
A Girl on Wheels

Alicia Weston



You are stronger than you think, braver than you believe, and more beautiful than you could ever imagine. Let nothing hold you back!

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Epigraph

I 'm not just a wheelchair
Look at me closely; what do you see?
Please have a look,
Do you see me?
I may be sitting and looking quite short
But, inside, I'm no different, full of life, love, and
thought.
You may move me around by pushing my chair,
But please treat me as a person,
Show me you care!
My chair is my transport, just boring old wheels,
I don't care how my chair looks or feels.
But I care for the person in the seat,
With lots to say, lots to do, and lots of friends to meet,
So please close your eyes tightly

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And listen closely,
Who is it you hear speaking...
The wheelchair?... or me?
Poem by Natalie Par

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Preface

I am disabled. The doctors diagnosed me before my twelfth birthday, and now that I have passed my thirtieth, I feel the stories I have to share about my life and disability may be a source of hope for someone who needs it. In the years following my diagnosis, I needed to hear someone say that my life would be worth living or, although less helpful, that my life had meaning. When people tried to comfort me, I heard them say things like "You're stronger than you realize" and "God doesn't give us more than we can handle." You'd think those sayings would be comforting, but they kind of had the opposite effect. They only made me feel dejected because people say those words when something bad happens and they don't know what else to say. And after hearing comments like that, the lives of those with disabilities whose club I had joined seemed

full of struggles. Through the words of this book, I aspire to give you hope that even with disability and struggles, you can still have a normal life. Maybe not everyone's definition of normal, but a life worth living to you.

If you are one of the over sixty million people in my country alone with the struggle of a disability ahead of you, my heart breaks for you. I'm so sorry. I can't lie. Living life with a disability is a constant struggle, and your life will have to change in so many ways. You may even have to let go of some dreams and perhaps some people, but never question your worth as a child of God.

With my disability, I always found it hard to think of my life as having any value when I have to depend on others in my life so very much. If my struggles are remotely similar to yours, I want you to know that you're not alone and your inabilities do not detract from the meaning of your life.

Nobody's life is perfect, no one has everything they want, and everyone faces difficulties. This is mine. I have an incurable disease called Friedreich's Ataxia, an inherited disorder damaging my body's nerves. A gene defect I inherited from both of my parents caused it. When the doctors diagnosed me, I didn't experience anger or sadness.

I almost felt relieved. Of course, not that I had a disease but that the difficulties my family and I had noticed had a name and a reason. I certainly became angry many times about what my disease has done and taken from me. But anger with how unfair things are helps no one, and I strive every day not to get consumed by anger for the life I never got to have. The only solution I have is to not dwell on things that no one can change and remember that even if your life is more challenging than it should be, someone somewhere has it worse than you do. So don't feel sorry for yourself because with the difficulties of your diagnosis will come a strength you didn't know you possessed.

The people I will introduce you to on the pages of this book had their names changed to protect their privacy. They will always hold a special place in my heart for how they helped make this book a joy to write. Much about what I have written are memories of events in my life that may be different from what others remember, and if anything I have written is unintentionally hurtful, I am so sorry! To family and friends who helped me check facts and remember events so I could write about them. Your help warms my heart, Thank you!

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As a teenager, I would have loved to read a story like the one I will share with you. One that has some struggles with disabilities but tells how much happiness I found despite all I have to contend with. I thought to make this a self-help book and share the many quotes I have loved through the years. But as a book lover, I found sharing my story and telling quotes aren't mutually exclusive. So I have included a quote at the end of every chapter. I hope you enjoy them as well as my story.

Introduction

I built a fort with one of my older sisters as an eight-year-old. It looked like the second little piggy's house, except no need for a fox because a stiff breeze could knock it over. Our second attempt had potential, but it still wasn't sturdy enough. As time passed, I had a hard time walking down the rough terrain to our fort and building a better one never happened. Becoming a wheelchair user only five years later made the desire to walk precede the desire to build forts.

I learned young life isn't fair. I saw my grandmother treat my father as more of a servant than her son. My mother could yell more than a typical parent, my oldest sister disliked me, and I received a diagnosis of an incurable disease. No one ever expects their life to turn out this way. Not everyone can have a picture-perfect life, though.

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Understanding nothing would change, I decided to live the life God gave me to the fullest and enjoy it. I don't live an incredible life or even a glamorous one. I just live with the one I have, with laughter and chocolate. And the rest is history. ~ Ali

Foreword

My world became brighter when I met my dear friend Alicia. It feels weird to call her that because I have always called her Ali, Princess Ali, and Ali-Cat for as long as I have known her. She rolled into my life quietly, but it felt like a light flipped on. She was meant to be my friend. I vividly remember standing at the window of my dorm room early into the start of my junior year of high school, and I spotted Ali riding her awesome three-wheeled bike in careful circles around the school. I immediately forced my little sister to go with me to meet her.

I didn't know what to say like I often don't, but that didn't stop me from introducing myself and my sister and begin babbling about everything and anything. I don't know what we talked about, but I'm sure I made her laugh.

There are very few things I love more than making Ali laugh. She throws her whole body into laughter.

From that point on, she was all mine! I claimed her and made her my friend. We took on high school with giggles, piggyback rides, and a bull-dozer-like desire to mow everyone around us down as I sat on her lap in her electric wheelchair. I never wanted her to feel like she couldn't do something. I never wanted her to be left out. She didn't have to worry because we were there, me, my sister, and our group of friends, always ready to be her legs when she came across a task she couldn't quite complete on her own, arms around her waist to stand during song-service at church, a ride along companion when she got the four-wheeler down to the river. I remember happily zooming past all our classmates who had to walk down the long rocky road to the Russian River. Suckers.

My friendship with Ali is difficult to label because I have always felt more than friendship for her. A familial love, an understanding that I wanted to be in her life forever. It was protective and deep. She called me "mommy" as a nickname, as a game... but it felt right. She was the first person to tell me that I would be a great mom at a time I never thought I would be a mom, and now, as a mom of

three, I know she's right. She saw something in me that I couldn't see for myself.

The thing about my friend Ali is that she has faced so much more than any person deserves to face. Complicated family issues, and staggering loss, all while constantly dealing with the day-to-day struggles of a degenerative illness. And yet she is kind. Life hasn't made her bitter. She is strong. Her illness hasn't made her weak. She laughs as hard as ever. Sorrow hasn't drowned her. And she has a faith and love for God that inspires me beyond words. How many people have turned from the Lord for less than what she carries daily? And yet she still has compassion for others.

I am so happy that she has decided to write this book. I am beyond touched that she asked me to write this forward. And I hope everyone who has bought this book and is reading it enjoys getting to know Ali as much as I have.

- Emma



Chapter One

Mickey Mouse and Mud

“Ouch!” I exclaimed, pulling my fingers quickly out of the dirt. With no blood gushing out of my fingers I went to find Mom so she could look. My mother had magical ways of improving everything, especially as a six-year-old, so I interrupted her as she picked grapes with my two older sisters in my grandparents’ vineyard. Whining, I held up the fingers on my right hand for her inspection. Seeing nothing but dirty fingers, she sent

me to sit on our six-wheeler, parked at the edge of the small vineyard.

As I cried, my grandfather played his harmonica. Trying to drown out my wailing or soothe me, I'm not sure which. The pain got worse and traveled up my arm, causing even more tears to go down my cheeks. Mom's irritation showed on her face as she walked over to me, but her expression changed to concern as she inspected my fingers closer and saw swelling.

Having hurt myself trying to help the dog dig a hole, I got covered in dirt, so my mom took me home to get cleaned up before driving me to the hospital. She called my dad on the way to let him know what had happened and asked him to meet us in the emergency room. When we had almost gotten there, my mouth began tasting funny. It tasted like I had something metallic in my mouth, so swirling my tongue around, I tried to find it but found nothing. At six, I loved to get my mother's sympathy, but the look of panic she gave me when I told her about the strange taste in my mouth gave me a sense of unease.

In the emergency room, everything happened quickly. The doctors told my parents I got bit by a rattlesnake, and they needed to administer anti-venom. Someone stabbed

me several times before they found a vein to run an Intravenous line. Under good circumstances, they would have given me the anti-venom already since the bite happened over an hour ago. And the doctor didn't want my small body to suffer the effects of hemotoxin and neurotoxins from the venom longer than necessary. Everyone in the room relaxed after they administered the anti-venom. But suddenly, I struggled to breathe. The machine next to me started beeping frantically. The room erupted into ordered chaos, with my parents looking as freaked out as I felt. More doctors rushed into the room to help with the emergency. A nurse placed an oxygen mask over my mouth and nose. Finally able to breathe without as much of a fight, I relaxed. Curling up with a warm blanket the nurse brought me, I rested as my dad stood at the foot end of the bed and rubbed my feet. Meanwhile, my mother nearby gave the doctors an earful, demanding to know what had sent me into anaphylactic shock.

Unsure how or why I had gone into anaphylactic shock, they sent me on an ambulance ride to a nearby hospital for a few days of observation. It excited me to go anywhere if I got to go in an ambulance. During our family trips, I sometimes saw an ambulance speeding down the road

with flashing lights and a siren that, without words, announced, “get out of my way” to the vehicles it passed. I thought that would happen, except I would be inside this time. But sadly, the ambulance didn’t speed or turn on the siren, and I imagine the lights didn’t flash either. They didn’t need to get to the hospital quickly, so it did not constitute an emergency, my mom told me later, and that made the excitement of getting to ride in an ambulance vanish.

A day later, I still stayed in the hospital for observation. With visits from friends and getting some of my favorite kinds of popsicles called bug pops, I liked staying in the hospital! Every night I looked forward to visits from my dad, who stayed the night with me at the hospital while my mom stayed with me during the day. As a daddy’s girl, I always wanted time with him, and no matter how late he got to the hospital, I talked with him, even though he looked more interested in snoozing. I loved doing many different things with my dad, even when he would take me and my older siblings fishing in the pond below our house. We wouldn’t exactly kill the fish; we would just catch and let them go. I always had so much fun with my dad; he found it hard to refuse anything, making me a spoiled

daddy's girl. And he always wanted me to have everything he could give.



When I returned home from the hospital, life became delightfully normal again. We lived in a mobile home my dad had added to a piece of property his parents owned. Our house had five bedrooms, three bathrooms, an attic, a garage, a good-sized deck, and an enclosed yard. My grandparents shared the property with their three children, my father, and his two younger brothers. I knew the property as “The Ranch,” which had many rattlesnakes. And considering I hiked and explored the property at a young age, the idea that I waited to get bitten till adults stood nearby I found humorous. The ranch had many hills that made driving a quad to get from place to place practically essential. Even though many hills on the property annoyed me, the views from the tallest hill look incredible. Covering the acres grew so many oak trees and buckeye shrubs and an immense number of wildflowers in the springtime. The sky always seemed blue, and the air smelled so fresh. I truly had some amazing times growing up there.

The ranch had a lot of beauty, but with fairly steep terrain and considerable underbrush it could also be unforgivingly cruel. On my dad's way home from work one evening, he found a fawn. I'm unsure if he saved it while a dog mauled it or found it like that, but it looked badly hurt. Dad brought it home with him, and I saw a fawn up close for the first time. Near death, my dad couldn't bear to leave her to die. Mom got understandably irritated that Dad had brought it home for their children to see. Because while we kids loved it as a cute and adorable fawn, it had a deep and bloody gash on its trunk where I could see a little part of its intestines.

My parents took care of the fawn as best they knew how, found a spot in the garage for it to stay overnight, and left the rest to prayer. One of the hardest explanations to give a child is why God didn't answer their prayer. And the next morning, I got my first lesson in unanswered prayer. The fawn had died during the night. Dad had taken it away before my siblings or I could discover it hadn't lived. As only the first time and certainly not the last, I needed to understand God isn't some sort of magic genie who grants prayers like wishes, but like a father who listens to and wants to help his children, he can't give us every desire.



My dad spent so much time away from home, working on the ranch or in a family-owned business. The family business called Country Dental Supply did dental sales and repairs. My dad's parents owned the business, and his mother, who I knew as Grandma Karen, ran the daily operations in the office. Her husband, who I knew as Grandpa Luke, used to work with her. But when their oldest son Jacob, who I called Dad, willingly did the job in the family business my Grandpa Luke had done, he left his job to stay at home and become a full-time rancher.

So my dad spent a lot of time away from home. As a daddy's girl and a spoiled youngest child, I may have simply wanted more attention from him than he could reasonably give. However, my mother worked as a nurse at the nearby hospital and cared for our home and her three young children, and even with her many jobs, my dad seemed to work more. Sometimes I would go to work with him, where they had several aisles of shelves filled with everything a dental office would need. I would go down

the aisles pretending to be shopping; I have always enjoyed shopping as one of my favorite activities.

Another section of the building they used, called the shop, had mountains of boxes and a large table in the center of the area where they would pack things to be shipped. The left side of the shop had a bathroom, where my sibling Taylor and I first played with matches. Next door sat the lunchroom, where Dad took a break from his job to sit and eat with those of his family who came. And that felt like the best part of coming with him.

Even though I enjoyed spending time with my dad, I also wanted attention from my grandma Karen. She always seemed sweet but never had much time to spend with me and my siblings. She had more time for her younger grandchildren, and that stung. It's still hard to understand why she couldn't bond with her granddaughters. Perhaps because she had not fully dealt with the pain of giving birth to a stillborn baby girl. Or maybe because of that loss, she could never properly bond with my dad. Aside from family gatherings, she would come over sometimes, and I would be so excited. But she never came to see me, only to talk with Dad about business. Before she left, she played with me for a few minutes, but it felt like she spent

time with me because it wouldn't look good otherwise. It doesn't matter why she spent so much more time with the family business than her granddaughters because I never blamed her. It just made me sad for what we both missed.

My grandma Karen held a family picnic every summer down the hill behind her house. The family came, including distant aunts, uncles, and cousins. I enjoyed getting to know some cousins and remember seeing them each summer became a highlight of the family picnic. Another relation came to the picnic with her husband and three children, who were only slightly older than my sisters and me. We didn't live far away and did more things together. Our families planned a vacation together where we would fly down to Los Angeles and visit Disneyland. At Disneyland, I wanted to see Minnie Mouse and only got to see Mickey Mouse. As my only memory from Disneyland, it didn't endear me to the Disney company. We had lots of fun at the hotel, though, mainly because it had a pool. On the flight, the high elevation made my ears hurt really bad. No one other than my oldest sister Elizabeth and I had discomfort, which seemed odd, but we thought nothing of it at the time.

Since my grandparents all remained alive, we visited all four of them, and thankfully without airplane travel involved. Though we lived on the same property as Dad's parents, I always felt more cherished by my mom's parents. They visited us once or twice in California, but I only recall going to visit them at their home in Oregon. Those trips began my love of road trips. The excursion took about an eight-hour drive, and at a young age, the need for stops could easily have made it ten. I loved it when my dad came with us because it became more like a vacation.

One time we found this great zoo. As a petting zoo, they had goats, pigs, rabbits, and many other animals to pet. But they had other animals in cages they wouldn't allow people to get close to. I loved it there, and as one of my favorite places, I always wanted to go on trips to Grandma and Grandpa's.

When you first entered the zoo, they had a gift shop, and as such a fanatical shopper, I never left without picking something I had to have. After buying tickets to get into the park, we got little pellets of animal food. Then we went out the back door and entered something I can only describe as a crazy-looking barnyard where deer and goats instantly assaulted us, wanting our food pellets. They fol-

lowed us around most of the time, wanting more food pellets. Sadly, I would run out within the first ten minutes.

Once, they had a baby opossum wrapped in a blanket. I enjoyed carrying it around like a baby. We always had a lot of fun there, and once we got back on the road, we didn't have far to drive before we arrived at Grandma and Grandpa's house.

My grandparents lived on a hill in a trailer park in Myrtle Point, Oregon. Their trailer appeared old, with yellowed walls from their excessive smoking.

When Mom arrived with all of us kids, she told her parents they couldn't smoke inside while we visited. I don't know if making them go outside to smoke while we stayed with them made much of a difference because the entire trailer already reeked of smoke. Nevertheless, I always looked forward to spending time with them.

Grandma always went shopping and ensured they had an adequate supply of candy and junk food to entice her grandkids. We never got to eat like that at home, and I took full advantage. While the TV show we watched took a commercial break, I would sneak into the kitchen and steal a slice of Kraft cheese or a Snickers candy bar to eat as we watched our show. Looking back, I'm not surprised my

grandma looked overweight if they normally ate like that because the unhealthy food far outweighed the healthy food. My grandpa had his spot in the living room in a comfortable Easy Boy chair that positioned him right in front of the TV. He kept an abundance of Cheetos by his chair, giving him easy access when he got a craving.

My grandma and grandpa didn't share a bedroom ordinarily, but my parents always wanted to share the same bed, no matter where they stayed. As a little kid, some couples sharing a bed while others didn't; just confused me. When I got older and understood why, it made me nauseous. So, I never thought about it too deeply. But when we visited, my grandpa gave us his bedroom, which he and my grandma shared. If my dad came with us, my parents would take my grandpa's bed; otherwise, my mom and some of my siblings would pile into the king-sized bed in my grandpa's room, but I always got the daybed in the living room. During the day, though, my siblings and I would get on top of Grandpa's big bed and watch TV Land for hours, starting my love of a 90s sitcom called "The Nanny."

I hold the memories of the times with my grandparents in Oregon close to my heart, but I'm sentimental about

some of the times at the ranch, too. Almost everything I did before I started school included one or both of my siblings. And a favorite memory is one time when we got covered in mud.

Having a very wet winter, the three of us kids explored the creek that had spilled over. We trekked down the incredibly steep hill below our house toward the overflowing creek. On our way, though, we saw that the rain had turned the dirt in the garden into a lot of mud. At ages six, seven, and eight, we decided cavorting in the garden looked more exciting than in the creek. We all jumped into the mud-filled garden with little thought of how our activities would anger our mother. We had a spectacular amount of fun playing in the mud. It felt warm and sticky, like swimming in chocolate pudding that, not too long later, sent us to the house to get cleaned up. We thought we would go into the house to rinse off a little and change our clothes, but before we got to our bedrooms, our mother shrieked, telling us she had seen our hasty and muddy retreat. She pointed her finger and insistently demanded, "Outside." She made us strip off our muddy clothes and rinse off with the hose on the patio before we could come back into the house.

Growing up on the ranch, we didn't follow the rules of etiquette very well. Luckily for my mother, we didn't often act like wild children, and most of the time, Taylor and I or Taylor and Elizabeth played. All three of us rarely got into mischief together; I don't know why, but Elizabeth never got along with me, so I played with Taylor or on my own. Elizabeth, the oldest child, and me, the youngest, made Taylor the middle child and an important go-between in our siblinghood. Taylor didn't enjoy doing tea parties or playing Barbies, but with only a year apart, we didn't have a hard time finding other things to do together. We would sew clothes for our little TY bears and be careless with where we put the needles, causing me to step on one and jam it so far up my heel that Dad needed pliers to pull it out. Other times we would play detectives, finding clues and arresting the perp, which would be the dog, since we had no one else to put the handcuffs on. Our dad loved collecting vintage military gear, and Taylor and I would play army with it. We played army like Cowboys and Indians but with our dad's army gear.

I enjoyed my youth, but aside from playing games, I had times when I needed to act a little more mature. The beginning of the year following my snake bite brought

preparations for my Uncle Matthew's wedding. My mother busily sewed three dresses out of floral print fabric for me and my two older sisters to be the flower girls. Taylor always hated wearing dresses, but we wouldn't understand how much till years later. But she simply had to wear a dress for our uncle's wedding. A flower girl has no way around it. Mom did our hair, and with the dresses on, we looked pretty enough for a wedding. I don't doubt we looked adorable going down the aisle, even though Taylor looked grumpy. How long we had to stand in front of the church, and remain perfectly silent, was agony. As a groomsman, my dad stood across from my spot on the stage. As the minutes ticked by, I sent my dad pleading looks for him to speed up the ceremony so I could get off my already aching feet. In reply, he looked at me, saying, "I'm sorry, but be patient." The wedding finally ended, but I then discovered I had to stand for the wedding pictures. I could not have felt more excited about getting an aunt, though, no matter how much standing it took. And they planned to live on my grandparents' property, right down the hill from us. I could not wait for my aunt and uncle to return from their honeymoon and move in.



Although I loved having a new member of the ranch family so close, my family had other things we did away from the ranch. Most of them were involved in the church we attended. We went to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The Seventh-day Adventist faith is a Protestant Christian denomination. My dad did the job of a deacon, and my mom led one of the Sabbath schools as I grew up. We went to church every week, and true to the name of our faith, we worshiped on the seventh day of the week. Saturday has always referred to the sabbath in my parent's home. The biblical sabbath began Friday at sunset and ended Saturday at sunset, and is what the Seventh-day Adventist religion observes. As a little kid, and maybe even a bit now, I anxiously await sunset most Saturday afternoons. Because on the sabbath, we had many restrictions on what I could and could not do. After sunset, though, I could play computer games, watch a movie, or play a board game with my family. My dad's family attended the same church as ours, and I had friends there too. So, every Saturday,

Church felt like a social event for me and one of the main things my family and I did on Saturday.

Each summer, our church hosted a Vacation Bible School for all the children in the community. They had Vacation Bible School, or VBS, every morning for one week, and I got to go. VBS had craft time, game time, and snack time, as well as prizes. I found a favorite in craft time. I enjoyed taking something like wood and making it pretty by adding paint or glitter. And other times, I got to build whatever I wanted out of a pile of popsicle sticks and some glue, like a bird feeder or a picture frame. They played snacks and games in the sunny outdoors where crumbs made no difference, and we could play games like “*Duck, Duck, Goose.*”. VBS didn’t feel like a terribly religious week, just a time when the church would keep track of children for their parents for a few hours. I always had a lot of fun at VBS. The program had so many fun activities that ended with singing, prizes, and a bible story given by our pastor. It worried my mom when I left before they handed prizes out one day during VBS to meet her in the foyer with the complaint of my legs hurting and wanting to go home. This is my first memory of my legs telling me something was wrong, but at seven years old I didn’t listen. Asking my

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mom or dad to rub my legs about every other week or more till I got too old to whine to my parents concerned them. And as a nurse, my mother began watching me and my sister Elizabeth, who had shown troubling issues similar to mine.

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said and did, but will never forget how you made them feel.”

- Maya Angelou



Chapter Two

School is Fun if it Includes Bugdom

Both Taylor and I went to school later than Elizabeth. We all started first grade at age six, but Elizabeth insisted on attending school while Taylor homeschooled for two years. I also began homeschooling at six, but I didn't catch onto education at home as quickly as Taylor had, so Mom and Dad sent me to school to redo first grade. And since Mom didn't want to separate us, Taylor came

with me. We shared the same classroom, but Taylor went into the third grade.

We went to a Seventh-day Adventist school in the same town where they had the family business. Therefore, my dad could come if one of his daughters needed him. The elementary school had two classrooms separating the upper and lower grades. Outside had a patio where the students would eat lunch on sunny days and a basketball court where the teacher would have all the students do laps around for PE. Behind the basketball court, the school had a swing. And around the time I started school, I heard how my mother broke her leg on the monkey bars. The story certainly made me wary when on the playground. Next to the swings sat an open field we would use to play baseball or tag during recess.

In elementary school, I had an exceptional time playing a computer game called Bugdom, had fun switching twins around to fool the teacher, and learned boys are weird. Adam, a boy in the same grade as me, I knew from church and vacation bible school throughout the years. He introduced me to the computer game Bugdom. He also teased me about having a crush on a boy while in school together. I barely even remember the boy he claimed I had a crush

on. The boy I really had a crush on was named Aiden; I sat next to him in the classroom, thanks to alphabetical order. The classroom of the lower grades had Mrs. Brown as the teacher, and whenever the classroom would frustrate her, she would turn off the lights and scream. It worked for Mrs. Brown to get control of her classroom because when she did that, we all froze. It, however, didn't happen often.

My best friend, Emily, also started first grade at the school I attended as I became a second grader. Emily and I spent a lot of time together with our families meeting at church at a young age. I felt ecstatic when Emily came to the same school. I had my siblings there as well as friends, and with our dad's office near the school, whenever one of us three kids forgot our lunch, he would bring us takeout from the Aztec grill. This made me love school all the more and caused the three of us to forget our lunches as often as possible.

In first grade, when the school had picture day, I don't think I even brushed my hair in preparation. I had fun teasing all the other kids about how nice their parents made them look. When we got home and told Mom we had taken pictures that day, she seemed unhappy I hadn't made at least a little effort. When our pictures came back,

though, it mortified her to see how much her youngest daughter resembled a beggar. And for the following year, in second grade, she made sure she knew when the school had picture day, picked out what I should wear, and even curled my hair to make sure she liked the pictures she got. That year in elementary school, I got teased because I looked very different from normal, and I had done the teasing the year before, so it felt like an appropriate pay-back.

I had an unfortunate memory from school that embarrassed me, so please never make me regret sharing this story. One day, as school ended and almost everyone had already gone home, I decided to use the bathroom before heading home. I should have used the bathroom sooner because, by the time I left for the bathroom, I really had to go. I had gotten stuck playing a computer game on one of the iMacs the school had in the classroom and kept delaying. I bolted down the hall to the restroom but didn't make it. I peed my pants. Not a little either, but a lot, like two wet paths down the inside of each leg of my jeans. Instead of trying to hide what had happened, I walked through the classroom and to my parents' minivan. On the way, I passed a few students still waiting for their parents,

who looked at my jeans, stunned that an eight-year-old would pee their pants. It embarrassed me, and not wanting to show how badly it mortified me, I strutted around like I wore a badge of honor. I imagine everyone has peed their pants at least once in their lifetime, and I envy those who haven't.

Later in the year, the school hosted a Christmas performance in the church, located only a few feet from the school. We had to sing a song about the star of Bethlehem and took turns standing in front of the podium saying part of the Christmas story. I messed up, but we all lived through it. The school also had a play we did for parents' appreciation. Elizabeth, who had apparently shown skill in acting or perhaps because of her age, got the part of the Grandmother, While those of us in the lower grades played the farm animals. I got to be a rooster. I got to cock-a-doodle-doo a few times but spent most of the time during the play pecking the floor with my nose. Adam had to play the worst animal, a pig. One of us girls should have played the pig because it mortified him to wear pink.

To be thorough in our Christian education, the school visited Elmshaven. Elmshaven is the historical home of Ellen G. White, a founder of the Seventh-day Adventist

faith. It is a beautiful two-story Victorian home in St. Helena, California, that the Seventh-day Adventist Church had made into a museum. The house and the furniture looked so old to a kid my age. I couldn't help but cover my mouth to try not to laugh as they showed us into the dining room that displayed a dish set like my grandma Karen's. And while I'm sure they told me what Ellen White did in her life, before and probably during the tour, I only heard that she lived as a Christian author.

In hopes of helping with a good Christian education, my dad got the school new bibles for the students. Firmly believing in the King James Version of the Bible, my dad offered to buy the school new Bibles if he could pick the version. He naturally picked the King James Version, and since he bought them for children, he got an array of colors to choose from. As one of the last ones to choose a bible, I looked through the remnants. The last colors were pink and red, with one left in each. Adam also hadn't picked a bible, and after making him play the pink pig for the school play, the least I could do would be to take the pink Bible. I don't know why it seemed such a big deal to me; I liked pink. I didn't necessarily want a pink bible, but I had another one in a different color at home. When my dad asked

me to give Adam the red bible because it felt like a nice thing to do. I would never have imagined my family would have held onto that pink bible, and every time I see it, I can't help but remember to be kind. The friendship Adam and I still have to this day probably has nothing to do with the time we shared in elementary school, but long-lasting friendships can come from meager beginnings.

In elementary school, my parents noticed problems with balance and hand coordination for Elizabeth and me. The older boys often teased Elizabeth because of her difficulties; she looked weird and abnormal with walking. That became my first lesson on how mean and stupid adolescent boys can sometimes act. Elizabeth had a much more unpleasant time in school than me, but children in the lower grades can be more accepting of those with problems. My teacher talked with my parents about wanting me to redo second grade because of how bad my handwriting looked. And my parents had enough; two out of three of their children had problems in school, so they took all three of us out of school to begin home-schooling.



Leaving school meant less time with all the fun things we got to experience at school and less time with Emily and her family. Emily had a little brother; her mom always wanted us to include him in whatever game we played. It annoyed me, but it usually turned out okay. Our families got along pretty well together. Emily had more of a friendship with me than with my two older siblings, but we all had fun with Emily and her brother. So, our parents planned a trip together where we could enjoy the beautiful redwood trees of Humboldt County. My parents have almost always had a travel trailer, and the Carters had one, too, so they planned for us to take our travel trailers to Jamesson Grove RV Park. The area had many attractions. A drive-thru tree called the Chandelier Tree had a two-hundred-seventy-six-foot-tall redwood tree with a six-by-six-foot hole cut through its base for a car to pass through. An amusement park known as Confusion Hill not far up the road had a train ride and a spooky vortex of confusion. Driving a little further brought us to the RV Park where we stayed. It is surrounded by a state

park and across the freeway from the famous One-Log house, making it an ideal location. About half a mile up the road sat a gift shop called Legend of Bigfoot, filled with big and small redwood carvings I enjoyed exploring. We had driven past the area many times on the trips up to my grandparents in Oregon and had finally made a trip to see it.

Not long after we returned home from our vacation to the Redwoods with the Carters, Elizabeth decided we should get rats. Nothing seemed appealing about rats to me, but if my older siblings each got one, I wanted one too. With us leaving school, I liked the idea of having something else to fill our days. When I envisioned our new cute little rodents, though, I pictured mice and what we got held their cuteness for maybe a week, and then they lost all their appeal. They had black and white fur, fat little bodies, sharp nails, and teeth, and always stank badly. I did little with them, but Elizabeth always took them out by their cages to hold them. Rats don't live long, and all three decided to die close together. We had an animal graveyard on a little hill above our house. We buried other animals there before but held a little service for our first pets this time. Dad had put each rat in one of Mom's glass canning

jars. I imagine preventing the dog from digging up the carcass because of the smell. But it didn't work. Because a few months after the funerals, the dog brought us one of the glass jars with rat blood and guts on display. I'm not sure how the dog brought the jar down the hill from the graveyard, but he did, and we had to see it; it looked and smelled incredibly disgusting. Whether the dog thought he had found a treasure to share with us or wanted us to open the jar is anyone's guess. After that unpleasant incident, we placed future dead animals in anything but a glass jar.

Though I found that experience with our rats rather unpleasant, in my youth, I always had something to look forward to. And for me Christmas caused a lot of excitement. I have always loved the holiday, but with youth, I could hardly contain my anticipation for it. I love presents, and even though I got presents on my birthday, at Christmas, everyone else got to share in the morning's excitement with me. I didn't always have enough patience to wait till Christmas morning to discover what gifts I got, so before they got wrapped and placed under the tree, I would search for their hiding place. And sometimes, I found them, but most of the time, I shook the wrapped gifts under the tree,

guessing what I got. My mom set up so many decorations in our house for Christmas and even two trees, one six-foot tall tree in the living room that had colored lights and Disney ornaments we embellished it with. A seven-foot tall elaborately decorated tree stood in the family room. We couldn't touch because Mom adorned it with white lights, a golden garland, and a mixture of gold and glass ornaments. Dad stood several inches taller than Mom and had to help put the ornaments on the uppermost part of the tree, but it looked incredible when they finished it. On Christmas morning, my siblings and I opened our gifts on the floor, lasting a frenzied few minutes, and left the previously clean carpet now littered with a mass of wrapping paper and bows. We had tremendous fun, though.



Before we left school, Mom and Dad announced the impending arrival of baby number four. My parents had asked us what we thought about adding to our family a few months before. I don't remember what Elizabeth and Taylor said, but I enthusiastically proclaimed I loved the idea. So, when they announced a new baby, it did not surprise

us, but the idea of having a little sibling excited me. Mom had a bad form of morning sickness known as hyperemesis. She had called a nurse to come to the house and give her some intravenous fluids. Seeing the nurse hold Mom's arm and grab scissors, tape, and a needle from her bag, I worried the nurse would hurt her. Going to Taylor's room, I sat on the top bunk on her bunk bed and confessed I worried the nurse planned to cut Mom with her scissors. Taylor tried to talk some sense into me, but the idea freaked me out, and I still sat on the bunk bed a short while later when Mom came to find me and assure me the nurse didn't hurt her. I hesitated to believe her because I assumed the nurse had gotten the scissors to cut her. Looking at her arm with only a pinprick from an intravenous needle, my freak-out sounded silly and a little crazy. Even after Mom's morning sickness finally ended, we had longer to wait for the new addition to our family.

That summer, before our family grew, my parents took us on another trip. Even with a growing family, Mom and Dad found the energy to take us all on several vacations most years. Mom never really got along with my dad's family, which may partly be why she always happily left. Her parents also hadn't gotten to take their family on many

vacations, and she wanted her children to have experiences she never got. Whatever the reason, I gratefully accepted all the traveling my family did in my youth.

For this vacation, we went to a 1,000-acre Christian camp in grizzly flats surrounded by the El Dorado National Forest called Leoni Meadows. We stayed in the Meadow View Inn and ate in the cafeteria, where I honestly don't remember the food as good or bad. But at the camp, we had a lot of fun. Taylor did archery at camp, and I had fun trying but didn't excel at it. And most of the time went with my mom to ceramics instead. They allowed the older people to make things out of clay, but the younger ones had some little figurines they could paint. I painted some little swans, and my mother made and painted a little oval vase that my parents used for many years in their home. The camp had some go-karts with a small track where we had a lot of fun. Away from the commotion of the go-karts, they had a barn with horses they used for trail rides. Dad went with us for a trail ride, and for the first time, I rode a horse. A guide who knew the area and the horses led the trail ride. The horses looked sleepy but were maybe just a little old. The guide said they knew the path very well and didn't worry about them not knowing where

to go. Once the horses got saddled, they demonstrated how to mount a horse properly. And climbing on the back of the horse we wanted to ride with only a little difficulty, the trail ride began. The trail ride didn't take long, but one of the horses without a rider decided to lie down for a nap. Many years later, I learned horses don't lay down to snooze, so whatever happened probably had nothing to do with him wanting a nap.

Even though we did the trail ride and ceramics as a family, we didn't do everything together. And considering my parents had noticed I had balance issues, I probably shouldn't have walked alone. The idea that I couldn't stay on my feet while walking on pavement slightly downhill hadn't even occurred to me. But when I fell and landed with a smack on both knees, I became painfully aware of my mistake of not having someone there for support. Standing up on shaky legs, I made my way back to where we stayed, which luckily wasn't far, and when I got to the room, Mom was there. She looked mad about my injury, but it probably upset her more that I had hurt myself again. I only needed Band-Aids, one for each of my knees, but nothing major; it had just hurt.

Our vacation also included a train ride on the camp's little engine. They had a small red train engine pulling at least ten cars behind it for passengers to ride on. The train ride started in a large meadow and went around the camp for miles through a cowboy camp held for teenage boys in the summer and back to the depot in the meadow. We had an amazing time on vacation; even though I had gotten hurt, an injury every week became normal for me.

Despite the challenges for Elizabeth and me, we had a relatively normal family life and sisterly rivalry.

Every time my parents left my oldest sister in charge, we would fight, and with me involved, that meant screaming. Taylor didn't seem very argumentative and always got along with Elizabeth, but I didn't want to do what she said as the youngest. And Elizabeth liked bossing me around. I annoyed her as the family's baby, so it didn't surprise me. Mom and Dad often left her in charge because to them older meant wiser, I suppose. As the authority in the house, she often got Taylor to help her carry me to my room, kicking and screaming. Our grandfather spent nearly every day on the ranch driving around, fixing things here and there. And he could hear my screaming from a respectful distance away. I had a robust pair of lungs

on me back then. My screams often brought him to our house, and I hoped he would end my sister's tyranny. Locked in my room, I don't know what they discussed, but I'm guessing she made it reasonable to believe she had no choice but to throw me in my room. I like to think my parents realized she threw me in my room for more than needing a timeout because she did it so often, and I wasn't that bad of a kid. I'm nearly positive, anyway.

Aside from getting picked on as the youngest, I enjoyed home-school and watching the baby bump on Mom expand. My older siblings and I found enjoyment in having more time to play. In our youth, Healdsburg had this awesome toy store in the Town Square called the Toy Box. The store felt small, maybe because of all the toys crammed into the space. I liked everything about the store, but I had a favorite in their display of Playmobils. They displayed something different every time we went, but I enjoyed the time they showed a hospital set the most.

Throughout the many trips to the Toy Box, I got a hospital room set, an Indian family and tepee set, and a diner set. I probably got many more, but I enjoyed those three the most. I played with both of my siblings, but Taylor often needed to be the buffer between Elizabeth and me.

Elizabeth could be very argumentative, and I cried a lot, not a good combination. As the middle child, Taylor tried to end the argument before I broke down in tears. Despite the occasional fight, I liked playing with my siblings better than alone. With all of my Playmobils and all of Elizabeth and Taylor's, we had plenty to play with and began building a Playmobil city. Elizabeth took the biggest Playmobil house we had to play with and named her character Princess Rose. I named my character Christina and made her more of a career woman than anything else. Taylor had a boy named Tommy as her character, which would make so much sense someday, but it didn't matter at that age. With all the toys, it made a big mess, and as with most mothers, our mom wanted to keep her living room clutter-free. We found another room with plenty of space to play, the attic. It felt hot up there and smelled like old mothballs, but we didn't care. Our dad had bought a swimming pool for his family the summer before, and if we got too hot in the attic, we could throw swimsuits on and leap into the pool.

“Every Individual matters. Every Individual has a role to play. Every Individual makes a difference.”

- Jane Goodall



Chapter Three

Dogs, Horses, and Little Brothers

Most of my time at age nine, I did things with my siblings and parents, but I cherished the times I spent with Emily. We would go to each other's houses and enjoy cooking and baking together. We did some pretty strange things with our adventures in the kitchen. One day we had fun trying to make something between choco-

late pudding and brownies, complete with sprinkles and whipped cream. But the result hadn't tasted as good as we had envisioned.

We also tried to make more practical things; one night, we made a top ramen dinner for her family before I dropped it all over the floor. I tried really hard not to drop the pot, but I never had much muscle for holding heavy things, and they had no room to set it on the table. When I dropped it, I managed to spill it all over myself. It felt pretty hot, not hot enough to burn me, but the temperature still shocked me. I didn't hear that it upset her mother to have a mess to clean up, which I often heard in my parent's home. Her mom just gave me a sympathetic look, checked me for injury, and sent Emily and me to her room to find something clean for me to wear.

Once I cleaned up, we began to eat something other than top ramen. I got mad at myself for messing up dinner, but they never treated me like they needed to be on alert based on all the accidents I had, which meant more than they knew. Another time we watched a scary movie. It couldn't be called a horror film because it looked incredibly unrealistic, but it still scared me. I had nightmares of a monster under my bed for a few weeks. I don't think I was

old enough, but age probably wouldn't have made much of a difference. I never got into scary movies, especially before bedtime.

Although Emily and I enjoyed baking together, I did it on my own, too, and made a wish for an Easy-Bake Oven for my eighth birthday. It overjoyed me when I got it. I opened a little restaurant in my room with my baked creations. I had a walk-in closet and used that space for the kitchen in my restaurant while I set up a little table and chairs in my bedroom.

While I enjoyed my little restaurant, I didn't do it very long and had much more fun with the typical annual celebrations. To commemorate the beginning of the Memorial Day weekend, Healdsburg has hosted a yearly parade called the Twilight Parade. At seven or eight, my dad entered a military vehicle in the parade, and my mom made all three of us girls' shirts saying, "Born in Healdsburg Hospital". Even in youth, I found it embarrassing and tiring having to wave constantly, and I didn't have nearly as much fun as picking up candy thrown by the parade participants. The parade had floats and tons of different vehicles, along with many other groups who simply marched down the street holding banners. I always enjoyed seeing

the horses dressed up for the event with riders on their backs. I loved horses less than Elizabeth but always enjoyed watching them prance by. After the Twilight parade, the city of Healdsburg Hosted a fair called the Future Farmers County Fair that lasted for several days. My parents always took my siblings and me to the fair following the parade, where my grandma Karen had a booth for the church. The booth served vegetarian meals and offered a health questionnaire and blood pressure readings. That I always thought served to help the patrons see the error of their diet and become vegetarians. But the fair had tons of excitement too. They had animals, games, and food, including my yearly dose of cotton candy. I loved it there because once I left school, I saw friends only at church or home, and neither had cotton candy.

Finally, at nine, I became a big sister. My mom and dad had gone to the hospital for the baby to be born a while before we visited, but babies can take their own sweet time. My two older siblings and I stayed with our grandpa until the next night when we came to see the new arrival. Grandpa Luke loved Trader Joe's and decided it would be a good time to stop at the store since he drove us to town to meet our new sibling at the hospital anyway. It irritated me

when he took as long in the store as any other day. When he finally returned, though, we didn't have much further to the hospital. I had a baby brother. He had red and peeling skin like he had overcooked, which makes sense with him arriving two weeks late. But a more precious bundle I hadn't seen. He went back and forth between his big sisters for hours. And then, an adult finally came telling us to put him down and return tomorrow. I looked forward to having a younger sibling when he finally came home from the hospital. I worried I would suck at the big sister gig. I had Taylor as my big sister, but we treated each other more like friends. I thought of Elizabeth as a big sister but she had a domineering personality, and I didn't want to be like that with my baby brother. So I didn't have an example to show me how to be the big sister I wanted to be. But as I soon learned, I loved rocking him, reading to him, and just hanging out with him as we got older, so I think I did okay.

Despite the joys of our new little brother around, my sister Elizabeth, as a big animal lover, wanted a horse. When my Great-aunt Linda had died the year before, she had left my parents some inheritance, and my parents decided they could afford to buy a horse. Mom didn't like the idea of a full-sized horse, so they looked around for

a miniature one. The idea of letting such a large animal around their daughters with apparent physical difficulties terrified her and maybe even my dad. So my dad looked around for a little horse that couldn't inflict as much damage as a full-sized one. It didn't take long before he found one. They called him Ferdinand. He was a cantankerous little horse owned by a lesbian couple who spoiled him like their child. And as a result, he acted very much like a prima donna. When we first met Ferdinand, he had nipped at little Anthony's heel as Mom held him on her hip. Elizabeth wanted him, though, and she left no room for arguing. He had become a member of the family the instant she had seen him. So Dad loaded him in the trailer, and we took him home.

Along with the horse, we also bought a cart Ferdinand could pull, with a bench seat big enough to fit all three of us older kids on. I think my parents bought a horse for all of their three older children, but Elizabeth didn't like to share, even the responsibilities of his care. Which I could never understand, but then again, I'm not a horse lover. All of us girls got to have fun riding in the horse cart, though.

However, that horse acted so difficult. He didn't like it when we tried to ride on his back or when Elizabeth

hooked him up to the cart, either. Sometimes he would freak out when he pulled the cart, and we sat on the bench. I recall once he pulled us right into some blackberry bushes. I think he did it in retaliation for something, but I had no idea what.

For as long as I can remember, I hated heights, and we had an incredibly steep hill below our house. Ferdinand couldn't seem to decide whether he feared it or liked it. I think he had a vendetta against me, so he always made the hill the worst part of the ride. Ferdinand had poor eyesight and was prone to freakout, even in the middle of the day. Once on such an occasion, something spooked him. I didn't notice anything, but he obviously did. We had gone down one of the few flat roads at the ranch with Ferdinand pulling the cart behind him. He started going faster, darted off the road, and ended up with the horse cart flipped over on its side. Thankfully, we were young because, to this day, I have no idea how falling in a heap on the ground didn't hurt more.

We enjoyed riding in Ferdinand's cart. Although it hurt much more often than it should have, the pain I unintentionally inflicted on myself hurt worse. I would fall so much that I would often have an injury on one body

part or another. I put several scars under my chin because my hands didn't always move fast enough to protect my face when I fell. I hadn't thought about how none of my friends had injuries like mine. I didn't overthink it. I was just clumsy. Looking back at this time in my life, I understand my mom's concern. I thank God for my youth; otherwise, I would have freaked out like my mom. We saw doctors, had tests, and I even had a CT scan. The results all came back the same: with nothing wrong. Nothing they knew how to look for, anyway. Life continued as normal because, as far as we knew, I was. But one day, I fell while I walked with my baby brother cradled in my arms. I had tried to protect him as I hit the carpeted floor holding him, and he was fine. It freaked my mom out, and Anthony cried, but everyone seemed all right. I tried to brush it off as no big deal, but knowing I had almost hurt someone so precious sent me to my room, where I broke down in sobs. Weeping for fear of a problem that scared me beyond words, and I now needed to acknowledge. I wish I could erase the memory of what had happened because I remained pleasantly oblivious to the problem before, but now I couldn't simply ignore its presence. The moment after Anthony and I hit the floor, every muscle in my

body tensed as I waited for him to make a sound. When he wailed and showed no signs of physical injury, I knew I absolutely never wanted to experience that again. Even though now I knew with little doubt my clumsiness could not be normal, I believed with time, everything would be all right.

After that, I didn't carry Anthony around much, and in an effort to forget, I had fun with my dad. One evening, my Mom had to work, so my dad had to babysit. We begged him to watch movies with us. My dad didn't really enjoy movies much, but he would do anything for his daughters. We convinced him to watch a movie, then another, and another until the clock struck midnight, and Mom arrived. She acted unhappy Dad hadn't put us to bed and, without letting us finish the movie, sent us to sleep. I understand my mother's irritation that her husband should have already put their children in bed, yet I can't help but be glad about the fun that memory with my dad elicits.

The times I would play Monopoly with my dad hold another fond memory. The game would start with everyone in the family playing, but whether they lost their money or got bored, Dad and I would be the last ones. During one of our games, we ran out of money and changed the fifty-dol-

lar bills into fifty thousand and the hundred-dollar bills into a hundred thousand. We would play for hours, and Dad rarely had that long to spend on a game, so we didn't get to do it often, making the times we did even more special. I never had great skill at Monopoly in my later years, and I honestly can't explain what happened. But it gave me a fun memory of something I would do with my dad. I'm not sure when we stopped playing, but probably around my teen years when spending time with Dad didn't feel as cool.

Families can be wonderful things, and even though my parents argued and we went through many things no family should have to deal with, we became stronger for it. Elizabeth and I had always struggled with the same difficulties. But around the time my parents had Anthony, she had an issue apart from mine that needed to be addressed.

Elizabeth had developed scoliosis. Scoliosis can be an issue for children and adults, with or without any other underlying health condition. So just more bad luck and not a sign of what could be wrong. She needed doctor visits and x-rays to decide whether she needed surgery and got a back brace that looked extremely uncomfortable to try to prevent the need for surgery. With the stress of Elizabeth's

scoliosis and the bonus of a little one, the six of us left on a family vacation, hoping fun would ease the stress. My parents took our travel trailer to a campground with a view of the Blue Lakes. Where we camped our trailer at a campsite a few feet from the deep blue water of Upper Blue Lake. My siblings and I enjoyed swimming in the lake while one or both of my parents sat on the shore with little Anthony. We had plenty of family time while on vacation, and I even made a friend.

I liked good nature walks, and with the roads around the campsites covered in pavement, the smooth, firm ground under me made me feel steadier on my feet. I decided to go for a walk and asked my new friend Candice if she wanted to join me. She eagerly said absolutely and raced to her campsite to get tennis shoes. Not wanting to rush her, I walked more leisurely behind her. Reaching Candice's campsite, I could easily see her from the road, and we waved at each other as I began walking to join her at her campsite. I stopped after several steps, noticing a dog with black fur and brown eyes that watched me as if I might be a threat. Tethered in the campsite, the dog couldn't move much, but he stood beside me before I saw him. Only having acquaintances with friendly dogs, I raised my

hand to scratch behind his ears, hoping to let him know I wasn't a threat. But before I could, he lunged. The dog bit me on my right abdomen, pushing me to my hands and knees on the pavement. Blessedly, I fell out of the dog's reach, who still looked menacingly at me. Pain radiated from my knees and abdomen as I knelt on the pavement, trying desperately to catch my breath.

Once air finally filled my lungs, I let out a piercing scream that would make a horror film proud, got to my feet, and ran. Somehow, my mother knew I had made that terrible noise, and as I sprinted to the safety of our campsite, Mom rushed out to find me. I had a bloody hole in my overalls over my right abdomen where the dog had bitten me and scraped both my knees where I had hit the pavement. She wanted to know what had happened, so I related the story to her in between my sobs as we walked to our campsite. The stunned expression on my siblings' faces as we entered the campsite would have made me laugh except for how badly I wanted to cry. Candice's mother, and the dog's owner, came into our campsite a few minutes after us, apologized for what had happened, and blamed me for it. As my mom looked up from the damage this lady's dog had done to my abdomen, she started arguing

about how a dog like that shouldn't be brought to a camp with children. I didn't get as mad at the dog's owners as my mother, but then again, she saw a dog bite on her ten-year-old daughter. Someone should have told me. The first foot I stepped into their campsite, they should have said to stay away from the dog. If I had only known, I could have avoided all the pain, anger, and fear caused within the last half an hour. As an OB nurse, my mom hadn't dealt with many dog bites. Even though it didn't look deep, she announced as soon as my father returned with the car, we would leave for the emergency room.

I felt like we sat in the ER waiting room for hours but remained for probably only twenty minutes. By the time I got in to see the doctor, I had gotten used to the pain and whimpered instead of my earlier wailing. Not appearing deep, the doctor put a gauze bandage over the dog bite and discharged me. It didn't need stitches or much of anything, but I still have scars for every tooth in the dog's mouth to remind me of a day that is impossible to forget.

When we got back to the campground, I gave my siblings a smile. Probably because with the help of some drugs and some time to calm down, it didn't hurt much anymore. I assume the dog's owners had left because they wor-

ried the authorities might be called to take action against them or their dog. I often wonder what went through Candice's mind as her dog bit me, mainly if she knew her dog could be that vicious.

That night in the trailer, I didn't sleep well because the way I kept trying to lie irritated the dog bite. After a while, I decided to find comfort in my parents' bed. In the trailer, their bed looked much smaller than at home, and too small for three people, so Mom left to snooze in my bunk bed. I wanted to snuggle next to Mom as much as Dad, but I understood there wasn't enough space. And I simply snuggled next to my dad and slept much better than I had in my bed by myself. In the morning, before Dad and I got out of bed, Mom and my siblings gathered around as my mom changed the dressing on my dog bite. I probably looked at it more closely than I had the day before, but it looked worse. It looked very unpleasant and still hurt, and while I happily accepted the attention I got because of it, I didn't like the reason. When gauze again hid the bite, we ate breakfast, packed up, and headed home.

“Buckle up and know that it's going to be a tremendous amount of work, but embrace it.”

- Tory Burch



Chapter Four

New Things

Though our first vacation from early in the summer became a disaster, every summer my family would go to a camp in the redwoods. They called it Redwood Grove camp. A Seventh-day Adventist camp in the incredible redwood forests of Humboldt County, California. Near the Avenue of the Giants, Founders Grove, and the Eel River, I haven't seen many better spots in Humboldt. The camp sat below a steep, windy road that amazingly didn't cause more accidents with big trucks and trailers driving down it. Twelve large campsites spread

throughout the one hundred-acre camp surrounded by a cream-colored canvas held the divisions. Each division or class had a specific age range from newborn to adult, where there would be singing, games, and a speaker every morning and evening. Except for the young kids who had an early bedtime and only got a morning meeting. Since my mother loves little ones, she led the division of three to four-year-olds for many years in my childhood. As a leader, our campsite sat next to the division. Elizabeth had most of her little animals at our campsite. Therefore, all the kids wanted to visit at the end of class. Elizabeth even brought Ferdinand once or twice. Everyone loved the little horse. I brought my bunny sometimes too, but with so much to do at camp, I never needed to bring animals to spend time with. The camp had outdoor dining at a restaurant called *The Burger Barn*; shopping at a store known as the *ABC*, swimming in the Eel River, and visits to Founder's Grove, where Dad would enjoy showing us the albino tree.

After our first summer vacation left me slightly traumatized, our second vacation in an area I knew by heart and people I had known for so long gave me serenity. And then my family experienced another trauma. The doctor told my sister Elizabeth she needed back surgery to straighten

her spine. I hadn't known anyone close to me who had surgery, so I had no comprehension of what having surgery would be like for her. The difficulties my parents had noticed in Elizabeth and me, we now know, also added more discomfort to what the surgery already put her through.

When Elizabeth finally came home from the hospital, she didn't look like herself. It worried me to see how much my mother hovered over her and that Elizabeth let her worry me the most. As a strong-willed person, Elizabeth always disliked getting cared for. It upset me to see her back, which now looked so painfully straight and had noticeable scars above the collar of her shirt.

Although Elizabeth had finished her surgery, she had more doctor visits and x-rays to see if it fixed her spine curvature. I don't think I even understood the possibility of it being unsuccessful until it happened. Elizabeth didn't cry much; I cried most in the family, but the day the doctor told her the surgery didn't work and she needed another one, she cried, making me want to weep right along with her. Her tears caused our mother so much distress she told the doctor, "No, you aren't allowed the opportunity to fail a second time." They found a new doctor who did his job well. He had to fix the mistakes of the previous doctor and

then fuse her spine. That meant two more surgeries. The doctor proposed they do them back-to-back, meaning a long time in the hospital without a break. But after that, she would be done and have no more surgeries to dread.

So my sister spent several weeks at UCSF, and my parents took turns staying with her. Luckily, these surgeries proved successful, as she had a rougher time with them than they expected. Giving more evidence of something wrong. The doctor had noticed my spine didn't look as straight as it should either and sent me to the hospital for an x-ray. And sure enough, I had scoliosis too. Elizabeth's spine had one big, drastic curvature that affected her breathing, while my spine curved in more of an S shape that balanced itself out. With Elizabeth's deterioration due to her surgeries, the surgeon recommended not operating on me unless it couldn't be avoided. Getting X-rays and lifting the back of my shirt to let the doctor see the outline of my spine became a regular occurrence for me. My spine moved a little, but it never warranted the need for surgery.

That spring, the Carter family decided to move. Emily would leave. They had sold their house but` didn't want to leave quite yet. So my parents let them stay in a travel trailer behind our house, creating more time for me to

hang out with Emily before she moved away. We did a lot together before she moved. One of the biggest memories I have from those months happened when my mom took Emily and me for a ride on our six-wheeler to get the mail. My mom drove while Emily and I rode in the utility bed behind the seat the driver would straddle, we rode like that all the time, and this time we had our first incident. Emily and I sat in the utility bed with nothing obstructing our view and nothing other than a small railing to keep us from falling. Understanding the risk, I held on with a white-knuckled grip, but sadly, I don't think Emily understood the danger. Because when we drove on a flat stretch of road and went over a bump, Emily flew over the side and under the wheel. Mom's fast reactions that day may have saved my friend's life because Mom had already stopped before I realized Emily had fallen. She had tire treads on her back and maybe a few bumps and bruises her mother worried about when we returned to the house, but it could have ended much worse. The time passed quickly after that, and she had left before I knew it. They moved to Oregon. My mom's parents lived a few hours away from where they moved, so we might see them again but nothing certain.



Shortly after my Uncle Matthew and Aunt Betty introduced their second son. My parents decided to move too, although not as far as the Carters had, but at least out of Sonoma County. A friend of my Uncle Matthew's told my father how little his family seemed to care about him. With how much more they expected my father to help physically and financially at the Ranch than his brothers, I could believe it. So my parents chose to leave the Ranch and the proximity to my dad's family, if not for themselves, but for my siblings and me. Growing up so close to family that didn't act like they happily had us so near caused me to assume I did something wrong that made me not good enough to earn their love.

I had thought wonderful things about my Aunt Betty until an incident right before we moved. As Mom pruned her roses in the front yard, Betty came up to talk with her. I don't know if Betty didn't realize some of my siblings and I played in the yard or if she didn't care. Letting herself in the gate, she walked up to my mother and angrily told her, "You better get down to the bank and sign the papers."

The papers would sign the legal property of our home over to my grandparents. At that age, it hadn't upset me that my aunt seemed so against us owning anything on the Ranch but that she yelled at my mom. With the stressful atmosphere of living on the property of my dad's family and the ever-worsening difficulties Elizabeth and I faced, no one objected to leaving.

My dad often traveled on business trips for Country Dental Supply, and with the summers we spent at the camp in the Redwoods, the idea of where we would live felt easy. Humboldt County occupied a beautiful area on the California coast and a place we all looked forward to moving to. We looked around a little without finding what we wanted or a place my older sister and I needed. Then we saw four and a half acres on an incredibly green and mostly flat property in a subdivision we fell in love with almost instantly. I would have liked a bigger house, but after seeing the property, which looked incredibly perfect, not much could deter us from making this our new home. A small town, even smaller than where we had grown up, made it seem ideal. Not as big as the ranch, but as big as we needed, and even Elizabeth's horse Ferdinand appeared to appreciate his new home. We had an easier time riding in

the horse cart pulled by Ferdinand; he still acted cantankerous, but on flat ground, I had an easier time staying in the seat.

While we loved the property, the house... um, looked creative, but it's hard to imagine anyone would call it a nice house. The living room had a high ceiling, but only on one end. The front of the house had an odd window in a triangle shape. It wanted to be a breakfast nook, but a table wouldn't fit. It had a small kitchen, but they apparently had plenty of room to build a sunroom, and the upstairs bedroom was the weirdest thing in the house. Right above the kitchen with a high ceiling, they raise part of the bedroom floor a few feet above the rest. Meaning the person who would live in that room needed to either be short or most of the time, hunch over. The house also didn't have enough bedrooms for all of us. Dad planned to add more bedrooms, but it felt small when we first moved in. Mom and Dad made the sunroom their bedroom, so their four children could have the four small and oddly shaped bedrooms. Taylor had the smallest room on the ground floor next to the room I got, a bit larger than Taylor's room, but yet the closet looked smaller and in an odd triangle shape. Elizabeth got the biggest bedroom in the house, the

master bedroom with a private bathroom, a walk-in closet, and a sliding door to the back deck. That still confuses me because my family remarked they noticed health problems for me before Elizabeth. So it upset me that Elizabeth still got the best of everything, but I didn't get the worst either so I didn't complain. Our parents gave her whatever she wanted because she could be incredibly demanding.

Anthony got the upstairs bedroom because he had a short height at age two and couldn't easily touch the ceiling. So, when we first moved, we all crowded into that small house, but years later, Dad built an addition, giving our family more room than we knew what to do with.

Besides the small size of the house, we liked our new home very much, and other than the weather, I had no complaints. The weather where we moved didn't feel bad; it's not as warm as Sonoma County, but it's okay. However, the further north you went, the colder it got, and we attended the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Eureka, to the north of our home. In the winter, it would rain so much that sometimes it would flood and make it difficult to get to church. On such an occasion, flooding had completely blocked the freeway. Instead of simply driving home, my dad found a side street where we only had to

drive through one to two feet of water. Rain or shine, we always tried to be at church, and after some time getting to know the other church members, Elizabeth, Taylor, and I decided to be baptized.

At only eleven, I don't remember wanting to be baptized. However, my older siblings wanted to, and since I hated feeling excluded or doing it later alone, I did it with them. I took Bible classes for over a month, but being raised in a Christian home, I always knew I would get baptized one day. And I loved how happy it made my parents. My mom had a strong faith, but my dad had a faith that rivaled any pastor, and he could be almost strict in his devoutness. He rarely church, always dressed in a suit every Saturday, and asked his family to dress with the same reverence. I never minded putting on an appropriate dress with nylons and dress shoes. But my difficulties made the whole experience of going to church rather time-consuming.



The day we were baptized, I wore my favorite pale pink dress and nervously went up two flights of stairs, where

I changed into my baptismal gown over a bathing suit. And taking my turn, I climbed down into the baptismal. The pastor took my hand and led me to the center of what appeared to be a large tub where I could see everyone in the audience. He said, "I baptize you: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit." He placed one hand behind my head, and the other covered my mouth and nose with a cloth. He lowered me into the water to fully immerse me, and helped me back up, soaking as the congregation said amen. Then, I made my way out of the baptismal, changed out of my now dripping baptismal gown, and into my dress. Making my way down the stairs to the sanctuary, I received my baptismal certificate, a bible gift, and many hugs. Considering Elizabeth and I had balance issues, it surprised me that day happened without incident. Grandma and Grandpa Foster came, along with my Uncle Matthew and his family. We had only moved a little over a year before, but it made me happy they came. Baptism symbolizes a recommitment of faith, a faith that for me would be tested in a few short weeks with a diagnosis my whole family would need to help me bear for the rest of my life.



It was a cloudy day in January and looked like it wanted to rain. Nothing was unique about that day when it began, but time can bring about good as well as bad changes. Elizabeth, my parents, and I drove to the testing center where we would get results read from the tests the doctors had taken a few months before. Driving to downtown Eureka, the weather worsened as if the clouds had a premonition about what we would hear. My grandpa Luke told of someone in his family with symptoms like Elizabeth and me. She hadn't gotten sick as young as we did, so what she had didn't necessarily make Elizabeth and me sick too. They had diagnosed her with Friedreich's Ataxia and thus began our testing, which led to this day where we would hear the results. The disease only affects one out of every 50,000 people in the United States. It is caused by a hereditary gene in both parents, culminating in a diseased child. And unfortunately, both of my parents carried the gene, but I still only had a 25% chance of having the disease and a 75% chance of not having it. That meant I had the odds in my favor. Arriving at the testing center, my parents

gave Elizabeth and me an arm to guide our steps as we entered the building.

Shown into an exam room, we waited to see the doctor, talking and laughing good-naturedly, ignoring that the air felt tense. As the doctor entered the exam room and sat down, the room grew deathly quiet. He glanced at each of us with a frown that proclaimed he didn't have good news to impart. Looking at our parents, he said, "The tests came back, and I'm sorry, but your daughters have Friedreich's ataxia." My older sister had tears streaming down her cheeks, and my parents' faces looked ashen. As for me, I felt numb. Nothing can truly prepare you to hear something like that. But at the same time, at only eleven, it would take many years to understand how dramatically it would change my life in so many different ways.

Friedreich's ataxia is a degenerative neurological disease. Those diagnosed with it have impaired muscle coordination throughout the body. At the time, doctors knew little about a patient's life expectancy or the disabilities they should expect. From what they knew, sixty percent of patients with Friedreich's ataxia develop scoliosis, which we already had. Some patients can develop cardiac issues as well as hearing and vision impairment. And the disease

also causes lung issues, speech issues, circulatory issues, damaged reflexes, and diabetes. All with varying degrees of severity. A patient should expect to live half or less than half as long as a normal adult. I sat quietly contemplating what the doctor had disclosed. He recommended to help with the next steps in our disease, that we go to California Children's Services. They helped so much more than we knew we needed.



Unfortunately, our diagnosis didn't give us the only upsetting news that year. I felt lucky; because I hadn't lost anybody close to me before. At only 48, Jacob's death, compounded by a major diagnosis, made everything seem unfair. He and his family watched us three older girls when our mom needed time without three little ones underfoot. His wife, named Fiona, had Multiple Sclerosis, but you would never know upon meeting them that they had anything but a perfect life. I have such fond memories of spending hours in what I remember as an incredibly happy home. They had two girls and a boy in their late teens when they lost their father. I thought of him as an hon-

orary grandfather. Even though we had lost touch after the move, I always thought of him and his family fondly. The funeral had a videographer to capture happy memories of Jacob people wanted to share. He asked if I had anything I wanted to tell about Jacob. Shaking my head, I mumbled, “No,” turned around, and made a beeline for the ladies’ restroom, where I broke into tears. I wanted to share how much he meant to me, but I knew I couldn’t do it without tearing up. No one thinks they look good when they cry, but I really don’t, and I knew it even back then. I didn’t want my tears on video. My mother gathered all her children and mentioned how much he meant to us. But I always regretted not feeling brave enough to speak on my own.

We stayed in town a few days after the funeral and visited with Fiona and her kids. They had moved into a cheaper rental than the home they had with Jacob. I sat on the floor next to Fiona’s head as she lay on the couch shaking with sobs. I wanted to do something to ease her grief, but looking up at my mother’s tear-filled eyes, I knew nothing could make it easier to bear. I don’t know how long we stayed with her, but I felt no better when we finally left, even though I had cried. I got into our minivan with the

rest of my family, and we drove several hours to our home in Humboldt. With time at home, we relaxed after the upset of the past few weeks and then heard some news from a friend.

Elizabeth had a friend from our first home named Shannon, whom we heard got pregnant. At fifteen Shannon would become a mother. She didn't have the same kind of home life as we did. Her mother was her only parent, and they lived together in a small, dumpy rental in town.

I never questioned whether I would have kids because good Christian girls married good Christian boys and started a family within a few years. I loved kids and wanted a family, so I never doubted it would happen. I didn't even consider how my new diagnosis might change that. But I don't think it would have changed anything even if I had realized how unlikely that would happen. No matter how much I wanted children, I could not imagine having a baby at fifteen.

We heard about her pregnancy from a lady at church, and the first time we got to see her after we heard the news, she already had a little bundle in her arms. My family stopped by one day as she and the baby woke up from a nap. You know what they say; sleep when the baby does.

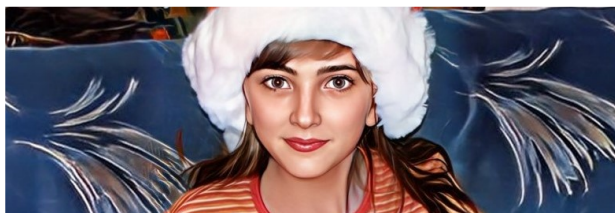
Shannon woke up, let us in, and introduced us to her son. I didn't see her mom around, and the house looked like it needed a good cleaning. Shannon looked so tired, but her baby boy looked incredibly adorable. We didn't stay long but wanted to give her a baby gift and meet her little man. On the way home, I couldn't stop replaying what I had heard about Shannon's pregnancy from the lady we knew at church. Her baby daddy was a young Mexican man. I heard nothing about marriage, but I hoped it would happen one day for her and, more importantly, for the baby. We never saw or heard from her, but I wish for good things for her and her baby, wherever they call home.

Although I have no doubt no one finds life as a teen parent easy, living with an incurable disease isn't something to hope for either. Living with a disease may make me worthy of help and respect, but my family deserves the accolades. My family had a harder time watching me get progressively sicker than I had in experiencing it. While I couldn't live easily with the difficulties of my disease, I enjoy things that made the transition to a disability a little easier. Like cuddling up on the couch to watch a good movie and playing games or listening to music. In my daily life, I have always enjoyed doing these things. However, my

sister Elizabeth liked to be outside caring for her horse, the chickens, and the turkeys Dad brought home for a short time. I found it hard to understand how she could enjoy doing something that looked so difficult and, at times, even painful. Elizabeth didn't let the difficulties she faced stand in her way, which I considered commendable. But as her sister, she took her frustrations out on the rest of the family. While the whole family struggled with a disease, no one could clearly explain what to expect, my mother told us she would have another baby.

“Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking a moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next.”

- Gilda Radner



Chapter Five

Couch Potato

In shock, my two older siblings and I sat in silence for a few seconds, then started laughing. It had become a joke that my parents had no fertility problems. My mother couldn't stop getting pregnant until dad had a vasectomy after my birth and when he had a reversal, she got pregnant with Anthony, and now baby number five! I wanted a baby sister, but I wouldn't complain if it happened to be a boy. I thought my brother was a wonderful little sibling too. Like her earlier pregnancies, Mom again had bad morning sickness for the first three months. I didn't see much of it,

though. By pregnancy number five, she had mastered the art of dealing with morning sickness.

During the next few months, I heard some upsetting comments people made when they thought I wouldn't overhear. About how my parents couldn't handle another sick kid, and my parents should have an amniocentesis done on the embryo to discern if he or she had Friedreich's Ataxia. And I can only imagine they thought my parents should have an abortion if the baby were sick. Did I create so much trouble people thought I didn't deserve to exist? Even as an adult, I'm happy to be alive, and while I certainly could have had life easier, it didn't take away from the value of my life.

Overall, some decisions are simple because you know they're the right ones for you. And my parents knew the amniocentesis wouldn't be worth the risk to the baby's life because, sick or not, an abortion would not happen. I loved to hear this because even if they knew I had Friedreich's Ataxia before my birth, they still would have wanted me. And that thought made me so happy.

Finally, Mom went to the hospital to be induced a few days before her due date. And the next morning, we heard she went into labor, and we needed to come to the hospital

to meet our new sibling. I couldn't decide what to wear. This felt like a big day, and as a girly girl I wanted to wear the perfect outfit. I looked through all my dresser drawers but couldn't find a shirt I wanted. Taylor never had girly clothes I could borrow, so I ran to Elizabeth's room to borrow something from her. Once I finally decided what to wear, we got in the car of a friend of my mother's and drove to the hospital. When we met Anthony for the first time, it took way too long to get to the hospital, but this time we got to the hospital a little too soon and got shown into Mom's room without delay. The baby had just come out, with Mom's legs still in the stirrups. My three-year-old brother looked terrified. I would have grabbed his hand and left the room, but he quickly got to our mother's side. Looking as if he wanted to cry, he asked if she was okay; she tried to assure him she felt fine, but he continued to look uneasy till they cleaned the room.

When we came into the room, the baby screamed and flailed on the baby warmer, and I couldn't tell if I had a brother or a sister. As the nurse wrapped the baby in a pink blanket and brought her to Mom, I managed not to embarrass myself by squealing and just smiled. A girl! I had gotten my little sister; her name would be Sara Doris

Foster, Doris after her great-grandmother, and Sara after her great-great-grandmother. I don't think little Anthony enjoyed sharing Mom. But he liked when Sara got moved from his mother's arms, making room for him in her lap and given to one of her older sisters, dying to hold her.

After our introduction to the newest family member, she and Mom came home the next day. During her first few breaths, Sara had swallowed amniotic fluid, but the doctor told my parents we had nothing to worry about. Within a few minutes, she would be fine. When you're holding your baby sister, and she's struggling to breathe, it's pretty impossible to remember everything will be fine. She rested in my arms, almost asleep, when she started coughing repeatedly. I knew from what my mother had told me Sara would cough quite a bit, but it would pass before too long. I tried to wait patiently for her to breathe normally again, but it took an irritatingly long time. My parents sat at the table with some company they had invited over. When I called, "Mom, Dad!" the stress in my voice and Sara's feeble coughing made them respond quickly. Sara had nearly turned blue by that point, and I felt close to tears and happily handed her to Dad, hoping he could fix it. My parents didn't know what to do either; Dad tried

giving her mouth-to-mouth, and Mom patted her on the back to help her cough. Finally, her coughing eased, and she became a beautiful baby pink again. I took a deep breath, feeling as if I hadn't breathed as I waited for Sara to first. Everyone returned to what they had done before, and the tension from moments before quickly evaporated. The experience shook me, but she could breathe again, we all could breathe again. I couldn't believe I once again found myself in a position where one of my little siblings almost got hurt. After this incident, Sara didn't have another coughing fit and since I loved to snuggle and hold her whenever I could, I was so thankful.

Little Anthony got used to Sara as time passed, and they became good friends as they grew up. My parents didn't allow me to walk with my little sister in my arms because of my balance difficulties. I wish things had been different, but I understood. Elizabeth's balance looked a bit better than mine. Even so, it racked my nerves to watch her walking while holding Sara. At that time, we could walk around on our own, but carrying something, even a little something, added an obstacle to our awkward walking. I couldn't help but feel jealous about what everyone else could do with my sister. Not necessarily Elizabeth;

she always looked really awkward while carrying Sara. But when others did it, sometimes, I would feel lacking. I tried to be satisfied with what I got to do with her and not focus on what I couldn't. My parents had a rocking chair at the time, and I spent hours rocking my sister. I enjoyed being able to hold her. As she grew up, we would watch Blue's Clues together, and I would give her baths and read her stories. I loved life as her big sister. Everyone liked her, even our new friends.

I had made friends with a girl from church, Sophia. Her parents, Frank and Debra Griffin, had become good friends with my parents, and she had an older sister named Chloe, who had a friendship with my sister Elizabeth. Our families did many things together, like Easter egg hunts, birthday parties, and after-church lunches at each other's homes. Shortly after Sara was born, we planned a trip with the Griffins where we would go as far away as Monterey, with some sightseeing along the way, all while pulling travel trailers. We planned a detour in San Francisco, where we went to museums and gardens and even stopped by a park for lunch, complete with a lake and duck paddle boats. San Francisco can be a wonderful place when you're not rushing. We brought the travel trailers so we could

camp at Monterey Bay Academy. I never got a good look at the school buildings, but plantations surrounded the three-hundred-and-eighty-acre campus. I can't remember all the crops, but I definitely recall strawberries. The campus stood above a small bluff a mile or two from the ocean and a short distance from the bluff we parked our trailers. One evening, when our parents visited in one of the travel trailers with my little siblings, Sophia and I got Chloe to read us some stories. We picked a spot outside to watch the sun as it set in the distance. Chloe read us a book of short stories to make it easy to stop and go inside at the end, but every time a story ended, we would beg for the next one. Chloe continued reading until the stars appeared, and our mothers came to direct us to bed.

Shortly after reading stories under the stars, we headed home. On the drive, Dad stopped at a car dealership. My parents wanted a new car but hadn't liked any at the dealership near us. We found a Suburban that could amazingly fit all of us, with no extra seats, enough room for luggage, and a wheelchair or two in the cargo compartment. My siblings and I got excited about a VHS player and a movie screen facing the back five seats. It meant no more long trips of boredom without knowing how to entertain our-

selves. The Suburban had a big trunk, which Mom and Dad happily accepted, seeing a future need for wheelchairs that I still remained ignorant of.

We had a lot of fun on vacation, but when we returned home, real life began to crowd back in. Mom took Elizabeth and me to California Children's Services or CCS. We met Katherine, our physical therapist, and Teddy, the wheelchair guy, as all the kids called him because he got called in when one of the kids needed a new wheelchair. For the first few years of our disability, we saw these people from CCS a lot. We took physical therapy as the only treatment for Friedreich's Ataxia. And we would need wheelchairs for the not-too-distant future. Through state and county funding, Teddy could get us the wheelchairs we wanted regardless that my parents' insurance wouldn't even cover 20% of the cost. The pushchair I decided on had a blue frame with shiny spokes. Teddy worked meticulously in his measurements to ensure it would fit me perfectly and leave a little room for me to grow, being only thirteen. Until now, I had little experience with wheelchairs and thought they all came off an assembly line. He genuinely cared that it fit me well because I still use the wheelchair I got nearly twenty years ago on a daily basis.

Along with push wheelchairs we could easily transport, my sister, and I also chose electric wheelchairs. My sister got the more basic one, but I happily admitted I didn't want a basic one; I wanted something fancier. So, the one I finally chose looked incredibly cool with all its functionality.

With our bimonthly visits to CCS, we spent our time with Katherine much more than with Teddy. She helped us learn how to help our increasingly disabling bodies through exercise. CCS also connected us with doctors known as the best in their fields, such as a doctor we began seeing for his formidable skill as a pediatric cardiologist.

Cardiomyopathy can concern those with Friedreich's ataxia. About 91% of people with Friedreich's ataxia develop cardiomyopathy. I saw a diagnosis of cardiomyopathy like hearing my life would soon be over. It sounds rather dramatic, but I think having a strong and healthy heart made me feel more alive. The pediatric cardiologist sounded well-known in his field, he appeared about fifty but looked a hundred in doctors' years, and his line of work had obviously taken its toll. Mostly he cared for infants and toddlers as his patients. Through the privacy curtain, I could hear bawling in the bed next to me as the little

occupant voiced their displeasure about the coldness of the stethoscope. In this atmosphere, visiting the cardiologist put things into perspective and made me blessed for so many things. And growing as a toddler and beyond without the added struggles of my disease, the biggest. We would see the cardiologist every year, and each time we needed a new echocardiogram. I liked hearing I still had a healthy heart, but I never actually looked forward to the visits. I did, however, enjoy seeing Veronica, the sonographer I saw every year for my echocardiogram. She smeared gel on my chest and poked a transducer into my diaphragm or neck to get a good view of my heart. Yet managed to make me smile every time I saw her.

As much as life with disease and constant worry for my heart upset me, I looked forward to the wedding of my Uncle James. He married much later in life than his brothers, but I really love whom he chose as my aunt. They married at the academy my soon-to-be aunt had worked at when she met my uncle. My parents brought the travel trailer and camped at the academy. So all seven of our brood, including a seven-month-old, piled into my dad's van, pulling our travel trailer, and drove to Rio Lindo Adventist Academy. We got there a few days before the

wedding and had time to explore the campus. A friend of Elizabeth's went to school at Rio Lindo Academy, and as she looked for her friend, she accidentally stumbled into the boys' dorm instead of the girls'. She figured everything out, and they sent her toward the girls' dorm on the other side of campus. For their wedding my Uncle James and Amanda would have an indoor ceremony, with the reception on the lawn in front of the church.

I saw the church for the first time during the rehearsal, and I have loved that sanctuary ever since. It had a large foyer and an even bigger sanctuary with four columns of pew rows and three aisles between the columns. The church looked incredible; the sanctuary had stained glass windows with beautiful scenes of the second coming high on the wall, directing your eyes heavenward. I got bored watching them perform the processional over and over, so I went in search of a bathroom. I think I should have gone in search sooner because when I got to the foyer, I really needed to go, and I didn't see the women's restroom, I only saw the men's. Thinking, "Hey, almost everyone here is family." I used the men's restroom. Since I have truly bad luck, I washed my hands as a guy, unrelated to me, walked in. Oh, the humiliation could have buried me. And

of course, in case I didn't feel stupid enough, I walked out of the men's restroom and saw the sign for the women's restroom several yards away. Hoping to avoid any more embarrassment, I found my mother sitting on a pew in the back of the sanctuary and said goodnight. Climbing the hill behind the church where our trailer sat, I crawled into my bunk bed, buried my face in my pillow, and tried to forget my embarrassment. In hindsight, it doesn't feel like that big a deal and isn't even on my top ten most embarrassing moments list.

The next day was the wedding, and everyone had things to do. My two older siblings and I greeted everyone in the foyer as the guest book attendants, and my mother juggled taking care of two little ones and helping frost the wedding cake. At the start of the ceremony, six bridesmaids in light purple gowns came down the aisle next to their groomsmen. I didn't recognize everyone at the wedding, but my dad, my uncle Matthew and my pregnant aunt Betty walked down the aisle as part of the wedding party. My four, and two-year-old cousins were the Bible boy and Tissue bearer, and then six flower girls came down the aisle. The mothers of the bride and groom arrived next, holding Amanda's bridal bouquet. At the end of the aisle,

they handed it to James, who carried it to his waiting bride at the entrance to the sanctuary. Taking her bouquet, the wedding march began, and the congregation stood as Amanda and her groom made their way down the aisle. As my uncle and new aunt kissed and the wedding party left the sanctuary, the congregation made their way to the tables set up outside. In the center of each table sat a fish-bowl with live goldfish, a creative table decoration that also served as wedding favors. As dinner ended and the sunset, James and Amanda left in a fancy, old car to meet the plane for their post-nuptial vacation. After the bride and groom left, things began to wind down, and as they hauled off the tables, I headed up to our trailer to leave the next day.

After their honeymoon, the couple would live in our old house on the ranch. My grandparents had paid my parents for it when we moved, though not what they should have, I heard. They had rented it out to some people they knew until James wanted to rent it for their future family. My mother hadn't been raised as a Seventh-Day-Adventist and expected her in-laws, as firm believers, would be warm and welcoming. She was disappointed, and I couldn't help but wonder if Amanda would be too. Over the next decade, I liked getting to know my aunt Amanda, who would one

day send me on the path to meet the love of my life and a place filled with wonderful people that would give me so many happy memories.



Following our trip home after the wedding, Elizabeth announced she wanted another horse. I find it funny that my sister's desire for horses coincided with when my parents had a new baby. Purely coincidental, I assume, but a funny coincidence. I understand my sister wanted the opportunity to own a horse bigger than a large dog, and that needed to happen while she could still care for it. Elizabeth loved horses, and I can understand it even though I don't share the same passion. I don't know why, but Elizabeth had the uncanny ability to pick horses that I found mean. I think she felt a kinship with horses that had some sort of anger to deal with because of her anger at how her life turned out. Her new horse had the name Rex, I found him nicer than Ferdinand, but not by much. Rex never hurt Elizabeth, not that she would admit it if he had, but he liked her; he disliked the rest of us. My parents had a hard time saying

no to Elizabeth, though, so she owned him for two or three years.

As a big horse, though, he needed a lot of care. Elizabeth never minded putting in the time, but our disability slowed everything we did. I think Elizabeth thought that since everyone in the family got to enjoy her horses, she should get to expect most in the family to help with their care. She could be demanding when she needed the family to do something for her, and she didn't just ask those older than ten. She wanted little Anthony to pull his weight too. Unsurprisingly, he didn't want to shovel up horse manure when Elizabeth told him to, and simply looked at her with an irritated scowl and said, "I am a gentleman! Gentleman don't pick up horse manure."

Most of the time, though, Elizabeth took care of her horses alone, and one morning she went out to take care of them on a chilly day. She returned with tears in her eyes, holding her hands as if she couldn't make them function properly. Elizabeth said her hands felt frozen and hurt. I nearly fainted with relief that one of the horses hadn't kicked her or something worse. But also irritated she didn't come in when her hands first started feeling overly cold and instead waited to come inside till after she had taken

care of her horses. It saddened me to think she took better care of her horses than she did herself. Mom worried about hypothermia because it took her a while to warm up, but when all ten fingers turned pink she relaxed. Elizabeth's disability got in the way of her taking care of her horses, but luckily my disability didn't have a huge effect on my hobby of shopping.

I love shopping. Mom isn't as big a fan, but with four daughters, she couldn't avoid it. While shopping one day in downtown Eureka, we found this little Christian shop. Not looking for anything in particular, I went to the entertainment section. I always enjoyed the Romance genre, so naturally, I looked at what they had, and I found my first romance novel. It was called *Red River Bride* by Colleen Coble. I read and reread that book so many times, and when I finally got my hands on another book, it had to be romance. I like stories with happy endings and stories of romance rarely disappointed. Even more than a happy ending, I liked that I could disappear into the pages of a book and even forget about my disease for a while. I still have Colleen Coble as one of my favorite authors, and with a disabled life for my future, it has come in handy that I love living as a couch potato. Elizabeth also liked books

and shared some of her romance books with me as I began building my collection.

I had another pastime I enjoy in my life as a couch potato, watching movies. I had exceptional skills at finding more movies to watch than I had time for. My father, a very religious man, decided his growing family should not fill our minds with the sort of garbage filmed for entertainment. So for a short period, at seven or eight, we mainly watched movies based on true stories. I often wondered if his dislike of television stemmed from the fact that my siblings and I had a strange desire to watch Power Rangers at a young age. I know, not a proud moment, but at least I can use the folly of youth as an excuse. The habit of watching true stories we didn't do for long before we broke it. At other times we tried to watch more wholesome things like "Little House on the Prairie" and another television show we found called "Road to Avonlea," which I still consider one of my favorites even today.

Once we moved to our second home, my two older siblings and I started watching more things with our mom than we used to. When Mom came home from work, we wanted to spend time with her. Many activities weren't easy to take part in for Elizabeth and me, but sitting

on a couch and watching a screen we could definitely do. Whatever the reason, we did it a lot and probably shouldn't have let Sara and Anthony watch everything we watched. It may have been vaguely too mature for them. I loved those times of movie watching, not necessarily because of what we watched, but whom we watched with. Although everyone should enjoy movies, friends are also an important part of life, especially in youth.

In the subdivision my family had moved to, we had a relatively close neighbor, much closer than when we lived on the ranch. Our nearest neighbors were a married couple in their fifties. I knew both of them but went to visit the woman of the house, Lena. I considered Lena a friend, even though she had already lived through so much more life than I had. On days when I came to see her, she always offered her arm and helped me up the three stairs into her house and over to a comfortable chair. Mostly when I visited, we would bake, or she would bake, and I would read the recipe cards. She would make some of the best fudge. Other times we would watch movies or just talk. Each visit entertained me with the interesting facts she had to share. She had a collection of Agatha Christie books she would let me borrow, beginning my love of mystery books. She

also had a cat named Toby. He would curl up in my lap. He had cute black and white fur, and I enjoyed snuggling with him, but he was heavy. Lena's husband, Eugene, worked on old-fashioned cars and would enter his car of the month in the nearby AutoXpo. The AutoXpo had a parade of old-fashioned cars. Lena and her husband invited my two older siblings and me to ride with them one year. It excited me! I liked seeing the classic cars, but driving in a car as part of all the commotion of the AutoXpo thrilled me!

“If you don't get out of the box you've been raised in, you won't understand how much bigger the world is.”

- Angelina Jolie



Chapter Six

Friendship

When we first started going to the church in Eureka, we made friends with Pamela. All my siblings and I liked her, but she and Elizabeth became great friends. Her mother, Laura Tanner, I saw as such a wonderful woman; she treated me as someone special and unique. In such a large family, feeling like that happened rarely for me, and I always happily spent time with the Tanners. Laura, along with her husband Donald, had adopted two children, Pamela and her older brother, Jack. We had a lot of fun with Pamela, but with Jack several years older

than me, I didn't do stuff with him. Before we even met the Tanners, Donald had died as a victim of a DUI when the kids were still young. He had left a good life insurance policy to ensure their family would be taken care of when he died. With his death, Laura became a single parent, a role I'm sure she wouldn't have chosen, but she handled it well.

I liked it every time I got to go over to their house. They lived in a gated community of lavish homes that sat on a hill in the countryside with a view of the bay. Their home looked substantial and even included a basement, an enormous room with an equally large television. The living room on the ground floor had an elegant grand piano. We had a grand piano too, but it didn't look so elegant. The same room also had a fireplace that you could control with a remote, unlike ours, which Dad had to fill with wood and light with a match. Their house looked so cool.

We went to the Tanners' house several times for church parties, and once all three of us older girls went over for Pamela's birthday party, along with Chloe and Sofia. Aside from normal birthday stuff like cake, ice cream, and presents, we stayed for a slumber party and went to a spa the next day. It really excited me! I never went to a spa

before, and going with friends sounded like a lot of fun. We spent time at the spa leisurely with time spent in the pool, where we tired ourselves out with physical activity. And then we went into a steam room, which relaxed me more than I thought it would, and became amusing when two old biddies came in and started gossiping. Feeling as if intruding, we left the steam room and couldn't resist giggling at what we overheard as we left the spa. After a pleasurable time at the spa and fun at the slumber party, the weekend ended, and we said our final goodbyes.

That weekend we had a lot of fun, and I couldn't help but think of old friendships, and wonder about my friend Emily, and if she thought of me too. I had called Emily on her birthday for the first several years after she moved away, but she had never reciprocated, and when I called, she always sounded distracted and unsure of what to say. Not that I could blame her. I felt selfish and spoiled until my disease changed almost everything in my life. I had some other friends with whom I didn't feel as close. They didn't stay in touch either, which made me feel a little unlikable and unworthy of a good friendship.

That year a couple moved from out of state with their only daughter, her mother home-schooled her like me.

Our mothers became fast friends; however, I took longer to warm up to a friendship with Anna. I still had a friendship with Sophia, but she went to school and had other friends. Because of my friendships that hadn't lasted through our move, I felt wary of starting another friendship.

It didn't take long before we got acquainted with Anna and her mother, Alice. Anna's father lived with them but didn't come to church. He seemed more of a hermit. There weren't many people I wanted to spend time with at our church. So, even though I felt unsure about becoming friends with Anna, we did a lot together. I remember this one time when I thought our friendship really began. We went out on the bay on a ship from the movie "The Pirates of the Caribbean." They named it "The Lady Washington" but in the film, they called it the "HMS Interceptor." And for the afternoon, it would entertain its passengers by performing a fake battle with another ship a short distance away. The cannon fire looked and sounded very realistic, with a puff of smoke when the gunpowder ignited and a whistling sound as the cannonball flew. Thankfully, the realism ended there, and the ship close by remained intact. As the battle finished and The Lady Washington docked,

they lowered the gangplank, and the passengers disembarked.

Our mothers met us on the dock and took us to lunch. As we arrived, I needed to use the restroom, and Anna offered her arm to assist me in walking to the back of the restaurant. When in public, I never enjoyed having to do things alone because without company people stared openly. I couldn't blame them since I stared at my sister as she fumbled around on her feet too, and gratefully accepted the support Anna offered. I went into one of the stalls and came out a few minutes later to find Anna standing in the same spot, waiting to assist me back to the table. Walking to the sink to wash my hands, I asked Anna why she wanted me to come with her and she simply proclaimed, "Because I like you." It sounded a little blunt, but I needed to hear it and know that she wanted to be my friend, and not because her mother pressured her to be friends with the disabled girl. Once I had dried my hands, I took hold of Anna's outstretched arm to make our way back to our table. We have had a friendship ever since.

Even though, as a teenager, I had quite a few good times with friends, we also had the constant annoyance of home-school. In the first several years of learning at

home, home-schooling got done in book form. But as Mom needed to help us less and less, schoolwork went from the dining room table with her to our bedrooms, where we could work quietly. Computers became something everybody had, and it took some begging, but my parents finally bought everyone in the house their own computer. Our home-school program began selling our class books to be read and done on the computer. With my fingers not handling flipping through pages and writing as well as normal, I happily made the change.



Another family we met when we first moved to Humboldt attended a different church. The Dorsey family had three boys: Jacob, Kyle, and Paul. They were nice and all really liked Sara; they also didn't act weird about me and Elizabeth. My mom and dad enjoyed their company, I assume in big part because of how they treated their disabled daughters. Whatever the reason, we ended up spending quite a bit of time with them. We would get together for a game night. The Dorseys had taught us this game called, "Kings, Queens, and Serfs." We had such fun playing the game

and shared so much laughter. Mrs. Dorsey often had a delectable dessert to share when we took a break. Needless to say, I enjoyed our times together.

We all enjoyed the times we spent with the Dorseys, but Elizabeth really liked whenever they came around, especially if Jacob came too. Elizabeth always acted sociable and enjoyed having company; when the Dorseys would visit, though, she seemed extra happy. I enjoyed their family and thought of them as good friends, but Elizabeth was two years older than me, so the fact she might like Jacob didn't surprise me.

When we first met the Dorseys, they lived in an apartment, and with three boys I imagine it could get very crowded. They owned the apartment building they lived in and own some other rental houses nearby. But still chose to live in an apartment that looked small for a good-sized family. I'm sure they had very good financial reasons, but to me, it seemed greedy. Since they had such a small apartment, we typically got together at our house when Elizabeth and I started using wheelchairs.

We hadn't done many family portraits; we mainly had pictures taken of our family around Christmas time after church when we had already dressed up. But Melissa and

Mom wanted pictures that looked a little more professional of their families. And we decided Dad would set up his red tractor, some hay bales, and some pumpkins, then we could take pictures for each other. So in November, the year of Sara's birth, we did a country-themed family portrait. For the photoshoot, my family didn't really dress up in country attire, but the Dorseys came wearing cowboy hats and plaid shirts, looking very country. My sister Elizabeth had two braids in her hair, and it surprised me that I hadn't thought of it because it did look more western. So naturally, I went to Mom and asked her to put braids in my hair. When Elizabeth saw me, she definitely didn't look happy that my hair now looked like hers, but we needed to get on the hay bales for pictures, so she left her braids in. Of course, Elizabeth wanted Ferdinand in the pictures too, and it went along with the country theme, so no one objected. But in some pictures, it looks like he's trying to nip at the people closest to him. After a few pictures of our family, we all switched positions with the Dorseys, and Elizabeth undid her braids. I didn't see the issue, but I guess no big sister wants her little sister to copy her. When the Dorseys finished with their photo op, I got some pictures with my baby sister. And Mom, Elizabeth,

and Taylor joined us for pictures of the girls. Taylor came as one of my mother's daughters, but she looked like she wanted to be anywhere else. After we got the pictures we wanted, Elizabeth got some pictures with Jacob and Kyle and her horses, a completely natural scene for Elizabeth.



While searching for a way to help, if not cure, an incurable disease, my parents found a book called *The Cure for All Diseases*. With desperate hope that something would help, they wanted me to try different things the book suggested.

The book recommended eating healthy meals, and even though as vegetarians we ate pretty healthy, I still went further. I don't think I became completely vegan, but I definitely stopped eating cheese and most dairy products. Even when we would go to Taco Bell, I would order a 7-layer with no cheese and no sour cream, and I even scraped the cheese off my pizza. The book also told you to sweat out your toxins, so my parents bought a small sauna, and I started using it regularly. My father also made a small electric device called a zapper, that involved me holding on to copper tubes with wet paper towels wrapped around

them for a few minutes, off and on every day. I can never forget how I heard Dad used plastic silverware because of something he had read in *The Cure for All Diseases* book. And I started doing the same thing without even questioning that my parents hadn't told me to do it too. It turns out the trace amounts of copper digested while using silverware can be harmful to an organ in the male reproductive system. When my dad told me I didn't need to do it too and then why, it grossed me out and I happily ended that conversation.

While it may have helped my body be able to handle my disease better, we didn't get the cure we all hoped and prayed for. To understand the life of people with disabilities, I started reading. I hoped to find an author or a story that would make me excited for my future and not dread it. The books I found inspired me but did not give me hope for the halfway-normal life I wanted for my future. Instead, they made me worried that while I would learn to struggle through my disability, it would never be a future I could look forward to. The sadness of not getting what I wanted out of life got compounded by the thought of living for the rest of my life in my parents' home. Living in the same home as Elizabeth, who could be so bitter

towards me, because she thought my life seemed better than hers. I don't know why she would think that because while I stood taller, she had beautiful golden hair, and while I had a clearer complexion, she had more expressive eyes. But I wanted a separate home life from her because she rarely treated me like a sister or even a friend.

The snake venom caused my disease progression to speed up, and frequently Elizabeth reminded me of that. Even though she always led me to believe I looked sicker than she did, I never felt as sure. Anna once told me, Elizabeth and I each had difficulties that looked worse than the others, which sounded like a great way to put it, not making me or Elizabeth think we were sicker. But as my friend, even if Anna had told the truth, I doubt Elizabeth would have believed it.

As two years younger than Elizabeth, I should not have been as sick, but life can be cruel sometimes. More than anyone else, I needed to learn to accept that. And blessedly, as a teenager learning to live with a disease, I took it all in stride. I struggled in the early years of my disease primarily with Elizabeth. I hate to say it since I could be wrong, but I don't believe so. Whatever abilities of mine that Elizabeth thought seemed worse than hers, she happily pointed out,

and it hurt. I love my sister, and I think I understand she emphasized my disease to take the spotlight off her and her disease. Whatever her reasons for treating me that way, were unacceptable.



The year I turned fourteen, my mom planned a Mexican cruise for the whole family. As my first cruise, it did not disappoint. At that time I noticed I not only had a hard time walking, but those whom I leaned on for support had a hard time helping me. And, when I tried to walk, I probably looked something like Elizabeth did when she walked, which really did not look good. I didn't want to draw stares with the awkward way I walked, and it could be painful too, which made using a wheelchair somewhat easier. So, with excursions to the mall and other trips with plenty of walking, I sat in my wheelchair. Elizabeth, however, stubbornly refused to use a wheelchair. I could understand but at the same time saw her as inconsiderate. Once I started using a wheelchair, she often pushed me, it irritated me with how slowly she pushed. But the rest of

the family didn't struggle with keeping her on her feet, so I never complained.

We had a long drive to Long Beach to board the cruise ship, but in the Suburban we stayed mostly entertained, running the television almost constantly. And when we finally got to Long Beach, we had more waiting to do because the terminal to board the cruise ship took as long to get through as an airport terminal. But eventually crossing the bridge and getting on board did not disappoint.

The cruise ship looked incredible. They had elaborate stairways, statues, and even a casino. One of the first things we had to do on the cruise ship, once all the passengers boarded, they called the muster drill. They alerted us to the safety briefing that would be mandatory and happen before the vessel left port. When the emergency siren loudly sounded, my body shook with adrenaline, feeling certain it announced a genuine emergency. Hearing the siren, my family made our way to our muster station on the open deck of the ship. The captain showed us how to put our life jackets on quickly and explained the best escape routes. By the time the drill ended, the sea air had chilled me, and I wanted to get back inside.

After the muster drill, my two older siblings and I began exploring everything the unbelievably large cruise liner offered. We ended up in a lounge as we waited for the ship to leave port. I sat in my wheelchair when the boat decided to move. Since I had forgotten to lock my brakes, I began to move along with the ship. Parked above a ramp that blessedly looked only a few feet high, the sudden movement sent my chair wheeling backward down the ramp too quickly for my damaged responses to react. They had turned the stabilization wheels on the back of my chair around, to allow for easier mobility getting over the threshold of doorways. I had forgotten to ask to have the stabilization wheels turned back around. So when my wheelchair reached the bottom of the ramp, it flipped me onto my back. It all happened so quickly that I didn't even have time to register if it hurt me before a random guy picked me up and put me in my now upright wheelchair. Two guys had come to help, one picked me up in his arms and the other put my wheelchair upright. I noticed they were members of the crew, which was probably why they reacted that quickly, trained to help each cruise guest without making them wait. Until then, my siblings had looked on with stunned expressions, but coming forward

they thanked the crew members for assisting me. The crew members asked if I was okay, and when I assured them I felt fine, they returned to their jobs. And my siblings and I returned to our stateroom next to the one Mom and Dad had.

The cruise ship had multiple swimming pools, and since I enjoyed swimming so much, I loved getting to swim whenever I wanted. Pizza has always been a favorite food group, and since they served it in the cruise ship cafeteria all the time, I could eat pizza as much as I wanted. The ship contained staggering amounts of ice cream because it got served almost everywhere on the ship, and I never heard of it running out. It amazed me that most of the passengers on the cruise line didn't disembark incredibly overweight like the human race in the movie "WALL-E".

The Carnival Cruise line had stores, a salon, and a movie theater as well as several live theaters where they would entertain people with comedians and ventriloquist acts. The ship was an amazing place, especially for a fourteen-year-old. I had a great time exploring it and Mexico in my wheelchair; I saw a lot I otherwise wouldn't have gotten to.

The cruise ship would dock at a port and allow the passengers to go on land for a shore excursion and explore different ports. Mexico appeared dry and sunny in August, or at least the parts of it we saw. At one of the ports, we took a bus trip to see some of the more scenic beauty along the Mexican coast. In another port, we saw a lot of Catholic churches and went to a factory where they let us watch how they made the glass items they sold. The restaurants in Mexico tasted pretty good, we heard not to drink the water though. But Mexican food tastes the best with soda anyway. In each of the ports we stopped at, they had a lot of shopping, mostly outdoors and kind of flea market style, nothing like the malls I enjoyed in California. The cruise line also offered a list of activities you could purchase to be done in Mexico. I really wish I had done swimming with the dolphins. Even though I regret some things I didn't do, the experience of taking a trip on a cruise ship, I never regretted.

“Dying seems less sad than having lived too little.”

- Gloria Steinem



Chapter Seven

The Gift Sisters

We had an exemplary vacation with the cruise to Mexico, but when we returned home, life continued to move on for us, while leaving behind others. My mother's grandmother Doris, my great-grandmother, died. When Elizabeth, Taylor, and I were young, she babysat us, taught us, and played game after game of Crazy Eight with us. She lived behind my parent's home in a travel trailer for many years, and then she moved to a retirement apartment complex in Cloverdale. When she lived in the travel trailer, she could easily come over and

babysit us kids, and in Cloverdale, we would visit her at her apartment. She made the best-grilled cheese sandwiches and would watch Andy Griffith or Matlock with us. She painted beautifully, but as she got older and her fingers weren't as agile with the paintbrush, she would cut things out of magazines and make collages. Mom would share with her all the incidents Elizabeth and I suffered, and it upset her but she never treated us differently. Once, she helped me stand on wobbly legs, and I stepped on her bare foot, wincing, she said not to worry, it didn't hurt. I have no doubt it did, but as a loving Grandmother her pain meant less than mine. Once we moved away, she wasn't a big part of our lives like she had always been. And knew Sara only a little before she died. She was eighty-five when we lost her.

Our grandpa, John, died soon after too. My mom's dad had heart trouble, so it didn't shock us that much. Every time my mother got a call saying he might not live much longer, she got in the car and drove all of us up to see him. One of those times happened during Redwood Grove camp, and we would have to miss several days, if not more, of our vacation. Needless to say, I didn't want to go and tried hiding to avoid leaving. It didn't work, though, and

I had to go. As it turned out, he didn't die, and I always resented the last-minute trips to Oregon. But at a young age, I didn't realize how much more I would miss not saying goodbye than the inconvenience of a last-minute trip. Visiting my grandparents' house without him felt sad, and because of that, we didn't visit my grandma as much. I loved Grandma just as much, but seeing Grandpa's Easy Boy chair without him reminded me painfully of his death.

Time passed, and the deaths in the family made that painfully obvious. The one good thing about the passage of time is a birthday party. I have never gotten sick of those because my parents always made that day great for me. When I turned fifteen, Taylor and I decided to have a joint party. Only a week apart we had our birthdays together a lot at a young age and decided to do it again. We invited our friends, but a couple of them had more of a friendship with Elizabeth. I didn't see this as anything weird though, because all of them knew us from church and became friends with our whole family. But Elizabeth still voiced her displeasure that I wanted to invite the friends she considered hers. But after Mom and Dad gave her a talking-to, she told me I could invite them.

With everyone getting to come as we wanted, we had a fun weekend. We went on quad rides, horse rides, and ate great food, compliments of our mother. Some girls who enjoyed jumping on the trampoline put our sprinkler underneath and bounced wearing their pajamas. I have no idea who thought of something like that, but it looked like a lot of really wet fun.

It would be a slumber party, and we planned for everyone to sleep in the living room in front of Dad's big flatscreen. Elizabeth invited her friends to crash into her room with her. I think, from insecurity, wanted to have her friends all to herself. But having fun together no one wanted to separate. So we all slept on Elizabeth's floor. With eight girls in a bedroom meant for two, it became very close quarters. Taylor had fun but never wanted sleepovers or to hang out with girlfriends. I definitely saw her as a tomboy and she didn't dress femininely either, often finding clothing from the boys' section. Every Saturday at church, when she had to wear a dress, she always brought clothes to change into right after church. We never pushed her to act more feminine. She made Elizabeth and I laugh all the time, and, despite her eccentricities, she was a loved member of the family. Taylor, as a musician, spent a lot of

time at that age singing and with her instruments, often alone in her room. I honestly didn't see her as depressed, I saw her as my sibling, and I had enough to worry about concerning my own difficulties. As a homebody, Taylor felt more comfortable caring for Sara and Anthony than in public. So when we got invited to a wedding a month later, only Mom, Dad, Elizabeth, and I went.

Our mom had a friendship with the mother of the bride, and we had known the bride since our birth. And she would now be someone's wife and the future mother of his children. I had a hard time wrapping my head around it. I hoped I would have the same opportunity one day. I found the idea that anyone would want to share a life with me ridiculous, though. My mother always tried to help me understand it would take a very special man to say, "till death do us part," and he would truly be one in a million. Whether I would meet such a man one day or not didn't matter yet because I was still young, and only at the stage where I would dream of having a husband one day. And a wedding made the perfect place to dream of happily ever after.

The wedding happened during the summer in Sonoma County, with a warm but pleasant outdoor ceremony and

reception. Sonoma County summers can be rather dry, it happened at the home of a church member who had the most serene garden, and as a young girl, I would think that if fairies existed, they would want to live here. It was a wonderful place to dream and made a perfect setting for an incredible outdoor wedding. Since they held it outdoors, I hadn't brought my wheelchair. As much as I enjoyed not having the stress of walking, wheelchairs don't have all that good off-roading capabilities, at least none I have ever had. I loved shopping for dresses and hoped in a beautiful dress, I wouldn't look that weird as I walked. But discovered trying to look ladylike in a dress while walking with jerky and uncoordinated movements, impossible. Knowing almost everyone there since we called their church family ours for many years, I felt comfortable and accepted because they already knew about my disability, and explaining my problems began to embarrass me.

During the ceremony, each of the four bridesmaids wore a pale green sundress and white flip-flops. And two darling redheads came down the aisle as the flower girls. The processional walked through the double door at the side of the house, down a few stairs, across the lawn between the chairs of guests, and onto a cement patio where the

ceremony would be held. And the bride looked incredible in a white floor-length gown with spaghetti straps and with her dark brown hair pulled back in a fancy bun with her veil pinned below it. Her hair looked stunning next to her white gown, and after the ceremony, she lifted her skirt to show off her white flip-flops.

As the wedding party and family got pictures taken, all the other guests went to a lawn in the backyard where round tables with elegant white tablecloths sat for the reception. We sat at a table with a nurse friend of my mother's and her children. I always loved visiting with people while seated at a table. I could hide my biggest inadequacies under the table, and since a cute guy sat at our table, I happily hid the parts of me I didn't feel proud of. As the sun went down and we ate a dinner of sandwiches and salads, we waited for the newlyweds to join the reception and cut the cake. I got to visit with the people at our table and the others who came by to say hello. And when the newlyweds came to the reception, they stopped by our table. The bride bent down to give me a hug and thanked me for coming, looking truly happy I had. She gave me a warm smile and took her husband's hand as she followed the wedding party to their table.

We needed to head home before the reception ended, and unfortunately left before the bride and groom cut the cake, but I survived without more sugar. My father assisted me in standing as we made our way slowly and carefully through the grass to the parking lot and the waiting car. Sadly the lawn had many bright lights, so anyone who looked in my direction could see me walking on wobbly legs that I heard made me look more than a little tipsy. Before we left the reception, I turned around to see the elegant scene on the lawn and caught the eyes of many people watching me. As I turned around to continue walking, my face turned red, knowing the stares indicated how awkward I must look as I tried to walk. I would like to say everyone's staring did not affect me, but I began feeling even more inadequate than I already did. I became a very good homebody because, with all my imperfections, I felt good enough there.

For someone living with the imperfections of an incurable disease, one of the hardest parts is having no hope. No hope of medicine the doctor can give that will make it better. A Bible verse says, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine." This became one of my favorite verses. Needing happiness alone sounded wonderful, granted I

think this verse talked about medicine for the spirit, not the body. But as a Christian, I also believe verses in the Bible can mean different things to different people. When I first read this verse, I needed to believe in something that would help me in my future. Despite the fact I didn't precisely look for this verse, I found it helpful. Happiness wouldn't cure my disease, but everyone needs to be happy with the life they have. And I wanted that, not a completely different life, but the one I had, just with help to always find happiness with it.

During that time, I found something to make me happy that I could do with Anna. We started making gift baskets and giving them away at church with a card signed, "the gift sisters." We put together the simple little gifts easily and had fun keeping our identities a secret. We would leave the basket in the church foyer for a certain member, to let them know someone cared. Our mothers would help make sure each person found their gift. It was an incredibly small thing to do, but we had thought of it all on our own, which made it special. I enjoyed arranging the gift baskets and making homemade cards. Anna would help, too, and she had beautiful handwriting to write a comforting and uplifting letter to encourage the recipient. I still loved

shopping, so I happily shopped for the contents of the basket. Anna, however, didn't like shopping as much as I did. "The gift sisters" project we shared, though, so she came to help figure out what to put in the basket. Some shopping trips became impossible to make just about buying stuff for "the gift sisters" baskets. And we couldn't resist trying on some clothes we thought looked cute on some of the trips. We had so much fun, and I even found one of my favorite dresses on one of those shopping trips. Once we had everything we needed for "the gift sisters" basket, we would go to her home or mine and make a homemade card. I liked making homemade cards, and my mom had oodles of stamps, decorative edge scissors, and colorful paper for any creative project. After we had made the card and decided what it should say, Anna would write it, and then we would put it all together. I found it a creative and fun thing to do with a friend.

Despite my disease making me feel awkward in social situations, I never felt awkward around Anna and her mother. And a few weeks before Christmas that year, they came over to help us build a gingerbread house. We had never made one before, which took a lot of work. Trying to get the walls to stay up while the frosting dried pre-

sented a rather hilarious challenge. Once we had gotten the house built, we decorated it with peppermint candies, gumdrops, and an assortment of other candies full of sugary goodness. Eating the delectable sweets before we added them to it proved the only challenge while decorating. When we completed the gingerbread house, it looked adorable. Unprofessional but not terrible, and we had so much fun building it together. We kept it as a decoration through Christmas, and then we got to eat it. However, soft no longer described it anymore, and we had to throw it away.

With so many people in the house, especially over the holidays, it felt crowded. Mom and Dad moved from the sunroom to the garage shortly before Sara came home, which made the house less cramped, but we still needed more room. So Mom finally persuaded Dad to start work adding on to the house. When we had first moved to Humboldt, Mom, and Dad had given Elizabeth the master bedroom. I also needed a bigger room to fit my wheelchair for the day I decided I needed that much support. And even though my parents lived in the garage, Dad built my room first and consulted me as the designer. I got a bigger bedroom than any room I had ever had. I needed no

grip bars in the bedroom since I had always grabbed onto furniture. The bathroom had a tub shower since I liked taking baths and didn't want to do a roll-in shower till I absolutely had to. A grip bar went along the wall across from the toilet and Dad built the sink for a wheelchair to fit under it. My mom, as the painter in the family, painted the bedroom a Tuscan Sun Shade of yellow and my bathroom a light ocean blue. And got me a dolphin shower curtain and towels because of how much I loved dolphins. My dad also built a room next to mine that Taylor moved into and then built an incredible master bedroom and bathroom upstairs for him and Mom. Unfortunately, the furnace didn't work as well in the addition. The temperature was fine for Mom and Dad upstairs because heat rises, but downstairs in my room, I spent an exorbitant amount of time in front of my space heater.

Now that I had a bigger room, I had space for a new full-sized bed that could easily fit Anna and me for the weekend. On one Saturday afternoon, when Anna had come home with us from church to stay overnight, I decided I wanted to go driving. A little silly, I know, because I would probably never get my license anyway, but that didn't matter. It just sounded like fun. My parents have

had many cars over the years, but at the time, my dad owned a little white Pontiac convertible. And he would let me drive it. I was so excited, and no matter what happened, I would be safe with my dad. We lived in a subdivision. It was a quiet neighborhood with little traffic, perfect for our Saturday afternoon walks. It would also be the perfect place for driving practice for the day. That afternoon, we took my dad's convertible for a joy ride. I had grown too big to drive while sitting on his lap, so he took the passenger seat. Driving in a straight line felt fun and easy. I know some people don't like driving, but I thought it must be because they have some sort of chemical imbalance because I loved this. But all of a sudden, I noticed something in front of me, and I had to stop and turn around, but instead of putting my foot on the brake, I pushed the gas. Hearing the girls in the backseat scream, I freaked out, causing me to push even harder on the gas pedal. Before I squished us on the gate in front of us, my dad pulled the parking brake, and the car jerked to a stop. Everyone in the car joked about me almost killing them, but I love telling that story because of how much fun we all had with our near-death experience. That story is one of the best

examples of why I trust my dad with my life. He never once let me down.

I remember so many good times, yet nothing could teach me to grow up with my disease. And not to brag, but I did pretty well growing through my teen years with all I had to contend with. I love my mother very much, but she has trouble controlling her anger from the stress she has dealt with and has done a lot of yelling throughout my young life. When I had a great day at the beach with my family, we sat in the car driving home. Someone mentioned Mom often struggled with yelling. Mom had a smile on her face till then, looking serious, she apologized and asked us if we feared her. Elizabeth answered no, but it didn't surprise me that Mom's screeching did not scare Elizabeth. Elizabeth could stand her ground and shriek right back when Mom got angry. I, however, cowed when my mom yelled. I was more likely to cry than to have a verbal fight with her. Somehow, I found the gumption to nod my head. Yes, she scared me. I didn't want to hurt her because, on some days, she was an incredible mother who I loved more than words could express. But I also didn't want to lie because it scared me every time Mom raised her voice.

Eventually, we found she has something known as Ankylosing Spondylitis or AS. And that meant she dealt with ongoing pain for all or most of her life. I have a hard time forgetting how upset I got each time she bellowed. But with the pain I experience from my disease, I understand how it could make her angry enough to yell. I just wish I had understood sooner.

As much as I hated my mother's yelling, she definitely wasn't the only reason for my stressful home life; Elizabeth was a big part of that too. My oldest sister always competed with me. She bragged she had more physical abilities when we should have helped and relied on each other through a difficult disease. Watching me reminded her of how disabled she must look, so she would put me down to make herself feel better. I can understand her actions, but as my sister, I think a sibling should never act like that, especially toward her younger sister.

As soon as summer came around, we went to Redwood Grove camp like every summer before. But the summer I turned sixteen, I met someone named Liam Neeson. Not the actor, but still a friendly guy. He was the husband of the pastor in the youth division. He and his wife worked at Rio Lindo Academy, where my Uncle James had gotten

married. Liam recruited at the Rio booth that year. He made the idea of going away to the academy sound like an incredible amount of fun that I deserved to experience. Anna wanted to go away to an academy, so maybe to live without her I should go to an academy myself and make some new friends. I didn't want to go to the academy Anna would go to. It sounded farther from home than I wanted to go and very musical, and I had absolutely no musical talent. And Rio Lindo Adventist Academy looked like a great place. I kept that academy in my mind as a place I thought I would like. However, I worried how my mom would feel sending me to any boarding school but one so near "The Ranch", and my dad's family was a whole other question.

"The most important thing is to enjoy your life – to be happy – it's all that matters."

- Audrey Hepburn



Chapter Eight

Five-Hour Energy

My great-grandma Stone died that year. She had lived to be almost ninety-eight. She was my father's grandmother. The house she lived in had three bedrooms. She slept in one bedroom while the other two held her books. I never met my great-grandfather, but I heard they enjoyed the collection of books together. When we lived nearby and visited for an hour or two, she would let

us kids explore the massive number of books she had and sometimes even let us have one.

My father always had a fondness for his grandmother and would spend time with her every month. They typically went out to a restaurant, but sometimes he went to see her at her home. We spent many Christmases over at her house when I was young. Someone should have told her to vacuum before the kids came because I always sat on the floor, and it had so many crumbs.

My dad looked so sad at her memorial, and my heart broke to see his tears. She was the one person in his family he seemed close to, even though she could say things that would make a logical person not have anything to do with her. But my father didn't always seem logical.

When Dad told Great-Grandma that Elizabeth and I had a disease, she answered, "It couldn't have come from my side of the family." She assumed right. It had come from her daughter's husband, who had passed the gene to my dad, and since my mom already had the gene, their combination created me. But she didn't seem to understand that my dad told her something that upset him about two of his daughters, and her remark sounded unsympathetic. That made me realize that, even though her

family line didn't carry the gene for Friedreich's ataxia, they had just as many issues. My parents didn't blame their parents for passing the gene to them but focused on the lives of their children.

Sara and Anthony had begun testing for Friedreich's ataxia but didn't know the results before great-grandma died, which felt providential. No child should have to feel the way her words made me feel.

When the test results came, I entered the dining room to find Elizabeth and Mom sitting at the table, sniveling. I couldn't understand because they were smiling too. Mom had shown Elizabeth the test results. Among the smiles and tears, Mom announced Sara and Anthony's tests came back as perfectly healthy. The most important test of their lives, and they didn't realize the significance of it. But then again, I don't think I did either. They hadn't changed at all, regardless of whether or not they had Friedreich's ataxia.

They shed happy tears for the pain, both physical and emotional, they wouldn't have to go through. I felt naive not seeing a future with this disease quite the same as Elizabeth, and my mother did, but I was still incredibly glad for them.



Though my future didn't seem as promising as it should have, Anna's mother thought if we wanted to we should get to go to high school together. So Alice took us on a trip to Oregon to see if we would want to go to a boarding school called Laurelwood. We had a fun time over the weekend, even on the drive.

Alice fell asleep easily, which worried me when she got behind the wheel. To help make sure she didn't doze while driving to Oregon, her sister gave her a supply of five-hour energy drinks. We drove on the road not very long before she tried one. Less than an hour later, she remarked how strange it tasted and that she still wanted to sleep. Her sister used the old bottles for things other than five-hour energy drinks, and Alice probably drank some of her sister's cuticle remover.

Regardless, we made it safely to Laurelwood. The campus remained unfinished, and they just completed the girls' dorm. The property had a pond that made the landscape look charming and peaceful, but besides that, I didn't like much about the area. Since we visited the school

to decide whether to attend, we spent the night on campus and ate our meals in the cafeteria. The building they called their cafeteria appeared rather small and looked more like faculty housing than a place for meals. While Anna and I were talking at dinner on our first night on campus, I heard someone come through the door near me, and Anna's eyes widened. Looking over my shoulder, I saw what had stunned her. It was Samuel Miller, a boy we hadn't seen or heard from since he and his mom had moved away from Eureka. I looked at him with my mouth open, a little stunned for a few moments, until I remembered to close my mouth and say hello. As we ate dinner, he told us how he came to attend Laurelwood.

The next morning, we went to church. Usually, Adventist academies have a church on campus, but they had their church a short distance away. Painted white with a little steeple, the tiny building had a small congregation. But before the boarding school existed, they probably had an even smaller attendance. While I don't remember the sermon well enough to comment, I imagine it didn't enlighten me. As the service ended, everyone filed outside to their vehicles, and to my amazement, I saw snow. The snow with the backdrop of a little white church looked

so serene I wanted to sit and enjoy the view for a while, but I started shivering so I happily got in the car. We went back for lunch at the academy and then started driving. Spending the rest of the day in the car, we made our way to Humboldt. On our drive home, we first viewed snow-covered farms, then beaches along the California coast, and finally the majestic redwood trees of home. Luckily, Alice didn't try drinking out of another five-hour energy bottle and other than deciding neither of us wanted to attend Laurelwood we had a good trip.

I liked the sound of attending Rio Lindo Academy, but it still remained over three hours from home. My parents would worry if I went to school so far away. I would also be a little freaked out living far away from my family; therefore, I looked for some options closer to home. I actually did look around, but what I found didn't appeal.

As a result, I still hoped I could go to Rio Lindo Academy. A month after my trip to Laurelwood, my parents and I visited Sonoma County as guests at a wedding. The bride was not only the daughter of my mom's friend, but we also knew the bride's family from the church we had gone to when we lived in Sonoma County. Alexis had a closer friendship with me than my two older siblings, and she

always made me feel special. The fact she had a friendship with a gawky and uncoordinated girl only gave me an even higher opinion of her than I already had.

Alexis wore her blonde hair back on her wedding day with a veil and a strapless wedding dress that made her look incredibly beautiful. It proved a lovely outdoor wedding, with white lawn chairs on the grass and the aisle in-between. Alexis said I do under a gazebo with her sister and three other bridesmaids wearing pink gowns next to her. After the wedding party walked up the aisle and the ceremony officially ended, the guests headed inside a building close-by for the reception. Alexis had graduated the year before as a dental hygienist and had toothbrushes placed on everyone's napkin as her wedding favors. She had chosen a villa surrounded by wine country for her wedding venue near the Rio Lindo campus.

One of the administrators of Rio also attended the wedding, and he and his family were church friends. He told me I could attend Rio for less than half the normal tuition fee. My aunt Amanda had talked to my grandmother, who paid a large amount of my tuition. Knowing that sending me to Rio wouldn't cost as much as they thought, my parents consented to let me attend. It really excited me.

Even though I hadn't pushed, I really wanted to go, and now I would get to.

A family member you both love and simultaneously hate is one of the most stressful relationships known to man. This is the relationship between me and my grandma Foster. I love her because she is my grandmother, but she has done little else to ingratiate herself to me. Grandma never gave good gifts and as a teenager living away from her, sent nothing and rarely visited. She is a good person: she goes to church every Saturday, helps out at VBS, and has a successful business. But she has never truly loved me as her granddaughter. Don't mistake me, I know she cares, but she has not cared the way a grandmother typically helps and cares for a disabled grandchild. Most of my friends have shown me more care than she does. Maybe she wanted to change by helping pay some tuition for Rio when Aunt Amanda asked, Grandma may have just felt guilt for her treatment of my dad, though. My grandma couldn't properly bond with my dad because shortly before his birth she lost a baby girl in her third trimester. I understand her grief but she learned to love her third son, my Uncle Matthew. Not simultaneously showing her eldest son motherly love, I think of as hateful

and unchristian. So far she sucked as my grandmother but as my father's mother, she was terrible. I don't like to use the word hate in relation to my grandmother but how she so easily disinherited my father I will never forgive her for.

A week after Alexis's wedding, I visited my aunt Amanda so she could take me on a tour of the school and ease my worries about not fitting in. Growing up in Healdsburg and going to James and Amanda's wedding, I had visited the Rio campus several times, but this time I truly saw it. The road to the school was right outside of Healdsburg and had two lanes that wound around country homes with barns and vineyards. A mile on the outskirts of town, the road came to a summit with a sign announcing Rio Lindo Adventist Academy! The church stood just inside the gate, which still looked as lovely as I remember. Continuing to the campus, we passed this incredible view of the Russian River with a wooden cross standing in front of it, where Amanda had her reception. Next, I saw the boys' dorm, then the school buildings, cafeteria, and girls' dorm with the gym, pool, football field, and auto shop behind them. That day the sun shone brightly, and with so many green lawns, the campus looked just beautiful. I loved everything about the school, even the teachers. One of them let me

hold the pet snake in his classroom; snakes terrify me, but I didn't want to refuse such a friendly offer. I met students in the school halls and some I already knew. I had made a bold decision when I said I wanted to go to Rio, but now, having seen the campus as a prospective student, I excitedly waited for the fall semester to begin. All the returning students and faculty prepared for my arrival in August by pouring cement ramps and reserving a first-floor room in the girls' dorm for me. I had nothing to do but wait through the summer for the rest of my life to begin.

During the previous summers that we spent at Redwood Grove camp, I hadn't gone to the youth division. It stood on the edges of the camp, and campers thought it to be a little rowdy, but since I would go away to an academy for high school, I wanted to mingle with other kids at camp my age. Shortly after Elizabeth and I got diagnosed, Dad bought us a scooter, which we used mainly for our summers at camp. It had a red frame with a very large seat. It seemed made for someone much wider, and Elizabeth and I were so skinny we could both fit on it at the same time, although not comfortably. When Dad had first bought it, the scooter had worked for both of us, even though Elizabeth typically drove it. This summer, though, I wanted

to use it on my own. I don't remember everything that happened, but Elizabeth acted unhappy. But she always got angry at me for one thing or another, so I didn't worry about it too much and took the long, rather bumpy road to the youth meeting. I nervously spent the first several minutes peering over the canvas that surrounded the area where they held the meeting, trying to decide whether I should stay or go. I eventually decided to stay and made my way to the back of the group, hoping not to be noticed. I found out later the pastor and her husband from Rio led the youth meeting that year like the year before, as well as many others I would meet in a month. The Adventist world is incredibly small.

Due to my impending absence from home, my mother planned a trip to Santa Cruz a month before I went to Academy. So all seven of us and Anna loaded up in my dad's one-ton van and went on another vacation. We rented a beach house in Santa Cruz that wasn't as close to the beach as advertised but appeared within walking distance. The house, although small, looked fancy and had a television with a ton of channels for entertainment. The living room had a white carpet and a cream-colored couch that looked so perfect it worried me to go in there

and mess it up. I can't say much for the other bedrooms, but the master bedroom Anna and I shared had a large room with an enormous closet I still dream about and an attached bathroom with a jacuzzi tub everyone relaxed in. My family thought I needed a bigger space since I had disabilities, and Anna as a guest and friend, we both shared the biggest room. But in the privacy of my bedroom, I used my strength to get from here to there while grabbing onto things and stumbled around clumsily instead of using my wheelchair. It might have worked better for me in a smaller room, but I didn't complain. When we went to the beach, I just lay on the warm sand, looking at the view, and enjoyed watching Sara and Anthony have fun with the sand, the Ocean, and even the seagulls. I only went once because sitting on the sand with the scorching sun overhead isn't exactly my idea of a good time. And getting into the ocean where I could easily float away with the tide, I didn't think I should try. We also got to explore the beach boardwalk for the first time, and I absolutely had to visit some of the shops and buy a few things. We didn't go on any of the amusement rides on the boardwalk and instead got cotton candy and watched a performance of Chinese acrobats on the beach below the boardwalk. Since Anna would go to a

boarding academy soon too, and her parents wanted some time with her, her mom came and took her home. This meant I had to share the master bedroom with Elizabeth for the rest of our vacation. She wasn't always difficult with me, just prickly. With the time left of vacation, we went to the Monterey Bay Aquarium. We had made the trip to Monterey for the Aquarium so many times I had lost track, but my sister Sara got to see the Aquarium for the first time. I always loved seeing the Sea Otters, but the exhibit looked a little boring unless we watched as they got fed. And seeing the incredible number of jellyfish, I always liked. Having watched *Finding Nemo*, I enjoyed seeing the Clownfish and the Royal Blue Tang fish, aka Nemo and Dory. The splash zone also had the most adorable Sea Horses, visiting the Aquarium, never disappointed. We also went to a place near Santa Cruz known as Gilroy Gardens, and it looked incredibly beautiful as an amusement park. They had a lake with paddle boats, a small water park known as the water oasis, a little zoo, amusement rides, a botanical garden, and a train around the entire park.

“Don't limit yourself. Many people limit themselves to what they think they can do. You can go as far as your mind lets you. What you believe, remember, you can achieve.”

ALICIA WESTON

- Mary Kay Ash



Chapter Nine

New Beginnings

In August, I became a student at Rio Lindo Adventist Academy. It was a sunny Sunday without a cloud in the sky as our vehicle pulled up in front of the girls' dorm. My parents came to drop me off at the Academy and helped me out of the car and into my wheelchair; we made our way to the school. It felt warm out of the vehicle, much warmer than in Humboldt, and I absolutely loved it! The fact that I didn't have much meat on my bones and the poor circulation from my disease made the Humboldt County weather tough for me at times. But I thought

I could thrive in this atmosphere, which excited me as I began signing up for classes. The Academy buzzed with activity as students and parents set up dorm rooms and met with teachers, preparing for the next school year. Since second grade, I had learned from either my mom or a video on my computer, and now I could learn from an in-person teacher, call me a nerd, but that thrilled me!

When I finished enrolling in classes, my parents and I went to the dorm to unload everything so we could set it up in my dorm room. The room came equipped with a bed, a dresser, a closet, a desk, and a bathroom. The room assigned to me was meant for an RA; the typical room they had for the students didn't have a bathroom. The room stood on the first floor down the hall from a kitchen and a small laundry room further down the hall. When we finished, it felt homier and looked more comfortable and inviting. Then it became time for my parents to leave, and I suddenly felt apprehensive about living without them. I became seventeen a few months earlier, but why did I think I could handle living independently as a disabled seventeen-year-old?

As my parents drove away and I calmed down, I reminded myself how this experience was my only opportunity to

leave my parents' house and live life on my terms. To start my new independence, I attended The Handshake, my junior year's first social meet and greet. At the handshake, everyone went down rows of faculty and classmates and welcomed each other to the new school year. Even though it neared evening, I still enjoyed the temperature outside, and the cafeteria served vegetarian burgers on the lawn for dinner. The cafeteria only had vegetarian food, which worked great for me because I had grown up as a vegetarian. Seventh-day Adventists treat the body as a temple and have a healthy diet; thus, most live as vegetarians.

I shook hands and muttered hellos, but I talked to Adam first, the boy I knew a lifetime ago, in elementary school. Things had changed so much since the last time I had seen him. I could walk when we first met, and now I sat on wheels. And yet, he and his family still acted as nice as I remember. He had brown hair and green eyes that, unfortunately, looked like he wore eyeliner. Despite enduring teasing in his younger years, he remained a super nice guy in high school. His younger sister Melanie stood a few inches shorter but looked so much like him; everyone knew they were siblings. Two years behind our grade in elementary school, we hadn't known each other then. I had

known her a little from church and summers at Vacation Bible School, and she had so much energy; I couldn't help but like her. His parents remained faculty members and didn't seem to mind Adam's friends eating them out of house and home. His group quickly became my friends and remained some of my favorite people.

This high school Academy I hoped to spend the next two years attending had so many people around, but I didn't know how to go up and introduce myself. Thankfully, Adam solved that problem for me and introduced me to Emma. She greeted me with a smile that made me feel perfect and emanated a warmth that made me so glad to be there. She told me how we met when I came in May to tour the academy. I had lunch in the cafeteria at the end of the tour before I left with my aunt, and Emma introduced herself to me. Apparently, I made a good first impression because she even remembered the newsboy hat I wore that day. After Emma shared how we had first met, she introduced the people on the lawn next to her. One girl Emma introduced as her sister, Bianca, had the most beautiful red hair and was a freshman. While her sister, who had introduced her, was a junior like me and had blonde hair. Next, I met a brunette named Erika, who was

also a junior, and everyone called her Erik. She smiled and looked friendly, not as bubbly as Emma, but then again, no one seemed as bubbly as Emma. After that, I met a boy named Jason who, with his black pants, a chain, and a dark top, looked unhappy to be there, but my heart skipped a beat every time he smiled.

On the second day, classes began. It appeared more of a day to introduce the students to the classes and the teachers than actually doing any learning. That evening they had a river picnic for dinner, and something called the rope pull, so all the students went down to the river at an area called boys' beach. The faculty brought a grill down to the river, and we ate dinner on the beach, and then they put a long rope on the beach from one side of the river to the other. One class got on one side of the river, and another got on the other, and they pulled on the rope to see which class got the knot in the middle of the rope to their side of the shore first. The freshman and sophomores played tug of war first, and next, the juniors and seniors. I found it silly, but I had never had much of a competitive nature, but the participants in the game of tug of war enjoyed the tradition. I felt more comfortable since I met many students and faculty in the last two days. At the

river, though, I felt antsy in a new place where I couldn't bring my wheelchair and participate. I could participate in most of the activities on the campus, though, even a few without my wheelchair.

One day of the first week of classes, I took a ride on my tricycle during one of my free periods. The day looked beautiful, and the Rio Lindo campus had a paved road around the dorms and the classroom buildings in a loop. With no one else around, I could ride without an audience. I couldn't ride a regular two-wheeled bicycle and had begged my dad to get me a tricycle. It had a blue body with a white basket in the back, and with my younger siblings still small enough to fit in it, I took them for rides all the time. And so, for the first time at Rio, I pushed it out of the dorm and onto the road, climbed on, and began pedaling. Before I had made it halfway around the campus, Emma and her redheaded sister Bianca rushed out of the dorm to meet me. It embarrassed me to have people watch me do something I couldn't do easily. It irritated me when they stayed to walk beside me, but when they didn't gape at how slowly I pedaled, I began to feel comfortable around them. And as we continued around the loop, babbling and laughing, the loneliness I had felt since my parents

left started to ease. They asked me questions about myself, told me things about themselves, and told me they hoped to be my friends. When I got tired and ready for dinner, they helped me get the tricycle back into the dorm, got my electric wheelchair, and went to the cafeteria.



The weekend after I arrived, they did something I had never heard of called a swap meet. Each of the four high school grades sat in separate corners of the football field with a collection of items they had brought from the dorms. As the game leader, one of the faculty members put a large gym mat in the middle of the football field. When they called certain things, the grade with that item raced to the mat and placed the item on it before another grade with the same item could bolt up and beat them to it. I couldn't take part in this game either, but at least I had my wheelchair, and on top of that, I now had friends. Though I could not participate, I found the game incredibly entertaining. We finished second that year, just like in the rope pull. I always wondered if my class let the seniors win

because the junior class appeared bigger than the senior class.

Along with the games the entire school would play and the times in the classroom, I greatly enjoyed the Academy. Maybe not all of the rules, but as a teenager, it seemed expected. To ensure all the students followed the rules of Rio, the school had social supervision. Which involved several faculty members roaming campus in the evenings and on the weekends. The Academy had very straightforward rules like boys couldn't go in the girls' dorm and vice versa, to prevent students from conceiving babies on campus. Although I know a few students who have ignored that rule. As a Christian campus letting the students get frisky would be bad for business. I also like to think the faculty liked the students they helped take care of and wanted only the best for us. Rio didn't even allow kissing because it has the habit of leading to other activities the school didn't want to endorse. But for those who wanted to smooch, they could make it happen. The students joked about hiding in the bushes, away from the eyes of the faculty, for canoodling. But the bushes on campus looked too small to hide much of anything, so I'm pretty sure no one ever went into the bushes with such nefarious purposes.

After sunset, each student needed to be in a supervised area, and during daylight hours, we had fewer limitations about where we could be. Still, they always recommended the supervision of an authorized adult. Rio had a girls' and boys' beach you could visit without supervision as long as only girls went to the girls' beach and only boys went to the boys' beach. They required the students to wear modest clothing, and they prohibited jewelry, which was no different from what I normally wore, so that rule, as most of them, didn't really affect me. As more of a guideline than a rule, the faculty didn't want the students to be too close physically. I found it difficult to adhere to this guideline because I needed assistance walking or being carried. When students went outside of these guidelines of social conduct, they could be put on "Social suspension". Some may consider these guidelines harsh, but they are founded on Christian principles and much of what my family has observed throughout my life.

The school had a female pastor named Rachel Neeson, who greatly impacted me. She taught the junior religion class I took. Rachel and her husband, Liam, made a yearly school mission trip. The academy had Liam in charge of community service, and the school requested each student

complete twenty-five hours every year they attended the school.

A favorite memory I had from religion class involved Emma leading me around blindfolded as part of Rachel's lesson about trusting in God's leading. As Emma led me back into the religion class after leading me outside for a while, I drove into the doorjamb. Everyone began clapping. Their approval of my inability to get through the door luckily didn't upset me and made me laugh as well. My classmates and faculty acted well around me, sharing in the laughter and with things I needed help with.

I really liked the girls' assistant dean Sarah, she reminded me of Emma, always friendly with a contagious smile. Until she and a few other faculty helped Rachel in her Religion class teach sex one day I didn't realize she liked Oliver. Oliver, the boys' assistant dean, helped Rachel teach her Religion class on sex along with Sarah. For my remaining time at Rio I saw them spend time together in their prospective dorms, gravitate towards each other at social functions, and subtly flirt with each other, they were so cute! But the sex talk in Religion class became the first time I noticed the palpable chemistry between the two. The sex topic in a Christian academy can make an awkward

conversation embarrassing, and it kept my face burning the entire class time.

A few days later, right before religion class started, I clumsily dropped my phone in the toilet. I took my phone to Emma and asked her what to do; she sat in the religion classroom, waiting for class to begin, and told me to give it to Jason, who stood in the room and would know what to do. Adam introduced me to Jason as his close friend on my first day at Rio. He appeared taller than Adam with short light brown hair, blue eyes, and horrible acne, but I still thought he looked cute. So I approached him rather shyly to ask him to fix my phone, but as Emma had said, he knew just what to do. He turned it off, put it in a bag of rice for the rest of the day, and gave it back the next morning, on and functioning. I breathed a sigh of relief that it had survived its dunking because it seemed too early in the year to need a new phone. I gladly didn't have to explain how I did that one to my parents. After that, I became friends with Jason.

With new friends, I enjoyed the next week called prayer week. We still had to do school, but instead of recreational time on the field at the end of every day, we went to church. We would listen to a sermon every night. Sometimes I

enjoyed it, and other times I found it bothersome. Often the day had worn me out, and after the sermon, we still had to complete study hall, where we went to our rooms and focused on homework. Whenever I fall asleep regardless of the sermon, Emma would let me rest my head on her lap. Even though I got Emma as my continual snuggle buddy, the faculty only made a few objections.

For the most part, I liked the week of prayer, and other than wanting to nod off, I tried to participate as much as possible. Not that listening to a sermon involved much participation, but whenever the audience would stand, usually during singing, with a friend's help, I would try to stand too. Thinking back on it, I hate how I must have looked, but my new friends never acted ashamed to help me stand. They just acted amazed that I would want to, but after the first few times, it became normal for them to do it for me. Even though I never liked how I looked when standing, I did it regardless of the looks I got sometimes.

At the beginning of the school year, the academy published a magazine called *Fitch Faces*, which had a picture of each student to help everyone meet each other. I remember looking through the magazine with Emma. I thought we should play matchmaker and set Adam up with one

of the cute girls at school. We looked through *Fitch Faces* because I wanted to set him up without delay and didn't want to take the time to meet everyone. I'm not sure why, but it never ended up happening. With Jason slowly becoming a friend, I wanted to set him up too. That didn't happen either, though, because whenever I asked Emma who would be good for him, she would point to my picture. It flattered me that she would think I deserved a guy so many other girls at school had a crush on. I knew I looked pretty, but sitting in a wheelchair did a lot to lower my attractiveness to guys. And besides that, I found another guy at school cute.

Another activity Rio hosted didn't just include a select number of students and faculty but the entire student body and some other schools. They called it football weekend. They held it on the field and required all the students to attend, and surprisingly, I had fun. Flag football appeared to be a huge sport for the school. Each grade had a booth with the food they would sell as a class fundraiser. Having cold weather later in the evening at that time of year, they needed good hot food to keep everyone warm while watching the football games. Our class sold cinnamon rolls, but when I finally got back to the dorm after the

last game, my feet were seven-inch ice cubes. I didn't begin putting up my feet to help with circulation for many years. And even though some fancier electric wheelchairs can raise the footrests, the one I used didn't have that feature. I really loved that electric wheelchair, though, and had a lot of fun with it.

I used an electric wheelchair for the first time in high school. I had very little respect for it and took advantage of how much fun my friends and I could have. We called my wheelchair cherry. Giving my wheelchair a name made it seem less depressing, but I don't know why we picked the name cherry because it was a cream color. I didn't properly appreciate the mobility it offered me that my legs no longer could. Some things I did as a teenager made absolutely no sense. I took very little thought before my actions. I decided to try putting one of my wheelchair tires on the sidewalk while putting the other tire on the road, about a foot lower than the sidewalk. Everything went okay for a few moments, and then the world tipped. Everyone came rushing over to see if I remained in one piece. It embarrassed me but I survived. With so many eyes on me, I said the first thing that popped into my head, "How's my hair?" I looked uninjured, and with my attempt at humor, people

began returning to sitting on the lawn while a few strong guys put me and my chair back upright. Always having friends around, ready to help if needed, differed greatly from usual.

While I didn't feel popular, I had plenty of friends, especially compared to my home-school years. Spending weeks away from family makes your friends become a surrogate family. I had Emma as my high school mommy. Even though the nickname Emma-mommy never stuck, if anyone filled that role, she did. Her boyfriend had the name Derek, and since they were dating and I had Emma as my mommy, Derek became daddy. The nickname Derek-daddy really stuck. I also had a friend named Shawn, who I jokingly called my son. Getting out of my wheelchair and sitting next to my friends on a lawn, he would sit in my wheelchair and ask if he could borrow the car. Saying something smart like "don't use all the gas, son" I would watch him drive away in my wheelchair. He saw it as something fun, not just something I needed, and I liked that. I think he had more respect for my wheelchair than I did. While I jokingly called Shawn my son, Emma, my mommy, had adopted him as her granddaddy. No matter the connection, my friends and I had a bundle of antics

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with my wheelchair. Sometimes I would have people hop on my wheelchair and take a ride. Those who have driven an electric wheelchair probably know the extra weight on the back or sides can cause the steering to become less responsive, creating no end of giggles as two or three girls plus I all piled onto my chair, and I couldn't seem to drive in a straight line.

“It was when I realized I needed to stop trying to be somebody else and be myself that I actually started to own, accept and love what I had.”

- Tracee Ellis Ross



Chapter Ten

Teenagehood

I first met Jason's family when they came over for his birthday. They decorated a table in the cafeteria with a cake and balloons and sat waiting for him. His parents, his older sisters, and his younger brother all came. Jason seemed uncomfortable with the attention, but besides that fact, they acted like a close and loving family. It shocked me to find out Jason's parents had separated. Emma said his dad acted flirty, and she didn't like him much. Suddenly, the separation made more sense, and I couldn't help but

feel a little sorry for his mom. His mom didn't act as if she disliked his dad but that she cared about the father of her children. His oldest sister, Brooke, looked really pretty and had a friendly smile, but her teeth were most notable. You couldn't really be sure she had any. But I had difficulty learning the lesson that beauty is only skin deep as a teenager. His next older sister, Jessica, had much better teeth and blonde hair that contrasted Brooke with her long brown hair. I found Jessica so friendly; I enjoyed getting to know her. Jason appeared thin, but his younger brother Morgan looked scrawny. I gladly went to school with Jason rather than his brother because I considered him the cuter of the two. Both brothers stood thinner and taller than their dad, which I found very amusing.

Aside from getting to know new people I continued getting to know Emma, who became a really good friend. She shared that at six years old, she lost her baby sister. Her sister, Manzanita, was not even two years old when she died. A simple accident had ended her life. Emma and her sisters spent the day with their mother at their grandparents' house. They had fun wandering around outside and when their mom went around collecting her kids, she couldn't find Manzi. Looking around the house she found

Manzi floating in the hot tub, not breathing. Letting out a blood-curdling scream that brought everyone quickly to the hot tub, Manzi got pulled out of the water and her grandpa started CPR, while someone dialed 911. She threw up the massive amount of blackberries her siblings fed her, so Emma thought that meant she would survive. But hours later, her mom returned from the hospital saying Manzi had gone to heaven. At the end of her story my heart broke for her family and more importantly for Emma as a new friend. I liked all three of the surviving Myers sisters and I imagine I would have loved Manzanita too. But Emma and her sisters wouldn't be the girls I love without the painful loss of Manzanita. It doesn't make her loss any less painful but it's a nice sentiment that Manzanita lives on in her sisters.



Rio was a wonderful place for me, and besides meeting new people, I loved living in the girls' dorm with friends. Emma lived on the second floor, though, and I naturally couldn't get up the stairs, but the dorm had an intercom system allowing me to buzz any room. I would buzz Emma

to watch a movie with me in the recreational room, and often she happily came with her sister and other friends trailing behind her. The recreational room in the girls' dorm stood on the first floor with a television and couches and a collection of movies approved by the deans. All the girls in the dorm would also get together for game nights in the recreational room. We had so many fun memories in that room! We watched a movie called Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella. Emma would sing along and make it a fun experience every time we watched it.

The dorm store stood up the hall and next to my room. With the dorm store opening only once a day, it made a quiet neighbor. Most of the time, it opened up before study hall to ensure the students had adequate energy and motivation to do their homework. My parents ensured I had snacks in my room, including a microwave to warm up the cans of Big Franks I had brought. I have loved vegetarian hot dogs called Big Franks since I could chew solid foods. But I still often got in line behind my friends to buy my favorite junk food for study hall. Next to the dorm store stood the laundry room, where I learned to do my first laundry load. Across from the laundry room stood the computer room, where Emma helped me sign up for

my first Facebook account. On the dorm's second floor, there stood a chapel where we would go after recreational time to worship. Emma would carry me up on her back to the second floor, and sometimes after chapel, we would visit her room before she took me back downstairs. Emma never complained, though. I loved living in the dorm, but the girls I shared the space with made it fantastic. But even this joy I had found couldn't hide me from the realities in my life.

Before school started, I went to see the cardiologist for my annual visit to see if my heart looked as healthy as I thought. My mom called to let me know the cardiologist gave her my results over the phone, and I had begun cardiomyopathy. My body had betrayed me. I had just started taking control of what I wanted for my life and didn't want to head home and lead a sedentary lifestyle now. I didn't know what to do. My mother sounded worried but didn't tell me I needed to do anything differently. I could stay, but it didn't make the news any easier to handle. For a day or two, I became depressed, and I almost constantly wanted to weep, and once or twice I actually did, in public, no less. It still mortifies me to think how hysterical I acted

about the whole thing. But emotions are funny and can sometimes surprise you with their intensity.

When the school had its Fall Festival, I felt less emotional and ready to enjoy it. I had gone to Fall Festivals before, but a high school Fall Festival has many differences from an elementary school festival. They held it in the gymnasium, and each booth intrigued the on-lookers to visit with enticing sights and smells. I saw a hysterical sight of our history teacher, Mr. Sawyer, in jail. While what he sat in looked more like a pretty cage than a jail, I believed he couldn't get out. He wailed about the incredible injustice of getting put in jail; he sounded so believably in pain that I couldn't help but ask if he was alright. Taking a break from his wailing, he whispered he was fine and not to worry, and with a deep breath, he once again began his wailing as if his life depended on it.

Along with having people thrown in jail, we could buy food that smelled incredibly delectable, pay for a kiss stamp to leave an impression of red lips on someone, and even pay for two people to visit a fake wedding chapel. They called the wedding chapel at the front of the gym "El Rio Loco Wedding Chapel," with Liam Neeson as the officiant dressed as a pot-bellied justice of the peace. I re-

member being informed I would get married as I talked with my aunt. The messenger expected me to start moving toward the chapel, but when I didn't follow, he grabbed my wheelchair joystick and moved me in that direction. As I got driven to the altar, Jason got hauled there too, and jokingly (I think) tried to get away from his captor as his objection to the marriage. The ceremony began when I sat, and he stood under the arbor. The ceremony sounded quite funny, but I don't recall ever having to say, "I do." Liam bound our hands with a zip tie and pronounced us fake man and wife.

Still tied together, my new fake husband grabbed my wheelchair joystick and made a beeline for his ex-girlfriend to show off his fake wife. I felt bad for Jason. Hannah had been his first girlfriend, and she had broken up with him without giving him a reason. But how he had put me in the middle upset me. As a typical teenage girl, as soon as we could get the zip tie off, I complained to all my girlfriends how upsetting I found his actions. That evening I realized I liked Jason as more than a friend. I didn't think he was ready to date anyone, though. He still had his first break-up to get over, and even if he didn't, I doubted he would want to date me. Because of how

bleak my future looked, I decided I probably shouldn't be anyone's girlfriend. Instead of letting that fact upset me, I simply reminded myself to enjoy my time in high school and my new experiences.

Jason looked so cute and acted really nice, I found it hard not to crush on him. Whenever I noticed someone I wanted to offer assistance to, he did it. The second before I would ask a friend to help, he helped without me asking, we were just on the same wavelength. I loved it just as much as it creeped me out. Not able to help when I wanted sucked but that someone I liked helped everyone, meant, apparently I was a very good judge of character.

Although I was a good judge of character, I didn't always think things through in high school. One afternoon, a friend from the senior class and I decided it would be epic to drive down a steep hill with my wheelchair at full throttle. Which probably wasn't speedy, but we still thought it would be a fun diversion anyway. She sat on my electric wheelchair while I sat on her lap and pushed the joystick forward. At the bottom of the hill, I remember thinking it proved a little anticlimactic. Followed by "busted" because Adam and Jason had seen our dash down the hill from the auto shop and walked in our direction. Standing before us,

Adam began telling us the stupidity of what we had done could have badly hurt me. As Adam continued telling us what a bad idea we had, I could only look at Jason. He didn't say anything, not even a nod in agreement with his friend. Looking upset, he bent down, picked me off my friend's lap, and carried me back to the auto shop with him. His actions bewildered me. With a family member or his girlfriend, I could understand why he would get upset if I did something where I could get hurt. But we only had a friendship and a new one at that. When we got to the auto shop and the teacher saw me in Jason's arms and someone driving my wheelchair behind us, his confusion showed on his face. Once the teacher heard what happened, he looked at me with disapproval as I sat in his office. Then he turned to Jason and asked why he had carried me to the shop instead of leaving me in my wheelchair. He shrugged and said, "I don't know." As a guy, the teacher may have understood why Jason didn't have a better answer, but it still confused me.

Sometimes teenagehood frustrated me, but the friendships made it all worthwhile. As in any high school, Rio had groups inside of groups of friendships. Bianca and Melanie, who I considered friends, had friendships with

each other and another girl from the freshman class. I knew the three friends as the walking blonde joke since the trio consisted of a blonde, a brunette, and a redhead. My friends and I loved telling jokes, and as teenagers, I recall many of them sounding dirty. Seeing the trio hanging around together often, those around me couldn't help but tell a dirty blonde joke. One that I heard most told about a brunette, a redhead, and a blonde at the OBGYN. The brunette said she would have a boy because her husband was on top. The redhead said she would have a girl because she was on top. And the blonde said: "Oh my God. I'm going to have puppies!" As Christians, we shouldn't have told such jokes, but during high school, we had so many good times with laughter.

"The purpose of life is to live it, to taste experience to the utmost, to reach out eagerly and without fear for newer and richer experience."

- Eleanor Roosevelt



Chapter Eleven

Princess Ali

For the next activity, we had a co-ed movie night. Everyone got to sit with their friends in the administration building's Chapel, the place we met every morning for worship. The Chapel was a large room filled with padded stackable chairs that faced a stage at the front of the room. A projector screen rolled down from the ceiling on the stage, and a balcony with a sound booth at the back of the room held the system to play the movie. As well as tons of other cool gadgets the school used to host its productions. On this specific movie evening, we watched

Aladdin, one of my favorite animated movies. Seeing how much I enjoyed the movie, Emma nicknamed me Princess Ali Ababwa, shortened to Ali or even Ali-Cat. As the movie ended, we slowly made our way to the front of the administration building, where the girls and guys would separate and head to their own dorms and rooms. And the faculty emphasized the last point of everyone going to their own beds. Many couples objected to the separation, and I quite hysterically watched as their friends dragged them away.

During high school, my legs would tremble every time I tried to stand. With people around to help me, it didn't feel that hard, but it became noticeably harder to stand and walk on my own with just me. I had a tough time getting ready by myself each morning, but to me struggling felt normal. One morning, after getting out of the shower, I left the bathroom. Just a disclaimer: wetness combined with terrible coordination causes accidents. I fell on the very hard marble flooring right on my ankle. I gritted my teeth and managed not to howl, but that had really hurt! After getting dressed, as gently on my ankle as possible, I went to the cafeteria for breakfast. And when breakfast ended, I went to find Mrs. Conner, the school nurse,

and told her what had happened. She looked at my ankle, touched it to see my reaction, and told me I should get to class because I didn't need to see the doctor since I hadn't broken it. I argued I must have done something because it had really hurt. So, to appease me, she wrapped my ankle. She must have known more about injuries, though, because it felt fine by the end of the day.

Among my many injuries throughout high school, I had a lot of crazy experiences. Such as one day when the cafeteria opened its doors for lunch. It was raining cats and dogs outside, making me eager to get inside. Driving faster than I normally would to get in the door, I didn't notice a puddle of water the other students had left on their way to the food. As I reached the puddle on the linoleum floor, my electric chair started spinning. One wheel had lost traction, and the other kept turning. It had never happened before, so it freaked me out at first. But after it had happened a few more times, I decided I found it fun. Jason, who had walked behind me during the whole experience, noticed I hadn't gone into hysterics. After that, he found a way to make it happen often, making me laugh every time.

While enjoying my experiences at Rio, I sometimes got conflicted about what my dad would want me to do. Growing up, Dad never liked cosmetics. At a young age, we all understood that. And without anyone else around us indulging, we didn't feel like we missed out. Life at boarding school, however, differed greatly from my wholesome upbringing. They still had rules about clothing and jewelry, but it seemed much different than my father's disapproval.

Rio had a monthly town trip where, for a small gas fee, students could go to the Coddington Mall and Walmart. I knew I needed help, so I only went with friends. Friends raised in less sheltered homes than mine. They did their best to teach me the ways of a teenage girl, and with the help of the mall store, Claire's, I now wore nail polish. I must have painted my nails with a new color every day for a month. The freedom to wear it without disapproval felt exhilarating. I enjoyed looking down in the middle of class and seeing pretty colors on my fingernails. Eventually, though, the novelty wore off, and I didn't do it as often. But I still remember bright pink as my favorite nail polish color, and I also had a pair of pink fingerless gloves that looked really good together.

One evening after dinner, I wore my favorite pink nail polish and fingerless gloves. Jason took a picture of me and informed me that he would keep the picture for blackmail, knowing I would prefer my dad never see it. Luckily, he never brought it up again, because I really enjoyed using nail polish and didn't want to return to an unpolished existence. Wearing nail polish had nothing to do with trying to look prettier for a guy. I wore it just for me, so since I didn't try to get a guy, my friend tried to get one for me.

The next school activity was the Christmas banquet. Banquets are, to Adventist education, what dances and the prom are to public education. They had no dancing, which worked great for me. A Banquet seems like a group date with the entire student body, so everyone wanted a date. And Emma, who had played matchmaker, tried to get Jason to ask me. I hadn't told her I liked Jason, but as a true girlfriend, she guessed. Jason, unfortunately, didn't want to take a girl to a banquet unless he dated her or had a very platonic friendship with her. Our friendship felt too new to know what he wanted. Emma had asked him to take me to the banquet about a week before, and he told me all about it and said he didn't want to ask me, so he didn't plan to. That probably would have insulted me,

except we had become good friends, and I knew he wanted to tell me the truth.



For the Christmas Banquet, the school would take buses down to San Francisco, where we would see *The Nutcracker*. I hadn't seen a ballet in a theater before, and Emma helped me find the perfect dress. I wanted to go and decided I didn't need a boy to do that. Before the Winter Banquet, I asked Jason and Adam if they could look out for me because I didn't know what to expect. With my disease, I learned to expect the unexpected. Adam would go and agreed to help if needed. Jason didn't want to go, but since it appeared mandatory, he would willingly help. I would get to wear my fancy dress and see the live performance of *the Nutcracker*; I felt so excited!

I planned to go without a date at breakfast that morning when an upperclassman knelt beside my wheelchair and asked me to go as his date. I immediately looked at my friend Emma, who had frozen after hearing Shawn's banquet proposal, and asked, "Did you do this?" She shook her head no. I did the only thing I could think of. I took a

moment, as if contemplating a tough decision, and threw myself into his arms for a hug and said yes.

A point often overlooked when remembering a banquet is how long the girls take to get ready. When those of us of the female persuasion finished primping, the guys came to the girls' dorm to escort their dates to the bus. We had many pictures taken because the girls looked nice, and we wanted to remember how cute we looked. Once we eventually made it out of the girls' dorm and piled into the buses all dressed up, we headed to San Francisco. I expected Shawn to sit next to me on the bus, but when Jason carried me on the bus and sat next to me, Shawn sat next to a friend. I was surprised but not disappointed since I would have happily gone with Jason. I settled in for the long bus ride with Jason's arm protectively around me, as my dress and the vinyl seat made it hard to stay seated.

After the bus pulled up in front of the theater, people began to disembark. Shawn came up to the seat where Jason and I sat and said, "You get the girl, I'll get the chair." It became one of my favorite phrases from high school. The theater looked large, and some seats were really high. Scared of heights, I prayed we wouldn't sit there, but of course, we did.

Leaving my wheelchair at the base of the stairs, Jason carried me to a seat where I sat with Jason on one side and Shawn on the other. With their nearness, I didn't feel like I constantly wanted to fall. The theater had elaborate designs on the walls, adding to the experience of seeing my first ballet. I thought the ballet was incredible, it had so much great music and dancing, and the outfits looked fantastic!

Before Jason could carry me down the stairs and back to my wheelchair at the ballet's end, my wheelchair had to be found. We discovered that an elderly gentleman had accidentally hijacked it, thinking he found a wheelchair owned by the theater and available for public use. This resulted in a very comical five minutes where my friends ran around like headless chickens in search of my wheelchair.

Once they safely retrieved it from the hijacker, with many apologies, we made our way downstairs and back to the buses in the parking lot. Somehow, I sat next to Shawn on the bus ride back to Rio. Since I had spent more time with someone who didn't ask me to come as his date, I enjoyed the time with my actual date.

After the Winter Banquet, we had about a week of school before we went on home leave for Christmas.

All the presents, holiday cookies, and decorations made Christmas my favorite holiday. I loved going on town trips and had plenty of Christmas presents for all six family members.

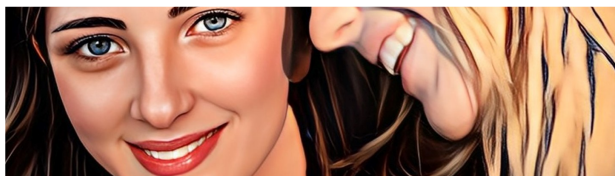
That Christmas, I had a fantastic time. My mom always decorated and made everything very festive. With my little siblings still so young, Christmas morning excited them, and they loved everything they got. I got one of my little siblings a long-sleeved shirt with Rudolph on it. We didn't believe in Santa Claus, but it looked cute. It even had a blinking red nose. I just couldn't resist. Christmas break didn't last long, and then the time came to return to school. Even with Christmas as my favorite holiday, I could not wait to return to school.

On the drive back to Rio, we would pass by the ranch, so we left a few days early to stop by for a late Christmas with my dad's family. I loved little ones and had all little cousins, giving me no objections to spending time with them. We spent New Year's Eve with them, and my aunt Amanda hosted a New Year's party. After sunset, they would have a Christmas tree burning, which I had always enjoyed. I missed my friends and felt unsociable, so while everybody visited and enjoyed the party, I sat on a couch

and played on my phone. I sat in view of the front door as it kept opening and closing, with more visitors arriving. A couple with their four-year-old daughter came in. The little girl with darling bouncing red curls made her way to me, said hello, and crawled into my lap. She sat in my lap most of the night and tried to have a conversation with me about her favorite toys. Some of what she said I couldn't understand, but she looked so cute while trying to tell me I couldn't help but look interested. I must have appeared noticeably lonely that evening because before she left with her parents, they told me she never got so friendly with strangers. I never saw that little redheaded girl again, but I will never forget her time with me. It was a great start to my new year.

“Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take,
but by the moments that take our breath away.”

- Maya Angelou



Chapter Twelve

Arcade Games

One of the first activities of the year, was a social activity where other students picked what we did. When we loaded into buses and drove off campus, I didn't know where we would go. And when we arrived, I had thankfully brought a sweater because we ended up at Snoopy's Home Ice. I have always loved Snoopy, and the place looked adorable. I excitedly and impatiently wanted to go on the ice. The rink had a big sled that my wheelchair could ride in. I'm not sure what happened; either someone was using it, or they couldn't find it. Whatever happened,

it upset me to have to sit on the sidelines. As I sat, I couldn't help but remember when I had first visited this ice rink. I came for a friend's birthday party at about ten years old. At that time we knew something was definitely wrong but didn't know what. And everyone else at the party went on the ice, so I wanted to skate too. My parents hadn't come, but with the help of another child's parent, I got on the ice. My legs didn't want to stay under me, and he never let me go, but technically I have gone skating. But I had no idea what ice skating would be like while sitting, and I had thought I would get to try it for a moment, but now I didn't know if I would get the experience.

When Jason's ex-girlfriend approached me and offered to push me on the ice, I happily accepted with a smile. I could see myself being friends with her, but as a senior, she ran in different circles. Tonight, however, she became a friend. She might have asked someone if she could push a wheelchair on the ice. Because she wheeled my chair from the floor to the ice with no concern of someone reprimanding her for the action. I had more fun going on the ice in my wheelchair and not on skates than I thought I would. The ice felt incredibly smooth under my wheels

and made the ride enjoyable as we moved quickly along with my friends.

While I enjoyed myself on the ice with my friends, I had a good time anywhere we went, even if we stayed on school property. One Sunday, all the students and some faculty walked down the dirt road to the river, all but me, anyway. Because they guessed my wheelchair wouldn't make it down the unkept road without causing damage, the Connors let me borrow their four-wheeler. Mr. Conner asked me to go slow since other students walked in front of me, and, in case I needed help, he could assist me. Many of my friends jumped on the quad for a ride to the river, and I gladly accepted the company because otherwise, I would have found the trip less fun. I grew up riding quads and had no trouble getting to the river. But all the same, Jason stayed close by, jogging sometimes to keep up. Because even though they asked me to go slow, I had much more fun driving fast.

Once at the river, my friends helped me off the quad and onto the sand. We had vespers and moments of quiet reflection where one of the leaders suggested the students should wander off and find their own quiet place. But I didn't have my wheelchair, which made finding my own

space not very likely. Emma got offended they wanted her to leave me because Emma felt God's presence most around those she loved. And since I couldn't leave, she didn't plan to either. So we found our quiet space together. That would have sealed our friendship if I didn't love Emma already. After the moments of reflection, some students walked back to campus while my friends and I stayed, enjoying the peaceful sound of the water flowing down the river and time together. Jason picked me up and put me back on the quad for the drive to campus, and even though I had proven I could drive a quad, Jason drove me to my wheelchair. Since I liked him, I didn't mind putting my arms around him as he drove. I had no idea where Mr. Conner had gone when we got back, but Jason offered to drive the quad up the hill to the Conner home and walk back down to meet us for dinner in the cafeteria.

Another fun experience during my junior year was The Photo Scavenger Hunt. It took place on the weekend, students grouped up into teams and got a list of activities to do, and took a picture to prove they completed them. That Saturday night, the campus appeared a little chaotic, with the boys going into the girls' dorm and the girls going into the boys' dorm. One picture supposedly required some-

one to leap in the probably freezing pool, Jason volunteered. Stripping down to his boxers in front of all the girls in our group, including his ex-girlfriend, he climbed the ladder to the high dive and dove into the pool. It looked dark, but the girls nearby still practically drooled as they watched. I stayed away from the commotion, irritated he would do something like that. I thought someone who would do that needed validation, and I didn't want to have a crush on someone who saw that as an okay way to get it. It upset me because of how much I knew I already liked him, but after a while, it wasn't such a big deal. Even so, I don't like to talk about it.

Next, we went to the boys' dorm and got a picture of my friend Derek shaving his leg. It had to be just one, so it looked like a noticeable difference. They had to carry me in because the boys' dorm didn't have a ramp like the girls' dorm. The girls couldn't go into the boys' rooms but ran around and took pictures of many things in the dorm. Unfortunately, they left me on the couch in the lobby, where I felt out of the loop. Adam sat across from me on a couch and decided to give me a driver's license for my wheelchair. It didn't have a realistic photo like most licenses, and it said 100% real, which undoubtedly would

tip off the police regarding its legality. I had no nefarious intentions with the license though, at least none that the police would see. I liked that Adam thought it sounded fun for me to have one, so he simply made me one.

Next, we went outside and did a human pyramid. I also remained the oddball out with that activity and just took the picture. Afterward, we went to the girls' dorm and with help from the wheelchair ramp, I got to join the activities. I could participate in the scavenger hunt better and love what happened next. A few of the bigger girls picked out some of their dresses for my three best guy friends to wear. We took more pictures than we needed, but Adam, Derek, and Jason looked very photogenic in their chosen dresses. It was dissatisfying at the end of the game because we had so much fun, but then it finished. After completing our list of activities, all the students from every group assembled in the chapel to decide the scavenger hunt winner. Every member of the prevailing team would get a gift certificate to Cold Stone Creamery for the prize, and our group won. It exhilarated us for a few minutes until we said good night to the boys and returned to the girls' dorm.

That experience definitely felt unique and almost made me look forward to the next week of class. Our history teacher, Mr. Sawyer, was a man with abundant energy. And one morning, he shared his excitement over the first African-American president elected in November. He then played a video of Barack Obama's inauguration. I'm not sure how long we watched, but we sat for a while. I have never had a political mind, but Mr. Sawyer's excitement almost got me to enjoy it as much as he did.

After the excitement over the new president died down, the school had a junior talent show. And as a junior, they asked me to participate. I contributed by making a video. Going on stage in front of an audience terrified me, but I could handle it on a screen. As our class sponsor, Mr. Sawyer would make the video with me. Whoever came up with the idea for my video decided it would be hilarious to have me chase Mr. Sawyer down the hall in my wheelchair. I think the video made me look a little silly, but Mr. Sawyer acted so well that we all truly believed him in peril.



Next, the school hosted the junior and senior banquet which was a special evening held only for the juniors and seniors in the chapel decorated like the '50s. Some junior and senior girls went all out and even found poodle skirts to wear. We had hot dogs, burgers, french fries, root beers, and sundaes for dinner. They showed a black-and-white movie with popcorn after dinner. Following the movie, they loaded a bus to take people to Scandia. Scandia had an arcade with a mini-golf course and a racetrack. I had fun every time I went, and it sounded like an exceptional Saturday night to me. No one from my group of friends except for Jason and Adam would go. And they planned to go just to race cars on the racetrack. They could help me on and off the bus, but if I went, who would I hang out with? I could have fun more easily if a friend came with me, but I could also have fun all on my own. After all, I did all the time.

When the bus pulled into the parking lot at Scandia, the guys helped me off the bus and into the arcade and headed off to the racetrack. I knew I could play some of

the arcade games since not all had chairs, and I could wheel right up to the game I intended to play. As I wheeled myself around the arcade games, a specific game caught my eye, but unfortunately, it had a chair in front of it. I looked at the chair intently, trying to decide whether I could transfer from my wheelchair to it, but I decided not to risk it.

About to turn away, I noticed a dark-skinned man with brown hair in a buzz cut standing at least six feet tall, coming my way. He began saying something with such a thick accent I couldn't understand what he said. "What?" I asked. He repeated what he said, but since I still had a confused look, he must have guessed I still hadn't heard. And instead of repeating what he tried to say a third time, he simply picked me up to transfer me into the arcade games chair. I typically smiled to let people know I was good, so once he sat me down, I gave him a smile. And he turned around and headed back the way he came. Once he had gone, I sat for a minute to process what had happened.

It turns out my parents knew best. I needed to be careful about what I did in public on my own. The guy did something nice and hadn't meant to scare me, but unfortunately, he had. It made me realize how easily someone could cause me harm if they wanted to. I played the arcade

game absent-mindedly until it ended, transferred myself to my wheelchair, and pushed myself to the bathroom. I only intended to stay for a few minutes but I no longer wanted to play games in the arcade.

I stayed in the bathroom until I thought the guys would be around to help me get on the bus. I still felt upset when I returned to the dorm and needed a friend to talk to. I found Emma and began telling her the events of the evening and why they had left me so shaken.

The next morning I felt like a wuss for my upset the night before, and my overreaction to what happened. With breakfast as my favorite meal of the day, I never missed it. Driving to the cafeteria, I got in line, grabbed breakfast, and headed to a table where some of my friends sat. As I went closer to the table, I noticed Emma arguing with Jason and Adam, and it didn't take me long to find out they argued about the events of the previous evening that had left me upset. I couldn't decide if I liked how upset Emma got on my behalf or distressed because everyone within hearing range now knew I had overreacted the night before. While Adam and Emma continued arguing, Jason looked at me with sad eyes filled with such guilt that I almost went over to comfort him. He later apologized for

not having stayed with me. Find fault in Jason or Adam for doing their own thing when they told me they would seemed illogical. So I didn't blame them, and even if I should, I couldn't have blamed them for acting like care-free teenagers when I wanted to be that way so desperately. I don't think Emma blamed them either; she was just upset with what happened. I blamed absolutely no one. I simply hadn't reacted well to the awareness of my inadequacies in protecting myself.

Since I shouldn't be left to protect myself, I didn't go anywhere where I would be alone. And for a while, except for classes, I didn't do a lot. That year I took chemistry. Jason and Adam also took the class but during a different class period. I didn't feel all that great at chemistry, and Adam wasn't a whiz at the class either. Jason did well in class and only needed to study, so Jason and I went up the hill on campus to the Conner home to study with Adam. Jason and Adam had a terrible time focusing on the books in front of us and actually studying. We all passed the class, but the times we studied together did not contribute. Even though my grades in chemistry were only average, I had fun in the class. We did experiments where chemicals had exceptionally cool reactions together, and we even took a

field trip to the Jelly Belly factory. So for the first time, I went to the Jelly Belly factory and had fun seeing how they made them. They wanted the trip to teach us something, but it mainly tasted and smelled fantastic. And Jason and my other friends in chemistry bought so many jelly beans. Before the bus headed back to Rio, we went to an oil refinery. We took another tour, like at the jelly bean factory, but this tour didn't smell so delicious.

When we finished touring the oil refinery, Jason carried me onto the bus and sat me next to him. But then Adam had an idea he couldn't wait another minute to talk with Jason about. So he slid into the bench seat next to me. Getting squished in between two guys became rather uncomfortable. I know many girls would have liked the position, but I simply felt in the way as they talked over me. Jason and I got to hang out on bus rides, but I could not join in the guy talk. To move into a more comfortable seat, and because I thought it would be funny, I stood and sat on Jason's lap, with all the grace of a hippopotamus. The guys looked surprised but quickly returned to their conversation while I still sat on Jason's lap, unsure of what to do next. On every bus trip, before leaving, a random faculty member would walk up and down the aisle to check

on students. The science teacher had the honor on this trip and began slowly walking from the front of the bus to the back. After making sure all the students sat present and accounted for, the bus would leave for the trip back to Rio. Thinking fast, I pretended to doze, afraid otherwise the teacher would get upset at Jason and me for disregarding rules about social conduct between the opposite sexes for Rio students. It's pretty hard to yell at someone who appears asleep. It seemed quite incredible because he said nothing, or if he mentioned it to someone, they never made an issue of it. I didn't want people to know I faked snoozing and especially didn't want the teacher to see me open my eyes, so I kept my eyes closed until I assumed he had gone. The funny thing is, it's hard to know where people are with your eyes shut. With my eyes closed, I not only had no idea if the teacher was watching me, but I also tried so hard to look asleep that I began to nod off. When the bus got to Rio, Jason gently woke me by tucking my hair behind my ear and saying, "We're back." He carried me off the bus and set me in my wheelchair with another friend waiting to push me into the girls' dorm.

At times like that, I found it hard to keep telling myself, "He doesn't like you" and continue believing it. I could

understand him wanting to help me because he wanted to help everyone; he was just that kind of guy. But I really thought, or maybe hoped, he had another reason for acting so sweet to me.

I needed distance from Jason, and the time away during spring break would help me clear my head.

During spring break, some students went on a mission trip. The mission trip would go to Mozambique, Africa, led by the school's pastor and her husband. Jason and Adam would go, which made me wish I could go too, but I knew the limitations of my disability, even though I had so much fun pushing them. Focusing on what I could do instead of feeling pathetic about what I couldn't, I always struggled with. And for the first time in high school, I couldn't participate in something I really wanted to, and it sucked.

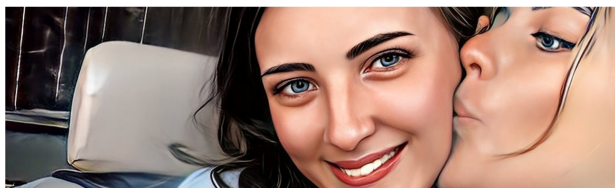
When I got home for spring break, I discovered little Anthony had broken his arm by tripping over his John Deere riding tractor. Sara came into my room a few days after I got home holding her arm, saying it hurt. Sara could be a bit of a hypochondriac, and with little Anthony having broken his arm, I thought it might be sympathy pains. But apparently, Mom saw some swelling and took her to

the hospital to get an x-ray, and though it proved simply a fracture, it had broken. The next day, they went to the doctor's office to get Sara a cast like her brother's. None of us older kids had ever broken a bone. I had wondered a few times, like one time when I drove full force with my electric chair into the footboard on my bed, my feet only in socks and my big toe hanging off the edge of the footrest. That had hurt incredibly, and thinking I had broken it, I got my mother to take me to the hospital for an x-ray. But it showed my bone didn't break. And another time, I slammed the index finger on my right hand into the car door of the Suburban, and when I could finally open the car door and get it out, my finger looked bloody and no longer straight. I made my way back into the house, screaming the entire way. I could scream superbly. We never got an x-ray, but I always thought I broke my finger that time. I may have broken my finger, and when the dog bit me, my mom thought I may have broken a rib. But suddenly, our family had two definitely broken arms in quick succession. I had a pain-free spring break and other than my little siblings breaking their arms uneventful. But not everyone had such a relaxing spring break.

ALICIA WESTON

“We must overcome the notion that we must be regular...
It robs you of the chance to be extraordinary and leads you
to the mediocre.”

- Uta Hagen



Chapter Thirteen

Fisherman's Wharf

For the first few days after I returned to Rio, Jason, and Adam still hadn't returned from the mission trip to Africa. It felt incredible how much I missed Jason. I spent so much of my time with him, and when he left, I really noticed his absence. He finally returned from the mission trip on a sunny day. He came off the bus wearing sunglasses and went to the dorm to get some shut-eye, tired from his trip. The bus pulled into the parking lot at Rio during

recreational time, and I hoped we could hang out, but I understood he wanted to sleep. When I saw him the next day, he still wore the sunglasses, and he explained that it hurt his eyes to take off the shades when the day had so much sun. In Mozambique, he had done some welding without an adequate welding helmet, so his eyes became sensitive. Though Jason often wore his sunglasses, things settled down after spring break, and I enjoyed time with the people I missed during the Break.

The Academy had become a big part of my life, but whenever I could, I did a lot with my aunt Amanda too. She and my Uncle James and their son Travis would take me off-campus, and we would go out to eat. We would go to this little Mexican restaurant in Healdsburg that my family had as a favorite place before we moved. And when I decided I couldn't live without an extra pair of my favorite jeans, she went to the store and got them for me. She always helped willingly, and I had so much fun around her.

One weekend, she invited me and several friends to stay overnight at their home. She hadn't told me they needed to be only girls, but she said overnight, and I had never had a slumber party with guys, so I decided it should be just girls. James and Amanda lived on the ranch in the house

I had grown up in, and I looked forward to showing it off to my friends. It would have taken all weekend to show them the whole ranch on foot. While it would make an ambitious exercise, my wheelchair definitely couldn't have handled it, so we took quads, making the tour fun and fast. The boat ride where the four girls I had invited and I got in a boat and rowed across the lake proved the most memorable event of that weekend. We didn't tip the boat or anything really memorable; we just had a great time.

After dinner around the table at my aunt and uncle's house, we got a surprise visit from some boys. My aunt had a friendship with the mother of a Rio student. My classmate's brother Sean and his friend stopped by to say hello. I'm not sure why they came by because Sean's mother didn't come with them to see Amanda. And the ranch took a bit of a drive from their home. But teenage girls never dislike seeing teenage boys, so we never questioned it. Emma had fantastic skills as a flirt, and Sean's friend also seemed exceptional at it, and the rest of us at the table just listened to their flirtatious banter. It sounded very entertaining.

Once the boys left, we got ready for bed and picked our spots in the family room. We made beds on the couches

and the floor, settled in, and after chatting for a while, finally fell asleep for definitely not long enough.

Less than a year before, I had attended Alexis's wedding, and a lot had happened since, but that felt like the beginning of so many things for me. Alexis, a friend of my aunt, had come by to visit that morning, and they both stood in the kitchen making breakfast when I came out of the family room. Because they both had already gotten married, they wanted to hear about my crush. Talking about Jason, I couldn't help but smile, and noticing how happy I looked, they approved. They decided they needed to meet him and told me to invite him later that month. When the other girls woke up and came out to the kitchen, I noticed they looked a little irritated that once again I babbled about Jason. I instantly felt guilty for talking about a boy I liked on our girls' weekend, so I mentioned nothing more about Jason as I enjoyed the rest of the weekend.



On the girls' weekend, I had so much fun that I impatiently waited for when I could join the family again. Every year, the Healdsburg church went on a weekend excursion to a

place along the coast called Albion. My aunt invited me to go with them this year, which I happily agreed to. As a kid, I had always loved the trip to Albion with my family, and I imagined it would be just as fun as nearly an adult. Albion is in Fort Bragg, nearly halfway between Rio and my parent's house in Humboldt. So my dad took the weekend to drive down and see me. Alexis and her husband Aaron would pick me up and drive me to Albion, where Amanda and the rest of my dad's family would expect me. The place the church rented had cabins and one with handicap-accessibility. The campus had a kitchen and dining room building where the church family prepared meals together. I enjoyed that as my favorite part of Albion.

Saturday included a church service and a trip to the beach after lunch. They always went to a spot called Glass Beach. I disliked not joining everyone, but I couldn't get down on Glass Beach. Luckily, my dad could help me forget what I missed out on and took me places without accessibility issues. When we returned to Albion after our excursions around Fort Bragg, we went down to the shore. As a kid, I loved digging for crabs. I tried not to let it bother me that with a wheelchair I couldn't get as close to the water as I used to. I always hated feeling sorry for

myself, but sometimes I found it easy. When everyone else returned from Glass Beach, the preparations for the game night began. Saturday night on the Albion weekend, they always had game night. The enjoyment became contagious with games like musical chairs with lots of laughing and so many smiles. Sadly, it seemed hard to be content just watching, and I only felt like more of an outsider because of all the activities I wanted so badly to participate in. As I tried to sleep that night, thoughts about my disability and things I could no longer do kept me awake, and the realization that I had to accept the changes in my life, no matter how hard. But with my new friends and the guy I really liked, who might like me back, perhaps I could survive my disease.



Jason accepted my aunt's invitation to come by the ranch with me, so we went the weekend after I returned from Albion. Alexis and her husband Aaron had come, and we saw my aunts and uncles with their children and my grandparents. I imagine it felt a little daunting for Jason to get overwhelmed with my family without even dating me.

Luckily, even though they knew I liked him, they treated him as a good friend. For the girls' weekend, we went on the lake in a rowboat, but this time my cousins and their friends had their own boats on the lake. Once we got out of the boat, my uncle gave us the opportunity to ride a horse bareback. Not a horse rider even with a saddle, Jason chose to forgo that experience, but I wanted to try it. It took three people on the ground to get me on the back of that huge Clydesdale mare. My uncle sat behind me with his arms around me, steering the horse with the reins on our blessedly short ride. No one ever told me about how much it hurts to ride bareback. Maybe, I just wiggled too much on the horse's back, but I never wanted to do that again. Next, we got on a quad where I drove, and he sat behind me. I don't know how that happened, but it didn't last long before he found a dirt bike to ride. I'm not exactly sure what caused it, but Jason flew over his handlebars and landed on his feet. Walking over to my quad, he said, "I hope you got a picture because I don't think I can do that again." He looked a little shaky, but he sounded fine based on his joke. However, my heart wanted to beat out of my chest as Jason's life flashed before my eyes. Quite literally too, as he flew off the dirt bike in front of me.

As the afternoon wound into the evening, I sat on my aunt's swing outside her and my uncle's home with Jason next to me, where we saw little critters. Jason carried me to the kiddie pool to see their turtle while my aunt snapped multiple pictures of me in his arms. As my uncle handed me the snake, I kept a straight face virtually the whole time it slithered about in my fingers, but it terrified me. Logically, I knew the snake couldn't hurt me, and my uncle even said as much, but fear doesn't always appear logical.



Life as a boarding school student was challenging because of my disability, and I couldn't have done it a few years later. But I could do it because of how much my friends helped me, and with my somewhat able body. I didn't find the activities the school did off-campus easy, but I did them and had so much fun getting included. We had a low-key spring Banquet compared to the Winter Banquet. Traditionally, the girls asked the guys, and by that time, most of the school probably already knew I liked Jason and wanted to go with him. He said yes when I asked him, and I like to think he wanted to go with me as

much as I wanted to go with him, but at that stage in our relationship, he wouldn't admit to anything. Once again, the students loaded up in buses, and we made our way to San Francisco, except this time to Fisherman's Wharf. We enjoyed a day full of shopping and eating and more shopping. I believe the afternoon involved a scavenger hunt, but I didn't participate because shopping held my focus. The afternoon felt warm in San Francisco, and for me, it has seldom seemed as beautiful there as it did that day. My friends and I found some great shops along Fisherman's Wharf and had a fun time shopping and an even better time hanging out together.

After about an hour of walking around the darling little shops along Fisherman's Wharf and occasionally going in to buy something, we found an outdoor eatery to sit, rest, and have lunch. Since I sat in my push wheelchair, Jason sat behind me, holding the handles to ensure I didn't take off down any hills and end up at the bottom of the bay. While people visited, Jason started making me do wheelies by putting my front wheels in the air and my head down. I could hear what people said, but they sounded far away, and Jason and I shared our own private little bubble. Which popped the moment Emma shouted, "Did you

just kiss her?" Emma, who had always wanted us together, asked, looking hopeful and excited that we did belong together. When he put my head back, my face got very close to his, and he touched his lips to my forehead before Emma squealed. Everyone looked at us, and I had no idea what to say. Jason denied having kissed me, which didn't surprise me. He acted like he shouldn't get too close for the rest of the day. But he acted more normal once we got on the bus and headed for Rio. I knew I liked him, and judging by what happened, he liked me too.

As summer approached, the temperature could easily reach a scorching ninety degrees. This may not have been much, but it felt hot to a girl who lived in chilly Humboldt County. On a weekday, when we thought it was not too sweltering outside, Emma, Erika, and I spread a blanket on a lawn in front of the school buildings. Erika just visited with Emma and me, but Emma and I brought knitting needles and yarn to knit blankets. Emma had blue yarn while I had pink, and, as a joke, Erika predicted I would have a girl, and Emma would have a boy. I don't think I ever finished that blanket. And the only reason I remember this small memory is that Erika foretold something similar, yet very different from what actually happened.

Along with the days getting hotter came Academy Days. Academy Days took several days where future students saw the campus and some classes and had one of the meals I considered the best the cafeteria served; Burgers. The year before, I had missed Academy Days by about a month and got my own private tour instead. Jason's brother came to Academy Days that year. The next year he would come and join his brother at the academy like Jason had done with his older sister Jessica, when she became a senior. Morgan and Jason had both struggled with speech difficulties as kids. You couldn't tell Jason had issues with his speech as a child, but Morgan still had noticeable speech problems. And I couldn't help but wonder if that helped Jason act so great with me, because he knew how it felt to be seen as different.

“The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss and have found their way out of the depths.”

- Elisabeth Kubler-Ross



Chapter Fourteen

A Canoe and a Motorcycle

During the school year, I almost always went on the Rio shopping trips, and a few times, Jason even came with me. Emma didn't relish shopping trips as I and some other girls did, so I typically went with Erika. I had a lot of fun shopping with her, and to this day, she remains my favorite shopping buddy. While Erika went to get my wheelchair out of the back of the bus, I would try getting

down the bus stairs on my own. However, I often ended up sliding down the stairs on my rump.

When Jason came along, getting on and off the bus went much smoother. The bus had seats made of vinyl, and all too frequently, I didn't stay where I should. One day I ended up with my butt on the floor between the seat I had been sitting on and the back of the seat in front of me with my legs up by my head. Erika had a dirty mind and said many things I didn't understand. So when she said, "Look, Jason, she's flexible!" I didn't know why Jason should care, but by the tone in Erika's voice, I knew enough to blush.

As it got close to the end of the school year, Rio announced the annual canoe trip to end the school year with some summer fun. I wanted to go but didn't know if I could physically do it since I had never tried. Luckily, Jason offered to be my canoe buddy, and if I had a hard time rowing, he would pick up the slack. Once again, everyone piled into buses and drove to a spot upriver to load into canoes to make our way down the river back to Rio. Paddling in the canoe wasn't hard at first, but it got hot, and my arms got tired. I still rowed a little, but Jason did most of the work.

Not long after we began rowing, my eyes widened as I stared straight ahead in a panic as fast-approaching rapids came into view. They hadn't looked big enough to give me nightmares, but for my first canoe trip, they terrified me. Looking at Jason behind me for guidance on what to do, he said to lean into the canoe, but with the sound of the water, I thought he said to lean out. And the next thing I knew, the canoe had tipped, and I got dumped unceremoniously in the cold water. With the heat of the day, the water had warmed up, but it still stunned me with the temperature difference. Of course, the faculty made us all wear life vests just in case, and I got to ensure they functioned properly. I went into shock and remember little of the next few moments. I recall my life vest pushing me above the water while the branches of a tree pushed me below it. But then Jason held me in his arms waist-deep in the Russian River. And I could breathe. With everything going on, I did not realize the romance of the moment, like a scene out of one of those romance novels I loved. Instead, I worried our canoe headed down the river without us.

While Jason went to rescue our canoe, he left me in the care of a friend to keep me from drowning yet again. Once he retrieved our canoe with no noticeable holes, we restart-

ed our trip down the river. I don't know when the shock wore off, but by the end of the canoe trip, I didn't have as hard a time remembering things. Once everyone returned to campus, they served dinner outside in front of the cafeteria. Some people had gotten back a long time before us, but almost everyone had already heard how heroic Jason had been. The faculty member who had witnessed our canoe capsizing told of Jason's quick actions that probably saved my life.



We had a week left of school, including graduation, so I wouldn't be home before my birthday. I would be in the middle of finals; consequently, I imagined I wouldn't have much fun on my eighteenth birthday. I decided I wanted to ride a motorcycle. I'm unsure why, but I saw it as my eighteenth birthday-rite of passage. The boys' dean, Oliver, had a motorcycle, so I asked him to take me for my first motorcycle ride. Happily, he said yes. We only had a brief ride and stayed on campus, but the fact I could now say I had ridden a motorcycle brought a smile to my face.

I got my first birthday surprise when I stumbled on the senior class, working on graduation stuff in a room in the admin building. Since I liked most of them, I went into the room and said hi. As I talked with some of them, I shared about my eighteenth birthday. The seniors appeared to be making posters and, with news of my eighteenth birthday, began making me a birthday poster to commemorate the event. Before leaving, I had a poster taped onto my wheelchair announcing my eighteenth birthday.

I got my second birthday surprise when Melanie heard about my birthday and brought some ice cream, which she stole from her parents' freezer, to some friends and me on the football field. Even though I had no presents to open or games to play, eating ice cream while my friends and I talked made it a birthday I think of as one of my favorites.

My final birthday surprise happened at the end of the day when I headed into the girls' dorm and went directly toward my room. Uncertainty caused me to slow as I approached my door. A bag hung from the handle of my door. Everyone in the dorm knew I had that room, so it must be for me. Taking the bag off the door handle, I peered inside. I found a stuffed animal, a dolphin with dark and light orange splashes covering it. It looked cute,

and I really liked dolphins, something I had said that I'm pretty sure Jason and countless others had heard. As a hopeless romantic, I wanted it to have come from Jason, but of course, he wouldn't admit to something so corny as to leave a birthday gift on my door like a secret admirer. Emma and I asked around but could not identify who had left the dolphin hanging on my door. Once plenty of time had passed, Jason finally admitted that it came from him. I sort of wish I had known when he gave it to me, but I'm also kind of glad I didn't know because the gift seemed excitingly mysterious. All in all, I had a pretty memorable eighteenth birthday. I may not have gotten a typical birthday party, but I thought I had an exceptional day.

Only two days after my birthday, the graduation festivities began. Graduation at Rio lasted the entire weekend, beginning in the Church on Friday and ending with the commencement ceremony in the gym on Sunday. As the successors of the senior class, the junior class and I marched in front of the seniors each day of the graduation weekend. It made for a long line filled with the junior girls wearing white dresses, the junior guys wearing suits, and the seniors wearing red graduation gowns.

Graduation ended on a boiling Sunday in June, and gladly for the weekend, I chose a sleeveless, white dress. After the graduation ceremony, all the seniors went out on the football field for a final picture of them together. All the occupants of the gymnasium where the graduation ceremony had been held followed the graduates outdoors to say congrats. When I got out to the football field, it looked full of people as they took pictures with the graduates. I got to say goodbye to some friends who were graduating Rio and enjoyed time with my aunt Betty who came for the day to take pictures. We began the day as juniors and ended as seniors. The idea that in a year, we would be the graduates preparing to leave Rio I found both exciting and scary.



Going home for the summer filled me with conflicting emotions and impatience for school to start again. My mother always tried to make an enjoyable meal for her family, even after a twelve-hour shift at the hospital. Once everyone sat around the table and we blessed the food, my five-year-old sister decided she needed some jelly for

her biscuits. She got some out of the fridge, and with a loud crack, the glass jar and jelly exploded all over the previously clean kitchen floor. My mother didn't allow my little sister to apologize but began shrieking like something priceless had been destroyed. No one got up to help Mom clean up the mess, or to console Sara. No one tried to defend her; instead, everyone sat at the table quietly as our mother verbally berated my youngest sister. Stressed from work, overwhelmed with kids, and carrying the weight of emotional labor moms always seem to carry, my mother had a habit of taking out her feelings through anger and yelling. We saw a smashed jar, but my mom saw another responsibility on her already overburdened shoulders.

I asked Sara to come to me, and wrapped my arms around her. Looking into her eyes, I saw the tears I knew all too well. I knew what it felt like to cry from my mother's verbal assault, and her tears brought me to my limit. I raised my voice and told Mom, "Stop yelling. It was an accident. Stop, you're upsetting her!" She didn't even react as if I had spoken, just continued to screech. I always thought she yelled at us because no one told her to stop, but now I didn't know what to think. I remembered so well how, before I had gone to Rio, I simply bowed my head and sat

quietly in submission as my mother aired her frustrations. But my experiences in high school and the new friendships I had built made me brave. Even though things could be rough at home, and I missed people from school, I gladly accepted the summer break.

Over the summer, Jason and I stayed in contact; nothing like the romance in my books, but a girl can dream. We texted some but mainly did instant messaging on the computer. Jason shared that he had gone on a backpacking trip with his dad earlier in the summer. He even sent me some pictures they had taken of their trip on the backpacking trails above Yosemite in the Emigrant wilderness. The pictures of nature that he got looked so raw and pure; I felt happy he got to take a trip to such an amazing place. It pleased me that Jason would go backpacking for fun in a society where more than half of the population acted too lazy for much physical activity. My parents didn't go backpacking before starting a family, but I would have liked it. I undoubtedly would have enjoyed backpacking with Jason. A little because of the crush I had on him, but I think mostly because of our friendship. I liked that my friends did what I couldn't. I don't think I would've found much in common with them otherwise. However,

sometimes I found it frustrating knowing what my friends got to experience that I longed to enjoy with them.

While I enjoyed my summer, I looked forward to Redwood Grove camp. I knew not only the division leaders for the youth meeting but also many of the youth my age. I would be away from Rio for the entire summer, but at least I would see some of my favorite people at camp. I liked the camp the years before, too, even though I didn't know many kids my age; the beauty of the redwoods always captured my heart. Jason said he went every year with his family like me, yet we hadn't met, and now I can't imagine not having him in my life. It's funny how some things happen. Not long after I returned home for the summer, though, I discovered there would be no Redwood Grove camp for the year. I couldn't believe that when I realized I couldn't live without camp, they wouldn't have one.

“I've learned from experience that the greater part of our happiness or misery depends on our dispositions and not on our circumstances.”

- Martha Washington



Chapter Fifteen

Senior Year

Before my senior year of high school started, I was boy crazy, or at least Jason crazy. The texting and instant messaging with Jason didn't feel like enough. Getting bored in Humboldt, I went to stay with my aunt Amanda in Sonoma County. Adam and his sister Melanie lived at Rio, so even if I didn't get to see Jason, I should get to see them, and they could be a lot of fun. It so happened that the week I stayed there, the church had its annual Vacation Bible School, and I went as a helper. Adam, Melanie, and their mom came to help with VBS too. Unfortunately, I

couldn't help as much as I wanted, so I sat on the sidelines quite a bit.

One day while Melanie played a game with the kids on the basketball court, I sat in my wheelchair at a picnic table, and a really cute guy came up to me. I don't know if he recognized me or heard my name, but he told me about how we had been in elementary school together and that his name was Aaron. It stunned me because I definitely knew him. When we went to school together, he seemed annoying and a bit of a pervert. That had been long ago, though, and now he seemed nice. I mean, few teenage guys would voluntarily help at VBS or visit with a girl in a wheelchair. And did I mention he looked incredibly cute? His appearance and his friendliness made him an instant dreamboat. But I only had eyes for Jason; however, he insisted he only liked me as a friend. When I thought about my disabilities, wanting more than a close friendship with a guy seemed selfish. But like most teenagers, I acted a little selfish, and all heterosexual females have weaknesses for boys. So in this instance, at least, I acted completely normal.

My aunt Amanda heard about Melanie and me helping at VBS together and let me invite her over for a sleepover.

She also took us to the Petaluma outlet mall for hours of shopping fun the next morning. And, of course, we babbled about Aaron because since she also had eyes, she thought he was a hottie too. I explained while I found Aaron really cute and very nice, I didn't like Aaron; I liked Jason. Knowing how much Jason insisted he did not like me like that, I suppose she thought I would have given up on him by now. And most teenagers probably would have after liking someone for over six months, but I liked him a lot. Dating someone with disabilities, no one should do on a whim, so I hoped with more time, he would decide to give us a chance because I didn't want to give up on him yet.

A few days later, Jason visited Adam and Melanie's house on the Rio campus. They had a blowup raft and inner tubes, so we floated down the river. After swimming, we all became hungry and went to the Conners' house and ate some snacks while watching *The Big Bang Theory*, which became one of my favorite shows. Time with my friends made me impatient to return to school and the atmosphere there, where I felt accepted regardless of the things I couldn't change.

My visit to Sonoma County ended too soon, and I went home to spend the rest of the summer with my family. I was close with my youngest sister, Sara. When everyone did their own thing, we would put some frozen burritos in the oven, sit in front of my computer, and watch an old TV show called *Doctor Quincy*. Even though I never watched that show again, I created some of my favorite memories with Sara.



Finally, the time came for school to begin. I signed up to take the classes I wanted on registration day. They had an excellent music teacher, and I wanted to become a better singer, so I signed up for her class. I also signed up for an auto body class, not because it interested me, but because I would get more time to hang out with Jason. I also helped my friend Erika ever so slightly with her first car. When I finished signing up for classes, my parents and I ran into Jason and Adam in the administration building. I heard something about Jason and Adam terrorizing the girls' dorm earlier in the day. But luckily, when they saw me and my parents, we didn't bump into them outside my room.

Like the previous year, when the parents left, we had dinner and did the handshake, but this year I knew many of my fellow students and gave hugs and smiles along with handshakes. As the first activity of the new school year, we did the Rope Pull, and our class prevailed. However, the senior class always won, so it didn't surprise me. And then came the school's swap meet, and after an action-packed game, we again became triumphant.

With the action of the new school year, I couldn't take part in everything and tended to like the sermons better. A boy in the grade below mine named Jeremy gave the sermon one sabbath. He had cerebral palsy. With his disability, he could walk, but he had noticeable difficulties. Yet he didn't act ashamed of what he couldn't help, inspiring me. On one of the first sabbaths of my senior year, Rio had an outdoor church, and Jeremy spoke. I don't even remember exactly what he said because, for me, how he said it meant more. His disability sounded extremely obvious with how he talked, yet the sermon he gave I found absolutely wonderful. I imagine not everyone felt as inspired, but few students could relate to his disability as well as me. I knew another boy at the academy named Jacob. He gave some of the most amazing sermons. Each

student at Rio I found incredible in their own way, and it thrilled me to get to know many of them.

A few weeks after the beginning of school brought a Saturday afternoon trip to the beach. I remembered some big news I forgot to tell Jason. I sat beside him on the bus when I shared it with him. Over the summer, my heart doctor called, saying they had confused my echocardiogram with another patient's. He apologized for the mix-up, but he believed I did not, in fact, have cardiomyopathy. It overjoyed me when I heard the news, but to make sure my heart looked okay, we took a trip with the whole family to UCSF for me to get a new echocardiogram. It showed no cardiomyopathy. Jason looked so happy as I related my news; I couldn't help but be glad I had him in my life.

Emma and her boyfriend Derek came on the trip to the beach too. My wheelchair couldn't go on the sand, but my friends never let that stand in the way of our good time and simply took turns carrying me. Derek acted moody that day and didn't even want to come with us, but Emma and I finally wore him down to agree. The day appeared sunny and warm at the beach. Not too windy or too hot, and the sky looked beautifully clear; even the seagulls recognized

the perfection of the day. We talked and laughed as we lay on the warm sand. Suddenly, a loud squishing sound interrupted our conversation. Looking over at Derek, I located the source of the interruption. A seagull flying overhead had crapped right on his jeans, and the poor guy hadn't even wanted to come. I began laughing so hard that I fell face-first into the sand and ate more sand, making the moment incredibly hilarious. Emma began laughing right along with me. It made a really hysterical moment.

Though we had new hysterical experiences with sand and were now seniors, not much changed. Some people left, and some people came, but in our group of friends, everything stayed the same. Jason and I still hung around together a lot, and Emma told me I let him get away with too much flirting and that I should put my foot down. She was right. One day I would think he liked me, and the next, I would think without a doubt that we only had a friendship. So, I decided I should set an ultimatum.

Jason had earned his lifeguard certification as a junior the year before. He had to drag Liam Neeson out of the pool's deep end for training, but luckily never had to rescue anyone from drowning. All the girls loved him without a shirt, and you could find many of his admirers by

the pool when he had lifeguard duty. One girl even called him fishy because, as a buff and skinny guy, she thought his chest looked as if he had gills. The faculty members often came by the pool to ensure the lifeguards didn't get distracted by things they shouldn't be focused on. I figured right then, when he appeared busy, I could have a quick conversation with him and head back into the dorm. I didn't want to make a big scene, but I had finally decided I didn't want to wait anymore. We remained in limbo, and I wanted to either date or not. So I went to give him my ultimatum one evening while he had lifeguard duty at the pool. One of the faculty came by and voiced their displeasure about us having a conversation when he needed to work. So I quickly finished what I wanted to tell him and left. He looked like he might want to follow me, but the faculty member still stood there and looked at him displeased.

While I gave Jason time to decide about the ultimatum I gave him, my electric wheelchair started having some issues. Since the new electric wheelchair I had picked became ready, I would have to wait two more weeks until my dad could bring it down to me at school. The electric wheelchair I had been using at school broke down after a

week and got pronounced dead by the auto teacher. Jason had to give me the news, and I burst into tears. A little silly, I know, but losing my wheelchair took away so much of my freedom.

My friends took turns pushing me to classes and through the cafeteria lunch line for the next week. I always had fun having a friend close by, but I missed getting around campus alone. I could have pushed myself from class to class, but I didn't push myself quickly. I could hardly wait for my new electric wheelchair. My old one seemed basic, and my new one was extremely cool. At least for a wheelchair.

As Jason helped me to one of my classes, the teacher appeared late, and I saw no one else around, so I asked if he had decided about my ultimatum. I guessed he would say, "No, I don't want to date you." I thought of which guy to ask to help me on and off the bus with school excursions away from campus. A guy instantly came to mind, and he took classes with me and would go on most of the excursions I went on. He even looked cute, which might turn into a crush, but I didn't think so. I really liked Jason and didn't think I would easily get over him. Jason interrupted my train of thought to say he wanted to date

me. I just stared at him with a confused expression on my face for a minute, trying to understand if he said what I thought he said. When I regained the power of speech, I smiled and told him I would happily be his girlfriend.

I spent the rest of the day with a sense of unreality and had a terrible time trying to focus on school.

Because Emma had comforted me so much throughout my junior year because of things Jason had done to irritate me, Jason and I had kept our relationship a secret for a week out of concern for Emma's reaction. But I decided I couldn't keep quiet any longer. Jason and I swam in the campus swimming pool with Melanie and her boyfriend. I liked her second boyfriend, Cody, a lot more than Seth, but I still thought she deserved better. Melanie wanted to help everyone be as happy as possible and the perfect person to tell first. I knew she would be overjoyed for me, but how she reacted to my good news always made me smile. We had water up to our elbows in the campus swimming pool, and as soon as I told her Jason and I started dating, she began bobbing up and down, spraying water everywhere and squealing. I enlisted her help the next day to tell everyone else. The entire campus had expected it, and all our friends thought we looked cute together, but

I noticed Emma acted upset. She got upset not because I began dating Jason but because I hadn't told her first. I felt terrible. Emma became my closest friend at the academy, and I kept quiet about something that excited me.

Dad drove my new electric wheelchair down to me, knowing I needed it badly since I called every other day for the past week. When I first saw my new electric wheelchair, it sat on a trailer behind my dad's van as he pulled up. It didn't take long before I absolutely loved my new chair; it could raise and lower and even recline. But even more exciting than my fancy new chair, I was shocked to see my oldest sister had come with my dad! It surprised me because I always thought for one reason or another, she didn't like me, but hopefully, the trip to visit me proved otherwise. While I found the visit good, it didn't take long to identify my sister's motivation to visit: she had come to brag. She would never admit it to me, but other people have told me she thought she never could measure up to me. I don't know if I believe that, but others would say that to explain her actions. And whenever she had something better than me, she liked to rub it in my face. I didn't feel like her actions toward me made her a bad person, but that she tried desperately to prove herself. I always tried to bond

with my sister, and she constantly upset me with her lack of interest in my life.

When she announced she and our family friend Jacob had started dating. My happiness for her coupled with disappointment that she hadn't come just to visit me. I regret what I did next. Instead of letting her have her moment, I shared my joy over Jason and I finally dating. I thought we could bond that we both had relationships, but her deflated look told me she couldn't be as happy if I also got to experience a relationship.

The conversation ended quickly after that, and we all headed to the cafeteria to grab dinner before they left.

As much as I had hoped for more from Elizabeth, I hadn't expected it. And pretty soon, I met someone who seemed to disliked me without even knowing me. Before I came to Rio, my friends had been friends with other students. I had already met a few friends of friends who had already graduated, and I liked them. I could see why my friends called them friends. But my senior year, I met Janet, who had a friendship with Emma and Jason and graduated before I came to Rio. She had a sister, Chelsea, who attended the academy our senior year. I liked Chelsea, and I think she liked me too. But at the beginning of the

school year, when Janet came to visit her sister, she didn't hide the fact she didn't like my flirtation with Jason or my friendship with Emma.

She first visited at the beginning of my senior year before Jason and I started dating. That day, we rode the bus to the beach. Jason carried me on the bus and sat by me like usual to protect me from sliding off the seat. While the bus drove to the beach, I sat by the window, and Jason sat beside me. We talked, and he told me how he hoped to visit with Janet, and I promised to try not to interrupt. Janet and her sister sat on the bench seat across from ours, and while Jason didn't notice, I couldn't help but see the looks of displeasure she aimed my way. When we got to the beach, I left Jason and Janet alone, as promised. I could see them prattling not too far away, but I spent the afternoon with Emma and Derek, where I once again ended up with too much sand in my mouth.

A few days later, after Janet had left, Emma told me some things Janet said about me, and I assumed right. She didn't like me. Her sister got irritated with what she said and told Janet she didn't even know me and shouldn't speak about me like that. It overjoyed me that someone who only knew me a little would stand up for me. It sad-

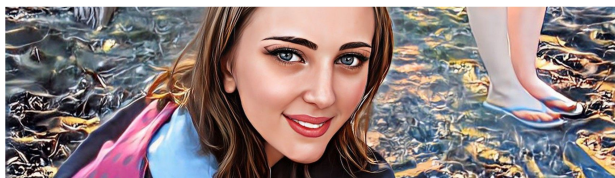
dened me that someone whom Emma and Jason considered a friend had such a negative reaction to me, but there was nothing I could do about what she thought, so I just hoped it wouldn't become an issue.

A month or two later, after Jason and I began dating, she came to visit again. But this time, she texted Jason before she came and asked to visit with him, specifically alone. Jason told me all about it and, as his girlfriend, wanted me to decide whether he should say yes or no. I wish he hadn't told me about it because I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to come between him and Janet's friendship, but it seemed like she wanted to come between our relationship. Emma also had a friendship with Janet, so I consulted her about what to do. She also thought it sounded weird for a friend to ask another friend and advised Jason not to agree with what she asked. I always feel guilty because he didn't even speak to her during the weekend she spent on campus, and I hadn't intended that. I just thought it shouldn't be an issue for her if I wanted to be near them while they visited. And when I heard she planned to visit, I fully intended to give them their space. During his freshman year, they were good friends, and her friendship remained important to him. But as my first

boyfriend, I got jealous because I had a theory that she liked him now that another girl wanted him. We had so many activities our senior year though, and along with my relationship with Jason continuing to grow, the hurt Janet caused became miniscule.

“Love me or hate me, I promise that it will never make or
break me.”

- Tyra Banks



Chapter Sixteen

Ziplining

No one feels like your first significant other, and I really liked mine. However, the girl code clearly stated: sisters before misters. So when Erika planned a slumber party at her home in Ukiah over the Halloween weekend, Emma, Bianca, and I all agreed dressing up and trick-or-treating would be crazy fun. I had only gone trick-or-treating once before with my cousin Garrett, whose parents were much more secular than mine. I was not very old and remember little except for how elaborately decorated the homes looked in my aunt and uncle's

neighborhood. One house had its front yard decorated like a graveyard, while another had hanging skeletons and a smoke machine. It had been a last-minute decision to go with my cousin. All the other trick-or-treaters wore costumes depicting characters from movies and comic books. But sadly, I didn't dress for the occasion; I still had a lot of spooky fun, though. I found the best part of Halloween, the candy, and I had a bit of a sweet tooth, so I would happily go trick-or-treating again.

When the four of us got to Erika's home in Ukiah, we spent all afternoon getting dressed up. For trick-or-treating, Erika dressed as a butterfly, Bianca went as a princess, Emma went as a mime, and I dressed as a slut. I wore a silky, red thigh-high dress with black elbow-length gloves. The dress made me want to slip off whatever I sat on. The outfit didn't look that slutty. I called it that because my costume needed a name, and I had never worn something so scandalous before. From what I remember, trick-or-treating had been a little disappointing, but afterward, we went back to Erika's and watched *The Nightmare Before Christmas* while eating our night's candy earnings. After the movie, we all lay in random places in Erika's bedroom for the night and woke up for a breakfast of donuts at an

appropriately late hour the next morning. I don't recall how we ended up back at Rio when the weekend ended, but we got there for classes on Monday morning.



Whenever I think of the school's pastor and her husband, I think of the definition of a perfect Christian couple. They started an outreach program at Rio during my senior year, involving Rachel's sermons and Liam's community service program. They called it *Open Table*. All the students and many of the faculty went to the Old Courthouse Square in Santa Rosa, where they held a church service for the homeless and anyone else who wanted to come. Liam and Jason, and a few other helpers left Rio early with the sound equipment to head to the Square in Santa Rosa and begin setting up for church.

After church, Rio hosted a lunch for everyone and gave away clothes, blankets, and toiletries for those who needed them. Jason always busily helped with sound, and almost all the other students found things to help with, but I never knew what I could do to participate. I did like helping others, and when we went somewhere for community

service, I always found something to do. But I had no idea what to do here, and even if I did, I knew people's eyes would watch me as I completed whatever I could to help. They had so many people around for *Open Table*, and I hated people I knew watching me when I did something difficult but having random people watch made me so nervous that I didn't even want to do anything. Some students got in trouble for going to the movie theater a few blocks over to watch a movie instead of staying to help, but when they left, no one questioned it, thinking they went to find a bathroom. My friends and I typically went two or three blocks over to the mall for the restroom because it seemed the closest one we could use. So having difficulty keeping track of the students and needing everyone to be around to help, the Academy didn't do it often. The school did a good thing through the open table ministry. Unfortunately, it made me uncomfortable and lonely.

While I found *Open Table* uncomfortable, Jason liked helping others. Growing up, his parents had enough money but nothing extra for frivolous things. So he had never particularly cared if he had nice clothes, a fancy haircut, or expensive shoes. He would wear the same pair of shoes till he desperately needed a new pair, and wore the same

cheap blue cargo pants every day. Possibly he just didn't want to shop for new things, but to help his family I find more believable. And because of that, I only found Jason even more appealing. Jason had an electric razor that he would use instead of making a trip to a barber. And since one day it had embarrassed him when he had missed a clump of hairs behind his head, he asked me to do it. Thus, Jason took me behind the boys' dorm to let me give him a haircut. The way he explained the tool to cut his hair made it sound so easy, and if I felt unsure of what to do, Jason would be right there to tell me. What on earth could I do wrong? He told me I couldn't hurt him, yet somehow, I made him bleed. Not a lot of blood, but I didn't think I could possibly injure him with something he had used on himself multiple times without injury. Considering I could see the back of his head and he couldn't, I did a remarkably terrible job; he never blamed me for it though. But he didn't ask for my help cutting his hair again after my failed attempt either.

In spite of my frequent failures, Jason and I still spent a lot of time together. We had dated for over a month, living at a boarding academy and seeing each other daily; I hadn't expected to go on an actual date. But apparently,

Jason wanted to give me the complete dating experience. So he asked me on my first date, and I naturally said yes. We went to a concert. They planned a school activity you had to pay for, so few students went. Jason liked concerts, and even though I hadn't been to one, going anywhere with him where we would snuggle on the bus sounded like a date I wanted to go on. The Christian concert with *Article One* and a few other bands performed in a church. The music sounded good, louder than most of my music, but the seats felt comfortable, and I came with Jason, my first boyfriend. I don't think I need to explain what it's like on your first date, but I loved everything about it.

They dimmed the lights as the concert began, and the audience stood, obstructing my view of the band. Not wanting me to feel left out, especially on our first date, Jason stood, picked me up, set his foot on the chair, and put me on his leg. It startled me. Because of the loud music, Jason hadn't informed me of his intent, but after a few moments, I relaxed and enjoyed his arms around me. We hadn't been dating that long, but I wanted him to kiss me, and from the look on his face, he had that idea too. But then we noticed the faculty a few feet away kept

looking in our direction and put a hasty conclusion to our canoodling in public.

School rules didn't allow any public displays of affection among the students, especially kissing. As a Christian institution, the academy didn't believe in showing affection before marriage. When the faculty would be affectionate with their spouses, they would say, do as we teach and not as we do. The faculty saw things with Jason and me as a little undefined because I needed help, and the faculty seemed unsure where to step in.

During the time Jason and I dated, the faculty didn't seem to want us to kiss. I, however, couldn't wait. But before that could happen, they had several pre-graduation activities for the seniors. The first one they called college days at a nearby college. About an hour away from Rio, the college became an obvious choice for many students after high school. Jason lived there in a home with his mother and siblings. His mother worked on campus at the copy center as a copy machine operator, and while his dad worked on campus in the technical support center, he didn't live with them. Jason had always lived by the school and the campus was home to him.

Exploring the college, they let potential new students sit in on some classes and hang out with students. I didn't know what to expect, but I excitedly waited for the drive because a bus ride that took about an hour spent snuggling beside my boyfriend thrilled me. But Jason wanted to take the trip from Rio to the college on his bicycle. It spanned over twenty miles, and he made it more than half-way before he called someone saying he had low blood pressure. The silly boy probably would have made it if he had just eaten breakfast before he left.

Among the many other classes at the college, one offered flight training. And inside the classroom, they had a flight simulator that looked like a small but very realistic cockpit. I don't remember spending much time with Jason that weekend, but I got to know his mother better. She acted like her son and didn't think less of me because of my disability. Most parents probably don't wish for their children to develop a disability or date someone with one, but she had no issue with me dating her son. We stayed overnight in the school's dorms, and I had hoped to stay in Veronica's room. Veronica had graduated from Rio in June and began attending this college. The dorm had guest rooms for visitors on campus, but for those who wanted

to sleep in a friend's room, the college allowed it. Unfortunately, they decided I should have one of the handicap-accessible guest rooms. I accepted it, of course, because when you take a long time in the bathroom, it's nice when you have your own. While the bedroom and bathroom appeared nice, I hoped to have my friends as roommates. I understand people have a cause to worry that they might get sued if someone disabled gets injured on their property. But I sometimes got irritated, not getting to make my own decisions. They didn't have many activities the next day. We had breakfast in the cafeteria, got to see more of the campus, and then loaded on the bus for the drive back to Rio. Jason rode back to Rio on the bus, and I finally got my boyfriend snuggles.

I had truly enjoyed visiting the college, and the next escapade promised to be just as fun. The next experience for the seniors, they called the senior experience, a bit on the nose with the name, but we had fun that weekend. We spent several hours on the bus before we made our first stop; Jason couldn't sit on the bench seat with me because the trip took so long. So I sat next to Erika with Jason on the bench seat in front of us. First, we stopped at a zipline course, which I had never done before, and because of my

fear of heights, I had no desire to try. But everyone thought I should try it at least once, so I got the harness on and waited for my turn. The harness looked like a belt that came down and wrapped around your thighs, letting you basically sit while it attached to a line you zipped down.

I felt apprehensive about trying it; it looked a little dangerous and maybe even stupid. The harness they gave me was attached to a carabiner, which connected to a lanyard that connected to the trolley. So it appeared completely safe, and the trolley I chose didn't even look that far off the ground, but I squealed the whole time I stayed in motion. Not having the balance to always protect myself when I fell made the sensation of having nothing solid and unmoving underneath me incredibly scary. But I did it, I went zip-lining. Only once, I didn't enjoy it enough to go a second time, but Jason catching me at the end of the line made it an experience I think of fondly. I can understand why some people enjoy it so much because I really did have fun. When everyone finally had enough of that activity, we got back onto the bus and drove to our next surprising destination.

We made our final stop at Leoni Meadows, a Christian camp I remember visiting with my family many years be-

fore. The camp looked beautiful with all the fall colors. The bus pulled in front of the dorm where we would stay, and Jason put his arms around me to carry me to my wheelchair. The dorm had a girls' side and a boys' side, with a family room in the middle. The weekend plans consisted of walks, games, a train ride, and swimming at the Dogtown Creek Cascades. We only spent a few nights there, but each night had so many games. They had one game where you would pass an orange under your chin to a classmate, who would grab it under their chin and over and over until the orange got to the other end of the room. I might have been able to do it, but everyone stood as they passed the orange to the next person, and I certainly couldn't do that. And with how close everyone stood to retrieve the orange, it surprised me the faculty would allow such a game.

I couldn't take part in many of the games, so I sat on the sidelines. Jason took part in more of the games than I did but joined me on the sidelines a lot too. The first night we spent at Leoni Meadows, Jason decided he wanted to stay up all night. I don't remember why, but Jason often tried to do things just to see if he could, and that night, he managed to stay awake all night. The next day had a trip

to the Dogtown Creek Cascades, which became a big deal for me because I wouldn't be able to get close enough to the Cascades to feel included. And the faculty decided I should stay at the camp. Emma, as my constant defender, got irritated that they chose something for the senior class to do that the entire senior class couldn't participate in. I, however, didn't expect to get included in everything. Life with my disability had so many things I couldn't do, and getting left out became something I grew used to dealing with. But instead of staying behind alone, Jason remained with me.

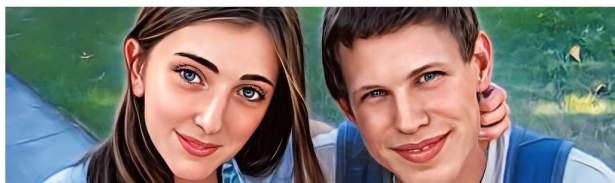
It concerned the faculty Jason and I were dating, but apparently, they still hadn't decided how to handle the situation. I had to think carefully about how friendly I got with Jason. But because they had few faculty on the senior experience and no better options, they allowed Jason to stay with me alone. Only having my push wheelchair, Jason took me on a walk as we waited for our classmates to return. We went to the science building, which had a large amount of dead and stuffed wild animals; it was a cool way to learn about the wild animals, but also slightly creepy. Afterward, we relaxed by a pond that didn't exactly look romantic with massive amounts of algae. We found it

a cool place to rest though, and it sat in a spot we would be sure to see the Rio bus when it returned. I tried batting my eyelashes and other subtle hints to get him to kiss me. It didn't work, though, and by the time the bus returned, I still hadn't gotten my kiss.

That night Jason tried not to crash again but didn't quite make it, and they found him in a deep slumber the next morning. Before all the seniors loaded up on the bus for the drive back to Rio, we had a train ride to take. The train at Leoni Meadows they made for children and watching so many fully grown teenagers pile in, looked amusing. Jason and I chose the caboose, where I thoroughly enjoyed his arm snugly around me. As the train traveled over part of Leoni Meadows, Jason pointed out the Cowboy camp he had stayed at as a boy, and I showed him where I had skinned both my knees when I came with my family many years before. I couldn't help but wonder if we had met before high school, would we be dating now or just be friends? My curiosity aside, I know things happen for a reason and no one can rush God's timing.

“Surround yourself with only people who are going to lift you higher.”

- Oprah Winfrey



Chapter Seventeen

Smooching and Drama

Even though all the students were in high school, we had plenty of little kids around, as children of the faculty, they were used to living around teenagers. The kids liked the students and though I used wheels for legs, they acted comfortable around me too. A single woman named Iris started an evening for the faculty kids. She and some students would watch the kids for their parents to have an evening to themselves. She called it “kids-corner”,

and made it essentially like vacation bible school. They had games, crafts, snacks, and, to end the night, some songs or a video of VeggieTales. It happened after dinner, during recreational time, so the students who helped had to give up their free time. I love children; having two little siblings, it felt natural around little ones and I often went. And Jason often took time to go too, even a few months before we started dating. Even as friends most evenings we spent time around each other. After we began dating, Jason spent the evening with me at kids-corner and it ended with a video of VeggieTales. I sat in the back of the semi-dark room, on a couch, with Jason next to me with his head on my lap. I honestly didn't see anything wrong with letting him put his head on my lap because he had a headache. I hoped resting his head on my legs while I gave him a light massage would help; the poor guy had too many headaches. Iris came over, looking uncomfortable, and when she cleared her throat, Jason opened his eyes wide and sat up straight. I guess the position my boyfriend and I sat in didn't look very good because Iris informed us if the faculty walked in, they would put us on "Social." Iris, as both faculty and a former student, did not want us to be punished for acting like teenagers. Jason sat a good foot or two away from me

for the rest of the VeggieTales show and when the parents came to pick their kids up, he picked me up and set me in my wheelchair. As we walked outside, we hugged for what the faculty deemed too long, said goodnight, and parted ways to our respective dorms.

As someone who constantly struggles with gravity, the weightlessness of swimming I find incredible. Now that Jason had become my boyfriend, we spent a lot of time together, even more than before. And because I needed a protector with so many things I did on campus, he happily offered to assist me with swimming. I'm sure I must have jumped into a pool at a young age, but I honestly couldn't remember what it felt like. So since Jason knew CPR, in case something went wrong, I had him leap into the pool with me in his arms. I didn't have as much fun as I imagined, and the girls' head dean stood by the pool at the time to witness our plunge. As we surfaced, Jason got me to the side of the pool where I could hold on and floated in the water next to me. I looked up and saw Dean Jamie's disapproving face. I guess I should have been glad she cared, but her frown had a way of making you regret what you did to make her show it to you. She directed her irritation at Jason, though, so I felt a bit better. She

told him he shouldn't have done that with me and that I looked freaked out before we hit the water. He argued I had wanted to jump in, and he made sure I remained safe. I loved her concern, I really did, but sometimes the things that scare you, are the most worthwhile.

Even though diving into a pool when I couldn't really swim scared me, with Jason next to me, I never worried he would let me down; even when my family disappointed me, he never did. The weekend before the Thanksgiving home leave, they called Parents Weekend. They had a choir program, drama, and an art exhibit to show off what the students had learned. My parents had told me they would come. I got excited that I could introduce Jason to them as my boyfriend. They could meet all my friends and see my creative work in art class. I talked with my sister Elizabeth and explained some students around Rio had been sick because I thought Mom might prefer not to bring Sara and Anthony. Mom called me a little while later, and, sounding worried, asked if Dad should come and get me for Thanksgiving vacation early. Apparently, I hadn't clearly related the situation to Elizabeth, and she had told Mom something very different from what I had intended. It resulted in my family not coming. I still had a good weekend, but it

disappointed me. I often wondered if Elizabeth intended to ruin the weekend they had planned to spend with me.

For the most part, I rarely broke the rules, but sometimes I had fun bending them. Jason wanted to go off-roading, so before breakfast on Saturday morning, we met up and he took me down to the river in his dad's truck. I didn't technically know doing that broke the rules, but I knew it probably did and decided not to share the excursion until after it happened. The crazy ride down by the river involved some minor whiplash, which, if you know me, isn't hard to do. Then we drove up to the campus and parked in front of the auto shop. I didn't want to leave the truck and he didn't seem to either. We stayed in the truck cuddling for what felt like hours but, in reality, probably only ten minutes. I just wore jeans and my favorite yellow tweety bird t-shirt but I still thought I looked kissable. And with no faculty around, why on earth weren't we smooching already? As a girl, I couldn't help but wonder if he had changed his mind about wanting to date me. Having to know once and for all, I blurted, "why haven't you kissed me?" He looked at me surprised and, after a moment, said, "I want to wait for the right time." With that comment, I wanted to swoon and hit him all at the

same time. Not wanting him to see my disappointment, I turned my face away and looked at my lap. Putting his fingers under my chin, I pulled my head back to look him in the eye; he had blue eyes, like mine, yet so different. With a darker shade of blue, his eyes somehow had a masculine allure I could never resist looking into. He brought his face toward mine and our lips met. I couldn't decide if it irritated me more he had said he wouldn't kiss me or if it surprised me more how soft his lips felt. I mean I thought every part of a guy would feel rough. Apparently not. Shocked, I took a moment to respond, but when I reciprocated, I had no idea what to do. I decided not to open my mouth and just hoped I didn't have horrible kissing skills. But as a first kiss, it didn't disappoint. We remained in the truck for quite a while and explored each other's mouths a little more. But unfortunately, we eventually had to separate and make our way to our prospective dorms to get dressed for Church.

Jason always said I had no patience, and I think the perfect example of why he thought that is in the story of our first kiss. I believe he is perfectly right; I do have very little patience. But my impatience, I have always thought, has nothing to do with me seeming spoiled. With how

time-consuming it is for me to accomplish a lot I do, I think I simply have no more patience left. However, with the story of our first kiss, I impatiently wanted the experience, but I also didn't want to miss another opportunity.

The rest of that weekend flew by, and before I knew it, I headed home for Thanksgiving. As vegetarians, we didn't have a turkey, but my mother made a fabulous puff pastry I waited all year for. With so many people in my house, we never had a dull moment. Still, I couldn't wait to get back to school and, more importantly, Jason. Regardless of how much I wanted to get back to Rio, I tried not to take for granted how much I adored my family or how blessed my life had always been. Because I could see not everyone enjoyed time with family.

After the Thanksgiving home leave, Jason and I found another thing in common: we both disliked Asian food. I don't know what Jason did on the nights before we dated when the cafeteria served imitation Asian food for dinner. But I would go to my room in the girls' dorm and open up a can of Big Franks for dinner. In my senior year, though, some of the seniors who could drive would go to town to buy Little Caesars pizzas, which they sold to other students for a profit to support the senior class. When

the cafeteria would serve imitation Asian for dinner, Jason would buy a cheese pizza for us to share. We probably wouldn't have eaten that if we had other options. Sometimes Jason even referred to it as greasy cardboard. Not eating dinner with everyone else, even though we remained at school, made it like a date. We would eat outside in front of the gym, and he would keep me warm as we talked. We sat alone and cuddled until other students came for recreational time, in and around the gym.



I really enjoyed the times we spent eating pizza together in protest of the cuisine the cafeteria served for dinner. But also looked forward to going on the next school activity of the Christmas banquet as a dating couple. As Jason's girlfriend, I assumed whether or not he asked, we would go to the Christmas banquet together. Regardless, I still wanted him to ask, and as the time for the banquet got closer, I became rather impatient. Then finally, one morning, he asked me to meet him before breakfast. With how much he knew I loved breakfast, I decided it must be big. Jason loved to go camping and had a camping stove in his

room in case someone invited him on a last-minute hiking trip. Taking his camp stove, he set it up on the sidewalk in front of a school building and made breakfast for two. He had gone to all that trouble for me. It amazed me, and as I approached, I hoped he could see how happy what he had done made me. While he put his arms around me to help me stand, he asked me to go to the banquet with him. With a wide grin on my face, I told him yes, and gave him a quick hug before he lowered me to the sidewalk.

We started eating, and I must admit he definitely doesn't cook as good as a chef. It tasted fine, but we probably could have gotten a better breakfast in the cafeteria. Okay, maybe not better, but at least warmer. The people walking by either still wanted to sleep or didn't wonder why two people ate breakfast on the sidewalk and simply said good morning as they made their way to the cafeteria. I froze when I recognized the next person walking toward us. The principal. I could see his expression, and he looked mad, but then again, I can't recall more than a few times in the two years I went to the school when he looked happy. He came up to us and asked what we did on the sidewalk. Jason calmly said, "Banquet ask." The principal only replied, "This is a little much." While flailing his hands around

in an exasperated manner. Telling Jason to clean up, he turned around and strode off. I let out my breath, not realizing I had held it in. Some students got along well with the principal. I wasn't one of them, though, and I became rather scared of the man. At least he didn't teach, and I saw little of him.



I liked most of my classes, but I joined the drama class that year, and it quickly became my favorite. I hoped the class would help with my nervousness in front of an audience, and while I enjoyed the few times I appeared on stage, it didn't improve my stage fright. The class met in the Chapel where they held the school productions. Everyone treated me nicely in the class except for one girl named Courtney, who had a dislike for me I never could understand. One evening during a class performance, Courtney stood backstage with several other drama students and me. I moved a little forward to get a better view of the stage. I heard Courtney repeatedly saying, "ouch!" Not loud enough to disturb the performance, but so everyone backstage surely heard. I realized I had accidentally run

over her foot with my wheelchair. I felt so bad. I knew how much it could hurt. I had even managed to drive over my own foot when I first came to the academy. My foot had fallen off the footrest of my electric wheelchair and somehow, I twisted my ankle just enough not to have residual pain, but to catch my foot under the wheel. Some friends found me near tears a few minutes later. It really hurt. But to get on the stage where the drama class performed, I could only bring my push wheelchair since it weighed less than my electric wheelchair. I couldn't imagine how bad it would hurt to be run over with my pushchair, but it would surprise me a lot if it hurt worse than with my electric wheelchair. Courtney may have overreacted to what happened because she even had the school nurse called. I hated thinking I had hurt anyone, and when I asked the school nurse, she told me Courtney's foot looked fine. The faculty often teased me about having to watch their toes with me in the vicinity, but I don't think I ever seriously injured anyone.

Other than drama class, I typically stayed around my friends, who didn't make such a big deal if I accidentally hurt them. And for a special activity during the Christmas season, my friends and I, along with many other students,

went to the Santa Rosa Plaza. The Plaza Mall looked bigger than the Coddington Mall, where Rio normally took us. The plaza stood two stories tall and over seven hundred feet long, with a wide range of stores from Apple to Sears. It had a photo booth near the eatery, where Jason and I decided to get some pictures of the two of us. Pictures of us smooching. I don't know why, but I felt shy getting photographed kissing him, and the first few pictures we got hadn't exactly shown us kissing. But we did finally kiss. When we finished taking pictures, we got out of the booth and grabbed the pictures from the photo holder before the faculty wandering around could see them. Emma stood next to my wheelchair outside the booth as we came out, and informed us the photo booth had a screen on the outside showing the pictures we took. I blushed with mortification, I could have died from embarrassment! Luckily, I don't think anyone saw enough to comment because no one ever said anything. And with time, I calmed down and enjoyed the rest of the shopping trip, finding everything I needed for the Christmas banquet.

For the Christmas banquet, the school took us to a San Francisco ballet, the same place we went to the year before,

and saw *A Christmas Carol*. We sat on the balcony once again, and it terrified me, again. Luckily, this year, no one took off with my wheelchair and we got to see a different play, but other than that, we had a sequel to the year before. I remember as Jason pushed me out of the theater; we used the elevator to get down the stairs and back to the bus. We spent the ride on the elevator completely alone, and Jason almost leaned down to kiss me, but then we both realized at the same time how easily we could get caught. The door could have opened sooner than we expected, and the faculty could have found us in a lip lock. It probably would have been funny to think back on. While I couldn't guess the punishment they would give for such an infraction, I also didn't want to find out. The moment died when we got off the elevator and made our way to the loud and filling bus. The bus ride was my favorite part of every trip. Our friends always sat in the bench seats near us, and we could hang out and appreciate the ride together and, of course, cuddling with Jason only added to my enjoyment.

Getting back to Rio, we found out the bus would leave again shortly to drive us to Powell's Sweet Shoppe for our choice of treat. As a candy store, Powell's had rows upon rows of chocolates, sugary treats, and ice creams. And as

someone with a sweet tooth, I thoroughly enjoyed it as an addition to the banquet. Surrounded by the Russian River, Rio had a beautiful and serene campus. It also proved to be less than ten minutes from town, so we didn't have far to travel. I looked silly still wearing the gown I had worn to the ballet, but it worried me I wouldn't be done changing when the bus wanted to leave. So I simply went to the sweet shoppe in my banquet gown, while my date had already changed. Many other couples came mismatched, too, with the girls not taking the time to change from their gowns. That made me feel better, but our group of students visiting the sweet shoppe probably looked very strange to any onlookers. The goodies from Powell's tasted so good no one minded what others would think and simply enjoyed the goodies.

After the banquet and the trip to Powell's Sweet Shoppe, home leave started, and Jason and I met by the school fountain to say our goodbyes. His mother had come to pick him and his brother up from Rio and my dad had driven down to take me home for Christmas break. We had only dated for three or four months, but as a teenage dating couple any separation felt dramatic. He knelt next to my wheelchair, not to be romantic, but so we could

be at eye level with each other. We gabbed and hugged and gabbed some more, not wanting to say goodbye, but finally, we did. When I went into the dorm, my dad busily loaded things in the car and Emma waited for me by my door to say her goodbyes. She had seen Jason and me as we said our goodbyes and had way too much fun teasing me for what she saw. Emma knelt by my wheelchair, grabbed my hand, and started saying nonsensical romantic dribble that made both of us smile. Her face looked mortified as she dropped my hand and stood. Knowing someone must have come in the front door of the dorm behind me, I looked over my shoulder and noticed my father. My dad looked a little startled to see what he had walked in on. I couldn't tell if he knew what was going on or not. I liked things between me and Jason, but I didn't want to share it with my dad. Dad helped me get in the car, sat in my electric chair, and drove it back into the dorm. The visual of him driving my wheelchair always makes me laugh.

During the Christmas break, we had the longest time apart since we started dating, and I didn't take the separation well. And since Rio had found Jason to be a worthy student, they gave him his first truck. They had gotten it as a donation, but he still appreciated his first vehicle.

Now that we had dated for a while and everyone already knew how much we liked seeing each other, he didn't act weird about showing me too. Now that Jason had some wheels and enough gas money, he decided to take a trip to visit me after Christmas. I felt ecstatic because even with the home leave taking only a few weeks. He missed me enough to risk the embarrassment of meeting my family as my boyfriend, and that made me feel special. Since he only had a learner's permit, he brought his mom with him to stay with a friend of hers while he visited me, but the trip didn't go as smoothly as planned. He called me earlier than I expected him to, and I excitedly thought he was sitting outside the gate to my parent's property needing to be let in. But he didn't wait outside. His truck broke down about an hour and a half away from my parent's house. Which didn't seem tremendously surprising, with someone having donated it to Rio. I still found it disappointing that it would take longer before I got to see him. I felt bad for the guy because he had to call his new girlfriend's father and ask for a ride for him and his mother. I had met his mother on several occasions and really liked her, but worried because some people can be weird about accepting help. However, she treated it like an adventure, not an

irritation as I expected. Impatient to see Jason and hoping to make the drive less awkward for everyone, I went along.

Jason and his mom had stopped at a restroom north of Willits and when they tried to leave, the truck wouldn't start. Getting there to pick them up, I got out of the passenger seat and moved to the back bench seat, thinking Jason would sit beside me on the ride back. But he seemed too oblivious, or maybe he wanted to be respectful of my dad and not be friendly with his daughter in the backseat. But either way, he didn't sit next to me, and his mother shrugged in understanding as she slid into the seat beside me. I should never have thought things would be awkward. My dad acted great and never complained about the drive. We drove his mom to her friend's home, and then my dad drove us back to our house. Once we got inside, everyone came out of their rooms and said hello and, because of the late hour, went right back to their rooms. To my amazement, my parents even went to their room.

Before my mom left, she let Jason know he could sleep on whatever couch he preferred and that she had put some blankets out for him, but then everyone left. With no supervision, we stayed in the same spots for a few moments,

speaking uncomfortably like awkward teenagers. Once we had talked and laughed a little, the ice broke and we moved to the couch. Jason helped me transfer from my wheelchair to the couch and sat next to me. It didn't take long before smooching ensued, and while we always stayed upright, we definitely did a lot of cuddling. I'm not sure how long we stayed on the couch, but I wasn't sleepy. Sometime in the middle of our make-out session, he told me he loved me, and I said it right back. I had been thinking about saying that to him for a while, but I gladly heard he felt the same way. I still hadn't settled from the high his words had left me on; we had already stayed up late, though, so we said good night on the couch and headed to bed. And excitedly looked forward to the next day, which would be uninterrupted by classes. Unfortunately, he only stayed for a brief visit. His dad drove up a few days later and got him, his mom, and his truck, and went home. My little siblings, especially Sara, really liked him. He had spent hours bouncing on the trampoline with them, and what kid wouldn't love that?

One time while he visited my home, he jumped on the trampoline with my little siblings and I fell. I sat on my bedroom floor, calling for help. In the room on the other

side of the wall, my mom and Elizabeth hadn't heard me calling. Sometimes, because of my disease, I didn't sound loud enough. But with my bedroom window open, Jason had heard me calling from the other side of the house while outside, jumping on the trampoline. He had come right in when he heard me calling for help. I couldn't help but be impressed that he had heard my quiet voice when no one else had. And most teenagers, as a guest in someone's home, wouldn't rush to come and help. But I knew I had a good reason for loving this boy.

“If you love someone, you say it, right then, out loud.

Otherwise, the moment just passes you by.”

- Julia Roberts



Chapter Eighteen

Ashland

With the new year, we both returned to school to say goodbye again because drama class would leave on a trip. We would go to Reno on a music trip with the choir and then branch off to Oregon, where we could enjoy the Shakespeare Festival. Jason couldn't come on this trip. It would take too long, and I didn't have to go either; I could choose. With Emma and everyone else in drama class who would willingly help if asked, I thought I would regret it if I didn't go. Therefore, I made the decision I would go. Till we left, the drama class busily prepared performances.

Since I would go with drama class, they gave me a skit to perform with a classmate on the trip.

At one of the first churches in Reno, I performed the skit at a Friday night vesper. I felt nervous, but we had practiced it so many times I now knew it by heart. In front of the audience, I surprisingly didn't feel that nervous, and the performance went off without a hitch. As a mime, the skit had a male classmate give me his heart, and I would play with it and then stomp on it. Since I couldn't stand, I couldn't stomp on it, so I needed to be creative and threw the metaphorical heart in my hands on the floor and rolled it over with my wheelchair. I thought the way I did the skit comical, and the audience's laughter indicated their agreement. The next day after a few more performances from other students, we went to the Shakespeare Festival in Ashland. A long bus ride with many teenagers can be fun but also very loud. The bus made stops on the way to let the occupants have bathroom breaks; I had a good bladder, but even I needed the bathroom a few times during the day. Emma sat beside me and, always wanting to help with whatever I needed, offered to help me get to the bathroom. A little freaked out; this wouldn't work as we hoped, I grabbed on securely as she lifted me onto her back

for a piggyback. Emma did beautifully, she got me off the bus without a problem, and I really shouldn't have been worried; she had given me piggybacks many times before. Just never off a bus, Jason had always been around to help those days. Now outside the bus, she quickly carried me the rest of the way to the toilet. Where we found a single bathroom without stalls for privacy. Not having a copy of the caregiver's manual handy, she simply did what she would have wanted someone to do for her if she had to depend on others. She set me on my feet in front of the toilet, turned around, and began to hum. All finished with hands washed, Emma gave me another piggyback to the bus; on the way, I couldn't help but notice the stares from our fellow students, staring mainly in amazement but others in disgust. Emma never let feelings from others influence her actions, though. She carried me on her back as if she had the honor and joy of helping a friend. I keep this as my definition of a true-blue friend.

Once in Ashland, we went to our hotel. No one got their own rooms, but since I didn't have a roommate in the dorm at Rio, I looked forward to the opportunity. However, the bathroom had no grip bar and wouldn't work for me at all. I didn't complain to anyone about it, though. It

embarrassed me. Luckily, the lobby had a bathroom with grab bars near the room I shared with some girls. I saw it as a small inconvenience, so I didn't fuss.

On our first day in Ashland, we went to a dance studio to practice graceful and artistic movement, the teacher had no idea what to do with me, though, and I sat on the sidelines watching. Before we all left the studio, everyone did a practice dance session, and Emma walked up to me, grabbed my hands, and started doing a very ungraceful dance with me. Even though dancing with a wheelchair appeared terribly awkward, she never cared that she might look weird and just wanted me to have fun too. That evening we went to the Angus Bowmer Theater for a live performance of *Pride and Prejudice*. It seemed odd to see a play written by Jane Austen at a Shakespeare festival, but they honored her at the festival that year. Once at the theater, they wheeled me into a handicapped spot, and the play began with a speaker saying Austen's famous first lines from *Pride and Prejudice*. "It is universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."

After Elizabeth and Jane married the men they loved, the play ended, and we all headed back to the hotel. We left

Ashland and the comfy hotel the following day. The drive back to Rio took a long time, so we stayed overnight at a school that let us use their gymnasium. Spending the night on a gymnasium floor wasn't very comfy but extremely entertaining. Some friends and I stayed up late playing Truth or Dare and telling scary stories. I had so much fun on the trip, which ended too soon, but I gladly saw Jason. I had missed him and Rio.

I was glad to be back at school with the comfort of familiar things around me. We went to a park in Windsor, less than twenty minutes away, for an afternoon social activity on a Saturday after the drama class returned. The park only had dirt pathways that made it very difficult to push my wheelchair on. And Emma and Jason decided to take turns giving me piggybacks. They lifted me onto Emma's back to begin the journey through the park, leaving my wheelchair with faculty to be pushed back to the van we came in on. When Emma got tired, Jason lifted me onto his back and vice-versa till the trek through the park ended, and we returned to the van. We got back to Rio before dinnertime. It had worn me out trying to hold on while getting piggybacks, it didn't feel necessarily hard for me to get piggybacks, but it definitely took more muscle than

sitting in my wheelchair. So, on the ride to Rio, I rested my head on Jason's lap. And I think Emma, who acted understandably tired from carrying me on her back, sat in a nearly identical position with her boyfriend. My boyfriend awesomely didn't act like carrying me on his back had exhausted him, and he didn't seem lethargic at all on the drive back to school. The driver obviously didn't see our positions because I'm pretty sure the faculty wouldn't have allowed it. Anyway, I had nodded off by the time we got back on campus and had to move. Jason got me to open my eyes by gently rubbing his knuckle down my cheek and saying low in my ear, "Time to get up." With Jason's assistance, I got out of the van and into my wheelchair and went with Emma into the girls' dorm. Once in my room, I fell into bed and napped until I went to the cafeteria for dinner. This day may not have been as big as my first kiss, but one I remember just as well because moments of little significance can make you feel loved.

Even though love is one of the best feelings in the world, in my youth, I didn't always have the forethought to remember loving him didn't make him all mine. Many times in my life, I had to experience things that I hate how I reacted. Often I felt insecure because of my disability. But

no matter why I acted the way I did, I should have reacted better. When a friend who graduated the year before visited Rio and she found Jason and me in the chapel. Everyone else had left but we remained scandalously alone, but as I recall, we had begun to leave when Debra came in. Seeing Jason, she raced toward him and launched herself into his arms. He grabbed her, clutched her to his chest as they spun around, and then let her go as they came to a stop. I hated my reaction because I immediately turned into a green eyed monster known as jealousy. Not because I believed Jason had wanted to hold her like that. But because it seems like a romantic thing for a couple to do when they missed each other and I knew I could never do it. I told Jason how upset it had made me. I knew he couldn't undo what had happened, but I wanted him to know how it made me feel. And hoped he might try to avoid it happening again, if at all possible, especially in front of me.

Aside from time at school, I visited with my aunt Amanda often, like when she brought me and my boyfriend to their church. After the service and potluck, Jason and I visited the nearby park, where a little while later, my aunt, uncle, and three-year-old cousin caught

us necking it on a bench. Practically in his lap, it slightly embarrassed me, but Amanda, as younger than my other aunts, remembered young-love. So, for a date away from Rio and the faculty, with their restrictions on date night activities, we asked for her help to get off campus. We even had a whole plan to go to a concert with Jason's sister Jessica. But Jessica hadn't driven long enough for the faculty to let her drive us off campus. Getting my aunt to sign us out of the dorms and take us to her house, Jessica could pick us up and drive us to the concert. It seemed deceptive but for spring break Jason would go to Thailand on a mission trip, and we couldn't stay in contact while he was there. The year before, when Jason had gone on a mission trip, we only had a friendship, but now dating, I couldn't imagine not getting to speak with him for over two weeks. Needless to say, the imminent separation upset me and I acted as clingy as only a teenage girl can be. Already having had our first kiss, we knew the perfect date needed to include enough privacy to do plenty of that, and Jessica had a jeep with room to make out in the backseat. Maybe I didn't demand enough as a girlfriend, not insisting on dinner and a movie, but I wanted to go with him no matter what we did. My aunt picked us up on Saturday afternoon

and took us to visit with her and her family at the Ranch while we waited for Jessica to take us to the concert. I always enjoyed spending the afternoon with my aunt and her family. Dealing with a disabled family member can be tough, but Amanda never treated me as anything different than a wonderful niece. We talked, and we laughed all afternoon till dusk when Jessica drove to my aunts, picked us up, and took us to the concert in Santa Rosa. I really liked the drive; getting to snuggle and smooch with Jason in the backseat made the ride pleasurable. Arriving at the concert disappointed me because not only did I have to untangle myself from Jason's arms, but I also had to use my weakening muscles to get out of a two-door Jeep. I knew Jason would help me get out of the backseat if I asked, but I didn't like to be a damsel in distress all the time. So it didn't look graceful, but I got out of the jeep and into the warm evening air on my own. Then we headed to the concert. It seemed a smaller room than the first concert we went to, and louder and more crowded, sending me to the Jeep with a headache before the concert finished. Jessica drove us back to Rio when the concert ended. The school had rules about who they would let their students leave campus with, but they couldn't control who brought the

students back to Rio. Even though the faculty probably wouldn't have been happy technically, we didn't break any rules. I think Jessica drove as slowly as possible to give us more time canoodling in the backseat. It's hard to make the drive take longer than half an hour, though, and all too quickly, we drove on campus and parked in front of the girls' dorm. Climbing out of the backseat to the car door, I opened my arms for Jason to pick me up and put me in my wheelchair. As the clock approached ten o'clock and the sky became dark with a thousand twinkling stars, he softly kissed me on the cheek and said goodnight. Jessica pushed me into the dorm, where everyone greeted us with smiles and kind words because they obviously liked her. Staying to visit for only a few minutes, she left to say goodnight to her brother and drop him off at his dorm before heading home. Lying in bed that night, I admitted that while I liked some concerts, I disliked most of them. But we had a good date because I got to do it with him, and he made me feel so unbelievably cherished, and I felt lucky to be his.

Among the many other experiences I had at Rio, I particularly recall the time they conducted a job fair. It took a day or maybe even two when speakers would come and share about their careers. As the mother of two of my class-

mates, my physical therapist, Katherine, from the years I had gone to CCS, came. Her husband, who worked as an orthopedic surgeon, also came to share with the high school kids about their jobs. Some careers I found interesting and definitely a lot better than doing school and homework. My favorite speaker was a woman whose youngest daughter and I had gone to elementary school together. She worked as a nurse. I had some experience in hospitals and knew a beautiful smile and kind words could make those cold rooms and uncomfortable beds more bearable. I desperately wanted to give something I learned through my experiences that meant so much to people who needed it most. Like my mom, I wanted to be a nurse. I knew my disease prevented me from offering physical support, but it doesn't make what I can give less valuable. They had a doctor as one of the speakers, but if I dreamed of a career, I would also dream of having children, and the hours of a doctor would make motherhood difficult. No matter how much I knew these dreams would be impossible in the future, they still seemed possible to my teenage self.



Seeing that I had the dream of becoming a nurse one day, I took anatomy and physiology classes with one of the school's science teachers. With the small class size and not mandatory learning, I enjoyed it. I took the class with another girl. I called her Elisa, and she helped me to remember things more readily because she acted so silly. Mr. Kirk taught the class; and as a smart man, he enjoyed teaching us what we wanted to learn.

One day after class, he announced a homework assignment of writing an essay about a specific disease he chose for each of us. He chose for me to write about Friedreich's ataxia. He said it interested him to read what I would write about my disease. I didn't know what to say in response because I had intentionally learned as little as possible about my disease. Because the upsetting things I knew to expect for my future would only make the life I had to live that much harder. I knew if I asked Mr. Kirk, he wouldn't make me write an essay about my disease, but that would mean having to confess how I didn't want to know how awful my future might become. And I really didn't want

to make such a confession since I positively could not do it without weeping. And bawling in front of a teacher would be mortifying. So I did it, not happily, and not well, but I got it done. I turned the paper in and got a grade of C. It didn't surprise me about the poor grade. I really should have done better, but I didn't want to. I suppose as an abstract observer, my disease would interest me too but having the disease made it impossible to write about it as just a problem.

With that essay that put my disease and life as a statistic, I needed some downtime and wanted spring break to come already. My dad wouldn't come to pick me up for my Spring break for several days yet but Jason needed to leave that day on a mission trip to Thailand. As we said our goodbyes, the bus that would take Jason and the rest of the people to the airport waited. And a class waited on me. I had been away from him for more than a few weeks before, but this time he couldn't even text me; he didn't have a data plan for overseas. Before he boarded the bus, he gave me an envelope filled with letters, telling me to read one every day in his absence. And he included an extra one in case the unthinkable happened and he didn't come home. I had other friends going on another mission

trip but they wouldn't go to Thailand; they would go to Albania, Europe, and their bus left at a different time.

By the time I got to head home, almost everyone had already left. Driving into the yard after a three-hour trip with my dad, where my two younger siblings greeted me with squeals, made a perfect beginning to my break. Mom had less stress at her job, making the whole house less stressed. My sister Elizabeth seemed happy in her relationship. Taylor still loved to make me laugh, and my little siblings always got up to something, usually together, and changed a little every time I saw them.

No matter what I did every day, I always remembered to read one of the letters from Jason and waited impatiently for the next day so I could read another. Earlier in the year, I had been riding my three-wheeled bike around the campus and had fallen forward and chipped my tooth on the handlebars. I hadn't hurt myself, but my smile looked kind of awful, and I insisted on a dental visit to fix my chipped tooth before graduation. Since graduation meant tons of pictures, I wanted to look my best. I put blonde highlights in my hair and fixed my teeth. My religion class had a special project for the senior class that involved us making a scrapbook filled with wedding plans and bud-

gets, a wedding, a pregnancy, and of course, a baby. So over spring break, my mom took me to Michaels to shop for a scrapbook and helped me find a pillow to stuff underneath my shirt that would look like a believable baby bump. We rather hysterically found a pillow to make me look fat. This fake pregnancy was going to be hilarious.

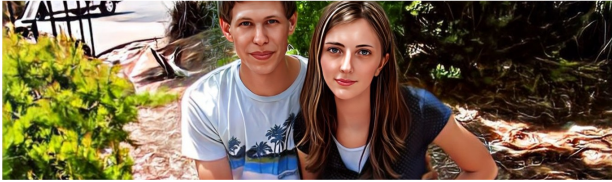
During spring break, I slept in because at home, I could. One of my mornings at home, Elizabeth came into my room, hearing someone opening my door, I sat bolt upright in bed. I heard Elizabeth pushing buttons on her phone as she took pictures because, apparently, my hair looked crazy. Not seeing me very much since I went away to school helped her mood around me. She woke me up by entering my room without knocking, which annoyed me, but she laughed, and I couldn't help but smile along with her.

Spring break flew by, and Rio classes began; the dorm opened, and the cafeteria began serving meals, but Rio didn't become the place I loved until my friends came back from their mission trips. The Albania mission trip came back first with Emma, her sister Bianca, Erika, Adam, and a few others. They had been painting clinics with ADRA and even got to see the Parthenon. When the bus from

Thailand came into view, I excitedly waited for Jason to disembark.

And finally, I saw him. He looked happy to see me, though tired from the trip. In Thailand, they helped a small village with their water system and even stayed in huts in the village. Some students had even helped with dental care. And knowing Jason, he had done more than his fair share. I pleasantly had my boyfriend back, but a few days after he had returned to Rio, I found myself curious. Curious about the one letter he gave me before he left on the mission trip that said only to open it if he didn't return. I hated the idea of having to open it, but now that he came home safe, I got curious about the last words he wrote for me. Once he told me I could open it, and I did, what I read sounded a little disappointing. It mainly said, "I love you". Of course, I always like to hear those words, but I hoped he wrote a little more. I'm not exactly sure what I wanted it to say but as last words, it didn't sound all that good. But since I had him, I ignored the fact he didn't have talents in writing and enjoyed the last few months of my senior year. "I try to live in a little bit of my own joy and not let people steal it or take it."

- Hoda Kotb



Chapter Nineteen

Marriage is What Brings us Together Today

I called my mother occasionally to hear news from home. It's not like I didn't want to speak with my dad, but mothers seem much more talkative. When I called this time, my mom had upsetting news about my sister Elizabeth. Her boyfriend had broken up with her. For someone normal, going through a breakup can be rough.

But for my sister, I feared it would feel like having someone tell you to your face you're not good enough. He had said they were unequally yoked, which is a biblical saying that believers shouldn't marry unbelievers. They both believed, so I couldn't figure out why he had said they were unequally yoked, except maybe he wanted a good reason to end their relationship. I thought him a nice guy, but it did not surprise me he couldn't handle a relationship with a disabled person. But I hated what he said to justify their break up. It upset me knowing how much heartbreak she must be going through, and unsettled by the idea Jason and I had a relationship that would doubtlessly end the same way.

Since Jason and I still dated, I thought I should tell him some of what the doctor had told me when they diagnosed me. Feeling nervous, I tried to phrase it briefly and to the point. So taking a deep breath, I began, "The doctor told me they didn't know how long I would live, but they estimated thirty. They didn't know how easy my life would be, but what they could say didn't sound comforting". I expected our relationship to end shortly after I told him this because, in my mind, no one would want to have a relationship with someone with unknown physical

difficulties ahead of her. He gave me a look that said he understood what I told him I never shared with anyone. He took my hand, and as he appeared to absorb all I had told him, we sat at one of the loveliest spots on the Rio campus and silently stared at the view.

Yet, I also thought I should provide him with a way out of our relationship. So a few times in the spring semester, Jason and I discussed breaking up. I didn't want to, but I thought he deserved more. I always chickened out whenever we discussed breaking up though, because I didn't want to end our relationship. However, I doubted our relationship would keep going after graduation. Not everyone can bear having a long-distance relationship, even only for a few hours, and as teenagers, I doubted we could. Away from Rio and living a few hundred miles away from each other, breaking up would be easier, anyway. I just hoped when we did eventually break up, I could let him go without too many tears. Maybe we were too chicken, but gladly our story didn't end there.

While our story may have been wonderful to me, it seemed nothing like the class productions in Drama. The drama class performed a play called, *Once Upon a Mattress*. It is an adaptation of *The Princess and the Pea*, with

singing, dancing, and a darling yet silly love story. In the tale, Princess Winnifred, an ungainly, brash girl, competes for the hand of Prince Dauntless. His domineering mother, Queen Aggravain, has declared he must marry a "true" princess before anyone else in the kingdom can marry. They chose Emma as the lead; she had as much energy and enthusiasm as Princess Winnifred from the story. If you haven't watched the movie or seen the play, I highly recommend it.

Once Upon a Mattress took place in the fifteenth century, and they didn't have many wheelchairs then. And certainly, none in the story, so having me wheel onto the stage wouldn't have been pertinent. Thus, I didn't audition for a character role. And earlier in the school year, Liam Neeson had offered some training for those who wanted to help run the various sound systems on campus. I took every lesson, thinking that helping with sound would be a good way to be involved without being onstage. So I sat in the sound booth with Jason for the production of *Once Upon a Mattress*. They had put me in charge of the music and figuring out how to remove the voices from the songs we had. It hadn't been all that easy, but eventually, we had what we needed. And the music sounded great as I played

each song for the actors to sing and dance on stage. But when the performance ended, with the actors bowing and the audience clapping, I played the wrong song. I guess it relieved me it all went like clockwork; I didn't pay enough attention to the next song I played. It sounded fine, but we didn't plan that song for the end. After everyone else left where we held the performance, all the drama students had a quick worship of thanksgiving for everything in the performance going smoothly; everyone said goodnight and headed off to their dorm.

A few days later, after worshiping in the girls' dorm chapel for the night, Emma carried me back to her room, where some girlfriends and I would hang out till time for study hall. We sat around and babbled about everything and nothing. Friendship is truly a wonderful thing; with how they stuck by me, I never wanted to lose them. Emma sat cuddled around me to keep me from falling off the bed she had put me on. As the other girls sat nearby.

That evening Erika told us of a dream she had the night before of all of us. She married a wonderful man and had a bushel of kids, and we were all still friends. Hearing that, Emma squeezed me extra tight, as if she promised never to let go. In the dream, all of them sat with me at the hospital.

Since I had gotten sick, my husband, Jason, cared for our little girl. It didn't surprise me that Erika's subconscious had made Jason my husband since we still dated. Everyone knew I would get sicker and my life would end before it should. The idea I would get to have a baby made it such a beautiful dream. Emma squeezed me, somehow knowing my eyes watered with happiness and sadness as Erika continued telling us her dream. Erika's husband and Jason watched our kids at a park near the hospital. Erika's husband tried to offer Jason comfort by saying that Erika could have a terrible accident and leave him and the kids alone without her, too. Sadly people you love can die young, but the flip side of love is loss, and just because he knew our whole marriage he would lose me didn't mean our marriage had less love. Thankfully the dream ended there because what possible thing could have happened next that would make it end with cheerfulness? The idea of the love and happiness I could find in my life before it ended from what I already had around me made me smile. I never liked thinking about when and how I would die. But everyone's life ends in some way, and sometimes the only thing anyone could do was hold on to happiness when they found it. So I endeavored to hold on to the

happiness I found and the people I loved. With a buzz, the intercom system announced study hall would begin shortly. Emma helped me get on her back for the trip down the stairs and back to my waiting wheelchair.



My life has so many sad things to focus on, remembering happy memories feels practically necessary, and remembering the next experience always makes me smile. The senior religion class had the tradition of having all the seniors get married and have babies. I assume they had us get married because the best way to teach us safe sex, or abstinence, would be to make us take care of a screaming bundle of plastic. And we couldn't do that without marriage first. Having a fake baby without a fake marriage just didn't sound Christian. First, they wanted each couple to complete a scrapbook. Including a wedding budget, location, and pictures cut out of a magazine of the wedding dress and tux you wanted. Jason and I got married on a yacht. I would roll down the aisle with my dad pushing my wheelchair to the theme song from *Gilligan's Island*, followed by the reception, which would serve a wedding

cake, spiked punch, and “special” brownies. Of course, we wouldn't have served that, but this fake wedding wouldn't happen. Since we had to write out a whole wedding plan, though, we had a little fun with it. And I loved the theme song from *Gilligan's Island*, so going down the aisle to that song sounded hilarious. His mother came to help us with the wedding budget and, to celebrate that we had finished the scrapbook, drove us to dinner. Shirley and I waited in the car while Jason dashed to the dorm to get his wallet. A classmate who knew Shirley stopped to say hello. I knew this girl and several others had crushes on Jason when I first came to the academy. He was nice, tall, cute, flirty, and a few girls at school talked about how they loved seeing him shirtless by the pool, so his fandom didn't surprise me. But he had chosen me, and no matter how much time passed, I found that spectacular as well as bewildering. And based on her look of contempt, it irritated her that he chose me. After finishing my wedding album with Jason, the senior weddings would happen next, and her disapproval had little impact.

The guys had to propose before anyone could get fake married. Jason knelt on one knee and asked me to fake-marry him. It didn't feel like the most romantic of

proposals, but it still put stars in my eyes. I wore the white gown to graduation the previous year on the day of my senior wedding. I thought it looked cute and was white, so it met all the requirements. They gave us fake red roses as our bridal bouquets, and, leaving the girls' bathroom where all the senior girls had been congregating, we headed to the Chapel. Apparently, Emma would marry Adam as part of a plan since their freshman year. And as the brides made their way to the chapel, Adam stopped the line of girls and proposed to Emma right before the ceremony. Once Adam left to stand next to Jason and the other grooms at the front of the chapel, the line of girls headed down the aisle while the rest of the students stood as the wedding guests. I naturally rolled in my electric wheelchair, following the row of senior girls as they moved down the aisle toward their grooms. And as each senior girl stood (or sat) next to their groom, the officiant, the boys' assistant dean, began an unforgettable performance of the wedding ceremony from *The Princess Bride*. "Mawwiage. Mawwige is whut bwings us togeva today." He ended the wedding ceremony with the words, "I now pronounce you man and wife. You may now shake hands."

After the fake wedding ceremony, Emma and I went outside to take pictures with our grooms to remember our big day. The saying goes, first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes a baby in a baby carriage! So suddenly, all the senior girls became expectant mothers and sported fake baby bumps. Emma even showed me a trick to eat with my plate on the pillow, masquerading as my pregnant belly. It made eating easier since the fake baby bump prevented me from getting as close to the table as normal. One evening during our recreational time, I couldn't forget how Jason whispered that I looked so cute pretending to be pregnant with his baby.

When the fake pregnancies ended after a few days, we got plastic babies that could scream, needed diaper changes, to be fed, and to be burped. To make us completely understand life with a baby, we needed to do these things at night too. I remember my baby waking me up at night and me falling asleep holding the bottle in her mouth. We even needed to be careful with the plastic baby's neck, or it could snap. Nothing much would happen; it would scream for a few seconds, then one of the faculty members with a baby key would come by and restart it. And if the baby's neck snapped, we would get some

points marked down on our baby grade. So we needed to remember to support the plastic baby's head.

In retrospect, Jason and I were terrible teenage parents to our fake plastic baby. We needed to care for her and decided that weekend would be the perfect time to drive in his truck down by the river. Our plastic bundle of joy came along, and she didn't even make a sound; her being plastic probably had something to do with that. We completed the plastic baby assignment on a Sunday morning. Since the girls had the babies the night before, they returned them to the classroom. After we gave the babies back, I kept feeling like I had forgotten something. Ironically I gladly didn't have mechanical howling waking me up at night, but in a way, I kinda liked her. After a few days, though, high school went back to normal.

As well as learning why we shouldn't become teenage parents, I took a Spanish class that year along with my friend Derek, who now speaks Spanish more often than English. I could roll my Rs surprisingly well in high school to sound out Spanish words, but beside that I didn't do well with the language. Mrs. Grimes taught the Spanish class. I liked her; she seemed friendly in the years following high school but could be tough as a teacher. Both years

I went to Rio, Mrs. Grimes held a Cinco de Mayo celebration for the entire school. They served churros and enchiladas outside the cafeteria and decorated with piñatas and colorful fiesta banners that, combined with the beautiful area of Rio, made for an amazing fiesta. Mrs. Grimes's Spanish class did well on a test, and to celebrate how hard we had all studied, she took her students to the river.

She brought me down in her car with Jason. He didn't take the class, but he got invited since everyone looked to him every time I needed to be carried. The water smoothly made its way downstream, the beauty and peace of it entranced me, and I decided I wanted to be part of it. It took some begging to get Jason to help, and he asked several other guys to assist with my wild idea. What ended up happening turned out very different from what I had envisioned. I imagined Jason carrying me into the river, setting me down, and letting me go to allow me to flow blissfully downstream for a few feet, where someone would be waiting to scoop me up and put me onshore.

However, Jason had Derek carry me a few feet down the river. I got in the water, but he never let me go until we reached Jason. Jason stood in a row of guys, prepared to grab me if I got away from Derek and headed downstream.

I ended up swimming into many guys, which I'm sure made me happy; I mean, why wouldn't it? But I recall disappointment in not getting the experience I wanted. I appreciated their protectiveness, even though what happened had probably been a little extreme. But I could be a thrill-seeker who didn't realize the limits of my disability.

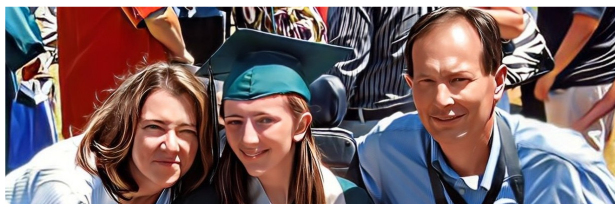
Overall, my high school experiences hadn't disappointed me, and next, we had the spring banquet to look forward to. The girls asked the guys like the year before, and to follow my tradition, I asked Jason to go with me, but unlike last year, I knew he would say yes. They planned a trip to Hurricane Harbor at Six Flags for the spring banquet; the water park sounded incredibly fun. The sun didn't come out the day we left; few people would call it swimming weather. Everyone still donned their swimwear and simply hoped the weather would improve. But since I didn't do well in the cold and on the best day, swimming could be difficult for me; I went fully dressed. I wore my swimsuit underneath my jeans in case I changed my mind and decided I wanted to go swimming. I loved getting in the water so the weather wouldn't need to improve much. It looked like a fun place to swim, but with the cold day everyone shivered whenever they got out of the water. I

ALICIA WESTON

gladly dressed for the weather because otherwise, I would have been too cold to appreciate how cute the guys looked without their shirts.

“Well-behaved women seldom make history.”

- Laurel Thatcher Ulrich



Chapter Twenty

Graduation

College and graduation would happen before we knew it. Leaving home and going away to a boarding school for two years of high school became a life-altering change. I didn't want to have it ripped out from under me to experience something new again. I also didn't know if I could emotionally survive life at home, which, before I had gone to the academy, had been tough. I worried that after such a supportive high school family, I couldn't handle my life without them. If I could choose, the next few years of my life would involve this area I had grown

to love in my childhood and still thought of as one of the best places in California. Nothing could prevent high school from ending and having to leave Rio to move on to college. No one expected me to attend college, and their indifference infuriated me. People expected it of other students graduating high school, but not me and that made me want to go all the more. Senior year of high school had a lot of exploring colleges and figuring out which one each student wanted to attend, and even though I wanted to go to college, I didn't expect to get to go where I wanted. It felt miraculous when my mom let me come to Rio. My disability added so much difficulty to my life, yet still allowing me to choose to live on my own was an amazing gift my parents gave me, and I thought asking to attend a college far from them with even less support than I had at Rio would be a lot to ask of them. And I wouldn't ask, so I already knew I would go to the community college in Humboldt County, but Jason would go to the Santa Rosa Junior College, and I dreamed of going there too. I sounded irrational, but insisted on seeing the campus with him. Jason had a license and could drive, but only having his license for a month Rio wouldn't allow me to go with him.

So, with the help of a faculty member, Jason and I visited the Santa Rosa Junior College campus. The college campus stood in the middle of Santa Rosa but didn't sound as noisy as you would think in a good-sized city, and the campus size appeared larger than I would have thought. They had a library in a four-story building that I imagine contained an impressive number of books and was only the first of two libraries on campus. Most of the buildings on campus were brick and covered with Ivy. I hadn't seen much other greenery because of the hot summers in Sonoma County, but the landscaping still made the whole area look nice. And across the street from the campus sat a Taco Bell, which made it a big selling point for me, and even bigger for Jason.

After exploring the Santa Rosa Junior College campus, I enjoyed the last few weeks of my classes at Rio before my class, and I graduated. After a few days, I noticed a few classmates I hadn't seen around for a while, and as a couple in the senior class, their disappearance at the same time looked suspicious. Some friends and I talked with the teacher of the senior religion class at the end of his lesson one day, and I asked if he knew where Nathan and Shelby went. He told me they got expelled, and thinking he

wouldn't say anything more, I simply said, "Oh." He must have heard the unspoken question in my voice because, with a deep sigh, he elaborated that Nathan got caught in Shelby's room in the girls' dorm. And they both were expelled. I felt sad for them to miss out on graduation, but at the same time, unsurprised by what they got caught doing.

Now that I knew what had happened, I wished I didn't. They would also miss out on our senior trip, our final opportunity to celebrate our graduation. The senior trip was an end-of-the-year trip to Los Angeles for the seniors, where they would go to grad night at Disneyland. I imagined everyone would have fun, but I had no interest in visiting Disneyland from nine at night till two in the morning. (I need my beauty sleep.) The seniors also had to pay to go, and making my parents pay for a trip because the other seniors would go sounded like a trip I shouldn't go on. So Emma, Jason, Emma's boyfriend Derek, and I decided we wanted to make our own senior trip, and my parents agreed to help us go somewhere. My parents drove us to Crescent City to visit the aquarium and enjoy the ocean for the weekend. They called the Aquarium Ocean World. I had gone there before with my family, but

I had a unique experience with my high school friends. The aquarium had a whole sea lion exhibit to show off the tricks they learned. My favorite part of Ocean World has always been the sea lions. They had so many places to take pictures in the aquarium; it seemed family-friendly. We stopped at a lot of the spots for pictures, but the most memorable was when Emma passed this mannequin of a slutty female pirate and got the boys to pose next to her. Derek stood with his arm around the slutty pirate, looking like he enjoyed it, while Jason, on the other side of the mannequin, looked a little uncomfortable. It appeared such a funny image that I couldn't help but laugh, which made Jason look all the more grumpy.

My parents had selected a hotel and reserved three rooms, one for the boys, one for the girls, and one for them. After the day of exploring Crescent City, my parents brought us to the hotel, ordered us a pizza, and left us alone as they went to a restaurant for dinner to give us our space.

The boys came to the girls' room to share pizza, and still having light outside, we made a trip to the hotel's indoor pool. So I could enjoy one of my favorite activities, swimming. I loved the freedom of movement I felt

and the sensation of balance. Once we returned to the room, we stayed up late eating leftover pizza, watching TV, and probably making out more than I would recommend. When we wanted to crash, we kicked the boys out so we could have some girl talk before we drifted off to sleep. The next day we drove to my parents' home for the night before heading to Rio. Jason already knew my little siblings, but Emma and Derek hadn't met them yet. I always had a lot of fun around Derek, so I'm sure they liked him, but Emma instantly became a favorite. Emma acted crazy about children, and I knew she would be a great mother someday. Throughout the senior trip weekend, I avoided calling Derek, Derek daddy. That had been my nickname for him since junior year because I wanted to call Emma mommy, and Derek was her boyfriend, so I called him daddy. Juvenile I know, but it was high school. I enjoyed calling Derek daddy; it just flowed right off the tongue. But Derek thought it sounded disrespectful to call him that in front of my real dad, and I didn't the whole time we traveled. When we got back to Rio, we parked in front of the girls' dorm and unloaded mine and Emma's bags from my dad's van. Then I said it; I called him, "Derek, daddy." I instantly covered my mouth and looked at my

dad, horrified he'd be upset. However, he did not seem to have heard as he continued unloading, said his goodbyes, and left.

Once my dad left, we still had a week of classes and an entire weekend of graduation before we had to leave, but I wished it had been longer. Most of my friends got to experience four years at this academy, but I only got two, and it didn't seem fair. I needed more time.



As my aunt Amanda's brother would get married the weekend of graduation, she had to fly to New York and wouldn't be around for anything that weekend. She wanted to be there as much as I wanted her there, but her brother planned to get married that weekend, and he needed her more than I did, so I tried not to whine too much. But besides that, the weekend should be very exciting, and my family would come! They planned to arrive on Saturday morning for the graduation weekend. The graduation festivities officially began Friday night, but I didn't think a few hours would make a difference, and it would probably only be a small gathering, anyway. But the audience

filled almost every pew, and as the rest of the graduates and I made our way to the stage, I couldn't help but feel unprepared. With Jason as my marching partner for graduation, he walked next to me, and every eye watched as Jason picked me up to follow the rest of the graduates on stage. The speaker for vespers shared stories of the seniors and inspirations for our future faith in God and asked the graduates' families to come up and sit next to them as he prayed. And I had told my mom nothing big happened Friday night, so they didn't need to be there till Saturday, and naturally, I needed my family. My Uncle Matthew had brought his family, and as they stood and made their way to my seat on stage, I nearly cried with relief. It was a simple act, yet it meant so much to me.



My family showed up shortly before church on Saturday, in time to watch Jason pick me up and carry me on stage to a pew. The pastor gave a sermon, and each of the graduates went off the stage to give their mother a rose and father a hug to show appreciation for everything their parents had done for them. Thank goodness my parents sat at the

end of the pew; otherwise, I would never have been able to reach them from my wheelchair. Again, I felt awkward about having an audience as Jason carried me at the end of the church, especially my family. But I must have lived through it. After church, my family and I, along with some other friends and their families, got invited to the Connors' home for lunch. And the last time during school everyone spent together.

After lunch, Jason announced his decision to be baptized down at the river that afternoon. With the heat, it felt like a good day to be dunked in the river. His oldest sister Brooke had brought her boyfriend with her, even though he and Jason weren't really friends. But their family dynamics are much different from mine. Jason's mother's parents also came for their grandson's graduation weekend, giving him a good-sized group of on-lookers on the river shore for his baptism. A bunch of Rio students decided to be baptized that day along with him. It surprised me to realize they hadn't gotten baptized years before coming to a Christian academy. And the idea they hadn't received as much of a religious background as I did, but yet still chose to believe helped me reaffirm my own faith. As it became close to the time for Jason to be baptized, I asked if

Adam could help me get down to the river's edge so I could hug Jason after his dunking. Adam didn't have a problem getting down to the river's edge, but for him to do it while carrying me made it tricky because the sand created a small bluff of a few feet to get down, and then the Russian River was right there. A friend stayed at our side to make sure we got to the river in one piece. After we got to the edge of the river safely, Jason got baptized, I gave him the hug I took this adventure for, and Adam carried me back to my seat.

That night they called class night; they held it in the gymnasium that looked all decked-out for graduation the next day. Each graduate accompanied by their marching partner dressed in formal attire and got announced on stage with the nicknames the faculty had chosen for them. The nicknames started with their first name, ended with our last, and had a really long middle name. Jason had the nickname, "Jason, only I can pick her up, Weston". I imagine everyone knew they meant me. I got, "Alicia, look out for your toes, Foster". Each of the marching partners wore outfits that complemented each other, so while I wore a blue dress, Jason wore a blue tie. After the announcer said the students' nicknames, the marching partners would strut down the aisle. Every pair of partners

did something unique, Jason and I made a plan where he would set me on the edge of the stage, come down off the stage, and I would leap into his arms. The practice was easier than the execution, however, because when he set me down on the stage, came down, and stood in front of the audience to let me jump into his arms, I got stage fright. I thought certainly I would fall and embarrass myself, or hurt myself. Even though Jason stood right in front of me and would never let me fall, I didn't think rationally. So I shook my head no and had Jason pick me up and set me in my electric chair to begin our walk and roll down the aisle. It upset me that I choked at the last minute. We had even rehearsed it. Thank goodness I didn't want to be an actress, because even after the few skits I had performed in Drama class, I still didn't act any better in front of an audience.

After my embarrassing debut, everyone moved to another building to watch a video of the graduates. I don't know who they put in charge of what went into the video, but in my opinion, it left something to be desired. Especially since everyone would see it, including the families of the less popular kids. After the video, everyone in the foyer said good night till the graduation ceremony the next day.

The next morning, the seniors got treated to a special breakfast with the faculty. The food tasted the same as what they had in the cafeteria but served in the library. They gave each senior student a graduation gift of a Bible, hugs, well wishes, and one last visit before we lined up to march into the gymnasium for the graduation ceremony. Though we would see many of them throughout the day, they had this as their official send-off. And with one last prayer, they ushered us off to prepare for graduation.



Once we wore our green graduation gowns and all lined up, we followed the Juniors into the gym. Jason and I went to the stairs on the left side of the stage. I had to park my chair, luckily away from the view of the audience, because Jason had to pick me up to once again carry me on stage where my pushchair waited. The graduation ceremony went on and on, but didn't last as long as some I've been to. The gym warmed up, and those gowns became long heat insulators that smothered me. Graduation couldn't be over soon enough. Finally, they handed out diplomas. The faculty and I spoke and planned what I would need

help with throughout graduation weekend. But we failed to evaluate what I would need while on stage without my electric chair. I didn't move fast when pushing myself in my wheelchair and worried about how I would get my diploma. Nervously, I heard my name announced and suddenly a classmate pushed me to the front of the stage. As I received my diploma, I thought no matter how difficult my life would become, the last two years of support and memories would mean so much throughout the rest of my life.

All my classmates received their diplomas, and the speaker announced the class of 2010. All my classmates stood and threw their pointy hats into the air. I quickly put my arm over my head in case one hat decided to cause injury to my head. Once the graduates finished celebrating, they formed a line to begin marching to the football field. Jason and I made our way to the side of the stage, putting my arms around him; I tried my best to ignore we were both sweaty, as he carried me down the stairs to my electric chair. Then he walked beside me as I rolled out the doors to follow the other graduates to the football field, with less stifling heat. As I and the rest of the other graduates took deep breaths of fresh air on the football

field with the relief of getting out of the overheated gym, the hoard of graduation guests followed suit. I received so many congratulations, took pictures, and gave hugs to say goodbyes. Since the field cleared out, I went back to the dorm to change my clothes and pack the last of my stuff. I wanted to weep for the wonderful memories I saw all over the room I would leave behind. To make the moment even more perfect, Emma came for the last time to say goodbye. For me, Emma was Rio: we laughed, sang, and danced; even though I danced from a wheelchair.

As we said our final goodbyes, my mother came to walk me to Shirley's camp trailer, where our families had planned a graduation party for Jason and me. As we walked, my mom told me how my dad's father had asked him what he thought of Jason. My dad had told him he thought he acted like a prince with the way he treated his daughter. Even though I knew Dad thought I had picked a good guy, it overjoyed me to hear my dad thought so highly of him.

When we showed up, everyone was there, and even though they all had fun, I couldn't get in the mood. It felt like the end of an era, and I didn't want to move back home for good this time. My aunt had gotten a graduation cake

for Jason and me that had a cap and gown on it; it looked adorable. Noticing I seemed grumpy, Jason came over, and to make me smile; he started feeding me cake. I grabbed a fork and started feeding him too. Pretty soon, we both had cake and smiles on our faces. After we found a hose for rinsing off, I looked at the clock and realized I would have to leave with my family soon because of the three-hour trip home.

For a goodbye away from prying eyes, we headed down to the river in Jason's truck to find the perfect place to park. And why two teenagers would leave a party to sit in a parked car is an absolute mystery (sarcasm pinky). I should have talked with him about whether he wanted to continue our relationship long distance. But that day had already been full of too many tearful goodbyes. And I didn't want to add goodbye to our relationship. I almost started bawling as my dad's van pulled away, dragging a trailer with my electric wheelchair and leaving Rio and Jason behind.

“If you find someone you love in your life, then hang on
to that love.”

- Princess Diana



Chapter Twenty-One

Self-Sufficiency and College

We went on another cruise, this time to Alaska. After about a week at home following my graduation, we loaded up our Suburban with all seven family members, their luggage, and two wheelchairs and headed to Seattle. The trip took over ten hours and was very crowded. When we finally came to Seattle, the highway merged into an interchange with many tunnels and overpasses; it looked like one of those labyrinth puzzle mazes I

played at a young age. After entering Seattle, we got a view of the space needle. The landmark looked impressive from miles away at six hundred and five feet tall. We had arrived a day before the ship would leave port to explore the Space Needle, a building taller than the Statue of Liberty. And with my fear of heights, rolling around the observation deck felt unbelievably scary, but the view took my breath away. The Space Needle is one of the most photographed structures in the world, and I definitely wanted a chance to take a magnificent picture of it. But since I rarely snap a picture at the perfect moment, along with a digital camera with me, I also bought postcards.

An incredible amount of things made me think of Jason, couples holding hands, guys in blue cargo pants, and Jelly Beans. I sent him a postcard expressing my desire to see him and urged him to visit. I probably shouldn't have acted so certain he would want to spend the time and gas money to see me. But over the eight months we had been dating, I discovered he cared as much about me as I did about him. I wanted to see him, and even though it hadn't been long since we graduated, I hoped he wanted to see me. Before I signed the postcard, I wrote 143, which Jason taught me meant I love you.

The next day we ensured all our luggage had tags with our room numbers and boarded the cruise ship. We boarded a Celebrity X ship, called the Infinity, with twelve floors. With our cruise many years before, we had two identical rooms next to each other. But for this cruise, my mom splurged and got a veranda stateroom for herself, my dad, and my two young siblings. While the handicapped stateroom Elizabeth, Taylor, and I shared appeared larger than the room Mom and Dad had, it didn't look as elaborate or even have a window. The two rooms sat on the same floor, but one room sat at the bow of the ship while the other room sat on the port beam. Three floors up, the Oceanview café had a pizzeria; that became one of my favorite places to eat. And deck eight contained a library. On our first cruise, the ship hadn't had one, but this ship did, and since I had become such a fanatic about books, I enjoyed browsing the shelves. I picked a mystery novel to read by the pool because Sara and Anthony wanted to swim whenever they could, and my family congregated there often. I decided on a mystery rather than my normal genre, thinking romance would only make me miss Jason all the more. I went to the ship's spa for a little pampering to enjoy the vacation and stop thinking about Jason and

the other people I missed. I did not want to try crawling on a table for a massage, and I definitely didn't want a pedicure on my always cold and very sensitive feet. So I decided I would go for a manicure since I liked nice nails. Even at a young age, I enjoyed pretty nails, pretty and long. Taylor used to joke I had handy little weapons. I had only once before gotten a manicure. I saw it as a needless expense when I could simply put nail polish on myself and be happy. But I still acted moody from the goodbyes after graduation and thought a little pampering would help. With the price, I almost didn't do it. I can be like my mom in that way. I didn't like paying for things that seemed overpriced. My mom had noticed I didn't seem in the best mood, and in hopes the pampering would help lift my spirits, she insisted. It helped my mood only a little, though, because it couldn't make me forget how much I missed my friends from Rio.

Alaska is an incredible place to visit. The trees appeared impossibly green, and the sky a pure blue without a hint of smog. We got off at every port and bought souvenirs to remember each place. In one of the ports, Mom pushed Elizabeth in her wheelchair while Dad pushed me, and Taylor walked with Sara and Anthony. When Mom stopped

to grab the map and figure out where to go, Elizabeth's wheelchair made a break for it and sent her moving into oncoming traffic. Taylor first noticed Elizabeth's wheelchair's mad dash for the road and, in hot pursuit, raced to catch up. Now realizing the danger, Elizabeth attempted to stop her wheelchair, but in horror, I watched as she continued straight toward the road. Then Taylor got there, and stopped her wheelchair; Mom didn't look far behind, and everyone else reached her too. I couldn't help but be surprised at how everyone had instantly leapt to Elizabeth's aid and left me alone. While I understood that Elizabeth needed help and I didn't, it reminded me of one of the big reasons I had gone to boarding school. Elizabeth had our family wrapped around her little finger, and even though I loved them all, I always would come in second place to Elizabeth.

We didn't do any shore excursions in Alaska until one of our last ports, Skagway. Skagway had a historic railway built in the nineteenth century for a gold rush which brought the first locomotive to Alaska. After the gold rush, they reinvented the railway as a tourist attraction for a historic train ride from Skagway to the White Pass Summit. It Costs at least a hundred dollars per person to ride on

the train, and with all the extra expenses on the cruise ship and our large family, I didn't know if I should go. I finally decided I didn't want to wait in the train station for nearly three hours as they took a train ride. The views on the train ride took my breath away, and delightedly I didn't miss the experience. Alaska has many other beauties, but as a wheelchair user who is restricted by what I can see and experience, the railway became the highlight of our trip.

The cruise lasted only seven nights, and we constantly stayed in motion, if not in a port. I had motion sickness, though thankfully not too badly. On the other hand, my mom had so much nausea she threw up and amazed me by coming out of the bathroom as if nothing had happened. She had learned to deal with terrible nausea through five pregnancies, and after that, not much fazed her. The cruise had been fun, but with motion sickness and little time to relax between visiting Alaska and exploring the ship, we wanted to go home. As we docked in Seattle, Washington, and disembarked the cruise ship slower than we would have preferred, we got in the car and started the long drive home. We stopped to grab food and almost constantly played movies on the little TV screen in the Suburban to stay entertained. When we finally got home, it felt late and

with a yawn and a sigh I crawled in my bed. A few days later, it overjoyed me to hear Jason missed me as much as I missed him and wanted to come see me.



Like the first two times Jason visited, he slept on the couch in my parents' living room. Since he had his truck with him, he decided we should go off-roading. And with The Redwood Grove camp property 30 minutes from my parents' house, we could go there. I doubt I had any desire to go off-roading, but I would do anything with Jason just for time with him. And the fact that I would get some alone time with him helped sweeten the deal. We went off-roading down by the river and managed to get stuck. Some workers prepared the camp for the infusion of campers during the summer months. Seeing our dilemma, a married couple working at camp pulled Jason's truck off the beach with their even bigger truck. I don't remember their names, but every time I see them, I want to thank them for their kindness to two people they didn't even know.

Jason stayed with me at my parents' house until his family and mine met at Redwood Grove camp. Jason gave me an iPod Nano that summer as a late birthday gift. My stomach fluttered with love because Jason didn't give many gifts, but he had saved for this and put thought into it—for me! I used it so much while at camp that I had to plug it in so it could charge. And the only place I could plug it in to charge was a public charging spot where I couldn't see it. I never even thought it would get stolen because it was a Christian camp, and I just hadn't thought. But of course... it got stolen. At first, I thought I had forgotten where I had left it and hoped I would find it by looking harder. But after several minutes of searching, I finally knew it must be gone. For the following days, though, I continually checked the charging area where I had lost it, hoping the thief would develop a conscience and put it back, but it never got returned. Though its loss upset me, most of my time had been spent with Jason anyway, so the loss hadn't seemed that great.

At Redwood Grove camp, I stayed almost continually at Jason's parents' campsite with him and his family. I guess Jason's dad technically had his own campsite right next to the one the rest of the family had. But since Jason's parents

had what appeared to be a very amicable divorce, it seemed like only one campsite. I got along well with his mom and sisters. Jason's oldest sister Brooke's boyfriend, Jesse, who Brooke brought to Jason's graduation, also spent a lot of time at their campsite. They would often be seen fondling each other. I get they liked each other, but they should not have been so physical in public. My aunt Betty knew Jason's family before I met him and stopped by his family's campsite one afternoon. It mortified me because my aunt had come over to visit, and Brooke sat on Jesse's lap, with him pawing at her. Luckily, my aunt treated it as normal, but I still found it disrespectful to do in front of our elders.

We had a few more days left of camp, days of nothing but relaxing under the sun, taking dips in the Eel River, and enjoying the fresh scent of redwood trees. And then... summer ended.

I began taking some courses in late August at the community college near Eureka. The campus didn't compare to the Santa Rosa College campus, which is one more reason I loved Sonoma County. My mother tried to convince me I didn't need to go to college. She and I both knew having the ability to work even with some sort of college degree probably wouldn't happen for me. I still wanted to

try, though, because I somewhat enjoyed education and didn't think I would like to stay home most of the time. A few years before, staying at home with no school would have been a lot of fun, but since Rio, I wanted more than my life before high school.

So for me, I wanted the experience of college more than I needed the education. I spent as much time learning as other college students did. At community college, I took four courses in my first semester. I took a history course because I had enjoyed Mr. Sawyer's class, but my college history class didn't compare. Mom typically drove me to college before she went to her shift at the hospital, parking the car behind one of the buildings where the college allowed me to store my electric wheelchair. She would walk in and come out a few minutes later, driving my wheelchair. Watching my mom drive it always put a wide grin on my face. After my mom helped me into my electric wheelchair and left campus, I was on my own.

Anna went to College of the Redwoods with me, and we finally became classmates. We took very different classes and didn't see each other on campus much. I loved Anna, and she had been my friend when I needed one the most, but our separation during high school changed everything.

Before we had gone away to high school, her friendship was a lifeline for me. I think she wanted things to go back to before high school, but I now had friends other than her, outside my family, and I didn't need her so badly. That changed a big dynamic in our friendship, and I had another change in my boyfriend, who Anna thought replaced her. I didn't completely understand because Jason didn't live near me, and she did, but it still upset me that Anna felt replaced.

In addition to Anna and I attending college, Jason attended a junior college in Santa Rosa, which we had previously visited only a few months before. He didn't take as many courses as I did, but he didn't like school as much and had a job. Working at a company in Healdsburg that built trollies, he had moved from home to continue living at Rio. He worked on the Rio campus for room and board and his other job. Wanting Jason to drive up to see me on top of everything else did seem selfish. So although I found it difficult, I came down to see him when I could. Most of the time, I came down to Rio with friends I could hitch a ride with, but once, I even rode the bus.

Since Adam had gone away to college in Washington and I could stay in his room, I stayed at the Conners'

house on numerous occasions when I came to Rio to see Jason. Typically, though, I stayed home, besides attending college for my classes a few days a week, and I missed Jason. Whenever he came for a visit, I always hated to say goodbye because he remained the most exciting part of my life. Each time he would leave, I would hug him as if he held my life in his hands and say goodbye as if he might change his mind about dating me. I would beg him to stay longer, which he would say he couldn't, and once when his mother came with him, she said, unless I let him go, he couldn't come back. I had never thought of it like that before, but I still didn't like saying goodbye.

Even though I acted very dramatic when Jason would leave, I didn't have a bad home life. Taylor enjoyed playing guitar, and on Friday and Saturday evenings, the whole family would gather for worship in the living room after dinner. Elizabeth and I had singing voices that sounded terrible because of our disability, and though I had some singing lessons in high school, my singing voice didn't sound any better. Taylor had a great singing voice, though, and I easily sang along with her, making singing songs during worship something I enjoyed.

Things between Elizabeth and me had even been better. She no longer needed to distinguish between her disease's severity and mine. I think spending time as the only disabled person in the house while I went away to school proved good for her as well as me. Because she seemed more comfortable in her identity as a disabled person. Taylor and Elizabeth had gone to the community college near our house for a GED after home-schooling. Elizabeth had taken a few years of classes at the community college. She went on to Humboldt State University to get a psychology degree. At the same time, Taylor stayed at the community college to get a computer science degree and worked at the nearby Christian elementary school. I could better understand a computer science degree than a psychology degree, but that both of my siblings found passions for their future overjoyed me.

Mom also dealt with her stress better but still struggled with anger sometimes. She had the same job at the nearby hospital. And my dad seemed the same wonderfully stable father as he had always been. He was my Rock of Gibraltar, always in the care of his family and of me. Honestly, I still acted a little spoiled, and my dad spoiled me more than my mom; thus, I thought more highly of him. Everything in

my life appeared good, but it still seemed better with Jason there. Because even though family can be a lot to handle 24/7, you love them, and they love you.

Even though I had a good family life, driving myself wherever I wanted to go sounded like unimaginable freedom. I liked to think my feet and legs still worked well enough to drive, at least briefly, but I didn't act delusional. I knew I didn't have time to ignore the reality of my progressive disease. My body would get sicker, and even if I could get my license now, it wouldn't be safe to keep it very long. Taylor had gotten her driver's license, and Mom and Dad had helped her get a car, so with her help, I had a few driving lessons. I had ordered hand controls to let me push the gas and brake with my hands. I got used to using them even though it didn't make driving as pleasant as it looked for those who could use their feet. I never became a driver, which seemed best. Because even if I had done the best I could, my abilities weren't as good as they should have been. And if I had caused an accident or, God forbid, taken a life, I never would have been able to forgive myself.

So since I had given up on the dream of driving after repeated attempts and wanted to be self-sufficient when possible, I used my scooter. I didn't use my electric wheel-

chair except at college because it seemed much easier to leave it at the college than to transfer it between college and home. And when the wheelchair guy had visited a few months earlier, I had gotten a scooter. My scooter and wheelchair helped so much with my self-sufficiency. I can't imagine what my life would have been like without such equipment.

While my wheelchairs and scooter helped me do things I normally wouldn't be able to do, I still tried to use my own strength in my room, where I knew no one would watch and scrutinize me for my weakness. I moved the furniture around all the time to give me something to hold on to because I knew the importance of using my still-working muscles. My physical therapist had often said, "Use it or lose it." The comment sounded a little harsh at first. Every time I thought something too hard to do, though, I reminded myself how much I didn't want to lose that I could still do it. Life for me might appear more challenging than it looked for most people, but I didn't remember what it felt like not to struggle when walking or to see clearly without glasses. So I found it normal to have these challenges in my life, and nothing would take them away. This was the life I had received, even though I knew I had been dealt a

lousy hand; anger would only add unhappiness to the life I had to live.

Trying to be self-sufficient, I decided to take my scooter to a little store a mile from our house. This sounded incredibly stupid because half of the way, I would have to drive along the nearly nonexistent shoulder of Highway 15. Mom and Dad had gone to work, but at home Taylor did not like my idea one bit. I could be stubborn, though, and I insisted I wanted to go. Taylor needed to watch Sara, but at the same time, didn't want me to go so far alone, so Taylor and Sara followed me. We got to the store and back fine, and zipping through the store isles picking what I wanted, I enjoyed. But going to the store took much more time driving a scooter than I had first expected, and I didn't do it again. I always knew I could ask my mom to pick me up anything specific I wanted the next time she went to the grocery store, but honestly, I don't remember doing much regarding food in my room.

“Aerodynamically, the bumblebee shouldn't be able to fly, but the bumblebee doesn't know that, so it goes on flying anyway.”

- J. K. Rowling



Chapter Twenty-Two

Family

My grandma Elizabeth had a bad accident and injured her ankle. She went out on her deck, hollering at the birds, who had given her a rude awakening. When a few of the planks gave way, she fell through. It took a while for her to get back inside and call an ambulance. Once the ambulance got her to the hospital, she called my mother to let her know what had happened, and as soon as they could, my parents went up to get her. Grandpa had died and living so far away from any of her children, alone, didn't feel safe anymore, and they decided she would live

with us. She always loved to spoil us kids, so the transition of her living with us went really well, and her room became a place for the family to congregate. The doctors tried to help her injured ankle for the first several months, but it became infected and wouldn't heal properly. My grandmother was told her ankle needed amputation. Hearing a body part that you have seen and used for your entire life needs removal sounds nothing short of terrifying. My mother looked mortified at what her mother would endure, but my grandmother showed a serenity about her amputation that no one else in the house could emulate.

My grandma Elizabeth moved into the room next to mine since Taylor moved to a different room to let Grandma have one of the bigger rooms. She made a quiet neighbor, not even having a television, and always willingly gave me Oreos. I got quite unsettled watching her as she hobbled around to prepare her meals on one foot. Not that I had it any easier, but she only had one good leg to stand on. Even though Grandma suffered the loss of her left foot, she never made a big deal about it, noticing how much two of her granddaughters suffered. The visual of Grandma's missing foot never disturbed Sara or Anthony, probably because they were young when it happened. Seeing it al-

ways upset me, though, and when I first got used to her missing foot, I found it hard to hide the sadness on my face. But Grandma had a way about her that made you comfortable enough to forget what she lost. I, of course, was biased, but even after she moved to our house, Jason still visited and never acted unsettled when seeing my grandma.

One of the many times when Jason visited me, he took me shopping. If he didn't already have my heart, his treatment of me would have made me beg him to take it. I loved it when he came around. He didn't have to take me shopping, but I must admit I did particularly love it when he did. We went to the mall in Eureka. I found it a far cry from the one in Santa Rosa but it had plenty of stores for a great day. They had a store called June I occasionally found cute things in, so we clearly had to explore that store. As Jason pushed me in my wheelchair around the store, I found a dress I absolutely had to have. A mannequin proudly displayed the purple turtleneck dress. I looked, and Jason even helped, but we couldn't find one in my size. Discouraged, I wanted to leave the store. Jason still had one more trick up his sleeve, though, and looked for the dress tag on the mannequin. I laughed at what he did because

he looked down at the dress of the mannequin as if he couldn't control himself and wanted to see how she looked under the dress. When Jason finished looking down the back of the dress on the mannequin for the tag, he came over and said, "It's just your size". With help from the store clerk, they removed the dress from the mannequin and brought it to the cash register for me to buy. As we left the store, Jason had so much fun teasing me about being the reason a store had a naked mannequin.

Though I had so many fun times with Jason after we graduated, I missed so many things and people from my time at Academy. My aunt Amanda was one of them. She made such a tremendous impact on my life, and with her constant desire to spend time with me, I unsurprisingly grew quite attached to her. So when she, my uncle James, and my adorable three-year-old cousin came to visit during my first semester of college, I felt thrilled. I missed this little family so much, and it meant a lot that they came to see me. They came with big news to share; Amanda would have another baby! I felt overjoyed for them because while I imagined childbirth could be painful, nothing could equal the gift you got in the end. It saddened me, though, because I wouldn't know the new little one like I had

Travis during my years at Academy. Regardless, I happily celebrated my new little cousin growing inside my aunt Amanda and couldn't resist asking, "How does it feel?" She smiled and said, "Weird." To this day, her response of weird, is such a unique description I can't help but smile.

A few months later, my aunt gave birth to a baby girl, and my family made the trip to meet her. And at the behest of Amanda, Jason also came. We had a short visit, but meeting a new cousin and seeing my boyfriend made it such a happy visit.



I wanted to go to college mainly not to have time to feel sorry for myself or let the negativity of others depress me, like before I went away to boarding school. But things had been good at home since I came back from the academy. Mom missed me while I spent time away, and with Grandma living with us now, Mom would visit with her first thing after she would get off work at the hospital. Having Grandma there as a sympathetic ear for my mom to voice her frustrations helped her mood. And my relationship with Elizabeth continued to be better than before my years

at Rio, so going to college to have a separate life from my family didn't seem as important anymore. But I still chose to continue my college education; I liked to learn, and the atmosphere of the college campus, while a little cold for me, looked beautiful.

Although college took a significant amount of time and I still enjoyed learning, I loved the time with Jason more. He would share things going on in his life, and it made me feel special that he cared to know what went on in mine. On one visit, he told me he had something big going on with his family at their home. He wanted to tell me, but he didn't feel it was his secret to tell, so he left it at that. Unfortunately, I didn't leave it alone, and since he wouldn't tell me, I guessed.

Jason cared a lot about his family, and they were such kind people. A lot of things that would have bothered the typical person did not bother Jason and his family. I loved that about him. While my disease and how I must look to others bothered me so much, he didn't see it as a big deal. So I knew if what went on with his family seemed big to him, that meant it probably was something big. The size of the issue really didn't matter though because it remained something big for him. It luckily didn't turn out as big a

deal as I first feared; however, he left me in suspense for several months, even though I had guessed what concerned him in his family. His oldest sister Brooke would have a baby! She and her boyfriend hadn't gotten married yet, and that probably upset Jason. But he would become an uncle, and I found that exciting. They got married a few months before the baby's due date, in a quick little service at their Church with no family. It elated me when they got married before the baby came, but not inviting family to the service after conceiving a baby out of wedlock may have only added insult to injury.

While Jason had family stuff going on, I focused on college. I took four classes again for the spring semester at college, one of which was a speech course I believed I needed. Otherwise, I would have happily not taken it. I never sounded very clear, and I didn't enjoy speaking to a group of people. But I made it through the class with no noticeable scars and even got an A. I also took a Spanish course with Anna. I remember one day we talked about different hair colors and how to say them in Spanish. I raised my hand and asked the teacher how to say dirty blonde. All of my classmates started laughing. Even after my high school years, I still must have been a little sheltered

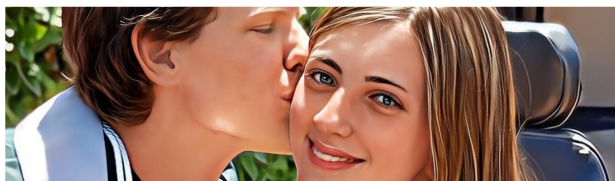
because until I heard everyone's reaction, I didn't realize what I said could be taken inappropriately.

I liked college, but I liked the times I could visit Rio and Jason even more. He had done such a good job with helping run the various sound systems at Rio that they asked him to continue helping with sound for his room and board on campus. I always thought he looked so cute running around preparing the sound system for the church, and it irritated me when I returned for visits after we graduated because it looked like some of the high school girls thought so too. I could hardly understand what Jason saw in me because any of the many girls who lived closer to him would make a better choice. Before I had gone away to high school I became depressed and knew something needed to change. Although I went to college now and things were different at home, it was happening again, depression wanted to smother me. I felt certain my depression had more to do with my disease than anything else. But no matter why it happened again, I was unhappy and either wanted to focus on my life at home with my parents or with Jason. Because I imagined either Jason or my life at home would suffer. I thought about how much I liked Jason, and he deserved much better than me, dealing with

depression and all my imperfections, no one deserved it, certainly not him. I loved him and knew I wouldn't be able to break up with him. But I also knew it was impractical for him to continue to pay for gas to come up and visit me or for me to continue to come down and visit him, regardless of my physical difficulties.

“If you want your life to be fulfilling, you have to believe in yourself. Put yourself out there and be thrilling, never be someone else.”

– Julie Hebert



Chapter Twenty-Three

Another Ultimatum

On a visit in early April, I gave Jason another ultimatum. He had put a minivan bench seat in his truck bed, and we sat in front of the Russian River on Rio Beach. I told him something needed to change, that we either needed to break up or get married. We had broken up for a brief period in the fall of the year before, so I didn't know what he would choose, but for me, a long-distance relationship didn't work anymore. Even though he lived

only a few hours away, I still wanted a change. I really wanted him to say let's get married, but I refused to let myself hope because I felt certain he would say that we needed to break up. I didn't want to break up with him, but it felt too hard with my disease to continue coming down to see him. And I didn't want to make visits with his girlfriend all his responsibility. After a while of talking it through and some time of quiet contemplation, he got off the bench and knelt on one knee. I felt stunned. Even though I basically asked him to propose, I certainly thought he would want to break up. Life can change so unbelievably quickly. He asked me to marry him, and once I recovered from the idea that he actually wanted to marry me, I instantly said yes.



We stayed by the river till the sun went down and drove to the Conners' house on faculty hill, where they hosted a birthday party for Bianca. We went into the dining room and found Mrs. Conner, Melanie, Bianca, and some other friends we had known from Rio. With the announcement that we would get married, everyone in the room wore big

grins, and Melanie hopped up and down, unable to contain her excitement. I felt over the moon to marry Jason, but their reaction to our engagement made me see our future life together as truly a wonderful thing.



The next day, we said our goodbyes as I got in Alice's car for the drive home. On the drive down to Rio, a portion of the freeway had closed because of a landslide, and we had to take a back road. A very bumpy and windy back road. The drive home went fine when suddenly the transmission died. I don't think myself an expert on the workings of a locomotive engine, but I knew the transmission was important. Alice pulled over to the side of the road and called a tow truck. I immediately started texting, and since my dad didn't know how to text, I texted Elizabeth. I told her everything that happened and asked her to tell Dad, hoping he would come and rescue us. Through Elizabeth, Dad said he had things to get done, but he would come if I needed him to. I knew I would be fine with Alice, so I had Elizabeth tell Dad we would be okay.

When the tow truck finally arrived, an elderly man sat behind the wheel, not a young guy with a strong back who could easily carry me into the tow truck I had hoped for. Alice ended up carrying me, very slowly. I felt every ounce of my one hundred and ten pounds and hated how dependent I needed to be on the people I loved even before my twentieth year. While Alice had carried me over to the truck, she lost her hearing aid, and they spent several minutes looking for it in the grass next to the freeway. They never found it, but luckily it had a warranty, which made me feel better about being responsible for her losing it.

We traveled to the closest town to wait for her husband and Anna's father to pick us up with their truck. I really should have asked my dad to come and get me, because when Alice's husband came down with the truck, I had to get into it. As a guy, I thought he could pick me up easily. I thought wrong. That day, I had my first lesson on learning that guys are not all created equal. To be fair, I compared him to my dad, a bit younger than him. The entire experience made me very glad for guys like my dad and Jason, who made it look so easy to help me transfer.

The freeway remained closed to the landslide, and once again we had to take the roundabout way on the back road

to avoid the landslide. When they finally dropped me off, I never felt happier to be home, and to have my dad help me out of the car with minor difficulty felt wonderful. The loss of her hearing aid never irritated Alice and saw the trip as a new experience with me, and thankfully nothing worse happened.

We had an eventful trip, and when I returned home, I had life-changing news to share. The idea of telling my parents I wanted to marry Jason made me paranoid though, because they planned on taking care of Elizabeth and me till we died. I didn't know how to tell them I wanted to make a new plan.

I first told my mom, the one person I worried the most about telling. We had done some shopping at the mall for the day and made one last stop at Mrs. Fields' bakery for some cookies. Jason had texted me saying I needed to let her know, and after having fun on a shopping trip sounded perfect to me. I stressed about her reaction when I told her, and my voice went low as it sometimes does when under stress. But she still heard me say, "Jason and I want to get married." She looked a little sad knowing if I got married, I would move from home and make a new home with Jason. She told me if we decided we wanted that,

we shouldn't delay. When the doctors diagnosed Elizabeth and me, Mom heard we had a life expectancy of twenty, and my twentieth birthday would happen in two months.

The doctor's office called a while after my twentieth birthday, telling Mom I would live to thirty, not twenty. But she thought I would die at twenty, so if we wanted to marry before I died, we should do it quickly. When they diagnosed me I understood my life expectancy was thirty, and if I had known my life would end at twenty, I doubt I would've bothered with college and now marriage but simply enjoyed my life while it lasted. Maybe we had heard my life expectancy from different people who knew different things, or maybe she got confused, or maybe I did. But the bottom line was I still had more life to live, and I got to do it with Jason. My mom didn't want to get rid of me so badly, though, that she approved of my June wedding idea, which would put the wedding in two months. Planning a decent-sized wedding could not get done in two months, and I didn't want to wait till the following June in fourteen months. Therefore, I decided on January for the wedding, and since I loved Christmas, snowflakes would make a perfect decoration for a January wedding. Also, not getting married in the summer months

with Jason younger, meant hopefully I wouldn't get teased about cradle robbing at the wedding.

We first decided as a soon-to-be-married couple to have Rachel as our officiant, who would bind us as man and wife. I worried my dad would be upset by my choice to have a female pastor, but I think I worried too much because he showed no sign of displeasure. As the pastor of Rio, Rachel had taught me so much in my time at the academy about how God proved omnipotent yet a loving friend. Her sermons inspired me that anything was possible with God, even for me.

As the pastor who would bind us in holy matrimony, she also had the job of giving us pre-marital counseling. Whenever the three of us could meet, we got together for a session to make sure Jason and I knew how to live and resolve conflicts before we said I do.

Jason and I almost called off the wedding a few times. I knew without a doubt he loved me, but people said he couldn't handle taking care of someone with disabilities. In moments of doubt, I think he thought they were right. And in retrospect, I can't be upset with Jason or anyone else whose love for one or both of us made them voice their concerns. Because marriage sounded hard enough without

adding a disease into the mix. At the time, I didn't act as mature as I wished I had, and I sounded like a spoiled child who didn't get the toy she wanted. I wanted to marry him already and stop wondering if he loved me enough. As the wedding got closer, he became more certain that he loved me regardless of my disease, enough to disregard the negative comments he heard; which made me overjoyed this man chose to marry me. The future wedding made me so happy I wanted to brag to everyone who would listen. I stayed at home so much I didn't have many opportunities to brag, though, and instead renamed his contact on my phone, my future husband. It would make me smile every time he texted me, and it would flash across my screen.



One of those times I didn't know if Jason and I would make it to the altar, I had Elizabeth there to talk to. Elizabeth had never been someone to listen to me when I got upset, and even though she listened more than usual, she still may have pushed her opinion a little too much. But I wanted a relationship with my sister Elizabeth any way I could have it. We talked about how I loved Jason and

wanted us to marry. To help her explain what she thought, she introduced me to a song she had found on YouTube by Kelly Clarkson called, "Already Gone." Most of what I heard the song saying didn't apply to me and made me think she hadn't taken the breakup with Jacob as well as she made everyone believe.

Then the song finally got to what she wanted me to hear. With the image of a tipped-over wine glass and a rose in the music video, Kelly Clarkson sang, "You know that I love you so, I love you enough to let you go." Knowing how Jacob had broken up with her, I wondered if she felt that because of her disability, she didn't deserve happiness and love. Therefore, I guessed because of my disability, she didn't think I should marry Jason. That would be a sad way to go through life, not loving because you didn't want to hurt anyone when your life ended too young. It made me angry, that because of a disability we had no control over, we should let go of love. Since Jacob had already broken up with her, it sounded easy for her to say that. And now she told me I should break up with Jason to what? Become miserable too? Me having a boyfriend when she didn't, I imagine, can be irritating to any older sister, and me getting married first, I felt could make Elizabeth say

ALICIA WESTON

what she said. Because of that, I didn't know if I could trust why she thought I shouldn't marry Jason. With every little injury in youth I acted overly dramatic because otherwise she got more attention. And now she didn't like that Jason wanted to pay attention to me for life. Her attempt to get me to break-up with Jason reeked of envy.

“It's one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself, to forgive.”

- Maya Angelou



Chapter Twenty-Four

Boys Will Be Boys

The first time I went to the home of Jason's mother and siblings, we had already gotten engaged. I didn't stay with his mom when visiting him, so I hadn't seen where they lived before. A few months after we had gotten engaged, Jessica had a graduation party that would also serve as the first family function I would attend as Jason's fiancé. Brooke and her husband came, and she looked incredibly pregnant since she would give birth to a baby

boy in a few months. I don't remember much of what they served at the party, but I recall they had so much ice cream and a huge amount of toppings. They threw such a tasty party. Everyone I met treated me so nicely and acted truly happy that I would join their family. Their simple acceptance confused me. Whatever the reason, I gladly accepted the kindness and love I received, not only from Jason but his family as well.

After Jessica's graduation party, we went to the home where Shirley and Jason's siblings lived. Seeing their home for the first time helped me realize things about Jason I had never understood before. They weren't exactly poor, but I felt completely spoiled in comparison. I didn't find it hard to tell that not everyone got their own room because a partition divided the living room to give Jessica some of the living room as her bedroom. I have always gotten my own room, which now made me feel pampered. For our visit, Jason helped me transfer from my wheelchair to his mother's living room couch, which appeared small and old, but I thought it would be more comfortable than staying in my wheelchair. I assumed wrong. I think I would have been more comfortable in my wheelchair, but I didn't want to

be rude and insist Jason transfer me back to my wheelchair, so there I stayed.

At the end of our visit, I went to the restroom. To get there, I needed to go through the kitchen. The house looked tiny, so the smallness of the kitchen didn't surprise me, but it shocked me that it appeared like they had just gone to Costco and not put things away. This home felt very different from the one I had grown up in. My mother always kept everything in our home clean and tidy, and I couldn't imagine living this way.

The bathroom looked a little unsanitary and needed to be cleaned badly. The toilet seat looked relatively clean, so I quickly used it, washed my hands, and left. Aside from how my mom kept our home, I thought everyone should keep their space clean for themselves, if not for anyone else. I hated my reaction to where they lived because I liked Jason's family. He didn't have a bad childhood, but seeing where Erika lived and now where Jason had lived made me so grateful for my parents' house and my mother's care of it.

With how his family home looked, I got a little worried Jason might be a slob, but it never made me consider not marrying him. Impatient to plan our upcoming wedding,

I went with my mom to find a bridal shop, and since Eureka only had one, that's where we went. I struggled with picking the most expensive dress I would ever own. They all looked beautiful, and I couldn't decide, but after trying on several dresses, I finally picked one. I chose a floor-length, sleeveless, pure white gown with embroidery on the bodice. I loved the way a wedding gown with a train looked, but since my dad would carry me down the aisle, that didn't sound practical or even safe. With the gown done I just had to decide if I should wear a veil. I wanted one, but since I wanted Melanie to do my hair for the big day, I questioned whether I should cover up her handiwork. I made the decision when the bridal shop showed me a white veil threaded with pearls, I knew I had to have it. Having chosen the dress and the veil, only left shoes to decide on, and I had already decided I wanted to wear tennis shoes like in the movie *Father of the Bride*. I loved that movie, so I had to have tennis shoes, and it made standing much easier.



Not long after Jason proposed, I heard Emily would get married too. She had completed high school in three years to graduate with her future husband—if that isn't a sign of love, I don't know what is. Her parents had married young before her arrival but had such a happy marriage, and I imagined Emily only wanted to find the same happiness her parents had. She had fallen in love in high school, just like I did. I had no uncertainty in my mind when admitting I loved Jason, but we probably wouldn't have been getting married so young if not for my disability. I don't know if I would have advised marriage at such a young age, but I prayed Emily would find happiness with her future husband. Her wedding would happen a few months before mine, on her mother's birthday. While I would be twenty and a half on my wedding day, she wouldn't yet be nineteen on hers. Melanie had been friends with her like I had, and we both talked about going to her wedding and maybe carpooling. Neither of us ended up going; as children, we both had friendships with Emily but life, especially as a

teenager, can move with incredible speed. So our lives had both changed a lot since she had moved.

Having already begun our wedding plans, I simply enjoyed the summer months with my future husband without stressing about wedding plans. As soon as he could, Jason came and stayed at my parents' house with me. He slept on the couch again, and whenever he spent time in my room, my parents told us not to shut the door. They had decided on this rule the summer before, and as a Christian household, our engagement didn't change the rules. Anthony and Sara went to school, but both liked Jason, and whenever they came home, an open door invited them in. I loved how he treated my little siblings though, and could not wait to make him a father. Jason spent most of the day outside with my dad working on something or other that my dad wanted help with that summer. He wanted to spend time with me but also wanted to work, so my parents helped him by letting him do both.

When the summer ended, my mom decided Jason had done good work, and they wanted to help him get a better vehicle. He planned to marry me, so they treated it a little like helping me get a first vehicle, too. So she told Dad to help Jason look on Craigslist for a good vehicle they

could afford to help him get. Unfortunately, they looked, found one they liked, and got it all in the time Mom spent at work. When my mom got home from work, a Toyota truck sat on a trailer in her driveway. When she had told Dad to get Jason a new vehicle, she hadn't pictured a truck. The idea they hadn't gotten a car I could easily get into irritated her. And when she found out the truck didn't even have a working engine, she looked like she might blow a fuse. Knowing how many times my dad had upset her with his financial decisions, it surprised me she wasn't more prepared.

That summer, we went to Redwood Grove camp, and I started to really enjoy the time I got to spend with Jason and his family because, in a few months, they would be mine too. Rachel would be there, too, and while we were all in one place, we got together for premarital counseling. Nothing difficult, we just talked about good ways to have a healthy marriage. This time, she talked about our wedding ceremony, and she asked if we would prefer to be introduced as Mr. and Mrs. Weston or Jason and Alicia Weston. Jason looked at me to let me decide what I wanted, and while I clarified I would happily become a misses, I was still me. I guess I shouldn't have seen it as a big deal, but I

wouldn't marry Jason because I wanted to be seen as someone desirable enough to get married but because Jason and I loved each other. I wanted Jason, not the change in status from single to married, and the wedding guests, and more importantly, Jason, should know that. So after my long explanation, I asked her to announce us as Jason and Alicia Weston.

Besides seeing people we hadn't seen in a while, the camp relaxed me with its canopy of redwood trees and nature surrounding each campsite. I also enjoyed the meetings in the youth division when I went. In the morning meetings, the youth division did more physical things, and because I couldn't do them, I felt uncomfortable and rarely went. The evening meetings got too cold for me to listen to the speaker without shivering. I tried to go, though. I enjoyed listening to the sermons, even if I shivered off my scooter. It never happened, but sometimes I thought it might. The evenings got cold, and sometimes I couldn't properly function, but regardless, I always enjoyed the time at camp.

A few days later, Jason and I sat at my parents' campsite with my sister Taylor and a friend and played bullshit. I know, not very pure of us, raised in the Christian faith to

play a game called a bad word. To be fair, we said BS instead of bullshit, and we had fun. I had played a few games but got tired and asked Jason to help me get into my tent so I could rest a little. I could hear the game from where I lay as everyone continued playing. Jason put down some cards and said, "A pair of eights." Something about the way he said it made me squawk from my tent, "Bullshit!" He later told me how funny he found it because I guessed right, he had been lying.



Once Jason had to leave, I enjoyed life as a future bride. Anna and her mother, Alice, invited all the women from my parents' church and hosted my first bridal shower. I have known most of them since my family and I moved to Humboldt County. They held the shower at the home of Laura Tanner, which I had requested because of how much I loved her home. Since we were a young couple moving into our first place, we didn't have much of anything. I opened presents of homemade afghans and things to use in our kitchen. I opened up one present and, to my surprise, found lingerie. Gifts typically got handed around

for everyone to see and added to the already opened gifts pile. Anna sat on one side of me, and my little sister sat on the other, and a bunch of older ladies from the church surrounded me. I had no idea what to do or say, but I knew with almost absolute certainty my face had turned red.

After all the gifts had been opened, everyone made their way to the table to choose from the selection of elegantly displayed appetizers and cake. My mother made the cake for the bridal shower as a trial run for the wedding cake she planned to make for me. She made it with fondant icing instead of frosting, which I heard tasted less than ideal, but looked the best for pictures and was simple to use. The fondant she used had a light blue color sprinkled with white snowflakes. She only made a one-tier round cake, while the one planned for my reception would have three tiers.

At the end of the bridal shower, most guests had already left or were cleaning up. As the future bride, I wasn't allowed to do anything, not that I could have done much from my wheelchair. Pamela and her fiancé Devin sat on a couch in a large breakfast nook by the kitchen. We started talking, and I decided I liked Devin. They asked questions about where Jason and I planned to live and other

typical questions for a soon-to-be-married woman, but I remember most how they asked whether we wanted to have children. Before answering, I looked around to see if my mother stood nearby. My mother had made her feelings clear about me getting pregnant, and she thought it shouldn't happen. She should have sat me down and talked with me as to why I shouldn't get pregnant. Because I thought she saw me as her hurt baby that needed her mom and shouldn't think about having a baby of my own. And that felt like the only reason behind her logic, but there was a bigger issue. Not seeing my mother nearby, I answered Pamela's question, "Definitely." I wanted children and knew Jason wanted children as well.

I wholeheartedly hoped we would have children, but honestly, I didn't know if I would get my wish. Even if we didn't have children and no matter how much time we got, I prayed our marriage would be happy. But I would get married! That idea kept blowing my mind. Because even though the future with my disease terrified me, a future with Jason gave me excitement and hope. But before I could prepare for married life, we had to prepare for the wedding and honeymoon. Mom not only did a lot for my wedding but also helped me save up money for me and

Jason's honeymoon. I had enjoyed the cruises Mom had planned for our family to go on, so I decided a cruise would be a great honeymoon trip. A trip on a cruise ship could be expensive. I couldn't believe my mother had our family do it twice, and she had seven of us to pay for.

For someone in a wheelchair, a cruise felt like one of the easiest vacations because there would be less transferring back and forth from the car and the wheelchair, not to mention loading the wheelchair in the car. Not that Jason ever acted like he minded having to do that for me, but I hated if people wanted to spend time with me apart from where I lived; it involved manual labor. So even though it wouldn't have mattered to him, I wanted us to go on a cruise. It would also be his first one, and I think everyone should get to go on a cruise at least once in their lifetime. So for our honeymoon, I found a cruise on a carnival inspiration ship to Catalina Island, which sounded kind of romantic and yet still affordable.

With our honeymoon all set, I prepared for my fall semester in college. I took three courses at the community college. I once again hated the idea of having a lot of time on my hands, so despite my impending wedding, I focused on learning things that would hopefully improve my fu-

ture and not just on one day of it. Elizabeth had taken psychology classes at Humboldt State University. She liked the social science of psychology so much that she would soon get a degree in it. So I took an introductory psychology class that fall. I hoped to like it and find enjoyment in sharing it with my sister. Psychology has some good points, but after that first class, I knew I wouldn't find passion in it.

“It is our choices... That show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.”

- J. K. Rowling



Chapter Twenty-Five

Bridesmaids and Sunburns

I made most of the choices for my wedding while my mother did a lot of the work. But I had the duty of choosing my bridesmaids and picking their dresses. I definitely wanted to have Anna, Emma, and Erika as bridesmaids. At the time of my engagement, I felt equally close to Anna and Emma and didn't know which one I should ask to be my maid of honor. I had known Anna since I turned fourteen, but I had seen Emma every day for two

years, excluding summer and home leaves. I got to have both women at my wedding, no matter whom I chose. Though I took time to make my decision because Anna had been such a good friend for longer, I picked her as my maid of honor.

Most people have sisters and friends as their bridesmaids, and I had three sisters, which I considered adding to my bridal party. As a bridesmaid, my little sister Sara didn't seem old enough, but I definitely wanted her as a flower girl. I had never gotten along well with Elizabeth, and I wanted to feel supported by my bridesmaids during my wedding ceremony. And as much as I wish I could say I wanted Elizabeth beside me that day, I couldn't. Taylor, on the other hand, I would have happily had as a bridesmaid if she wanted to. If I had told her I wanted her as my bridesmaid, she would have for me. But Taylor always looked so awkward in social situations, and I didn't want her to remember my wedding day with discomfort.

Therefore, even though I spent several days deliberating over whether I should include one or both of my older sisters in my wedding, I finally decided what I wanted on my wedding day shouldn't matter to anyone else. As a result, I kept my bridal party small and included my close

friends. Already having decided who I would have as my bridesmaids, that left only shopping to find what they would wear.

Since I had liked none of the bridesmaid dresses at the bridal boutique where I had gotten my wedding dress and found no other stores nearby to look for wedding apparel, I did online shopping. I had envisioned a specific color of purple for the dresses the bridesmaids would wear. The dresses I had seen from the websites of the stores I had visited online had not been the right color of purple or even a style I liked. Not thinking I would find what I sought, but to leave no stone unturned, I went to [walmart.com](http://www.walmart.com). And I found it, dresses in the perfect shade of purple and a full-length gown that looked exactly like what I wanted. I felt elated that I had found gowns I wanted my bridesmaids to wear at such a good price.

Getting my three bridesmaids' dimensions, I ordered the dresses and had one mailed to each bridesmaid. Each bridesmaid received her dress and reported it fit well. I would wear a sleeveless dress, and the weather rarely got cold at Rio, and even if it got cold outside, the ceremony took place inside, so I didn't see a problem in sleeveless bridesmaids' gowns. However, Anna was more conserva-

tive and wanted the bridesmaids to wear something that would cover their shoulders. So already deciding I wanted my bridesmaids to wear these dresses and not wanting to search for others, Anna looked around and found short sleeve black satin shrugs. It added elegance to the attire for my bridesmaids I liked, and they would wear some black dress shoes of theirs. That was it. We completed their ensemble, and it looked perfect.

With wedding preparations getting completed, we needed to plan where we would live after the wedding. We originally intended to move to Humboldt County to live close to my parents and, in fact, in a rental they own. The apartment we would have lived in needed some major work, but we could make the apartment into a nice first home. We decided to live in Humboldt for proximity to my family, so they could help Jason care for me. During our time at Rio, we had fallen in love with the Sonoma County area. Therefore, not yet needing support from both my family and my husband, I thought we should live where we wanted. So we told my parents no and looked around Healdsburg for a place we wanted to live the next time I came to Sonoma County. I relished looking at the apartments we considered and imagining our lives there.

Most of the apartments we considered we found in Santa Rosa and a half hour from Jason's work. When I told my mom, she worried about me staying that far away from Jason for most of the day. However, I didn't think of myself as needing constant help, and I did not want to live every day prepared for something bad to happen. And even if I got hurt while alone, painful things happen to perfectly normal people every day.

We found an apartment that looked perfect, with a large enough bathroom with plenty of space to add grip bars and a good-sized kitchen to fit my wheelchair. It had monthly rent we could afford but didn't have handicap-accessibility. I thought I would do fine without handicap-accessibility, and I loved how the yellow and cream colors made the whole complex so bright and cheerful. And the apartment we would move into sat next to the pool! We would get to sign the lease agreement before the end of the year and move in before leaving for our honeymoon. The apartment building stood in Santa Rosa near the junior college where I could take classes like I wanted. My future began to look exciting.

The church in Humboldt County where my parents held memberships didn't have a dream wedding venue.

And deciding our future home would be in Sonoma County, having the wedding at Rio just made sense. It delighted me that we could get married on the Rio campus and in a church I loved so much.

I could keep the insurance through my mother for a while longer, even though I wouldn't be living in her home. Since I didn't plan on trying to get a job with insurance, I gladly would keep hers. Her insurance fully covered my medical needs, and even had dental. My wisdom teeth had never bothered me, but life as a wife was undoubtedly time-consuming. So my parents decided I should have them removed now. My parents worried about how I'd handle the pain and made an appointment with an oral surgeon who could remove my wisdom teeth under general anesthesia. I could be a lightweight with many drugs and heard how loopy I acted one evening from taking some doctor-prescribed pain pills. But my mother, who worked as a nurse, didn't worry, so I figured I would be okay. The day arrived for my morning appointment with the oral surgeon, and my dad drove me to a brown office building in Eureka. They showed me into a hazel exam room and transferred me into a tan-colored dental chair with the help of my dad. A dental assistant came

in wearing brownies on her scrubs; everything looked so brown! Every dentist I have ever met has acted super nice, and this one was no exception; he walked into the exam room with a wide grin on his face. Introducing himself and shaking my dad's hand as if they knew each other, my dad had probably done dental work in the office, and everyone liked him. The dentist put an alien-looking contraption over my mouth and nose, told me to breathe deeply, and about a minute later, I snoozed. I recall waking up and hearing the appointment ended and getting transferred from the dental chair to my wheelchair and from my wheelchair to the car. But I have no recollection of the drive and getting in the house and into my bed. Not waking up till evening for dinner, I felt surprisingly good for having had my wisdom teeth yanked out. Thankfully I wasn't so disabled I had a long list of doctors to see before I moved, but my mother had one more doctor she wanted me to see. A gynecologist for a birth control shot which would last about three months, and then I would need another. My maternal grandmother had problems with birth control pills causing tumors on her ovaries, and because of that, my mother had always been careful about the type of birth control she used. And now I got passed the baton.

Birth control has this way of making you feel so grown up, even when you're really not. Mom and I still hadn't talked about why a pregnancy for me shouldn't happen, and even if I had known then what I know now, I wouldn't have changed a thing. Not a damn thing.

Whenever I got to, I loved visiting my future husband. On one trip, I went to a Christian festival at the city of Calistoga fairgrounds called *The Rock of Ages*. His sister Jessica joined us for the hot and sunny day in Calistoga, I got along well with her, and her presence only added to my enjoyment of the day.

They held *The Rock of Ages* festival in Calistoga every October, and this year the band BarlowGirl would come. The band consisted of three sisters, and most of their songs sang about purity. Many other bands performed at the concert Jason liked, making the day fun for everyone. The festival had four different stages, but before we got to the area where we could sit to watch the main stage for the appearance of BarlowGirl, we passed a Compassion International booth, among many other vendors. Compassion International has a ministry that asks for help with sponsoring thousands of children. And as a young, almost married couple, it sounded very adult-like to sponsor a

child together. We chose a six-year-old girl from Ecuador who asked for help with her education. After we selected a child to sponsor, we picked a spot on the field to sit and watch as different bands came to perform.

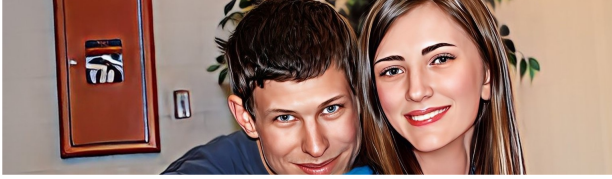
When we decided to eat, we returned to the parking lot to have my first tailgate party with the food we had brought. Following our lunch, the concert announced BarlowGirl. As a fan of their music, getting to see them in person felt surreal to me. I had Jason take me as close as possible to the stage. The area nearest to the stage hadn't looked exactly like a mosh pit, but people stood close, and some did a jig to the music, so it seemed very G-rated but still exciting. After the band performed, BarlowGirl moved to a building on the fairgrounds, where they gave a workshop about their Christian thoughts on dating and relationships. I enjoyed their discussion. I rarely met young people with fame and so much respect for marriage. I found it refreshing. Afterward, I returned to the field with my future husband to listen to the rest of the performers.

I noticed my legs had a really bad sunburn as the sun started going down. I had put sunscreen on my arms earlier in the day but regretfully hadn't done the same for my legs. They offered me some sunblock for my legs, but I

didn't want to struggle with putting it on in public. I had worn a mini skirt with leggings underneath that looked unquestionably adorable but didn't protect as much of my lower legs as I would have liked. I really wish I had accepted sunblock, I just didn't know I could burn that badly. On the ride back to Rio, my sunburn made my legs twitch terribly, making my knees come up and hit the dashboard more times than I could count. I stayed in Shirley's trailer at Rio, and Jason still lived in the dorm. When we got to Rio, Jason helped me into his mom's trailer, but every time before he left, my legs would start twitching, and he would worry about me hurting myself if he left. I don't remember when he finally went to catch a wink, but I didn't get much sleep that night, and I'm fairly certain he didn't either.

“Spread love everywhere you go. Let no one ever come to you without leaving happier.”

- Mother Teresa



Chapter Twenty-Six

Penis Cake

I returned to Rio with my mother and little sister a month later for my second bridal shower. With Jason still living at Rio, he could swing by with a kiss for me before the bridal shower began, making all the ladies ooh and ah about how sweetly he treated me. The guest list included people I had known from a young age, friends from Rio, Jason's family, and others who knew my family and wanted to support me. I also met Jason's little nephew, Blake, for the first time. Brooke had given birth to a baby boy at the beginning of August, and she and

her husband Jesse had moved to Chico for him to finish his college degree but visited and planned to stay for our fast-approaching wedding. I loved the pictures of him in the arms of his Uncle Jason, and now I got to hold him. Holding a little one so small always reminded me of the preciousness of life.

The luncheon didn't serve a fancy meal, but everyone at the bridal shower sat at tables to visit and enjoy the food. I sat with Emma and Bianca, and other friends while we visited. The August after Emma and I had graduated, a new girl came to Rio that Bianca had become friends with. She came into the room they hosted my bridal shower in. I don't remember why, but she stopped by our table to say hi. She told Emma she loved her shirt and, with Emma's general bubbly friendliness, said, "Well, I just love everything about you." That is the main reason Emma's friendship meant so much to me. She had the biggest heart and wanted everyone to be loved and happy, especially her friends.

When the gifts were opened, my aunt Amanda sat beside me at the front of the room and read the cards attached to each gift out loud. And a host of young ladies, including my sister Sara and my cousin Olivia, whom I had

chosen to be my flower girls, assisted me with opening my gifts. Next to me, my aunt would comment on each new gift as I opened them. I announced one gift as the first purchase of our wedding registry. When I shared that with my aunt, she kindly and quietly informed me I shouldn't have watched to see what gifts I got. My aunt Betty made me an album from the bridal shower filled with wonderful pictures and included words of wisdom for my marriage from each lady that came. Once I had opened all the gifts at the bridal shower, they were taken to Jason's room until we moved into our apartment.

We signed the lease on our apartment in Santa Rosa in December. Our first home waited for us to move in as husband and wife, and Jason made a surprise trip up to my parent's house for Christmas. We never had small holidays in my parents' home. They had decorations, a delectable meal, and plenty of sugary treats. I can't imagine anyone wouldn't enjoy visiting my parents' house for the holidays. When Jason called, saying his family wasn't really doing anything, and asked if he would be welcome to join my family. I, of course, told him yes. I really like Christmas, and having him there made it so much better. I still remember calling him into my room early one morning,

worried I wasn't okay; he came quickly. Obviously, having just woken up with how his legs wobbled as if uncertain he should be upright, I instantly felt bad for waking him up because I simply wanted to cuddle with my future husband in front of my tree. Without telling him why I had called, he sat beside me, wrapped me in his arms, and began dozing.



When Christmas ended, my girlfriends announced they wanted to throw me a bachelorette party. And since most of the people I wanted there lived in or near Sonoma County. The girls decided to have the party at mine and Jason's new apartment in Santa Rosa. As close to the wedding as they planned the party, I thought I would move in early and get acquainted with my new home. Before I left, Taylor talked with the family about a decision she made. Feeling as if her brain was masculine she wouldn't continue living as a girl. Since we became teenagers, Taylor often acted depressed, and as siblings, I knew she hadn't always acted like that. As a Christian, I also knew this decision must weigh heavily on her heart.

A choice between faith and happiness is tough for any young adult. But hearing the God you believe in wouldn't let you have both is incredibly difficult. In high school, I came to understand God as a loving friend. If Taylor and I both had things wrong with us, why wouldn't God see us the same way? And if I could fix my problems, if I were able; why couldn't she? Our problems may be several universes different but doesn't a sinful world cause them both? As Taylor told me, she wanted to start living as a boy and eventually have surgeries to complete the transition. Next to me, as Taylor talked, sat Elizabeth, who didn't look surprised by anything our sibling had told us. Taylor and Elizabeth had gotten closer as teenagers, and unsurprisingly Taylor probably had already shared this big news with her. Excluded at home, it didn't disappoint me that I would be leaving to start a new life with my future husband because everyone in my family shared and talked with Elizabeth more than me, and that hurt. But I felt like my time away at Rio could also be a huge contributing factor to why we hadn't been close for the past few years. I would leave, again, for good this time, and since I wouldn't be around to deal with Taylor's transition, I could think about it in an uncomplicated way. But my parents had a

much harder time with it. Parents have a hard time when a child wants to change a lot about themselves, but when changing something as fundamental as gender, even the most loving parents would have a tough time. And as Christians, it must be monumentally hard for them to accept. As a transgender guy, would their child be loved by God? As well as countless other questions I have no doubt they asked themselves. And I didn't know how our little siblings would handle the change, and I worried, but I planned to move and could only pray. I loved Taylor, and I wanted her to have the best out of life. If she wanted this, then I wanted it for her. As a nurse, my mother worried about her putting male hormones into a female body. In response, Taylor continually said her mental health seems more important than her physical health. As someone with a degenerative disease, I can say that both are equally important, and neither should be taken for granted.

Driving down to Santa Rosa and simply leaving behind the drama from home was easier said than done, but when my girlfriends arrived for the party, they helped banish my worries. Even though my bachelorette party didn't have any strippers, we had a penis cake, and most of my friends made great dirty jokes, which for the occasion seemed ap-

appropriate. Between the jokes and the gifts of lingerie I kept opening, I had a red face almost all night. We had kicked Jason out, and many of the girls stayed the night between the couch, the bed, and the floor. In the morning, we had breakfast of Big Franks and probably something else like eggs, but the Big Franks is all I remember. Vegetarian hot dogs called Big Franks were among my favorite things to eat. Jason didn't care for them much, but he would have to learn to deal with them because I definitely would not give them up.

After my bachelorette party, I noticed our apartment definitely needed a few necessities and went shopping with Erika to find them. I had less excitement than most of my shopping trips, but they had been a little juvenile and extravagant. For this shopping trip, we went to Walmart and loaded the cart with everything I thought I needed for the apartment. After the shopping trip, the apartment looked ready to live in and host our first company.

For the week before the wedding, Emma would stay with me. She and I would take the bed while Jason would get the couch. I loved my time with Emma, although her presence may have been more of a chaperone for me and Jason than to visit me.

Regardless of the reason, though, she spent the week with me, and we enjoyed unpacking to make my new apartment into a home. She didn't really like shopping but went with me half a mile to get to the Coddington Mall (which was a trip I would make often). I felt so grown-up and able to go to the mall whenever I wanted. With this new freedom, I bought something only an adult woman would buy; hooped earrings. They were clip-ons, of course! I never have and never will punch holes in my ears. It felt like a silly purchase because I don't think I ever even wore them in public once.

When Emma visited her sister Bianca at Rio and Jason had work a few days later, I decided to do some laundry. Our apartment had washer and dryer hookups, but no washer or dryer yet. So I got into my electric chair and went to the apartment complex's laundromat in the management building. It didn't feel as easy for me as my mom always made it look, but complaining wouldn't help. In my parents' home, I had help every time I wanted to complete something like that, and this time I wanted it done and did it myself.

After accomplishing the task, even though I wish I had done it better, I felt a sense of pride in a job well done.

Leaving the laundromat, I held the laundry basket filled with clean clothes on my lap and steered my wheelchair toward our apartment. I noticed two guys as I drove to our apartment, sitting in a golf cart with various tools, and appeared to be waiting for something. I had asked maintenance to come by and fix some things for me a few days earlier, and they had just got around to it. Instead of showing irritation, that I had kept them waiting. One guy made a comment that surprised me a little. For times like those, I wish I had a perfect memory because to save my life, I can't remember the exact words he used. He said, something like "You're incredibly undaunted, aren't you?" It surprised me because I thought of myself as pathetic and a little scared of trying new things.

After all, I couldn't do most things as well as I wanted, and it amazed me to think of someone I didn't even know thinking of me as brave for doing those things with a disability. I know few disabled people like others, calling them brave for doing such a simple task, but I felt pleased by the compliment. Though I would never call myself brave, having someone notice the task I had accomplished with all of my difficulties was nice. And it also made me feel my efforts to be a good housewife might be hard but possible.

I hadn't become a housewife yet, though, and I still had several days before I could call myself that, and Jason still had his bachelor party to enjoy.

Unlike my bachelorette party, the guys planned to leave the premises for the bachelor party. As Christians, I didn't expect them to go to a strip club, but I gladly heard they wouldn't go wild. They had this place in Rohnert Park called Driven Raceway the guys planned to take Jason to for his bachelor party. It had an indoor kart track where high-speed electric karts could race. The guys had already been there, and even though I felt like driving go-carts around could never get boring, I felt like my party had been more of a pre-wedding celebration.

Jason had his brother Morgan and Kieth as groomsmen and Adam as his best man. He and Adam had been great friends since freshman year of high school, which felt like a long time to us, but spanned only six years. Jason mainly knew Kieth through Adam since Kieth had already graduated from Rio when he came, but as a faculty kid and Adam's friend, Kieth was often nearby and happy to get up to mischief on campus. This one time, Jason, Adam, and Kieth played in Kieth's Rhino and decided it would be a hoot to drive through the Russian River. Losing traction,

the Rhino unintentionally flowed downstream a few feet, but it survived its soaking in the river. Kieth also went to the same elementary school as Adam and I did, so I knew him before I came to Rio, too; I just hadn't known him as well as Adam. In elementary school, Kieth had been away a lot, in the hospital with Leukemia. Morgan, Jason's brother, was one of his last groomsmen; he went to Rio our senior year, so I knew him a little. He seemed like Jason, only taller and less... sociable, helpful, polite, productive; and I didn't like his hair as much, but everyone is less than Jason to me.

“Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it.”

- Brene Brown



Chapter Twenty-Seven

A Man I Love so Completely

We went to Rio Lindo Adventist Academy church for Sabbath worship the day before the wedding. I kept worrying that I had not sent an invitation to someone I wanted at my wedding, so at church, I asked the speaker to announce an invitation for those who wanted to come to our wedding to feel welcome. We had enough space and food for more than we planned to come. So it didn't worry me about this invite welcoming more people

than we could handle. Even if it did, a wedding seems like a social gathering where the more, the merrier.

Following church and lunch in the cafeteria, we spent the afternoon at the Connors' house like many times before. While waiting for the rehearsal, which would be that evening, I decided it would be fun to wear a shirt with the word BRIDE stamped across the chest. I told my idea to Melanie, and she found a white shirt of hers along with some fabric paint and made it for me. With the shirt sitting out in the sun for the paint to dry, I realized I had forgotten something important for our wedding day. The photographer. Since we had graduated, some new faculty had come to the school. A new boys' assistant dean had come with his wife, a photographer, named Haley. Jason had mentioned taking our wedding pictures to her, but I had intended to talk to Haley about it more. I had forgotten, though, so I needed to talk to Haley the day before our wedding. We called her, and luckily, she agreed to come to the Connors' home and discuss our wedding pictures on the Sabbath. I apologized profusely for not talking to her sooner and invited her to the rehearsal. Haley and I talked a little about the kind of pictures I wanted. While I enjoyed taking pictures, I knew little about wedding photography

and left most of it to her. She said she would see us that evening as she left, and I breathed a sigh of relief, happy that she would capture our big day on camera.

I heard little of Sarah and Oliver after graduation, but they ended up teaching at the same college in Mississippi. They married in an outdoor ceremony a few months before; the saying Rio created many marriages proved completely accurate.

While wearing my BRIDE shirt that evening, my family as well as Anna and her mother arrived at Rio for the rehearsal dinner. My grandma Elizabeth chose not to come with them, and before I left home, she told me how she liked Jason and wished us well but thought if she came, she would be another burden for my parents. So though wishing she had come, I understood. Since the sun appeared almost down and the sabbath was nearly over, we could discuss plans for the wedding. Jason's family also made the trip over from Napa for our rehearsal dinner, except they brought salad and pizza for everyone to enjoy before the rehearsal. It would all really happen, and every time I took a moment inside my head, it seemed unreal.

I had planned on having three bridesmaids: Anna, Emma, and Erika, and Jason having three groomsmen:

Adam, Kieth, and Morgan. I had ordered the bridesmaid's dresses a few months earlier and had them mailed to each bridesmaid. And all three groomsmen had gone with Jason to get tuxedos. When Erika forgot her dress in Arizona, she asked her classmate to mail it to her, and we thought it would make it to her in time for the wedding. Regretfully it didn't, and I needed to decide whether Erika and one groomsman should be left out of the wedding or if all the bridesmaids should find new dresses. Talking to a few people who I thought knew everything about weddings, I understood the bridesmaids should be the same number as the groomsmen. Unfortunately, I later found out that if it's your wedding, you can do anything you want. I could have had Erika wear a different dress or simply let Jason have three groomsmen while I only had two bridesmaids. I focused on marrying Jason and didn't concern myself about anything else. So with the wedding happening the next day, I decided to have our wedding party a little smaller.

In spite of wishing I had another plan, I talked with Kieth and Morgan at the rehearsal dinner about who would step aside. I didn't bother talking to Adam. He was Jason's best man and my friend to boot; therefore, he didn't have

a chance of getting out of our wedding. I kind of hoped Morgan would choose not to be at the wedding. He was Jason's brother, so I felt bad I had even hoped he wouldn't be in the ceremony. He had red hair that looked past time for a haircut, and I thought Kieth would look better in our wedding pictures, and he probably would have too, but Kieth graciously stepped aside and let Morgan stand up for his brother.

After dinner, the rehearsal simply had Jason walking his mother and mine down the aisle. Preceded by two couples of my bridesmaids and his groomsmen, then the bible boy and next the flower girls, and lastly, my dad and I coming down the aisle. Our wedding coordinator was a friend of my mother's. She and my mom had helped with many weddings throughout the years, but I was the first one of their children to get married.

When the rehearsal finished, most of us in the wedding the next day said goodnight and headed to our beds, while my parents and many others stayed behind to decorate the Chapel for the reception. My parents had gotten me and my bridesmaids a room in one of my favorite hotels in Healdsburg for the night before the wedding. Emma asked her sister Bianca to fill the empty place we had left for Erika

in the hotel room. Emma and Bianca took one bed while Anna and I shared the other. The rehearsal ended a little before nine, and we drove to the hotel, gave each other French manicures, and went to bed.

In the hotel room the next morning, I got up early to make sure I had plenty of time to get ready for my wedding day. I spent most of that time in the bathroom, where I plucked my eyebrows, brushed and flossed my teeth to perfection, showered, and shaved my legs. Just typical girl stuff, but I knew how much time I could take accomplishing things, so I wanted an early start. I felt the most worried about my teeth. When I had chipped my tooth during my senior year of high school and went to the dentist before graduation to have it filled, the filling and the remaining tooth turned an orangish color that made the tooth look like it wanted to rot out of my head. It didn't look that bad, but it made me feel awkward about smiling, and I liked to smile. Call me vain, but I saw it as one of my prettiest features. However, it looked much better when I used Crest whitening strips and cut them just to put on that one tooth (the bane of my existence). After several attempts at teeth whitening, the tooth discoloration looked less noticeable.



Even now, I can remember how nervous and scared I felt that I would mess something up and ruin my wedding day. I did forget the champagne flutes for the rehearsal engraved with our names, but I survived and everyone else did too.

Emma drove me to the church in my pajamas because I wanted to put on a little makeup, get my hair done, and put my wedding dress on there. It worried me I would take too long to get ready. Thus, as soon as Melanie got to the church, I had her plug in her curling irons to get ready to begin my hair. Melanie had Bianca and the third friend in their trio come to help her with my hair. Haley showed up and started taking pictures of me getting ready. My aunt Betty brought my wedding dress from the dry cleaners. Emma helped me put on some makeup, and Melanie began curling my hair. When Melanie finished with my hair, my mom came in to help put the wedding dress over my head. Apparently, it's the rite of motherhood to help put the wedding dress on your daughter (I had no idea). I also didn't know they took pictures of the bride while she got ready. Getting dressed on your wedding day is definite-

ly no joke. My mom and dad decorated the stage in the sanctuary for the wedding ceremony as soon as the Sunday service had concluded. An arch with tulle flowing down its inner sides and an enormous bouquet on the top with white roses, purple carnations, baby's breath, and ferns sat in the center of the stage. On each side of the arch, they had placed three pedestals, with each one further from the arch and a few inches lower than the one before it. On the top of each pedestal sat a single candle surrounded by lush green ferns, and below each fern, Mom had tied a bow of velvety ribbon and white tulle.

Since we had a January wedding, we hadn't expected a sunny day, but I got a sunny wedding day with barely a cloud in the sky. I had wanted an outdoor wedding, but with my wheelchair, it wouldn't be easy, and I hated to inconvenience anyone; therefore, I didn't push it. But with the sunny day we had, despite needing it, I felt like God blessed our marriage.

I had really overestimated the time I would need to get ready; we still had hours before the ceremony. Having already dressed for the wedding, I decided I would love pictures outside. No one objected and just helped make it happen. They brought the bench from the sanctuary

stage, where it sat waiting for the ceremony. The bench had a white fabric seat big enough for two with gray metal sides decorated with small bouquets of flowers in our wedding colors. They transferred me from my wheelchair to the bench, where it sat outside under a metal vine canopy with the church in the background. As we waited for Jason, Haley took some pictures of just me, and others of me and my mom. I smiled, noticing my aunt Amanda had decorated the back of my wheelchair with a blue sign with white snowflakes that said “Alicia and Jason January 8th, 2012.” She had also decorated each of my wheelchair handles with a ribbon of white tulle, reminding me why I happily claimed Amanda as an aunt.

Jason and the groomsmen finally arrived. I felt incredibly relieved because part of me worried he had changed his mind. Since we couldn't wait to see each other till I came down the aisle, we needed a big reveal. I had never heard of a big reveal, but it apparently made seeing each other before the ceremony special. They used a purple bandanna to cover Jason's eyes as they guided him over to where Melanie held a photography diffuser, only letting me see his shadow as he knelt with my bouquet. Melanie quickly lowered the photography diffuser and untied the bandan-

na from behind Jason's head. The effort everyone took to keep us from seeing each other till a specific moment made us laugh when we finally saw each other.

The pictures we got outside are my favorite photos of the entire wedding. We had such a sunny day, though; we couldn't always easily smile and keep our eyes open for pictures. My little sister Sara found the sun in her eyes very unpleasant and, sadly, would not come to me when I opened my arms for her. My heart broke a little with the realization that with me moving hours away, we wouldn't be as close as we always had been. She may have been only my sister, but my love for her felt more profound. Even though part of me wished things didn't have to change, another part of me felt thrilled they would. Because even though I would say goodbye to my precious little sister, I would marry a man I love so completely.

As the girls and I went inside the church, Jason, his groomsmen, and my adorable cousin, who I had as the Bible boy, stayed on the lawn to get some pictures together. Before everyone came into the church, my younger brother Anthony and Olivia's two older brothers, who looked like a young security detail, all dressed up in suits and

wearing shades, caught the attention of the photographer, who snapped several pictures.

Once everyone got inside, we still had about an hour until the wedding ceremony began, so we took more pictures inside the sanctuary, both with his family and mine. I hated how I looked trying to stand with my height of almost five foot five and having difficulty keeping my back straight because my legs didn't even want to support my weight of a hundred and ten pounds. Therefore, we only took a few pictures, with Jason helping me stand. And most of the time, I sat on the bench next to Jason with his arm protectively around me in case I tried to fall backward, and our families were standing around us.

Things didn't go quite as smoothly as I had hoped when we got pictures with my immediate family. Even though Elizabeth had a better identity as a disabled person, she still seemed eager not to be seen in her wheelchair in pictures. I could understand, but as my wedding and not hers, I felt like she shouldn't have been as picky. At first, she sat in her wheelchair on the left side of the bench where my groom and I sat, while Sara and Anthony stood on the right side of us, and the taller family members stood behind us. Next, she stood behind Jason, holding onto his

shoulder and our mother's arm. Then finally, she sat next to me on the bench while Jason stood behind me with my parents. I don't know how that happened; I guess I would have agreed to the new arrangement, too, but no one asked me, which happened to me a lot. What Elizabeth or Mom wanted typically occurred, and I had gotten used to that, so I made no objections. I smiled at all the pictures even though I felt a little annoyed. When the pictures with my immediate family finished, I got some with the smaller members of our wedding party. The bible boy and flower girls all looked so cute, but it somehow turned into getting pictures of just me and my little sister.

Getting close to the time when the guests would arrive for the ceremony, I went into hiding. Nervous that morning, I hadn't eaten breakfast, which now felt like a lifetime ago. After the pre-wedding pictures, I noticed my hunger, and gladly, no one had commented on my gurgling stomach. They put napkins all over my white dress so I didn't make a mess of it before the wedding, and my mom brought me a sandwich. When I finished the food and washed up, the time came for the ceremony to begin and the processional to make their way down the aisle. Mom had asked Jessica Davis, my second cousin, to play her

violin for my wedding ceremony. She played beautifully and it made the ceremony very elegant.

When the processional began, the first bridesmaid and groomsmen, Emma and Morgan, went down the aisle. Followed by the maid of honor and the best man, Anna, and Adam. My cousin Travis came down the aisle next to the Bible boy. Lastly came the flower girls, my sister, and my cousin, who wore dresses that looked like the ones I had chosen for flower girls for my senior religion project in high school.

As they began playing the Wedding March, my dad picked me up and walked down the aisle with me in his arms. I never enjoyed others' stares but tried to focus on holding on to my dad and looking as good as I could as he carried me down the aisle. At the base of the stage, I went from the arms of the man who had taken care of me for the first twenty years of my life into the arms of my future husband. The officiant asked, "Who gives this woman?" My mother stood next to my father, and they both answered, "We do." Jason carried me up on the stage and sat me on the bench we would sit on through the ceremony.

After Jason sat next to me, Anna came up to me and took the bouquet she would hold for me during the ceremony, and then Rachel began the nuptials. Knowing us from high school, she made it a little more personal than the typical wedding ceremony. Unfortunately, I tend not to be very loud and decided I didn't want to say vows. As the officiant said, "Do you take Jason to be your husband to have and to hold, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health, and forsaking all others for as long as you both shall live?" I could barely hear myself say, "I do," but Rachel heard. She turned to Jason and asked him the same question. His "I do" nearly brought tears to my eyes because his promise felt more than hypothetical; he vowed to care for me in the absence of health for the rest of my life. We had already signed the marriage certificate, but they had us do a reenactment of signing the certificate during the wedding ceremony. Rachel said, "I now pronounce you man and wife. You may now kiss the bride.". I felt nervous with everyone in the audience watching, and I have never been comfortable with public displays of affection, at least not when it's scheduled in the program. We didn't share a long passionate kiss, but when our lips met, the audience and my nervousness evaporated

until the audience chuckled and Jason pulled away, nearly sending me into his lap. Then Rachel said, "I'm happy to announce Jason and Alicia Weston," Jason picked me up and, letting me grab my bouquet from Anna, carried me up the aisle to begin the recessional.

Stepping through the double doors leading out of the sanctuary, Jason set me in my wheelchair that still sat in the foyer from when my dad had carried me down the aisle. As my new husband lowered me to my wheelchair, I took a deep breath, stared at him in amazement, and thought with glee; we did it, we got married!

As the rest of the wedding party exited the sanctuary, the reverie broke. Followed by the wedding guests as they headed to the Chapel in the administration building for the wedding reception. Family and the wedding party stayed behind for more pictures in the sanctuary. When Elizabeth had tried to convince me not to marry Jason, I thought the pain from her breakup with Jacob clouded her judgment, and the fact that she couldn't just be happy for me hurt. I wish I had put my irritation aside and gotten some good pictures I could cherish with her because after all she is my sister. I think everyone has things they regret

not doing on their wedding day, and this is only one of mine.

As we entered the reception with me in my wheelchair and Jason pushing me, followed by our wedding party, I felt shy all over again. After the ceremony, I had a reprieve from the activities of the wedding, and now I felt like they pushed me right back into the center of attention. The reception looked beautiful; they had decorated the room with large lighted snowflakes that hung on a cord, like Christmas lights decorating the edge of the stage. In front of the stage sat the long table for the bridesmaids and groomsmen to sit with Jason and me. They dimmed the lights and hung candles everywhere. The cake my mother lovingly made had three tiers covered with blue fondant and accented by white snowflakes that sat on a round table. On top, they placed a lit cake topper in the shape of a heart illuminating mine and Jason's names. I hadn't even seen them move the decorations my mom had designed for the podium in the sanctuary to the stage in the chapel for the reception, but I felt that little oblivious that day. My mom had decorated the arch with Christmas lights they turned on for the reception, and the candles on the pedestals had

been lit. And the music Emma and I picked out played softly in the background. It seemed perfect.

We had a young wedding party, and without spouses, the table arrangement simply sat me and Jason in the center with my bridesmaids to my left and his groomsmen to his right. I felt more comfortable staying with my wheelchair beneath our table to hide the visual reminder of my disability.

As the time came to give the speeches, the Best Man gave his first and started it by pulling a toaster from under the table and saying he would give a toast. Jason and Adam had thought of the hilarity together and couldn't wait to share it. As Adam finished his toast and in the middle of Anna's, filled with memories and kind words, the bread popped out of the toaster. After the uproarious laughter quieted and Anna finished her speech, they served a meal of soup and salad.

Jason got me food, but with all the attention, I don't remember eating more than a few bites. We cut the cake and Jason helped me throw my bouquet, because I have remarkably poor aim. It may be a wedding tradition, but having Jason put his hand up my gown, take off my garter in public, and throw it at a group of single guys embar-

rassed me, and I felt relieved when my little cousin Travis caught it. We may have stayed longer at the reception than typical for newlyweds because they had begun putting chairs away as we left. And headed outside to the car to begin our drive down to Long Beach, where we would meet the cruise ship and leave on our honeymoon.

I had not gotten my happily ever after from being perfect. But perhaps the happiness I found came from the fact that Jason nor I expected perfection. As he put me and my chair into the car and we drove away, I knew this story was only the beginning with my one in a million.

“Love is friendship that has caught fire. It is quiet understanding, mutual confidence, sharing, and forgiving. It is loyalty through good and bad times. It settles for less than perfection and makes allowances for human weaknesses.”

- Ann Landers