


Forever Exposed

THE NIKKI CATSOURAS STORY

A family's fight for justice and the unstoppable power of the Web

LESLI CATSOURAS



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Dedicated to
the author of life,
my creator and redeemer.
Thank you for being so patient with me.

To Christos,
my best friend.
If love is a fairytale...
may our story never end.
Thank you for encouraging me.

To Danielle,
my precious monkey...
If the world were a song,
you'd be the perfect melody.
Thank you for your inspiration.

To Christiana,
my little bubas...
If the sun refused to shine,
you would light up my world.
Thank you for putting up with me.

To Kira,
my baby lulu...
If dreams were made of sugar,
you'd be my chocolate-dipped strawberry.

And to Nikki,
my precious angel...
If heaven is the distance that stands between us,
then thank you for showing me the way.

FOREVER EXPOSED

A MEMOIR



Lesli Catsouras

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Prologue



Lesli

Ten years earlier: October 1996

On the night before we found the tumor growing in our daughter's brain, I had a dream.

I didn't wake up right away; instead, I lie still, watching every moment of my daughter's life play out like a movie. Words rained down on me like shattered glass — a caveat. Then I heard a voice — a strong, indelible sound like thunder. It was a message, a warning to heed. "*Don't be afraid,*" it said. "*Everything will be okay if you trust me.*"

I sat up startled, sweat-soaked and shaking. I knew something was horribly wrong, yet I was strangely calm. So I hurried down the hallway toward Nikki's room. And just as I had suspected, she was fast asleep, lying with her little arms stretched high above her head — exactly as she was in my dream.

I stood over her little body and studied her face: the curve of her nose, her round fleshy lips, her thin, honey-blond curls fanned across her Cinderella pillowcase. She was

safe, and dreaming peacefully. But somehow, somewhere deep inside of me, I knew it was there — the tumor.

It wasn't until the next afternoon — when I insisted she see the doctor — that an unplanned MRI revealed the large mass growing in the center of Nikki's brain.

That was the moment I knew I had experienced something amazing.

Ten days later, at the hospital, while I watched my eight-year-old daughter being prepped for a twelve-hour operation on her brain, I still couldn't get it out of my head — how I felt when I had that dream, how the words came alive, and promised me that everything would be okay. It was a conviction that was so impossible to explain, it challenged everything I had ever believed about life — about God.

“It's a silent killer,” the doctors told us.

They explained that these rare, deadly tumors have no symptoms and are usually found only after the patient has died. They said that Nikki would not survive that kind of cancer; that children under the age of ten *always* died. They told us that the best we could hope for was to prolong our daughter's life, and to do that meant removing the tumor completely.

The surgery was delicate: If you were to slice an apple in half, and then in half again, that's where you would find the 10mm tumor that was invading the stem of our daughter's brain.

The pediatric neurosurgeon explained the devastating risks of this type of brain surgery: *She may never walk again. There is a chance that she will lapse into a permanent coma. She may die. She may not be the same little girl we know and love.*

I knew the risks — that with the surgery, she *might die* but without the surgery, she *would die* — so I had no other choice but to sign the consent form. I wondered how long she would stay in the hospital. No matter how many times I had asked, no one would say — for certain — if she would ever be going home.

Smaller than her hospital gown, Nikki sat quietly on top of the plastic bed sheets. At eight, her legs were thin and stringy, barely dangling over the side. I just stared at her little, round face, sweet and scared, wondering if maybe it was true. Maybe the golden sand in her hourglass had begun to fall.

Just then, a team of doctors and nurses gathered around. I couldn't breathe. Nikki looked frightened and small and someone was nudging me away from her. I think, until that moment, every part of me believed that it was all just a terrible mistake, that all the doctors and tests were wrong, that it was some other poor, unfortunate child that had only months to live — not mine.

I didn't see her again for twelve hours.

Every half hour, the nurse brought us an update: *They've located the tumor. They've begun the excision. She's still breathing.* Finally, at 7 p.m. they brought us the most amazing news of all: *She made it. The operation is finished.* But the bad news was quick to follow: *The tumor was connected to the two main arteries and the brain stem. We could only get enough for a biopsy.*

The next four days were surreal. My prayers for Nikki's recovery turned to pleas; I needed a sign. I needed to know that my precious little girl was still as perfect as the day she was born. Christos held out his hand and we stared down at our daughter lying like an angel wrapped as a gift. "We're going to get through this," he said, "together — a team."

Before I had the chance to speak, the doctor walked in with the final pathology report. Our eyes came together as if the world had suddenly stopped. He didn't have to say a word. It was there in his smile, the miracle, confirming what I had already known: Everything was going to be okay.

The news swept through the hospital like a hurricane. Our daughter was a living medical phenomenon. The doctor came clean: "Do you realize that your odds of winning the lottery — ten times over — were better than your odds of that tumor being benign?"

I felt my head nodding, my eyes bending together like rubber bands, as if God had really spoken to me — as if Nikki had been chosen to do something amazing.

For a long time that afternoon, I watched Nikki sleep, listening to the symphony of machines echoing from one solid glass wall to another. I watched her chest push the air in and out with ease, her eyelids moving steadily through the course of a dream. I couldn't imagine anything worse than losing a child. Then in one split second, when a thought swam through my mind, this question floated to the surface:

What if this miracle is not meant to be the conclusion? What if it's just one small scene written in the book of an even bigger story, a microcosm of something even more unfathomable to come?



A journey of a thousand sites begins with a single click.

~Author Unknown

One



Lesli

October 31, 2006

“CHRISTOS,” I SAY, STARTLED, AS I drop the ivory bowl into the warm soapy water. “Is that you?” I look over my shoulder. No one is there.

I’m not usually this anxious, especially in the middle of a weekday afternoon. In a household of four kids, a husband, two dogs and a bird, you get used to strange noises at any given moment. But it was a long night, and lately things haven’t been quite as they seem.

I listen carefully to the noise behind me and stare into the reflection of the kitchen window. The dog is barking, but no one is there — at least no one I can see. It’s funny how doubt always looks different when you are ignoring your deepest instinct. I tell myself it’s nothing and continue scrubbing the ivory bowl from the tuna salad I made for lunch.

Somewhere along the way, I’ve learned how to calm that still, small voice — the one that keeps telling me that something is about to go horribly wrong. I feel as if I can change fate by focusing on menial tasks like carpools and housework,

or just making sure lunch is ready when Christos sneaks in from work for a quick bite to eat. But when it comes to Nikki, I can't afford to ignore it completely. And lately, the unrelenting whispers have been deafening.

That's why today, Christos and I are taking our daughter to meet with a neuro-psychiatrist, a doctor who specializes in brain disorders. Although Nikki's life is proof that miracles do happen, the highlights seem to be fading, overshadowed by an unexpected neurological diagnosis.

In spite of all the maladies that have surfaced over the last ten years — pineal cytoma, scoliosis, juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, all the sleepless nights we held hands in prayer — Christos and I know that it's never been quite this bad. A brain tumor is one thing; paranoid psychosis is another. And there is nothing running deeper through my mind as I dry off the dishes and check the clock above my oven. It's almost 1:30. Just one more hour to go.

I have always lived in fear of days like these, when at any moment my whole world might come crashing down on top of me. And I am convinced this is exactly how it will start: with a cautious whisper floating on the edge of disbelief, balanced by the thread of a blinding fear, snapped by a moment I never saw coming.

She seems fine now, the picture of perfect health. But something I learned a long time ago with Nikki is that it's not always the things you see on the outside that are so dangerously deceiving, it's what you can't see on the inside that will cut your heart to pieces.

She still gets mad when I worry this way. But I think deep down she knows that I can't really control how I feel. "It is what it is, Mom, stop worrying so much," she always says.

"But it's my job," I tell her. Then I stand in front of her, with that harsh mothering stare, a glass of water and a pill. And eventually, when she is finally convinced that I really do know what is best for her, she caves.

But it's only when she begins to feel better that she will give me a hug with that impish smirk, and say the same thing she said the last time she refused to let me help her: "Thanks Mom, but couldn't you find something better to do with your time?"

I never do answer that question. I just shake my head and smile, because nothing could be more satisfying.

Another sharp thud in the hallway behind me makes me jump. “*Christos...*” I say, almost knocking over the Tweety Bird cookie jar with my dust cloth. “Did you forget something?” As I say this, I hear a swift thunder of footsteps, dense and solid, plummeting down my back stairway.

I freeze.

I do this every time something startles me. Despite the fact that something might be terribly wrong, I stop whatever I’m doing and hold my breath. I am completely unaware of the idling car in the distance. Or the fact that Christos is not even home.

Carefully, I glance behind me toward the noise just in time to see the garage door slam shut. The wind from the door sweeps the papers from the kitchen table, scattering them like fallen leaves; they float gently to the ground. Then it is silent, and there is no one moving about — nothing.

Now my heart is racing and my head is spinning with questions. *What time is it? Where is Nikki?* I hadn’t taken my eyes off her all morning — not until a minute ago when she went upstairs to take a shower, which is why I am positive she’s in the shower.

For a second, I’m so confused I have to think twice before I remember to walk.

Then suddenly, I hear it, that strong, indelible voice — soft, and familiar. “*Trust me,*” it says, “*everything will be okay!*” Without thinking, I bolt toward my garage.

I fling the door open with a surge of panic, but not in time to stop my precious Nikki from driving away — in Christos’ black, 911 Porsche Carrera Cabriolet, the high-performance sports car we’d sequestered to the garage, locked up tight, and tagged for sale because of its impetuous flair for unsafe speeds. The car that only Christos is allowed to drive.

The fumes are fresh; she is backing down the driveway. My body stiffens and the towel I’m holding falls from my hand.

I close my eyes in disbelief, hoping they are playing tricks on me. But when I open them again, there she goes.

“*Nikki!*” I cry out; she turns toward my voice as if to say she is sorry.

“*No, Nikki don’t...please don’t!*” But the weight of the moment is shattering, as heavy and sharp as glass.

As I take a breath, I feel my shoulders thrust backwards into the doorframe of the house. Huge sections of my body go numb. Instinctively, I want to run, throw myself behind the car, and stop my daughter. But I can’t move. I am locked in the prison of my own disbelief.

So I focus hard and try to stop her with a stare. But she turns her eyes away from me, driving backwards, fast and confused.

Unlike most teenagers who break the rules from time to time, Nikki is not leaving this house because she is angry, or to get my attention, or because she didn’t get her way. She’s sick and confused. And she’s not in control of herself — at all. But unlike when she was younger, a harsh, mothering stare will not be enough to stop her, or to convince her to change her mind.

As I swallow, I feel the liquid swim to the corners of my eyes, and I just stare at her face.

God, her face...

Her long brown hair is draped like ribbons over her shoulders. Her round fleshy lips bloom like a budding rose into her pale porcelain skin. I see her eyes — Christos’ eyes, electric blue, telling a story of mystery and uncertainty as they drift through a rivulet of thoughts.

But this girl, the one staring back at me through the windshield of her father’s car, is not one I recognize. And now it’s too late. Her psychosis is back, and this time it holds a vengeance.

Taking the Porsche is something even *Nikki* would never do.

It’s hard for me to fully understand Nikki sometimes; why she does the things she does — like this, something totally irrational and unexpected. And sometimes, like now,

even though I feel that I know my daughter so well, I recognize there is a subtle difference between knowing someone and understanding them. For me it is the balance between living in fear and living with hope. It is the chasm between my need to protect her and my need to see her happy.

But I do understand this about her: When you live your life on a moment's notice, you can't afford to think twice. You see reason in the unreasonable, humor in the things that feel so sad. You measure worth by time and not by weight. You understand that when things become too black and white, you just add in your favorite color. And when everything turns upside down, you simply stand on your head. When you live with the constant reminder that life can be wiped away in an instant, you learn very quickly how to live as fast as you can.

In the distance, I hear the roar of the Porsche shattering the placid stillness of our streets. Suddenly, everything in front of me turns dark, and for the next several seconds, time changes its meaning — and everything about me. It doesn't exist. I don't exist. The world around me spins fiercely, and I am lost somewhere in the middle of timelessness.

Then a warm sensation sinks into me; a feeling of peace and assurance pulses through my thoughts like a drug, soothing and somehow comforting me. I hear it again, a promise that everything will be okay. "*Just trust me!*" it says. "*This is what you agreed to...remember.*" But as hard as I listen, and as much as I try, for the life of me, I cannot remember a thing.

It seems ridiculous to believe, but somehow, I know that my daughter is about to die. I know that in a few moments, she will be ripped away from me, away from this world. I know this as if I have lived this moment in another time or place. I know exactly what is going to happen next.

As I argue with my thoughts, dismissing them as nonsense, my need to stop anything bad from happening has me running into the house to find a phone. There is a mixture of Downey fabric softener and the warm smell of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies, a subtle reminder that my life is normal and things are perfect.

As I listen closely to the voice inside of me — “*It’s okay,*” it says — I know that despite everything that is about to happen, and all the pain that it will bring, even death will not be enough to take Nikki away from me.

The thought seizes my mind, and my hands begin to tremble as I dial Christos’ cell. He just left the house a few minutes ago to go back to work, so I know he can’t be too far. I am scared, so scared, yet there is a feeling of understanding — confidence — as if everything makes perfect sense. As if this is what I have always known. *As if this is what I have agreed to?* But then suddenly, I can’t breathe. It’s like all the oxygen is being sucked out of the room and I can no longer think.

I clutch the phone against my cheek. And the second I hear my husband’s voice, I just cry. “*Oh, Christos, it’s...it’s Nikki...*” I squeeze my eyes let the tears drain out. “*She left, she took your Porsche. Oh God, Christos, she’s, she’s...I think something awful is going to happen!*”

I hear the sound of his car accelerate. “*What!*” he exhales hard. “Where the hell is she going?”

I cry even harder. “*I don’t know. She just left.*”

Then I hear a sigh. “Don’t worry, babe, I’ll find her.”

I met Christos when I was only seventeen. I fell in love with him not only for his ability to stop my world from crumbling, but because he fights hard for the things he loves. And because he always knows how to put my world back together again, even after it has fallen to pieces.

Although it’s true Christos is Nikki’s hero, and she his princess, her impulsiveness has been a challenging task for both of us. But it is always Christos who swoops in at the last second to pluck her from the dangerous circumstance she has found herself in. He has spent eighteen years protecting his daughter, and I am certain he will do whatever it takes to bring her home safe, to me. “Hey, she can’t be too far,” he says. “I’ll bring her home... I promise.”

I close my eyes and nod. Because even though I know it’s not true, I believe him.

It's moments such as these when the tiny knots in my stomach twist up tight and remind me that I need God. This is when I grab my keys, my cell phone, and rush to my car. I pray harder than I have ever prayed in my life.

I'd spent years convincing myself that I was the only one who knew when something was about to go wrong with Nikki. That the intuitive bond between us was so strong it made it possible for me to see things that parents were not supposed to see with their kids. That it was my job as her mother to keep her safe — even if it was just from herself. Because I knew, at any moment, I could lose her. Now, as I step into my car, something is telling me that I already have.

I back quickly off my driveway, slamming the car door as my wheels hit the street. I drive hard and fast, begging God to take anything, anything at all, just not my child.

Nikki is not like most girls her age, typical and predictable. You won't find her shopping, or lying in the sun, or getting her nails done on her days off. Instead, you will find Nikki on a hill taking photographs of nature, or sketching a stranger playing his guitar in the park. Sometimes you will find her just sitting against a tree somewhere alone, reading Freud, sipping on Boba tea.

But today, she is not in any of those places.

Today, she is nowhere.

I drive first toward the high school, but on second thought, I head toward the beach. I drive excessively fast, willing her — in my head — to turn around and come back home. But before I have made it to the main road, the urgency within me stops completely. A tingling sensation creeps up my arms and then into my chest. A sinking feeling, light and smooth, drops me like an elevator. All the life inside of me turns cold, and again I am struggling to breathe. I look at the clock on my dashboard: it's 1:52.

Somehow, I've managed to pull my car over to the side of the road and put the gear into park. Cars zip past me as if I'm not even here. I feel the tears trailing down my cheeks while I try to catch my breath. It's getting harder to breathe, harder to think, because somehow, I know that it's true. I know that my daughter has died.

But the humming of my car grabs my focus, and reminds me that bad things don't happen to my family. That miracles are what Nikki's life is made from. I try hard to convince myself that Nikki is fine, that it's only my imagination telling me that she's not. But nothing can explain the anger welling up inside of me, or the sting of despair so strong it steals my sight.

I clutch my head with my hands and try to block out the thoughts. But I can't stop them. I know what I know, no matter how hard I try to will them away. I take in a deep breath, grab hold of the steering wheel firmly with both hands, and I scream into the air.

"N-O-o-o..."

All my attention travels back to Nikki's face and my breathing slows. I squeeze my eyes, concentrate my focus — make a U-turn — and drive, willing away the truth that's been building for the last ten years. I take everything that is in me — fear and determination — and search for my daughter. Because grief isn't stored in your heart or mind or soul. If you ask me, it's found in the distance between a mother and her child.

Christos

There are many things I am thankful for: the fact that my office is just a few blocks away from my home, where I go every day for a healthy lunch with my wife and, lately, my daughter, Nikki. I'm thankful to have a career that allows me the time to go with my kids to the doctor when they are not well, like today. But the one thing that I am most thankful for is the fact that Nikki is still as healthy as any other kid her age. It's a scary thing raising a child whose dreams balance precariously on the edge of uncertainty. It hasn't been easy on any of us. But if there is one thing I know for certain, it's that Nikki is a fighter.

Lesli says she's not like our other girls; she's cheeky, a free spirit. It's her way of *not* saying she's defiant and irresponsible. But I say she's had to be all of those things. She had to fight for her right to be here. I admit she can be a handful, curious about everything — but honestly, she never means to do anything wrong. The truth is if you give Nikki the chance, she can change the way you think and feel about everything.

A few months ago, Nikki and I left Costco with some take-out food — a couple of hot dogs and a pizza. As we exited the parking lot, I noticed what looked to be a vagrant or even more so, a very dirty con man standing on the corner of the road. Nikki rolled down her window.

"Nikki, what are you doing, roll up your window!" I said.

"Hold on a minute."

Nikki offered the man a hot dog. He didn't take it; he said it would just make him thirsty. I swerved quickly and drove the other way but she managed to toss him a bottle of water. As I drove off, thinking, *yeah right, since when did beggars become choosers*, Nikki turned to me and asked, "I wonder if he has to sleep in the dirt?"

A few days later, I was looking for some tools when I found an old, disgusting twin mattress folded and stuffed in the trunk of Nikki's car. She said she had found it on a street corner somewhere. When I questioned her intentions, she pushed her lips to one side and awkwardly said, "It was just lying there, so I gave it a ride home."

I folded my arms and stared at her. "And?" I asked.

"And!" she raised her eyebrows and then surrendered. "OK, I'll go throw it away... Hey, do you think Costco has a Dumpster?"

I honestly don't know how information passes through her mind, but I do know she always has good intentions.

I hadn't counted on a relapse, though. I really believed we had things under control. Although lately it seems that every time I start to understand what's going on with my daughter, it turns out to be something else entirely — sending me again running toward God knows where, to save her from God knows what. Honestly, I didn't see this one coming.

But this time, when I heard Lesli's trembling voice telling me that Nikki had taken my Porsche, I knew right away that something bad was going to happen. Lesli seems to have a sixth sense when it comes to Nikki, and over the years I have learned that she always knows when something is about to go terribly wrong. I guess she was right to ask me to come home early for lunch today. I should have stayed home. I thought about it, but Nikki seemed fine. Plus, my day is crazy. I'm going to be up working all night as it is. And besides, I was going to be meeting them at the doctor's office in an hour.

I pull up to a stop sign and look over to the car on my left. A black Mercedes with chrome wheels is waiting for a girl with long brown hair to cross the intersection. I watch her walk fast, listening to her iPod. I squint at the image to make sure it's not my daughter. Nikki was doing the same thing when I left her a few minutes ago, right before she told me she loved me, and flashed me a peace sign. Right before she blew me a kiss.

"I'll see you in a bit, angel," I said.

She answered, "Or, maybe *I'll see you* in a bit, Dad."

"*Damn!*" I say. "*Where the hell did she go?*"

There is nothing in front of me but houses and street. So I head north, toward the high school. I drive past the bank, the grocery store and then the restaurant where we had dinner just the other night. We hadn't been there since the kids were little, but Nikki wanted to try their all-you-can-eat salad bar. When we walked in, I noticed the place was practically empty: only one elderly couple sitting at a table in the middle of the

biggest dining room you've ever seen. The sign read, "*Seat yourselves,*" so I started assessing the situation when Nikki murmured my name, "Dad."

I turned to look at her, eyes wide, lips pressed to one side. She pointed at the elderly couple with her eyes and whispered, "You think we should ask them to move?" And then she smiled at me. It is definitely that sense of humor that makes it impossible for me to stay mad at her for long.

I drive across the main road, winding slowly through traffic, when my cell phone rings. I look down at the screen. It's my office. But as much as I need to take the call, I ignore it. I study the narrow street in front of me, amazed at how big the world becomes when you're looking for someone. I have no idea where to begin. So I turn into my neighborhood, but there is no sign of Nikki.

I stare hard, panning the streets when it hits me: *I left the keys out.*

I turn left.

I have done it before — left those damn keys hanging on the key rack after someone has come to look at that car. My worst fear is its speed. And that's precisely why it's for sale. 100 mph on the highway feels like you're cruising at a quiet 50. I would never *let* one of my children drive that car — not in a million years. But, last night, I was so consumed with Nikki — hiding *her* car keys, yanking off her bedroom door, taking everything away from her — I guess I wasn't thinking about my car keys.

Today is the last day of October, and the hot California sun has finally simmered down to a warm, windy afternoon. To my left I see an ambulance whizzing through the intersection. And for just a moment, denial reveals its ugly truth to me. I should have taken Nikki to the hospital last night when I still had the chance. I let her talk me out of it. I let her words sway my decision. *My life is not a coloring book, Dad,* she said. *I can't live inside those lines.*

But last night, she was more rational than she was two months ago — the first time she had a psychotic episode. She was calm, and she convinced me that I just needed to relax. She told me that if she got a good night's sleep she would be

fine in the morning. But she's obviously not fine. I have made a horrible mistake.

As I weave through traffic, I notice a sign on the freeway: "Report drunk drivers by calling 9-1-1." I know Nikki's not drunk, but this is an emergency just the same. I have to do something, so I dial.

The second I hear the dispatcher's voice I lose all control of my words. "My daughter has just taken my car without my permission..." I squeeze my eyes and feel the chain of trust that I have spent eighteen years building unlink. To make sure I get the dispatcher's attention, I add: "I think she's been drinking alcohol."

The words tumble out so fast I can hardly stop them. I now feel a warm swelling in my throat as I think about what I have done. Even though I know it was the right thing to do, I cry because it has come down to this.

I mutter some words, spouting off information about the car. I give him the license plate number, the year, model, the make. "It's a convertible," I say. He takes my information and files a report when I notice two California Highway Patrol cars come from out of nowhere, sirens blaring. They bullet right past me. I look in my rear-view mirror. They are already gone. I check my watch. It's 1:55.

"Ah...excuse me sir," I say, "has there been an accident around here?"

Without hesitation, the dispatcher answers, "Yes."

I swallow what feels like my own beating heart. "Well, do you have any information? Was it a Porsche?" I keep my eyes focused on the road up ahead as I drive. I don't even notice the traffic building up behind me.

"I don't know, sir," the dispatcher says. "I don't have the details of that accident. Hold the line, please."

I look out the window at the dry, grassy hills on my left. I don't see the thick, black cloud of denial that I'm about to drive into. I don't see the truth even though it's falling all around me like snow. The dispatcher comes back on the line and asks me for my number. "Ah..." I say, blinking hesitantly, because for the life of me, I can't seem to remember a thing.

There is a relief in knowing the police are searching for my daughter. But I am determined to be the one to find her. It seems like I'm always the one to find her — just when I think I won't, there she'll be.

I pull up to a stop sign and stare out my car window. I imagine Nikki pulling up next to me. *Oh, hi Dad*, she'd say, and then she'd point her finger at me, *you need to stop worrying about me!* She'd smile and say, *I love you!* I imagine the look on her face. She would narrow her eyebrows, tilt her head, and nervously she'd giggle. She would look so sorry, and I would forgive her even before she was finished apologizing.

Yesterday, Nikki and I went to Starbucks to talk about Kira's eighth birthday and our annual Christmas cruise. We spoke for nearly an hour before I looked down and noticed she wasn't wearing any shoes. "Nikki, what are you thinking?" I asked.

"That if I had a pet goldfish I would take him on a cruise."

"You'd *what* — No! I mean your feet."

She smiled. "Did you know I wrote a poem about my feet?"

I felt my eyes clinch with confusion. "Nikki," I lowered my voice. "Why aren't you wearing any shoes?"

She looked at me soberly and lifted her eyebrows. "No Dad, the question is: *Why are you wearing shoes?*"

For a moment, she just stared at me. Then we both burst into laughter. I laughed so hard I cried. I gave her a piggyback ride to my car.

The recollection makes me laugh but my eyes don't move. I just stare at the sidewalk and think. *Maybe if I stare hard enough, she will somehow magically appear.*

The driver behind me lays on his horn, so I pull forward and drive. I look at my watch. Only an hour has passed, but it feels like two or three. By now I have covered every inch of this city, and I'm starting to think that Nikki is not here.

Lesli and I decided to raise the kids in Ladera Ranch mainly because the schools have such great educational standards. It's a quiet, safe town. The neighborhoods are filled with

children and dogs and cookie-cutter homes. Like me, the families who live here safeguard themselves against the perils of life by driving sports utility vehicles, and securing their homes with high-tech alarm systems. Only now, I don't know if that was enough to protect my little girl.

If you ask Nikki, she will tell you that her mother and I worry too much, or that *I'm* too strict and controlling. But that's only because she doesn't realize how difficult she is to keep track of. It's not a rebellious thing. She just lacks good judgment. Like taking my Porsche. Maybe Lesli is right. Maybe we are seeing the beginning stages of the side effects of brain radiation.

I drive back onto the main road, smiling at strangers as I pass. I hit a few dead ends, but I just turn around and keep driving. It's been at least thirty minutes since I spoke to Lesli. It worries her when I call, though, because I never have good news. And every time I call 9-1-1 they say the same thing: "I don't have any information, sir." But as I roll up to the next red light, I remember my first conversation with the dispatcher two hours ago. Like in slow motion, it plays in my head like a movie, the glowing red lights swirling on top of the two patrol cars that sped past me, heading for the toll road. And the two thoughts connect:

Oh God, the toll road...

I blink wearily at the notion, questioning whether I had imagined this, or if it truly happened. As the memory resurfaces, my cell phone rings.

"Christos?"

This time it's my wife. I relax at the thought of her calling to tell me that she's found our daughter, that Nikki's on her way back home, safe and sound. My heart stops pounding at the promising thought. But as I listen to the brief, icy silence, I feel the muscles in my neck tense.

"Yeah?"

The quiet thickens before she asks, "Have you found her yet?"

I let out a long, deflated breath, searching my thoughts for an explanation — anything I can possibly conjure. "No, not

just yet, Les. She's probably just gone over to a friend's house and lost track of the time. She's probably on — " The cacophony of car horns behind me stops my words like a guillotine. The stoplight has turned green, but I'm frozen stiff. I can't drive. My hands are shaking so hard I have to use my knees to pull my car over to the side of the road. "I'll call you back in a minute, babe." As I hang up the phone, every thought in my head becomes transparent. Without thinking, I dial every hospital within a thirty-mile radius. When they tell me my daughter is not there, I cry and thank God for the miracle.

But the strange moment of clarity has left me thinking. And I realize I have waited long enough. This time I make another call to the dispatcher.

"9-1-1, what's your emergency?"

I switch on my blinker and turn into traffic.

"Yes, I'm calling to find out if there has been an accident on the toll road..."

I feel my pulse quicken as I swallow, but this time I *do not* say my name.

The dispatcher answers immediately, "Yes sir, I did report that about two hours ago."

Oh God...

Without thinking, I swing my car over to the side of the road and stop abruptly. "Well, can you tell me what cars were involved...?"

"Ah, yes sir, that car was a black Porsche."

I shudder. Everything inside that was holding me together lets go. I watch my arms just fall from the steering wheel. My mouth must have dropped open, because suddenly I can hear myself breathe. I try to speak, but my words are stuck to the roof of my mouth. I concentrate hard and suddenly say, "My name is Christos Catsouras, can you please tell me if my daughter was in that car!"

"Ah...hold on, sir. I'll have to get that information."

I exhale, in suspense. I want him to say it was someone else. I want him to tell me it was a different car altogether. I want him to tell me they found my daughter, and that she is safe at home with my wife. But he doesn't say another word.

This time, I don't even look. I just turn my wheel to the left and hit the gas. Everything in my head coils together like a deadly snake ready to strike. And then, suddenly, all my thoughts, all my feelings, just disappear. For the moment, I have forgotten where I am, what I am doing — where I am going — and just drive.

As I fight my way through traffic, my cell phone beeps through my call; this time it's a client. Without thinking, I rip the earpiece off my head and toss it onto the passenger's seat. I guess Lesli's right. I've been burning myself at both ends: listing appointments, open houses, termite inspections. I've been gone so much and right now, today, when Nikki needs me most, I'm not there for her.

I have to admit I love my job. Selling real estate in the O.C. is what I love best. It's what I've done for almost twenty years. It's what I know. It's what I do. It's who I am.

But maybe if I had been home a little more, I would have seen this coming. I fix my earpiece back into place. I don't even realize that I'm still on hold with the dispatcher.

My thoughts seem to steady, focusing on the fact that Nikki left the house. I'm not sure why she would take off like this. Maybe she's worried about seeing her doctor. Maybe she knows he will admit her, the way he did two months ago; the first time she had used cocaine. She's not in any trouble; we've forgiven her completely. And she knows that.

Although I don't know what makes me angrier: the fact that she took even one hit of cocaine, or the fact that she knew better than that — especially after her doctors had warned her of the dire consequences of someone with her medical history. Especially after she ended up in the psych ward because of it. She knows that even a small amount of any drug could cost her her sanity — even her life.

I think about what she said to me last night. *Dad, I know you have superpowers!* This is when I press my foot to the ground and race against the devil himself.

A moment later, the dispatcher comes back on the line. "Ah...sir," he mutters, and I feel my heart sink. "The accident was on the 241 and Alton Parkway in the southbound lane. And...it appears this car was a hardtop...not a convertible."

Every tensed muscle in my body falls limp. “*Oh, thank God... Can you please check the license plate number — I, I need to be sure.*”

“I’m sorry, sir, that’s all the information I’ve got. When I hear from the sergeant on the scene, I’ll see to it that he contacts you with the details.”

Now I start to rationalize. I take the information and turn it far enough around to keep it from going anywhere near the truth. *Southbound lane... Two hours ago? There’s no way she could’ve gotten that far, and then be headed south? Anyway, that car is hardtop... That’s not Nikki...*

It takes only a second for me to convince myself completely that Nikki was not involved in that accident. But then, where is she? Certainly, it’s just a coincidence that the car in the accident was a black Porsche.

Right?

No matter how I look at it, everything about it feels bad.

So I turn my steering wheel and drive in the direction of the accident. Because I know it’s not just about finding my daughter. This time, it’s about saving her life.

As I round the corner at Alton Parkway, I notice the road up ahead is closed. I circle around to get a better look. It’s not like me to meddle, but I have to make sure. First responders are working feverishly to keep the public away. It’s like something out of a movie scene. Though I don’t see many pedestrians, men stand guard around the onramp. I pull up next to the blockade and step out of my car. As I walk over to the area, three well-built Caltrans’ workers walk in front of me. The guy in the middle reaches his hand out to stop me.

“I’m sorry sir, but you can’t go down there.”

I look over his shoulder and notice a large crane. I can’t see any wreckage but I know there has been an accident. I guess that’s why my mouth just opens and speaks for itself.

“I think that’s my daughter in that car. I need to go down there and see...”

He places his hands firmly against my chest.

“I have strict orders sir; I can’t let anybody go down there.”

"But what if that's my daughter..."

Under normal circumstances, I might push him out of the way. But something is telling me to remain calm and do as I'm told. He radios down to the sergeant on the scene. "Sorry," he says, "but I can't let you go down there...sergeant's orders!"

I stare at his face for a second, wondering whether or not I should kick his sorry ass. But before I can take another breath, something even stronger is telling me to leave.

As I turn, I see the crane lifting what is left of the wrecked car. I see nothing but a mountain of twisted metal dangling in the air, until one very distinct, shiny chrome wheel catches my eye. Though my conscious mind is sure of what it sees, some deeper instinct is refuting the ridiculous thought. That car is a hardtop, I remind myself. But the truth seeps in.

Without warning, my body thrusts to the ground, and large pieces of dirt rake through my fingers. I don't want to believe what I have just seen is real. I refuse to let my mind see the truth. So I lay on the ground chanting the word, *no*. And I am speechless, in a state of visceral shock. I look up at the men standing all around me and pray that this is all just a bad dream.

I must look cold because the tall man on my left offers me his jacket. The other two pull me off the ground. I stagger back to my car, and somehow I inch my way inside. I hear the sound of my own voice quivering, while blurry shapes dance around my head. I try to focus on Nikki's face, but the world just keeps spinning all around me. I sit in my car trembling for what could be minutes or even hours. Somehow I manage to twist my key into the ignition, floor the accelerator, and throw the transmission into reverse. My car screams as it soars backwards, burning rubber, as I turn around and drive toward home. Maybe it's not her. Maybe this is all some horrible coincidence. This is what I'm telling myself as tears begin to drip from my eyes.

I honestly don't know how, but I somehow manage to find my way home. And just as I pull into my driveway, my cell phone rings.

"Hello sir, this is Sgt. Miller. We're on our way to your house to talk to you about the accident."

Tuesday, 5:17 p.m., Oct. 31, 2006

5:17 pm October 31, 2006 | **oneday** wrote:

Don't take the 241 hideous accident. Looked fatal.

5:28 pm October 31, 2006 | **ocmom** wrote:

The accident was right by my house. I think it was a Porsche.

5:32 pm October 31, 2006 | **kimber** wrote:

My brother was one of the firefighters at the scene. Some girl was driving like 100 mph and then slammed it into the tollbooth.

5:36 pm October 31, 2006 | **Anonymous** wrote:

That was stupid!

5:42 pm October 31, 2006 | **hhvergo** wrote:

Awe--I feel so bad for the Porsche!

5:44 pm October 31, 2006 | **Anonymous** wrote:

Who cares?

Two



Lesli

FOUR HOURS AFTER NIKKI LEFT the house I am still trying to convince myself that she is fine, that she will pull up and walk through the door any minute. I tell myself that I'm crazy, that nothing bad could ever happen to Nikki, but really, I know what I know, and this feeling has nothing to do with my current state of mind.

Patience is usually my strong point. But when it comes to Nikki, everything is always urgent. And right now, when I should be angriest, I don't have the emotional wherewithal to be the slightest bit upset with her. I just want her home.

Christos is still searching for her. He calls repeatedly, and each time, he tries to convince me that Nikki is fine. But that only makes the twisting knots in my stomach tighten because the truth is, I know she's not fine.

Despite all the adrenaline pulsing through my veins, I have managed to keep myself quite calm. I have fetched my other three daughters from school, on time, and have gotten them home safely, and even kept quiet about where their sister is — or is not. Thank God no one has asked about Nikki.

It's my job, I suppose, to keep my children blissfully ignorant about certain things. Like how I worry so much about their sister.

I walk upstairs, slinging shoes and laundry over my shoulder. When I get to the laundry room I dump the pile onto the floor and stand still. For a moment, I just close my eyes and pretend that everything is as it should be. But when I open them up again, I have to walk away. It's getting harder to deceive myself into believing that everything is fine.

I walk down the hall, heading toward Nikki's room, when I hear my three younger girls laughing. It's the sound of their voices, happy and untroubled, that somehow calms me. It's proof that my life is perfect. *Blessings tangled in the delicate web of miracles*, I remind myself. But as I inch closer to Nikki's room, a thousand fears spring to my mind. What will I do if we don't find her in time?

I look back through the hall and down the stairs, studying Nikki's exit plan, when I notice her bedroom door leaning against the wall. And for a second, it steals my breath.

I had forgotten about everything that had happened last night. I had forgotten about her psychosis. I had even forgotten about the cocaine. But what I hadn't forgotten about is how hard we tried to get her to the hospital. The truth is, getting her to the hospital is all I have been thinking about. It's not so easy anymore, now that she's eighteen. Convincing her to *agree* to go to the hospital is like convincing sugar not to be sweet — it never works.

When I step into her bedroom, I am greeted with a scent that is a mixture of Asian candles and Channel perfume. With it comes the feeling of peace, a God-is-with-me feeling. I scan the room where vintage posters of rockers and 1950s film stars — who had lived hard and died young — line the walls, while her favorite Muppet looks on.

It was here, last night, under the watchful eyes of Jim Morison, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe and Big Bird, that Nikki handed me a small, round mirror from inside a tiny plastic drawer on her desk.

On its surface was a small amount of white powder no bigger than a dime. I knew it was cocaine. I froze, catching my

own reflection in the glass. In an instant, I was “Alice” tumbling through the looking glass and into a topsy-turvy land where down was up and up was down.

I bolted toward the bathroom and flushed the substance down the toilet.

Nikki was crying. She could barely speak.

“I’m so sorry Mom... I’m so, so sorry!”

I guess it wasn’t enough: the drug tests, the counseling, taking everything away from her. I feel my eyes squeeze together as I pick up her pillow and hold it tight against my cheek.

How in the world did this happen to my Nikki?

When I open my eyes, I notice her open Bible on the nightstand. The small, whiteboard she uses to take notes is resting on top of the Bible. I look sideways at the words and let the sentences take shape. And when I read what she wrote, I just cry:

“I found the Lord, I found love, I love you, I can’t wait to feel real.”

I stare, crying for over a minute because as hard as I try and as much as I want to, I just don’t understand her sometimes. I pick up her Bible and run my fingers across the highlighted words on the page:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28

I dab my eyes with the sleeve of my blouse, remembering what Nikki told me in the car last Sunday on our way to church. “When I take communion this morning, I’m going to rededicate my life to Jesus. I’m going to ask him to renew me, to forgive me for everything,” she said. “But mostly, I just want to start over.”

That was two days ago.

And this is the first time I will allow this question to challenge my most curious thoughts: Why is it that every time Nikki gets so close to God, something always manages to get in her way?

A large part of me knows that answer, but a larger part of me is too afraid to confront the reality that we live in a spiritual world. Last night Nikki told me that she didn't believe her doctor was being honest with her, that the cocaine didn't really trigger her psychosis. That's when I told her what I thought: That it didn't make a difference, and she shouldn't be using cocaine. It never occurred to me to tell her to pray about it.

I walk over to her desk and rummage through her drawers. There are handwritten pages filled with her favorite quotes. I find them everywhere. Yesterday this was in my coffee cup: *The most important thing is not to stop questioning.* ~ Albert Einstein

The day before, I found one on the front seat of my car. I think she put it there right after our conversation about best friends: *What is a friend? A single soul in two bodies.* ~Aristotle.

Sometimes I'll find a note scribbled on a napkin when I open my purse, or written on her bathroom mirror. Today she writes: *Always do what you want, and say what you feel, because those who matter don't mind, and those who mind, don't matter.* ~Dr. Seuss

Underneath is Nikki's new college folder. I open it to find a bright red "100%" written on the top of her history test. I look at the next paper — same. It's hard to believe that there was ever a time that we wondered if she would even make it to high school. It's true Nikki is the most determined young lady I have ever known, but she is also the most impulsive, the most irresponsible. And it terrifies me to imagine what she might be capable of — especially now, if she is hallucinating.

I squeeze her pillow and lie down on top of her bed. I think about the first time Nikki used cocaine two months ago. She said she thought we had deceived her, that her brain tumor was really a device so we could read her mind. She believed those were not metal rods in her body from a spinal fusion, but a GPS device to track her every move. Then I think about how she spent her recovery time in the psych ward because of her hallucinations. And that makes me remember my dream.

The building, the explosion — Nikki...

It was then, a few days before we admitted Nikki into the hospital for her psychotic reaction to cocaine that I had a dream she died. I assumed that I'd just been worrying too much again. I knew things were off balance two months ago, but I figured things are always off balance with Nikki, and what could I have done, anyway?

In my dream, I was standing in my kitchen when Nikki kissed me goodbye. "I'll see you in a bit, sweetheart," I told her. A cloud followed behind her like a vapor. She was sad, and her smile faded as she turned to walk away from me. I felt her despair somewhere deep within my heart. Then through a bright, cloudy haze, she was suddenly dressed in her cap and gown. In that instant, I saw her walking on a hillside, laughing and talking to someone — a friend, maybe a boy. They were walking toward a tall building where I knew automatically she would be graduating. At that point, Nikki was smiling, happy — everything seemed perfect, and then the phone rang where I was standing in another dimension. As I answered, I watched Nikki slowly disappear into the building. I saw a woman's face as she spoke to me through the phone.

"I'm very sorry ma'am, but there has been a fatal 9/11 accident in the building where your daughter's graduation ceremony was being held." She had a soft, agile tone. "I am so very sorry. It happened so quickly; there was nothing we could do. The explosion killed Nikki. No one else was killed, but it has been confirmed: Nikki is dead."

"Oh, my God... No!" I screamed.

My pulse raced while I slept, and the words pierced through me like bullets.

"It was instant," the woman said quietly. "She didn't feel a thing."

I didn't want to believe it, but I knew it was true. It was confirmed, and that word stuck with me like glue for weeks. The phone fell from my hand as I collapsed to the ground. I was crying, and then I screamed. But it was too late. Nikki was dead. I looked over at my brother-in-law George, who

was standing next to me, denying everything. All he could say was, “I promise, I will fix this.”

“No...” I cried again. “I need to hold her. She needs me!”

And then I heard it again, those words soaring like missiles inside of my head: “*There has been a 9/11 accident... I’m so sorry, but it has been confirmed: Nikki is dead.*”

I felt sick when I awoke from that dream, and spent the better part of the morning telling Nikki how much I loved her and begging her to stay away from any high-rise buildings. She felt bad for me, told me that I worry too much, and then she agreed to stay away from any tall buildings. But this dream was different from the dream I had ten years ago. The first dream felt like a warning of death. But this dream, felt so...confirmed.

As I replay that awful scene in my mind, I feel that same tinge of acid creep into my throat. “There has been a 9/11 accident... I’m so sorry, but it has been confirmed: Nikki is dead.” I think about the 9/11 explosion. And then I think about the 911 Porsche. “It was instant,” the woman said in my dream. “She didn’t feel a thing.”

As I sit myself back up, I feel my insides suddenly drop. I place my hand against my stomach. Was God trying to warn me, prepare me for something I never could fathom until now?

A sudden jolt of energy rushes through my chest; a feeling of panic. The kind you get right after something unexpected has lurched at you. I don’t know why, but I somehow know that my perfect life has come to a bitter end.

I look down at my hands and watch them tremble when I sense that voice again, calm and authoritative. “*It’s okay,*” it says again, but this time, I understand. “It’s okay” doesn’t always mean what you want it to mean.

I hurry out of Nikki’s room and sneak down the back stairs so the girls won’t see me. I am halfway down the stairs when the cell phone in my pocket vibrates. I freeze, staring at the unfamiliar number. And without a doubt, I know it’s the police.

I close my eyes. *No, please God, no...*

I take a deep breath and put the phone to my ear.

“Hello...”

“Hello ma’am, are you at home? We’re on our way to your house,” a man’s voice says calmly. “I have a record of a 9-1-1 call from earlier, and we’re coming to take a report. I’m real sorry it’s taken us so long to get there.”

Oh, thank God... “Do you want me home? Did you find her?” Tears of confusion, tears of relief come hard and fast and without warning. The man on the phone never does answer me.

“Yes, I’ll be home.”

By now the house is getting dark, so I switch on the lights when Christos walks in. His eyes are glazed over and he’s looking right through me. “I think...” he mutters, “I think something really bad has happened to Nikki.” He squeezes his chin with his hand while tears well up and cling to the corners of his eyes.

I stare at his face, sweet and scared. His left hand opens, freeing the briefcase from his grip. Files spill onto the ground. He doesn’t move. It’s as if his batteries have drained the charge right out of him. Even his eyes refuse to blink.

But his comment is now marching its way up my throat. “What do you mean? Why do you think something bad has happened?” I wait. “What...tell me?”

“It’s the California Highway Patrol,” he says. “They’re coming to talk to us.”

I feel the hairs on my body smooth back into place. “Yeah,” I push out a breath of relief. “They’re coming to take a report...”

As he shakes his head to disagree, he grabs my wrist, aging me ten years with his eyes. “They’re coming to talk to us about the accident.”

I take a step back and squeeze my face with confusion. “What accident? No one said there was an accident...why do you think there’s been an accident?” I squeeze his arms and feel my pulse race. “*Tell me...what accident!*”

He stands still. He says nothing. I shake him furiously, but still he says nothing.

I shake him harder, but he doesn't move. I scream louder. Nothing. "*Tell me what you're talking about!*" He drops his head and the tears spill onto his cheeks.

"I... She," is all he says.

He knows.

I link his arm into mine and pull with all my strength. I usher him out of the house where we wait for the police to arrive. As we step onto the driveway, my next-door-neighbor, Helen — my best friend — is rushing toward us. She stops us with a stare and takes us both by the hands. Maybe it's the words in her prayer or the grip of her hand, I don't know, but I suddenly feel strong. Strong enough to walk, talk and live through the moments that await me.

When I look up, I see patrol cars driving onto our cul-de-sac. One by one, they drive slowly past us — so many of them — and one by one they park. Like in slow motion, I watch in horror, and in this very instant, I know why they are here.

I close my eyes and force myself to breathe. It isn't true. It can't be true.

Oh, God... No!

No, no, no...

My legs go numb, but I force them to walk. The next thing I know I am standing in the middle of our street. I cling to Christos. His arm is around me tight as a vice, waiting for the officers to get out of their cars and tell us something, anything, just not that my worst nightmare has come true. Finally, the sergeant steps out of his car and walks toward us. The look on his face is how I know it's really true. He lowers his head.

Oh God, no, please no...

I feel a small part of me escape, hiding from what is coming next. I look down at the street, shoot my focus on a tiny stone anchored in a small crack in the pavement. Maybe if I wish hard enough, when I look up again, they'll all be gone.

The slam of a car door snaps me back to the horrifying moment. A white sedan has parked across from us. Two women in green jumpsuits make their way toward my husband and me. My eyes hone in on one word: *Coroner*.

And it's all too much.

As the women approach us, Christos is shouting, his voice is fractured, but he manages to speak. “Did you find her? Did you find Nikki? Is she okay?” His words are quivering and they break over me like shattered glass.

“Are you Christos Catsouras?” the first woman asks.

I feel his grip tighten around me. “Yes, I am,” he mutters tightly. “Why?” As he says this, my heart is a butterfly inside of my chest, and in an instant, everything inside of me turns numb.

The woman tilts her head. Slowly and quietly she speaks. “I’m very sorry, but the black 911 Porsche Carrera registered in your name has been in a fatal accident. I’m so sorry, sir. It happened very quickly. There was nothing we could do.”

“*Oh, God!*” Christos puts his hands up to his face. “*Oh God, Nikki!*” His knees slowly buckle, lowering him to the ground.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Catsouras!” She reaches out her hand to help him to the ground. “But there was nothing we could do!”

“*Oh my God!*” He screams. “*No-o-o...!*”

I don’t say a word. I can’t speak, I can’t cry. The words just roll off me like droplets of dew dripping from a morning rose.

Maybe I’m invisible.

“*No, no, no...!*” Christos is wailing, howling, like a dying animal in the middle of our street. “Are you sure? Are you sure it was Nikki?” he asks. “Are you absolutely sure?”

I, however, am sure. It’s not as hard for me to believe because it’s not the first time I am hearing it.

“It was instant,” the woman, says quietly. “She didn’t feel a thing.”

This is when I completely disengage. I feel a small part of me lift out of my body. Suddenly I am floating high above myself, watching what is happening below. It’s a movie. I am moving and speaking, but I am not here. I’m a ghost.

With my next breath, it happens. It begins with thoughts of Nikki — her eyes, her smile, the way she chews her food, her smell, her favorite color — everything about her tumbles through my mind all at once. The very purpose of my life has

ended, drained out of me forever. To breathe is too difficult, yet not difficult enough.

I want to die.

So with anger, I put my hands over my face, lower myself to the ground and in my head, I beg God to take me, too, away from what is happening, away from this horrible moment. I concentrate on breathing, staring at my shoes, when I hear it. "*Don't be afraid,*" someone says, and I freeze, lowering my hands to the ground and I listen. "*It's okay, I'm right here with you!*"

My head snaps up and my heart races inside my chest. I squeeze my eyes and study the faces all around me — in front of me, next to me, behind me — until I realize no one has said a word.

Laced with compassion, Sgt. Miller's words are finally sinking in. He explains everything at once. Around 1:50 this afternoon, Nikki clipped the side of another car while changing lanes in an attempt to pass it. But because she was driving 100 mph, she lost control. The Porsche spun off the ground, sailed end-over-end across the southbound lanes, and slammed into a tollbooth. Although Nikki was wearing her seatbelt, she died instantly.

I ask if anyone else had been hurt or killed in the accident. But before anyone answers my question I already know the answer. In my dream, Nikki was walking with a boy. He wasn't killed. No one else was killed. No one except Nikki.

I look up at the coroner. "Is the other driver okay? Who was he?"

"Yes, he's fine, he's a local kid. He was...shaken up, but he'll be just fine. He's already been released from the hospital."

Christos lifts his face and stands. "Oh my God, she hit someone," he says, and with his free arm, he scoops me up from the street. For a moment, I manage to restrain myself from doubling over, but now I think I'm going to faint.

"You don't need to worry," the sergeant says, lowering his clipboard. "We'll deal with that."

As he says this, I feel my breathing slow. A calming feeling washes over me again, soft and warm. But this time, when I hear the voice, I can feel it: *“It’s okay... Nikki is safe. She is whole and perfect — she is with me.”*

I’m so stunned, I feel myself wavering from one side of reality to the other. Inside of me there is conviction, an exactness that reminds me that I belong to God. I look in front of me and feel the soft, warm air, still and unchanging, promising to keep me safe, and I can think of nothing else.

The feeling is so unbelievable it stops my tears. It reminds me that I’m not alone. And this is when the truth sinks like an anchor to the bottom of my soul. And I understand with every bone in my body that even death cannot take Nikki away from me. It is a conviction, a promise, a truth that’s been stamped across my heart like a secret.

I feel the tears dripping down my face and yet I can’t help but smile. This is the most unthinkable loss a mother could ever know, the most devastating and worst physical pain she could ever feel. And yet I have the most amazing sense of peace lifting me high above it all. Can this be the presence of God? I glance over at my husband who is crying into his hands, and for the quickest second, it occurs to me that maybe I am losing my mind.

Christos

Helen has the officers bring us into her house. I suppose you don't want to hear news like this in your own home. And now the kitchen is buzzing with CHP officers. I sit on the floor listening to them talking. There are questions; it's turmoil. I look up to see Helen shuffling back and forth from my house to hers. She is everywhere all at once. And it's suddenly very clear to me that this is the end of my perfect life. I drop my head into my hands, and once again, I just sob.

Inside I am oddly numb, as if I were someone else, but outside, I am trembling as if I were cold. They are telling me that I can't go and identify my daughter, because she hurt her thumb, but that just doesn't make any sense. Nothing makes sense. Words and sentences bounce through the room, but nothing penetrates me. Pictures, metaphors, descriptions — her clothes, her boots, the color of her hair; it's only when the coroner asks if Nikki had spinal surgery, referring to the long scar across her back, that I finally understand. They are talking about *my* Nikki.

When I lift my head, I find Sgt. Miller's eyes staring back at me, a striking combination of blue and bloodshot. He crouches down to meet my gaze. "Can I get you anything, Mr. Catsouras?"

"Yeah," I say. "You can take me to my daughter."

I squeeze my face and feel my head harden with pain. And when I try to stand I just drop like a rock. "Please..." I say, lifting my arm. "I need you to take me to her. I need to go see her. I need to be sure." The sergeant blinks warily and leans his face close to mine.

"Mr. Catsouras, I'm, I'm very sorry, but we can't let you see her!" He gestures to the officer behind me and then he shoots his gaze on my wife who is sitting next to me on the floor, staring off into space. I stare at him in disbelief, feeling like I've just been punched in the face. He puts on a faint, friendly smile, but I shut him down cold.

"Please!" I demand. "I have to go to her!"

Sgt. Miller puts his hand on my shoulder but his face twists with pain. "I'm so, very sorry Mr. Catsouras, but it's in

your best interest to let us take care of all of that. Your daughter has suffered serious head trauma, and..." he lowers his eyes. "...You wouldn't even recognize her." There is a sudden falling feeling in the pit of my stomach and I feel his hand squeeze my arm. "Mr. Catsouras," he says, "listen to me. No one can see your daughter. There will be no public viewing." I look into his red, swollen eyes. "You will have to have a closed-casket funeral."

I feel my mouth drop open. It's a ghastly combination of fear, shock and revelation. It's also when the words finally start to sink in and make me see the truth. I squeeze my eyes and feel the grip of the sergeant's hand tighten firmly around my arm. I am speechless; why would he say that, a closed-casket funeral, where no one can see her? Why? Why would he say such a thing?

The thought frightens me. The words are sharp, and cut me deeply. What happened to my baby? The truth is now lurching, clawing at me from the inside. I want to turn and run, but instead I look at the sergeant, his eyes full of authority and protection.

And with the kindest smile, Sgt. Miller makes me a promise — a promise that soon will be shattered into a million tiny pieces; pieces that will slash my family to the bone.

"I'm going to make sure you remember your daughter...the way you saw her last, smiling and laughing."

Lesli

The minutes are crushing. Nothing has dulled the pain. It scratches and claws at me, digging its way deep into a place I never knew existed until today.

Christos' voice has finally returned. He is standing at the center island answering questions and constantly wiping his face. "That car is so fast," he tells the coroner. "She couldn't have known how fast she was driving...she couldn't have known." When he is finished speaking, he rubs his hands across the back of his head and lowers himself into a fetal position on the floor.

"She didn't know..."

There is a hand on my shoulder. I turn to see Sgt. Miller, and I notice his eyes are the lightest shade of blue. "Your friend, Helen, went to get your two oldest daughters." He says. "They'll be here in just a minute." Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, the knife seeps in a little deeper. "We're right here with you Mrs. Catsouras; we'll help all of you get through this!"

When I hear my girls walking in the hallway toward the kitchen I feel every muscle in my body tighten. Christos wraps his arm around me. "Oh God." He says. I watch in horror as they inch closer, and before I can say a word, Danielle is shaking her head, her palms raised. I watch her mind fit the pieces together like a puzzle. I say nothing, but now I feel a warm pressure forming in the center of my throat.

Time seems to slow while my daughters' eyes scan the room filled with men and women in uniform. I need a moment to get myself in order, to think, to understand. I reach my hands into my pockets and squeeze the silk lining inside. I think this would be where they would yell "cut!" in a horror film.

Christos walks toward them. When he opens his mouth, his voice is small, barely a whisper. "Nikki," he says slowly, "Nikki...was in an accident." I hear his lungs fill with air. "I'm so sorry, but..."

"— *What?*" Danielle shrieks. She then covers her mouth with blinding speed, blinking away protesting tears. She drops her hand. "*Is she okay?*"

Christos shakes his head. “No sweetie...she’s not okay!” He grabs her and pulls her close, cradling her into his chest just as he did when she was a baby. I turn toward Christiana and catch her as she falls like a rag doll into my arms. I feel the knife in my stomach twist.

When I look up, Danielle’s eyes are all I see. I try to speak but the air around us chills. She pulls back to study her father’s face. “Are you sure, Dad?” Her tears flowing, “Are you sure?”

At fifteen, she is convinced that daddies can fix anything. But this time, as hard as he will try, even her daddy won’t be able to fix a thing.

The next thing I feel is the weight of my daughter in my arms as we collapse to the ground together. I hold her close to my body. She is only thirteen. I press her tight against my chest. “Oh, Christiana.” I say. “It’ll be okay, I promise.” And I know, even as I say this, there will never be a time when this will ever be okay.

The pain is so intense. Once again, I’m watching from above while the woman below cradles my children in her arms. It’s not real. I am not here, and it is better this way. Because I can’t feel the pain of the sharp steel blade that has just taken up residency in my heart.

Suddenly, I remember what day it is.

“Oh God, it’s Halloween...Kira!”

I look at my watch. It’s 6:15.

Without thinking, I stand and my legs stumble toward the door. “I have to go tell Kira that Nikki can’t take her trick-or-treating tonight.” As I say this, Helen bolts in front of me and grabs me by my arms.

“Just stop,” she says calmly. “I’ve got it all taken care of; she’s fine and busy for now.”

The storm inside of me is raging. It seems like each time I get my footing, another wave comes and throws me overboard. “Okay,” I say and the tears form. I place my hands over my face. *Oh, Lord, how will I tell this child, my precious little girl, that her sister has died?*

I look over at my two brave girls arm-in-arm consoling their father. Maybe it’s the look of courage on their faces or

the way they smooth their father's arm, his cheek. But this is how I learn that life will somehow go on.

By now it's dark. Every bone in my body has crumbled inside of me, and I cling to my God for strength. I don't know it yet, but the razor-sharp edge of disbelief has laid itself secretly at my feet.

I look up to see the trauma intervention specialist who has come to usher us back to the place that just a few hours ago was our home. Now it will never be the same. A woman with tears in her eyes hands me a pamphlet and asks if she can take my hand and help me walk next door. I nod, hold out my hand, and she grips tight to keep me from falling.

As I stand at the threshold of my own house, I have to hold my breath. It seems impossible, but I lift my foot and walk through the door. When I look around the room, evidence that Nikki lived in this house is everywhere. I see her shoes, a breath away, lying on the floor in the corner. A small fragment of what is now left of my first-born child. And again, I want to die.

I walk over to the sofa where I last spoke to Nikki. I rest my head and drift back to that safe place, where life is happy and good, where it is easy, where I am Nikki's mother.

One by one, our nieces and nephews arrive. Huddled together, it looks as if they are behind the line of scrimmage planning their next play. I'm not brave enough to look them in the eyes, so I start playing games with myself. *It's okay. Nikki is safe now. Can't you see, it's finally right, everything is finally right.* I am thinking this as I cling to the tiny edge of hope that it's actually true.

My brother Geoff walks in and his eyes are all I see. He doesn't say a word until he wraps his arms around me.

"Is it true?" he whispers, and I feel my throat knot into a ball. I can't answer. So I just stare at his face, remembering the little boy who always used to say, "Don't cry sissy, everything will be okay." It's only when I see the tears on his face that I relinquish my own.

I hear the kitchen door open. Kira's tiny voice sings. "Hello..." I sit up and quickly wipe my face. Danielle and

Christiana sit down on the sofa next to Christos and me. We will tell her together — a team.

I'm sure she doesn't realize this, but her smile fades the moment she sees the police officers in the kitchen. She makes a mad dash into my lap, hiding in the safety of my arms. She studies the strange faces, then pulls back to study mine. I squeeze my eyes with concentration.

The crisis team assured me that being honest and straight to the point is the best thing for a seven-year-old in the long run. So I do exactly what I'm told. While Christos runs his finger down the length of her hair, I swallow a breath of courage and let my words form the perfect sentence. Christos grabs her little hand. I close my eyes against the pounding in my chest, and say, "Oh, sweetie." I squeeze her once more. "Nikki was in a car crash, and...and she died, today."

Her eyes tighten and she buries her face into my chest. I feel the vibrations of her tearful breaths absorb into my blouse. Now I can exhale. For the next few minutes, I speak to the top of her head, trying not to cry, squeezing her as tight as I can. The only thing that comes to my mind is heaven, and I promise her that, one day, we will see Nikki again.

In a flash, she bounces off my lap and stands to face me. She is twirling her hair around one finger and her arms are as skinny as rose stems. She wipes the tears from her face and smiles.

"I'm going to make my lunch for school tomorrow, okay Mommy?" she says. Then she darts into the kitchen and I don't say another word.

Christos

Shortly after 8 p.m. I realize that I cannot find my wife. When I get up to find her, she is sitting on a lounge chair in the courtyard, alone.

I look around at the officers, the trauma team, and my family standing and sitting, and I realize it's true. Something bad has happened. But it's still not registering, those three words: "I'm sorry, sir."

It's as if they are saying sorry that she left, or maybe they are sorry that she took my car. I can't hear what they are really saying: That my daughter is never coming home.

I sit down next to Lesli on the lounge chair and stare at my driveway. I look at the garage and try to imagine what Nikki was thinking when she drove out of here. I feel my face burn with anger.

Where in the hell did she get cocaine?

It's dark, it's cold and my wife hasn't said a word in hours. I pull the blanket up and wrap part of it around her shoulders. She doesn't move. Her eyes are fixed on the ground and her lips pressed together. How are we going to get through this? What will become of my family, my wife?

Lesli's brother walks up behind me and hands me a slice of pizza.

"You guys need to eat," he says.

I take the plate and hand it to Lesli.

"Here, take a bite..." I say, but again, she doesn't move or say a word. I toss the pizza onto the table in front of me. "Thanks, Geoff."

John Halle, my best friend, walks over chewing a slice of pizza. He sits down across from me and stares. "She told me I missed the most amazing sermon on Sunday." He tosses his pizza onto the table, wipes his hands on his jeans and looks at Lesli. "She said she felt the Holy Spirit, and she knew that her life was about to change. She said the experience made her feel real — something she had been wanting for a long time."

He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "That was the last thing she said to me. I just thought you should know."

Lesli's eyes tighten, and she stands smiling. "Thanks, John."

I ask him if he had a chance to speak to the officers. He nods and then begins telling me how he thinks the accident happened. But the details, like everything else, stand between us like a brick wall. I know he's still talking, but I can't listen. My eyes are glued to my wife, who is now leaning against the garage door, crying. John's hand slaps me on the knee. "I'll go check on her, dude. In the meantime, you need me to get you anything?" he asks.

I look at my girls through the window sitting with their cousins in a heap on the kitchen floor, and then I look at my wife who is trying to keep her tears to herself. I look back at John and his kind, generous face. And even though I kicked the habit more than ten years ago, I nod.

"I need a cigarette."

A second later, I feel a warm hand on the back of me. I turn to meet Pastor John's gaze. I feel all the muscles in my back loosen as he sits down next to me. I look at him — really look at him. "How you doing?" he asks, but I can't speak. It's like all the words inside of me are suddenly tangled together with questions so thick, I don't know where to begin.

I wasn't looking for God when I met Pastor John a few months ago. I was just looking for someone to help me with Nikki — a specialist, someone who understood teenagers. I had no idea he was a pastor. At the time, I found the coincidence to be quite comforting. Tonight he tells me his second specialty is grief counseling. But this time the strange coincidence leaves me curious.

I try to crack a smile, but my face won't move. "I'm okay," I fib. Because really I'm not okay; I'm miserable and angry and I want to know why God took my daughter from me. Those weren't things I learned growing up in a private Greek Orthodox school in South Africa. I learned how to make the sign of the cross, how to light a candle, how to bow my head in prayer. I even have a couple of prayers still memorized, but I never really understood what I believed, or why God allowed these bad things to happen.

"You know, my mom taught me to say my prayers at night, before I went to sleep. She used to tell me that God was good and that everyone went to heaven. I guess I just believed her without questioning anything. It made her feel good, so I figured there was nothing wrong with believing that. But now," I feel my eyebrows knit together, "now I want to know the truth. Is that all just a bunch of crap? Or am I going to see Nikki again?"

"Listen," he says, "going to heaven is like a dinner invitation. As long as you RSVP, you're guaranteed a place at the table when you get there."

He assures me that Nikki is alive and well and in heaven with God. Then he tells me that this friendship of ours is not a coincidence, that we met this way for a reason — this reason. That God figured it all out ahead of time, for both of us. And that's when I cut him off cold. I look him straight in the eye.

"Look bro, no disrespect, but you're going to have to do a hell of a lot better than that. I'm really pissed at God right now!"

I stare at his face and wait for him to say something, or maybe punch me. But he just smiles. "It's all right to be mad at God, Christos." He says, and the next thing I know, my head has dropped into my hands and the tears — by their own will — pour out of me.

"I'm sorry, Christos," he says. "You need me to get you anything?"

I lift my eyes to his and squeeze them together. "Proof," I say, blinking away the tears, "You can get me some damn proof that there really is a heaven!"

But as I stare at his face, looming like the sun on a cold day, I am suddenly fixated on this strange coincidence. "Wait a minute," I wipe my face. "You're really a grief counselor, too?"

He nods.

It takes a moment, and then suddenly, the most curious realization breaks through my thoughts. Maybe the proof that I'm looking for is staring me square in the face.

Wed. 4:02 a.m., Nov. 1, 2006

4:02 am November 1, 2006 | **I Like Hamburgers** wrote:

Well kids today we learn that being a #### stealing your rich daddy's Porsche and driving fast result in many many LULZ

4:05 am November 1, 2006 | **cyndi** wrote:

IT'S HER OWN FAULT SHE'S DEAD!!! I DON'T FEEL SORRY FOR HER IN THE LEAST!

4:06 am November 1, 2006 | **I Like Hamburgers** wrote:

Well she got what she deserved LOL!

4:11 am November 1, 2006 | **LNROa2** wrote:

I knew her. She was cool.

4:17 am November 1, 2006 | **PupKaplan** wrote:

Typical American women...only good for one thing.

4:23 am November 1, 2006 | **rockmebritney** wrote:

if you teach your kids right they wont steal your car and drive 100 mph in it. luckily she only killed herself. lesson learned.

Three



Lesli

The morning after

THE CLOCK ON MY NIGHTSTAND is ticking, but I can't move to look at the time. The curtains are drawn. It's dark. Yet somehow, I know that morning is just beyond the door.

I am alone, cocooned inside a vortex of emotion, oblivious to the world around me. My eyes brim with tears, yet they are empty and dry. I try to trick myself into believing it was all just a bad dream, but only until I feel the air enter my lungs.

As I take the next breath, the need to understand possesses me. I want to know why she left, where she was going. I want to know how I knew I would lose her and why I couldn't stop her. Images of Nikki's smiling face suddenly cloud my thoughts. The feeling of her is so strong it seems to be falling from the pages of my mind. Emotions flash through me like lightning. Feelings of shock and disbelief — a feeling of I told you so — is spinning all around me. I know that I'm sobbing. I can hear it. But it's almost as if it is someone else. Some other poor mother who has just had her heart ripped to shreds.

Christos

It's just past 4 a.m. I can't sleep. I haven't eaten or cried in hours. I'm stuck with one perpetual question: how did this happen to my daughter? I never imagined Nikki would leave and not come back. I guess with all that we'd been through, I thought we'd be immune to something like this. I haven't stopped thinking about the guy who sold her cocaine and what I will do to him when I find him. Then I think about my children. How will they cope with the death of their sister? How would they cope if I were to go to jail?

I take some aspirin and turn out the lights. But the darkness only makes me think of the first time Nikki never came home. I didn't believe she could be so disrespectful, and I certainly didn't expect to find her drunk. But as I sit here in the dark, alone, I remember it as if it were yesterday.

It was 2 a.m. on a Saturday night and Nikki was still not home. She never made it home for dinner, nor had she called or answered her phone. I was worried sick, lying on the sofa, listening to the sound of passing cars in the distance, and hoping the next car I heard would be hers. But she never came.

Until that night, I couldn't remember a time when Nikki had raised her voice to me. She had never been disrespectful — not to me, not to anybody. I couldn't remember her doing anything wrong, although I'm sure she did. The thing is she had never been in any kind of trouble. And she never left the house without saying goodbye. She was a great kid. Honestly, I couldn't remember anything about her that wasn't perfect. Not until she turned eighteen, when state law told her she was an adult.

I sat down in front of her computer that night convinced that I'd find at least one clue as to where she might be. But Nikki didn't have an online social life. She didn't have a MySpace account like all her friends had. I had no way to track her down. So I started calling her friends, and at the same time, I went online to check her cell phone information. But

she hadn't made any calls, and as a result, I got nowhere. So I got in my car and drove.

I drove aimlessly around town, searching up and down the streets. I drove past most of her friends' houses, but didn't find a thing. And just as I started to head back home, I spotted her car parked in an alley next to an old, dark apartment complex. I pulled into the parking area where I could see most of the streetlights had been broken. As I circled around, the music got louder — so loud it vibrated through my hands on the steering wheel.

I parked next to an old Dumpster then followed the music as I walked over beer cans and cigarette butts. When I got up to the door to knock, it was slightly ajar. I gazed inside the darkened, smoke-filled apartment and found Nikki standing next to a tall guy wearing a hooded sweatshirt. She was holding onto his arm with one hand and a can of beer with the other, talking to a group of kids I had never seen before.

I walked toward her, pushing through the crowd of unfamiliar faces: Kids in their late teens and early twenties, strung out on beer and marijuana — maybe more, I don't know. As I pushed my way through the crowd, all eyes landed on me — even Nikki's, and she panicked when she saw me. And there it was, that impish grin that later became her calling card.

"Hi," she said, and all I could smell was alcohol.

I grabbed her by the arm and ushered her toward the door. She closed her eyes in anger and defiantly pulled away from my grip. But I was able to drag her out of the apartment and force her into my car.

As we drove home, she gave me a million reasons why she forgot to call. She reminded me that she was eighteen, and then told me what she thought of me. I blocked out the words and told myself it was the alcohol talking, but she was mad.

I already knew the answer, but I asked her anyway if she had been drinking or using drugs. Even before she answered, I could feel that cold, steel blade against my throat.

"Yeah," she said, "but not a lot."

Her honesty was like instant death. But at least honesty was something I could always count on with Nikki. I felt like I

couldn't breathe for a few minutes after she answered that question. For eighteen years, Lesli and I had worked, prayed and sacrificed for that child. And there she was, just barely out of high school, throwing her life away.

I sent her to bed that night, grounding her for the rest of her life. But before I went upstairs, I stood in the doorway of her bedroom and watched her sleep. I wondered why she was changing into this other person, why she would be so careless with her life. It seemed like just yesterday she had asked me why big kids did bad things. I stared at her sleeping for another few seconds, the light of the moon kissing her face like an angel. It came so easy, I thought, letting myself believe she could never do anything wrong.

Lesli

It was right after that little episode that things with Nikki went spiraling downhill. Getting her home was the easy part, but keeping her there was not so simple. She was perfect for days, but then suddenly she disappeared. Christos quickly found her and brought her back home. She was always sorry. She conformed to our rules for about a week but as soon as her punishment was over, she disappeared again. Before we knew it a month had passed.

We knew she was in trouble. It was time to intervene. So Christos started his search for a counselor, I started praying for a miracle, and that's when we met Pastor John. It was also when we got the phone call. It was Nikki, frightened and alone, asking us to come and help her. It was then that we admitted her into the hospital's psych ward. Her diagnosis: paranoid psychosis from the use of cocaine.

It was, for me, a life-changing moment. All of the fear I had stored up inside instantly tumbled down on me.

“*Cocaine?*”

Because in spite of what I had believed, my daughter had been using something other than marijuana or alcohol. And it was there, tucked underneath the folds of my denial: a truth I had been too blind to see.

Christos had a fit. “How did this happen?” he asked the doctor. “How long has she been using cocaine?”

“It's hard to say,” the doctor said, “but not *that* long.” And we found out later that he was right. I guess you could say she had a severe psychotic reaction to the drug that made it impossible for her to get away with using it for long. He glanced down, closed her medical chart, and placed it on the bed. “Some people just aren't meant to experiment with drugs.” I assumed he was referring to her extensive medical history.

The thing about being a mother of a child whose life hung by a thread is that even when you are certain you have done everything right, there will come a time when you will convince yourself that you must have done everything wrong.

The doctor ushered us outside the room. “Your daughter needs to be hospitalized,” he said. “The problem is she’s eighteen, so you won’t be able to make that decision for her.” He peeked at Nikki through the open door, and lowered his voice. “It would be nice, however, if you could somehow convince her to want to stay with us for a couple of days. Otherwise, I’ll have to admit her into the psych ward against her will. And that’s a very uncomfortable process. Either way, you’re not able to make that decision for her. This is between Nikki and me. You can’t be involved in her medical treatment — at all.”

I was confused. That was *not* how we did things. I made all of the medical decisions for that child. She needed medication and medical treatment, and because she was eighteen, I could no longer be in control of that?

The truth was I couldn’t convince Nikki to do anything she didn’t *want* to do. She had a mind of her own. That was just who she was. Stubborn, strong willed and impossible to persuade. The cutest, sweetest, most defiant child you would ever meet, and I was supposed to convince her to stay in the hospital.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “She’s not going to do anything she doesn’t want to do.”

But that’s also when it hit me: the way it all happened, the way she ended up in the hospital. I felt the blood settle back into my face, and instantly, I relaxed. It was suddenly so clear. “Okay...” I smiled. “I can do that.”



Seventy-two hours in the psych ward was not long enough to fix Nikki. It was only long enough to make her angry with us for tricking her into wanting to stay there. Thankfully, with medication, her psychosis had begun to fade and she was acting more like herself again: quiet, thoughtful.

Although we tried, the hospital wouldn’t keep her in their drug rehabilitation program because they didn’t believe that our daughter had a drug problem. According to her doctor and the admitting staff in the drug unit, her problem was

neurological. So with a list of doctors and counseling appointments, some antipsychotic medications, and an in-home recovery plan, we treated her ourselves for what we were convinced was a drug problem.

Her first morning home, I made her a cup of tea and handed her a slice of toast. I sat down next to her and flipped through the morning paper. I watched her chew her food in a stare, wondering what was going on inside of her complicated mind. She was obscure, and I was starting to believe that I would never figure her out. It was only a matter of time, with patience and prayer, before she would get completely better, I told myself.

But I still couldn't take my eyes off her. I just stared at her face. I wanted to reach over the table and hug her, squeeze her, and tell her how much I loved her. But I didn't. I just looked down at the paper and turned the page.

I handed her a book to read on self-preservation. She looked at me blankly, and then looked away. I couldn't help but wonder what I could have done to protect her. And just when I thought she was not going to say a word, she looked at me and smiled.

“I love you, Mom.”



Two months later, I was convinced that parenting was like a game of poker. Sometimes you're dealt a bad combination of cards and lose your hand, and other times you're dealt a winning combination of cards — at every hand — and win the game.

It wasn't until that point that I started to believe there was more to the game than just dumb luck. I watched Nikki become more conscientious, more focused and motivated, while her drug issue slipped into an old, faded memory. We continued with drug testing, and each time, the tests were negative. College had become her new focus but it was her faith in God, I am certain, that really changed her life.

I heard Nikki laughing when I poked my head into her bedroom. She was sitting at her desk, telling Danielle that she

was going to be famous someday in a freaky, weird way. Danielle agreed as she always did and I realized things were just normal again. I looked around her room. Her pillows were placed neatly on top of her bed, her clothes all put away. Our daughter had evolved back into her old self again — ravishing, obedient.

“We leave soon, girls,” I said.

As I walked down the stairs, I felt a very strong sensation of doom. It was a feeling of loss, a feeling of losing Nikki. Usually that meant something was wrong with Nikki, but she had just been to the doctor the day before and there was no sign of anything suspicious. So I swallowed the feeling down and headed for the kitchen. At that point, I had started to believe that if I concentrated on something positive, nothing bad would happen. I had no idea that God was getting me ready for something too big to swallow — something so enormous and horrific, so unbelievably excruciating, that the only thing worse would be to relive the pain for the rest of my life.

As I walked through the house, switching off lights, I thought about how Nikki’s doctor had been so impressed with her the day before. I thought about what she had said to him: how she loved her life, her family. *I have such a good feeling about my life, lately. Everything is finally making sense, and I really believe that something important is going to happen.* Then it clicked what she had just said to Danielle upstairs.

Yesterday, on our way home from the doctor, she said the same thing to me. She put her feet up on my dashboard and smiled. She was just so happy.

“Wouldn’t it be cool, Mom, if I got famous someday, in some freaky, weird way?” She said.

She was so hopeful, optimistic, and so full of life. So why did I feel so bad?

As the memory faded, Nikki walked into the kitchen, where I was locking up the dogs. She made her way over to Christos and smiled. “Here Dad, this is for you.” She pulled out a crumpled piece of paper from her jeans pocket, unfolded it, and handed it to him, “It’s just something I want you to know.” She looked at me and her face was beaming. “I’ll meet you guys in the car, K.”

I knew it was important, especially when Christos sat down.

But when I saw he was crying, I asked him if everything was all right.

“Yeah, everything is perfect.” He wiped his eyes and handed me the letter. “Read this.”

As I began reading the first sentence, Nikki walked back inside and made her way into Christos’ arms. Suddenly, they were both crying. “Thanks for everything Dad, and I’m sorry I messed up your whole life!”

“Oh angel,” he squeezed her into his chest, “don’t you know you girls are my whole life!” She wiped her face with her sleeve, and they both burst into laughter. “Oh sweetie, I love you so much! Look how hard you’ve worked, how far you’ve come... You’ve accomplished something huge, and this is only the beginning of the rest of your life. You should be so proud of yourself!”

She pushed her lips to the side of her face and smiled. “No Dad, *you* should be so proud of *yourself*.” Nikki straightened his shirt and touched his chin. “You are the best father a girl could have. You should know that.”

Christos grabbed her right hand. I looped my arm around her left arm and as we walked toward the car, I read the letter she wrote to her dad:

Dad,

It’s been hard for me to fully come to terms with what’s really going on in my life. The fact that I have a beautiful home, food always available, fresh and only a few feet away for when I am hungry. A car — not to mention a high class one — to get to school where I can learn, get to the movies if I want to be entertained, go to the store if I want to shop. I have all these things AND an intelligent, caring, beautiful family. It’s so surreal to me right now. I am given everything an individual needs to live the best life possible.

History has established a lot and through the generations, this world has evolved so greatly. It’s hard for me to believe... Is this really happening to me?

My brothers and sisters of the past; their ideas, beliefs and common sense, have come to this, the ability to mold a once lost human being into a perfect being by simply knowing truth. Do I really have all this because I am born into a TIME and into a family that has been taught the TRUE answers from past generations?

Apparently I do. I am human, I am young, grasping everything day by day as growing, and learning has affected me. But what has affected me the most is the fact that a person, such as yourself, has stuck by my side in times of need and has ALWAYS looked out for me — especially when I have felt that I am the only person who can save myself — even when I disregard others.

I feel like I am only now beginning to understand anything. Thank you for putting up with my Bull...!

I love you, Nikki Catsouras 10-25-06

In the car on our way to the restaurant, the girls argued over which radio station to play first. Nikki got her way as she always did and flipped the dial to her favorite station. But I didn't hear the sound of bickering or heavy metal. I reached into my purse and grabbed a tissue, listening instead to the sound of a healthy family living a wonderful life, the sound of true happiness.

As I watched Nikki sleep that night, I thought that today, perhaps, was my winning hand.



But the feeling that I would lose Nikki became persistent after that night. First at night, when I lay down to sleep, and other times I'd awaken with the panic that she was gone. I prayed about it incessantly. I told myself that I was always worried about Nikki, so why should this be any different? But the last few days, I had found myself staring at her constantly, studying her face; not because she was so unbelievably gorgeous, although she was, but because somewhere inside of me I knew she was going to leave.

I wondered how, in those moments, when I felt like I was so close to the hands of God, I could feel like I was so close to the fists of the devil.

It was Monday, October 30, 2006. I was making dinner in the kitchen.

“Mom, why are you keeping secrets from me?” Nikki asked as she stood behind me.

“Oh, you scared me, Nik.”

I turned to face her.

“Wait, what did you say?”

She didn’t answer. She just pressed her fingers against her face so I wouldn’t notice that she was crying. I fanned the steam and switched off the stove when her words rang clear in my head.

“What do you mean keeping secrets? What secrets? What’s wrong?”

Her voice became soft, breathy. “Nothing.”

And then she pretended to laugh. “Nothing, I’m fine. I just watched something sad on TV.”

I grabbed her hands, tried to pull them away from her eyes, but she fought to keep them there. She turned and walked back upstairs. I knew something was wrong. It wasn’t like Nikki to cry. And she never played mind games. I couldn’t see what was really happening. I had no idea that my worst nightmare was getting ready to come true.

So I just closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths when the rest of my family walked in for dinner. And as I called for Nikki to come back downstairs, it occurred to me: *She has been awfully quiet today.*

I paid close attention to her, watching her picking at her meal — plucking small shreds of chicken from the heart of her ravioli. She pushed her food from one side of the plate to the other and complained of a stomachache. Her lips moved, her words were clear, but nothing she said really made any sense.

Christos was also watching Nikki. He knew exactly what was happening. I couldn’t see it yet. I was too busy trying to understand her joke. It was funny, but she seemed so serious.

Not knowing what to say or how to respond, I jumped up and began clearing the table. That was an automatic response for me. If I concentrated hard on an ordinary thing, everything would go back to normal. Nikki stood up, grabbed her plate, and as usual she followed me into the kitchen. There I breathed a momentary sigh of relief. Maybe she was fine. Then she spoke again.

“Dad has super powers,” she said matter-of-factly. “I *know* he does!”

The dishes I’d been holding slipped from my hands and tumbled loudly into the sink. I spun around toward Nikki, searching her beautiful face, for any hint she might be joking. But her electric blue eyes were shining just a bit too brightly. She was on something.

I didn’t get it. We’d been with Nikki 24/7. Except for her morning class at the college, she hadn’t been out of my sight. I was positive she didn’t take any drugs. It was impossible, I thought. And just as I felt my world tipping sideways, she spoke.

“What’s wrong, Mom?” she asked, suddenly lucid, as if trust was not an issue between us.

Then, she said quietly, “It...it’s in my room.”

I followed her upstairs and into her bedroom, where she reached into a plastic drawer on top of her desk and handed me the cocaine.

“*Christos...!*”

I think I screamed loud enough for the neighbors two blocks away to hear. Nikki put her hands over her eyes while I bolted into the bathroom to flush the white substance down the toilet.

“I’m so sorry,” Nikki said, blinking away her tears. That was the moment I knew: Everything I felt inside, every word in my heart, was true. I truly was losing her. “Please don’t be mad, Mom. I made a mistake. I just wanted to prove to myself that I didn’t have a problem, but I think I do.”

“Oh, Nikki, what were you thinking?”

“I got it from a kid at school this morning, and I brought it home. I swear I wasn’t going to use it. I was just going to keep in my drawer, but...”

She was coherent, sad and confused. *But could she really be that careless?* I wondered.

“I just took one small hit, Mom, I swear.”

I was so stunned I couldn't speak. I had to get her to the hospital — fast. I couldn't take any chances. I couldn't tell yet whether she was psychotic or simply feeling guilty. I just stared at her face, wondering how I could have let it happen — again. Christos walked in. I didn't have to say a word. He already knew. And when Nikki opened her eyes to look at him, she burst into tears again.

“I'm so sorry Dad...”

I grabbed her duffle bag from her closet and began stuffing her clothes inside. She would take them out, one by one, fold them neatly, and lay them on her bed.

“Stop it, Nikki, you're going to the hospital!”

But the more I insisted, the more she refused because she didn't want to be hospitalized; she didn't want to spend the next three days locked up in the psych ward. I grabbed her by the arm.

“We had a deal!”

“But it's so late, and I'm fine, I swear,” she said.

When I didn't answer, she turned to Christos.

“I'm fine, Dad, I promise, and besides I have a doctor's appointment tomorrow anyway.”

“Nikki,” Christos said very calmly. He walked over and trailed his fingers through her hair. “Maybe you've reached the point when you have to admit that you're not big enough to handle this on your own, that you're not strong enough to carry this weight without the help of those who love you.”

Christos held up the small round mirror that held her cocaine. Nikki closed her eyes. “Nikki,” he said, “if this is what stands between who you are, and who you want to become, then you have to let us help you.” He looked at me then back at Nikki. “We can do this Nikki, together — a team.”

She just nodded. “I know.” And when she opened her eyes, I saw the most genuine tears. “I know.”

In the end, we decided she was right. It was late, already 11:30 and letting her psychiatrist make the decision the next

day seemed easier on all of us. She jumped into bed and sat up.

“I just really need to sleep,” she said. “I promise, I’m fine...really!”

Christos nodded and pulled the covers up to her face. I went through her bedroom with a fine-tooth comb, looking for anything inappropriate: cocaine, drugs, alcohol. I never found a thing.

By the time I had finished packing her clothes, Nikki was fast asleep. She was sleeping so hard. Tiny sweat beads had formed across the arch of her nose. I leaned over and stared at her face. I couldn’t help but wonder how much of this was just a mistake and how I could blame her for anything.

I watched her heart beating strong at the pulse of her neck. Big Bird kept watch from the top of her desk. I leaned over and brushed the top of her forehead with my lips. But it didn’t feel like I was saying goodnight. It felt like I was saying goodbye. I couldn’t help it. Tears began pouring out of me. I turned to find Christos who was sitting on the floor, his knees drawn to his chest. I didn’t think we could be that strong, strong enough to go through it again. It had been so easy, I thought, believing we had come so far when really, we hadn’t.

I ran my fingers across Nikki’s hairline. She looked so peaceful, so angelic. I wanted to scoop her up and freeze time, and keep her safe with me forever. Instead, I took the silk edge of her blanket and tucked a little fold around the curve of her face. Before that night, I had probably asked God a million times to protect Nikki, to keep her healthy and safe. But that was the first time I had ever asked God to protect her soul.

“At any cost,” I said, even if it meant taking Nikki away from me. But I didn’t mean forever.

I walked to the edge of the bed and sat down next to Christos. “It’s better if we let her sleep it off,” he said. “We’ll know more when we see the doctor tomorrow.”

I nodded, pressing my eyes for a moment, never dreaming just how long and painful tomorrow would be.



If only I had known that night what tomorrow would bring, I would have done everything differently. I would have talked to Nikki, listened, asked questions; I would have told her more, how much I loved her. If I had known what tomorrow would bring, I would have held her tight in my arms and never let her walk out that door. I would have saved her from the plight that finally ended her life. If I had known what tomorrow would bring, I never would have let it happen.

So the darkest day of my life is over, and getting out of bed takes enormous strength. My body is cold and drawn, and thoughts of Nikki hit me so hard I can barely move. All I can do is lie here and think and wonder what I could have done to stop her — how I could have changed her path. Then I beg God to take me, too, away from all of this. Yet each time I inhale, I realize, again, I'm still alive and that makes me angry.

Suddenly, there is a hand on my arm, and for all I know it's Nikki's. So I turn, carefully toward her voice. "Mommy," she says, and her eyes are all I see, blue and electric. For a moment, I stop breathing until my eyes readjust and I see them. Three little bodies emerge from the waning darkness. The three reasons I'm still breathing, the three reasons I'm still alive.

"I love you, Mommy!" Kira says, wiggling her way underneath the covers and into my arms.

Christiana climbs in behind her.

"I'm right here, Mom," she says. Then she strokes my hair, her tears falling.

Danielle slides in next, pillowing her head against Christiana's shoulder. She reaches her hand over Kira's arm and touches my face.

"We're going to get through this Mom, together — a team. I promise!" she says. Her tears are falling but her voice is calm.



Wed. 9:41 a.m., Nov. 1, 2006

9:41 am November 1, 2006 | **Anonymous** wrote:

The toll road girl was 18 and driving her dad's Porsche.

9:45 am November 1, 2006 | **xboy** wrote:

Dude she was hot!

9:52 am November 1, 2006 | **Regithom** wrote:

I agree but this girl drove her parents car driving 100 mph, I' glad God took her life away

9:58 am November 1, 2006 | **Anonymous** wrote:

Poor dad I bet he's distraught over loosing his Porsche like that.

10:02 am November 1, 2006 | **repo4sale** wrote:

THE TRUTH HURTS!!! THE PARENTS HAVE SOME BLAME 4 BRINGING UP A BRAT! ANY 18 YR OLD THAT DRIVES LIKE THAT CAN DIE. IT HAPPENED, AND OTHER TEENS CAN LEARN FROM HER MISTAKE!!! IM A PICAPOI AKA POLITICALLY INCORRECT AND PROUD OF IT! IF YOU COVER UP THE FACTS THEN YOUR LIKE THE CHINA GOVT.

10:07 am November 1, 2006 | **usafor99** wrote:

Have humans become so desensitized about violence, blood and death that they choose to ignore any hint of compassion for the sake of adding to an ugly medium that is called the Internet!!!

Four



Lesli

THERE MUST BE SOME COSMIC button you can push to stop the world from spinning when someone you love dies — at least long enough to figure out what you are supposed to do next. This is what I'm thinking when I push aside the image of my previous life — the one before the accident — and finally get out of bed.

As if blindfolded, I find myself walking carefully down the stairs — slowly, one step at a time. My eyes have swelled. They sting of salt, but I manage to slit them open enough to let the outline of my husband's face loom into view.

"Take my hand," he says. "Just take a breath, and take my hand."

The faint smell of coffee and the sound of my father's voice in the distance is how I know that my parents have arrived. As most parents would, they have come from their home in Idaho to fit me for my new role as grieving mother — a job no one is ever prepared for.

For a moment, I'm just delighted to see them — their warm, loving arms stretched out just for me. Thank God they

can't see the jagged pieces of my heart fluttering around inside my chest.

"Oh, honey," my mother says as she wraps her arms tightly around me. "This was God's mercy. There is love and mercy in this, honey... I just know this."

She pulls back to get a better look and her face is all I see. "The minute I heard about the accident, I just knew that." She pulls me in close to her warm body. "Sweetie, I know that God allowed this. Out of love, and with mercy!" She squeezes me hard and for a second, I'm her little girl again.

"Thanks for coming, Mom."

"Snap out of it, kiddo. She's in a much better place now. We should be celebrating!" This is what my father says right before he breaks out into falsetto, yodeling the words "cheer up, cheer up." Then he grabs me into his arms and squeezes me tight against his chest. I feel him kiss the top of my head. "Death is nothing to fret about, honey," he says, repeating a truth from a man who has lived his entire life dancing on the stage of danger. "It's something we all have to face!" He squeezes me again.

I know he means well. He has never been afraid of anything. You would never guess by his fresh-scrubbed CEO face that, for a time, the FBI had believed my father was the infamous D.B. Cooper. But he is not a bank-robbing, hijacking skydiver. He is a man, though, who skied on the Olympic team at Alta while in college, who during a skydiving show landed on a racetrack where he bought his first race car, and the same man who keeps his air tanks filled and his scuba gear tucked in the trunk of his car.

He is a man who, at seventy-five, still takes the checkered flag in the Fountain boat speed races on Catalina Island, the man who made his living racing sports cars, who made his name racing in the Indy 500 for more than thirty years. But underneath all this is the kindest, most gentle man I know. And it's the strength behind his embrace that reminds me why he's here. To protect me.

"I know exactly how it happened, Les."

He stretches his arms out to get a better look at my face. "It happens to rookies all the time; they just don't realize how

fast ‘fast’ is. They miscalculate the distance when they go to pass the other car, and they clip it. This sends them flying into the wall every time. It wasn’t her fault, you know. She didn’t know the speed of that car. She never stood a chance the second she entered that toll road.” He squeezes me hard. “You’ll be all right, kiddo, she’s in heaven now, with God.”

I concentrate hard for my dad so he doesn’t notice that a part of me died yesterday. I pretend to be strong so he can’t see that I am shivering deep inside this cold, heavy armor that is fitted just for me. My mom grabs me into her arms and looks at my dad.

“She’ll be just fine,” she says. “I’ll make sure of it.”

When I was two, my baby brother died from a hypoplastic heart. The left side of his heart failed to develop during pregnancy. Back then babies didn’t survive after birth without a heart transplant.

They say it’s genetic, but by the time I was pregnant with Nikki there were special ultrasound tests to rule out deformities like his. It wasn’t until Nikki was born, however — healthy and perfect — when I held her tiny body in my arms that I could truly understand how excruciating the pain of my brother’s death must have been for my parents. At least they can understand my grief. At least they will know how to bandage the gaping wound across my heart.

The thing I remember most about our family tragedy was my parents’ determination to keep our lives normal. Even though they had been torn to shreds over the loss of their son, they made sure that my brother’s and my life were rich and full of love. I make a silent promise to do the same for my children.

I sit down at the kitchen table next to Christos and press my hands against my face. I will be strong, I tell myself. I will not let this tragedy take me away from my children. I will keep our world warm and whole in spite of our circumstances. But when I realize what I’m thinking, I just cry.

My mom is standing over the sink cleaning the breakfast dishes, a symphony of glass and china echoing behind me. She

walks over, hands me a cup of coffee and lays the morning paper on the table in front of me. I look across the room where my dad is sitting on the sofa with a mug of hot coffee watching the morning news. I am actually breathing just fine, until my eyes roll onto the article.

“Ladera Ranch teen killed in 241 collision,” the headline reads.

Below it is a picture of Nikki — her yearbook photo. My heart flutters inside me and the title steals my breath. It’s all in print, proof that it is true. “Nikki Catsouras, 18, lost control of a Porsche 911 at over 100 mph...” I read further, “CHP officers found open alcohol containers in the trunk of the Porsche.”

While I’m still reading, Christos reaches his hand across my chest and wrenches the paper from me. “*What,*” he shouts, “there was no alcohol in that car...wait a second, that’s impossible!” he says. His eyes are like fire, colorful and beautiful but dangerous to be near.

He grabs the phone, walks around the center island where he grabs a pencil, and places the phone on speaker-phone. My mother looks terrified when someone from the CHP answers.

“I need to speak to Officer Hunt!” Christos demands.

Officer Hunt was the investigating officer at the accident scene. It’s too much for my mind to process, so I look out the window at a bird resting on the wall that separates our house from the neighbors. Such a peaceful creature without a care in the world. Oh how I wish I could trade places with him.

Suddenly a voice: “This is Officer Hunt.” He assures Christos there has been a mistake; that the open alcohol containers were actually found in the trunk of the car that collided with our daughter.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about; nobody told me there was alcohol in that kid’s car!” Christos says, calmly and then suddenly, he asks: “What a minute. Are you saying the kid who swerved in front of my daughter was drunk?” My mom makes a crying sound and leaves the room. I feel my heart sink.

“No, Mr. Catsouras, nobody was drunk. They checked that kid at the hospital, the alcohol containers were empty,

and we found them in the trunk of his car. It's nothing. No need to be alarmed."

"Well, that's not what it says in the paper. And if it's nothing then why am I even reading about it?"

"I don't know what to tell you, Mr. Catsouras. Maybe you should ask the newspaper reporter that question."

"You're damn right I will!" Christos lunges the phone back to its receiver and turns loose his rage. He looks at me. "Damn them!" he says, and looks away.

My dad calls out from the family room. "Don't let 'em get away with that crap, tiger." Christos continues cursing without looking at my dad.

I understand his frustration, and I am as angry as he is somewhere, but it's all the same inside right now. I am disconnected. Parts of me work, yet parts of me don't. I do, however, feel a peaceful calm. One I can't explain. Maybe it hasn't hit me yet. Maybe my mind *is* playing tricks on me.

A second later, Christos picks up the phone.

"*Now* who are you calling?" I ask.

"I want them to fix this!" he says, and because I have nothing better to do, I listen in on his conversation. The receptionist is going to connect Christos with the journalist who wrote the article. I rub my hand across the table.

It's hard to believe that just one day ago Nikki was sitting here with me having lunch. She was here laughing, telling me about the dream she'd had the night before — telling me about the history test she had studied so hard for, the one that is scheduled for tomorrow, and how sorry she was for all of the trouble she had caused. The memory is strong, releasing a deluge of tears. But this time, when I put my fingers to my eyes, they are dry. So I concentrate on the good stuff, the feeling that God is with me and somehow involved in all of this. Maybe if I close my eyes and concentrate hard enough, that escalating feeling of heartbreak will lessen.

"Hello, sir," the reporter says, "I was at the accident scene yesterday. And I can assure you...the officer in charge of media information — the officer I spoke to — told me there were open alcohol containers in the Porsche at the time of the collision. I've made notes of this. Sir, it was a CHP officer who

gave me that information. And I wasn't the only one standing there that heard it."

"Are you absolutely positive that's what they told you?" Christos asks.

"Yes, I'm positive. Why?"

"Because he made a mistake, he was wrong, or he lied to you. Look, will you please...will you just check the accident report. You need to write a retraction!"

Pastor John walks in during the middle of all of this and sits down at the kitchen table. I try to smile but I can't. It's all I can do right now to breathe.

"Sure," the reporter says. "I'll double check the facts...look, if there was — in fact — no alcohol in the Porsche, I'll definitely write a retraction, but only if I get a positive confirmation on that."

Christos looks at Pastor John and becomes noticeably calm. "All right, thanks. I would really appreciate that."

Four days later in the O.C. Register:

Empty alcohol containers were found in a gray Honda Civic at the scene of an Oct. 31 accident on the Eastern (241) Toll Road. The containers were not found in the Porsche driven by the 18-year-old woman killed in the collision. Because of incorrect information from the California Highway Patrol, the vehicle in which the containers were found was incorrectly identified in an article on page 6 of the Local section in the Nov. 1 edition of the Register.

By the time the correction is published, it's too late. Rumors of drunk driving have navigated their way through a sea of lies, flooding the Internet with false information. One human error and we will forever be haunted with the mendacity that marks the exit of our daughter's life. But people make mistakes every day — horrible, awful mistakes. And forgiveness is an opportunity to heal and become even stronger. All things considered, this is small on my scale of unbearable.



It is easy to assume that when your world has come to a crashing halt, everything else stops, too. But the kids need to be fed, bathed and schooled, the plants need water and there is a funeral that needs to be planned. I am a robot, a useless machine stuck on autopilot. I don't understand how, but I still have an unexplainable peace lingering inside me somewhere, a feeling that God is here, close enough to touch.

Christos is fidgety, annoyed at everything and everyone — mostly God. If he's not obsessing over finding the person who sold Nikki the cocaine, he's fixated on the newspaper article and the damage it has done to our daughter's reputation. Maybe if he puts someone behind bars, or restores the bit of dignity that was taken away from her, he will stop being so mad.

I'm still floating around in empty space. But I don't think the girls know this. I've been strong and surprisingly calm all morning. I haven't even allowed that lingering feeling of grief to ruin my day. It's the smallest things, though, that will crush my strength. Like picking out clothes for my child to be buried in. It's the only task my mother gave me, and I can hardly bear it.

Nikki didn't follow any kind of fashion trend. One of her favorite things to do was to tailor old garments that she would buy from the second-hand store. That was her way of staying genuine, unique. The way she felt on the inside. And right now, I don't think I can bear to part with any of it.

I open her closet and shuffle through her things: her favorite homemade T-shirt, a tie-dye cluster of peace signs, a pair of leather shorts that used to be someone's leather jacket. A few years from now these things will be all the rage and Nikki will never know that she was years ahead of her time. I take out the cream-colored sweater she had bought for the first day of school. I hold it up to my face when Christos walks in.

I turn to face him.

"I gave her my trust, Christos. And she did it anyway. Maybe she wasn't ready to go back to school. Oh, what was I thinking?"

He grabs my wrist and lays Nikki's sweater down on her bed. "Listen!" His eyes dance around my face. "You raise them the best you can and sometimes they break the rules, sometimes they disobey, and sometimes they make mistakes.

"Do you know how much courage it must have taken her to tell us she used cocaine? Do you know how terrifying it must have been for her to admit she made a mistake?"

He pulls me into his chest. "You raise them the best you can, and sometimes even when you do everything right, even when your only fault is that, you love them way too much. They'll make mistakes — just like everybody else."

I close my eyes against the pounding of his heart and for one moment, there is a feeling of relief. For one moment, I can pretend that maybe this wasn't my fault.

In the end, I settle on something simple, something she wore all the time, something she would have chosen herself: a white "wife beater" and her favorite pair of jeans.

There are no rules, no handbook to shuffle through for direction. I have to go by instinct, and right now, it feels as if that, too, has been washed away in the storm.

When my mother walks into my room, I am lying face down on my bed. My car keys are dangling in her hand, she walks over and pulls me up.

"Come on...it's time to go. We have to go make the final arrangements; did you pick something yet?"

"No, not really. Well, kind of."

"I know it's hard, but it needs to be your choice, and we need to go."

The funeral is four days away, and I am still living outside of my body. I have trouble sorting my thoughts and trying to remember things in order. It's frustrating. So I focus and pray for strength to get up, and make things nice for Nikki. Suddenly I'm thinking about my best friend Celeste, and how she stayed awake with me whenever Nikki was sick — day and night. She was there for Nikki's birth, every surgery, every birthday party. Every event that Nikki participated in, it was Celeste who sewed her costumes, glued the feathers — the sequins, the make-up — to the point of perfection. She will

know how to help me up, how to make everything perfect for Nikki.

“Okay, but I need to — ” I say, fighting my way into a standing position. “ — call Celeste.” And just as I stand, my knees buckle beneath me and my body falls to the ground. I want to cry but I can’t. Every fiber of my body is screaming out with grief, but I can’t cry. It’s only when I look at my mom scrunched down beside me with her hand on my face that I realize why. She is doing it for me.

The mortuary is chilling proof that my daughter has died. As we pull into the parking lot, I feel the blade at my throat press tight.

“I can’t go in there,” I say. “I just can’t do it... I’m scared!”

I know Nikki is inside the building, but I am afraid to be near her in death. I look over at Christos, who is deep in thought, staring out the window. He doesn’t say a word. It’s our final gesture of love — to celebrate Nikki’s life on Earth — and our grief and fear has frozen the two of us.

My mom sits up from the back seat. “We have to do this,” she says while she unbuckles my seatbelt. “We have to make this special, for Nikki and for her sisters.”

I focus my attention back on the building and force myself out of the car. I will not let my sorrow interfere with the most important thing I can do: give my children a life unaffected by loss.

There are all sorts of questions for us to answer: what color casket, the theme, the flowers. *Flowers? How could I possibly decide what kind of flowers?*

“Well,” I say, “when Nikki was little, I would have picked pink roses, to show her femininity. But as she grew and blossomed, I’d probably have picked wild flowers, or daisies to show her fun, silly side. Oh, I don’t know.”

I laugh on the outside, but on the inside, I am drifting in and out.

“Exotic,” I say. “Unique. Something to express her eccentricity.”

And it is that statement that brings me completely to tears. I feel the trail of them streaming down my face, but my throat has closed so I do not make another sound.

This is when the first sense of understanding pulses through me. I am suddenly aware that Nikki is alive — somewhere. My mind rejects this concept of death — it's a lie. I know the truth. Nikki is alive. I can feel it. And just like that, I know what she is thinking. That's just how it is — that's how it always was. Christos is right; it is like a sixth sense. As I stand, all uncertainty vanishes into thin air.

"We'll let Celeste choose the flowers," I say. "Nikki would want her to."

The California Highway Patrol made it very clear to us that we could not see Nikki because she was unrecognizable. Birthing in me a fear so deep, I begin to shake from this inconceivable thought. Contrary to their instructions, the funeral director, Neil O'Conner encourages us to view at least a small portion of Nikki's body — possibly her feet — but only after the mortician prepares her. This ritual helps the bereaved find closure, we are told. But I am terrified of what I might find. I think of Sgt. Miller and the words he so carefully chose: *You need to remember your daughter the way you saw her last, laughing and with a smile on her face.* So I ask God to be in my eyes and shield me from what I am about to see.

"You'll keep her covered?" I ask Neil.

"Of course," he says.

Before we walk through the threshold of the chapel, I am already floating above myself.

Again, I'm invisible. In front of me, about twelve feet, there is a table. The air is cool and as I walk to the front of the room, I recognize the light-blue blanket that my mom bought the day before. It takes me a second, but then I realize Nikki is underneath that blanket. We inch our way closer until I see the pale, narrow arches of her beautiful feet tilted slightly to the left. I watch as my fingers, by their own will, lightly caress her toes. They are cold; my baby's feet are cold. Sadness burns me like a hot flame. It sings away another layer of me. I close my eyes, thinking of all the times I'd tickle her feet until she'd

finally fall asleep. How I would tickle her again to wake her back up.

Christos hasn't stopped sobbing. Listening to him cry stings my skin like pinpricks. But now he wants to see for himself if the person under the blanket truly is Nikki.

"Uncover her," he asks.

I can't imagine what he's thinking. We know better than to look at our daughter.

"Yeah," he says. "I'm ready. Uncover her!" My heart is pounding so hard I think I'm going to be sick.

Neil looks over at my mom. She nods, and as they had discussed the day before, she walks us out of the room while he removes a small portion of the blanket from one side of Nikki's face. He keeps most of her head covered and calls us back over.

I close my eyes and will myself slowly back toward my daughter's feet, terrified of what I might see and how it might scar me for life. Christos can't help himself. He rushes over to her face, kneels down, and presses his lips against the tiniest part of his daughter's cheek. He closes his eyes, and finally he cries.

"If only I had sold that car. If only I hid those damn keys. Why didn't I lock you in your bedroom, why...Nikki?"

I ache more inside from the pain he is feeling.

I decide to walk closer to Christos, maybe study a small portion of Nikki's face through my tears. My face is just over hers.

I can see her left eye, closed, her lashes swept to the side, just the way she likes them. I scan down to her full fleshy lips pouting downward, and suddenly, I realize this is Nikki. But just as quickly as my impulse pulls me back, I understand that Nikki isn't here. This body lying on the table, which once housed my sweet child, is here, but Nikki is not.

As I study the side of her face, smooth and peaceful, her voice suddenly comes alive in my mind. I hear what she said to me, last Sunday, on our way to church:

"I'm going to rededicate my life to Christ. I felt the Holy Spirit, Mom."

And just like that, I'm remembering for the very first time the last thing she said to me, right before she drove away in the Porsche:

"I was with Jesus last night, Mom. He was with me, in my dream."

For a long moment, I stand motionless in awed silence. My mind races back to a very special morning in spring, right after Nikki turned five. I can almost feel her tugging on my shoulder.

"Mommy, Mommy, wake up!" Nikki was shaking me hard, her mouth pressed against my ear. "I just saw Jesus, Mommy. He was with me...in my dream."

I remember how the light glowed all around her like electricity. "He took me to a river, Mommy. He's really alive. And the water's alive!"

She held her hand up to her face, wiggled her fingers. "He held my hand, Mommy. He's real. He's really real, and he's alive..."

Tears fell from her eyes while the tiny muscles in her face moved her words rhythmically as she spoke of this place.

"Mommy, he wants to baptize me... I belong to him! Oh, please Mommy...please can I get baptized by Jesus?"

Even at the age of five, Nikki's will was stronger than anyone I had ever known. She was baptized just a few days after she had that dream. That day, she spoke this promise out loud: "Dear Jesus, I promise to tell everyone in the whole wide world that you really are real and that you can even walk on water with no shoes on, amen."

Christos walks over and puts his hand on my arm.

"Are you okay?"

I gaze into his eyes, which are full of strength now — just for me.

"She didn't get to tell the whole wide world."

I say this while I turn back to look at Nikki's lifeless body on the table.

Christos squeezes my arm. His lips touch my hair and he whispers, "She's with Jesus now." He says this not because he believes it, but because he knows that I do.

And that makes me smile. Because I know she's with Jesus. How else could I explain the most incredible feeling of peace in the midst of the most horrific pain?

Tears fall from my eyes, unannounced. My mother walks over and wraps her arms around me. "It's time to go, sweetheart," she says, but there is no way I can go. Maybe I will remember something else — something important. Maybe Nikki is trying to tell me something right now.

I turn to Christos.

"*What if* — " I say, stiffening my shoulders, trying to be strong for my mom who is nudging me out of the room.

I cover my face with my hands and shake my head. *No, Nikki's in heaven now*, I tell myself. Christos clutches my arm and pulls me. But I resist. I can't leave. I cannot leave.

Oh, Nikki... Talk to me, where are you? I say loudly in my mind. And when she doesn't answer, I surrender my will, and let my husband lead me toward the exit sign.

Just as I reach the door that leads me away from my baby, I feel a warm wind brush across my face. It stops me in my tracks. I turn slowly, and one last time, I look at my precious daughter lying lifeless behind me. And as if I have lost all sense of reason, I let my eyes sweep the room, the walls — the ceiling, the doorways — and search for a hint, or a sign, for one last clue she must have left behind.

But as long as I stare, and as hard as I try, I do not see a thing.

By the time we arrive home, I'm exhausted. As we walk through the garage door, I notice the smell of my own house: flowers, cinnamon candles, coffee. I push my way through the kitchen, smiling at my children as I walk past them. But just as I round the corner, I stop and hold onto the wall. I close my eyes and tell myself to be strong. I have promised myself that I would never fall apart in front of my children. But when I open my eyes, my brother is standing in front of me, holding out his hand. He walks me into the family room where he and his wife are rummaging through boxes of photographs that we keep stored in our garage. Their daughters, Brooke and Livi, are sorting each photograph by age.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“We’re making a DVD of Nikki’s life to play at the funeral,” Beth says.

Geoff hands me a stack of photos and sits me on the sofa. “Before you look at these,” he says, “I wanted to tell you about something that happened the other day. The day of the accident.”

Geoff looks at Beth, and with a great effort continues.

“We were out for most of that day, and when we got home around four o’clock — before we had heard anything — we noticed Nikki’s graduation photo was lying face down on our kitchen floor. I guess it had just fallen off our refrigerator.

“It was weird, though, because no one had been home, and that photo had been there for months. It’s never been touched.”

I stare at his face, listening, wondering.

“Never mind,” Geoff says. “It’s not important. I just thought that was an interesting coincidence.”

He grabs my hand, holding the stack of photos. “Do you want to check these and tell me if they’re okay to use?”

“Yeah,” I nod. “Sure.”

I look down at the photos of Nikki, and slowly I am absorbed into the beautiful story of her life. Her graduation, her prom, Easter at Grandpa and Nanna’s — there must be a hundred photos here. I lift up the photo of my little Nikki, sitting in the snow next to the snowman — the picture was taken when she was six. I trace my finger across her face and start to cry. It’s only when I see the photo of my precious newborn, lying in her bassinette beside Big Bird — who is twice her size — that I remember her tiny voice during the car ride to her first radiation appointment.

“Mommy,” Nikki said, smiling, *“when I die, will you please put Big Bird in the box with me?”* I felt the heat of her stare on my skin.

“I’m not scared to die, you know... I’m going to be with Jesus. But I really want Big Bird to come with me to heaven. Okay, Mommy?”

I feel the bones inside of me harden and dark spots dance in circles around my eyes. I stare at the photo, which is beginning

to fade — just like my heart. I picture Nikki's face in the car that day, her hair mostly bald, with a scar on the back of her head that looked like half a railroad track. In spite of everything she'd been through, she was more beautiful that day than I had ever seen her before. I feel my body sink into the sofa. My cheek resting against a pillow, I imagine myself, just like the photo, fading away.

“Yes,” I say to my brother who has now wrapped his arms tightly around me. “These will be fine.”

fri. 6:17 p.m., Nov. 5, 2006

6:17 pm November 5, 2006 | **Anonymous** wrote:

What's worse than a drunken truck driver screaming down the toll road? A drunken prom queen throwing a tizzy fit in her daddy's Porsche.

6:28 pm November 5, 2006 | **Anonymous** wrote:

What a waist of a beautiful car.

6:32 pm November 5, 2006 | **danajr 14** wrote:

It's un real that anyone would treat a young girls tragedy as a joke. It's disgusting!

6:36 pm November 5, 2006 | **Anonymous** wrote:

Who gives their daughter a Porsche 911? Her father should be charged with murder.

16:42 pm November 5, 2006 | **CenterLamb** wrote:

And little sick, creepy people crawl out from under a rock and make ugly posts on here. It scares me to think a link like this can represent my nation.

6:44 pm November 5, 2006 | **johnB** wrote:

I have zero sympathy for these self-centered jerks who predicated this event by their lack of parenting supervision and obvious sense of entitlement compounded by a lack of common concern for anyone else. Oh how I wish I could state this directly to these inconsiderates...

Five



Christos

WHEN I'VE FINALLY BECOME CONSCIENCE to the fact that I'm alive in a hellish nightmare that has somehow become my life, I realize that I'm preparing a funeral for my daughter. I'm still not able to fathom the word *funeral*. The word itself has become a nylon rope that wraps its viselike grip around my neck and squeezes me back to unconsciousness each time I hear it.

I can't function.

It's just wrong losing a child. Nikki should be the one saying goodbye to me. It almost feels like God has conspired against me, taking her now after all these years of defying the odds. I slam the balcony door shut in my bedroom. The shutters against the window make a loud bash, and the noise helps me feel better.

I throw the phone onto my bed and head downstairs. It's amazing how hard it is to report a drug dealer in Orange County. I sit on hold for hours at a time. This is the third time I have tried to file a report. Turns out, it's easier to find a drug

dealer than it is to report one. I won't give up, though. Not until I hand this guy's name over to authorities.

I walk into the music studio where I sometimes go to be alone. We all have our hobbies in this family, and music is mine. The studio is the one place I can go to find peace and to escape the truth that has me crawling out of my skin. Danielle, whose first love is also music, has asked me to help her record a song for the funeral. She says she's not brave enough to sing in front of a crowd. But right now, I don't know if I'm brave enough to help her record it.

When Nikki was born, I wrote her a song. It was my gift to her. I knew that one day I would write her a song for her wedding day — maybe for *her* firstborn child. How is it that I am recording a song for her funeral? When did she even grow up?

I lay my arms across my music equipment and rest my head on top. I let my mind drift back to a time, not so long ago, when life was just simple, when Nikki was a baby, when everything was funny.

I think all the way back to when Nikki was about eighteen months old, when I started playing the "I Got Your Nose" game with her. It was fun at first, but like everything I do, I took it way past the limits. I started dropping her "nose" on the floor, or I would eat it; sometimes I would hide it. I thought it was crazy the way Nikki believed me, and watching her just about hyperventilate before I could stick it back on her face was hysterical. Lesli would get so mad. She would holler from the other room. *They learn by example, Christos! You'd better be careful what you teach her.*

I would shake my head. *I know what I'm doing.*

The last time I played that game was when I had flushed Nikki's "nose" down the toilet.

"Your nose went bye-bye, Nikki," I said.

She went completely white, as if I had transformed into a monster right before her eyes. Her shrills were deafening. Before I could tell her I was joking and give her back her nose, she had already plunged her arm halfway down the toilet drain, screaming at the top of her voice, "*No Daddy, give it back, give it back!*" I felt so bad for traumatizing her that way. I took

her straight to the pet store and bought her a puppy — a cute little white Maltese she named Romeo.

He was adorable — almost as cute as Nikki — except for the fact that he chewed up all of her toys in a matter of seconds. Nikki would tell him “*no, no, Womeo*” and she would put her toys up high, but that dog always managed to get a hold of something that belonged to her. Nikki tried giving him time outs, and she locked him out of her bedroom, but that only made him scratch at her door. So I would put on his leash and we would walk Romeo to the park and soon enough, all would be forgotten.

But a few mornings later, when Nikki and I were enjoying our morning breakfast together, I heard a noise coming from the other room. I looked across the table at Nikki but she was no longer sitting next to me eating her bowl of Cheerios. So I jumped up and ran down the hall toward the noise, hopping over Big Bird and his left arm, and then I saw the stuffing. *Oh no*, I thought.

I followed the big clumps of white stuffing into the bathroom where I found Lesli standing at the doorway with her hands on her hips, eyes glaring, waiting for me to come and see what I had taught our daughter to do. I looked inside the bathroom to find Nikki standing with her right elbow clinched around Romeo's neck. She was holding him up while she dangled him over the open toilet bowl. Her left arm was blindly reaching for the flusher while her eyes, full of tears, bellowed softly into mine: “Doggy, bye-bye, Daddy.”

That moment changed everything for me. That moment, I swore I would never take my eyes off her again.

I lift my head and feel the tears fall off my chin. If only I had not taken my eyes off her this time. If only I would have listened to my gut and stayed home. Maybe then I would have been close enough to stop her.

I look down at my mixing board. The buttons have all been switched off. And for the life of me, I can't remember how to work the machine. That's when Lesli walks in. I remove my hands from my face and feel it freeze up completely.

"What's wrong?" Lesli asks as she makes a beeline for me. "What can I do?"

"Nothing," I say, lying. I look back down at the board. "I'm fine."

That's when Lesli wraps her arms around the back of me, pillowing her face against my cheek. She slides her finger gently across each dial and everything is suddenly back in its place. If only it were that easy. If only she could slide her finger across my heart and put all the pieces back into place.



Today my best friend, Frank, arrives from Canada. He has come to take my mind off my troubles — maybe even help me remember my name. He has been talking for twenty minutes about things that used to interest me: business, the economy, our futures. It's kind of a game we have played for as long as I can remember: finding the relationship between specific situations and their inevitable consequences. We turn perfectly good logic into a *What if* scenario: *What if* the economy tanks, *What if* you didn't have enough money to get through it, *What if* you didn't have a job for the next ten years. But right now, I can't think about anything logical. The only questions that burn inside me are completely unreasonable: *What if I could go back in time a few days*, *What if I could bring Nikki home*. I can't listen anymore to what he's saying. Instead, I'm staring at my wife who is standing about twelve feet away from me, looking at photo albums and constantly wiping her eyes.

"Hey, are you even listening, Christos?"

I turn to Frank and smile. "Sorry bro, go ahead."

He puffs out his chest and exhales, then finally changes the subject. But this time he seizes my full attention when he tells me what happened to Nikki's graduation photo in his house on the day of the accident. At first, I don't believe him. I think he's just messing with me. But when he's finished speaking, he just stares at me with his arms folded and falls back into the sofa. He's dead serious.

"Hang on a sec," I say. And before I ask him to repeat himself, I call Lesli over to listen.

"Go ahead, Frank," I look at him. "Tell her what you just told me."

Lesli puts her hands on her hips and raises her eyebrows. Frank looks at me and clears his throat.

"Well," he says. He looks at Lesli and smiles. "I was telling Christos that last Tuesday, on the day of the accident, Sharon and I had been running errands all day. But when we got home that evening, the first thing we both noticed was Nikki's photograph -- the one from her high school graduation that you sent us. It had fallen from the refrigerator and was lying facedown on the floor."

Lesli makes a gasping sound and covers her mouth. Frank panics.

"Oh no, it was no big deal. It wasn't damaged at all. I just picked it up and stuck it back up where it belonged. It was fine. But I do remember wondering how it could have fallen. No one was home. Anyway, it was later that night that we got the call. The whole thing was very strange."

Lesli looks at me with suspense.

"Did you tell him about Geoff's house? The same thing happened to my brother." She adds, "And Nikki's teacher sent us a letter yesterday, something about a video of Nikki in her classroom, that same day. Also right around the time of the accident."

I see the color drain from Lesli's face as she slowly sits down on the sofa next to me.

"Wait a minute, Christos!" she says. "Remember about a month ago when Nikki went through the house and turned all her photographs around so you could only see the back of the frames?"

I nod. "How could I forget? She didn't want us looking at her pictures." I turn to Frank. "Leave it to Nikki to make a statement like that."

"You think she wants us to put her photographs away?" I clench my jaw. "No, don't be silly."

Lesli squeezes her eyes and looks at Frank. "Are you sure it was the same day?"

"Yeah, I'm positive."

I see Lesli's mind running in circles, looking for that one last missing puzzle piece. "Babe, I'm sure there's a logical explanation. There is no meaning to this. Although I must admit, it is a bit out there." As I say this, it starts to sink in. Can there be a logical explanation? So what is an illogical explanation, anyway? I look over at Frank who now has a question mark frozen on his face. "So what is it?" I ask. "What's the logical explanation for that?"

Frank just lifts his shoulders. "Yeah, well maybe some things can't be explained. And what if Lesli's right. What if Nikki's trying to tell you guys something?"

Lesli shoots her eyes on me. She looks worried, confused. "No," I say. "If anything, Nikki was just trying to make us laugh."

"Or," Frank chimes in, "what if she's trying to tell you to look deeper. What if there is some hidden clue in one of her photographs."

"*Hidden clue...*" I feel my eyebrows pinch together. "What if you both stop watching TV for a while?"

A second later, Kira walks into the room and into Lesli's arms. "Mommy," she says as she plays with the charm on Lesli's necklace, swinging her legs beneath her. "How do people up in heaven go pee-pee?"

Lesli looks at me and then at Frank. "Which one of you two would like to find a logical explanation for that one?"

Lesli

When I was young, I believed in fate. I believed that people were put in our life path for the purpose of some significant universal plan. How else could I explain the fact that a girl who looked just like me — also a new student — was standing next to Principal Fisher holding onto *my* class schedule? Her hair was just like mine: long, blonde — with bangs — not quite as light, but it seemed to balance out the fact that her eyes were just a tinge bluer than mine. Everything about her was oddly familiar — the color of her eye shadow, her Jordache jeans — except for the fact that she was cool and composed while I was shaking underneath my periwinkle Angora sweater.

Truthfully, we could have passed for twin sisters. That was the first time I told myself, “If this girl can do it, then so can I.” She led; I followed. She sat next to me through first and third period, lunch and P.E. And with her help, I made it through my first day of high school.

There were many reasons Patti and I became best friends. We had so much in common. Even our differences seemed to complement each other’s flaws. Patti helped me toughen up whenever I faced a challenge. And I was there to reassure her whenever she launched a plan. It always worked this way: She got her driver’s license, and then I got mine. She started beauty school, then me. She got married. I got married. It worked well that way, because I always secretly knew that if she could do it, then so could I.

Five years later, when I found out Patti was going to have her first baby, I knew that I would soon be getting pregnant. And later, when I found out that my baby would require 3 a.m. feedings, I would just remind myself, “If Patti can do this, then so can I.” Christine was born in October, Nikki in March — one year later.

No matter which way the stars aligned themselves, or how far the universe would tear Patti and I apart, I never once imagined that eighteen years after our precious daughters were born, I would be telling myself again, “If Patti can do

this, then so can I.” Christine passed away in March — now Nikki, the following October.



By the seventh day I’m exhausted and confused, and before I’ve even realized that we’ve left the house, I remember that we are on our way to our daughter’s funeral.

“Wait,” I say. “Turn around, we have to go back!”

Christos looks at my mom who is sitting in the back seat. “It’s all right sweetheart, we’re all here with you.”

“No,” I say, “we forgot something, we have to go back!”

By now I feel my heart hardening like a stone. I can no longer speak without crying. Christos pulls into the driveway and I race upstairs to Nikki’s bedroom. I grab what I need, and I exhale. But when I turn to leave, my entire family is standing outside Nikki’s door just staring at me in dismay.

“What?” I ask, and then my mother lifts her hand to bring me back to the car. But before I take a step toward my beautiful family, all of whom are obviously thinking I came in here to have a mental breakdown, I lift Nikki’s ratty old Big Bird to my face. “We can’t forget him.”

I don’t remember getting back into the car or even driving away. All I know now is that we are pulling into the parking lot of the largest church in the city. I glance out the window and watch the trees and cars pass by in slow motion. It’s not real; this is not really happening. It’s what I’m telling myself as we park and I unbuckle my seatbelt.

This funeral is the last thing we will ever do for Nikki. Christos and I have been useless, so everyone in the family has had to take on a task, but somehow — because it’s for Nikki — I know everything will be just perfect.

As I open the car door, Neil O’Connor holds out his hand. I hand him Nikki’s Big Bird, and then I hold my breath. The next thing I know, I am hunched over a thick, fabric chair in a small waiting room in the back of the church. I glance up at the ceiling, hoping that God will say something to me, remind me that he’s here. But with each passing minute, there

is nothing but silence. No God, no voice to rescue me from the truth that's about to swallow me whole.

My girls sit close to me, quiet. Their lips are so full of sadness they don't say a word. I want to speak, tell them that I'm sorry, that I love them each so much. But when I open my mouth, there's nothing. So I stare at the ground, but I can't cry, I can't feel. I am completely numb.

When it's time to find our seats in the sanctuary, I realize I'm in a trance. My feet move, my body follows along, but I have little control over what I do. Someone tells me there are more than a thousand people here. I don't look at the faces behind me; I can't bear to see anyone. I find my seat next to Christos and wait for the pain. The knots in my stomach tighten, pushing the acid up into my throat.

I feel my husband's fingers weave through mine. He looks at me hard, as if he wants to say something. But there are no words to comfort me. So he lays his head against mine and squeezes my hand. I squeeze back. If grief makes any sound at all it is lost somewhere in the silence of his heart.

Kira has managed to climb onto my lap. Her top half is lying across Christos. Her feet slowly make their way to my face. "Tickle me, Mommy," she says, and the second I touch her leg, she cries.

I glance behind me where I see Celeste sitting, chatting to Nikki's best friend, Josh. They don't notice that I'm listening.

"I wanted to sing Nikki's favorite song to her tonight," Josh says, "but I never had the chance to ask Christos."

"Oh," Celeste answers. "What did you want to sing?"

"'Do You Realize' by The Flaming Lips. You know it?"

I hear Celeste. "Yeah, I do," she says. "That's so sweet."

"I used to ask Nikki that question all the time: '*Do you realize you have the most beautiful face?*' and she'd just laugh."

I turn to smile at him but he doesn't notice me. He is shaking his head and looking at Celeste. "Nikki had no idea how pretty she was," he says. "Those things just weren't important to her. She wasn't about anything you could see; she was all about what you couldn't see. She was deep, humble, mysterious. *Damn*, it just sucks, you know!"

This time when I turn to smile, he is hiding his eyes behind his hands.

I have to look away.

Just as I start to get used to the intensity of the florescent lights above me, the room suddenly turns black. The music starts. Christos and Danielle spent the entire week trying to record Danielle's song for tonight's service, but they just couldn't get it right. But by some small miracle, just one hour before we left the house, her song made it onto CD — in perfect form.

Tonight, she is singing her rendition of "Angels," by Robbie Williams. The precious sound of my daughter's voice, soft and illuminating, sends a warm chill right through me.

It is so beautiful.

I know that Nikki is with Jesus. But I also know that she is watching and listening. I can feel it. And I know even more that she is so proud of Danielle.

It's not until I look to my left where I see Big Bird's big yellow body, resting under the shining light beaming down on top of Nikki's casket, that I realize it's true. Nikki, my Nikki, is gone. Could I even find words to describe this moment?

Christos

One week after my daughter's funeral, I have the most amazing dream. Nikki is sitting on a chair in front of the vanity in my bathroom smiling at me as I walk in.

"Hi Dad," she says. "Please don't be sad anymore. I'm in heaven now with God, and I'm so happy here! You don't have to worry about me anymore."

I feel my breathing stop and I just stare at her, speechless. She looks and sounds like Nikki, but we buried Nikki in the mausoleum so it can't be her. For a second, I'm so confused I think she's a ghost. But when I squeeze my eyes to get a better look, I can see that she is very much alive. She looks perfect; she is so extraordinarily happy and beautiful. When I ask her why she left, she just smiles and tells me that she loves me. And just like that, I wake up.

It's always been easy for me to believe in God and heaven. I was raised in a good home. My parents took me to Mass every Christmas and Easter. And although I have no idea why, I knew that Jesus died for my sins. But as far as a relationship with God, well, that is something I still don't understand.

I've always assumed that when I died, I would go to heaven — if there really was a heaven. And I figured that if there were *no* heaven, I would just simply no longer exist. Until now, believing in God had been easy, like when my mom passed away four years ago. I believed she went to heaven; it was as simple as that. But that loose philosophy is not so simple anymore. I need to understand what heaven is, where it is, and, if it really, definitely, truly and absolutely is, does that mean hell is real, too? And I need to know all of this now.

But it's late, and now I can't sleep. I don't want to wake Lesli, so I get up and head toward the bathroom. I know Nikki won't be there so I'm not expecting to find her. But I must confess: The second my hand touches the empty chair, I have to fight the urge to cry. It makes me want to scream, to tell the world how angry I am. But instead, I pick up the phone and call Pastor John.

Like a nervous child, I rattle one question after the other into the phone. There's so much I need to know about God and heaven. And who was Jesus, really? There are so many questions burning inside of me, like how do we recognize each other in heaven if we don't have bodies, or how do we remember things if we don't have a brain? If there is a God, why can't I see him, and if he is all-powerful and mighty, then why do bad things happen to good people, to children who love him?

Before he's even had a chance to respond, I've fully convinced myself that somebody, somewhere has invented this whole heaven concept just for a bereaved father like me.

Pastor John explains everything: God, Jesus, heaven. He starts with the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden in a way that opens my mind just enough to challenge my deepest convictions. I listen carefully, dissecting his words, imagining the reality. And then it hits me: If none of this is true, I will never see my daughter again.

Lesli walks in as I hang up the phone. Although I hate it when she sees me like this, I don't even try to hide my tears. I just let them flow as if I hadn't ever stopped crying in the first place. "I'm sorry if I woke you," I say. "Go back to bed."

She looks at me and smiles. "You didn't wake me. I always come in here at 2 a.m. for good conversation."

I pull her close and her warmth soothes me. Her hand on my face ends my tears. "What would I do without you?" I ask.

"You'd just be a mess!" she says as she pulls away and stares at my face. "Your question on the phone about Adam and Eve, about Jesus, can I try to answer it?"

"You want to give me a 2 a.m. sermon?"

"No, actually, I want to talk to you about a computer."

"A computer?"

"Yeah, a computer named Adam." She puts her hands on her hips. "What if God made Adam and Eve, but they were computers? He's God, so he can do anything, right? Imagine he makes these computers perfect, with no viruses, diseases and no death."

"*What...*"

She nudges me down onto the chair where I had just seen Nikki in my dream, and just like that, I'm suddenly in the mood to hear about a computer named Adam.

"Go ahead," I say.

"Let's just say God gave Adam and Eve access to everything; every website; Photobucket, MySpace, etc. Adam and Eve surfed the net, downloaded anything they wanted or needed — whatever, whenever. God had only one warning: not to click on the website marked 'Deception,' or they would definitely crash and die. You get it, right?"

"Yeah, but Les, it's the middle of the night."

I say this, but the truth is, seeing how happy she is right now comforts me. I watch her animated but serious facial expressions and I remember why I fell in love with her all those years ago.

"Just listen," she says. "Eve is surfing the net, and comes across an advertisement for this 'Deception' website. It claims to be the smartest website out there, and tells her it'll make her smarter than God. It also claims it will give her more memory than any other computer God will ever make. All she has to do is click. So she runs to get Adam and they both click on the forbidden 'Deception' website."

"Oh, so she's looking out for her man," I say, waiting for her to smack the back of my head. But she doesn't. Oddly enough, she just keeps talking.

"Here's where evil comes in." She's all eyes. "The 'Deception' website is corrupt, and when they clicked, evil filtered into their hard drives, plaguing them instantly with viruses, diseases, suffering and war. You know, spyware and pop-ups."

I roll my eyes. "*Pop-ups?*" and whack, now she smacks me.

"So, because they clicked on this website, Adam and Eve are no longer perfect and they will eventually crash — die, maybe even malfunction in the process. Their hard drives are no longer good enough to keep their data saved for eternity. And so now when they die, their data will be overwritten and unrecoverable — lost forever. God warned them. They didn't listen."

"Oh, wait a minute," I say, pinching my nose right between my eyes. "Is their data like their souls?"

"Yes, exactly! That's why God sent his one and only external hard drive, 'Jesus,' to save their data from being permanently erased."

I feel a warm chuckle rising from deep inside my chest. "Oh...so, let me guess," I say with such confidence. "God downloaded Adam and Eve's database into his one and only external hard drive, Jesus, and pressed, 'save,' right?"

"Right!" she says, smiling. "Does that help at all?"

"Yeah...it does," I say, pulling her close again with all of my might. "It really does!"

And for one split second I saw her: the woman I married. The one who went missing the day our daughter passed away. I saw the woman who hides that certain smile just for those moments when I might never laugh again, whose crazy, enthusiastic need to save the world is charming and unforgettable. For one split second I saw my wife, the woman who made me Nikki's dad.



One week later, I still can't sleep. I lie in bed for hours, asking God question after question. I think about what Pastor John told me, how Jesus is God wearing skin, Leslei's subtext of a computer named Adam. But I just get more confused. Because finding the answers I was looking for has only left me with a million more questions. I roll over on my side. Leslei is curled under the covers like a baby, her hand clinched tight around her pillow. I stare at her sleeping face and wonder how she can sleep after everything she's been through. Or maybe I know and that's why I'm so curious? I look past her face and stare out the window at the night sky. If there really is a God, why is he invisible — wouldn't he want to be seen and prove himself?

Suddenly I'm thinking of Nikki and her inquisitive fascination with God and the afterlife. How her philosophical questions always seemed to shower me with curiosity. There is one night in particular that seems to be making its way to the surface of my thoughts.

It was right before our world started to spin out of control. Nikki was late — past curfew — and I was angry with her for breaking her promise. She had promised me she would be home by midnight and yet it was 12:15 and she still wasn't home.

I didn't know what to do with her. So I walked downstairs and searched her bedroom. For a second I thought I was over-reacting, that maybe I would find her in bed, asleep. But I didn't. I just found her sheets crumpled in a ball, her favorite blouse a puddle on the floor. I walked over to her desk, tripping on her shoes, and the first thing I did was pick up her notebook. I flipped through the pages and before I realized it was her *private* journal, I had read the entire first page. My anger just melted into joy, and the next thing I knew, I was laughing. It was right after I finished laughing that I heard the garage door open.

"Hello," Nikki hollered. "I'm home!"

The recollection makes me get out of bed and quietly walk into Nikki's bedroom. Everything is just the way she left it. Her journal is lying open on the middle of her desk. I walk over and flip it to the first page and I read it again. This time I have to be careful not to smudge the words with my tears:

Written March 2005. Nikki had just turned seventeen.

I have always felt some kind of connection between me and someone I don't even know. I know one day I will come across this person and he will fill that void I have had since as long as I can remember. Everything will feel complete and significant. This is the reason I am saving myself for that one person, so I can tell him, "I have been waiting for only you."

But what if this is not true, what if I find someone I love, but they don't fill that void completely? Maybe for a little while I will think everything is perfect, but later it fades. There are couples everywhere that still feel lonely. What is that? Maybe they found the wrong person? Is it the absence of God or whatever is out there?

No matter what reason I get sad and down about, that same lonely emptiness occurs. Maybe when the true meaning

of this void is filled nothing can ever bring us down again. I don't think it is possible by the love of your soul mate to give you the effect of never being sad again, so therefore, there is something else out there waiting for us in our afterlife that is going to complete this void. No more emptiness and no more distress. But if that's the case, then why do we have to go through life feeling empty when after life we are complete? Maybe God had a void so he created us to love him. By us going through life feeling empty and frustrated, we then find and love God. This fills God's void and later he fills our void when it's our time to meet him?

So pointing out at the fact that it's not about your soul mate filling your void, it's all about God; why waste your tears on thinking you're in love with someone? Is that feeling you get only to find marriage, to have babies, to help repopulate the world so God can get more love?

Nothing is ever going to make sense to me, but it's fun to try...

She walked in that night while I was staring at this same page. She apologized for being late, and surprisingly she wasn't even mad at me for poking through her stuff. She sat down next to me and we talked about this journal entry. We talked about life, the afterlife, God and love. I asked her that night how she could believe in a God that she couldn't see. And of course she lifted her eyebrows and smiled.

"But Dad, how could you *not* believe in a God that you can see?"

It was her enigmatic energy and that pinch of innocence that always had a way of making me dig a little deeper. She spent over an hour trying to explain to me why God was so perfectly good. She told me she believed that she understood the answers to life's most difficult questions — the same questions that I seem to be searching for now. But the crazy thing is, it's only because of her that I am questioning these things at all.

I sit down at Nikki's desk and lay my forehead on top of my hands and think, maybe Nikki was right. Maybe we aren't meant to go through this life feeling satisfied and complete.

Maybe our dreams do have to shatter. Maybe we need to experience a pain so deep that we long to serve a higher purpose. Maybe it's not just about finding God, but getting to know him well enough to trust him no matter what happens next.

I wipe my eyes, pick up her journal, and read it one more time. Maybe the answers are not always found in the words strung across a page, but in the unseen clues that live in the tiniest space between each line.



There is something to be said about being a member of a small Christian church. Like the warm casseroles delivered to your door night after night, the woman's Bible study group stopping by to support your family, your name printed on the Sunday service prayer list — week after week — even when you don't attend regularly. But more than that, it's the way the pastor stops by every morning to answer some of my most fundamental questions.

Pastor John helps himself to a cup of coffee. He lifts his cup. "Anyone else, or am I drinking alone?"

"No thanks," I say. Lesli is on the phone, so to answer, she smiles and shakes her head.

"Hey Christos," Pastor John says. He makes his way over to the table where I am recording names from the thousands of condolence cards sent from well-wishers for my records. "Have you heard the one about the two scientists who walk up to God and tell him they've scientifically figured out how to create life?"

"Um," I say, stopping what I'm doing to look at him. "I don't think so."

He puts down his coffee to free up his hands and leans in close. "Okay, so these two scientists — they've come a long way with DNA right — and, so now they've got something to prove, okay. Anyway, God was so amazed with their proposal he decided to give them a chance to prove it — to see if they could create life. So they leave and when they come back they have a wheelbarrow full of dirt. And just as they're ready to

start creating life, God stomps his foot — he shakes the earth so hard it tips the wheelbarrow to the ground. So they're like, 'Whoa, what's the problem Lord, does this make you nervous?'

"God just laughs.

"'This is good.' He tells them. 'Now go get your own dirt.'"

The joke makes me laugh. "Oh, I get it. If there is no God then where did the dirt come from, right?" For a moment, it takes my mind off my thoughts. It also reminds me why I should believe there really is a God. Because when you get down to it, nothing plus nothing equals nothing, right?

Pastor John spends the next 45 minutes telling me again how Jesus conquered death and how when we die we don't really die because our spirit lives on for eternity in heaven or hell. I'm not really listening to the sermon, though. Mostly I'm engrossed in my own thoughts: wondering why I didn't hide the damn car keys, why I didn't take my precious daughter to the hospital when that was what she needed.

"Christos," Pastor John says and he leans in close. "I'm really worried about you lately. You know, there's something different in your eyes. Something, but I can't quite put my finger on it."

He chokes up as he watches me fight back my tears. "You know," he says, hesitating. He looks away and when he looks back at me, he forces a smile. "If you think about it, I mean really, really think about it, you didn't really lose Nikki. She's just waiting for you somewhere on the other side of eternity."

The storm of emotion breaks me and I begin to cry. As naturally and automatically as a breath or a sneeze, I cannot help myself. He is right. There is something different in me. It is guilt, and it grows each time I hear my daughter's name.

fri. 6:17 p.m., Nov. 16, 2006

6:17 pm November 16, 2006 | **Anonymous** wrote:

Don't drink and drive... daaaa!

6:28 pm November 16, 2006 | **Anonymous** wrote:

The girl had no direction she was an idiot because her parents are idiots!

6:32 pm November 16, 2006 | **ANON** wrote:

I think the parents needed to learn a lesson. If you can't raise your kids right you shouldn't have them! I feel sorry for their other kids. Maybe now some of these stupid OC parents will wake up and smell the coffee. STOP SPOILING YOUR KIDS!

6:36 pm November 16, 2006 | **Anonymous** wrote:

Boo hoo hoo...

6:42 pm November 16, 2006 | **anon** wrote:

I'm a DEAD WHORE. Women can't drive

6:44 pm November 16, 2006 | **Anonymous** wrote:

Just one less female driver on the road.

Six



Christos

I REALIZE NOW THAT IT'S ENTIRELY impossible to explain what losing a child feels like. It's nothing less than an intense, excruciating pain wedged in a part of your body you never knew existed. Maybe it's like open-heart surgery without anesthesia. No, it is worse than that because after surgery, you heal and the pain subsides.

It's been two weeks since the accident, and I'm finally getting my appetite back.

As usual, my brothers bring dinner over to my house. We sit around the table. Tonight is the first time I am actually able to eat since the accident. But it's also very quiet; there's something wrong with the energy in the room. Something doesn't feel right. It starts with silence, but ends in a stare from Geoff and Pepi. It's as if there's something they need to tell me.

When we are finished eating, I walk into the family room to hold my precious Danielle. She smiles and kisses my cheek, but before I can ask her how she is doing, she disappears into her bedroom. So I walk into my office where I can

sit down and be alone. But as I turn to sit down, my brother-in-law, Geoff, is standing right behind me, practically getting ready to sit on my lap.

"We need to talk," he says.

Then my brother Pepi walks in. He doesn't say a word, but I feel like a punk kid who has just been cornered off in an alley for a gang fight. It's obvious that something's wrong, but I'm so numb, there's nothing they can say that would faze me right now. "Christos," Geoff says loud and strong, bringing my eyes back to his. "Something's wrong...we have to talk to you."

Suddenly, he has my full attention. "Talk to me about what?"

He looks nervous. I watch his jaw tighten, his fists clinch, and I wait for him to get on with it. His eyes brush over Pepi and then down to the ground. "It's about Nikki," he looks at me, "and her accident."

"All right, I'm listening...what is it?"

Geoff's eyes seem to be trapped in his thoughts. I'm not sure, but there could be tears. "There were several pictures taken of Nikki during the accident investigation," he says, "and, well those pictures have been leaked in sort of mass email."

I swallow hard. I'm not completely sure of what he just said, but suddenly, I feel the blood drain from my face as he speaks. "Listen. The emails have some very graphic pictures of the crashed car, with close-up shots of...Nikki's body." As he says this, I feel his hand squeeze my shoulder.

"Emails? Wait... *What?*"

"I'm so sorry, Christos, we've been working all day to shut it down, but the emails are unstoppable. We're doing everything we can."

"Are you sure?" Slowly, I turn to look at Pepi. "What do you mean her body?" I watch him take a breath. "What kind of pictures are you talking about?" I turn toward my computer. "*What are you talking about?*"

Ripping my arm from Geoff's grip, I try to stand. This is when I feel Pepi push me back down. Instantly, my elbow

presses into his side. We scuffle. "Move out of my way. Let me see!" I demand.

Finally, I'm able to spin around toward my desk and look at my computer. But then I stop because it makes no sense to me. "They said no one could see her." I look up at Geoff and ask, "What do you mean pictures of her body?"

Pepi pulls my chair back, slides me away from my desk and stands in front of me like a human shield.

"Look," he says, "we're trying to fix this; we are going to fix this! But we need more time. In the meantime..."

He kneels down at eye level. "You just need to trust me. I don't want you to see those photographs. This is something you have to do for me!" As I listen to my brother, the sound of his voice calm and authoritative, I am suddenly a little boy, promising my brothers that I won't pet the neighbor's dog. I touch the scar on my right arm where the poodle left me with twenty-five stitches, and nod.

"Yeah, I get it," I say. "I won't do anything stupid."

As I sit, shocked from what I'm hearing, the words 'her body' and 'mass email' pull me in a downward motion. I'm no stranger to the Internet. Anything caught up in its web is permanent prey. I will never see the end of this. I turn to Geoff, who I've always referred to as a computer geek.

"We need to stop it Geoff... *Now!*"

I squeeze my eyes and concentrate my vision down the hall and into the kitchen where I find Christiana. She is sitting at the kitchen table staring back at me with her big beautiful blue eyes. This is the first time, in over a week, that I have seen her smile. I feel my hands grow cold as I experience what feels like a herd of wild elephants trample across my chest. I look at Geoff. "How in God's name did this happen, do you know this for sure? Are you positive?"

Geoff nods, and then brushes a hand over his head. "I'm so sorry man, but we'll get them off the Internet now — immediately!"

Pepi puts his hand on my shoulder to comfort me. "Yes, we'll get them off, I promise!" he says. "We've already spoken with the CHP. We're working on it!"

"What does the CHP have to do with this?"

Geoff's eyes slide over to Pepi's and then back at me. "Uh, these photographs are from the accident investigation. Someone from the CHP — someone involved who had access to them — must have emailed them out. But they don't quite know who or why. They don't really want to talk to me, or cooperate at all. The sergeant said it'll just blow over. But it's getting out of control!"

"Wait, wait, wait!" I stand. "You're telling me that these cops, the same cops who wouldn't let me see my daughter, mass-emailed photographs of that shit out into the public? How do you know this? Who told you this?" I look around the room and then back at Geoff. He looks mortified. "Have you seen the photos?"

"No," he says, "but my neighbor has. He got an email today."

I feel him pushing me back into my seat. The octave in his voice rises. "He warned me. The photos he saw were extremely graphic. But listen, we've sent out emails to every recipient and asked them to please delete them."

I think about my question to Sgt. Miller, and his answer to me: "*Seeing your daughter that way would only harm you. There will be no public viewing. Nobody will see your daughter... You'll have to have a closed-casket funeral.*"

Every breath I take fills me with fear; the fear of seeing my daughter that way, the fear of the unknown, fear for my family. "How many emails have been sent? What do they say — ?"

Geoff cuts me off brusquely. "There have been at least three-hundred, but we can talk about that later," he says.

"Three-hundred emails..."

"Just try to stay calm and stay off your computer," Geoff says. "Let's work on this drink- and-drive thing."

"Stay calm! How? How can I stay calm? Who are these people?" The information isn't registering fast enough. And then, I hear it — drink and drive — and my hand, without warning, slaps the chair.

"She wasn't drinking! They know she wasn't drinking! Screw it. I want to see what's going on here."

I swivel around fast toward my computer when Pepi again stops me cold. "Listen. You need to let us handle this. It's for your own good."

I feel my eyes pinch together. "Yeah," I say, staring at his face. "That's exactly what the CHP officers said, and now look what's happening."

I get up to leave the room. I'm so angry I can barely see two feet in front of me, but I walk fast anyway. Geoff jumps up and falls into step behind me. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To find my wife," I say, and then I stop in my tracks and face him. "She's the only one that can stop me."

I turn and continue walking.

Geoff grabs my shoulder. "Stop you from what?"

I stare at his face and blink. "From doing what I'm about to go do."

Geoff drops his arms and nods. I walk fast through the kitchen thinking of Nikki, and the accident, the horror — her privacy, her dignity, and these photographs. And just when I get halfway up the stairs, it hits me. I think about Nikki and what a private person she was. How she didn't like having her photographs displayed and how I promised her I would take them down.

Oh God, the Internet!

The inconceivable thoughts bounce so quickly through my mind I can't help but punch a hole in the wall. It's a father's job to protect his family, to pick up the broken pieces of life's messes, to put them all back together again. How in God's name will I protect my family from this?

I straighten the photo that now hangs just above the big, jagged hole left by my own fist and stare at my family who, in the picture, are whole: my children are smiling, laughing — happy. How much will that change now? How much will this scar them forever?

Lesli

If you're a mother who has lost a child, you can look into the heart of your beautiful family and see, instead, a dark endless hole where your happiness used to be. You see the distance that now exists between you and your surviving children. Children who have not only lost a sibling, but have lost the mother and father they have always known. You understand very clearly that when your living children need you most, you have the least to give.

This evening, when I check on Danielle, I start to wonder if she will ever stop crying. She has barely said a word to me in two weeks. And the dark circles under her eyes make me wonder if she is even sleeping. Tonight, when I find her lying on her bed staring at the dark wall, I begin to worry that she'll never be the same again.

I knock softly on the open door. "You okay?"

She lifts her hand and lets it fall. "Mom," she says softly, her eyes fixed in a stare. "What am I supposed to say now if someone asks me how many sisters I have?"

It is one of those moments when everything you have prepared yourself for, every thought in your mind, vanishes. I walk over and place my hand on the back of her head. She is still unmoving, except for a single tear that falls onto her pillow. "Oh sweetheart," is all I can muster.

There was a time, not so long ago, when her questions seemed so simple. I'm not sure how to answer this one. I'm not sure of anything anymore. How will I look my children in the eyes and tell them that life will go on, that they will somehow be okay, when deep inside I'm not sure that's true? I lay down next to her, managing to hold in my sobs. Honestly, until this moment, I hadn't even considered what moving forward might be like.

I never do answer her question. Instead, I lie down next to her and rub the top of her arm. I close my eyes against the pounding in my head and let my mind drift to a time when life was perfect, and my family was whole.

I remember one very busy September morning. It was early and I was making breakfast, getting Nikki ready for her first day of school, when I suddenly noticed Danielle struggling to drag an old backpack behind her. It was half zipped and bursting with thick, heavy books that she had pulled from the living room shelf. She must have been three because I remember she looked like a troll doll with her bed head of white curls sprouting from the top of her scalp. She had been playing make-believe school — she was the teacher. I felt a tug on the back of my bathrobe and when I turned to look down, she handed me a book, “Pride and Prejudice.”

“Mommy,” she said. “Will you please teach me how to read this, real quick? I want to read it to my students.”

Today, I realize, some of my fondest memories in life are carved from the simplest moments. Moments I can never get back. Moments I have safely stored in my most private place of all: my memory. I feel the sudden need to write them down and keep them safe, like secrets from the enemy.

At the sound of footsteps, I wipe my eyes and sit up. Christos looks as if he has just seen a ghost. “Babe, I need you...”

I jump up. “Okay,” I say, but I can’t imagine what could be so terrible. Surely, it can’t be *that* bad. But I follow him downstairs and into the office anyway.

I watch him pace from one side of the room to the other. “Sit down,” he says, and I stare at his horrified face.

There was a time, not so long ago, that I could tell exactly what Christos was thinking. A certain grin meant he had spent too much money. A certain stare meant he was worried about money. But whenever he paced the floor with his eyes squinted like that, it usually meant he was angry as hell about something. I can’t begin to fathom what he must be thinking — why he is acting like the sky is about to fall. My heart is delicate. One wrong move and I will shatter.

“Please, Christos, tell me what’s wrong.” I look straight into his eyes. He doesn’t say a word.

Danielle’s voice sneaks up from behind. “Yeah, Dad, what’s wrong?” she says, startling me.

“Go get your sisters,” he says sternly. “There’s something I need to tell all of you.”

There are a million thoughts running through my mind. But why would he bring the kids into this? They are also breakable, barely surviving. One wrong move and they, too, will shatter.

I watch my husband’s face and try to imagine what’s wrong. The sight of him makes my legs quiver. “Christos, you’re scaring me...tell me what’s wrong!” He grabs me by the arms and holds me close. It is his embrace, however, that causes my knees to buckle beneath me.

By the time the girls walk in and sit down, Christos has calmed himself enough to speak.

“Well,” he says as he crouches down to eye level and rubs his hands together. I walk over and sit down facing him. “Now that you’re all sitting down, there is something very bad that has happened. We...”

He cups his hands over his mouth and breathes as if his hands are cold.

“Someone from the CHP has emailed photographs of Nikki and her accident out into the public — to people, strangers. There are several images, and...I don’t want any of you to use the computer until we can get it stopped.”

He glares at each of us. “I mean it,” his voice deepens, “*No computers!*”

My vision turns instantly fuzzy. I heard him, but I cannot comprehend what he has just said. My heart must understand, because now it’s pounding hard inside of my chest.

“What kind of pictures are you talking about?” I look down at the ground and focus my attention on the haze around my feet.

“There are pictures of Nikki’s body, in the car, and...”

My head snaps up. “*What! Oh my God, Christos...*”

I cover my mouth and shake my head from side to side as the thought sends me downward into a deafening darkness. And the word, “*No...*” is all I can muster.

My husband’s words are soaring through the air like hot fists, but I can no longer hear him. I can only feel the heat of every word that punches me in the face. Suddenly, the bandages

holding me together snap and I stop breathing for several seconds. I wait for some impulse or reflex to kick in and help me catch my breath, but instead, everything around me slowly fades to black — until, finally, I inhale.

“Oh my God, Christos...get them off!” I say this as loud as I possibly can. “Oh God, my baby...get them off, Christos, get them off the Internet!”

Someone recently told me that God would never give me more than I could handle. But as bright flashes of anger blind my eyes, I question this. He has certainly overestimated me. As the information trickles in, I feel a great force of death erupting all around me. The weight of its presence bears down on me, crushing my chest. I put my hands over my heart to stop it, but the force flattens me.

“Oh my God, Christos,” I say. “*Please...get them off the Internet!*”

Danielle sits next to me, sobbing and choking.

“*Why,*” she says, catching her tears with her trembling fingers. She grabs my hand and squeezes in desperation. “*Why, Mom? Why would someone do that to Nikki?*”

Once again, I have no answer for my daughter.

Christiana and Kira are scrunched into a ball of limbs, crying hysterically. Somehow, I have wrapped my arms around the two of them, but I no longer see the four walls around me. The room has gone dark, but I hold on tight to my children. If I close my eyes, I stop descending, and somehow, I manage to breathe. Suddenly, I’m thinking about the accident and all the reasons the officers wouldn’t let us see our daughter.

In the thousand times I have replayed that accident in my mind, I never imagined how Nikki might have looked. The image my mind created is one that I can deal with, cope with, and one that I am able to keep safely tucked away.

It’s a curious thing, the mind. It can calm you, protect you and offer you peace. Or it can show you your deepest fear and devour you completely. Suddenly, I no longer can push away this reality of death. I no longer can hide behind these walls of denial.

Fear sparks an image that begins to unravel inside of me. I hear only the sound of my heart pounding and the cries of my children. And it dawns on me: People — perfect strangers — are looking inside my deepest wound. I am suddenly naked, exposed, suffocating with the most repulsive anger I have ever felt. I must be dying, or I'm in the presence of the devil himself.

I can feel myself disengage, floating upward, above everything that is happening below. I look down on us, crying helplessly on the sofa, and once again, everything is spinning out of control. This time, however, all I can see and feel is evil — pressing, clawing and pushing against me. I try to pray, but I can't shut out the screaming in my head.

So I stare silently at my children. The words hang between us, trapped in the stillness of the cold, darkened air. I feel my fingertips tingle and my body go numb. I close my eyes again and I wait — for that faithful voice, those two precious words: “*It’s okay.*” But there is nothing. Only silence. Maybe this time it’s not going to be okay.

Suddenly there is a hand on my cheek, warm and secure, and if I concentrate hard enough, I can see my husband’s face.

“*Listen,*” he says, his eyes burning a promise into mine, “I swear to you, I *will* get them off!”

But I just stare at him, and cry. Because as much as I want to believe him. I can’t.



During the last few weeks, there have been mornings when I would lie in bed, barely awake, and for a few moments, I wouldn’t feel the horrific anguish that has taken over my life. I would lie wrapped in the warmth of my husband’s arms, and for those few quiet moments, I would lie peaceful and let my mind drift to a place where life was good and Nikki was alive — where memories were kind and death did not exist.

I would dream of the little girl with the big happy smile, the little girl who’d sprinkle pixie dust onto the flowerbeds and ask Jesus to turn the bees into butterflies. My dreams of

the little girl who could talk to Jesus, who dreamed of heaven and walking on water, have been the substance that holds me together whenever life threatens to break me apart.

And here's the thing I've never told anyone about my dreams: the emotions that come to life inside of me when I sleep, the ones that give me comfort and hope, reassurance and strength, all the things I had never needed until now — they sustain me.

But today, reality overflows and all of my dreams are submerged into a flood of darkness. Now I lie captive to a twisted array of images that my mind has sketched from pure horror. I want to remember Nikki the way I saw her last, but evil still has its teeth in me. So I concentrate hard on my daughter's precious face — her eyes, her voice, her smile — but all I can see are photographs. Disgusting, horrible photographs.

It's only when I hear the sound of my alarm clock that the madness in my head quiets. But as I sit up to switch it off, it hits me again.

The photographs... Nikki!

Today, I have a sick feeling when I get out of bed. I'm so confused. I don't understand any of it. I want to believe there has been a mistake, that this is some other mother's worst nightmare turned into a public spectacle. I shake Christos to wake him. "Get up...go see if the photos are gone yet!"

He stares at me with eyes that could light a fire. He had promised our brothers we would let them handle this, but honestly, I don't think he can keep his distance for long. He's never been good at ceding control.

I throw on my bathrobe and imagine myself fixing the bed sheets, but I don't — not today. Today I just stare.

My brother has been searching tirelessly for a company, a specialist, who might know how to halt the spread of these emails. But as it turns out, there's no such thing as Internet police. And when he asks the CHP for help, they tell him it's not their problem. Christos puts on his pants and walks over to the window.

"I'll go make another call to the CHP; I'm sure there's something they can do. The last thing they want is for these photos to get out of control."

We walk downstairs where I start the coffee. I contemplate waking the girls; they have just gone back to school, but now I don't know if I can let them out of my sight. How will I keep my promise? How do I keep their lives unchanged if I can't even send them to school? As I open the breakfast cupboard, I catch myself wondering what Nikki might want to eat. I hold my breath and force myself to keep moving when a tiny little cry escapes me.

I don't know what to expect from any of this. I don't know what will happen if one of us sees the photographs that my brother says are so horrible. I only know that every time I think about it, the world in front of me starts to swirl in circles. Christos reaches for the phone. I reach for the bottle of Tums.



It doesn't matter what we say: Our girls know that this is bad. They know that their parents are frightened and they know we have no control. We try to stay positive, make them promises that it will all be over soon, but it doesn't matter how convincing we are — they know it's not true. They know we will never be able to put the pieces of our broken world back together again, especially now if the glue that has been holding us all together will never dry.

It's already been four days, and despite George and Geoff's best efforts, the images have gone viral on the Web. As of today, the numbers of unsolicited e-mail chains have spiked. Before we have the chance to petition the owners of the websites to stop, the photos have already been forwarded spontaneously from one user to another. They are countless and proliferating out of control. We don't know if the CHP is helping because they haven't returned our phone calls.

But this morning, while I'm shuffling through the mail, condolence cards, letters and some photographs of Nikki, a certain light-blue sympathy card stops my thoughts. I can't tell if it's the words written or the tone that goes extraordinarily deep to my heart, but it sends a curious shiver right through

me. I cannot make out the name at the bottom if it is a man or a woman, but I know it's someone from Christos' office. I hand it to Christos to read, but he is too busy making phone calls. So I slip it back into the light-blue envelope and stash it in a safe place — not with all the other cards that come daily. This one will go on the shelf next to the angel that watches over Nikki's photographs. This one I will read every day for another week. It won't matter that every time I show this card to someone else, they will never see what I see. They will just tell me it's another silly feeling that cannot be explained.

"No. Damn it!" Christos is shouting while he paces the floor with the phone to his ear. It scares me to see him this angry. He's never been good at managing his temper, and I'm afraid that if we don't shut this down soon, he will do something he will regret.

"But George..." he barks. "I can't just sit back and do nothing!" His eyes narrow; he brushes the top of his head with his hand. "Yeah, I understand, I'll stay off the computer."

He finishes the call, holds the phone steady in his hand, and then slams it down on top of the receiver. "Goddamn punks!"

He looks at me. "They're on a bunch of websites. We need to stay off the Internet!"

"What, wait a minute, what do you mean?" I feel a sudden closing of my throat, but I manage to ask. "What are we going to do?"

Christos picks up the phone and looks at me. "I don't know if there's anything we can do."

He turns away from me, and leaves another message for the sergeant on duty at the Highway Patrol. This time, he insists someone call him back — immediately. He takes a sip of coffee and turns to face me. "We need to stay off the Internet, so...keep an eye on the girls." He says, "Don't let them near that computer — no MySpace...no homework, nothing!"

Under normal circumstances, this would make me cry, but right now, I feel as though I'm going to be sick. Has this horror invaded the privacy of our own home? I look over at

the family computer sitting on the desk next to Christiana's opened homework folder, her backpack slung over the chair. I turn to Christos, "I just don't think it's going to be that simple."



Tonight my brother stays late — long after the rest of our family has left. He hasn't been to work in days. Instead, he spends all his time contacting anonymous Web hosts, begging them to remove the photographs of our daughter. Despite the fact that these are confidential, official, investigative photographs that belong to the CHP, they are photographs of our child, and we want them removed from the Internet.

We ask these websites to be considerate and remove the photographs for the sake of our children. But they respond with threats, because according to them, *we* are violating *their* First Amendment rights. And this is a grim, disgusting truth; it is how we learn that it doesn't matter how much torment this brings to our family, we have no legal say in the matter.

By ten o'clock, the dishes are all put away, the dogs are locked up, and the girls are tucked into their beds on the floor of our bedroom. My brother hasn't moved from the kitchen table, and while I watch him click away on his laptop, he is suddenly a little boy again.

I have him sketched in my mind, sitting at a desk in his barnyard bedroom. I see him swimming through books trying to figure out how his computer transmitted information onto the screen, and so forth. His curiosity started when our parents bought him his first Commodore 64 when he was about twelve, before the age of the Internet. It was right around then when I had my most chilling childhood nightmare. And now I'm remembering the nightmare like it was yesterday:

In my dream, I walked into my brother's bedroom and saw him floating in the air, just below the ceiling. He was smiling, and so happy. He asked me to press a key on his computer keyboard to make him spin in a circle, so I did, and he spun. Then he asked me to press another key, and when I did, I

watched him float back and forth around the room. He was ecstatic, giggling. Suddenly, the devil's face appeared on the computer screen red and electric, and the keys started pressing themselves. I couldn't stop them. I could only watch in horror while my brother flew uncontrollably across the room, crashing into his bedroom walls. There was blood everywhere. Although it was only a dream, I knew from that moment on that the devil inside the computer would someday control the world with just the click of a button. And this is what I told my brother the very next morning.

"Hey Geoff," I said, "promise me you won't go anywhere near that computer."

Christos walks into the room as Geoff plops a thick stack of papers onto the table. The noise takes my attention off my dream. I watch my brother grind his teeth. His jaw muscles are clinched tight — his official trademark for frustration.

"I don't know..." he says. "But I'm positive the leak was from the California Highway Patrol, maybe a 9-1-1 dispatcher. But I just can't be sure yet."

My breath catches. "*What...?*"

The information takes a sharp, unexpected turn. "A 9-1-1 dispatcher?"

I feel a sudden cold chill blanket my arms. I lower myself onto the chair and stare at the ground, and think back to the day of the accident. I think about the 9/11 explosion, the coroner's voice, the 911 Porsche. It's like a puzzle, each piece fitting together as if they were perfectly placed.

My brother continues, and I'm left in a fog of disbelief. "As for the purpose of the email," Geoff says, "I'm pretty sure it was a sick Halloween prank."

I stand. "A Halloween prank?"

I look at Christos — who looks like he just swallowed a sour lemon — and I let the words find their way into my head: *a 9-1-1 dispatcher, a Halloween prank.*

I lower myself back onto the chair and rub my thumbs into my palms. "But we trusted them," I say. "They said we couldn't see her, that it would devastate us. Why would they

do that? Why would they do such a thing?" I look up my brother. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, Les, I'm sure." Geoff promised me he would figure out who did this. And now that I know, I'm sorry that I asked. "The problem is..." Geoff says, "it's getting harder for me to get a handle on things because now they're on quite a few websites."

He looks over at Christos. "I still haven't heard back from the Highway Patrol, I don't think they're helping me with this. But what's even worse, Christos: This person, whoever leaked the photos, has identified you by name — first and last. This means that every email, every website — well, they're all being linked to you. You'd be taking a huge risk of seeing those photos if you check your email or go online.

"Oh, and don't Google your name! You need to make sure you *never* Google your name." He stares at us. "Do that for your girls — for yourself!"

Christos puts his hands over his eyes and shakes his head.

"Christos," Geoff says as he grabs his upper arm, "the Internet is off limits now. No, emails, no checking on your listings online — nothing until I get this all figured out. Do you understand me?"

"Yeah, I get it!" Christos says, fuming. He pulls his arm away from Geoff. "I understand. I can't use the Internet. I'm staying off the Internet!"

He walks out of the room and into his office where he slams the door behind him. I recognize the look on his face. The last time I saw it was the day Nikki passed away.

"I'm sorry, Les. But I don't know what else I can do."

The information circles aimlessly through my mind, leaving me stunned and too frightened to cry. Everything about this is bad, and somehow I know it's only about to get worse. It will be more than a battle; it will be a full-fledged war. I look at my brother. "This is crazy. Why won't they help us — surely the CHP can do something, right?"

"I don't know, Les, I would think they could, should. It just doesn't make any sense!" He grabs his jacket and keys. "But don't worry. We'll get through this. I won't stop until I

get every single photograph off the Internet. You know that, right?”

I smile, and even though I know it's not going to be possible, I agree. “I know.”

There are a million words inside my head scratching to get out. I am angry and confused, and I want to understand why this is happening to my family. But mostly, I want to know why this eerie nightmare is still stuck in my head.

Geoff looks at me and exhales. “I've got to go put my kids to bed. I'll work on this again in the morning.” And just as he reaches the front door, he stops and turns around. “Hey Les,” he says, “promise me you won't go anywhere near that computer!”



Ten days later, websites carrying Nikki's photos have more than tripled. Our efforts are endless — and useless. No matter how hard my brother works to reduce the number of websites publishing the photos, with each passing day, the numbers climb — and now the gruesome images are dominating the cyber world. With them come defamatory accounts of Nikki's life stating facts that are untrue and detestable. Today, we receive threats. Some anonymous blogger has threatened to make a billboard out of the images and stick it in our front yard if we don't stop infringing on his rights. Websites whose operators believe they have a right to host the horrific images of our daughter tell us if we don't let it go, we'll be sorry. I guess the sergeant was wrong — it's not going to just blow over.

I stare at the swing outside my kitchen window. I imagine Nikki, her dark-blond hair pulled back into a ponytail. She would spend hours when she was little singing and laughing — legs in the air — on that same swing. She was such a happy little girl, even if she were just playing outside.

The pain is so fresh it steals my breath. I douse my face with cold water from the sink and wonder how I will get through the rest of my life without all of my children around me.

I walk over to the table where my brother keeps his collection of paperwork on Internet laws and privacy. There's not much here — a few meaningless pieces of paper — and nothing relevant to help us because the laws have not caught up with the Internet yet.

I glance at my laptop on the coffee table in my family room and think about the horrible things people are saying about Nikki — malicious, heartless monsters spreading lies about my daughter and telling us to leave them alone. I wonder for a second if we should just leave them alone. But what kind of mother would I be to sit back and ignore this; pretend nothing is wrong? What kind of mother would condone such a monstrosity? What kind of mother wouldn't do everything in her power to fix this — for her daughter, her children, her family?

Anonymity is the biggest problem — all that prowling around in secret, hiding behind a mask, disguised as freedom of speech — and it is also the most threatening. The scariest part is these people have more protection against us than we do from them. At this point, it's all just a game to them. They are daring us to make them remove the photos of *our* daughter. In other words, they are forcing us to make laws. And let me tell you, when you've tried it every other way, eventually you are left without a choice.

Today I realize that the Internet is not much different than a tree. Both were created to serve a good purpose. Trees provide the world with nutrients and shade. You can hide from the rain underneath thick branches, or chop them down to build a fire, a house, hospitals. The Internet is also a valuable resource. It gives you a voice to speak, and the power to be heard. You can learn, do business and communicate. Like a tree, the Internet is precious — until it falls into the wrong hands. Because it only takes one person to break off a branch and bludgeon you to death with it.

Kira walks into the room where I'm still sitting at the table reading about Internet privacy, or lack thereof. She puts her hand on my arm. "Mommy," she says.

I glance down at her little round face chewing a piece of bubblegum that is far too big for her mouth. She is wearing her pajamas in the middle of the day, and her long, honey-golden hair is unbrushed.

“What, sweetheart?”

She smiles up at me with her liquid-blue eyes. “I love you!”

Until now, I don’t think I really realized how much she keeps me going.



I have one more thing to do before I go to bed. I crouch down onto the floor and stare at my children for the third time tonight. The light from the television glows against their skin like the moon over the sea. They sleep in our room now. It’s safer that way — safer for Christos, safer for me. I pull the covers to the creases of their necks, kiss them each on the cheek, and then climb into bed. But tonight the tears don’t stop, no matter how hard I try to will them away.

When morning arrives, before any of us are awake, the phone rings. Instead of doing what I would do naturally, I freeze. Dread filters through my nervous system and causes me to fall when I try to get out of bed. I don’t know why, but I know it’s bad news.

“Hello...” I whisper. It’s Davina, Nikki’s best friend since the sixth grade. By the time I sort through her broken sentences, I realize the graphic images have surfaced onto MySpace. I look down at my children sleeping at the foot of my bed — innocent, peaceful.

Why is this happening to us?

Davina’s voice is trembling softly, but I manage to listen. “They’re horrible, graphic! Oh my God, Lesli, what happened, who did this?” She is shouting and sobbing all at once. “They’re horrible, it’s awful. Oh, my God, Lesli, it’s Nikki...”

Christos hears this and is already out of bed and at his desk. He is furious, frantically searching for a contact number, emailing MySpace while he waits on the phone.

“Damn it,” he says. “Pick up the phone!”

We never will hear from them.

There are flashes of horror racing through my mind as the phone I'm holding slips down my face.

I feel so betrayed. I look down at the girls, now awake and crying, their eyes on my skin, waiting for me to make it stop. How can this egregious exploitation possibly fall under the CHP's code of ethics? I put the phone back up to my ear, anger pulsating through my face. "Oh, Davina," I cry. "We're doing everything we can to get those photos off the Internet. I'm so sorry you had to see Nikki that way!"

As I hang up the phone, it occurs to me: It was the CHP officers who carved out that bit of hope that we would remember Nikki's smiling face. It was because of them that I believed we would be safe from all of this. Was I wrong to assume that if the police were the ones who promised to protect you, they would also be the ones not to break you with that promise?

I walk into the hallway to a wall covered with photos of my children. I place my hand against the glass frame that covers Nikki's beautiful face. I stare at her smile, her teeth, her eyes, the same shade of blue as her cap and gown. I make a vow to look at this photo a thousand times a day and prove to myself that in this world, at least one perfect memory of my daughter still exists.



Christos knocks on the bathroom door, "Come on babe, I'll drive you if you like!" he says, but I can't answer because it takes too much effort for me to speak. I haven't been able to leave the house since the cyber terror began. I'm afraid of people now. I'm afraid of my own shadow now. Now, I'm afraid of everything. Christos walks me through it. But the process is excruciating and takes him hours to convince me that my world won't end if I go somewhere. He promises me our life will be back to normal soon, and finally I come out of hiding.

"You sure you don't want me to go with you?" he asks.

"I'm sure," I say, because I know conquering my fear is for my own good. By the time I reach for my car keys, he is

holding the door wide open. I don't understand why, but lately I fear that something bad will happen to my family if I leave the house. Maybe it's because of my dreams. Lately, they are full of images of death and blood — all involving my family.

But with a little help from Christos, and because I have to go to the grocery store, I take a deep breath, walk out the door and head toward my car. I open the door and when I get inside, every possible scenario runs through my mind. I remember that day; the day Nikki left and never came back — the look on her face — and I begin to cry. But it's not sorrow I feel today. It's fear. Fear that my perfect memories of my daughter's perfect face might be the next thing I lose.

I sit crying for no less than ten minutes when I realize I haven't even started the engine. As I slide my key into the ignition, the cell phone in my purse rings. I fumble through my things — my wallet, my sunglasses — until finally I find my phone. I look at the screen. It's Celeste.

“Hi,” I say.

“Oh God, Lesli! I don't know how to tell you this.”

She starts to cry. “The memorial video — the one Nikki's friends made for her on YouTube — it has a link to the photos. Oh Lesli!”

There is a long pause.

“I just saw the photos.”

Now she is inconsolable.

“You have to fix it,” Celeste says. “The photos, the comments. It's awful, Lesli. It's horrible. It's Nikki...they need to take it down. They need to get rid of that website!”

Everything in front of me splits in two, and suddenly I have double vision. I jump out of my car, slamming the door as I walk back inside my house. I am angry and terrified — angry for my friend and terrified for my family. I walk to the nearest chair and fall into it when Christos comes running into the room.

“What's wrong?”

I look at him — both of him. It is one of those moments when you want to scream and let the whole world know you

are angry, but when you try to speak, nothing happens. Christos reaches down, grabs the phone from my lap, and speaks to Celeste. I press my fingers hard into my temples, take a huge gulp of air, and finally say, "I just want everything to go back to normal!"

Christos hits the table with his hand. "That's it!" he shouts. His fists clinch together and he looks at me as if he's ready to explode. "If it was legal for the cops to email these kinds of photos to their friends, then they'd be all over the Internet, and they're not!" He slams his hand down this time on the counter, and turns to me. "If it *is* legal to post death photos...then I'm going to make damn sure to make it illegal, if it's the last thing I ever do!"

This is his way of promising to protect me, to fix this for his family. But when I put my head down, I notice my cell phone broken into tiny pieces on the floor. Christos lets out a deep moan.

"Free speech, my ass! Those photographs need to be protected!"

He strides toward the phone, his hand opens, and then it closes as if he were fitting it for a boxing glove. There are still so many unanswered questions, and I think today he's finally had enough. He grabs the phone.

"Who are you calling?"

"The coroner," he says, looking suspiciously around the room. "I want someone to tell me what in the hell I'm supposed to do about all of this!"

He walks over to the kitchen door with the phone to his ear. He leans his back against the flat surface as if he were holding it shut from a gusting wind. He glares at me, his face as pale as death. I watch his arm rise, his fingers grip the dead-bolt and then latch it shut. "I just want everything back to normal, too!"

Christos

The woman who answers the phone must recognize my accent because she apologizes immediately for the photographs and their publicity. She is the same woman who came to my home and spoke to me the day my daughter passed away.

"I haven't been able to get that accident out of my mind," she says. "We tried so hard to protect you, and now this. I can't believe you have to go through all of this. Have you had any help from the CHP?" she asks.

"No," I say. "Actually, I haven't heard a word from the CHP regarding this. That's why I'm calling you — to find out if you know anything about these photos."

"Yes, I know they don't belong to my office. If these were my photographs they'd be considered illegal. These types of photographs require a court order, and a judge's signature before they can be released to anyone. It's also illegal to uncover the body and take photographs during a coroner investigation. These photographs were taken during a coroner investigation."

I scratch my head and think. "Are you serious?"

"When we're finished with our investigation, we cover the body before we open up the scene to the other investigating agency, in this case, the California Highway Patrol. Nothing should be disturbed until my investigation is complete.

"Something else that bothers me. We don't take pictures of our own people picking up body parts. That's not a relevant part of any type of investigation."

Body parts... In an instant, I feel my face get pushed out of shape and the room where I sit grows larger. I see bright, speckled dots swirling all around my head, all the colors of the rainbow, and suddenly it's dark. A million thoughts have spun through my mind, but never had I suspected that Nikki was not in one piece.

All kinds of thoughts race through my mind: body parts, judge's signature, my daughter *uncovered*.

I hear her voice rise.

“Mr. Catsouras, you really need to get some legal advice.”

Until now, my head has been spinning so fast with the words “freedom of speech” that it hadn’t occurred to me to call an attorney for help. And why do they call it *free speech*, when it’s been at our expense?

Although my brothers have asked me not to, I decide to pay a visit to the California Highway Patrol. While I drive, my mind floods with flashes of that awful day: how Sgt. Miller refused to let me down to the scene. How at first I thought it was protocol, or a liability issue, but later he said it was too horrific, too shocking. I assumed he was protecting me. I remember how his eyes welled up, how he shook his head from side to side, when I begged him to take me to see my daughter.

So why, I wonder? Why did they keep me away from the accident scene if they were just going to expose me to it anyway? I guess what they say about the cops is true for me, too: You never see the bullet that finally takes you down.

I walk inside the building where I find an officer standing behind a desk. Thank God I’ve had the chance to calm myself down. That’s what I’m thinking when I see his eyes watch me walk toward him. I ask to speak to his supervisor. He glances down the hall at the other officers gathering around. He stares at me as if I am the eye of the bull for his next target practice.

I was never one to stand firm or speak my mind to a cop. I wasn’t raised to be disrespectful to anyone — especially to a man in uniform. Surely this isn’t the cop who took pictures of my daughter. Surely he isn’t the one who emailed them out to masses. “One second,” he says, raising one eyebrow.

I know instinctively that I am fresh meat for a hungry pack of wolves. But that doesn’t bother me. I just stay focused. The sergeant on duty walks over and shakes my hand. “Hello... I’m Sgt. Becker.” He points to a chair and tells me to have a seat. Before I have even said my name, he tells me that someone in his department leaked to the public nine out of fifty of their department’s investigation photographs — the same photographs that are circulating the Internet. He doesn’t tell me

why. However, contrary to what the coroner told me on the phone, Sgt. Becker assures me that his agency broke no law.

I have no idea yet why it's so important for me to understand that the CHP hasn't broken a law. At this point, I don't care whether a law has been broken or not. I don't even want to know why the CHP did this. I just want someone to help me get those damn photos off the Internet. The truth of the matter is, it wouldn't take much to make me happy right now.

The compassion in Sgt. Becker's eyes helps me relax and gives me a good feeling about him.

"Well," I say, smiling, "as of today there are thirty-five to forty websites hosting these photographs. My brothers have managed to get a few down, but most of them tell us to go pound sand — they are citing their First Amendment rights — so, I'm afraid I can't stop this without your help."

Sgt. Becker shrugs his shoulders, appearing confused. We lock eyes, and I can tell, for some reason, that he doesn't understand how serious I am. "See, I can't do this on my own. I need your help!" I smile and sit back in my chair and wait for him to answer. But he doesn't say a word. He just stares at me.

"Sir," I say, "these photos are horrific, and they're completely out of control on the Internet. Please understand how devastating this is to my family! Look, my brother is emailing you all the Web addresses again, right now as we speak. That'll make it easy for you to take care of it. Please!"

The sergeant drops his shoulders and shakes his head. "You know, I already explained this to two of your brothers. This is not our problem, you see, and really there's nothing that we can do."

I'm stunned.

I feel every drop of blood drain from my face. I think if he breathes just a little harder, I will fall over. "Wait a minute," I say. I lean forward in my seat. I feel my eyes squeeze together. "Here's the thing. When I went down to the accident scene, your guys said they had everything under control. They said it was *their* accident scene, and *they* had it under control. But now," I slam my hand down hard on the table, "it looks like it's out of control. So, I think this *is* your problem!"

He stares at me expressionlessly and after several minutes of getting nowhere, I ask him, "Look, is someone going to be reprimanded for doing this?"

He grimaces. "No," he says very matter-of-factly. "No one broke the law."

Then he lifts his eyebrows. "Well, you know, a slap on the hand maybe, but no one's gonna get fired over it. No one broke the law."

I don't get it. . . what law, and why does he keep saying that?

I want to believe that somewhere inside of him, Sgt. Becker has empathy for me, and he wants to help. I tell myself he's just doing his job. But I feel as though I'll be hit in the back of the head as soon as I turn to leave.

"Hey, just relax," the sergeant says with a smile. "Don't make a big deal of this, and something worse will come along. It'll all blow over!"

"Blow over?" I gasp. "For God's sake, photos like this don't just blow over! Not when they're on the Internet!" My anger returns full force. "And by the way, my insurance company told me that this accident is still under investigation. Doesn't that mean something? Doesn't that compromise your investigation, leaking facts from a crime scene?" He doesn't say another word. Instead, he reaches into his desk drawer and pulls out a stack of papers.

He explains that first I need to go through the legal red tape process that CHP headquarters will need to do a complete internal investigation before they will get involved. He tells me it will take about six weeks. I didn't realize they hadn't already started to investigate this problem when it was brought to their attention two weeks ago. He asks me to fill out some forms and write a comment explaining why I'm so upset. As he hands me the forms, he warns me about their protection — he calls it immunity — and tells me it will just be a waste of everyone's time. He raises his eyebrows.

"You'll be contacted in writing when the internal investigation is finished."

I look down at my hands. The forms I'm holding have creased in half. Sgt. Becker sees my discomfort. "Let me type those for you," he says.

As he types, he says, "You know, it'll be impossible for you to bring any charges against this department. Nobody broke the law."

He looks up from his desk. "You really should just let it go."

Just let it go?

The words strike against me like a flame. Now I'm hot, on fire. How is he not getting this? I stare at him in disgust and shake my head. I use every bit of self-control inside me to stand up and leave the building before I do something I regret. I look down at the sergeant.

"No, sir," I say calmly. "I will *not* just let it go!"



I am just finishing my morning shave when my cell phone rings. I balance the phone to my ear. "This is Christos."

It's an agent from my office, crying while she explains that one of our agents, a co-worker, has just lost her eighteen-year-old daughter in a freak dune buggy accident.

I turn off the water and wipe my face on a towel. "I, a, are you sure?" I stutter, because even though I am standing in the exact same pair of shoes, I cannot fathom what she has said. My thoughts race for an explanation: This must be some kind of mistake, she must be wrong. This has to be a complete misunderstanding. All of this is running through my mind when Lesli steps out of the shower.

The reflection of her body through the mirror makes me jump. "What is it?" she asks, steam rising from her body. "Christos, what's wrong!" I lift my finger and point to the phone.

"When did it happen?" I ask. "Was anyone else hurt?"

Lesli wraps a towel around her and with lightening speed dashes out of the room.

It takes me a while to let myself believe everything I am told. I am cautious now. I don't like surprises, especially when they are wrapped in bad news. As I hang up the phone, Lesli walks back in, out of breath, and hands me a

light-blue envelope. Inside is a condolence card. "Is this who you're talking about?"

I glance at the name at the bottom of the card and then as if I have lost all sense of reality, I look at my wife. "How in the world did you know?"

Her eyes are like melting glass — teardrops. "I just knew," she says.



Outside, I hear the neighborhood kids playing in the street — a day like any other day for the rest of the world. But for me, it is the thirty-second day after my daughter's death. And all I can do is watch helplessly while my daughter's memory is defiled in a repulsive display of perversion for a bunch of rubbernecks who think death is funny.

The first thing everyone asks me is, why? Why did the CHP post our daughter's accident photos on the Internet? And the craziest thing is I can't even answer that question. Because the only reason they have given me so far is that it's not against the law. So I guess the answer is *because they can?*

Today I learn that the only way to get a photo removed from the Internet legally is with copyright ownership. It's that simple. According to copyright law, whoever takes the photo owns the photo. So how is it, I wonder, that this has gotten so out of control?

In all likelihood, with just a little effort, the CHP could have had every photo removed from the Internet by now. Am I supposed to understand why it's taking so long?

Today, when I call the CHP for an update — and to find out if they have even started looking into the matter — the answer I get is the same as before. This is my problem, not theirs.

And this, I realize, is precisely the problem. How many more families will they destroy before they will take some accountability?

So with tears running down my face, I make a note of this.

I lean myself back against the wall of my bedroom and think.

Over the past few weeks, I have watched a smoldering fire ignite, flames filling the Internet, and now it's burning out of control. Embers of hopelessness fall around me, scorching what is left of our daughter's dignity. I can hear the crackling in the distance, as it's coming closer. Yet there is no way to stop it, no hope for containment. Because the CHP's legal water hose is currently tied up with a roll of *red tape*.

Without copyright ownership, I have no control, no legal standing. My efforts of fixing this for my family are useless. My rights as Nikki's father mean nothing to the Internet world, and the only possible solution I have found — the CHP — has turned its back on me.

But I can't just give up. I can't let my wife and my kids down. But what in the hell am I supposed to do?

Three days ago, my brothers found seventy-two websites hosting the gruesome images of my daughter. Today there are more than two-hundred, all of them with comments about how our daughter got what she deserved because she was a spoiled Orange County brat, a messed-up teen with no direction from bad parenting.

Some posters say we should have spanked her when she was little; others say we should have enrolled her in sports, maybe then she wouldn't have been so reckless. But they all say it's my fault she died because I'm the one who bought my teenage daughter a Porsche. These are mostly police and sports car forums. Today I read that police blogs are chatting about the authenticity of the images, and bragging about their involvement surrounding the accident. I remind myself that it's not their problem while I wait for them to get back to me about their internal investigation.

"Daddy, Daddy, look..."

I turn to see Kira's golden locks bouncing around her shoulders as she twirls in circles. She's wearing Lesli's high-heeled shoes and a bright pink scarf double-looped around her neck.

"Do I look pretty, Daddy?" she asks.

I put my folder down and cuddle her tightly. All my anger sheds off me like old skin. If only the world knew Nikki, the world would know that she wasn't much different than a seven-year-old child wearing her mother's shoes: innocent and full of imagination.

It's why I have the hardest time understanding how anyone could feel so hateful and say such angry things about a person they never knew — about a kid — about Nikki, for God's sake. They are arrogant, condescending assholes that have absolutely no idea who my daughter was. I wish they would all just fall right off their high horses and land straight in hell. I look up to find Kira's face questioning my thoughts. And suddenly, I feel the weight of my own hypocrisy strike the surface of my conscience.

Well, what do you know? I guess these idiots and I have something in common.



Once a photograph hits the Internet, you can never get it off. This is the first thing people tell us when we ask for professional help. They tell us that there are few laws governing the Internet and in order to achieve complete success without copyright ownership we would need to sue the World Wide Web, and that really would require me to have superpowers or receive some kind of earth-shattering miracle because you cannot sue an imaginary person. And this is when it finally sinks in: We are fighting against human depravity.

We want to stop this madness, tame the uncontrollable power of the Web, but how do you wage war against the spirit of an evil heart?

I think about this as I'm switching off the lights and getting ready for another kid's funeral. But then I hear a TV newscast. I grab the remote and turn up the volume while my dog nips at my heel to let him outside. It appears the FBI is running a sting to catch child molesters and pull child pornography off the Internet. "Les, come in here..." Without thinking, I grab the phone. I am staring at the number at the bottom of the screen, but I'm stalling because I'm scared to bring attention

to the photos. I don't want to make an issue of this. But it's an instinct, a sense of urgency, a need to protect my family that causes my fingers to dial the number.

As soon as I open the back door to let my dog outside, an FBI agent answers the phone. I'm stunned. I didn't expect anyone to answer. So I grab a notepad from the junk drawer and begin explaining my situation with the photographs, the CHP, and the five hundred websites that refuse to pull the photos down. I emphasize the fact that the number of websites increase daily, but it's only when I tell him that the photographs belong to the California Highway Patrol that he becomes truly interested.

He agrees the CHP is not supposed to leak investigative photographs to the public, whether an investigation is ongoing or not. He tells me to hold, and for one quick second, I feel like I might be getting somewhere. Maybe we do have rights.

When the agent gets back on the line, he is extremely apologetic. "Yea, sir, it's like I thought. We have no jurisdiction with state government records. You'll have to get the CHP to handle that for you. Legally, those photos belong to the state of California. It's up to them to get their property off those websites." I hear him exhale. "You know, even if you did have the legal right, I don't know how you could get photos removed from that many websites. I don't blame you for trying. I'd be doing the same thing if it were my kid. I'm really sorry we can't help...hey, I wish you the best of luck."

Before I've had a chance to ask him any more questions, he tells me this: "You really should speak to an attorney."

For a full minute after I've hung up the phone, I convulse with rage. It is ridiculous to think that I have no right to oppose this. Those are photographs of my daughter, and I don't want them flaunted for public viewing. It's impossible to believe that I have no control over images of my own daughter, especially in these circumstances. Surely, I have rights — don't I?

I turn toward the television and inadvertently throw the remote control. The noise brings Lesli running into the room. Her face is stained with mascara. She is holding a gift bag and a pen. "What?" she asks, wiping her face with her arm. I don't answer. I just take her into my arms and cry with her. The last

thing I want to do is put my family through any legal turmoil. But now, I'm starting to realize I don't even have a choice.



I haven't been back to work in more than a month. I keep thinking that maybe the sergeant knew what he was talking about and maybe things will blow over. Lesli doesn't want me to go back to work and take any chances of seeing the photos. She wants me to wait until we have them off the Internet. But it's been two months and I'm running out of time. I have to pay the bills.

I'm in real estate, commission only, so I have no other choice but to go online and check my emails. As of today, there are more than a thousand websites hosting the images of my daughter, and God only knows how many emails are still floating around in cyberspace. But I have to work. I have a family to feed and a mortgage to pay. I've got too much to lose if I quit now.

When I enter my office building, I feel a twisting in my stomach. Because the number one tool I use to stay in my game is now my number one risk for coming across the photos that I'm told would destroy me. I'm terrified to be anywhere near my desk, but I sit down anyway.

According to my brothers, my name and anything related to my name is now swarming with photos of my daughter's corpse. Attached are defamatory comments not only about Nikki, but about me as well. This is how the public learns that I am an idiot, a horrible father, a complete asshole — things that not only destroy my reputation, but my business, my name and children's names.

As a real estate agent, I depend on the Internet in every aspect of my business. I use it for marketing my properties and myself, for leads, for communicating with my clients. It would be impossible to work without it. And yet, now, it will be impossible to work with it.

I'm told that the first mass email was generated from a mortgage company, and my email inbox is full of mortgage leads. What are the odds, I wonder. This is when I start to

become suspicious. Why would a CHP officer — a stranger, I presume — email investigative photos of my daughter's corpse to mortgage companies? Maybe it *is* a personal thing. I look around my office and then at my co-worker, Karen, who has been helping me with my files while I've been away.

I stare at her while she clicks away at her computer.

Have I really become so suspicious that I can't trust anyone anymore?

I think about it long and hard. Some cop, whom I don't know, took inappropriate photographs of my daughter. Then the same cop emailed them to a bunch of mortgage companies after he told a newspaper reporter there was alcohol in Nikki's car when there wasn't. Who is this guy?

As I sit down in front of my computer, the unsettling sensation returns. The mere thought of seeing Nikki in that car frightens me to the point of dizziness. So I force a smile and remind myself that sometimes, you just have to push through the pain.

I first scan the subject titles, deleting most of my emails, which are all from mortgage companies, and just when I get to the last email — the one marked, *you have a real estate lead* — I click. I open it, expecting to find a new client lead, but instead I find this: "*Woohoo Daddy, I'm still alive!*" I have to look twice before it registers in my brain. And suddenly, with a great surge of adrenaline, I stand and push my chair back from my desk. My heart feels like thunder and my eyes blur with shock. For a moment, I consider opening the attachment, even though I am intensely aware of the dangers inside. But I'm not thinking clearly. I stare at my computer screen to find this email is from *dead girl walking*, a fake name from an anonymous sender.

Immediately, my mind takes a sharp and unexpected turn toward fury. *Who would do this?* I feel my jaw tense as I bite down. Visions of the accident plague my thoughts. In my mind, I see the car flip end over end, with Nikki trapped inside, and again, it feels like the world is closing in on me. I want to hit someone. I want revenge. And the thought of the world gazing at my daughter in this condition pummels me into a cold sweat. Could this email be from the officer who leaked the photos?

My anger increases with the many possibilities. But in spite of my indignation, my increasingly queasy gut has me leaning over my trashcan.

Why would this cop want to hurt me this way? Doesn't he know that I've already been ripped to shreds? For every answer I give myself, I'm left with another thought: Either way, this cannot be legal. Something is up and it's no good. This is when I start to believe there is more to this than I know. Broken law or not, I know when my rights have been violated.

I stand to stretch my legs when my head spins so fast it forces me back into my chair. I feel the tears gathering in my eyes. My head is pounding. I hold my hands steady on my desk and concentrate my vision back to my computer screen. The blue hue of light swirls in circles around my head. My fingers rise automatically to my eyes. I press hard and squeeze them tight until finally all I can see in my head is my daughter's beautiful face, helplessly waiting for her daddy to come and protect her from everything.

When Nikki was in the second grade, she was standing next to me in the kitchen watching me scrape the dinner leftovers into a polystyrene container. Her shriek was so loud it made me jump back about two feet. "Daddy, don't use that...it will kill our world!" She was trembling and covering her face with her hands. Her eyes peeked through the small slits between her fingers while she watched to see what I would do next. Her crazy, impulsive passion to protect the world was something I truly loved about Nikki. It wasn't just a part of her personality. It was who she was. And she never grew out of that.

It was because of her that I finally quit smoking. She was always protecting me. Come to think of it, she was protective with everything and everyone she ever loved. I squeeze my eyes with my fingers.

"Damn," I say out loud. Because as hard as I try, I can't protect *her* from any of this.

After a very long hour, I'm still fighting to absorb the enormity of this horror. I finally decide to think productively. I don't

dare go online, so I reach over my desk and pick up the phonebook. The Yellow Pages are thick with attorneys, and right now, I can't think of anything I want to do more than to speak to one. I skim my fingers across the pages, looking for someone who might be clever enough to help. Through the blurry, thin black words, I find attorneys for just about everything: personal injury, divorce, bankruptcy, wrongful death. But nothing that really fits. I flip the page and look for Internet crimes.

Nothing.

I start taking out loud: "Oh, please God, if you really are listening, won't you help me?"

But no matter how much I beg, I can't find even one attorney who specializes in death photos, reputation destroyers, or brokenhearted fathers like me.

Almost another hour has passed and I'm still sitting in front of my computer just staring at my name. I decide on a civil rights attorney and pick up the phone. But when I start to dial, I realize I don't even know where to begin. I place the phone back down on the receiver and look at the clock. I stand. The day is lost now, anyway. So I grab my jacket and head for home, because it's only a matter of time before I lose that, too.

fri. 6:17 p.m., Dec. 1, 2006

6:17 pm December 1, 2006 | **Anonymous** wrote:

There is nothing better to me than seeing an OC real estate agent's daughter getting her head smashed into bits.

6:28 pm December 1, 2006 | **jroach** wrote:

I live in Missouri and someone emailed me these pictures of a crash scene last night. I honestly could not sleep because of what I saw. I have two small girls, and my heart just goes out to this family. How someone could be so sick and post these photos, it just makes me angry. It's so sad that people will stoop so low to get a cheap thrill. I hope the family can find some peace somehow in this terrible situation. Hopefully these terrible pics can be taken off the Internet.

6:32 pm December 1, 2006 | **Anonymous** wrote:

I'm a law enforcement officer and I have posted the images at www.thecarlounge.net

6:36 pm December 1, 2006 | **mamab** wrote:

I think this is a good thing. The shock value does wonders for stopping teenagers from driving under the influence. The scared straight sort of thing. Just don't look if you have a weak stomach!

16:42 pm December 1, 2006 | **ppzzaz** wrote:

I don't believe the parents care about shock value right now. What about their kids seeing this.

6:44 pm December 1, 2006 | **Anonymous** wrote:

Might be worth showing to anyone who has an 18 year old. Crazy! You have to click on the link once you are in the site to see the most graphic one.

Seven



Lesli

LATELY I FIND MYSELF SITTING on the floor in Nikki's room. There's a smell that reminds me of the things I never want to forget. Like the mornings when Nikki and I were home alone, cleaning house, exercising or just watching TV together. The way we sat and talked about nothing important — just silly conversation. I miss it all so much, and sitting here brings me closer to those memories — closer to Nikki. I don't think about the bad things: the psychosis, the cocaine, the accident, the aftermath. It's better to remember the beautiful things we had and cherished. Memories are all we have left now. I can only pray that the Internet won't take those away from us, too.

I glance over at Nikki's shoes lying in pairs on the floor of her closet. It occurs to me that she grew up and into a size seven. Eighteen years I spent fighting for her life, and now, here I am, fighting for her in death. Somehow, it just doesn't seem fair.

I pick up one of her beaded moccasins and hold it to my chest when Christos walks in white as a ghost. "Hi," he says and then kisses the top of my head. "I got an email."

I stand. "I knew it." Without thinking, I hurl Nikki's shoe to the ground. "I knew this was going to happen, did you see them, did you see the ph — ?"

I cover my mouth with my hands and stare at his face, waiting for an answer. But the truth is I don't want to know. I'm too afraid to know anything about those photographs. Before he can answer, his cell phone rings.

We both look at the screen. It's George. Christos answers, and I can tell by the way he turns to the side that it's not good news.

Apparently, someone impersonating Nikki has just created a MySpace profile. Not only has this person posted the images onto their MySpace page, he or she has befriended every one of our family members, sending each of us the images to our MySpace accounts. Attached are comments telling us how the *Porsche girl* was a spoiled brat and that we are stupid moron parents with too much money and not enough brains. And they tell us they are never going to take the photos down.

George is furious and I hear his voice rise through the phone. "You need to let the CHP know what's going on," he shouts. "They need to do something, especially if this is one of their employees. Christos, this needs to stop...*now!*"

Christos paces from one side of the room to the other, looking like he just wants to disappear. I want to find words to soothe him, but my tears flow without warning as I speak.

"Stop, just stop," I say as I grab his arm. "We need to call the police."

He spins around to face me. "*The police?* Have you completely lost your mind? Who do you think is doing this to us?"

"Well, then, maybe you need to go down to the station with a gun and start shooting until you get some answers. Maybe then someone would help us!" As I say this, I realize it was a very stupid thing to say. We need to stay focused and do the right thing. But what is the right thing?

Christos pulls away from my grip. "That's not a bad idea..."

He walks toward the phone. "Maybe I should find this guy and — " but before he has finished his sentence, he grabs

the phone and dials Google and emails MySpace for the umpteenth time. I watch a tear run down the side of his nose when he stops again to do the right thing.

But the wheels in my mind keep turning. I imagine Christos inside the CHP building ripping apart every officer and supervisor with his bare hands. I imagine him shooting holes in the walls and destroying everything within his reach. I imagine him going to jail. Then I imagine his patience, his diligence and his humility. And I admire him, because although he wants to do these things, he does not.

I know it's not what he wants to hear right now, but I say it anyway: "Christos. You need to find an attorney."



I don't really want any legal trouble. I just want it all to stop. I want people to stop displaying the photos, stop sending them to us, harassing us. But we're running out of options. We're running out of time. Everything we do to stop this madness just seems to make things worse. And it's only a matter of time — one hasty click — before one of our girls accidentally stumbles across a photo of their sister. Just the thought sends a creepy shiver down my spine — one that doesn't seem to want to go away.

So every morning, before anyone in the house is awake, I pray for my family's protection. I pray for strength to get me through the day. I pray that my children will never see those images, and I pray for God to soothe my nerves. I pray until my head clears and my heart softens — until I find patience and wisdom fills me, until I remember that God is with me every step of the way. I pray until my mind drifts into a dream and I finally stop wondering when I will see those godforsaken photographs of my precious baby on my computer screen.

"Mom!" a voice calls out from behind.

I turn to find Danielle sauntering toward me, cocooned inside her favorite Chenille blanket. "What are you doing?" she asks. She sits down next to me with the most amazing smile. It makes me forget why I'm so sad.

“Nothing, really,” I say. “Well, actually, I was praying.”

“Oh,” she says, but her smile fades, and she looks at the ground. “I don’t know if I believe in God anymore, Mom.”

“Oh?” I sit up quickly, placing my hand on her knee. “Why, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know, I’ve been thinking about it a lot lately, and it just doesn’t make sense. Because if there really was a God, then why did he let this happen to Nikki — to us? What did we do wrong?”

I relax. “Yeah, I wonder that too, sometimes. I don’t know...”

“The only problem is,” she says, her eyes melting through me. “Every time I get mad at God, and stop believing in him, I feel bad because I don’t want to hurt his feelings. You know...”

And this is how I come to understand that adversity doesn’t grow faith — it reveals it.

On the floor in front of me are all the things I need to do: take out the ironing board, and the basket of work shirts that have needed to be pressed for over a month now. But the phone rings and I want to escape from the daily monotony.

“Hello.”

“*Keep the girls home from school!*” Celeste is crying into the phone frantically.

“What?” I say, because I don’t understand a word of what she has said.

“Just do that... Just keep them home!”

I look at the phone to make sure it’s Celeste when she begins to sob. “I just... I just read online that, that someone, somebody is going to tape the photographs of Nikki onto the girls’ lockers at school. They are saying the most horrible things about Nikki.”

I hear her inhale. “There’s more, Lesli. It gets worse. Just don’t let the kids out of your sight.”

The information hits me so hard I can no longer hear what she is saying. I’m picturing the kids I have seen in the mornings when I drop the girls at school. I imagine groups of them hanging out on the football field. Is it someone we

know? And now, somewhere between the word “taped” and the word “sight,” the phone falls from my hand. Shock weakens my knees and sends my body crumbling to the ground. How do you heal when the bandages that hold you together keep ripping from your wounds, when every time you stand you are kicked back to the ground? How do you regain consciousness if you never stop bleeding?

“*Christos!*” I scream, and my body tightens into a ball on the floor.

In my mind, I see Nikki’s sweet face and the indelible mark she left on me. I remind myself to look at the world through her eyes, and try to remember that sometimes, things really can be colorful even when they are hiding behind a veil of black.

Don’t these people know that Nikki was special, that she never said a word unless she was spoken to? Don’t they know that she loved chai tea on rainy days, or that she ate chicken noodle soup with a fork — that she made me who I am today, softer and more patient?

Christos walks in and finishes the conversation with Celeste. He reaches down and pulls me to my feet. But even he can’t save me from the tears this time.

“Who?” I ask. “Someone we know?”

“No,” he says, and he holds me close. “It’s no one we know. It was an Internet blog, just one of these punks making threats so we’ll leave them alone. It’s no one we know, I promise.”

This makes my stomach churn, the thought that someone — anyone — would want to hurt one of our children just because we ask them to remove the images of our daughter.

“What kind of world do we live in, Christos? Why are they doing this?”

I stare at his face and into his eyes and try to remember that he is on my side. “Is this going to destroy our kids, too?”

“No!” he says. “I’m going to fix this. I’m going to make things right again. I promise.”

And because I cannot listen to his nonsense any longer, when the phone rings again, I excuse myself to the bedroom where I cry myself to sleep.

An hour later, I walk into the kitchen to find Christos standing at the table, jovial, with the phone pressed to his ear. When he sees me, he covers the mouth of the phone and whispers, "I've just hired someone to help us remove the photos."

I stare at his face, but I can't find the courage to get the slightest bit excited. So I narrow my eyes and whisper back, "I hope you're not speaking to one of those rogue cops, or one of those depraved cyber trolls!" I glare at him for a moment longer. "Bad people don't come with warning labels, you know." I walk away because now I trust no one.

Anyway, it's too late. We have already lost Nikki, her memory, her dignity. A cracked egg can never be repaired. I grab a pillow and flop face down onto the sofa where I listen to my husband talk about what seems to be another wild goose chase.

There was a moment before everything got so out of control that I was just foolish enough to think that we could stop these photos from spreading — like a cancer — into our lives. I really believed God would intervene and give us a remission, especially because it was Nikki. But here we are, watching the images of our daughter multiply across the universe, polluting our lives, our children's lives.

I listen to Christos explain it all to the man on the phone. It sounds almost farfetched hearing it outside my head, the atrocity — the outrage against us. It is, however, hard evidence that evil really does exist in the world, and yet as I listen, I can hardly believe it myself. "I understand," I hear him say. He hangs up the phone.

I feel his arm on my back. "Hey this guy, Michael Fertik, is just starting a new business that monitors and destroys unwanted Internet content *and* photographs. Not that it matters, but he's got a law degree from Harvard, and — "

I lift my head and look at him. "He's an attorney?"

"Well, yeah, but he won't be acting as our legal representative, he'll be providing a specialized service." I feel my face hit the pillow. "But he thinks he can get rid of the photos. Isn't that great! His company's called Reputation.com."

"Reputation..." I say, my voice muffled by the pillow over my head. "It's a little late for that."

“Hey, he’s willing to try.”

I flip over to face him. “You really think it’s going to be that easy?” I watch his smile, the curve of his lips fade into the sadness that is now suffocating the two of us. “Christos, we need to hire an attorney!”

“Yeah, I know,” he says, arranging the pillow to fit just perfectly under my head. “I get that... I know that!”

But does he? I wonder.

“It’s worth a try, babe, so please, let me fix this!” he pleads.

I stare at his hopeful face for several seconds. Maybe he is right. Maybe we do need to infuse the veins of the Internet world with some kind of lethal cyber-chemotherapy. “Yeah,” I say as I allow a relaxed smile to creep across my face. “I’ll let you fix this.”

I roll over on my side and concentrate on my thoughts, and try hard to make sense out of something so senseless. And it hits me: Maybe the miracle won’t be found in the remission, but in the circumstance that finds the cure that no one thought was possible.

Christos

The astonishing thing about website hosts is the combination of good and evil. Some remove the photos with apologies, while others play their freedom-of-speech card. It seems the more we beg these guys, the more angered they become. If you ask me, leaking the images was one thing, but trolling them on the Internet is another. At this point, it's not a legal issue — we only ask them to be kind and take them down for the sake of the children. We don't even ask them to remove the ugly comments, because words are not weapons as the images have become. At least, we don't see it that way yet.

Personally, I don't see it as an issue of free speech. I see the photos as stolen police evidence that is compromising an ongoing and active police investigation. I see it as a crime. I see it as unethical, immoral and wrong. I still can't believe that the CHP won't do something to help us out. I, personally, would give up everything I own to go after these websites legally, if I could. And it makes me sick to think that I can't. But even if I could press charges against the website hosts, I'd definitely go broke, and I would probably spend the rest of my life trying to find them.

On every level, this is wrong.

I can always tell when Lesli is up to something. She is quiet and keeps to herself. Which is why it doesn't surprise me when she walks in and sits down next to me at the center island. "We've got to do something else, Christos. This just isn't getting any better."

She says this as if I don't already know that. "Babe, I'm doing everything I can!"

"But it's not getting better!" Tears well up in her eyes. "Why won't it get better?"

I try to hold her but she pushes me away. She walks over to the table where she grabs my cell phone and puts it in my hand. "Michael can't do this by himself. We need the copyrights, Christos. You have to call an attorney!"

Deep down, I know she's right. And it kills me when she looks at me this way. "It's just not that simple, babe. This

whole thing is so convoluted. No one has broken any laws. So, I don't know what to say, where to start, who to call..."

I stand and wrap my arms around the back of her shoulders. I think of the financial burden this is putting on my family. "Maybe we should sell the house."

She turns to me with lightning speed. "No — o! I can't move away from Nikki's things, her bedroom. This house is all I have left of her. Please, Christos, don't do that to me!" Her eyes melt through me. "Please," Lesli says, "just do something. Figure it out. We can't sell this house!" Her voice rises as she walks away. "And I don't want the girls to see those photos!" She slams the door behind her. "Just do something!"

I stand with my hand in the air staring at the door. "Yeah, okay." I stammer. "I'll do something."



It's a quick lesson of ethics vs. the justice system. I am sitting in my kitchen calling every attorney listed in the phone book, and I'm being told — although I already know this — that websites that host the images of my daughter — though repulsive — are protected under the U.S. Constitution.

Honestly, I don't think anyone is really listening to me.

They just tell me the same thing over and over: Websites have the right under the First Amendment to forbid me from interfering with their freedom of speech. In other words, these guys have the right to f— with me. Apparently, it's un-American to exercise your desire to fight against the rules — even if it means finding any middle ground. But I can't just give up. My greatest fear is that my wife or one of my children will stumble across one of those photos and be traumatized for the rest of their lives. I'm only trying to protect them from any more unnecessary pain. But these guys think I'm out to get them. So, now what?

I lean back in my chair, prop my arms above my head, and stare at the ceiling. I want to scream, but I don't have the energy right now. So I close my eyes and begin counting to ten. That's when I hear what sounds like an animal sprinting

across my rooftop. I sit up and look out my kitchen window to see it pouring down with rain. There's not a cloud in the sky. But the crazy weather sends me back a few years to a warm, beautiful day in spring when Christiana was about four. She had paid close attention to the weather report that morning. The weatherman had reported clear skies with a light wind, and she dressed accordingly. She asked Lesli if she could go swimming when her sisters got home from school, but before Lesli could answer she had dashed off to get her swimsuit. About an hour later, thunder shook the house. The rain was coming down like bullets. I remember Christiana's little feet racing to the back door. "*Oh no...*" she sighed, and she turned to her mother with her hands on her hips. "*But Mommy, it's passed to be a sunny day.*"

She stared out the window a little longer and then finally, she lifted her shoulders. "*Well,*" she said. "*I guess the weatherman changed his mind.*"

The memory brings the sweetest tear to my eye. Little girls and innocence — they must be the most wonderful things this world has to offer.

The thought revives my ambitions and I force my eyes back on the phone. I pick it up and start dialing. This will be my thirteenth call to an attorney who is unwilling to help me. *Am I explaining myself wrong?*

They all say the same thing. They tell me I don't stand a chance suing the CHP, because a governmental agency such as the California Highway Patrol has what they call qualified immunity. I'm told that it doesn't matter how hard I fight, or how much money I spend, I will lose. That's how it works when you file a lawsuit against a state agency when the agency hasn't broken a law. And now I understand why *that* was so important to Sgt. Becker.

One attorney was interested in helping me — but even if I sold everything I own, I wouldn't have enough to conquer every website, he told me.

This is the mountain I have to climb.

As I thumb through the pile of mail that has been sitting on the table for days, I begin to realize our situation is worse than I thought. The bills are piling up, and I'm not out there

closing any escrows. It's getting dark inside my head, and I'm having difficulty seeing my future. I have no legal rights. Even if I did have rights, the financial cost would kill me, and yet if I do nothing, the financial cost will kill me. Either way, I lose.

This is how I learn that it's not as easy to file a lawsuit against the California Highway Patrol as the general public may believe. And because the CHP *refuses* to help, the FBI *can't* help, and there is no such attorney willing to take on such a great financial risk. Everything I have worked so hard for is going to crash down all around me.

Denial comes in layers at first. But getting rid of the photos at this point is going to be impossible. And now, as I give up my search for an attorney, I realize the only choice I have is to take matters into my own hands: I'll plead insanity before the jury if it comes down to that. Just as I am thinking this, I see a small droplet of water run from the ceiling down the wall.

"Oh great...!"

But it's the small things like a leaking pipe in my living room or a flat tire when I'm running late for an appointment that seem trivial to me now. I grab a towel and the phone, but this time I call a plumber.

Lesli

I probably *should* add the pepper. This is what I tell myself as I stir the tomato sauce, which is bubbling with a hint of garlic. Ravioli fresco was the last dinner we had together as a family of six. It was Nikki's favorite — without the pepper — prepared by her favorite restaurant on the planet, Il Fornaio. Or was it the pancetta penne pasta? I freeze and for a moment I want to scream because for the life of me, I cannot remember.

As it turns out, anger can sneak up on you — even when you are praying for peace. I realize this as I reach for a paring knife and begin to chop the basil. It's true: Lately, I've let a certain amount of anger seep under my skin — not just because a couple of photographs have taken complete control of our lives, but also because the only agency that can fix it for us won't. They turn us away as if we don't even matter.

What makes me angriest is that we have no power to fix things, no method to fight. We can't make it go away, and yet we can't ignore it. Now Christos tells me he can't find an attorney who is even willing to try to help us.

From where I'm standing, there is no hope for rescue, no chance to salvage what is left of our lives. There's no light at the end of the tunnel, no hero riding in on his white horse. No one has come to save us. No one sees what I see: darkness, injustice, unfairness, evil.

There comes a point in everyone's life when you stand at the edge of a cliff, look across to the other side, and dare yourself to take a step. I read somewhere that if you trust God fully when you take that step, he will either catch you when you fall, or he will teach you how to fly.

Maybe I misunderstood the context, because I feel like I'm about to hit bottom any minute now.

Every day for a month, I have asked God this: How did you let this happen to us? How are we supposed to go on with our lives? Why won't anyone help us? Why are people so mean? Why don't you answer me?

I am angry because we awaken to the face of evil every day of our lives, and I can't find God or his army anywhere.

The only thing I think I hear him say is that it will be okay. But it's never okay. It's just one big giant mess, and I'm beginning to agree with my deepest fear: maybe I am losing my mind.

Maybe I need to change my perspective, I tell myself. Maybe I need to look at this from God's point of view. The truth is, I have been so consumed with getting rid of the photos that I hadn't considered that God might have another purpose for them — another plan for my life. Maybe he is working on something so huge I just can't fathom the greatness of it. That is, of course, my fairytale. But fairytales always have a happy ending. And it's already too late for that.

I look down at the dinner table that I have unconsciously arranged with six place settings and I realize that even when nothing appears as it should, when everything is so unclear, there is still one truth that I can never run from: what I believe, what I feel, what I know deep inside. "Dinner's ready!" I shout. I grab Nikki's place setting from the table and cradle it into my arms, thanking God for his eternal blessings.



Tonight while Christos is in his office on the phone with Pastor John, I walk into the family room to be alone. I sit down on the sofa, pull the blanket just over my legs, and stare at the ceiling. I wonder, sometimes, if I am doing something wrong.

As usual, I start cutting deals with God, asking him for a miracle, a sign — maybe even a hero — and then I cry. Because before it felt like God was so close, listening to me, speaking to me. But lately, nothing makes sense.

When I'm finished with my bargaining, I open my eyes — let my vision adjust — and notice three little bodies tangled in a ball on the floor watching television, so peaceful, so sweet. Were they there all along, and I didn't even see them?

Immediately I cry, feeling the sting of guilt, yet I'm defensive and tell myself this is all just temporary.

But is it?

This is when reality wraps itself around me like a noose and chokes the lie right out of me. I have been so disconnected, so

distant, so consumed. Are my children suffering a second loss? How much have I let this take me away from them, and tangled the threads that weave us together? Can I ever make it up to them — give them the mother they love and deserve?

I jump up and throw myself into the middle of them — a mother and her pups. I wrap my arms around their bodies, kissing them, absorbing their energy into me like a sponge. I keep it all to myself. My children define me. They are the reason I carry on. They are my recovery. I can't bear the thought of what this is doing to us. If only I had a way of fixing their world, fixing their father and me. If only I could erase that one terrible mistake that someone else has made. If only God would come and rescue us.

I wake up to the sound of the phone ringing. The light crackles all around me from the television. I am freezing. The girls have left me lying on top of their blankets with the dog at the bottom of my feet. I look at the clock and just like that, the pounding begins, because at this hour, it's always bad news: another email, website, another posting, another knot in the tangle of our thread.

Christos walks in, stepping quietly around me, when he answers with a serious, "Hello!" I sit staring into my lap, picking at my fingernails, and wait for the latest awful news. Two months ago, I thought the worst thing in my life was losing my child. Now, while fear and anger grow inside of me like weeds, I wonder how much more poison I can choke down before I wither away to nothingness.

I watch Christos hang up the phone. Our eyes meet, and that's all it takes for me to cry. But instead of giving me horrible news, he smiles. "A friend of George's..." he says and puts his hands over his face, "he's an attorney, and he's on his way over — right now — he thinks he can help us."

"What?" I say, wiping my face with the back of my hand. "Are you serious?" I look up at the ceiling. Maybe God is going to catch me.

A few minutes later, when there's a knock at the door, I feel an amazing sense of reassurance — not because we are finally going to speak to an attorney, but because I know, in

my bones, that God has sent him. This is God's rescue, his plan to help us, to lead us to the finish line.

I peek through the peephole to see if maybe he is dressed in white. I know he is not, but it is my fairytale, after all. Standing on the other side of the door, though, is a man who wants to help us, an attorney who is coming to our house, late at night, to talk to us when no other attorney would give us the time of day.

He calmly stands. I open the door to find my hero, Keith Bremer. He's not exactly the angry, brash, bullheaded attorney type I was hoping for; he is warm and kind, a gentleman. And it's exactly why I like him so much.

He straightens his button-down shirt with one hand and holds out the other to introduce himself. "I'm so sorry for your loss," he says. "I'm a father, too, and I just can't imagine."

The three of us talk for hours.

For the first time in two months, someone is finally listening to us. "They won't even call me back!" Christos says, frustrated, and now he wants to know how to make a law to get something so personal off the Internet — or, at least, somehow get our dilemma before a judge. "And we can't let them do this to someone else!" Christos says.

Keith is taking notes.

Before I can wrap my head around the complicated legal process of dealing with private Web hosts out of the state and the country, Keith says we need to start with the CHP — the reason we are in this mess in the first place. He taps his pencil repeatedly against his notepad. "Sounds like we need to get them to step up. You're sure they said they couldn't help you?"

"I'm positive." Christos says. "They say it's my problem. So, I hired a guy who's been helping us keep track of these websites and he's been able to pull a lot of them down, but he can't get the last ten or so. These free-speech liberals are throwing around their First Amendment rights like it's a game. We need the copyrights to get around them. We need the CHP to get involved, or we're basically screwed."

“All right, listen,” Keith says. “First, you need to know that you probably don’t have a cause of action against the CHP. You can’t sue them, seek a money judgment, without a cause of action.”

Christos pushes himself back from the table. “I don’t want their money. I just want them to help. To do the right thing! I want the copyrights to those damn photos!”

Keith scratches his head. “I don’t know about that — getting them to sign over copyrights. I don’t know if that’s even possible. But,” he smiles, “I’ll see what I can do.” He looks at Christos, and then me. “You do realize it’ll be impossible to get every one of those photos off the Internet, right?”

Before either of us can respond, Keith sits up. “Look,” he says, “this is going to go one way or the other. They’re either going to fix this very quickly, and it’ll just be that easy. Or they’re going to drag us through the longest, thickest, slimiest process you can ever imagine. You can’t get your hopes up. Breaking through the barrier of immunity with a state agency is almost impossible, especially if they haven’t broken any laws. You don’t have a cause of action. Clearly, they were negligent, but I don’t know how I can prove that. You have to understand. You may never see justice here.”

Christos stands up. “I don’t care if I see justice! I just want them to help us out!”

“Yeah, I know,” Keith says, shaking his head. “It’s not always that easy, though. But you’re right. We need to make sure this never happens again.”

This is not exactly what I wanted him to say. I wanted him to say he has the authority to fix everything. I wanted him to push a magic lawyer button and have the photos off the Internet by morning. I want him to say something more positive. Justice is one thing, but getting the photos off the Internet is another. And although I feel as if we might be biting off more than we can chew, I stand and smile. “We really appreciate your help.”

Keith straightens his back and stands from the table. “Well, I don’t know how much help I’m going to be. But,” he says with a smile. “I’ll do whatever I can to help you get those photos off the Internet. I can file a governmental claims notice

against the Highway Patrol, I'll put a hefty price tag on it, light a fire under them. It's not a lawsuit; it's more of a cautionary move, a heads up — but it'll sure get their attention! Anyway, sometimes it's the only way to get any cooperation from a state agency. We get their attention, and they'll know we are serious. Hey, you never know, maybe they'll just do the right thing."

As Keith turns to leave, I can feel the weight of a thousand worries trailing behind him. "*It's okay,*" is what I hear, and I breathe in a moment of hope. I stand quiet for just a second and imagine the possibilities, wondering if maybe we will get a chance to fly.

Tonight, as Christos and I lie in bed, the light of the moon is a blanket covering the sadness between us. He doesn't say a word. He stares deep into me. His eyes — crystal blue — remind me of a clear summer day, and I know exactly what he is thinking. He is sorry for the way things have turned out, sorry he can't fix it, sorry that he can't make all the bad just go away. I press my finger to his lips; this is how I tell him that I know it will be okay.

Christos

When I first met Pastor John I had programmed his number into my cell phone on speed dial. Whenever I was having some trouble with Nikki I would just pick up the phone and dial Nikki's favorite number: four. We would meet somewhere, like a restaurant or a coffee shop, and by the time we were finished talking everything would seem to make perfect sense. Today we meet at Starbucks, the place where my Café Vanilla Frappuccino addiction began — the same place where he hosts his teen Bible study on Monday nights. It's the same Bible study that Nikki had begged me to take her to on the night before the accident — the night our world caved in on us. I didn't let her go. Bible study or not, I knew it was Nikki's way of getting around my rules. I didn't budge. But every now and again I am forced to wonder what would have happened if I had just let her go.

It's that haunting question that brings me down about two hundred notches when I walk through the door. But that's not why I've come here today. Today I've come to get Pastor John's perspective on why God is allowing this Internet horror show to take over my life. I see he is already here, so I decide to sneak up on him from behind. "Anybody sitting here?"

"Hey buddy," he says as he stands. He gives me a hug and pulls up a chair. "Dude, you look like crap."

"I haven't slept, let's see, in about two months."

I smile, but he just stares at me like I have bugs crawling all over my face.

"Can I get you something?" he asks. "Is something going on that I should know about?"

"No," I lie. I don't tell him that I'm scared shitless to go online or to let my kids go online. I don't tell him how badly my business has been dwindling to nothingness. I don't tell him how every time I think of Nikki it's not a pleasant thought. "Everything's fine."

"The Internet stuff getting any better? You're not up all night working on that, are you?"

I sit up in my seat and then my head drops. Words have left me. It's not that I don't know what to say — I just don't

know how to say it. Nobody really understands what's happening to us on the inside. Nobody ever should. I smile at him. "How's Melissa?"

Pastor John leans in close. "Christos, I'm here for you. You can tell me what's going on."

My anxiety has me flinging my cell phone with my fingers. I fling it so hard I accidentally drop it onto the floor. I reach down to grab it and when I look up, Pastor John is shaking his head. So I smile again. "So, what's going on with the kids?"

And as if I hadn't even asked that question, he responds with a question. "How're things at home, and with your business? You able to work yet?"

"No," I say and stare through him, scrambling for another diversion. But anger sneaks its ugly little face into my thoughts and as much as I don't want to talk about it, I turn into a blithering idiot. "Look, if I can't work then I have to do something drastic, like move into an apartment and sell everything I've got. I can't keep my family living the lifestyle they're used to — it's not possible. And that pisses me off. I can't take all that away from them now. It wouldn't be fair. It wouldn't be right."

"Have you been praying about it, Christos? You know if anyone can fix it, it's God. It's just all about timing."

"Yeah, I've been praying nonstop. But dude, he's not answering me. And I don't think I can wait much longer; things are getting worse. I don't know what to do. Do I sell my house and live on unemployment, or do I sue the CHP and force them to fix this so I can take care of my family myself?" I catch his eye and stare. "If you think God can fix this, then what's taking him so long?"

"You need to pray for patience. Like right now!"

He laughs. I roll my eyes.

"Maybe you should look at it this way, Christos. What if it was me and my family going through this? What would you tell me to do about it?"

"You don't want to know what I would tell you. It'd be a colossal sin." I push on my temples and try to release some tension, but I still feel so much pressure. "This whole thing is probably going to cost me the rest of my life and the rest of my

money." I look up at Pastor John. "You think God is going to help me anytime soon?"

"Actually, Christos, it's funny you should ask. Have I told you about my friend who can talk to God? He's a very curious guy, just like you, and he has a lot of questions, too."

I nod, but I don't respond. I know him too well by now so I just wait for the punch line.

"Anyway, the other day, he was lying on the grass staring up at the clear, blue sky when he reached into his pocket for his cell phone and dialed G-O-D. To his amazement God answered — called him by his childhood nickname and everything. And so, my friend asked him a question: 'God,' he said, 'how long is a million years?'

"God answered, 'In my frame of reference, it's about a minute.'

"Then he asked, 'God, how much is a million dollars?'

"God answers, 'To me, it's a penny.'

"My friend then asks, 'God, can I have a penny?'

"God says, 'Sure. In a minute.'"

"Dude," I say. "I must have the wrong cell service." And just as I bust out laughing my cell phone rings. I lift my hand and flash him the screen. "It's just Lesli," I say.

"Christos."

She says my name with worry in her voice when she explains to me that another twelve websites have popped up since I've been gone. "What are we going to do?"

After I hang up I lift my phone to Pastor John. "What did you say that number was?"

fri. 6:17 p.m., Jan. 12, 2007

6:17 pm January 12, 2007 | **Anonymous** wrote:

Bummer she was smoking hot!

6:28 pm January 12, 2007 | **Anonymous** wrote:

Her head popped like a zit.

6:32 pm January 12, 2007 | **anonymous** wrote:

Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha...

6:36 pm January 12, 2007 | **Anonymous** wrote:

Maybe the family should pay me for hosting the images.

6:42 pm January 12, 2007 | **anon** wrote:

I am a Dead Whore. Someone want to fap to my rotting corpse? I have a googlemap to my Grave: <http://tinyurl.com/cs6frj>

6:44 pm January 12, 2007 | **Anonymous** wrote:

Nikki Catsouras was an 18 year old whore who proved, yet again, that women can't drive. ... We Are Anonymous. We Are Legion. Expect Us!

Eight



Lesli

WHEN I WALK DOWNSTAIRS THIS morning, the first thing I see is Christos' car still in the driveway, which means he hasn't left for work yet. It also means that I will find him in his office, which is also why I know he's on the phone. "Whatever it's going to take," I hear him say as I peek inside. "But only, I just...you know!" he glances at me briefly, lifts his chin. "See you at ten," he says and hangs up the phone. And this is how I'm reminded of our appointment this morning with Keith and his co-worker, Tyler Offenhauser.

We met Tyler for the first time about a week ago. He was everything Keith had promised he would be — sincere, hard working, calculated. He was kind, but more than anything he had a deep emotional connection to our case. Which is why we will meet with him again for the second time this week.

Today, we will reexamine all the facts and reorganize our strategy — the same thing Tyler has been doing every day for almost a month. As frustrated as I have been fighting a losing battle, I can't help but notice how far we have come. We have

evolved from a small family army to an army with lawyers and Internet specialists.

There is one variable, however, that is still left out of the equation. We still don't have copyright ownership to the one thing we wish to destroy. Our petitions are not enough, our seize-and-desist orders are not enough; nothing is enough to put an end to the cyber cancer that is spreading like wildfire across the Internet.

Although Tyler and Michael have been diminishing the number of websites that continue to post the photos, the images are still running wild through cyberspace in the form of emails, which is why there are now more than sixteen-hundred websites hosting the photographs of that horrific day — the day we try so hard to forget. But Christos and I, like Tyler, refuse to believe that nothing more can be done to fix this.

Christos puts his arms around me. "You know it has to get worse before it gets better." He says. I stare at his face. "How about some coffee, will that cheer you up?"

I don't speak. Not because I can't, but because I'm not so sure that I'm up for the challenge. It's been a month since Keith filed a government claims notice, and still nothing has changed. The CHP has no interest in signing over the copyrights, or helping Reputation.com clean up the Web. I'm still preoccupied and spending too much of my time and energy on something other than grieving and healing, and being emotionally available for my girls. "I'm going to go get ready," I say, and I head upstairs to wake my children so I can leave them home alone, again.

Tyler says that in his experience, the only way to fix a problem with a government agency is through the court system. And so far he has been right about everything.

As a matter of law, we have to give the CHP a six-month head start before we can file a lawsuit. If we don't have everything worked out by then, or if they continue to ignore us, we will sue them for every penny we have spent fighting them to help us. We may not have a cause of action against them. And the law might not be on our side. But we have something even greater, more powerful than any law could ever provide: We have God, and somehow I know that is all we really need.

This is what I'm telling myself as I head upstairs fighting the urge to cry.

So far, it has been a month since we filed our complaint and three months since the CHP leaked the images. And even though I pray nonstop, I can't help but wonder how much worse things will get while we wait around another five months.

As I peek inside the girls' rooms, I hear my mother's voice in my head. "*Blood money; it's what most people will call it if you sue the California Highway Patrol!*" But do we hide under a rock and risk our children seeing those hideous images of their sister? Do we ignore the atrocity, and let the CHP do this again to someone else? Do we let these Internet demons taunt us forever? Or do we take a firm stand and fight for what we believe is the right thing to do, in spite of the public backlash?

As I lean in to close the bedroom door, the answer is staring back at me in the form of crystal-blue morning eyes. I blow my sweet daughter a kiss and mouth the words *I love you, Christiana*.

Because doing whatever it takes to get rid of these photos, even if it means suing the California Highway Patrol, is how we will tell our children they mean more to us than the opinions of the world.



This morning I manage to make a few phone calls other than to my brother and attorneys. I get caught up on my housework and finish the laundry that's been piling up since the accident. I'm trying hard not to think about anything bad. I want to focus on all the things that really matter: my family, my friends, God. It's amazing how much peace I have in spite of it all, and keeping it that way is the most important thing I can do for my kids. The only problem is that every now and again something distracts me, like a phone call or an email, and reality kicks in. Fear takes over my life and once again consumes my every thought.

I dump my coffee into the sink and watch it swirl down the drain when the phone rings. This time it's a newspaper reporter from the Orange County Register. He has seen the accident photos on the Internet, and he wants to write a story about how they got there.

My natural inclination is to hang up the phone. For all I know, he wants to sensationalize the story, create controversy just to get hits on his newspaper websites. Anyway, how would a news story help us get the photos off the Internet? Wouldn't that just magnify the situation? "Well..." I hesitate. "I don't know... I'd hate for people to seek out the photos."

"Yeah, I get that," he says, "but there must be hundreds of websites hosting them right now." And he's right; would a few more even make a difference? In my opinion, just one website is too many.

I decide to give him the benefit of the doubt. "Okay, but I need to speak to my attorney first."

Before I have finished my sentence, he recommends that we ask the public for help — to help stop the spread of emails. "Anyway," he says, "people have a right to know what happened; you'd be amazed at how much people want to help. If more people know what's happened, and how the photos actually got onto the Internet, well, that might be what it takes to stop this from ever happening again, to someone else, you know."

Obviously, there is nothing stopping the CHP from doing this to someone else. And that thought alone twists my insides. "Yeah," I say, because I get it. This is not just about my family.

"If you talk to me," he says, "I can put an emphasis on the fact that Nikki was a real person — somebody's child, sister, friend. I think by showing the public that Nikki was a *real* person, people will have a different perspective. If you talk to me I can humanize Nikki to the world, share with the public how you're seeking justice for your daughter."

This is when I realize that he wants to write a story because we have filed a complaint with the CHP. I don't know yet that he's calling this a human-interest story, but I get a

good feeling that he's going to write it whether we want him to or not.

First, I have no control over the photos, and now, I have no control over the media. As I let this bit of information sink in, I am automatically in prayer mode. I slice it into small pieces and divide them into opportunity, and truth. It's our opportunity to stop agencies, such as these, from doing this again in the future. It's my chance to tell the truth about who Nikki really was. "This complaint is about getting the photos off the Internet," I say. "It's not about getting justice."

Tonight, before I fall asleep, I think of a million reasons why I should not speak to this reporter. Before morning, I will have forgotten them all.



I wake up, as always, with a blistering sensation in the pit of my stomach. I tell myself it's grief, and not anxiety or fear. Today is the first day, however, I feel like I am playing an active role in my own cause.

I sink into my seat as we drive to Keith's office. The thought of a news interview makes me cringe. I have always wondered about people who get a rise out of media attention. But we have spent the last few months fighting a losing battle, and really it feels like the right thing to do.

We pull into a parking lot of a four-story glass building. I'm surprised. To be honest, I was picturing a dingy office building connected to a barbershop or an old-fashioned toy store. I look at the information board and see that Keith is a partner in an eighty-person law firm, and suddenly I'm at ease.

We proceed upstairs and into the conference room where we sit down at a large glass table, where someone sets a glass of water in front of me. I smile politely, but inside I'm as cold as a stone.

When I look up, I see the reporter and his photographer.

"Mr. and Mrs. Catsouras," the reporter says as he holds out his hand. "It's really nice to meet you." We exchange a handshake, but I keep my lips pressed tight, silent.

The reporter explains how and why he wants to help us. “I know this may sound trite,” he says, “but I like to do a little good in the world, and I think your story will help bring awareness to the evil side of the Internet. It’s definitely proof that we need some Internet laws and content removal.”

I just stare at his blinking eyes. I have always been suspicious of people who label themselves do-gooders. Maybe I watch too much TV. Or maybe I have been so focused on protecting my family that I have become suspicious of everyone. Have I really become so vulnerable?

I watch as the two men find their seats in front of me, but I’m not really looking at them. Instead, I’m staring blankly into my own thoughts and wondering how I could have stopped all this madness from happening in the first place — how I could have prevented those photographs from reaching the public.

What if I would have let the officers know that Nikki was a very private person and she shouldn’t be made into a public spectacle? Would that have even made a difference?

This is when it happens. Everything in front of me swirls into view and I see them for who they are: newspaper reporters. And suddenly, it’s as if I am being unplugged. Everything that is in me drains out. My thoughts simply vanish; the words on my tongue just melt away. The truth is I want the world to know that Nikki was special, sweet, authentic and kind. But does that even matter anymore?

While the reporter and Keith are going over the details, Christos reaches forward and presses his mouth to my ear. “I don’t feel good about this. Maybe we should leave.”

I bow my head toward my lap where I am clutching a photo of Nikki at her high school graduation. I stare at her beautiful face, lean into Christos, and whisper back: “We have to do this! We have to stop those emails...we owe her that much! We have to think of the girls!” I hand Christos the photo. And then I watch him hold his breath.

The reporter directs his first question to Christos. “How are you guys getting through all of this?”

Christos straightens his back. “Our faith in God...that’s how we’re getting through this.” I feel his hand on my knee

and marvel at his faith. I had no idea he felt that way. Oh how pleased God must be to hear that.

The reporter swivels his chair to face Keith, “So,” he says, “what do you do with all of this? Are you positive the photos belong to the CHP?”

“Yes, positive,” Keith says as he slams his hand down on his leg. “Although I don’t have it in writing yet. My clients filed a complaint with the department about two months ago. And they confirmed the photos floating around in cyberspace are the same photos that belong to their department. They just wouldn’t say how they were leaked.”

The reporter scratches his nose. “Are they working with the family at all?”

Keith looks down and types something on his BlackBerry. “Well,” he looks back at the reporter, “the CHP won’t speak to my clients. They’ve denied their request for help. They haven’t contacted them or assisted them in any way.” He puts his BlackBerry down and looks up at the reporter. “That’s why they hired me.”

“Oh, I see... ” The reporter makes a note. “Does this mean you’ll file a lawsuit?”

“Ah, no. As far as I can tell, they didn’t break any laws. They have no responsibility to my clients or to anyone for that matter. Even if they were negligent, it would be impossible for me to prove. This isn’t a legal issue, it’s an ethical one.” Keith looks at me and then back at the reporter. “We’re hoping they’ll just come forward and do the right thing, either sign over the copyrights or help us get the photos off the Internet and let my clients put this behind them — so they can begin to grieve, heal. But, on the other hand,” Keith says and his eyebrows lift, “if they don’t help us — and it seems highly unlikely they will — we will fight them in a civil court. We have already filed a governmental claims notice.”

“That’s like a precursor to a lawsuit, right?”

“Right,” Keith answers. “It’s just the first step in a very long legal process.”

The reporter makes another note on his legal pad and nods. “Now what about the California Vehicle Code the CHP

violated when they disseminated the accident photos.” My ears perk up and I look at Keith.

“A what?” Christos mumbles.

I didn’t know there was a law violation. That changes everything. “Does that help our case?” Christos asks. Keith looks down and studies his hand, then shoots his eyes on me.

“No...not at all,” he says brutally. “In fact, it actually hurts our case.”

“Wait, I’m confused,” I say. “They violated the law? Isn’t that what we need to file charges or something?”

“No, unfortunately that law only protects the police officers and the witnesses involved in the accident, not deceased victims or their family members. I’m really sorry.”

I put my hand on my stomach. Just hearing this makes me nauseous. “But that just doesn’t make any sense, Keith. They broke a law, right? Shouldn’t that be good enough?”

Christos can’t hold back. “*Those bastards!*”

“I know, I know, it’s not right, on every level this is wrong. But hey...” Keith holds up his BlackBerry and smiles at the two of us. “I’m on top of it!” He closes his notebook. And just when I feel all hope starting to spill out of me, he grabs my focus with his eyes. “Don’t you worry about a thing. I’m working on something even better!”

The reporter stops writing and looks at me. “Why do you think people are taunting you, I mean, do you have any idea why anyone would want to be so cruel, posting these images onto their websites, and saying such mean things about your husband and your daughter?”

This time I answer with anger. “No, we don’t know...” I stare at his face as if he’s the one taunting my family. “I have a hard time with that question because these people are dark — very dark — but what’s really scary is... I think even they don’t know how truly depraved they are. They honestly believe they have a right to something that doesn’t belong to them, a right to act this way, a right to hurt people.”

The reporter reaches over and pats my shoulder. And this time he asks me the question. “So, how are *you* getting through all of this?”

I feel the weight of the question linger in the air, hot and sticky. I lift my eyes to his and fake a smile. “Getting through it...” I say, and Christos looks at me. “I don’t know that I am.”



A few days later, I awaken early to find the morning paper on my front porch. I pick it up and study the front page. *Lasting Images*, it says in bold print. I sit down at the kitchen table and listen to Christos shuffling through the silverware drawer behind me looking for a spoon to stir his coffee. I trace my finger across Nikki’s beautiful face as it covers the entire front page of the Tuesday morning paper. And even though I lock the muscles in my throat, the tiniest cry slips out.

The article is a cold, hard truth that my life is a living nightmare. I read the details of that day; how I heard the garage door slam, how Nikki left without saying goodbye. It talks about her free spirit and her love for photography. It explains that we blame the CHP for leaking confidential accident photographs to the public. I blot my eyes on the back of my sleeve and keep reading until I see this statement written under our family photo: *The Catsouras family has filed a 20 million dollar governmental claims notice against the CHP.* This is the first time I am hearing this. So I read on, searching for an explanation on how a government claims notice works. Because I am sure it is something most people don’t understand. But there is no explanation. Nothing.

Now, anyone who reads this article will just assume we are in this for the cash, when the truth is we don’t want their money — we just want their help. But now it won’t matter to the public what the truth is; people will have already formed an opinion by the time they are finished reading this article.

Christos hands me my coffee and sits down next to me. I’m scared to show him, but I slide the newspaper just in front of him and let my head drop into my hands. The article doesn’t say what I wished it would say, like how CHP officers at the scene protected us against the horrific ramifications of seeing our daughter that way, only to later rub it in our face.

How they insisted there would be no public viewing, that we had to have a closed-casket funeral. Or how we asked them repeatedly for help only to be turned away, even before those horrible images began popping up on websites. I wished it had mentioned how out of all the members of the CHP not one has offered any assistance. But it does remind me that life is very temporary. And in some weird way, I'm relieved.

Christos runs his fingers across the page when he suddenly stands. "I knew it!" he says with a smile that could light a fire. "I knew this would work!"

"*What...What are you talking about?*" He points to a sentence, *The CHP is sending notices to operators of Web sites that have posted the images, demanding that they immediately be taken down.* I am speechless. "It worked!" Christos lifts my legs off the ground, "Oh my God, it worked!"

He holds me so tight I can feel his body quiver as he lets me go. "Really," I gasp, "they're going to help us..." I lower myself back into the chair when all kinds of thoughts begin swirling around in my head. "I... I just can't believe this." It's not as easy for me to understand because truthfully I've been waiting for a war to break loose. But I smile, and try to let myself be thankful. I look up at Christos. "Why do you think they've decided to help?"

Christos grabs the phone, and makes a gesture with his finger. "You know better than anyone not to look a gift horse in the mouth! Sometimes miracles happen, remember?" he says as he smiles and turns around. "Hey, George, have you read the paper?"

For a moment I let myself feel relieved, let the knots of cynicism untangle. Honestly, I think this is the first time I have smiled a happy smile since Nikki's death. The thought of putting all of this behind us is so liberating. Maybe we *can* get through this, move forward and find our new normal. Maybe we can lay our daughter to rest — in peace — after all. Now, suddenly, I'm thinking about the backlash, the public scrutiny, and none of that matters anymore.

A few hours after I have reenrolled Kira into her second-grade class, I hear the kitchen door slam. Christiana is standing

in the alcove with tears streaming down her face. I rush over and grab her books and binder from her arms. "What's wrong?" I ask, but Christos moves in before she can say a word.

"It was awful, Mom. He had photos." She covers her mouth with her hand. Her eyes blink through her tears. On a scale of bad things happening, I can only imagine this is the worst thing ever. The phone rings and before I can ask her any questions, I answer.

"Hello, Mrs. Catsouras," the man on the phone says, and I listen. "First, let me apologize. I had no idea that Nikki's sister would be in that classroom."

My heart sinks into my chest while I watch the terrified look on my daughter's face melt into her father's chest. "I'm a retired firefighter," he says. "I've been teaching traffic safety to high school students for over twenty years. I've never stumbled across someone who knew the victim I was talking about."

As he speaks, my vision splits. I'm feeling faint. I know what he's going to tell me. And I know that my daughter's inconsolable world has just collided with horror.

Now I'm dizzy — too dizzy to stand. I press my fingers into my forehead. "I'm sorry sir," I manage to say, "but I don't think I understand...are you talking about Christiana Catsouras?"

"Yes," he says. "She left my classroom in tears and I felt that I had better call and explain."

Before I drop to the ground, I manage to pull in a large gulp of air and I ask him, "Did she see the photos?"

Christiana is shaking her head. "No..." she cries. "I didn't, I didn't see them."

"Oh, no Mrs. Catsouras," the firefighter says, "I would never bring photos like that into my classroom. That's not how we teach the kids about traffic safety. I wish it were that easy! But they don't learn anything from viewing graphic images. I use photos of the victims before they have died, talk about who they were and what they had accomplished, what they loved and aspired to become. We humanize the victims

and talk about their life. Otherwise, the kids don't think it's real, and it just doesn't sink in. It's useless."

"Oh," I say, relieved, and stare at Christiana. "Thank you for your concern." I hang up the phone and grab my daughter. "Tell me what happened."

"I didn't know what they were looking at. He was passing out pictures and then he started talking about Nikki's accident and the toll road and I just got scared so I ran out of there. I thought I would see the photos, Mom. I thought he was passing them out!"

I run my hand down the length of her hair and think about how scary that must have been, coming so close to seeing something we all fear so much. This is the second time this week she has come close to seeing the photos. A few days ago, Christiana Web-searched a local hair salon to get its phone number. Who knew you would come across dozens of query entries of Nikki's fatality from the words "Ladera Legend?" But the scarier part is she almost clicked on the links.

"Oh, babe," Christos says grabbing her and holding her close to his chest. "I promise you, sweetie, I'm going to fix this mess." He pulls back and locks his eyes onto hers. "This will all be over...soon!" He looks at me. "Right, babe?"

And even though I have the urge to roll my eyes at the comment, I just smile and agree.

Four days later, I'm still leery, refusing to keep my fingers crossed. I want to believe that my husband is right, that this will all be over soon, but it's just not that simple. Even if the CHP removes every website with every photo, we still run the risk of receiving an email — or dozens. It only takes one idiot to break the rules and we have to start the process all over again.

Today, when Michael, our Reputation.com representative, calls to give us an update, he tells me that the newspaper story has stirred an international media storm. This is how the next proliferation begins: another click of a button, and the virus spreads across the universe. But this time I'm surprisingly calm, because if the CHP is helping us then we have control. We have a solution, a cure. And suddenly it's clear to me: All I ever wanted, really, was a chance.

“So Michael,” I say, “is it getting easier now that the CHP is helping us?”

There is a long airy silence. “What do you mean?” he asks. “The CHP is not helping us! They won’t even return my phone calls!”

I feel my jaw drop and my eyes tighten. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No, I’m...not kidding,” Michael says.

As he says this, my mind races back to that first newspaper article. How CHP officers said they found open alcohol containers in the trunk of the Porsche. And how it wasn’t true. I feel my lungs expand, a pressure building in my eyes. Did they do it again? I open my mouth to speak, but my thoughts have silenced me.

“I’m sorry to tell you this, Lesli,” Michael says, “but we’ve been stonewalled!”



It is strange, suddenly having a piece of your life shared with the public. There are so many interpretations, and yet nothing sounds remotely familiar. I wonder if life will ever be the same now that our private lives and time of mourning have become a public story of interest.

In some ways, it frightens me to think that this fragile dome we live under has been branded to the world because of these photographs. We have no idea yet how insidious the uncivilized cyberworld can be, or how deep these images will encroach on our livelihood.

But now it seems as if the media has navigated the focus from the dark side of the Internet to the dark side of justice. *Should our government employees have the right to pass around investigative photos of the deceased? Is it free speech or an invasion of privacy — and if it is, an invasion of whose privacy? Is the issue a matter of law?*

In spite of all the inconveniences, we manage to stay offline. We stay focused on the positive, like our family and friends. Because when your life has been flipped upside down,

and everything important falls from your pockets, you are sure to catch the things you love.

And because today is Danielle's sixteenth birthday, I have vowed to make it a happy and special day — as if none of this about our life were true.

But while the girls are setting the dinner table, I decide to do the stupidest thing. Although I was warned not to, I walk over to my computer and pull up the latest news articles. But it's the reader comments that grab my immediate attention. At first, I'm surprised how many comments there are — hundreds, maybe thousands when you put them all together. People — perfect strangers — are making comments about my family as if they have been in our home and watched us raise our children.

I scroll through each one carefully, noticing some sort of dialogue: strangers criticizing our motivation for suing the CHP, questioning our parenting skills, insisting we have no say in the matter, no right to remove anything, because the photographs don't belong to us, and because the accident happened on a public highway. And it's all just enough to bunch my insides into a tangle of knots.

But this is how I come to understand that people on the Internet don't have to understand what they read. They don't have to have all the facts. And even when they couldn't possibly begin to absorb the complexity and enormity of a situation, they still speak — even when they are way off the mark.

I slam my hand on the power button, angry with myself. I know better than that. I walk back into the kitchen and try to put on a happy face, but I can't help it. The tears find their way through my eyes and down my cheeks. Let's face it: Anyone who reads comments — written by perfect strangers — about themselves, and what horrible parents they are, or how greed motivates their pursuit for justice, will at some point fail to remember what it is they are really fighting for.

I stare down at the pasticcio, which is Danielle's favorite, and lose my appetite.

“Looks amazing, Mom! But you didn't have to cook for me. You could have just ordered a pizza!”

Although the tears are gone, Danielle always knows when something is wrong with me. She smiles, scooping a spoonful of pasta onto her plate. “But I’m so glad you did.”

Today Danielle was scheduled to take her driving test at the DMV to get her driver’s license. But because she is too terrified to drive, and because we are too terrified to allow it, we postponed her appointment for the following *year*.

“Nothing’s too good for you, my Belle!” I call her Belle mostly. It’s her pet name. It has a happy tone; it’s special. Now she’ll never know how sad I really am.

Christos walks in from the garage holding something behind his back. He bends down to kiss the top of Danielle’s head and sets a small gift bag in front of her. “Don’t get too excited, it’s not a car,” he says.

“Thanks Dad, a pony is fine!”

The girls all laugh and Kira spills her drink. But it’s a happy moment for all of us. And really, when you boil it all down, that’s all we have left to look forward to anymore: happy moments.

“Hey Les,” Christos says. “You remember Jim Tuggs? I saw him today.”

I lean over the table and swab up the spill — red punch. “Yeah, I think I do. He owns the two condos next door to each other, right?”

“Exactly. He’s looking to sell them and came by the office today. He offers his condolences, by the way. He also let me know that he can’t find me professionally via the Internet.” Christos looks up at me. “That’s the third person this month.”

“I don’t want to talk about any of that tonight. This is Danielle’s day!” As I say this, the phone rings. We let the machine answer. We try to talk over the frantic voice, ignoring what the person on the other end is saying through the speaker, but finally we all just listen. And this is how we learn that a traffic safety school near our home is displaying the photographs of our daughter on a big-screen projector in their classroom. I stare at Danielle’s face; I know what she must be thinking. I turn to Christos, who has just turned a deep shade of red punch. Just another full turn in the lever that winds his

patience too tight. He slams his hand onto the table. "Damn it!" he says and looks at me. "She could have seen them today!"

Danielle drops her fork, covers her face and begins to cry.

I lock eyes with Christos. "It's only a matter of time, Christos. And they're not just accident photos — they're bad, really bad! And it's Nikki, *our* Nikki. It's hard enough for strangers to — "

Danielle runs off.

I get up from the table, run after Danielle, and this is how I remember exactly what it is we are fighting for.

Because, yes, the accident was on a public highway, and yes, the photos belong to the CHP. This, however, does not give them a right to pass them around as if they were candy at a child's birthday party. It's an invasion of our privacy. And that's what this is about.

Christos

It's the possibilities that I can imagine that haunt me the most: A music video on MTV, the cover of a grocery store gossip magazine, the guy sitting next to me at Starbucks scrolling through his emails. The pictures could show up anywhere, at any time. And I can't help but wonder where I will be when I stumble across one for the very first time. What will I say to my wife — my kids — if they should find them first?

At times the thoughts get wedged so deep in my mind that I can't think about anything else. At times they haunt me in the middle of the night while I sleep; at times they're all I see when I'm awake. But most of the time, like now, it's like they're driving a stake right through the center of my heart.

I walk over to the kitchen window and stare at the darkness outside when I catch a glimpse of my own reflection. Lesli is right: These photographs are dominating my life, changing who I am, everything I have inspired to become. They are literally destroying my future from afar. With my fingers, I make circles on my cheeks and just stare at my face. I don't see the man I was before the accident — young, full of energy, running a business tight as a ship. I see a man who has lost his passion, his zest for life, his energy to live. I see a man who doesn't even know who he is anymore.

I turn to face my two beautiful daughters still sitting at the table on the edge of their seats. It makes me burn inside, revisiting our nightmare on a daily basis. On so many levels, this is wrong.

"You may be excused, girls," I say.

It's maddening fighting against a never-ending storm when the awful conditions keep navigating you back to the one thing you wish so desperately to get away from. Eventually you lose your way. You start to question your purpose, and yet you fear your answer. You pray that someone will come along and point you in the right direction, maybe give you a little push. But when you look around, no one is there. You're alone, drenched in fear and confusion.

I walk into my office where I go to think. There must be something that we've missed, something that is there that we just haven't found yet. Deep down I believe there is someone, somewhere who knows how to help us. But where, whom? I walk past the bookshelf where I see Lesli's Bible lying open with a highlighter pen sitting on top. And before I sit down, curiosity has me reaching over to pick it up. I run my finger across the highlighted section in the middle of the page, but I don't really understand it. *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

I feel my head drop. My hands come up, clasp each other tightly, and my knees — by their own will — lower me to the ground. *"How can any part of this be for any kind of good?"*

"Christos!" Lesli touches my shoulder. When did she walk in? I look at the clock and then back at my wife. I'm feeling disoriented so I rub my eyes when I discover the tears. "Danielle is fine now, everything is calm." She stands over me, sorting through the mail. Then she hands me an envelope addressed to me.

"What's this?" I say, feeling a quickening in my pulse, because every now and again we receive information regarding the photographs. I sit back in my chair, open the envelope, and carefully look inside. It has been my fear that someone will send us colored prints of my daughter's death just for the heck of it. I'm not falling for it.

Instead, the letter is from a man who also lost a child in a recent car accident. He starts with a Bible verse, Romans 8:28 — the same verse Lesli has highlighted on the page I was just reading.

The man writes that since he heard about our story in the news, he lives in fear of coming across photos of his own daughter's accident on the Internet. He offers his condolences, and then thanks me for my courage: for standing up to the police, and the Internet, for doing what no one in their right mind would ever want to do in my circumstances. He tells me he is praying for my family, for our privacy, for our peace and for a complete victory in a war against evil. He closes with a promise that good things will come of this. As I slide the letter

back into the envelope, I think I start to understand what they mean about God's timing.

"Is everything okay?" Lesli asks.

I look up at her and just smile. I guess it's true. Sometimes you just need to let someone point you in a different direction. Everything you know and believe in suddenly falls back into place, and magically you remember your way. "Yeah," I say, "everything is fine! Just fine."

Lesli

Two weeks later, I am positive that the Internet is the devil.

Add anonymity, and you get hell.

I have spent the better part of each night lying awake wondering what makes people so mean, commenting about strangers they know nothing about. What makes them so perfect? This strikes my interest, though. These people — the ones hurling insults at my family — hide behind masks like evil little creatures. They never sign their names at the bottom of the page. It is chilling, and lately, I'm finding it impossible to ignore them.

Over the past few months, we've removed all commemorative websites, memorial videos, Web petitions, and every tribute photograph of our beloved daughter from the Internet. Internet bullies have hacked into these websites. They post the gruesome photographs alongside our photographs, or they insert them into a video. First you see a photograph of a lovely, smiling Nikki, and then bam, you are accosted with horror. Now instead of these tribute webpages being filled with memories and well wishes, they are infiltrated with morbidity, lies and even threats against us. But removing the memories is like removing from your life all the medicine that might help you feel better somehow.

I know better than to wait for someone to show up at my door and say these things to my face. These people are cowards and wouldn't dare reveal themselves. Evil doesn't want to be seen, it only wants its wicked thoughts to be seen, and I refuse to look.

Well, the truth is I'm desperate, and I want to make it stop. And even as I say this, my natural inclination is to go online and raise hell — literally. It's impossible to maintain any self-control when you are being criticized by demons that are invisible.

This is why, before I join my family for breakfast, I walk over to my computer and sit down in front of it. I have already mentally switched it on when I feel the blood pump into my face. There is a need that takes over my thoughts; an

instant surge of madness takes my finger and pushes the power button. I can feel the energy pop in front of me as the screen begins to turn blue. I know I should leave, but something inside of me stays and watches what my finger will push next.

Honestly, I am not the type of person who goes online to read about herself. But right now, while I think about my children, frightened and defenseless, I want to know why these anonymous trolls want to hurt us this way.

This is when I learn that nothing can be more stupid than Web-searching my own name: *One less c... in this world, even better. There are thousands of people who die each week and you're sad because your daughter died. F... you!* I click on the next page: *You deserved it bitch, your daughter was a spoiled bitch who deserved to die. You don't deserve to be called a mother. See what you've done!* Attached are the photos of the crash. I manage to avoid looking at them this time, but my pulse quickens as I read the next comment. *Spoiled OC bitch deserved to die... It's your fault she's dead, you should be locked up for spoiling your children to DEATH! Parents like you deserve to die!* Or even just, *Ha, ha, ha, ha...* All of them are anonymous. It's amazing how you don't even see the blade coming at you — just the blood that drains from your heart after the blade has disappeared.

They say this is legal. But I say it's a crime of the soul.

I push myself away from the desk when my eyes fall to the bottom of the screen to a comment that finally pushes me over the edge. Because when I learn that there are people — demented, horrible people — in this world that become sexually aroused when they look at these horrific images of Nikki, something inside of me dies a slow and painful death.

I can't help it. Tears well up in my eyes. I can't breathe. This is mental rape. It's also when the tiniest piece of thread that I have been clinging to snaps and sends me plummeting downward into a dark and dangerous world; to a world that is waiting to devour me. I slam myself backwards against the wall just before the room begins to spin. I think of Nikki, her laugh, her smile, those eyes and suddenly I want to hurt someone.

It is a mother's job to protect her children from the wolves of the world, crushing whatever threatens to come between them. It is an instinct, and for the quickest second I think about what I want to do to the man who put my baby on public display. I manage to switch off the computer. I manage to keep myself breathing. And this time, I manage to walk away. I understand now how a mother could cross the line and end up in jail for protecting her child. Then I shiver, because a small part of me wonders if jail might be a blessing by comparison.

Christos walks into the room while I'm crying hysterically, holding onto my bedpost. "What is wrong with these people?" I sink into the side of the bed with my hand against my stomach and look at my husband. "Why are they saying these things, what does this mean?"

Christos widens his eyes. "What does *what* mean, babe?"

"This!" I point to my computer then walk toward the mirror and I stare at my reflection. "Are we different on the inside, where no one can see who we really are?" I turn and look at Christos. "Don't these people have a conscience? How can they say such things? How can they write it and then push send?" Christos looks over at the computer and back at me. I stop him from speaking with my voice. "Why are they doing this to us?"

He walks closer and puts his arm around my shoulder. I bury my face into his chest and just cry. Just feeling his arms around me makes me feel safe. But then he grabs my arms tightly and looks me in the eyes. "You'll never figure people out, babe. The only ones who know what goes on in their minds is, well, them."

"But this isn't right! Writing insults over the Internet, about people they don't even know, about things that are not even true! How can you enforce any laws against slander if there is anonymity?" I wipe my face abruptly. "It's not free speech. It's hate speech."

Christos' eyes narrow. "Do you think you're an idiot?"
I just squint.

“Are you happy with yourself, proud of the things you believe in?”

“Well, of course,” I say.

“Then forget about what anybody says. I guarantee you they’re not thinking about what they wrote. Those people spend ninety-nine percent of their time wondering what everyone else is thinking about them. Gossip just makes them feel better about their own deficiencies. So try to understand this is their problem. It’s not even about us. It’s about them.”

“But still...everyone in the world can read these horrible things they’re saying about Nikki, about us, and that’s just not right!”

“Honestly, do you really think it matters what people read or how they feel about us? The only thing that should matter to you is what you think, how you feel about yourself. How God feels about you.”

I look into his eyes. When did he become so amazingly wise? He walks me over to the doorway where I see Kira coloring in her book. She is so small and innocent. “I think you need to focus on that for a while,” he says, “help the girls express their feelings. Look at her. She’s drawing a picture for Nikki.”

I feel his wisdom seep into me, warm and wistful.

“Maybe you could paint pictures with them; pictures of Nikki — for Nikki — remember how Nikki loved to draw and use watercolors. Give the girls a purpose in all this.” He turns me to face him. “Maybe teach them how words can be hurtful, and how people make mistakes. How we can forgive them no matter what. Show our girls how to have compassion for those who *don’t* deserve it, just like Nikki always did. But *you* have to do that, too. Look you can change the rules, make new laws, but I’m sorry to say...you cannot change a person’s soul.”

“I know,” I say, embarrassed about my own foolishness. “But I don’t think I’m going to just get over this. Not until we get those photos off the Internet. Not until I can salvage what’s left of Nikki’s dignity. She deserves that from me!”

“I think you missed my point.”

I stare at his face even after he has walked away and try to get used to the fact that the cold, invisible world of the Internet that once made no difference to me has now become the main focus of my life. I pop my head out the door and holler. "Well, at least I'm honest." Then, under my breath: *I didn't miss your point.*



Everything has its price. You might have the perfect marriage, perfect children, the perfect life, but in a blink everything can change. You move mountains to help your family find peace, some closure, only to watch things spin out of control. There is no magic "stop" button. No recipe to turn back the clock. But when your only focus is putting the pieces of your life back together again, you don't see the enemy of time surreptitiously ripping away another precious day. You learn too late that the things that matter most are those moments you will never get back.

That same evening I am on my way to the craft store to purchase a box of watercolors and some canvas when I hear the sound of Keith's voice coming from my car speakers. "It's not about free speech, it's about conduct," I hear him say. "It's about the outrageous conduct our government employees are being allowed to get away with."

I have a sudden mental image of a bunch of plump-faced cops sitting in a shady bar with neon beer signs in the window. I see them shooting pool, knocking down shots of tequila and making jokes while they pass around photos of my daughter. In my vision, they are laughing at the fact that we can do nothing about it.

I shake off the image as I drive in a complete circle through the roundabout. I abandon my mission and head back home with tears in my eyes. Once again, I push my priorities aside and let my troubles have my full attention. What do I know about arts and crafts, anyway? The only thing I want to do now is find out how the CHP is being allowed to get away with letting the images roam to all corners of the universe.

I guess somewhere in the back of my mind, I really thought they would do the right thing. I thought they would help us return those images to the confidential file they came from. I thought it would be over by now. It's sad, really, how they don't care or even want to help — how they treat us as unimportant, as if we don't matter. How they are fighting us as if *we* are being unreasonable.

I roll down my window and let the cool evening air caress my face. "I promise you, Nikki," I say to the wind that blows against my skin, "I will never stop fighting for you." At least that is something I know how to do.



When Nikki was four, her favorite movie was "The Land Before Time." She watched it repeatedly — well, she watched the first half repeatedly. Every time we got to the middle of the movie, she would cry, "Mommy, Mommy make it go back, make it go back!" When I asked her why she didn't want to watch it all the way through, she'd say, "Because Little Foot wants his mommy back." Oh how I wish it were that simple. If only I could push a rewind button with my life, I would have my Nikki back.

Christos had told me during the week that he wanted to go to church to let God know he is thankful for his life, his marriage, and his awesome, wonderful, beautiful children. It's funny. I have always been the spiritual one in our relationship. Now it's Christos clinging to God for strength and hope while I am still floating around in a sea of utter distraction.

It's difficult for me to be so preoccupied, to allow angry, suspicious thoughts to drift through my mind like scenes from a bad horror film. Because no matter where I go now, I see him: the officer who leaked the photos, the one who sends them to us via email. I see the man who makes fun of my daughter's death.

He is everywhere, following me wherever I go. Today he sits in the pew in front of me holding a Bible in his hands. Yesterday he stood in line behind me at the grocery store. Then he

watched me sign checks at the bank. He was even outside my neighbor's house, watching from his car as I walked inside my house.

It is terrifying to think that at any time, in any place, I could be face-to-face with any one of those anonymous monsters that talk about us online; who disgrace my baby girl. It is horrifying to think that at any given moment, without any warning, we might exchange a glance, and I would still never know who they were.



Around four o'clock the next day, I'm in the kitchen giving Christiana and Kira each a spelling pretest, and helping Danielle with her history homework, when Christos pops his head into the room. "It's Keith. He wants to know if we can meet in five minutes. You okay with that?"

In his spare time, Keith has been researching ways to write some new laws for the Internet — a very lofty aspiration. The problem is you cannot interfere with one's constitutional rights, such as expression of speech, and this is what we are up against. Convincing a few websites to pull down the photos is encouraging, but preventing further publication, at this point, is another very high expectation.

"Yeah, give me five minutes," I say.

When you get down to it, it's ridiculous for us to believe that we will ever get a handle on this. And yet, here we are, holding on to that sliver of hope that something good will come out of this horrible wrong.

"Sorry, girls," I say, "I have to go." It comes so easy these days — pushing aside everything that matters to me. I kiss them each on the lips and pretend it will all be over soon.

When Keith walks into the Starbucks — our usual meeting place — his face is glowing and before he greets me with a hug, he hands me a letter.

"Read this," he says. "You're not going to believe it." He hugs Christos. "With all the publicity lately, CHP headquarters sent this." He walks around to the other side of the table,

sits down and shrugs his shoulders. “They somehow got word that we’re getting ready to do a news conference or something and, well, I guess this is their way of making sure we’re *nice* when we speak to the media.”

“Oh, really,” I say, and I sit down and read the letter aloud. “*We are sorry for your loss... In completing our internal investigation, we have found that two of our employees violated department policy by emailing unauthorized photographs of the accident scene, involving your daughter, outside our secured email system.*”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Christos says with a wry look.

I finish reading about their deepest sympathy for our tragic situation, confessing they screwed up, but I’m not understanding why this is so important for our case. I look at Keith. “So...they admit to violating their own policy, and they’re sympathetic, okay. But what are they going to do about the photos?” I hand the letter to Christos and wait for Keith to answer, but he just stares at me. “This letter doesn’t say anything about giving us the copyrights, or getting the photos off the Internet,” I say. “We still need their help. They’re going to help us, right?”

Keith’s face drops as if someone just let the air out of him. He opens his mouth to speak, but on second thought he shakes his head. And then it hits me. “They’re not going to help us. Are they?” I stand, fuming. My hands automatically rise to the top of my head. I try to calm myself down, but then I remember what the sergeant told Christos: *No one’s going to get fired for this!*

It is an infuriating moment of injustice. I am livid. It is also a terrifying thought: that our police officers, who are the cornerstone of our protection, the pillars of our community — the men and women who find and punish the bad guys, who are held to a higher standard — are under the protection of the government. Even if we were able to fight it, it would never be fair. “That’s it, that’s all they have to say?”

“*No, listen...*” Keith taps his hand on the chair next to me. “This is a good thing...just sit down and listen.” He slides his hand across the letter that now lies face up on the table. “Do you even know where this letter came from?”

I look up at Keith. "Sacramento?"

"No..." Keith says and his shoulders drop. He is dead serious. "Look, I don't know who you guys are praying to, but this letter. I think it came from..." he points his finger towards the ceiling and leans in close "...up there!"

I stare at his face trying to decide if this is a good thing or bad when he continues. "Look, the CHP probably doesn't even realize this, Christos, but with this letter, we have a negligence cause of action. I don't know why they sent it, but this letter is proof that they violated department policy. I could never have proven that for you!"

"Well, wait...what do you mean?" Christos asks.

"What I mean, Christos, is now we might be able to convince a judge to let us have a jury trial, and we can let a jury decide the outcome."

"*Might* be able to convince a judge?" I question.

Keith puts his hand on mine. "Look, it won't even get to that point." He holds up the letter. "When the CHP figures out what they've done, they'll be doing back flips to get those photos off the Internet! But don't get too excited, nobody's getting fired. This letter is, however, going to force them to get involved, and hold their agency accountable. This is a way to see that they never do it again, and for you to take back some control of your life. Hey, without this letter, this whole issue would just be thrown out like yesterday's trash. Seriously! I've scheduled a meeting with the state attorney general in the morning. I'm going to let them know that we'll drop the complaint *if* they're willing to work with us. You'll see."

Keith stands, puffing his chest. "It's just a matter of time; they'll do the right thing!"

I stare at Keith's face and his confident smile. And for a second, I wonder if it really will be that simple. But as the fleeting thought passes, I feel a scream working its way to the surface, and all I want to do is tell him that he is wrong, that this is just one more way for them to stab us in the heart just to see if we still bleed, a way for them to measure how far they can push until we finally give up and just go away. I want to tell him that I'm finished, that I want to forget about this

whole thing. Instead, I smile and straighten my shoulders. “Well, of course they will,” I say. “Why wouldn’t they?”

I’m not getting it yet, why this letter — this proof that they broke department policy, the gaping hole that we need to climb through to get to the other side — is so important to Keith. To me it’s just a letter. Just another polite way of saying they couldn’t care less.

Christos

I go to visit Nikki at the cemetery at least once a week. Lesli waits in the car. She says that Nikki is not there, and refuses to speak to a cold marble wall. It just makes her think about what is behind that wall — what we have lost.

It's been a week since we got the admittance letter from the Attorney General's Office, a week since Keith called to schedule a meeting with them, and still, we haven't heard a word regarding how they will fix this for us. I guess I was hoping we would have had it all wrapped up by now. I guess I was wrong.

On top of all my many issues, I am still trying to figure out what I'm going to do to earn a living. Every time I go online, I get a nauseous chill in the center of my gut that ultimately leaves me with a debilitating headache. I am still very angry with the CHP for their lack of compassion and support. Don't they know what this is doing to my family, my career?

As I look around the cemetery, I wonder if I will ever move past the day I lost my precious Nikki. Will I be stuck in this one horrible day for the rest of my life? What about the last eighteen years. Where did they go? It's like part of my hard drive has been erased and I'm left with only one day to think about. The day that I'm certain will kill me.

I spend the next twenty minutes sitting on a concrete bench staring at the inscription on my daughter's grave plaque. I still don't believe she's gone. I put in my earphones, switch on my iPod and meditate, clearing my mind of everything bad. I try to focus on memories of happy times. Nikki's face covered in ice cream and my foot on the gas pedal. For a second, all I can see is Nikki's face in my rearview mirror, laughing at herself because she fell for my "smell the ice cream" trick — again. I remember asking her, "Nikki, how do you still fall for it?"

In my mind, I see her wiping the vanilla ice cream off her mouth. Her eyes are the only things smiling. "No Dad, the question is why do you still do this to me?"

The next thing I know I feel a smile creep up from inside of me somewhere.

Just as I let my mind drift, I get a call from Keith. Sparing me the small talk, he tells me the defense attorney for the CHP has just informed him that they will be defending the actions of their employee's internal violations. Negligent or not, they will *not* be helping us get the photos off the Internet. "Christos," Keith says, "as far as they're concerned, they didn't harm Nikki in any way, so you as her father can't bring any third-party charges against them. In other words, you have nothing to do with this issue. It's between Nikki and them, and Nikki's rights died when she did. Also, they say we're off target, that we should be going after the websites that host the photos — not them, and...they're questioning whether or not you've even seen the photographs. Unfortunately, they think they have a solid case and they're going to fight us all the way."

I am utterly stunned. Just when I had finally convinced myself that the CHP was just sorting through mounds of paperwork, that they really did want to help us, and that this was only some process they had been forced to put us through, this is what I am told. How do they not see the madness they have caused my family? "They don't get it," I say, kicking the ground while I stand. "They don't even kind of get it!"

I am fuming, amazed at their lack of concern and capability to understand that if they hadn't leaked the photos in the first place, we wouldn't have to go after these websites. "And what do you mean they question whether or not we've seen the photos? We'll be seeing them for the rest of our lives for God's sake!" I take a deep breath. "Wait a minute, you're joking, right?"

"No, Christos," Keith says. "I don't find anything about this amusing!"

"Damn them," I say.

It's like a sudden gust of wind that comes out of nowhere and scatters leaves across your freshly raked yard. It chases any thoughts of solace right out of me. "They just want to wear me down until I've had enough, get tired and walk away. But you know what, Keith?" As I say this I'm hit with the strangest sense of resolve. "I'm not going anywhere!"

We finish our conversation on a positive note. But now I find myself in the same predicament I was in four months ago: standing in the middle of uncertainty, wondering if this is how the rest of my life is going to be — fighting, searching and praying for something I may never find.

Closure.

I launch my iPod to the ground and watch the tiny pieces scatter. Just like my life, it's so damaged it can't be fixed.

I feel the temperature suddenly rise around me, and a hand on the back of my neck. I turn to find Lesli with tears streaming down her pale cheeks.

"I hate this place!" she says. "It's not fair. Parents should *never* have to bury their children!"

I wrap my arms around her tightly and wonder how in the hell I'm going to tell her that the CHP doesn't want to help us.

"You're right, it's not fair." I squeeze her tighter. I look at Nikki's grave plaque and scramble for something comforting to say. "We have to be strong, Les, for the girls. They've had to bury their *sister*."

She falls out of my arms and onto her knees. "*But...*" she says, crying to the wall. Her hands move forward against the inscription and she traces our daughter's name with her finger. She rests her cheek against the photo and looks up at me with tears in her eyes. "But we had to bury our *child*... I just don't think I can be that strong!"

Tues. 1:17 p.m., Feb. 27, 2007

1:17 pm February 27, 2007 | **Anonymous** wrote:

That little cunt deserved it. erratic driving?! go the fucking speed limit and you won't fucking crash and die on a god damn corner.

1:28 pm February 27, 2007 | **anon** wrote:

Women drivers, on my roadway? Let's just let nature take its course. Much like it did on your daughter.

1:32 pm February 27, 2007 | **Anonymous** wrote:

Dear Nikki's family Why would u want to rember taht bitch by driving so eratically she culd have killed someone that actually mattered then what huh this waould be a dree nikki from jail sight **YOUR TERRIBLE PARENTS YOUR DAUGHTER WAS A FUCKING STUCK YP BITCH**

1:36 pm February 27, 2007 | **Anonymous** wrote:

It truly is a shame that a young girl was taken from the world. but the masturbation material those pictures provided will surely compensate for you sadness. worry not, as millions will ejaculate on your daughters image daily, so she will live on as the whore in all of us.

1:42 pm February 27, 2007 | **Anonymous** wrote:

Here is the plan:

1. Use rastebator
 2. print out a 6x6 meters huge posters of the pics
 3. Erect billboards outside theyre house with those posters
 - 4 Profit?!?!?!?
-

1:44 pm February 27, 2007 | **Anonymous** wrote:

Yes, it's really awful that copyrightholders can force people to remove their pics from a website. Nobody should be able to remove anything from the web. I'm a pirate and i aprove of all free sharing, that is including the pictures of Nikki. Your family just have to grow some balls and watch those pics and get over with it...

Nine



Lesli

THE THING ABOUT HIDING SOMETHING from yourself is that you spend every minute wondering what it is you are so desperately afraid to find. I have a good idea that seeing the images of my daughter would be the death of me. So I run from every chance that I might come across them. Still, I can't forget that the devastating risk is waiting just around the corner — every day of my life.

Tonight is the first night we have left the house since the accident — our first Sunday night dinner at George and Brenda's — and we are actually enjoying ourselves. We are slowly getting back to our old routine, something I was afraid would never happen.

I am clearing the table but I can't take my eyes off of my husband who is staring into the dark living room — his plate, once again, untouched. He must be a million miles away. His brother Pepi notices this too, and to get his attention back to the table he asks him if we have heard from the Highway Patrol. He doesn't respond, so he asks him again. "No, nothing," he finally says.

George makes a clearing sound in his throat. "One of my customers read something online that a female dispatcher was

responsible for leaking the photos. I think he said it was an online Las Vegas newspaper article. Have you heard anything about that?"

I watch Christos' face transform. "What? A woman?"

I, too, am stunned. The thought of a woman leaking the images makes my skin crawl, but it would also mean Sgt. Miller didn't do it. I hesitate, expecting him to say he is joking, but he just folds his arms. As much as I would like to believe it wasn't Sgt. Miller, I remind myself that it's only an online newspaper article. I'm no stranger to online gossip. And I know, all too well, how it works. How it takes more than one person to bring it to life, the one who writes it, and the one who reads it. And I refuse to be a part of it.

But the next thing I know, I am sitting in front of Brenda's computer while she is shuffling through the closet looking for a disc to download the article onto. I know it is risky, and I know I shouldn't be in here, but I am not the same person I was four months ago. My reasoning does not work the way it once did.

I feel my blood pressure rise, but I don't stop. I just sit and stare at photos of Brenda's children trailing across the screen. Without thinking, I am typing a combination of words, searching for an article regarding a female dispatcher. I come up with nothing so I add Nikki's name, and click on a query that I am positive to be a newspaper article. But what pops up instead is a ghastly combination of shock, horror and revelation.

Death fills my eyes and thrusts its ugly truth into the core of my mind. It's a toxin erupting, suffocating me with its mass. I can't breathe, I can't think, I can't move.

I try to close my eyes, but I can't. I just stare at the screen, and in my head I say the same thing over and over again: *Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God...*

I want to look away, but my eyes are transfixed, so blurred with tears I can't even blink. I tell myself it's not true, what I see is not real, but it's too late. I have seen, and now I know.

I feel the blood rush to my face, tingling. I can't speak, but I manage to cry out. "No, Nikki... No!" I don't want to see this. I don't want to know.

Brenda darts in front of me. She swivels my chair in the opposite direction. She shakes me frantically. “Lesli,” she shouts, “look at me!” But no matter how hard she shakes me, or how loud she speaks, I cannot see or hear anything.

The only thing I see is blood and hair, and the horrifying proof that my daughter has died. “*Lesli!*” Brenda slaps her hands together in front of my face. But I don’t respond. I can only whimper from what feels like the sharpest blade of the longest knife tearing into my heart. It’s indelible pain. I concentrate hard on Brenda’s face, but all I can see is Nikki.

Immediately it starts. Anger burns me from deep inside. I feel rage building and I want revenge. I want pain. I want justice. I want to see his face — that son of a bitch who has displayed this repulsive horror for the world to see. It’s an atrocity, a deliberate violation of my trust, my faith in people, my confidence. I want to scream. I want to find this guy and kill him. But instead, I just fall to the ground and sob.

Brenda covers me with blankets, while I lay on the ground shivering. I’m holding my breath. I know that I’m dying. I can feel it. And in some small way, that comforts me. It is such a physical pain that I can’t speak. It’s like a tender new layer of skin has just been ripped off my wounded heart; everything that keeps me alive is seeping out of me. It’s all too much.

It’s only when I imagine my children seeing their sister this way that my teeth begin to chatter inside my mouth. This is when I stop breathing. I let the world around me just fade away. And the next few hours completely escape me.

The nightmares start immediately and the recollection lasts for days. Usually, I am running into a grassy field and there are flowers and music. My husband and children are right in front of me. Then it happens: I see a plane crashing down on them, shards of glass and big chunks of crumpled metal. Sometimes there is fire. But no matter how violent the outcome, the contents of the remains always belong to my family. The torture I now endure in the night is just as unbearable as living without Nikki through the course of a day.

Before I would have said it was true: Burying a child is the most painful thing I had ever experienced. But now that's not true. Because it's much more excruciating to see what happened to Nikki in that car, to imagine the fear and pain she must have felt as she died. The truth is I never wanted to know the details. Because sometimes you can convince yourself that it's not true if you haven't seen the proof.

Most nights I don't sleep. But I force myself to get out of bed each day, to smile at my children's beautiful faces, to walk and talk as if I were fine, but I'm not fine. I have changed.

My doctor calls it a brain injury. He believes this kind of trauma causes changes in the brain chemistry — changes that are helpful short term because they reduce the level of emotion to something bearable, but harmful in the long term because they reinforce symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder.

If only the officer who leaked these images could see me right now. Would he see the dark circles under my eyes? Would he know that I can no longer sleep, that my children have lost a part of their mother? Does he know that the images locked in my mind are now the only thing I see whenever I think of my beautiful Nikki? Surely, in his line of work, he must know there are some things in this world you can never un-see.

Christos

It's 3 a.m. when I hear a noise downstairs. It takes me only half a second to realize that Lesli is not lying next to me. Although she hasn't told me, I know she's been having nightmares. It's the sudden jolt, followed by the sobbing in the wee hours of the morning that gives it away. And for the rest of the day, she just sits and stares into empty space. Still, there is not a damn thing I can do for her besides taking another personal day — the third one this week.

Thankfully, I was able to start a salaried position in my office last week. Now I can work without advertising, checking emails or worrying about my online reputation. I just have to show up with a smile on my face and keep everything in working order. It's not permanent. It's just a temporary solution until I get the photos off the Internet. So for now, I'm in charge of nearly two hundred agents, and for the first time in my life, I answer to someone. Don't get me wrong, I am very thankful for the opportunity. It's just that if I take too many days off work, I could lose this new job that doesn't pay me nearly enough.

But under the circumstances, I will stay home, again, today. I will keep a close eye on my wife, watch her dangle on the brink of collapse. It's the look on her face whenever I leave the room that scares me the most. So I try to stay close. I'll do the breakfast dishes, make the kids their lunches, and even get them to and from school. Honestly, I don't know if my wife is capable of doing these things or not.

I admit this devastating reality makes me question God. Because everything bad just keeps getting worse. I feel like I'm swimming in pool of quicksand, as if a giant mass of grimy liquid is pushing against me, pulling me downward, flattening my chest until I can't breathe. I fight against it and push my way to the surface, and just when I get ready to take in a deep breath of air, there is nothing but more wet sand. So if God really is in control of this, am I supposed to know what to do?

In spite of everything, Lesli hasn't said a word about how she feels, what she thinks, or what she had seen on Brenda's computer screen. Not to me, not to anyone. And frankly, it's

beginning to piss me off. My wife and I are supposed to be a team in this game of diminished strength. But it seems she has lost her conviction. She doesn't even talk about God anymore. I don't know if maybe she's depressed, or if she is just confused. But honestly, I don't know how capable I would be balancing the faith for both of us.

Now, more than ever, I want to know who did this to her, to us. I want to press charges, somehow put these assholes behind bars. And believe me, they would be safer locked up than anywhere near me.

It's too early for breakfast, so I sit down in front of my computer and immerse myself in case law. This time I start with police brutality. I think about the bruised faces I have seen on the news. Only our bruises live on the inside, and even time won't make them fade away. I flip myself around and look at my precious sleeping angels twisted in a ball at the foot of my bed. I can't protect them from this. I can't fix their mother. I can't do anything to stop their world from crumbling apart piece by piece. Suddenly, all the anger I was somehow managing to control has slipped into my fists and I slam them hard onto the top of my desk.

I grab a bright-red Sharpie and I circle the date on my calendar. Maybe today I've had enough. Maybe I'm not going to take it anymore. I turn toward the doorway where I find my wife — too small for my bathrobe — standing in the darkened hallway. Her hair has fallen from the elastic band that she wears when she sleeps. She is silent, looking right through me, as if the world no longer exists, as if everything she loves and believes has just disappeared.

A few hours later, I am shuffling around in my sock drawer and I notice my socks aren't tied together in pairs. Lesli doesn't put them together like she used to do. Come to think of it, she doesn't do anything she used to do.

As I'm searching for a matching sock, I come across a bag of Nikki's things; items I had confiscated the night I should have taken her to the hospital. I take out her cell phone, car key and driver's license, and I just stare at them. I flip open her cell phone and switch it on when this message pops up on the

screen: *Keep your head up!* My breath catches and for a quick moment all I can think about is how hard she worked, how determined she was to get better. As I scroll through her phone list, I notice the first person listed is me: *Control Freak* is what it says right where my name should have been. Suddenly, as if I've fallen through a time warp, I remember everything she said to me that night — the night that burns a hole through my heart.

You can control the universe Dad...

I know you have superpowers!

I ask myself a thousand times a day why I didn't do something, why I didn't take her to the hospital that night. Why did I go to work the next morning? What was I thinking? How could I have not known she was psychotic? How can I rewind time and get another chance to do things right?

I put Nikki's things back into the plastic bag but I set her driver's license up on my shelf. Maybe Nikki was right. Maybe I am too controlling. Maybe it's the reason I feel like I'm suffocating all the time, because everything that matters to me, everything with meaning and purpose, is just sinking into a dark and empty pit.

I swipe my face with the back of my hand and stare at the tiny photo of Nikki's face. If only she were right, if only I could control the universe. Then none of this would be true, because I would be God. And it's that crazy thought that makes me wonder about that place called heaven. Because lately, whenever I look up, all I can see is a dark and gloomy sky.

I slam my sock drawer so hard a plastic cup falls to the floor. I watch it roll in a complete circle on the carpet, wondering if I will ever get this all figured out. As I'm thinking this, Lesli walks in sobbing hysterically. "What's wrong?" I grab her shoulders while she stares into me, weeping. She hands me a crumpled piece of paper with Nikki's handwriting scribbled between the lines. "*To know is to know you know nothing. That is the meaning of knowledge.*" ~ Confucius.

I pull her close and we stand in the closet, just for a second feeling the very same thing for the very first time: a dark and powerless space between us.

Lesli

Hope is a curious thing. It is a concept that is impossible for me to grasp. It is a need increasing inside of me, a trust I can feel but can never see. It is the premise of my faith. A promise whispered. It is something I cannot understand, yet it is the only thing I think about.

It is early when my eyes open from the most amazing dream. I can still feel Nikki's breath on my skin, her eyes on my face waiting in anticipation for me to guess what her name is in heaven. When I gave up, she just laughed, "*They call me Nikki Tay-Tay here in heaven, because I talk so much. Isn't that crazy, Mom?*" The thought sends a warm rush right through me. Imagine that: Nikki, the most private, quietest girl I have ever known, talking too much. How do we dream up such things?

I let the feeling linger, warm and alive. It is the first time since I have seen the horrifying images that I feel something other than disgust or despair. So I let myself breathe in the moment, try to keep it inside of me forever. And then I remember what day it is. Nineteen years ago today, Nikki was born: eight pounds, two ounces. I place my hand on my belly and for just a moment, I remember the day I gave birth to her, and how I loved her so much it terrified me. For one quick second I can almost feel her tiny, warm body cuddled in my arms. I look at the clock on my nightstand, and just like that, my mind goes blank. Like every fleeting memory, it escapes my thoughts, leaving me so numb I can no longer feel anything: neither good nor bad.

Shock is a funny thing. It paralyzes a large part of you, leaving you numb, but with a craving to feel something. It teases your mind and shows you small slivers of truth that would otherwise choke you if you were to swallow them whole. But sometimes, it opens your eyes to the simplest things, moments you might have otherwise missed. I roll over on my side and stare at my husband's sleeping face, the curve of his nose, his round fleshy lips. It's amazing how I never noticed until this very moment how much Nikki looked like him.

He turns to face me as if he knew I was staring all along. "What?" he says, and I stare at his face without blinking.

"Nothing. Go back to sleep."

He just stares. "What is it?" He picks up my hand and kisses my knuckles. "You know you can tell me anything."

I smile. "I was just imaging my handsome, clean-cut husband with a tattoo on his arm."

He jumps up. "What time is it?" he mumbles, and then disappears into the bathroom.

I throw off the blankets and grab his sketchpad from the side of the bed. For months, he has been designing his tattoo for this very day: a beautiful cross with Nikki's name written on a banner flowing across the front of it. I trace my fingers across her handwritten words just above the picture. *I love you, Dad!* it says, but what it really means, I think, is that our daughter has brought her father to the cross. Maybe he doesn't know it yet, but she has given him the gift of hope.

For Christos, the cross has always been a fictitious object that represented a religion. But I think now he has found new meaning for the cross. Now it is a place where he can bring his grief and find hope. It is a new beginning, a beginning of understanding that we are all here for a purpose: to find and love God, to die on the cross with Jesus, to find heaven, even if it means that sometimes we have to feel the pain in order to get there.

The girls go with Christos to watch, but I stay behind. There is an unsettling fear that sits at the bottom of my throat now. It festers at the mere thought of going out into a public place; it's the way I feel whenever one of us needs to go online.

This is the reason we started attending a weekly support group for grieving families: to force me out of the house and to help the girls understand that they are not alone, that there is someone else in the world that can truly understand how they feel. But it only makes our children feel more alone, because in spite of our native tongue, the only language the kids in group therapy speak is MySpace. And that makes me wonder if those parents cry, too, whenever their kids ask to go online.

I'm not expecting anyone, which is why I am startled when I hear the doorbell. I sneak into the dining room and peak out the window where I see a group of Nikki's friends gathered on my front porch. They are holding flowers and birthday balloons.

But when I open the door, I am hit with the most unexpected feeling of grief, as if everything that I have ever loved has gone. For a moment I want to slam the door and stop the truth from coming anywhere near me. But instead, I just stare into their precious faces, their watery eyes behind their awkward smiles. It's like a train is racing through my heart plowing through the walls of my denial. And I realize this is my chance to see Nikki through the eyes of her friends, through those who miss her as much as I do, those who had shared so many priceless moments of her life. I smile. "Come on in...please, come in!"

We huddle on the sofa in the family room and for hours, we talk about the things we remember most: the days at the beach, the time Nikki hired a taxi to drive her around town, just for the heck of it. We talk about her eighteenth birthday party, how loud the band played and how she insisted she would become famous someday in a really weird way. We talked about how she bought a pet hamster and kept him in the garage so that Christos and I would never know, but we knew. And when I least expect it, laughter fills the room and suddenly the world feels warm and alive — different. Maybe the memories we lose aren't really lost, but quietly waiting for that one special moment when it's safe enough to explore them.

As wonderful as it is to remember these things, these moments, like every other, disappear into the reality of my life. And when everyone has gone, the visions that kept themselves hidden from me filter back into my thoughts and cover me again with a bitter, cold sweat. But the phone rings, and when I see that it's Sandi — Nikki's best friend since kindergarten — I cannot answer it fast enough.

"Hi sweetie..."

There is a long silence before I hear the sound of her voice. "Oh, Lesli..." she whimpers, so small and quivering I

have to close my eyes. I've always been careful not to cry in front of Sandi. She's like a daughter to me, someone I want to protect. Nikki and Sandi were closer than friends were — they were sisters. And she will always hold a place of her own at our dinner table. "I tr...I tri," she says and I know she cannot speak.

"*Sshh*," is all I manage because mothering Sandi is second nature to me. I draw in a deep breath. "Oh sweetie — " I say, right before the tears sting my eyes. It is one of those moments when a million memories fly through the air, and suddenly — all at once — you see everything you have lost. Every age, every circumstance, and every moment that has slipped through your hands jumps up so fast it slaps you in the face. Every word, every memory slithers through the cracks of my mind, and somehow breaks the seal of shock. I am so grieved I cannot say another word.

"It's okay, Lesli," Sandi replies. "I'll come over and sit with you." And just as I have done for her so many times in her life, she comforts me with a promise that everything will be okay. "Just set my place, I'll be there in time for dinner."

Grief is an amazing thing. It is the dark and empty hole in the pit of your stomach, the silence in the song of your broken heart, and yet, it is the word that holds the deepest meaning:

Hope.

Christos

The most pressing issue of the day involves deciding what to have for dinner. When I get home around five, after getting inked for six hours straight, I am ready to take on the world. But when I walk into the house, I see my beautiful wife hunched over the kitchen table, crying. "What's wrong, babe?" I walk over and grab her chin with my hand. "Don't cry. It's a special day," I say.

She puffs her lips but she doesn't smile. Instead, she changes the subject. "You want to go out for dinner?"

That's a question you don't have to ask me twice. And because it's Nikki's birthday, we need to go somewhere special to celebrate. But where? "Yeah, absolutely. Let's go out." I wait for a grin, something. "Anywhere you want, your choice." This is a little game we play. I ask her to choose a place, and then I make a face. Ultimately, no matter where she decides to go — although I like her suggestions — it's going to be up to me.

This is when she finally smiles. "No." She shakes her head. "Just decide. But Sandi's on her way over, so make the reservation for six."

"You got it!" I kiss her on the forehead.

I head toward the stairs to go have a nice relaxing shower when I notice the kitchen door is standing wide open. Instead of closing it, I walk outside to have a look around. Thankfully, everything is fine, just the way I left it a second ago. It's amazing how paranoid you become when you are being taunted by electronic mail. And it's that thought that sends me walking out to the mailbox before dinner, which is something I normally would never do.

I'm sifting through the mound of bills when I come across one very thick piece of paper. I pull it forward to see what it is and before it has the chance to register to my brain, I start to choke on my breath. "Damn!" I say to the ad. "Why didn't I think of that?" No kidding. It's an advertisement from Il Fornaio, Nikki's favorite restaurant in the entire world. We ate there at least once a week — twice, maybe the last few years of her life. I have to be honest. The last time we were there it

was with Nikki. But this is not the weirdest part. Because when I look down, I notice the screen on my cell phone has dialed an unfamiliar phone number. For whatever reason, I slide my phone to the bottom of the ad, and what do you know. It is a perfect match. I am so stunned I think I must be seeing things, so I push send, and that's when I think I'm going to fall over. Because I know I did not subconsciously dial this number, or conjure this up in my head. There is no QR Code on the ad. They don't even exist yet. But the strangest thing of all for me right now is that all these bizarre occurrences that I keep calling coincidence always have something to do with Nikki. When I walk back inside the house, I must be white as a ghost because Lesli stops what she's doing and rushes towards me. "What's wrong?" she asks.

I just shake my head. "Nothing." I hold up the ad and my cell phone when I feel the most refreshing smile break over my face. "I just made us a dinner reservation. How's eight o'clock?"



Over the past six months, I have become a completely different person. Once I was negotiating million-dollar sales transactions, now I'm writing time schedules and work sheets. I used to have termite inspections and walkthroughs, now I have office meetings and interviews. But today, I won't be signing paychecks or pink slips. I'll be signing legal documents for a civil action suit. Because this morning — after six months of getting absolutely nowhere — we are filing a civil action suit against the California Highway Patrol.

What this actually means is that while we are still in the throes of our grief, these guys are pushing us right into the center of a legal boxing ring. I grab my toast, walk over to the kitchen window, and look outside. The trees are still, the air is crisp; a crystal-clear California day with no clouds, no over-cast. I force myself to imagine a day when I can look at my family and see no more interruptions, no more distractions in our lives, and no more intrusions on our grief. But sure enough, before I finish this comforting thought, my hands are

trembling and my stomach twists, because in spite of what they had told me — eight months ago — it has not blown over, and the only way to resolve it now is in a courtroom.

On that note, I take any form of faith that I have left in me and pray for the strength to fight this fight — for my girls, and for any other grieving family that might have to go through the torment of being taunted by the one thing that has already destroyed them.

I take a bite of my cold, dry toast. But all I can taste is contempt. Because when the public finds out that we are suing the CHP, they will have a field day blogging about our greedy intentions, about their tax dollars going to waste on our family's *frivolous* complaint. And this is why I toss my toast back onto my plate and pitch it into the garbage.

I walk into my office, sit down in front of my computer and carefully scroll through the latest news articles. There are thousands of opinions posted in the comment section at the bottom of each page — about me, my family, Nikki. Most posters vent their outrage toward the CHP, but so many of them aim their outrage at me for my protest against the cops, for being an idiot, a horrible parent, an asshole. It's all a bunch of crap. They don't know who I am. I don't even know who I am anymore.

I understand that everyone has an opinion, a point of view. Everyone has something to say. But when comments are made without knowledge, without all of the facts, the story becomes fiction. And when you believe fiction, you have lost sight of the truth.

Here's the funny thing: Ask any one of these people who comment about me on the Internet how I treat my wife, how I raise or discipline my children, how I act at work, what I eat for breakfast, what car I drive, and they can't answer truthfully, because they don't know. They don't know me, or my family, or Nikki. I'm amazed at how entitled they feel to share their opinions about people they don't know. I guess you would have to say their statements are fictional, invented by their own imagination. It's all about them; it's not about us at all. This is what I'm telling myself as I obsess once again over comments about me that are not even true.

Lesli walks into my office and puts her hand on my shoulder. "Can I make you something to eat?" she asks, but I don't answer her. I'm too consumed. I feel my leg shake beneath me as I try to decide which of these comments pisses me off the most. The ones calling me greedy — saying we are taking advantage of the system, trying to get rich off our spoiled daughter who deserved to die, just because we can — or the ones giving kudos to the CHP for releasing the photographs that have twisted me into a pretzel of nerves. I wish everyone knew that the only people making money here are the attorneys who work for the defense. I must admit: What bothers me most is that any one of these people who comment about me without knowledge could be sitting right next to me in my office, could be living right next door, could be someone I do business with, and still, I would never know.

"No thanks, babe, I'm not hungry," I answer. I don't even notice that Lesli has already left the room.



Two weeks later, I am in my kitchen leafing through the defendants' demurrer. "Sovereign immunity is the rule in California," it says in black, bold letters. I count them: fourteen pages of reasons why we cannot hold their agency accountable. Page after page of excuses called immunity. Negligent or not, the CHP answers to no one, because the law protects an agency like the CHP when there's an accident or when they make a mistake. As far as I can tell, the agency is immune from any accountability.

I slam the paperwork down onto the table and think about that. I may be hard-headed, but this does not make sense — even to me. Accidents and mistakes *are* excusable. I get that. But creating an email — with an image that does not belong to you — takes thought, planning and consideration. It's a decision with a purpose and intention. Emailing those images of my daughter was not an accident or a mistake. It was a choice. It was an intentional, calculated act done with reckless disregard to my family's detriment. I'm sorry but I don't believe that any deliberate violation of department policy falls under *that* blanket

of immunity. And I don't believe our legal system was founded on such crap. But what do I know?

I look out the window and watch my girls haul out the trashcans, which are stuffed full and, at this point, far bigger than they are. I look down at the pages of legal documents I am holding and the next thing I know I am scrunching them into a hard ball of crumpled paper. I don't know if I'm angry, disappointed or shocked when I learn that this is what we are dealing with.

They call this a department issue, but so far, the only thing the CHP does about the issue is hold up their shield of sovereign protection and shoot us full of holes. "Hold up, girls," I say as I walk outside, slamming the door behind me. "Here's another piece of trash."



In our first pretrial hearing, the attorney general discloses the names of the two employees who are responsible for leaking, to the public, the inappropriate photographs that were taken during their so-called police investigation. According to the CHP, two of their emergency dispatchers, first improperly obtained the images of my daughter, and then emailed them outside of the CHP's secured email system. This is when *they* broke department policy. While the first dispatcher claims he sent the images to his family and friends, the second dispatcher swears he only sent them to his home computer.

"Wait a minute, Keith," I say into my Bluetooth as I drive home to my family. "These guys are at work — being paid with our tax dollars — using government computers to email confidential, investigative photographs of my daughter's corpse to their friends for absolutely no good reason? And this is not against the law? I can't press charges?" I feel an angry heat brewing beneath my hands. "And people are angry with *me* for wasting their tax dollars?"

I hit my hand against the steering wheel and roll down my window. Suddenly I'm too hot to breathe. I want to hit something. I want to hurt someone. I want to do whatever it takes to make sure these guys get what they deserve.

But somewhere, behind all of the darkness, there is a light that shines a bit brighter when we learn the names of these two dispatchers. I don't know this yet, but the dispatcher who sent the images to his family and friends, also worked for my family years ago — he and his sister did. I will find this out in a few weeks from now when the LAPD sends my brother a verification of employment form so this dispatcher can become a cop. Because that's just what we need, right? More rouge cops.

"Hey, Christos." Keith says. "If the courts grant us vicarious liability, we'll be able to sue these two dispatchers as individuals. They're getting their own lawyers now. They'll be teaming up with the CHP. You won't be able to press charges and see them go to jail, but at this point you need to take what you can get. With their admittance letter, the judge is allowing us to amend our complaint."

For one quick second, I feel a slight trickle of hope run through me when I think there is a chance that they will pay for what they did. "I don't know, Keith. It's all so black-and-white, yet for some reason, they're so committed to defend this. I don't know which bothers me more: the cyber-taunting, or the fact that these guys think they have a right to do what they did. You think they know something we don't?" I ask. "Why won't they just help us, for God's sake?" As I hang up the phone, I start to believe more than ever that there is more to this ruling than we know.

"Hello!" I holler when I walk through my kitchen door. "Anybody home?" I toss my keys onto the kitchen table and grab a fresh pile of mail. I poke my head into the family room. "Hello?" Nothing. Maybe Lesli took the girls shopping or out to lunch. Just this morning she told me she was feeling guilty about the distance between them. Then she thanked me for doing the best thing a father could do for his children: love their mother. And then she cried because the best thing a mother can do for her children is to be happy, and she's not able to do that anymore.

I wander down the hallway and up the stairs into the bedroom where I find my wife sitting in a ball on the floor in the corner. "What's wrong?" I ask. I reach down to lift her from the

ground and help her onto the sofa next to the window. She is sobbing hysterically, but she doesn't say a word.

I sit down next to her and loosen my tie. I take her chin into my hand and stare at her face while she cries. Sometimes when I look at her I don't see the pain in her eyes. I don't notice the giant hole that now exists between her heart and her soul. I don't see that she, too, has been split wide open. I forget that Nikki's her daughter, too, who has been ripped out of her life. Instead, what I see is a warm, forgiving woman. A wife and mother whose arms are always wide open and ready to take on the world with a single hug. I see a woman with compassion and strength, a woman of faith who knows exactly who she is. I see the part of me that I long to be, my other half, the half of my whole.



The next morning I'm staring out my office window, watching people walk to their cars and drive away when the strangest feeling comes over me. A whole string of thoughts wraps tightly around me, making me laugh and cry at the same time. It starts with a memory of Nikki when she was about three. We were stopped at a red light on our way to her preschool one morning when she asked me, "Only boys are allowed to spit, right Daddy?" I can almost see her little round face in my rearview mirror, so serious, so convinced.

"What?" I asked. What did she know about spitting, anyway?

"You told me only boys are allowed to spit!"

"No I didn't, I never said that," I protested.

"Yes you did, Daddy! You said spitting wasn't ladylike, remember!"

There is a knock on the door when I jump. I shuffle some paperwork into a nice square pile when a short, heavyset man walks into my office smiling behind an awkward stare.

"Excuse me sir, but are you Mr. Catsouras?"

"Why, who's asking?"

"This is for you," he says and he hands me a large envelope. "Hey, I'm really sorry about this, sir!"

I feel my eyes squeeze together then I peek inside the package of legal documents. And suddenly I have the urge to sit back down. "Oh, thanks," I say.

"Hey, no problem, sir."

The driver of the Honda that collided with Nikki is suing us for damages. I'm not too surprised or upset. I've been harboring such guilt ever since I heard his car was hit. But now suddenly everything around me begins to look fuzzy. It's probably my blood pressure acting up again. I never told Lesli that it was high when I saw the doctor last week. She has enough going on with herself and the kids. She doesn't need to be worrying about me.

My assistant, Martha, sees me through the glass wall. She pokes her head in and asks me if I'm okay. "Absolutely," I lie, forcing a smile. I put the paperwork back into the package and hand it over to her. "Forward this to Keith for me, please."

Now I feel my throat thicken and my eyes automatically shut. It's not self-pity, it's just one more snag in the slimming rope that dangles me over the edge of sanity. But it forces my thoughts on the Porsche, the wreckage — that day. As I'm pushing my thumbs deep into my temples, I am suddenly sitting on the floor in my buddy's kitchen. I see Sgt. Miller's blue eyes two inches from my face, his mouth shaping words I can't quite understand, and then just like that, I understand.

I feel my eyes snap open and my hand slaps the top of my desk. I suddenly remember how Sgt. Miller ordered me to stay away from that car. How he told me if I saw what happened to the car, it would destroy me forever. I think about that damn car sitting totaled in a storage lot somewhere restricted, concealed for *my* protection. Why, on Earth, would they protect me from that damn car and then spread photos of my daughter around as if she were a sound bite? I feel a burning in my throat as I pick up the phone and dial the towing company. I tell the receptionist that I received a letter from my insurance company and I need to come down right away and arrange for that car to be sent to a salvage yard.

"Sir, I have orders here." She says, "You are not permitted in the yard. Trust me. You really don't want to see that car. It's for your own good, you know."

"But I have some personal belongings in that car."

"I'm sorry sir; the lockdown order was issued by the CHP. You'll have to send a friend for your stuff."

I hang up the phone with only one thought in my head. That's when I decide to call MADD.

Mother's Against Drunk Driving is a national organization, and its mission is to stop drunk driving, support the victims of this violent crime, and prevent underage drinking. The woman I speak with does not want the wrecked car for two reasons. Number one, contrary to what the world believes, Nikki was not drunk, nor had she been drinking on the day of the accident. Number two, according to MADD, nationwide statistics have proven that showing graphic images of wrecked cars and deceased people is entirely ineffective. "Sir, we don't use scare tactics anymore," she says.

As she says this, I feel the blood rush to my head. I hang up the phone and my head drops like a rock onto the top of my desk. I can see in my mind all the things I will never have: Nikki's fingers holding out a peace sign, her college graduation, her wedding, her children, her love. And then the sound of her voice comes out of nowhere and touches the side of my face somehow: *It's okay Dad, I'm in heaven now with God.* I lift my chin just enough to see the photo of my four girls sitting on the beach with their mom. Everything fell apart so fast. And yet, I still don't know what happened.

It's so easy to forget all the things you were dealing with when you have been away from them for a while. Like how Nikki was eighteen and I couldn't force her to go to the hospital. Like how admitting her into a psych ward against her will would have gone on her permanent record. Like all of her medical issues that confused me. You think about those things when you have to, but you forget the intricacies that tangled your mind into a knot at the time. But this is how guilt etches its ugly presence into my head every time. Just one more woe to add to my list of afflictions, I guess.

When I get up to leave my office, I see one of my clients walking swiftly toward me. I think about turning around and walking the other way, but I don't. I stand and watch her inch closer, and again I force a smile. She looks sad, like a child who has just missed the ice cream truck, shocked and disappointed. I feel her arms trembling as she grabs hold of me, burying her face into my sleeve, lipstick and all.

"Oh, Christos." She looks up, her head shaking from side to side. "I've spent the whole morning looking for your phone number — online. I had no idea, Christos!" She puts her hands over her mouth. "Oh Christos, I didn't know you were going through all of this. I... I just had to come and find you."

"Oh, thanks! I'm glad you did," I say, but this not at all surprises me, and it's not the first time a client has come to my office to find me.

"I'm so sorry, Christos, I just can't believe what I saw. Well, I knew it was a bad accident, but...did you get my card?" She squeezes my hand.

"Yes, thank you!" I pull away. "My family is strong, we're doing fine," I say, lying again, but I change the subject because I don't want to talk about that. I don't want to know what happened to my daughter. I look away. I don't want to be rude, but suddenly I feel my chest begin to constrict.

"I wasn't sure if you still worked in this office, honey, and...well, you're not listed."

I turn to see her eyes glistening, reminding me of my mother — sweet and sincere. I know she means well. But now she begins to cry. "I just had to come find you and see if you're okay. Is there anything I can do?"

"No, no, thank you. I'm just trying to avoid the Internet right now. My biggest fear is coming across those photos. I... I don't want to know all the details." I add, "Anyway, I'm working here as a team leader now. I can't sell real estate at the moment. It's company policy. Did you get my letter?"

"*What...* no, well, I don't think I got a letter!" she says. "I, I don't know..."

"That's okay, I'll refer you..."

"Oh, Christos..." She cries and wraps herself tightly around me; her tears are falling like buckets onto my shoulder. I feel my throat swell when I pinch my eyes with my fingers, and I promise myself I won't cry.

Now I'm thinking about these dispatchers who have ruined my life, how my name and reputation are now buried beneath despicable remarks and disgusting accident photos, and how they haven't been fired for their repulsive conduct. Suddenly, I'm burning to know why. I walk back inside my office, sit down at my desk and Google the guy's name who sent the images to his friends.

For the past eight months, I have been terrified to search for anything on the Internet. Right now I'm so angry, I almost don't care if I see the photos. I scroll around and click on the first query entry with this guy's name when this jumps out at me: *your local OC Real Estate Agent*.

My jaw drops open. Suddenly there is a ringing in my ears and I feel my neck heating up underneath my tie.

This guy is a local real estate agent?

I scroll around to learn that not only does he still work for the CHP, he's a real estate sales agent in my area. And now it's all making sense. This is a personal thing. There is no way that any of this can be a coincidence. As I scroll around, I wonder what this guy has against me. What could I have possibly done to make him want to hurt my family this way, to destroy my reputation? Then I wonder how many kids he's trying to feed. But getting to the bottom of this is the least of my worries right now. And this is how I come to learn that evil isn't always so black and white. Sometimes it shows up in an ugly shade of gray.

I print out a stack of information about this asshole — the real estate career he has advertised, his phone number, his broker's phone number. And then I stick them into a legal envelope that I now hold in my trembling hands.

It takes a moment, and then I wonder if I can still sell houses the old-fashioned way. Then I look at my computer and realize it is only a matter of time. Then what will I do?



Oct. 31, 2007 is the first anniversary of the accident, and the phone hasn't stop ringing that familiar sound from just one year ago. Today I stay home from work, keep the kids home from school, and take my therapist's advice. Today I will take my family to visit the accident site. Today we will confront one of our greatest fears.

And here we are, rounding the corner at Alton Parkway, revisiting the day that I swore would kill me. The sight of it leaves me cold inside. I pull onto the shoulder and park the car. I sit for a second with my eyes closed and listen to the roar of cars whizzing past us. Lesli and the girls get out of the car, but I can't move. I just sit and think.

When I finally get out of my car, a gulp of dry heat collapses my lungs. But I keep walking, slowly, one foot in front of the other, until I have reached my girls. Danielle is crying pretty hard, Christiana is silent holding Danielle's arm to keep her from falling. Lesli has Kira pinned to her body. I try to breathe normal, stare at the tollbooth, and imagine the likelihood: What are the odds that car would hit the only thing standing within hundreds of feet from here?

I look around the area, dissecting the pavement, the dry brush and the tollbooth when I notice a reflection of something small tucked underneath some dead grass just a few feet away. The sight of it draws me over magnetically and when I bend down to pick it up, I feel my heart race. It's a small, splintered piece of a CD that must have flown out of the Porsche during the crash. I rub my thumb across the top and notice my handwriting and the letters, *Ni*.

Time suddenly stops. I have to concentrate to take my next breath. It's true. Everything you have ever loved and hoped for in your entire life can be trapped inside a single moment. I just stare at the letters and imagine my daughter's face. How is this happening?

I feel my legs buckle beneath me, my face buried in my hands, and I sob.

I took it for granted — my life, my family, my children. I always thought we would have tomorrow. Now there are no more opportunities, no button to rewind, no more trying to figure out Nikki. No more anything. It is over now.

I stick the small piece of plastic into my pocket and concentrate to force the air back into my lungs. But as hard as I try, I cannot find the strength to stand. And all I can hear are these words in my head: *It's too late! It's too late! It's too late!*

Everyone keeps telling me Nikki's in a much better place now. But I think that's all a bunch of crap. Because the best place for my daughter is here: with me, with her family. To grow up, get married, have children and work hard, to live here in this world — this evil, horrible, cruel world with savages, predators and an unjust legal system. I cry for a full five minutes before I realize that maybe it's true. Maybe Nikki is in a much better place.



Although it feels like only a week has passed since Nikki passed away, it's been one year since we filed our complaint against the CHP.

Nothing has changed; the photos continue to dominate the cyber world, infesting the Internet like cockroaches on a dark night. We still get emails from strangers and now Michael tells me he had to hire a guy to work full time on our file. Some website hosts remove the photos to avoid legal confrontation, only to post them up again under a pseudonym — like “stupid bitch,” or “Porsche girl.” Then we start the process all over again. It never ends.

I don't know how, but despite the impossible, Lesli and I have managed to hang onto that shred of hope that we will one day make the photos all go away. Maybe it's because today, after a year of complications and delays, we finally get the green light to begin the discovery process on our civil lawsuit. I have to admit I didn't think we would get this far. And I don't know what will come of it. But I am thankful for the opportunity because I know better than anyone that we are in for the fight of our life.

Tyler has lined up depositions for next week, and Keith has subpoenaed the video from the camera at the tollbooth where the investigation unfolded. We are certain this video will uncover the truth. It will tell us everything we need to know —

every infraction, every violation — including whether or not someone illegally uncovered Nikki's body to get the gruesome photographs. If the coroner is right, and a violation of the law did occur, then we'll have what we need to proceed — a cause of action.

When I walk in from work, Lesli hands me a document with her written account of the promises officers made to us on the day of our daughter's death — promises that lulled us into a false sense of security, promises to protect us from the pain of the unimaginable, promises that were already broken, promises that have sliced us like a knife every day ever since.

I bend down to kiss Kira and watch her draw a picture of herself holding her mother's hand underneath a rainbow in a beautiful place. Somewhere that doesn't exist, I imagine. Danielle and Christiana are baking brownies together in the kitchen, laughing, making a mess. "Here Dad, your favorite..." Christiana hands me her spoon to taste and my cell phone rings. When I see that it's Keith, I dash into my office where I can lock the door and be alone.

"What's up?"

"Are you sitting down?"

"What now?"

"Well, Christos, I just found out there's nothing on that Caltrans video." As Keith says this, I hear the loudest pop in my head. "I know you were anxious to see it, but apparently the video machine broke when the car hit the toll booth — there's no video footage."

"What?"

I heard him, but I don't believe him. "No, Keith, that's not true," I say. "I remember reading something about a dust cloud in the police report."

I think back to the first time I read the report, over a year ago, before the photos went viral. "The video showed a dust cloud before the car hit the tollbooth, and then it shows the car pinned against the door of the tollbooth after impact. So the camera was working after impact, according to their report. There must be a mistake?"

I say the words, but that is not what I am really thinking. I am really thinking that someone is up to no good. And I am thinking I'm not going to let them get away with it.

Keith reads it again. "No Christos, I've got it in writing from Caltrans: There's nothing on that video."

I rummage quickly through the pile of papers I keep in a red envelope at the bottom of the stairs — papers of the accident — papers that I haven't had the courage to look at again until now. I sit down on the step and read them one by one until I find the original accident report. And here it is, in black and white. "Hey Keith, I'm right, there is a video, or there was one." I follow the words with my fingers when my pulse quickens. "The officer who wrote this report obviously saw a video; he obviously had it in his possession when he wrote this." Now I can't get it figured out fast enough. "I don't know what they're telling you Keith, but someone's lying. There is a video. I have the report! There *is* a goddamn video!"

I shake the pinpricks out of my hands as I scan through the report. It seems like every time we get a few inches closer, we just get kicked back a dozen more feet. I have to figure this out — what it is they're trying to hide. This is when I see the guy's name. "Keith," I say, "this officer that took the photos." I turn the page and just as I suspect, he's the same officer who told the media there was alcohol in the Porsche.

Damn? Why didn't I know that?

"We need to be going after him, too!" I tell Keith.

"Christos, these things take time, they have a process. We have to follow procedures, and I swear to you I'm all over it! Have some faith, for God's sake."

"I just want to get my camera and go take pictures of this guy's face after I get finished with him. Damn it, Keith, these are the cops, they're supposed to serve and protect, and all they have done is f— with me." I feel my hand constrict, but instead of punching the closest wall, I take a breath and silently count to ten. I think about my family and all the pain the CHP has put us through. As I stand, I suddenly get it: There is something in that video besides a dust cloud. Something they don't want us to see.

"Keith," I say, "we cannot let them get away with this."

"Christos, who do you think you're talking to? They're not going to get away with anything — none of them. I'm going to kick their sorry butts all over the courtroom, and don't you forget that. Listen, you don't need to worry, we start depositions day after tomorrow. We'll find out exactly what happened that day — exactly what went wrong.

"We will get to the bottom of this. And when we get our day in court, we will prevail and make things right again for your family. You know, right after I kick their CHP butts."

I hang up the phone and feel the salt from my skin sting my eyes. I'm so shocked and disappointed I don't know whether to laugh or cry or if I should just break something. I walk over to the doorway where I'm greeted with the smell of hot chocolate brownies. For a moment, I just stand and watch my precious daughters making a mess in their mother's kitchen — happy, as if nothing were so horribly wrong. Even from here, I can hear the bubbly hum of laughter and it soothes me somehow. But when I see Christiana grab the stainless steel bowl with a wooden spoon in her hand, I am hit with the most amazing memory.

About two months before the accident, Christiana was sick with a head cold. She had slept through dinner so I decided to go check on her. But she wasn't in her bedroom. She wasn't anywhere. I walked down the hall, it was dark, but there were lights flickering from Nikki's bedroom. Curious, I walked over to check it out. There were candles everywhere, burning in unison, and there was Christiana, lying on the bed while Nikki stirred something in that stainless steel bowl. Danielle was standing against the wall with her hand over her mouth, trying to keep from laughing. I watched Nikki rub a greenish colored paste onto Christiana's face, around the sliced cucumbers that were covering her eyes. She looked like a bug.

"Ouch, Nikki," she cried. "It stings."

"Just wait," Nikki said. "It's working. Your body is releasing your toxins. Just breathe, and think of something smooth like the ocean."

Nikki's arms balanced steadily in the air as she waved her hands rhythmically over Christiana's face. Nikki was dead serious. "Are you feeling better yet?" she asked.

Christiana sat up and pulled the cucumbers from her eyes. "*Better...* Are you kidding me, Nikki..." she said and then stormed off. Danielle ran after her, laughing hysterically.

And just for one quick second, I see Nikki's face looking at me, thrown by her sister's anger. I feel my body relax. My pulse slows to a harmony of thoughts, and for the first time in weeks, I stop thinking about the CHP. For the moment, nothing else matters to me. What could be more important than a memory — one cherished moment with my precious gifts? I think this is the first time since the accident that I have actually laughed aloud.

Today Keith hires a team of forensic computer specialists to recover the source and succession of emails that went viral on the Web. It's time consuming and expensive, but it's crucial. We may not get to see what took place at the accident scene, but we'll see what took place inside the CHP's computer system. This is when the pieces of the puzzle start fitting together for me. And I'm beginning to understand why Lesli is so certain God chose Keith to represent us.

For the first time in over a year, I have a relieved, peaceful feeling coursing through my veins. In fact, I was singing in the shower this morning — something I haven't done in as long as I can remember. Maybe it's because we are finally going to get somewhere. Maybe this is what faith is: believing that maybe, just maybe, God really is at work in your life.

Whatever it is, today I am determined to have a good day. Let life just happen. Maybe even enjoy my office meeting and stay after to answer some questions, enjoy a cup of coffee or two. Everything is good. Or as Nikki would say, "Life just feels smooth right now."

But then, without fail, I'm interrupted with something complicated or thought consuming like Martha standing on the other side of the thick glass wall. She is waving the phone in her hand, bidding me to come when she mouths the word

attorney. This is true about my life: nothing ever goes smoothly for long.

I walk into my office, grab a clipboard, and sit down at my desk. I pick up a pen and then the phone. "It's good news, right Keith? They've signed over the copyrights." I say this jokingly, of course.

"Well, Christos, are you sitting down?"

It's not the words in his mouth, but the tone in his voice that makes my heart skip a beat. "One of the dispatchers has just served us with anti-SLAPP motion, and we can't get a hearing before the court until our next scheduled court date, a month from now — and that's not a good thing."

"A what?" I say. "I'll motion to *slap* his ass from here to China, what the hell is an anti-slap motion?"

"Christos, California's anti-SLAPP statute is a special motion to strike a complaint where the complaint arises from conduct that falls within the rights of petition and free speech. In other words, Christos, they are saying that we have violated their First Amendment rights, which is totally outrageous and without merit. But when an anti-SLAPP is filed it puts everything on hold. Our discovery process has been put on a stay; no depositions, no computers, no evidence to support our claims. They obviously have something to hide. It's clever though. I would have never thought of that."

"Just like that, everything goes back on hold?"

"I'm afraid so, Christos, I'm sorry."

I'm listening. I don't even notice that I'm drawing a hole in my paper with my pen. For a moment, I entertain the thought of finding this dispatcher's attorney and beating his head into a wall.

"It is no great stretch of imagination to know that they are up to something. The other dispatcher is also off the hook with this motion," Keith says. "Anyway, he's claiming now that he was going to use the images for educational purposes."

"Educational purposes, are you kidding me?"

Suddenly I feel my arms stiffen. My hands feel hot and ball into fists. Those photos are swarming all over websites: sites that cater to the police, to the macabre, to sports car fans, even necrophilia websites, but they have never been

found on any educational websites. I stand up. "Keith, I bet the governor wouldn't put up with this crap. I bet laws would be made, people would be thrown in jail — or at least fired — if something like this happened to his kid!"

I say this right before I slam my fists down onto my desk. It's like pumping a flat tire with a hole in it. You pump, and pump, until so much sweat and blood has covered your face you can no longer see. And just when you think you are finally finished filling it, you notice it's still flat.

"Christos," Keith says. "As of today, we are right back where we started a year ago. The problem is we're required to show a cause of action in order to proceed. Without any proof, we have nothing to convince the court. We're screwed."

My head is swimming.

"You mean...we just have to let the photos hang around on the Internet forever?"

He doesn't have to answer. We are going to lose our chance at ever getting them off.

After we hang up, I am furious. My hands are shaking. I can't think. But I'm starting to get it. All those attorneys I had talked to on the phone were right: You can't sue the state of California. They will stop you at every turn.

"Damn them!"

I lay my head down onto my hands, not noticing the tears. If only they would have locked up those damn photos — the way they have locked up this entire investigation — I wouldn't need their help for anything. And I wouldn't be sitting here, with an office job — something I swore I would never even entertain. I feel the temperature rise inside me. My hands are shaking so hard but I force them to open and close.

How do I let this go?

Well, I may not know what this dispatcher is hiding under his armored shield of sovereign protection, but I do know that I will live in a cardboard box if that's what it takes to make those images disappear. This is what I'm thinking while I'm driving home to explain to my wife that the CHP has wiggled their way out of this entire discovery process. And now I'm thinking they have done this before.

The bottom line: Publishing police photographs of a fatality should be against the law. It's absurd to think that a cold-blooded murderer could go online, click a button and gawk at his victims because a 9-1-1 dispatcher felt like emailing pictures to his friends. It's ridiculous to think that everyone of us is at risk of being violated this way.

My guess is that it's only a matter of time before one of these trusted cops crosses the line and offers up a high price for the death photos of someone famous. I wonder how our governor would feel if a state official sold death photos of his child to the paparazzi and they ended up on TMZ or on other Hollywood websites. I wonder if he could just let it go.

Tues. 4:19 p.m., Jan. 1, 2008

4:19 pm January 1, 2008 | **anonymous** wrote:

No wimmenz on the internets.... not even headless ones.....

4:28 pm January 1, 2008 | **Anon** wrote:

Dude, when she died in that accident, I was SO HAPPY! I raped her corpse over and over until I came in her dead womb with her dead fetus, which I also raped.

4:32 pm January 1, 2008 | **Anonymous** wrote:

I'm terribly sorry for your loss.

I can't imagine how painful it must be to lose a porsche 911 like that :(

4:36 pm January 1, 2008 | **Anonymous** wrote:

By the way, you'll never catch us from EbaumsWorld and SomethingAwful!

4:42 pm January 1, 2008 | **anon4chan** wrote:

I FAP TO THOSE IMAGES NEVAR TAKE THEM DOWN>

6:44 pm January 1, 2006 | **Anonymous** wrote:

So a spoiled little bitch stole her Daddy's Porsche, then drives like a moron and dies for it...

Now we can see the results of her idiocy all over the internet. As her parents you have a right to grieve and mourn the loss of your daughter, but as people you should be ashamed. She STOLE a car. She drove it at 100+ mph. She clipped another car. She is DEAD because she was being stupid.

Ten



Lesli

IT IS NOT WITHIN OUR genetic makeup to forgive someone for doing something so wrong it makes your teeth hurt from clenching. It is not within our scope of understanding to believe that something good can come out of something so horrible it makes you lie awake all night. And it is not within our feeble minds to accept the unacceptable: at least, this is true for me.

Like clockwork, this is the month that Nikki would normally have her annual MRI assessment. Every year around the first week in January, we would take a drive to Children's Hospital of Orange County and all the feelings and emotions from the years before would be fresh and alive in the pit of my stomach. It would start with anxiety, move into dread, and end with despair — until the next morning, when the doctor would call and give us permission to exhale.

But now, instead of January being filled with fear and uncertainty for Nikki's life, they are filled with lies and gossip about her death. And because we are finally nearing our day in court on a demurrer (a motion to dismiss the case altogether),

the paper has decided to write a story on behalf of the defense. Now we will have to wade through news articles that throw controversy to the public like a sizzling steak to a pack of wild dogs.

“Like anything else, Lesli, it’s just part of the process,” Tyler says. “They want to do an update on the progress — although there is none — but this time, the defense wants a chance to speak, share their side of the story.” And just when I feel my insides knot up, he tells me this: “The defense is going to use the *blame the victim* approach.” I lean myself against the wall to keep from falling, trying to keep my tears hidden from my mom, who is standing next to me in my kitchen. It is only when my dad asks me what is wrong that I lose it altogether.

Despite the fact that the story is not about Nikki, the paper will make it public knowledge that cocaine metabolites were found in her system at the time of the collision. I will never salvage my daughter’s dignity. When Tyler tells me this, I feel my cheeks burn. “That is so not the point of this!” I protest. “That was something we were dealing with privately, as a family, something that no one could possibly understand. Anyway, that has nothing to do with the CHP leaking the photos! That’s what this case is about, right?”

“Yes. That’s right it is, and don’t you forget that!” Tyler says, “Look, the defense is just trying to get under our skin, scare us away. If that’s the way the defense wants to play, let them. It’s just going to make them look foolish. Besides, we don’t have any say in the matter, and fighting in the media is as sleazy as you can get. Anyway, they’re the bad guys here, and don’t you forget that.”

It’s true; none of this will help their case. The judge won’t even allow it in his courtroom — and the defense knows this. I suppose it’s just another opportunity for the defendants to twist the already jagged knife they have stabbed us with in the first place. “Hey,” Tyler says. “We have their admittance letter. They can lock up all the evidence, knock us around in the media, but we have everything we need. Think positive thoughts, it’ll all be over soon.”

The next morning the paper arrives on my front doorstep. I fumble my way downstairs, switch on the lights, and head straight for my front porch. This time the photo is of one of the defendants. I can't bear to read it so I toss it onto the kitchen table and start the coffee instead. Christos walks in while I'm looking for something to eat.

"Good morning," he says, and I look at him, assuming he has forgotten about today's newspaper. I blindly pour some cereal into a bowl when I am stopped by his voice. "Oh good God...they're saying Nikki committed a felony by stealing my car and driving over the speed limit, and of course, because she used cocaine!"

Slowly I turn feeling the knife in my back twist. "Of course," I say. "This way everyone can forget what this story is really about. What happened *after* the police took over the accident scene, not before. The story should be about the dispatchers conduct, not Nikki's." I assume the defense is giving us a taste of what to expect if we are able to have a jury trial. But now, any hope of forgiveness that I have tried to muster has just drained out of me.

"This is all a bunch of crap!" Christos says. I sit down next to him and skim through the article. I'm already angry, but now I'm angry, disturbed and frustrated.

I slide the paper to the end of the table, away from my face. "I don't know why they keep printing these articles. Why do they call it a human-interest story, why do people have a right to know anything?"

"Well, I think people have a right to know." Christos says. "They have a right to know that the CHP is defending their employees even after they broke department policies and harmed members of the public. They have a right to know how the CHP has refused to help us over the past year." Christos stands from the table and slaps his hand down on top of the newspaper. He faces me. "Yeah, people have a right to know, because the same thing is going to happen to them. I don't understand why they don't print that in the paper."

I sip my coffee and think about our first phone call to the CHP, a year ago, and how easy it would have been for them to stop the websites. I think about the urgency in Christos'

voice. I think about how they slighted him. I think about Sgt. Miller, and how hard he worked to protect us from all of this. I remember the tears in his eyes. I wonder what he thinks of all of this. I set my coffee down on the table and cover my face with my hands. “We’re going to live like this for the rest of our lives, aren’t we?” As I say this, I feel the tears creep their way to the surface. Could something so horribly wrong actually be right?

I used to believe that our police officers were who you ran to when you were in danger. I used to believe that our justice system was how we fought and punished the bad guys, and I used to believe that God answered my prayers. I feel my husband’s hand on the back of my shoulder and his breath in my ear. “No,” his grip tightens. “I will *not* let that happen!”



It’s dark, the sky is orange and hazy, and I am standing alone on the edge of a cliff. I know that I am dreaming, but it feels incredibly real. I bend over the side to look down. It’s deep. There’s no visible end in sight. Instinctively I know that if I jump I will die, which means that I will finally be able to see Nikki again. I’m not afraid at all, so without thinking, I jump. I’m soaring downward. The air is cool on my skin, light and breezy, and there is no turning back. But as I approach the end, preparing to cross over into death, I notice it’s not Nikki waiting there for me at all. Instead, it’s my other three daughters.

“*Girls!*” I shout, and sit straight up. I feel my husband’s hand press against my back. But he doesn’t say a word.

I look out the window at the waning darkness and feel the most incredible sense of guilt. And then I remember what day it is. Today, four days after Keith and Tyler pled our case in front of the court; the Honorable Judge Perk will post his decision explaining why we do *not* have a right to proceed with a lawsuit against the CHP. I don’t really know this yet, but this is what I feel — in my bones — as I lie back down and lament with frustration. Because even with a boatload of evidence hiding behind a court-ordered stay, with this decision,

we will never get the chance to prove the CHP broke any laws. And it's all just enough to bring me crashing down to reality.

The irony is that Keith is the one, from the very beginning, who said we would never get anywhere with this complaint. But it's Keith holding onto faith — not me. I already know that God has made other plans for us. I already know that we have lost this battle. And now I'm not sure if I'm losing my faith, or if I'm just hiding this question in my protest to God: *Why did you let us go through all of this just to lose?*

In my mind, I go over every scenario, every conversation with Keith — about a hundred times — trying to find something positive to focus on, but there is nothing. I almost believed him when he said that we just might get a judge arrogant enough to kick this one out of court — that the law in California is very clear on survivor privacy, that the offense was done to Nikki and not us, and that California state employees are immune to just about everything. Deep down I want to believe he's wrong, yet something keeps telling me that in spite of how I feel, he is right about everything.

I know the judge will dismiss our complaint. I can sense it. I don't feel or hear anything, but I know it's there — the voice that is trying to tell me that everything will be okay. Instead, the only voice I hear is Keith's trailing through the instruments of my mind, like a harpist strumming the same tune over and over again. *"The law is very clear on survivor privacy, and the Internet has free reign."*

I walk outside to the patio chair that sits next to Nikki's bedroom. Sometimes, when I sit here, I don't see the injustice — the moral and ethical wrong that is right, according to the law. I can see only the tiny paint stain that dripped on a cushion the day we let Nikki sketch murals on her bedroom walls one summer afternoon.

It frightens me to think about my life without Nikki — the girl who thought sundried tomatoes were grown that way, whose favorite number was four, because it followed her around like a lucky penny; the girl who kept me awake at night for the past eighteen years wondering when our world would come to a complete stop. It frightens me to think that

we have lost the right to lay her to rest in peace, the right of closure, the right to grieve. It frightens me to think I will not be able to remember my precious daughter without the dark cloud of death looming over my shoulder.

Christos sees me crying through the window and brings me a cup of hot coffee. I'm usually careful not to let anyone see me cry, but this time I just can't stop myself. He sits down next to me and pulls me into his chest. "I love you," he says, and I watch a rivulet of tears pour from his eyes. Years from now, when memories fade, and I'm having trouble recalling the slightest details of Nikki's life — the tiny dimple at the side of her chin, the way her nostrils moved ever so slightly when she spoke — I will have Christos to remind me of these things. With my finger, I trace the tiny droplet that trails down his cheek and I smile. Because sometimes the most beautiful part of a man is his pain, his grief, and the tears he will cry forever.



Only an hour has passed since Christos left for work. Yet here I am, still standing in the doorway, staring into open space, waiting for the phone to ring. So after another hour passes — taking with it every fingernail I tried to grow on my own — I decide to keep myself busy by reorganizing the house. I start in the kitchen when the phone finally rings. I can't find it anywhere. "Ugh," I shout and then I trip over a cardboard box and land straight on my nose and into the phone. "Yeah," I answer. "Hello." I can't really talk so I just sit on my kitchen floor and listen as Tyler and his sorry news tumbles down on me like a brick building.

"Well," he says, "it's Judge Perk's opinion that the CHP does *not* owe a duty to the family members of deceased accident victims for any violations their employees execute — even if they were negligent and deliberate. So any harm *to you guys* caused by CHP employees is simply immune to legal remedy. If Nikki were alive she could sue for damages, but this is California and her rights died with her. I'm really sorry Lesli, but we cannot take legal action against the CHP. In

Judge Perk's opinion, they broke no laws. Our case has been officially thrown out."

Even though I knew this would happen, I am so dumbfounded with the news that I hang up without saying good-bye. But before I lay the phone back down on the receiver, it rings again in my hand. "Hello," I say, expecting it to be Tyler again.

But it's not Tyler. It's one of our good friends. "Ah... Lesli," he says. "You'll never guess who I saw having a chummy lunch together on the day of your court hearing."

"I'm listening," I say, confused because what does he know about our court hearing?

"The defense attorneys — representing the two dispatchers — had lunch with Judge Perk. I don't know what they were talking about, but they were talking and it looked serious. I just thought you should know."

After a few minutes of silence I hang up the phone — along with it the truth that we never even stood a chance.



This time I am sorting through DVD's when the phone rings. It's Keith. I answer. "So," I say, chagrined. "They won."

"For the moment," Keith says, "only for the moment." There is a quick beat of silence before I hear a change in his voice. "You know," he says, "sometimes good things come out of bad situations. You see Lesli the appellate court is where you make law! Listen, I'm filing an appeal. If the appellate court overturns Judge Perk's decision, we might just change the law. This could be a shortcut to our final destiny, and Nikki's final resting place. I think this is a blessing in disguise."

"Do you think so? Do you really think we can change the law?" As I ask the question, I glance up to see Christos walking through the door. His tie is hanging loosely around his neck, so I assume he is finished for the day. I hand him the phone. "It's Keith," I whisper. "He's talking about an appeal."

I wish I could say I feel as confident as Keith sounds right now. But losing this first round has really left its sting in me. I

worry about the images living on the Internet. I worry that moving forward is the wrong thing to do. I worry about my children and their emotional well being, especially if they come across the photos. And I'm certain one-day they will. I want to believe this decision to proceed down the legal trail is part of God's plan. Who am I to say that God should work by *my* rulebook?

Christos grabs my arm and passes me the phone. "I'm going to get changed," he whispers. "Keith wants to talk to you about the costs of an appeal. Hold on, Keith," he says, "she's right here."

As I watch Christos walk down the hall, I feel my heart race inside me. And despite the fact that I know well and good that we cannot afford to appeal this, my mind does the calculations anyway. I put the phone to my ear and listen to Keith assuring me that we will make law through the appellate court. It sounds easy. But the truth is I am completely overwhelmed with the risk. It's too much to lose.

"Listen," Keith says, "the appeals process is precarious and there are a lot of exorbitant costs involved, but I really think we have a responsibility to see this thing through. Something is telling me that we need to do this. California laws need to catch up to the Internet, and I feel extremely confident that this court has made a mistake. You know, sometimes unanswered prayers are just miracles waiting to happen. Look, I really think we're going to get a miracle here. That's why this next process is coming out of my own pocket." As he says this, I feel a million knots untangling inside of me. The ground beneath me must have lifted because suddenly I'm on my knees.

"Thank you, Keith!" is all I can say before my eyes fill with water and my throat closes shut. I let the information swirl around in my head when I get the strangest feeling of Nikki.

Sometimes it feels as if somewhere along the way I struck a deal with God. Sometimes it feels as if this is what I had agreed to in return for ten extra years with Nikki. I don't know why or even if that is possible, but sometimes I am sure that's what I did.

“Oh, and by the way,” Keith says, “one of the defendants has just served us. He’s letting us know that if we don’t drop the complaint, he’ll sue us for damages.” I hear Keith laughing on the other end of the phone. “Just so we’re clear. We are *not* dropping the complaint.”

Christos

February 2009 One year later

I don't think it's possible to save the world, or rid the planet of evil. I don't think it's conceivable for any one person to walk through this life without a scratch, and I no longer think that righteousness has anything to do with justice. But I do think that God has given me way more than I can handle. I think he has finally taken me beyond my own mortal limits.

In the course of a year, we have filed an appeal with the state of California — in order to win the right to take legal action against the CHP — taken a second mortgage and a personal loan to supplement our income, have attended two funerals, and helped Lesli's father through open-heart surgery. Lesli now has a full-time job — a first for her in twenty-two years — and last month, she began home-schooling our fourth grader while she works.

Other than that, nothing else has changed. The images still run wild on the World Wide Web and so do the predators who keep them there. Like pop-up clowns, no matter how many times we push them down they just bounce right back up.

We have not begun to grieve for one reason: Just as we become vulnerable enough to let our defenses down, one of us inadvertently comes across a photo on the Internet, and the world, as we know it, shatters into tiny pieces all over again.

Even with this knowledge, the California Highway Patrol continues to defend the fact that posting death photos onto the Internet is a good thing. Now they call it a public service while they fight us — heavy fisted — for their right to continue this ridiculous service. If you ask me, it's like tossing a drowning man a lifejacket made out of lead. It adds insult to the injury.

But somewhere along the way, Lesli, the kids and I vowed to fight either until we make certain these agencies can never do this to someone else, or until God himself stops us. Because the hope that we once had of finding solitude,

redemption or any kind of healing has been flushed down a legal system that has failed us. So we are making it our mission to fix that broken system. Because this is not surrender that you see on our faces. These are defensive wounds.

Keith comes in to meet us. "Christos...Lesli," he says. "Good to see you." His eyes look tired, and why shouldn't they? He was in trial court all day and now he is back in the office to meet with us.

I concentrate hard and smile. Over the last couple of years, I have learned that if you work hard enough on your appearance, nobody notices how messed-up you are on the inside.

"Newsweek called again, Newsweek, CNN, 'The Doctor Phil Show'..." Keith is sorting through files, "they really want to talk to you about getting your story out there." He looks at me. "I've told them you're not interested at this point, that we're trying to keep the attention off the photographs, but it sounds like they're willing to take a proactive approach, bring in some public awareness, the legal issues. Here's some info." He hands me the files.

"Forget it!" I say.

Keith stares at me from behind a scowl. "Just think about it, Christos."

"No, I'm not interested." I look at Lesli. "I won't do it!"

If there is one thing I've learned about Keith this past year is that he doesn't take "no" for an answer. "Just think about it," he says.

Lesli puts her hand on my shoulder. "What if they really do want to help?"

I look her in the eyes. I don't need to say a word. She knows I'm not going to speak to the media.

This will be their third mock trial in two months — our first. And as the minutes climb, we watch the conference room slowly transform into a courtroom with mock judges and attorneys. Tyler thinks it's a good idea for us to experience the attitude of the courtroom. But mostly it's about getting Everett Skillman, our appellate specialist, ready for oral arguments on Friday.

A young woman in a suit walks in with a smile. "Good evening." She offers us a glass of water. "I'm one of the attorneys here with the firm, and I've been working very closely on your case. I find it very interesting."

"Oh," Lesli smiles. "I find it very overwhelming," she says, and I flip through the media files.

"I can imagine," the woman says. "I'm going to be acting as one of three justices that will be slinging questions at Everett tonight. He should be here soon." She points to the chairs. "Please, sit down and make yourselves comfortable."

I take a seat. "What kind of questions will you be asking?"

"Well for starters," she says, "we'll be going over the fact that you didn't get to do any discovery. How does a judge make a decision when he hasn't seen any evidence?"

"Right," I nod. "Of course."

"You think they'll allow us to do that now?" Lesli asks.

"I don't know," she says. "We have a lot of issues to focus on." While she searches through her briefcase, she reminds us that the California Superior Court does not recognize survival privacy — the rights to privacy of survivors of people like Nikki. "It's up to us to convince the appellate court to extend that privacy right to us through case law, but that's just a small part of it." She looks at me. "You need to be prepared for the courtroom on Friday." Her eyes dart quickly to Lesli. "You need to be prepared for the worst."

Suddenly the door flies open. Keith steps into the room. Everett walks directly behind him. "We ready to do this?" Keith claps his hands together. Everyone takes their seats. I lean back on the thick leather chair and brace myself.

When we lost Nikki, I thought I would die. I thought I would never breathe again and here I am in the fight of my life. Yet I'm beginning to believe that this fight to protect Nikki's memory, her dignity, and my sanity will be the very thing that eventually kills me.

I sink further down into my seat and watch the attorneys flip through their notes.

I feel myself try to swallow, but I can't. I'm listening to their voices, commanding, authoritative — defensive — and

the sound begins to spin all around me. Something is not right. Why don't these people understand that Nikki was so sweet — special — that this is not right? I pull my chair closer to the table, fold my hands and remind myself that this is nothing in comparison to what my children will have to endure for the rest of their lives if we don't stop it.

I don't realize I'm crying until Lesli puts her hand on top of mine. "Hey, are you okay?"

I shake my head and wipe my eyes. "I'm fine," I say. "I'm just tired." I lie because it's easier than having to admit that listening to strangers talk about my daughter — people who didn't even know her telling each other that she was not important, that she was irrelevant and that her rights died when she did — is killing me.

Behind me on the other side of the thick glass wall is the reception area. Although it's late — way past business hours — people are shuffling through like it's the middle of a business day. I notice the elevators that extend into the hall just past the front desk. Part of me wants to hurry into one of them and run as far away as I possibly can. But another part of me wants to stay and make certain that the world understands that this matters.

The mock trial was only supposed to last an hour, but almost three have passed. I shift in my seat when Keith stands. His eyes narrow and his voice rises with the energy in the room. He smacks his hand down onto our file that is now about two-feet thick. He gives a loud, visually graphic explanation for why we are here and then reminds everyone that the photos are still alive on the Internet. I look around at all the puzzled faces when I realize: *Maybe this is why God chose Keith to represent us — to help us change the parameters of the Internet world.*

I look at my wife and the calm expression on her face. This is all I have to see to make me finally understand. We are going to convince the appellate court to change the law in California. And then we are going to tame the wild, wild Web.

And just like that, I understand. God didn't overestimate my limits. He extended them. It's a feeling, I guess, like all the other feelings I've had, but either way, I know what I know.

We are going to win this appeal.



I wonder if it's true when they say what doesn't kill you only makes you stronger? I have wondered this for two years now, but stronger, I don't think so. More angry, bitter, capable of doing something I might regret, yeah maybe, but stronger — no way.

It's two days before oral arguments in the appellate court, and I'm feeling like I need a vacation. I need to keep my mind busy on something productive. So I sit down to check my business emails, although the only emails I open are usually from friends telling me they are still coming across the images of my daughter on the Internet. Yesterday, an anonymous person with a German Web domain downloaded multiple videos containing the accident photos. Today, someone has emailed me proof.

Horror comes to life in me once again, along with fear for my wife and my children. This time the images hide under a tribute page, a lullaby, and Nikki's beautiful face. These are more offensive than any others we had found so far because you are expecting to see something beautiful. I can tell myself this will end soon; I can convince myself that I will get used to it somehow. But the truth is it cuts me fresh every time.

One day, a few months ago, I purchased every combination of Web domain names that I could think of in order to circumvent the images away from my family name. Until then I had managed to avoid seeing the worst of them. But that particular day, I was so focused on protecting my family, when I clicked on what I thought was my new website. I came face to face with the most disturbing image out there. And that was the first time I thought about killing someone. It was the first time I let my thoughts have their way with me. It was then that my fantasies — of seeing death and blood on someone else — become an idol to me. Eventually, it became my deepest conviction.

I have to remind myself every day to stay proactive, not reactive — something I was taught while I was recovering at a

mental hospital from my first breakdown. Honestly, if my wife hadn't taken away my gun, or convinced me to check myself in, I know I would have been locked away someplace else. But that is something I don't like to talk about.

I turn on my music and beat my desk rhythmically, when it suddenly hits me.

I need to fight fire with fire.

Because sometimes when a fire is raging out of control you have no other choice but to light a match, start a new fire in the path of the flames and halt its advance. Sometimes it is the risk that brings the reward. And anyway, what the hell have I got to lose? I don't even think twice before I pick up the phone and dial Newsweek magazine.

Lesli

This morning, two hours before oral arguments, I'm in the shower attempting to wash away the nerves when I hear Christos' voice. "Hey, check this out." He presses the front page of the L.A. Times up against the glass shower door. I look closely at the photo and scan the headline. It seems that someone from the LAPD has been accused of releasing confidential evidence photographs of a famous pop singer after she was beaten in a domestic dispute. "Can you believe this, the day of oral arguments? I mean, what a coincidence, right?" he says.

I have to admit I am not surprised. I knew it was only a matter of time. And I know it won't be the last time, either. But I have to wonder: Did someone pay the police officer for the photograph? Will he lose his job? Maybe he wouldn't care if he lost his job. Maybe he collected a hefty compensation and will never have to work again.

Christos looks angry, like a ravenous tiger ready to tear into his prey. "If you ask me," he says, "the bastard needs to get his ass kicked!" I stare at the page through the glass door, feeling that familiar sting of defeat and betrayal. *They did it again.*

I close my eyes in disgust and try to think of one valid explanation for this violation of privacy. "That poor girl, she's Nikki's age you know." I grab a towel and make my way over to the vanity. "God! Why do they think they have the right to do that?"

As it stands today, there is no law in the state of California to prevent police officers from publishing photographs taken during a police investigation. Although doing so may break internal policy, such conduct usually results in few if any repercussions.

"So much for relying on ethics and decency anymore." Christos tosses the newspaper into the trash and sits down, thoroughly revolted.

"Christos," I say, tying the towel onto my head. "You're wrong!" I grab the paper out of the trash and slap it down on his lap. "This is *not* a coincidence."

Christos

I made a promise to Lesli, just this morning, that I wouldn't do this. But as soon as I've gotten the girls off to school, I sit down at my desk and read — one more time — the opposition briefs filed by the defendants. And this is how my anger ignites. It comes to life with a vengeance this time; I feel its heat brewing hot beneath my skin, as if the words were the sulfur and I was the match; they spark the flame that burns away another layer of me.

I'm flipping through the pages so fast I begin to feel dizzy. Lesli is right. I need to stop reading this crap. So I lean myself back and close my eyes. I think about everything I have been through over the last few years and how this experience has affected me. I see myself walking through a haze of grief, one foot in front of the other. I see my pain and shock, and how it turned to frustration, then to anger. I see myself sitting in a courtroom, searching for answers, obsessing over laws, the Internet, trying to find justice and closure, some peace. But all I find are accusations and delays — precious time being wasted.

I see myself staring into my computer, reading emails, being taunted, slamming my fist through the screen. I see a man demented, screaming out obscenities in his sleep. I see myself planning revenge and then loading my gun. I see now why I spent time in a mental health facility. My anger consumed me like a fire; it grew because the CHP and their dispatchers fueled it.

Just the other night I opened up a message that was sent to my daughter Danielle's Facebook account. She never wanted to be on Facebook, but she's in the music entertainment industry now — a singer-songwriter — and her job requires her to use social networking. We figured if she kept her last name out of it no one would find her to harass her. We were wrong.

In her message box was a video with the images and a link to a website that displays an aerial shot of our home; attached was a map with our home address. In the next message was a photo of a little girl with a reminder message. I

opened that message to find a screen-size image of the most graphic shot of Nikki's fatal crash. But the messages, telling my daughter they will hack her computer and turn on her camera so they can watch her, are worse. And it gets nastier than that. But the worst part is that we can do nothing to stop them.

I decided that night if we didn't get some kind of justice, and soon, if the appellate court doesn't reverse this ruling today, I will have no choice but to take matters into my own hands. I will do things my way.

I slam the opposition brief down on top of my desk and open my eyes. This document says the same thing each time I read it: how the defendant sent the images as a somber warning — although he can't prove it — and how that was within his rights of free speech. How Nikki was driving drunk, how she stole my car. The attorney arrives at the same conclusion: Nikki's privacy died with her, it was a public issue, and the dispatcher was protected under the First Amendment. Those are the reasons they keep fighting us. It doesn't matter to them that my daughter's death is still alive, slicing us open just as fresh as the day it happened.

For the next several seconds, I find myself staring at the tiny slice of black that frames the top drawer of my desk. I open it. Suddenly, words begin swirling around in my head in a haze of utter confusion; thoughts tumble over me like heavy bricks.

I slide my hand into the drawer, past the stationary and the paper clips, to the space above the wooden lathe where I hide my loaded gun. I let the palm of my hand brush against the cold, steel barrel and my mind races ahead. Suddenly, I'm not feeling the pain of everything I've lost, but a sense of justice and satisfaction as I grip the piece.

A perfect fit.

Slowly, and carefully, I pull the gun toward my body, letting revenge course through my veins like a drug. It's a total rush. For the next few minutes, I just sit and listen to the fiery sounds of my own heart pounding, and relish the sense of need — and power and validation — that I am feeling. I almost don't care if I go to jail. I feel my eyes close and my finger slides against the trigger. My thumb — by its own will —

presses down into place. I hear a sudden snap when my eyes pop open.

I wonder if this dispatcher realizes that at any second I could walk right up to him and destroy his life just as recklessly and pathetically as he has destroyed mine. Because I am capable now of doing things I had never dreamed of doing before.

The contemplation of such a horrifying act terrifies me. It feels as though I'm losing my mind, my conscience, my soul. I force my thoughts onto Nikki's face, her long brown hair, her impish grin, until my heart finally slows to a natural pulse. I try to imagine what she would say if she could speak to me right now. And the thought makes me laugh. I laugh so hard I begin to cry because for the next several minutes all I can see in my mind is my sweet angel's face, her lips pressed to one side. I can almost hear her voice: "No Dad, what would *you* say to *me*?"

I don't want my family to have to suffer because of this. And I don't want them to suffer because of me. If my anger is the distance between who I am and who my family needs me to be, then I have to find a way to let it go. Because if I'm not able to see all the beautiful things all around me — what is truly the most important reasons for my life — then it doesn't matter how hard I play the game. In the end, no one will come out ahead.

Suddenly, somewhere in the depths of my mind I hear Pastor John's voice answering the one question I was never brave enough to ask: "*Christos, this is not about what you've lost. It's about what you'll gain if you just have a little faith. And then, when your life is over, and you get to heaven, you'll see Nikki, and she'll smile and say, 'Great job dad!'*"

What if he's right about that? What if Nikki *is* waiting for me? What if the things we lose aren't really lost at all, but rather waiting for us somewhere on the other side of eternity? If I do something stupid I may never see her again.

I put my hands to my forehead, gun and all, and in my mind I start making promises. First, to God that I will try to have some faith. Then I make a promise to Nikki that I will see her again — in heaven — right after I make things right the legal way down here on Earth. I make a promise to Pastor

John that I will see him in church on Sundays, and I make a promise to my family that I won't do anything stupid.

I lean back in my chair when I hear what sounds like glass breaking beneath me. I look down. And to my surprise, I have inadvertently extricated the cartridge clip of my gun with my left hand. Bullets are scattering across the ground like tiny insects.

These guys can take many things from me — my livelihood, my reputation, my sense of future, my peace of mind — but they cannot take my soul.

I lay my gun down on top of the desk and close my eyes. This time, I make a promise not to take it from myself.

Lesli

As we walk out to the car this morning, a strange combination of fear and doubt lingers inside of me. "Let's go through this again," I say. "You think that when all of this is over the images will just disappear?"

Christos opens the car door and looks at me. "No. That's not what I said."

"Well, then," I say as I slide into the passenger seat. "What did you say?"

He fumbles for his keys and then looks at me. "I said that we're going to win this appeal and we're going to change the law, then we can work on making the images disappear."

I buckle up. "What if we lose?"

"We won't lose," he says smiling. "We're going to win."

I take a deep, exaggerated breath. "And if we don't?"

He buckles himself into the car, but before he starts the ignition he turns to face me. "I really believe that we're going to win."

The air goes silent and he starts the car. We don't speak until we hit the next red light when I look at him. "What happens to us in the meantime? We just keep avoiding the Internet and forget about it? These things can take years."

He lifts his shoulders. "You need to have some faith, babe." He turns to face me. "I promise you, we're going to win this appeal. You have to believe that."

I lay my head on his shoulder. It's weird how he has this unyielding faith. It used to be the other way around. I look up at him and smile. "I know," I say, as if we even stand a fighting chance.

As we pull up to the courthouse, I feel my legs go numb. Instead of opening the car door, I sit tense while a cold sweat makes its way to the surface of my skin. I want to make things right again for my family, get the images off the Internet, get the cyber bullies to stop, get justice. But something I am learning on this journey is that it doesn't really matter what I want, and getting justice will just be a bonus.

I look out the car window and see Tyler and Everett waiting for us outside. This is it, I tell myself. This is the moment when I take that step forward or I turn and run away. I think about my children and the horror they are exposed to. And this is how I get out of my car.

I walk to the ladies room where I close my eyes and give God one more chance to let me disappear. I hear the toilet flush and a woman steps out of the stall to wash her hands. She is pretty. She smiles at me. She couldn't be one of those cyber bullies, could she?

In the holding room, there are people everywhere — attorneys, I assume. Maybe the defendants are here, too. I don't know, but just the thought of being in the same room with any of them makes my teeth clinch. How are you supposed to forgive a person when they are not even asking you to? Just as I turn to smile at the man standing next to me, I notice two uniformed CHP officers standing at the security line waiting to check us in. "You have got to be kidding me," I turn to Tyler. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"No, it's no joke," he says. "This courthouse belongs to the state of California."

"And we're here today so we can sue *who*?" I ask.

Tyler lets his eyes fall to my gaze then lifts his eyebrows. "The state of California."

I just stare at his face without blinking.

It's my turn to walk forward so I set my purse onto the conveyer belt. I fix my eyes on the ground, but I can feel the officer's eyes thick on my skin as I squeeze through the line. Maybe it's my imagination, but I swear someone in here is laughing at me.

It is hard sitting in a courtroom listening to strangers vilify your daughter to a justice panel that is only interested in listening to the facts of this case — the leak of the photos, police misconduct, the violation of our privacy. It is especially hard when directly behind the justice panel exhibits a wall size mural of the California state seal. Just another reason we feel defeated even before we've had our chance to speak.

Christos puts his arm around me and I look at him. "We can do this," he says. "Together — a team, remember..."

I just smile and the strangest feeling falls over me. It is a feeling of strength and authority. A God-is-with-me feeling. So I bend my head forward, close my eyes and try to block out the arsenal of words that fly about the room. I let myself relax, take it all in, when suddenly, all I can hear is the defense attorney's voice explaining to the court that his client did not mean for the images to become an overnight Internet sensation. My head pops up. And then it hits me. Nikki really did get famous in some freaky, weird way.

I keep my eyes locked in front of me and listen to the defense attorney explain that his client was simply trying to educate his family and friends of the horrors he is exposed to every day by emailing the graphic photographs of our daughter's tragic death.

I feel my face being pushed out of shape. What about my family and friends, and the horrors they are being exposed to now — every day? Anyway, he is a 9-1-1 operator, what is he exposed to besides telephone communications?

My fingernails begin to dig into my legs. My head drops and my eyes close. I might scream. Any minute now, I might stand up and shout, "Objection, your honor!" What I really want is for this attorney to explain to the court why he thinks it's okay for a 9-1-1 operator to send photographs of my daughter's corpse to his friends when even the coroner, the medical examiner, and a medical doctor have no legal authority to do such a thing.

Everything after that is a blur.

When the arguments are over, Christos and I are ushered out of the courtroom. We tell ourselves it went well for us, because it's easier than believing we might have to live in a future filled with painful memories of what we've lost — and how we lost her. And because there would be only one thing more egregious than losing this appeal, and that would be to watch them get away with it so they could do it again to someone else.

This time, we will wait one year for a ruling.

Christos

January 2012

Justice is a wonderful thing.

Three hundred and fifty-seven days later, the decision was unanimous: The California Fourth District Court of Appeals overturned Judge Perk's decision in a sixty-four-page published opinion. The state of California now recognizes that publishing death images *is* an invasion of a family's privacy.

We made law.

With this ruling, we now have the right to sue the California Highway Patrol for all the damage they've done to us. What this means is, we *will* have our day in court.

It was, for me, a total vindication. Reading the opinion was like reading every word I wanted to say but couldn't: "*We conclude that the CHP and its officers owed plaintiffs a duty of care not to place the decedent's death images on the Internet for purposes of vulgar spectacle.*" "*We rely upon the CHP to protect and serve the public. It is antithetical to that expectation for the CHP to inflict harm upon us by making the ravaged remains of our loved ones the subject of Internet sensationalism.*" "*It is a sad day, to be sure, when those upon whom we rely to protect and serve do the opposite, and make the decapitated remains of a teenage girl the subject of international gossip and disrespect, and inflict devastating emotional harm on the parents and siblings of that girl. The CHP should know better. Every one of its officers should know better. The CHP is in a position to ensure that this does not happen again.*"

I felt justified knowing that our justice system felt exactly the way I did. It validated everything I knew to be true. And knowing that I would finally get my day in court gave me that sense of peace that I had so long been waiting for. It was the depth of it, the remedy — the cure.

But our justice — like all the evidence we have stacked against the CHP — disappeared just as quickly as it came; everything, again, was put on hold. The defendants appealed the Court of Appeal decision. And when that was denied, they

filed an appeal with the California Supreme Court. When that was denied, they filed another anti-SLAPP motion — this time in the Fourth District Court of Appeal. And although it took a year to happen, they lost again. All of this happened, I believe, to delay us from getting our day in court. So today, more than five years after the leak of the photos began, I'm still just a dog chasing his tail — still running fast, still going nowhere.

But that doesn't mean we stop fighting. If anything, it just makes us fight harder.

When I walk into my office this morning, this time I close the door. I tell myself to be patient, but my eyes go to the phone, then to the clock. Today, Tyler is in court fighting to lift the stay so that we can proceed with our depositions for the defendants. For a moment I fight my natural inclination — to pick up the phone and find out what's taking so long. But I don't. I just force myself to go do something productive while I wait, like pace around my kitchen.

When the phone rings, I freeze. I don't know if I'm going to be thrilled or pissed. *Either way, I'm going to get justice*, I tell myself, because it's easier than believing that, at some point, this could all blow up in our faces. The door to my office is open. Lesli is already sitting at my desk with a pen in her hand. She's on speakerphone. *It's Tyler*, she lips.

I walk close to the phone. "Tyler how's the family?"

"They're good, Christos. Thanks for asking." I pull up a chair next to Lesli and wait for the news. "Well, Christos," Tyler says, "the one defendant is ready to cooperate. I had a nice chat with his counsel this morning. Remember he just sent the images to his home computer." I feel my breath catch, but I don't want to get my hopes up — just yet. "If we let him off the hook financially, he'll testify that when he sent those photos to his home computer he was working. That gives us course and scope. He'll also testify under oath that the day he received those photographs, they were also given to at least a hundred police officers. That's huge negligence, Christos."

Lesli and I just look at each other.

"And what about the other dispatcher, the one who sent them out to his friends?" I ask. "I'm not letting him off the

hook. The only reason he's not dead is because I'm planning on getting justice with his face."

"Christos," Tyler's voice drops about two hundred decibels. "Are you guys sitting down?"

Okay, here it comes. "Yeah, why?"

"That dispatcher — the one who sent the images to his friends — he's just filed bankruptcy. He's out. And here's the thing. If we don't play ball with the other defendant he's also going to file BK and they'll both be out. But listen, I've got the court's permission to depo this guy on his bankruptcy case. They're reviewing my questions as we speak. The good news, Christos, is we've named the officer who gave out the pics. He's the one —"

And just like that, I'm transfixed. I can't see or hear anything he is saying. He must have lost me at *off the hook*, because everything after that just bounces across the room, like a rubber ball. I stand, and interrupt. "So, that's it, that's how it works? You get sued, mess with someone's life for five years, then file BK and it's over. Just like that, no consequences, no accountability?" As I say this, I realize that I'm slapping my hand down on the same corner of my desk where I used to hide my loaded gun. And this is why the ugly thoughts begin racing through my mind.

They move so fast I have to sit back down. I tell myself I'm not that guy anymore. I'm not going to risk putting my family through any more hell than they already have been through. I look up at Lesli, who is nervously twirling her hair around her finger, and I slam my hand down one more time — hard — against the top of my desk. "Damn them!"

"Yeah," Tyler says. "The whole thing is convoluted, Christos, but we've still got the CHP."

I cover my face with my hands and think. *I really wanted this asshole to pay for what he did.* I wanted justice for every motion, every delay, for him to suffer too for every minute he has made my family suffer — for every day he has kept us from moving on with our lives. "What the hell? This guy's off the hook?"

"Yeah, Christos. He's out. All I have now is his deposition. That's really all there is. I'll call you back when I've got

more information on him. I'm just waiting for his personnel files. We'll be back in court in a month on a standing issue. We'll get it all sorted out then."

"A standing issue?" I ask.

"Yep, it's just part of the process, Christos. It's like a pre-court hearing to make sure you have legal standing to sue. It's no big deal. The big deal is getting this guy in my chair with his personnel files. Once I have those, I'll have a lot more ammo for court. Oh, and by the way Christos, this dispatcher, he's just filed a protection order."

"A protection order for what?"

"For you. You'll have to sign a contract — that the information you receive from his depositions won't be released by you or be discussed with the media or any other outside parties now or in the future. The information has to stay contained to his files. If you leak the information, it'd be an invasion of his privacy."

My head snaps up. He finishes his sentence with a chuckle, but before he hangs up the phone he lets this statement stand: "Christos, you'd probably get yourself sued."

My eyes slide over to Lesli and for the next few seconds we are trapped in a strange conspiratorial stare. Suddenly, nothing in the world matters to me.

can't speak. But there are words gathering in my mouth. Who would have thought that justice could taste so sweet, that it really can be poetic?

"Christos." Lesli's voice brings me back, and I can tell by her eyes she knows exactly what I'm thinking. "You'll get sued, Christos!" She grabs my arms and moves in close, her face sober. "And then what will you do?"

All I can do is lift my eyebrows, and smile. "I'll file bankruptcy."

Lesli

One month later

It came out of left field. Instead of ruling on a minor standing issue, the judge recommended a mandatory settlement conference. That's when the disputing parties come together and try to find a resolution before a trial begins. For the CHP, it was about saving money on a jury trial. For me, it was like throwing ice in my face. I didn't want to settle. It had been such a huge part of me for so long, I wasn't going to just let it go. And besides, it was about more than just money. We needed their help. We needed to tell our story. We needed them to acknowledge that what they did was wrong. They didn't drag us through this hell for five years for nothing.

"You're making me dizzy," I say to Christos as we head back to the courthouse. Traffic in Santa Ana is thick this time of day, and of course because we are in a hurry we hit every red light. Christos lays on the horn. "Get out of my way, you idiot!" he says to the driver in the grey car in front of us that, like him, keeps swerving in and out of our lane.

As we pull into the parking lot I feel my nerves start to bend at the edges. Christos parks the car and looks at me. "We don't settle without copyrights. Deal?"

I grab my purse and open the car door. "Deal!"

Neither of us is sure what to make of this settlement conference. We want to settle and move forward, but we both know it's not going to be that simple. Keith has asked the CHP several times over the past five years for the photo copyrights, and each time, they fail to respond. But this will be the first time we will have them cornered in front of a judge.

Tyler is waiting in his blue suit and tie right outside the building. He walks us to the main entrance while Keith is inside checking us in. We walk through security and down a long hall into a dimly lit conference room where we'll sit, except for a brief lunch break, the entire day.

Christos drags his finger along the conference table then touches the single faded poster that hangs in the middle of the long, unpainted wall. He turns to Tyler. "Budget cuts?"

Tyler laughs, and I sit down just as Keith walks in with a strained look on his face. It is not good news. He tells Christos to sit down. "I'm sorry," he says, "but we're not going to get those copyrights."

His eyes look from me to Christos. "It's out of the question. They just refuse to get involved with any plan to help. I really am sorry."

It is so complicated a scenario that Keith and Tyler together have trouble explaining why: why we cannot just take possession of a legal document that could put our lives back to a decent normal.

"We're still here for you, though," Tyler promises.

It comes as a shock at first, but as the words take shape in my mind, I become so infuriated I decide to leave. What is the point of this, anyway? Nothing *we* ever do will be good enough. No settlement will stop the cyber bullies from finding their way back into our lives. No amount of negotiating will erase from our minds the images that will haunt us forever.

"They need to do something to help us, or we're not settling!" I say.

Keith puffs his chest and shakes his head to agree.

I grab my cell phone from the table but when I stand to leave, Christos puts his hand on my shoulder and sits me back down. So I stare at him. "If they don't want to help us, then there is no point in being here!" I say.

Keith pushes himself up from the table. "Let me handle this," he says, and then he disappears into the hall.

Tyler convinces us to play a game of ping-pong with the CHP. "Why not?" he says. "We may as well find out how serious they are, right?" We start with a \$7 million demand. They insult us with a \$250,000 counter. We go back and forth from there. In the meantime, between a private meeting with the judge and a couple of phone calls, Keith is in and out of the room like a magic rabbit. Now you see him, now you don't.

After seven hours of this ridiculous game, the judge walks into the conference room. This time he is zipping up his

coat. The CHP has laid down their final number: just over \$2 million, and now the judge is going home. We take it or leave it. The judge walks out so we can talk.

Keith is ecstatic and tells us that this is a win for us — that it's more than what we will get if we were to proceed to a jury trial. No more delays and new appeals. But if this is a win for us, then why does it feel like we have lost?

I don't really know the answer to this question. All I know is that it's not enough. Without their help, no amount of money will ever be enough to make my family whole again.

Keith leans into the table facing Christos and me. "The real win here, guys," he says, "is that we made law. We made it so that this will not happen again to anyone else. That is justice."

He tells us that we should be proud no matter what happens; that they cannot take that away from us.

But maybe this is not about winning. Maybe it's not about justice. Maybe this is about knowing what happened and why. Maybe it's about seeing the faces of the men who destroyed our lives. I cover my eyes with my hands. Maybe the details are not as important as the outcome.

It's true. We've already won. And yet our whole world is on hold because of this lawsuit — because we have let it encroach on our daily lives just as surreptitiously and relentlessly as the images had. Maybe we need to move forward, even without the CHP's help.

Christos slides his chair in close and puts his hand on mine. He stares at me as if he is thinking what I am thinking: another five years of this getting nowhere is more than we can take. If we ever want to salvage what is left of our lives then we will put an end to this horrible nightmare and take the offer.

It takes tremendous effort, but I know my husband is right. He's always right. I squeeze my eyes and then his hand. Christos looks at Keith and nods. Keith leaves the room.

I don't fall back in my chair or experience a rush of relief. I don't really feel anything, because although it is a great deal of money, it changes nothing for us. It doesn't help us solve the problem with the Internet. And besides, it has cost us far

more than our share of \$2 million over the last five years in the death of Christos' career alone. But how much more will we have to sacrifice before we realize this is as good as it's going to get?

Everything happens so fast after that. The judge returns and walks us in procession into his courtroom where we will swear under oath to the terms of the agreement. This is when I start to feel the mistake crawl up my leg and bite me in the face — because without the copyrights, we are right back where we started nearly six years ago: buried beneath a problem that we can never fix. That is not moving forward. That is giving up.

As we walk through the courtroom, I spot Keith speaking to defense attorney and her entourage over at the defense table. She is the main attorney for this case — the one who has fought us every step of the way, the one who asks for time extensions and delays us year after year. I had met her once at Christos' deposition, but other than that, I have only seen her from a distance in the courtroom.

I watch her talking to Keith, shaking her head from side to side. And when she sees me watching, she quickly looks away. I wonder how she lives with herself knowing what is happening to us and doing nothing to stop it. Does she have any sympathy, or does she truly believe that what she is doing is for the greater good?

As we walk forward, I find myself staring at her, as if she is the one taunting us. I watch her load files into her briefcase. I watch her zip it up. But when she looks up and sees me staring, this time she smiles.

I freeze.

All the breath inside of me stops and I can feel myself, for the first time since all this began, thinking clearly.

Somewhere along the way, I had become so frightened that I had stopped trying to move forward. I had become so angry that I had stopped living, stopped feeling.

I stopped trying to forgive.

I feel the tears climb to the top of me, so I take a huge gulp of air.

It takes a moment, but then I smile back.

Maybe this is not about moving forward. Maybe it's about letting go.

Just as I'm thinking this, the judge orders us to our seats where we wait to be sworn in. But through the corner of my eye, I notice Keith making his way through the crowd, and the next thing I know we're standing face to face. I feel the tears dissolve into the thick of my throat. I feel the rawness of my anger melting through me, dripping away the last few breaths of fear.

"You'll still help us with the websites," I plead. "You'll go after the bullies?"

Keith grabs my hand and lowers his eyes. "Nothing," he says, "will take away the pain of what you've lost. No amount of money will put an end to the nightmare that will follow you for the rest of your life."

He pulls out a folded piece of paper from the inside of his jacket and presses it into my hand. "Which is why the CHP has just added this to the contract." He smiles and his voice rises. "They've agreed to help you — with everything!"

Sat. 4:19 p.m., Jan. 28, 2012

4:19 pm January 28, 2012 | **Anonymous** wrote:

WE ARE LEGION WE ARE ANONYMOUS WE DO NOT FORGIVE
WE DO NOT FORGET EXPECT US!

4:28 pm January 28, 2012 | **anon** wrote:

Those pics were taken on a public highway they are public record
and I will NOT take them down!

4:32 pm January 28, 2012 | **Anonymous** wrote:

Have you fapped to pictures of my dead, naked body yet?
<http://tinyurl.com/cugepa>

4:36 pm January 28, 2012 | **Anonymous** wrote:

IM A DEAD WHORE!

4:42 pm January 28, 2012 | **anon4chan** wrote:

PLL FIND YOU AND PLL KILL YOU YOU FUCKING PIECES OF
SHIT! YOUR DAUGHTER WAS A WHORE!!!!!!

6:44 pm January 28, 2012 | **Anonymous** wrote:

We will NEVER take them down!

Epilogue



Christos

*A*ND SO IT'S A BITTERSWEET RESOLUTION: the CHP shells out \$2.3 million, and my share is gone before I even sign the contract. I now have legal documentation promising me assistance with websites, but I am still at the mercy of the CHP.

It's like being stranded on the shore right after an earthquake. You know the tsunami is coming, but no matter how fast you run, you can't make it to higher ground. Finally, just before the water laps at your feet, someone comes along and pulls you to safety. But by then it's too late. Because when you look behind you, everything you've always known is already gone.

As it turns out, I wasn't really looking for justice — although \$2.3 million sure feels like an apology. I guess what I really wanted was for someone to look me in the eyes and tell me they were wrong, to tell me they are sorry enough to want to help me fix it.

But now instead of feeling satisfied and relieved, I am feeling terrified. Terrified there will be nothing left to focus on,

terrified that I have to face the truth: that Nikki is never coming home.

It's just easier, I guess, to fight for the ones you love rather than to accept that one of them has gone.

I've learned many things over the last five years: how to be more patient, how to look the other way, how to overcome my anger. I've learned that I cannot always control the circumstances of my life. I cannot always control what people say or what they do. But most importantly, I know now that when life sneaks in the most unbearable tragedy, and you are having trouble finding your way, all you really need is to have a little faith.

I don't know how things will go, or what lies ahead of me now. I don't know if anything is going to change. I do know that in the last seven months since we settled with the CHP, I have identified seventy-seven websites hosting the photos, and there are still thousands of links leading people to them. Now I will send this information to the CHP — twice. And I will patiently wait for someone to get back to me.

Lesli

There are moments now when I catch myself thinking about something other than Nikki or the horrible aftermath that follows her life. There are moments when peace sneaks between the folds of my mind and the heaviness lifts — moments when I can't feel the infinite distance that separates my daughter from me. There are moments now when I understand that in the end, it really will be *okay*. Because life is short. But heaven is forever.

I still dream of Nikki driving off the driveway. I still smell the fumes in the air as I watch her drive away from me. I see her with her long brown hair flowing like ribbons against her pale, porcelain skin, her eyes wide, looking into mine as if to say she were sorry. *I know you are, Angel!* I wake up screaming her name sometimes, reaching my arms out in front of me as if I could stop her from driving away. But I'm always too late.

These, however, are my favorite dreams, the dreams I cherish most. Because in these dreams, in spite of how painful they are, I never have to see what happens next.



Acknowledgments

WRITING OUR STORY WAS A difficult, emotional journey and one that I could not have done without the help and prayers of my family and close friends.

For that, I wish to thank my three awesome daughters Danielle, Christiana and Kira for allowing me the time and freedom to put my grief somewhere constructive especially when life became unbearable. I love you so much!

Thanks also to my amazing husband, Christos, who inspired and encouraged me to keep writing even when my eyes were blurred with tears.

A special thanks to Pastor John for his unrelenting compassion and support for not giving up on us and for showing us God's love through the gentle grip of friendship. Yes, God sent us an angel: you. Thank you for always being there.

I wish to thank the team at reputation.com for their continued support and willingness to help control such awful circumstances. Your professionalism and empathy has been extraordinary.

Keith Bremer, Tyler Offenhauser and Everett Skillman: We have been so fortunate to have such professional and compassionate people representing us. Thank you for taking on the challenge that was much more than you bargained for.

For those of you who took part in the effort to remove the images from the Internet: Thank you from the bottom of

our hearts. In the early days you were the only reason we held on to hope.

I wish to thank our wonderful brothers Geoff Simon, George Catsouras and Pepi Catsouras for all their help and support. We could not have survived without you.

A special thanks to my parents Dick and Dianne Simon, whose prayers made it possible for my family to walk unscathed through even the darkest days.

Thanks also to my father-in-law, Jimmy Catsouras, for his love and kind heart and for always being there when I need him the most. Thank you, Dad!

My sincere and deepest appreciation to Helen Halle for her reassurance and strength, for keeping me focused on the one and only truth and for reminding me daily that we are only in this world for a short time. Thank you Helen and John for your extended prayers and continued support and for giving of yourselves freely and expecting nothing in return. You have been a beautiful example of God's love for his children. You are truly amazing. Thank you!

A heartfelt thanks to my wonderful mentor and editor, Eddie Glasier who put more than her time into this project, she put a piece of her soul.

For their invaluable feedback and support: Thank you Brenda Catsouras and Travis Binns, who both promised me it was great even when we all knew it wasn't. You're guys are the best!

A very special thank you to all of Nikki's friends who still call to wish us well, and who still come to visit and share their heartwarming and funny stories about our beloved Nikki.

And last, equally supportive and committed is my dear friend Ronnie James, who is responsible for this amazing book cover. Thank you Ronnie!

RESOURCES

IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU know is a victim of cyber bullying or trolling, please visit these sites, which were extremely helpful to us along our journey.

ABOUT INTERNET PRIVACY PROTECTION/ REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

Reputation.com: www.reputation.com.
(888) 668-1822

Michael Fertik

ABOUT LEGAL ASSISTANCE

Bremer, Whyte, Brown & O'Meara: www.bremerandwhyte.com
20320 SW Birch St # 200 Newport Beach, CA 92660
(949) 221-1000

Keith Bremer
Tyler Offenhauser

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Forever Exposed

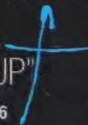
THE NIKKI CATSOURAS STORY



Forever Exposed is about much more than the horrific aftermath brought about from the death of 18-year-old Nikki Catsouras in a car accident. In her moving and poignant memoir, Lesli Catsouras not only weighs the significance of freedom of speech in America against the complicated issues of cyberbullying and trolling, but also delves into the reality of how one ordinary family coped with such unimaginable circumstances.

Since late 2006, the Nikki Catsouras story has been an ongoing subject of widespread public interest making headlines across the nation. Nikki's story has been featured on The Dr. Phil Show, 20/20, CBS Evening News with Katie Couric, NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams, ABC News, Fox News, CNN Headline News, Issues with Jane Velez-Mitchell, Newsroom with Megan Kelly and more, including top local and international newspapers, magazines (including Newsweek and Forbes), radio and television broadcasts.

"KEEP YOUR HEAD UP"
NIKKI CATSOURAS
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