

# FAITH IN THE FIRE

The Journey of Belonging & Resilience



SHARON LENA HILTON

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Faith in the Fire: The Journey of Belonging & Resilience

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## Dedication

This book is dedicated to the young girls and women who have endured experiences similar to mine. It may be growing up in a home with a drunken father who inflicts harm upon their mother, or suffering at the hands of an abusive uncle or father who violates personal boundaries. I want you to know that you are not alone. You are a survivor, and you have the strength within you to overcome.

To all those who have gone through unimaginable pain and had to keep silent, I want to emphasize that you are stronger than you realize. Your courage and resilience are remarkable, and I pray that this story finds its way into your hands at the right time to remind you of how truly resilient you are.

Writing this story was not an easy task; it was a painful journey. But I am acutely aware that there are numerous individuals out there who are currently enduring similar hardships. Young girls and women face immense challenges, and some are silenced by fear and circumstances. I want to encourage you to keep fighting, to hold onto your strength, because life will indeed get better.

In my own journey, I turned to a higher power for solace and guidance. I relied on God because my trust in people had been shattered. At the time, I had no one to turn to for help, but I want you to understand that none of the abuse you have endured is your fault. You have done nothing wrong. It is important to remember that when someone touches your body without permission and tries to twist the blame onto you, their words are false. You did not ask for it, and it is crucial to internalize that it is not your fault.

Speaking from my personal experience, I never believed that talking to someone about my trauma would be helpful. I yearned to confide

in a therapist, but for some reason, I couldn't bring myself to do so. However, I want you to know that you have the strength to reach out for help, to seek therapy and counseling. If access to professional assistance is not readily available, I found solace in the power of prayer.

Lastly, I want to address the mothers. I urge you to shield your children from pain and misery. Listen and trust your children when they speak. They go through so much, and many of them feel compelled to remain silent. In an African context, parents often struggle to truly hear and understand their children. I implore African mothers to listen and give their children a voice. Teenagers have important things to say, and we need to create an environment where they can freely express themselves. Allow them the opportunity to speak and do not suppress their voices.

I also acknowledge the power of loving God, but I ask parents not to force religion upon their children. Do not treat church attendance as a chore. Let your children develop a genuine love for God. I have witnessed many children who, as they grow older, are ready to walk away from the church because their parents have made it burdensome and overwhelming. I plead with parents to have patience and give their children space. Trust that if you have raised them with values and taught them well, they will make the right decisions. Trust that open communication with your children is valuable. Trust that you are doing a good job. Do not treat your children like locked prisoners. Do not burden them or make them feel like a weight on your shoulders.

When I was facing my struggles, I asked God to help me release the hate and bitterness that lived within my heart. The most intense and transformative moment in my life occurred when I decided to let go and release everything that held me back. This pain held so much

power over me, but once I made the conscious choice to let it go, I experienced a newfound freedom and happiness. No one has power over you. Nobody can control your emotions and feelings. You are in control of yourself. Now, take control.



# Chapter One

## Shadow in the Middle of the Field

Growing up, I never truly felt a sense of belonging. My childhood was fragmented, nestled in the shadows of my father's numerous children, struggling to find my place. My dad had a lot of kids, so his attention wasn't really on me unless I misbehaved. It's in those moments of transgression that I saw the fury of my father. Though I knew deep down he loved me, I also knew that ever since he lost my mom, the love of his life, he was never the same.

### A Fragmented Family

My father's attempt to move on with his life was a complicated one. He remarried and had children with different women, eventually marrying the very mistress with whom he had cheated on my mother. When my mother died, she swiftly took her place in our home. I was young, and my grief and confusion manifested in ways typical of any child experiencing such tumult. Yet, as an African child, I was expected to suppress these emotions and obey my elders unfailingly.

### Finding My Place Among Siblings

Living in our crowded, two-bedroom house was a constant struggle. All of us children shared one room, two to each bed. The competition for space, both physical and emotional, made it difficult to forge connections within my own family. The discontent simmered beneath the surface, and I longed for an escape.

### A Sanctuary of Warmth and Love

That escape came during school vacations when I got to visit my mother's side of the family. Those periods of freedom were the happiest times I've ever experienced. Seeing my grandparents filled

me with a profound sense of love and belonging. My grandfather, a hardworking man, spent his days driving a Coca-Cola truck. The squeak of the gate opening late at night as he returned home was a sound that always made me excited.

I would rush to greet him, feeling the warmth of his presence as he brought me food and I sat on his lap, reveling in the love that radiated from him after a long, grueling day at work. My aunts and cousins would visit, and we'd play until exhaustion claimed us. Those moments were pure bliss; for once, I wasn't a shadow, but a cherished part of something larger.

### Memories of Peace

At night, I'd lie down and wonder why I couldn't just live with my aunts, who showered me with affection. My sister Sandra would sleep with Grandma, while I shared a room with my cousin Majo. Being at my grandparents' house felt like a breath of fresh air, an oasis of care and attention. These are the memories that remain etched in my mind, a beacon of comfort amidst the chaos.

### The Return to Reality

Returning to my father's house after these idyllic breaks was like plunging into a relentless storm. I hated going back to school and living under my father's harsh scrutiny. Nothing I did seemed to escape criticism, even the desperate attempts to garner his attention. It felt like every action was met with disapproval or punishment.

I needed him to see me, to acknowledge my existence. But I felt like a shadow in the middle of the field, lost and unseen. My identity blurred, struggling to find myself in the midst of it all. The love and acceptance I found at my grandparents' house were glaringly absent

in my father's world. The disparity left me longing, constantly yearning for a place where I truly belonged.

In the grip of this internal struggle, my childhood unfolded—a journey marked by fleeting moments of happiness and prolonged periods of feeling invisible. Amidst the trials, the love I found at my grandparents' home remained a lifeline, a reminder that somewhere, I was valued and loved. And as I navigated the complexities of family, I held onto those memories, drawing strength from their warmth to face the uncertainties ahead.

### The Charm of Africa

Looking back, living in Africa was truly special—a land teeming with unseen beauty and endless vibrancy. Every street corner buzzed with life, vendors selling mouth-watering food that enticed me with a symphony of aromas and colors. The bustling marketplaces, the echoes of children's laughter, and the infectious warmth of the people created a deep sense of community that wrapped around me like a comforting embrace.

### Childhood Adventures

Some of my fondest memories come from the times I spent with my cousins. We were a pack of young adventurers, finding joy in the simplest activities. Climbing trees was a favorite. Our laughter would carry through the branches as we scrambled up, feeling invincible atop our leafy perches. We played soccer on dusty fields, our bare feet kicking up clouds of red earth. The exhilaration of scoring a goal would send our hearts racing with sheer delight. Hide and seek was a universal favorite, the thrill of finding the perfect hiding spot and the rush of being discovered keeping us entertained for hours.

## The Abundance of Nature

Africa's natural bounty always amazed me. The trees, laden with fruit, seemed to offer us their gifts freely. Mangoes, guavas—every tree held a promise of sweet, juicy treats. I remember the pure joy of running around the dirt roads, circling my compound barefoot. The rugged beauty of the terrain, the endless blue sky— it made every day feel like an unfolding adventure.

Riding my bike was a particular feeling of freedom. I would pedal along the winding paths, the wind rushing against my face. In those moments, the weight of family struggles and the harsh realities of home life fell away. With the wind in my hair, I felt unstoppable. I would close my eyes and dream of a world where I was limitless, my dreams unbounded.

## Embracing the Simple Joys

The dirt roads of Africa, worn by the countless steps of children, were the canvas for our youthful exploits. The simple joys of playing games, sharing meals, and making memories with my cousins painted my childhood in vibrant colors. Those fleeting moments of freedom were a beacon of strength and hope.

## The Struggles at Home

Yet, reality often pulled me back. Returning home from my grandparents' house to my father's place was always tough. The loving embrace of my grandparents was replaced by the stern gaze of my father. School was another burden, a place where I felt invisible and misunderstood. Nothing I did seemed to escape criticism, even my desperate attempts for attention.

## Moments of Escape

There were times when I managed to escape the stress. Sometimes, I would take a walk to the nearby hill, where the view was breathtaking. Standing there, looking out over the land, I felt a deep connection to the earth, the sky, and everything in between. It was as though the entire world was holding its breath, waiting for me to make my mark.

Running around with my friends, climbing trees, playing hide and seek, or football with the other kids—these activities filled my days with joy. It was in these simple, unstructured moments that I discovered the purest kind of freedom.

## Finding Hope in Nature

The natural beauty of Africa, the trees, and the open fields were my sanctuaries. They provided a sense of stability and peace that I desperately needed. The freedom they offered was unparalleled, giving me the space to dream, to imagine, and to simply be a child.

Africa, with its hidden beauty and rich culture, gave me moments of joy and a sense of belonging that balanced the struggles I faced at home. The land and its people, the adventures with my cousins, and the dreams fueled by the open skies formed the cornerstone of my happiest memories. And in those rare, yet profound, moments of freedom, I found the hope that carried me through the darker days.

## Chapter Two

### Wishing on a Star

One beautiful night, under the blanket of a star-studded African sky, I witnessed something extraordinary—a shooting star streaking across the heavens. Until that moment, I had never really believed in miracles or the magic of wishes. But I knew that many in Africa would love to wish upon a star, hoping their dreams would come true. I stared in awe at that fleeting, fiery trail and, almost instinctively, I made a wish: to come to America.

#### A Dream Takes Flight

Years passed, and life continued with its usual mix of joy and struggle. The memory of that night and my wish lingered like a soft whisper in the back of my mind. Then one day, seemingly out of the blue, my father gave me news that left me speechless: I was going to the United States. Shock and disbelief washed over me. With so many siblings, why had he chosen me? I was the shadowy figure, the unseen girl, only noticed when I caused trouble. My father's decision felt like a blind man opening his eyes for the first time, finally seeing me for who I was.

#### A Father's Love Revealed

I had always felt like I existed on the periphery of my father's world, seen only when I misbehaved. His attention seemed to be caught up in the whirlwind of my many siblings and the complexities of life. The idea that he had chosen me to go to America was unfathomable. Did my father truly see me all along? Did he love me in ways I couldn't comprehend as a child?

## Preparing for a New World

As the reality of moving to the United States set in, I found my emotions oscillating between excitement and apprehension. The prospect of leaving everything familiar behind, my family, my friends, and the land that shaped my childhood, was daunting. Yet, there was an undeniable thrill in the promise of new beginnings, a fresh start in a land I had only ever dreamed of.

## Questions and Doubts

There were many questions that plagued my mind: Why me? What made my father decide to send me, out of all his children? These questions simmered within me, intertwined with a burgeoning sense of hope. Perhaps, just maybe, my father saw something in me that I had never seen in myself. Perhaps he believed in my potential, my ability to carve out a new path in a foreign land.

## The Unseen Girl

My entire life, I had felt like the unseen girl, the one overlooked in the chaos of a large family. But this decision, this incredible opportunity, made me reconsider everything I thought I knew. My father's choice felt like a light piercing through the fog of my doubts and insecurities. For the first time, I felt truly seen, like my existence mattered.

## The Journey Ahead

The journey to America loomed ahead, filled with uncertainties and possibilities. As I prepared for this monumental change, I held onto the memory of that night with the shooting star. That singular moment of making a wish had set into motion a series of events that would transform my life. What did I know back then? I was young and naive, but that wish carried the weight of my hopes and dreams.

## Leaving Home

Saying goodbye to my family was heart-wrenching. The thought of leaving my grandparents, who had shown me unconditional love, and my cousins, with whom I had shared countless adventures, brought tears to my eyes. I felt a deep sense of gratitude for the memories and the love they had given me. Yet, amidst the sadness, there was an underlying sense that this move was my chance—an opportunity to create a better future for myself and, perhaps, for those I loved.

## Embracing the Unknown

As I boarded the plane, the reality of my impending adventure began to sink in. The world beneath me grew smaller, and with each passing mile, the weight of my past seemed lighter. A new chapter awaited me, filled with unknown challenges and opportunities. The excitement mingled with apprehension, but deep down, I knew that I was ready to embrace whatever came my way.

## Conclusion

The journey from Africa to America was the start of a transformative chapter in my life. It was a journey that began with a simple wish upon a star—a wish that carried the dreams of an unseen girl. My father's decision to send me to the United States was a revelation, a testament to a bond I had not fully understood. And as I looked ahead to my new life, I carried with me the lesson that, sometimes, dreams do come true, and that love and recognition can come from the most unexpected places.

With a heart full of hope and a spirit ready to soar, I embraced the new horizon, knowing that I was no longer the unseen girl in the wind, but a young woman ready to write her own story in the vast tapestry of life



## Chapter Three

### A Painful Night

The night before my trip to America was meant to be a night of excitement and anticipation. My family and I went to stay at my auntie's house, where I would spend my last night before the flight. The house was uncharacteristically quiet, a silence hanging in the air that felt both strange and comforting. The stillness was occasionally broken by the soft footsteps of my cousins moving about the hallway. Two of my boy cousins wandered aimlessly, while three of my girl cousins were gathered in a room, engaged in a lively conversation about who knows what.

#### A Horrifying Ordeal

I was just coming out of the bathroom when two of my boy cousins approached me. Without warning, they grabbed me and dragged me into a nearby room. Panic surged through me, and my heart raced as I struggled against their grip. One of them pinned my hands down while the other got on top of me. At that moment, they forced me to lose my virginity. I was only 10 years old.

The pain was excruciating, and I felt my innocence being torn away. When they were done, they released me. I stumbled out of the room, tears streaming down my face, my body and spirit shattered by what had just happened.

#### A Silenced Pain

My three girl cousins, who had been chatting in another room, found me in my distress. They quickly took me aside, their faces filled with concern. But instead of offering comfort, they pleaded with me to keep quiet about what had happened. They urged me to stay silent because I was leaving for America the next day. As a young child,

confused and heartbroken, I did as they asked. I buried my pain deep within and went to bed, the agony of that night weighing heavily on my heart.

### A Stolen Choice

The pain I felt was indescribable. Something precious had been taken from me by force, something I had always hoped to cherish until it was my choice to give it away. That night, the innocence of childhood was brutally stripped from me, leaving a wound that no one could see but that I felt profoundly.

### The Morning After

The next morning, the cold light of dawn illuminated a day I was supposed to be excited about. The trip to America, the beginning of a new chapter, was overshadowed by the trauma of the night before. As we boarded the airplane, I started to bleed. Unaware that this was a result of the horrible incident from the previous night, I tried to cover it up, treating it as if it were just another ordinary day.

### A Heavy Heart

My heart was heavy with worries of going to a new country, but now it also bore the weight of an unbearable secret. The excitement I should have felt was replaced by a gnawing pain and confusion. I felt lost, the sparkle of adventure dulled by the shadow of my trauma.

As the plane soared into the sky, my mind was a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions. I was leaving everything familiar behind, stepping into the unknown with a heart full of sorrow and a body marked by violence. The promise of a new beginning felt tainted, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I was carrying a dark cloud with me into my future.

## Seeking Hope

In the midst of my turmoil, I clung to the fragile hope that maybe, just maybe, this new country would offer me a chance to heal, to find a sense of safety and belonging that I so desperately needed. The journey ahead was uncertain, and the path to healing seemed impossibly long. But as I looked out at the endless sky, I vowed to myself that I would someday reclaim the joy and innocence that had been taken from me.

The transition from Africa to America was no longer just an adventure—it was now a journey of survival, a quest to find peace amidst the chaos, and a search for strength in the face of shadows. With each passing mile, I tried to let go of the pain, hoping the vast distance would somehow diminish the hold it had on me.

## The Unseen Warrior

I was no longer the unseen girl in the wind. I was now a young warrior, scarred but determined to find her place in a world that had shown her both cruelty and wonder. As the plane touched down on American soil, I took a deep breath and prepared to face a new reality—one where I would fight to reclaim my voice and find the strength to heal, one day at a time.

## Chapter Four

### A New World

Upon our arrival in America, we settled in South Boston, crammed into a tiny one-bedroom house. There were six siblings, jostling for space and some semblance of normalcy. The tight quarters made me feel as though I was suffocating, not just physically, but emotionally too.

#### The Magic of Snow

Despite the crowded conditions, I remember my first experience with snow. The world outside was blanketed in a pristine layer of white, transforming the landscape into something out of a fairy tale. To me, seeing snow was like witnessing an angel for the first time—it was stunningly beautiful. Everything was so pure, so breathtakingly different from anything I had ever known.

#### Lingering Loneliness

But even the magic of snow couldn't erase the loneliness that had plagued me for so long. The pain of what had happened before coming to the U.S. lingered like a dark cloud over my head. I knew how to isolate myself, to retreat inward where it was safer, even if it meant feeling disconnected from my family. I never really felt close to them; the emotional scars ran too deep, making it hard for me to open up.

#### The Dread of School

I was terrified about starting school. I knew it was just a matter of weeks before I would have to face yet another new and intimidating environment. I felt anxious thinking about the kids who wouldn't look like me, the subjects I would struggle to understand, and the

constant feeling of being an outsider in a foreign land. The unfamiliarity of it all was daunting, and the fear of not fitting in weighed heavily on my mind.

### The Pain of Separation

As the weeks rolled by and I joined the school, the ache in my heart grew stronger. I missed my dad terribly, even though our relationship had always been complicated. I missed the familiar sights, sounds, and smells of my home in Africa. The bus ride to school felt excruciatingly long, a journey filled with the noisy chatter of kids who seemed to belong to a world I couldn't quite grasp. I would sit in the corner of the bus, quietly looking out the window, taking in the beauty of this new, yet alien world.

### A Cycle of Isolation

At school, I felt overwhelmed. The classes were a blur of unfamiliar faces and lessons that seemed impossibly difficult. The kids whispered among themselves, their eyes occasionally darting my way. I felt their curiosity, but also a sense of detachment. I was 'the new kid,' the one who didn't quite fit in. This sense of alienation only fueled my desire to withdraw further. I isolated myself, retreating into books or simply staring out the window, daydreaming about the life I had left behind.

### Missing Home

The more I tried to adapt, the more I realized how much I missed the simplicity of home. The open spaces, the warmth of my grandparents, the carefree laughter of my cousins—all of it seemed like a distant dream. The vibrancy and color of my childhood contrasted sharply with the monotonous, sterile environment I found myself in. I missed running barefoot on dirt roads, feeling the sun on

my face, and the tangible sense of freedom that Africa had offered me.

### Finding Solace in Nature

The only solace I found was in the small moments of connection with nature in this new world. The snow, though cold and unfamiliar, held a certain magic. It was in those quiet moments, standing outside and feeling the snowflakes melt on my skin, that I found a semblance of peace. The beauty of the natural world, even this new and different one, offered a brief escape from the pain and confusion that clouded my heart.

### The Journey Ahead

As I settled into a new routine, I realized that my journey had only just begun. The challenges were immense, and the sense of isolation was profound, but there was also an opportunity for growth and learning. I knew that I had to find the strength within myself to navigate this new world, to build a life that balanced the past I cherished and the future I was trying to embrace.

### Hope Amidst Struggle

In those early days in America, surrounded by the unfamiliar and overwhelmed by the new, I clung to hope. Hope that I would someday find my place, that the pain of the past would fade, and that the beauty of this new world would become a part of me. It was a fragile hope, but it was enough to keep me moving forward, one step at a time.

As the snow continued to fall outside, blanketing the world in white, I allowed myself to dream. Dream of a day when the pain would no longer define me, when the sense of belonging I so desperately craved would finally be mine. And with each passing day, as I

navigated the bus rides, the school corridors, and the crowded rooms,  
I held onto that dream, nurturing it in the quiet corners of my heart.

## Chapter Five

# Facing the Unknown

Walking into the school was like stepping into an entirely different universe. The hallways buzzed with energy—children stood by their lockers, chatting animatedly, their laughter echoing off the walls. It was a cacophony of new sounds, a medley of unfamiliar faces and cultures. I felt a lump in my throat as I clutched my backpack tighter, trying to steady my nerves.

Boys and girls holding hands at such a young age left me bewildered. Back home, public displays of affection were rare, especially among children. Here, it seemed normal, almost expected. I felt like an outsider looking through a window, watching a world that I couldn't quite understand or be a part of.

### Isolation

The sense of isolation was immediate and overwhelming. As I navigated the crowded corridors, I felt eyes on me—curious, indifferent, sometimes even judging. My anxiety grew with each passing moment, and I desperately wished for a friendly face, someone who would take my hand and guide me through this labyrinth of the unknown.

When lunchtime came, I walked into the cafeteria, my heart heavy with dread. The sight of kids sitting in groups, laughing and talking, only deepened my sense of loneliness. Holding my tray, I scanned the room for a familiar face but found none. I made my way to an empty table and sat down, the hum of conversation around me making me feel even more isolated.



## The Weight of Loneliness

Eating alone in the cafeteria was a new kind of agony. I picked at my food; my appetite lost to the sorrow that welled up inside me. My soul cried out, but there was no one to hear its silent lament. I watched as friendships thrived around me, bonds that I longed for but couldn't seem to form. Each bite of food tasted like loneliness, and the noise of the cafeteria faded into a background blur as my thoughts took over.

## Missing Home

In those moments, my mind often drifted back to Africa. I missed the vibrant life, the warmth of my family, and the familiarity of my surroundings. I missed the laughter of my cousins, the joy of playing soccer on dusty fields, and the comforting embrace of my grandparents. The memories of home became a sanctuary, a place I could escape to, even if only in my mind.

## Searching for Belonging

The days passed slowly, each one a struggle to find my place in this new reality. I attended classes, did my homework, and tried to understand the lessons, but the weight of loneliness never quite lifted. School was a battlefield where I fought to keep my head above water, trying not to drown in the sea of unfamiliar faces and overwhelming emotions.

Sometimes, small acts of kindness would catch me off guard—a teacher's encouraging smile, a classmate lending me a pencil—but these moments were fleeting. They offered a brief respite from the isolation but never quite bridged the gap. I longed for a friend, someone to share my worries and dreams with, someone who would make this strange new world feel a little less frightening.

## Finding Resilience

Despite the overwhelming sense of loneliness, I found small pockets of solace. The library became my refuge, a quiet space where I could lose myself in books and stories that transported me away from my troubles. I discovered a love for reading, immersing myself in tales of adventure and resilience. These stories became my companions, offering me the strength to face each new day.

## The Journey Continues

As the weeks turned into months, I slowly began to adapt. The bewildering newness of everything started to fade, replaced by a cautious sense of familiarity. I learned to navigate the hallways, to find my way around the school, and even began to understand the nuances of this new culture. The pain of the past still lingered, but I found ways to carry it without letting it overwhelm me.

## A Silent Strength

The journey was far from over, but in those early days, I discovered a silent strength within myself. The resilience that had carried me through the darkest times in Africa now fueled my determination to find my place in America. I was still alone, still searching for belonging, but I held onto the hope that one day, I would find it.

Walking into school each day was a reminder of the unknown, but it was also a step toward the future. With every step, I vowed to keep moving forward, to keep searching for the light even in the darkest corridors. And as I sat in the cafeteria, feeling the weight of loneliness, I reminded myself that this too was part of the journey—a journey that I was determined to navigate, one step at a time.

## Chapter Six

### A Flicker of Hope

**R**eturning home from school one day, my heart heavy with the weight of another day spent in isolation, I received some unexpected news. My family told me that we were moving to a new, much bigger apartment. The idea of a new place filled me with a flicker of hope—it felt like an opportunity to start over, to leave behind the suffocating smallness of our current home.

The new apartment was indeed bigger, offering more space and a sense of possibility. But it wasn't perfect. Some of us still had to share rooms. I shared a room with my cousin, the one person in the family I had always felt closest to. Yet, she was rarely home, always out with her boyfriend, leaving me to navigate my tumultuous inner world alone.

#### The Closest Bond

Though we were close, I never opened up to her about the storm raging inside me. I didn't share the depth of my loneliness, my fears, or the lingering pain from the past. She was my confidant, but there were walls even she couldn't penetrate. I was going through so much, and yet I kept it all bottled up, afraid of burdening anyone with my grief.

#### The Descent into Rebellion

With each passing day, the weight of my emotions grew heavier. I woke up, went to school, and came back to a life that felt increasingly hollow. At school, I was alone, my soul crying silently as I ate lunch by myself. At home, the newness of the apartment failed to fill the void within me. I felt trapped, both physically and emotionally, and in my desperation, I started to misbehave.

I began to act out, my behavior worsening with each passing week. I wasn't doing well in school, skipping classes, and going out without permission. I got into fights, my anger a manifestation of the pain and confusion that I couldn't articulate. I was a child lost in a sea of emotions, struggling to stay afloat.

### A Misunderstood Cry for Help

My aunt, witnessing my downward spiral, made a decision that would only deepen my sense of isolation. She told the school that I had special needs, and they placed me in a special need's classroom. It was a decision I couldn't understand. I wasn't special needs; I was a normal child acting out because of unknown trauma lodged deep within my mind and soul. Being labeled and placed in that classroom felt like a betrayal. I was even more lost than before, surrounded by students whose needs were different from mine.

### A Deeper Isolation

In that special needs classroom, I felt like an alien. The walls seemed to close in on me, amplifying my sense of being out of place. The other children had their own struggles, and while I empathized with them, I knew my challenges were different. I was a normal child in a setting that accentuated my already profound sense of loneliness. The isolation I felt was even more acute; I was even further away from the normalcy I so desperately craved.

### A Crumbling Spirit

My spirit, already fragile, began to crumble under the weight of these new circumstances. The classroom, meant to be a place of learning and growth, became a constant reminder of how misunderstood I was. My cries for help had been misinterpreted, my rebellion seen as

a sign of something it wasn't. The pain in my soul grew heavier, deepening the chasm between who I was and who I was perceived to be.

### Yearning for Understanding

The ache for someone who would truly understand me grew stronger. I longed for a connection, for someone to see beyond my actions and recognize the person struggling beneath the surface. I needed someone to delve into my tangled emotions, to help me make sense of the chaos that had taken root in my heart and mind. But such understanding seemed always out of reach.

### Seeking Solace

In my quiet moments, I sought solace in the memories of home—in the love and warmth of my grandparents, in the carefree laughter of my cousins, and in the beauty of Africa's landscapes. These memories became my lifeline, a tether to a time when I felt seen and valued. They were a source of strength, helping me endure the daily struggles.

### A Glimmer of Resilience

Despite the overwhelming sense of loss and isolation, a small part of me held onto resilience. The same resilience that had helped me survive the darkest moments of my past now fueled my will to endure this new chapter. The hope that things could get better, that I might someday find my place, kept me moving forward, even when the path seemed impossibly steep.

### A Journey of Healing

The journey was arduous, filled with setbacks and moments of despair. But it was also a journey of healing, of slowly unraveling the knots of trauma and finding the strength to rebuild. With each small step, I inched closer to understanding myself, to reclaiming the parts of me that had been lost to pain and confusion.

### Embracing the Unknown

As I navigated the complexities of my new life, I began to embrace the unknown, to face each day with a determination to find my way. There were no easy answers, but I knew that the journey was mine to walk, and the path, though fraught with challenges, was also filled with possibilities.

In those quiet moments in our new apartment, I allowed myself to dream of a future where I was no longer defined by my past, where I could forge connections and find the sense of belonging, I so deeply longed for. And with that dream in my heart, I continued to move forward, one step at a time, navigating the shadows and seeking the light.

## Chapter Seven

# Discovering Sanctuary

Suffering silently in the isolation of my own mind, I desperately searched for an outlet, a place where I could feel seen and heard. That lifeline came in the form of a program called Big Brothers Big Sisters. It felt like a beacon of hope amidst the overwhelming darkness. Through this program, I met a wonderful lady—though she looked nothing like me, her kindness and warmth bridged any gap between us.

She became someone I could truly talk to, someone who made me feel valued. Since I often went hungry at home, I especially looked forward to our meetings because she always asked me what I wanted to eat and where I wanted to go. Each time, I gave her the same answer: New York Pizza for chicken wings and fries. It became our little ritual, a rare moment of joy and sustenance.

### A Dream Come True

The Big Brothers Big Sisters program was nothing short of a dream come true. It was the first place where I felt truly seen and cared for. Each outing felt like a small escape from the suffocating reality I lived in. But those few hours of joy couldn't change the harsh reality of my everyday life; at school, my thin frame drew questions from other kids who wondered if I was starving myself.

### Artistic Expression

In addition to Big Brothers Big Sisters, I joined another program called the Harriet Tubman House. Here, I discovered a new way to express myself—through art. For the first time, I was able to channel my emotions into something tangible. I could paint, draw, and create, allowing my soul to speak in colors and shapes where words failed.

The program also introduced me to Camp Howe, a place that quickly became a sanctuary. Camp was a world away from the struggles I faced at home—free food, new friends, and the carefree excitement of having boy crushes. For once, the weight of my troubles seemed to lift, replaced by the simple joys of camp life. Though it only lasted a month, that brief period felt like a lifetime of happiness.

### The Freedom of Camp

At Camp Howe, I lost myself in the beauty of the campgrounds. It felt like an endless adventure where I could be a child and nothing more. The friendships I formed, the activities I engaged in, and the freedom to simply be happy were all new to me. The camp was a bubble of safety and joy, where the world's harshness couldn't touch me. I looked forward to it every year, a respite from the lonely and challenging life at home.

### Harriet Tubman House: A Sanctuary

Harriet Tubman House became a regular part of my life, a true sanctuary. I spent years there, and every minute was a gift. It was a place where I could escape the chaos and find solace. I learned so much there—not just academically, but about myself. I discovered talents and passions I never knew existed. The program allowed me to live the childhood I was so often denied, engaging in activities that brought me pure, unadulterated joy.

### Outgrowing the Nest

Eventually, I outgrew the Harriet Tubman House program. It was a bittersweet transition. The program had been a cornerstone of my youth, the one place where I felt free to be myself. But leaving it behind was also a sign of my growth, a step toward finding my place



in the world as I matured. Even as I moved on, I carried the lessons I learned and the joy I found there with me.

### Reflecting on Growth

Looking back, the combination of these programs offered me a lifeline during some of the darkest years of my life. They provided me with a sense of community, a space to express myself, and a break from the relentless challenges I faced at home. Through the Big Brothers Big Sisters program, I found a mentor and a friend who made me feel cherished. Through Harriet Tubman House and Camp Howe, I discovered the joy of artistic expression and the thrill of simple, carefree fun.

### A Glimmer of Hope

These programs taught me that even in the worst of times, there are spaces where joy and growth can flourish. They were vital stepping stones on my journey, showing me that I was more than my struggles, more than the pain I carried. They filled my life with unforgettable memories, moments of happiness that helped shape who I am. And most importantly, they gave me a glimmer of hope—a reminder that life, despite its hardships, also offers moments of sheer, unfiltered joy.

In those formative years, amid the suffering and confusion, these programs were my sanctuary. They held me up when I felt like falling, they offered me a taste of normalcy, and they were the foundation of the dreams I would later pursue. Each moment spent in those safe havens was a testament to my resilience and a reminder that there was still good in the world, even for someone who had seen so much darkness.

## Chapter Eight

### Tumultuous Love

As I continued to grow, so did the troubles I found myself entangled in. It wasn't as though I was actively seeking trouble; it seemed to find me more often than not. Instead of heading straight home like I was supposed to, I began spending more time outside, particularly with Danny, the boy who lived upstairs. Danny was my first love. I fell for him hard, swept up in the whirlwind of young romance.

Months flew by, but eventually, Danny and I had a falling out. My heart ached from the breakup, leaving a void I was desperate to fill.

#### Meeting Angel

And then I met Angel. He was nothing like Danny—tall, with beautiful cream skin and a broad, comforting presence. Angel wasn't the type of guy I would typically go for, but at that moment, I needed something more than a type; I needed love and comfort. We began talking, spending hours deep in conversation. He had a mesmerizing smile, and his wisdom made me feel safe. Though he was older, it didn't matter to me; he was what I needed right then.

#### Seeking Comfort

Angel invited me back to his place one night. We continued talking, and before long, one thing led to another, and we intimate. I wasn't looking for a relationship, just a moment of connection to stave off the loneliness. The next morning, I slipped out quietly, not wanting to wake him. For weeks, there was no contact. I almost forgot about him entirely.

## Finding Connection

Then one day, just like in the movies, Angel came to my building and threw rocks at my window. I looked out to see him standing there, looking up at me. I went downstairs, and we talked for hours again. This became our routine—long conversations, quiet walks, and the budding of deeper feelings. Angel became my rock; someone I could depend on. His wisdom and experience filled gaps in my own understanding of the world.

## Love's Confession

Our relationship grew, and so did my feelings for him. On one of our soul-searching walks, I confessed that I loved him. His response was silence. I questioned him, desperate for a reciprocation. His reply was that he didn't want to say it unless he meant it. Weeks later, he finally said the words I had longed to hear. We continued seeing each other, building a relationship that felt solid, real.

## A Heartbreaking Displacement

But life has a way of throwing curveballs. At the age of 15, my aunt decided she had had enough. She called the police on me, effectively kicking me out of the house. Before I left, I remembered to grab the essentials: my green card and birth certificate. Sitting outside the building with my suitcase, I felt a wave of despair. I had no idea where to go or what to do next.

## Thoughts of Desperation

Sitting there in the dead of night, countless thoughts raced through my mind. Should I take a bus to New York City and let fate decide my path? Should I become a stripper just to get by? My mind spiraled through scenarios, each one more desperate than the last. It was a moment of complete vulnerability and confusion.

## An Unexpected Savior

Then, as if by some divine intervention, Angel appeared. It was past 1 a.m., and he came walking through the alleyway where I sat, shivering in the cold and uncertainty. He approached me like an angel—my Angel—and asked why I was out so late. I poured out my story, feeling a mixture of relief and bewilderment as he listened.

## A New Home

Angel didn't hesitate. He asked me to stay with him at his father's house. In my shock and uncertainty, I accepted. The next half a year was spent living with Angel and his father. In that house, I found a temporary refuge, a semblance of stability. Angel continued to be my rock, guiding me through yet another turbulent phase of my life.

## Reflection

Those months living with Angel were a mix of emotions—gratitude, confusion, and love. I was thankful to have a safe place to stay, yet I couldn't shake off the feeling of being lost. The world outside was chaotic, and my mind often drifted back to my unsettled thoughts. But in Angel's presence, I felt a sense of calm, a brief respite from the storm within.

## Moving Forward

Looking back, I realize how pivotal these moments were. They shaped me, taught me resilience, and showed me the importance of human connections. Angel's unexpected appearance in my life was more than a coincidence; it was a lifeline that kept me afloat in a sea of uncertainty.

In Angel, I found not just a lover, but a teacher and a guide. Someone who helped me navigate through the complexities of growing up,

who offered a safe haven when I needed it the most. Those memories, though bittersweet, are a testament to the power of love Navigating the future.

## Chapter Nine

### A New Turning Point

Months passed and one evening, Angel broke the news that his father was selling the house. My temporary stability was about to be uprooted again. The looming uncertainty returned, bringing with it a sense of panic. I needed to find a place to stay, and quickly.

#### Finding Shelter

Fate intervened when a local agency took up my case. Given that I was still underage, they referred me to a shelter in Somerville that's designated for teenagers under 18. This shelter had its own set of rules and guidelines—most notably, they couldn't accommodate pregnant women. Despite the restrictions, I finally had my own room and started to form new friendships. It felt surprisingly comforting; for the first time in a long while, I felt a semblance of peace.

#### New Beginnings

One of the biggest blessings was the case manager I was assigned. She was more than just a coordinator; she was a listener, an advisor, and the ear I desperately needed. Her presence provided both guidance and comfort, making my stay at the shelter a transformative experience.

Starting at Somerville High School marked yet another significant change. My academic performance, which had been dismal before, started to improve dramatically. From straight F's, I began to earn B's, thanks to caring teachers and engaging programs that caught my interest. For the first time, I felt valued and stimulated academically. This shelter, unlike any place I ever imagined liking, began to feel

like home. I was taking care of myself, yes, but I was also genuinely happy.

During weekends, I traveled from Somerville to Boston to visit Angel. These trips were the highlight of my week, strengthening our bond despite the physical distance.

### Unexpected News

Life at the shelter was generally positive, but then I noticed something unsettling. For weeks, I felt unusually tired, sleeping through days and nights. Given my age, I brushed it off. However, my case manager noticed the change in me and called me into her office one day. She handed me a pregnancy test and asked me to take it. My initial thought was to trick the test, but she insisted on accompanying me to the bathroom.

### The Positive Test

When I saw the positive result, my heart sank. My case manager reminded me of the shelter rule: no pregnant women. The facility wasn't equipped to accommodate or care for expecting mothers. I felt the weight of my world crashing down around me. Pregnant and scared, I realized my life was about to take another dramatic turn.

### Confronting Reality

Holding that positive pregnancy test was a moment of sheer terror. The sense of security I had found at the shelter started to crumble. My immediate thought was, "What's next?" I couldn't stay at the shelter, but I couldn't just disappear either. I needed a plan, and fast.

My case manager, ever the supportive figure, talked me through my options. While it was another overwhelming moment in a series of

overwhelming moments, knowing she was there provided a sliver of comfort. I wasn't entirely alone in this crisis.

### A New Struggle

The following days were a blur of meetings and difficult conversations. I had to navigate the healthcare system, find prenatal care, and most importantly, think about my future and the future of my unborn child. I had to inform Angel about the pregnancy, a conversation filled with mixed emotions—elation, fear, hope, and uncertainty.

### Support and Fear

Angel was initially shocked but supportive. We talked about our next steps, recognizing the gravity of our new responsibility. He assured me that we would face this together, but it was still a lot to process. Our relationship was strong, but this was an entirely new level of commitment and responsibility.

### Leaving the Shelter

With heavy hearts, my case manager and I began the process of finding a new place for me to stay. The shelter had been a sanctuary, but growing my family required different resources. I couldn't help but feel a sense of loss as I packed my belongings. The friendships I had formed, the stability I had found—it all seemed to be slipping away.

### Journey to the Unknown

Once again, the future was uncertain, but this time I had to think beyond just myself. The stakes were higher, and the responsibility was greater. I knew that despite the challenges ahead, I had to stay strong for the sake of my unborn child.



My journey was far from over, but each turning point, each struggle, only made me more resilient. The love and support from Angel, my case manager, and my newfound friends gave me the strength to move forward, no matter how daunting the path ahead seemed.

## New Beginnings

In this new chapter, life was no longer just about surviving; it was about creating a future. With Angel by my side and the lessons learned from my past, I felt more prepared to face the challenges awaiting me. The journey would be tough,

Chapter 11: Building a New Future

## The Uncertain Path

Leaving the shelter was an emotional ordeal. The sense of community, the newfound friendships, and the stability I had cherished were now memories as I ventured into an uncertain future. However, one thing was clear: I needed to create a safe and environment for myself and my unborn child.

The decision to terminate the pregnancy was a difficult one, driven by my feelings of unreadiness and my young age. As I sat in the hospital waiting room, doubts swirled in my mind, and I questioned whether I was making the right choice. Then, unexpectedly, they played the sound of my baby's heartbeat on the screen. In that moment, something shifted within me. The connection I felt with that tiny life growing inside me was undeniable.

Leaving the hospital that day, I couldn't shake the overwhelming emotions coursing through me. The decision had been made - I would continue this journey of motherhood. I made my way to Boston to tell Angel, uncertain of how he would react. To my surprise and

relief, his face immediately lit up with joy upon hearing the news. Having him by my side provided a sense of stability and support that I desperately needed.

However, challenges awaited me back at the shelter. I received the news that I had to move out within 24 hours, leaving me overwhelmed and unsure of what to do. Returning to the shelter, I began packing up my belongings, trying to find a solution amidst the chaos. With the help of my case manager, we were able to secure a room for me at St-Mary's in Dorchester.

Moving into St-Mary's was a turning point in my journey. Sharing a room with a woman named Stacy and her daughter brought a sense of camaraderie and understanding. St-Mary's was different from the previous shelter I had stayed in; it wasn't just a place to sleep, but a supportive community. Upstairs, there were programs for GED education, parent classes, dedicated case managers, and even daycare facilities. The environment was clean, safe, and offered a plethora of resources and assistance.

I took the opportunity to enroll in the GED program, determined to complete my education and provide a better future for both myself and my unborn child. Balancing the challenges of pregnancy and living in a shelter was not easy, but having Angel's unwavering support made it bearable. Although he couldn't join me in the shelter, knowing that he was just a phone call away brought comfort during the overwhelming moments.

Leaving the hospital after my daughter's birth was a whirlwind of emotions. I had enjoyed the support and care of the hospital staff, but now it was time to return to the shelter. It was a bittersweet transition, as I left behind the comfort of the hospital and reentered the reality of my temporary home. The shelter's limitations continued to pose

challenges, but deep down, I held onto the hope that our situation would improve.

Even though my daughter and I were the ones residing in the shelter, the bond between Angel and our little family remained strong. Every weekend, I cherished the moments we spent together at his sister's house. Those precious hours provided a semblance of normalcy amidst the shelter's restrictions. Seeing Angel's face light up with joy as he spent time with our daughter filled me with a sense of reassurance and love.

As time passed, the hurdles we faced at the shelter became more daunting. We were given limited timeframes to vacate and find new arrangements, intensifying the pressure on me. In those moments, I returned to the shelter, packing up our belongings as I prepared for the next phase of our journey. Working closely with my case manager, we explored potential solutions and finally secured a room at St-Mary's in Dorchester.

Coming into St-Mary's felt like a breath of fresh air. I shared a room with a woman named Stacy and her daughter, and together we formed a small community within the shelter. What made St-Mary's different was the wealth of programs and resources it offered. Upstairs, I found educational opportunities such as the GED program, parenting classes, and dedicated case managers who provided guidance and support. Additionally, having an on-site daycare facility eased some of the challenges of being a parent in the shelter.

St-Mary's brought a sense of safety and stability to our lives. It was clean, well-maintained, and the staff genuinely cared about our well-being. The positive atmosphere in the shelter gave me hope and

motivated me to work towards finding a permanent place to call home.

During our time at St-Mary's, I committed myself to the pursuit of finishing my education. I enrolled in the GED program, determined to equip myself with the knowledge and skills necessary to create a better future for my daughter and me. It wasn't easy, juggling the demands of being a mother and a student while living in the shelter, but I knew the hard work would pay off in the long run.

Although living in the shelter presented its fair share of challenges, Angel remained a constant pillar of support in my life. Though his circumstances prevented him from residing with us in the shelter, he made sure to always be just a phone call away. His unwavering presence and love provided comfort during the difficult moments, reminding me that I was not alone in this journey.

As our days at St-Mary's progressed, I made it my mission to actively pursue housing opportunities. I submitted numerous applications and explored all possible avenues to secure a permanent place for my daughter and myself. The journey was filled with ups and downs, but the dream of having a stable and secure home for our family kept me going.

Our time at the shelter served as a stepping stone in our lives. It taught me, determination, and the strength of the human spirit. I knew that the shelter was not our final destination, but a temporary support system that would help propel us towards a brighter future. With my daughter in my arms and the love of Angel by my side, I held onto the belief that we would find a place to call our own—a place where we could lay down roots and build a future full of happiness and stability.

After spending several months in the shelter with my daughter, I received the letter that every struggling mother dreams of: an approval from Boston Housing. They had found an apartment for me and my child. A wave of relief and happiness washed over me, and I immediately called Angel to share the news. We were overjoyed because this meant we could finally live together and start building our lives as a family.

The following weeks were a whirlwind of activity. We rented a truck and began moving the few possessions we had from the shelter to our new apartment in Franklin Field on Blue Hill. The excitement and anticipation were palpable as we embarked on this new chapter in our lives. We were filled with hope and determination to create a stable and loving home for our daughter.

Once we settled into our new apartment, Angel resumed his work at his family's store, while I focused on taking care of our daughter and navigating the challenges of being a young mother. At the time, I relied on food stamps for support, as I wasn't yet in a position to pursue my career goals.

Initially, I had started attending school and working towards my GED, but as the demands of motherhood grew, I made the difficult decision to put my education on hold. Taking care of my child became my top priority, requiring my full attention and dedication. Angel, on the other hand, worked long hours and often came home late due to the store closing. Our busy schedules and the pressures of parenthood began to take a toll on our relationship.

Looking back now, with the wisdom that comes with age, I realize that my young and restless nature played a significant role in the growing distance between Angel and me. At such a tender age, I hadn't fully experienced being in a committed relationship, and I

yearned for the freedom to explore and discover myself. I made the mistake of believing that I was missing out on something, not fully appreciating the wonderful partner I had in Angel. He was honest, loyal, and everything a girl could ask for.

In my youthful naïveté, I ended our relationship in a way that I now deeply regret. I didn't fully understand the value of what I had, and I foolishly believed that there was something more out there for me. I wanted to experience the world beyond the boundaries of our relationship. It was a decision driven by immaturity and a lack of understanding about the depth of love and commitment.

Angel, being the good man that he was, accepted my decision and allowed me the freedom I thought I needed. Little did I know at the time, the pain and remorse that would follow. As the years have passed, I have come to realize the true character and qualities of a person like Angel are rare to find. His honesty and loyalty were the foundation of what every girl dreams of.

Now, looking back on those days, I wish I had been more mature, more appreciative, and more aware. Life has a way of teaching us lessons, often through heartache and regret. Now I understand the gravity of my actions and how I let go of someone truly special. Angel deserved better, and I wish I had been wiser than to recognize the treasure I had in my hands.

Angel and I never reconciled; we went our separate ways. I think there was too much hurt and pain between us. I understood why. I had been horrible to him. I left him, mistreated him, and took advantage of his kindness. I felt like I truly broke his spirit. Moving on from Angel was easy at first because, as I said, I was young and not very smart. I didn't fully grasp the gravity of what I was walking

away from—someone who truly loved me, someone who said he would die for me.

I moved on quickly with the guy next door, Geo. He was attractive with broad shoulders and an eight-pack. What impressed me most about Geo was his work ethic. He would wake up at 4 AM and not come back until 6 PM. His dedication drew me to him, and we started a sexual relationship. In the beginning, it was just physical attraction. That intensity made it easier to walk away from Angel.

However, once the sexual tension was gone, so was the spark. I never loved Geo the way I loved Angel. Then, months passed, and I found out I was pregnant with Geo's child. I didn't even realize it until I was three months in. Geo was thrilled, but I wasn't. I wanted to terminate the pregnancy. I wasn't ready for another child, especially with someone I didn't love.

What I hadn't mentioned was that Geo was in his forties, while I was barely in my twenties. I was captivated by his looks and physical presence, not his mind or heart. When I went to the hospital to terminate the pregnancy, I found out I was too late. I was already too far along. I tried to find comfort in the belief that there was a reason for everything, but deep down, I felt it was just a way to make myself feel better. The pregnancy hit me hard. I felt like God was punishing me for leaving Angel.

It's funny how they say a child is supposed to bring you closer to the father, but in my case, this pregnancy pushed me further from Geo. I sank into a depression so deep I couldn't even get out of bed. I regretted everything—the fling with Geo, leaving Angel, harming a good man. I felt trapped, knowing Angel would never take me back because I was carrying another man's child.

I decided I couldn't keep the baby and planned to give her up for adoption. I wanted to give her a good life, so I decided I'd leave her at the hospital after she was born. But then, I spoke with Angel's sister, Karen, and she offered to take the baby. I felt a sense of relief, knowing my child would be with someone who would care for her.

When it came time to give birth, complications kept me from getting the epidural. I pushed and pushed until Gigi was born. My depression lingered, never letting me find peace. Everything about Gigi made me anxious and disconnected. I was afraid I might hurt her. I would lock myself in the bathroom and let her cry at night because I couldn't cope.

After the birth, I stayed at Karen's house for a couple of days before returning to my own home. I was scared to be alone with both of my children because I knew, deep down, I wasn't okay. In my culture, postpartum depression is not well understood. Poor Karen didn't speak much English, so she wouldn't have known what to look for or how to help. I knew I needed help but stayed silent, just like before, drowning in my sorrows.

As months passed, Gigi grew older, and I still struggled to bond with her. I saw her as the child who stood in the way of me and Angel reuniting. The mother-child bond was lost in the fog of depression. Legal challenges delayed the adoption, and at some point, I decided I would keep Gigi. The depression finally began to lift, and I started to let her into my heart.

One morning, after months of not seeing Angel, he showed up at my door. I don't remember why, but I was happy to see him. During our conversation, he mentioned how excited Karen was to have the baby.



In my foolish, love-stricken mind, I took that as a sign that Angel would never come back to me if I kept Gigi. So, I went through with the adoption, believing that without Gigi, Angel would return, and we could be a family again.

But he never came back. He moved on, and I lost my child because I held onto the words of a man I loved. People often don't understand postpartum depression and its impact. My depression lasted for so long because I had no one to lean on, no one to tell me, "Sharon, wake up and take control of your life."

. After parting ways with Gigi and Angel, I moved on with my life. For years, I only saw Gigi at family gatherings, and those were rare, happening maybe once a year. As the years went by and it became clear that Angel wasn't coming back, I realized that, to move forward, I had to let him go. Angel was the first guy I ever loved—and even to this day, the only one. Releasing him from my heart was the only way to truly move on.

Years passed, and I started a new chapter in my life. By then, I was older, more mature, and more focused. I found a job near my house working with children. The supportive environment and the friends I made there gradually felt like a new family. I was happy. I worked hard because I genuinely loved my job. Working with children, with their gentle, pure souls, brought me the sense of fulfillment and love I desperately needed at the time.

I was employed at USES for many years, and I cherished every moment of it. Each child I worked with, and each person I met became a part of the tapestry of my new life. Having a community that appreciated and depended on me was healing in ways I couldn't even articulate. It gave me purpose and joy.

As stability returned to my life, I began to think about dating again. Now older and wiser, I felt ready to open my heart to new possibilities. I signed up for a few dating apps, feeling a mix of excitement and nervousness. That's when I met him—the next chapter in my life.

He was different from anyone I had ever known. Perez was such a beautiful man—the kind of guy you'd call "pretty" with nice hair, big beautiful lips, and round, expressive eyes. I was attracted to him right away. I met him for the first time in Salem, MA. Yes, I traveled from Boston to Salem just to meet a guy I met online. Maybe I wasn't fully mature yet, but I felt a strong pull towards him.

We met in front of a hotel in Salem because he lived with his mom, so I rented a room to hang out. Initially, I wasn't expecting much, but as the night went on, I broke a rule I had set for myself: not to sleep with someone on the first meeting. But I was so drawn to Perez's looks that I couldn't help myself. We ended up sleeping together, talking through the night, and I went home the next day.

We kept in touch, texting back and forth for weeks, but I didn't make any more plans with Perez. Although I was physically attracted to him, I didn't feel the emotional connection I had hoped for. It was more of a physical affair for me.

Then, a few weeks later, I found out I was pregnant with Perez's child. At first, I didn't know how to feel about it. By then, I was in a better state of mind and my finances weren't as dire, so I decided to keep the baby. I enjoyed every minute of being pregnant, likely because I had a supportive community behind me in the South End.

I told Perez about the pregnancy, but it was clear he wasn't ready for children. He was young, and his priorities revolved around drinking and getting high. Nine months later, I gave birth to a sweet and beautiful baby boy. Angel's sister, Karen, was there with me at the hospital, helping me name him. She had named my daughters, and now she was naming my son. However, Perez was nowhere to be found; he didn't even show up for the birth.

I didn't know anything about Perez's family, so my son grew up without knowing them. I spent years searching for them on Facebook by typing in his last name. Whenever I found someone named Perez, I sent them a message and pictures, hoping they might be related.

Years passed, and when my son turned two, I finally found Perez's half-sister. She lived in the Dominican Republic, but through her friends list, I tracked down his parents. I sent them messages and pictures, informing them about their grandson. They came to Boston to meet my son, showering him with gifts. Although Perez wanted nothing to do with him, I was happy that my son finally had a connection to his paternal family.

Perez's parents made up for every missed birthday, Christmas, and Thanksgiving. They were always there for my son, even when Perez wasn't. He reached out sporadically, and each time we met, I found myself foolishly falling back into old patterns.

Despite knowing better, I let him into my life once again. We tried dating, but Perez hadn't changed. He was still a man-child, obsessed with drinking, smoking, and playing video games. He didn't work or take care of his son. Eventually, we broke up, and he moved back in with his mom in Salem.

A couple of years later, Perez reached out again, wanting to see our son. My policy was never to keep my children from their father unless they were in harm's way, so I agreed. He came over, and in his drunken state, professed his love for his son. I couldn't help but call bullshit. Yet, despite my better judgment, one thing led to another, and I found myself in bed with him again. I knew it was a mistake, but I didn't seem to value myself enough to stop it.

Weeks later, I found out I was pregnant again with his child. I know it's hard to believe, and I certainly questioned myself. Despite my tumultuous relationship with Perez, I loved kids and wanted them, even if not ideally under these circumstances. My daughter arrived prematurely at seven months and had to stay in the hospital for her lungs to develop.

She was beautiful, a true gift, and Perez's parents were elated. They lavished love and attention on her, just as they did with my son. They provided everything the children needed, making up for Perez's absence.

Having my daughter gave me a sense of peace, but now I had three children and needed to move forward with my life.

One thing that always takes me back to my past is when the building we lived in caught on fire and burned down. I remember the chaos and fear. I ran out with my kids and my daughter's friend, who was staying over for a sleepover. Once they were safe outside, I ran back in, knocking on doors and ringing doorbells because the tenants thought it was just another false alarm. The fear in my children's eyes is something I'll never forget.

Everything burned down except for my birth certificate and passport. It was ironic because those were the very things I needed to survive and rebuild. They put us in a hotel until they could find us a more stable place. We stayed in that hotel for two weeks until they found us a three-bedroom apartment in Jamaica Plain. It was a tall building with dark brown stones, located on the 7th floor. The hallway and elevator reeked of pee and poop. Homeless people and drug addicts loitered around the building, smoking and drinking. Sometimes they even ran around the halls naked. They slept in the hallways, shooting up drugs in their arms.

Living in that apartment was a nightmare for my children. When the drug addicts got really high, they would pound on our door. I'd tell my kids to go into their rooms and pretend it didn't exist. Fireworks turned into gunshots at night. I remember an old man and a young kid who were killed downstairs from our building. Gang members were everywhere. Gunshots echoed every night, and I started growing numb to it. I protected my children by never letting them go outside at night and only taking them out during the day for school and work. We lived there for five long years before we got an offer for Section 8 housing.

The minute I heard that we got Section 8, I started searching for a place far from the gangs, drug dealers, and abusers of Heath Street. I was mainly looking in Salem, MA because I wanted my children to be closer to their grandparents and uncles. After months of searching, I finally found something I liked! It was a big house with a spacious yard. The inside wasn't perfect—the hardwood floors had holes in them—but I was so desperate to leave that I took it.

We moved to Salem, enrolled the children in school, and began a new chapter in our lives.

The move was a turning point for us. I felt a weight lifting off my shoulders as we settled into our new home. The children seemed happier and more relaxed. The environment was calmer, and they could play outside without fear. With time, the house started to feel like a real home.

Living in Salem brought us closer to Perez's parents. They were a constant source of support and love for my children. Although Perez was absent, his parents filled the void in ways that made a significant difference. They celebrated every milestone, every birthday, and every holiday with us. For that, I was eternally grateful.

Life wasn't perfect, but it was a far cry from what it had been. We were healing, one day at a time. I found strength in the community, in the small victories, and in the love and laughter of my children. Each day was a step towards a brighter future.

Salem was something new, definitely different. The people here were unlike anyone I had known my whole life—more accepting and welcoming. I loved that about Salem. For me, acceptance of everyone is vital. I believe in loving everyone no matter what and leaving the judging to God when we finally meet.

Salem was definitely smaller than Boston. It felt more intimate, more community-driven. The change in environment was evident, and for the first time in a long time, I felt hopeful. My children finally had a chance for a brighter future.

The transition to Salem introduced us to a new way of life. We found ourselves embraced by the community. Neighbors would smile and wave, and school drop-offs felt like a scene from a friendly small-town movie. The kids settled into their new schools, making friends

and adapting to a life far removed from the chaos of our old neighborhood.

I started attending local events, enjoying the sense of unity Salem offered. The festivals, farmers' markets, and community gatherings reminded me of the simple joys of life—something we had missed out on for so long.

My children thrived in this accepting environment. They joined sports teams, took part in after-school activities, and, for the first time, played outside without fear. The smiles on their faces were worth every struggle we had endured.

As for me, I found solace in the peace and quiet Salem provided. I started to take better care of myself, both physically and mentally. I had more time to reflect and heal, and slowly but surely, I began to feel whole again. I got involved with local groups and charities, wanting to give back to the community that had welcomed us with open arms.

One of my favorite aspects of Salem was its rich history and the way it embraced its past. The stories of resilience and perseverance resonated with me. I felt a kindred spirit in the town itself—both of us survivors, both of us forging ahead despite difficult pasts.

The warmth and acceptance of Salem renewed my faith in people. I felt like I had finally found a place where I belonged, where my children could grow up surrounded by kindness and understanding. It was a stark contrast to the violence and despair we had left behind.

In Salem, we found more than just a house; we found a home. We found a community that lifted us up, that saw the best in us, and that

believed in second chances. And with that, we moved forward with hope and a sense of belonging.

Salem became the backdrop for a new chapter in our lives—a chapter filled with love, growth, and endless possibilities. And as we built our new life, I couldn't help but feel grateful for the journey that led us here.

I have always believed in God because, without Him, I don't know how I could have survived this kind of life. My faith has been my anchor through all the storms. However, my relationship with the church has been complicated.

When I was young, I stopped going to church due to some very bad experiences. One pastor stole money from the congregation, and another was involved in something far worse—he touched a little child. Those incidents shattered my faith in church leadership and left me deeply disillusioned.

For a long time, I struggled with this. I still believed in God, unwaveringly, but the idea of returning to a church was fraught with pain and mistrust. I couldn't reconcile the actions of these pastors with the teachings they preached. It felt like a betrayal of the highest order.

The church I once viewed as a sanctuary had become a place that I couldn't trust. So, I chose to foster my faith in my own way. I prayed at home, read my Bible, and talked to God directly. I found solace in personal worship rather than communal gatherings. It wasn't conventional, but it was what I needed to keep my faith alive without reopening old wounds.



Living in Salem, with its accepting and welcoming community, gave me a sense of peace and a fresh perspective on faith. I realized that while people can fail you, God never does. My relationship with Him became more personal and intimate. I didn't need a pastor to validate my beliefs; my faith was strong on its own.

In time, I found a small, non-denominational group that met for prayer and fellowship without the hierarchical structure that had disillusioned me. This group reminded me that faith wasn't about the building or the leaders; it was about the people and their genuine connection to God and to each other.

This journey of faith wasn't easy, but it taught me valuable lessons about resilience, trust, and the importance of personal belief. I learned that my faith was my own, independent of any institution or person. It was something that no one could take away from me.

As I watched my children grow up in Salem, I felt a deep sense of gratitude. Despite all the hardships, despite the betrayal by those who should have been trustworthy, I had found a way to keep my faith and pass it on to my children. I wanted them to know that while people might fail us, our faith and our relationship with God could provide the strength and guidance we need to navigate life's challenges.

Moving forward, I embraced the new life we were building in Salem, always mindful that faith is a deeply personal journey. I prayed that my children would find their own paths to God, free from the shadows of the past, and filled with the hope and love that faith brings.

## Chapter Ten

### Finding Belonging in Faith

Living in America was not easy. From the moment I arrived, I felt like a puzzle piece that didn't quite fit anywhere. I was constantly trying to find a place where I belonged, a community where I could feel at home. But it was a struggle. I didn't fit in with my own African culture because I hadn't grown up there, and I didn't fit in with the people I grew up with because I wasn't fluent in their language. Many of my friends were Latino, and Spanish was their language of choice. This constant feeling of not fitting in anywhere led me to keep to myself and rely solely on the companionship of my children.

#### The Loneliness of Not Belonging

The isolation was tough. Day in and day out, I found myself drifting through life, interacting with people but never truly connecting. My children were my world, and I poured all my love and energy into raising them. Wherever I went, they went with me. They were my constant companions, the only ones who truly knew me.

But as much as I loved my children, the loneliness lingered. I longed for adult companionship, for friendships that went beyond surface-level interactions. I wanted to feel understood, to share my thoughts and experiences with others who could relate. Yet, my past experiences had made me wary of letting people in, and the fear of not fitting in kept me from reaching out.

## Finding the Church

I had always been searching for something—a sense of belonging that eluded me. That’s when I found the church. I had always believed in God, but my relationship with Him had been distant, almost impersonal. I never realized how close you could feel to God by being part of a church community.

One Sunday, feeling particularly lost and yearning for connection, I decided to attend a service at a local African church. From the moment I walked through the doors, I felt a warmth and acceptance that I hadn’t felt in years. The vibrant music, the heartfelt prayers, and the smiles of the congregation enveloped me in a sense of belonging.

## Embracing Faith and Community

The African church became my sanctuary, a place where I could connect with others who shared similar cultural backgrounds and values. The services were filled with vibrant music that resonated with my soul, and the sermons spoke directly to my heart. The pastor’s words about overcoming adversity through faith and finding strength in God’s love were soothing to my weary spirit.

I began to attend regularly, and with each visit, I felt my connection to God and the community grow stronger. The church members welcomed me with open arms, offering support and understanding that I had longed for. For the first time in a long while, I felt like I belonged.

## Building Connections

Through the church, I began to build connections that went beyond the walls of the sanctuary. I joined a women's group, where I met other mothers who shared similar struggles and joys. We supported each other, prayed together, and celebrated each other's successes. These friendships became a lifeline, providing the companionship and understanding I had been missing.

The church also offered various programs and activities that allowed me to get involved and give back to the community. I volunteered at events, helped organize charity drives, and even started a support group for single mothers. These activities gave me a sense of purpose and fulfillment, knowing that I was making a positive impact in the lives of others.

## A Newfound Hope

My relationship with God deepened as I immersed myself in the church community. I found solace in prayer, comfort in scripture, and guidance in the pastor's teachings. I realized that I didn't have to carry my burdens alone; I could lean on God and my newfound church family for support.

The church became a place of healing, where I could confront the pain of my past and find peace in the present. It helped me break down the walls I had built around my heart, allowing me to open up and trust again. I began to see myself not just as a survivor, but as a beloved child of God, worthy of love and belonging.

## A Life Transformed

The transformation in my life was profound. The loneliness and isolation that had once weighed heavily on me began to lift, replaced by a sense of community and connection. My faith grew stronger, providing a foundation of hope that carried me through the challenges of single motherhood.

As I continued to grow in my faith, I felt a calling to share my journey with others. I wanted to inspire those who felt lost and alone, to show them that there is always hope and that they are never truly alone. My experiences had taught me that even in the darkest times, God's love and the support of a caring community can bring light and healing.

## Moving Forward

With each passing day, I embraced the present with renewed hope and determination. My journey was far from over, but I faced the future with confidence, knowing that I had a strong support system and a deep relationship with God to guide me.

The church had given me more than just a place to belong; it had given me a sense of purpose and a reason to hope. And as I continued to navigate the complexities of life, I did so with the knowledge that I was never alone. I had my children, my church family, and my faith to support me every step of the way.

## Finding Light in the Darkness

The church was once a sanctuary that provided solace and a sense of belonging. But as time went on, the reality of what it had become hit me like a tidal wave, leaving me in a state of disillusionment and

despair. Instead of finding comfort, I was met with judgmental stares, whispers filled with condemnation, and a feeling of isolation. This was not the refuge I had envisioned.

Every Sunday, I would carefully dress myself and my children, hoping to blend in and meet the unspoken dress code. However, it seemed futile as I could feel the weight of their critical eyes, dissecting every detail of my appearance. My clothes were scrutinized, my demeanor questioned, and it felt as if my mere presence was an affront to their rigid standards.

But it was the hushed whispers that cut the deepest. I caught snippets of conversations discussing my past, my status as a single mother, and what they viewed as my failures. "She had children out of wedlock," they would say, as if my worth as a person was solely defined by that one aspect of my life. The pain of their judgment opened up old wounds, reminding me of the battles I had fought so hard to overcome.

The church, which should have been a place of community, became a venue of isolation for me. Now, during services, I found myself sitting alone surrounded by empty seats that served as a stark reminder of my outsider status. The women who once smiled warmly at me now purposefully avoided me; their eyes filled with disdain. It was a heartbreaking experience to feel like an unwelcome guest in a place that should have felt like home.

It wasn't long before my children began to sense the change as well. They noticed that we sat alone and that their friends no longer interacted with them. Their innocent curiosity led them to ask why, and I struggled to find answers that would shield them from the pain

I felt. Despite my best efforts to stay strong and keep their spirits lifted, their perceptive eyes could see through the façade. The heaviness of isolation was suffocating, each breath becoming a struggle.

But the breaking point came when the pastor summoned me into his office, confronting me about an incident involving a young girl who confided in me about her sexual orientation. His disappointment and accusations weighed heavily on my heart, leaving me feeling betrayed not just by the church, but also by God. I couldn't understand why He had led me to a place that only brought me more pain. It was a crushing blow that left my spirit defeated.

Back at home, I tried to maintain a composed exterior for the sake of my children, but the mask started to crumble. On countless nights, after putting them to bed, I would collapse onto my own bed, tears flowing uncontrollably. The walls of my room bore witness to my silent cries and sobs that filled the emptiness. I mourned the agony of judgment, the anguish of isolation, and the sense of betrayal that gnawed at my very core.

In those moments, I felt like a failure—a woman who couldn't find her place in the world. The church had been my last beacon of hope, a place where I longed for acceptance. Yet, even that had slipped away, leaving me feeling abandoned not just by the congregation, but by God Himself. The dreams that once filled me with hope now seemed like cruel illusions, taunting me with the unattainable sense of belonging I craved.

And then, my children became the unwitting recipients of my pain. Their innocence could sense the sadness, frustration, and anger that consumed me. They would wonder why we no longer attended

church or why their friends stopped coming over. It was a heartbreaking moment when my eldest questioned, "Mommy, why don't they like us?" I held her close, my heart breaking as I struggled to find the words that would shield her from the cruelty of judgment. As I whispered comforting words, I realized the weight of my own brokenness.

In the depths of despair, my faith began to waver. The church had once been a place where I felt a profound connection to God, but now it felt like He was distant and silent. I pleaded for answers, for a sign that I wasn't alone, but the heavens remained silent, and darkness seemed to grow around me. It was a time of soul-searching, questioning everything I had placed my trust in—my faith, my worth, and my sense of belonging in this world.

Yet, amidst the bleakness, a glimmer of hope emerged. In the midst of my struggles, I discovered moments of light that kept me going. My children's laughter, their warm hugs, and the love we shared became an anchor that held me steady. They became my reason to keep fighting, to cling to the belief that somehow, things could get better.

One night, as tears threatened to overwhelm me, I felt a presence—one that brought comfort and solace. It felt like a gentle embrace, reminding me that God had not forsaken me. Even in the darkest times, He was there, holding me close and granting me the strength to persevere.

With this newfound strength, I began to see that my faith was not confined to the walls of a church or the judgments of its congregation. It was a deeply personal relationship with God that



extended beyond any physical space. I sought solace in prayer, pouring out my heart to Him in quiet moments of reflection.

Though the journey ahead remained challenging, I approached it with a new perspective. No longer did I seek validation from the congregation. Instead, I focused on nurturing my relationship with God and nurturing the love within my family. The judgments and whispers that still hurt no longer defined me. I learned that I was more than their opinions, more than their harsh words.

Though my ultimate hope was to find a community where acceptance and understanding were the norm, I resolved to focus on what truly mattered: my faith, my children, and my personal growth. Each day became a step forward, no matter how small, and I found strength in my resilience.

Returning to the church was never easy. Every Sunday, as I walked through those doors, a mix of trepidation and determination enveloped me. The stares and whispers were still present, but I discovered that holding my head high and acknowledging my worth as a child of God made a difference. I knew that my value wasn't defined by their opinions; it was rooted in the love and respect I deserved.

In the midst of services, I found solace in moments of worship. The songs, prayers, and sermons became a refuge where I could connect with God and find inner peace. Focusing on the message and the reminders of His love and grace brought a sense of healing, igniting a flicker of hope that permeated through the darkness.

Outside of church, I actively built a new foundation for myself and my children. Seeking out support groups and communities that embraced understanding and acceptance became instrumental in my healing journey. Connecting with other single mothers who shared similar experiences formed a network of support, where we celebrated each other's triumphs, shared our struggles, and nurtured our dreams. Together, we found strength in our shared journey.

Personal growth became a priority. I enrolled in courses, attended workshops, and sought therapy to heal from the wounds of my past. Each step toward reclaiming my life brought me closer to discovering my own worth and purpose. I began to perceive myself not just as a survivor, but as a warrior who had faced tremendous challenges and emerged stronger.

One of the hardest lessons I had to learn was the power of forgiveness. The judgment and pain inflicted by the church left deep scars, but holding onto that pain only perpetuated my own suffering. I realized that forgiveness was not about excusing their behavior; it was about freeing myself from the burden of resentment. With every prayer for strength, I gradually let go, understanding that those who had judged me were often battling their own fears and insecurities.

Throughout this journey, my children remained my anchor. Their love, laughter, and presence reminded me of the beauty and joy that still existed. I made a conscious effort to reconnect with them, creating a nurturing and supportive environment where they could flourish. We spent precious time together, sharing our thoughts, dreams, and fears. I wanted them to grow up knowing they were cherished unconditionally and that we would face any challenges as a united front.

Together, we began to build new memories and traditions—a testament to our resilience and the joy that still flourished within our home. Movie nights, family dinners, and weekend outings became cherished moments of bonding, allowing us to create a lifetime of memories. I wanted my children to always remember their inherent value and believe in their ability to achieve anything they set their minds to.

While the pain and judgment from the church still lingered, they gradually faded into the background. They became reminders of the trials I had overcome, rather than defining factors of my worth. I drew strength from my faith, my relationship with God, and the love my children bestowed upon me. The church ceased to be a place of judgment; instead, it became a classroom where I had learned invaluable lessons about resilience and forgiveness.

Though the journey ahead was uncertain, I faced the future with renewed hope and determination. I acknowledged that challenges would come, and moments of doubt and fear would test my resolve, but I knew deep within that I possessed the strength to conquer them. I was not alone—I had God, my beloved children, and a newfound sense of self-worth to guide me.

As I pressed forward, I carried with me the profound lessons learned from my past. The pain and judgment that once shaped me no longer defined me. I realized I was more than my struggles and scars. I was a warrior—a survivor—and above all, a cherished child of God deserving of love and belonging.

Embracing the future with open arms, I continued to build a life filled with love, laughter, and hope. I found joy in the simplest of moments, appreciating the beauty that existed in everyday life. Yes, challenges would come, but armed with resilience and the knowledge of my own worth, I knew I had the strength and courage to face them head-on.

The church, with all its complexities, had been an integral part of my journey, teaching me invaluable lessons about faith, forgiveness, and the power of resilience. I continued to attend, but now with a new perspective—one that prioritized my relationship with God and the support of my children. Though the judgments and whispers might still sting, I refused to let them define me. I had come to understand that my worth was far greater than their opinions or harsh words.

As I pressed forward, I carried with me the hope that one day, I would find a place where I truly belonged—a community that would embrace me without judgment or scorn. Until that day came, I focused on personal growth, healing, and finding strength in my faith and the unconditional love my children bestowed upon me. The journey was far from over, but I faced it with courage and determination, armed with the knowledge that I was never alone.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Originating from Kampala, Uganda, Sharon Lena is a captivating storyteller and a fervent advocate for the rights and empowerment of African girls. Moving to the USA at the tender age of 10, she carries a profound connection to the trials and triumphs faced by young girls in rural African settings.

Enduring the struggles of her upbringing in Africa, Sharon encountered many challenges vividly depicted in her work "Silent Struggles: The Journey of a Village African Girl." Her personal experiences have shaped her into a voice that resonates with authenticity, capturing the resilience, bravery, and aspirations of numerous girls on similar journeys.

Despite facing adversities, Sharon pursued her education and successfully obtained a Degree in Early Childhood Education. This academic voyage ignited her passion to share the untold stories and advocate for transformative change.

Beyond her role as an author, Sharon is the visionary behind SheAid Foundation and the CEO of Evolution Cleaning Business. Through SheAid Foundation, she tirelessly works to provide menstrual hygiene products and health education to girls in marginalized communities. Her commitment to enhancing the lives of African girls transcends beyond words, as she spearheads initiatives aimed at dismantling obstacles to education and economic inclusion.

"Silent Struggles" marks Sharon's debut e-book, a labor of love that merges her storytelling prowess with a heartfelt mission to illuminate the realities of village life and the unwavering spirit of its young heroines. With her writing, Sharon aims to motivate readers to comprehend, empathize, and take action to bolster the education and empowerment of girls globally.

When she isn't immersed in writing or community endeavors, Sharon finds solace in hiking, hitting the gym, tending to her children, delving into books, and exploring the world. Presently residing in Salem, MA, United States, she persists in championing for the rights and welfare of African girls.

**For further insights into Sharon Lena and her impactful work, please visit [www.SheAidFoundation.org](http://www.SheAidFoundation.org).**