



Chapter 1

The Nightmare Begins.

There she stood, frail and broken, her pretty face and eyes gaunt with grief, her cheerful smile and countenance but an illusion of her past. Lying in a coffin before her was the lifeless body of her precious Melanie. Clinging to her side and sobbing were her younger children, Robby and Susan. The agonizing pain of losing their big sister was more than they could bear, as they desperately clung to their mother's side, oblivious to the fact that her state was more desperate than their own. Death had taken their big sister, who had celebrated her thirteenth birthday just two days before. The carefree innocence and youthful exuberance of their sheltered lives would be forever marred. A storm cloud had enveloped their tender hearts and minds, eclipsing every ray of life and light they had known, plunging them into darkness beyond imagining.

Robby was at a friend's house and Susan with a baby-sitter on the morning Alice heard the news.

"Why were the police at the store?" she thought.

As the officer inquired at the service desk and slowly began walking towards her, a chill ran down her spine and her heart began to pound.

"Oh Lord, no," she quietly said to herself as he slowly and solemnly made his way to her cash register.

"Mrs. Dixon?" inquired the officer.

"Yes?" she replied, with fear and trembling in her voice.

"Is there somewhere we can talk?" he asked.

“Yes,” she answered. “This way,” as she turned and led him down the isle to the employee lounge.

The fear and trembling mounted as she turned to face him.

“What has she done this time?” she asked.

Hoping for it to be just another one of her juvenile escapades, she began to say, “Has she been...?”

“No, Mrs. Dixon,” the officer interrupted. “Please... sit down.”

Slowly she sank into the chair behind her.

With faltering voice he continued: “We were called to Jennifer Bailey’s house early this morning. It seems the girls were consuming alcohol in Jennifer’s room last night, and Melanie passed out on the floor. Sometime during the night she vomited, and unfortunately... she choked. The paramedics tried to revive her... I’m so sorry. Please come with me; we need you to identify her.”

Her trembling erupted into sobs, and her sobbing gave way to a deep guttural wail as the officer embraced her in a vain attempt to console.

As they made their way through midmorning traffic, Alice sat silently in the back seat of the police car, totally oblivious to everything around her.

“Please God,” she thought to herself, “please, let it be a bad dream... I want to wake up... please let me wake up.”

As she made her way down the walkway to the building entrance, the officer had to support her for fear she would faint. The cool autumn air was but a chilling foretaste of the winter of despair that had now descended upon her soul.

Standing over the lifeless form of her precious Melanie, she silently nodded as the officer asked for confirmation.

“I’m so sorry,” he gently said with a broken voice, on the verge of tears. “I’ll leave you with her. When you’re ready, please come to the office. We need you to sign some papers.”

Standing by the side of the cold, lifeless frame that had once been her daughter, she reached out her hand and gently touched her cheek. Her eyes welled with tears as she recalled the day of Melanie’s birth. How clearly she remembered the ecstatic joy she

knew as the doctor told her it was a girl. The sound of her first cry still lingered in her memory as she gasped for her first breath, boldly announcing her arrival. Oh what bliss was hers as she cuddled her darling Melanie for the first time! The love and tenderness she felt at that moment was far beyond anything she could imagine or had previously known. Though the attachment and feelings she had for her parents, her sister and husband were profound and deep, they all paled into insignificance, compared with the love and affection that had just now burst upon her soul. There was nothing she would not do, nothing she would not give to protect and shelter her precious child. At that moment she realized the depth of God's love as she had never known before. She had been raised in a Christian home and had often heard the love of God declared by her parents, Sunday school teachers and pastor. But never once did it prevail upon her consciousness with such clarity and power.

“My Father, my precious Holy Father,” she prayed; “I’ve been told all my life that Your love for me is far beyond anything I could ever know or feel for others. My ability to love, though a precious gift from You, is but a faint reflection of Your infinite, eternal, unchangeable love for me. Though I’ve been taught this since I was a child, I haven’t been able to even come close to comprehending it until now. The thought of Your love exceeding the love I have for my precious baby is something that I cannot even begin to fathom.”

As she prayed, a profound sense of the Father's love enveloped her, springing forth into tears of joy and thankful praise. The sense of His presence and tender embrace burst upon her spirit with waves of light and peace, lifting her to the heavens.

As she continued, she recalled the first time she heard little Melanie laugh. She was only eight weeks old - a beautiful, vibrant child, full of spirit and life. While drying her on the change table after her evening bath, she recalled delighting in the combined fragrances of bath oils and baby powder. She then began to tickle her tummy and make baby sounds. What joy and tranquility she felt at that moment. To see her sweet child gazing into her eyes with a warm, tender smile as she eagerly anticipated the next tickle, brought

a sense of incomparable peace and superb delight to her soul. She reflected upon how her Heavenly Father must also delight in her. Though she thought it impossible, the love and fondness she felt for Melanie in the hospital, was but a glorious foretaste of the oneness and tender affection that now possessed her heart.

Often she would dwell on these things and pray, “My precious Heavenly Father, I am but a finite creature of flesh and dust. You have made me in your image that I might be a reflection of Your love and goodness. I am but a faint reflection at best, my pride and human weakness so often getting in the way, yet the love I feel for my precious baby is beyond my ability to express. Oh how great must be Your love, both for me and my precious child, who in reality, is more Your child than mine. I am but a finite, tarnished reflection, whereas You are the very essence of love. Where I am but a flickering candle, You are the noon day sun in all it’s glory, and even this comparison is not worthy of You.”

Again, she recalled when Melanie was only three. A flu virus had been going around and Melanie complained of a tummy ache just before bedtime. Before long the poor child was in tears, lying in bed with a pillow pressed against her abdomen, her forehead burning with fever. Alice tenderly recalled spending most of the night laying by her side embracing her. Gently she would rock back and forth singing Melanie’s favorite song: *“Yes Jesus loves me, yes Jesus loves me, yes Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so.”*

She recalled Melanie tearfully saying, “Mommy, it hurts.”

She remembered holding her close, with her own eyes welling with tears, praying, “Dear Lord, take the pain from my precious child I pray. Please, let me bear it for her.”

Again, the infinite love of her Heavenly Father and blessed Savior was reinforced as she considered afresh the depth of love and undying affection she had for her darling Melanie, but a faint reflection of His.

How vividly she recalled her soft voice and gentle disposition, her innocence and guileless desire to please. She hadn’t realized until now how desperately she had missed those tender years — the times

of brushing her silky, blonde hair, telling her a bed time story, and gently stroking her forehead as she drifted off to sleep. Though these memories should have been precious and comforting, they were nothing more than daggers in her heart as she gazed upon her lifeless frame: radiant eyes never to light up again, precious laugh lines and dimples forever frozen in the pale of death. Never again would her sweet voice resonate, “Mommy, I love you.” Never again would she be able to embrace, comfort and console her. Never, never again.

These memories were not fresh ones, as Melanie had long ago succumbed to the weight of the world that had been placed upon her tiny shoulders. When she was just seven years old, Tim left Alice for another woman. They had recently celebrated little Susan’s first birthday when Tim broke the news. Within a week he was gone and out of their lives forever. Tim was a talented chemical engineer and was often gone for months at a time, working on projects all over the world. During one of his contracts he had met another woman and chose to leave Alice and the children for her. She didn’t see it coming at all.

Tim was a professing Christian and faithfully attended church with them when he was home. Everything appeared to be normal, until the day he dropped the bomb. Alice was completely devastated. How often since then had the words of her father come back to haunt her. “Yes, he appears to be a good guy, but we don’t know the family... You’ve only known him for two months; that’s not enough time... Yes, he’s very intelligent and charming, but he seems to have a flirtatious spirit... Think of your children!”

Child support payments came for a few months, and then he seemed to disappear right off the face of the earth. Instead of casting her burden upon the Lord, Alice bore it herself and she totally withdrew. She was able to put on a front for others, but her children knew the true Alice. She had become quiet, distant and sullen. Having an affinity for the younger children, she was often able to go beyond herself in her relation and dealings with Robby and Susan, but she lost touch totally with her oldest daughter. Melanie was heart-broken.

Not understanding or knowing how to articulate her feelings, she too became withdrawn, and sought the love and approval she craved from her mother outside the home. The rift between mother and daughter became more evident and explosive as Melanie grew older and sought greater independence. Conversations were continually confrontational, as Alice didn't have the strength or wisdom to narrow the ever-widening gap between them. The stress of being a single mom was taking its toll. Alice was working at two department stores just to make ends meet. The children were often with baby sitters, and Melanie spent more time with friends than with family. During this time, Alice's view of God had changed from that of a tender, compassionate Heavenly Father, to that of an angry, vengeful judge, and she felt the sting of His rod every day of her life. The rift that had developed between her and Melanie was only a symptom of the larger rift between her and God.

The police officer walked Alice to the door of her apartment.

"Is there anything at all I can do for you?" he asked.

"Thank you, no," she replied, as she fumbled for her keys and opened the door.

With compassion and deep sympathy in his voice, he said, "I'm so sorry."

Almost oblivious to his presence, she closed the door behind her and walked into the apartment. Not having the strength to face her children, she had called her parents from downtown and asked them to pick up Robby and Susan and keep them overnight. Her mother and father wept openly as she shared the terrible news. They wanted to come for her, but she insisted they not. This was a nightmare that she had created alone, and she felt she had to face it alone.

After taking a few moments to compose herself, she went into Melanie's room. Walking over to the nightstand, she picked up a picture of Melanie on her seventh birthday with three friends from church. With streamers and balloons in the background, her radiant smile lit up the frame. The pretty, frilly dress she wore, they had made together. This was the last time she could remember her smiling. Sitting on the bed, she pressed her face into Melanie's pillow.

For a brief moment the sweet fragrance eased her pain, but only for a moment. This was all that was left of her precious Melanie. She wanted to cry, but she didn't have the strength. Eyeing the hairbrush on the dresser, she reached for it. With tenderness she began to gently caress the strands of hair. How she longed to embrace her once more. How she longed to say, "I'm sorry, please forgive me."

Seeking comfort, she went to her bookshelf and selected a volume of sermons by the great nineteenth century preacher, C. H. Spurgeon. Occasionally, during times of desperation, she would find relief and solace in the warm, devotional applications at the end of his sermons.

Randomly she opened the book and began to read: *"When thou diest, thy soul will be tormented alone; that will be hell for it, but at the day of judgment thy body will join thy soul, and then thou wilt have twin hells, thy soul sweating drops of blood, and thy body suffused with agony. In fire exactly like that which we have on earth thy body will lie, asbestos-like, forever unconsumed, all thy veins roads for the feet of pain to travel on, every nerve a string on which the devil shall forever play his diabolical tune of Hell's Unutterable Lament."*

Overwhelmed with despair, consumed with deep anger and an intense sense of betrayal, she threw the book to the floor and began to weep. Not wanting to be heard by the neighbors, she buried her face in a pillow and screamed repeatedly, "I hate You! I hate You!" Being totally exhausted, she eventually cried herself to sleep.