

THE ELEVEN YEAR BURN

A Mother's Memoir

Karen Sparks

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

In writing this book, I relied on my own memory, journals, and others who experienced these events. I have tried to recreate events, locations, and conversations from my memories of them. In order to maintain their anonymity in some instances I have changed the names of individuals and places, I may have changed some identifying characteristics and details such as physical properties, occupations and places of residence.

PROLOGUE

On November 1, 2015, my children, Reagan Ashley Small (9) and Grant David Small (8) were murdered by their father who also killed himself.

Fifteen years ago, there wasn't a #MeToo movement. I wish that there were. It might have given me the courage to leave before it was too late. When I look back, the warning signs had been there all along.

It was a slow eleven-year burn. The aftermath isn't #MeToo. We're talking #MyTwo— as in my husband killed our two children because I told him that I'd finally had #enough and I officially left and filed for divorce. Enough lies, enough evictions, enough lost jobs, enough pawning to stay afloat, enough of not having the money to feed our kids, enough manipulation to the point that he had slowly chipped away at my soul and all that made me human was gone.

I became a mat, a rug, a verbal and mental punching bag, a mother who was forced to struggle while juggling to find a roof, get a meal, and keep my kids unaware while building their confidence and self-esteem.

No, he never hit me. I didn't know it at the time, but his manipulative schemes were like venomous bites with just enough poison to keep me delusional. So yeah, although I left him, I still honored him as my children's father.

I didn't want to take away their innocence on that matter nor their blind love for their father.

Once I left and his hypnotism no longer worked on me, he came out in his true form— as the devil himself. I'd always believed that he reserved this side of himself just for me. I never suspected it would bleed over to our precious children.

It was his weekend with the kids, and per legal advice, I allowed Reagan and Grant to go with their dad. They were excited to go to our old neighborhood to trick or treat with their friends that Halloween. He was the only one not in disguise that evening. He did dress up, but it wasn't for pretend. He finally dressed up like himself that night... he came out in all of his fallen glory like Lucifer, the fallen Archangel.

Innocent as it seemed, my kids happily walked around the neighborhood that night in make-believe. Unfortunately, it turned into a horror story once they got back home...because Satan never took off his mask.

You read correctly; my children's own father murdered our two precious babies.

That was 1,338 days ago— and as you can imagine, I, myself, have remained in the balance between life and death.

Where was the Almighty, All Powerful God when my children were murdered by this vile monster? A spiritual warrior, Corrie Ten Boom, said, "There is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still."

Oh trust me, my faith in God has been tested in that pit of grief, anger, frustration, doubt, shame, guilt, rage, and all the evil that surrounds us. But, it's by God alone that I'm standing today. The prayers of loved ones and strangers helped pierce the darkness — allowing me to realize I'd exhausted all attempts at trying to fight this on my own. I finally surrendered and entered a long-term residential therapeutic facility.

Today, after intense therapy, grieving, coping, and the support of so many, I've come to realize a great new purpose. With the life I have left in me, with every breath, every step, every waking moment... I want to tell, to publish, to broadcast, to chronicle, to herald, this tragedy, in order to proclaim God's love through my children. I have to believe that the woman I was fifteen years ago, if, given the tools, the strength, the advice, the wisdom to play her cards differently would've gotten out while there was still light.

I believe my story needs to be told. There are women out there just like me who are being manipulated as I was 10 years ago and made to lie to friends and family; or 5 years ago, after all the heartache, and I was giving him one last chance; or any woman facing the dilemma I was 4 years ago when I said, "Okay, let the kids go with him on Halloween, after all, he's their dad."

This hate crime epidemic happens in our country and all over the world almost daily. Twenty years ago, statistics showed 450 children in the United States were murdered by a parent each year. That was 1999. What would the statistics say today? And I'm talking about the cases where it's the children who pay the ultimate price. My two innocent children were not allowed a chance or a choice because he decided for them.

My tragedy is real. I've slowly come to accept it. My story can't change my past or the abusive and detrimental patterns of another. But I'm confident it can give many women in an abusive relationship the strength and courage, the right tools, the warning signs, and the foresight, to get out when it's safe to escape before darkness sets in and hopefully, prayerfully, wishfully with the life of her precious children, where #MeToo doesn't turn into #MyTwo, like it did for me.

I've found that my faith in God hasn't removed the pain or grief, but will remain sitting with me while I wallow, scream, cry, talk, fake-it, or laugh. In that "sitting", there is a calm. I can go to my roots and, there, deep within, I am at peace with my purpose and find the courage to keep going. We all have stories to tell. And through our stories and collective brokenness, let's encourage and remind one another, as others have reminded me, that we are not slaves to fear, pain, debt, abusive relationships, self-doubt, or any evil or darkness.

I do believe that we are children of God firmly rooted in love and light and because Jesus is real...we can stand up and dream again. No matter what your beliefs, may you find encouragement on your journey. You are not alone.

Reagan, you are my sunshine. Your heart beamed through your smile, your courage and strength made me brave. Not a room was dark when you bounced into it. Grant, you're my man. Your sweet spirit, curiosity, and humor made you a natural-born leader. You two are the great loves of my life. No one can ever take your place. Not a second passes that I don't ache to hear your laughter, watch your ball game or gym meet, hold you in my arms, or hear you call me, "mom". *I would give anything.* I don't want to be writing this book! I want you here with me. Jesus, help me. I am forever blessed and it is the greatest honor to say that I'm Reagan and Grant's mother. I know that we will be reunited one glorious day! Until then, it is my prayer and my continual fight, as your mother, that your deaths are not in vain, but instead will bring hope to others and remain a symbol that #LoveNeverEnds.

"I can do all things [which He has called me to do] through Him who strengthens and empowers me [to fulfill His purpose—I am self-sufficient in Christ's sufficiency; I am ready for anything and equal to anything through Him who infuses me with inner strength and confident peace.] "- Philippians 4:13 (AMP)

CHAPTER ONE: The Phone Call

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Chapter 1: The Phone Call

Psychodrama is an active and creative therapeutic approach that uses guided drama and role-playing to work through problems.

Brenda, our group therapist, announced, "Today, per our therapy schedule, we're working through individual trauma, using the psychodrama technique." She looked at me, "Karen, are you willing to do the work around the phone call?"

"Yes. I'm ready." I said.

"Karen, I want you to choose someone in the group to role play you in this session. I'll be here to guide you. Remember, we're all here to support you."

On the very first day I arrived at this residential treatment facility for trauma and codependency, I observed a psychodrama session. For me, it was weird. People re-enacting their trauma in front of a group? I didn't come here to take some acting class! Granted, I wasn't in the right frame of mind at the time, but, it truly angered me to think anyone would expect me to recreate any part of my trauma in front of an audience!

Forty days later, it was my turn. I'd since participated in these sessions, both as an observer and in re-enacting other areas of my trauma.

With a deep breath and a thorough search across the room, I landed on my friend, Mia. For anonymity purposes, we were not to tell other residents our last name. So, I didn't know anything about anyone other than what they revealed in sessions and what, if anything, they were willing to share about themselves outside of therapy. Mia was a gifted artist from the west coast. She'd been living here a few weeks before I'd arrived. Mia was easy-going, so we bonded quickly. She created the most vivid watercolors during our art sessions. I dreaded art therapy. I loved the instructor, but my sketches resembled childhood scribble on the envelopes I gave my mom for her birthday — you know...hearts, stick figures, and my signature touch was the sunshine beaming with rays from the corner and birds made from lower case "m's."

Brenda asked me what props we'd need. Yes, we had a prop closet full of so many items! I told her we'd need a table, one chair, and a phone. A few group members set up the props. She began to prep us by leading us in our breathing exercises.

"Inhale slowly through your lungs and exhale through your core. Release all that air, all that tension. Focus." Brenda reminded us.

After a few minutes, Brenda took my hand, led me to the center of the room, and said, "Karen, your piece of work today is to relive the phone call. You'll direct Mia with your words, and she, in turn, will act out the scene as you narrate."

Mia stood. Almost all of the eight people in the room knew my story. They sat on the floor and waited.

I could feel sweat rolling down my back. My hands were shaking. I *do not* speak in public; it's not my thing. My dad, a high school principal/football coach, and my sister, who's in film production, could run for mayor, but not me, I'm the quiet one.

Mia took her seat and waited for me to begin.

"Set up the scene when you're ready, Karen," Brenda instructed.

I started pacing. Closed my eyes, took a breath...in...out. I walked towards Mia and opened my eyes.

I spoke.

"It's Sunday, November 1, 2015, at 2:30 pm. I'm sitting at the kitchen table at my parent's house. My mom's in another room. We're waiting for my dad, Duke, Pop — that's what the kids called him, to bring Reagan and Grant home from a weekend with my soon-to-be ex-husband, their father, David. Dad was on his way to meet David and the kids at a nearby gas station at 3 pm. I'd initially planned to go with dad, but at the last minute decided against it. David had been texting me incessantly that morning - ranging from strangely calm to aggressive. I'd told my parents and sister. They urged me not to respond, reminding me that I couldn't reason with him because he was a con-man and sociopath. It's what David always did — manipulated me so that I'd give in and go back to him. I always went back to him. But not this time. David was so angry about the divorce papers I'd served him two weeks ago on October 19th. He couldn't believe that I had the courage to leave and the strength to stand up to him. His texts went from blaming me, then apologizing and pleading for me to return, to warning that I should listen to him.

As usual, he taunted me, "Do NOT try and outsmart me! You WON'T win!" Daily, he made me feel stupid and told me how "weak" I was, how he did everything! Then he'd apologize, and the cycle continued as he'd rage at me that he knew one day I'd run home to my mommy and daddy and choose them over him. When I did yell back at him, he'd tell me to lower my voice and show him the "respect" he deserved. I stammered words flying.

Mia's taking in every word.

David's texts today said the same thing over and over, "I will speak ONLY to you...I need you alone. I can't talk to you with your dad there! I have something to show you.

I have to talk to you! You need to see something. Call ME NOW. YOU BETTER CALL ME!"

"No phone calls, only texts. My mom, dad, and sister urged me not to respond to him. David continued to text — telling me to call him. I wanted to call, but after years of his manipulation, they reminded me not to allow him to flip the situation and place the blame on me because that's what he'd always done. My only response to him was that my dad would be meeting him to make the exchange today and that I'd talk to him another time. I didn't engage him any further. "

I see Mia's face changing, as she pretended to read David's text messages.

"I sat right next to the garage door because as soon as I could hear dad's car pull in, I wanted to rush out and hug R&G — Reagan and Grant, my kids. I was holding my phone in one hand and nervously flicking the little extension latch under their kitchen table with the other...back and forth, open and close...this table was older than me." I said.

I paused. Mia paused and looked up at me from her phone.

"This weekend...Halloween weekend was the first time David had the kids alone since I served him the divorce papers. I followed the legal advice my attorney gave me when I'd called their office a few days ago telling me to proceed as normal and allow him his weekends with them, after all, he was the father and had rights. Grant wanted to go. Reagan was more apprehensive, but they were both excited to trick or treat with their friends. They wanted me to go with them because we'd always gone together. I wanted them to have their time alone with their dad. This was all happening so fast. I mean, this is divorce. Divorce is hard on everyone, especially the kids. That's common knowledge. And the process had only begun, this was their first weekend away after all of the craziness, so of course, I was nervous. This is normal. Nervous is normal."

Mia nervously fiddled with the edge of the table, her face deep in thought, while mimicking my stage directions.

"I tried to think of something to calm my nerves. I looked over the kitchen table and thought about all of the memories we'd had right here. My kids ate pancakes they made with Pop, at this very table. They colored in coloring books with my mom, their Mimi, here. I snuck Cheetos to my childhood dog, Prissy, from this table. I had birthdays at this table; my kids had birthdays at this table. We played Chicken Foot Domino Tournaments with R&G at this table...maybe we'd play a game when they got home."

I nervously spouted out whatever came to mind.

I stared at Mia and said, "I'm sorry."

She looked confused, not realizing that I'm looking at her as myself. Brenda gave me a look of confidence.

My narration of the phone call began.

"My phone rang. I answered it immediately."

It was a neighbor of mine panicking, "Karen, your house is on fire! I can see the smoke from here! It's your house! Where are you? Are you in the house? Where's Reagan and Grant? Are y'all okay?" she shouted.

Mia had tears in her eyes while Brenda positioned herself behind me.

I paced back and forth in a linear fashion, describing the moment. Mia, holding the phone, stood up!

"We called 911! I told my husband to call 911!" my neighbor said.

"I froze! I knew immediately, but I ignored all of my instincts and raging energy — fight or flight took over, and I tried in the moment to make it not true.

"No, they're with David, everything's okay. They're okay! They're meeting my dad to come home. David's meeting my dad right now to drop them off." I told her.

"Oh, thank the Lord! I hear firetrucks in the area. Someone must've already called." she replied.

"I have to call my dad!" I hung up and immediately dialed him.

"Dad! Do you have Reagan and Grant," I asked?

"Not yet. I'm sitting here waiting on 'em," dad said.

"My neighbor just called — SHE SAID MY HOUSE IS ON FIRE!" I yelled.

My mom ran into the kitchen, "What?"

"Your house is on fire! Dear, Jesus! Okay, I'm heading there now!" he said.

"What if David hurt them? What's happening? DAD, GO TO THEM NOW! HURRY! PLEASE, GOD!" I screamed.

"Stop, stop saying that! He'd hurt himself, but not them! Just stay there in case they come to you. Let me make some calls. I'm on my way! Stay put," dad said.

"Jesus, you're covering them— you're protecting Reagan and Grant..." I heard him praying as he hung up.

"I relay everything I know to my mom and tell her to start calling family for prayer. I could hear my Aunt Jan's voice coming from mom's phone. I started crying harder. Was this really happening? I repeatedly called David! No response. I texted him! No response. My mind is racing." I said.

Mia's pacing in front of the table. I got caught up in the moment even more. I watched her pacing and dialing; I heard her asking questions!

"I dialed 911," I said.

"911, what's your emergency?" the operator asked.

"MY HOUSE IS ON FIRE (telling her my address)! MY KIDS ARE IN THE HOUSE; THEY'RE 8 and 9 - REAGAN AND GRANT SMALL!! PLEASE HELP! SEND HELP!"

"Ma'am, please remain calm—I've got the information, and we're sending someone now. Emergency units are on the way. Just stay on the line with..." she said.

Frantic, "I hung up on her!"

"I gathered myself and began dialing everyone I could think of from family to friends."

Mia dialing, pacing...shaking. I'm watching her do everything I was doing, everything I was saying. I'm watching this unfold in real time.

"Hey, it's Karen! My house is on fire - my neighbor called! Have you seen Reagan and Grant or David? Are they with you guys? Or with anyone we know? Maybe they went to someone's house? Or a game or something?" I asked, holding my breath.

"The answer no matter how many people I called was the same, "No, what? I don't know - I - I haven't seen them today. I'm so sorry! What can I do? I'll call around right now! I'm praying," they'd say.

"My phone was buzzing nonstop. I didn't know who was saying what! I'm struggling to keep my thoughts from going to the worst case scenario. I just wanted to hear that they were safe somewhere — that David had dropped them off with a family member or they were out riding bikes with friends. Maybe David just didn't tell me... maybe he burned down the house to get insurance money or something...ANYTHING! My mom was pacing the entire time in a panic...she'd interrupt me during my calls to try and understand what was happening. I only yelled bits and pieces because I didn't even know!"

Mia's body was shaking, and she was talking and crying. She looked lost. It's all happening so fast. I'm reliving all of this! I'm narrating this scene and watching Mia as myself... talking to her as myself. It was surreal! I could feel Brenda's hands rest on my shoulders from behind. I pulled away from her and circled Mia!

"My dad called me back and before he even got a chance to speak... I took a deep breath and allowed the words to come out. I screamed, "HE KILLED MY KIDS! DAVID KILLED MY KIDS! HE MURDERED MY BABIES!"

"I knew it from the moment I got my neighbor's call, and I wanted to yell to my mom that David was murdering Reagan and Grant! But I didn't want it to be true. My babies are gone! I ran into the living room, grabbed their picture off my parent's mantle, and fell to the floor, holding them in my arms. Family members started

flooding into the house, surrounding me. I screamed, "REAGAN! GRANT! MY BABIES, MY BABIES...NOOOO! I LOVE YOU...NOOOO! JESUS, HELP ME, JESUS PROTECT THEM! DAVID KILLED REAGAN AND GRANT! THEY'RE DEAD, I KNOW IT! WHYYYY, David? WHYYYY would you kill our precious babies???"

My words turned into deep groans that I can't describe. I felt dizzy, and I felt like Mia really was me, and I was watching her in some out-of-body experience! Brenda motioned for a few in the group to approach me in case I needed support. I'm groaning louder. Emotionally spent, Mia dropped to her knees. I fell to the floor and held her. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." I whispered. Mia looked at me with tears streaming, "It's not your fault, it's not your fault...it's not your fault, Karen."

Tears and sniffles filled the room as I was consoling myself in the form of Mia, and it was working. The hardened layers I entered the program with were falling away.

We held on to each other until Brenda felt she needed to bring us out of the moment, safely.

When I heard my family had arranged for me to enter a "long-term therapeutic facility" in the middle of nowhere...my mind wandered to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*...I thought it'd be like a prison. I was told ahead of time I would have to turn in my phone once on-site for the full stay, that I'd have one phone call per week on a public phone, and would be assigned a roommate.

This "facility" turned out to be the exact opposite of anything negative I'd imagined. The main ranch-style building spread across acres of green. Several other buildings surrounded its meeting centers, cozy retreat cabins, a state-of-the-art kitchen and dining area, horse stables, and a workout room. The residential cabins, where I was staying, were nestled at the bottom of the property's central hill, several hundred yards away from the weekend and short-term group retreat facilities. Generations of trees lined the green hills and followed creeks. Wild animals - deer, ducks, owls, butterflies, and some not so friendly creatures, welcomed strangers as observers of their daily routines. It was picturesque. It was peaceful.

Addiction, loss, mental/physical/sexual abuse, and suicidal tendencies, were only some of the reasons the residents were here. One young woman was here for drug abuse and self-mutilation. In a group session, she said her parents traveled a lot and didn't know what to do with her during the summer, so they dumped her at the "crazy house," she stated. That was her version. Another, Jess, was there for bulimia and wasn't allowed to exercise without permission, had to log her daily meals and weigh-in

with the medical staff. Then there was Jonas, a twenty-something millennial from Brooklyn, New York, who I later found out was a successful entrepreneur who'd started a company that made watches from recycled materials. The company hit it big on Instagram, and he became a multi-millionaire. He was a total "class-clown," and you'd never know he was rich. He referred to himself as a "functional addict". One of his goals after leaving here, other than helping people in his community, was to one day, be able to go to a Yankees game, have a couple beers, and not wind up in a cop car.

We were required to attend breakfast, lunch, and dinner...and to eat. We needed this structure. Therapy sessions, group activities, and alone time varied from day-to-day. But, our daily meal times were always the same — schedule-wise, everything revolved around our meals.

- Wake 7:00 am
- Breakfast 7:30 am - 8:00 am
- Meds 7:00 am - 8:00 am
- Lunch 12:00 pm - 1:00 pm
- Meds 12:00 pm - 1:00 pm
- Dinner 5:00 pm - 6:00 pm
- Meds 7:00 pm - 8:00 pm
- Free Time after dinner
- Lights Out 11:00 pm

Our group dynamic changed every few days, as residents rotated in and out. It was designed that way so that we wouldn't get attached.

I'd just completed the psychodrama and had to go to lunch. I really wanted to go into the woods instead for some alone time. But, I was required to go to every meal. My nose was stopped up, and my eyes were swollen from crying, but, that was par for the course. I wasn't hungry but the food was always excellent. Healthy options or comfort food were always available: grilled chicken, roasted vegetables, salads, burgers, sandwiches, chips, and candy. The chef even had the freezer stocked with ice cream sandwiches and popsicles as it was the middle of the summer heat wave. The entire staff was amazing, thoughtful, and supportive. I swear some of them are actually angels.

I stood at the lunch buffet line but wandered over to the residents' kitchen.

"P.E.M.S.?" Jonas asked as he jumped into line.

P.E.M.S., pronounced "Pims" was short for "Physical, Emotional, Mental, and Spiritual" well-being. In therapy sessions, this was a prompt to find out how residents were doing. At times, we'd use it sarcastically.

I stared ahead at the mini cereal boxes. "I'm trying to decide what cereal I want," I said while flipping Jonas off.

He stepped back, pointing at the buffet line, "Cereal? Whaaa? Not when we have this bounty laid out, salmon, asparagus I mean... key lime pie, bro."

"Today, Frosted Flakes," I said.

We sat down at a rustic round wooden table with four matching criss-cross dining chairs. The dining area, like the rest of the buildings, was decorated in a modern farmhouse motif. The chef's kitchen was separated by a wall from the commons area and cabinets full of snacks. The faux roll-up garage door was open so that we could eat outside. It was a beautiful home away from home.

"Rough session?" Jonas asked.

"Good. Exhausted. Psychodrama." I muttered.

"Oh, for real? I've not done that yet! I cracked up the first time I saw it though!" He said.

"Yeah, it was weird the first time," I said.

Jonas had a serious look on his face and asked, "But no, like for real, how was it?"

I didn't want to talk. I was still reeling from the emotional roller-coaster.

I looked directly at him and said, "Can we not...I just had to describe the day I found out my kids were murdered by their father, and now I'm about to eat cereal for the first time since they died."

Taken aback, Jonas responded, "Oh, damn! My bad. Yeah, for sure — Frosted Flakes — good call."

Feeling uncomfortable, he quickly motioned for Anna and Anthony to join us. Anna was a marine. She'd just arrived, so that's all I knew about her. Anthony was pretty quiet, but his personality came out when we played "Uno" during our free time. He'd lost his brother to suicide a few months prior.

They sat down.

"Ahhh, I didn't know we could have that for lunch. Do they have Lucky Charms?" Anna asked.

Anthony chimed in, "We used to take the marshmallows out and save them for last."

Anna asked, "Who's we?"

"My brother and me," Anthony said.

"Cool." She responded.

Jonas nodding, "Skills."

They laughed.

Watching people smiling, eating...the sound of the birds and locusts gradually filled my head. My mind drifted. This little milestone...something this small, like eating cereal without them for the first time meant a lot to me. Grant liked Corn Pops, Honey Nut Cheerios, and Kix. I laughed to myself — sometimes he'd eat it dry because he wasn't a big fan of milk. Reagan loved Lucky Charms, Fruity Pebbles, and Peanut Butter Cap'n Crunch. The three of us would have cereal for dinner sometimes.

Everyone around me — still eating and talking. I guess no one here notices that I'm so deep in my head that I'm talking to myself. They don't even realize. I nod like I'm following the conversation, but they sound like Charlie Brown's teacher. Maybe they do notice, and they're trying to ignore me or give me space. I wish I weren't required to attend meals. But, as I said, our schedule revolves around them.

I don't get to plan my kids' schedules around our meals anymore. I'd lost all sense of time — sometimes, a bag of chips and salsa was my breakfast and some days I've forgotten to eat. Breakfast and rush to school, pick up dinner on the fly...maybe Sonic, then off to the gym or ball field. Homework, bath, story time/prayers, bed. Everything revolved around them. The three of us could let our guard down and have so much fun when David wasn't at home. Those were my favorite moments.

Just thinking about him, my thoughts shifted to anger. It was after he murdered his own children, that I found out that he wasn't actually "working late". Nope, he was out hustling some woman for money or sex - "hosting (he's paying for the motel room)," "DDF (Drug/Disease Free)," "SWMP (Single White Male Professional)," and all the disgusting and vile things he listed in his Craigslist ads! Or maybe he was busy conning some innocent person out of money...like our church pastor, a former boss, or...stop! Don't go off on everyone. My mind's all over the place. Okay, control your thoughts, Karen. Everyone here's messed up. Act normal, nod, and take in the scenery. Breathe. Refocus. Think about how much Reagan and Grant would love it here. Reagan would be yelling at me to count how many backflips she could do across the big lawn. Grant would be playing with Millie, the resident dog, and be so curious as to how anyone mowed a yard this big!

I could hear my lunch mates' voices coming in clearer as I regained focus. I opened my eyes wide and tried to hold a smile. I heard Jonas tell them I'd had a rough morning.

"How you holding up?" Anna asked.

"Uhhh, how am I 'holdin' up'?" I repeated in a thick southern drawl.

Jonas and Anthony leaned back in unison.

I leaned over to Anna and said with intensity (southern drawl), "Okaaaaay... *Steel Magnolias!* Sally Field is literally at the gravesite, standing next to her daughter's (Julia Roberts) casket and Dolly Parton asks her, 'how you holdin' up, honey?' I mean, that's the most asinine question anyone could ask a parent who's having her final moments before her daughter goes six feet under!"

Anna slouches, "Oh...I know. I know. And I - I just said that to you. I'm sorry."

I laughed, "No, it's fine, you're good. It's a great movie. Sally rightfully goes nuts and of course she wants to hit someone..."

Anna, laughing, finishes my sentence ..."Here, hit Ouisa! Go on! We'll make everybody in town t-shirts that say, 'I hit Ouisa Boudreax!'"

We cracked up. This reference was lost on Jonas and Anthony, obviously, neither of them had seen the movie. Both of them seemed super relieved that the moment turned funny, instead of setting me off. They'd seen me snap before.

"I mean...that movie though — I love it so much. Gut-wrenching." Anna said.

"The whole cemetery scene, we laugh, we cry. Sally Field plays the perfect grieving mom!" I said. I extend my hand to Anna... "Hello, I *am* Sally Field from that movie in real life — nice to meet you."

About that time, Marty, a man who reminded me of David, walked by and quipped, "Hey kiddo, Frosted Flakes AREN'T THAT G-R-R-R-E-E-A-T!"

Everyone knew how much I despised that guy. He annoyed almost everyone here. Plus, I hated being called "kiddo"! David used to call me that!

I sat up and snapped back, "Tony the Tiger..."

Jonas cut me off, "Tony's THA' KING. Now swim back upstream, Marty and get your salmon."

Anna chimed in with a southern drawl, "Heeere, hit Marty, we'll make t-shirts!"

We cracked up. I mean...one minute I'm screaming, the next laughing. Thank you, God, for moments like these.

Instead of going full "Steel Magnolias" on Marty, I took a walk in the woods to get some alone time before my one-on-one follow-up therapy session with Brenda. I began to journal about the day. Journaling is part of the "work" required here. If I want to see results, I must do the work.

Brenda's office was homey; essential oils, and some candles lined her bookshelves. Paintings from residents lined her wall. Her windows looked out towards the horse stables. When I first started with Brenda, I wasn't sure I'd like her. She didn't give an

inch during our sessions — holding me accountable to the "process". Of course, she turned out to be one of my favorite people here. We sat across from each other.

"The morning session wore me out. I just journaled about it." I told Brenda.

"Good, I'm glad you were able to get those feelings on paper." She said.

We talked nearly the whole session about the psychodrama and all it stirred up within me. My recollection of that day was not like my dad's or others who kept saying, "Jesus is real," "Reagan and Grant are with Jesus now," "they're in a better place, or they're your angels now," and so on. Jesus was real for some people that day, but not for me. I didn't feel an ounce of His faithfulness, His peace, His promises, especially His love. What was happening? Where was the ALMIGHTY, ALL KNOWING & ALL POWERFUL GOD that I prayed to my whole life? My Savior? You promised me that you would love us and protect us in the face of evil and in every circumstance! Where were you when my babies needed you? Where were you, Jesus, in the midst of this evil? My children were innocent, beautiful, loving, trusting, and so much more, and you allowed them to be murdered in the hands of an evil and vile monster who was supposed to be their dad. Why didn't you warn me, why didn't you stop him? What were they going through that night? Were they scared? Crying out for you? Crying out for me? Why did you let this happen? I don't love you; I can't breathe. I just want my babies. I want to die and be with my babies. Take me with you. I need my babies...what did I do wrong, God? Did I make you angry? Did I stay with him too long? Should I not have left him? I shouldn't have listened to my family...I should've just stayed. Why didn't I stay...my children may be here today — I wouldn't be here going through this hell. This was never God's plan — Reagan and Grant were supposed to be here with me; that's always been God's plan!" I said, slumping back in my chair. I exhaled.

"I'm freaking exhausted. Are we done for today?" I asked.

Brenda looked at her clock on the wall then back to me, "Okay, now, tell me about David's suicide letters."