

CHAPTER 1

A Bloody Back Leads To My Lucky Break

“People, even more than things, have to be restored, renewed, revived, reclaimed, and redeemed; never throw out anyone.”

-Audrey Hepburn

May 1975

I’m startled by a car horn honking behind me. I’m stopped at a red light in Oakland where the University of Pittsburgh is located. I must have been daydreaming. I’m nervous and scared because I’m on my way to my dermatologist’s office. I know I’ll have to take off my shirt in front of people again. I hate doing that. I know they’re professionals, but it still bothers me. Why shouldn’t it? Even *I* feel frightened every time I see my back in the mirror.

Why does it bleed all the time? I can’t even sit back on my seat without it hurting. This has been going on since the tenth grade. Blood keeps oozing through my shirt and it won’t stop. I wear extra undershirts to soak it up. Now I have to wear three of them under my regular shirt. I’m tired of wearing all these shirts. It’s hot. It’s going to be 80 degrees today. I don’t want to wear all of these shirts.

As I drive down Fifth Avenue toward the doctor’s office, I see all these beautiful girls walking to class. Tears well up in my eyes. I know deep down I’ll never be able to talk to girls like them. I’m only three months away from being a 20-year-old-virgin.

Who would want *me*, after all? My own family hates me and has disowned me. Last Saturday, my dad and grandpap threw me out of the house. They’d always told me I was hopeless. They said I’d never amount to anything, that I’m a loser.

I guess they're right. My car is falling apart. I'm working as a janitor at the Holiday Inn in Greentree. At least the homeless shelter took me in. The people there are nice to me.

I wish Dr. Gibson would see me by himself. Why does he have to have two nurses with him? The fact that they're young and pretty makes it even worse. I'm sure they cringe when they see me on the exam table. Why can't he help me? He's my fourth dermatologist in the last four years. So far, no one has been able to cure my bloody back.

I walk into his office on the 5th floor of the Medical Arts building. His office manager, Gloria, greets me with a smile. She's about 50 and really nice. She's always friendly to me. Everyone who works for Dr. Gibson is nice. Every time I come here, they always seem to be having fun at work. Gloria says...

Lou, Dr. Gibson will be with you in a minute.

OK.

I take a seat in the waiting room with the other people. I make sure not to make eye contact with anyone. I pick up a magazine and pretend to read. Right away I start biting my fingernails, or what's left of them. I bite them to the point that they bleed. After a few minutes, Dr. Gibson looks in and sees me. He smiles.

Hey, Lou, come on back. How are you?

Hi, Dr. Gibson. I'm OK.

Dr. Gibson is 58 years old, about 6' 1'' and 190 pounds. He has slicked-back grayish hair. I think he's a great guy. Every time I come here, I see him laughing and kidding around with his staff and the other patients. I always force a smile when he greets me,

but I usually don't interact much with him. I wish I could. I want him to know I like him.

Lou, you can go in the exam room on the right. I'll be with you in a few minutes.

OK.

I know the drill. I go in and take off my bloody shirts, then lie down on the exam table. I lie face down on my stomach and wait for him and his beautiful nurses to come in. This is the worst part. Minutes feel like hours. I close my eyes and feel like I'm waiting for the executioner to show up. Sometimes I wish that were true. At least I'd be put out of my misery.

Dr. Gibson finally walks in. I can tell he's smiling down at me as he says hello again. I don't look up. I keep my eyes closed and barely acknowledge him. I just want this to be over. I don't want to even see the nurses. Maybe I can leave today without having to look at them.

Dr. Gibson makes small talk with me, then begins his routine of using dry ice on my bloody back. Tears well up in my eyes, not only from pain but from the shame I feel. I keep my head down so no one can see me cry.

His treatment only lasts about 10 minutes. When he's finished, he usually wishes me well and tells me to make another appointment with Gloria two weeks away. This time is different.

Lou, after you get dressed, can you come back to my office? I'd like to see you for a minute.

What's this about? Maybe I'm in trouble. What did I do? I pay my bill every visit. What could he want? I get dressed and walk down the short hall to his office door. As I approach the door, I see him sitting at his desk looking at some papers.

Hey, Lou. Come in and close the door.

Yes, sir.

Have a seat.

I sit down. I see him looking right at me with a compassionate face.

Lou, I feel badly that I haven't been getting results with your back.

I nod.

I usually see good results with others from these treatments.

I nod again, trying to make eye contact with him. I hear his gentle voice and feel a little less afraid.

Lou, would you mind if I asked you a personal question?

No.

How is your home life?

What? Why does he care about that? *No one* cares. Suddenly something inside me bursts. I start crying and say...

It's terrible. I was kicked out of my house on Saturday.

Why?

Because I was sleeping at eight-thirty in the morning.

Where are you living now?

At Light of Life Ministries homeless shelter near Allegheny General
Hospital.

As I say those words, I cry even harder. I don't know what's happening, but I can't stop
crying.

Why would they kick you out of the house?

I look down and shrug my shoulders. I manage to blurt out...

My dad hates my guts.

I'm now crying so hard, I can barely get the words out. Dr. Gibson hands me a box of
Kleenex.

Lou, would you mind if I give you the number of a doctor friend of mine?

I keep my head down.

No, I wouldn't mind.

He is a psychiatrist. Would that bother you to see him?

No.

Lou, this man is my friend and a great doctor. I think he could help you
more than I can.

I nod OK. Tears running down my cheeks, I glance up at Dr. Gibson with a look of
thanks and gratitude.

Lou, here's his name and address. He's only one block from here. I'll call
him for you. You'll like him. Lou, *he gets results*.

Dr. Gibson stands up and hands me the paper with this doctor's name. I put it in my pocket and stand up. Dr. Gibson walks me to the door. I take the elevator to the parking garage. When I get in my car, I take out the paper he gave me and read it. It says...

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