

Sample Chapter

It wasn't supposed to be like this. It wasn't supposed to be like this. This can't be happening.

Tara's sheets lay crumpled at the bottom of their bed. A plump untouched pillow lay next to hers, a cruel reminder that she was alone yet again. She steadied her legs and defiantly marched into the bathroom; there was no time for self-pity. The cool water hit Tara's face with an unfulfilled promise of restoring her focus. As she patted her face dry, a blurry reflection glared back at her from the mirror. Her eyes, still puffy, told the story of tears and an unsettling night's sleep. Tara grabbed her toothbrush and vigorously brushed, forgetting to even apply toothpaste. Her face was void of any color, the life... her life... had been drained out of her. No amount of personal grooming could fix this sorrow. She wondered what it was about her that made people want to leave.

Rushing back to their otherwise meticulous bedroom, she jerked open the top dresser drawer, almost toppling over their five-by-seven-framed picture, taken during happier times. Tears began to well up again. Focus, she had to focus. She was determined to quickly find something to wear, something that hid the pain and covered the scars of a lifetime of abandonment. She pulled open the bottom drawer, rummaging through two piles of worn sweatpants until finally settling on her grey sweat suit.

Tara pulled her hair into a ponytail, slid her feet into her white laced sneakers and headed downstairs. Tears like these hadn't made an appearance for some time but now they were back with a vengeance.

Tara's eyes darted from the kitchen table across the counters and finally to the front door, where she spotted her keys still hanging in the lock. Two lefts and a right turn on Livingston Road and she would be at Fort Washington Hospital. The uncertainty of what she would find when she got there was terrifying.

15 years earlier

Tara and Maggie strolled through the men's department at the Wal-Mart.

"We gone find you a daddy today, so keep smiling and don't mess up that hair that took me an hour to do."

Maggie stuffed her own shoes deeper inside her purse and tried to balance herself in the brand new fancy shoes she had just borrowed from the ladies' shoe department. She'd also borrowed a fancy coat and the most expensive looking pair of earrings she could find. As soon as she found her a potential husband, she would be sure to put almost everything back in its original place.

“Excuse me?” Maggie said as she batted her ice-blue colored eyelids, courtesy of the sample eye shadow palette in the beauty department.

“Yes, Ma’am.” A tall good-looking man answered.

“My daughter wants to send this jacket to her daddy; we’re divorced, and she wants to see how it looks on you. You have the same gorgeous body as him.”

The man smiled, flattered by this tired phrase Tara had heard dozens of times before.

She had reeled in another one. Maggie’s promise to buy her school clothes was trumped by the capture of another pervert. As they were leaving the store, Maggie tucked the man’s phone number in her purse.

“Momma, where’s my real dad?” Tara hesitantly asked.

Maggie walked on, ignoring Tara’s question.

“You tell me he’s gone, but what happened? Does he know about me? Does he even care? Did you meet him at the Wal-Mart, too?”

Tara stopped walking and Maggie jerked her arm, pulling her across the street toward the bus stop.

“Girl, you better come on. I don’t have time to explain nothin’ to your little ungrateful self. I’m the only one you got. So stop talkin’ to me about all this daddy crap. You ain’t got no father.”

The bus stopped at the corner of Hester Avenue. Maggie and Tara trudged down the unpaved street, stopping in front of a brick multi-family apartment dwelling. Maggie unlocked and entered the first floor level of their apartment and emptied the contents of her overstuffed pockets onto the kitchen counter.

“Go on girl, put that stuff away,” Maggie sniped.

Tara entered the kitchen, stumbling over the same half tied trash bag that had laid in the hallway since that morning. Maggie hurried into her bedroom, dropping her coat on the tattered tweed sofa along the way.

“You see my lighter out there?” Maggie yelled.

Tara spotted the lighter next to the yellow tinged toaster oven that hadn’t worked in years. She brought it to her mother.

Maggie pursed her lips, inhaling as she lit the cigarette. Tara hated the smell of smoke. Her third grade teacher, Mrs. Sanchez, warned the kids about the dangers of secondhand smoke. Tara was disgusted by the thick and cloudy film that it left on every living and nonliving thing nearby. Blowing in and blowing out. It served no purpose except to deprive her of at least two days’ worth of meals. There

was very little money to go around as it was, yet a mound of cigarette butts filled Maggie's nightstand consistently.

"Well, those people found me another place to work, so you gonna be by yourself tonight."

Maggie buttoned up the burgundy uniform shirt that read "Fry Daddy" on the pocket. She slipped on the matching pants and hurried back to the front room.

"I'll be fine," Tara convinced herself.

"My legs gonna be sore tomorrow, so you gonna have to take care of that laundry."

Maggie twisted her wig into position as she walked to the door.

"I will, Momma," Tara said, unsurprised by this request.

"Okay, I'm a get goin'. You know those people don't like me being late. You ain't got school tomorrow, but keep yourself in da' house," Maggie reminded Tara. "I don't want no police showing up at my door like they just did wit' O.J."

"Okay," Tara sullenly answered.

"I get off at eleven and they should have plenty chicken left over so I'll bring extra if I can."

"Bye, Momma."

Maggie's promise to Tara was as firm as the watered down Jell-O that sat in their empty refrigerator. The thought of not having dinner that night didn't faze Tara. But the impracticality of fending for herself for the next two days was distressing.

By the fifth grade, Tara routinely came home to an empty house. She ate dinner alone, finished any remaining homework and put herself to bed. From her bedroom, Tara observed her mother entering the house with her male company, strutting through the living room in her high heels as if she'd just won the grand prize at the county fair. Her hair was combed, her lips were painted perfectly and she smelled of vanilla. The simple things that Maggie was so incapable of providing to Tara were often done with enthusiasm when *he* was in the house.

He paid the bills, bought the food and kept Maggie smiling. Those were good days for Tara.

Maggie's tired legs easily pranced back and forth from the oven to the kitchen table as she presented meals to him, sometimes meatloaf or chicken with rice and green beans. Maybe even cornbread or sweet rolls. Tara ate dinner in her bedroom away from all the manipulation and ensnarement. Maggie's evening with him always concluded with a secret retreat to her bedroom. All Tara knew was for the next few weeks she would at least have dinner and maybe a small treat bribing her to stay out of the way.

Ironically, young Maggie's life started off with much promise. She was raised in the small town of Asheville, North Carolina by her mother and father. Every summer the family made the pilgrimage to Richmond, Virginia for the annual Fowler reunion. Spending two weeks of the summer reconnecting with family always produced fond memories. With fishing poles in tow, Maggie and her cousins wandered down barefoot to the lake to catch trout, cod and sometimes craw fish. During Maggie's junior year of high school she met James, a boy who knew a lot about fishing. Sitting together under a weeping willow tree he filled Maggie's head with the enticing words all young girls yearned to hear. The following summer it wasn't just the words that enticed her, he convinced her that they should be each other's first. Maggie was barely seventeen when she became pregnant.

Her parents, embarrassed for her and for themselves, wanted to avoid the scandal and gossip of a small town. They moved Maggie back to Virginia to live with her grandparents for her final year of high school.

On May 12th a five-pound twelve-ounce premature baby girl was born. She was named Tara Mary Fowler. Six months later Maggie moved out of her grandparents' home and found an apartment with James. She worked during the day at a local fast food restaurant and James worked the second shift in a manufacturing plant. They were young adults now but they were also parents. They had to make their own decisions was what her grandfather said. Some days it came down to a coin toss whether to buy food or diapers. Sustaining this lifestyle became impossible. James eventually grew weary and left, never to be heard from again. Maggie and baby Tara could no longer stay in Richmond, so they headed back home—to Asheville. Things had to be better there.

Months passed before she was able to get on her feet and find employment, but she finally did. She worked at the 24-hour pharmacy. The hours were long and the work was exhausting, but after a year Maggie was able to move out of her parents' house.

Maggie's Father, Randall, could ill afford to come to his daughter's rescue but he did once again, assisting her with the deposit for a nearby ground-level apartment on Hester Avenue. Randall also offered Maggie the money to get the phone and the electricity turned on. The place needed work: the chipped walls needed painting, the carpet was worn and the refrigerator made a loud buzzing noise that resembled the sound of a bug zapper. But at least Tara would have her own room instead of the sofa pillows that for the last two years she knew to be her bed.

The demands of working full time and trying to raise a daughter proved to be too much. Maggie began taking medication that she said "helped her get through the day." Her short temper, jittery nerves and odd sleep habits were clues that things were changing. Strangers began knocking at the door all hours of the night. The transactions were short and simple. Not long after, Maggie was fired from her job at the pharmacy.

Tara dragged herself to school that following Monday. Her long weekend, which consisted of washing clothes, scrounging around for food and cleaning up after Maggie, was finally over. At least Timber Brook Elementary provided two consistent meals every day.

Tara meandered her way through the hallways. Her goal was always to go unnoticed, to keep the glaring eyes of teachers and students away from her and her miserable existence. She made no attempts to make friends. Friends asked questions and sent pencil-pushing social workers to the house, threatening to remove her. So she resigned herself to her bubble of loneliness. It was life-sustaining and had an ample supply of question-free silence. It neither asked nor demanded much from her and it cared little about her emotional state.

It was the final period of class and students were instructed to go directly to the gymnasium where the results of the Timber Brook Elementary writing competition would be announced. Parents were invited to attend and Tara was thrilled when her grandmother and grandfather informed her that they would be able to make it. Maggie chimed in as well and promised she would try and be there.

The fifth grade class filed in. Tara searched the room, hoping to see a familiar face. She grew nervous as she waded through waves of smiling parents and excited students hugging and holding hands. The principal tapped the microphone in an attempt to get everyone's attention. "Students and parents, please find a seat so we can begin the program," she squawked over the microphone.

Tara took a seat in the abandoned last row. Her head sank low and her eyes began to well up. The gymnasium was silent and each fifth grade teacher was being introduced to a round of applause.

The gymnasium doors slammed shut, and Tara turned to see her grandparents and Maggie entering. She feverishly waved them to her empty row of seats.

"Hi honey. Sorry we're late," her grandmother greeted her.

She kissed her on the cheek and squeezed Tara's hand. Her grandfather and mother took their seats alongside her. Tara smiled broadly and held on tight to her Granny's hand as the winners were being announced. Her eyes scanned the room somehow feeling a greater sense of belonging. They landed on Felicia Walker in a lavender sundress and matching shoes.

Tara shamefully re-adjusted her faded grey t-shirt and blue jeans. She smoothed back the flyaways that had escaped from her ponytail.

"And the fifth grade, first place winner is... Tara Fowler," the principal announced.

Tara was ecstatic. She jumped up out of her seat and scampered to the front. The possibility that there was room in her bubble for happiness gave her hope. Felicia sat in her lavender sundress next to what looked like an entourage of family members. She didn't clap her hands, but instead looked away, refusing to acknowledge Tara's victory. She finally had something that Felicia didn't. She felt the

trajectory of her life shift just a bit.

Tara was awarded a certificate and a one hundred-dollar cash prize by her principal. Her grandparents smiled proudly and her mother clapped frantically. It was good to know she could do something to please her mother. After the ceremony, she ran to her grandmother waving her certificate and her gold money envelope.

“Sweetie... we are so proud of you,” her grandmother said with outstretched arms.

“Girl, you sure can write a story,” her grandfather said, popping a peppermint in his mouth.

Maggie bent down and gave her daughter a big hug. Tara watched her as the burgundy painted lips read the certificate. Maggie took the gold money envelope and peeked inside.

“You done good, girl,” Maggie said. She shifted her shoulders back and held her head high as if she had been the recipient.

“Thanks Momma,” Tara said as she tried to reclaim her money envelope, but Maggie was already tucking the envelope in her purse.

“You know if you hold it, you gonna lose it,” she said, with a questionable tone to her voice.

The next morning Tara found her empty gold envelope balled up in the kitchen trash can.

Tara’s grandmother was the center of her unbalanced life. She admired her and the sound advice she was always able to impart. Granny was a small woman with very petite, delicate features. Her curly black hair had just a few streaks of grey. She walked at a quick pace and was always busy cleaning or preparing a meal. She had a big heart and a tiny little voice. A well-worn Bible adorned every room of her small country house.

Tara wasn’t sure why the words Granny spoke to her were so comforting. Half the time they were as confusing as a backwards playing record. But, those words of encouragement were worth the four mile trek to Granny’s house

“Why would she do that?” Tara scowled, fidgeting with a tiny figurine that sat on Granny’s coffee table.

The miniature angel stood like a ballerina in an arabesque, kicking one leg back and holding a rose. It was beautiful. Its wings spread wide and ready to soar. It was perfectly smooth, harboring no jagged edges or ill-will.

“I know it don’t seem fair to you, but you got something your mother or nobody else can take away from you,” her grandmother said, carrying a basketful of freshly laundered towels.

She sat next to Tara on the couch. Tara sniffled and having left her shoes at the door, dug her

toes into the pale blue carpet that oddly matched the color on the walls.

“What’s that, Granny?”

Granny pointed to Tara’s chest and tapped it three times. “You have the spirit of wisdom.”

“A lot of good that’s done,” Tara replied.

“Since you was a little tot you always knew right from wrong. You had the clearest ideas in your head of which way to go.”

Granny picked up a towel from the basket and folded it with all four corners neatly falling into place. She placed it on top of the rest of the perfectly aligned towels.

“I know your life ain’t been perfect. The good Lord never promised us a perfect life. We have to make do with what we got and lean on Him to give us the rest.”

“Granny, I know you’re just trying to make me feel better.... Thanks.”

Tara got up and placed the soaring angel back on the coffee table. She smiled and kissed her grandmother tenderly on the cheek. Right then she decided that soaring shouldn’t be limited to angels.

Tara was searching through a bag full of laundered clothes for her black jeans when she heard keys jingling in the door. No doubt it was Maggie returning from her normal weekend tryst. She rushed to the door, unlocked it and with quick reaction, caught Maggie as she nearly stumbled to the floor.

“Hey, ba-by girl,” Maggie slurred out. Tara winced at the smell of Maggie’s breath. There was just no getting used to it. She guided Maggie to the sofa, where she flopped down. Tara went to the kitchen and filled a cup with water then handed it to Maggie.

“Here, Momma. Drink this.”

Maggie’s wobbly head glanced up at Tara. Maggie then raised her hand and with profanity flying from her mouth sent the cup crashing to the floor.

“I don’t want no water, gimme a real drink,” she demanded.

“There is none,” Tara replied.

“Girl, you aint worth nothin’. Get outta my house.”

“But, Momma,” Tara cried.

“You heard me! And don’t come back till you got me somethin’ to drink.”

Tara grabbed her coat and was on her way out the door. Her mind raced as she tried to devise a

way to get Maggie what she wanted. It was a Sunday and even if she'd had money all the liquor stores were closed.

The phone rang, welcoming a reprieve and hopefully reconsideration on Maggie's part.

"Get that phone, girl. You hear it ringing," Maggie yelled.

"Hello." Tara apprehensively answered.

"No!" she screamed. "Oh ,Granny," Tara cried out.

Tara dropped the phone and ran to her room.

"What's wrong wit' you, girl?" Maggie asked.

"He's dead! Grandpa's dead."

