

My Life, My Soul
Surviving, Healing And Thriving
After An Abusive Relationship
Part 1: Surviving

By Ivette Attaud

My Life, My Soul — Surviving, Healing and Thriving After An Abusive
Relationship — Part 1: Surviving

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This book is dedicated to all who have survived any form of abuse,
as well as to those who have lost their lives, including my
daughter Samantha Michelle.

Over twenty years ago, I stood at her grave on Fort Bragg
and promised that one day I would make sure her death would not be in
vain. Writing *My Life My Soul* is my way of keeping my promise
so she can rest in peace.

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Preface

As of the completion of this book, it has been over twenty years since I buried my daughter in Fort Bragg's Main Post cemetery and left my abusive husband. Almost ten years ago, I started to write down my deepest thoughts, feelings and experiences from my teenage years all the way to adulthood as a way of coping with the loneliness and isolation that is all too familiarly felt by not only those still in abusive relationships, but also those who have left. As with anyone who has experienced relationship abuse, you remember everything — every act of violence, every cruel word, every scar, what made you cry, where you were and what you were doing when these things happened. Initially, these thoughts were written for four reasons:

1. as a way of coping with the loneliness, isolation and grief from losing my daughter;
2. I wanted something to pass down to my children so they would have a better understanding of what happened to me;
3. that my children would use my experiences as a guide to help them in their lives; and
4. to finally let go so I can move on.

With the exception of the only friend I had while living in North Carolina, no one, including my family, really understood what I went through. When I tried to reach out for help to report the abuse:

- The Military Justice System labeled me a troublemaker and didn't believe me;
- the Legal System called me a liar and jeopardized the safety of me and my children;
- the Mental Health System labeled me with Borderline Personality Disorder and joined the Legal System in jeopardizing the safety of me and my children;
- the Medical Community patched me up and sent me back home to my abuser;
- my own family refused to believe me and told me “my place was with my husband;” and
- my own church condemned me, telling me that what happened to

me was God's punishment for my sins.

These thoughts, feelings and emotions, in graphic detail, have turned into what you now hold in your hands. When I made the decision to publish this book and include actual documents as well as excerpts, I wanted:

- The Military Justice System to know what the daily reality of someone being abused by an active duty service member is like;
- the Legal System to understand that there is more to addressing the issue of domestic violence and abuse than “whoever gets to court first and has the most money wins,”
- the Mental Health System to see how their decisions and diagnoses, without the appropriate follow-up, severely impacts the lives of the victim and his or her children long after the case is closed;
- the Medical Community to see that the number of bruises and broken bones that pass through their emergency rooms are more than statistics;
- the Religious Community to realize that you have to heal the body before the spirit;
- people whose loved ones are in an abusive relationship to recognize the signs of the type of severe depression that leads to suicide and to understand that family support is crucial in the healing process;
- parents of teens who are dating to recognize the red flags of an abusive relationship; and
- anyone who currently is in an abusive relationship or has left an abusive relationship to know that you are not alone and you can and will break the emotional and psychological chains that bind you.

Just a few years ago, I founded My Life My Soul, The Unspoken Journey of Life After Domestic Abuse to raise awareness and foster a better understanding of domestic violence, as well as raise awareness about teen dating violence. When I have been invited to various events to talk about domestic violence and abuse, I was emotionally and spiritually moved by scores of men and women who have been brave enough to share their story with me.

As a former member of an organization that advocated for the rights of women and children, I came in contact with women who, as of a few years

ago, had similar experiences. I have seen domestic violence laws evolve and change over the years, all designed to protect the rights of women and children. Yet thirty-two million men, women and children have experienced some form of physical violence, including sexual, emotional, psychological, financial or spiritual abuse. Some of those thirty-two million Americans have even lost their lives as a result, and those I will call the real victims.

In teen dating relationships, females aged 16 to 24 are more vulnerable to intimate partner violence than any age group. What is even more astounding is that 54% of parents admit they haven't spoken to their teen about dating violence.

Why is this happening? I believe that despite new laws being created to protect those who experience relationship abuse, a lack of coordinated resources, gender bias and prejudice is what enables millions of men, women, and children to fall through the cracks like my children and I did.

Without help from any of the systems designed to help those in abusive relationships, I had no other choice but to pull myself up by my bootstraps and move on because I didn't want to spend the rest of my life being angry, feeling isolated and ashamed of what happened to me. I wanted to be free from the emotional, physical and psychological chains of my abuser and move on to an improved way of living and a better quality of life for me and my children.

Deep down inside, a part of us wants to be happy and fulfilled. That healthy part of ourselves has been buried under years of neglect, abuse, criticism and other destructive forces. Change is never easy and it is always easier said than done, but a conscious effort to change has to be made in order to really know how enjoyable life can be after leaving an abusive relationship.

With inner strength and help from my Higher Power, I have learned to let go of the negativity in my life that weighed me down so I could move forward in a positive direction. Despite my physical and psychological scars, I have learned to love myself, embrace what has happened to me and hope that others can learn from my experience.

For anyone who has experienced abuse, surviving is not the first part of the healing journey — telling yourself you are a survivor is.

Your life and your soul depend on it.

Some names have been changed to protect the innocent and the guilty. Fictitious names are marked with an asterisk (*).

Acknowledgments

To my three children — you have been the light of my life, my core, my reason for surviving. There have been days that you have given me the strength to wake up and face my challenges, and I love all of you for that.

To Michael — thank you for your patience and your unwavering love.

To S. D. — thank you for always reminding me that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

To Kip Smith, my editor, and Atlantic Authoring — thank you so much for helping me with this difficult project.

Last, but not least, to my Higher Power — I couldn't have lived to tell my story if it weren't for you. You have carried me at times in my life when I felt I couldn't take another step.

Chapter 1

Fall 1983 — When We First Met

It was October 1983 when I first met him. At sixteen and in my junior year at Brooklyn Tech High School in New York, I was still a big kid at heart. Every winter, Bernice* and I looked forward to ice skating at Lasker Rink in Central Park because it was one of the few harmless activities our parents allowed us to do. The extent of my outdoor activities was limited to playing outside with the neighborhood kids, reading a book or going to Kingdom Hall. My mom used to tell me as a kid that “Boys and books don’t mix,” so at the ages of fifteen and sixteen, my sister Bernice and I were not allowed to date. By the middle of the school week, my sister and I talked about going skating on Saturday in Central Park, what we were going to wear and reminded each other to make sure to clean and polish our ice skates. We even talked about decorating our skates, so we grabbed all of the red and blue yarn our mother had so we could make pom-poms. On Friday when Bernice and I came home from school, we were in a good mood because we knew we were going ice skating the next day. By the next morning, we were so excited that we completely forgot that we had to go out in field service, which meant we had to knock on doors and spread the word of God. That morning, preaching and going out in field service was the last thing on our minds because we wanted to eat breakfast, watch cartoons, put on our skates, go out and have some fun. But in our family, God always came first and we had to do what our parents told us to do, so Bernice and I went out preaching with our parents. We knew that if we didn’t, we wouldn’t be able to go skating later.

When we got home from preaching around midday, my sister and I ate

lunch, quickly changed into our outfits, grabbed our skates, said goodbye to our parents and headed to the rink with a reminder from our mother that we had to be home by 7 p.m. We ran out of the apartment building we lived in on 111th Street and then walked across Central Park North and 110th Street and down the road towards the rink. As we climbed the steep hill and got closer, we heard the song “Maneater” by Hall and Oates blaring from the speakers.

“...Oh here she comes,
Watch out boy she’ll chew you up.
Oh here she comes,
She’s a maneater...”

As we heard the music from the oversized speakers on top of the rink, it made us even more excited to get inside and start skating. After waiting in line for what seemed like an eternity just to pay to get in, we finally got inside and found a locker to put our shoes in after we changed into our skates. I got my skates on first and waited for Bernice to put on hers. We stood up and tried to keep our balance as we walked down the ramp and up to the ice. When we got to the edge of the rink, we watched people fly past us while we waited for our chance to get on. I got on first and held on to the rail and Bernice followed, holding onto the rail as well. I noticed some kids wore Bauer hockey skates, while others wore black or white figure skates. Bauer hockey skates were nice, but they were expensive and we knew our parents wouldn’t have bought them for us. As soon as I saw an opening, I skated along the outside of the crowd and dared my sister to keep up with me. We skated for about an hour as we had fun listening to the music, when I told her I was getting off the ice to get something to eat from the concession stand.

Bernice loved french fries, so when I placed my order at the concession stand, I made sure to get enough so we could share. On my way back to the ice with the french fries and soda, I noticed that she was talking to a guy. From a distance, he looked to be about six-feet tall and light-skinned. As I got closer, I realized he wasn’t a bad looking guy, except for the fact that he desperately needed a haircut and a tissue to wipe the caked snot from his nose. I was curious about the guy my sister was talking to, so I walked up to her and offered her some french fries. As I was about to say something to

her, she interrupted me.

“Victor,* this is Ivette; Ivette, this is Victor.”

Then she skated off and left me standing there looking really stupid. I couldn’t believe she just set me up!

Victor and I stood on the ramp outside of the ice and talked for a bit, although I wasn’t used to guys showing any interest in me whatsoever. I was very shy as a kid and always got picked on in school because of the way I looked. But, I enjoyed the attention nonetheless. We talked about the schools we went to, the kinds of classes we had, the teachers we didn’t like. It turned out that he was the same age as me, lived a few blocks from us and went to a high school in midtown Manhattan which was the same school that my best friend went to. He mentioned he was in the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps program in his high school. When I asked him what that was, he said it was a program that prepared him for going into the military when he graduated. I told him I was a Jehovah’s Witness — nothing exciting there. He said he and his mother didn’t like Jehovah’s Witnesses and when they knocked on his door, he would turn his dog loose on them. His statement struck me as strange, so I asked him why he would be interested in me when he didn’t like Jehovah’s Witnesses. He told me that there was something “different” about me.

After finishing my fries and soda, I told Victor I was going back onto the ice to catch up with my sister. It wasn’t long before Victor got on the ice and caught up with both of us. We skated for a few more hours, laughing, playing and watching Victor show off by doing fancy tricks on the ice in his Bauer hockey skates. We were having so much fun that it was almost 7 p.m. before we remembered we had to be home for dinner. So, we made our way off the ice towards the ramp and walked to our lockers so we could change back into our shoes and Victor followed us into the locker room as well. He gave me his home phone number and then he asked for mine. Again I told him I was a Jehovah’s Witness, hoping that since he didn’t like them, that he would change his mind. He insisted I take his number anyway and said that he only wanted to be friends. I was afraid to give him my home number because our mom didn’t allow boys to call the house.

Secretly, I was excited at the prospect of having a boyfriend and it didn’t

matter to me that he wasn't a Jehovah's Witness. In my teenage mind, if a boy showed any interest in me, he wanted to be my boyfriend. As my sister and I left the rink and made our way back down the ramp out of Central Park, we talked about Victor and laughed at how he could have at least wiped the snot from his nose before he approached us. She told me there was something about him that she didn't like, and that for starters, he needed a haircut. Little did I know at the time that my sister would be on a long list of people who did not like Victor.

Later that week, I waited until our parents went to sleep and worked up the nerve to call Victor. His mother Susan* answered the phone and I politely asked for him, as I was taught to do by my parents when I called someone else's house. Then she screamed for Victor to pick up the phone. After a few minutes, he got on the phone and we continued our conversation from the weekend at the rink. In listening to him, I noticed that he liked to brag about the things he had and what his mother bought him — the latest this, the best that. He wasn't an only child; he had a six-year old sister from his mother's previous relationship. I found out years later that his mother had never married his father. Victor was the product of an affair between his 16-year old mother and his 35-year old father, who at the time, was married with six kids. When Susan got pregnant with Victor, his father left and went back to his wife and children in Colorado. He mentioned to me that his father never paid child support and when he left, his mother was so poor that she had to buy the most inexpensive meat from the supermarket. Victor resented him for that until the day his father drew his last breath.

It wasn't long before his mother picked up the other phone in the house and broke into our conversation.

"Victor, get off the goddamned phone!" I heard him sigh.

"Susan, I'm not done yet. I'll get off the phone when I feel like it!"

I was shocked! How could he talk to his mother like that? I thought that his response to his mother was a bit strange and disrespectful, because my sister and I could never have yelled at our parents or called them by their first names and live to tell about it! I found his self-confidence to be admirable, although at the time, I didn't know the difference between being cocky and being self-confident. I took the hint from his mother and told

him I was getting off the phone and would talk to him later because I had homework to do. Besides, I didn't want to be the cause of an argument between him and his mother. His mother telling him to get off the phone with me was such a regular occurrence during our phone conversations that I could swear she didn't like me.

Victor and I talked on the phone everyday to the point that my mother noticed it and said something.

"Who are you talking to?" she asked.

"A friend from school," I replied.

"Why do you need to talk to your friend every night? Don't you see her every day in school?" She shook her head as she walked away from me.

Of course, my mother would think it was a girl I was talking to. When I spoke to Victor on the phone, I did everything I could to make sure she didn't find out that I was talking to a boy.

Victor surprised me one day by inviting me to his house to meet his mother. When I got there, Susan opened the door and when she did, I immediately sensed that she didn't like me. Their apartment was a two-bedroom in a high-rise pre-war building, a block away from Central Park on the west side of Harlem, with a doorman. Victor would always say that he didn't live in Harlem; that he lived on the "Upper West Side," as if "Harlem" was a curse word. Central Harlem begins at 110th Street at Central Park North, Spanish Harlem extends East Harlem's boundaries south to 96th Street, and the "Upper West Side" is between Central Park and the Hudson River and runs from 59th Street to 125th Street. I guess he felt living on the Upper West Side meant he lived in a better place than me. But that didn't matter, because to me, Harlem was and always will be my home!

Compared to where I lived with my family, their apartment was really small. The walls were painted an off-white color with brown carpeting on the floor. His mother's room was also small and cluttered while Victor slept in the master bedroom. His mother then turned the small living room into a bedroom for his little sister. The kitchen was even smaller, with just enough room to walk in, turn around and walk right out. I walked into the kitchen where Susan was and felt claustrophobic because I was used to our larger kitchen. I didn't say much while I was there, unless Susan asked me a question and I answered it. She seemed a bit crass, talking loud and fast and

cursing like a sailor, which made me uncomfortable as well. I couldn't wait to leave and after about two hours, Victor offered to walk me home.

As we walked, Victor did most of the talking. Despite his unusual family life, Victor tried to impress me by telling me that his family had a lot of money. He talked about how his mother was driven home from work every night in a limousine and she would give him money to buy expensive things. From the perspective of a teenager, I didn't care about that because he was confident in ways that I wasn't and that was one of the things that made him attractive to me.

A couple of weeks later, I was working on a book report for school that was due the following week and planned a trip to the library on 115th Street to do some research. Victor told he had a book report to do too, so I suggested that we make a date and go to the library together. He told me he couldn't, that he had a part-time job after school and wanted to know if I could do the research for him. At the time, I really didn't see a problem with it and I liked him, so I said I would do it. Besides, I couldn't think of a reason not to do it. Later in the week, I went to the library and not only did I do the research for my book report, but his too. When I got back home from the library, I called the pizza shop where he worked to let him know he could pick up the research. His response shocked me.

"Thanks for doing the research for me, but I don't have time to write it. Could you write it for me?"

How could he have the nerve to ask me something like that? How was he managing his school work before I came along? My parents always taught us to work hard, do our homework, take responsibility for our own work and get good grades. I wasn't confrontational as a kid, always did what was asked of me and wasn't taught how to say "no." After arguing back and forth, I finally gave in and said I would write the report for him. Looking back, I guess I did that because I really wanted him to like me. I managed to write the report and get it to him so he could hand it in. When he did, his teacher suspected nothing and gave him (or should I say me) an "A" on the report.

I really liked Victor and wanted to introduce him to my parents but was nervous about the idea. As a Jehovah's Witness, you were taught that when you date, you should be ready to get married. If I introduced him to my

parents, would they expect him to marry me? After thinking about it for some time, I finally got up the nerve to tell my mom about him. Of course she asked me if he was a Jehovah's Witness and I told her "No." Then she surprised me by inviting him to our house for dinner! My mom continued to ask me more questions about Victor: where he lived, went to school and how old he was. Although her questions were warranted, I was a bit apprehensive since that was the first time I actually talked to her about a boy I liked. She even agreed to cook one of my favorite meals, which was fried chicken, red rice, collard greens, potato salad and iced tea. Excited, I called Victor to invite him over to our house that weekend and told him what we were having for dinner. He sounded excited about it too and said he would be there.

My mother was from South Carolina and therefore from the very "old school" and that meant instilling in us the traditional female roles.

"You have to learn how to cook, clean and keep house. Men don't want no woman who can't cook and clean and keep house."

Between what my mother instilled in me and being raised as a Jehovah's Witness, where the wife's place was to be subservient to her husband, I had no reason to believe anything was wrong with that belief system. What reinforced my belief system was that within the Jehovah's Witnesses organization, only men could hold leadership positions in the Kingdom Hall and the women's role was to support them. I wanted to show Victor that I could be a good wife, so in anticipation of Victor's coming over later that day, I picked a room to clean and asked my sister to help me. She protested the whole time, mumbling under her breath so our mother wouldn't hear.

"Why do I have to help you? He's not MY boyfriend."

Like most siblings, I had to bribe her by giving up some of my allowance so she would shut up and help me.

My younger sister and I were born in the mid-60s and raised in Harlem. We lived on 114th Street between Lenox Avenue and St. Nicholas on the fifth floor of a tenement. My mother lived there for quite some time before we were born, having moved to New York from South Carolina in the 1950s and living with my grandmother's sister Eve.* My mother had three children that she raised while she lived in that apartment long after she and her first husband divorced. It was a spacious apartment with three

bedrooms, a formal dining room with French doors and a long hallway. Our living room was a decent size, with 70s style multi-colored furniture covered in plastic and a multi-colored brown shag rug on the floor. We also had a floor model television along with a big cabinet that contained a record player and in order to play records, you had to lift the top off the whole cabinet. The kitchen was large enough for a kitchen table, washing machine, china cabinet, plenty of walking room and even a small walk-in pantry right off the kitchen where my mother kept the food. The bathroom was a decent size as well with a large, deep, white clawfoot bathtub. After divorcing her first husband, she eventually met and married my father who came to New York from Guadeloupe, French West Indies. I was born first and my sister followed eighteen months later. We lived there until I was thirteen years old, when developers came and moved everyone out so they could demolish the buildings and make way for a new high-rise apartment building. Today, the Harlem of my childhood is gone, with its mom-and-pop stores and other small businesses and was replaced by high-priced, high-rise apartment buildings and chain stores.

At the time, my mother wasn't too happy about leaving that apartment, not only for the years of memories there, but also that her rent was only \$42.55 a month! Eventually, she and my father found an apartment on 111th street, across the street from Central Park right at the corner where St. Nicholas meets Lenox Avenue. The new apartment was just as big as our old one and even better that it was on the first floor. Bernice and I really liked the new apartment, with its fifteen-foot ceilings, hardwood floors, unusually tall windows and big rooms. It was when I had a scarf tied around my head, on my hands and knees scrubbing the hardwood floor with a brush and a bucket of water to prepare for Victor's visit, that I actually resented living in such a big apartment.

Victor was going to be there soon, so I yelled at Bernice to hurry up and finish cleaning. While I took the floor through another rinse, or "rinch" as my grandmother would say, I thought about whether my parents would like him or not. Just as I was drying the floor, the door bell rang. I panicked because I didn't have enough time to change my clothes, so I bit the bullet and went to answer the door dressed as the house slave. As I opened the door, the smell of fried chicken blew right past me and hit Victor in the

face. He was about to walk in, but had to steady himself first because he laughed at how I was dressed. I called him stupid in return and told him I was dressed like that because I was cleaning the house. I guess he didn't know about "gettin' down" and cleaning like that. I ignored his laughing as we walked down the hallway towards the kitchen where my mom put the finishing touches of sliced boiled egg and paprika on top of the potato salad. When I called out to her, she turned around and I introduced her to Victor. He was very respectful to her as he shook her hand and said hello. When he did that, she looked at me with a wide-eyed look and I could tell by that look that she was glad he was well-mannered, even though he wasn't the same religion as me. We continued walking down the hallway through the dining room into the living room, where my dad relaxed on the couch, watching television and drinking his favorite Reingold beer. I introduced Victor to my father and he shook his hand as well. My father wasn't as strict about religion as my mother was and thinking back to that time, I don't think he cared too much for it because he was born a Catholic and when he met my mom, he converted to a Jehovah's Witness. Victor and I sat on the couch and watched TV with my dad while we waited for the food to be done. Unlike me, Bernice had time to change out of her house clothes and put on something more presentable before she came into the living room to say hi to Victor. Another ten minutes went by before my mother came into the living room and told us the food was ready. In reinforcing traditional female roles, my mother fixed my dad's plate and then asked me if I would fix Victor's plate. Victor seemed surprised that my mom served my dad first, but that was how we did things at home. Bernice fixed her plate, then I fixed Victor's plate and we all sat down at the dining room table to eat. When Victor saw the fried chicken, red rice, collard greens and potato salad on his plate, he slowly pushed the plate away as if he didn't want to eat it.

"I'm sorry ma'am, but I don't eat yellow potato salad."

My mother raised one eyebrow in disbelief at what he said.

"What do you mean, you don't eat yellow potato salad? Don't you eat potato salad at home?"

"Yes I do ma'am, but the potato salad my mother makes is white."

"Victor it's the mustard that makes it yellow," my mother said, as if that

was something he should have already known.

He turned up his lip and said his mother never put mustard in her potato salad, that hers was white. My mom was shocked because being from the South, she never knew potato salad to be made any other way than with mustard.

She put her hands on her hips and said “Just try it.”

He tried it and he liked the food so much that before long, his plate was clean. We stayed at the table and talked and laughed for a quite a while before it was time for Victor to go home. As he was leaving, he told my parents he enjoyed the food and had a good time. I walked him to the door, kissed him goodbye and said we would talk later. As I walked back down the hallway, I got the feeling that Victor was a little uncomfortable with us sitting at the table as a family, as if he wasn’t used to that.

As Christmas was right around the corner, Victor called to say that he wanted to see me on Christmas Eve and that he had a surprise for me. I was excited at the prospect of getting a gift from him because it was the first time a boy had given me something, and that made me feel very special. When Victor came to visit me on Christmas Eve, he gave me a small box covered with Christmas wrapping paper. Inside was a writing pen with blue ink that smelled like perfume. It was a small, inexpensive gift, but I cared more about the fact that he gave me something than how much it cost. Although I was not raised to be materialistic, I noticed that Victor spent a lot of money on himself, but when it came to spending money on others, he was cheap.

For several months, Victor and I were like most teenage boyfriends and girlfriends, talking on the phone until late at night during the week and seeing each other on the weekends. We didn’t really go out on “dates” per se, but he would either come by the house or he, my sister and I would spend time together walking our two Chihuahuas in Central Park. My mom once told me that she would rather have Victor come to the house to see me than my “going out in the street” to meet him. It was fun being around him and for a while, our relationship didn’t go passed kissing because I didn’t want the relationship to go any further. I didn’t know anything about sex and conversations with my mother about sex, dating and relationships were pretty much short and sweet because she was uncomfortable talking

about it. Instead, she made short, clipped statements such as:

“Boys and books don’t mix.”

“A man only wants you for one thing and, once he gets what he wants, he’ll dump you.”

“You give him what you got between your legs and once he gets it, he’ll take advantage of you.”

“You have to learn how to cook, clean and keep house because a man won’t want you if you don’t.”

Talk about confusing! But I guess those were the life lessons my mother learned and thought the only thing left to do was to pass them on to us.

One day, Victor suggested we play hookey from school and I come over to his house, with the reassurance that his mom would be at work. I was a “good little girl” and never played hookey before, but the thrill of getting caught would be fun, so I agreed to go to his house. He told me he made an arrangement with the doorman to ring the apartment bell if his mother came home early and that would give him enough time to get me out of the house. Being naïve and a virgin, I thought that we would hang out and talk, as having sex was the last thing on my mind because I was taught that you don’t have sex until you’re married. But when I got there, we ended up having sex after all. Afterwards, Victor called me his “little virgin” and said those three words that every young woman wants to hear from her boyfriend — I LOVE YOU.

Afterwards, as I lay in the bed with Victor, I thought to myself that having sex with him was okay since we were dating. He said he loved me so that meant it would only be a matter of time before he asked me to marry him, right?

I didn’t realize at the time how having a romanticized view of my relationship with Victor would severely distort my judgment.

Chapter 2

Spring 1984 — Young Love

Dating Victor made me feel like a grownup and it was nice to have someone care about me. I liked Victor because he was confident, or so I thought, and his mother let him do a lot of things that my mother wouldn't let me do. Growing up, my parents never told me that one day I would fall in love. I wasn't taught about what being in love feels like, or that there was a big difference between liking someone and loving them. So I thought that what transpired between Victor and me was normal. Although we didn't do things like go to the movies or go out to eat, it was nice to have someone other than my parents to show me affection.

After dating for a while, Victor became preoccupied with the idea that I was cheating on him. Although I reassured him I wasn't, I also noticed that he never volunteered any information as to whether he was faithful to me or not.

"You wouldn't cheat on me, would you Ivette?"

"No, Victor. I would never cheat on you." And that was the extent of those conversations.

Victor told me once that he knew a few guys that went to my high school and although I asked who they were, he never revealed their names to me.

"That's not for you to know," he would say.

Sometimes, he would ask me about what happened at school just to see if I was telling him the truth or not. I thought it was because he wanted to know how my day went, but this was a red flag that I should have paid attention to, but didn't.

Victor came to my house one day after I got home from school.

“I heard you were talking to some guy today. What’s his name?” Victor asked, as if he couldn’t remember the guy’s name.

“What are you talking about?” I replied.

I quickly thought back on everything I had done that day. I didn’t see anything wrong with what he asked me, since he was my boyfriend and felt he had a right to ask me those type of questions. Since Victor was familiar with the teachings of Jehovah’s Witnesses, he knew that a man couldn’t date you unless he had plans to marry you. So, it felt like the normal course of the relationship to assume that since we dated and started having sex that Victor would eventually marry me. I was also preoccupied with wanting to prove to him that I was capable of being a good wife and that I was an honest person, so I didn’t mind telling him what I did during the course of the day.

“I stopped and talked to this one and that one. What are you saying?” I asked him.

“I’m saying I don’t want you talking to any guys. It makes me angry when you talk to other guys. My friend knew who you were and told me he saw you talking to some guy on the football team.”

Victor was right about that because I did talk to a guy who was in my class and was on the football team. It upset me that he had someone spying on me and although I asked him who this “friend” was, Victor never did tell me. It wasn’t long before I started to feel isolated and uncomfortable talking to anyone in school because whoever this “friend” was, he was reporting everything I did back to Victor. I didn’t think it was fair that Victor knew what I did in school but didn’t volunteer any information about his daily activities. My instincts told me that something with Victor wasn’t quite right. When I was a teenager, I didn’t know what “instincts” were, but learned the hard way that I should always trust them. So, I called my friend Maxine,* who was my best friend since we were in first grade. We both went to the Kingdom Hall, always went to each others’ houses and our parents knew each other as well.

“You’ve seen Victor at school, right?” I asked her.

“Yeah, I’ve seen him at school,” she replied.

“Have you seen him talking to other girls?”

“I’m not sure,” she replied.

I told her about the conversation Victor and I had earlier. I got the feeling that she didn’t like him and saw what he did in school, but didn’t want to tell me. Then she came up with an idea.

“You could sneak into my school. I know where a couple of Victor’s classes are and you don’t need identification to get in. I know a few of the security guards and a side door you could sneak into.”

Perfect! I’ll sneak into Victor’s school and see who HE’S talking to! Maxine and I talked about the details of the plan — what day, what time and how we would do it. The only thing I didn’t know was where I was going to go after that! I couldn’t stay in her school all day!

The day came for me to sneak into Victor’s school and spy on him. Maxine let me in the side door like she said she would. It was fun ducking in and out of stairwells and trying not to get caught by the school’s security guards. When Maxine showed me where Victor’s class was, we snuck up to a corner in the hallway and were startled by a thundering male voice that nearly shook us out of our skins.

“What are you girls doing in the hallway?”

The voice came from a school security that was behind us. That’s it — I’m going to get arrested for trespassing. How am I going to explain this episode to my parents? I thought. But Maxine was a little more quick-thinking than I was.

“She’s new in school, so I was just showing her around,” she said to him.

To keep us from getting in trouble, Maxine laughed and flirted with the security guard. Then she walked back towards me.

“It’s okay, he’s not going to bother us.”

I was glad that Maxine distracted the security guard so I wouldn’t get kicked out of the school and arrested for trespassing. We hung out for the rest of the day while she skipped classes to help me find the next place to hide. Maxine took me to an empty classroom where I could hide for about half an hour until school was over. She told me she had to hand in homework for one of her classes and would meet me in the empty classroom, which was across from where Victor’s Jr. ROTC class was. Victor didn’t know that Maxine and I were best friends and I wanted to

keep it that way. If he could have a spy in my school, I could have one in his! When she came back to the classroom, we peeked through the window of the closed door and giggled when Victor showed up. Then we watched as he talked to other junior recruits in his class when a girl walked up to Victor and gave him a kiss! Maxine and I stopped giggling and looked at each other.

“Do you know who that bitch is?” I asked Maxine.

“I sure do. Her name is Maxine too. Maxine Williams.”* Gotcha! I thought as I turned to Maxine.

“If he thinks he can watch what I do so he can do what he wants, he’s crazy!”

At that moment, I thought that Victor was really stupid for wanting to keep tabs on me and not thinking for one moment I might be keeping tabs on him! We watched as Victor talked with the other Maxine for a bit, then he took her around the corner from the classroom and they kissed some more! The sight of watching him with someone else was unbearable. I wanted to run out of my hiding space and punch that girl and Victor in the face! Maxine must have sensed what I was going to do because she grabbed my arm.

“Ivette, don’t do that now! Wait until Victor gets to your house, then confront him!”

What Maxine said made sense. I decided to be patient and wait until Victor got to my house. Then, I was going to break up with him.

Victor came to my house a couple of days later. As I let him in through the door, he tried to kiss me and I turned my cheek.

“Don’t kiss me!” I said to him under my breath.

I walked away from him towards the living room and sat down.

“What’s wrong with you, Ivette?”

He acted as if he did nothing wrong. After being with Victor for a while, I got to know that look — it was as if part of him was surprised and part of him tried not to laugh. I couldn’t hold it in anymore, so I came right out with it.

“Who is Maxine?”

“Who?” he asked sheepishly. I started getting mad all over again.

“Maxine? Maxine your friend?” he replied.

Geez, how did he know that Maxine and I were friends? That's when I remembered my friend's name was the same as his other girlfriend. I ignored his question.

"I HEAR you and Maxine are real lovey-dovey these days!" I yelled at him.

Victor had a surprised look on his face before he raised his voice.

"How DARE you accuse me of messing around with your friend!"

I put my hand in his face to stop him from talking.

"MAXINE WILLIAMS, YOU ASSHOLE! Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about! You didn't have a problem with someone spying on me in my school and reporting back to you. Only thing is, I SAW you and Maxine kissing!"

Victor's facial expression changed and the color in his face reddened.

"You couldn't have seen me and Maxine kissing! I bet your slut friend Maxine told you!" He was so angry he looked like he wanted to hit me.

"No, Victor, I saw you with my own eyes! You know what, you make a choice. It's either me or Maxine!"

Victor had a habit of lying, even when the truth was presented to him. I wanted Victor to leave right then and there, but instead, he sat down on the couch as fake tears welled up in his eyes.

"You don't have the right to spy on me! Maxine is just a friend!" He said.

He didn't believe that I actually saw him. I wasn't about to tell him how I got into his school. That would be my little secret. Victor continued talking through his fake tears.

"I can't believe you don't trust me! I love you! You're my little virgin! I don't know what I would do if I lost you!"

I stared at Victor. I felt my anger subside as he sat on the couch with tears streaming down his face while telling me how much he loved me. By saying that, Victor turned the tables and shifted the blame on me. Then, while tears welled up in my eyes, I actually felt ashamed for accusing Victor in the first place. After a brief thirty-minute breakup, Victor and I were together again.

Chapter 3

Summer 1984 — The First Time

It wasn't until my grades slipped and I was in danger of not graduating from high school that I realized how preoccupied I was with Victor. Because everything between us happened so gradually, I couldn't see that I was vulnerable to being manipulated and controlled by him. So, I spent my last semester in high school going to day school, night school and summer school just to graduate on time. As I signed up for summer school, I could hear my mother's voice in my head: "boys and books don't mix."

It was almost June and our respective proms were right around the corner. I was so sure Victor would take me to my prom but, to my disappointment, he never asked. So, I decided I would go to my prom alone and waited a few weeks for my mom to mention it, but she never did. I got tired of waiting because the money for the prom was due soon, so I approached her while she washed dishes.

"Ma, can I go to my prom?" I asked, then waited nervously for her to answer.

"What day is it on?" she asked.

I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. I knew what she was leading up to.

"Wednesday," I said in a mumble.

"You know we go to the Kingdom Hall on Wednesday nights. You don't have any business going to your prom and listening to that worldly music and that will interfere with you serving the Lord! And nothing should come between you and the Lord!"

I walked away from her with tears in my eyes. Why couldn't I do things like other kids? Not being able to go to my prom because I had to go to the Kingdom Hall was one of many things from my childhood that haunted me as an adult.

Feeling depressed, I called Victor's house to see if he was still going to his prom, but he wasn't there and Susan picked up the phone instead.

"Victor's not here Ivette. He ran to the store for me. Wait a minute, he just came in the door. Victor, go and try on the tux I just bought for you. I'll talk to Ivette while you try it on."

In the meantime, Susan and I made small talk. I heard Victor protesting in the background about trying on the tux.

"Come in here and let me see you," Susan yelled at Victor.

"Damn, he looks good, Ivette. I think I'm going to have to take his pants back to the store and exchange them for a larger size. They're so tight you can see how big his dick is!"

Susan laughed hysterically, but I didn't think a comment like that was funny. Susan had no boundaries to what she said and did, and in turn, Victor didn't have any boundaries either. Then I knew where Victor got his warped sense of humor from. I pulled the phone away from my ear and stared at it as I thought that there was something wrong with that woman to talk about her son like that. I didn't like it when Susan got a kick out of cursing like a sailor just to shock me. I didn't like her language because we didn't talk like that at my house, but for her and Victor, it was normal. I couldn't take listening to her anymore, so I told Susan to have Victor call me when he was done. Besides, it was getting more and more upsetting for me to know I wasn't going to the prom and he was.

When Victor called back some time later, I asked if I could see him the next day which was Saturday, and he agreed to come by. I thought I would cheer myself up by spending some time with him, so when we went out on Saturday, we talked about our plans after high school. Brooklyn Tech was a prestigious college-bound high school and I went there not because I wanted to, but because I passed the test. I come from a generation where a high school diploma was all you needed to get a good job and my parents did not encourage us to further our education. What was worse was that Jehovah's Witnesses frowned upon anything that would "interfere with

serving the Lord,” including going to college. Victor, on the other hand, wanted to go into the military since he really liked being a part of Jr. ROTC in high school. After he got out of the military, he said he wanted to be a police officer. I told him that my immediate plans entailed graduating high school and getting a job. We talked for a while in the park and shared ideas about our plans for the future. It was a warm sunny day and we saw people walking their dogs, people playing loud music on their boom boxes, some rode their bikes while others jogged or played with their kids in the park. The ice skating rink where we first met was used as a pool in the summertime and Victor and I sat on a bench near the entrance to the pool. We stood up and watched as the workers swept, painted the pool and removed the rubber flooring left from the winter. I let my dogs off their leashes so they could run around while Victor and I talked, when in the middle of my saying something, he hauled off and slapped me so hard that he knocked my earring out of my ear. My face stung and while I stood there dumbfounded, I wondered how he could have the nerve to hit me like that. As he stared at me, I noticed his eyes darting to the left and right as if he was checking to see if someone was watching him. Then, out of the blue, he screamed to the top of his lungs.

“Don’t you ever fuckin’ talk to me that way! Ever!”

My two Chihuahuas, being so protective of me, ran towards Victor and barked at him because they heard his yelling. With the left side of my face still stinging, I turned slowly to look in the direction he looked in and saw a couple of guys within earshot of us. They looked at us and turned away as if acknowledging that what Victor had done was right.

“Now pick up your goddamned earring!” he screamed.

I knew Victor liked to show off but this was ridiculous! Still holding my face and fighting back tears because I was angry, I quickly assessed the situation and what Victor was trying to do. He was showing off for those guys and I was sure he didn’t even know them! I couldn’t understand why Victor felt he had to prove his manhood to those strange men by hitting me in the first place. I should have seen this as a sign that Victor had the capacity to be an abuser when he became an adult.

Then he repeated himself.

“Pick that shit up, I said!”

I bent down to pick up my earring and as I began to stand up, I curled my right hand into a fist and shot it straight up into Victor's chin.

"How dare you fuckin' hit me!" I said to the top of my lungs.

I wasn't taught to fight but I was definitely taught how to defend myself. Victor stood there shocked as he held his bloody mouth because when I punched him in his chin, he bit his tongue. He was so shocked that I hit him back that he couldn't talk. Then I continued to yell at him.

"Nobody hits me! You are NOT my father and my father NEVER laid a hand on me! I don't ever want to see you again, you fuckin' asshole!"

By then my dogs were getting out of control, as they barked and jumped around because we were fighting. I managed to get them calmed down enough to put them back on their leashes and walked out of the park towards my house. I walked past those same guys that saw Victor hit me and hoped they might have said "that wasn't right," or "he shouldn't have done that." But instead, they said nothing.

Victor followed me and called for me to stop.

"Ivette, stop! Wait a minute! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to hit you!"

What in the Hell was he thinking? He hits me then says he's sorry? I came to the conclusion that Victor was testing the waters to see if he could get away with hitting me.

His pleas fell on deaf ears as I stormed down the ramp and out of the park. Victor caught up with me and grabbed my arm as he tried to keep me from walking any further.

"Ivette, I'm very sorry. I don't know what happened."

"You hit me! That's what happened! You didn't have any right to hit me. I didn't do anything to you!" I yelled at him.

Victor continued to plead with me. "I'm sorry Ivette, please don't leave me."

I snatched my arm away from him and continued walking when he grabbed me by the arm again and tried to kiss me. I was so disgusted that I pushed him away. Then he laughed and rubbed his chin.

"I gotta tell ya though — you've got one hell of a right hook!"

What was wrong with this guy to think that hitting me was funny? I ignored him as I continued to walk towards my house with him following me all the way to my building. I told him again that I didn't want to see him

anymore and went inside my house, leaving him standing on the stoop. Once I got inside, I let the dogs off their leashes and went to my room. Then I plopped down on my bed, still reeling from everything that happened. I decided not to tell anyone about that incident — not even my mother.

I was conflicted as to whether I should forgive Victor or not, because his actions didn't make sense to me. Part of me didn't want to be with him anymore and part of me thought that this was an isolated incident — after all, he did apologize for hitting me. Is this how someone treats you when they like you? Hit you then say "I'm sorry?" In my head, I made excuses for Victor. There was no one I could talk to about what he did to me, at least no one that I could trust. I was determined not to have any more to do with Victor, but for several days, he called me to beg my forgiveness and wore down my resolve in the process. So, I eventually forgave him. It never occurred to me at that time that Victor's actions were a prelude to worse things that were to come.

As the summer wound down, I finished summer school, passed all my classes and received my diploma. Victor, on the other hand, was packing to go to Basic Training at Fort Dix in New Jersey for nine weeks. During that time, we talked constantly on the phone, and he asked me over and over again not to cheat on him while he was in Basic Training.

"I'm going to need you to be there for me because Basic Training is hard. Please don't cheat on me. I love you and you will always be my little virgin. It would be hard for me to concentrate on finishing Basic Training if I thought you were cheating on me."

I had such a romanticized view of my relationship with Victor that I couldn't see the forest for the trees. I thought it was romantic that he told me he loved me and it made me feel special. I also felt that I needed to prove to him that I would make a good wife because that's what I was raised to do — to be a good wife. It never occurred to me why Victor was so preoccupied with my cheating on him and made me responsible for what he could or couldn't do.

I felt good knowing that he needed my help to get him through Basic Training, so I assured him I would stay faithful to him. I had mixed feelings at the time because I was sad that he was leaving, glad he told me he loved

me, yet still mad at him for hitting me weeks earlier. He promised he would call me as much as he could. When Victor left for Basic Training in August, I focused on finding a job so I wouldn't be depressed about being without him.

Note from the author:

I hope you enjoyed the free preview. You can purchase your copy of the first part of this series at www.mylifemysoul.com

Please direct any comments, review, and questions to ivetteattaud@mylifemysoul.com