

Chapter 1

Discovery

"When we are dreaming alone it is only a dream. When we are dreaming with others, it is the beginning of reality." —Dom Helder Camara

For as long as I can remember, I wanted a little girl. "The Dream" was clear in my mind and I played it over and over throughout my childhood. She would be cute and sweet. Long, dark, curly hair flowed to her waist. Her big, blue eyes were framed with thick lashes, and they betrayed the wisdom she radiated from within. Everyone would be dazzled by her and it wasn't hard to see why. She would be easy-going and quick to laugh, loving, caring, obedient, smart, and giving. Sent down from the heavens, she was the perfect angel... she was *my* perfect angel.

Her brother would be exactly three years older and very protective. Instantly, he became her best friend and playmate. No sibling rivalry in *this* family. The bond they created would never be broken. As they grew into adolescence, his friends would date, perhaps marry, her.

Their father—the "Man of My Dreams"—would be handsome, kind, and sensitive to my every need and desire. He would be involved, cultured, sophisticated, generous, and playful, my partner in life, my confidant and trusted companion, my best friend. He would cherish, maybe even *adore* me. Our love would be so strong and enduring, that we could survive anything. Of course nothing devastating would ever happen to us. Those things only happened to *other* people. Our perfect life would protect us from harm, tragedy, or anything unpleasant. Thinking and dreaming this life would make it so. I was convinced.

We'd live in this great, big, fantastic house set high on a hill, overlooking the ocean, surrounded by lots of trees and land. Our vacation home would be in the mountains, deep in the woods, with a stream that we could see from our living room and listen to from our bed. A big skylight opened up the universe as my husband and I lay in our bed, wishing on the falling stars that whispered across the velvet backdrop. I could feel his arms around me, the warmth of his body next to mine, and treasured the thought, "I feel so safe... so secure... so truly loved." My pleasant thoughts held me as I drifted off to sleep.

Of course, money would be no object. I'd have my career as artist/teacher; he'd have his as dynamic executive. We'd have a four-wheel-drive truck to plow through the snow and the back country and a luxury sedan for our forays into the city to soak up the cultured life. My closets were filled to the brim with totally coordinated outfits that complemented my totally pampered and toned body. I was on a first name basis with the staff at the local first class spa where my personal trainer set his schedule according to mine.

When I'd return home, exhausted from my shopping spree, the house would be clean, my husband would be romping on the living room floor with the kids, and dinner was waiting on the perfectly set dining room table. The housekeeper greeted me with a smile, then set about serving dinner. My family, my home, my health, my good fortune, all of this waited for me in my future.

Here, in our happy homes, we'd watch our children grow as we grew old together; still deeply in love after all those years. No problems, no worries. And so my life would go. I truly believed this, until that August evening.

It was a typical Connecticut summer evening—hot, still, and humid. As I gazed out our bedroom window, I could see the day turning to night as the sun was just beginning to sink behind the trees. After working as a construction laborer all day, my body wallowed in rest. Having finished our daily routine of dinner, bath, and story, I was ready to succumb to sweet slumber. A slight cross-breeze brushed against my skin as I lay next to Amber. She was exhausted from her long day at day care and somewhat sleepy. I felt drowsy, almost dreamlike, as I eased her to sleep,

singing the Irish lullabies my mother used to sing to me. Her breathing slowed down; her muscles relaxed. I knew she'd be asleep in a matter of minutes.

As I gently stroked her, my thoughts turned to us. Our life together was a struggle with very little time for rest, but we had each other, our health, a roof over our heads, and this nice room to sleep in. Raising a child alone was not part of "My Dream." Though I tried my best to achieve it, I knew in my heart it was just that—a dream. *This* was my reality: I had my angel and she had me. We were alone in the world. Amber was my family, my *only* family. The mother I *wanted* as a child, I had become. I remembered my needs, wants, and dreams of my childhood, then set out to fulfill them with Amber. She was me; I was her. It was easy to put myself in her place and see the world through her eyes. The exchange was seamless and true.

As she lay on her belly, I could hear the rise and fall of her breath; my hands traced the map of her body. I knew it well. "How perfect she is. Her skin is so soft... stubby toes like mine... legs, with this beauty mark just above her knee... cute buns... strong back... chubby arms... I *love* it when her arms are around my neck... silky, soft hair... mmm... I wish I had these curls. She's *so* beautiful and perfect and...

"Oh, my God!!!"

I quickly pulled back her hair. Behind her right ear, a small, hard lump grew. **"CANCER!!!"** I screamed inside my head. It was loud, long, and empty. My body trembled, my mind raced, and I fought to stay in control. I had no reason to think it was cancer; no experience with cancer at all. Though I desperately tried to reason, I couldn't explain the thought away or find peace in a silent comfortable void. The words would not stop.

"Oh, my God, *IS* this cancer??? *It's cancer!* No, *kids don't get cancer!* Only *old* people get cancer. It can't be..." I silently rattled on and on. I didn't want to wake her up. I didn't want to frighten her. She was enjoying my touch and drifting off to sleep. "She's nearly there." I kept stroking her, straining to slow down my pace, control the panic that was rising within, praying for her sweet sleep, trying to avoid the area behind her ear. But I couldn't stop myself. I was desperate to examine it.

My hand pulled back her hair from the lump; my fingertips touched it. I was wide awake now, not dreaming. I stared at the nightmare. Like a bright light in my eyes, it stared back at me. It hurt. I blinked. My eyes were wet and burning. My mind began to race and then I heard it: A voice... a vision, "It's not *you* who will die, it's *Amber*." The voice was calm, almost reassuring, but I refused to accept it and fought back. "*No!!! It can't be!!! Not Amber!!!*" I was losing my mind. "Oh, God, *please*."

I looked around the room. There was no one else but us. Her sweet sleeping body—so beautiful, so innocent—and me. Oh, how I wanted her... tried for her... did my best to create a good life for us. What I saw with my eyes, betrayed what I knew in my heart. Amber would die and I would have to endure it—even surpass it—and carry on her message to the world. "*God... NO!*" Without words, my entire being implored the silent space that surrounded me. And then there was silence, a loud crashing silence. I scrambled for answers.

Everything fell into place. My life became a movie and I watched it in my mind. Hours after Amber's birth, I had a premonition: I would die before she was six. "Mother's instinct" told me this was true and I lived my life accordingly. I began to document our life together so that she would know me after I died. If I couldn't stay behind, the movies, tapes, photos, and my journal could; they would be our "link." It was crucial that she'd have the tools to know me and relive our time together. She could see me living and laughing with her and know that she was loved and cherished.

Ever so gently, she turned over and let out a sigh; blissfully ignorant of the nightmare I was living. Lost in her world of dreams, she was relaxed and confident that I was there to care for her. "Oh, God, how I love you, Amber." My thoughts became a plea. I didn't know or care who was listening to my thoughts... who could see into my heart and soul. I just wanted her to live, not die.

Returning to the scene, I saw The Lump, my life, our life, Amber's life, and her impending death. I tried to talk myself out of this nightmare; tried to convince God that we didn't deserve this. Our life had been too difficult already. We needed some

peace and comfort and joy. I was sure "The Dream" was not too far away now. It was just around the corner and I needed some time to achieve it.

I was desperate. No matter how much I wanted to change this reality, the scene began to escalate. I was a spectator and this was a horror movie. In a flash, I found myself in a courtroom—God's courtroom. It was packed full of people, though I couldn't see their faces. The jury walked in. The verdict was delivered. I sat in front—helplessly human—unable to stop it.

In one voice, they spoke. "She will die." The people vanished. God and I remained. I begged for her life. "Oh, God, *please!!!* I don't want her to die! She's just a baby... hasn't had a chance to live. She has so much to give to the world. Please don't take her from me. She's all I have! I can't live without her! I *WON'T* live without her!" He reassured me. "I am here. I will guide you. Open your heart... listen... follow."

The movie faded. Before me, my beautiful daughter lay sleeping. "Is she... breathing? Yes... breathing. She's alive." The sun was down. The room was dark. I could only see the silhouette of her... of our future... of my hope. Illuminated by my fear, The Lump glared back at me. I wanted to erase it, pretend I never saw it. I blinked it away. It remained.

Amber was in a deep sleep now, so I touched it. I probed the area around it, hoping to change the diagnosis. "It doesn't feel like a mosquito bite, it's too big. Could it be a spider bite? Maybe she bumped her head. Yeah, kids are always bumping their heads. That's it." I wasn't convinced. My thoughts were in vain. The Lump was there. It didn't move. Hard like bone, it was there to stay. Nothing I could do, say, dream, or plead would make a difference. Like a prediction made in stone, it would change our lives forever.

My life seemed like a bad soap opera. No matter how hard I tried to make "The Dream" become my reality, happiness and contentment eluded me. Obstacles grew like weeds. As I plucked them from my "garden," others would spring up without warning to take their place. There were so many weeds and I was so tired of pulling them. Looking back, I can see they took root in my childhood and then grew, unchecked, throughout my life.