



***“Be strong and courageous. Don’t be fearful or discouraged,  
because the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” ~Joshua 1:9 NLT***

## **CHAPTER 1**

October 1984

*Breathe, Denise! Stop being so paranoid!* I told myself as I ducked behind the truck at the sight of a slow-approaching car. *Pull it together. After all, you have the car and Doyle has no reason to come home before his workday ends. Breathe!! This is going to work.*

I hoisted the huge box of clothes into the truck of my friend and closest confidante, MariLu Short. Sweat crept down my forehead, stinging my eyes. I squinted at the bright sun, trying to determine how much daylight was left. I knew I had to leave before dark or I’d never find my way through the back roads that led to MariLu’s house.

I swept back a wisp of blonde hair that refused to stay in my ponytail. A jolting vision flashed before me: Doyle storming through the front door. I could almost hear him scream, “Denise, what the hell are you doing with all *our* stuff packed in that truck in the driveway?”

*Breathe!! It’s just your imagination!*

I trudged back into our brick ranch, dry autumn leaves crunching under my feet. In the family room, I picked up a stuffed Minnie Mouse that belonged to our three-year-old daughter. The moment Jaime discovered it under the Christmas tree last year, she’d given Minnie a tight hug, then danced around the room and sang the cartoon’s theme song. A giggling Samantha, our

sixteen-month-old, had waddled up to Jaime to see what all the commotion was about. Just the image warmed me inside for a moment.

I looked around the big family room and a wave of sorrow hit me. The girls would no longer play here or romp in the backyard. We had looked for a home with a huge yard for the girls to play in. We'd spent so many hours of laughter, jumping rope, playing hide and seek. I looked down at my arm and was jolted back to reality. The sight of the black and blue marks trailing down my arms and the ache in my muscles strengthened my resolve. I had to leave.

I looked through the kitchen, deciding what I needed to take. The bake ware and dishes were wedding gifts from my family, so rightfully they were mine. There wasn't much time left to get the rest of the things we needed. The sun would be setting soon.

After filling a cardboard box, I went into the family room to finish packing toys. A loud ring pierced the quiet, sending a rubber ball flying out of my hand. It came crashing down on top of a single red rose in a crystal vase, leaving shards of glass and red velvet petals on the table and floor. A shiver ran down my spine. The rose had been Doyle's sorry attempt to convince me to "forget" his latest eruption, and the vase was a present from his mom. The irony did not escape me. It was the perfect depiction of our marriage.

I clutched my chest to calm my pounding heart. The phone rang again. *What if Doyle's calling?* He would expect me to be home. But he never called from work.

*Breathe! It could be anyone.*

I picked up the receiver. "Hello," I said, with forced cheerfulness.

"Hey, honey. What are you doing?" Doyle inquired in a syrupy voice.

The receiver nearly slid out of my sweaty palm. Doyle *never* called me honey. Did he know what I was doing? How could he?

"Nothing. Why?"

"I just wanted to know if you'd do me a favor. Could you bring me the stash of money that I put away for Christmas gifts? There's a sale today at Maupin's and I want to get a new suit during my dinner break."

Relief washed over me. "Of course. Be there in a few."

I felt the room spin and fade as I hung up the phone. Flecks of light shot at me from my peripheral vision and I slid down the wall. I put my head between my legs, determined not to

faint. When the spinning stopped, I lifted my head. My stomach rumbled, reminding me I hadn't eaten all day. I'd lost thirty pounds in the last three months and now, where there once had been curves, my clothes loosely draped my twig-like frame. For the sake of my girls, I had to take better care of myself. But I didn't have time to think about that now. I had to get to Doyle's office before he suspected something.

I fought to get up, then tugged at the drawstring on my pants to tighten it. I found the granola I'd stuffed into my purse that morning and nibbled on it while walking down the hall to our bedroom. Doyle was a bit OCD – everything was neatly in its proper place, which made packing my things easy. The dark, four-poster wooden bed and the matching dresser and desk had been his when we got married. I'd be happy to leave them behind, along with the ugly rust-and-brown-plaid couch.

Every item I packed brought back a chilling memory. I vividly recalled the day he stormed off into our bedroom and, in one fell swoop, knocked everything off my dresser. When I walked in after him to find out why he was so upset, he picked up a perfume bottle and threw it at me, yelling, "Dinner should be ready to eat by 6 ...every night!" I shook my head to release the memory, so I could focus on the task at hand. The desk drawer rattled and shook as I got the money out. I shoved the money in my pocket, glanced at my Timex and hurried down the hall.

Searching frantically around the living room for my windbreaker, something caught my eye. I walked over to the end table and gingerly picked up a shard of glass that had pierced the middle of a rose petal. I gasped as I viewed the haunting image from every angle. It was my wounded heart, stabbed so many times by his angry words. I freed the velvet rose petal and rubbed it between my forefinger and thumb, then threw the tiny weapon to the ground. A boldness grew in me as I spied my windbreaker behind the lazy boy chair. I had to cover up the massive bruising or risk interrogation from Doyle's employees.

I pulled it on, put the rose petal in my pocket, grabbed my purse, and walked out the door.

MariLu and her brother, Jerry, would be here in less than thirty minutes to drive the truck to my parents' house and unload it for me. Shifting the gear of my silver Fiesta into drive, I took deep breaths to try and calm my nerves. Then I headed to Nobel's Jewelry Store at nearly breakneck speed. I'd learned it wasn't wise to keep Doyle waiting. Not that he'd physically harm me in front of his employees. No, he'd never risk his good-guy image. But I also knew that

behind closed doors, I'd endure a verbal lashing and a reminder of my incompetence. I didn't want to hear it.

I zoomed into the nearest parking space, slammed the car door and made my way inside. The store wasn't crowded. It rarely was this time of day. Zigzagging through the store, I ignored the sideway glances and a wave from a sales person as I headed to the back towards Doyle's office. He almost plowed into me when he came around the corner. "Whoa. You're in a hurry!" He beamed at me. "Couldn't wait to see me, huh? Thanks for bringing up the money. Where are the girls?"

*Oh crap. It never entered my mind that he would ask where the girls were!*

Panic set in. Doyle knew my mom never kept the girls because she was always so busy with golf, bowling or her bridge club, and I was not a good liar. Suppressing the urge to run, I said the first thing that came to mind. "Oh, my mom stopped by just before you called to drop off a book I'd left at her house. She offered to stay with them while I ran up here."

*Now I am a liar!* I held my breath.

"Oh, OK. Well, have fun with your mom. Remember, I'm closing the store tonight. So, you'll need to pick me up at 10."

"Got it."

*He doesn't suspect a thing* I thought as I exited the store as composed as possible.

I sat in the car, gripping the steering wheel tightly for a few seconds. I rolled down the windows, and as I drove off, I peered through the rearview mirror to see the Nobel's Jewelry Store sign fading from view. The familiar fear that had lurked like a lion waiting to pounce, controlling my every move, was gone! A fresh, delightful breeze wafted through the car, my pulse slowed, the black grip of fear released me, and I sailed away free from his fierce control. Now all I had to do was quickly gather the last few things at the house.

A tear trickled down my cheek. There would be no happy-ever-after for us.



***“Everyone is a moon and has a dark side which he never shows to anyone.” ~Mark Twain***

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **A Week Earlier**

“Couldn’t you keep them quiet for another hour?” scowled a bedraggled Doyle, shuffling out of our bedroom. “My tee time isn’t until ten.”

“I’m sorry. I was trying,” I apologized, my voice feigning strength.

“Really? You could have fooled me!” he snorted as he stomped into the bathroom.

My stomach tightened. I scampered into the kitchen and pulled out the coffee maker. Maybe breakfast would make him happy. All of a sudden, I heard screeching and then, out the corner of my eye, I saw Doyle bouncing into the family room acting like a crazed gorilla, growling at the girls, making them shriek with laughter. I poured batter into the waffle maker, my mood lifted from the antics I heard coming from the family room. Doyle really was a kid at heart and loved playing with the girls.

I had been a very naïve, impressionable nineteen-year-old when I met this man who was eight years my senior. Doyle Boese managed Nobel’s Jewelry Store, where I’d landed a job just days after moving to Missouri from Texas. We’d moved because my father’s job had transferred him. From the moment I witnessed Doyle work his magic, seducing a customer into buying just about every piece of expensive jewelry in the store, I was infatuated. Oozing confidence, he would lean into the customer, joking, “This newly created design will get you noticed from across the room at your next party.” Eyebrow raised, he’d wink. “It’s sure to compel any

admirer to come over and explore your beauty.” Falling for the lure, hook, line and sinker, the customer giggled like a school girl, admired herself wearing the piece he had fastened around her neck, then add coyly, “How can I pass up on such a stunning charm that will help me cast spells on unsuspecting admirers? I’ll take it!” The magnificent piece now adorned her chest as she walked out of the store minutes later.

“Hmmm,” MariLu, better known as Loui, my fellow customer service rep, had chortled one afternoon. “I do believe that man is a bit smitten with you. He seems to find any excuse to make his way to the diamond counter, and I’m pretty sure he is not drawn by *my* dazzling beauty. My dear, he has his eyes on you!”

“No, he’s just being nice,” I replied, hoping Loui hadn’t notice that I was, in fact, the smitten one. Each time he sauntered our way, my heart pounded, my stomach fluttered, my face flushed. He’d lean his tall, muscular frame on the counter, sweeping his hand through his jet-black wavy hair, and bore through my soul with his piercing sky-blue eyes which were magnified by his pale complexion. And he had the most intoxicating baritone voice! A simple “hello” in that deep, sensual voice made my knees weak and everything in me melted. He was the most handsome, mesmeric man my nineteen-year-old eyes had ever seen, and I was drawn to him. I just couldn’t imagine that he could really be interested in me. I never imagined we’d ever become more than co-workers.

And then it happened. He asked me out. Doyle’s charming smile captivated me on that first date, and his sense of humor made me laugh until my side hurt. He was a perfect gentleman; opening car doors for me, pulling out my chair, even ordering my dinner for me. He made me feel safe and significant, something I’d never really felt before. He lavished me with compliments and was so focused on me that even in the crowded five-star restaurant, I felt as if I were not only the most beautiful woman in the room, but also the *only* woman in the room. We talked about everything. He was so intelligent, so sophisticated, so knowledgeable on a multitude of topics, and he seemed to genuinely care about the things that interested me. He got me to talk about my family, my dreams and desires. But when I asked about his family, emptiness filled his eyes.

“I prefer not to talk about my family. Let’s just say I witnessed some bad things growing up. My parents didn’t have the most loving relationship. I hated the way my dad controlled my mother – even picking out her clothes, never wanting to let her out of his sight. I hated even

more that she let him.” He seemed to drift into some deep hole as he spoke. Then suddenly, he chuckled, “Aaahh! No more talk of the past. What matters most is you and this moment.”

We began seeing one another on a regular basis. He wined and dined me. Doyle was so gentle with me -- his hand on the small of my back, directing my steps around the dance floor, whispering compliments in my ear – all the things a girl likes to hear, wants to hear to make her feel beautiful and desirable. And the candlelit dinners while being serenaded by romantic tunes on a piano. He’d even attempted to sing to me, “You are the sunshine of my life.” Who could resist such attention?

But it all came to an abrupt end three months later.