

A photograph of a butterfly with purple and black wings resting on a dense cluster of green leaves. The butterfly is positioned in the center of the frame, facing slightly to the right. The background is filled with various shades of green leaves, some in sharp focus and others blurred, creating a natural, textured setting.

*Surviving Murder:
A Story Of Overcoming Abuse*

By Cynthia Bailey-Rug

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via her website if you have any questions.

Knit Wit's craft store was busy for a Thursday, Alexandra Miller thought as she entered the store. In fact, so were the other stores in the shopping center. She brushed a little snow off her coat as she headed for the large yarn department towards the back of the store. Her husband, Ron, asked her to make a baby afghan for one of his younger coworkers who was due to have a baby soon. Again. Alexandra thought those coworkers of his bred like bunnies! She spent plenty of time knitting baby afghans, sweaters and hats for them.

Alexandra studied the yarn on sale, looking for the best yarn at the cheapest price. She saw a saleswoman approaching from the corner of her eye.

"May I help you find something?"

"I'm fine, thanks. Just trying to figure out which yarn to get to make a baby afghan."

"Well, the Silky Soft is on sale this week. It's not quite baby yarn, it's closer to worsted weight, but it does work up nicely. I crocheted a scarf with it for my boyfriend for Christmas last year, and he loves it." The saleswoman said quietly. Alexandra looked at her- this girl could not be any older than twenty at best. She was shy and had a sweet smile, but her eyes were very sad. She smiled at the young saleswoman, and began looking at the yarn she recommended. It really was nice yarn, and Alexandra decided to buy it.

"I like it. The pattern I have calls for two colors to be stitched together. We don't know if the baby will be a boy or girl yet. Which

colors would you suggest?" Alexandra asked, making conversation. She had a strange feeling about this girl, and was hoping some conversation would help her discern what exactly that feeling meant.

"Well, what about mixing white with the green, yellow and white tri-color? Would be soft and pretty, and neutral colors would be good for either a boy or girl."

"I like that. You're right. Thank you, uh, I'm sorry, what's your name?"

"Heather." The salesgirl said shyly, as she handed Alexandra three skeins of white yarn, and three of the yellow, green and white tri-color yarn.

"Heather. I'm Alexandra. Thank you so much for your help. You must be a knitter. You even knew how much I needed."

"No Ma'am. It was just a guess. I crochet though. My mom always said you can knit or you can crochet, but no one can do both."

"Really? I do both." Alexandra thought that was an odd thing for Heather's mother to say.

"You do?"

"Yes. I started out crocheting when I was quite young, then my ex-husband's mother taught me to knit when I was nineteen."

"Wow. Mom was wrong." Heather seemed to ponder this uneasily.

"Are you ok, Heather?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"Please stop calling me that. It makes me feel old! Call me Alexandra."

"Yes, Ma'am, er, Alexandra."

"Would you like to learn how to knit sometime? I'd be glad to teach you."

"My mother would be furious! I can't! I'm not smart enough to do it anyway."

Alexandra had grown up with a controlling, manipulative mother who wanted her to cater to her whims, and forget her own desires. After living with that for many years, she learned to spot other women in the same position. She was looking at one right in front of her. Being a devoted Christian, she quickly prayed, asking God to give her the right words to say to this young woman.

“Maybe it’s not my place to say this, but don’t you think that’s a bit odd?”

“What?” Heather looked genuinely confused.

“It’s just knitting. I’m not asking you if you’d like to learn to build weapons of mass destruction here. Besides, you seem like a very smart girl- I’m sure you could learn it in no time.”

“But my mom wouldn’t approve!”

“Honey, how old are you?”

“I’m eighteen. I’ll be nineteen in a couple of months.”

“Do you always do what your mom wants?”

“I try to.”

“What about what you want, Heather?”

Heather looked completely confused by Alexandra’s question. “I guess I hadn’t really thought about it much.” Alexandra reached for Heather’s hands.

“I was a lot like you at your age, and your mother sounds a lot like mine. I’d like to get together to talk sometime, if you’re ok with that.”

“I’ll have to check with my mom first.”

“Do you think she’ll approve?”

“No.”

“Then why don’t you just not ask her? Let’s have lunch together soon. She doesn’t have to know.”

Heather looked a bit afraid, but something in her told her she needed to do this, and fast. She looked at her watch. “Ok. I have a lunch break coming up in about fifteen minutes.”

“Great!” Alexandra said. There’s a pizza place at the other end of the parking lot near the pet store. Want to go there? My treat.”

“Sounds good. Thanks.” Heather smiled. “Well, I better finish up what I was doing so I can leave here in a few minutes.”

“Ok, Hon. I’ll check out at the register, and meet you at the restaurant in fifteen minutes. I’m looking forward to it. See ya.”

“See ya.”

Alexandra walked towards the register, thinking about Heather. She was much like Alexandra at that age- very obedient to her mother, to the point of being deathly afraid of disobeying, even in trivial issues. No teenage rebellion existed in her. She thought about her traumatic early years as she paid the cashier, and went

out to her car. She thanked God profusely for getting her out of that horrible situation with her sanity in tact, and for using her pain to help other women in similar situations.

Inside the restaurant, Alexandra found a booth not far from the door, and waited for Heather. She looked around the quaint place, with its red-checkered tablecloths, and Chianti bottles with candles decorating tables and shelves. It was a nice little place, and very quiet- just the atmosphere she wanted.

The door opened, and in walked Heather. Alexandra waved in her direction, and Heather quickly sat down. They made small talk as they decided what to eat. The waitress approached a few moments later, took their order, and vanished into the kitchen. Alexandra and Heather lapsed into an awkward silence.

“I know this is kind of uncomfortable for you. You seem so shy. I’ll tell you something though- I’m a born again Christian, and I think God led us to meet today, Heather. What little you said about your mom reminded me so much of my own mom. My mom didn’t let me out of her sight until I was about your age when I moved out. I wasn’t allowed to spend time with my friends, unless it was at school. I had to do everything her way- the courses I took in school, the music I listened to, the way I dressed, how I wore my hair... I didn’t even know what I liked or didn’t like- my life was all about living for her. I finally had to move out when I was nineteen. I couldn’t take it anymore.”

Heather’s eyes began to tear up. “That sounds familiar.”

“Tell me about your life, Heather.”

“There’s not much to tell. I just graduated from high school. I did ok grade wise, I guess, but I never made the principal’s honor roll, just the regular one. My dad died about two years ago.”

"I'm so sorry! What happened?"

"He was hit by a drunk driver. Died immediately, by the side of the road in what was left of his car."

"That's so sad!" Alexandra was heartbroken for this strong young woman beside her who had been through so much in her short life.

"Yea, it was. It was really hard on my mom, too. That's when she started getting on me more. She always wanted me to be what she wanted, but it got even worse after Dad wasn't around anymore. He kinda, I don't know, kept her from getting too bad, I guess.

"So anyway, I got really tired of working so hard in school towards the end of eleventh grade, a few months after Dad died. I had started working by then, and I just wanted to get out of school and work, but I knew I couldn't quit school. I didn't really like school all that much, and I had worked hard on my grades mainly because he was proud of them. My grades began to slip some, not bad though, but Mom had a fit. She made me quit that job that I really liked, and wouldn't let me work anymore until I graduated last June. That's when I got the job at Knit Wit's. I like to crochet, so I thought I'd try working here. I didn't want to go to college, anyway. I got my car shortly after. I had to fight Mom to get my license, though. That was hard- she didn't think I was smart enough to drive, so she fought me getting my license. I still have a curfew too, so I can't stay out very late. My boyfriend, Charles, is fine with that though. He adores my mom."

"Does she like him?"

"Oh yea. She told me I should date him. She wants us to get married."

"How do you feel about him?"

"He's a nice guy. He's going to college. In his first year. He wants to be a doctor."

"That's great, but you didn't answer my question. I didn't ask you to tell me what he's doing. I asked how do you feel about him?"

"I like him."

"Do you want to marry him?"

"You sound like my friend, David. He asks me the same thing, and I don't know the answer." Heather's eyes brightened somewhat.

“What’s David like?” Alexandra asked.

“He is wonderful! He’s so funny- he always makes me laugh. He is sweet too; he listens to me when I talk about my problems. I don’t get to talk to him as much since we graduated, though. Mom doesn’t like him, so we talk in emails or texts sometimes, or late at night on the phone after Mom’s asleep. She doesn’t think he’s ambitious enough, because he works at a grocery store for now, and wants to drive the big trucks. He doesn’t go to college, either. I don’t care what he does, though, I think he’s a great guy.”

Alexandra looked at the dreamy look in Heather’s eyes as she spoke. It was obvious- she was in love with David, not Charles.

“Well that’s obvious.” Alexandra said with a smirk. Heather blushed. “So why are you with Charles and not David?”

“Mom.” Heather and Alexandra said in unison, as the waitress delivered their sodas.

“Ok, it’s time for me to do some talking. I’m going to tell you my story. It’s a long one, so you might as well get comfortable...”

“Like I said, my mother wanted me to do everything her way when I was a kid. Wore clothes she chose, studied subjects she wanted me to, and more. It was rough, but I never thought of doing anything else. Even though I did what she wanted, she was still so mean- she picked on me constantly. Told me I was stupid, ugly, fat, useless... it was so bad, I went through anorexia when I was only ten years old. I starved myself for months, and all she did was yell at me for not eating. Said I wasted her money by not eating the food she put in front of me. Then when I did start eating again, she told me I was a pig.”

“Dear Lord! That’s horrible!”

“It really was. But, I lived through that, even though I was sick for a while. I kept that to myself as much as I could, because Mom was embarrassed about it. I got well again, and life went on- her controlling and insulting me at every turn.

“When I was sixteen, I met the man I later married, Todd. We met just before my seventeenth birthday. My mother hated him on first sight- she told me to stay away from him. I thought he was ok, but nothing special until he started asking me out. He told me things that I’d been wanting to hear- that I was beautiful, smart, wonderful...all the things I heard the opposite of from my mom. I was so used to hearing how disappointed she was with me, how fat

and ugly I was, and stupid, and how I'd never amount to anything. His kind words were like a breath of fresh air to me.

“On my seventeenth birthday, he gave me a little bouquet of flowers. They were beautiful- the first flowers I ever got from a boy. He even put a cute little balloon in the middle of them that said happy birthday on it. I loved the attention, but dreaded what would happen later when my mom saw the flowers. I took them to her car after school that day. She always took me to school, and picked me up at the end of the day. Anyway, she didn't say anything at first, but I could see she was mad. We had to stop by my friend's house so I could give her a book- she had been sick at home for several days, and I took her homework to her. As soon as I got out of the car, I heard a noise from inside Mom's car, but wasn't sure what it was. I just ignored it, and gave my friend her book. When I got back into the car, I saw Mom had destroyed my flowers, and popped the balloon. She even broke the glass vase they were in. She was so mad, she was shaking. I was terrified, but said nothing- what could I say? When we got home a few minutes later, she told me to clean up the mess I made of her car. I did it, silently. Throwing away my present was so hard. She told me it was my fault for making her do that. She said I “acted so snotty” that she was forced to do it. Later, when Dad got home from work, I told Dad about the incident. He talked to Mom about it, I don't know what he said, but she came into my room afterwards, and screamed at me for “tattling” on her. This was just between us, she said.”

Heather looked at Alexandra in shock at the awful story. She had tears in her eyes when she spoke quietly.

“I'm so sorry, Alexandra. That must've been horrible for you.”

“Thanks, Sweetie. It was, but that was just the beginning. Like I said, Mom hated Todd. I don't know why- she never said. As much as I feared going against what she wanted, I felt like had to do it though, because I found someone who I thought cared for me. Mom had told me that no man would ever want me, so I really felt like I had to take what I could get. I did care about Todd, but I wasn't in love with him.

“So anyway, we would sneak around at school or at my work to spend time together. Mom found out about it- she had someone at school watching me, and would call her often to tell her what I had done that day.”

“Oh my! Who was it?”

“I never found out, but I suspected one of my teachers. Anyway, I don’t know if the person gave Mom the wrong information, or if Mom just changed what she heard, but I always knew when that person called, Mom was going to have a fit. She screamed at me, telling me what a horrible person I was, how everyone was talking about me behind my back, what a slut I was. Do you know, she even accused me of sleeping with the entire high school football team? I was a virgin at the time, and even told her to take me to a doctor to prove it, but she wouldn’t. Instead, she just screamed at me for sleeping with so many guys. She spent an awful lot of time screaming at me during those days. In fact, my school had an open campus lunch policy, which meant so long as you came back after lunch, you could go anywhere during that one hour lunch break. Do you know my mother picked me up daily for lunch, and spent that entire time screaming at me? She would take us to a fast food restaurant, screaming the whole way there, order at the drive through, tell me to pay for our lunches, then scream at me after we pulled away until she dropped me off at school again? For at least an hour every Monday through Friday, I could count on being told I was a terrible, ugly, stupid, worthless human being. It was at this time, she also told me how ashamed of me my dad’s parents were of me. She knew I adored them, and her telling me that broke my heart.”

“How terrible!” Heather said quietly. “Did you tell anyone what was happening at home?”

Alexandra sighed. I talked to a counselor at school. She didn’t think I had it so bad. All I told her was about Mom’s lectures, as I called them when she screamed at me. The counselor didn’t think it was a bad thing. I later went to a therapist. She wanted to see my mother, and after they met, she told me she could no longer see me because I was “a terrible daughter.” She only saw my mother after that. Interestingly, years later, she was in legal trouble for not reporting a client she knew was abusing his kid.”

“Are you serious?! That woman has problems!”

“That’s for sure. As time passed, I got used to Mom’s constant lectures. The more I heard I was a terrible, awful person like Mom said, and the more hungry I became for Todd to tell me I wasn’t those things. And he did. For a while, anyway. After we had been

together about a year, things began to change. He wasn't as attentive. He began to tell me how my mom's actions upset him, and ignored what I had gone through. I let it go, just grateful any male would give me attention.

"Time passed, and Todd and I graduated high school. My mother knew that when I turned eighteen, I knew she couldn't legally stop me from seeing him anymore, so she finally relented, and let me date him the week before I turned eighteen.

"One night about a year later, I went out with Todd. It was in May, and an unseasonably hot, humid night. I took off my high school ring, and left it in his car. It was a big ring, and too warm to wear on such a night, I thought. When I got home, Mom saw I wasn't wearing it. Her first question to me when I got in the door was to ask where my ring was. I told her I'd forgotten it, but it was safe in Todd's car, and I was going to bed. She cursed at me, and followed me to my room. I just had time to get my pajamas on when she burst in the room, screaming at me. I told her to leave me alone and to stop screaming- she'd wake up Dad who had to get up early. She got louder and louder, cursing me the entire time. Dad came into my bedroom to see what was happening. Mom immediately said to me, "See what you did? You woke your dad and he has to get up early in the morning!" Dad told her she is the one who woke him, and she began screaming at him, too. I finally couldn't take anymore. I ran past them, and locked myself in the bathroom. I sat on the floor, shaking from head to toe. I could hear my parents arguing outside, and my mother telling me to open the door. I couldn't move, Heather. I was paralyzed and speechless in that bathroom for several hours. A friend of mine that's a counselor told me a couple of years ago that I had a nervous breakdown that night, that that was what happened."

The waitress brought a medium pepperoni pizza to the table at this point. Heather was grateful for the opportunity to stop listening to this ghastly story. The two women were served steaming pieces of pizza, but suddenly, neither was very hungry.

"Do you want me to stop talking, Hon?" Alexandra asked tentatively.

"Yes and no. This story is horrible, but I want to hear how you managed to get through all of this." Heather said. "Go on, please, if you don't mind that is."

“I don’t mind.” Alexandra took a bite of her pizza and continued to speak.

“The next day after that breakdown, I got a newspaper, and found somewhere to move to immediately. I thought if I was out of the house, the abuse would stop. It didn’t, really. It wasn’t as frequent, just because I wasn’t living there anymore, but it still happened.

“Todd’s and my relationship continued, but it also got worse. He pretty much stopped listening to me, and it really began to get under my skin. I felt ignored, and he also began to tell me how I should act and dress. I finally broke up with him, and dated someone else. Someone who I’d been friends with for years, and who actually liked spending time with me, and who I had fun with. We were a good match, but he was seeing other girls, and didn’t want to get married for a few years. I, on the other hand, thought I’d finally have some security if I got married, so I was in a rush to marry. While we were involved, I kept in touch with Todd. It was his idea to be friends. Inside, I knew it was a bad idea, but I did it anyway. I always did what I was told, no matter who told me to do something. The things he said to me made me feel so guilty. I ended up feeling like I owed it to him to break up with Mark, the other guy, and marry him. I knew it was a bad idea. Everything in me said don’t do this, but I married Todd anyway, out of guilt. I remember thinking, “How bad could it be? Mom hates him, and usually people she hates are good people, so why shouldn’t I do this?” So, on a whim, I married Todd when we were nineteen.

“A couple of weeks later, I saw the other guy again, Mark. He heard from someone else about me getting married. Not that it stopped us from seeing each other for a while, mind you. I really cared for Mark, and had for years. We sneaked around behind Todd’s back for a few months. I wasn’t ready to let Mark go- he was a good guy, and I liked how down to earth he was. His compliments were always genuine, he was comfortable to be around- we were good friends, in addition to the romantic element. The same couldn’t be said for Todd and I. Ever.

“Anyway, after about four months, I told Mark I felt too guilty- I couldn’t keep seeing him. It broke my heart, and I think his, too, although he never said. After that, I poured myself into my marriage. I tried being the woman Todd wanted me to be, which,

oddly, was pretty much the opposite of who I discovered later I really am. And, the entire time, I was also trying to be the daughter my mom wanted me to be. It was miserable. I was constantly told what an awful person I was from my husband and my mother. At least I wasn't living with Mom, so I didn't hear it from her daily.

"Finally one day, I had it with Mom. I stopped speaking to her for over a year. Todd was thrilled- he wanted to alienate me from my friends and family, so this was one more person out of his way. He'd already alienated most of my friends and family. Oh, and incidentally, he had agreed wholeheartedly about my grandparents being ashamed of me. He told me he thought I should cut them out of my life, so I did shortly after we got married. It was the most difficult thing I've ever done. I even missed my grandmother's funeral thanks to believing my mom and Todd." Alexandra picked at her pizza, as she remembered how much she loved her grandmother. "I still feel guilty, yanno. I wasn't there when Grandmom was so sick. I wasn't there for Granddad after the funeral, when he needed his family."

"But it wasn't your fault! They told you these things, and you believed them. Especially your mom- who would think their mom would lie about something like that?" Heather put her hand on Alexandra's comfortingly.

"Thank you. Logically I know that, but it still hurts. Well, anyway, I finally told Todd I wanted a divorce. It was miserable- he stalked me, messed with my car's fuel lines, cut the brake lines on the car of the guy I was seeing then, the guy I'm married to now, Ron. I started talking to Mom again during that time. She never did believe me about Todd. She acted like I was making it all up. Nice, eh? She even became friends with him, for the first time."

"That's unbelievable! No one would make up something like that!" Heather said.

"Well, Mom was convinced I did. Finally though, thank God, Todd was no longer a part of my life. My divorce was final the day after Christmas when I was twenty-five. It was the best Christmas gift I could've asked for! I got a bottle of champagne and toasted the good news with a friend. We also set fire to my old marriage license. It was a good day!" Alexandra said with a mischievous smile. She thought quickly to check on the time. It had been almost an hour since Heather arrived at the restaurant.

“Your lunch break is almost over, Heather. Do you want to continue this another day?”

Heather looked at her watch. Only fifteen minutes to finish and get back to work. She made a quick decision, and reached for her cell phone.

“No. Just bear with me for a moment.” She dialed the phone, and talked to her boss. She told her something came up, she needed the rest of the afternoon off.

“Ok, I’m off for the rest of the day. Please go on, Alexandra. This story is incredible! I really want to hear what happens next!”

“You sure you won’t get in trouble?”

“No. I almost never ask for time off. My boss, Kaitlyn, is really cool. She won’t mind. She said it got slow in there since I left anyway. So go on with your story.”

“Ron and I became Christians shortly after we got together. It was strange- we were living together, I was still legally married to Todd, but we were firm in our newfound faith. I think we were both lost and looking for answers in our lives, although different answers. We started looking at the Bible, at the urging of a friend of ours. It was funny- I never believed in God before. Mom always said He existed, and if you’re good you go to heaven, bad you go to hell. I didn’t want to deal with a God like that! I also thought that **IF** He existed, He sure didn’t care about me at all to let me go through what I had gone through. Plus, Todd definitely didn’t believe in God at all, so I wasn’t even allowed to wonder if He existed while we were married- I had to adopt Todd’s views.

“So, here Ron and I were, reading a Bible. For me it was a first ever. For Ron, it was the first time in years. His family was hardly religious, except at Christmas time. Mine was moreso, but not very outward with discussing their faith. Through reading the Bible, I learned God did indeed exist. I then met Jesus thanks to some kind lady at a local church. I was eaten up with guilt about my failed marriage, and terrified I was going to ruin what I had with Ron. I didn’t have insurance, and couldn’t afford to see a psychologist, so I decided to contact local churches to see if anyone offered free counseling. One lady who answered the phone was so sweet. She said for me to come on down and talk to her. I did. She told me about the sinner’s prayer- it’s when you realize that Jesus died for your sins, and you accept His death on the cross and resurrection

as payment in full for your sins. I prayed that prayer that night, and my guilt and fear began to lighten. I began to learn. I read the entire Bible. I prayed a lot, asking for wisdom.

“Mom was still in my life, calling and visiting often, I think just to insult me. She always said you couldn’t trust Christians, so I didn’t tell her we were Christians at this point. She would’ve called us hypocrites anyway. I was still dealing with her nasty comments about everything I said, did, thought, wore, right down to the car I drove and how I wore my hair. The only difference was I had heard the commandment, “Thou shalt honor thy mother and father.” I had no idea how to do this, but I thought honoring this difficult woman meant not speaking back to her, letting her say and do whatever she wanted, enduring her meanness quietly. So that’s what I did for a couple of years. It was painful to say the least! So many times, I’d hang up the phone from a call from my mother in tears. Or, I’d drive home after spending time with her just bawling my eyes out. I wanted things to change, but I didn’t know how.

“Christmas eve one year, after Ron and I got married, we went to my grandparents’ house. Mom’s parents, not the grandparents she told me were so ashamed of me. Anyway, my grandfather had a stroke that day. The poor man had to go to a nursing home. His body was fine, but his mind was never the same. There was no way my grandmother could’ve taken care of him- she was eighty-four at the time, and fragile. He had been the one taking care of her until his stroke. So, Mom and I took care of Grandma. I lived about a mile from her, so she didn’t hesitate to call on me often. Plus, like my mother, she liked to be the center of attention at all times. That was a hard time. I spent a lot of time with her, doing things for her like cleaning her house, getting her meds, taking her to doctor appointments, and she was mean as a snake during the whole time together. Just like Mom, she never had a nice word to say to me- just criticized everything about me. Mom never recognized anything I did for Grandma, either. In fact, to this day, she says she is the only one who took care of her mother. I worked my butt off for her for over a year, then suddenly, Grandma stopped speaking to me. No clue why- just out of the blue, she stopped. Sadly, I was so fed up with her meanness, I was fine with it. Unfortunately without me, the entire burden of being a caregiver fell on my mother. She

became quite the martyr until the next year when Grandma passed away.

“Shortly after, I waited to get my inheritance- several savings bonds. Grandma got three for each of her grandkids when they were born. Mine never arrived. I did some research, and found out who to contact to see if the bonds were cashed in. They were. Only Grandma or I could legally cash them in. Interestingly, the signature on the back was Grandma’s, but the handwriting looked different. It looked just like my mother’s! She stole my inheritance!”

“She did what?! You can’t be serious!” Heather was shocked.

“Yes she did- she stole my inheritance, even though she knew I needed money. I was beyond hurt- money meant more to her than me! For a while, I had felt like God was leading me to sever ties with my mom, but I wasn’t sure. It seemed wrong- how could God tell me to cut ties? She’s my mom! I should honor her! In return, He told me there was no honor in the fact my very presence created strife with her. Well, sorta told me. When I say God tells me something, I mean I get a knowing feeling inside, yanno? So anyway, this was the icing on the cake- I had the courage to sever ties since I learned I meant so little to her. I did it, but only after I sent her a letter asking for my money. I was direct and respectful, but it must’ve been enough to show her I meant business. She sent me a check for the money the bonds were worth. That check was our last contact for several years.”

“You mean you spoke to her again? I couldn’t have!” Heather said.

“You don’t really know what you’ll do until you’re in the situation, Hon. I told myself she was out of my life for good at that point. I settled it in my heart that even if she died, I’d have no regrets- I was ok with no longer speaking. I’d seen her a couple of times, passing on the road, or in a restaurant, but we never spoke. I was completely fine with that.

“Well, six years later, she had heart surgery. Dad told me, and I told him I was praying for her. He told her, and she called me. She thanked me for the prayers, and asked if she could call again sometime. I said maybe. It was the best I could say at the time- she caught me completely unprepared. We talked again, then again as I let her push her way back into my life. She seemed to have

changed somewhat though- she was gentler, kinder. But in time, she became critical and mean again, although interestingly, not to the same extent. We still speak to this day, but I have set boundaries with her, and I let her know some comments are no longer acceptable. She hates it, she breaks those boundaries often, but that is when I set some distance between us- I don't answer her calls for a while. I don't get together with her. For me, distance is healing. And for her? She gets the point. She may not behave permanently, but she does behave for a while at least, and when she does it again, I set distance between us again. It's not an easy relationship, but it is manageable for the first time ever."

"Wow. Alexandra, I am so sorry for all you've been through. I know how you feel- my mom and yours could be twins! I never thought anyone else would understand, or had been through what I have. I thought it was just me." Heather seemed confused and relieved all at the same time.

"No, Honey, it's not just you. A lot of women have been through what we have. I've met a lot of them. But we should all be proud of ourselves! We have survived the most insidious form of attempted murder- when our mothers tried to destroy who we are, replace us with what they want us to be, and to break our spirit. It's not illegal, and they'll never go to jail for it. Many people won't even think of it as murder- mental and verbal abuse doesn't show scars on the outside, only the inside, so it seldom gets the recognition it deserves. Don't ever trivialize what your mom has done to you- don't brush it off by telling yourself others have it way worse than you do. Face it head on. It truly is a form of murder, this type of abuse. Once you admit that to yourself, and only then, can you deal with it, and finally heal."

"Have you really healed from all that, Alexandra? You seem like you have it together, but how? You've been through so much."

"Well, I don't know if I can say I have it all together, but thank you. I think I'm as healed as I can be. One good thing came of my relationship with Todd. He was the first person to tell me that what my mom was doing wasn't right. Ironic, since he did the same things to me. But anyway, he was right- and that helped me to start seeing what she did was abusive. I had to first, admit that I was a victim. I had to realize, really get it through my head that my mother didn't know everything, and had no right to treat me as she

had. I started to get angry then. Once I started getting angry, I didn't think I'd ever be able to forgive her, because the anger was so consuming."

"Why forgive her? I know the Bible says we are to forgive, but what she did was just so terrible!" Heather said.

"It was, and no, it didn't deserve forgiveness. But for my own sanity and peace of mind, I had to release that anger at her. There was no point in carrying it around- what good did it do? I was getting sick, physically, I was extremely depressed- I even tried to kill myself once. Obvious, I didn't do a good job at it since I'm still here, but I tried anyway. All because I was angry, and wouldn't let it go. I finally decided I had to, but I wasn't sure how. I started praying a lot- telling God how angry I was, and that I wanted to forgive, but didn't know how. He helped me by taking away my anger. I also wrote some letters to my mother, telling her how I felt about things she'd done to me, but I never sent them. Instead, I burned them. I also started keeping a diary. For me, just getting it out was a tremendous help. And yanno, that time when we didn't speak? It was the best thing in the world for me. It gave me space and time to work through things without my mom being there all the time creating new issues."

The two women sat there quietly for a few minutes. Alexandra let what she said sink in for Heather. She knew it was a lot to absorb, especially since she was still in the throws of the abuse. She also knew, though, that God is good, and would help this young lady break free. Heather finally broke the silence.

"So. What do you think I should do?"

"I think you should move out of your mom's house."

"Oh I don't know...my mom needs me!"

"For what, Heather? To run your life since she doesn't seem to have one of her own? That sure doesn't help anyone!" Alexandra was immediately sorry for her harsh words. "Heather, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

Heather thought about what Alexandra said for a moment.

"You're right, though, Alexandra. You're absolutely right. I need to move out. It'd be good for me and for Mom."

"Can you afford to do that?"

"Well, I have some money saved. Maybe I could find a cheap apartment locally. Maybe even find a roommate. I have some

friends at church. Maybe one of them would consider moving in with me.”

“That’s a great start. If you want, I can help you get settled in- I have some things at home that you can have.”

“Yea! That’d be great!” Heather looked excited, but Alexandra knew exactly what she was feeling at that moment- fear, joy, and anxiety all at the same time.

“You ok?”

“I think so. I’m just, I don’t know. I want to do this, but I’m so scared.”

“I know you are. But you are strong- you’ve survived so much. You’ll be just fine. I’d be glad to be there to help you work through things, you know. I’m sure David will be too.” Alexandra said the last part in a playful tone. Heather smiled as she thought of him.

“I’m sure he will, too. Once I break it off with Charles. Mom will have to just get used to the idea. I can’t marry him. He’s too boring!”

Alexandra laughed. She knew that Heather would be just fine. It would take her some time, but she would be able to find herself, and live a good life according to how she wanted to live.

Six months later...

Alexandra visited Heather at her little apartment, as she often did. It was such a cute place- cozy and welcoming. The one bedroom floor plan was rather open, making it feel larger than it really was. The two women sat on Heather's sofa, talking.

"I still can't believe how different you look, Heather!" Alexandra said.

Heather swung her hair freely. "I know! I love this new layered cut! It's so easy to take care of!"

"It's not just that- you look happy! When we first met, you seemed so sad. Not anymore. Just look at you, Girl! You're practically glowing!"

Heather laughed. "Well, it really was good getting away from Mom. I feel bad she stopped talking to me, but that was her choice."

"Yes it was, and you have nothing to feel bad about. You needed to move out, and there is nothing wrong with that at your age. And you needed to lose Charles. Geez, did you need to lose Charles."

"Oh I know. David and I are having so much fun- more than Charles and I ever did! In fact, I've been thinking of learning to drive the big rigs, too. We could go on the road together."

Alexandra was stunned. “No way! A petite little thing like you driving a semi? Now that is amazing! You go girl!”

“Yep, I think it’d be great, and so does David. We could share the driving, and still be together. There’s just one thing we need to do before traveling together, though. He wants to get married.”

“And...??” Alexandra said anxiously.

“I told him I need to talk to my matron of honor first. Make sure she’s available. So, are you busy on September twelfth? If not, I’d really like you to be there for me.”

Alexandra squealed excitedly. She jumped up and hugged Heather tightly. “Oh Honey, I will be there with bells on!”

Heather giggled. “No bells- this is just going to be a simple wedding. It’ll be at my church- the church is located on the water, so we’ll get married and have the reception out back on the beach. Very casual, but I think nice. Oh, and I hope you like pink- I want my matron of honor and bridesmaids to wear pink. It’s my favorite color.”

“It is? I’ve never seen you wear pink before.” Alexandra observed.

“I never did because my mother said it was tacky. But I’ve recently bought a bunch of new clothes, most of which are pink! And, as I can afford it, I’ll be redoing this apartment with a lot of pink.”

“Your mother would hate it.”

“I know. And yanno what? I don’t care- it’s MY place!” Heather said.

“I am so proud of you, Heather!” Alexandra said. Heather smiled. She smiled because she was glad her friend was proud of her, but also because for the first time in her life, she was proud of herself.