical drains, and recorded oh-so-not-fun post-op moments. (Side note: For any interested reader with a strong stomach, watch "Surgery Update 6" on my FB page.)

When the doctor gave us the thumbs up and assured us my recovery was on track, Tami completed her caregiving practicum and flew home to Salt Lake. I stayed for another week at a step-down recovery unit, aka, my cousins' house.

The Brandon Dickens' family filled their fridge with yogurt, eggs, gourmet mashed potatoes, protein drinks, applesauce, and smashed foods galore. The surplus of soft-serve foods made life easier that week, but the surplus of friendship, hospitality, and love made life infinitely better. Brandon's 5-star car rides, nature walks, and sight-seeing trips convinced me that downtime can be good time when you are with the right people. Tawny and I chatted for hours, and never found a topic that didn't engage us in conversation. I watched in awe as cute Laney twirled, leaped, and spun around the living room with the beauty of a dancing fountain. Austin could be heard participating in band practice from his room (online school). When he left each day for work, I realized he exemplified the qualities of his employer, Chick-fil-a, for he made a "pleasure" out of every interaction.

I lucked out and got to be there for the waffle breakfast celebration party for Laney's big 12th birthday, which made me want to be part of their family, while simultaneously making me miss my own family.

By the time Brandon took me to the airport, I was already planning a future get together for our families. Every interaction is an opportunity to change a life—and my cousins certainly changed mine.

The plane landed smoothly, and I limped through the aisle toward the gate, where a wheelchair waited for me at. Though I'd just been sitting all day, I felt spent by the time I fell into the seat.

My new friend with the prosthetic leg sat in a wheelchair nearby. A few minutes of conversation later, an airline worker arrived to push her chair to her next gate for her flight home to North Carolina.

“Don’t worry, hon, it gets better,” she said, and she turned to go. Our hours-old friendship had already yielded plentiful fruit.

A young man came to attend to me, which meant riding out of the airport—and to the freedom and comfort of home. On the short trip out of gate D, I thought about my beloved family, whom I looked forward to greeting again.

My grown entrepreneur man son runs three side-hustle businesses at any time, but still smiles like the Trenden who turned ten just days before his mom went into the hospital. The little girl, who once followed me around, eventually followed both her parents, to college. Lindi attends BYU and is exploring a major in computer science. Larger-than-life Casen still protects his mom, but he is no longer little. He drives me to appointments and stores, instead of the other way around. My baby boyfriend, blue-eyed, blond-haired, Daven, still gives me hugs, but he idolizes his engineer dad. And he knows no other way of life than our “new normal”. As Casen’s regular MMA and boxing partner, he steps in as protector whenever needed.

But it was Tolan, my anchor, fixer, and forever companion who met me in the pick-up lane outside the airport. He spotted me and he hurried to open the passenger door. The airline worker pushed the wheelchair next to the car and my husband loaded my luggage in the trunk, and then rushed to my side. Tolan’s arms wrapped around me in a hug, and then helped me into the front seat.

Once in the car, he grinned at me and momentarily laid his hand on mine.

“You ready?”

I nodded my approval.

In seconds, he maneuvered the car away from the airport terminal and onto the freeway—once again, headed for home, healing, and hope.

The End

In Memory Of:

Nancy Beckstead Howard

Who taught me that living, and dying,
can be done with faith, gratitude, and dignity

George E. Pringle

The miracle maker, whose faith in God surpassed all else

Vearis Anderson Orgill Lisenbee

Forever my Grandma B., angel, teacher, and example
My role model for how to live, forgive, and love unconditionally

Mona Rae Heaton Ketchum

My newest angel, and sweet grandmother, whose most often uttered
words to me were, "You are beautiful"

In Honor Of:

Jodi Burton Carlson

The other Jodi B, who set the example for my second
life, with her stalwart strength, wit, and never-give-up attitude

Heidi Carrigan Shaw

My dear friend, who shows me every day
that you can always choose to walk forward with faith

Q & A with Tolan Brown

I frequently get asked about the perspectives of the other main characters in my book. While I am not surprised that people are drawn to Tolan, and my mother and father, what I can tell you is that their viewpoints on these shared experiences would warrant a book from each. For now, I'm both excited and humbled to share a little of my husband's thoughts on our journey. Conducting this Q&A with him turned into a highly emotional experience for both of us. It is our hope that you appreciate his perspectives.

Question: What are your top takeaways from your shared life journey?

Tolan's Takeaway: Everyone deals with something in life. Some challenges are more public than others, and ours became very public, but every family goes through life-changing struggles. When we assume the people around us are facing critical situations, I think it allows us to be more empathetic and understanding.

Tolan's Takeaway: Many times, all of the attention goes to the person struggling with the illness or the disease, and not a lot of attention goes to the caregiver. But the caregiver is often struggling as much or more, depending on the situation. That was a lesson to me, that we need to pay attention to the caregiver, not just the person who's suffering. For me, I'm not a person who likes attention. I got many calls, and we had plenty of help, so I was taken care of that way, but I did realize you need to keep an eye on the caregiver.

Tolan's Takeaway: Helping others feels good, but pride can make being helped feel a little bit humiliating. I think part of the journey in life is to learn to be on both sides. You have to learn to help others. But you also have to learn to be the one being helped. And if you think about the way life is set up, no matter who you are, how powerful you are, how far you go in your career, how much money you make, sooner or later, your body's going to start to fall apart. And, when that happens, someone's going to have to help and take care of you. And, you're going to be humbled -- that's part of life. It's probably better to learn to accept help, and be grateful for it, earlier, rather than later in the journey.

And, helping someone doesn't require doing a big thing to make a big difference. Just being there at the right time can make a big difference.

Tolan's Takeaway: In crisis, you can't be everywhere you feel you need to be. While Jodi was in the hospital, I was still trying (with lots of help) to raise four kids and keep their lives as normal as possible, plus I had a job

and the responsibilities as the primary provider for the family. Wherever I was, I felt like I should be somewhere else. If I was with the kids, I felt like I should be with Jodi, or at work. If I was at work, I felt like I should be with the kids or with Jodi. And, and if I was with Jodi, I felt like I should be with the kids. So no matter where I was, there was a feeling that I should be somewhere else. And to complicate matters, hospital time is a lot of sitting and waiting, after surgery or during long recovery days, so it feels like there's not much going on. When I was at the hospital and she was sleeping, I'd feel like I should go to work and see what was going on, or I should go home and check on the kids. But as soon as I left the hospital, I always thought, "What am I doing? I need to be back at the hospital".

It seemed impossible to balance all the responsibilities. We were fortunate to have so many people helping and supporting us. Between Jodi's family, my family, and our friends and colleagues, not too many things actually fell through the cracks, but I understand how hard it is to keep all the balls in the air while you are juggling. You have to cut out everything that is not a top priority, just to keep going and maintain sanity.

Question: How did you deal with the “what if” factors of the brain tumor?

Tolan's Answer: I don't know if this is a normal inclination or unique to me, but by nature, I'm a problem solver. I chose engineering, professional problem solving, as a career. Whenever something happens, my mind always goes to the worst-case scenario, and then I work backwards from there. So, when we first found out Jodi had a brain tumor, my mind immediately went to, "What if she dies?". Our four children were between the ages of two and 10, so immediately, I wondered how I would take care of the kids, and how their lives would change without a mom. Of course, I thought about losing my wife, the person who is the right companion and partner for me in life. What that would be like? How would I move forward without Jodi? I couldn't help but think of my Grandpa Pringle, when he lost his young wife, and wonder if I would be mad at God, or if I'd be able to push ahead and live. And I've had to go to that place many times in the last 10 years.

That's how my mind works, and it's been a real struggle, but it's part of my journey. I've had to address the worst-case scenario—but find a way not to focus there.

Question: Your Grandpa Pringle played an important part at a critical time for Jodi. What was his role in your life?

Tolan's Answer: From my Grandpa Pringle, I inherited traits and idiosyncrasies that are part of my life to this day. He needed routine, and savored the little traditions that became part of his daily schedule, as do

I. He chose his career when he opened the college catalog and saw “Accounting” first on the list of majors. So, he chose numbers and worked until he figured them out. Choosing my degree in mechanical engineering was similar, and like Grandpa, it didn’t come easy to me, but I worked until it made sense. He ate the same food at the same time every day, and he always enjoyed a salty snack, usually peanuts, in the evening. For years, I ate a cup of dry oatmeal every single morning, and then I shelled peanuts and ate them every night. While this may seem small or silly, I recognize that he is part of me, and I can learn, grow, and progress like he did.

In the stories about my grandpa as a young husband and father, he had a little more of a temper, and not as much patience as he did later in life. But he was always hard-working, determined, and very much a family man. When Grandpa and his wife, Carrie, had two teenagers, she suddenly became quite ill. Within just a few months, Carrie died from breast cancer. She was only 33 — the same age Jodi was when she was diagnosed with a brain tumor. All the plans he’d made for his life disappeared, and it challenged him. I think he was mad at God that his wife, and his plans for life, were taken away. The kids, my mom and uncle, had a hard time losing their mother, and Grandpa didn’t always know what to do. Even after he got remarried, to my Grandma Helen, the family would drop him off at the golf course and then they would go to church together, without him. He needed more time to work things out in his mind, and with God.

Grandma and Grandpa Pringle both had tough situations early on that could have turned them permanently bitter. Some people get grouchy as they get older, they take on their worst traits and become almost caricatures of themselves. Others become kinder and more loving, and that was my grandparents; with Grandma’s help, Grandpa’s hard edges softened, and they grew into the best, most influential people in my life.

As a teenager I took a road trip with my buddy and we stayed with some of his family. We had fun and I didn’t really think much about it, until we got to California to visit my grandparents. Something was different in their home. That trip was the first time I realized that I could feel the influence of God’s Spirit, in their home. Given all he’d gone through, I admired that he was close to God, his wife, and his family.

For me, Grandpa Pringle held a reputation as a miracle maker. Throughout my life, I knew of Grandpa’s little miracles, everything from prayers that saved our house when a huge storm caused the roof to leak, to him showing up at just the moment someone needed his help. When he was in his late 80s, he still struggled with seasonal allergies. One particularly bad day, while visiting my parents in Utah, he excused himself, went upstairs, and came back

a while later. He'd stopped sneezing and appeared unaffected by his allergies. When questioned by my dad, Larry, Grandpa replied, "Larry, I told God that I've had allergies my whole life, and I'm done with them. And I asked him to remove that challenge from me." And then he went right back to work. Little things like that seemed normal for him.

So, when Jodi was so sick, and getting worse by the minute, Grandpa Pringle came to the hospital, and I suggested he give Jodi a blessing, because in my mind, I had these family miracles associated with him and his faith. And, in the blessing, he said that night, that very night, would be her low point. And then moving forward, she would start to do better. And that indeed was the case. We added that to the list of family miracles.

Q: How did your experiences impact you as a spouse?

One challenge I didn't anticipate is how much the whole experience would change Jodi. The person who went into the hospital is not the same as the one who came out. And she had no control over that.

Jodi had been an extremely independent person. I'm an independent person. We were both active and had lots going on with careers, community, and church. Then suddenly, she couldn't do the things she could before. Instantly, I became a caregiver, not just a spouse. Sometimes being a helper or caregiver is hard, you're trying to do all the right things, but it is easy for one, or both of you, to develop a little resentment around the burden you each carry.

Physically, since the tumor, she has decreased levels of energy; her body just does not function as well. She needs assistance and help, sometimes with even small tasks, like walking. She sleeps a lot more, and can't be as active as she'd like. She's very sensitive to air pressure (due to closing her eustation tube in order to seal the spinal fluid leak), so a little wind or a few clouds can totally ground her for hours or days. Big storms trigger migraines and dizzy spells that can keep her in bed for a week. Other days, Jodi is the same getter-done girl, perfectionist, high-expectations woman I married. She doesn't know when she's going to take a hit, or fly high, which is hard on both of us.

But also, her personality changed. Brain trauma can cause chemical and hormonal changes, and I think that put a strain on us because sometimes Jodi didn't seem like the same person I married. In the first dozen years of marriage, Jodi was not a moody person. Some people say their wives or daughters are moody, but I never saw that in Jodi. But when she's in pain, hormones are spiking, and her body is off it's routine, that increases her struggles and makes it harder for her to interact with people. Plus, you have

the added element of additional surgeries, complications, medications, and side effects, and all those factors contribute to the impact on our relationship. At times, we feel the weight of a decade of pain and stress.

On the flip side, necessity is the mother of invention, so out of need, we have also made many positive changes. Since Jodi's physical strength varies so much, we actively seek activities that we can do together. A few years ago, I bought Jodi a tandem bike for her birthday. She says it is the best gift she's ever received because it allows us to be active together, and on equal footing, when she is up for it, or just a passenger, when she's struggling. Our best dates have been riding through the canyon, along the river, enjoying the outdoors together. We have a loop that is almost exactly 20 miles, and on the return part of the loop, we often get off the river trail, navigate into Ogden, and then get a meal and a cold drink, before we finish our ride. Physically, the tandem bike puts us close enough to easily talk and share conversations, so it creates positive and memorable time for us.

Both of us are still active learners with growth mindsets, so we read and listen to podcasts regularly. We share an Audible account and we listen to the same books and then compare notes and talk about the stories, lessons learned, and who else should hear the messages. When I listened to Steve Job's biography, I came home every day and gave Jodi a recap of what I heard. After days of recaps, she finally said, "Stop telling me what happens, I want to read it for myself". We've probably read/listened to more than 150 shared books in our library.

Part of marriage, part of that commitment, is *choosing* to love each other. We both believe that you don't *fall* in and out of love, you choose your way in and out of love. So, even though our life together presents challenges, we try hard to choose love and choose each other. Finding shared activities and interests is just part of choosing each other, but it is something we can have control over. We are both stubborn, and that probably helps us in the long term. We simply refuse to give up on each other or our marriage.

Am I different now than I was 25 years ago? I'm changed, for sure, but hopefully I've learned and changed for the better. One thing that hasn't changed is that I have a personal goal to get Jodi to laugh at my jokes. Sometimes she rolls her eyes, or shakes her head, but on the occasion when a joke hits, it's totally worth it. I will never stop trying. Though, I have stopped jumping out of the shadows to scare her. Turns out, she doesn't think that is funny.

Q & A with the Author

Question: What is the one thing you struggle with the most while writing? And how do you defeat it?

Jodi's Answer: Putting other things ahead of writing is always my struggle. Though I love writing, actually sitting down and DOING it is a challenge. There are always other things that “need” to be or “could” be done. My best defenses are deadlines and accountability. When I tell someone else about a deadline, I am more likely to push myself to meet that target. If I am the only one who knows the timeframe, I can easily slip.

Writing is both terrifying and therapeutic for me. I worry that I am not doing justice to my stories, and I fret over finding just the right words. But, when I get into the flow, it is a marvelous and beautiful experience. (If you want to learn more, read *Flow* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.) Writing is demanding and draining, but also fulfilling.

Question: What is the best advice you received growing up?

Jodi's Answer: While I am sure I received advice from multiple sources, I don't recall any of the speeches. What I do remember is watching my father put in countless hours at work, come home to spend time with his family, and then volunteer at church. He toiled and kept at it, and never shunned the duties and hours that accompanied hard work. My mother worked tirelessly at home, raising seven children, yet she smiled at every meal and every completed homework assignment. She loves being a mother -- and it shows! From them, I learned the most important things you can do are work hard, love what you do, and trust in God.

Question: When did you start writing, and was there a specific event or person who influenced you to become an author?

Jodi's Answer: I've been a writer my whole life, long before I published a book. In my youth, I scribbled poetry, wrote stories with heartbreaking endings, and teamed up with friends to throw a twist into every English writing assignment. I love the power of words. When I was in 8th grade, my English teacher assigned us write to about our favorite author. I wrote a letter to the publisher and asked for information on my favorite author, Jack Weyland. A few weeks later, Mr. Weyland called me on the phone! He also sent a packet of reference materials to my home. My favorite author became one of my greatest inspirations. He writes powerful stories, but he also showed me that is he a real person. Today we are Facebook friends and he comments on my posts and sends notes and congratulations. He continues to inspire me!

Question: Are you currently working on a writing project, and if so, can you tell us anything about it?

Jodi's Answer: Yes! During my recovery from a recent surgery, I realized it is finally time for the world to have *A Million Little Miracles: 150 Ways to Show Up, Give Love, and Instill Hope When You Want to Help*. This book will be an inspirational and practical guide to making a difference for someone in need. With dozens of real-life stories, and hundreds of ideas and tips, readers will find wonderful ways to show others they care.

People ask me all the time if I am going to write a sequel to *The Sun Still Shines*. And the answer is—I can't decide. Though the epilogue of this edition gives 10 years of highlights, I could easily write three books from my experiences.

Right now, I feel like Benjamin Button, as though I'm aging in reverse. New medications are decreasing my rate of migraines, and empowering me with energy. I'm torn in deciding if I want to use my energy to keep deep diving into myself and hard times, or do something completely different. I'm sure I could be convinced, so if you want to read the next part of the story, please let me know, and I will start writing.

One writing project on my bucket list is a narrative based on the real-life experiences of my grandmother, Vearis Lisenbee, who lived one of the most incredible life stories I've ever known. I hope to resurrect her strength by telling the lesser-known and humble heroics of her life of love, loss, forgiveness, and joy. Because she passed away in 2009, the book would have to be fictional, as I'd have to invent details to craft the story. Readers would be amazed by the incredible strength and grit she mustered to create a beautiful life for her family.

Book Club Discussion Questions

1. What did you like best about *The Sun Still Shines*?
2. What aspects of Jodi's story could you most relate to?
3. What gaps do you wish the author had filled in? Were there points where you thought she shared too much?
4. Why do you think Jodi chose to publicly tell this story?
5. If you could hear this same story from another person's point of view, who would you choose? Why?
6. In what ways were you able to identify with the characters? If you were a character in the book, with whom would you most relate?
7. Did you find the ending satisfying? Did it meet your expectations?
8. Share a favorite quote or passage from the book. Why did this quote resonate with you?
9. If you could ask the author one question, what would it be?
10. Which individual in the book would you most like to meet? Why?
11. How does this book relate to your life or experiences?
12. What themes or messages did you take away from the book? Do you think these were themes the author was trying to convey, or based on your personal perspectives and insight?
13. Was there a chapter or passage that stood out for you or gave you an "a-ha!" moment about the topic?
14. In what ways did the book change your perspective?
15. Would you have read this book if it hadn't been a book club selection? Would you recommend read this book? Why or why not?

Photos

For more insight and photographs, please visit the original online blog at: www.amiracleforjodibrown.blogspot.com



Jodi on Mother's Day, 2009, three days before brain surgery.



Casen, Trenden, Tolan, Daven, Jodi, and Lindi Brown, May 2009



Top row: The first look at Jodi's incision & staples; Jodi and her dad (Von Orgill)

Second row: The ONE hospital day Jodi got out into the sunshine

Jodi and Tolan cuddling in the hospital

Third row: Jodi's mom (Sherri), with Jodi and sister, Tami, joining in the neighborhood welcome home celebration

Tolan and Jodi napping together on the couch, first day at home

The Sun Still Shines



The Brown family, Trenden, Tolan, Casen, Lindi, Daven, & Jodi, spring 2019



Enjoying the sunshine and water together, January 2020

To see more photos, including pictures after Jodi's latest surgery, follow her on Facebook or Instagram @jodiorgillbwon

Acknowledgments

More than ever, I am grateful to God for the gifts of family and time. During and post-brain tumor, I haven't known if I had much time left. I feel I have lived an entire life in the last decade alone. Countless hard days trap me in bed, but God continues to send earthly and heavenly helpers to my aid, as He will with all who ask. Each time I knock, HE opens with arms full.

Every interaction is an opportunity to change a life, and I'm grateful to those who choose daily to show love in simple moments and interactions, and thereby change lives for the better.

My parents, Von & Sherri K. Orgill, stand as role models for what parenting *should* look like. Though I am 44 years old, my mother still loves and longs to take care of me (and the other 25+ members of her family). Faith and family are at the center of all she does. My father jumps first and invests himself in anything I am involved in. He is a pillar of strength and righteousness. All I can hope to do is be the Jodi they think I already am.

My siblings, Kristi & Jamin, Tami & Dave, Scott, Brandon & Michelle, Michael & Erin, and Brett & Lindsey, are my teammates, emotional rocks, and my closest friends. Brandon bear hugs me through every high and low, and infuses me with love. Tami acts as one of my fiercest advocates, and most tender caregivers, even when her own family is in the midst of great struggles. She encourages me to vent – to her – even though she's heard it a million times. She is my constant, and my best friend. I couldn't walk this journey without her.

My in-laws, Larry & Kay Brown, are solid in their love, support, and participation in my family's lives. I treasure the countless hours we spend together building (and repairing) family projects and properties. They are wonderful second parents and dear friends.

I never imagined that I would give birth to my best friends and greatest blessings, Trenden, Lindi, Casen, and Daven. My children amaze me with their talents, wit, humor, dedication, passions, abilities, and compassion. They are better versions of Tolan and me, and I'm forever grateful for every earthly day as their mom. Though they are no longer little, they forever have my heart, energy, and love.

My husband, Tolan, needs more than a sentence of mention. God brought us together, and ensured each of us that we really are a match made in heaven. We have needed that heavenly reassurance many times, and I give thanks to Him for keeping us together. Tolan was instrumental in this anniversary book edition. He revisited painful moments to provide insight and perspective that I could not provide.

Marriage to a brain tumor survivor is much harder than marriage to a getter-done, fully abled individual. As my plate emptied of tasks and to-do's, in exchange for rest and recovery, Tolan's plate filled with all the tasks left undone. He still willingly takes on additional responsibilities, and continues to be patient, even when I struggle with crazy brain days, high emotions, seemingly pointless tears, extreme fatigue, compromised vision, and limited physical abilities. Tolan bears the weight of my chronic condition more than any other person, including me. I'm beyond grateful for his patience, loyalty, and love.

To my dear friend, Gonzalo Arellano-Pino, you will never know how much your little blonde lady adores you. You infuse me with love, support, humor, and strength in every interaction. And you encourage my sass and attitude, which I love. *Te amo, mi amigo querido.*

I never imagined, nor do I like to admit, that I need so much ongoing help and care. Special love and thanks to my inner circle of friends, who keep me and my family going, even when I struggle to ask for help. This is not a full list, but a few of my biggest angels need acknowledgement because they continue to show up and instill hope at every turn: Diana, Celeste, Brittney, Nik & Darla, Cami & Eric, Craig, Greg, Dan, Brandon & Debbie, J.D., Annette & Adam, and Cindy.

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Thanks to the wonderful communities of Riverdale, UT, Orem, UT, Warrenton, VA, and Laie, HI, for supporting my family through it all.

Thanks to all my brain tumor and facial paralysis friends who help me figure out the next steps on this beautiful journey of life.

As a note to my dear friends, please know that each of you starred in this book at one point in time, but editors and reviewers told me I shared too many stories about my friends. What a wonderful problem! You are in my heart, even if you are not in the book.

About the Author

Jodi Orgill Brown, MS, C.F.R.E., is an interactions and communications expert, a nonprofit consultant, professional speaker, and an award-winning author. She loves spending time with her muses, namely, her husband Tolan, and their four children, Trenden, Lindi, Casen, and Daven. They reside in a mountain valley of northern Utah.

Jodi is an avid learner and consumes books and podcasts daily. She loves speaking, training, and coaching to help individuals improve their interactions to increase their influence for good. She discovers inspiration from nature, history, stories, and especially from her children. Jodi can often be found lunching with her friends and business community associates in Ogden, or working with her favorite nonprofit organizations. She prefers to be outside and in nature, especially Hebgen Lake, Montana, Hawaii's North Shore, the rolling hills and woods of Virginia, the Weber River Parkway Trail, and her own backyard.

Jodi earned an MS in organizational communications and leadership from the University of Utah, a BA in communications from Brigham Young University, and is a Certified Fund Raising Executive (CFRE).

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Visit **www.amiracleforjodibrown.blogspot.com** to read the whole story as it unfolded, unscripted, and unedited.

Please leave a review!

The author reads all reviews and appreciates feedback that will improve future editions.