

Chapter 1

It's a Girl

I was an eight-pound girl born in Shreveport, Louisiana, on June 23, 1971, to two college kids. My parents met at Grambling State University. My mother was from northern Louisiana, and my father was from the southern portion of the state. My grandparents told me that my mother had a full scholarship to Southern University, but she wanted desperately to go to Grambling. My mother was born when my grandparents were older, so they spoiled her whenever they could. She only had one sister who was twenty-one years old at the time of my mother's birth. My aunt was just as excited about my mother's birth as my grandparents were.

So, off to Grambling my mother went. Years ago, I sometimes wondered what path my life would have taken had my mother gone to Southern instead... Anyway, she met my father who was also the baby of the family but in a very different way. He was the youngest of ten children: five boys and five girls. His parents were farmers. My father was taught the value of hard work at an early age by working the fields with his father. I remember him telling me that he worked on a dairy farm at some point as well. My father's mother died when I was in college. She lived the last ten years of her life bedridden in New Orleans.

I remember life being extremely happy and loved when I was living with my grandparents while my parents were away. I was excited about two days of the week more than any other: Fridays, when we "went to town" to get groceries or anything else we needed from the dollar store (there was no Wal-mart then), and Sundays, when we dressed up and went to church. My grandmother made sure that I dressed well for church because I had to look just as cute as "Mary Allen's granddaughter". It was like a little competition every week. I also enjoyed going to Sunday School and Vacation Bible School.

I remember sometimes going to my grandmother and asking her if she loved me. She would always say, "Yes, gandmaw love her gand baby," using baby talk. Then she would give me a big hug. I guess I was a love addict right from the start.

But after some years passed and my parents graduated from college, the time had arrived for me to live full-time with the people who actually gave birth to me. My father took a position in Laurel,

Mississippi, so we moved there. I've reflected back on my life several times, and I can only remember having happy times when I visited my grandparents. My father was a very playful man, but he was extremely strict and seemed to fuss about everything! My mother didn't let us get away with much, either, but I remember her to always be in a state of fear concerning my father and always trying to stay one step ahead of him so that he would not get angry with her. This put me in a constant state of stressful awareness. I remember my father threatening to hit my mother on several occasions; he would actually carry out the beatings a couple times a year.

The holidays were the worst! I didn't begin to get excited about Christmas until the second Christmas after I got married. When I was younger, we would plan trips to visit either my mother's parents in Shreveport or my father's sisters and brothers in New Orleans. I don't know why, but it always seemed as if a big fight would break out the day before we were to leave, and the fights nearly always ended up physical. Then the next day, my mother would have to call whomever we had planned to visit to tell them that we weren't coming or that we might be delayed a day or two.

In some cases my father would leave the house for several hours and even stayed out overnight once. In my later years I began to put two and two together on that. I don't have evidence, but I suspect that my father was creating tension at home so that he could go to see another woman. I never had proof, but that's what I suspected. Even though I had no clue about this sort of thing when I was younger, I was still very disturbed emotionally and physically by the tension and by seeing my mother hurting. Many times she would come to my room and talk to me about what was happening. I grew up rapidly as a result. All throughout my life people here and there told me that I acted very maturely, and that I was always so self-motivated. These are the positives that the outside world saw, but they knew little about what spurred it.

There was one Christmas (I have no idea how old I was or what year it was) that my father hit my mother in her forehead so hard that she had a huge welt. Fluid oozed from it and it protruded so far out of her head that it terrified me! I was utterly helpless. I wanted to do something, but I had no idea what. Besides, I was a kid. I had utterly helpless feelings that I could not remedy. Later my father came home bearing Big Macs, his normal reward for me. I remember being so nervous that I couldn't eat it. I felt as if I would pass out. But on this occasion, as in so many others, I made it through and life continued on.