

The Whispering Of My Heart

For the lonely and those who need something or someone to love

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South Africa
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CHAPTER ONE

Back then, I could never understand the need to latch onto something, the need to feel loved, the need to feel needed and the need to be saved. I also never realized the power of a simple touch. Now, looking back on my years as a child, I understand and I have learned the importance of listening to the whispering of my heart.

As an only child growing up with an overly strict mother - I guess a single parent needs to find that delicate balance between discipline and freedom, something my mother never really mastered - I longed for companionship and recognition that any eleven-year-old child might crave. I had two friends: Sasha, a shy and rather reserved little red-haired girl, and Kita, who loved to hear her own voice and felt that what she had to say was of utmost importance at all times. In her mind, nobody was as interesting as she.

I attended a small school not too far from our rather humble home, which stood out like a scar on a beautiful person's cheek. Because of the close proximity of my place of learning, on a weekday morning, I would arise early, wash, eat and ready myself for another day of bullying, teasing and learning. I guess it was during these moments at school that I discovered more about relationships than I did of mathematics. I also learned the art of escaping, by allowing my mind to wander beyond the four walls that trapped me for eight hours every school day.

Whilst Sasha and Kita played tug-of-war with my emotions at school, my home-time companion was a Ouija Board that I had found buried at the bottom of a rather rusty, broken trunk, which I stumbled upon one stormy afternoon in our dark, dank basement. I knew that this was not the ideal companion and Mother would often say I was "looking for trouble mingling with such nonsense." But I was so terribly lonely. I

was desperate. I had survived another broken day at school. And Mother believed that I had spent enough time “out on the streets”, so on afternoons and weekends, my home became my prison. I’d wonder from one sparsely furnished room to another, aching to interact with someone, anyone, anything. I knew I was different to all the other children in my class and I guess I was a little awkward around people. So, the yearning to be accepted and understood by someone, anyone other than Mother, ate away at my soul.

“Mother,” I’d cautiously approach her. “Please…”

I would fall silent, crushed by her anger and irritation. Her fiery eyes would glare right through me, singeing my already wounded self-confidence. I knew what the answer would be anyway. But, driven by my desperation, I’d try again, some other day.

CHAPTER TWO

A short distance from our home, stood our only neighbor, a rather surly and frightful looking man. He was, as the town-folk rumored, a recluse not to be looked at, no less spoken to. Stories floated around our little town that Mr. Reynolds had never married. He lived on his own in a tired looking house, closed up with wooden shutters, which desperately hung on with rusty hinges. His overgrown garden was formidably protected by a hedge of thorns, as hard, callous, and threatening as Mr. Reynolds himself.

On winter mornings, when the frost would cover the ground outside, the sun would force her way through the little window in our kitchen. I would climb onto the counter top, rest my back against the paint-peeled wall, and turn into a sun-lizard, soaking up the warmth that defied the icy cold outside. It would not be long that I would drift into a deep sleep, comforted by the sun's warm smile.

"I've told you time and time again, DeDee. You do not sit on the kitchen counters," Mother's stern voice scolded.

I jolted awake, "Sorry, Mother." That's all I could muster up at that moment. I slipped off the counter top, but reluctant to leave my sunny heaven, I lingered there a little longer.

"What are your plans today, Mother?" I already knew the answer. Mother worked hard to support us, often having to keep two or three jobs just to bring food to the table. The dark rings that caressed Mother's sunken and tired eyes made me sad.

"DeDee, you know I have to go into the office. Please do a little more around the house today, other than play with that ridiculous Ouija Board. I don't like the way it feeds your imagination. I am sure all this nonsense of wanting a monkey only started

when you became so engrossed in that idiotic game.”

You see, that is where Mother was wrong. Firstly, the Ouija Board was my desperate attempt to find companionship. Secondly, if Mother had paid any attention to my pleas, she would have known that I had been begging her for a monkey for many, many weeks.

It was one cold winter morning while sitting in my sunny heaven in the kitchen, that I happened to look out the frosted window in the direction of Mr. Reynolds' house. In the distance, I could vaguely make out the thickly-set dark figure of a man pushing against the icy wind. It appeared as though he was protecting something under his coat. As he stumbled up the cobbled road that led to Mr. Reynolds' garden gate, I allowed my imagination to fill in the missing pieces.

He is sheltering a puppy... I imagined, possibly a little Cocker Spaniel. I had always found those little dogs amusing. I once saw an old lady pretending to throw a ball into the long grass. All I could see were these two long ears flapping frantically as the short little dog bounced up and down chasing the invisible ball.

No, it must be a kitten, or at a push, maybe it is a bunny.

Nothing could have prepared me for what I saw being ripped from under the jacket and thrust into Mr. Reynolds' hands. It wriggled; it fought desperately to run free, only to be yanked back by the leash that chained it to its anchor. From our kitchen window, I was sure that this was no ordinary pet, the ones that the children at our school so often would brag about. “My mom bought me a puppy!” I wanted to tell them all to shut up! I knew that I would never have the luxury of owning a pet. Mother would never allow me to have one.

No, what that man had under his jacket was not a puppy. It was a baby monkey! That was the moment when I knew that no Sasha, nor Kita, and certainly no Ouija Board, could ever satisfy the yearning that seemed to eat away at my soul. My arms longed to cradle that baby monkey. My cheek tingled at the thought of caressing its soft gray fur. My heart whispered gently, “This little creature will fill your soul.”

CHAPTER THREE

“DeDee! How many times do I have to tell you? No! No! No!”

Detached from our home was a rather dilapidated old garage. It would be on days such as these that I would run to the stillness of this old building; its emptiness reflected my own.

“She doesn’t understand,” I’d sob. “She never has, never will.”

In my attempt to repair my own brokenness, I proceeded to console the old garage by converting her into my very own playhouse. She needed to feel wanted, just as I did. And as I started sweeping and dusting, and repairing, I caught my mind wandering over the road, down the hill, across the thorny protective hedge, into Mr. Reynolds' house. If I felt this way, how did that poor little monkey feel? Scared, ripped from its mother, confused, bewildered. I shook my head violently trying to obliterate the thoughts that swam frantically around.

Days passed, weeks passed, and I would take up my post every opportunity I had to survey Mr. Reynolds' house, in my self-appointed role as guardian over Chloe. Chloe, my name for the little unknown monkey, became my obsession. If Mother would never allow me to have my own Chloe, maybe I could befriend Mr. Reynolds, and in so doing, make contact with that one little creature that would ease the pain in my soul. Such was my desperation.

Little could have prepared me for what happened next. However, first, let me go back.

The bullying never ceased.

“Ugly face, big nose, horse teeth…”

I was always told that “Sticks and stones could break my bones, but words could

never harm me.” Huh! Whoever came up with such garbage was obviously never a victim of bullying. I have fallen many times, scratched knees, stubbed toes, even a broken arm and bruised ribs. But, you know what? They all eventually healed. However, the scars, no the trenches that were etched into my soul by those mean words, would probably never heal. My attempt to repair my aching self would be to patch up the furrows and fill them with someone or something, that would look at me and say, “You are amazing. Thank you. When I needed you, you were there. You complete my life.”

And so it was on that Thursday morning, when I was on my way for another bout of bullying, that I became Miss Cluso, Private Investigator. It so happened that I had to walk passed Mr. Reynolds' house on my way to school. As I was always cautioned by Mother to walk swiftly in the opposite direction in the event of ever encountering our frightening neighbor, it amazed me that I was permitted to pass in such close proximity to his forbidden house. Nevertheless, I needed to make contact with Mr. Reynolds if I was ever to meet with Chloe.

As I walked gingerly on the opposite side of the road, I heard the desperate cries of something being tormented. I froze. My feet became glued to the cobbled sidewalk. Nausea bubbled up from the pit of my stomach. I swallowed hard trying to push back the bitter bile that burnt my throat. As swiftly as the cries had begun, they ended. Silence swallowed up even the chirping of the birds, and with my last strength, I ran.

Never was I more happy to be at school.

CHAPTER FOUR

That Thursday, all day at school, my thoughts were trapped by the shackles of fear. I knew that I had to pass Mr. Reynolds' house to get to the foot of the hill that led to our home. As if that was not a galactic enough challenge, my persistent heart kept whispering, "Only Chloe can mend your ache."

My feet carried me along the narrow, cobbled sidewalk edging me closer and closer to the formidable thorny hedge. With my heart pounding loudly and my knees shaking visibly, I pushed open the weathered wooden gate that moaned lazily as if being disturbed from its deep sleep.

I crept up the overgrown path and finally reached the house. Very cautiously I stepped up onto the first stair, hesitated, turned to flee, but I was being pinned down. To this day, I don't know if it was my over-active imagination that Mother always insisted was fed by playing with my Ouija Board, fear, or Mr. Reynolds himself. All I do know without a doubt, I could not move. Once again, I heard the faint, but now, feeble cry of a tortured soul. I ripped myself loose from whatever it was that held me in place and ran until I could no more. Then, I sat down exhausted and sobbed.

"Chloe! I have failed you!" I chanted repeatedly.

"Man up!" I scolded myself. "You appointed yourself as Chloe's guardian. P.I. Cluso! Don't you get soft now! Chloe needs you. Go back. Face your giants."

What I did next surprised even myself. I was so used to backing down and giving in. I thought of how whenever Sasha plucked up the courage to speak, I would instantly close my mouth and reserve my words for some other time. And then Kita would shout down Sasha and I would cower away like a scolded puppy. I could not be Sasha's guardian, but I could be Chloe's. So, standing up, instead of climbing the hill

home, I turned around and boldly walked through Mr. Reynolds' weathered wooden gate. This time, it did not complain but gave into my newfound bravery.

I made it to the front door and stretching out my shaking hand I confidently lifted the door-knocker.

“Cluck! Cluck!” The noise echoed. Silence. Nothing.

“Cluck! Cluck!”

“Yes?” The hard thorny face of Mr. Reynolds towered above me.

“Um…Good day, Sir,” I managed to mumble. “Pleased to meet you, Sir.” My pathetic attempt to introduce myself was obviously not welcomed.

I swallowed hard trying to loosen my tongue, which had become glued to the roof of my mouth.

“What you want, kid?”

“I…uh…I.” The words were stuck. Nothing would come out. At every feeble attempt, all I could muster up was some incoherent noise.

“I said! What you want, kid?” Mr. Reynolds barked at me once again.

With that, I turned on my heels, scampered through the rickety gate, up the hill and darted through our back door. Exhausted and thoroughly petrified, I lay on the kitchen floor panting and gasping for air.

CHAPTER FIVE

The days blurred into weeks and every day I'd pay attention to the constant whispering of my heart and the haunting cries that I had heard every time I walked pass Mr. Reynolds' house.

"Please, Mother," I persisted.

"DeDee, you cannot have a monkey! It is against the law. If the authorities catch anyone keeping a monkey in captivity, they will get into terrible trouble!"

I felt a sense of relief on one hand that Mother had at least an apparent valid excuse for not allowing me to have a monkey. All along, I always thought she was just being difficult. Yet, on the other hand, I was confused.

"Well then, how is it that Mr. Reynolds can have a monkey?"

"What do you mean, Mr. Reynolds has a monkey?" Mother looked at me in disbelief. Did she think that all this time of me nagging for a monkey was purely a whimsical wish? Something maybe I had watched on the television that had planted a seed, which had grown into this uncontrollable monster? She needed to understand I was serious about this and I was not about to let it go.

"I saw a man dropping off Chloe at Mr. Reynolds' place, Mother. And a while ago, on my way to school, I heard Chloe screaming. It was the most terrible cry, Mother. A desperate and pathetic cry for help. I tried to go and save her, but Mr. Reynolds scared me and I ran away."

"Do you mean you have been to Mr. Reynolds' house?" Mother's face reddened and I could sense that she was not very pleased with what I had done. "DeDee! Do you know how much danger you could have placed yourself in? Don't ever let me find out that you have done such a silly thing again."

“But, Mother,” I persisted. “Mr. Reynolds is being cruel to Chloe. He doesn’t love her, Mother. He hurts her. I hear her crying!” My own tears welled up and like a spring overflowing, I could no longer hold back all the pain I had been hiding for so long. I rested my head on Mother’s lap and I cried and cried.

“Come now, Baby,” Mother’s tone of voice had changed. “I tell you what. Next time you think you hear or see something, you let me know, and I will help you. Maybe we can contact the Animal Safety officials, or the police and they can confront Mr. Reynolds.”

I must have fallen asleep on Mother’s lap, while she stroked my head and consoled my broken heart.

CHAPTER SIX

In an attempt to make me forget about Chloe, Mother broke her own rules and permitted me to have friends over for a play date. Sasha and Kita reluctantly accepted my invite; after all, they had never been invited to my home before. I was sure there were as many rumors bouncing around town about our home as there were surrounding Mr. Reynolds.

“Let’s go into the basement,” I suggested in desperation, after trying to entertain my two guests with playing dolls and dress up, and failing miserably.

Sasha reluctantly followed Kita and me down the creaking steps that led to the dark and damp basement.

“Is it safe down here?” Sasha was always the timid one in the group.

Kita snapped at her, “Oh! Don’t be pathetic, Sasha! There is nothing down here that can hurt you. We are just going to have a bit of fun!”

I carefully unwrapped my Ouija Board that was snugly wrapped in an old baby blanket (probably mine when I was a baby) and tucked safely at the bottom of the old rusty trunk which sat in the dark far corner of the basement. I took as much care over my Ouija Board as I would if I had to care for Chloe. I shook my head to rid myself of the thought.

“I don’t like this,” Sasha complained.

I took great care to explain to my two guests the rules of the game. We rest our hands over the center crystal ball, concentrate really hard and ask a question. Miraculously, the crystal ball will come to life and move gently towards the letters of the alphabet, spelling out the answers to our questions.

“That’s freaky, DeDee! I don’t want to play!” Sasha started to cry.

“Oh, shut up!” Kita never had patience with anyone who showed a weakness.

“I’ll go first,” I suggested. “How do I free my friend?”

“What?” Kita glared at me. “What kind of question is that? I don’t understand! What do you mean, free your friend? Aren’t I your friend? Do I look trapped? Do I look as if I need freeing?”

Kita bombarded me with question after question. For a brief moment, I felt like the crystal ball on a Ouija Board.

I was irritated with my guests and wished they would go home, but Mother had taught me good manners so, I just smiled shyly. I was feeling a little embarrassed by my reaction and encouraged Kita to move onto asking her question. She commanded question after question, and all of us sat quietly expecting answers to be offered by the ridiculous crystal ball that lay dead beneath our hands.

“This is stupid!” Kita finally stood up and started walking towards that side of the basement that I had never plucked up enough courage to explore. “What’s in there?” She drilled me with questions as to what lay on the other side of the wooden slates that appeared to be hiding some mystery. I really didn’t know the answer. I was always petrified of that side of the basement.

As the afternoon grew old, my two visitors lazily climbed the creaking steps and opened the little door that entered into the passageway of our home. I turned to face the dark basement before closing the door behind me. I was sure I had seen something move.

CHAPTER SEVEN

In the days that followed, Mother seemed a lot more approachable, but I decided that I would never again ask her for a monkey. I was sure that I would find a way of saving Chloe from the grasps of Mr. Reynolds. I had it all planned. Once I had Chloe in my possession, I would keep her safe and warm in her own little home in our garage. I had worked hard scrubbing, tidying, decorating and creating what I thought was the perfect home for Chloe. Mother had given me some old linen, crockery, even some old ornaments, and a mirror to decorate my new playhouse. Mother was under the impression that since my two friends had had so much fun visiting me, I was preparing the garage as our very own “Secret Club”. She was content that I had found some interest other than that “silly Ouija Board” and of course, relieved that I appeared to be no longer concerned with Chloe.

Naturally, I would never tell her what I was really doing. And how I was actually going to get Chloe into her new home, remained a mystery.

“DeDee! Time to come in. Clean up, dear. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes.”

The bathroom cupboard stood ajar. As I washed my hands, I glanced up looking at my reflection in the mirror. I felt guilty keeping secrets from Mother. My heart continued to whisper, “Chloe will soothe your broken soul.” Irritated with myself I slammed the cupboard door shut.

Thump! Something dropped from the shelf into the wash basin.

I carefully picked up the little brown bottle and held it gently in my hands. V.A.L.I.U.M. What was this? Why were they in our bathroom cupboard? Why was Mother taking pills?

Dinner consisted of an awkward silence in between mouthfuls of mash potatoes

and peas. “Mother,” I broke the silence. “Why are you taking pills?”

“What pills, DeDee?”

“Those pills in the little brown bottle in the bathroom cupboard. When I washed my hands, they fell out into the wash basin. Are you sick, Mother?”

Mother chuckled. “No, DeDee. I am just very stressed. I cannot sleep very well at night, so I take one of those little pills to help me to relax and to sleep.”

“Then you aren’t sick, Mother?”

“No, Sweetheart. I am fine. Those pills are a real help.”

I don’t think Mother ever realized just how helpful her pills would actually become.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The usual routine absorbed my Friday morning. School was a bore and Mr. Franklin made every effort to make my day as uncomfortable as possible.

“DeDee! You might as well be elsewhere. You never pay attention in class and then wonder why your grades are dropping. You need to understand, young lady, that it is going to take a lot more than just sitting at your desk, glaring out of the window, to pass.”

“I am sorry, Mr. Franklin. I’m not feeling too well today. Please excuse me from class.”

I couldn’t sit at a desk at school one moment more, while my heart continued to whisper, “Go get her.” I had tried so hard to block out her desperate cries that pierced my ears when I pass Mr. Reynolds' house on my way to school. I really did. My blood boiled. I could not contain my anger any longer.

“Go to the office, DeDee. Ask the secretary to write you a sick pass to release you from school. Go home and get better.”

“Thank you, Mr. Franklin.” Of course, I never went passed the secretary. I never did get a sick pass. I wasn’t sick. I wasn’t the one needing to be released.

My mind must have been absorbed as I walked from school. When I looked up, I was standing on the top step of Mr. Reynolds' veranda, my hand resting on the door handle. I don’t remember walking through the tired wooden gate, nor climbing the creaking broken stairs. What I do remember was the faint and weak sounds of a scared and tired Chloe.

“What do you want?” Mr. Reynolds glared at me with his beady small black eyes.

“I was just passing on my way home. I didn’t eat all my lunch at school and I was

wondering if I might share it with you.” What a ridiculous answer! That is all I could come up with at that moment. I tried desperately to peer into the dark and smelly room that was hidden by his thick frame.

“Why would you want to give me your lunch?” Mr. Reynolds' voice was deep and gruff and made my heart knock at my ribs.

“I… I just want to be your friend, Sir. I…”

“I don't need a friend. Give me that sandwich.” With one hand Mr. Reynolds snatched the little plastic packet that hung feebly at my side, and with the other, he held onto my wrist.

I had never seen anyone eat anything so quickly. I was sure that he hadn't eaten before, and had I not ripped my aching wrist from his grasp, I was sure he would have made a meal out of my arm as well.

“Bring me another tomorrow.” After one last failed attempt at peeking into the darkness that lay beyond Mr. Reynolds, I turned to go. The cries that echoed from within were now nothing more than a whimper.

“What is that noise, Sir?” I turned to face Mr. Reynolds. I was not afraid anymore. He was hungry, I gave him food. He was indebted to me.

“That? Oh, that is just some creature I have locked up in the back yard.”

“What creature, Sir?”

“None of your business, young lady. Now, get you gone from my property. Make sure you come back tomorrow with that food.”

“But, Sir! There is something crying. What is it?”

“I told you it has nothing to do with you!” I felt myself being shunted down the stairs, through the wooden gate and orderly dismissed from our meeting.

CHAPTER NINE

The one thing I did learn from Mr. Franklin was “if one failed to plan, one planned to fail”. I never fully understood that ridiculous saying; however, I did know that I would have to organize a faultless rescue for Chloe. I couldn’t afford to rush this. After all, I had waited a long time; a few more days would not make much difference. In my eagerness to set the bait and hook Mr. Reynolds, I had forgotten that it was Saturday. I had created a problem, and I did not know what to do. Mr. Reynolds was expecting his sandwich, but there would not be one, as there was no need for Mother to make sandwiches on a weekend.

“DeDee, would you like to come with me to town? I need to get a few things. I’ll buy you an ice cream.”

“Gee thanks, Mother. I’d like to. But, you know how my grades have dropped. I’d better stay and catch up on the work I missed.” Darn! I should not have said that.

“When did you miss work, DeDee?”

“Oh… Uhh…” I had dug a hole so deep for myself, how was I ever going to get out?

“DeDee?” Mother’s face transformed into that stone cold stare that I had seen so often before.

I always seem to mess up things. Just when it appeared that our relationship had improved, I went and opened my stupid mouth. What was I thinking? “Well, DeDee. If you tell Mother the truth, she will never trust you again, and if you lie, you will have to live with the guilt,” I scolded myself.

I chose the route I thought was the easiest to handle at that moment. “Oh… Uhh… I was asked to help one of the teachers for our school fair coming up, Mother. It was

just a little story I have to write for our English teacher. It is nothing serious. And Mr. Franklin said if I didn't really want to do it, he wouldn't count it against my grade mark."

Phew! I had escaped that one!

"Well, I would still like you to come with me to town, DeDee. I don't like leaving you at home on your own. We won't be that long, and when you get home you can write that story."

So it was that I did not get to make Mr. Reynolds his sandwich that Saturday morning, nor did I get out of going to town with Mother. Then, to add to my woes, when we returned from town, I was forced to sit and write a story. Now, some would say that I deserved what I got, and this was the way things worked out when a person lies.

'Once upon a time, there was a young girl who lived all alone with her mother. Close to their home lived a mean old man who scared all the little children in the neighborhood. The little girl had always been warned not to speak to the old man, as he might harm her. Nevertheless, this old man had the one thing that this little girl really wanted. She wanted it so badly that every night she would get onto her knees and pray that she would find a way to get it...'

That was it! I realized that I had not really prayed to find the way to rescue Chloe! I was filled with renewed hope.

"DeDee, it is late. You need to go to bed now. Don't forget to say your prayers."

"Yes, Mother." I couldn't wait to get onto my knees and to ask for a sign. Anything that would show me how I could get to Chloe. "Please help me rescue Chloe. Please show me how I should save this little monkey from Mr. Reynolds."

CHAPTER TEN

The weekend slipped away and Monday morning was staring me in the face. However, this time, going to school was different. I felt a tinge of excitement knowing that I could make a detour after school and possibly get just a little closer to Chloe.

“Mother, may I take an extra sandwich to school?”

“Whatever for? DeDee, you don’t need more than one. Besides, when you get home, your afternoon snack will be ready for you. One is enough, dear.”

This was going to be difficult. I had always enjoyed my sandwiches. Mother put such care into making them every morning. Freshly baked bread spread with a thick layer of real butter and thick homemade berry jam. No sacrifice was too great for Chloe, though. In order to get close to that little monkey, I would have to forfeit my sandwich and watch it being devoured by Mr. Reynolds. If that is what it was going to take to win over the trust of that mean old man, then I was more than ready to sacrifice my lunch.

At recess, Kita and Sasha took out their little lunch boxes and stared at me in confusion. “Where’s your lunch, DeDee?”

“Oh, I’m not hungry,” I lied. My stomach thought my throat had been cut. The gnawing discomfort made me feel quite nauseous. I knew that I’d have to just ignore the pain if I was to take Mr. Reynolds his sandwich and have any chance of seeing Chloe.

Recess over and just three more lessons to my mission. I could barely sit still. I endured the wrath of Mr. Franklin, once again, but by now, I had become quite accustomed to his droning on and on about how useless I was. I really didn’t care.

When the bell went to mark the end of the day, I was the first out of the class.

“DeDee! Wait up! We want to come and play at your house this afternoon!”

Sasha’s calls fell on deaf ears and as I hastily ran up the path that led to Mr. Reynolds’ house, my two closest school friends became a distant memory.

With my renewed energy and excitement, it seemed as if the little wooden gate too had found its strength. Mr. Reynolds had placed a chain around the crooked staff that supported the gate, and there was a rusty lock securely clamped through its links. I felt a little relieved that I didn’t have to walk up that thorny path on my own, but the realization hit me like the icy wind that blows in mid-winter. How was I going to get to Chloe?

“Mr. Reynolds!” I shouted as loud as I could.

There was no answer; no movement at all came from the house. I couldn’t even hear the faint cries I had heard so often before. The nausea I had felt earlier intensified. The bitter bile bubbled up my throat and into my mouth. My stomach could no longer hold what little food that was in it.

I turned, weak and defeated and made my way home.

My regular routine of watching Kita and Sasha scoff down their sandwiches at recess, and my feeble attempts to make contact with Mr. Reynolds to pass over my small sacrifice lasted for about two weeks. Every failed attempt saw a stale sandwich tossed in the trash and my precious Chloe being pushed further and further away.

Exhausted and thoroughly drained, one late afternoon, I sat down on the pavement and sobbed. I had tried everything; I just did not know what else to do.
PLEASE! PLEASE!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Just when I started to believe that Mr. Reynolds had finally killed Chloe and he had moved on to haunt some other neighborhood; I heard an old pickup truck rattle up our driveway. Straining my eyes against the sun streaming in through the kitchen window, I could only just make out the figure of a man sitting behind the driver's wheel.

"Mother!" I screamed. "There is someone driving up to our house!"

"Oh, dear. That is probably Mr. Reynolds. I asked him to come over."

My blood ran cold. What on earth could have possessed my mother to invite Mr. Reynolds over to our home, knowing full well that I was petrified of the man. Had she forgotten that I was never to talk to him? And when, on meeting him in the streets, I was to turn and walk the other way? Besides, I had also explained at length that Mr. Reynolds was a mean animal abuser and he should be stuck away in a dark cell where he could no longer harm any more little animals.

Before I could interrogate my mother, I heard the lazy shuffle of feet outside on the loose gravel path that led up to our front door. I stiffened at the very thought of Mr. Reynolds setting foot in my house.

"DeDee! Please open the door for our guest."

I slipped off the kitchen counter top with the hesitancy of a petrified puppy. How could I possibly face my enemy, on my own turf? "Mother, I..." The words were but a mere whisper. Even my voice had decided it were best to stay hidden from our ominous guest.

"Good day, Mr. Reynolds," I greeted the rough and over-sized figure standing at our front door. The smell of cheap cologne mingled with the odor of the sweat beads

that rolled down his cheeks.

“Your mother invited me over. Tell her I’m here.”

“Gosh!” I thought, “What a rude man!”

By the time I had returned to the living room from summoning Mother from her small bedroom, Mr. Reynolds had invited himself in and had made himself comfortable on our little, worn sofa. He looked rather misplaced and awkward sitting there, and I had to hold back a snicker. He looked like a giant seated on doll’s furniture, such was the size of our terrifying neighbor.

“Mr. Reynolds,” Mother broke the silence. “I have broken my own rule by inviting you into our home.” Well, at least Mother admitted she had gone against her own word. I had thought I was losing my mind!

“My daughter has been very distracted for quite some time now.”

“Well, what is that to me?” Mr. Reynolds looked confused, and I felt a sense of satisfaction that Mother had out-smarted him.

And then it felt as if Mother had dropped an elephant on my head! “I have asked you to come over to our home, as my daughter seems to think that you are housing a monkey. Now, I don’t need to tell you that, should this be the case, you would be breaking a federal law. What have you to say to this, Mr. Reynolds?”

The elephant sitting on my head was suffocating me. I gasped. I couldn’t breathe. I have never in my life felt more petrified, not even on that day that Mr. Reynolds opened his front door and devoured my sandwich. I found myself chasing words around my mind, desperately trying to think of something to say that would change the subject. But nothing. It was as if I was groping around the dark, damp basement. I could not think of anything to say. And then I surprised even myself when almost uncontrollably, “May I get you a cup of tea, Mr. Reynolds?” escaped from my gaping mouth.

Relieved at his acceptance of my offer, I escaped from the living room. It was my turn to have beads of sweat running down my cheeks, and I hurried to the bathroom to splash my face with cold water. Looking up into the little mirror that stuck to the

door, which persistently stood ajar, my anger, scampered along every nerve fiber, down to my tightly clenched fists. With an outburst of fury, I smacked the stupid door, and out fell the little brown bottle.

“Hmmm…You want a cup of tea, Mr. Reynolds? I’ll make you a cup of tea.” I unscrewed the metal cap off the little brown bottle and carefully turned it upside down, tapping it in such a way; it had no alternative but to give up its precious content. Out popped the little, round, pink pills, each proudly bearing its identification V.A.L.I.U.M. I caught myself grinning with satisfaction while carefully crushing each little friend that held the promise to Chloe’s escape.

I really did not expect to hear what my mother said next. I felt betrayed and mortified. “Oh, Mr. Reynolds! You know what wild imagination young children have. DeDee is no different. Please don’t take offense. It seems that this has all been a terrible mistake.”

“Your tea, Mr. Reynolds. Would you like sugar and milk with it?” Nothing was going to stop me. I had been humiliated by my very own mother. However, what Mother didn’t know was I had mastered being beaten down. I had overcome all the bullying and breaking to pieces, and the belittling that was thrown at me most days of my life at school. I would rise above this. I would show her. I would show Mr. Reynolds.

I watched beady-eyed as he slowly swallowed mouthful after mouthful of tea. It seemed Mother had found a new friend, and she and Mr. Reynolds appeared to share much in common, which made me sick. Nevertheless, my little pink friends had started to take effect and the unwanted guest yawned rudely, got up, excused himself and lazily walked off to his pickup truck.

Looking back on the situation now, I guess it was a good thing that Mr. Reynolds’ house was so close to ours, for I think it was not much more than ten minutes after he had swallowed his last mouthful of tea, that he was sound asleep. He had managed to maneuver his old rusty pickup into his yard, but that is as far as he could go. When I arrived, panting heavily after running as fast as I could down the hill, Mr. Reynolds

was slumped over his steering wheel. The snoring that rattled from that man reverberated around the small-enclosed backyard, and I couldn't help but burst out laughing. "You are not so big and strong now, are you?"

I glanced to my right and then to my left, and in the far corner of the backyard stood a tall pole with a wooden box perched on top. Caressing the pole was a ring that reminded me of the ring Mother wore on her second last finger of her left hand. Once, when I asked her why she never took it off her finger, she said it was given to her by someone very special and it was a promise that the two of them would remain together forever. Well, I guess, that glistening ring around that pole was just as much a promise to whatever was on the other end, that they would remain tied to that pole forever. In the failing light of the late afternoon, I crept cautiously towards the pole and ran my fingers along the chain that was connected to it. At the other end of the chain lay a lump of fur.

I froze; my heart jumped into my throat and beat so loudly that my ears hurt. In the distance, I heard the rasping snore echoing from the pickup truck. As long as I heard that noise, I knew I was safe. I placed my hand over the bundle of fur. It was icy cold. Beneath the bundle, I could feel the faint movement of a creature gasping for air, its feeble heart rattling faintly at its ribs. "Chloe," my heart whispered, "you have found her at last." I frantically pulled on the chain, however, the promise that ring had with the chain was obviously a lot stronger than the promise that was made to my Mother years ago. Nevertheless, I had come this far, I was not turning back empty handed.

Even though there was not much chance of Mr. Reynolds awakening from that deep sleep, I cautiously crept passed the tired old truck and stumbled over an old wheelbarrow on my way into a rather overgrown garden shed. On finding a pair of rusty hedge clippers, I hurriedly tucked them under my arm and opted to crawl back to my precious Chloe. Unlike our small patch of luscious green grass in our front yard, this garden was more thorns and weeds than grass. I had only one thing on my mind, and I honestly never noticed the pain of thorns embedding themselves into my soft

knees. It was only days later that I found evidence of their defeated attempt at preventing me from reaching Chloe, and I spent weeks trying to dig them out from beneath the calloused blisters that had formed over them.

“Chloe,” I whispered. The feisty little monkey I had once seen desperately trying to escape from under that man’s jacket months before was no longer. In its place was a broken, flea infested, starved and petrified monkey who had reached its teen years not knowing anything but punishment and hatred. I slipped the blade of the hedge clippers through the rusty chain link closest to the ring that trapped Chloe, and with all my strength, I twisted. At first, the chain resisted my attempts to release its charge, but in response to my persistence, it finally gave in and reluctantly opened up releasing the snare that had become embedded in Chloe’s flesh. I removed my blue denim jacket and gently picked up my precious treasure. She didn’t resist, she didn’t even flinch. She opened her weak eyes and I am sure I saw a tear run down her cheek.

As I slipped out of Mr. Reynolds’ garden and hurried up the hill home, I heard the rasping snores echo behind me.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It took many days to nurse Chloe back to health. The sandwiches that, in the past, I was prepared to sacrifice to Mr. Reynolds became Chloe's daily treat. She loved freshly baked bread with thickly spread butter and homemade berry jam. A daily diet of fresh fruit and vegetables, oats for breakfast and a balanced evening meal, ensured that Chloe soon became a happy little monkey.

My days at school became a blur. Mr. Franklin continued to shout at me and remind me that I was wasting my time in his classroom. The fiery words from the bullies kept stinging like salt on an open wound and Kita and Sasha found great enjoyment making me feel unwelcome in their company. However, this time, it didn't matter. I really didn't care. When the bell went to indicate the end of the day, I didn't wait to hear if Sasha called after me. I ran through the school gate, along the cobbled path, passed Mr. Reynolds' house, up the hill to our home and straight to my playhouse. Chloe would welcome me with a hug and a little squeal of delight and I would feel such love, as I had never felt before, nor would, I feared, ever feel again.

Hanging in my playhouse was that old mirror which Mother had reluctantly given to me. At first, Chloe was weary of the image that grimaced back at her every time she glanced at herself. She would gingerly stretch out her little dark gray finger and gently touch the reflection. The icy cold reception it was met with caused her to retract her little hand like a tightly wound spring that had been let loose. I would spend hours watching Chloe trying to make sense of the image that reflected a now healthy and happy little monkey. But her eyes told a different story.

I recognized that emptiness in her soul and knew that Chloe would never belong to me. The nagging realization that nothing lasts forever became my constant

companion, and I finally conceded to Mother's persistence that Chloe should be given to an Animal Sanctuary. I knew as well as everyone else, that Chloe would not be able to stay in my playhouse forever. After all, she was a wild animal and she deserved the opportunity to live as God had intended her to live. I probably realized this from that very first day that I spotted her clinging to her freedom from under that man's jacket. No one has the right to claim ownership over another life. I had obeyed the whispering of my heart and saved Chloe, but now it was time to let her go.

"Mother, I think it is time."

"Are you sure, sweetheart?"

"Yes, Mother. I am sure."

"Hello, Mr. Sharp? I need for you to send the local authorities over to our home, please. There is a situation which needs attention," Mother's voice gently requested assistance from over the telephone line.

The CLUK of the receiver onto its cradle made me think of that day I stood at Mr. Reynolds' door for the first time. How my heart knocked at my ribs and how the empty CLUK CLUK CLUK sound of the door knocker hitting the metal plate hurt my ears. That same sense of finality that I had felt back then, I felt now.

I will be forever grateful to Mother for her efforts at trying to cheer me up that afternoon. Nevertheless, no matter what she said or did, I turned a deaf ear and fell deeper and deeper into my own sorrowful world. I honestly cannot remember all the details of that day, but I do recall the husky voice of Mr. Sharp, who ruffled my hair as he walked with Chloe to the white van, "It's gonna be alright, kid."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The incessant sound of the clock that hung on the wall in our living room irritated me.

TIC TOC TIC TOC TIC TOC echoed in the emptiness that swallowed me. I felt as if I was living in a vacuum and at any moment, my life would be sucked in by some unknown force. How I wished it would. There is not much in life that can gnaw at a person's heart more than the aching loss of someone they have loved as deeply as I loved Chloe.

I moped around day after day seeking for that space to which I could disappear. Finally, I realized I needed to face my giants. I cautiously walked towards the little door at the end of our passage that led to the basement. I had not been in there since Sasha and Kita had come to play, that afternoon I thought I saw something move in the shadows. I crept down the creaking stairs that seemed to disappear into the darkness below. In the past, when my foot touched the cold stone of the last step, I would feel a prickle of excitement crawl up my spine, knowing that the adventure for the afternoon was only just beginning. But now, it was different. Everything was different. Somehow, the enchanting mystery of the basement had disappeared and all that was left was an empty, cold and damp room. In some strange way, this lonely and sad room made me think of Mr. Reynolds. I made my way to the far corner, sat down on the old weathered trunk that safely buried my Ouija Board and cried.

I knew that Chloe was safe and she had all she needed in order to complete her world. Not only was she getting healthy food and medical care, she had a new playmate – someone that looked just like her. However, this reflection was not just an automated copy of Chloe's actions, as it had been so many times before when she

looked at herself in the mirror. This monkey had its own will, its very own face, and a unique personality. I had been invited to visit Chloe as often as I wanted. To see her interacting with another of her own species, to see her mischievously jumping from branch to branch, teasing her playmate, to hear her squeal with delight, would become the highlight of my daily visits. Nevertheless, I longed to hold her and my arms ached with the knowledge that I would never again get to cuddle her. And as I sat alone in the cold and dark basement, I realized it was not Chloe who needed the saving anymore, it was Mr. Reynolds.

The gnawing ache began to fade as the weeks melted into months. Sasha and Kita would come around after school most afternoons, but we never again went into the basement. I no longer needed to escape into the darkness and I certainly didn't need the companionship of that silly Ouija Board. Come to think of it, I wonder what ever happened to it!

I had learned so much courage from that little monkey. No longer would I stand by and watch Kita shout down Sasha. "No, Kita! Don't use others as your punching bag. You have no right to talk to Sasha the way you do. What she has to say is as important as your message. Give her a chance to say what she wants to say." For the first time in my life, I watched Kita back off and I am sure I noticed that, from that day on, Sasha walked a little taller.

I too realized my own worth. As Chloe had so often done to the old broken mirror in my playhouse, I now looked into that same old mirror and stretched out my hand to touch the reflection that looked back at me. I noticed that the dark rings under my eyes had started to fade, and at long last, I liked the DeDee I saw looking back at me. Those sad and empty eyes had life in them again. I smiled at myself and said, "Gone are the days that I will accept the rejection that is dealt out by my two friends and then pretend it does not matter. No more will I cower beneath the stinging words of my bullies." I was a new person. I could stand up for myself, for the weak and for those who could not defend themselves.

But, there was one more thing I had to do in order to complete my journey.

“Mother, will you come with me to visit Mr. Reynolds, please?”

Mr. Reynolds had been placed in a sanatorium. He would spend his days cleaning the cages of animals that were waiting to be reintroduced into the wild. Once he had served his time and paid the price for breaking the law and for his cruelty, he would return to his home to start his life afresh.

“Hello, Sir,” I stretch out my arm ready to shake his trembling hand. Mr. Reynolds knelt down in front of me. He looked different. His harsh face had softened and his cold black beady eyes were now just simply empty and sad.

“Hello, DeDee,” he croaked in a soft and feeble voice. “Thank you.”

“Thank you?” I was confused. Why was Mr. Reynolds thanking me?

“You know, DeDee. If it wasn’t for your courage, I would have killed that monkey. You showed me what true commitment is. That afternoon that your mother asked me over to your house…” He hesitated, sure, that I would not believe what he was saying. “Well, after I left your home, I only just managed to get my pickup truck into my driveway. Goodness, girl! I have never felt so sleepy in all my life. I just could not keep my eyes open. Before I knew it, I must have fallen into a deep sleep, right there in my old pickup truck. The strange thing is, I dreamed that you came to visit me. You took a pair of garden clippers out of my old shed and I think you cut the chain that kept that monkey trapped to that pole. You freed her, DeDee. You saved her from me. When I woke up, that monkey was gone. I looked everywhere for her, but realized then that as I had treated her so badly, no doubt, she ran away.”

I wasn’t sure if I should tell Mr. Reynolds the truth or not. I remembered the last time I fibbed to mom, I landed up having to go to town and then write that English story for Mr. Franklin as well. No! No more lies. I was a new person and I was going to tell the whole the truth no matter what.

“Mr. Reynolds,” my voice quavered. I felt really nervous, but Mother placed her warm hand on my shoulder as if to reassure me that everything was going to be just fine.

I spent most of that afternoon telling Mr. Reynolds exactly what had happened.

Well, almost exactly what happened. That Chloe had not run away, but that I had stolen her from him, fed her, fixed her and freed her.

“You are a very special little girl, DeDee. I hope that one day you will be able to forgive me for what I did to Chloe.”

“Well, Sir. That is exactly why I wanted to visit you. You see, Chloe taught me some very valuable lessons. She taught me that no matter how badly people treat you, you need to forgive them in order to heal yourself. Mr. Reynolds, it is not for me to forgive you. You need to go and visit Chloe and ask her to forgive you. You need to be forgiven so that you can be healed.”

When I turned to go, the light streaming through the small window fell on Mr. Reynolds' face and I noticed a small tear roll down his wrinkled cheek.

“Oh! Mr. Reynolds? I'm sorry.”

On our way home, Mother had a wry smile on her face. I looked questioningly at her, but she just kept gazing straight ahead. Finally, she said, “I always wondered whatever happened to all my Valiums.”

* * * * *

The following day the sun was shining brightly and the little daisies dotted yellow patterns in the gardens that I passed on my way to visit the Animal Shelter. I felt happy at last and caught myself skipping up the paved path that led to Chloe's enclosure. To be honest, I never truly believed that Mr. Reynolds would ever visit the monkey whose life he nearly snuffed out. But sitting on the little wooden bench that overlooked the enclosure was a hunched-over man. I quietly sat down next to him and placed my little hand in his. Mr. Reynolds didn't say anything; he just stared down at his neatly polished shoes. We must have sat there in silence for a very long time because the sun's strength had weakened when I finally heard him say, “Thank you, Chloe. I am finally healed.” He let go of my hand, stood up, smiled and slowly walked away. I watched him shuffle down the same path that I had skipped along earlier that day. Mr.

Reynolds turned one last time to look at me. Or was it Chloe who he lifted his mighty arm to as he offered a final goodbye? I waved in response and shouted, "Goodbye, Mr. Reynolds! See you soon!" As he walked away, melting into the setting sun, I had a feeling that I would not be seeing him again too soon.

I sat a while longer on that little wooden bench staring into Chloe's new world and I was happy. When she looked at me, I sensed that she was saying, "Thank you. You are amazing. When I needed you, you were there. You helped to complete my life."

Finally, the whispering of my heart became silent.

About Petite Breaux

Originally, from New Orleans La, lower ninth ward across the canal, as we would describe it. Raised in a single parent household an only child, Petite has three adult children of her own and is a grandmother of three. Petite is a first time author with her memoir *Slightly Bruised* and *a Little Broken*. She works a full time job and writes whenever possible. Petite is currently working on writing a series of short stories. Petite enjoys time away from home enjoying all the adventures of vacationing. She is an avid reader of all genres, loves watching a good movie and relaxing. After her past struggles, trials and tribulations of life, Petite just keeps moving forward. With all that behind her, she is enjoying living life, loving her family, and being as happy as can be. Petite currently resides in Alabama, not sure, if she can call it home.

Other books by Petite Breaux

Slightly Bruised and *a Little Broken*, a memoir released June 2015 and revised copy released October 2015

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