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Born under a Lucky Chinese Sign, Just wish I was Chinese.

Suzanne Newsham

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Born under a Lucky Chinese Sign,
Just wish I was Chinese.

Suzanne Newsham

An abstract presented to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Lindenwood University in fulfillment
of the requirements for the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Writing.

Abstract


This thesis is a cumulation of my life and my career as a student at Lindenwood University. Each essay is a comedic peek into the chaos that is my life. I was heavily influenced by the writing styles of David Sedaris and Sloane Crosley. Their views and easy read style of writing influenced me to write the same type of stories.

The first essay speaks to the influence that my parents had on me by making me feel overly loved and accepted even though I was adopted. “Not a dirty word in my house.”

I continue with various lengths of essays that speak to moments in my life that helped to shape who I am today. Both of my experiences with my bank robberies are contained in the thesis as well as the decline of a family friend's mental health.

As I wrote each essay I found that the main player in my life besides myself is my husband. His presence is felt throughout each essay through one aspect or another. When I went to put the essays in order, I discovered much to my delight that the thesis became a love story to our romance.

The final chapter about how we came to be married was supposed to be chapter three but I realized that it need to be last. I had a responsibility to my reader to show where the love that my husband and I share, came from.



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A culminating project presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Lindenwood University in fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Writing
2009

Committee in Charge of Candidacy

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Introduction

My mother loves to tell the story of when my family was visiting the sea shore when I was three years old. Apparently, I had been able to read for quite sometime when we ventured on this particular vacation with other members of my family that we only saw once a year. My aunt Margaret saw me reading a book that was intended for 1st graders and remarked how cute I looked pretending to read.

My mother proceeded to inform my aunt that I was not only could I read , I enjoyed doing so. My aunt scoffed that a “baby” could read. I read a few passages out loud but that only convinced my aunt that I had memorized the book. So my mother went to the local grocery store, bought a magazine then brought in back and made me read it out loud to my aunt. She was amazed that I could read at such a young age.

And so began my love affair with the written word. Growing up, I was an avid reader. Reading anything I could get my hot little hands on. My favorite time at school was when the Scholastic book sellers would pull in and set up their wares. They'd let the kids walk around the display and write down what titles they wanted so they could then go home and ask their parents for money. (Smart people Scholastic) I, invariably, would run home with a list of any book that I didn't already have in my

possession. Then my mother and I would sit all that night talking about what books I could get. My dad and her were very supportive, I usually ended up with about half of what I wanted with a promise to go to the book store when I finished them.

When I was in second grade, my mother received a phone call from my school. It seemed that the principal was worried that I was losing interest in reading class since I was academically ahead of them. The principal wanted to know if my parents would consider allowing me to attend the 4th grade reading class. At first my Mother resisted saying that she didn't want me to be in a class where I was the youngest. But the principal assured my mother that I wouldn't be because I was only one of six 2nd grade students who were chosen to "skip" a few reading grades. My mother relented and I soon found myself in a class where I was finally able to be challenged again with reading.

It was about this time that I realized I liked to write as well. I began to look forward to the writing assignments as much as the reading assignments. I wrote a short story for my mother called the "Duck Princess," about a princess who is turned into a duck. My mother loved and encouraged me to write more. Which I did but didn't show to people. Writing was just something for me to enjoy and show my parents.

Then in 8th grade, the school held a writing contest for the DARE program. I wrote an essay that involved my brother and me discussing drugs and their affect on people's lives. I turned in the essay and just a few days later my father went to a parent/teacher meeting at my school.

My father returned home, his face beaming with pride. My teacher, Mrs. Dilley told him that my essay was the talk of the faculty. I had not only won the

contest but they were considering sending it to the state contest as well. Mrs. Dilley told my father that I had a gift and the school wanted me to help me grow this talent in any way possible. To that extent, they assigned contests and helped me with my writing as much as they could. But a threat to my creativeness was coming that I hadn't anticipated. That threat was called puberty and high school.

I hated high school. I floundered whereas before I had been a natural student. High school wore me down and made me and my creativity take a nose dive. I never quit thinking of stories or essays but I never wrote them down or told anyone about them. It was just enough to get through the day at school and not want to hang myself when I got home.

I failed courses because I didn't want to do the homework. The teachers had thirty kids in each course, extra attention was a non-entity. So I coasted through barely graduating in four years. But one thing did happen that changed my life in high school and my writing. I began to date a wonderful boy in Senior year named Jesse Newsham.

Jesse was as much a reader as I was and doubly so in creativity. For the first time in my life I was able to talk about my writing with someone who understood because he had the same drive and ambitions. He encouraged me to write and to try to express my creativity through writing.

My high school career had been a bust but my college years were full of insight, growing and new information. I took classes that inspired me and made me want to be a better writer.

But then a teacher came my way to dash my dreams. I had started out as a English major, writing and literature being my passion but when I took English 101, I

kept receiving Cs. I went to my teacher for guidance and she told me that perhaps English wasn't my forte.

I wasn't crushed, just surprised because I loved English but I decided that maybe she was right. I turned my attention to the other field that I had fallen in love with at college-psychology.

My school career and job career intermixed within the next years of my life. When I graduated with my B.A. in psychology, the bank I was working at to support myself didn't want to let me go and hired me as the assistant branch manager. I rode that wave into becoming a branch manager at a larger bank by the time I was 29.

But writing was never far from my mind. I wrote when the feeling possessed me and I was still a voracious reader.

My best friend in sixth grade(who is still my best friend) introduced me to romance novels. Not the classical type from Jane Austin or Emily Bronte but the bodice rippers from Joanna Lindsey and Danielle Steel.

I became sucked into the story, the romance that was budding between the hero and the heroine, any complications that would arrive and, of course, the sex scenes. I didn't quite understand the mechanics of the scenes when I was younger but I adored the closeness that the characters were experiencing. The author's wording of the feelings and emotions made me giddy inside and I loved it.

The romance novels that I began to seek out were ripe with historical backdrops: Scotland's highlanders and English Dukes being the top of my readers list. I devoured them through my banking years, reading three to four a week and still never getting enough.

I began to write them in my mind. I had read so many that I knew the patterns

and knew I could replicate them. But also give them a twist of my own creativeness.

But writing a novel was harder than I thought. When I first started out, the first chapter flew out of my brain but then it stopped. Writer's block sat in and although I tried to write and eventually got to chapter seven, the rest of the story wouldn't come out. So it sat on my computer's hard drive for five years. Gathering dust around the other ideas that I would type on my computer lest I forget all about them.

Happily I'd get up in the morning, go to work, come home, watch Law and Order, then went to bed. A pattern that I perfected for over two years of my life. Then one day I woke up in the morning and realized that I wasn't happy anymore. I had become complacent in my life. I had let all my hopes and dreams of writing fall to the way side. I decided to do something about it and change my direction.

So I set out to find writing classes at the local community college. I also took an few fun classes along the way: sign language, French, Italian, knitting, crocheting, cake decorating, painting and the study of the 1920 jazz poets.

I searched for writing classes but they were far and few between so I took some online writing classes. Then after about a year of me taking continuing educational classes, my mother began insisting that I go back to college to get my masters degree in business. It made sense, she said, since I was a bank branch manager. But I still wasn't ready to give up on my dream of writing and if I took business classes for two years that would definitely interfere with my dream again.

But I reluctantly began to search for business classes at the local University-Lindenwood. Just so I could tell my mother I was at least looking into the idea of getting my masters.

I'll never forget the day that I looked on the website and found that Lindenwood offered a Masters Degree in Fine Arts in writing. I became giddy and excited. I had been searching for classes to help me with my writing and here was an entire program that would allow me to receive my masters in my dream subject.

I called and set up an appointment with the LCIE director immediately. My husband was behind me as long as he gave me a lecture about how important it was that I try to get published and actually finish writing projects that I started. My mother still wanted me to go to school for business so I promised her that I would talk to the director about both degrees.

The director was wonderful and insightful. "What do you want to do with the rest of your life," he asked.

"I want to write," I said.

"Then get your degree in what you love and want to do," he said.

From the moment, I stepped into my first class, I knew that this is what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. Getting your master's is supposed to be hard work but I have never once found it difficult.

For the first time in my life, I had somewhere to go to talk about my writing and other people's writing. I looked forward to every class and found myself to be growing as a writer. When I look at what I had written before I came to Lindenwood, I am astounded at how much I have learned and grown.

I also made tons of new friends and met some classmates that although I did not like them personally, I found them to be extremely talented. Which pushed me to write better. All in all, a good situation.

When I came to Lindenwood, I thought of myself as a fiction writer and no

more. The ideas that swirled in my brain were romance novels and an occasional mystery story certainly my life was not interesting enough for an autobiography.

The only interesting occurrences in my life had been my two bank robberies at my work. And I had those in my hip pocket ready to go when I took my first nonfiction cluster. Which so happened to be my first cluster. I thought that I would flounder like I did in high school but much to my surprise, I didn't.

I found myself caught up in the magic of being in a safe haven for writers. I could talk freely and bring my work to be critiqued. Not torn apart or shredded in front of me but a chance for development. I did write about my first bank robbery but then something happened to change my life that cluster.

My beloved dog developed cancer at only six years old. I cried and wept and found myself wanting to write about it like I had through my years. But I experimented with what I wrote then turned it in as a lyrical essay. Something I would have never tried before.

I continued to experiment with my classes, trying new stories and ideas that I never thought in a million years I would write. In fact, I had planned for my final thesis to finish the fiction novel that I have been trying so desperately to finish over the past five years. But then one of my teachers introduced me to the writings of David Sedaris.

I laughed so hard at Mr. Sedaris' humorous take on the moments of his life, that I got stared at as I waited for my prescription in the local grocery store. I amazed at how he could make the most mundane occurrence vivid through his humor. I ran out and bought all I could of his books and read each one with a smile and a chuckle under my breath. I also realized that it was the first time since I was a child that I had

bought a different genre besides romance novels. I needed to expand my horizons.

Then one day in class, I was telling my classmates a funny story that had happened to me the week before. I had gone to the hospital to visit a family friend and had ended up in the psyche ward to hilarious results. The class laughed as I told them my story and someone commented to me, "Suzanne, you always have the best stories." Which made me feel good because I love to make people laugh.

As I walked my dogs that night, I realized that I was one of those people that have the best stories to tell. I see the humor in almost every situation and then love to repeat the story for a laugh. Maybe my life stories weren't so boring after all, maybe like Mr. Sedaris, I could write about moments in my life.

So I thought about what would my essays of life include. First, I am adopted but I'm the most well adjusted adopted person I know. My parents and I even joke about it over the years. Once when my mother asked if I was happy they adopted me, I replied, "not if the Rockefeller's were next in line."

I knew the second chapter would be my belief that I have an identical twin somewhere out there. Why would this be my second chapter? Because almost no one else can say that.

My third chapter would be about my husband's and my courtship. We went to kindergarten together and reconnected in high school, that's too sweet a story to pass up.

My two bank robberies would be perfect chapters as they were both violent and somewhat funny. In the first bank robbery, the robber actually asked me how my day was going. When I replied, "not good." He said his day sucked too.

My dogs became a chapter because they are my children and they've done so

many things to make me pull out my hair. Macey ate my wisdom teeth, Shamrock howls at Aerosmith and Asuka ate an entire baby pool.

Also, my excursion to the psych ward, the story that got me thinking that I could write my own humorous essays became a story in my thesis.

But I never realized how much life lends itself to writing and humor. I had my thesis plotted out from start to finish but some essays didn't make it because I had other incidents happen in my chaotic life.

My mother's cancer didn't make it because I had another traumatic incident happen. A friend shot herself on purpose through the hand. My story of me losing my job from Edward Jones didn't make it because I got asked to be the Faculty Advisor for the Cheerleaders. (I'm so not a cheerleader, just read Will my I.Q go down?)

But I discovered that my life and everyone's life is full of rich, vivid stories if you just look. I hope that any reader who finds this thesis enjoys reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it and living it. But mostly I learned from being a student at Lindenwood is never give up on your dreams. Keep fighting for them and make them come true.

I still plan on becoming a Romance novelist. I have quite a few ideas in my head and I've joined the Missouri Romance Writers of America to help facilitate my dreams.

Chapter 1

For 50 cents more, my parents could have gotten a Hot Plate

Adoption-(noun)-The act of being better than other people because your parents got to chose you. Where as birth children just have to be accepted despite their obvious flaws.

-Suzanne Struckhoff Newsham

"You're weird because you're adopted."

Christine Knoll spit these words out at my five year old face during kindergarten recess. Two seconds before I had been playing ball with a group of girls, minding my own business. I didn't get angry but I did remind Christine of her error.

"Well, my mommy and daddy wanted me, your mommy and daddy *had* to have you."

Her eyes began to widen and her lower lip begin to tremble. Then in a flash of energy, she turned tail, ran to the playground supervisor, Ms. Schimwig and burst into tears.

I found myself hauled to the principal's office with my mother being called in.

"So, let me get this straight," my mom said to the principal. "You want her to

stop defending herself from bullies."

Sister Barbara put her hands together, "What we want is for her to tone down her...exuberance about being adopted."

My mom laughed, "She's special and she will continue to say so."

With that we left the office and went to the car. My mother put her arms around me and said, "I'm so glad we adopted you."

The word adoption was never a dirty word growing up around my house. My parents let me know from the moment that I could understand that I was adopted. That meant that although my parents weren't my biological parents, they were my parents in the bigger sense. They took care of me when I was sick, they fed and clothed me, they helped me grow physically and mentally. Most importantly, they loved and supported me in everything I did.

When I was younger, all I knew was that I was special because my parents chose me while other children were just born into their families. And because we all knew I was adopted, the thought of me being adopted never really crossed our minds.

When I was seven, I developed allergies that affected my daily functioning. My parents took me to the allergist and during the appointment were asked numerous questions about their genetic history. My parents happily obliged and were at the office about two hours, when it dawned on my mother that I was adopted. Their genetic history played no part in mine. My mom and dad's laughter filled the room. The allergist failed to see the humor in the misunderstanding and gave them dirty looks.

My adoption was never a taboo subject for my parents and me either. When I

was 16, my mother and I were watching a special on abused children. She turned to me and said, "Aren't you glad we adopted you?"

"Not if the Rockefeller's were next in line," I retorted with a smile.

When I was eighteen, after watching my favorite soap opera, All My Children, I began to worry that I had been the product of rape. What if my birth mother had been raped and I was born from that violence? I couldn't stand that idea but I couldn't bring myself to talk about it. I became convinced that my birth mother had been raped. Why else would she have given me up?

After weeks of the turmoil, I finally asked my mother what she knew about my birth parents. She seemed surprised, since I never brought it up before when I told her my theory about the rape.

"Suzy," she said. "That didn't happen."

"How do you know? You don't have any information about my birth parents."

"Who says I don't? You've just never asked." Then she told me everything she knew. My birth parents were high school students who weren't ready for a baby. They had dreams of going to college and decided to give their baby to a family who was ready and could love and support the baby. My mother answered all the questions that I had and then some. She didn't know their names but she offered to help me look for my birth parents if I wanted.

"I already have the perfect parents," I said, "Why seek out anything else?"
It's a creed that I still carry to this day.

But being adopted also has affected me in more ways than just who I am. It's made Jesse and I realize that adoption is in our future. Especially since the idea of pregnancy scares me to death.

I can pinpoint, almost to the exact second, that moment I decided that pregnancy wasn't for me...

It was lunchtime at my work and my boss, Dana and I were sitting in the back room, just shooting the breeze as we had for the past five years.

Dana was eight months pregnant on that particular day with her second daughter, Jordan. Now, I had known Dana when she had had her first daughter but we weren't as close as when Jordan was on her way. In fact, I had known about Dana's second pregnancy before her husband even had because Dana had done the pregnancy test at work so I felt closer to the little bundle of joy growing in Dana more than any other baby before in my 28 years. Dana and I spoke frequently about what was buzzing in her family with the baby's room and Dana getting her daughter, Emilie ready to be a big sister. I was really excited for Dana and her family, Dana had always wanted a lot of kids and now her family was expanding. As was her belly...

At lunch, she began rubbing her belly, as she had been doing the last six months, and moaned about her shape and how she looked like a whale and how much weight she had put on. I, of course, was telling her how beautiful she looked and it wasn't fat; it was a baby. (I truly think that all pregnant women know this but they love to have other people dote and tell them that they are beautiful).

"No kidding, it's a baby." Dana laughed as she began to pull up her shirt. She tucked her shirt under her breasts and proceeded to rub her bare tummy. She found a particular spot on the top of the swell, "watch this."

She pushed down on her stomach, not hard mind you but with pressure, her stomach went in and then a bigger bump appeared. "See that's Jordan's butt, right

here," she smiled as she rubbed where Jordan's tushy supposedly was.

"Are you sure," I asked. I was not smiling like Dana was, my eyes were bigger than saucers with my left eyebrow in a high arch.

"Sure, I'm sure, Jordan's eight months now; she's entirely formed. Watch I'll do it again," she said as she began to push on her stomach again.

"No, no: no need to do it on my behalf." my hands waived in the air trying to stop her but it was too late.

Her hand lovingly pushed her stomach, but instead of Jordan's rump, something else appeared. It was the perfect outline of a baby's hand. Dana shrieked at the top of her lungs and called for the other employees to come see what was happening. Allison, who has two kids, was the first to respond.

"Omigosh," Allison squealed as she placed her hand on Dana's belly and Deanie, with one child, was the next shrieker. "I've never seen such a perfect outline. That means she's going to be gifted, Dana," Deanie smiled and nodded her head approvingly.

It was about then that Dana noticed I was not shrieking, squaling or screaming. I was avocado green in the face, sick to my stomach, trying not to throw-up.

"Are you okay," Dana stared at me, eyebrow in the air, with all the concern of a mother.

"I-I guess s-so." I stuttered as my mouth hung open at the sight of the tiny hand print on her stomach.

"Was it something you ate?" Allison asked as her head tilted to the side, motherly concern dripping in her voice.

Before I could answer, my stomach answered Allison's question. I had to run to the kitchen sink to vomit. When I was finished, I slowly wiped my mouth and turned to face the trio behind me. Dana still hadn't pulled down her shirt so I could see Jordan moving again. The nausea hit me like a ton of bricks and I turned back to the sink but I didn't throw up again. I just stood over the sink, breathing hard trying to get the nauseating feeling and lightheadedness to pass. It took a few minutes but with me doing my own version of Lamaze, my stomach settled down. As I stared at the dull, gray finish of the kitchen sink, I was slowly beginning to realize that it hadn't been my chicken pot pie that I had had for lunch that was causing my illness.

"Dana, can you put down your shirt," my request echoed from the sink.

"Sure, Suzanne," Dana said.

I slowly turned to her and leaned my back against the sink to support my shaky legs. She had pulled down her maternity shirt and told Allison and Deanie to go back to work, she would take care of me she told them. I crossed the room and resumed sitting in the chair opposite of Dana. I put my head on the table and closed my eyes, willing Dana not to ask any questions.

"What just happened?" She asked, I could feel her glaze burning through my head, "Do you need to go home?"

"No-Just give me a minute," I wasn't sure if I knew what had happened to me. But Dana wasn't the kind of boss or friend to not check on me.

"Why did you want me to put me shirt down before you turned around again?" her voice was soft, almost melodious, it put me at ease. I almost hated myself for what I said next.

"Because that was the grossest thing I have ever seen," I sputtered out as I

lifted my head from the table.

“What, my fat belly,” She looked offended. I would have been offended, if a close friend had said that to me.

“No, the whole thing,” I stretched my hand out and waived at her stomach in a general way.

She put her hands over her belly as if to shield Jordan from the harsh words from my mouth. She looked at me with a puzzle on her face, like she wasn't sure what to say next but eventually she said, “The whole moving baby thing?” She said it like she was questioning me and the question, like she shouldn't even be asking that question. But that was the answer.

“It looked like something from Aliens,” I said, my hand going over my mouth again.

“Aliens?”

“You know, that movie where the alien comes out of the guy's chest,” I made the appropriate motions of an alien escaping from my chest: with my hand coming away from my chest as a claw.

Dana's eyebrow went up, “that's disgusting.”

“Exactly,” I said my head bobbing up and down in agreement.

“Suzanne,” Dana's managerial voice came out, she leaned as much as she could across the table, “This is a baby. It's a miracle. A gift from God.” Her pointer finger was tapping the table with each line, “It is not disgusting. It happens every day. And you should feel lucky that you saw this.” She pointed at her stomach. “This is going to happen to you someday.”

“Oh no, not me,” I said shaking my head, “not me.” My husband and I had

been wavering on having children since we had gotten married but this was it. Jordan acting like an alien had put the final nail in the coffin-pregnancy was out.

And that meant adoption was in. Jesse and I look forward to telling our children that we are so happy that we adopted them. Hopefully, I'll give them the confidence that I had growing up. And be just like the great parents I had.

Chapter 2

Me, Myself and My Twin

*It is not economical to go to bed early to save the candles
if the result is twins. ~Chinese Proverb*

“Sean Kielty is dead, Suzy. He was only 35, and died of a massive heart attack at Lowe's!” Jennie said.

I had just lied to my best friend. When the phone rang and I realized it was her on the other end, I said I was happy it was her. Now as I heard the news, I wasn't happy she had called at all.

“Jennie, oh my God. You can't be serious,” I said. Why is it when people tell you bad news you always say that?

“Can you believe it? He's the same age as my brother. He was only 35. Dropped dead in Lowe's, today. It's all anyone can talk about.” Jennie had worked at the local Italian restaurant since she was sixteen, everybody in town went there to eat, drink and gossip. Sean's death was a main topic on everyone's plate. “God, do you remember when we babysat at his house?” She said.

"How could I forget?"

In high school, my cousin Gretchen was friends with Sean's sister, Kristie. Kristie called me and wanted to know if I would watch her two year daughter at her parents house. "Parent's house", I asked. "Why don't your brothers watch her?"

"Watching a two year old is not really their thing," she said.

"I have my best friend spending the night that night," I said, the disappointment clearly coming through my voice.

"Jennie," she said, "Why don't you bring her?"

Jennie squealed like the good fifteen year old she was when I told her.

"Where are her brothers going to be?" She panted between screams of ecstasy.

"I don't know. All she said was that watching her daughter wasn't their thing," I said trying to be cool, calm and collected. But the truth was that the idea of being in the Keilty house was making me giddy. I was going to be in the house of the hottest guys in school. Maybe they'd be there? Maybe they'd come home and take a shower? They were on the football team, after all. If not, Jennie and I would still have to chase Kristie's daughter into their bedrooms and see their stuff, look around, see where they slept.

"I can't believe such a gorgeous guy is dead," I said to Jennie.

"I know, that's why I had to call you. Well, I have to get back to work. Talk to you later," she said.

I sat with the phone cradled to my ear for what seemed like an eternity. When Jesse walked into the room. "What's wrong?" He said.

"Do you remember Sean Kielty from high school? He was two years ahead

of us.”

“Name sounds vaguely familiar,” Jesse said. He crossed the room and took the phone from my hand.

“He was 35, Jesse and died of a massive heart attack today.” I said

“That’s terrible.” Jesse kissed the top of my head and began telling me that we were healthy, we went to the doctor and nothing like that was ever going to happen to us.

I didn’t say much except nodding: then I blurted out, “Jesse, he was a twin. He has an exact twin named Michael.”

Jesse’s arms came around me. He didn’t say another word. Only he would understand why that would make me so upset.

“So do you ever think you have any siblings out there,” Jesse asked. We had only been dating a few months, and we were enjoying the picnic he packed. The breeze blew over the blanket that we were sitting on in the park.

“I have a sister,” I said as I bit into the cheese spread covered French bread.

“Wow, what’s her name? He asked.

“I don’t know.”

Jesse’s head came off of the blanket, “You know, you have a sister but you don’t know her name?”

“Well, I don’t *know*, know it, but I know it,” I said as I placed my hand over my heart, “in here.”

When I was about five, my Mother and I went to the grocery store to shop

and visit my Pop. While we were there, my Dad called over his friend, Angie, to retell a story that she had told him earlier.

The day before while Angie was stocking the shelves, a lady came up to ask her a question. With the lady was a little girl, who looked identical to me. In fact, Angie had even called her by my name and wanted to know how the lady knew my parents. The girl looks so much like me, the lady had a difficult time proving that it wasn't really me but her own daughter.

"What do you think of that kiddo," my Pop said to me.

"Everyone has a doppelganger out there," I said as I shrugged my shoulders.

The group of adults laughed and Angie asked me what a doppelganger was.

"I saw it on T.V.," I said. "It means everyone has a twin. Someone who looks just like them. Mine just lives closer than Germany."

I never thought much about that incident again until I was in High School. My sophomore year in High School, a change began to overtake me. Instead of being the happy-go-lucky kid I once was, I became depressed and shut myself away from the world. I would come home from school and sit in a dark room until my Mother came home to scream at me to get out of this funk. I tried to explain to her why I was feeling that way but it never quite came out. "I didn't know," I'd tell her. "There's just something wrong in my chest. There's nothing wrong with my life but I feel that there's something missing."

I never wanted to hurt her feelings by talking about my adoption but I felt that there was something wrong with my adoption. Not that I didn't feel loved at home, not that I didn't love and adore my family but there was something or someone missing.

By junior year, I was back to my old self: happy, cheery, like the empty space had completed itself. It was if, a fog had cleared around my soul. My Mother told everyone that my mood had been caused by "hormones." I never corrected her but what it really felt like was someone else was having a bad time and their mood was transferring to me. Like when you watch television and you see the suffering of others, it affects you where you feel for them, but for me it was as if my internal television was tuned into someone and I couldn't turnoff the emotions it was invoking.

After my "episode" of depression, I began to have strange pains out of nowhere. A sharp pain when I was sitting and not touching anything. I felt one day like I stubbed my toe but I was sitting in class and my feet were on the floor.

I felt I was connected to someone but I couldn't explain how. Never being able to explain it to anyone. I never talked about it until that day with Jesse.

"So, you think it's a sister," he said as he wiped the cheese off my mouth.

"I know it's a sister," I said as I lowered my eyelashes, "That's what I feel."

"Maybe a twin as beautiful as you," he said as he kissed my lips.

The rest of the afternoon did not involve us discussing my birth family but Jesse got me thinking. What if what I was feeling was a twin out there?

My Mother certainly believed in the bonds of twins. In 1999, John F Kennedy Junior, his wife, Carolyn and her sister, Lauren Bissette were killed in a plane crash. While the world mourned for the loss of John-John, my Mother felt more for Carolyn and Lauren's family. "They lost two daughters," she'd say, "and most importantly, Lauren had a twin sister. A twin who's lost part of herself."

I still didn't have the courage to tell my Mother that I thought I had a twin

then. Jesse was understanding but maybe she'd think I was crazy. But a few years after I was married, I came as close as I ever would one day when I stopped by in the morning.

She was intently watching the Today program when I got there. Matt Lauer was interviewing a set of identical twins that had been adopted out to two separate families. The twins only found each other after they had enrolled in the same college.

I elbowed my Mom and said, "Wouldn't it be weird if I had a twin?"

"The world couldn't take two of you, Suzy." She said.

I laughed then said, "I'm serious. What if I had been a twin?"

She turned to me and said, "You aren't a twin. I would never separate twins, you know that."

"But what if the state separated us and you didn't know?"

"Then I would be very angry and upset that you two didn't grow up together."

I made another sarcastic remark and then dropped the subject. But I smiled, knowing that when I did find my sister that my Mother would be angry that we had lost so much time.

It's been seven years since that conversation with my mom. I still feel the phantom pains or I'll get a flash of irritation for no reason and I'll know somethings up with her somewhere.

Even my Mother in law, Jamie has seen and talked to her. About a year ago, Jesse's Grandmother was in the hospital. Jamie and her sister saw me walk past the room and followed me down the hallway. When they caught up to me, it wasn't me but according to them, the girl they caught was my identical twin. She even sounded

like me. Jamie apologized to the girl and told her that I looked just like her daughter in law. The girl said that was okay, the mix up had occurred before. Then they parted ways.

I told Jamie later about my “feeling” that I had a twin in the world somewhere. She was dumbfounded and never even thought that I could have a twin. If only she had known, she told me, she would have found out her name.

That's okay, I said. We'll bump into each other when the time is right.”

To that extent, I'm always on the lookout when I go somewhere. Looking for a mirror in a sea of faces. If it takes the rest of my life, I will look for her but until we meet, it's still great to feel her in my heart.

Chapter 3

Exercise Shemexercise

Hana 'i'o ka haole!

The foreigner does it in earnest!- Hawaiian proverb

As I stared at women around me, I couldn't believe that my cousin had talked me into taking a hula class in the middle of January. My cousin signed us up for a hula class for my Christmas present, she thought that it would be fun and we could get some exercise at the same time.

My darling cousin is 20, gorgeous and five-nine with long flowing tresses that reached right about her waist. Her idea of dinner was a salad with a glass of water after her long evening walk. She freaked at having gained five pounds(making her weight exactly 115 pounds) over Christmas, ergo my "together bonding present".

I am the complete opposite of my cousin(we could have been the female version of Laurel and Hardy), 33, short brown hair and never exercised a day in my adult life. I'm heavy but I like who I am, so gaining or losing weight never affected my mood either way. My husband, Jesse barely contained his laughter as I put on my sweat pants for the first class.

“Are you sure you're going to go through with this?” he snickered as I put on my coat to venture out into the snow filled evening.

“I'm sure,” I said annoyed. I hated leaving the house in sweatpants, I could fit into jeans and I loved my jeans.

“Suzy, you have to stretch first. Don't just start Hulaing. You have to warm up first.” Jesse said as he walked me to my car.

“Yeah-yeah,” I waved him off as I got into the car, “you just make sure that you meet me at the door with a cup of hot chocolate.”

He gave me a kiss and off I went.

And so I stood with my cousin waiting for class to begin. I smiled and was jovial but each time a new student came into the class, they were skinnier than the person previous, oh and young, let's not forget young. I appeared to be the only person over 25 in the class. But I was determined to have fun with my cousin. I adored her like she was my little sister and her wanting to spend time with me was amazing. I just wished we had gone shopping instead.

With that our hula teacher breezed into the room, I was elated! Dori was around 40 years old and a bit overweight. This was our hula instructor! I was imagining a tall, lanky, Hawaiian goddess, not the woman next door. But Dori was more than the woman next door. She proceeded to show us what we would learn in the next eight weeks of hula, the dancing was more beautiful and fluid than anything I could have imagined. She even winked at me when she said that woman with extra weight had it easier when it came to the hip gyrations because we actually had hips! I snickered at my cousins toothpick figure at that one. Then the one hour class began. Dori taught us lots of things that I never knew, like the knees are always bent

during a hula and that hula can even be done to modern music. (Shaking your hips to Nelly Furtado rocked.) We learned arm movements and how to tell a story. I learned a lot in that one hour.

Most importantly, I learned that exercise is work. I was out of breath in the first half hour and my muscles were screaming in my bent legs. I was having fun, my cousin and I laughing, me learning new moves for my hubby in the bedroom. But the pain in my legs and the sweat pouring off of my head were reminding me of why I don't like to exercise.

When class was over, I told Dori how much fun I'd had and I couldn't wait until the next week.

"Next week is even harder so make sure you practice," she smiled as my cousin and I left.

"Did you really have fun?" my cousin asked as we walked through the cold to our cars.

"Yeah, but I swear I lost your five pounds tonight," I said as I rubbed my back. We hugged each other and said our goodbyes.

My husband met me at the door with hot chocolate. "How was it?"

"Wait til you see the moves I learned tonight," my eyebrows went up in a suggestive arch.

"Let's go," he said as he pulled me towards the bedroom.

"Maybe tomorrow, my side really hurts," I said as I rubbed my back again.

The next morning was hell, Dori had said that we would be feeling our workout but it was my side that was in excruciating pain. I could hardly move as I tried to get up for work. But it was no use, I screamed as I put my left foot on the

floor. I called my chiropractor and she got me right in.

“You did what last night,” Dr Smith said incredibly as she checked my x-rays.

“I hulaed,” I said sheepishly.

“Well, you just hulaed your way into a sprained sciatic nerve,” she said as she shook her head.

Needless to say I never hulaed again. But I did go see my cousin in the recital that we were supposed to be in at the end of the eight weeks. She looked beautiful. This year for Christmas I got a sweater. Which I think my sciatic nerve was happier to get than I.

Chapter 4

But I Don't Like Steve McQueen Movies

*Something's coming. I can feel it, and it's coming right around the corner at me.
-Steve McQueen, The Great Escape*

There are very few days in my life that I can remember with pinpoint accuracy. Like the day that my husband and I purchased our first house and adopted a six week old yellow lab puppy on the same day. And I hate to be cliché but I remember every second of my wedding day.

But what I have noticed is that the days I can remember the most, all happened in my favorite season of all--autumn. Maybe it's crispness in the air. Maybe it's the long summer days turning into cool fall evenings. Maybe it's because it is my favorite season and God has a sense of humor, so if he made sure that the happiest moments of my life happened in autumn. He was going to make darn sure that the most traumatic experience of my life was also going to happen in autumn.

I woke up on Tuesday October 22nd, 2002, in the new bedroom of the ranch style home we had purchased on September 30th of the same year. My ten week old lab, Asuka, was hopping around on the bed looking as adorable as ever. My husband, Jessc, had already left for work, kissing me on the head as he always does. I was three days away from my week long vacation and my wedding anniversary of three years. I was smiling and singing as I went off to my job at Lindell Bank.

I was still humming to myself as Ashley and I unlocked the bank's front door. "You are entirely too happy, Ashley grumbled as she walked to the key pad to turn off the alarm. Ashley was the newest teller with Lindell; she had started only three weeks earlier. She was twenty years old, thin, pretty with long brown hair and the biggest chip on her shoulder I had ever seen.

"It's too damn early," she grouched again as she walked in the back to hang up her jacket. I shook my head and smiled to myself as I began to open up the vault for another fun day at Lindell Bank. With that, I heard the key click in the door, my boss swept into the office with her usual bravado.

"Good Morning," Dana chirped as she threw her jacket and briefcase into her office. Her beautiful auburn hair and black business suit looking as stylish as ever.

The Lindell I worked at for over three years was a very small bank, about the size of a gas station convenience store. Two offices with glass walls were on the side of the lobby with a teller line directly in the middle of the building. The rest of the space was out of the view of the public with a back room with bathrooms, a break room, and storage. It was tiny but I loved it.

I had started in 1999 as a part time teller while I was going to college. When I graduated in 2001, Dana was loathe to see me go. I had graduated with a bachelor's of art in psychology and was planning on leaving to work at Magellan health, a mental health care provider that was going to pay for me to continue my education. I wasn't thrilled about working for a HMO but the education was not something I thought that I could pass up, until Dana came to me and offered me an assistant branch manager position at \$6000 more per year than Magellan was going to pay me. I loved my job at the bank, I loved my boss, and I loved the customers. I

officially became the assistant branch manager of Lindell bank on September 11th, 2001 (maybe a shadow of things to come).

“What did you and Emilie do last night,” I asked Dana as she entered the bank vault with me and we began to ready for the Tuesday ahead. Emilie was Dana’s six year old daughter and only child. Since Dana had gotten divorced the year before, Emilie was Dana’s best friend and confidante. Not that I was too far down on Dana’s list of confidantes, Dana and I had been friends from the moment I began working at Lindell. We liked to joke that since we worked together 40+ hours a week together, we saw each other more than we saw our families.

“Not much. Just watched TV, A typical Monday. How about you and Jesse,” she asked as she pulled Ashley’s and my cash drawer from the vault.

“Played with Asuka and read a fabulously trashy romance novel,” I laughed.

Dana rolled her eyes and laughed, “Typical Monday night for you.”

We continued our banter as we rolled the cart to the teller line and began to set up the teller line.

“Ashley, what did you do last night?” Dana asked as she handed Ashley her teller drawer.

Ashley took the drawer with a huge sigh. “Nothing” was the answer as she turned her back on Dana.

Dana’s eyebrow arched as she looked at me. I knew she was thinking the same exact thing I was. Why had she hired Ashley? We were a little family at Lindell, with only five employees, we shared the ups and downs, the weddings, the birthday parties, the divorces, everything. Ashley was snide and narcissistic; she cared more for her paycheck than anybody. It had been three weeks and we were still

trying to make friends with her and quite frankly I think most of us had stopped trying.

Dana and I continued shuffling on, getting ready for the nine o'clock opening time. When nine came, Dana unlocked the front door and I opened up the blinds for the drive-up customers.

Ashley was situated in the first teller window as usual. She was checking herself in her little hand held mirror. I sat in the tall chair in the second window as had been my station for the entire time I had been at Lindell. There was a third window that was sometimes by Dana when we got really busy. Deanie was at stationed at the drive up window and even though she was supposed to be at work at nine, she was always late. That day was not different. Deanie, blond hair and all, in her typical tornado blew in at 9:10am.

"Sorry, I'm late," she said to Dana as she passed the branch manager's office. She opened up the door to the back and disappeared.

I sat down in the chair at my window, took off my wedding ring and began to put to put the hand lotion I kept at my station.

I noticed out the lobby that two men were beginning to come in. One was white and the other was black, we were a small bank in a small community and we knew 95% of the people that came into the bank. I didn't recognize either of the two men coming in.

So I stood at my window and when they came through the door I greeted them with my most dazzling smile and said, "Good morning gentleman, how may we help you?"

I was expecting them to reply that they were new customers or just workers

who needed their paychecks cashed but instead the white guy pulled a gun from the bag he was carrying and screamed, "This is a robbery. Back away from the counter."

I froze. He had to be kidding right? We were on candid camera? I had worked in banking for almost three years. Weren't robberies supposed to be quiet with note passing?

But he pointed the gun at Ashley and me and repeated his demand, "Step away from the counter now."

The black guy started moving towards us and said politely, "Back away please." He walked behind the counter with us and told Ashley and I to sit on the floor with our backs together, he was going to tie us up.

I heard the white robber screaming obscenities at Dana to get out of her office and open up the main vault or he was going to kill her. I'd like to say that I was worried about Dana but at that moment I was more concerned about myself and Ashley.

We sat on the floor, back to back and held hands as tightly as we could. The black robber pulled rope out of a bag that I hadn't seen.

"I'm going to tie you up," he said as Ashley and I squeezed hands even tighter. I was beyond terrified, my breathing was shallow and I was shaking. It's funny how your mind works in a crisis because suddenly, my mind moved to my wedding ring that I hadn't put back on. Here I was about ready to celebrate my third wedding anniversary and these guys could end up stealing it. I wanted to beg the man who was getting ready to tie us up not to take my ring when he suddenly said to me, "I don't have enough rope."

I looked at him dumbfounded. He looked at me like he was asking a

question. He looked at me and then looked at the rope that he held in his hands. It was though he was trying to figure out how to tie us up with the rope that he had. I thought quickly.

When I was younger, my little brother and I would tie each other up with rope. I would always put my wrists and fingers together in a fist and my brother would put the rope around my wrists in a loop. I always got out of the rope in seconds much to my brother's amazement. But the trick was this; as soon as he was done tying. I'd put my hands into a "praying" position and slip my right hand out of the rope. I did it every time and my little brother thought I was Houdini.

I let go of Ashley's hands and offered my wrists to the robber the same way. Fingers and wrists together and I hoped that he would loop around the outside as my brother had.

Sure enough, he took the bait. He smiled and began to tie my wrists. Then he asked me, "How is your day going."

I looked at him and cocked my right eyebrow, "Not very good. How's yours?"

"Not very good either," he said as he tied a knot in my binds.

"It can't be as bad as mine."

He laughed as he stood and walked towards Ashley.

It was then that I realized that Deanie hadn't come from out of the back. I was suddenly worried that she would walk right into the robbery. What would happen? Would she be shot? I didn't know if the black guy had a gun. I didn't know what was happening with Dana and the white robber who I knew had a gun.

I heard the black robber talking with Ashley as he was tying her up. "Please

don't hate me," I was hearing him plead with Ashley. I hoped she wouldn't give him a smart ass answer like she had for us the past three weeks. Instead, the black robber said, "Don't cry."

I sighed inwards. What was happening to us? How was it all going to end? Was I going to see my family again?

Those thoughts were swirling in my head when I heard Dana scream from the vault. 'I can't remember the combination. Stop screaming at me. I'm too scared. Suzanne might remember it. Suzanne help me," she cried.

I screamed back, "Is it alright if I come help?"

No answer. Then Dana started crying and screamed again, "Suzanne help me."

I stood up and looked at the black robber who by this point had Ashley's drawer open and was stuffing her money into his bag. "Can I help her?"

"You two switch."

I ran to the vault and Dana ran behind the teller line. But the white robber dodged past me and ran outside the door. I was confused but I slipped my hands out of the binds and opened the main vault and waited. I watched as the black robber tied up Dana and then went back to raiding my teller window.

The white robber burst back through the front door and screamed, "We have to go. Come on. We have to go." Then he went back out the front door to his little cream-colored two door car.

The black robber finished and then started towards the front door when he stopped. He turned towards the door where the bank's back was-where Deanie was. I held my breath as he reached for the handle, when a car horn blared. The black

robber looked at me, then went out the door, he jumped in the car and they took off. I don't even think he saw my wedding ring because it was still where I had left it.

I ran from the vault to look out the window to see if I could catch their license plate number but Dana started screaming, "Untie me. Untie me."

I forgot about the license and went to lock the front door so they wouldn't come back and get into the bank. I sighed with relief when I saw Deanie come out from the back and begin to untie Ashley. Dana had been tied so tight, we had to get a pair of scissors to get her out of her binds. As soon as she was untied, she screamed at us to get down on the floor in case they came back. I tried to calm her and tell her that I had already locked the door but she was too upset to listen to me.

"I kept waiting for the bang," she sobbed, "I just knew that I wasn't going to make it home to Emilie tonight."

I put my arm around her and hugged her. Then motioned to Deanie and Ashley to come over to us. We huddled on the floor, hugging each other. Then the phone rang and scared us to death. I reached up and answered it.

"Suzanne, it's Pam from the St Peters office. Are you okay?"

"No," I answered honestly. "How did you know we were robbed?"

"The police are up here at St Peters. There was a mix up with the alarm. But I'll send the police to St Charles."

We sat on the floor for another five minutes waiting on the police. I can't even begin to tell you the emotion of waiting for help after you've had your world turned upside down. We were angry, scared, terrified, sad, panicked, and much more.

Finally, they arrived. They called the branch and I had to walk out with my hands up. There were police everywhere. There were about ten police cars with

about twenty cops. They were all armed with guns pointing directly at the bank. As I walked out a police officer that I knew approached me.

“Are you okay,” Officer Bextermueller said, his voice soft.

I nodded as I lowered my hands.

“Are they gone,” he asked as he looked over shoulder.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Who's inside?”

“Three other employees.”

He leaned into his shoulder and said something into his intercom then put his hand on my shoulder. “You did good, kid.” he said as he steered me towards a female officer on the side of the building.

She was incredibly open and friendly, she gave me a hug and asked me again if I was okay.

“Mentally or physically?”

She laughed and then asked me to repeat what had happen during our robbery.

I must have repeated the story hundred times that day. First to every police officer then to the FBI when they came. Apparently when a bank is robbed, it falls under federal jurisdiction so the Federal Bureau of Investigation is always involved with the case. Three agents showed up and were incredibly nice. They made me re-act the entire robbery for them, everything that happened, everything that had been said. They wanted to know how I had gotten out of my bonds; I told them matter of fact, “I have a little brother.” They all laughed over my explanation of the “Houdini”

trick but they also called me clever.

I asked them how many times tellers actually get tied up during a robbery. One of them answered; "I've never seen a robbery where someone was tied up. The robbers must have watched an old Steve McQueen movie last night."

"I don't like Steve McQueen movies," I said.

"And I'll bet you'll really hate 'em now," the FBI Agent said.

The robbery had started at 9:11 am, at 2pm, I was still at the bank when I looked out the window and saw my husband. I had called him at work at one point and told him what had happened. I wanted to tell him because I hadn't wanted him to hear it over the news and worry about me. I told him that he didn't need to come to my work because I was fine. But he didn't listen and came immediately to Lindell. I hadn't cried all day but the second he put his arms around me, I began to cry and shake. I told him about how I almost lost my wedding ring. He said he could have cared less--the most important thing to him was that I was safe. I asked if I could go home and everyone said yes.

Jesse followed me home and as I pulled into my driveway of my new house I wondered if I would ever feel safe again.

Jesse ordered pizza while I hugged Asuka like it would be the last time. It was only three in the afternoon but Jesse suggested that I relax and get into my pajamas. I put them on, then Jesse and I got into bed. He put his arms around me and told me that he had been terrified while he drove to Lindell. I had said I was okay but he had needed to see me, hold me, make sure I was all right. I snuggled deeper

into his arms and the blankets when the phone rang. It was the FBI, they had caught the robbers and they wanted to know if they could stop by our house and show me a photo arrangement. Jesse turned and asked me. I thought about it a second. Here I was in my pajamas, in a brand new house, what would my neighbors think with police cars pulling up at the new neighbors house? The FBI agent must have read my mind because he told Jesse that it would be two unmarked cars. I said yes.

When they arrived, I was nervous that I wouldn't be able to identify the robbers. But when they laid the pictures out in front of me, I knew them both without hesitation. (In fact even after eight years, I would know them if I bumped into them on the street.) I pointed to their pictures and told the agent, "That's them."

"You don't need to look at the other five men on the sheet?"

"No," I said as I looked at the pictures again, "That's them."

The agent smiled and nodded at me. He began to pack up the pictures and leaned over. He said with a wink, "We got them an hour ago."

I think I breathed for the first time that day after he said that. After the agent left, Jesse and I went back to bed but I never got to sleep. My phone continuously rang that night--my mother, Jesse's mother, friends and family who had heard it on the news. Most importantly, my brother called and I got to tell him about the "Houdini" trick. I think he was more happy that I thought of him at the most traumatic moment in my life.

The next day was different at Lindell. There were police waiting to escort us inside. Pam from the other branch was also there with donuts and bagels. When Dana, Ashley and I all arrived, we hugged each other. We also hugged Deanie when

she arrived at 9:10am. I had expected Ashley to quit that day because she was 20 and had only been with Lindell for three weeks but she surprised me by staying after the robbery. I also found out that day that she had problems at home and she normally didn't like to talk about it but now she felt like she could talk to us. She became a friend that day and family to the rest of us at Lindell.

I still shake when I think about the robbery even though its been almost eight years since that day. I no longer work at Lindell, but I stayed in the banking business for another 7 years after that robbery. People told me that I was crazy for staying in banking after my ordeal. I just smiled and told them I hope the next time I'm robbed that a Steve McQueen movie isn't on the night before.

Chapter 5

**Let's all go to the funny farm,
where life is happy all day long**

I think I've discovered the secret of life - you just hang around until you get used to it.

Charles M. Schulz

St Patrick's Day. Wearing my green shirt for a job interview down in St Louis. The bank was right in the middle of a lot of bars so I figured I'd get my interview over with then go for a little green beer.

But when I arrived at my destination, the building was swarming with people. I asked the guard what was going on.

"George Clooney's in the building shooting a movie."

I almost passed out. "Really?" I didn't really need to ask because it had been all over the news that George was filming in St Louis. But the thought of being so close to gorgeousness made me weak in the knees.

"Yes, George Clooney is really in the building" the guard replied, "where are you headed?"

"I have a job interview with UMB bank," I said, my neck straining looking around.

"That would be the 25th floor," he said.

I headed to the elevators and hoped and prayed that I would run into him. But

I didn't. Although everyone that I encountered in the UMB office was chattering away about Mr. Clooney.

I didn't get the job but the worst part was when I stepped out of the building, the street and bars were suddenly packed. I figured that news had gotten out about George so my green beer was going to have to wait.

It was only noon so I decided to visit a family friend in the hospital. Katie had been having problems with prescription drugs the past few months and had ended up in the hospital a few days earlier. So I decided to be a good family friend and stop by with some magazines and my "no news" about George.

But when I got to the hospital, I was ushered to a wing that I had never been in. I was met by a nurse who told me that I had to relinquish my purse and all its belongs into a locker. She then patted me down before she locked the locker and gave me the key. The doors to the wing were locked but the nurse undid the lock and let me into a small visitors room.

Katie was sitting there eating her lunch. She looked up and smiled at me but then I noticed the razor cuts down her arms. Katie was sitting next to a young girl who had both of her wrists bandaged tightly. Katie smiled and pulled out the seat next to her. She was dirty, sweaty and reeked of BO.

"Suzy," she said as she took a bite of her hamburger, "how's it going?"

"Katie," I said as I handed her the magazines I brought her, "I'm great, how are you?"

"It's horrible in here," she said, "I can't wait to go home."

I looked around at the stark whiteness, "Yeah, I can't blame you."

With that, a nurse poked her head into the room, "Katie, your mother's on the

phone.”

Katie stood up, “I’ll be right back, Suzy. Why don’t you talk to Becky here.”

Becky and I watched Katie walk out the room when Becky turned to me and lifted up her bandaged wrists to me and said, “I tried to kill myself last night.”

She stared at me waiting for a response.

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t succeed,” I said.

“So are my kids,” she said as she smiled.

We talked for a while, Becky was young but she had two small kids. The youngest was only six months so the diagnosis was that perhaps Becky was suffering from post partum depression. She told me she was thankful that she hurt herself instead of her baby.

Katie returned with a big smile on her face, “They’re going to release me. I’m going to get to go home. Suzy, my mom wants you to call her at work.”

“They took my purse, Katie. I don’t have my phone.” I said.

Katie moved the open door to the waiting room. Behind the door was a red hand-held rotary relic from the 1970s. I walked over and picked up the behemoth receiver and dialed Michele.

“Suzy, what are you doing today,” Michele asked.

My mind wandered to the bars and my green beer but I replied, “Nothing right now.”

“Because Katie is being released. Can you take her home so I don’t have to leave work?” She said.

“Sure,” I said to the woman who I consider my Aunt and second mother.

What I didn’t say but wanted to, was why no one had told me that Katie had tried to

off herself?

“Okay,” Michele said, “I’ll call the nurse’s station and tell them that you’re taking Katie home. You’ll have to show them your driver’s license.”

“They took my purse, Michele.”

“They have to escort you out. You can show them it when you leave.”

I hung up with Michele with our typical “I love you.” I wanted to let out a huge sigh but I didn’t since Katie was right behind me.

When I turned around I noticed that the room was beginning to fill up with people. People in robes. People without brushed hair. People with bandages on lots of places of their body, especially their wrists.

Katie gestured for me to sit next to Becky again, “I have to tell the nurses that you’re staying after visiting time.”

“Excuse me?” I said as I sat down.

“That’s why everyone is coming out of their room,” Katie said, “Visiting time ends at one. Then they lock the doors.”

I remembered how much trouble I had getting into the ward. They lock it down even more after visiting hours? “Okay,” I said.

As Katie flounced out of the room, a few more people sat down at Becky’s and my table. Becky turned to me and mouthed, “they’re crazy.”

I just smiled and nodded. A woman who sat down with us reached over and touched my shirt, “Good, Good. You’re wearing green.”

“Well, it is St Patrick’s day,” I said.

The woman then turned to Becky. “You’re not wearing green.”

“I didn’t bring any green with me,” Becky said.

"I'll be right back," the woman said as she jumped up and ran from table.

The older gentleman who had sat at our table just shook his head but he brightened up when a guy in a white coat came into the waiting room, pushing a cart.

The guy proceeded to hand out coloring books to all the people sitting in the visitors room. The gentleman at my table handed me a coloring book with a huge grin on his face. I took it with an uneasy smile. Next, the guy in white began to hand out packages of crayons. I got handed those as well.

As the room burst into nervous happiness of coloring. I shrugged my shoulders and opened the coloring book to the first page and began to color the bear on the page, light brown.

I hardly noticed the guy in white come up behind me.

"Oh, I see we have a new person," he said to me with a huge smile.

I looked up from my coloring book, "No, I'm just visiting a friend."

The guy began patting my hand, "Of course, you are."

I put down my crayon, "No seriously. I'm taking her home. I'm just waiting for her to come back."

His smile grew bigger as he nodded his head up and down sarcastically.

"Seriously," I stared at him, "I'm not supposed to be here."

Becky finally looked up from her coloring book. "She's picking up Katie. The nurses know she's here."

The guy looked flummoxed then said, "Sorry about that." He then turned his attention to another table.

I sat bristling. Did I look crazy? Hell, I had just come from a job interview

and looked fabulous. Was he blind? A commotion stopped my internal rant and I turned to look down the hall.

An African-American gentleman was running naked down the hall towards the doors that lead to freedom. Following closely on his heels was a nurse, she was carrying a blanket like a net chasing after him. A few people in the waiting room chuckled. Some urged him onto freedom.

I turned silently and looked at Becky. She shrugged her shoulders and went back to her coloring.

The lady who had approved of my green shirt returned to the table and handed Becky a black shirt with a bright green shamrock on it.

“Now, you'll be properly attired in here,” she said as she sat down.

Becky shrugged her shoulders again and stood to leave the table. I reached for her arm, my eyes pleading for her not to leave me. She patted my hand and said, “You'll be fine.” Then left.

I stared at my two compatriots at the table then dove back into my coloring book. Katie reappeared a few moments later with her luggage: two large brown paper bags.

“Why are you coloring?” She asked as if I was doing something completely insane.

The sigh that I had wanted to make for the past twenty minutes came out, long and dramatic.

“Because I was handed one,” I said through clenched teeth.

Katie's eyes widened but she ignored me, “I can't wait to get out of here.”

“Did you know that a guy just ran past here naked,” I said.

"Oh, he does that all the time," she said.

"Oh," I said.

"Katie," a nurse called from the desk.

Katie bolted up and gestured for me to follow her. I got up from the table and said goodbye to the two sitting at my table. "See you later," the gentleman said. "Not bloody ever," I mumbled under my breath.

The nurse gave me an envelope to give to Michele with the instructions not to give it to Katie. Katie rolled her eyes and let out a huff.

Then the nurse went to escort us out the padlocked doors. I was walking side by side with Katie carrying one of the grocery bags when I felt someone on my heels. I turned and came face to face with a small statured woman. She was ragged, dirty and was wearing a robe that looked like it had never been washed.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi, back," I said.

"My name is Barb."

"Hi, Barb," I said, "What can I do for you?"

"I want to leave," she said hopefully.

Katie leaned over and whispered in my ear, "she does this all the time."

"Well, I'm taking Katie home today," I told her. "not you."

Barb's hopeful face fell like a ton of bricks. She hung her head then turned and walked away from me.

Katie's urged me into motion again. "She's crazy," she said.

We left the ward and retrieved my purse from its holding cell. I had to show my license and sign papers saying I was taking responsibility for Katie and her well

being. I almost didn't sign the papers, the idea of being responsible for someone who had just attempted suicide made me pause. But I did it.

As we walked through the doors, Katie let out a whoop. "I'm free again."

I just kept walking but inside my mind was screaming the same thing.

Chapter 6

The Weaker Sex

It is rare that one can see in a little boy the promise of a man, but one can almost always see in a little girl the threat of a woman.

Alexandre Dumas

The feminist movement had nothing on my house growing up. My grandmother had been the first female council member in her hometown in Highspire, Pennsylvania in the 1960s. When I was little in the 1980s, she was elected president of the union retirees. A position she held until she had a stroke at age 87.

My mother wore the pants in my family. She raised my brother and me, worked as the Court administrator to St Charles City, took care of all the bills, housework and did it all without breaking a sweat most days.

When it came to me, the idea of being anything I set my mind to was a given. My mother raised me strong, intelligent and independent. I certainly didn't need a man to take care of me. Just like my grandmother and mother didn't. Sure, they both got married and had kids but only because they wanted to, not because society dictated it. My mother preached discipline and school to both me and my brother, Matt. But as I got older, I began to notice that my mother was talking to me more than my brother.

I struggled in high school when I decided possibly not to go to college. My mother told me I WAS going, no questions about it. Even though I had to pay for it myself. Any money that my parents could have helped me with was going to my brother to go to Catholic high school

"But you made me go to a public high school," I said. "Why isn't Matt going to a public high school?"

"Because Matt couldn't handle a public high school," she said. "He needs the safety of a private school."

I tried to remind her that I had struggled at a public high school but she wouldn't hear it.

"You're stronger," she said, "you're a girl."

Mom was right, college agreed with me. I flew through with A's and B's, hardly breaking a sweat. I also accomplished it by working full time. Just when I finished college, Matt, was graduating high school.

Matt attempted to go to college for one semester and working part time but at Christmas he announced that he was dropping out of college. My mother didn't raise one objection.

"Mom," I said, "You forced me to go to college. Why is it okay for Matt to drop out?"

She patted my hand, "You're smart. I knew you would excel. Matt just has a different path."

Matt's path included working at a pest control company then quitting when his long time girlfriend was caught cheating on him. Matt became a shell of himself. He stopped going out, sleeping all day and generally being miserable.

“Mom,” I’d say anytime I stopped by, “how long are you going to let this go on?” Then I reminded her of when I went through a horrible depression in sophomore year of high school. She’d kick my butt daily telling me to snap out of it, life was for living. Thanks to her, I came out of it eventually. But here my brother was six months later still pining for a slut.

“Beth broke his heart,” she said. “He just needs time.”

The big things in life weren’t the only differences. The moment I graduated from high school, I was taken to the local bank and opened a checking account. My brother eventually opened his when he turned 21.

When I was 22, I wanted to go out of town with my fiancée whom I had been dating since I was seventeen. My mother threw a fit, how dare I go out of town with a guy I wasn’t married to? Matt, at age 18 would leave the house for days and my mother wasn’t exactly sure where he went.

I got married at age 24 and purchased my house at age 27. I graduated college and became the branch manager of a large bank at age 29.

My brother is 27, still lives at home and only has three bills: his new car, car insurance and medical insurance. And he only had a part time job until last week, when he was laid off.

My mother became a mess. She snapped at me, was sullen and moody. She stopped sleeping and eating. I asked her about it and she said that Matt was dealt a horrible blow and she can’t stand to see her child in so much pain.

I was laid off late last year and she never sounded once in a bad mood about it.

“That’s because you’re strong and I knew you’d survive,” she said, “I don’t

know about Matt.”

I feel sorry for my brother but I lived in a house when I was laid off. Matt still lives at home, he's guaranteed a roof over his head and food in his belly.

“Suzy,” my mother said, “You're intelligent, successful, everything you could ask for in a woman. Your brother's just a man.”

And I smiled. Because who can argue with logic like that.

Chapter 7

My love, my life, my everything and then my Husband

There is no psychiatrist in the world like a puppy licking your face. -Bern Williams

Last night, while sitting in the living room with Jesse and Shamrock, my lab-terrier mix, I noticed that Macey, our blue tick coonhound mix was not sitting with us. That could only mean trouble.

Macey came to us a year earlier from the Humane Society. She had won me over with her beautiful white and black spotted coat, the fact that she had been at the center for over a year and she walked over to our yellow lab, Asuka and licked the stump where Asuka's leg used to be. I wasn't quite ready for a new dog, Asuka's right leg had been amputated just three weeks before but the prognosis wasn't good: bone cancer. The vet couldn't tell us how long our first baby had to live. Jesse and I wept, cursed the fact that Asuka was too young at six years old and realized that Shamrock and Asuka were inseparable. They played, slept and ate together. Whenever Jesse and I would take one outside to give them a bath, the other one would scratch, howl and whine at the back door. Obviously, Shamrock was not destined to be a only child so a search for a third dog went out.

After Macey came home the real fun began. She wasn't potty trained, which

did wonders for the carpet and my husband's mood since I don't clean up poop. I told him every time he cleaned up after her that was the reason I married him so I would never have to touch poop. I also promised him that she would get better soon. We had trained two other dogs, how hard could a third be? My husband just huffed after the third month of me saying that.

Jesse also seemed to develop amnesia with Macey. He would lecture her after he was through cleaning up. "Why can't you be more like your brother and sister," he'd say, "They're perfect."

Then I'd have to remind him that the first time Shamrock stayed with us, I promised we'd never have him in the house again.

Shamrock belonged to my boss at Lindell Bank and I offered to watch him while she went out of town when he was just a puppy. He came to our house and proceeded to have diarrhea in every nook and cranny of my home. (Note above my attitude towards poop) But another thing happened that weekend. Asuka and Shamrock chased each other in the back yard, in the hallway and through the finished basement. They wrestled over toys, pounced on each other when the other wasn't looking and completely inseparable the entire time. When Dana picked up Shamrock on Sunday, Asuka sat at the front window and whimpered, she was only a year but Jesse and I realized that maybe it was time for a second dog.

But what kind of dog? Asuka had fallen in our laps, from a customer through my work. I mentioned to Mary, who helped dogs find homes, that Jesse and I had just purchased our house that day and were looking for a lab mix that needed a home.

"Does it have to be a mix?" She asked as I handed her deposit receipt.

“Not at all. I just want some type of Labrador Retriever,” I had grown up with labs in my family.

“How young?”

“As young as possible, it's my first dog with my husband,” I said.

“Then have I got the puppy for you,” she said as she jotted down a phone number on the corner of her receipt, tore it off and handed it to me.

That night, as Jesse and I drove in the car, he continued to lecture me even though my excitement was causing me to vibrate through the car seat.

“Suzy, getting a dog is a big deal. We have to pick the right dog for us. We can't just pick the first dog we see even if it's a six week old.”

I nodded and agreed even as we pulled up to Joanne's house. We walked up to the door and was greeted by a beautiful lady who was in her late forties. She ushered us into the house where we were greeted by two of the most beautiful yellow labs I had ever seen. My smile must have radiated too largely because Jesse elbowed me and gave me the raised eyebrow look: “remember what we just talked about.” I forced the smile from my face and walked towards the labs. They padded over towards me, sniffing at my hands then pounced on me. A giggle escaped my lips as I petted them and cooed baby talk into their ears: “whose da babies? arc u da babies? Yes, you'se the sweetie babies” Their tails wagging wildly, pushing each other out of the way to get to me. With so much excitement, I couldn't contain myself when I saw the littlest bundle of yellow fur come out from under the table. She ambled out like her little paws were too big to use, sat down in front of me and yawned so wide I could see her entire tiny mouth. An unbridled scream of pure joy left my lips as soon as I saw her. I could hear Jesse's eyes roll from where I stood.

Joanne's face lit up, she pulled me into an embrace then screamed in my ear, "You'll be a wonderful mommy."

She scooped up the puppy and handed her to me. Puppy fur: soft and luxurious slipped through my fingers as I held her close to my face. She yawned again and the musky smell of puppy breath filled my nose. I sighed as I looked up at Jesse, he shook his head in exasperation then nodded slowly. The baby we named Asuka became ours.

So where exactly were we going to find another dog with as magical of a beginning? It turned out that getting the second dog wasn't magical for us but it was for Asuka.

After Shamrock left, Asuka's mood turned depressed and sour. She sighed and huffed, lounged around lethargically and hardly looked at Jesse when he pulled out her tennis ball. She was so pathetic just three days after that I found myself begging Dana to go out of town so we could have Shamrock. Dana didn't relent at all, she loved Shamrock and she wasn't going to let us borrow her baby. Her stance lasted exactly two weeks.

Asuka's depression began getting to Jesse and I, so we decided to re-begin our search for a second family member. I was revving up for that Monday: asking Mary, checking humane societies, scouring local shelters. But all I really had to do was say "Good Morning" to Dana at the bank.

"I'm pregnant," she said we began to open the vault.

I screamed and hugged her.

"Shamrock's going to be a big dog," she said as I released her.

"What does that have to do with you being pregnant?" I asked.

“My husband and I decided that we don't want to have a baby with a big dog...”

“So you're not having the baby?” I said but my smile was growing with realization.

“No, dork, we're going to give up Shamrock. And we were wondering...”

She didn't even have to finish the sentence, “We'll take him! We'll take him! Asuka will be thrilled.”

Jesse, however, proved the harder sell. “He was sick all weekend, Suzy. You promised me never again.”

“But, Honey, I'm sure it was just a fluke that weekend.” I laid my head on his chest. “Besides think about Asuka and how sad she's been.” I rubbed my hand up and down his arm. “And if we don't take him, Dana's going to turn him back into the shelter.”

Jesse stared deeply into my puppy dog eyes, then looked at Asuka into her puppy dog eyes and sighed. Shamrock came home to us that weekend and is now Daddy's buddy.

Macey didn't even stand a chance. In the six years, Asuka and Shamrock had gone from shit disturbers to angels that could do no wrong. Shamrock dug holes big enough to bury bodies. Asuka jumped our fence like it was only six inches high. Shamrock barks at anything that moves (when we look and don't see anything, we say “ninja squirrels again.”)

Once I actually wished Asuka was dead. It was when my Mother had breast cancer for the second time in her life. Then phone rang at the bank. When I answered, my Mother was crying hysterically.

“What's wrong,” I screamed into the phone. Her mastectomy had only been two weeks previous.

“Oh my god, Suzy. Oh my god,” she wailed.

“Mom, Mom. What's happened,” I screamed into the phone, my knuckles turning white from clutching the receiver.

“A-A-A-A-Asuka,” she said through her tears.

“Asuka?” My heart dropped into my shoes. My Asuka was dead. Here I was terrified about losing my mother and now I have lost my puppy.

“C-C-C-C-O-U-C-H,” she sniffled

“Couch?” I said. The couch killed Asuka? By this point, the line of customers at my teller window was out the door. None of them were angry as far as I could tell but they were fidgeting. “Mom, I'm at work. What's happening?”

I heard the phone rustle and suddenly my Pop was on. “Suzy, I'm sorry. She shouldn't have called you at work.”

“Dad, what happened to Asuka?”

“She's fine. She just ate the cushions off of the couch and destroyed the matching ottoman. We'll talk to you tonight.” And with that he hung up the phone.

I hung up the receiver and took the next customer in line.

“Is everything all right?” He asked.

“I just wish my dog was dead.” I said as I cashed his paycheck.

Asuka's voracious appetite only got worse. When we moved into our house, the previous owners left us a beautiful set of white wicker patio furniture. Two chairs and a couch were devoured over a four hour afternoon. In a vain attempt to save the remaining two chairs and table, we purchased a product called Apple Bitter from

Pets mart that according to the package, the taste made dogs stop chewing on things. When we began to spray it on what was left of the wicker furniture, I accidentally tasted it: sharp twang, followed by a numbness that coated my entire mouth, my tongue felt like it was three sizes too big for my mouth. As the water I couldn't feel swished around my mouth, I sat confident that Asuka would hate it too. Her little seven month old puppy mouth would hate not being able to taste every bug and stick that made its way into her mouth. That's when I heard Jesse laughing. Asuka was on the back porch licking the apple bitter off of the furniture! When she finished polishing off her treat, she came wagging her tail begging for more.

But she wanted less the day we had to rush her to the vet for an enema. I picked her up from my parents house were she had spent the day playing with her cousin. Mossy, my parents three year old black Labrador Retriever, the apple of my parents and Asuka's eye. I petted Mossy goodbye then put Asuka in the car and drove home, The moment I stepped into my house, the phone rang.

"Suzy," my Mom said, "We have a problem. Your Dad and I can't find Mossy's baby pool." Labrador's being hunters are renown swimmers but since my parents didn't live near a lake, ocean or pond and their back yard wasn't big enough for a pool they had purchased Mossy his own baby pool. Actually, he got a new baby pool every year. But I digress.

"Did it blow away?" I said. But it hadn't been windy that day.

"Let me rephrase that. We didn't find it but we found pieces all over the back yard." My Mother said.

I looked at Asuka, her tail wagging at me as it usually did. "You mean the pool is in pieces in the back yard." I said.

“No, we found small pieces of it. Not the whole pool.” she said. “And someone has eaten an entire five pound box of dog bones.”

“Someone,” I said as I stared at my thirty pound destructor who was scratching her left ear. I hung up with my mom and called the vet.

“You need to bring her in immediately,” the vet technician said.

Two hundred and fifty dollars later, Jesse and I found out that Asuka had indeed eaten an entire plastic pool, that was impacting her lower intestines and colon. But luckily, the five pound box of dog bones that were also inside her had cushioned the plastic so that none of her organs were damaged in any way. In fact, the vet said that surgery wasn't necessary, but an enema was. Jesse chuckled, “That'll teach her to stop chewing everything in sight.” We left Asuka to do her business and Jesse and I had dinner at the deli next door. Surprisingly, Asuka wasn't happy to see us when we got back.

But now six years later, the Asuka and Shamrock of yesteryear had turned into feet warmers, that came when called, completely housebroken and never needing leashes when we went out because they would never think about leaving our sides. Macey, only one year old, paled by comparison. It had been three months and she still wasn't housebroken. She didn't just dig holes, she dug trenches that would put soldiers to shame. But mostly she didn't listen. We'd yell at something she was doing and she just continued doing whatever it was until we'd chase after her. She probably thought her name was “NO” the six months after she came home.

But slowly her real personality came through, she learned to go outside and not on the carpets. She learned to get along with us and to let us sleep in on Sundays. When we lost Asuka to the cancer just nine months after getting Macey, she helped

the family to heal by snuggling with us and being there through the tears.

But she still wasn't trust worthy and the fact that she had disappeared from the room caused me to go searching for her. She jumped when I entered the front room and ran to her kennel. From that I could only conclude she had done something wrong. Believe me after a year I knew the signs. She had already chewed the window frame, tons of my shoes had teeth marks, decorative baskets were gone and books destroyed. I looked around the room when my gaze landed on a wooden box that I had since I was a teenager.

"Macey, NO," I said as I picked up the box off of the floor. Then I noticed there was nothing in the box. A scream left my lips.

Jesse and Shamrock bolted into the room. "What's wrong," Jesse said as he looked from me to Macey.

"My box is empty," I said as I shook the box at him.

"So," Jesse shrugged his shoulders.

"It's the box that held my wisdom teeth. You know, the four that the dentist cut out of my head."

We searched the floor and Macey's crate but nothing. I called the veterinarian, from memory.

"She ate what?" The vet technician said.

"My wisdom teeth, the teeth are about fifteen years old," I said.

"I'll check with the vet," she said. I was petting Macey as I was talking. I had to stop myself from strangling her.

"The vet said that she'll be fine," the technician said when she returned.

"Dogs tend to swallow their puppy teeth so a few extras will just pass through her

system.”

“So what you’re telling me is that it’s just incredibly gross what she did, not life threatening,” I said.

The tech laughed.

As I hung up the phone I asked Jesse if he would retrieve the teeth for me when he picked up their poop.

Jesse just walked away with Shamrock on his heels.

Chapter 8

Bank robbery in progress: Take two

All my life I wanted to be a bank robber. Carry a gun and wear a mask. Now that it's happened I guess I'm just about the best bank robber they ever had. And I sure am happy. "
John Dillinger

The bank where I worked at was robbed for the first time by two idiots. They came quickly into the bank, pulled out a gun and white silky rope and proceeded to tie me and my coworkers up before taking off with a grand total of \$3000. Just thinking about the amount pisses me off, they messed with my mind and changed who I was. The rope as it began to tighten on my skin, produced a tremor in my soul that wouldn't go away. I became an emotional wreck after the robbery. Sleeping was out of the question and paranoia became my constant tormentor. Each night when I got home from work, daylight or not, I would slowly check every room of my two story house because, in my mind, there was someone laying in wait for me. Never mind the fact that the house has two locks on each door and a large dog that would scare away any prowlers. It took months for me to resume my life the way that I had lived before the robbery--happy-go-lucky and easy going. But then just a year and a half later it happened again...

The first day back to the bank after a three day holiday weekend. Since the fourth of July fell on Sunday that year, the fifth became an automatic observance

day. So on Tuesday July 6th, I trudged back into the bank after a weekend of constant partying. No rest for the weary my mind moaned as Lori, Deanie and I unlocked the vault door and scurried around getting ready for what was sure to be a busy day since the bank had been closed for three days. And sure enough, the day burst out of the gate like a race horse at the Kentucky Derby, we were undated with deposits, withdraws, customers and non-customers. Way too much work for just three of us but the rest of employees at the bank were taking vacation that week, so even though exhaustion followed me after the independence day weekend and I would rather have taken a nap, I forced my usual "assistant manager smile" and plodded on.

Around 11:40, Lori reminded me that she had to leave at 1pm because her mother-in-law was going into surgery that afternoon. It dawned at me that if I was going to get a chance to eat I had to go now because after Lori left it would just be Deanie and me for the rest of the afternoon. Also the customer crowd had thinned out a bit, basically the calm before the storm in banking terms since most customers came into the bank during their lunches and that was noon. So I headed towards the back room for my double noodle soup and raspberry chocolate bagel and told the girls that if they needed me that I would be watching the television monitor of the bank in case it got busy. The truth was I didn't really need the security camera to know if it was busy or not. The bank was so small the only thing that separated the lunch room from the main office was a door. So if Lori and Deanie really needed me, I would have heard the crowd through the wall.

I microwaved my soup and settled down into a chair and sighed loudly. *Damn, it felt good to get off of my feet for a minute.* It had been a long fun weekend: barbecues, friends, family, fireworks and booze. My eyes were fluttering shut into

the cream cheese on my bagel, I wasn't hung over but I definitely did not get enough sleep that weekend. Just five more hours at the bank and then I was going to get into bed the moment I got home at 5:30pm, I thought. Then I heard the front door open hard to the bank.

The monitor was black and white but I was certain I didn't know the black gentleman coming into the bank, which was strange. Lindell Bank was a small community bank, I knew 98% of the customers who came through our doors. I knew the customer's name, family, friends, their likes and dislikes. I even knew how they liked their cash back and in what denominations. But the person who came into the bank this time was different. He had on sunglasses(not a big deal, it was a sunny July afternoon) and a baseball cap that was pulled down over his face. I stood up and walked over to the monitor to get a better look. I stared at him and shrugged my shoulders. He was probably just a non-customer cashing his payroll check. When something else caught my attention, the monitor wasn't recording. *Oh crap*, I thought. I forgot to change the video tape when I had come in that morning. I scrambled to find a blank tape and then popped it into the VCR. How could I have been so stupid? We could have been robbed, I said as I chastised myself. I hit the record button and then turned to enjoy a few more minutes of relaxation.

"This is a robbery, bitch, give me your money or I'll kill you."

I whirled around to the monitor, the robber had just produced a gun and was pointing it at Lori. I froze, staring at the screen like it had suddenly began showing a TV show. It was on the television but live and in person in the bank lobby.

He kept screaming at Lori and Deanie to hurry up and get him the money or he was going to shoot them. Lori appeared to be frozen but then slowly moved and

opened her drawer. All the while, the curses and threats oozed out of his lips.

I stood mesmerized by the scene that was playing out in front of me, like a reality show gone very wrong. My brain raced with unreal hypothetical questions. Should I hide? Does he even know I'm back here in the lunch room? There are three cars in the parking lot and only two people in the lobby. What if Deanie or Lori mention that I'm in back? Should I call to him and come out? In my first robbery, the robbers had taken the branch manager to the vault. I was the assistant now, would he want me? I listened for him to mention me but he was too busy telling Lori and Deanie to hurry up or he'd kill them, each time his gun gleaming in the monitor.

Did Deanie or Lori hit the alarm? There was an alarm in the back but I opted not to hit it because I didn't want the police to show up before he was finished and have us as hostages. The same thing with the phone in the back, I was not going to be a hostage. What if they had hit the alarm? What about customers? I hadn't seen anyone in the monitor but what if someone came in while this was happening?

I could escape, fear overpowering my sense of duty whispered in my ear. There's the back door that leads to the parking lot. You could be in your car and on your way to the police station and safe. *You could live another day*, my sense of self preservation cooed softly.

But it was anger that took over in me. I started talking to the robber in my own mind. Motherfucker, just finish up and get the hell out of my bank. Who the fuck do you think you are, coming into my bank and scaring the hell out of us. I started to pace. I wasn't going to hide and I'd be damned if he'd shoot one of my people. My heart beat moved to my ears and my heart thumped like it was going to explode in my chest. I was not going to let him kill them. I looked around for

something to throw at him. My mind screamed. Don't be stupid, the only thing that matters is Deanie and Lori. What if you miss him? I'm sure then he'd kill all of us. But sitting around waiting for the other shoe to drop has never been one of my fortés. I picked up a crystal paperweight, it was heavy and felt cool in my sweaty palm and slowly edged towards the door towards the lobby.

“Down on the floor, if I see anyone stand up, I'll blow your fucking head off.”

His voice echoed throughout the bank and my head. A sigh escaped my lips, he was finished. I ran back to the monitor, he was opening the front door and leaving. “I mean it, I'll kill you,” he screamed. Shut the fuck up, I thought, just get the hell out of the bank.

I rounded the corner to the teller line and listened. The front door closed with a bang. My purse. I had to get the keys to lock the front door and keep the bastard from coming back. Slowly I approached the teller line.

Deanie was huddling on the floor underneath her teller chair. Her beautiful face was bright red with tears streaming down her cheeks. Her blond hair was tangled around her fingers and she moaned when she saw me. “Suzanne, don't he'll kill you,” she gulped through her terror.

“Deanie, he's gone.” I didn't stop to see if she was okay. I couldn't. I had to lock the front door.

Lori was huddling on the floor sobbing, scurrying past her, I slowly approached the front door, straining through the lobby windows to see if he was coming back. My fingers were like lightening as I locked the front door. A sense of relief flooded my soul, he was gone and wasn't coming back in the door. I hurried

back to the teller line.

“Is everyone okay?” I asked as I knelt next to Lori. She turned to me and whimpered, “no”. I threw my arms around her and then called for Deanie. Deanie crawled over to us and joined us in our embrace. “Did someone trip the alarm,” I asked as I held onto my coworkers with all my might. Deanie and Lori both said yes, that they both given the robber the bait money. The bait money was five \$20 bills in sequential order and was attached to an alarm that went off the moment the \$20 bills were removed.

“Good,” I said, “then the police will be here any minute.”

But they weren't. We sat on the dirty floor of the bank for what seemed like hours when I turned to see what the time was. It had been almost five minutes since the robber had left. Where were the police? Where were the phone calls from the alarm company? Or the phone calls from our sister branch on Mexico, the first time we were robbed they had called our branch immediately.

I stood up, telling the girls I was just going to use the phone and then dialed 911.

“911-what is your emergency.”

“Lindell Bank at 3212 North Highway 94 was just robbed. Do you have the police dispatched?” I asked.

“No. This is the first I've heard of it.” the dispatcher said concerned.

“God-dammit,” I screamed. What the hell was happening.

“Are you all right,” the dispatcher asked.

“No, I'm not all right,” steam coming out of my nose.

Then the dispatcher began to ask all kinds of questions. Was anyone hurt? How

many

robbers were there. What did the robber look like? Was there a weapon? What kind? Which way did he flee?

I couldn't think. I was a volcano that was erupting. What if the robber had shot and killed us? No one would have found us because the police weren't on their way. I handed the phone to Lori to answer the dispatchers questions as I moved to their teller drawers. Both of the alarms had been tripped, the red light that indicates that the alarm is on was bright red. I went to the phone and called our sister branch and told them what was happening. Chris, the assistant manager there was as upset as I was. What do you mean the alarm didn't go off, she asked before she said she was on her way.

The police alarms were finally blaring in the background. But even that sound couldn't cool the anger in me. The phone rang and the police told me to come outside the door with my hands up to show that I wasn't armed. As I left the bank, the same Officer that had greeted me at my first robbery, greeted me the second time. His friendly smile, white hair and mustache a beacon of light after the experience I had just had.

"We need to stop meeting like this, Suzy," Officer Bextermueller said as he turned me away from the bank. "Is the SOB gone?"

I nodded and officer Bextermueller radioed into the microphone on his shoulder. "Are you okay," he asked.

And with that my emotions became unleashed. "No" I screamed tears flowing down my face, "I am not fucking okay. This is my second robbery with guns-a-blazing in a year and a half."

Officer Bextermueller put his arms around me and said quietly into my ear, "But you were cool and calm headed both times. You did good, kid."

I pulled it together as good as could for the police investigation. I had to help them track down the asshole. We found out a lot that afternoon, like the alarms had been knocked out by a storm over the weekend and that's why they weren't working. Of course, that led to me to a screaming fit with the alarm company that they should have contacted us to let us know.

We also found out that there had been at least two other men involved with the robbery. Surrounding the bank was a cornfield and the police found evidence of at least three guys watching our comings and goings from the bank for a week.

I didn't return to Lindell on Wednesday because the alarms were still not fixed. Plus my mind began to play evil tricks on me. After the first robbery, I was worried about invisible robbers in my house. But the day after the second robbery, I began to worry that ordinary people were gun toting robbers in disguise. Lori, Deanie and I went to a restaurant for a few drinks, Wednesday afternoon, and talked about the robbery and how it had affected us. When I got home, that night, I had myself convinced that a busboy had overheard our conversation about the bank robbery and he was going to rob Lindell bank himself. I was so convinced of this, I was crying and screaming to my husband that I had to call the police and warn them.

When I showed up on Thursday, it took three employees and a police escort to get me to walk into the bank. I hyperventilated with each step towards the bank but in the end, my loyalty to the bank and its customers is what made return to work. But I jumped every time the front door opened. And I screamed at a customer when

he jokingly asked if the robber had taken his portion of the money. "No", I said, "your money with the bank is insured. Me, Deanie's and Lori's lives are not."

By noon on Friday, I was sitting at a counter trying to balance the vault when I began to cry. I couldn't believe that I was doing something so trivial after I had been debating over life and death just three days earlier. When my coworkers tried to calm me down, I began screaming and throwing pens and paper at them. How could they have possibly understood what was going through my mind? Deanie and Lori hadn't returned to work yet but here I was trying to act like nothing had happened. The branch manager took me to the lunch room to try and calm me down but being in the lunch room was a trigger that brought the robbery back to life. I screamed at the screen and watched each customer on the monitor with the evil eye until I could recognize who they were. After an hour of this, the manager called my husband to come take me home.

On Saturday morning, I walked into the bank and told my manager that I was through. I hadn't sleep in days and the paranoia was getting steadily worse. Shadows, loud noises and televisions frightened me. She begged me to just take a week off and relax but I knew in my heart that it was going to take longer than a week to get over the robbery. "Besides," I told her, "my feeling of security here is shattered forever. Two robberies in two and a half years was enough."

I'll never know if how I acted during the robbery was the right thing to do. In my first robbery, I was tied up and had no control of the situation. In the second robbery, I had to watch and was still able to make decisions. Still now, five years later I second guess myself with questions of what ifs. What if I had know about the

alarm? Would the police getting there any sooner have helped? What if I hadn't gone to lunch? What would I had done if he started shooting? Sometimes I feel like I acted like a coward by just standing in back and not actively helping Lori and Dcanic. My husband is thankful that the robber left before I got through the door with the paperweight. Other times I feel like I did the only thing possible. I found out a year after the robbery through my Mother who works at the police station that the robber had been killed in a drug shooting. Some people asked if that helped me get over the trauma. I don't think anything will help me get over the trauma of being violently robbed twice. I finally sleep now through the night, with the help of three large dogs but I still freeze when I see a guy in a black baseball cap and dark glasses. And I cry when I see any kind of bank robbery portrayed on TV. But I guess that's part of being a victim having to deal with paranoia every day after. But then I've heard it said that paranoia is just another word for longevity.

Chapter 9

Will my IQ go down?

To know what is right and not to do it is the worst cowardice.

Confucius

It was my fourth week as a teacher and every thing was going swimmingly. So far, my enthusiasm was winning over my classes. They were bored learning about writing techniques in English but smiled when I looked their way.

At the end of my classes one day a student named Sarah approached me.

“We need a faculty advisor for cheerleading,” she said, “Can you help us?”

I stared at her for a moment. I rolled the word cheerleading around in my brain for a moment.

“Yeah, I saw that a few weeks ago.” I said, “but I don’t know anything about cheerleading.”

When the email came across my computer, I had deleted it immediately. What I didn’t know about cheerleading could fit volumes of encyclopedias. I had been overweight my entire life. I only recently started exercising by walking my dogs every night. I’m a female nerd. I go to school for fun. I read books, play video games and go to musicals.

I don’t know anything about cheerleading. The only sport I like to watch and enjoy is baseball, no cheerleaders there. The closest I think I’ve ever come to

cheerleading is liking the movie "Bring it On." About a bunch of cheerleaders who well, um cheer.

"You don't have to know anything about cheerleading," Sarah said, "We just need a faculty member or we can't have the team."

What I do know is that my heart has the consistency of a marshmallow and Sarah's big, brown eyes were toasting it nicely.

"Well, I think I have the time but why don't you send me the schedule so I can decide," I said.

"Great," she said and left me to talk to the other students who wanted questions answered.

I called Jesse on the way home. He laughed at me.

"You don't know anything about cheerleading."

But he was generally fine with it, as long as he got to watch them bounce up and down and take pictures.

My mother laughed.

"You don't know anything about cheerleading."

However she thought it was my duty to help them out as long as it didn't interfere with my job or school.

When I got home, waiting in my email was a message from the head of student relations. I called her and we talked for awhile. She thought she might be able to get me some help, but also warned me it was going to be work.

"Let me ask you a question," I said. "If I say no, what happens to the cheerleading group?"

"There won't be one. You are the only person that's shown any interest at all."

She said.

And with that my marshmallow heart melted into sticky goo.

"I'll do it," I said wondering if I should go buy pom-poms.

Chapter 10

Suzy's got a Gun

All you need for a movie is a gun and a girl. -Jean-Luc Godard

"Can't I get a pink one?" I asked my husband for the tenth time.

"Why do you want a gun?" he asked exasperated. The look in his eye told me he wasn't ready for another discussion.

"So I can protect myself."

"From what," he asked, "You don't have a job right now, and you have two very large dogs to protect you. What in god's name, would you want with a gun?"

"My dad had guns in the house growing up," I said.

He put his fingers to his temples, "For hunting, Suzy. Your father has rifles to hunt deer."

"It'll be cool," I said, "I can get a small one that'll match my purse. Then if I get attacked I'll just pull it out." I made a little gun out of my fingers and pointed them at him.

He let out the longest sigh, I've ever heard and walked away. I really did want a gun but I wanted my hubby on board before I bought it.

A month later, I was at my mother's work making copies for my new job at the community college. It was the end of the day and my mother was trying to get

me to go out to dinner with her and Michele. Michele works with my mother but is also her friend and ally. I refer to Michele as my second mother and aunt. I was attempting to resist my mother's advances because the new diet I had started was being thwarted by going out to dinner. When Michele started screaming into her cell phone, "What, what did you do? Where did you get it? Oh my god."

"What's going on," my mother asked.

"It's Katie," Michele cried, "she says she shot her own hand."

Katie is Michele's 28 year old daughter who has been in and out of psychiatric wards for the past year. She developed an addiction to pain killers which led to her husband kicking her out of the house and losing custody of her three year old daughter. But Katie also been trying everything she can think of to get attention while living with her mother so Michele wasn't sure if Katie was lying or not.

"Come home with me," Michele begged to my mother and me.

"Suzy," my mother said, "I'll finish copying your papers. You follow Michele home and I'll meet you there as soon as I'm done."

"Okay," I said as I dashed out to my car to follow Michele.

The weirdest thoughts went through my head like why weren't we calling 911. Also, I was wearing my brand new white STL cardinals hat on my head, what if I got blood all over it?

When we pulled up at Michele's house, it was eerily calm. Michele reminded me what Katie had said about shooting her hand and we went in.

The smell was wet and dank. Katie sat on the floor crying, rocking back and forth, screaming that she was never going to get to see her daughter again. Her right hand was covered with a blue towel soaked in blood.

“What did you do?” Michele screamed at her, “Where's the gun?”

Katie nodded to the floor in front of her. Michele picked up the small silver gun, it gleamed in the living room light. Michele flicked her wrist which threw the bullet chamber open. She stared at the chamber for a moment then whipped it back close with a snap.

She leaned over Katie and grabbed her hand. Katie screamed in pain but Michele showed no mercy as she unwrapped the bloody towel.

I stood in muddled silence as Michele examined Katie's hand. The hand looked like raw hamburger with a hole in it. Katie had placed the barrel to her palm and pulled the trigger. The back of her hand was bloody with pieces of skin hanging onto bone.

Michele quickly re-wrapped the hand to stop the blood flow then told Katie to get her shoes on, she was being taken to the hospital.

Michele then picked up her cell phone and called the hospital. I sat next to Katie trying to get her shoes on and her off the floor.

“Suzy,” she wailed, “Tom, doesn't love me anymore.”

“Of course, he loves you,” I said trying to get her to stand, “He married you and you have a daughter together.”

She doubled over on the living room floor, “No, he told me today that he doesn't love me anymore.”

“Is that why you did this, Katie? Is that why you shot yourself in the hand?”

She didn't answer me, she began blubbing that Tom was going to keep her from ever seeing Sarah, her daughter ever again.

I tried talking to her, pleading with her, yelling at her to get up. She had to go

to the hospital but she just kept rolling on the floor into a ball.

“Katie,” I said. “If I’m here, who do you think is on the way?”

She stopped and looked at me.

“If I’m here, then it means my mother is on the way.” I stood back from her.

“Do you want to get up now or do you want her to make you get up?”

Katie put her good hand on the couch and pulled herself off from the floor. I said a silent prayer and thanked god that my mother was the kick ass she was.

My mother did arrive but she didn’t say much to Katie. Katie apologized to my mother for doing something embarrassing. My mother’s retort? “No, you’re not.”

We ushered Katie into Michele’s car, hugged Michele and watched them drive away. My mother then berated me for my car being dirty.

“You know, Mom,” I said. “In the daughter department, I wouldn’t complain today.”

She hugged me and said, “At least, that’s all I have to worry about. Your dirty car.”

We got back in our cars and left Michele’s house. I called my husband and when he asked what was wrong all I said was, “we’ll talk about it tonight but you won the argument.”

“What argument,” he said.

“I don’t want a gun anymore.”

Chapter 11

Dream on, Shamrock. Dream on

If it is worth doing, it is worth overdoing.
Steven Tyler

Three days before Christmas. I was so sick of Christmas music that I decided to turn on my Ipod and listen to some real music while I baked 48 dozen chocolate chip cookies.

My friend Kat had asked me to bake them since I was the only one of our group of friends that was unemployed. Kat's son Nathaniel had passed away at the St Louis Children's Hospital a few years ago. But Kat brought them homemade cookies every year since, as a thank you for being so wonderful to their family. When Kat asked me to make the cookies, how could I say no?

And I didn't. My kitchen looked like a disaster area but smelled heavenly as the warm cookies came out of the oven. I was covered from head to toe in flour as my puppies circled my feet hoping for the moment when I'd drop something edible. I tried shooing them away but inevitably they'd end up back near my feet again.

I ignored them, dancing to the music coming from my Ipod. I attached the speakers that played the music everywhere instead of my usual headphones because getting tangled amidst the chaos was definitely a worry.

Dancing in my kitchen, adding chocolate chips to the batter, I squealed when Aerosmith's love in an elevator came on. I shook my booty and mixed with all my might when I heard something else. A low pitch whine began coming from the speakers. I tried to ignore the sound but soon it was overshadowing the music. So I put down the bowl, walked over and put the IPOD on pause. But the whining continued. And not from the speakers.

I looked down at the floor, my lab terrier, Shamrock was howling at the speakers. I shook my head and nudged him with my toe. He stopped immediately and wagged his tail at me. Perplexed, I turned back on my IPOD and resumed my Aerosmith. The song barely started and Shamrock howled along with the lead singer, Steven Tyler, again. I leaned over and paused the song again. Again, Shamrock stopped.

Bursting into laughter, I turned back on Aerosmith and split my sides as Shamrock howled along with the entire song. When the song stopped, so did Shamrock.

"Not much of a Steven Tyler fan, are you," I asked as I patted his head, his tail wagging ferociously.

In July, I was lying in my bed around 9pm, just reading a book. Shamrock was lounging next to me with his head in my lap. When suddenly, he bolted up and strained his ear into the air.

"What is it boy," I said, "Ninja squirrels again"

He answered me with a low moan.

"What's wrong, are you hurt?" I said as I put my hand on his head. He shrugged me off, jumped on the floor and began howling.

Jesse, my husband heard the commotion and ran into the room. "What's going on."

I raised my hands in question, "I have no idea. I haven't heard him howl since Christmas."

Jesse burst into laughter. He doubled over and slapped his knees. He put his arms around Shamrock but it didn't stop the howling.

"What is going on," I yelled to be heard.

"Guess who's at Riverport tonight?" Jesse asked. Riverport, the local concert arena is only about 5 miles from our house. I'd never heard a concert so I was confused by the question.

"Who cares," I screamed.

"Aerosmith," he said through his laughter.

I smiled and began to howl along with Shamrock.

Chapter 12

That Funny Honey of Mine

*We're simply meant to be.
Jack and Sally, The Nightmare before Christmas*

For my 18th birthday, my boyfriend gave me a pewter angel necklace. It was November 19th, only three weeks after we had begun dating. Our first date was a Halloween party that I threw at my house.

My costume for the evening: Phantom of the Opera. Which included me dressed head to toe in black, a long black cape and an actual Phantom of the Opera mask that covered half my face that I had purchased at the show after I had seen the musical at the local theater. The object of my desire was dressed as the psychopath, Alex from the movie "A Clockwork Orange." I flitted around the house: cleaning, decorating, making food and generally fighting the butterflies in my stomach. After weeks of flirting with Jesse at school and over the phone, he never asked me out. So I decided to take matters into my own hands that night.

But it wasn't going to be that easy because I stood to experience rejection on a massive scale. This moment could have been the revenge that Jesse had waited two years for. In Sophomore year, Jesse called my house and asked me to a movie. Which I promptly turned down. I hardly remember why I did: young, a crush on

someone else, friends told me not to. But now here I was two years later with a massive crush on a guy that I had once rejected. The butterflies were tango-ing and getting drunk as I turned over and over in my mind what I was going to say to him.

The trouble was that we were becoming close friends. I didn't want to get to the point where the friendship was so important to me that I didn't want to jeopardize it. The imprint of the phone had squished my right ear from talking to him for hours. He made me laugh so hard that tears ran down my cheeks and the wide smile he gave me just from looking my way made my face hurt. It had to end, either I needed to tell him how I felt and get him, or we needed to just stay friends.

And Halloween was the perfect day to tell him that I liked him. It wasn't really me spilling my feelings out like an overturned purse. It was the Phantom and if Jesse rejected him, I'd only be rejected to half of my face.

After everyone left, my blowout of a shindig, Jesse and I stood alone on my front porch at 11:30pm. We were chatting and laughing about the party and I was thanking him for showing and performing the Rocky Horror Picture Show. When silence fell over us. I took a deep breath and told him that I liked him.

"I like you too," he said.

Another deep breath. "No, I mean I like you, *like* you." I said as I stared at the street, trying not to make eye contact with him.

He didn't reply for what seemed like hours. I finally turned to look at him. He looked like a deer caught in headlights, just staring at me: eyes wide, his mouth hanging open.

"Well, what do you think?" I said.

"Thank you."

Thank you? What the hell kind of response was that? The butterflies were drunk as skunks and throwing up in my stomach. The outdoors was closing in on me, escape was my only option. I began edging for the front door. That's it, duck inside and never talk to him again, I thought.

"I *like* you too," he finally said. He took the three steps that separated us and pulled me into a hug. The butterflies disbanded and went home to sleep it off.

Our first date was the very next day. We went to Jesse's house and I was introduced to his English heritage as we watched Monty Python, *Live at the Hollywood Bowl*. Next, he took me to see the movie *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, a stop motion animation movie about the king of Halloween, Jack Skellington, who is bored with his holiday then decides he wants to kidnap Santa Claus and deliver presents to the world on Christmas. The movie was magical, beautiful and prophetic. Jack through out the movie falls in love with a beautiful ragdoll named Sally. Jesse and Suzy. Jack and Sally. J & S. The last line of the movie is "we're simply meant to be."

The butterflies returned the night that he gave me my birthday present. As I unwrapped the angel necklace, he whispered that he was giving an angel to his angel. It was the first time he used my nickname for me. We shared our first passionate kiss that night. He had been a gentleman for the three weeks we were together. Frustrated, I told him one night on the phone that I wanted to sit on his lap and suck out his fillings. He told me that he didn't have fillings. The problem was that he had never French kissed a girl before and was nervous. He told me that later, but to me that passionate kiss made me fall in love with him.

Having a steady boyfriend in high school, senior year, is great. You're

guaranteed dates for every party, the prom and, of course, graduation. But when Jesse and I went to college, we went separate places. He headed off to the local university; I went to the community college. I worried everyday that he would find someone else.

Little did I know that it was me that would find someone else. My first job out of high school involved me at the snack shop inside the Target, a local department store. His name was Dave Murray and he worked as a greeter at the front door, right next to the snack shop. We eventually became friends that hung outside of work especially since we also attended the community college together. Dave met Jesse and we all hung out together but soon it became obvious that Dave wanted more than just friendship and after dating Jesse for more than two years, I became a little interested in the attention. While Jesse was busy with college, working part time at a electronics store and felt comfortable like an old shoe. Dave flirted at school and work, bought me things and took me anywhere I wanted to go.

One night after a group of us hung out at the Denny's, I realized that I had romantic feelings towards Dave. So when Jesse dropped me off at home, I told him on the same front porch that I liked him, that I wanted to break up. Jesse proceeded to walk toward the river.

“What are you doing?” I cried as I chased him.

“If you don't love me any more I may as well throw myself into the river,” he said.

I grabbed his arm and spun him around to face me. “Don't be melodramatic. Of course, I love you but don't threaten me with your death. Is that what you want? To only stay by you because I don't want you to kill yourself?”

He hung his head, "No, that's not why I want you to stay with me. But whatever the problem is we can fix it."

And we did. Which actually turned out for the best. Once Dave realized that I wasn't leaving Jesse, he became mean towards me. Insulting me, being rude and just generally driving me away as a friend. It makes me wonder how long I would have dated him once his true colors came out? And I would have lost the best thing that ever happened to me.

But it wasn't just my feelings for Dave that came between Jesse and I when we were dating. Jesse was an only child, which meant that his parents were constant hoverers in our lives. Jamie seemed nice enough when I first met her but then the pestering began. I was Jesse's first true girlfriend, so after we had been together three years, Jamie started a campaign to get Jesse to date other girls. Never mind that we were happy but she waited to tell him this the weekend he had his wisdom teeth pulled. Jesse fought back but it didn't stop his father from telling him not to be pussy whipped.

They finally stopped the tirades when Jesse and I became engaged when we were 22 but then his mother tried to inject herself and her ideas into every aspect of our wedding. Which cheesed my mother off no end because I was her only daughter and this would be her only wedding. When I began resisting Jamie and putting her off, she'd complain and cry to Jesse, which in turn would cause he and I to fight.

So one month before our wedding, I called Jamie and told her to butt out or Jesse and I were eloping to Las Vegas. I pointed out that she wouldn't get to see her only son get married if she kept pushing us the way she did. She cried and pleaded with me not to elope. But I did get her to back off.

The wedding was the happiest day of my life. A candlelit ceremony in a green house on a cool October evening. My Jesse looking dapper in his tuxedo with our friends and family surrounding us. I thought I had pulled off the big one, gaining the upper hand on my now mother-in-law. I had proved that I was now the important woman in Jesse's life. But she didn't stop trying.

The day after our first Thanksgiving as a married couple, Jesse and I were putting up the Christmas tree and decorating it. His mother called for something and the next thing you know, she hung up on Jesse, causing him to go into panic mode.

"I have to run over to my mom's right now," he said as he was putting on his coat.

"Jesse, we're decorating the tree. What's wrong?" I said.

"My mom hung up on me."

"So?" I said as I put my hands on my hips.

"She's mad at me," he said as he headed towards the door.

"So, she'll call back later when she's not mad."

"You don't understand. She's mad. I have to go talk to her."

"If you walk out that door, I'll divorce you."

He stopped, turned to me. He saw the look in my eyes. I was not going to let her spoil my holiday time just because she hung up the phone. What were we-eleven years old?

Much to Jesse's credit, he took off his coat and continued decorating the tree.

When Jamie called the next day, I wouldn't let her talk to Jesse.

"He's making us breakfast. I'll have him call you when he's ready," I said as I hung up the phone. Then I wouldn't let him call her until breakfast was over. If she

wanted to play games, I was a master. But of course, with us playing games with each other, we put Jesse right in the middle of our little tug of war matches.

Fast forward to three years into Jesse's and my marriage. On holidays, we split our time equally at everyone's house. But a few days before Christmas eve, Jesse came home with an attitude about the family time for Christmas eve.

"We have to stay longer at my parents on Christmas eve this year," he said.

"What? Then that cuts into my family time. I'll miss some family members who leave early," I said, "No, we're going to do the same thing we've done the past two years. Two hours at your family's, then two hours at my family.

Jesse shook his head at me, "No, my mom says that my aunts and uncles get offended when we leave early. They think we don't like them."

I stared at Jesse, "Your mom says that, huh."

I went to the phone and called Jamie. She denied saying that but did agree that we should stay longer not to insult her family.

"Tell you what Jamie. We are leaving after two hours but I'll apologize to each and everyone of your family as we walk out the door. But we're not cutting time with my family," I said.

"No, no. You don't have to do that," she said, "I'm sure they'll understand."

I hung up the phone and turned to Jesse, "We will never give up my family time. Do you really think that your family is insulted? Or do you think that your mother just hates it when you leave?"

"My mom just hates it when I leave," he said. He hung his head and I realized that as angry as I was over the power play, Jesse was the innocent bystander who had to watch the two women he loved battle it out for his soul.

There were battles like that throughout the years but I never let her get away with anything. If she'd say something to Jesse that could possibly start a fight between Jesse and I. I'd call her on the phone and confront her to her face. If she'd play games with Jesse like crying or whining to get him to do something, I wouldn't let Jesse do it.

Eventually though, Jamie and I came to a common ground. She's a strong woman and so am I. She loves her family and so do I. We believe in being there for our family and that family is the most important thing in the world.

I was there when Jesse's cousin committed suicide three days before Christmas. She lent Jesse and I the down payment for our house. I was there for Jamie when her father died. She was here for me when my Mother had cancer and I lost my uncle. Most importantly, when Jesse was fired from his job, she was loving and supportive. She was doubly so when I lost two jobs in six months. She never once let me feel like a failure, she brought us food and asked all the time if needed anything. She really became my mother-in-law during these times.

Jesse has always been my biggest supporter though. After my two bank robberies, he came up to the bank to see if I was alright, followed me home then held me in bed while I cried. He kisses me goodnight, takes care of me when I'm sick and supportive. When I told him last year that I wanted to follow my dream, go back to school and get my master's in writing. First, I got a lecture that I have to work really hard and try to get published if I do, then he supported me in every way.

We celebrate Halloween as our anniversary every year with a trip to the zoo, watching the Nightmare before Christmas and welcoming the trick-or-treaters that night. It'll be our 16th anniversary this October. Sometimes it feels like 5 months and

sometimes it feels like half my life. Which it is.

Whenever we are in a playful mood, I always turn to Jesse and ask him if he'll marry me.

His blue eyes mist over and as he pulls me into an embrace, he gives me his usual reply.

"Everyday of my life."