

Chapter 3

Creating Amber

"The whole difference between construction and creation is exactly this: That a thing constructed can only be loved after it is constructed; but a thing created is loved before it exists." —Charles Dickens

From across the room, I saw him. Our eyes met, then locked together in an almost uncomfortable stare. He moved in my direction as the rest of the room fell away. Dark curly hair, big blue eyes, and a voice that was soft and sexy. "Hi, I'm Michael." I instantly fell in lust. "Finally, I've found him: the 'Man of My Dreams' " I thought. For the next two weeks, we were inseparable. I was *sure* this was love, not lust, and no one could tell me differently.

Vermont was the perfect backdrop for this perfect romance. It was August; the days were warm; the nights were cool. We walked through the fields and apple orchards, picking flowers, holding hands and talking. I can't remember *what* he said and besides, who cared? The important thing was how his mouth moved when he spoke; the way his dreamy "bedroom eyes" glanced at me; how his hair danced when he shook his head in laughter; how good his butt looked in his jeans or out. I was awestruck and sure *this* was the true love I'd been longing to know. Confident it would last, I wanted this man's baby.

In December, Michael and George, his roommate, moved to California and in with Jan and me. We all lived in a big house near the foothills of the Sierra Madre Mountains in Altadena. From the beginning, there was a personality conflict between George and me, though I never understood why. A few months later, Michael and I moved to a small cottage to begin a life of our own.

We both had jobs selling Kirby vacuum cleaners door to door. Despite our efforts to build an ideal life, strife began to creep into our relationship. Part of it was immaturity, part of it was different personalities, and the rest was my warped view of family life. I had learned to "look at the bright side" or "ignore the ugly reality" depending on your perspective. If my world was not perfect, I would create one that was, even if it was only in my mind. Reality could've jumped up and bitten me and I'd still refuse to see it. It was a survival skill I learned in "prison camp." Never see the "ugly" in reality or it will be true.

After a period of calm and closeness, Michael asked me to marry him. I didn't hesitate. I was sure I wanted to have a family with him. I knew I would give birth to Amber. On December 22, 1974, we were married in a simple, outside, "hippie-style" wedding at the church we attended, Altadena Baptist Church. The previous week, Michael and I had sold a couple of Kirby vacuums to pay for our wedding and reception. It cost less than \$200. Our honeymoon was spent in the back of our 1966 Chevy Impala station wagon at the local drive-in movies.

Marriage was not the magic solution that I hoped would transform us... hoped would create the perfect relationship I longed for. In spite of the frequent fights, his "wandering eye," and threats of leaving, I still wanted his baby. "You can leave, just get me pregnant before you go," I'd say. He didn't want a baby; he already had a four year old daughter, Krissy, from a previous marriage. "Well, if he doesn't want a baby, let *him* do something about it," I thought. But in my heart, I knew he wouldn't. I stopped taking birth control pills and began to manipulate him into making love with me. I was certain that if he *physically* loved me, then he *truly* loved me. How could I know the difference?

We couldn't depend on our sales commission selling vacuums. I wanted... I *needed* more stability. I decided to get a steady job with a reliable paycheck and applied for a job as a glassblower for Glass Instruments in Pasadena. Several people were considered, but I was chosen. Little did I know that the job had... the job *has* the potential to kill me.

For the next six months, I learned and mastered the art of blowing glass. My main job was to fuze two glass tubes together

to form a vacuum that would test the ultra-violet lamps for leaks. With short puffs into a rubber tube, I would blow air to keep the tubes open, while heating up both openings, then connecting them. My workspace was always clean and tidy; the white boards and work surfaces free of the white dust that continually coated them. Years later, I would learn how deadly the powder was. It was asbestos. My work area, my gloves, even my apron, which protected me from the molten glass, was pure asbestos.

Our married life was just as rocky as before, but I was determined to make it work. I began to turn myself into the person I thought would make Michael happy. Besides, I didn't know who I was anymore and even if I did, who on earth would love *me*? It didn't make a difference; the fights continued. "Maybe a change of scenery will help." In July, we moved to a tiny house in Long Beach. The tension between us was immense, but it was familiar... it was family. If he fought with me, he apologized, he paid attention to me, he cared about me, he loved me. And we always made love when we made up.

Within weeks, my body began to feel very odd. "Could I be...?" Hope in hand, I went for a pregnancy test at the local clinic. The results came back. "Positive," the nurse said. "It's *POSITIVE*?" I was overjoyed as I hurried to Michael's work to break the news. I was certain that once he knew we were going to have a baby, he'd be thrilled. I believed that this new life would resurrect our own.

He was a mechanic for a paving company and covered in dirt and grease when I drove up. I opened the car door and ran into his arms. "Michael, Michael, guess what? I'm pregnant! You're going to be a *father!*" I waited for his reaction. A cold wave of shock and disappointment covered his face. I could feel his body tighten and pull away. My heart sank but I tried to overlook it. He realized his obvious slip and quickly faked a smile. "Oh... good," he strained. At that moment I knew, but buried the knowledge, that he would not love this baby as I did. Again, I was on my own.

My belly began to grow and the life within me stir as I meandered through the myriad of emotions that began to rule my life. Although I was now four months pregnant and married, it was hard to feel stable and grounded. Like a see-saw gone berserk, my hormones dictated my mood swings. I couldn't explain what

was happening to myself *or* to Michael. He had little patience for the changes that were taking place; he seemed to *want* to argue, to engage me in another fruitless struggle. I just wanted peace. Many nights, I'd leave the house and drive down to the beach for a walk; unwilling to participate in the dispute, unable to sleep. I desperately wanted to leave him but was afraid to be on my own... on my own *and pregnant*. And so I usually walked and walked and as I did, talked myself into staying. "It really isn't *that* bad. Maybe I am doing something to *provoke* him. How can I change to make our life better? Maybe Michael will change. If I just stick it out, everything will be okay..." On and on I went, walking and talking until I was exhausted, then drove home. Despite my temporary reprieve, the drama would only get worse.

After one of my late night beach walks, I returned home. It was two in the morning. Michael's breathing was slow and deep. I prayed he was asleep. Carefully and quietly, I crept into bed and, with the utmost care to keep the bed from moving and possibly wake him, I lay down to sleep. He woke up. He was enraged that I'd left in the middle of an argument earlier in the evening. All my life I had to listen to people fighting; I simply didn't have any "fight" left in me. I just couldn't return the "volley" or take the bait. I didn't fight back. I surrendered. I did my best to soothe him, to pacify him, to fake it if I had to, just to stop the yelling and keep my integrity intact. My body was stiff with fear as I lay on my back, my eyes squeezed close, hoping he would tire of listening to himself rant and rave. I couldn't block him out. Suddenly, I felt the impact of his fist on my stomach and it knocked me off the bed.

I was too stunned... too paralyzed to speak. I clutched my stomach and mumbled. I cried, then screamed at the indignity. He not only hit me, but my baby who had barely begun to live. I grabbed some clothes and left. "How could he..." I know *now* that I should have left for good, but my need for a family far exceeded any thoughts of danger. "This *has* to work," I told myself again and again. I suspected the relationship was dead but was determined to revive it. "I am powerful. I can do this. I can resurrect the *dead*, even if it is only a dead relationship." My irrational thoughts ruled my reality.

We moved to Whittier, closer to work, hoping to make another fresh start. I was now working as a bookkeeper at the same paving company as Michael. To take the focus off us and our problems, we decided to expand our family. We went to the dog pound and found a couple of dogs. I chose Tara, an Irish Setter/Golden Retriever mix; Michael chose Wimpy, an old German Shepard who had an insatiable need to be free. To escape, fences were meant to be eaten. As a result, he had little white stubs, all that was left of his teeth.

Our life seemed normal enough to the observer. Go to work. Come home. Work to fix up the baby's room. Go to church on Sunday. Socialize with friends. I truly wanted a "normal" life... a life filled with respect, trust, honesty, fun, and deep abiding love. But my desperate need to have this be true, cloaked the truth. "Red flags" were everywhere and I refused to see them. Our life together was yet another facade I helped to create to hide the *real* world we were living. A secret, seething tension pervaded our lives.

According to My Dream... my childhood fantasy of the perfect life, I was going to have a boy first. "Maybe Michael will love our baby if it's a *boy*." My mind said, "Boy." My heart said, "Girl." I knew this was Amber, though I didn't know her name. I talked to her in my journal, I painted her picture—a chubby little girl with dark, curly hair and big, blue eyes. She looked like an angel.

I worked up until the day she was born. The pregnancy was normal and healthy; the labor was, too. In my heart, I knew she was a girl. I named her Jennifer until the day I gave birth. On our way to the hospital, I stopped at the store for some magazines to read during the long hours of labor. While standing in line, I heard my inner voice. "Amber." It was then that I knew *who* she was. She now had a name and was not simply "my baby."

Her birth was miserable beyond belief and almost surreal, like a bad acid trip. To speed up delivery, the doctor induced me with Pitocin and then gave me "twilight sleep." I remember only pieces of the nightmare... scenes that didn't connect: The ceiling lights whizzing by as they wheeled me to the delivery room, the doctor yanking and pulling and tugging at my body—at *her*—with

forceps as if he was in a hurry, the nurses removing something from my body and taking it away. I passed out after that and woke up at four in the morning in my hospital room, bewildered and afraid. I struggled to reach the button to call the nurse. "Where's my baby?"

The nurse brought her to me. I expected to feel the "motherly bond" I'd read so much about, but didn't. I searched the depths of my feelings, but still found nothing. I brushed it off. "It'll come later." I looked at this tiny red creature as I held her in my arms. Bruised and battered, helpless and dependent, she depended on me for her very existence. She needed me to live and, as I would find out later, I needed her to *truly* live. And this was our bond: I gave birth to her body. Amber gave birth to my soul.

"You will die before she is six." I dismissed it as quickly as it came. "Of course not. I'll always be here for her. I'm her mother." I couldn't control the feeling of doom that hovered over me like a cloud. A deep sadness lingered just on the edge of my joy. I made up my mind to record our life together, just in case it was true.

Giving birth had taken its toll. I felt battered and beaten. Recalling the delivery made me recoil. To heal my body and soul, I went into the privacy of our backyard, lay naked on a blanket, and basked in the warm sun with Amber at my side. "Oh God, it feels *so good* to be relaxed, at peace, and feeling Your warmth." Many days, we would picnic, play, and swing from the huge walnut tree that dominated the yard. It was a good life punctuated by periods of torment and anguish. "Finding the balance" continued to elude me so I was determined to focus on the good and ignore the bad, hoping it would resolve itself.

Michael seemed happy to have Amber in our lives and we both enjoyed watching her grow. The 8mm movie camera, that he'd gotten me for Christmas during my pregnancy, was used to capture our life on film... to document our time together. I wanted her to know me after I died—how much I loved her, all of the fun we had, and that she had a "normal" childhood. I'd forgotten my "thought" in the hospital until she was two months old.

Throughout my pregnancy, I smoked. I had no intentions of quitting, until I felt sick. Reluctantly, I went to the doctor. He

suspected tuberculosis, tested me, and told me to stop smoking. "I can't." He gave me the name of a program that would help: The "Five Day Plan." I drove away in terror... my "thought" was coming true.

As soon as I got home, I called to get information and directions to the next meeting. It was an educational program. Each evening, smokers met to learn about smoking—what it is and how it affects your body. They brought in lungs from cadavers. The smoker's were black and full of holes; the non-smoker's were pink and full. I imagined my own lungs and knew I needed to live... to be Amber's mother, not die. The premise of the program was clear and powerful: Once you know... you actually *see* what smoking is doing to your body, you make the conscious choice to quit.

On the third evening, I brought Amber. She lay sleeping in her car seat at my feet, while we watched a movie about a young mother who smoked, as seen through the eyes of her child. It began with the child in the womb, talking to her mother about what her smoking felt like, and followed the little girl throughout her childhood; all the while her mother continued to smoke. I glanced down at Amber. The last scene was much too close to home. The girl, now a teenager, entered her mother's hospital room. The image of a woman cut down in the prime of her life, suffering and dying from lung cancer, and her daughter distraught at her side, sent chills down my spine. "Mom, why didn't you quit smoking?" she pleaded. I saw Amber. I saw me. I decided to quit smoking. I didn't want to die of cancer and leave my daughter behind.

The arguments with Michael continued; many of them ended with him leaving and going to the local nightclub. "At least it's peaceful now," I told myself. But I wasn't ready to let my marriage—My Dream—die. Something inside told me to hang on. "It will be different," I convinced myself. We asked Pastor George, our pastor at Altadena Baptist Church and the man who married us, to help us sort out the difficulties in our marriage. We learned a lot but we were too immature to take his advice to heart. Hoping a change of scenery would be the catalyst that would save our relationship, we moved again.