



# Friends



# Unlikely



Susan  
Smith  
Alvis

Friends Unlikely  
*by Susan Smith Alvis*

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## Dedication

I want to dedicate this book and all of the words in it to my siblings, every one of them. Bert, Alex, Ben, and Anna-Marie—you are loved.

## Acknowledgements

I planned on keeping this simple. However, there are some extraordinary people who have waltzed through my fairly ordinary life, and I want to thank them. They deserve to be recognized.

I first want to thank my husband, Brent Alvis, for taking the time to read pretty much everything I write and for being honest enough to tell me the truth about it, whether I want to hear him or not. I want to thank my beautiful children, Matthew and Amber, for being just as frank. I don't know if I could've written this book without their participation and guidance because they reminded me of several things throughout the entire process.

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I'd like to thank Yvette Lynn, my publisher at Amira Press. You've given me the opportunity to write a book about a geographical area that is special to me while allowing me to touch on two areas that need to be addressed with teens and young people today. Thank you!

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PART ONE

## PROLOGUE

I suppose I'm pretty, in an ugly sort of way. Some people might say I'm beautiful but they don't see what I see. They don't feel what I feel. These are people who don't know me. They don't know me at all.

I live in a tourist area. It's easy to get lost in a town like ours. Most of the people who visit our area want to see the mountains and relax. They wear the faces of strangers and while they might nod in my direction if we happen to meet on the streets, they have no interest in me or anyone else. Who could blame them?

Tourists don't generally visit our little corner of the world to make friends. They stopover to breathe the mountain air, rest and relax or who knows, maybe they are running from something or someone and they just want to escape. With the natural beauty evident everywhere, there's always a place for a weary soul to wander just to clear a troubled mind.

It's actually a blessing to live in a town where so many people flow in and out, always in a hurry. I don't try to make too many friends, because I don't want people to see the real me. I'm afraid of what they'll notice if they move in too close. Since travelers come and go, it's a safe bet I'll continue to go unnoticed.

I'm a product of dismissive parents and if it weren't for a few close relationships with a select group of friends, I would be a recluse. It would be by choice. It's something I used to

do well because it allowed me to escape the humiliation of rejection. All of that changed when I met Juan.

My name is Abbie Davis. Yes, it's a plain name. I've been told so before but it's mine nonetheless. I go to high school in the small town of Sevierville, Tennessee set on the outskirts of one of the biggest tourist playgrounds of the south—Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg. As I mentioned before, it's easy to get lost in a town where so many tourists wander in and out, which is why I've always felt so comfortable. It allows me to be invisible.

Even though I don't like to be in the spotlight, I've become the center of attention when I'm with my group of friends. It's really kind of cool. I can be myself around them and believe it or not, they still like me. I can't get over that small fact!

I'm a sixteen-year-old Catholic with an alcoholic father and a mother who doesn't seem to notice the obvious. I'm going to tell you more about my friends than my family because, well, they are my *real* family. They make living among the zombies tolerable. We call them the drunk and delusional. Yes, that would be my dad and mom. Still, don't get the wrong idea. One or two of my friends can be as dysfunctional as the biological nuts who decided to bring me into this world but I love them anyway.

We've created our own little inner circle. A secret society of sorts. We aren't particularly popular, which is one of the reasons we all get along so well together. We're kind of like a club of misfits, only we fit perfectly. Like a puzzle, I suppose.

I'm the paste that keeps us all glued together or so I'm told. It's because everyone knew me first, with the exception



of the cousins. Still, the cousins didn't like one another until I came along so maybe I felt responsible for keeping them on common ground. Today, I still ask if that was a privilege or a curse. It just depends on my mood I guess.

Let me tell you about our group of holy terrors. Well, it's not as bad as all that, I just wanted to get your undivided attention. Make an impression, if you know what I mean. Now I have it, so here goes. Let me introduce you to the best people around. I don't know too many folks but those I do know are worthy of a grand introduction.

First, let me introduce Juan. If I had gone through an existence without knowing Juan, I would have missed out on a lot of living. I was backwoods-backwards until Juan came into my life. I really didn't know anyone who wanted to be around me. I struggled in school and accepted the facts as they were. I wasn't smart or as he would later tell me, *gifted*. However, as he pointed out after he knew me much better, I wasn't exactly stupid either. *Shew, I can't begin to tell you how that made me feel!*

Juan is and always has been a lot of fun. He refused to let me sit alone in my room all day. Thanks to him, I began to make better grades. He is also responsible for my realization that I had quite the nose for scavenger hunts, not to mention a great arm just perfect for throwing a football. He made sure I was a participant in life rather than merely a spectator sitting alone in the stands. Of course, some of the boys preferred to see me there when they realized I could handle a ball much better than them.

Juan became my buddy in third grade. He's been like a twin brother to me. He's the good twin. I'm the bad one. He's the smart one and I'm just the ... well ... I guess you could say I'm just the blonde one. He's Hispanic and has a laid-back temperament. He's as steady as they come, which is a southern phrase in case you didn't know.

Davina St. Clair is my best girl friend. We were in fourth grade together and became instantly inseparable. Well, not exactly. We reached an understanding. We knew it would be in both of our best interests to become friends rather than remain enemies.

We only came to this decision after she pulled my hair out in clumps on the playground because the boy she liked was pushing me in a swing. To pay her back, I decorated her beautiful braids in chewing gum while sitting behind her during reading time. She went home after a full day in fourth grade with a new look that a beautician couldn't quite fix. After both of us received much-needed haircuts, we had a mutual respect for one another. Go figure.

Davina's father is a doctor and she's a little on the spoiled side. I try my best to keep her *real people*. You know, grounded. It's a tough job but someone has to do it. I have appointed myself the sole party responsible for 'keeping Davina real people' but she doesn't seem to mind. Truth be told, I think her parents even appreciate it.

Her family is Southern Baptist and her father insists that she remain that way so she can't go to church with me, not that I've been in recent years. Dr. St. Clair is a deacon in their church and is well thought of in our community. In fact,

he's a legend around the area because his second cousin was none other than the great Doctor Martin Luther King. I've always been impressed with that fact so I claim Dr. King as my cousin too.

When I tell people about my family history, some look at me like I'm one card short of a full house but I think Davina's heritage is really cool so I try my best to cash in on her family legacy by claiming it as my own. Of course, those who don't know us, immediately ask if Davina and I are sisters. I guess many wonder how a white chic could be related to Dr. King. When people ask if we're related, we just giggle and nod.

Davina is in love with my other life-long friend, Carlos. Her father would die if he knew. Carlos Garcia is eye candy for every young girl our age. He's just plain gorgeous. He also has *several* hang-ups. Once most girls our age find out about them, they run for the door. Not us though. We're friends 'til the end, bad habits and all.

Carlos definitely needs a few buddies. If he didn't have us, he'd likely meet his end sooner rather than later. We keep him on a short leash by trying to stay one step ahead of the trouble he's certain to find. Carlos has a few problems that I think he brings on himself so he and I fight a lot. Kind of like brother and sister, I suppose, but I love him just the same.

Last-but-not-least, Rajesh Hussain is our fifth wheel. We call him Raj. He's very focused on the fact that he is going to be an upperclassman when we return to school in the fall. He's Muslim so I think that's why being an upperclassman is so important. Raj says his faith has nothing to do with it. I may be blonde but I'm not stupid. I think he focuses on rank

or class rank, as the case may be, because of his culture and religion. See, it even sounds smart doesn't it? Juan would be proud.

Raj had a difficult time when he first moved to the south. He moved to Tennessee right after the traumatic events of September eleventh. He was terribly shy so with the added pressure of having roots still firmly planted in the Middle East, he had some prejudices to overcome. Carrying around the last name Hussain didn't help much either. Still, I'm happy to report he adjusted well and before long he'd become just another typical southern boy. Cowboy boots and all.

I think I may be a little responsible for building up Raj's ego beyond repair. Carlos and I agree that Raj was quiet for so long, he's doing his best to make up for it now. He still doesn't talk that much but when he does, Katie, bar that stable barn door because his tongue is as quick as a whip! By the way, that stable thing? It's a southern thing too.

So after introductions, you can see where my friends are as diverse as my family which brings us back to a family member I forgot to mention. It was on purpose. Still, he's important in my life, but I wouldn't want him to know it. My brother, the hard rocking senior who thinks we're all a little nuts for being best friends. I'm the pest that he'd like to squash with the heel of his boot or at least he tells me something stupid like that a lot.

Some say my brother is a man of few words. I think he's just a guy with a lot on his mind. Girls. Girls. Oh, yes ... and did I happen to mention *girls*? His name is David and that's

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about all you need to know. What else do you expect a little sister to say about her big brother?

So there you have it. You should be acquainted with everyone. We're somewhat of a strange gang until you get to know us. Some might say we were the most unlikely group of kids to befriend one another based on obvious differences. Then again, fate had a way of putting us together for a reason. Ironically, after all is said and done, I think we were destined from the start to know one another. Some say it could have been a blessing and others would say a curse, but whatever fated hand we were all dealt, I sure am glad I had my friends.

## THE DAYS OF SUMMER

It was time to celebrate. School dismissed for summer the day before and we were all looking forward to the short break from homework. Juan and I met the gang at Davina's for a day by the pool. Her parents were away for the weekend so a lazy Saturday in the sun seemed like an appropriate way to spend the afternoon.

"Bout time you two made an appearance." Davina pretended to look at an invisible watch. "It's a hair past party time folks!"

As if on cue, a spray of water from Carlos and Raj made sure my dry clothes never stood a chance. I was immediately soaked. Laughter followed another flood.

"Ah guys! *Stop!* I wanted to decide when to get wet!" I didn't really mind but the squeal indicated I did. Of course, it didn't matter anyway once I caught a shove on the back. Juan just gave me the one push needed to ensure I was completely drenched!

"You never could make up your mind Abbie so consider it decided!" He called out behind me and snickers followed the loud words.

After a splash and quick trip under water, I resurfaced to a pool filled with smiles and the guys were already directing another wave of water toward the only dry person present. Juan quickly stripped down to swim trunks. He did so in record time, I might add. He wasn't going in any other way but with proper attire!

"Bombs away!" Another swoosh was heard as he made a cannonball plunge close to Davina. Her inflated boat float rocked her into the cold current.

Carlos began screaming. "Woman overboard! Woman overboard!" Pretending to swim frantically toward the damsel-in-distress, he retrieved the sinking victim in a hurry.

She took her time coming up for air probably irritated at the instant roughhousing the guys couldn't resist starting. I was already stripping off my clothes that I should have dropped at the door. A swat sound here and a plop made over there and I was down to my new pin-stripped bikini leaving soaked street clothes to bake in the sun. A process that would later leave chlorine and mildew since I didn't hang them properly, but what would most teenagers do? Probably, the exact same thing.

Blinking her mascara covered eyes, Davina sighed. "Okay, well there goes a morning of effort." At first, I thought she was talking to me but turned to see she was rubbing the pads of her thumbs over both lids removing the evidence of make-up.

Carlos was oozing with sweetness, which meant it was a little too early in the day to start getting wasted. "Ah, honey. You don't need that eye gunk. Just be natural. You're pretty enough without it." He pulled her to him backwards allowing her to float and drift along while the other two boys wrestled for a minute stopping only long enough to make fun of their buddy for being so nice.

I watched Raj and Juan wishing I could horseplay too but I knew I'd lose. One head would dunk under the water and

resurface for a second or two before the other would disappear. Arms tangled as splashes caught one or the other off guard. Raj and Juan duked it out until Raj came up breathless coughing in between attempts at catching his breath. He held up his arms. "Okay. Okay." He seemed to struggle just for those two words.

Juan laughed swimming away. "You're losing your drive my friend. You give in too soon now days!"

Raj swam to the side of the pool and slowly climbed the ladder. "Yeah. It looks that way pal but Carlos wore me down before you two slow-pokes made it over here today."

I watched him from the corner of my eye. Even after he stretched out on his beach towel, his chest rose and fell in a quick pace that didn't seem to slow like it should. I knew he'd been sick on and off since Christmas so I went to check on him. Truth be told, Raj had always been a little on the puny side. He was diabetic but with insulin, seemed to maintain well.

"Are you okay Raj?" I called from the water before I placed my palms on the flat ground outside the pool and lifted myself up.

I sat down beside him and he glanced over at me. "Don't start mother hen. I'm fine."

Shrugging, I decided he probably was okay. "If you say so." I jumped back into the cool water leaving a splash of it all over his towel.

"Hey now!" Raj was on his feet in an instant. "I didn't want a damp towel moron!"

I pouted. "That hurt my feelings."



Immediately, Juan turned around to be sure I was kidding. Forever my protector, if someone actually did bruise my heart, I imagine he would've slugged them regardless of who said what or how they meant it.

Carlos and Davina were still floating along looking like two love birds when Juan started tugging me around by my ankles. He'd give a quick yank and my head would go under water not to mention a swallow of chlorine then repeat the process.

Giggling and coughing water up at the same time, I begged for mercy. "I've drank enough to clean out my windpipes!"

"Not yet you haven't!" Juan called to me as he tugged me under once more before swimming off in search of another victim.

It was a perfect way to hang out. It was also tiring because the boys never left the girls alone to chat about girl-things. As I splashed everywhere on a kickboard with my friends, I didn't take the moment for granted. I knew how lucky I was to have great people in my life. Many kids didn't have what we had.

Even when Carlos lifted himself out of the pool in search of *his stash*, even when my clothes later smelled like mildew, even when Davina told me my bathing suit wasn't her favorite, even then. I knew my friends were gifts. They were each just packaged a little differently, which kept our time together interesting.

The summer began perfect in every way. We were all together having a good time chatting about things kids should

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talk about like what was for dinner and who would go get it. Who was in and who was out on our top friends at MySpace and what we were going to do the next day. Funny, I never knew life was so simple until it all became so very, very complicated.

## LIFE AS FIVE

"I don't know why you do the things you do." Davina was perched on the hood of her brand new Honda giving Carlos a disapproving look.

He inhaled the weed he smoked as if it was the most divine thing he'd ever had the pleasure of sucking into his lungs. "You don't seem to mind when it gives me inspiration." His hand rested on Davina's knee. By the look on his face, not to mention the rapid speed he somehow had in his fingers, he seemed to have full intentions of traveling north until she swatted him away.

"Shoo fly."

They both turned at the same time to look at me. I'd been standing behind them for a couple of minutes or so but when those two were in their zone, no one else could get their attention. They were lost in the moment, or whatever people say when they are with the one they want to jump or care about whichever the case may be. Of course, the latter sounded a little better.

"Abbie, you're always late. Where have you been?" Davina's words almost didn't escape the large quantity of peanuts she was trying to chew.

Carlos exhaled his polluted mouthful into our faces as slowly as humanly possible while Juan waved his arms. "Man, if I wanted to get high, I'd smoke that poison myself."

Raj was slow to get out of the back seat. He hadn't been feeling well since our pool party at Davina's house. Two

weeks later and life wasn't treating him much better. I really hadn't thought much of it since he'd actually been sick on and off for awhile. His immune system just seemed to be out of order or shutting down for maintenance.

Carlos watched him with obvious curiosity. "Raj, what's up with you? You haven't been yourself. Did some chic give you mono?"

I shot Raj a knowing look. He *had* been with a girl from out of town over spring break a year ago and swore the chic had given him some kind of flu that he couldn't shake. It was a one-time fling he refused to discuss with anyone other than me and Juan but lately, he'd been talking about it a lot.

Carlos had set them up but he didn't want Carlos to know anything about his little misadventure. He lost his virginity to the sleazy gal in the back of my father's van of all places. I haven't looked at it since without thinking about Raj and his once-coveted virtue. It seemed a pity that he had to give the gal his virginity when he'd only known her for a few hours. Worse still, he never saw her again or wanted anyone to say anything about it. Can't say that I blame him. Raj was a kid himself when he let someone pop his cherry. *Okay, blonde moment. Let it go.*

Davina must have caught the looks we exchanged. "Anyone want to spill the juice on why Raj acts so distressed anytime Carlos mentions mono? Apparently, I'm left out of some big secret." She seemed to be waiting for an answer. She wouldn't get one. Raj made us pinky promise, for my benefit more than Juan's, that we wouldn't say a word. A year or more had passed and I would not be spilling the beans to

Davina or anyone else. Being sworn to secrecy was serious business and a pinky-promise was golden.

Raj stripped off his shirt. When he let out a moan, there wasn't any doubt of the effort the task took. After he caught his breath, he smiled as he peered at Davina. "Ah, now darling, you know I can't share the intimate details of my life. I would have to demonstrate my skills if I told all and I'm sure Carlos would get jealous."

Everyone laughed as Raj searched for a landing spot. Planting his butt on the ground, he leaned back on a rock and threw his arms behind his neck. Snickering, he carried on with his mischief. "So you two, are you a couple yet or what? I'm just dying to know."

Raj knew Davina would love nothing more but her infatuation with Sevier County's number one marijuana consumer wasn't a relationship holding a lot of promise. She knew it and apparently, everyone else, including Carlos, did too. Still, Raj didn't mind teasing them about it.

Coughing sounds flooded the bank of Douglas Lake as Carlos took his final puff off a dwindling joint. "Anyone want a hit of this before it's all gone?"

We all seemed to stare at him in disbelief. He had smoked the whole joint by himself, which was typical of Carlos more and more. Shaking my head no, I started to get on my soapbox ready for a lecture when Juan jumped in. "Anyone going swimming?" He must've read my mind.

"Not me. I'm too high." Carlos stated the obvious as if anyone had any doubts. Guess he thought his glassy eyes never tipped us off.

"Well, at least you haven't killed off all your common sense cells yet." Davina disapproved of everything Carlos did, yet her heart only beat for him. Okay, so it may have skipped a couple just to keep things interesting.

"Common sense cells?" I glanced over at Juan who was already giving me his 'don't you dare ask' look. It was another passing blonde moment. One I decided needed to move on along without my further acknowledgement.

Juan started again. "Sure is a nice day to swim..."

"I'll go." Davina hopped off the car and within moments showed off her cute petite figure sporting a candy apple red bikini. With a disapproving look at Carlos, Davina asked me to keep an eye on him. "You know, eventually the angels are going to tire of keeping him safe so maybe he'll have you or Raj to look out for him. I'm getting tired of it." She wasn't. It just sounded good, but I knew Davina better than she knew herself. She was probably just trying to hide the fact that she was disappointed. Again.

Raj was already taking in the sun. He had his eyes closed but opened one long enough to catch the view of her backside running toward the water. Shaking his head, he pulled a ball cap down over his brow. "I'll love her till the day I die."

I spread out a quilt on the flat rocks above Raj's head. My high buddy stretched out like an eagle without any hesitation. "Hey, now! Bring your own next time. I don't like to share!" I flipped him with two fingers but he didn't budge.

He was already slaphappy stupid so he just giggled without any attempt at speaking. I silently wished we could find his little stash and set fire to it. Maybe even use it to roast some

marshmallows or something. The day would be better spent if he could join us with at least half of a functioning mind.

The afternoon was perfect all-in-all. The sun was blazing hot but the wind moved across the grass with just enough movement to keep the shaded area near the rocks cool and tolerable.

Laughter filled the air. Davina and Juan ran into some kids from school who wanted to chicken fight so he kept her steady on his shoulders as they battled it out with our classmates. Splashing water and other sounds of a frisky wet romp drifted toward us as I pulled out a book to read and Raj slept.

Occasionally, Carlos would sit up. He'd muse over the water activities and search around for a cigarette, smoke a puff or two and then lean back on his elbows again to take it all in. I watched in awe when my eyes weren't skimming the pages in front of me. We'd been friends for a long time. He was Juan's cousin by marriage and I'd known him for almost as long as I'd known Juan.

All the girls thought he was handsome, a real player, but I knew or thought I knew, he only had eyes for Davina. They were soul mates, if there really was such a thing. Whenever he wasn't high or drunk, he treated her like a goddess, which probably ruined her for a better suitor during her high school years.

Out of nowhere, Carlos started talking to me in a serious voice. It would later haunt me but I guess when you're young, you don't always analyze the things you should.

"I love her. I really love her." His ramblings were soft but I heard him the first time.

"Then why don't you tell her?" I asked him pointedly, eager for his answer.

"It's complicated."

Raj opened one eye and glared at Carlos. It was a scolding look but one that would speak volumes to me later on.

"Good reason." I went back to my book ignoring his stupor.

Acting as if he wanted to get something off his chest, Carlos reached into a cooler and took out a beer. "Want one?"

"Are you kidding me? Give me a break. No, I don't want a beer." I was snappy with him because truthfully, it pissed me off that he had to be the only one in our bunch high.

Raj was quick with his wit. "Does she look like she needs anything to sharpen her mind? Help us all if Abbie begins to follow in your footsteps, the level of intelligence she would possess would be nothing short of remarkable. She might even be cool like you, Einstein."

Carlos was right back at him. "Yeah? Really? Then, hey, let's fire up another one just for Abbie!"

I smiled. My lack of being on top of their sarcasm kept me from joining in. They fired one quick-witted comment after another. Both guys found it funny so I guess I was at least smart enough to keep my mouth shut when I didn't understand what they meant.

Davina and Juan had encouraged me over the last year to smile sweetly when I didn't know the meaning of a word in use or when I didn't understand what everyone was talking



about. Since I wasn't sure why my intelligence would be comparable to Einstein's brain, I kept quiet. I listened as the two fired back and forth for a few seconds more.

Juan had also been working with me on improving my vocabulary. This proved to be a dangerous thing sometimes because I would use words in the wrong places and if I realized it too late, I'd just grin and bear it.

Carlos still had the cold beer in my face. "Just cause your dad's a no-good alcoholic doesn't mean one sip of beer will turn you into his spit-n-image."

"He's not a no-good alcoholic." Raj came to my defense from under his cap without so much as a movement.

"What do you know?" Carlos and Raj had unspoken animosity between them at times. I thought it was because he was the only boy Davina had ever made out with other than Carlos. He was her first boyfriend and when Carlos was high, he seemed to remember it long enough to bring it up.

I looked back at my book. Funny, later I wouldn't be able to recall what I was reading that day but at the time, I remember being very involved in the story, almost anxious to turn the next page.

"I know Abbie's father loves her and he has some good traits." Raj said. He was such a loyal friend.

"Yep, Raj. I would agree with you there. He has the best moonshine in the county so I know all about his good qualities." Carlos chuckled at his own words. Whenever he was stoned, he thought he was the funniest guy on earth and he didn't seem to care if he hurt anyone's feelings which is why he easily provoked Raj ninety percent of the time.

I slammed my book closed. "Thanks Carlos, I appreciate it. Raj, don't say anything to him. He's stoned out of his mind and stupidity needs a chaperone but not company." I stood up looking for a place for my anger. When I didn't find it, I kicked a nearby rock. My toe hurt afterwards, but I guess my mind didn't think before my leg made a swift move into it again. The "ouch" fell from my lips before the second stride met the rock causing both guys to look at me bewildered.

I pretended not to notice. "You know Carlos, you are just about as bad as my parents. The drunk *and* delusional at least are one *or* the other. You're both—you're delusional as well as stoned or drunk whichever the case may be. I'm not even sure which is which with you anymore."

Raj laughed. "Go Abbie!" His smile widened as he sat up straighter.

Carlos must have been dumb-founded. He moved his mouth as if he wanted to figure out what I'd said but remained silent. I guess that meant he gave up.

"Man. I believe you've been politely told off." Raj seemed all too happy about that fact.

Carlos stood scratching his head for a minute or two but he didn't move much more than a scratch here or there. His face showed some disappointment.

I was still boiling. "Light up another one Carlos, I'm sure it will come to you." I headed toward the water when he grabbed my waist pulling me down to the blanket with him.

"Give me a kiss and I'll let you up." He never could stand for any of us to be mad at him.

"Get off of me Carlos." I was firm with the request.

"Kiss Abbie. I want a kiss." He started tickling me. "You aren't going to stay mad at me."

Carlos wasn't going to kiss me and both of us knew it. In fact, Raj was so convinced I was in safe arms, he stepped over us both and headed for the water.

Gouging him in the ribs, I batted my eyes. "Move your skinny butt over and let me up now or I'll scream rape."

Slowly, he moved. "Rape? That's funny. Davina can tell you, that's not even possible."

I didn't dare ask. I *really* didn't want to know.

His tone had turned serious again like it had been earlier so I didn't dwell on his confession.

"Abbie, why won't she let me take her out on a real date?" His forehead was crinkled up. I could tell he'd pondered the reasons more than once or twice.

I studied him for a second before I answered. "She can't and you know why."

"Because I'm from the wrong side of the tracks or because I'm not a Christian?"

"Both and then again, neither." The truth had a way of pouring from my mouth before I thought about it. Looking back, I wish I could've said something different that day but I'm not sure it would've mattered in the broad scheme of things.

I think he tried to comprehend what I was saying through eyes stained with red streaks. He spoke with a slur in his speech and so slowly that I almost went to sleep waiting for him to finish a sentence.

"So ... she'd date me if I was a Christian or ... she'd date me if I wasn't Latino or ... if I was rich? Maybe she'd date me if I made straight A's in school. What do you think?"

"She'd probably date you if you weren't a pot-head." My kinder spirit was in no mood to tiptoe around him. He needed to hear the truth so he could play around with a dose of it for a while. Slurp it down real good. Digest and deal with it.

"If you were someone she could take home to her mother and father with pride, she'd likely go out with you. Dr. St. Clair is a reasonable man and you know it. He wants his daughter happy. If you could light up her world, he'd probably accept you just like you are without any questions."

"Yeah, right."

I was suddenly filled with possessiveness. "Yeah, right. You know, if it wasn't for your cousin and the St. Clair family, there would have been many nights when I was younger that I would have gone to bed hungry. Dr. St. Clair used to pick me up and take me home from school when I had band practice and dad was too drunk to drive me home. He never questioned it. He never said to me, 'Abbie, call a cab cause your white' or 'I'm sorry, white Catholic girls should call their priest if they need a lift home from school'. He isn't judgmental."

Carlos seemed to be in deep thought before he found the words he wanted to say. "Yeah but I'm not you. I'm the guy who would like to date his daughter."

"So? What point are you trying to make or better yet, do you even have one?"

"My point is, you got morals. You have religion. I don't even know who I am so how can I have any morals or religious beliefs? Davina says this is important to her and very important to her mother and father."

"Yeah ... well, you do too. I don't know about your morals, only you know whether or not you have a soul or a conscience. As far as religion? Well, you have religious beliefs alright. It's called the religion of self-destruction and I don't know how to tell you to walk away from it."

I don't know what got into me that day but I guess we were all getting a little tired of Carlos and his drug use. Before he started smoking pot, we all had a lot of fun. Maybe it was because we could be kids without having to worry about being busted for keeping the wrong company. I'd dealt with substance abuse and I knew the devastation of it. I couldn't get it across to Carlos and I guess, I should've tried a little harder. He was worth the extra effort but on that particular day, I wasn't interested in taking up the cause of saving Carlos. Like most teenagers, I just wanted to have a fun time at the lake.

Little did I know, he was hanging in the balance of life and death by only a shoe-string to separate the two. Pot wasn't the only thing he smoked. It had just become the accepted drug he could use in the company of others because we allowed it. Maybe if I'd known, but— all I could later say was ... I didn't. No one could've seen into the future we all faced and if any of us could have, maybe things would've been different. Maybe we could have set up detours along the

contaminated road he was determined to travel. Who knows?  
I guess none of us ever will.

\* \* \* \*

I left Carlos on the banks of the lake to take a swim. While I was swimming, I revisited our youth in segments trying to figure out when Carlos became not just a dope head but also a real dope. I came up empty-handed. I couldn't peg it. I knew he was getting high more and more but what I didn't know was why or how to stop it.

When I walked back toward him, I noticed he seemed alive with energy. It wasn't typical Carlos behavior because Carlos was lazy. The more marijuana he smoked, the lazier he became. I also remember a chemical-type smell that I later figured out was Meth but at the time, I couldn't put my finger on it. Since it was the first time I'd ever smelled it, I didn't think much of it but still, I knew something was noticeably out-of-character with Carlos.

"Everyone's hungry. Help me get the cooler out of the back of Davina's car." Someone could have knocked me over with a feather when I didn't have to ask for help twice. Generally, we had to crack a whip or two to entice Carlos to just move his legs. Before I could get to the rear of her car, Carlos had popped the trunk from the inside, and had practically plowed over me to get the cooler out.

"Wow, I didn't know you could move that fast but Carlos, let me tell you a little secret. There isn't any beer in there." I couldn't help laughing.

He winked at me and for a split second, just a tick in time, I saw what Davina and many other girls saw. Carlos wasn't just hot but he was *smokin* like nobody's business. His rugged good looks were enough to drive those who didn't know him, past the point of crazy.

"Mrs. St. Clair made chicken salad, ham sandwiches and lots of goodies. You must be starved if you are running me over like a race horse." I intently watched him and for a second, thought I might even be smitten with him myself. *Loyalty, Abbie. You are a loyal friend.* I shook off the sixty-second crush and remembered all the faults he had.

"Nope, just helping out a friend, that's all." His eyes danced with mischief so somehow I wasn't buying it.

After I set up the makeshift buffet on the tail of the S10 truck Carlos drove, he whistled for the others to join us and we sat around enjoying the day, good food and easy conversation. It wouldn't necessarily be the last of good times but it would be the last of days together without the complications of life always threatening to pull us apart.

Davina looked beautiful and happy as she indulged in the sudden Carlos-transformation. He was attentive, chatty, and full of life. He held her hand, smacked kisses on her cheek and showed her plenty of adoration while we all looked on.

"So, buddy. When *is* the axe going to fall?" Raj turned to the only person standing in between him and Davina. He seemed to wait for a come back.

Davina leaned her back into Carlos as he wrapped his arms around her waist. With quite possibly the coldest eyes I'd ever seen, he decided to answer him. "I don't know what you're

talking about." The look was displaced. It was kind of like Carlos had lost his eyes to another spirit or something. His demeanor changed in a fraction of a second and he was instantly stone cold.

When Juan and I exchanged glances, I had a feeling all the guys knew what was going on while leaving the girls out but I didn't have time to question it. Raj seemed ready to take up a sword for preserving Davina's happiness when suddenly he started to weave. He was losing his balance.

"Raj, man, are you okay? Have you been sneaking a hit or two on my glass pipe?" Carlos had moved Davina aside as he reached out to steady him. Raj and Carlos had a very strange relationship. Something none of us seemed to understand. One minute they were ready for a knock down drag out and the next minute, they were ready to lie down and die for the other one.

Before he could answer, Raj hit the ground hard. No one had time to ask about the reference to a glass pipe. Out like a light, Raj lay face down in the grass. Everyone seemed to move at once and whatever happened from that moment until we reached the hospital with him was a complete blur.



## ER CONFESSIONS

"He isn't breathing damnit!" Carlos screamed out to no one in particular. "Drive faster! Please drive faster!"

I couldn't see what was going on in the rearview mirror just a blur of passing cars as we sped toward the hospital. It didn't occur to me that I had been the one to drive us all to the medical center until we pulled in. Seriously, how we made it there alive could be anyone's guess. I remember the ear-piercing shouts of terror and Carlos telling someone, to drive faster. I also recall hearing him yell at God to make Raj breathe while Davina gave him mouth to mouth following Juan's instructions.

The slam of the car door jarred me into reality. I sat frozen behind the wheel of the car with my hands locked on the steering wheel. I watched in disbelief as Carlos pulled Raj's lifeless body from my backseat.

I'll never forget how Carlos picked Raj up like he was a weightless feather and sprinted into the emergency room. His voice echoed into the open corridor as his screams for help told medical personnel they had a real emergency on their hands. *"I need help now!!! Move your ass people!!!! Help me! Please!!! Help us!!!"*

Raj was quickly taken behind swinging doors by one group of the medical team while a Physician made his way over to us. Carlos was pale white with eyes glassed over in a haze. One look at him and it was justified for the attending

physician to ask a lot of questions. We all stood in front of the doctor ready to answer and eager to help.

"Who is he? How old is he? Can you call his parents? Has he been using drugs? Has he had anything to eat or drink while you've been with him?" When the doctor finally stopped for a breath, he had to notice the confused and terrified looks on our faces. With a deep sigh he said, "I need one of you to call his next of kin." Davina was already dialing the phone trying frantically to reach Raj's mother when she handed her cell to the doctor. He walked away from all of us as he talked to her.

When the doctor returned a couple of minutes later, he handed the phone back to Davina and directed his conversation to her. "Mrs. Hussain is on her way. I didn't realize you were Dr. St. Clair's daughter. She would like for you to call your father and ask him to meet you all here. We would've called him anyway." He paused a moment to observe us. "Kids, this is serious. I need to know if your friend is on drugs. This could be a life or death situation here and I have to know."

We all started talking at one time. "No. He'd never used drugs. *No*. Absolutely not. There was no way. He'd been sick for a long time. He was diabetic. Insulin ... he was on insulin. The flu ... he had a paranoia of sorts about the flu. Of course it was a flu bug or something. It had to be."

I think I was the one to mention the flu or a virus several times before the man in front of us held up his hand. "Alright. If you think of anything I should know, please speak to the nurse over at the station behind me." He pointed it out as if

he thought we wouldn't be able to locate it. "We'll do everything we can to help him."

We were directed to the waiting room down the hall by a nurse who seemed to watch our every move, yet we didn't budge. Davina was already on the phone again barking orders at her father. She wanted him to come to the hospital immediately. The whole time, Carlos stood in front of the swinging doors as if he thought catching a glimpse behind them would suddenly make everything okay. There, doctors were working frantically to save Raj's life and the commotion behind them could be seen from the two tiny windows at the top of each door.

I approached him cautiously with Juan who reached out and patted him on the back. "He's going to be alright man."

Carlos shrugged him off. "You don't know that!" His voice was raspy and he appeared to fight back angry tears but something else was there too. Something I couldn't put my finger on. Was it regret? I didn't have time to figure it all out but when I did later, everything made such perfect sense to me.

I watched Davina as she walked away from us. She continued to talk on the phone and kept a keen eye on us. I'm sure she probably didn't understand why Carlos stood out as clearly frantic.

"He's going to be fine." I tried to reinforce what Juan had already stated while shrugging in Davina's direction.

"Did you get a phone call or something from one of those angels Davina is always carrying on about? Hmm? Is that why you think you're in the know? If so, tell me now because if

he's going to be *just fine*, I'd much rather be in the car with the stereo blaring and a cold beer in one hand and a nice looking chic in the other."

Juan and I both stared at him with an *Oh-no-you-did-not just say that* glare. Carlos didn't talk about girls in front of Davina and by the look on her face, even though she was still on the phone, there wasn't any doubts that she'd heard him.

"Knock it off Carlos! Go sit with Davina. We'll know something soon. Standing here throwing your negative energy around isn't going to help anyone." Juan seldom crossed Carlos but when he did, his cousin typically listened. *Typically* being the choice word.

Before Juan could have possibly known what was going to happen, Carlos had him pinned to the wall. "You go sit with Davina damn it! I'm going to stand right here until I know if he is going to live or die alright?" His words fell through gritted teeth as he held the collar of his cousin's shirt.

Both guys locked eyes but Juan came right back at him with a calm voice. "Carlos, man, let me go. This is nuts. I just thought you could sit down out of the way. You're acting like this is your fault. This, whatever *this* is, isn't your fault."

Carlos released his cousin before anyone needed to break them up. Davina started toward us but made a u-turn when her cell started ringing.

Carlos paced. Juan scratched his head. I prayed. I didn't care if I was praying to the angels or to my God, who I happened to believe was also Davina's God. It didn't matter. I was praying as hard as I could. Behind the doors that had swallowed Raj whole, our friend was fighting for his life. We

knew it by the way the medical staff rushed around and by the codes that kept coming over the loud speakers of the emergency room.

A few minutes passed before Juan tried to console Carlos again. "Why are you blaming yourself man? This isn't your fault. Abbie had to practically drag Raj out of the house this morning. He hasn't been feeling well for a long time. For some reason, he didn't want anyone to know but since I'm always with Abbie when she picks him up, I've known it. He coughs all the time and has no energy. You act like this is your fault or something. I'm telling you, he's just sick and needs a good antibiotic and he'll bounce right back. I know you think that everything that happens to all of us centers around you but man, he isn't in here because of you. He's back there because he wouldn't go to the doctor when he first found out he was sick. It has nothing to do with you."

"Really?" Carlos was sarcastic.

"Of course not. He isn't lying back there because of something you did. Do you think he's back there because of a broken heart over you and Davina? If so, you're a *real* piece of work man, a true legend in your own mind. He's happy, she's happy. He's moved on. You and Davina have moved on. Everything is way cool. Think about it. He even nailed that girl you set him up with on Spring Break last year..."

My mouth fell open. I couldn't believe he revealed the secret Raj specifically asked him to keep quiet about. Juan and I made a pact years ago not to go between Carlos and Raj. They always kept things from one another. We decided we were going to stay on common ground between the two

because it was hard to say when they were at odds or when everything was all-good between them. Juan had just broken our self-inflicted code. He had told Carlos something that Raj wanted kept in confidence.

An unexplainable panic-ridden expression took form across Carlos' face and told a story none of us wanted to read. I noticed his breathing became labored and what little color he had in his cheeks quickly drained.

Juan pointed back toward the admitting area of the ER. "This has something to do with the girl you set him up with doesn't it?"

Carlos didn't say anything.

"Answer me man. This has something to do with that girl, doesn't it?"

Carlos looked away from him as he dug into his shorts for a cigarette and light.

"You can't smoke in here." Juan stated the obvious with a jaw set in determination.

Giving him the best *no-shit* look I've ever seen, Carlos tossed the cigarette into his mouth and headed for the exit with both of us right behind him. I caught a glimpse of Davina on the way out. She was still on the phone.

Once outside, Juan continued. "Does this have anything to do with that chic you set him up with or not?"

Carlos inhaled the cigarette smoke as if he was smoking pot. He was such a pot head, that I thought he probably drifted in and out of a fantasy world almost believing he was smoking a big fat joint even when he wasn't. Another drag or two and he decided to give Juan a nod.

Juan's face reddened. "You knew her?"

"Her cousin. I knew her cousin. Her family comes here every year at Christmas and Spring Break so we hang out some."

"What's this got to do with Raj man?" Juan looked as if he anticipated the worst. I know I did.

"Not much." Carlos took another drag and shook his head. "Maybe everything."

"So what? What are you trying to tell us? Did you set him up with someone who made him sick? Did he catch something from this chic? Is that what you're trying to tell us?"

Carlos shifted from one foot to the other. He lit another cigarette soon after the first one was out. I think he liked the idea of lighting a cigarette. Maybe he thought it looked cool or something because he rarely finished one. He wasn't talking.

"Man, if you think Raj's is sick and she's the reason, you better go tell the doctors what you know. I mean it man. This is serious stuff. He's been sicker than a dog."

Carlos shook his head. "It's cause he's diabetic. He's always going to have health problems. I've just been worried about him and he looked like he um ... well ... "Carlos struggled for the right words before continuing, "It scared me because he stopped breathing in the car. Davina will tell you. He stopped breathing."

Juan squinted his eyes and sighed. "Carlos, Raj has been getting sick and not like he does when he's having a damn problem with his blood sugar. It's something else and two weeks after he was with that little honey you set him up with, he was sick all over. He even thought she might have had

something like Mono." Juan walked away from him and came back. "Damn it. Do you know something?"

"Carlos, think about it. He has been sick almost since the day he met her. He's lost over thirty pounds." I thought back to when I first noticed Raj as being sick and it all started right after Raj's big date with the world's most sexually aggressive teenage girl. The one who was capable of dragging someone she didn't know into the throes of passion in record time. I almost lost my lunch thinking about it.

Juan's eyes seemed to plead with his cousin. "He's in a bad way man. A really bad way." If someone overheard Juan talking, they'd swear he was a drug user because of his lingo but Juan was far too smart to let drugs empower his ability to be generally stupid. Unlike our Carlos.

Filling his lungs full then blowing out a puff of smoke, Carlos threw the cigarette down and started back inside. I could tell he knew something. Maybe he couldn't find the words he wanted to say.

Reaching out, Juan stopped him before he stepped into the cool air-conditioned lobby. "He's our friend man. If you know something, you gotta tell it."

Carlos took a deep breath. "If he slept with her, and you say he did..." He seemed to have trouble wrapping his mind around the idea. "I don't know man. There's no way he did. He couldn't have. That's not Raj. He's not one to sleep around. He was so young too. He just told you that to make himself look big or something.

"He told me too and they even did *it* in our van." I confessed and yes, broke the pinky-code when I did.



My confirmation must have been needed because Carlos finally gained the courage to spit it out, "That girl I set him up with ... he slept with her? *He slept with her?*" His eyes darted back and forth, with angry words ready to spew from his lips. "She's dead! She died two months ago. Wanna know how she died? She died of AIDS." He wiggled out of his cousin's grasp and slipped through the door with his head hung low but not before yelling over his shoulder. "Now, what were you saying about it not being my fault?"

In that moment, the whole world came to a screeching halt. I couldn't believe what we had just heard. Carlos had set one of our best friends up with a girl who was passing through with her cousin and their family. I didn't know enough about AIDS to know the seriousness of the disease at that moment but I would soon discover, what a deadly game my friend had played when he wanted to play around with the gal who was a little older and more experienced. The only thing I knew was Carlos had set up Raj on a date with death. It didn't make any sense. I had to believe he didn't know.

Tears formed in Juan's eyes as he reached for me drawing me in for a tight hug. My tears came slowly maybe from the shock of it all or maybe because they belonged on my cheeks long before Juan's hug drew them out. I thought about the deep cough Raj had kept for weeks and how it almost sounded like a bad case of bronchitis so I told Juan not to worry.

"It could just be a bad case of pneumonia. You know his mom kind of thought he might have bronchitis and even made an appointment for him to see the family physician."

Juan stroked my back and then whispered. "Yes, Abbie. It probably is a case of pneumonia. It's something you see a lot in patients with HIV. I've read some about it."

I felt like I was smothering as Juan hugged me even closer. Whispering, he confided in me. "I remember seeing sores on Raj's back when we were in the locker room. He just said it was a scrape he must've gotten from his grandfather's farm when he was out riding four-wheelers. Abbie ... sores or lesions are something commonly found on people with HIV or AIDS."

Dr. St. Clair walked up on us and we broke our embrace. "Abbie, honey, are you okay? Juan, what's going on?" Dr. St. Clair was a big man. Big, in the sense that he could take you on if you crossed him but he had kind eyes and an even bigger heart.

"I'm okay." The tears I'd fought back with force streamed down my face once again as he hugged me.

"Now Abbie, I want you to pull it together. I've been on the phone with the ER all the way over here. Raj is stable and we're going to get to the bottom of what caused this. I'm sure there is an explanation."

Maybe he was right. There was probably a good reason. A clarification other than the one Carlos had given. Besides, what did Carlos know? He could've been stoned out of his mind when he heard the news about the slut Raj had been with. I immediately felt guilty for tagging a person I didn't know with such a label. Well, there was no nice way to think about her. Even though I'm sure, I could've come up with one or two other words, I just didn't have it in me.

Dr. St. Clair stood in front of Juan with his hand on his shoulder. "I'll check on Raj myself and make sure he gets the best of care. It could be anything. Just because he passed out doesn't mean he has something life-threatening wrong with him. He'll be fine. I know it."

"Okay."

"Are *you* okay?" He studied Juan's face.

"I'm fine sir. Just fine." Juan didn't sound believable.

"Alright then, I'll go check on Raj and let you know how he's doing."

"Dr. St. Clair?" Juan wanted to say something more. Something helpful. I knew him well enough to know that he wanted to tell him everything he knew.

"Yes?" He turned with curiosity written across his face. He had to know there was something more just by looking at the worried faces of two teenagers that he had known for a great number of years.

"Never mind." Juan's voice sank to a whisper.

He nodded and continued inside with both of us on his heels. When he approached the nurse's desk, Juan just blurted it out. "He needs an HIV test."

Dr. St. Clair turned around slowly. He must have been shocked by Juan's words because I know I was surprised too when he'd blurted them out. He had enough experience with Davina's friends to know we wouldn't tell-all so he didn't bother asking too many unnecessary questions only those we probably wouldn't want to answer. "What? An HIV test? Why? What makes either of you think he may need an HIV test?"

Juan wasn't as confident in his speech after he had the good doctor's full attention. "I think sir .. that he um ... may um ... need the test." He stuttered over each syllable.

Dr. St. Clair seemed more agitated than shocked. He turned his back to us again briefly, as the receptionist at the nurse's desk gave him a stack of messages. Taking a step closer to Juan, his voice was low. "Is this something you feel is warranted?" His words were directed at Juan but his eyes glared in my direction too.

"Yes sir, I do." Juan looked him squarely in the eyes.

"Do you want to tell me why?" Persistent as ever, it became clear that Davina's father wasn't going to order a test without just cause.

"No sir, no I don't. I hope I'm wrong but if you can't find anything wrong with him, then, test him for HIV."

"Juan, regardless of whether or not we find anything wrong with him, we need to test him if you think he has been exposed to the HIV virus. Would his mother know anything about it?"

I jumped in. "No! She wouldn't know at all I don't think and he wouldn't want her to know."

Dr. St. Clair shot me a disapproving look. One of those I just hated. "Abbie, if he has HIV and you think he needs to be tested, his mother is going to know. I'll speak to Raj but Juan, I'll ask you again. Do you think this is something that we need to talk to Raj about? Do you think he has been exposed to the virus?"

Juan was honest. "Yes, sir. Yes sir, he has. Well, I don't know how much of an exposure he had but yes, I think a test may be needed."

Dr. St. Clair nodded and worked his way toward the back station to read over a few charts. Davina approached him as he read over what I assumed was Raj's chart. We stood within earshot hoping he would tell his daughter something he might not be as willing to reveal to us.

"Hi Daddy." Her voice wasn't full of mischief and the enthusiasm typical of Davina.

"Hi sweetie." He smacked a kiss on her forehead.

"Thank you for coming."

Barely looking at her, Davina's father patted her arm and disappeared behind the swinging doors without saying anything more.

## THE SINS THAT FIND YOU OUT

Raj was sitting up in his bed when we all went in to see him. His color was good or at least, better than it had been when we brought him in the day before. When I said as much, Carlos was the one to take his blonde shot. "Well, Abbie, I see what you mean. Golly darn, who would've thought he could look better with some level of consciousness rather than with his face down in the dirt?"

Everyone laughed so I joined in too realizing my blonde-moment had been a bit of an icebreaker even though I really thought it had been the appropriate thing to say to him. *He did look better*. My guess was he felt better than the previous day too!

Raj was in a good mood and stopped laughing long enough to tell us about the crummy food. Then he had to take another minute to tell the guys about the beautiful nurses. We all laughed hysterically as he described the things he did to try and win their attention.

My favorite Raj-caper was the one where he called for the nurses and once two of them arrived, he stood to show them that his gown was ripped in the back. I rolled when I pictured it. I could see Raj standing up to show off his bare behind just to tell the nurses his backless gown had left him *exposed* which was the word he used when he complained to the staff.

He seemed to be back to himself with high spirits and a quick wit.

I noticed that Carlos was still on edge. He was wound up tight like a clock pacing back and forth with sweat beaded on his forehead. Raj must have noticed it too. "You don't seem like yourself today Carlos. Anything wrong?"

"Uh.... no. Why?" He spat the words out.

"Are you sure? You can tell me. Remember, we're all friends here." I could tell Raj couldn't resist poking some fun at Carlos and his teasing was ready to rip before Carlos could prepare himself. "Now, come on Carlos. It can't be that bad. What? Did someone run off with your stash or was it the pipe? Come on. Tell us what's going on in that brain we all like to call mush."

Carlos laughed. "Raj, better watch yourself over there. I'm not the one with the lovely nightie on after all. By the way, it looks stunning on you."

"Thanks Buddy. I appreciate the compliment. It's so the women can check out my sexy legs." He let the lower half of his leg hang from the bed showing us his calf.

Juan let out a whistle. "Whoa! Now, that's one hot leg. Quick, Davina and Abbie, close your eyes! They've never seen something quite so ... hmm ... so skinny?"

Raj started laughing so hard that tears came to his eyes but soon a cough took him back to a calmer demeanor. I watched as his look of concern took us all by surprise.

Ignoring Raj, Carlos made an excuse to get away from the uncomfortable silence. "I gotta get a smoke."

Raj sat up and asked the question that I am sure we were all dying to know, "Is it a doobie or a Camel?"

He didn't look back over his shoulder. "Shut up Raj or else I'll find one of those beautiful little nurses and make sure she brings in the longest needle she can find filled full of a laxative."

Raj's smile returned as his eyes followed Carlos out the door and then moved back to Juan.

He started talking about Dollywood. We all worked there part-time in the summer. Davina worked on one of the show sets and the rest of us worked the rides. It was a good place to work and we all liked working together even though we rarely saw one another.

Juan started telling us about the work being done on Dollywood's Blazing Fury. We were happy to hear about it because it had become our favorite. On occasion, we had hidden in the park until it shut down and watched for security to leave the area so we could have one last thrill. It was fun, just our crazy group of friends riding together, hoping we weren't caught. It was always entertainment at its finest with the guys making sure to hop on and off as the carts moved throughout the set. Hollywood would have loved to have had these guys!

We had just started to get into the business of asking Raj about his hospital stay when Raj's mother, Dr. St. Clair and another doctor came into the room. Davina's eyes locked firmly on her father but I noticed he didn't look at her. He didn't look my way either. We had barely acknowledged them when we were asked to leave the room so they could have a word alone with Raj.



Raj asked if I could stay with him. His mother reluctantly agreed. Juan and Davina left as I moved to the corner of the room. What happened next was nothing I could have ever prepared myself for.

It's strange, but I remember everything and nothing about that day. I knew what news he was going to receive. I knew from the moment Carlos said the ugliest words I'd ever heard on the day before. I knew then. He had said them with mindless passion. "She died of AIDS." Now, my friend was going to meet a similar fate. I knew it before I heard it. I saw the words come before they ever met the lips of the physician whom I later discovered was Raj's family doctor.

Since no one in the room paid any attention to me, I looked out the window. I saw my friends standing on the sidewalk. How ironic. They were there with us without even being in the room.

"Raj, honey," his mother's voice shook, "there's something I need to tell you..." Her words drifted off. I looked harder for something to focus on outside. *Heaven, that's what I'll do. I'll look up toward heaven. Pray. I'll pray for a little bit. Bargain. Let me bargain with you God. Don't let them say what I think they are going to say ... I'll do just about anything....*

As if on cue, God let it rain. I guess the angels were starting to cry. Maybe they were pulling for Raj from the beginning. On earth, my friends didn't move. What idiots, I thought to myself. *Move. Just go inside.* I already knew the words that were going to be spoken and with everyone outside staring up at me, well, it just didn't make any sense at all. It was as if they were going to suffer outside because

they knew what we were facing inside. They didn't go. They wouldn't budge. Instead they stood there in the rain watching me, as if something told each of them I needed them there. Raj needed them there.

My mind wanted to drift and I guess it did because beyond Mrs. Hussain's initial words I heard nothing. The next words I remember hearing from her were the ones I couldn't bear for my friend to hear. They came anyway.

"Raj, when you went to the doctor a few weeks ago, I had them run some blood work. Do you remember?"

He grinned. "How could I forget? The woman drew so much blood I swore she was feeding vampires at home."

The laughter he apparently tried to share wasn't met with enthusiasm by anyone else. The tension could've been sliced and diced and still been as thick as a slab of meat. Raj called to me, "Laugh Abbie, laugh. That's funny, by the way."

My smile was forced but I tried to give him what he needed in that moment or two. "Yes, Raj. It's funny. baby vamps. Ha."

It's weird. I believe Raj had his fate hit him with the truth all at once. I saw it on his face. It was like he was ready to listen to what those in front of him had to say. In that moment, I realized the true cruelty of the disease that would lead my friend down a hopeless trail. His face told the tale all on its own. He was sick. He knew it. He only needed to hear it. I guess the confirmation of it made it real to him.

I looked at a cloud moving rapidly across the sky and then looked down to see Davina return below with an umbrella. My gaze had moved from the window for only a moment so I

never noticed she was gone. We all needed to be where we were at that point in time. Raj needed me and I needed them. Even if they were standing in the rain. I could see them and it brought me a little peace.

"So, I had some blood work done. Okay, I'll just tell you Mom. I probably caught something from this chic I saw once over Spring Break last year. A kissing disease or something. In fact, I mentioned Mono to Dr. St. Clair." Grasping at straws, always grasping at straws. Did he really believe that those around him would believe Mono had him down for over a year?

Mrs. Hussain didn't look amused. Her frown and her voice must have told Raj all he needed to know and that was, she wasn't buying his story. "Raj," her tone was firm, "Evidently, son..." Tears streamed down her face before she must have decided there wasn't any escape route from the truth. "Son, we both know you did more than kiss that girl you met. We have reason to believe that she died of AIDS."

I heard Raj gasp and watched the emotions cross his face as he sucked in the realization that when he met body to body with someone he knew nothing about, he had essentially locked palms with death. His eyes widened as they held onto mine. I couldn't look away. I couldn't retreat to those who waited below wanting to know but scared to see the reflection of bad news hanging above them.

It seemed like time just slipped away in that hospital room as I waited for someone to say something. Relief flooded me when Dr. St. Clair spoke. "Raj, do you know about HIV, the virus that causes AIDS?"

He nodded then turned to his mother. It was almost as if he granted me permission to look back to the outside world and share his heartache with the others. I moved in front of the window ledge that held a lone plant.

Before my eyes drifted below, I cheated time for as long as possible looking again at the sky while watching a cloud run from the building. Finally, I fixed my gaze on my friends. I guess I wanted to be certain that they knew before I moved away from the glass. The news was what we had been afraid it would be. I looked first at Davina and nodded then Juan and finally Carlos. Before turning back to face Raj, I saw Davina and Juan hug as Carlos tossed a cigarette in his mouth and started down the sidewalk alone.

Raj moved swiftly into denial. "Mom, whoever told you that nonsense doesn't know what they are talking about. I didn't even know that girl. I ... I met her and I.... I..."

Dr. St. Clair cut him off. "Raj, the girl you met was Camilla Stevens."

Raj's face was beet red. He was stuttering and clearly agitated when he threw back his bed sheets. He started to get out of bed but probably thought better of it. He reached around to close the back of his hospital gown. "Yes, with all due respect Dr. St. Clair, I know her name." His frustration spewed from his lips.

"I imagine you do." I know Dr. St. Clair didn't mean to be arrogant but it came across like ice.

His words were matter-of-fact and for a minute or two, I was mad at him for his choice of words. They were inappropriate.

"We have confirmed that Camilla Stevens, the girl you met, did in fact, die of AIDS." Well, if Raj wanted verification, he'd just had it delivered to him bedside.

My own tears came. Raj's followed with a stifled cry for understanding. "That can't be. She didn't look sick. She couldn't have been sick. There's just no way."

Raj's mother took his hand and I walked up to stand behind her resting my open palm on a weary shoulder as if that could begin to console her. I couldn't bear to hear more but was forced to wait with them as Raj's condition was explained in more detail than I wanted to know.

Dr. St. Clair explained that Raj had tested positive for HIV. He would be in the hospital for a few more days. Necessary tests needed to be run and Raj needed to become familiar with his medications as well as HIV and AIDS education. "Raj, this isn't the disease it once was. We are far more advanced and equipped to help those with HIV and with education, I think and your doctor thinks you can live a very productive life."

Raj looked weak and sick. I'm sure his soul and his heart ached. He swiped away another tear and found just a few words to snap at his medical team. "Yes, that is a life without children and a life with hands in medicine bottles and on schedules and just—"

His mother interrupted him. "You should have thought about that, son, before you bedded down with a girl you knew nothing about." She didn't appear to look sorry that she'd said it but that was Mrs. Hussain for you. She never showed her true emotions.

When everything that could be said, had been, Dr. St. Clair turned to me. I think he tried to find something to say that would ease the pain he knew I was in. I stopped him with a request. "Can I talk to you a minute Dr. St. Clair?" He nodded and I followed him into the hall.

Davina, Carlos and Juan joined us. His words seemed to slice them in half too just as I'd expected. "Raj does have HIV. His mother requested a test recently from a family doctor and we found out those results just an hour or so ago. Kids, I'm very sorry. If you have questions or need some information, do not hesitate to ask me. I can even arrange for some counseling if you'd like and would be willing to go with you to the sessions." His words were piercing but I had to remember that when we were in a medical building, he was always going to be professional. He was treating us like the friends and family of any other patient only I imagine he gave us a bit more compassion.

"Daddy, he's going to die isn't he?" Davina was clearly overwhelmed as she openly cried.

Carlos took a deep breath and just walked away. I knew he didn't need or want to hear an answer.

I don't remember what Dr. St. Clair told her, how he answered when asked pointedly. I've thought about it a lot. I wanted to know later. What did he say to his daughter when asked a direct question? Did he lie or did he tell her the truth? I wanted to know, but I could not remember what he said.

Before he walked away, I asked him for more information on HIV. Within minutes, he had handfals of material for us. "Kids, what I'd like to see you do is become familiar with this

disease. Raj is going to need you. He's facing the battle of a lifetime. Your support can make a difference in the quality of life he is able to lead and we all need to talk to each other about what you're feeling and about questions you have. I'm going to help Raj and each of you get through this. You can count on me."

Davina, always the prolific one, had to add her own personal observations as she thumbed through the literature her father handed out like everyday forms. "Isn't it sad that today people are still getting infected with HIV? So much research has been done on a disease with such a little name. Millions, yes it's really in the millions, have lost their lives to AIDS."

Her father nodded. "Yes, Davina, but there's still a lot of hope for a cure. You can't give up hope. When people are sick, they have to hang on somewhere."

*You can't give up hope.* Dr. St. Clair's words seemed optimistic but his expression told a different story. It gave everything away. *You can't give up hope.* I guess when you're dying or a loved one is dying, the only thing you can cling onto *is* that prospect. So, if hope is all there really is when death is beating down your door, then we'd have to do it. Raj would do the same for any one of us.

I looked at my friends for answers. They didn't have any and why I bothered looking at them is beyond me. Maybe it was for comfort. My voice broke as I started to turn my back to them. "Well, if we're going to buy into this positive affirmation stuff, then I hope God will change his mind and those damn tests you ran on Raj are wrong." The tears came

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and I tried to outrun them before anyone could see them fall.



## EVERYONE COPEs IN THEIR OWN WAY

Raj had a hard time with the news. I guess anyone in his shoes would have a difficult time dealing. I wasn't surprised when his mother came out and told us he would have to see us the following day. I could hear his cries and screams. It sounded as if he was slamming doors but later I would learn he threw a few chairs up against the wall. Who could blame him.

"Can I go in and say goodbye?" My words were snubbed out through choked-back tears.

Juan shot me a not-a-good-thing-to-say-Abbie look. So when Mrs. Hussain shook her head, I understood. I had a reputation for saying or asking the wrong thing at the wrong time I guess.

"Tell him ... tell him I ... I..." the tears stood in my way of saying what I wanted to say.

She nodded as if she knew anyway. "He knows Abbie and he loves you too child."

I couldn't offer her a smile or even a hug. I simply nodded in robotic fashion. When I turned to face the exit, the faucet from my eyelids spewed moisture once more. Carlos was already waiting for us outside the door. Davina had gone to say good-bye to her father while Juan lingered behind to talk with Raj's mother.

Even though I walked right by Carlos on my way out of the hospital, our eyes never met. I just couldn't face him so I turned my back on him and watched the cars passing by us

on the nearby street. I watched each make and model. Thought about the people in each vehicle and even wondered about their lives. No one looked over in my direction. Not one solitary person.

For some reason, I was mad in that moment because no one seemed to notice me. I wanted everyone on the planet to see my pain. Sometimes, the world just swallows people up whole. Everyone gets so involved in their own lives that they don't have time to stop and smell the flowers or to push a swing for a child with short legs, unable to meet the ground. It's as if most people just float through this world and don't bother to stop and appreciate the life we have until it seems threatened with an ending.

My thoughts never left Raj. He was getting ready to face some kind of journey. Even though I was in my own little secluded world in his tiny hospital room, I gathered the seriousness of the disease. I'd heard a lot about HIV and AIDS but it had been years since any of us had attended an awareness class in school about it. I remembered watching a movie back in elementary school and then that was it. No further information was given and no other mention of it.

There wasn't a doubt in my mind. My friend was going to die. However, the information I overheard while the doctors spoke to Raj suggested a patient's life span had greatly improved for those with HIV. Still, the stigma alone carried such sadness. Here he was. Rajesh Hussain. A young man who had overcome the fact that he was carrying around a name viewed as taboo right after the events of nine-eleven and then he had to face a stigma of a different sort. HIV, the

virus that causes AIDS. What a torch to carry. At that moment, I *really* wanted to blame someone. Carlos looked like a likely target. He must've sensed it. If he'd been smart enough to keep his mouth shut, I wouldn't have been so determined to tell him exactly how I felt, but Carlos was never high on the honor roll.

I could hear his lighter behind me. Flick. Flick. Flick.

"Damn. Can't get a light around here either. No one smokes in this place. You'd think this sorry facility would at least have a smoking patio."

I turned to meet him head on. Maybe I wanted him to see the anger. I guess I thought it would make a difference if we faced one another and just had it out. Whatever was racing through my head, it was moving too fast to keep it trapped inside. I had to get it off my chest. Get everything out in the open once and for all.

"You're worried about a light? *You* are concerned about a damned light and Raj is up there in that hospital bed?" I pointed up toward the sky rather than back toward the hospital.

He raised a brow at me and it only made me more agitated. "Answer me —right now! With everything going on inside, you are worried about lighting up a cancer stick so you can stand here looking cool. *Is* that right? Impressive. I know, at least, I'm impressed. Very much so. In fact, I might just light up one too. After all Carlos, why not introduce me to an early death. God knows you couldn't wait to help Raj find one, so whose next?"

"I might as well smoke. I sure as heck can't do anything to help Raj! You should have told me about him you know. You could have told me about the *one-nighter*. I would have told you. Think about it. He's been sick for a while. You couldn't put two and two together? A little too tough for you, was that it?" His anger marched across his face with reddening patches as his voice raised an octave.

"Okay..." My heart started to race and I couldn't think as quick on my feet as I wanted. *Calm down Abbie. Calm down. He's going to make this all your fault just because he was kept in the dark about it for so long. You know this.* I told myself to be calm but the thing about these conversations I have with myself, the bad Abbie usually wins out over the good one.

I shook my head. I felt like I belonged in the psych ward of a state facility. I'd become quite accustomed to having internal conversations with myself. As annoying as it could be, I decided it was much better to talk to myself than to a stoner. At least, I could talk back. Someone high couldn't manage that much sometimes. Okay, in defense of all pot smokers in the world, if they feel real froggy, some can get a slurred word or two in. An occasional sentence formed that would impress the one speaking far more than anyone who would hear them.

"Okay? Okay, what Abbie? Did one of those light-colored hairs get trapped in your vocal chords?" Armed with anger he was ready to move into a war of words. I understood his fury, but why was he directing it at me?

I took a deep breath and tried to count backwards from fifty so I wouldn't say something I would later regret. It would have worked too but I couldn't remember what came after five because the resentment had started to move through my veins like venom. The magical number of five stumped me. *Five* friends. *Five* best friends. We'd always been *five*. The thought consumed me far more than counting backwards.

"Carlos, I understand you're upset but think about Raj. Let's stay focused on him. Is that possible or do you need to go get high in order to focus on the important people or things in your life?"

"Yes, *let's* think about Raj. Let's think about the fact that he came to your house and asked for the key to *your* dad's van. Let's think about the fact that you knew long before now that he slept with that girl. Let's talk about the real reason he is up there in that bed right now trying to wrap his mind around the idea that *he is going to die!*"

Madness ran rampant and grabbed me specifically. The only thing I knew with any certainty was that I would be forever grateful that I didn't have something to throw in his direction. My quick tongue reloaded and spat with weapons meant to destroy. "*You* of all people have some nerve! Laying the blame on me would make you feel a little bit better wouldn't it Carlos? Let's be honest here. Okay? Can you do that? Or have you smoked so much *Mary Jane* that you honestly don't know the truth when it hits you in the face? I guess when everything is exposed, it's hard to see when there's so much fog and smoke to further cloud your ability to reason!"

Little did we know, Carlos was hurting far more than any one of us would ever suspect until much later on and I just kept digging in for more. I wanted him to hurt. I wanted him to feel something. I wanted him to know pain like the rest of us.

"You're stupid Abbie. Shut up! You're running in last place. You can't win this race when your mind is lagging so far behind. It's not possible so zip it!"

"Carlos, I'm getting pretty sick of the stupid blonde comments and the outright poor, dumb Abbie jokes. I may not be as smart as Juan or Davina or even Raj but one thing I know without any doubt, I am far more smarter than you are. You're the dumbest mother..."

"Abbie! *That's enough!* This isn't helping anyone!" Davina's outright screams prevented me from saying something I would later regret. I'd already said too much.

Carlos laughed at me. "*Far More Smarter?* Abbie, you can't even insult someone using correct speech so I understand why you don't share in the responsibility that Raj is here. You don't have the ability; the capacity to even begin to understand any of this so I'm not going to be like Juan and Raj and try to teach you something you can't begin to learn!"

Maybe he was right. I'd heard it so much I'd started to believe it. I missed out on a few brain cells when the baby designer was giving them out upstairs. I was probably over to the side crawling around with someone like Carlos, which would explain why Carlos was missing a few too. Well, no, that's not right. His ignorance was most definitely self-

inflicted and only on those occasions when he was totally plastered.

"Carlos, don't make me say it. Don't make me say what I really want to say to you." I paused and looked at him. At his arrogant smirk, I lost it and continued, "If you were the kind of friend you should've been, you wouldn't have set Raj up with someone you knew nothing about."

"No, Abbie. It isn't going to help things to blame him." Juan walked up and wasted no time jumping right in. He was forever the sensible one but in this case, had no idea that he was wrong at least according to my calculations.

"I wasn't blaming your precious cousin, Juan. He was blaming me." The truth was that we were blaming each other.

I watched as Juan stared Carlos down as if to send him a telepathetic message to shut the hell up. When I thought he had safely retreated to his respective area of space, I went in for the kill. "It's your fault Carlos. What kind of person sets up a friend with a girl who has one foot in the grave? Hmmm? How's that for directing blame? Raj is lying in that hospital bed because you set him up with death when you introduced him to *that* two-bit slut..."

"*Abbie!* That *is* enough!" *Great.* Dr. St. Clair came from behind me with his hands waving in the air and a frown I thought was meant to show everyone in the parking lot how I'd disappointed him. "This is exactly what Raj doesn't need. He needs friends to stand by him. This bickering doesn't solve anything whatsoever. Raj needs you guys. Placing blame isn't productive and it isn't going to help him at all. Abbie Davis, I'd better not hear another thing like that come out of your

mouth or I'll turn you over my knee." He wouldn't dare and I knew it but I also knew he was definitely mad to have said such a thing.

Carlos walked away from us and Davina caught up with him. If things would have been different, Dr. St. Clair might have noticed the affection in his daughter's eyes and recognized the fact that she had strong feelings for Carlos. He was focused on me so he didn't see what most would.

"Juan, would you excuse us for a moment please?"

He nodded as Dr. St. Clair pulled me to the side. "Abbie, this isn't the behavior I expected from you." His voice proved he was disappointed but his look is what broke my heart.

I looked down at my feet and noticed an ant crawling across the toe of my shoe. That pissed me off. I was so mad at everything around me that an ant even made my anger boil. I followed it until it was on the surface again and then tormented it with a slow kill. I first tapped the end of its body with the same shoe it had invaded and then as it *struggled* for one last taste of life, I squished it.

"That's irony." I whispered the words.

Dr. St. Clair rambled on scolding me. When I said something about irony, he stopped in mid-sentence. I guess the observation was misplaced based on what he was saying. "What are you talking about?"

"That ant."

"Abbie, what ant?" His frown showed further disapproval.

"The one that ran across the toe of my shoe." I pointed at the ground.



His brow wrinkled as he studied me "What about it? Are you feeling alright? Do you feel like you need to talk to someone?"

"I *am* talking to someone. I'm *trying* to talk to you!"

"About an ant? That's err ... interesting Abbie. Very ... uh ... interesting. While I'm trying to talk to you about your friend, you are talking about an ant."

"You don't understand. I *am* talking about Raj."

"No, you were talking about an ant." He shook his head and studied me.

"Okay, it's weird. You don't get it. Never mind." My eyes were watering and I could feel the moisture threatening to puddle in the corners.

"Abbie, tell me about this ant. I'm all ears. Honey, I'd like to know what you mean. Tell me. I am listening." He took a deep breath extending his arm to place his palm on my shoulder.

Oddly enough, I wanted to talk about the insect that chose the wrong shoe to cross over. "I hate all bugs. You know how I despise anything that can crawl on me. While you were talking a second ago, the big ugly one there crawled on my shoe." I pointed to the dead ant remains at my feet. "It seemed to just take its own sweet time crossing over the leather. So, I watched it until it hit the ground again. I wanted it to suffer and pay the ultimate price for doing it."

Davina's father looked at me like I was most definitely losing it. "And you had time to think about all of this while I was talking to you?"

I hesitated only for a minute as I tried to determine whether Dr. St. Clair was paying me the attention I wanted from him. He appeared to be listening so I continued. "Yes. I squashed the back part of its body as a penalty for being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Watched as it fought for a little more time, a little more life and then I decided, *I decided* it had reached the end of its rope. Then and only then did my foot rise slightly almost on its own and *smash it*." I didn't even sound like myself as I described the assassination of one of earth's little creatures.

The man who had taught me to be loving and kind was slow to speak. "That's real interesting Abbie."

"Don't you see Dr. St. Clair?"

"No dear. I'm not sure I comprehend what it is you want me to understand about this ant."

I took a deep breath. Sometimes even doctors were a little on the dense side and through the years; I'd learned to be patient with the man who had stepped into the role of my surrogate father. Physicians had a lot of book smarts but sometimes they were left out in the common sense department. I guess a beautiful mind could only process so much. "You don't get it?"

"No Abbie, I can't say that I do. Tell me what you want me to read into that little story. I want to know why *murdering* the ant made you feel better."

*Murdering the ant. Okay. I'll take it.* "The whole ant thing is a comparison to what Raj is going to face. The stupid bug chose the wrong shoe. With a thousand feet walking into that hospital every day, the bug chose my shoe! With hundreds of

thousands of people coming into this area every year, Raj chose the wrong girl to ... well, you know." I paused for a second to look up at the window where I had stood only an hour or so earlier. "Dr. St. Clair, I hate ants and I hated that girl from the moment I laid eyes on her. When they came over to my house she was just so ... so..."

"Abbie," he cut me off with disapproval in his tone. He had to know what I wanted to say. I wanted to discredit her beyond repair.

He continued with caution. "I've taught you and Davina both better than that. We don't hate our brothers and sisters. You know I don't like to hear you say things— that are negative about another person."

"Just listen to me. I'm telling you why this all makes sense to me. Raj chose the *wrong girl*. That little bug? Well, it chose the wrong shoe as I've said. I took my time claiming its life and HIV will do the same thing. One minute, we'll think everything is going to be okay. He'll be in pain; we'll see it and watch it, probably experience some of it too."

"What does this have to do with the ant? Go on and find your point."

"Oh yes, that. The little varmint thought it could just crawl away unnoticed and everything would be okay. I stepped on the back part of its body. After the first shock of pain swept over its tiny legs, it squirmed to try and get away from me but it couldn't." My voice broke before I continued. "See, Dr. St. Clair, we're going to watch Raj struggle. We'll see his health just slowly disappear. There will be times that we will

all think everything is going to work out and then *bam*, he'll be sick again."

"Yes Abbie, his health will slowly decline even with the medications we have today. You are correct but dear this could go on for a great number of years if he's lucky so with this disease, he isn't going to decline rapidly if he takes care of himself and makes his health a priority. This isn't the eighties. What many people don't know about HIV is that now, those with it can still live very productive lives."

"But won't he get better at times, worse at others?" My emotions were all over the place. My eyes would water up and spill a few tears and I'd swipe them away and then manage to choke back more of them as I waited for Dr. St. Clair to give me an answer I wanted.

"Yes, I'm afraid so." Dr. St. Clair knew there were many factors involved and it would start with Raj and how well he cared for himself as well as how willing he was to make an overall lifestyle change. He shrugged. "Abbie, time is going to be telling and right now, the answers you want, I can't give you. How I wish I could but honey, I can't."

"So, it's like a yo-yo. We think he's doing better and then his health gets worse, bad tests come in to confirm it and the whole thing repeats over and over right?"

His eyes were moist. "Yes, honey. I'm sorry but that's right for the most part, but that is what you see in the more advanced stages usually. I am optimistic that Raj won't start experiencing such a decline until he is much, much older."

"And that's where the suffering comes in." I was still focused on my ridiculous story. "I wanted to punish the ant

for being on my shoe. Raj is being punished for his choices. It's a slow, cruel way to go. HIV is going to deal Raj the same fate I gave that stupid bug."

"Well, not exactly." Dr. St. Clair started to say something but I cut him short.

"This disease is going to hand Raj over on a silver platter to AIDS. Do you know why? Because it's already been decided. Just like I decided to kill that damn ant. Raj made the wrong choice and HIV is going to decide all sorts of things for Raj now. Do you understand now?"

He studied me for a long time. I didn't realize Davina was behind me.. She cut in. Dr. St. Clair turned his attention to her. "He will die of AIDS won't he?"

"Girls, I'm supposed to give everyone hope and believe me, there is hope. Still, because you are my family, I just can't candy coat this for you. The facts are in front of us. AIDS claims lives. The good news is that even with a diagnosis of HIV, patients are living longer than ever before. It's common to see a person diagnosed and then watch in amazement as they live out their lives productively for many, many years. So, even with HIV, Raj has a chance for a longer life than you may think. He's not going to die tomorrow or next week or even next year."

"Daddy, you don't know that."

"No, I don't. No one knows what tomorrow or the next day or the day after that holds. You never know Davina. You just live today and you live it the best way you can. Try to make your life count and touch those around you in a way that can make their lives a little bit easier, happier even."

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"Abbie, I think you have an interesting way of seeing this disease. I want you ... all of you ... to read up on HIV and AIDS. It's important that you know more. It helps to have knowledge girls." His pager went off and he smacked kisses on our foreheads. "I have to go. Abbie, stay with us tonight and we'll talk more later."

I nodded and watched as he disappeared back into the hospital.

## BAD TO WORSE

Davina and I started to move toward her car. I kind of got the feeling she was still pissed off at me for talking down Carlos. Wow! I was getting good at noticing things. Chalk one up for Abbie the progressive dumb blonde in motion! Unlike Carlos, I was smart enough to keep quiet. Well, at least, in the beginning.

"I don't know where the guys went." She didn't look up as she unlocked the car and slid in behind the wheel.

"Me either. I was so busy talking to your dad that I didn't notice they had left."

Davina took a deep breath and let it out. "Abbie, I want you to please ease up on Carlos. He's in a bad place right now. He does blame himself." Davina rubbed her temple with two index fingers. "I have a splitting headache and I hope you can understand this. Carlos is..." Before she could finish, her voice broke and she cried uncontrollably.

When she began to sniff back more sobs, she asked me for patience. "Please Abbie. He isn't all bad. I know you know that. I just want him to be okay and right now—he's not okay. Please try to be kind to him."

"He wanted to blame me." How dare Davina throw off Carlos and his problems on me.

"You know and I know it isn't your fault," she started to defend him and shot me a look daring me to interrupt, "Carlos is fragile. He's a ... I don't know how to say it exactly but he's..."

"Davina, face it. He's turned into a no-count pothead. I still care about him but I don't like substance abuse. He's using far too much weed and Lord only knows what else." I stood my ground with her looking straight ahead refusing to give an inch.

"Abbie. I love him. Now, enough Carlos-bashing for one day. Listen, you know nothing about what he's going through right now. He's beating himself up something terrible over Raj. He knows he set that girl up with Raj and he is carrying all the blame. His spirit seems to have blown away into the wind and left behind a body without a soul. It's really weird. I never thought he cared about one of us as much as he does but he sure loves his friends and believe it or not, he's a truer friend to Raj than I ever realized. He's loyal and that's a great characteristic. Give him a little break."

I was quiet for the rest of the drive. Davina wanted to stop by Dollywood and get our schedules for the coming week so I agreed. I couldn't care less about when I worked next but for some reason Davina decided work was what she needed. She told me the worst thing I could do would be to lose my summer job and she had a point. I needed the money because my father had long since had the reputation of drinking up everything he made and typically went through my mother's money quickly too.

As soon as we walked into the park, her cell phone rang.

A panic-stricken look swam across her face. "*Where? Tell me where?*" She started to sprint through the park screaming over her shoulder. "Come on Abbie. Hurry. It's Carlos!"



I followed behind her unsure of what was going on but having enough dark roots in my blonde head to know it was serious. I stayed on her heels as she ran into the amusement area. She headed straight for the Ferris Wheel.

There pretty as you please was Carlos.

He had climbed in between grooves making his way to the center of the ride. I don't know how many feet up in the air he was but he was there nonetheless. He was perched on a bar made perfectly for his skinny little butt. He appeared calm but of course he had the birds-eye view and I was just going by the fact that he wasn't screaming for help. His legs dangled freely as he waved to us. "Come on up! You'll enjoy the view."

"Carlos! Get down from there now!" Davina yelled up to him with more contempt than concern. I guess she was already thinking more about what others would think rather than the real possibility that Carlos might actually jump or something.

The park was closing so no one was in the amusement area except employees. We knew all of them. Juan was talking to the security guards and had convinced them to hold off the 9-1-1 call until we tried for a few minutes to talk him into returning to solid ground.

I stretched my neck every-which-way but loose trying to figure out how-on-earth he had gotten up there. When I couldn't find the way I thought he'd gone up, I began to worry about the way he could get down but I didn't want anyone to hear concern in my voice. "Carlos. Get down. This is ridiculous. Quit fooling around. We've all had a long day

and don't want to deal with your drama. We want to go home, get something to eat, and then get back to the hospital to start it all over again tomorrow."

"Abbie? Is that youuuuuuu down there?" The words slurred off his tongue.

I knew instantly he was stoned out of his mind. My heart suddenly thumped faster as the realization hit me dead on. If he was out of his head, he was probably in danger and maybe unable to get down safely on his own. "Davina, he's messed up."

"Abbie, what else is new? You didn't think he went up there without being high did you?"

"OH ABBBBBIEEEEE!!!!" Carlos began to taunt me.

"Yes Carlos?" I called back up to him with my hands cupping my mouth as if he wouldn't hear me any other way.

"Abbie." His voice was sober. "I ... I'm afraid of heights you know." He started laughing out loud as if his proclamation was much funnier than it actually was.

"Yes. I know this!" I yelled back up.

"I had to come up here though." His voice was heavy.

"Why Carlos?"

"There's something here for me." His body swayed and we all gasped.

Davina tried to coax him. "Yes, honey. We're all here for you."

"No, you stupid bitch! There's something *up* here for me." He tried to stand and weaved back and forth when he did.

Davina's eyes glared straight ahead. He'd called her a bitch and he'd done it in front of everyone. Her heart must've

splintered into a billion pieces. I patted her arm trying to console her and called back up to him with growing anger. "Carlos. That's just about enough. You get down here this instant and apologize to Davina. Explain yourself to security. Apologize to everyone here and let's go home!"

His laugh was wicked. "*Home? Home you say?*"

"Yes Carlos. Home." I had my hands on my hips as I yelled with growing irritation.

"Now *why* would *you* want to go home?"

"Just get down here now and we'll talk about it!" I cupped my hands over my mouth again hoping to carry the words up to where he was perched.

He seemed to be satisfied with where he was because he didn't make a move to climb down. He lit up a joint and began to sing at the top of his lungs. "On a dark desert highway ... Welcome to Dollywood's Hotel ... Okay, so the words changed significantly from *Hotel California* to whatever lyrics Carlos wanted to include. Still, he had the tune down to an art. He was pretty good in fact for a lunatic swinging from the interior cavity of a Ferris Wheel.

Juan had to be exhausted from dealing with him and it was showing in his voice. "He's been there since we got here. I guess I'm going to have to let them call 9-1-1."

Davina was angry and let her hostility flow when she called up to him again. "Okay, have it your way! Security is going to call the police. You've left them no choice. Do you want your family and your little cousins to see you acting like a drunken monkey?"

He seemed agitated at her comparison and he started mumbling. We could barely hear him at first but then he screamed out. "Drunk monkey? I'll show them. I'm not a monkey. I'm one cool cat." Carlos began to move across a few bars. Since he really was afraid of heights, I imagine he held on with a death grip probably grabbing onto anything he could find. I knew he was apprehensive when he began to move to a tighter area and then gasped loudly before he sat back down on a thicker piece of wood. He pulled something out of his pocket and popped it in his mouth.

"Davina, is he taking pills?"

"Of course not." Juan jumped in and walked over to whisper in my ear. "Remember who you are talking in front of Abbie. If these people think he's on drugs, he'll lose his job."

For once, Juan said something *really* stupid. "Did you forget he just smoked a joint in front of them?" There was no doubt he was going to lose his damn job and he deserved to lose it.

Juan turned away from me but I saw the hurt in his face.

Davina threw her hands in the air as she shrieked out the obvious. "Well why on earth would people in this park think something like that? Drugs? *Oh! No!* Of course not! It takes a sane person to act like him!"

"Shhh! Davina, please!" I tried to warn her. It was bad enough already without us nailing his fate shut for him.

"JUAN! ABBBBIIIIIEEE!" Carlos didn't acknowledge Davina again after calling her a bitch.

"Carlos, man, I'm running low on patience here. Low, real ... real low." Juan's voice dropped an octave much like a

baritone would do. I guess it was for effect but it was anything but effective.

Laughter bellowed throughout the park and then the strangest thing happened. Something I couldn't explain and didn't understand. Carlos turned to his side and started talking to thin air as if someone was seated right next to him. We couldn't hear what he was saying from the ground because it sounded like rambling. Davina dropped to her knees and started praying.

"Juan? What's going on?" I was puzzled as I watched what unfolded. I'm sure security thought we were part of some larger plan maybe even members of a cult. To my left, I had my best friend on her knees with her hands in prayer position, silently praying. Above me, Carlos carried on a most intense conversation with absolutely no one. He used his hand for gestures as if to drive home a point.

Security tapped Juan on the shoulder and informed him they were calling the police. I can't say I blamed them because the whole Carlos-show screamed out for some kind of sensible intervention. We were *not* it. Juan held up a finger to indicate he wanted one more chance.

"Carlos, get down from there right now. You have thirty seconds to start making your way down here. The last thing we need is for Raj to see this kind of fiasco on the news tonight. If 9-1-1 is called, the cameras will come in right behind the call. You don't want that man. I know you. This isn't you man."

There's something about a person's mind on drugs. Depending on the drug, the mind can do various things.

Trickery seems common. What I didn't know then was that Carlos was battling Meth and all its many friends. See, Meth rarely travels alone.

What we were witnessing was something so bizarre. Meth comes into a person's life with loads of company—primarily demons and hallucinations. Someone addicted to the drug can see them at various times. Their personality changes and can flip in an instant. Before that day, I only knew of one choice drug Carlos used—marijuana. However, it appeared he had another one or two as well. I seemed to be the only one left in the dark. The person I knew couldn't smoke weed and climb anywhere or at least, I didn't think so. I was in shock watching him in action yet I got the feeling Davina and Juan had witnessed similar shows.

I was just about to begin thirty seconds of pleading when he did something even stranger. He extended his right hand into a handshake movement as if he was shaking hands with someone. I couldn't see his face but I could still hear the rambling. Obviously, no one shook back but he thought they did and when they did, they apparently said their good-byes. *Now I was beginning to reason out what Carlos was doing. Apparently, we'd all visited the loco side of the park and joined in with our friend. Gees.*

Carlos turned to make his announcement. "I got what I came here for. I can go home now. They said it would be just fine to go ahead and leave." He began his descent chattering a bunch of nonsense as Davina rose from her knees to watch in disbelief. When he started down, I held my breath but as it would turn out, he made his way down with ease. He moved

like he was walking down a flight of stairs. He wasn't careful and he didn't take his time. He just trotted on down like it was no big deal.

Once he was on the ground safely, the guys in security pulled him aside to have a long talk with him. He, of course, would lose his job or at least, they told him they'd recommend it. There were many other employees who had gathered around and witnessed his apparent cry for attention. The park security officers pointed out that one small detail I had overlooked. Once they had given him a piece of their mind, they allowed him to leave with us.

Juan and Carlos had started to make their way through the park and Davina and I stayed for a moment longer to thank those who could've turned the whole event into a media circus. Davina made excuses for him like she always did, as she told about a friend who was ill and in the hospital. "Carlos isn't coping well." Her attempt at providing an explanation wasn't working if the expressions of disgust on the security guards faces were any indications.

One of the younger security guards didn't allow her to simply dismiss Carlos' behavior as inappropriate. "He's on drugs." He said it matter-of-factly. "Make all the excuses you want for him but it doesn't change the facts and it will not save his life. The guy needs some kind of help."

Davina smiled a sweet I-don't-owe-you-an-explanation look and started up the hill toward the main park area. Left behind, he began to work on me. "She said your friend is in the hospital but it appears you may have another one there soon if you don't get him some kind of help."

"Thank you for your concern." I shook the three guards' hands that remained in the area and started walking quicker in an attempt to catch up with Davina.

By the time I reached her, the guard who wanted us to hear him out had caught up to us as well. "Girls, look. I know this guy. He's bad news. I know what drugs he's on and where he gets some of them. My guess is he's in a place where you can't go now. If not, you'd better get him some help and help him fast because he'll soon be joining half the kids on this stuff and once he does, there's no turning back."

Before we could say anything, he was gone. I guess he just wanted to say his peace and move on. It wasn't his business. Davina wasn't saying anything and well, I wasn't able to comprehend everything I'd just witnessed. I didn't understand this kind of behavior. I'd seen a lot of drunken moments with my dad so I should've been very used to it but coming from the Carlos I knew, this was way out of the realm of normal even for him.

I wasn't sure what he was doing or how far gone his mind was—how quickly I would learn precisely what the security guard was trying to tell us. Sadly, I'd later learn he knew exactly what he was talking about.



## YOU CAN ENABLE OR YOU CAN HELP

After an impossible evening, orchestrated by Carlos and his invisible friends, we all returned to Juan's house. His parents were out of town and he wanted to stop by and feed his dog before going over to stay with Carlos and his family.

When we got there, Davina walked from the foyer to the patio in record time while I helped Juan pack up a few things to take with him. He was quiet and withdrawn. I knew whatever was going on with Carlos, no matter what it was; Juan had a good idea about the details.

"What's he taking? He's not just smoking pot because I saw him put something in his mouth when he was at the park. I tried to pretend like I might know more than I did and took the approach cautiously in hopes I could find out the seriousness of his problem.

"What do you mean?" He didn't want to answer me that much was obvious, so he danced around it. I could accept that most of the time. However, when it came to one of our own, I wanted some answers and he would give them to me if he wanted to avoid bodily harm.

My hands rested on my hips. "Don't mess with me Juan. I want to know. What *is he taking*?" I ground out the words through clenched teeth. "That little stunt back at the park wasn't the pot talking. Heck, it wasn't Carlos talking."

Juan rolled his eyes.

"Do you care that he now has imaginary friends that he shakes hands with while slapping them on the back?" I

shouted. I searched for some way to try to understand before I continued, "Let's put aside the fact that he does all of this from way up in the air hanging onto thin bars within a turn cage of a Ferris Wheel!" I ended with a shriek. Taking a deep breath, I took a step back and glared at him.

I could see the hurt in his face as he tried to decide how to tell me the truth. "Oh Abbie. I didn't want you to find out like this. Not like this. Not now. Not with Raj and your parents and..."

"What? What is it?" I couldn't stand for him to make excuses. I didn't want to be protected. I wanted the truth.

He walked over to me and without warning, grabbed me around the neck. He kissed me hard on the mouth. I think his forward actions shocked as much as my eager reaction because I kissed back. When he broke away from me, which wasn't quick enough in my opinion, I was breathless. "*What* was that?" My heart was racing and I'm sure everyone in Sevier County had to have heard the thump, thump, thump as it beat loud enough to draw attention.

"I've wanted to do it for awhile I guess." His voice broke and with trembling fingers, he swiped a stray hair out of my eyes.

I stood a little taller. "Juan, now is *not* the time for this kind of nonsense."

"You're right. I ... I ... I'm not sorry, but next time I'll tell you to pucker up!" His humor broke through the uncomfortable moment we'd just shared.

I think I may have laughed for a second. "Okay, you do that." I was relieved he made me laugh because I really just wanted to cry.

"Will you pucker?" His grin was all-boy right down to his devilish dimples.

"Maybe. I'll have to think about it and then we'll play it by ear." *What the heck was he doing? I couldn't deal with anything more.* He just brought on something I had no idea if I wanted but after the fact, it seemed like it might be a good idea at another time.

He sat down on the edge of his bed and patted the spot next to him. I sat down waiting for an explanation of the unexplainable.

"Carlos is using Methamphetamines." He took my hand as he said it.

"What?" I didn't need a lot of explanation. Crystal Meth was destroying families and claiming lives all around the world but our community had been hit hard with rampant users.

"Abbie, please don't ask me what it is. You know what it is so now isn't a good time to start with the dunno and don't understand bit. Okay?" His eyes were watering as he spoke.

"I'm not. I'm just shocked. Crystal Meth? He's using Crystal Meth?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Where does he get that? Is he making it himself? When did he start using it? Are you sure he is using *Meth*? Maybe it is coke. A lot of kids in school use coke and it is much easier to treat in rehab facilities they say. I'm sure it isn't Meth. It can't be. Meth? No. It's gotta be something other than..." I just

stopped trying. I knew better. My gut told me Juan knew it for sure because he would know these things. He was with Carlos far more than me or anyone else. Add in the erratic behavior of Carlos and there wasn't anything to question.

"Yes. He is." He had no doubts. I knew Juan well enough to know that much.

"How long?" I barely spoke the words and wasn't even sure if I spoke them or thought them.

"I don't know. It's been a while, I think. My guess is he's been doing it on and off for a few years." Juan looked defeated as he told me. His hunched shoulders and drooping head told of his shame in keeping the secret.

"There's just no way!" I shouted in disbelief as I tried to understand more of what I knew to be true. I wanted to put my hands over my ears and drown out the truth. No matter how hard I tried, the honest example I'd witnessed earlier wouldn't go away "*Carlos is using Meth*. The words swam around in my head and a single tear ran down my cheek.

"Where's he getting the money?" I asked still shocked.

Juan looked at his hands for a long time. They were clasped in front of him. He got up and went to the dresser in front of the bed and stared into the mirror locking eyes with me behind him. "I think I know but I'm not sure."

"Davina?" I was afraid to hear his answer.

"No, I don't think so. At least not yet."

"Well I have to tell her about this." He had to know I'd tell Davina.

"She knows." Juan said quietly.

"She couldn't know! Davina would never put up with that and she'd never keep a secret from me about one of you at all." I shook my head as if that would make him take back the words that I couldn't bring myself to believe.

"Honey, what you don't know is that she has put up with more from him than his own family will tolerate. She has a love for him like ... like ... I just can't explain it." He said in a tone of gentle understanding. Tears ran down my cheeks, I couldn't speak. My heart suddenly ached for her too.

Juan continued, "It's an unconditional love. I know. I've seen it. Maybe it's because we've all been such good friends for so long or maybe it's because he's just been there for so long. I don't know what it is but today when he called her a bitch, I thought she was going to die right there on the spot." Juan stood and began to move throughout his room gathering stuff he wanted to take in a duffle bag. "Truth is Abbie, she has heard worse."

"I doubt it. She isn't one to put up with that sort of thing. You've known her about as long as I have. Davina is stronger than that. She isn't going to take his crap." I was mad. It was an emotion that I was beginning to know well. Damn him for doing this to himself and to us. Damn his timing and damn it all, his inability to care about anyone but himself or his drug. Yep, Raj was sick because Carlos had to set him up with one of his friends from the other side of the tracks. Probably did drugs with her too. The thoughts just ran together and made no sense. The only purpose served was the empowerment of full-fledged anger.

"Okay, I'm just going to shoot straight with you here. I'm not going to spare your feelings or keep any more secrets on this matter. I think by covering up for him, Davina and I stood by and watched him get worse." Juan's eyes dropped to the floor as if he couldn't look at me when he said what he had to say. "Abbie, it's bad. It's very bad. He's an addict and Davina has taken so much verbal abuse from him when she should've just walked away. Raj and I have too."

Carlos stormed in the room and tackled Juan. They were always wrestling around and his addiction didn't stop him from the occasional rumble. They rolled around on the floor for a minute like two wild turkeys before separating.

Juan spoke first. "Man, knock it off. I've had enough of you for one day."

Carlos couldn't possibly know he'd been the topic of our discussion. He flipped his shoulder length hair that I just took a moment to notice had gotten longer, not to mention greasier, than his typical style and shot me a grin.

"You have? Well that's too bad cuz, 'cause I'm just getting started." He pulled out a glass pipe and scooted his back against the wall in Juan's bedroom. Davina walked in and sighed so hard her cheeks swelled with air and she stormed back down the hall.

Juan slapped it out of his hand. "No you don't. You aren't smokin' that stuff in my house. I don't want to breathe it and I don't want Abbie and Davina subjected to it either."

"Then I'll take my little girl outside." Carlos said with a smile as he rubbed the outside of the pipe tenderly.

I squinted in his direction. Maybe it was out of curiosity over his chosen description of the pipe he held in his trembling hand.

Once he had left the room, Juan jumped up on his dresser. "Now that you've seen the new and improved Carlos, do you have any questions?"

"Yeah." I was still in shock from being told the truth. "What little girl?"

Juan let out a forced chuckle. "One thing I've learned about this drug is that these guys and gals that get hooked on it have a love for it like what Davina holds for Carlos."

"An unconditional love? That's a little dramatic." I said not understanding the true depth of Carlos's addiction.

"It's a dose of the truth is what it is. With Meth, they get so connected to it that it's like a personal relationship. I've read a lot about it. When a person becomes addicted to Meth, the drug becomes their new best friend. What's even worse, they hear voices and see things. In the beginning, they have a lot of energy and seem to be on top of the world but then it takes their soul and their ability to reason. Before you know it, the only thing that matters to them is their drug."

"He couldn't be to that point yet Juan because I saw him with Raj. If he was at that ... that place, then he couldn't have been so terrific yesterday." I said the words forcefully. I just couldn't believe Carlos was slipping away from us. *It can't be as bad as he's making it out to be. He's just being dramatic. I tried to console myself since no one was apparently around to do it.*

"I think he may be battling this thing out. We've seen him when he was perfectly normal and thought he wasn't using only to find out later he was and then we've seen him when he seems to be in withdrawals only to find out he's strung out. It's hard to tell with this drug. It's one of deception that's for sure."

We heard a lot of noise on the patio and ran outside. Carlos was on his knees picking up tiny pieces of glass and Davina was on a bench crying. Her hand was at her cheek.

"Davina?" I knelt in front of her but she refused to look at me.

"Carlos, did you hit her?" It was obvious and my question really wasn't needed, but I asked anyway. I was enraged, "Carlos, *did* you hit her?" I stumbled across each word enunciating each syllable so he would realize how damn mad I was.

He peered up at me and then started babbling to his imaginary friend. "I know. I know. I shouldn't have. You're right. I shouldn't have taken my eyes off the prize. You're right."

"*Who* are you talking to?" I tried to get in his face but he moved away from me.

His sneer was enough to make chills run down my spine but I didn't back off. I didn't know why Davina and Juan were letting him get by with this stuff, but it didn't fly with me. I moved over to Davina. "What happened?" She just shook her head as Juan handed her an ice pack.

I turned on them all. "Juan? Are you going to let your cousin hit a girl?" When he didn't answer, I turned to the



injured. "Davina? You are letting him hit you now? *What* on earth has happened to us?" I turned back to the addict with the real problem. "Carlos, you are nothing more than a..."

Before I knew what had hit me, he stood up ready for the confrontation. With a shove, he started yelling at me. "Come on! Give it to me! I know you have it. Give it to me!" His voice was creepy as his hands started to search my jeans pockets. I tried to get away from him and couldn't. Why Juan was standing by and letting him basically feel me up was something he would pay for later. Probably the next time he said, "pucker up" unless a more appropriate time presented itself.

When he couldn't find whatever he was looking for, he turned on Juan. "Go get it or I'll kill you."

"*That is about* all I am going to take from you buster!" I yelled as I turned my back on him and marched inside. Within a minute I had 9-1-1 on the phone. Carlos was on me like an attack dog with Juan right behind him. This time their wrestling wasn't fun and games. They rolled on the floor as I screamed trying to break it up.

I never heard whether or not the 9-1-1 operator asked if we had an emergency. I guess she finally decided it was safe to assume that we did with all of the yelling and screaming in the background.

"Damnit! Juan, I told you. I told you not to mess with my stuff. I don't want to hurt you but you can not take things that don't belong to you." His hand struck Juan a couple of times across the face like a gentle but taunting slap. "Where is it? Where is she?"

Juan tried to keep from fighting back and I continued to try to pull Carlos off him because his eyes were focused in a fixated glare. They didn't blink or look from side to side just straight ahead. Davina backed in a corner appearing to be afraid of him and I knew she'd seen so much more than what she'd ever tell me.

By the time the cops arrived, the boys had separated and while Carlos ranted and raged like a lunatic, Juan dabbed at the corner of his mouth wiping blood away by the second. Carlos was bleeding and never swiped away the first drop. It was like he didn't notice.

When the police came to the house, Juan knew the police officer who knocked on his door.

"Juan, is everything okay? I hear there's some kind of domestic dispute?" He peered over his shoulder.

Juan stepped outside with me on his heels and began talking with the officers. He explained to them that Carlos had been fighting addiction and tried to down-play it as a few pills and a no big deal but the cops didn't buy it once they saw Carlos. The county reeked of too many folks like Carlos and they could spot tweakers a mile away.

Juan asked the officer he knew to talk to Carlos but pleaded with him not to arrest him. "Officer, we're going to get him some help. Please, if you could just talk to him and calm him down..."

The cop was direct. "I can't do that son. I'm sorry. We've had several complaints on your cousin. We've been waiting on a call like this one so we could haul him in. He's reckless and he needs to be in our custody until he decides he's going to

act like he belongs in the community rather than in a zoo full of wild animals."

Reluctantly, Juan let them in. He shot me a look of disgust and we all followed behind three officers. The crack pipe was still on the patio in a bunch of pieces. One of the officers pointed to it. "What's that?"

My guess is that they all knew what it was but also knew if there was too much evidence some very innocent people would pay a big price. Juan's parents were well known in the area and his father spent a lot of time with the local police because he was a fireman. He spent a lifetime building a stable future for his family and that wasn't something that could be easily replaced.

Carlos pranced around everyone oblivious to what was going on. The first officer who walked inside the house tried to talk to him fully aware, at least that was my first impression, he was dealing with someone on something more than Juan's claim of pills. He tried to approach him with that good ole' southern boys attitude.

"Man, do you know who I am?" The officer asked.

Carlos walked around him in a circle. It seemed he was checking him out like he was scouting out prey. "I know who you are. You're the one that took my pipe."

If the situation was a laughing matter, I would have congratulated Carlos right then and there for being so generous and making the police officers' job so much easier.

One of the cops looked out on the patio again and nodded in the direction of the broken glass but none of them went in

for a closer observation. "Yeah, that's right man. I did. Do you want to go with me to get it?"

Carlos grinned. "Why sure. Are you're going to give it back?"

"You betcha." The officer nodded at Juan and another officer.

"Why would you do that?" Carlos had a distant look on his face and his brow wrinkled when he must have decided the man wasn't shooting straight with him.

"I take care of my friends man." He was trying to build a rapport with Carlos and almost had it sealed.

Carlos turned around with his arms spread wide. "I have plenty of friends. See them. They're everywhere. Let me introduce you to them."

Davina pushed by him to introduce herself while Carlos ignored her. She must've known the far away look in his eyes wasn't a good sign so she stepped in trying to protect him. Leave it to Davina. She'd go to bat with him if she had to face the devil to do it. Truth be told, she was dealing with the devil's child and didn't even know it.

Carlos wasn't going to be silent. He wanted everyone to see who he saw. "Over there in the corner, the guy with the top hat works for the FBI. Frank is his name. He's with me most of the time. Now, in the other corner, is Belle. Ahh, Bella. She goes with me to distract the boys when I have to get more ice. She's jealous of my on-again off-again girlfriend so she never gives me any privacy."

All three cops followed his finger as he pointed to bare walls, empty chairs, and a room full of faceless, non-existent

people. After they'd seen enough, one of them approached him cautiously from behind and the other two from the side. Within seconds, they had him in handcuffs. They must've expected some resistance but he was zoned out and he didn't give them any. He acted like he didn't even know he was in handcuffs.

The officers fired one question after another at him as they led him out of the house. "Can you tell me what drugs you're on? What have you taken today? How long you been best friends with Crystal?" They must've known how to deal with the drug users of Meth because they seemed to be in full control of the situation.

At first, I thought the way the officer personalized the drug indicated he was going to make fun of him but after hearing the responses Carlos gave, I soon figured it was because he was building up rapport with someone he viewed as potentially dangerous. I guess I had watched far too many cop shows. His chest seemed to swell with pride as he talked about "Crystal."

"Oh, man, it's been awhile. I started flirting with her a little a few years ago, nothing serious but every now and then, I'd have to have her. You know, she's got such a beauty about her. Her glitter is like nothing I've ever seen. She calls to me seductively in my sleep and sometimes, I can be watching TV and she just reaches out for me."

"I can believe it man. I know you know what you're talking about." They played him for all he was worth and Carlos fed right into their hand.

"You do? Oh man, I tell you. There's nothing like her in the world. I would go to hell and back for her." Carlos had dreamy eyes when he spoke of his love affair with Crystal Meth. It was heart breaking.

The older police officer Juan knew nodded. "I imagine you would son. I imagine you would." His voice was sad. I guess he'd seen similar situations all over our area.

One of the cops pointed at the other one and he hung back long enough to ask us questions while the other two loaded Carlos in a squad car. Juan and Davina told the police officer that I didn't know about his problem until an hour or so before he snapped. There they were. Always protecting me but from what? Carlos? It just didn't make sense.

"Has he snapped before?" He scribbled as Juan tried to open up and tell him more about another Meth statistic. He referred to it later as just that.

"He's cracked some but it's been really bad lately. Over the last three or four days, he's been trying to clean up his act and I swear, I almost liked him better when he was using every few hours."

"I bet you liked him far better when he wasn't using at all." The uniformed man spoke the truth but lately, I wasn't sure if any of us had ever known him when he wasn't drinking or smoking pot. It was a reality that brought with it a twinge of guilt. We should have seen all of this coming.

"Yes, yes sir, I did." Juan forced a smile.

"Do you kids know that much about Meth?" The officer probed for more information.

Juan answered for all of us. "No sir just what we've heard in school but that's about it."

"It's very bad in this area." The cop searched our faces for a reaction but we had already heard that Meth was easily obtained in Sevier County. "Juan, I'm going to shoot straight with you. I like your dad. I'm cutting you kids some slack because of your father and only because of him so the only thing I can do is take your cousin to the hospital for testing. I'm not going to be able to hold him without that pipe." He sighed before continuing. "This means you kids are going to have to get him some help and you need to do it soon."

He searched all of our faces. "Will anyone be available to pick him up later?"

"I don't know." Juan was honest when he answered. None of us would want to be anywhere near Carlos later. We'd all witnessed enough for one day.

The officer seemed to give unspoken approval for Juan to remain quiet. "He'll have one phone call if we take him to the station after we leave the hospital. I'll have to think of what we're going to do. I can charge him with underage drinking if he fails the breathalyzer but in all honesty, I doubt we can hold him."

"He won't call home. He'll call me first. Then Davina or Abbie. No one will pick him up."

Thoughtfully, the officer seemed to struggle with what he wanted to say. The silence spoke volumes. I'm sure he wanted us to tell anything and everything we knew about where Carlos hung out and who his other friends were but no

one knew. "Look, do you know all of your cousin's friends, or do you think he is running with different circles?"

"He runs at night a lot when he's using. He's still with us all the time but he's with them when he goes to use. None of us use any type of drug so he goes by himself when he's looking to score or looking to get high."

"Any chance you know where he's getting it?" The officer asked with a raised eyebrow.

"No and if I did, I wouldn't tell you." Juan said defiantly. I wasn't sure why his demeanor changed but I think he was just ready for the cops to leave so he could talk to us and get back to Raj. We'd all had a long day.

"So you do know?" The officer shot back at him.

"No and if I did, I'd have to ... Juan's voice trailed off.

"Okay, I gotcha." The officer said looking away.

"Okay, Juan, I'll be in touch. Keep in mind, when this kid is free of us, he will be very angry at whoever called the police. He may hold you all responsible." The officer paused letting his eyes rest on each of us for a moment. He took a deep breath and continued "If he's angry, who knows what he'll do or what he's capable of. You can't tell with this Meth addicts. They are unpredictable."

"Yes, that's true." Juan seemed to listen to every word.

"These people are crazy when they are on this drug." The officer wanted to drive home his point.

"Yes, I'm beginning to see that." Juan agreed.

"Kids, I know this guy is your friend. Juan, I know he's your family but trust me. I have seen it all. Never take anything he says with a grain of salt. We're losing lives



because people are killing their friends and family because these voices inside their heads told them to do it. This isn't schizophrenia were dealing with here. I'm not about to tell you what we're really dealing with because I guess it would scare the hell out of you. Once these folks start on this drug, they hear and see things that most of us would never believe. It is like nothing you can imagine. Now, here's my card. Page me in case of an emergency." He extended his hand carefully in our direction.

"Thank you, I will." I reached for the card but Juan immediately took it from me.

They shook hands and in a flash, they were gone. My guess was the officer talking to us would soon meet up with our buddy. Carlos had left in a separate cruiser and it struck me suddenly that I hadn't said anything to him at all once he was in cuffs. Still, I imagined he was safe for the time being, at least.

Wherever the cops took Carlos would hopefully offer him some kind of solace for one night. Perhaps the voices would quiet down and the ghostly people he saw wouldn't follow him behind bars if he was taken to jail. I wondered where they'd taken him. Then a harder dose of reality struck me. I didn't know his destination but since he was calling a glass pipe his little girl, I had a feeling his final destination might arrive even sooner than Raj's. The thought scared me to death.

## BARGAINING WITH GOD

### WHILE MAKING DEALS WITH THE DEVIL

The sun was bright as it came through Davina's room. It lit up the area announcing the beginning of a new day. I laid there rubbing my eyes for a moment in a twin bed that had been bought specifically for me when I had decided to claim the St. Clair family as my own. Davina must have gotten up in the middle of the night and raised the window. The cool morning air drifted in and smelled of freshly mowed grass and floral arrangements from the boxwoods outside her bedroom window.

Birds seemed to pitch their song an octave higher beckoning me to come over and look outside. I played their game and threw open the curtains only to find Carlos walking up the sidewalk.

Turning around, I started scrambling for clothes. "Davina! Davina! Get up! Carlos is here!"

"Hmmm? No Abbie. He's locked up or in the hospital somewhere remember? Besides, he wouldn't come here." Davina rolled over and threw a pillow over her head.

"I just saw him outside..." I tugged the sheet from the bottom of her bed hoping she'd spring into action.

The doorbell set off an alarming sound. Davina sat straight up and threw her legs to the ground before sprinting to the loft still in her pajamas. She hung over the railing as her mother answered the door. "Don't get that..."

I walked up behind Davina as her mother turned the doorknob to let him in.

"Davina, don't be silly. It's Carlos." Her mother ignored her daughter. It wasn't the first time she'd heard us ask her not to get the door when we were still in our pajamas but Mrs. St. Clair, couldn't possibly know of the mutual attraction between Carlos and Davina, and didn't seem to care that we were a mess. Of course, on this particular morning, we had other reasons for wanting the door to stay securely closed.

He came in with flowers in one hand and a grin spread wide. "Yeah Davina, don't be so silly."

"For me?" Davina called down to him.

"Hardly. They're for your mom." As Davina's mom hugged him, he shot us both a cold and empty glare.

"Why Carlos, thank you." Her face lit up the room as she turned to make an announcement. "Girls, if either of you had a lick of sense, you'd snatch him up before someone steals him away from you."

I yawned pretending to be bored while looking over the loft area that allowed me to see the foyer on one side and the family room on the other. Mrs. St. Clair led him into the family room saying something about breakfast. Davina and I looked at one another and moved to the other side to watch his every move. He shot Davina a quick wink. I rubbed shoulders with her watching the two figures below move into the kitchen, and just knew Davina was a goner after the gesture. Pure mush.

My look of disapproval didn't matter to Davina. She didn't make excuses for her sudden grin and giddy step back into

her room. "What? I can't help it. I just can't. I'm so glad to see him."

"Mmmm.... and *what* are you going to tell your dad when he goes in for a closer look at that swelling on your cheek?" I asked pointedly.

"I guess I'll tell him during the chaos of trying to get Raj to the hospital, something happened." Davina raised her hand to touch the bruise on her cheek. A sad look came into her eyes. I didn't like to contribute to her growing passion for covering up Carlos's mistakes so I said nothing as I walked back into her room and fell back into bed.

"*Mom!*" Davina began to yell for her mother in a shrill voice that sent chills up my arms. It was too early for her lungs to be in perfect form.

"Don't be a brat Davina. If you want something, go downstairs and ask for it. Don't scream for your mother." She could have easily gone down the stairs and spared me the temporary loss of hearing.

"Oh shut up. I'm in no mood for you this morning." Davina snapped back at me.

"*Motherrrrrrrrrrr!!!*" Her voice rang through the house.

I could hear her mom from below. "Child, what *do* you want?" Her mother sounded irritated and who could blame her if she was a little put-out.. She should have been because I, for one, found Davina's screaming almost painful.

"I just wanted to tell you how lovely you look this morning." Davina's voice was sugary sweet.

"*And?*" Her mother's tone was laced with humor.

"And please send Carlos upstairs with two bottles of water." Davina turned to come back in the room.

"Happy now?" You've got him on the way up. Great. Fabulous. Wonderful. I'm calling Juan." I threw a pillow under my legs and propped them up on the bed.

Davina ran over to the mirror to primp up her morning look and then sprinted to the bathroom to brush her teeth before returning to her own bed to slide in between sheets and comforter. "How do I look?"

From the doorway, she got her answer. "Beautiful." Carlos looked at her like he adored her.

"Grrrr ... You two kill me. Really you do." I said feeling aggravated by their lack of concern over the situation at hand. I watched Carlos put his moves into high gear as he walked over to her and handed her a bottle of water. He let his fingers linger on her a hand a minute longer than necessary. Naturally, he passed mine to me like a football.

"So, tell us what happened?" Davina was so matter-of-fact about the incident that if I didn't know any better, I'd think she had convinced herself he'd just been on a camping excursion or something. For all I knew, Carlos was so out of his head that he probably thought he'd slept in a tent rather than behind bars or a hospital bed. Whichever the case may have been. Those two were beginning to run a tight race with the first generation of the drunk and the delusional—my own parents.

Fortunately, Juan picked up the phone almost as soon as it rang. "Juan, hi. Come over here. Guess who is here? Yep. He is. Yes. Davina? Oh, she's fine. She's so good in fact that she

seems to have forgotten who put that shiner on her face." I couldn't hide the sarcasm as I glared at Davina and Carlos.

I talked with Juan for a minute more. When we hung up, I noticed the way Carlos looked at Davina and that's when I saw the real twisted relationship between the two of them, and I shuddered. In that instant, I saw love on his face. You had to know him to recognize it but it was there.

"Did I do that?" He cooed as he stroked her cheek with the back of his hand and then an open palm.

"Oh save it! You know you did and if it happens again, the last thing you'll ever hear from Davina's mother won't be anything close to the adoration she gave you when you first got here. I can promise you as much." I sneered the words at him.

"You've really become quite the little spit-fire haven't you?" He asked, looking at me as if he was trying to intimidate me. But it wasn't working. Within just a few seconds, he was on my bed tickling me all over.

"Stop it. Darn it. I want to be mad at you. So quit until I'm not mad anymore." His hands caught my ribs until I was laughing and almost crying because he just wouldn't stop.

"Stop! I'll pee in my pants!"

"Oh but I can't stop Abbie. I don't want to quit." He enunciated his words and fear was instantly on Davina's face. She got up from the bed and shut the door sensing a sudden change in his demeanor.

Davina tugged at his sleeve. She all but offered herself up to him to get him off me as his hands went from tickling to right above my collarbone and then wrapped snugly around

my throat. He pulled me up to an upright position to face him nose to nose.

He wasn't placing pressure on my neck but he wanted me to know I was vulnerable. "Okay, you can let go now. This is all a bit more than I signed on for when we decided to be friends."

His head tilted and when it did, his lids closed and he seemed to be savoring the feel of my thin neck in his hands. I was afraid of the voices he might be hearing so I started to pray that if he heard them that they wouldn't tell him to strangle me.

Remembering what the cop had told us the night before, I became too scared to speak. I watched Davina plead with him, "Let her go Carlos. I'll do anything you want if you will just let her go."

"Anything huh?" He glanced from Davina back to me. "Did you hear that Abbie? She said she'd do *anything* I wanted?"

"Last night, I asked you to do something for me and you didn't. Why would I believe you now Davina?" Carlos never took his eyes off me but he was clearly addressing Davina.

"Cause I will. I couldn't go and get your drugs for you. I just can't do that but I will do anything you want now." Davina patted his arm. "Carlos, honey I will if you'll let Abbie go."

"But now, you'll do *anything* if I let Abbie go?" Carlos asked suspiciously.

She moved her hand to rest on his shoulder. "Yes, anything." She enunciated every word. It didn't work because he was too focused on me.

"Abbie, they are telling me to snap your neck. What do you think?" His speech was even but the voice and tone he had was raspy. My worst fear realized. If I could get my own hands around those damn voices he heard, he would never hear them again!

"I guess that's a good question." I tried to keep my wits about me as his grip actually got a little tighter. "Since it is my neck in question, I'm of the opinion that it isn't a good idea." I quipped hoping to get through to Carlos. I could see it wasn't working to my advantage and what I didn't see in his eyes, I could feel as his grip tightened a little bit more.

"Don't kid around Abbie. I'm serious here. I'm going to snap your neck. You called the cops on me last night." He sneered.

"No, that would've been me." Davina tried again to come to my rescue.

"Liar!" He screamed in my face without looking over at Davina and I didn't flinch.

"Abbie, did you call the police or didn't you?" He asked.

A sudden knock came at the door. Carlos hopped down and sat on the floor, he began to stretch as if he was engrossed in stretching out sore muscles. Dr. St. Clair poked his head inside. "Well, I wasn't expecting to see you here Carlos."

"Good morning sir." His face gave absolutely nothing away.

I stared at Carlos stunned by the transformation. His smile seemed sincere. I couldn't believe I'd just witnessed such an



easy change. He'd gone from behaving like the devil's spoiled child to an angel right in front of my eyes.

"Well, I guess I'll head on over to the hospital. Davina did your mother tell you to wait until after one this afternoon to visit Raj? He will be having tests all morning."

"No, but thanks, you just did. I'll see you at one o'clock." Davina smiled at her dad.

"I'll count on seeing you both then." He started to walk out and then paused. "Carlos? Can I get a hand with something in the garage? I need to move a box and my tired old body can't seem to tug and lift on my own anymore." Dr. Sinclair beckoned the little darling sitting on Davina's floor and I was glad he'd be leaving the room.

He was on his feet in an instant. "Sure, I'd be glad to help."

With a quick wave good-bye, Davina's father walked out with Carlos trailing behind which allowed me to breathe easier.

When they were gone, I shook my head and started with my soapbox spill. "I'm not putting up with this Davina. I mean it. He's going to have to get some help. I'm not going to let him treat us like this." My hand rubbed the back of a near-broken neck.

"I know. He's completely out of hand. I don't know what to do. I've prayed and prayed for some kind of answers but ultimately, I have to face the real possibility that my prayers may go unanswered."

The sadness in her voice was evident. I squeezed her hand in encouragement, "What do you mean?"

"Another day. I'll tell you another day. Let's get downstairs before he comes back. Once Juan is here and Mom leaves for her bridge club meeting, we can talk more." Davina's only priority was to be near Carlos and hover over him like she always did in case he needed her.

"I don't know if I'm staying anywhere with Carlos. I have to be honest. I'm a little scared of him."

"Abbie, you have to realize that Carlos isn't himself."

"Really? Oh no, I ... I ... didn't notice." I should've left it at that but just couldn't. "I get so sick and tired of people making excuses for other people when they bring stuff like this down on themselves." I was disgusted. I'd spent my entire life watching my mother protect and make excuses for my father. Now Davina was going to turn into one of *those* women. "People have to take responsibility for their own foolish mistakes."

"I hope you don't include Raj in that group too." Davina spewed the hurtful words at me.

"You know I don't. I'm talking about the mean-spirited people running around here these days with twisted agendas and evil thoughts trying to make things tough on anyone they can. Like Carlos. They try to blame their deceptive ways on someone else, anyone else, when they should just look in the mirror." I wasn't making any sense. I understood what I was trying to say but I wasn't sure Davina knew where I was going with it.

"You think Carlos brought this on himself and Juan and I are trying to help him get by with it don't you?" Davina said.

I couldn't lie to her, "Yes, that's exactly what I think. Davina, as long as you keep going behind him cleaning up his messes, he's going to keep doing what he's doing. He doesn't have any reason to try to help himself."

"And Raj? You don't think he had a hand in his own fate?" She was almost smug asking such a question.

"He's going to fight for his life and will he blame anyone because he ended up with HIV? Probably not. He'll think about how he got it, come to terms with it and cope. That's what kind of person he is. He's not going to blame someone else." I knew I was telling her the precise way Raj would deal with his disease. He wouldn't look for excuses or a place to put blame. He'd accept it and learn to live with it in time.

"Do you have a point somewhere by chance? What does all..."

"Let me finish. I may not be real smart, everyone seems to remind me all the time so I believe that's true. You're able to keep straight A's without so much as trying. You are one of these people who can make a difference in the world. Juan is like that too. Just because I'm not smart or as fortunate as you, I'm not going to start using drugs. Carlos isn't liked by a lot of the kids at school so to deal with it, he uses drugs now? Poor Carlos. Life dealt him a pathetic hand so why not just fold and ante up at a different pity party." My father was a drunk but he was also a poker player so sometimes gambling comparisons snuck into the way I described things. "This is all just too sad. Why did he begin using drugs? Do you even know?"

Davina shook her head. I was at least glad she didn't tell me some Carlos sob story.

I sighed and continued. "I could've done the same thing too you know. My parents wouldn't have noticed. Have you ever thought about what would've happened to me if you and your family hadn't taken me in when Dad was at his worst?" I asked.

Davina reached out and hugged me. "I don't want to think about it."

Our best friend bonding was cut short when Davina's mom called up to us. "*Come down here ladies!*"

The sound from below brought us both out of our gloomy mood. We both grinned. "Pancakes."

Just as we always did, we raced to the kitchen. "Last one there does the dishes!" And of course, I was always last. I had almost quit trying to be first.

Our giggles stopped short when we walked in on a sober looking table full of recognizable faces. My brother David was there. Carlos and Dr. St. Clair were seated next to one another and a phone book was opened to a page with a large ad posting. *Drug Rehabilitation*.

I ignored the phone book and thumped David on the head. "What are you doing here?"

David gave me a knowing look. "I figured it was time someone did the right thing since the rest of you seem to be living in a fairy tale or something."

I gave him an inquisitive look. I could only imagine what he was doing there. David typically kept to himself but

sometimes, when he did pop into my life, it was for a very good reason.

Dr. St. Clair gave us his most disappointed look. "Juan's here too. He went out to the garage to grab a case of Sprite."

"Oh. Well, that's good I guess. You know, I was just thinking about..." I was nervous and wanted to keep the conversation flowing but leave it to a brother to cut you off short.

"Abbie, sit down." David pushed a chair out for me and then on his other side, he did the same for Davina.

"Don't come over here and boss me around. You got some nerve." I thumped him on the back of the head again with an open palm.

"Have. You *have* some nerve." Davina corrected me as Juan came in with the case of drinks. She was obviously uptight to correct me in front of everyone. I'd forgive her. She was stressed. Besides, everyone in our group seemed to be in the forgiving mode lately.

Everyone said their good-mornings again. I tried to keep my own focus off of the yellow pages. Carlos looked like all the blood had drained out of his face. I imagine things looked grim for him at the moment. The one man he wanted to impress was now apparently aware of his growing problem.

"Girls, Juan, first I want to say I am very disappointed in you. Now, David tells me there is a problem here and Davina, your mother and I intend to get to the bottom of this. Carlos has admitted to using drugs. He has a strong marijuana problem and from my experience, I know that—..."

David cut him off. "Marijuana? Is that what he told you? Dr. St. Clair, I promise you that I didn't come over here because of a weed problem. He's using something a little more than pot."

Juan kept his head down. I followed suit. It seemed like a good idea. Davina wasn't far behind. No one wanted to look at anyone. We certainly didn't want to look squarely in the eyes of truth.

"Kids, unless you're praying down there on that end of the table, I suggest you show some respect and look at me when I'm speaking." Dr. St. Clair's voice was stern. When he took that tone with us, we all made a point to pay attention so three heads bobbed to an upright position simultaneously.

"Now, David as you were saying?" Dr. St. Clair looked pointedly at him.

"I didn't come over here to interrupt your morning over pot but instead, I came over here..."

Carlos cut him off with a wave of his hand. He cleared his throat before he began to speak. "He came over here because I have a different problem sir."

Dr. St. Clair motioned for his wife to come over to the table and she slipped out of her apron and left hot pancakes that we would never eat on the stove. They exchanged a horrified look as Carlos braced himself to tell the truth about his addiction. He took a deep breath and glanced at each of us, Davina, Juan and finally me.

"It isn't marijuana and alcohol. I lied because I didn't want you to know and think less of me."

"Go on Carlos, tell him or I will." David encouraged him by being the pushy one.

"Shut up David. He's getting around to it. Just shut up." I was irritated that he had felt the need to intrude into what was a very private issue for our group.

"Abbie. You will not talk to your brother like that in this home. Do you understand young lady?" Mrs. St. Clair said.

"Yes ma'am." I bit my tongue to keep from saying more. I hated when Davina's mom scolded me. It made me feel like a complete loser when she did and truthfully, she only did it on rare occasions. *Deserving ones.*

Carlos cleared his throat and stood up moving over to the window before speaking. He looked out through the blinds. The glare off the swimming pool seemed to pull at all of us. We watched him waiting for a full confession.

"It's Meth." He whispered it more to himself than to anyone else.

"What did you say?" Dr. St. Clair was closer to him than any of us and I'm sure he heard him.

"Sir, I'm addicted, or at least uh ... that's what they seem to think." He pointed an accusing finger at Davina and Juan before he continued. "I have a problem I think with Crystal Meth."

Davina's mother shook her head. "Oh Carlos. You dear, dear boy. What on earth child? What on earth were you thinking?" Tears started to form in the corners of her eyes as she moved back to the stove to hide the ones that had already fallen.

"How long have you been using?" Dr. St. Clair waited for Carlos to answer him.

David butted in before Carlos could respond. "Best I can tell, about three years. Is that right Carlos?"

He slowly nodded in agreement.

Panic was evident on Davina's parents' faces. Dr. St. Clair sighed and then stood. "Well, then, I guess we have some talking to do. Boys, come on. The girls need to be at the hospital for Raj later. You all are coming with me."

"Oh, I can't Dr. St. Clair, I..." Leave it to David to rush in and save the day but need to move on after his job was done.

"David, I respect you for coming over here today. Now, I'd really appreciate it if you would come with us."

My guess was that Dr. St. Clair knew he might need David's size if Carlos acted up. My brother was solid muscle and could hold his own.

Dr. St. Clair shot us another dirty look before he turned and followed Juan, David and Carlos out of the room.

Once he was out the door, Davina jumped to her feet.

"Well, mom, we're going to go on over to the hospital and..."

"Sit down young lady." She held a tone that said no arguing would be tolerated.

I thought about making a mad dash for the door but I remembered I wouldn't get very far in bare feet, not to mention without my car sitting in the driveway, I wasn't going anywhere. She slammed down plates in front of us stacked high with pancakes. I wanted to throw up. My nerves weren't equipped to handle everything we were going through in our



lives much less Mrs. Butterworth and more pancakes than I could ever choke down.

"Now, I want to know what has been going on and don't either of you even think about lying to me. I am in no mood." She set her jaw.

"Mom..." Davina began but couldn't find the words.

"She has a reason to be mad Davina." I stopped her before she even started making those same excuses I was already tired of hearing.

"Good. Tell me why I should be mad?" She looked at me and I wished I'd kept my mouth shut.

"I guess because we didn't tell you about Carlos ourselves." I wish I'd been quiet. I knew better than to speak first.

"Exactly." She would've made an excellent psychologist. She was always capable of asking the right questions while waiting patiently for us to answer them. I think we always told on ourselves in that type of format. She wasn't as dumb as I wanted her to be, especially in the split second we'd just passed through.

"Okay, girls. I need to know all about this. Tell me anything you can. It could help Carlos if you just tell me everything you know."

Davina looked everywhere around the room but at her mother. I could sense her discomfort and knew she didn't know where to begin. Of course, since I couldn't stand to get a shame-on-you look from Davina's mother, I just let it rip.

"Carlos has smoked pot for awhile and we all knew it *and* he didn't seem to have a problem with it *and* he seemed to be

able to smoke it and work *and* it didn't really interfere with his life *and*—"

She cut me off and turned to her daughter for answers. "Davina?" I knew I hadn't really told her much because I was trying to tell it all in one breath.

"Let me ask you something first, Mom. Where did Daddy take Carlos?"

Mrs. St. Clair sighed. "I think they were going to Knoxville. Your father was going to call his family first. They are going to try to get him into a good medical-based facility for drug addiction. I assume you were both with him out at the park last night when he put on his exciting show." She wasn't asking a question. She probably knew we knew all about it.

We both indicated reluctantly that we did by nodding our heads.

"How did you know?" Davina approached the question she wanted her mother to answer with caution.

"He called David to pick him up this morning." Mrs. St. Clair was matter-of-fact.

"David? Why David?" That didn't make any sense to me.

"He said he didn't think any of you would want to deal with him after last night so he called David."

"Hmm." That struck me as odd.

The phone rang and Davina snatched it up. "Yes Daddy. Hang on."

She passed the phone to her mother.

"What? No, no one has told me that yet. Hmmm. Yes. Yes dear. I'll ask her. Call me back and let me know what you need."

After the phone was placed back in the cradle, Davina's mother looked truly saddened. She appeared to be in deep thought. "When were you going to tell us that Carlos was the reason you haven't dated anyone in high school Davina?" She raised her eyebrows.

My stomach did a back flip. It sounds impossible but how that works isn't all that complicated. It was growling with hunger when we entered the kitchen and then of course, it rolled in agony because of my nerves. Then, just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, bam. When that happens, I just pray I don't lose my meals from the day before.

"Carlos isn't my boyfriend Mom." Davina probably thought she was speaking a half-truth.

"Hmm. He says differently."

I peered over in Davina's direction. "You had to see this coming."

She snapped at me. "What do you mean 'I had to see this coming' Abbie?"

"We all did." I tried to set up the stage for a scenario of he likes her but she doesn't like him but Davina was far too slow or maybe, just plain guilt-ridden.

Her mother's head moved from side to side. "Girls, don't even think about it. Carlos said it. Juan confirmed it and David knew it. So back up and punt again ladies and this time when you do, try telling the truth."

"Actually," I began, "you took what I was going to say the wrong way." I lied. I was becoming as good as President Clinton was back in the day. Before long, I'd be saying things like, 'I did not kiss one of my best guy friends on the mouth

and like it' and would that ever be a lie. Whew! I got chills thinking about it.

Davina just went for it. She didn't have a whole lot to lose by telling her mother the truth because the truth was already known. Her eyes drowned out some of the pain or at least, that's what it looked like. It looked like she had been saving them for a special occasion or something because when they started, there was no end in sight. To complete the effect she must've been after, she snubbed her words and seemed to choke on some of them.

*You go girl. Drama. Use drama. It works every single time.* I almost verbalized my thoughts with an outburst of encouragement. Good thing I didn't.

Davina went to sit on her mother's lap as she held onto her neck tightly like a much younger girl would typically do. "Momma, I love him. I love him so much it hurts." Davina sounded tortured.

"Shhh ... now. Calm down." Her mother tried to reassure her as she patted her daughter's back.

Well, that may have been overkill on the drama. Professing her love for the recently discovered Meth addict that talks to invisible people, one of whom hates Davina and the other that is supposedly well connected to the FBI doesn't make a mother feel all warm and fuzzy inside. At least, I wouldn't think so.

They sat in one chair while Davina's mom rocked her back and forth. I tapped her on the shoulder and mouthed the words "can I go upstairs?" I wanted to escape the mother and daughter bonding time. Not out of jealousy because for some

reason, I was never jealous of Davina and her mother. I just wanted to use it to my advantage. It proved to be a prime opportunity to retreat upstairs and call Juan and Raj.

As I topped the steps, I suddenly remembered I shouldn't call Raj. He didn't need to know any of the garbage going on with us. He'd find out soon enough. I thought about his sense of humor and dialed the hospital anyway.

"Would you ring Raj Hussain's room please?" I asked the voice on the other end of the line.

The phone rang and rang before a weary Raj answered.

"Hiya."

Lowering his voice, he articulately said the words in a very deep and sexy voice. "Who is this and what are you doing calling my number?"

I laughed. "Wow. That was good Raj. It's me. It's Abbie."

"Oh *my gosh!* You *are* kidding me. I never knew it was you!" His voice gave away the fact that he was glad I called.

"Really?" I guess I sounded disappointed so he reassured me he would recognize my voice anywhere especially in a church choir. I couldn't sing, so his quick wit made me roll with laughter.

"How are you?" Leave it to Raj to ask about everyone else.

"I think you're the patient. I'm supposed to be asking *you* that question."

"Well?" He was patiently going to wait for me to ask.

"Well what?" I played along.

"Ask me how I'm feeling." Raj taunted me. He must've been really bored.

Snickering I went ahead and played his game. "Oh Raj, by the way, *how are you feeling?*"

"Well, let me just tell you. I've had better days. I've also had worse but now that you've called, I can see things only going up from here." He laughed.

"Raj. I love you."

"I know Abbie but stand in line. All the women love me."

I was rolling with laughter. Raj seemed to be back to his old self. As soon as I thought about that idea for a moment too long, reality hit me with a vengeance. *His old self? Wouldn't that be really, really, nice if that were in fact, true?*

"So, what's up? Anything new and interesting?" He asked.

"No, not really." I lied.

"Hmm. You sure about that?" Raj seemed to be probing me for something.

"Uh," I let out a long sigh, "No, not really."

"That's what I thought so tell me what's going on. I don't like to be out of pocket." He stated what I already knew.

"Out of pocket?" I giggled.

"Skip it Abbie."

I decided to avoid telling him what I really wanted him to know and what I thought he needed to know. Instead, I thought I'd practice my newfound ability to lie. It would be fun to try it out on him. "Okay, now listen. I don't know what you've heard *but I did not kiss Juan* on the mouth hard and like it."

"That's funny Abbie. You and Juan? HA!" His laughter poured into the phone.

"No. It did not happen." I said seriously.

"Well I believe that one. I'm sure it didn't happen." His laughter roared through the receiver.

"Raj?" I was very confused now. The lying thing wasn't working out as effectively as I had hoped.

"Yes?" The humor in his voice was obvious or so I thought. Maybe it was another blonde moment.

"Why don't you think he'd kiss me?" I had to ask because I was afraid it was something I needed to know.

"I dunno. I guess because he would be afraid of ruining your friendship. I know I could never kiss you. It would be like kissing my sister. Yuk!"

"You don't have a sister." I said wrinkling my brow as if he could see it.

"Thank goodness for small miracles. Could you imagine *me* with a *sister*?"

"True. You're protective over me so if you had a sister, she wouldn't stand a chance." I paused before honesty poured out from my end of the phone. "Okay, listen to me. He really did kiss me." I admitted.

In his duh tone, he threw in an exaggerated "Oh, okay."

"I'm serious. He did." I insisted.

"He did." It wasn't a question only a confirmation of what I was apparently going to stand by as the truth. "But you said he didn't first."

"I know, I was practicing my Bill Clinton impersonation."

"Oh, so tell me. How'd that work out for ya?" Raj was funny with a dry wit not everyone related to but I enjoyed it.

Now I was confused. "What the Bill Clinton impersonation or the kiss?"

"Abbie?"

"What?" This game was losing its appeal.

"The kiss. How'd the kiss work out for you?" His snicker followed the question.

"I'll think about it and let you know." I didn't know how it worked out for me. I wish I did, but I didn't.

"You do that."

"Okay. I think I'll try it again sometime." I said without thinking.

"Good. Don't forget to pucker up!" He rolled with laughter. He had already talked to Juan.

*Great. Just my luck. Raj probably knew about it first thing this morning.* "Raj! That wasn't funny."

"I'm still laughing over here." Indeed he was because I had to hold the phone away from my ear.

"Of course you would be because they are pumping you full of drugs. If I was there in your bed, I'd laugh too."

I'd said the wrong thing. He was completely silent because of my inconsiderate ass. After that, the hard part came. Did I back up and apologize or did I skip it and start talking fast to move past it? I had no idea how to act around him or his disease.

"Raj, I..."

"Don't. Don't you dare. We've been friends for far too long for you to say or do anything differently than what you've always said or done. I mean it Abs. No changing."

"Abs?"

"Like that nick-name do ya?" He paused and then continued, "Hmm ... I bet I know why."



"Oh yes, I'm sure you do." It was good to know where Raj stood about his illness or at least, how he wanted us to act around him and I was glad he'd moved us on past it.

We both started laughing again and then he said he had to go for more tests. "You are coming over later aren't you?"

"I'll be there."

"Good. It's a date."

"Okay." Hearing the word *date* took me back to why he was in the hospital in the first place and I returned to that bitter feeling I'd been revisiting more and more since we found out he had HIV. I had so many questions about the disease. One of the main questions was would Raj ever be able to *date* anyone?

"Abbie?" He lowered his voice and I almost had to strain my ears against the phone to hear him.

"Yes?" I sighed almost dreading what was next fearing it could be a question about Carlos.

His laughter almost kept him from saying what he wanted to say. "Pucker up!"

Friends Unlikely  
*by Susan Smith Alvis*

**PART TWO**

## EVERYTHING CAN CHANGE IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE

It had been a long and difficult two years but miraculously, we had survived. In the fall, Davina and Juan would be going to the University of Tennessee. I would be commuting to a nearby community college in Morristown and Carlos would be taking care of Raj. We were all looking forward, but still, we were unable to leave the past behind.

Raj had learned a lot about his disease in the two short years. He'd learned to watch his CD4 Count or T-Cells or something like that and followed a strict diet while we all hovered over him to make sure he took his handful of meds every day.

We'd gotten so used to being in hospitals and doctor's offices that we even picked up on some of the lingo. I never went out on a limb with some of the terminology. Mostly, because I was afraid someone might be listening and want me to explain. Meds versus medicine was about all the health care lingo I could master.

Juan and Davina both had decided to pursue careers in medicine while Carlos decided to wait tables for a while. We didn't know it, but a lot of illegal drugs flowed through the restaurant business. It was a fact that would later explain why he chose restaurant work, although he had been offered better paying jobs. After the stunt Carlos pulled at the park, we all lost our jobs. It was for the best and since we'd all tried to lie for him to save his job initially, we deserved to lose ours

right along with him. Lies had consequences and obviously, a lot of hard truths did too.

Carlos had been in and out of two treatment programs but had remained sober for the better part of two years, which only brought him and Davina closer together. He had talked to her about marriage and she told everyone how sure she was that they would be together forever. If someone on the outside didn't know their history, they'd swear it was a match made in Heaven. We were on the inside and knew what they'd been through to get to the place where they seemed to be.

Everything appeared to be going well as we anxiously hurried into the lazy days of summer. We were all excited about our recent graduation with the exception of Carlos who had graduated the year before. Still, he was glad we'd all graduated and seemed to be better overall. Of course, none of us knew the rollercoaster ride of a Meth addict. We assumed he'd gone to rehab, gotten treatment, and was all better. End of story.

Juan dated a few girls on and off but never came back to me for that second kiss so I just held it, and the memory of it, close enough to revisit anytime I started to feel like I'd missed out on something. Raj, Juan, me and Davina went to the prom together. Though Davina wanted to go with Carlos, he couldn't go back in the school because he sent a pile of horse manure to a former teacher after he graduated. He didn't miss much though, because thirty minutes into the event, Raj got sick and we all left with him.

When Carlos found out that we had to leave the prom, he told Davina he wanted to make the night special and he set up a candlelight dinner on a ridge in the middle of nowhere. I will never know how he pulled it off so quickly, but I was happy that he did. The smile of joy on Davina's face later showed that he had done a great job of making the loss of the dance up to her.

Until wee hours of the morning, Juan and I sat in ER with Raj. He was apologetic but I reminded him of what he had told me two years prior. We had all been friends for far too long to apologize for anything.

It was as the old saying goes, the best of times and the worst of times. Unfortunately, being young and caught up in the excitement of moving on can make you miss the signs that are right in front of you. We were all excited about the prospect of moving into a bright future so we didn't notice what should have been very noticeable changes. Raj was getting sicker and weaker *and* he was putting up a good front to make sure none of us knew it.

\* \* \* \*

"Abbie? Are you home?" My mother's voice was loud.

I'd started spending more time at home. Since Davina was allowed to see Carlos under her parent's supervision, I felt like a third wheel so I went back to my own roots even though I felt like some of them had sprouted in dry dirt.

David had been going through his share of troubles with my father so I tried to play peacemaker with the two of them. Just being there seemed to mean a lot to my brother but

Mom and Dad probably didn't care one way or the other. I was just another mouth to feed.

I stood at the top of the stairs brushing my teeth as Mom yelled for me. "Oh, heavens, Abbie. You scared me. Couldn't you answer me when I first called for you?"

Through toothpaste and spit, I finally managed, "Mom, umm ... I'm home."

She managed a forced smile. "Yes, so you are. Juan just called and said to meet him at the hospital." Worry set in, I had talked to him earlier in the day and he was supposed to take Raj to a doctor's appointment. It was supposed to be routine.

My mom had said the words in such a matter-of-fact fashion, that I almost had to ask her to repeat what she said. "When? When did he call?" I stopped brushing and waited for her to think about it.

"I think it was an hour or so ago but he woke me from a nap. I can't be sure. You would hear the phone yourself if you would turn down the stereo from time to time." No emotion was on her face.

That was the mother I knew. The one that cared more about her nap than giving me an important message, but I couldn't really blame her. She had lived with a man, who systematically destroyed her zest for life. It was sad really. It still didn't explain her lack of any emotional attachment to her children. I think she had just decided her situation was hopeless and drifting through life suited her and her circumstances.

I put aside my feelings toward my mother and quickly finished getting ready before heading out the door toward the hospital. Racing through the traffic on the upper end of the Parkway was never an easy task but I maneuvered through it in spite of bumper to bumper vehicles. When I finally swung into a parking space at the hospital, a beautiful day turned into a gloomy one as if on command.

I sat in my car and cursed the rain. I don't know why the rain bothered me so much. My eyes drifted back up to a window on the second floor. *The window of death.* As the thought entered my mind, I saw Raj's mother standing in it looking out. I sat frozen in time. I didn't want to get out of the car because I already knew the news was bad. My cell rang only seconds after I arrived at the hospital.

"Are you here yet?" It was Juan.

"Yes, I'm sorry but my mom ... never mind. How's Raj?"

He didn't say anything else.

My stomach dropped. The news waiting inside couldn't be good. I ran through the puddles and stopped short to give the window above one last silent curse. I stood there for a few seconds longer than I should have. When I entered the lobby Davina confirmed how I looked when she asked, "What were you doing out there in the rain Abbie?"

"Looking at the window." I answered her as if she should know what I was talking about

"What window?" Davina seldom stood in the rain without an umbrella so I'm sure I looked ridiculous coming into a medical facility in dire need of a huge hair dryer for my entire body.

"The window, don't you remember the window where I stood the day that Raj found out he was HIV positive?" I asked as if she were dense.

Davina nodded. "Yes and Abbie?"

"I already know. He's in that same room." I said the words slowly almost afraid to voice anything more.

She nodded and couldn't tell me what I really didn't want her to say anyway. She ended up racing to the bathroom apparently ready to drown herself in tears of truth.

Juan was next to me before I could follow her. "He's been waiting for you. He won't talk to the doctors or nurses or anyone until you're in there with him."

Searching his face for something I knew I wouldn't find, I wanted to see hope but it wasn't there. I wanted him to reassure me that Raj was going to be okay but he didn't offer it. He wasn't able to because Raj was running out of time.

"Juan, tell me that this isn't the end."

He shook his head. "No one knows anything yet so I can't tell you what you want to hear Abbie."

"He's been feeling so great lately. What's changed?" I asked choking back the tears that begged to drop from my eyelids.

I was startled when Juan grabbed me and hugged me until I couldn't breathe. I was so grateful because his tight embrace stopped the tears from falling. At least he was able to give me that much so I could walk into Raj's room with some optimism. I took a deep breath and Juan and I stepped inside. Davina wasn't too far behind us because I heard the clickety-click of her high heel shoes.



His face lit up but he didn't try to sit up the way he usually did whenever he had visitors. Raj's mother kissed me on the cheek. "Can you stay with him for a few hours after the doctors leave today? I think he wants you all here with him right now."

"Of course I'll stay. I'm here until he sends me home." I said emphatically.

I went over to him and nudged his arm. "Hey there. You know, if you miss me there's a better way to get my attention. You don't have to pull this kind of stunt to see me. I'm honored and all but..."

His hand reached for mine. When it grasped mine, I looked at it with a new realization. It was limp and certainly lacked any strength. There was barely any skin clinging to it. At best, he was a bag of bones. A very small one and I hadn't noticed it until right then. "Remember, we have a pact. None of this illness-crap changes our friendship, okay?" Raj said the words as if sensing my thoughts.

I nodded slowly. My eyes focused on Raj's mother who was standing near the window. Her focus was on Raj and then turned to me. She turned to look outside to see what caught my attention when the irony hit her too. I could see it creep across her face and before I could stop her, she pushed past all of us. I could see that her emotions threatened to drive her over the edge of a cliff with no hanging. She must've known something we didn't.

Raj said he wanted to talk about the last time we were all in that room together. He needed to talk about it but wanted

to do it before the doctors came in on rounds. "Where's Carlos?" His voice was surprisingly cheerful.

"I'll call him." I tried to sound upbeat but it wasn't working. Davina pulled out her phone before I could and caught him right before he left work. He told her he'd be there within minutes.

While we waited on Carlos to show up, we turned on the sports channel. Raj talked of dreams he once had to play baseball. "I was never any good at it but I wanted to play." His voice was wishful. He sounded like he was so far away.

"I bet you were great and just didn't know it." I said trying to stay positive.

"No, it's safe to say I was terrible." He laughed out loud.

"I don't think so. It's not possible." I tried to remain upbeat while he insisted he wouldn't have been a good baseball player. "You were probably better than you think."

"Abbie, I never hit one ball. Not even in T-ball."

"Huh?" I was confused.

"It's true. Not one." We began laughing so hard that for a minute I thought the nurses would have to come in and ask us to be quiet.

The only time we calmed down was about an hour later when Carlos appeared. I was happy that he held true to his word and rushed right over.

"Raj, my man, if you just wanted a good meal, all you had to do was say so." He pulled out a plastic to-go box and flipped the lid showcasing a big juicy hamburger with all the trimmings. It looked scrumptious, but Raj found his taste in food had changed over the last few weeks. His skin fell one

shade short of a green tint once the scent of a cheeseburger reached him.

Waving it away, his mother came back just in time to grab a bucket to stick under his chin. "Carlos. Go get a nurse please." Her monotone voice caught me off guard.

Juan and Davina stepped outside the room and I waited for Carlos to return with a nurse or at least someone with a medical background. As his heart monitor began to beep, I became frantic. "*Davina! Juan! Find Someone Now!!!*"

I worked with Raj's mother to try to keep him from choking as he continued to throw up. When the nurses and a doctor came into the room, they asked us to step out of the way. They worked on him for several minutes before one of them walked past us to the nurses' station without so much as a glance in our direction. Soon, the other nurse and doctor left Raj's room and gave us a disapproving glare on the way out.

"Excuse me?" Davina was hot. To say she was mad would be a gross understatement. The girl was on fire and growing horns, she was so mad. The doctor continued to chat with the petite nurse and held up a finger to Davina as he stepped behind the nurse's station. He made the grave mistake of turning his back to her.

I moved closer to Davina and together we listened as the doctor and nurse talked. I could tell the conversation wasn't on the patient they had just left but instead on a ballgame they were missing the following night because of a staff shortage. Raj wasn't at all their focus. Anger rolled in the pit of my stomach but I managed to maintain control. Davina on

the other hand just lost it. "Do you know who I am?" She screamed.

The intern looked up at her like he couldn't care less but since Davina's father was up for a Chief-of-Staff position, his lack of concern was about to change. He shook his head. "Honey, no and right now, unless you are going to tell me what possessed someone to bring a very sick patient a hamburger, I'm not sure I care who you are." His scathing glance traveled the length of her body.

*Oh. Wrong move man.* I thought. I had first hand experience with Davina's anger. The girl could pull out a fist full of hair back in the fourth grade so I could only imagine what she was capable of doing with a few years on her. Heck, she might just scalp him!

"You may change your mind pretty quick there slick." Davina eyed her father nodding in his direction as she did. There couldn't have been a better time for Davina's father to have walked through the door than the very minute he did. Davina and I ran into his arms immediately.

"Well, there's my other girl. Abbie, did you forget us? We haven't seen you in a couple of days. Is everything at home okay?" His concern was always sincere and forever appreciated.

I don't know if I answered him or just thought I did because my attention had returned to the nurse's station. Davina tossed a condescending *go-to-hell* look over her shoulder and locked arms with her father. She started whispering in his ear as if to tattletale on the staff members who weren't too eager to help Raj.

The looks on their faces told me they didn't need Davina's dad to hold the Chief-of-Staff title to make them squirm. They knew they were in hot water.

As Dr. St. Clair entered Raj's room, Carlos came out with plastic bags of towels, which only boiled Davina's blood faster. "*Housekeeping!!!*" She stepped out of the room again long enough to yell as loud as she could.

"Davina, please be quiet. He's fine now." Carlos looked my way and rolled his eyes.

"Oh my gosh Davina. Stop it. You can't make someone do their job and you are wasting your energy with the effort." I couldn't help but be a little proud of her even though my mouth spoke words of contradiction.

Juan forced a knowing smile. "Uh oh. Davina, I think the 'let's keep Davina real' police is hot on your trail. Hmm ... come to think of it Abbie, you haven't been on your soapbox lately so that must mean Davina hasn't been misbehaving."

Carlos laughed. "Oh, trust me she's been misbehaving..."

Davina punched him in the ribs. "Shut up Carlos. You're going to give someone the wrong idea." As we stood outside waiting for Dr. St. Clair to finish a quick examination, we chatted back and forth as if nothing in the world was wrong. I felt guilty all at once for doing it and decided to wait quietly until we could go back in. The others followed suit.

Remember, I was the paste. Maybe they didn't even know it but for some reason, when it came to tough times, they all turned to me and yet, I wasn't really leader material. I didn't typically hold up well under pressure.

Dr. St. Clair appeared in the door. "Come on back in kids. Raj wants you all with him."

"Well buddy, you look a little better than you did the last time I saw you," Carlos began.

"Yeah? Try bringing me food again and see how much appreciation you get." The strength in his voice was lost. His speech had actually been slowing down for many weeks but I had thought it was because he might be fighting some sort of depression since we were all moving on in life and he seemed to be stuck in Sevier County.

I decided I was going to fight Raj's fate. My only wish was that I had something stronger than my will if I was facing a losing battle. I started to go and stand by the window as I'd done a little over twenty-four months earlier. I changed my mind. Instead, I pulled up a chair to the side of the bed, which left Raj's mother on one side of the bed and me on the other.

One of the women who had taught some of the HIV education classes came in with a doctor I'd never seen before. He conferred with Dr. St. Clair for a moment before handing over the charts. He left us in the hands of a trusted friend, which was appreciated. We all exchanged pleasantries with the nurse from the education department.

If I hadn't heard Dr. St. Clair's gasp, I don't think I would've turned around to face him but the outward display of shock and disappointment rang like agony between my ears. He cleared his throat and sat down on the edge of Raj's bed. The rest of the gang moved in behind me.

"Raj, I ... I ... am so profoundly sorry." Dr. St. Clair couldn't seem to get a grip on what he was reading.

The gentle smile of my friend faded some but still lingered behind the sorrow. "I know. You don't have to say it. I will. I'm in the final stages?"

"Yes, that appears to be the case. Raj, you knew your body wasn't fighting off the infection even with the drugs. I think the biggest problem we had initially was that your immune system was so broken down when you first found out about your infection." I could tell Dr. St. Clair was struggling to try to put everything in terms we could all understand.

"How long?" His voice was steady and careful as he chose the questions he wanted to ask and didn't bother with the ones he wasn't ready to hear.

Dr. St. Clair rose to walk over to the window. I wanted to scream at him to move away but I knew everyone in the room would think I had lost it. So I just watched him in hopes he would continue to explain Raj's prognosis in layman terms.

"I'm not sure. No one knows when. Raj, to be honest with you so much of your illness has been a mystery because we thought you would have more time. Admittedly, you didn't take your meds as prescribed. Your kidneys working overtime with your diabetic complications, your refusal to maintain a proper diet, we've talked about all of this. That worked against you and in the beginning, you were very sick when we discovered you were HIV positive but still, your disease has progressed much faster than we expected."

"Yes, Yes. I'd like to have more time. So, tell me what you know and let's see how I'm going to get out of this latest setback." Raj nervously nodded.

Dr. St. Clair began to explain what being in the last stages of the disease really meant. "Your T-4 cells have dropped significantly below two-hundred. You understand that your current meds aren't working and the only other thing we can try at this point is an older drug I told you about before remember?"

"Yes. I remember, it was the one with so many side effects."

"Yes, that's right. It's worth a shot but you've been so sick over the last few weeks, I'm going to leave that entirely up to you."

I looked at the others and then back at Raj. By their expressions, I was sure none of the others knew he had been sick. He'd kept it from us.

Dr. St. Clair began talking to him about his viral load, Anti-retroviral drugs, side effects, and something I'd never heard before. "As you know Raj, when HIV advances, a patient is typically able to recover from the first three AIDS defining illnesses. My concerns are of course, the recurring pneumonia, weight loss and high fevers. These are our current worries."

"Yes, current." Raj was thoughtful for a moment.

I patted his arm. "Raj, these aren't health problems you can't overcome." I didn't know how wrong I would turn out to be.



He studied me closely like he wanted me to throw him a lifeline. I smiled weakly but found it difficult looking into the eyes of someone whose once tan and beautiful complexion was now ashen. In appearance, it seemed as if death was at his door lightly knocking.

Raj cleared his throat. "So, I guess I'm almost out of time." He paused for a moment and then continued. "Everyone has health problems. Shoot, everyone has life problems for that matter but now, it looks like mine are going to be never-ending. They'll begin and end simultaneously. That's right isn't it Dr. St. Clair?" He turned toward his doctor and friend.

Davina's father offered a half-hearted smile.

"So, um ... it's here isn't it?" Desperation was in Raj's every word.

"I'm afraid it is closer." Dr. St. Clair's eyes watered. In the short time that Raj had been under his care with HIV, Dr. St. Clair had obviously grown closer to Raj.

"Okay, well then. We just have to accept it." Turning to his mother, he dabbed her eyes with the back of his hand. "You stop that okay?" His voice was tender and full of love.

She nodded and I watched as she tried to hold back the evidence of a breaking heart.

Dr. St. Clair stood up. "Raj. I'll be back in to talk with you later." He set his jaw showing his determination to separate his professional and personal lives.

Before he could leave, Raj had a request. "I have something I want to do Dr. St. Clair."

He hesitated and stopped short of the door. I saw him wipe something off his cheek before he faced Raj. "You name it and if we can do it, we will."

"I want to go see Camilla Stevens' parents."

Just the mention of her name sent a sudden wash of anger over his mother's face and probably mine too. "Why do you want to go and visit them?" His mother's head snapped back toward her son and she waited for an explanation.

"I need to do it." His lips were a thin line after he spoke with determination.

"You don't need to do anything of the sort." The bitterness of her words cut the thick air in half.

"Then," he looked at all of us quickly, "One of you find them and bring them to me."

"Absolutely not." His mother stood. "Raj, I am still your mother. You owe those people nothing. If they had been the kind of people they should've been, they would've found you before you found out you were sick. In doing so, they might have allowed you a few more years. You wouldn't be in this hospital bed right now but no, they couldn't do the right thing."

"Mother, did it ever occur to you that they didn't even know about me?" Raj tried to reach for her hand.

"No, I don't believe that at all." She shook her head.

"Mother, you don't know for sure. What if they wanted to know about me or wondered about me or my life? I want them to know."

Carlos shifted behind me and moved to stand at the foot of Raj's bed. "Why Raj? Just tell us why. I can get in touch with

Camilla's cousin and find her parents but I want to know what you hope to accomplish by contacting them. I think you are setting yourself up for more pain." Carlos was speaking the truth.

Wearied eyes drifted across the room at Dr. St. Clair who seemed to understand the reasoning behind Raj's request. He continued. "I want to tell them something. If you're my friend Carlos, and I believe you are, you'll do this one last thing for me."

The words 'one last thing' cut through me, so I know that they went through Carlos' chest like a sword. I saw him take a deep breath before he headed out of the room. He called back without turning around. "Of course, I'm your friend you idiot. I'll go see what I can do right now."

Raj's mother and Dr. St. Clair followed right behind him. "Davina, go tell my mother to let Carlos do this. I need this off my chest before I ... before I ... change residences."

Davina laughed and cried at the same time. I swear she did. "Change residences? Oh Raj ... I wish ... I wish..."

He stopped her. "I wish you'd get your act together. You never were pretty as a weeping willow but you were always gorgeous with a smile." He took her hand and moved it to his lips then pointed toward the door. "Go please. Tell them this is very important and if they let me have my way, I'll be the perfect patient."

Davina on a mission is like a battleship going into combat. In fact, when she stormed out of the room, Juan wasn't far behind her. Raj would have his "last" request because Davina

was the type of friend that would go tie Camilla's parents up and bring them in if she had to do it. Raj knew as much.

I grinned. "I'm impressed. I see you are pretty impressed with yourself too. Weren't you the smart one putting Davina in control?"

His cough overtook him before he could answer. I waited for him to finish. When he could, he said, "Davina ... she's something else. She's the only person I know that would have stood by Carlos and his addiction problem. She's the only one I know who could have endured what he put her through and still love him. Maybe she loves him even more because of it all."

"I guess..." I never knew what to say in times like this because at one time, Raj really had strong feelings for Davina.

"I know." He smiled softly and closed his eyes.

With a scoot, I moved my chair closer to his bed and laid my head over on the side of the mattress. His hand smoothed over my hair like a protective and caring caress. "Raj, I'm so sad. I know I'm not supposed to tell you that but I'm just so broken hearted."

"Me too Abbie. Me too."

I cried until I couldn't cry any more and he let me. He didn't tell me to be strong or tell me any nonsense about how he would pull through. I think he knew he'd pushed for about all the time he was ever going to have so for a while, we mourned our loss together.

When I finally pulled myself together, Raj whispered. "Sit up Abbie, I need to tell you something."

Surprisingly, his face was full of acceptance, I immediately felt guilty for not holding it together better for him. "Abbie, I want to tell you something. I'm not angry anymore."

I'm sure I appeared to be having a blonde moment as I asked what he was talking about. "I never knew you were angry. You never showed anything but understanding about this disease. You just met it head on."

"Maybe, but I was mad. I was furious as hell. I cursed Camilla, her family, Carlos, your dad for having a van available; I cursed everything and almost everyone because of it. I felt sorry for myself. I invited myself to one heck of a pity-party and wallowed in it again and again."

I searched for something in his meaning as he continued. "Juan knew. Carlos knew but I tried to be strong for you and Davina but yes, I was a hate-filled person on the inside and then it just changed." He snapped his fingers. "Overnight really, I decided if I couldn't change it, I would accept it because no one likes to be around a whiner."

"It never showed on the outside. You weren't a cry baby as far as I'm concerned."

Chuckling, he told me something I don't think I'll ever forget. He said, "I have lived, loved, smiled and I have cried. I've cried for all the times that I won't be here to live, love and smile. Oh yeah, indeed I have cried."

"I ... am ashamed." I said the words as I watched his pain in telling me his brilliant truth about a future he would never see.

"You don't need to be. I didn't want you to know how I hurt. I didn't want you to see the pain. I wasn't ready to die."

"Now you think you are?" I asked for more sincerity.

"I am ready when the time comes." He slowly nodded.

"To go find your new home?" I needed to know how he looked at death.

"Yep." His eyes drifted toward the window. "I want to go find that place where pain doesn't exist and beauty can be from the inside out. I want to see what it's like again to be known for myself rather than *that guy with AIDS*. Yes, I think it will soon be time to go explore that other world Abbie."

Taking his hand in mine, I closed my eyes and prayed that God would let me hold onto him a little while longer. He was giving up. I knew it. He'd decided it was too hard to live now so I would just will him back from the brink of death. I'd pray him back if there was such a thing.

Carlos, Davina and Juan came back in with an announcement. Carlos seemed extremely proud to let him know what was going on. "Dr. St. Clair is going to send them a plane ticket. They'll be here in the morning."

Davina was excited to bring Raj the news too. "They were so glad to talk to us Raj. They can't wait to meet you." Her smile told Raj how tickled she was to have played a part in helping him out.

"Yeah man. They are so glad you wanted to see them. Carlos and I will pick them up in Knoxville at ten." Juan confirmed the arrangements.

Leave it to my friends. They all wanted to talk at the same time maybe because they thought if they did, they'd be credited for getting Camilla's parents to agree to come all the way to Tennessee from Texas.

He sat up straighter in the bed that confined him. The delivered news gave him new life. I silently sent God a two-thumbs up. He didn't waste any time in answering my last prayer. My thumbs-up were followed by several kudos. "What else did they say?" I wanted to know.

"I think they want to tell us a lot when they get here." Davina beamed.

"Well, then tomorrow will come and we will meet Camilla's family." Raj pursed his lips. "This calls for a celebration."

Carlos backed up with his palms out to indicate he wanted no part of it. "Hold on man. No way. A party with you isn't much fun if it involves food."

"No, I want ginger-ale and a lot of saltine crackers." He started laughing. "And a stripper."

From the doorway his mother laughed too. "I've got you covered on the ginger-ale and crackers. Forget the stripper. Last I heard, they don't allow them in here." She flashed a smile toward her son. I'm sure she realized the one she saw on her child's face was there because he was among his friends but I am just as sure, she also knew it was only temporary.

## HIDING THE TRUTH AND THE PAIN IT BRINGS

I heard the sound of a flushing toilet and could tell it had woken Raj. I could see him looking around the room as he shifted and scooted up in his bed. Carlos appeared within seconds going back to a chair in the corner. He seemed to stagger over his own two feet from what I could see. I could tell he didn't see me in the opposite corner slumped down with my blanket behind the closet door.

"Hey man." Raj's voice was weary.

"Do you always sneak up on people like that?" Carlos acknowledged him with a gruff voice.

Raj laughed. "I'm not the one lurking around in the corner of hospital rooms."

"What? You don't like my company?" Carlos was in a bad way. I could hear it in his voice. I could only hope he was there because he wanted to be with Raj and not running from someone or something.

"The company's not the problem." Raj said.

"What is it then? Do you need something? Can I get you a nurse or someone?" The concern in Carlos's voice was touching.

"Yeah man. Maybe you should. I've just peed my bed." I detected the humor in Raj's voice.

Carlos allowed a deep sigh to escape. I shrunk back further into my corner hoping I would continue to go unnoticed although I was hiding in plain sight. "Great. Just



how often do you do that?" The tone Carlos used was indicative of disgust.

"Do what?" Raj asked.

"Pee your bed." Carlos snapped the words.

"Uh..." Raj paused, "I try to do it as frequently as possible so I don't have to get up." Raj spoke calmly.

"You what?" The shock was evident in Carlos' voice.

"Yep, I'm too damn lazy to get up so I just let it rip. The nurses are paid to clean me up and I figure, why not? May be the only thrill I'll ever have."

I began to snicker. I smothered it in the blanket over me because I knew that he hadn't gone to the bathroom in his bed by his tone. Why Carlos wasn't catching on was anyone's guess.

Carlos sounded uncomfortable. "So you peed your bed?"

"Yeah, you ought to try it sometime. It's great to have those cute little nurses come in and change you and your bed in the middle of the night. Of course, they always like it when I pee my bed because they can check out my sexy legs."

"You didn't go did you?" Carlos said.

"Nope, not tonight." He laughed. "What's wrong with you anyway? You're not usually this slow unless your..."

The truth probably hit him at the same time it did me. I slumped further into the corner with my eyes closed in case someone turned on the overhead fluorescents. The bathroom light was on so I could make out Raj's shadow and also could see Carlos pretty good.

"You're in a bad place again aren't you?" The hurt was obvious in Raj's voice.

"No. I'm in a great place. You're the one in a bad place when you've resorted to wearing night gowns and telling people you pee your pants for attention." Carlos stood up and then sat back down.

"Old joke Carlos. Doesn't fly with me." I could hear the anger in Raj's voice.

"Yeah well, I'm flying all right."

"Why?" Raj was probably getting put out with him like the rest of us. I guess Juan had filled him in on a lot he missed when he was sick before.

"Why not?" It seemed that Carlos was signing on for one of those parties full of pity that Raj talked about. I hoped neither one of my friends spotted me hunched down in the corner because I was dying to see how well Raj could handle Carlos.

"I can list a lot of reasons." Raj probably felt like the rest of us. Carlos was wasting the life Raj would love to live.

"Go for it." Carlos had his old attitude back. The one that existed right before the voices started to speak to him.

"I will just as soon as you tell me why you are doing this to yourself again." I could tell Raj's temper was ready to snap even though his illness likely weakened it some.

Carlos stood up and walked over toward the window. From my position on the floor, I could see he was standing there with his legs slightly apart and his hands stuck in his pockets on either side of his waist. His head was centered on his shoulders, and he seemed to be glaring into the moonlight. Maybe he was searching for answers the way I'd done many times from that very spot.

"Do you ever wonder why we're all friends?" Carlos asked a sincere question.

Raj was quick to answer. "No. I'm just glad we are."

Carlos seemed dissatisfied with his response. "You would be Raj. That's probably because you've never seen what a messed up bunch of people we've been since childhood."

"Speak for yourself. I'm sane most of the time. Normal by some people's standards or at least, my own." Raj was trying another stab at humor but my guess was it wouldn't work.

Carlos was condescending. "You think you're normal?"

"Carlos, don't go there." Raj warned him.

"Maybe you need me to go there." Carlos spat out.

"Not now. It's far too late now." Raj seemed angry for some reason.

Carlos walked over to his bed and stood at the foot of it. "No, it's not too late to tell you I love you. It's not too late for that." Carlos sounded as if he were crying but I couldn't see him.

Raj didn't say anything. My heart melted as I heard the words so I'm sure it caught Raj by surprise too. Carlos did have a heart. I knew he did and he loved all of us. He'd always loved us all.

"You have nothing to say back?" Carlos probed.

"I told you not to go there and I meant it." I couldn't understand Raj's sudden change in demeanor. Maybe it was the meds.

Carlos continued. "We all have our secrets don't we?" He walked back over to the window. "You love me too." I could see Carlos nodding his head.

Raj had another fit of coughing. "I think you're like a hemorrhoid that refuses to go away. Now, I'm tired so take a hint."

Carlos didn't budge. "You know I guess one of the reasons I connected with Davina was because she kept me grounded. Kind of like she did for Abbie."

"Yes she probably did. Someone needed to because you sure weren't going to let me." Raj had a definite note of jealousy almost spewing out his words. I was getting a little confused and almost came out of hiding to tell Raj to be nicer and Carlos to get clean once and for all. Instead, I stayed hidden in my corner.

"Huh, funny thing is all of us just had too much baggage. When you are traveling nowhere with heavy luggage, it makes it hard to ever go anywhere in life and I don't know where I'm going yet." Carlos said thoughtfully before adding, "I don't think any of us really do."

"You have to have goals Carlos. You have to dream. If you don't have dreams or goals, you haven't lived man." Raj enunciated his words.

"I had dreams and goals, you destroyed those." Carlos tossed the bitter words at him and I was totally lost. *How had Raj destroyed Carlos and his life goals?*

"I said we aren't doing this right now." Raj was firm with Carlos but then his voice softened. "I want to give you something you can give yourself."

"What could that be?" Carlos said his voice oozing sarcasm.

"I want to give you faith."

"Now, would that be in your God, Davina's or Abbie's?"

"I'm beginning to believe more like Abbie on that. I believe they are one in the same." His voice was steady. "I want you to have faith in something Carlos. You need to find it from within and you need to find it soon. Before all this other stuff does become more important to you than your own well being." Raj coughed out the last few words.

"How can you talk like that? Why would you have any faith whatsoever when your death sentence is closer than ever before? Why would you want to have a smidge of belief in anything you can't see? What kind of God gives one of his own this horrible disease?" Carlos was loud.

"I don't know. Maybe one that's a bit parental." Raj said gently.

"What are you talking about? You told me that once before. I don't understand it!" Carlos slammed his fists down on the windowsill. Raj had once said something similar to me and I didn't understand it either. It goes back to that baby designer in heaven leaving us out of one of her assembly lines.

"Maybe God saw what I did with Camilla and didn't like it so he smacked me on the hand with this for punishment."

"See you are a prime example of how messed up we are. You think you deserved to get AIDS or HIV or whatever you want to call it. You've decided to quit trying because you *just deserve* to die." I understood the anger in Carlos's tone. I was angry too, angry that Raj seemed resigned to accept his fate. I wanted him to fight it for all he was worth, but he was ready to give up. I was glad I chose to be quiet. It appeared this

was a talk Carlos needed to have with Raj. Maybe he'd say something to Raj that would put the fight back in his veins so death could once again be postponed.

"Today, Carlos, today what I have, what *it is called*. .." He paused as he seemed to struggle with coming to terms with it as well, "Today it became AIDS. Well, at least, in my mind, today it became official. Now, I didn't quit trying but I did realize I'm not going to be one of those who will get to live ten or twenty more years with this thing. I wish I could, but I can't. I'm not able to keep down anything I eat. I'm not gaining weight and I am battling one infection after another. My kidneys are shutting down while my blood sugar is at an all time high. I can't fight the skin infections or the infection in my lungs much less keep down the antibiotics to help cure them."

I wanted to crawl out of my corner and hug him tightly because I could hear his pain. Something told me to sit still and just listen. I felt like one of those FBI people Carlos talked about when he was hallucinating.

"Officially in my mind..." Carlos stopped himself.

"I know and it's okay for you to say it. In your mind, as soon as we heard the words HIV, you saw AIDS but you and I both know why, so it goes without saying. Carlos, the truth is HIV gets your attention but it doesn't take your life. AIDS does that. HIV sends out the warning that unless something takes you first, AIDS will be the way you go when it's your time to go." Raj's words made a lot of sense and I could tell he'd thought about it a lot and of course, he'd had the time to do so.

"You and Abbie are a lot alike you know. You both personalize everything. Since the beginning, she's tried to put a face on this thing." Carlos brought me into everything these days.

"She's hurting. You're hurting." Raj hit the nail on the head.

"We all are Raj. I guess lately it is bothering me because we're family. All of us are as thick as any blood that would ever bind us, but when it came right down to it, we didn't know each other as well as we might have thought." Carlos seemed to choose his words carefully. Maybe he was regretting spending precious times with drugs rather than those important to him.

"I think we knew each other better than most." Raj countered.

"Maybe but we were still a screwed up bunch of kids. Take Abbie for instance. She's been with Davina's family for so long that she claims Martin Luther King is her cousin and adamantly swears she is telling the truth. She looks ridiculous with her pale white skin professing that Dr. King was her cousin but she doesn't care."

"Carlos, if that's what she does and it makes her feel better, then leave her alone. Davina's family took her in when no one else would. You don't know that situation as well as I do but I can tell you from spending so much time with Dr. St. Clair that he thinks of her like a daughter. I'm telling you he does and truth be told, he's proud to know that Abbie adopted his heritage as her own."

Carlos seemed to ignore him because from what I could hear, he was ready to discuss all of our faults. "And Juan, he's another story too." Carlos sighed, "He's got this infatuation for Abbie now that won't go away and he won't act on it. Reminds me of someone else I once knew."

My heart skipped four beats or more so Juan did like me as more than friend. Our one moment hadn't just been a quick impulsive move to comfort one another. Whew! Was I ever glad to know he still might be interested in trying out my lips on his again!. My mouth puckered at the thought.

"Sounds like you are just eager to tear us all down tonight. What about Davina, what's her problem? I'm sure she has one according to you." Raj spat sarcasm.

"You have to ask?" Carlos laughed. "She's the most together on the outside but the most screwed up on the inside."

Raj giggled. "Yeah, I could see where you might think so. Hey, remember the first picnic we all took and Davina raised sand with Abbie because Abbie didn't bring china and linen napkins? She had planned out the entire day outdoors as if she were entertaining guests at a society luncheon or something." His light snicker turned into a full blown hee-haw.

Carlos rolled with laughter too and I had to cover up my mouth also as I pictured all of us on that particular day.

"Davina's hands were on her hips as she informed Abbie that eating off paper plates would not be an option." Raj coughed out a long laugh as he said it.

"Do you need some water?" Carlos sounded concerned.



"No, I'm fine. It's funny, that's all. It was the day Abbie decided to become the Davina police or whatever she calls it. Remember? She told her she had no mercy for snobs." He continued to laugh with the obvious memory.

"I remember." Carlos walked back over to the side of the bed. He was in the opposite corner from where I was snuggled behind the opened closet door with my blanket and pillow. "I also remember something else."

The whole room fell silent. I tried to think back to that day and remember what else might be worthy of instant recall and came up empty-handed. Nothing stood out.

"Raj, look at me because I'm going to say this whether you want me to or not." He spoke with something I almost translated as authority.

There was a stifled cry in his voice. "Please not now Carlos. Please. Let's do this later, another time, maybe even another lifetime."

"No, I was very cruel to you that day. I was awful to you. Said some things I could never take back. Things you would never forget."

"I did forget." Raj probably did remove from memory whatever seemed to weigh heavy on the lips of his friend because he was like that—forgiving. I still had no idea what they were talking about so I continued to be extra quiet so I could find out. Raj repeated himself. "Yes, I did forget."

"You didn't. I didn't." Carlos continued with a firm voice.

"Let it go. I don't have much longer. Let me live without the heartbreaks and aches or pains of something that couldn't be. Let it go."

"That's why I can't let it go." Carlos persisted.

"You're on that stuff and you're talking that crap you don't need to be talking!" Raj's voice rose an octave and he was shouting which surprised me.

"You wanna know why Davina is the most screwed up in the bunch? Do you? I'll be happy to tell you." Carlos had a matter-of-fact tone in his voice.

"No. Carlos, I want you to leave." Raj was steadfast in his request. I couldn't see either of them at that point and couldn't tell what was going on.

"I'm not leaving until I say this. Then, I'll go." Carlos was stubborn as a mule. Whatever he needed to say, hell wouldn't stop him from spewing what he needed to get off his chest.

"I want you to go now. Give me my remote. I need oxygen. I need a nurse." Raj seemed to be throwing a childish tantrum as his breathing became labored.

"You don't need anything but the truth. Davina is one messed up chic because of what happened that day in the park. At the picnic, she saw us together. She liked you and she saw you make your move on me. I denied it and told her that you were gay but I wasn't. That's why she dumped you for me. She saw us. She's always known about you. The thing is, because she loves me so much, she doesn't see me for who I am and Raj, I'm the one who loves only you." His voice was sincere and I was getting the gist of the conversation. They were in love. With each other. I was in shock.

Raj's rage was probably heard throughout the hospital. "*I said I want you to go! I don't want you here! Go! Get out! Now! Go!!*" His screams were piercing.

I continued to be in shock. I was sure I'd heard something that had been a dark secret. I'm sure they both had held onto it tightly for years. All the bickering they had done. Friends one minute and enemies the next, suddenly it all made perfect sense. It was the one reason Raj didn't want Carlos to know he'd slept with the donor of the virus. *That was really bad Abbie.* I cursed for my ill will toward the Stevens girl as the sadness took me to another thought. *They'd hidden the truth from their own friends. How could they hide the love they obviously shared?*

"I'm going and tomorrow I'll come back. I'll bring Camilla's parents to see you. We'll talk about this again." Carlos's tone left no room for argument. I was so stunned I didn't see anything for a few seconds. When I could see clearly, I noticed that Carlos must've left the room.

I heard the door open and close and I turned toward Raj where the sobs threatened to drown him in the bed where he was lying. I wanted to go to him and then again, I wanted to hide. I wanted to go to Davina and tell her the truth but with Raj on his deathbed, what purpose would it have served? I wanted to keep their secret. Then again, I wanted to bring us all together in our close-knit group and discuss it. Bring it out in the open. Finally, as I listened to a person I love cry his eyes out, I wanted to cry too.

## SOMETIMES YOU LEAVE WELL ENOUGH ALONE

I scrambled to my feet just before seven. The activity at the nurse's station woke me up before I wanted to roll out of my blankets and away from my pillow. Having gone undetected through the night had proven to be a curse. I slept without the comforts of a soft bed while the agony of Raj's cries haunted my dreams.

After my blankets were folded, I went over to sit by him. I pulled out some chewing gum and a hairbrush from my purse. Popping the gum in my mouth, I pulled the brush through my hair as I watched Raj in the peacefulness of sleep. When the phone rang, it startled me out of my chair and Raj jumped, when the sound woke him up. "Abbie?"

Holding up one finger in a *wait a minute gesture* that told him I was already on the phone, I smiled. It was one of his mother's friends calling to check on him. He didn't look like he was up to talking to much of anyone since he'd just woke up, so I reassured her that he was fine. When I hung up, Raj took my hand. "How'd you sleep dear?" He smiled.

Laughing, I met his attempt at early morning humor with defiance. "Oh I just got here." I couldn't look at him if I was going to lie so I jumped up and started to tidy the room. "You know, we need to get some color into this room. I'm going to bring over some..."

Raj interrupted me, "While you pretended to be asleep in your cozy corner over there, you heard everything didn't you?" He was matter-of-fact.

"You knew I was there?" I was at a loss for other words.

"Not until about an hour after the tears stopped. When the nurse came in to give me my meds, she flipped on the closet light so she could see me. I saw you curled up behind the door."

"Oh." I said not sure what else to say. I looked away from Raj, "So anyway, I'm going to bring flowers and I think a couple of pictures of us at the lake and at Davina's—"

"Stop." There wasn't any doubt he wanted me to quit babbling.

I didn't want to discuss with him what I'd heard. I wanted to forget about it. I chose to ramble on. "Okay, no colors then, no pictures and *absolutely* no flowers. I don't have time today anyway. We have to get you ready to meet Camilla's family since your mom isn't going to be here. I thought maybe we could..."

Raj's voice was firmer when he cut me off again. "Everything? You heard everything? I'm willing to bet you heard it all. That's okay. I dreamed about it last night. It was time he talked to me about his feelings because I think it's why he can't seem to hold it together. I guess maybe I should've opened up more and let him talk to me about it. Maybe it's selfish but with everything I have to deal with now, my feelings for him can't be a priority."

I felt like there were some things Raj needed to know before he went on. "I'm not sorry I heard your conversation and I know it was one meant to be private so I was wrong to listen but I can't apologize for being here. Raj, you and Carlos should spend some time together. You owe it to one another."

He ignored my coaxing or coaching, whichever it may have been. "I was so pissed at you when I saw you over there pretending to be asleep." Raj grinned slightly and I had a feeling he was probably over it.

"I probably *was asleep* when the nurse came in because I don't remember anyone being in the room. In any case, what was I saying?" I looked pointedly at him, "It explained a lot to me. Things I didn't understand." I looked away. "And maybe I need to tell you something you don't know."

"What could that possibly be?" Raj smiled and reached for my hand.

I detected his sorrow and hoped it wasn't because I'd betrayed him by listening in. "The day you passed out at the lake. There's something you don't know. He freaked."

"He would be Carlos?" Raj asked with a raise of his brows.

"Don't *you* dare start with me," I giggled before giving him a playful word of caution. "I haven't had any caffeine this morning." I smiled as sweetly as I could and fortunately, Raj returned it with one of his own.

"He acted fast, Carlos that is, and if he hadn't, I don't think you would be here today. When we arrived at the hospital, he sprinted through the parking lot with you and once he hit the door with you in his arms, he just stood there screaming for some kind of help. I don't think there was a person in this hospital who couldn't hear him. Later, he stood at the swinging doors separating the hospital waiting room and patient rooms hoping someone would go through them at any time so he could catch a glimpse of you. Juan and I couldn't

get over it. He cares about you a lot and now it just makes better sense."

"Abbie, maybe we shouldn't talk about this right now. I need to focus on my visit with Camilla's parents." Raj's eyes teared up as I told him the story.

"Well, before we talk about something else, I want to tell you something. I've been running from my father since I was a little girl. I didn't want to rock his boat. I didn't want to ask him why he did the things he did. When David and I were small children, we'd ask Mother why he loved the alcohol more than he loved us and her answer was always the same, 'he loves you as much as he knows how and maybe he did.'"

"Do you have a point?" Raj asked me quietly.

"From what I can tell from the conversation last night between you and Carlos, this is what I think happened. You were sweet on Carlos but didn't want to show it because of course being from Pakistan and moving to the US after all the September Eleventh events was hard enough much less moving to the south as a gay young man..."

"At the time I moved here, I didn't know what gay was exactly." Raj said, his voice tentative.

"I guess you probably didn't. I don't know about the homo stuff. When *did* you find out?" I asked him pointedly without thinking.

"Nice Abbie." Raj's tone told me I'd flubbed up.

"I'm sorry. That wasn't the right thing to say was it?" I was sincere because I really wasn't judging him at all.

"Skip it. Go on." Raj said dismissively.

"Look, I'm not judging you. If I said something that made it look that way, I'm sorry."

Raj's face reddened. "Abbie, that is exactly why all of us have always looked out for you. Your simple mind allows your mouth to get you into trouble. You don't think before you speak. Your friends love you anyway but you have to learn to be more considerate because I'm really hurting here."

I could see as much. I knew he was hurting and I wanted to make it all better for him and for Carlos. "Anyway, from where I stand, I take it that while you were "going with" Davina, you were sweet on Carlos. You must've put the moves on him like he said last night. He turned you down and you pretended to forget about it. To make matters worse, you lost the girl—and the guy."

He looked across the room at a blank television screen. "I guess it happened something like that. It was a long time ago and I really can't remember."

"Yes, and I guess a lot has happened between now and then. Carlos set you up with someone to make it look like you weren't interested in one another. You fought like cats and dogs to make everyone think there was some lingering bitterness between you because he stole your girl and then there's Davina. Poor Davina. Standing by in the shadows while you two made a mockery out of her, well it isn't right. If you wanted to be together, you should've been and left Davina out of it."

Before he could jump in, I continued. "You're running from the truth just like I've been running from my father. Just like I will continue to run because I've been doing it for so long."



Still, I have time to live with it. You Raj, don't. You said it yourself, you think you are *out of time* or you are running out of time. Do something to make this right. Do it before it is too late."

"Did you stay up all night thinking about how you wanted to give this little speech?" Raj sounded sarcastic but I knew I'd hit a home run with it. He was going to think about what I said.

"I was up and down all night because I think you were right. This is why Carlos can't hold it together. He's got it for you bad and even as you've laid here sick, he's still carrying a torch for you. You owe him something in return and you both owe Davina the chance to get on with her life."

"That's where you've got it wrong. Carlos is going to stay with Davina even after I'm gone. They're going to get married Abbie." Raj said flatly.

"Why? Why would he marry her? He's not interested in girls, that much is obvious. Now that I think about it, he never was that interested in girls. He wasn't was he?" I wanted to know and Raj had the answers to the questions I had.

"You'd have to ask him. I can't answer for him." Raj shifted in the bed. It was obvious the subject made him uncomfortable.

"I'm asking you. Let him go on with his life after you're gone. Give him what he needs before you can't offer him anything. Whatever it is he needs, you know what to do to make this right for him. If you don't, he's going to turn to drugs each time he thinks about you. Those voices he talks

about, they'll come more frequently and they'll get louder because that drug he's on is like nothing any of us have ever experienced."

"Okay, Abbie, I'll talk to him." Raj sounded resigned.

"Do you promise?" I persisted.

"I promise tomorrow, I will talk to him tomorrow. You're probably right. There's a life waiting to be lived and I want him to live it to the fullest. I've always wanted the best for him."

"Then give him your best."

Davina came in with a big bouquet of balloons ignoring the serious conversation she interrupted. "Good morning everyone!" As usual, she could light up a room.

Raj moved his head from side to side. "Whew! For a minute there, when you said everyone, I thought I'd missed something. Carlos imagines people and I was afraid I was missing a few!" He looked around the room again and laughed.

"Not funny Raj." She didn't turn around. "Besides, that was a long, long time ago."

She began typical Davina-in-a-crisis mode. "You look terrible Abbie. Go home and get cleaned up and get back here before Camilla's family gets here. I'll sit with Raj."

I wanted his permission and he seemed to know it. "Go on, get outta here." He waved me off with his hand and I bent down to kiss his forehead before leaving.

## DEATH BY THE CRUELEST OF HANDS

It was ten minutes after eleven when I walked back into the hospital. The gang was already there and Carlos was telling Raj what to expect from Camilla's parents. He acknowledged me with a wave of his hand before he continued. "They are pretty cool. You'll like them. They wanted to get a bite to eat in the cafeteria and then they'll be right up."

"Good, I wanted to know about them first. Did you ask them about her and her life or what did you find out?" Raj was understandably nervous.

Juan jumped in. "Carlos and I are going to let them tell you everything because they skipped around a lot and we think it would be better if you heard it from them because they just gave us bits. More than anything else, they talked about her childhood."

"Did they say she suffered in the end?" Raj held an empty glare as he studied the faces of his friends.

I was curious. "Why Raj? Do you want to hear that she did?"

"Of course he doesn't. He just needs to know more about her and how she died." Juan was agitated and it showed in his voice.

Mr. and Mrs. Stevens entered the room cautiously. Juan quickly introduced them. Mrs. Stevens studied Raj carefully as if she wanted to see what her daughter would have seen in the boy lying in the hospital bed.

It didn't surprise me that she looked at him for so long. Raj didn't look his best at his current weight of less than one hundred pounds. Mr. Stevens was older than what I would have expected and appeared to be in failing health. He looked like he was around seventy years old and the first thing I thought of when I saw him was J. Howard Marshall, the billionaire who married Anna Nicole Smith. He bore a striking resemblance.

Raj shook their hands and asked them to sit in the two chairs we'd moved slightly away from his bed but still close enough for him to talk to them comfortably. He wanted them placed precisely in the right spot so he could see them when he spoke to them. "I'm so glad to meet you both. Thank you for coming."

Mr. Stevens spoke first. "When we first received the phone call, we weren't really sure about making the trip."

"I understand. I guess if I'd been in your shoes, I probably wouldn't know what to do either." Raj's inviting tone held a kind demeanor.

The older man's face looked drawn. The corners of his mouth fell into one of the saddest looks I'd ever seen in my life. "Raj, may I call you Raj or do you have another name you prefer..." He stopped himself before he finished what he was going to say.

"I'd love it if you called me Raj. All my friends do." Raj smiled as he looked at Carlos and then me, Juan, and Davina.

I had to admire him. Here he was in front of the man whose daughter gave him the HIV virus and Raj seemed interested in making the man feel comfortable around him.

"Raj it is then." Mr. Stevens seemed pleased with the ability to call him by the familiar name we all knew and used.

Davina interrupted before he could speak again. "Mr. and Mrs. Stevens, if this makes you uncomfortable or Raj, if you want us to leave, we can."

Neither the Stevens' or Raj indicated they would rather we leave, so we hung back away from the bed to afford Raj and the couple some space. Somehow, I ended up by the window and when I did I was nearly choked by the way a frame of glass seemed to hinder my level of comfort. I decided to ignore the way I identified with it.

"Raj, I did know your name, but I had no idea of where to start looking for you. Since we are a very private family, my wife and I decided to keep our knowledge of the boys our daughter slept with very hush-hush." The older man kept a watchful eye on his wife.

"Boys?" Raj was curious.

"Yes, there were ... how do I put this without disrespecting her memory ... several and more than a couple." Her father looked down.

Mrs. Stevens must've been a very bitter woman at one time because she followed his words with meticulous articulation. "To say our daughter was a loose girl would be a grave understatement Raj. In fact, it would be a large lie." She didn't smile and who could blame her based on those facts alone.

With a sour squint, Mr. Stevens began to unravel the sad life story of his daughter. "My little girl was the apple of my eye. She was the love of her mother's life and mine as well.

We did everything we could to provide for her, anything she wanted when she wanted it. She took without questioning where the money came from. She never noticed that her mother and I both worked two jobs so she could have what she wanted. But we wanted to do it."

I had briefly met Camilla when Raj came to my house for the van keys. The picture her parents painted matched my memory of her. She was a very pretty girl decked out in the latest fashions and seemed to have an outgoing personality. I hated her again as soon as I thought back to that night. She seemed to be in a rush to get Raj into the van and regardless of what her father wanted us to believe about her, I think her mother had it right. She was a loose girl. I couldn't help but think her parents were likely giving her too much credit because she was their daughter. *She was a friggin slut is what she was.* I decided no one needed to hear my inner thoughts on the subject so I kept my opinions to myself.

Her father brought out a handkerchief to wipe off a bead of sweat forming above his brow. "Camilla was home alone a lot but we afforded her a lot of trips, nice clothes, jewelry and pretty much anything she wanted. We had tried for years to have children so when she came along we did what we could to make her feel special. What she needed most, we later discovered, was an adult at home with her at night." His lip formed a tight line, his regret obvious.

Mrs. Stevens cut in. "This is the part that is the toughest for my husband so I'll say it. Camilla was raped by a minority male when she was fourteen. She didn't tell anyone about it at all until right before she died."

"None of her friends knew? No one?" Davina showed sympathy for a teenage girl she'd never met. "Her eyes watered and her mouth turned down in disappointment.

Mr. Stevens shook his head. "As far as we know our daughter never told anyone." He looked at each of us for a moment. His eyes clouded and he took a deep breath. He seemed to be searching for a way to continue. After several heartbeats of silence, he went on. "My daughter went on a killing spree using the virus she contracted during the rape as her weapon of choice."

Raj sat up. "She did what?" His face suddenly reddened. Not one person in that room could have missed the visible struggle he had while he tried to accept the news he was being told.

Carlos went over to him to stand at the head of his bed, which was very unusual. In fact, as I tried to avoid the irony of the alcove full of glass leading to the outside world, I noticed the way Carlos stood protectively over Raj. We all anxiously waited for the Stevens couple to continue. They had to continue. They couldn't just drop a bomb like that and give nothing more. I stared at them, mouth open, eyes wide. What they were saying bordered with true madness but I knew what I felt was nothing compared to what Raj must have felt.

"Raj, my daughter must've snapped and as her parents, we should've noticed it but we didn't so nothing was done to get her help. When she first discovered she had HIV, she told us there was a boy that gave her the disease and was just matter-of-fact about the whole thing. She wasn't sick a lot in

the beginning but her cocktail of meds worked beautifully in the beginning. Then she stopped taking them."

Yes, of course she would. If she wanted to share the virus with as many unsuspecting males as possible, she would want to be as infectious as possible and she certainly didn't want to help herself.

Camilla's mother jumped in. "We were under the impression that she would live a very long and productive life with all of the medical advancements and since we thought she was following doctor's orders, we had no reason to believe that she wouldn't still be living today."

Mr. Steven's patted his wife's hand. "Raj, if I had wanted to contact the men or boys, as they were, that Camilla had spent time with, it would have been next to impossible. There were far too many."

Raj gave him a blank stare. "What are you saying? So you're saying she gave me this disease on purpose?"

The older man held his head down in apparent shame for a moment and I noticed from where I stood that he seemed to twist his mouth in a nervous fashion. "Yes, I'm afraid I am."

"You must be mistaken." I jumped in for Raj knowing he wouldn't want to believe what he was hearing.

Mrs. Stevens reached into her handbag and brought out an envelope. "It's all in there. It's a copy of the original but I felt like you had a right to see it."

She then directed her words toward me. "My daughter was broken after her experience. She wanted a day of reckoning so she decided to orchestrate one. When one didn't help her feel any sense of empowerment, she did it again and again.



No one suspected her or what she was doing. First, no one knew of the rape and second, she found a lot of these boys and men out of town when we traveled on holiday breaks. She'd meet these boys and just find away to sweep them off to the side somewhere for a romp. As you know, a few minutes in a closet or a bathroom is all it takes to pass off this disease. Her desire for revenge because of one evil man turned her into a person I couldn't even begin to recognize as my own child." The woman didn't cry and I saw something resembling regret and rage in her eyes.

Mr. Stevens' sobs filled the room as Raj flipped through the pages of the material Camilla's mother had given him. It was a lot to digest. A long letter to her parents followed an even longer list of names of Camilla's victims.

Obviously startled by the older man's show of emotion, Raj handed the letter off to Carlos. He spoke thoughtfully. "Mr. and Mrs. Stevens, I don't hold you responsible. I had a choice. We all have choices. Your daughter was very forward but I wasn't saying no by any means. I could've said no but I was a young kid with too few experiences." He glanced up at Carlos and for several long seconds, they stared into each others eyes. "I'm as much to blame as she is."

I couldn't help it. I had to ask. "How many boys or young men did she sleep with?" Call me nosy. The shoe would fit.

Juan shot me an oh-no-it's-Abbie look and I didn't ask again. Suddenly, I was also very aware of the fact that I always witnessed bad things or heard bad news when I was next to the window so I moved to the door.

Mrs. Stevens seemed unaffected by my question. "Over a hundred." She said the words flatly.

Raj didn't seem to be angered by Mrs. Stevens or her dismissive tone. I was learning that appearances weren't always what they seemed. Still, he was very nice to her parents.

"Raj, if you want to ask them anything specific, you need to do that because we'll have to leave in fifteen minutes to get them back to the airport in time for their flight out." Juan was always the sensible one and he knew there must be some questions.

"I guess I can't apologize enough for Camilla's actions. She tried to deliberately spread AIDS to unassuming young men." Mr. Stevens spoke sincerely and I watched him take several deep breaths. He continued. "There's no easy way to say it, many of you are sick and many will die." Her father's mouth twisted as if it pained him to say the words to the young man before him.

Snapping at him for his comment, Carlos let him have what he probably deserved. "Don't you mean they'll all die? Isn't that more accurate?" Bitterness was on his face more than Raj's or anyone else in the room.

"Mr. Stevens, I understand your heartache probably more than you do because I was one of her victims but I want to give you something to think about." Raj looked over at me as if he wanted me to know he had listened to my ramblings earlier. "You can't run from this. I understand that you are a private family and want to protect Camilla's memory but you know the consequences if you remain silent."

Mrs. Stevens bristled and sat taller in her chair. Carlos looked at her for a moment and slid the note he'd been handed into his back pocket unnoticed by the Stevens couple. "We aren't going public with this. It would ruin us. Financially, it would devastate us and we don't have much after all the medical bills. Camilla was a minor and we've been advised to never go public, which is why we haven't. We'll be blamed and as you can tell by looking at us, we aren't in good health ourselves."

Davina met her opposition with sincerity. "I can relate to what you're saying. You open yourself up to lawsuits and ridicule, that's true but I have to ask you, have you thought about what you are doing if you don't go public with that list or try to find those people? Let me tell you, if I were in your shoes, I can promise you that would be a weight I couldn't carry." Davina's jaw was set.

Raj folded his arms over his chest. "Let me ask you something. You say you traveled some. Was it a lot?"

"I suppose it was." Camilla's mother answered.

"Various locations, tourist areas, lots of young unsuspecting men in their youth will be spreading this disease, and have been spreading this disease to hundreds of people all because Camilla couldn't keep her legs closed. She wanted revenge so she decided to follow through with a vengeful act. She ultimately took her spite out on our society. You are helping her get away with it. Now, there's the ugly truth." Raj didn't blink as his words came across harsh and cold.

So much for being nice, I guess. Can't say they didn't have that one coming to them though. It was a known fact that Raj would have had a much longer life span if he'd gone to the doctor long before he actually did especially since he was a juvenile diabetic.

I watched Juan walk over to the window. I wanted to tell him to hurry up and move his ass away from it but it was too late. Camilla's mother was very angry.

"Mr. Hussain," *oh he was in trouble now, she'd gone from Raj to Mr. Hussain in less than ten minutes*, "has it occurred to you that you are still speaking about my daughter when you make those crude comments?"

Raj made no apologies. "Mrs. Stevens, has it occurred to you how many people may be spreading this virus as we speak. In the early eighties, this virus was out of control. There are various beliefs it could have been contained much better if the CDC had been more aggressive in their pursuit of a patient they believed spread the disease intentionally through the bath houses of San Francisco. Do you know the story behind that particular patient?"

The Stevens couple exchanged empty gazes. Of course they did. Everyone who became involved with the horror of HIV found out about the CDC and their track down of the patient who apparently made a habit out of spreading the virus. Naturally, he wasn't the only one just the more notorious."

Raj must've read their facial expressions. "Oh so you do know. He was a flight attendant. He traveled to various cities spreading something he referred to as a *gay cancer*. I'm sure

you know the rest of it. All of us plagued by this disease in one fashion or another know the story but if not, buy the damn movie. Who knows, maybe Camilla's story will be told the same way. If so, I hope she is portrayed in a similar light. After all, she went after kids." Raj was angry and had a right to be. "Let me remind you. I was just a kid."

"I'm sorry you don't understand why we decided to keep this quiet." Mr. Stevens stood up and nodded as if to tell his wife it was time to go. "Perhaps some day you will."

"*Someday*? Let me tell you both about my *someday*. I've bargained with God for more time. My friends have bargained on my behalf. The thing is—when your number is up, it's up and I think mine has been skipped over a time or two thanks to the aid of prayers but surely you're smart enough to recognize the dying. Mr. Stevens, I *am* dying. So no, when I see a cruel list of victims with ages of boys set at twelve and thirteen years old, no, I don't understand. I was one of them and had my whole life ahead of me. Your daughter took all that away."

Mr. Stevens walked over to his bedside and extended his hand, which Raj ignored. "I am sorry for your illness. That's all I can tell you."

Mrs. Stevens didn't say anything else as her husband took her hand and they turned and walked out of the room. Raj picked up the remote control on the bedside table and threw it along with a few choice words at the door that closed behind the couple.

I couldn't blame him. If it had been me, I guess I would have thrown it at Camilla's parents in hopes of knocking some

Friends Unlikely  
*by Susan Smith Alvis*

sense into them. But of course, that's just me.

## AND THEN DEATH KNOCKS—ON THE WRONG DOOR

Juan typically didn't let things get to him but I knew he was bothered by what we had learned and seemed even more upset by the fact that Camilla's parents weren't doing something about the knowledge they had. Raj and Juan discussed it at length while I went with Davina to talk to her dad.

We sat down in Dr. St. Clair's office. His secretary offered us milk and cookies. Davina pasted on a smile I knew was fake, and in her most sarcastic tone said, "I'll have some coffee please." She could still be a little arrogant when she was agitated.

"And for you?" The secretary turned to me.

I grinned from ear to ear. "I'll take the milk and cookies." I wanted to hold onto youth as long as I could. Milk and cookies seemed like a great place to start gripping it a little tighter. Davina just shook her head at me.

"Baby." She shot at me. I didn't take the bait and just sat back and waited for the secretary to return.

Dr. St. Clair returned with the secretary. "Okay girls. What's up?"

"If you're busy Daddy, we can come back."

"I'm never too busy for you." He threw some files on his desk.

Davina took her time explaining what we had witnessed with Camilla's parents. She had one heck of a memory

because she could quote exactly what was said. I munched on cookies as she spoke.

When she finished, Dr. St. Clair massaged his temples in a circular motion, "This is bad. This is real bad."

"I know Daddy! We have to do something. Raj even mentioned the incident about Patient X from the eighties."

"And, what did they say?" Dr. St. Clair asked.

"Let's just put it this way, they have no intentions of doing anything about it."

I spoke up again. "I can't believe they are that cold-hearted."

Dr. St. Clair leaned forward. "Girls, one thing I'll say about this disease is that nothing surprises me anymore. See, this is something I've known for a number of years because of my work in infectious diseases. AIDS is a peculiar disease. It's something I've known for many years now, and I'm sorry to say you two are now witnessing it first hand." He looked at us and the seriousness on his face made me feel sick to my stomach. I didn't know if I wanted to hear anymore, but he continued, "This disease brings with it many things. It brings a pain like no other disease because of the stigma attached to it, still today. When someone dies because of AIDS, family and friends grieve but it's deeper than typical grief. It's a devastation that only AIDS can bring. Worse still, it's the stigma driving families to remain silent about the illness that took the life of their loved one."

Carlos had talked to Davina about the list he had and Davina told her father about it. "Daddy, you have to do something with the list Carlos has because we can't just



ignore this. There are probably other boys in this area and all of them are young. It's of catastrophic proportions. I'm telling you it is."

"It does sound like it. Unfortunately, Mr. and Mrs. Stevens are now accessories to her crime or at least, I would imagine they will be considered an accomplice because the numbers of those infected could be great by now with a list like what you are talking about."

Davina and I both nodded.

"Okay, let me get to work on this. Go spend time with Raj."

\* \* \* \*

Juan was asleep in a chair and Raj was flipping through channels when we walked back into his room. I could still see the rage across his face.

Davina poked Juan on the shoulder. "Great company for the ill aren't you?"

"I know. I can't seem to stay awake with poor entertainment." He was trying to lighten up Raj's mood.

Raj acted like he didn't hear him. Then, out of nowhere, he must have decided to take advantage of every opportunity and he perked right up.. "Hmm ... maybe it's not my company but the fact you're love sick."

Juan stood up and yawned as he stretched. "That's not it."

"Are you sure?" Raj tried to start something.

"Man, I'm sure. I'm just tired." Juan squinted in his direction.

"Well, come over here a bit closer. Let me be sure you don't have a fever."

"Raj, you aren't my mother so quit fretting."

"And here I thought you were going to give me an opportunity to pucker up!" Raj rolled with laughter.

To keep from snorting my own laughs too, I left the room and Davina was right behind me. She apparently hadn't heard the joke behind the 'pucker up' line. I filled her in and she seemed to be happy that Juan had an interest in me or at least that I was flirting with the idea of being interested in him. I reminded her that *the flirting* had been going on for over two years.

Giggling she offered reassurance. "That's a good thing though because you sure haven't been tied down!"

As we were standing outside Raj's room, Carlos returned from the airport. His eyes were glassy. I could tell he was in a distant haze. "I've never been so glad to get rid of anyone in my life." His speech was rapid but he couldn't look at us. He was at best, fidgety. "What's the occasion for hall chat?"

Davina stared at him with pursed lips. I could tell she knew what was up. "Where have you been Carlos?"

He ignored her and pushed by her to see Raj. Davina and I were right behind him and she slammed the door. "Okay everyone, Carlos is high." Calling the addict on their slip-ups seemed to be necessary for full recovery or at least we thought so according to the material we read from the counseling center.

"You friggin bitch! I just walked back up and you are going to accuse me of being high. Man, I don't have to take your crap!" He walked over to Raj as if to look for some support.

Juan moved right in. "We're not going to take you calling her names anymore man. Apologize."

She didn't get an apology and no one pushed it because we were afraid to rock the boat when he was high on Meth.

"Well?" Raj gave him a disappointed look. "Are you?"

"Man, no. Of course I'm not." He couldn't look him in the eye. That's how I knew he was lying. "This is ridiculous. Just because Davina says I'm high, you all side with her. I went straight to the airport and straight back. Sue me for not getting there and back sooner."

Davina looked disappointed but not in total shock. "Carlos, I think we need to talk."

He ignored her and directed his conversation to Raj. "I thought I'd get Dr. St. Clair to help us get you out for a quick field trip. What do you think? Are you up for it?"

"No." Raj said flatly.

"No? Come on Raj. You'll love it. Don't you want to even guess what I had in mind? Aren't you even a little curious?" Carlos gouged him forward tempting him with a fun time. I could only imagine what he had thought up. This was the guy who had a romantic dinner planned in record time for Davina so I was quite confident he could pull off just about anything when he wanted to be nice.

Leave it to Carlos to rattle off at the mouth when he was trying to cover up something. "Okay, have it your way. I have a buddy running our favorite ride over at Dollywood and he's

going to let us all have the last ride tonight so let's get you into some street clothes. We'll go and come straight back. I promise."

Raj looked at all of us. I knew he really liked the idea so for his sake, we ignored the fact that Carlos was strung out and just gave one another a look or two before dismissing it altogether. I couldn't help but feel bad for Davina.

She couldn't have known that the real reason her boyfriend was so cruel to her when he was high was because of his true feelings for Raj. She couldn't have known, or at least, I still wanted to believe she didn't.

Juan spoke up with an idea. "Abbie, call your brother and get him to bring over your Dad's van," he paused as he remembered the significance of the van, "if you don't mind of course Raj. I just thought it would be an easier ride for you over there if we pad it down with sleeping bags or something so you're comfortable."

"It's okay Juan. I actually think that would be good in case we get there and I can't go on the ride."

Carlos patted him on the cheek and everyone noticed it with wide eyes especially Davina. "If you can't go, none of us will go. Leave it to me." His show of affection in front of us dumb-founded everyone especially Raj.

I made the call to David who was happy to bring over the van while Davina went to tell her father. He *wasn't happy* with the idea but he didn't make a fuss over it. The guys helped Raj get ready and by the time he was unhooked from the monitors and IV, David was at the front door waiting for us.

Davina's father had offered one of the emergency vehicles but we didn't want to use the staff that went along too. We wanted our last outing to be free of supervision and it seemed like a perfect thing to do for Raj. I hated to say Carlos was right about anything but in this case, he was right. Raj needed to have a few laughs in a familiar setting.

Once we were on the way, the old group became one again. Carlos snuggled up to Davina while he and Raj made snide remarks to one another. We laughed as Juan and I became the focus. Everyone, especially my brother, agreed that I should "pucker up" so I closed my eyes and waited. Nothing happened and everyone snickered. My brother laughed the hardest.

When we pulled up to the park entrance, a wheelchair was waiting for Raj. Just like Carlos did for Davina when he wanted to make her feel like she was the core of his world, he'd done the same for Raj.

We ran through the park like a pack of wild animals. The truth was that we were trying to keep up with Raj and Carlos. High or not, Carlos steered the chair through crowds of people on their way out of the park.

David decided he would go for the ride too so I lingered back some with him to talk and catch up. I'd been so caught up in Raj over the last few days that we hadn't seen one another very much. My brother seemed to recognize the stress I was under with my friends so he tried to be there for me, which was nice. Strange but definitely appreciated and needed.

"He's using again isn't he?" David recognized it probably because he was in a band. I'm sure he saw a lot of users in the night clubs where he played.

In agreement, I shrugged but nodded. "I guess so. Or at least, it sure looks that way."

"I've seen the signs more than a couple of times. He's definitely wired. None of us can keep up with his speed right now. He's coming out of his skin."

I could appreciate what he was saying. I knew Carlos had fought drugs but the fact was, he just couldn't beat it while Raj was so sick. It must've been how he coped or something. What a lousy way to deal with the approaching death of a friend.

When we reached Dollywood's Blazing Fury, we had to wait until everyone was off the ride before we could go in for our special group ride. Carlos said he had to run to the rest room so he disappeared leaving us all to discuss the show of over-indulgence.

Raj already looked grey and he was toying with the idea of going back to the van. "I don't know if my stomach can handle it or not."

From out of nowhere, Carlos reappeared. "Of course you can! Follow me, your chariot awaits!" He pushed to the front of our little crowd and we walked into the familiar mine-like set. Carlos was nervous and giddy. He had to be driving everyone crazy because he was on my last nerve.

Everyone took their regular "seats" but since David had never gone with us before, he sat in the front alone. That left

Davina and I behind him, then Juan and finally Raj and Carlos in the rear of the makeshift rail car.

In the good ole days, we'd go through the set with the guys hanging over the sides and jumping on and off to place themselves in the action. Today, Juan wouldn't be acting out the part of goof ball. Besides, the biggest loon of all was serving up enough entertainment for everyone.

Of all songs, *Hotel California* began to play. It was the very song that Carlos had made exhibit A when he was on the Ferris wheel a year earlier acting out the part of a chimpanzee. The music blared through the speakers and I thought for a moment that he probably planned it since his mood was similar to the way it was the last time he had been in the park.

Carlos stood up in the back of the car as our cart steered through the set much faster than I remembered it being. He was singing at the top of his lungs by the time we hit the part where the train sounds begin and Davina screamed, just like she always did. The buggy carrying us dropped abruptly underground swirling us around like a typical coaster.

I don't know why I didn't notice that Carlos had stopped singing. I don't even think I thought too much about it. Maybe I was just glad he'd decided to shut up for the rest of the ride but once we pulled back into the loading station, reality struck me harder than anything else had ever hit me in my life.

*Hotel California* was on its last few notes and Juan and David were laughing along with Davina. I guess maybe they were trying hard to make the ride seem like it was the best

one in the world. I do know I watched all of it in slow motion. From the time I got on the cart, I felt like I was watching my own life in a clip of a movie or something.

When we pulled back in to the station, the friend that arranged the ride for Carlos was standing there on the phone. He turned around and his expression gave everything away. Fear bulged from his eyes and his mouth dropped. Something was terribly wrong.

We probably all saw it in the boy's face at the same time. The fear. The truth. The acknowledgement of death. We all quickly turned around. Carlos had laid his head over on Raj's shoulder and at some point during the ride, died. His eyes were set and blood streamed slowly from his mouth.

Raj didn't seem to have a clue. He was often so numb by the medications that it took him a little longer to react to certain situations. When Davina screamed, he looked down. As if the wind had been knocked out of him, Raj scooted up trying to catch his breath but couldn't.

David called out to the ride operator as he jumped up and ran over to them. "Hurry up, call 9-1-1." He felt for a pulse but his frown said it all. There wasn't one. He shook his head and my brother's eyes teared.

After the initial shock of what had happened hit Raj, he grabbed him up by the collar and held him close while Juan took care of Davina. I remember hearing her screams over and over again. I just stood there watching her body tremble. I wanted to move. I couldn't.

I think I remember hearing Raj scream his name. Maybe it was Juan or maybe I just wanted someone to call for him.



Call him back to life. Who knows, maybe it didn't even happen the way I remember. All I know is that I wanted so badly for him to come back to us. I begged him to come back in my mind but my mouth never formed the words to say as much. I thought about bargaining again but decided against it since it was more than a little obvious that he'd already left this world behind.

Even when the rescue teams came in to take Raj back to the hospital and even when I saw one of my best friends loaded onto a stretcher and the sheet pulled up all the way over his head, I still couldn't move. I remember people talking to me but I don't think I ever spoke while I was in that loading area of the ride.

Still in slow motion, I watched Raj's little body move up the ramp on the stretcher as his body shook with the pain felt from the hand of death's angel. I wanted to stop them. *Bring him back. No, don't take him. I need to go with him.* My feet didn't move. Not so much as a shuffle in their direction.

Juan and Davina walked up to me at some point and then they walked away. Did they say anything? I don't think they did. Did I? Probably not.

David whispered something to me. A paramedic helped me onto a stretcher too. *Why am I on a stretcher? Where were we going?* It was a dance with irony again. Carlos had sung *Hotel California*. The last words I heard from his mouth were, "still those voices are calling from far away" or maybe it was the lyrics "You can check out anytime you like but you can never leave." No, that wouldn't be right because that's the last part of the song. Yeah, there's something else to taunt

me. It was the last part of the song *I remembered hearing*. He'd checked into the life of drugs and the only way he could ever check out was through death.

He knew those lyrics so well because he lived them. It described his addiction to the letter and there wasn't any doubt in my mind—he'd overdosed. He'd finally done it. Everyone said he would. Damn him for refusing to make everyone out as liars. Damn him for not getting his life together and keeping it that way. *Damn him for leaving us.*

On the way over to the hospital, I overheard one of the paramedics tell another one that I was in shock. Funny, I didn't feel any electricity or anything. Still, I was *in shock*. I guess that's right. I know I was cold. For some reason specs of memories with Carlos and I alone replayed again and again for my mind's viewing. Haunting me with blurred clips from memory's film.

I remembered a teacher in the fifth grade giving him a hard time in front of the class. "Young man," she had said, "you borrow trouble and I'm sick of it."

I was sick of her making him out as an example so I decided to help him out. "Mrs. Watson? Mrs. Watson?" I'd raised my hand to be sure I wasn't ignored. "If you'll tell me where to return it, I'll take it back for him. He doesn't mean to borrow trouble." Everyone had laughed and Carlos and I spent one day serving an out of school suspension sentence for disrespecting a teacher.

Another time, I remember telling a group of kids on the playground that Davina's cousin was my cousin too. When they couldn't see the resemblance between Davina and

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myself, they made fun of me. Since they started it, I tried to finish it by telling the kids not only was I a relative of the great Dr. Martin Luther King but I also had a lot of his facial features and bore a strong resemblance to him. Some boy beat me up for lying and Carlos almost killed him. He made the kid apologize to me every day before and after school threatening to tell everyone that he French kissed his dog if the boy wasn't nice to me.

I remembered a lot and then ... forgot just as much.

## SAYING GOODBYE

Three days after Carlos died his funeral took place. We were all deeply saddened and shocked to learn that Carlos had ingested a deadly mix of Methamphetamines, alcohol and cocaine. Juan talked to family and friends and had found out a heart-wrenching truth. Carlos' drugs of choice had apparently become more diverse after he left rehab because he had met up with someone who taught him how to be a *functioning addict*. Imagine that. Someone could be taught to be a functioning screw-up.

I worried about Davina most because even though Raj was suffering, Davina had a truth hitting her from every angle and in my opinion, she just kept running into more and more of it. Instead of a wake and a burial the following day, Carlos was remembered with a tribute to his life at a graveside service where we all were permitted to follow behind Juan, and say a few kind words. It would prove to be one of the hardest days of my life.

Juan was always an excellent speaker so he didn't have any trouble in conveying what he wanted to say. Still, I never imagined how well he would describe our best friend.

"Carlos was a troubled soul." He began with the truth. "But my cousin wasn't always that way. He lived by his own self-proclaimed theory. Never apologize, never make excuses, never complain and never explain." He looked at Davina at some of the most appropriate times and I imagine she knew

what he meant when his eyes met hers with the opening of his eulogy.

I think I tried not to focus too much on the fact that we all sat before a coffin waiting to drop into the earth so I only heard bits and pieces of each. Relatives did talk of Carlos and his addictions. My guess was because they had so many young children in the family, they probably knew they'd face it again if they didn't say all they could right then about Carlos and his death. They wanted to sketch a reminder into the young memories of those who would soon be tempted by the same evil that took Carlos from all of us.

Davina had prepared something to read and couldn't so I went up to say something for both of us. I decided to keep it short and to the point because otherwise I just knew I'd break. It was something like, "We all loved Carlos. Did we love enough? No, probably not. Davina said something yesterday that I want you all to know." I paused and turned to talk to her more than anyone else.

Before continuing, I looked at Raj then looked back to my best friend. "Davina believed she loved Carlos with her whole heart. I believe she did too because I know her heart. She said to me that she just couldn't get through to his. Today, I want to tell you why." I saw the fear on Raj's face. I think he thought I was going to mention his somewhat unconventional relationship with Carlos. That wasn't going to happen. I was far too loyal to Raj and no one needed to know what I knew.

"Davina couldn't get through to him anymore than you or I could. The reason is something I only started to see right before Carlos died. We couldn't reach him and had actually

been told as much by a security guard one time." I paused before I could finish, fighting back the tears that were forever threatening, wasn't easy. Taking a deep breath, I looked back and forth between my friends. "Carlos slipped into a place that none of us could ever go and we couldn't get past the demons that guarded him to save him. I guess that is the biggest heartbreak of all but it's a truth about Meth and the people who take the drug. Some say once you try it you're hooked. I don't know the statistics but Carlos once told me, at least for him, it was the truth."

I took a deeper breath in, and then it all came to me. Everything that I should have done or said while Carlos was among the living would now follow behind him in death. My feelings took over and rolled off my tongue as I said my final farewell. "If I'd known Carlos was leaving us for good, my eyes would've held his stare for just a few seconds longer. If I'd known we were saying our final goodbyes, my hand would've rippled a wave a few more times in his direction. If I'd only known, there wouldn't be a tomorrow, my arms would've embraced with a hug meant to linger forever."

When I finished, I tried to move back toward my chair quickly but slowed down long enough to value those who were still living and breathing. I scanned the faces of the familiar and saw tears everywhere. I felt them too, but all I could do was look forward, straight through them. I could see Raj who had to know all too well that I was speaking to him as much as to Carlos, and I wanted to freeze time even if it housed sorrow.

After I spoke and took my seat, I saw Dr. St. Clair and Juan's parents help Raj to the front. He looked so feeble. I wanted him to sit down. I knew whatever he wanted to say couldn't be so important that he had to risk his own health and well being to do it.

Raj took a moment to get adjusted and held tight to the stand in front of him. Clearing his throat, he began. "I loved Carlos Garcia. He was my best friend and he..." He choked up before he slipped an arm around Dr. St. Clair. He whispered something to him and Davina's father nodded. Before he continued, Raj gave Davina a glance of apology. "I know he loved me too. He loved all of you."

Davina held her hand over her heart and I started to cry. I stood up and turned around looking for an escape route. I don't know why but once I stepped away from my chair in front of that casket, I never looked back. In a very straight line, I walked away from Carlos, his family and our friends. I marched out of the graveyard and onto the sidewalk that ran parallel with the Parkway in Pigeon Forge.

As I started out walking, I revisited the time when Carlos was at Juan's and the police arrived. I remembered when he was placed in handcuffs but unaware of it because he was out of his mind. It hit me that I didn't know exactly where they were taking him and how I really didn't know my friend at all. He had gotten to that place with an unknown destination. Now, I seemed to be there but for an entirely different reason.

Before I thought too much about it, I started running. I didn't know where I was running to but I did know what I was

running from. I was running away from death. It was all around me threatening to choke the life from me or maybe it just wanted to smother me. Either way, I was drowning in it so running seemed like the better option.

I ran from the heartaches and Raj's illness. I ran from the sadness that I knew Raj had to feel since the tomorrow he wanted to have with Carlos to tell him his true feelings never came. That kind of tomorrow would never come. In fact, Raj had few of those left and without Carlos around to spend them with, probably fewer than I cared to admit.

At some point during my sprint home, I thought about my father and just how long it had been since I'd even said hello to him. I was always so busy avoiding him that I never noticed when he was drunk or just well on his way anymore.

When I hit the front door of my house, I heard my mother. "Your brother is out looking for you. You must've given some of your friends a scare because they've all called wondering if you are okay."

I was in a dress, for some reason that fact escaped me while I was running. "Mom, where's Dad?" I was out of breath.

"He's where he always is. What do you want Abbie?" The look of concern was apparent on her face.

"I just want to talk to him." I moved by her without so much as a glance because it was already obvious she didn't want me to talk to him. She never wanted me to talk to him.

My father's spot for the evening was always the same. He was on the sofa in the sunroom. A cooler full of beer was at



his feet and I reached in and pulled one out. "So, how are you Dad?" I began with a matter-of-fact tone.

"Fine." He never looked at me.

"Good. That's good." I cracked open a beer and chugged it to the bottom before I could taste it. I really wanted to go throw it right back up but determined to get his attention, I reached in for another one and down the hatch it went too. I thought I would gag.

When I reached in for the third, he looked up at me.

"Something on your mind?"

"Yes. There is something on my mind." What I wanted to say was going to come easy simply because I was at rock bottom. There's something to be said about someone who has or at least thinks they have, nothing left to lose. They do not care what they say or whom they say it to. When pushed just a little too far, anything goes. On that particular day, there were no boundaries.

"One of my best friends died three days ago and you said nothing. His mother came by here with something for me and you didn't even tell me." I fought back tears with a vengeance and years of anger management because I knew once the crying began; the anger would also come and consume me into the pit of its belly.

"Dad, we *buried* him today and you didn't even say you were sorry. I wanted someone to say they were sorry for my loss. Would that have been so hard for you to do?" I suppose considering the man I was talking to, yeah ... it would have been a little too much to ask.

He said nothing. I really thought he might say something but instead, he remained silent. I guess he had nothing important to say. Maybe he wanted to know what it even had to do with him.

"I was sorry." I looked up and saw my mother in the doorway and my tears came in droves. "Abbie, I was so, so sorry for your loss and so hurt for his mother. I apologize that I didn't tell you sooner."

Nodding my head, I moved past her in hopes she would reach out with an offer for a hug but she didn't. Still, she was sorry for my loss. At least I had that much.

\* \* \* \*

I must've gone right to sleep after I came home because I woke up to an afternoon sun and assumed I had slept straight through the night. I heard David before I saw him. "Could you be a little quieter?"

"David?" I looked around my empty room.

His head peered over my mattress. "What? It's too early for you to be stirring around?"

"Why are you in my room pray tell?" I scoffed at him like most sisters would do.

He laid back down so I couldn't see him. "I guess I was worried about you. Is that okay for a big brother to worry about his brat-of-a-little sister?"

"I guess." I stared at the ceiling until my eyes were heavy and I fell back asleep.

When I woke up again, there was a sense of panic in the room. Mom and David were throwing my clothes at me as I tried to get a grip on what was going on around me.

"It's Raj." Mom said it in a tone that told me everything I needed to know.

I dressed without a word and met David downstairs. On the way over to the hospital, he told me that Juan had called and things weren't looking good for Raj. He'd collapsed when he tried to get up and walk out to the nurse's station something he did on very rare occasion.

"He's going to die isn't he?" I stared at the passing cars as David gunned the engine.

"I hope not Abbie, I really do." I could sense he was looking at me but I closed my eyes to avoid looking at him.

We drove the rest of the way in silence but I already knew what I was going to find. More heartache, more devastation, more sorrow. It was something I should've been prepared for but for some reason, found I wasn't at all ready to face.

Davina was in the lobby. I looked at my friend who had everything and yet looked like she had been stripped down to nothing. Until that day, I think I always thought money could buy happiness but at that very moment, I knew my misguided perceptions were wrong. Sure, it had bought her quality time with family and friends but it couldn't afford anyone she loved the luxury of life.

"Davina?" My voice was gentle and I reached out to her.

She shook her head and pointed to the elevator. I didn't know if that meant he had already slipped away from us or if he was slipping fast. David followed me to the second floor as

I bypassed the buttons pointing up and took the stairs two or three at a time. By the time I got there, Raj was barely holding on.

Juan kissed me on the cheek. "I'm sorry I didn't reach you sooner. He's been asking for you but he's not here right now. He's in and out." He patted my shoulder and left us alone.

"Okay. I'll sit with him until he comes back to us." I took his hand in mine.

Raj's mother watched from a black corner. The whole room seemed to be lit with the florescent lighting except for the corner where she was sitting. Then it hit me, it was the exact corner where Carlos had sat when he had visited Raj in the middle of the night. It was from that corner that he had watched him sleep waiting for the appropriate time to tell him how he felt.

Releasing her son's hand, I approached her slowly. "Mrs. Hussain? Can I get you something?"

"No dear," she replied.

"Are you okay?" I knew better than to ask.

"No dear."

"Okay." I didn't know what else to say. Of course she wasn't okay. She was watching her only son take sips of life while hoping that he could hang on just a little bit longer. She watched from a corner of a hospital room hoping that somehow his T-cells or viral load or whatever it was that needed to improve would in fact, turn around in Raj's favor.

She stood up and came over to me as soon as I picked up Raj's limp hand from the mattress. "You might as well know that the doctors have said he may not wake up again."

She was so calm when she told me. It was very weird. Then, she just walked out of the room. Maybe she was so overwhelmed that she didn't have time to think about what she said before she said it or perhaps she was a little mad that I left the funeral and seemed to wrap myself up in my own grief. None of it mattered really. The fact was, I wanted to be there and should've been there long before I arrived. Raj wanted me there. I'd let him down. Let myself down.

People act strangely when staring into death's eyes and no matter how dark it seems for the other person the scary thing about dying is another realization. When you look over the edge and see the valley of death, all you see is the fact that you too will eventually face it. The death angel will come for you and when tomorrow never comes, that's when things left unsaid seem to haunt those that are left behind.

My eyes were fixated on the corner. It would always be Carlos in that corner. He was probably there now lurking around in the shadows making sure I was taking care of Raj. Before I thought, I said it out loud. "I'm trying Carlos. I'm trying to take care of him but he doesn't seem to want to stay here now. He's anxious to meet up with you on the other side."

"Abbie, who are you talking to?" Juan came in with a puzzled frown taking up residency across his face. "I thought I heard you talking to someone and thought maybe it was Raj."

We gave one another a knowing expression as if to say, 'no, but keep the faith, keep the hope but no' and then he disappeared again. About as soon as Juan left, I started to

make a mental list of all the bargaining chips I might have that God might be interested in taking into consideration.

I had my relationship with my father and I could work on it if he'd give me one more day with Raj but somehow I wasn't sure if that was a good idea or not, considering he was an alcoholic. Before I could go much further, I heard Davina's father behind me.

"Abbie, there you are. I'm glad you're here sweetie. Come outside and talk a minute?"

"No, not until someone else is here for Raj. I should've been here sooner than I was. Everyone was here. Juan, Carl ... no, not Carlos but Juan and Davina were both here and I should've been too."

"No Abbie, you've been here when it mattered and you should've been exactly where you needed to be and you needed to be with your family this time. I understood, and I know that Raj understood. He was worried about you though." His smile gave me something. What, I don't know but I felt better.

"Dr. St. Clair, what could I give God that he might consider worthy enough to give me one more day with Raj? Is there anything I could say or do for him that would be of any significant use to him?" I pleaded for something.

The man I respected far more than anyone I had ever known had no answers for me. "Abbie, I know you are struggling with the idea of death and maybe you are struggling with the idea of where your faith needs to be directed but there's something I feel I should say to you. I don't personally believe you can bargain with God. You can

pray but you can't negotiate. You can't tell him you'll do something for him if he'll do something nice for you. It just doesn't work that way."

"Well, right now, I'm just mad at him so I guess he isn't listening anyway." I choked out my act of defiance and immediately said a prayer asking for some understanding and forgiveness.

"Child, he always listens but the problem is, you don't always want to return the favor."

"I don't?" I didn't understand how that could be possible.

"No, you don't. I don't. No one does. It is easier to ask for what you want and then expect it to be delivered precisely as you requested. That works best for me and I'm assuming you feel the same way." He knew me all too well.

He had a point I guess so maybe someday I would see it. Right then, I just wanted to bargain. Make a deal and be given what I was asking for as soon as possible. I wasn't asking for anything more than just another day but I did want that day to be one where Raj and I could sit and talk without the worries his disease had brought. I didn't want Raj to suffer anymore but with that realization came sorrow, not relief.

"Ab..." Raj tried to say my name. Dr. St. Clair moved from the doorway quickly to check the monitors and give him a good once-over.

"I'm here Raj. I'll be right here with you. I'm not going anywhere." I stroked his arm and his hand.

He tried to turn his head toward me. "I ... am.... "He raised his head as if he needed air but then gave up the fight

when his initial labored breathing slowed again. He would have to find more inner strength if he was going to carry on a conversation. He seemed to really want me to hear something so I leaned over him as he whispered in my ear. "I never got to tell him." His head fell softly over to the side again.

I knew what he was talking about and I also knew that he didn't tell Carlos the things he wanted him to know. I'm sure it proved to urge him closer and closer to his own end. I knew he was guilt ridden but carrying that guilt wasn't going to help anyone.

"His stats are stable." Dr. St. Clair announced some good news before walking over to me. "Pray Abbie, you aren't much of a negotiator so just say a prayer and be here for Raj when he wakes up through the night."

Dr. St. Clair patted me on the back and was out the door. I reached over and put my arm around Raj's waist and gave him a super-sized hug. "Talk to me in bits if you want to. Start at the beginning and then give me a few words here and there. I'll piece it together. It can be like a game Raj."

When I released the bear hug I had on him, I looked up to a lone tear running down his face. I guess he heard me. Davina came in and pulled up a chair beside of me so we could sit quietly together.

"Are you okay Davina? I haven't been able to be there for you and yet, I don't have any reasons to explain why. I just got lost in the grief I think."

"Abbie, you don't have to explain." She lowered her whisper another octave. "Raj and I had a good talk after the



funeral. I understand what you were fighting. You wanted to tell me I'm sure."

My inquisitive nature would've prompted me to ask her what she meant but I was afraid of what she might tell me so I just skipped it at first. She wasn't going to let me off the hook though. Maybe it was intentional or maybe she needed someone to help her make sense of something she had believed in.

"He told you about him and Carlos?" Davina wanted to know.

I squirmed in my seat unable to look at her. "Davina, let's do this another time. It's not right to sit here and talk about it now. I know he hears everything we say because when I hugged him, a tear ran down his face. He's in a struggle for his life battling it out for one more breath. Let's focus on Raj so he will want to come back to us."

"You still believe he can don't you?" Davina had lost hope. Maybe ignorance is bliss and since I was the one short on brains, maybe I wasn't supposed to accept it yet. My confidence in Raj and his ability to escape death one more time would have to be enough to pull him through.

"He's only going to wake up on occasion Abbie and even then, there will be very few times he'll be able to speak and fewer times that he'll make any sense." Davina began to explain the obvious shape Raj was in but I ignored her.

"Dad talked to the CDC and the FBI contacted him about the Camilla Stevens ordeal. Did he tell you?"

"No." I said.

"There had already been a few reports about this list." Davina dabbed her eyes.

"Really? Will anything be done?" I could only hope.

"My guess is they'll be arrested. There were over a hundred names on that list. All of them were minorities ranging from the age of twelve on up."

"Oh my gosh." It was something I recalled hearing but acted surprised. I really just wanted her to shut up so I could think about Raj.

"Yeah. That's what I said. There were fifteen names from this area alone but they think they'll discover more than the fifteen because investigations have to be done as they try to locate the individuals that were on her list."

"How sad. Think about it. Have you ever heard the expression that 'hurting people *hurt* other people?'"

"Yes of course." Davina's head nodded up and down with little consideration.

"I've been thinking about that a lot. I think there may be a few meanings behind that expression."

"What do you mean? I'm about to lose you in Abbie-land." She smiled as she tried to offer a quick stab at some old fun. It didn't work at first until I heard Raj.

"I ... like it. Abbie-land." He struggled to get the words out and then he was asleep again. We both fought the weeping away and I continued without reminding her that I told her Raj could hear every word.

"Take Raj for instance. He went to school in his junior year and no one knew he had HIV so everyone treated him like any other kid at school. Then, something happened, the word

got out and while others referred to him as the 'kid with AIDS' some of the teachers stood by and allowed it. I stopped back then to consider the ones who did it. One was going through a divorce, one had a sick invalid husband at home and the one that acted the worst toward him ironically was the math teacher, Mr. Preston."

"Mr. Preston is the gay teacher right?" Davina asked thoughtfully.

"Yes, just like..." I caught myself before I said *just like Carlos and Raj*.

"I see what you're saying. I think. You mean because of their own personal pain or suffering they just didn't care who else hurt right along with them. Maybe it was even easier to think someone else might carry more heartaches."

"Yes, but I still think the people in positions of authority, especially in schools, need to remember why they are there. Even though they're human too, these people could have made Raj's life easier if they'd acted with maturity but instead, they chose to turn their heads and look the other way or sometimes, even added to his pain. Raj had an awful year this last year but he met every challenge with class. He didn't retaliate. You know and I know that all he ever wanted to be was an upperclassman."

Raj raised up slightly off the pillow long enough to look over at us. "Upperclassman graduated."

Davina patted his arm. "Yes, but remember, you cheated off me you little stinker."

His smile came and went quickly as he once again slipped into a state of sleep.

"One thing you have to remember Abbie is that people who aren't educated in AIDS fear it. Did you ever read the story of Ryan White?"

I nodded. "Yes, I did."

"What that boy went through as a young child was terrible. He couldn't go to school because the schools didn't want him. Some of the medical personnel didn't treat him much better. He was the boy with AIDS and he wasn't anyone the other kids wanted to play with because he might give them the disease. Of course, everyone knows more about HIV and AIDS today. The public knows how it's spread whereas years ago, there was a level of uncertainty. Still, Raj was ridiculed and a lot of people avoided common contact with him."

My head started to hurt. "Davina, with everything that has happened, have you lost some of yourself?"

Her eyes teared up instantly. "Oh honey, I didn't just lose part of myself, I lost who I was entirely. My world is Carlos. He is the reason I get up in the morning and he is the reason I have a good day. I love him that much." I caught the fact that she referred to him in the present tense. Maybe she always would.

"So if you love him so much, how are you holding it together so well right now then?" I had never understood Davina and Carlos as a couple and wanted to so I could help her when she needed me most.

"Abbie, Carlos would want me to hold it together. You know, we've been so blessed to have our little circle of friends but even then, there was a lot we didn't know about each

other, wasn't there?" Davina's voice sounded off— like that of a woman twice her age.

"Yes, I guess there was." I nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, there was and I have to sort that out before I begin to grieve and definitely before I'll be able to heal." She looked around Raj's room.

"So you aren't angry?" I questioned her because I wanted her to talk to me. I wanted to understand as much as she was looking for some sort of understanding.

"I can't be mad when I suspected it all along. I know you thought Carlos and I um..."

"Did things?" I offered.

"Yeah, well ... we didn't and that's why." Davina spat the words. They probably lingered longer on her lips than she wanted since the truth had to sting her heart in a way I would never understand.

"He told you about Raj then?"

"He told me some things the night after he left here and professed his love for him. The drugs drove him to do it I think and I wish that he hadn't done it but then again, maybe Raj needed to hear it. I hope when I have time to sit down and think about it that I won't focus on the pain. I only want to remember the love." Davina spoke with the very love she would later want to recall.

"I guess I can relate to that. And Carlos did love you right?" I shouldn't have asked.

"Yes, he did." She seemed certain.

Raj rolled his head to the side of the pillow and opened his eyes. For a minute, he lingered with Davina. "Yes, he ... did

... a lot." Then, his eyes locked with mine. "Abbie ... keep an eye on my mother always ... and you go ... now ... and live ... for me and for Carlos..."

His voice trailed off and then came back quicker than I'd thought. It must've been because he knew somewhere deep inside that it would be the last time he would speak. "I ... love ... all ... of ... His breathing slowed and he seemed to fight for the next breath and then the next.

"Davina, please hurry. Go get your dad." I jumped up in a panic.

I took his hand in mine and started crying the words. "Raj, no. Please don't go. Please don't go! Please stay with me. I want to say something else. Please wait..." The alarms on the monitors went off with a dull beep to let me know he was gone. This time he wasn't coming back. His eyes were set.

I had witnessed two people only seconds after fate's caller had turned in their number. Both of them seemed to lock their focus straight ahead. Since I knew Raj and Carlos so well I believe I know why. I think it was because they had lived through so much pain on earth that they were ready to look into a much brighter future. They wanted to see ahead, be ready for where they were going. I have to believe that they each found what they were looking for on the other side. Most of all, I want to believe, they found each other.

## EPILOGUE

The day Raj died, I was the only one with him when he actually left the world. Davina had tried to find her father and found him slumped down in his office. He had a mild heart attack. Even though we were all grieving over the loss of two dear friends, we had to count our blessings because Dr. St. Clair didn't die that day. It wasn't his time to go.

While I don't know if I will ever have the kind of faith Davina and her family have, I do believe in God. With as much certainty as I know I live on earth, I like to think there's a beautiful place called heaven. I'd like to believe there isn't that other place but I imagine if there's a heaven, there is probably a hell too. I can tell you from my heart. That's not a place for this blonde.

I guess I believe in both heaven and hell because when Carlos was on drugs, it was most obvious. He brought all of us into a spiritual battle we were going to lose because we didn't know how to fight it and win.

Juan and my brother David had fallen asleep in the lobby the night Raj died. He was pronounced dead at two minutes after midnight. The exact time on the clock in the waiting room where David and Juan slept hit two strokes after twelve when both of them were startled awake. I guess I believe more and more about the things we can't see or understand. They both later told it was like a cold breeze so chilling that they were instantly awake. Juan saw a figure he couldn't

describe and tried to follow it outside into what became one of the worst rains Sevier County had ever had.

After everything my friends and I went through, I believe there are some things better left unsaid. There are some things that must be said and I believe that sooner or later, you have to live by your own rules when it comes to deciding between the two.

I was never told to pucker up again but two years after we buried Raj, I did marry Juan, the man of my dreams. Our first baby came with an additional surprise, I gave birth to twin boys and you can guess what we named them.

We were the best of friends at one time, all five of us. Now, I hang out at home where there's the twins, Juan and a new baby on the way. My brother and I spend a lot of time together now and as chance would have it, David is quite smitten by Davina. The truth is, I don't know if Davina could ever be happy with my brother after having what she still refers to as the *one true love* of a lifetime.

In a way, I think the five of us all ended up with true love. A love that a person finds in life through those they can love unconditionally. It's rare to find that kind of love because it is one that first begins with a deep rooted friendship, much like that of a family, and develops into a bond that carries us through to eternity.

THE END



A note from the author:

*Friends Unlikely* is a work of fiction. Any character names, events described or particular dialogue or anything pertaining to this work was through the imagination of the author. Anything you may find to resemble true life or real people are completely coincidental.

Still, the sensitive subjects covered within the pages of this book have been researched for the purpose of writing a fiction book geared toward young adults as well as people of all ages. With that in mind, it is important to note the following:

—There's still a lot unknown about Crystal Methamphetamine addiction. If you or someone you love has a drug addiction, particularly a Crystal Methamphetamine problem, seek help as soon as possible. Methamphetamine addiction is robbing families of their young people and the best thing we can do is to educate and prevent someone we know from knocking on the door of the drug that takes hostages with no intent of ever letting them return to any normal way of life.

—Crystal Meth is known to some as the drug that will rob one's soul. Carlos, a character in this book portrays that image to a certain extent. I assure you that the delusions and the hallucinations experienced by those who use Methamphetamines are very real and not exaggerated. However, they are fictionalized with the appropriate character in this book. While I will not go into all of the reasons that I personally do not believe there is a viable way to reform true Crystal Methamphetamine addicts, I still believe in the hope

that through education and prevention, Meth can be battled in a war to be lost by those pushing the drug on our young people.

—In regards to HIV. I remember a time when AIDS was first on the lips of those in this country. It was an expected epidemic of potential pandemic proportions. Just because awareness isn't as predominant as it was in the mid to late eighties, it is easy to be under the misconception that the worst is behind us. The facts don't necessarily support that silent, if not deadly assumption. Don't take my word for it please because I am not a doctor but the facts are widely posted on the internet. Do your own homework and you decide. It's worthy of your consideration and worthy of our world's attention.

When I was in college, I had the opportunity to take a course entitled HIV/AIDS: Biology and Beyond. During that time, I was able to learn so much more about the disease and some of the very special lives it first held captive before finally claiming as a statistic. I highly suggest if you don't know anything at all about this disease, that you take a moment to find out. You owe it to yourself as a young adult. Parents; it is your responsibility to ensure your children are armed with some knowledge of HIV and AIDS.

AIDS may be on the rise or it could be on the decline. There have been several debates about this and it is one argument I don't want to address because with statistics available on various websites including the CDC and WHO websites, I think you can be your own judge while keeping in mind that those statistics can be ever-changing. Since this

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book was written for fiction purposes, stats probably shouldn't be discussed here. However, please visit the websites mentioned above. You'll discover that millions of people are living with HIV and AIDS today.

Finally, in closing, I'd like to invite everyone who reads this book to join me in supporting ONE. It is an organization that you can support on a shoe-string budget without a dime to your name. This is a group kids can support simply by telling others about it and wearing the ONE bracelet. Check it out. We can make this great big old world a better place.

As I leave you now, I invite you to join me on "Myspace" at [www.myspace.com/susanalvis](http://www.myspace.com/susanalvis) and add me to your friends or visit me on my website anytime at [www.susanalvis.com](http://www.susanalvis.com). You can always email me whenever you have something on your mind or drop me a line to let me know what you thought of *Friends Unlikely*!

Take care and live well.

Susan Smith Alvis [susan@susanalvis.com](mailto:susan@susanalvis.com)

## About the Author

Susan Smith Alvis writes in various genres. Her non-fiction titles have earned top five percent placements in Amazon's sales and her pen name earned her a 2006 Ecataromance Nomination.

Susan lives in East Tennessee with her husband and two teenagers, Matthew and Amber. Together, they live in the somewhat-harmonious house, minus deadlines and sports' schedules, with their dog Lucy. Susan is also the proud aunt of her little niece Hannah. You can visit her websites at [www.susanalvis.com](http://www.susanalvis.com) or [www.myspace.com/susanalvis](http://www.myspace.com/susanalvis).

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