

Part One

Life is full of surprises and serendipity. Being open to unexpected turns in the road is an important part of success. If you try to plan every step, you may miss those wonderful twists and turns. Just find your next adventure-do it well, enjoy it-and then, not now, think about what comes next...

Condoleeza Rice

To fear love is to fear life, and those who fear life are already dead...

Bertrand Russell

1

We all have incidents in our lives that change us; some for the good and others for the bad. Then there are those events that make us the people we are destined to become. These changes may take weeks, months, or even years, but when they do come, they either come at us head-on or tackle us from behind. What changed my life had tackled me as though I was a quarterback, and life — the defense lineman — just itching to toss me on my ass.

Birthdays are not always memorable, especially for a young child, but I remember my sixth birthday vividly. We moved into the house I grew to love that day. When I first saw my new bedroom, I pestered my mom into painting the ceiling as though it was the sky, complete with stars that sparkled when the lights were turned off. Granted, my mother was no Leonardo da Vinci, but the woman had the skills to create the resemblance of a magnificent nighttime sky.

I would often lie in bed at night staring up at my stars, thinking each one was like a dream come true and if only I could reach up and grab one. In my mind's eye, as I gazed up at them, they twinkled and helped me sleep better.

My sister's bedroom was just down the hall from mine. Older than me by two years, she was the kind of sister who would never let me forget she was the eldest, not for a minute. She also thought she was superior. As you can tell, we didn't get along and to this day we still have our differences. I truly believed she hated me, well, that's what I sensed from

her. When we were near each other, the feeling of friction was so strong that I thought the sparks we created might ignite and burst into flames at any moment. Hate can be like that: the longer it's harbored, the more flammable it becomes.

She always seemed so much smarter than me. I could always tell she was my dad's favorite, well, that was my impression growing up. No matter what I did, it was never good enough for him. I guess it's something siblings and children go through as they grow up together.

After I turned fourteen, we moved to a new house in a different town far away from everything we knew and loved; everything that felt right. My sister stopped talking to me on the same day. Her verbal communication became that of a caveman with grunts and groans over anything and everything I said. Apparently, it was my fault she had to leave her friends behind. Reflecting on my life-changing incident, I should have been more careful that night. I should have trusted my gut feeling.

A car passed as I turned towards the road, its muffler spitting out gray smoke that filled the pre-summer air. My eyes caught a glimpse of the *FOR SALE* sign hammered into the front lawn with a *SOLD* sticker across the front. I strolled up the stone walk to the front door. The lilac bushes planted in the garden gave off a sweet smell, an enticing aroma.

I stood still, musing if this house could talk and tell you about all the memories we shared here, good and bad. It was nearly twenty-six years since I had seen this house, my old home. The house is now painted an olive green which is a far cry from the buckskin brown I remembered. I knew I would come back to our old house one day, but I never thought I would buy it.



I jingled the keys in my hand and unlocked the door, entering with mixed emotions. Everything looked just as I had imagined it. I stood in the foyer and soaked up all my old memories.

Still feeling uneasy, I walked into the living room. The floodgates opened and reminiscences flew around my mind. I recalled the dark brown sofa and loveseat we had. Those pieces of furniture always felt like an old pair of corduroy jeans; soft to the touch and comfortable against the flesh of my legs.

The walls were still painted a light pineapple yellow, so that hadn't changed. We would often sit for hours in this room playing games and watching television. The current carpet, a beige Berber with lighter shades of background colors, were pleasing to the eye, not like the light blue shag we had.

In the kitchen at the rear of the house, I could still visualize my mother cooking us meals, and baking cookies and pies. She was a woman of multiple household talents. As a child, I spent many hours doing my homework at the dining room table while helping my mom cook in between. I had an inexplicable connection to my mother. No matter what was on my mind, she would always sit down and listen to me. She never interrupted me or even tried to force her opinions on me. We were closer than my sister and me.



I walked out of the kitchen and up the oak stairs and headed to my old room which was the last door at the end of the hallway. The door was closed and the hinges squeaked as I turned the knob. I flicked on the light and glanced around. My mind flashed back to a time when I sat on my

bed reading my favorite novel, *Misery* by Stephen King. My hair at the time was long, thick, and black; I always wore it tied back in a braid my mother wove for me every morning.

My heart raced, memories knocked me back into the past as I fought to stay in the present. All at once, I remembered lying on my bed, crying the day after my incident. I didn't tell my parents what happened that night, at least not right away. I guess I was ashamed and always thought I could've done something to prevent it.

I heard a car door shut. Glancing out of the window, I jogged down the stairs and wiped the tears from my face — I hadn't realized I was crying. I composed myself before opening the door.

"Hey Sis, glad you could come over and see me."

"Deanna, I wouldn't miss this day for a million dollars. So, are the papers signed? Is this house yours now?"

"Yes, I signed them this morning." A smile formed on my lips.

We hugged and I moved aside to let her enter. It was months since I saw her last. With her blonde hair cut just above her ears, I noticed she looked much thinner now. We lived in different towns, not close, maybe two hours apart. For some reason we never made the time to get together and bond like sisters should. Maybe now that I had bought this house, we could start over and become the sisters we should've been many years ago; communicating and accepting each other for who we are, with love and understanding.

"Wow, it's been such a long time since I was here."

"Me too, but it feels good to be back in our house again."

"Where's Brent?"

"Still at school. He has finals this week and then he'll graduate from eighth grade. He's excited about moving and going to high school here."

“He’ll love our school.” Her smile faded into a frown, perhaps she was reminiscing as well.

I wonder if she still blames me for the family having to move all those years ago. I hoped she would forgive me one day.

I nodded. “It’s a good school. The movers will be here on Friday. Will you be around to help us unpack?”

“You know I will.” Sheila nearly ran up the stairs.

I bet our parents would be proud I have moved back here and that we are spending more time together.

I’ve thought about them often since their sudden death. The air was brisk that fall morning and I was out on my usual jog when fire trucks raced by me, sirens blaring. I followed them as the red truck turned down my parents’ street. Rounding the corner, I felt the heat against my skin; the flames burning hot and fast. It was then I realized it was their house on fire. When I ran up the driveway, a police officer grabbed me and held me back. I kicked and screamed as he gripped me tighter. I pleaded with him, to let me try to save them, but he said there was nothing either of us could do, the fire was too intense to go in.

I watched as the firefighters tried to extinguish the flames. In the end, the house had burned to the ground leaving nothing but charred wood and cinders. When the firefighters were able to continue after the ashes had cooled, they found what was left of my parents in their bed. To this day I wish I hadn’t been there to see it — to see them dead and burned beyond recognition.

I hurried up the stairs to join my sister. She stood inside the doorway of her old room as though in a trance. I don’t think she knew I was standing there.

“...Everything okay with you?” I blurted, startling her.

“Yeah, I’m fine, I was just remembering all the times I spent in this room. It feels like yesterday.” I watched her wipe away tears. A part of me wanted to reach out and hold this woman I called my sister, but my head and heart were fighting for control of the moment. I knew it wouldn’t be to my benefit. Instead, with as much sensitivity as my hug might have encompassed, I decided to lay my hand on her shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, “I don’t even know why I’m crying.”

“No need to apologize. I cried too just before you arrived.” I wrapped my arm around her shoulder and she leaned her head on mine. I don’t know how long we stood there, a few minutes, maybe more. The memories of those lost years of misunderstandings seemed to fill the space around us. This embrace proved that every relationship deserves a second chance.

“I shouldn’t have treated you the way I did back then. I...I just want you to know I’m sorry for what happened.”

At first, I remained silent, but I needed to let her know that I understood why she felt the way she did. “Hey, we were kids back then and we didn’t know any better, I guess,” was all I could say before I choked up. I had tried to forgive her many times, but I wasn’t ready to — at least not yet. I think she realized how I felt. I suppose we both needed to forgive each other before we could move on.

“Let’s go get some lunch?” I suggested, changing the subject. “We can catch up on old times later.” I released my hold on her and went back downstairs.

I stood outside the front door and soaked up the mid-morning sun; closing my eyes, I took in a deep breath to help clear my mind. I had to let go of the past and move on. *I hoped I had made the right choice to move back here. Back where a single event that happened to me changed my life forever...*

2

The next few days were hectic. Packing our belongings and getting rid of trash from the house I had lived in for eleven years. As I sorted through the many miscellaneous objects I had collected, I began to recognize I had the genes of a hoarder. It was hard to let many items go as I remembered everything about the once precious possessions. I needed to remind myself this was a welcome change — for the better and not for the worse.

I stood in the kitchen when the movers arrived early Friday morning and put the last of the food in a cooler ready for the journey. I glanced around one last time and knew I had to let go of this place I had called home.

A few hours later, I stood in our new kitchen and watched the men unload the truck. My sister said she would pick Brent up from school and stop for ice cream before coming over to help me unpack.

I kept busy by putting things away and didn't even realize it was getting dark outside. I dug in my purse for my cell phone. No messages. *They should have been here by now.* I dialed my sister's number, but it went straight to voice mail.

"She never has her phone off," I mumbled just before I left a quick message. I paced the room and then went into the kitchen to finish unpacking.

All of a sudden, I felt as though someone was watching me. I looked around the room and then through the window. The darkness had to be playing tricks on me, so I rubbed my eyes and looked again — the figure I thought was standing by the old oak tree was gone.

I began to pace from room to room willing for my sister to call me back, but the hours just ticked by.

I sat on the sofa waiting and sprang to my feet when my phone rang.

“Hello.”

“Yes, is this Miss Iris?” A man asked.

“Yes', this is she.” Disappointed it wasn't Sheila.

“This is Officer Bates. I'm sorry to be calling you this late, but I've just received your contact information.”

Panic flowed through my body like a heat wave. “What's this about?”

“I'm sorry, but I have some bad news. Sheila Larisa was in a car accident. She is at Mendota Community Hospital.” Tears flooded my eyes. Then I remembered she went to pick up Brent.

“Oh God, no! What about Brent? Was Brent with her?”

“Yes, there was a boy with her. They are both at the hospital. Ma'am, do you have someone to take you there?”

“No! I'm sorry, I mean I can drive.” Grabbing my purse I ran to my car.

“How long will it take you?”

“I'll be there in fifteen minutes.” Officer Bates said he would meet me in the lobby.

I flashed back to a day many years ago, a time way before Brent was born and a day I will never let myself forget.

Stop it Deanna. You can't think like that. He will be fine. He's not going to die — you have to believe that.

I parked the car and sprinted up the walkway to the main entrance. As the sliders zipped open, my eyes searched the waiting room then I saw the officer approaching me.

“Are you Miss Iris?”

I nodded.

"I'll take you to your son and sister. They're in the intensive care unit and their conditions are not good I'm afraid."

Tears poured down my face. I was scared and sad all at the same time.

"Do you need to sit down, Miss Iris?" He put his hand on my shoulder and I flinched.

I shook all over. "I can't lose him."

"I'm sorry, Miss Iris, but if there is anything, anything at all I can do to help, just let me know."

"Deanna."

"Sorry?"

"You can call me Deanna." I gazed up at his deep hazel eyes that glistened with sympathy, yet there seemed to be something different about him when I mentioned my name. I noticed a scar on his forehead, long and thin; his short blonde hair not quite covering it. He reminded me of someone I knew long ago. I imagined from his touch that he was gentle and kind, but he seemed quiet and distant. I started to feel unsteady and reached for something to hold onto. He grabbed my arm, but I pulled away from him and leaned against the wall.

"I'm fine. Really, I'll be fine." I hoped he would believe me and leave. Instead he led me to my son's room.

"Can you tell me what happened? What caused the accident?"

"From what the State Trooper told me, a deer ran out in front of her car and he thinks she jerked the steering wheel too hard, causing them to flip over when they hit a ditch. It took a couple of hours to cut them out of the vehicle. They are lucky to be alive, thanks to some of the other drivers who saw the crash happen and called it in, but..."

"But what?"

"There's something you should know before you go in."

"What more could you possibly have to tell me?"

“I overheard before I called you...your son is unconscious and your sister is in a coma.”

“Coma. You mean she won’t ever wake up?”

His eyes widened. “I didn’t say she *won’t* wake up. I wanted you to know before you went in to see your son because he may not respond to you.”

I absorbed what he said and had to see for myself. I took a deep breath and swung the door open. Officer Bates waited outside the room.

Wires hung all around my son. A machine beeped beside his bed. An IV pumped fluids into his body through his left arm. I could only see his fingers on his right arm because a light blue cast hid the rest and reached his shoulder. I stood beside him stroking his cheek. Tears slithered down my face as he didn’t even look like my son. His swollen face covered with cuts and bruises — he was unrecognizable.

This morning he left for school wearing his favorite Cubs shirt and a pair of jeans. Excited about living in our new place and he couldn’t wait to sleep in his room. He begged me to let him stay home from school, but I said no and that I would see him later. He tried to change my mind and said he didn’t need to go because it was the last day of school. That he didn’t need to go. Now I wished I had let him stay with me, and then he wouldn’t have been lying in this bed, hurt, helpless, and alone — perhaps even dying.

I smoothed his dark brown hair, though a lot of it was shaved and replaced with stitches. He no longer had that skateboarder look with his hair worn long which covered his eyes. I kissed his forehead and felt the warmth of his face on my lips. I whispered, “Please God, let him be okay. Don’t take him from me. He’s all I have — I can’t live without him.”

When I came out of the room, Officer Bates had his eyes closed as he sat in the chair. I nudged his arm and his eyes popped open.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“It’s okay. It’s been a long night. Can you take me to my sister now? I would like to see her.”

He nodded and stood up as he stretched. We went down a couple of doors then he pointed to her room.

“You don’t have to stay you know. I’ll be fine. Go home and get some sleep.” His eyes looked bloodshot.

“Are you sure? Do you have family nearby that can stay with you? Do you need me to contact your sister’s husband and let him know what’s happened?”

“No.” I shook my head, in part to clear the haze of despair that had begun to set in. “They are all I have, and as for her husband, he died four years ago.” Not giving him time to respond, I turned and pushed the door open, leaving him outside.

I stood at Sheila’s bedside. Her face was puffy, black and blue. A neck brace pushed up the skin around her cheeks. Her left arm lay on a pillow and the right arm raised in a sling, both were in casts. When a nurse came in to check her vitals, I asked how severe my sister’s injuries were. She began telling me about the Glasgow Coma Scale: a scoring system to assess the level of consciousness after a head injury, whether the person can move their eyes and limbs, and if there is any coherent speech. I stopped the nurse a moment and asked if she was awake when she was brought in, but she replied, Sheila was already in a coma.

I had so many questions. How could my sister be helped in any way by a test she couldn’t pass when she was out cold? How could they assess her coherence when she was unable to answer their questions?

The nurse seemed frustrated with me as I was with her. “The abilities are scored numerically. Higher scores mean milder injuries. A CT scan is run to visualize fractures and uncover evidence of bleeding in the brain or swelling.”

Before she could finish, I asked when she would come round and whether an MRI had been carried out.

She shook her head as if I didn't understand hospital emergency procedures. She replied, "Doctors don't often use MRIs during emergency assessments of traumatic brain injuries because the procedure takes too long. That test can be used after the person's condition has stabilized." She also added "We can't give an exact time when she will wake up..."

My attention lost focus as she started to tell me about the tissue swelling and how the doctor had inserted a probe through my sister's skull to monitor the pressure. After all that information the nurse ended the conversation with, "Your sister was lucky to have survived at all."



I sat in a chair next to her bed and touched her fingers, as they lay motionless on the sheet.

I don't know how long I sat there staring at her. I prayed she would wake up; as I wanted so much to tell her I would forgive her. To tell her everything I felt inside — like sisters should.