BETRAYED

*The Aftermath of Child Abuse*

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Loveland, CO

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Dedicated to children

around the world

who suffer in

silence

 each

 day

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Author’s Introduction

The primary purpose of writing this book was to inform the public about the emotional and psychological damage caused by sexual abuse. However, as the story evolved, further types of abuse became evident, each resulting in trauma, anguish, humiliation, and feelings of guilt, responsibility, and worse, for the victim. This will be an emotionally difficult book for some to read. It is filled with suffering and anguish, and it contains little levity. One friendly reader described it akin to “walking on broken glass, barefoot.”

*Betrayed* is thestory of Emma Johnson and seven other women who suffered grievously from abuse as children. Feeling society little understood the pain sufferers of child abuse endured. Emma decided to make it her mission to educate the public. Using her own experiences and the narratives of others, Emma determined to write a book to enlighten the public on the havoc such violence inflicts in people’s lives. This is her story. While the characters are fictional composites of existing women and represent no single actual person, living or dead, they are based on real acts of violence.

Not all children who are abused become violent. Without help, however, many suffer from various forms of emotional pain, sometimes throughout their adult lives. When the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary occurred, I began to wonder about the young man who had committed this outrageous slaughter on society’s most innocent. I believe that no baby is born violent. Something happened to that boy to cause him to develop such rage within himself, and to act out in such a horrific manner. Perhaps he was abused or bullied as a child, we don’t know, but I believe a study should be conducted on these mass killers. What were they like as children? Who were their childhood friends? What were they like in school, from kindergarten through to high school? How was their family life? What made them tick? The results might prove interesting and informative.

Our society has become so materially oriented that, for many, money and work has become number one, family second. Every child deserves a loving home—a place where he feels, safe, wanted, and loved. But, unfortunately, that is not always the case, and it can have terrible consequences. It is challenging to have a public conversation about the violence perpetuated against children, especially sexual violence. It is easier to pretend it does not exist. But it does. Let us begin that dialogue now. We must continue to teach others about abuse: what it is and what the signs are, and how to talk with an abused child. If we, the adults, do nothing, it is my belief that events like those at Newtown, Columbine, Aurora, Tucson and others will occur over and over again, and the sorrow will be unrelenting.

LH



Chapter One: Penn State Sexual Abuse Scandal

It was a perfect autumn day, reminiscent of Indian summer. There was a refreshing chill in the air and the leaves were beginning to turn, flaming red touched with burnt orange and golden yellow. Overhead, a flock of Canada geese, flying in their usual “V” formation, were honking at each other, making a commotion that could be heard throughout the park. With their mothers nearby, several children were playing on the swings and slides, laughing merrily, having fun. Jon and Emma had spent the afternoon walking through the park, enjoying the delicious weather, the sights and sounds of nature, the laughter of playing children, and each other’s company. The path ended at their favorite restaurant, and after dining they returned home. A full moon shone brightly on the lake behind their home, a lovely sight.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” remarked Emma, as she sat down with her husband to read the evening newspaper.

After a few minutes, Jon put the paper down. “I’m disgusted! This sexual abuse scandal at Penn State—the cover up makes me furious.” He gestured to the paper. “Those students were betrayed by their teachers!”

Emma looked up. Reflecting on her life for a moment, she said quietly, “Most people have no clue about the psychological and emotional wounds sexual abuse leaves on a child.”

“I’ve watched how you suffered, Emma. I know first-hand the pain you endured. And how long it took for you to heal. I guess that has given me an awareness most people don’t have; that’s why I get so angry. The focus is on the wrong thing—it should be on the victims, helping them heal.

“Because of you, I have tried to learn as much as I can about child abuse. I know the harm created, the degrading effect it has on a child. The damage continues into adulthood. I wouldn’t be surprised if many of the inmates in our jails suffered child abuse. It’s a horrifying existence, and a huge cost to society.”

“But what can we, as individuals, do to rectify this situation? How can I help other women who have suffered as I have or help them to heal? How can we make the public aware of the emotional harm done to children?” Emma asked.

“I don’t know.” Jon ran his fingers through his hair in frustration.

Over the following weeks, Emma contemplated the conversation. How could she, one lone woman, begin a public conversation about the trail of destruction that sexual abuse leaves behind?

After much thought, Emma presented an idea to her husband. “I was thinking of forming a small group, maybe eight women who have been abused—a place where they could share the consequences abuse has had on their lives, and how they survived. After gathering all of their information, I could write a book revealing their stories to the world. It would take a lot of courage on their parts to divulge secrets they have held for years. What do you think?”

Jon put down the book he was reading and looked at her thoughtfully. “It’s something to consider. Do you think you’re qualified for the task?”

“I don’t know. I’m not a therapist, but I have had years of therapy and analysis. I know from personal experience their pain, their suffering. Perhaps we could help each other.”

“How would you go about it? Would you establish rules?”

“Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, I wrote up a few. Here they are.” She handed Jon a piece of floral notepaper that contained the list.

1. Everything said in the room must be confidential.
2. Treat everyone with respect.
3. Listen, but do not judge.
4. Do not ask probing questions that might embarrass the speaker.
5. Encourage and/or compliment when appropriate.
6. Do not interrupt when another is speaking.
7. Be on time and try not to miss a meeting.

“Can you think of any others?” she asked him.

Jon shook his head. “That’s a good start. Where will you hold these meetings, Emma?”

“I don’t know. Do you have any ideas for a place?”

“Maybe.”

“Do you plan to be upfront with the women and tell them you hope to write a book?”

“Yes.”

“Then give it a try.” Jon smiled and hugged his wife of more than fifty years.

Several weeks passed and Emma continued to mull over her idea. What would it achieve? What kind of format should she use? As a retired teacher, should she make the meetings educational as well? Would the women open up and reveal their secrets?

Doubts crept into her mind. What made her feel she was capable of helping women? Would she be effective or create more harm?

She decided to do some research on her own to begin the project. What she learned was horrifying. The cruelty some children had suffered at the hands of their parents, relatives, school bullies, neighbors, and supposed friends was incredible. Emma was surprised to learn that the most common form of abuse children were exposed to was neglect by their parents or caregiver. Physical, sexual, and emotional abuse followed—in that order. But if a child suffered from one form of abuse, the chances were that he or she had experienced a second as well. The consequences of such brutality were frightening. Exploited children might suffer from multiple problems: poor self-esteem, self-loathing, shame, fear of being found out, personality disorders, and much, much more. It was then that Emma realized what a monumental job she was undertaking.

She decided to discuss her idea with her friend Theresa, a woman who had been abused by her father and who was currently in therapy. Attractive and with a beautiful smile, Theresa was tall, slim, and sported a crop of beautiful red hair.

“I think it’s brilliant. I would like to be a part of it. May I?” Theresa said when Emma explained her ideas. The cobalt blouse Theresa was wearing enhanced her blue eyes, which shone with enthusiasm.

“Of course. You will be my first participant.” Emma smiled and hugged her friend. “Here are some rules I’ve composed. What do you think?”

Theresa read over the list. “They’re similar to the rules my therapy group has.”

“Do you know anyone who might like to be part of this, too?” Emma asked.

“There’s a woman named Janice who goes to my church. She’s a retired nurse. I believe she was abused as a child, but I don’t know what kind of abuse she suffered. Does it matter?”

“Not at all,” Emma replied.

“She might be interested. Let me telephone her. I’ll give you a call and let you know.”

The next week, Emma met with Janice.

“I’ve been expecting you, Emma,” Janice said warmly as she opened the door. “Please come in.”

Janice had a shock of white hair and her face was etched with deep furrows. As Janice busied herself making coffee, Emma wondered how much Janice’s past had contributed to those frown lines. Janice seemed happy enough now, but Emma knew that one never knows what lurks in a person’s past.

“Theresa said you might be interested in becoming a part of this small group.” As Janice set the coffee mugs down before them both, Emma explained what she had in mind. “It is for women who have been abused. I want to make it a place where they can share their stories, and maybe let go of their pain.”

“I don’t know. What do you plan to do with the information?” Janice sipped at her coffee and looked hesitant, avoiding eye contact.

 “I feel the public is not truly aware of the emotional and psychological damage sexual abuse does to a child.” Emma took her eyes off Janice’s face, and gazed out the window as she considered what to say. “People don’t want to talk about it. It’s too uncomfortable. My goal is to write a book that presents individual accounts and highlights the impact the abuse had on the women’s lives; to break the silence.”

“I think I’d like to participate, but no promises,” Janice replied, finally making eye contact. “What makes you feel you’re qualified to lead such a group?” she added.

“I am a survivor of abuse. I have had many years of therapy and analysis. I know the pain victims suffer and how difficult it is to heal.”

“I’ll give it some thought and let you know.”

“Thank you. Here’s my phone number. By the way, do you know anyone else who might be interested?”

“I have a friend, Kelly, who was raped by a priest. She’s an amazing artist. She paints native birds and fowl using watercolors and she’s well known for her work. She lives not far from here.” Janice took her address book out of her purse and flipped through the pages. “Here is her phone number.” She read the number aloud and Emma carefully copied it into her mobile phone. “You might like to call her.”

“Thanks, Janice. I appreciate your help.”

That evening, Emma told Jon about the women she had interviewed. “I have two prospective members for my circle, and I’m going to interview a third woman tomorrow. I’ve made an appointment to meet her tomorrow. I’m really excited. Theresa looked over the rules I had written and said they were similar to her therapy group.”

“I’m impressed,” said Jon, “but then, I shouldn’t be. You’re a remarkable woman, Emma. I am so very proud of you.”

The next day, Emma found Kelly busy in the garden. She was about five foot five with dark brown eyes and brunette curls. She looked up and smiled as Emma approached the gate.

“Hi,” Emma said. “Beautiful roses.” She gestured towards the blooms. “I’m Emma Johnson, we spoke on the telephone.” Emma began to explain her mission.

Kelly stood and pulled off her gardening gloves to shake Emma’s hand. When Emma had finished explaining, she said, “May I think about it? I really don’t like dwelling on my past or reliving the pain. It’s over and done with.” She drew a rose she had just snipped off the bush to her nose, and sniffed it.

“I understand, Kelly. Your friend Janice is considering participating, and we’d love to have you join. Here’s my number. Just give me a call. I think you could offer much to the group.”

As Emma was leaving, Kelly said, “It might not be for me, although I’ll consider it. But I have a friend, Barbara, who suffered from abuse. You might like to speak with her. She lives a couple of blocks from here.”

“Oh, that’s super. If you give me her address, I’ll stop by this afternoon. Would you call her and tell her I’m coming first?”

“I’d be happy to.”

Kelly ducked inside and returned with Barbara’s address.

That afternoon, Emma paid a visit to Barbara—a petite strawberry blonde and retired social worker.

Barbara thought the group was a great idea. “May I be a part of it?” she asked. “I’ve lived on the West Coast all my life, and it would be nice to have some more female friends out here.”

“I would like that,” Emma replied.

“By the way, I have a friend, Jean, who suffered abuse by a family member. She might like to join.”

“Thanks, Barbara. I appreciate the tip.”

“I’ll give you her phone number and call her to let her know you will be telephoning her. Jean Bartley is her name.”

“Thank you.”

On her way home, Emma stopped at the local coffee shop for a latte and saw a woman sitting alone, staring out the window. She seemed deep in thought and her expression was melancholy.

“May I join you?” Emma asked, hating to see anyone looking so lonely.

“Of course,” she replied.

“Emma Johnson.” Emma extended her hand and pulled out a chair with the other.

The woman shook her hand warmly. “My name is Jean Bartley.”

“Jean Bartley.” Emma shook her head a little at the coincidence. “Are you, by any chance, a friend of Barbara Bond’s?”

“Yes, I am. How did you know?” She looked surprised.

“What a coincidence! I spoke with Barbara just this morning. Actually, she suggested you might be interested in my project and gave me your telephone number,” Emma said, and proceeded to tell Jean about the circle of women she was forming. “Do you think you’d like to attend?”

“I would,” Jean agreed immediately. “I was abused years ago, but I have told only one or two friends. It might be time that I did.”

“Great, Jean. I look forward to having you as a member of our group.”

The two women continued to enjoy their hot drinks while they chatted about Jean’s former work as a computer information specialist and Emma’s days as a teacher. Emma found Jean sociable and friendly, but she was also a wise woman who measured her words carefully. She would fit in well. Emma was pleased she had decided to join. *You just never know who you’ll meet when you extend a hand in friendship*, Emma thought.

That evening, Emma told Jon, “I have three more women who might be interested in my circle. You should see Kelly’s watercolors—they are spectacular. And she led me to Barbara, a former social worker from California, who told me about Jean, a retired computer tech. It’s all coming together.”

“That is great news.” Jon grinned at his wife’s enthusiasm. “Look at you, you’re alive with excitement.”

“Oh, I am, Jon, and a bit apprehensive too.”

“Don’t be,” Jon said. “I might even have found a place for you to meet, but I’ll tell you more about that once it is a little more definite.”

Emma smiled at her husband. She was so grateful for his help, and not just with her new project. There had been a day when their marriage had been rife with trouble, but her therapy had helped with that too. Leaning over, she placed a hand on his and squeezed it tight, and then she returned to her needlework with a smile.

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The next day, Emma went shopping for thread at the local fabric shop. The store was showcasing quilts made by locals, one of whom was a petite, auburn-haired woman named Tia Bakka. Tia not only enjoyed quilting, she was quite good at it too. A few of her beautiful quilts were on display. During their brief conversation about quilting, Emma explained that she would soon have less time for needlework because of the group she was trying to put together. She explained a little about it to her new friend.

“What you’re planning sounds good. Could I be a part of it?” Tia asked. “My husband and I only recently moved to the region from Milwaukee, and I’d love to spend some time with like-minded ladies.”

“That would be great! I’ll call you with the details later this week.” The two women exchanged numbers and Emma paid for her thread.

“By the way,” Tia called as Emma was on her way out of the store. “I know a woman named Ruth who might like to join. She’s a single mother with three teenagers. I’m not familiar with her story, but she could be interested. I’ll have her give you a call.”

“Thank you so much, Tia.”

That evening, Emma told Jon, “I’m becoming a little anxious about my new career. I have done some research on abuse, and I’m beginning to question my own capabilities. Who am I to take on such an assignment?”

Jon smiled. “You’ll do fine. You make people feel comfortable, you have suffered the pain they endured through your own experience, and you have recovered. Don’t underestimate yourself. I have confidence in you.”

The next day, Emma drove to Ruth’s house. Ruth was a striking, tall woman in her early fifties. With her long, thick black hair, she looked like a model. To begin with, they chatted about career and family, as Emma could tell Ruth was a little uneasy. Ruth had worked for a large medical firm before having her children, but she now worked as an accountant. When Emma explained what she was trying to do, Ruth appeared uncomfortable.

“I don’t know. I’m not much for sharing my personal life with others. I’m a very private person.”

“I totally understand. It’s difficult to come to grips with your past and to share it with strangers,” Emma agreed. “But, if you think you would like to join us, just let me know. Here’s my phone number.”

“Thanks,” said Ruth. “I spoke to Tia and she told me she’s thinking of attending. I suppose I might be more comfortable if I knew at least one person in the group.”

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Later that evening, sitting in her recliner, Emma thought about the seven women she had met. Thoughts of her own past engulfed her mind, and long-forgotten memories emerged. She had agonized for so long and now she was finally free of the emotional anguish that had dogged her for decades. Now, in her twilight years, she was embarking on a new adventure to help victims by educating others. Emma wanted society to understand the emotional pain victims suffer, and to share the knowledge she knew to be true: that the wounds caused by sexual abuse are not healed by time alone. Without help, Emma knew that the pain would just burrow into the psyche and fester like an abscess. One day, it would explode, wreaking havoc on the individual and those close to them. Therapy with someone who was trained in dealing with sexual abuse was essential. And how much assistance a person needed depended on their childhood, their family, and their home life. As for Emma, she had been in therapy for more than fifteen years. The ringing phone startled her out of her reverie.

“Hello, Emma?

“Yes.”

“This is Ruth. I’ve decided to participate in your project. Is it too late to accept?”

“Oh, no. I would really like to have you as a member. I’ll call you with the details once we secure a venue.”

“Sounds great, Emma.”

“Thanks for calling.” As Emma hung up, Jon walked into the room.

“How’s it going?” he asked.

“Really well. Seven women have agreed to be part of the group and I need to schedule our first meeting. You said you might know a place where we could meet?”

“There is a brownstone on 4th street, not far from here. There’s a large room on the first floor that is vacant, and the owner told me you can use it until he finds a tenant.”

“That’s perfect, Jon. Thank you so much for your support. I’ll call all of the women with the details right away.” She smiled.

Chapter Two: The First Meeting

It was a bitterly cold February day, the type of cold that digs deep into your bones. Bone cold, Emma’s mother used to say. All bundled up in her coat, hat, scarf, and gloves, Emma arrived at the brownstone. Three women were gathered by the door, the steam rising from their mouths as they chatted. Emma was apprehensive, still questioning her own qualifications. Each of these women must be suffering from past abuse that left deep wounds or they would not have been interested in her project. In addition to writing a book, Emma wanted to help these women heal, to free them of the agony they had endured, and to help them to finally let go of the pain. She prayed God would help her.

“Good morning,” she said with a smile. “Welcome.” As she opened the door, she could see the room they had been given to use was warm, cozy, and ready for them. A gas fireplace in one corner warmed the room, and a plate of cookies had been placed on a table along with a pitcher filled with iced water surrounded by glasses. Eight chairs had been set in a circle. Emma was pleased.

“Theresa, I would like to introduce you to Barbara. She’s from the West Coast and was a social worker,” Emma said, smiling. “I’m so glad you both could come today.”

“Hi, Barbara.” Theresa reached out her hand.

“Where do you live, Theresa?”

“I live in a subdivision for retired people.” Theresa obviously felt uncomfortable saying any more.

“And you?”

“I have a home on Lincoln Lake,” Barbara replied. “I feel like I am living in the country, yet I’m five minutes from Wal-Mart.”

“Oh, that is a beautiful area,” Theresa remarked. “There is a path around the lake and I walk my dog, Lucy, there every day.”

Their conversation was interrupted by Emma, who introduced them to Jean.

“Theresa, Barbara, let me introduce you to Jean. Barbara, I believe you and Jean are acquainted.”

“We are. Hi, Jean, it’s good to see you again.”

“I met Jean yesterday at Starbucks. She was having a latte, sitting alone, and I asked if I could join her. One thing led to another, and here she is. Welcome, Jean.”

“Thank you, Emma.”

Soon, two more women entered. It had started to snow, and the warmth from the fireplace made their faces glow.

“Ruth, Tia, I’m so glad you could make it. The weather conditions are really becoming bad.” Emma shivered as she spoke and smiled.

“Good morning, Emma. Thanks for inviting us.” Everyone appeared a little uneasy, unsure of what they were getting themselves into. Each had a secret they had carried all their lives; to divulge it now, to total strangers, was a bit daunting. The one person they had all met previously was Emma, but they knew little about her except that she was a survivor of abuse. Her easygoing manner had made them feel comfortable enough to come along, yet Emma also knew that within each woman was a longing to be free.

The front door opened and the women could hear the wind howling outside. Two more women entered, their coats covered with snow. “Whew! It’s getting nasty out there,” one said.

Emma approached the women and smiled. “Welcome. I am so glad you decided to come, both of you.” Turning to the group, she said, “Ladies I would like to introduce you to Kelly and Janice, who complete our group. There are cookies on the table for you to enjoy. Let’s spend a few minutes getting to know one another.”

After twenty minutes or so of conversation, the women sat down. They seemed more relaxed and comfortable.

“Thank you for coming today. Let’s begin by introducing ourselves. I’ll start. My name is Emma Johnson. I’m from New England and I’m married with two daughters and three grandchildren. My husband and I are both retired. In my former life, I was a teacher, and my husband, Jon, was an engineer. My goal is to write a book about sexual abuse, to convey to the world the devastation it leaves in its wake and how it destroys lives, robs a child of innocence, and steals his or her childhood. All of us sitting here have been violated in some way. I hope our stories and the pain we endured can be used to educate help break the silence surrounding child abuse.”

Continuing around the circle, the next lady spoke. “My name is Janice McGuire. Looking at my hair, you can tell I was born eons ago…” The group laughed. “…in Nebraska,” she added. “I am a retired pediatric nurse. I am a widow and have one daughter. My husband was a medical doctor. He passed away three years ago.”

“My name is Theresa Evans. I was born in Nevada and taught English for many years. I am also a widow, and I have one son and two grandchildren.”

“My name is Jean Bartley. I was born in Connecticut and moved here five years ago. In my other life, I was computer specialist. I am single.”

“My name is Kelly Malone. I come from Washington, State that is, and I’m married with three children. My husband is a retired mechanic. I am an artist and have been painting with watercolors for years. My specialty is native birds and waterfowl.”

“She’s very good, too,” Emma added.

“My name is Tia Bakka. I was born and raised in Milwaukee. I am married and have three children and six grandchildren. My husband is an attorney and my hobby is quilting.”

“Tia recently had a showing of her quilts in town at The Fabric Shoppe. They are gorgeous,” added Emma.

“My name is Ruth Johansen. I’m from Arizona, divorced, and have three children. I sold medical supplies for a number of years and now I work as an accountant.”

“I’m Barbara Bonds. I’m from California, where I was a social worker. I am divorced with no children.”

“Thank you.” Emma smiled. “I brought each of you a notebook.” She handed one to each member of the group. “On the inside cover I have written a few rules. I would like each of you to look at them and let me know what you think and if we should add any others.”

The women read the rules. Theresa spoke first. “They look good to me.”

The others nodded in agreement. Only Kelly raised her hand. “What do you mean by probing questions?”

“What I mean by that is that if a woman is sharing her story, do not ask intimate details of the abuse or ask questions about penetration or specifics. If a person wants to tell that, fine, but don’t ask if that information isn’t volunteered. Most women who were sexually abused feel the abuse was their fault. Asking a victim personal questions can make them feel uncomfortable and embarrassed.”

Emma continued. “When I was recovering from abuse, I found journaling was extremely helpful. The primary purpose of this notebook is to help each of you get in touch with your feelings. You may find it painful to remember the abuse or the emotions you were having at the time. However, the more honest you are with yourself, the more beneficial your journal will be. Try to write a little each day about the violence you suffered, how and when it happened, how you felt, and how it affected your life. In addition to sharing our stories, I would like these meetings to be educational. At the end of each meeting, I will ask you a question. Use this notebook to write the question then, later, in the privacy of your home, write your answer. You can make this your private journal if you wish, or you may share what you wrote at the next meeting. Also, as we discuss abuse we will use the Internet to research topics and share what we learn with the group. Use this notebook to write down whatever information you find.”

Once the housekeeping was completed, Emma said, “I am not a trained therapist, but I have had fifteen years of therapy and analysis. I was a teacher for twenty-three years and I have worked with many children during that time. Some of those children were abused, but at the time, I was working through my own set of circumstances and could do little but empathize. Today, I feel that, as a group, we can benefit people everywhere. Since I first met each of you, I have researched child abuse and discovered there are basically four categories: emotional, physical, sexual, and neglect. There is also a fifth group that is a conglomeration of everything that doesn’t fit within the first four. What I have learned is horrific. What concerns me most is the reluctance of the public to acknowledge and discuss child abuse, especially child sexual abuse. It is an uncomfortable topic for most people. Unless one has been abused, it is impossible to understand the effect it has on the victim.” She set aside her own journal and looked up at the women, her eyes moving from one face to the next.

“Today, we’ve assembled here to talk about child sexual abuse, and to reveal our stories of abuse and survival. By sharing our pain and the emotional cost abuse has had on our lives, perhaps we can begin the dialogue, educate the public, and hopefully, get people talking about the topic.”

“I don’t see how we can do much to help with this problem,” Tia interjected, pushing her auburn hair back away from her face. “I was reading about child sexual abuse last night, on the Internet. One website, the American Heritage Society, said that one in four girls and one in six boys suffer from sexual abuse. That’s such a huge portion of our population. And, according to the **American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress,** in New York State alone approximately two hundred sexually and physically abused children are found dead each year and never identified. It is clearly a huge problem and much more widespread than people think.”

“It *is* a huge problem, Tia,” replied Emma, “but if not us, then who? Someone has to do something. If we do something, I hope that others pick up the ball and run with it. And there are so many acts of violence carried out on children: rape, incest, physical and emotional abuse. Sometimes children don’t even realize they have been abused until much later in life. Who can give me a good general definition for child sexual abuse?” Emma asked.

“Forcing a child to do something of a sexual nature that he or she doesn’t want to do,” Jean answered.

“Having sexual intercourse with a child,” Kelly suggested.

“How about taking pictures of a naked child? Or showing pictures of naked children on the Internet?” responded Theresa.

“Yes, all good responses,” Emma replied. “Child sexual abuse can be all of that and more. It can be touching or non-touching. Touching a child’s genitals or having a child touch an adult’s genitals, or entering a child’s body, no matter how slight, through the vagina or anus are all considered child sexual abuse.”

Ruth put her hand up. “I’ve never heard of non-touching abuse. What does that mean?”

“Good question, Ruth.”

“Allowing a child to watch a couple having sexual intercourse or masturbating in front of a child are examples of non-touching child sexual abuse. Viewing pornographic material with a child or using a child to pose for pornographic material are other forms of sexual exploitation. In most states, the legal definition of child sexual abuse is when a person, either an adult or a child, forces a child to have any form of sexual contact or engage in any type of sexual activity at the perpetrator’s direction.”

“Which is worse?” asked Janice.

“All are equally harmful and alarming to a child,” Emma replied. “The humiliation, embarrassment, and theft of innocence involved in any of these acts are destructive to the child’s psyche. Their childhood has been stolen from them. In many cases, the abuse makes it hard for the child to develop social skills, make friends, and more. It is a serious problem and one that needs to be addressed. We are here to do just that.” Emma looked out the window. The snow had let up and was now falling gently. Cars lining up the sidewalk were covered with at least an inch of snow. How quickly the time had passed. “Does anyone have any comments or questions?”

Ruth raised her hand. “In this book you plan to write of our stories, will we be identifiable or will you use pseudonyms?”

“Names and places will be changed to preserve our identities. Are there any other questions?”

“I would like to say thank you for forming this group to help us deal with our past,” Jean responded.

“Yes, thank you,” Tia added.

“Thank you, Jean, Tia, and everyone else for coming and being part of this project. As I mentioned earlier, use the Internet to research types of abuse. Next week we will discuss incest. These meetings won’t be easy. It is more than likely that many tears will be shed. Remember, what is shared in this room is private and other women’s stories are not to be discussed with anyone, not even with your husband or best friend.”

Emma stood up and gave each woman a hug as they left, personally thanking them for being there. The last to leave, Emma picked up the dishes and took them to the back room, washed them, and put them away. Then she turned off the fireplace and walked outside. As she locked the door, she smiled. Jon had found this building for the women to use at no charge, and it had been perfect.

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Emma was tired by the time she returned home. She sat back in her recliner with her computer in her lap, her fingers resting on the keyboard. She didn’t feel like writing, but she knew she had to put down on paper her thoughts of the day’s events. All in all, she was satisfied with the meeting. She thought of each of the women and tried to remember their faces and something about each one. With the exception of Ruth, most of the women were in their early to mid-sixties, some with children and grandchildren. Emma closed her eyes and leaned back. Suddenly, she felt hands gently massaging her shoulders. Jon was there.

“Oh, Jon, thank you so much for getting the brownstone for us. It was ideal. And what a treat to have the fire going, cookies, and a pitcher of iced water on the table. That was so thoughtful, honey. ”

Jon smiled, leaned down, and kissed Emma on the forehead. “How did your first meeting go?”

“It went well. What a remarkable group of women!”

Chapter Three: Jean

On the day of the second meeting, Emma arrived early to light the fireplace, arrange the chairs, and put water on the table. She had baked cookies for the women to make them feel more at ease and the aroma of them filled the air. Within fifteen minutes, all of the women arrived, sampled the cookies, and were ready to begin.

Emma started the meeting. “Today’s topic of discussion is incest. Who can tell me what incest is?”

“Sex between relatives.”

“That’s correct, Kelly. The American Heritage dictionary states incest is ‘sexual relations between persons who are so closely related that their marriage would be illegal or forbidden by custom.’ Today, some define it to include those persons delegated to care for or have authority over a child.”

“I read that many times incest occurs in families where there may be one or more alcoholics,” added Tia. “Under the sway of alcohol, the offender’s judgment may be compromised and the abuser may not even remember hurting the child. And, for the child, the physical and emotional pain may be so severe, they may block out the memories for years.”

“I just don’t understand how parents can hurt their own flesh and blood so blatantly,” interrupted Barbara. “It’s sickening.”

“But many do,” added Tia. “Often, the offenders were abused themselves as children. If the culprit is someone the child loves, and whom all the family admires, telling someone about the abuse is more difficult than ever. It’s a dirty little secret. When children are victimized by those who should be protecting them, they may develop fear and a lack of trust for adults in general.”

“You mentioned last week that abuse robs a child of his innocence. Can we discuss that?” asked Barbara.

“Of course” replied Emma. “Any thoughts?

“To me, childhood innocence means being carefree or filled with imagination,” said Janice.

“I think a child’s mind is fragile and can be broken easily,” added Tia.

“You’re both right,” declared Ruth. “I had the same question, so I went to my encyclopedia. More or less, it said that children are innocent and trusting with well-meaning hearts. Innocence makes them curious, carefree, and devoid of the meanness that exists in the adult world. When a child experiences traumatic events, such as abuse, that innocence is lost.”

Emma noticed that Jean had said nothing, and simply stared down at her journal, but Emma’s own thoughts were interrupted by Theresa entering the conversation. “I felt it was my fault when I was abused. I couldn’t forgive myself.”

“It was not your fault, Theresa,” said Emma. “You must believe that. Carrying a secret of that enormity can be very destructive. Was anyone here abused by a family member?”

Jean raised her hand and whispered, “My brother raped me.”

“Would you like to tell us about it?” Emma asked gently.

Her eyes downcast, fixed on her notebook, Jean said, “My mom worked a lot and my dad was always traveling. My brother and I were really close. As children, we played together. When he went to high school, he hung out more with his friends and I with mine. We were three years apart.”

Emma noticed Jean doodling on her notebook as she spoke, anything to keep her eyes from meeting those of the other women. “Everyone liked Bobby. He did well in school, and although the other students seemed to like him, he had lots of acquaintances but no really close friends. He never caused any trouble either at school or at home. One night, when I was thirteen years old, mom and dad had gone out for the evening. Bobby came into my bedroom and lay down next to me. Feeling his presence, I awoke and looked at the clock. It was after midnight. I could tell he had been drinking. ‘Bobby, what have you been drinking?’ I asked him.

“‘Oh, I just had a little sip of something,’ he said.

“He pulled me close to him and said, ‘Jeannie, I love you so much. You do know that don’t you?’

“‘Yes, Bobby. I love you, too,’ I told him.

“‘When people love each other, they do things they don’t do with other people. They hug and kiss and stuff.’

“‘I know, like dad and mom do.’

“‘That’s right, Jeannie, and sometimes brothers and sisters, too.’”

Jean paused and swallowed hard.

“It’s okay, Jean,” Emma said. “If you want to stop, that’s okay. We’re all here for you.”

“No,” Jean said, and took a sip of water. “I … I … I just didn’t understand what he was saying, but all of a sudden he was on top of me. He spread my legs apart with his knees. I cried out, ‘Stop, Bobby!’ But he didn’t stop. The liquor on his breath was so strong that I wanted to throw up. Before I knew it, he was inside of me. It hurt so badly. When he was finished, he said, ‘Don’t tell mom. She’ll be mad at you. She might even send you away. You’re the best sister in the world.’ Then he gave me a hug and left.”

Kelly burst up from her chair and erupted with anger. “That bastard! Someone should cut his balls off!” She balled her hands into fists at her side. “I’m so sorry, Jean,” she said when she had composed herself and taken her seat. “Your story just made me feel so angry.”

Jean acknowledged Kelly’s apology. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she continued. “I cried for a long time. The next morning, I went into the bathroom. There was dried blood over my genitals, and my inner thighs were black and blue from where he had forced my legs apart. It hurt when I peed, and my insides were all sore. I locked the door, slowly filled the bathtub, sat down in the warm water, hugged my legs and wept. I kept asking myself what I had done to Bobby to deserve that? I must have stayed in the tub for an hour, alone in my thoughts.”

“Oh, sweetie, I am so very sorry for what you went through,” whispered Emma. Reaching across, she took Jean’s hand in hers and squeezed it reassuringly.

Tears filled the eyes of several of the women, as if they were reliving their own horror. Emma got up and brought Jean tissues, and enveloped Jean in a big hug. Then she returned to her chair.

After a time, Jean blew her nose and then continued, “Suddenly, there was a knock on the bathroom door. It was Bobby. He asked me if I was okay. I said, ‘Yes, I’m taking a bath.’

“‘Okay, he said. I’m going to work. Mom and Dad are still sleeping. Tell them I’ll be back this afternoon around one.’ He said nothing about what he had done to me the night before.”

The room was quiet. No one said a word.

Finally, Ruth asked, “Did you tell your parents?”

“No. I was so ashamed and embarrassed. I felt it was my fault. I loved Bobby so much. He was my best friend. But, after that night, I was afraid of him. I didn’t want to be alone with him.”

“How did you handle living in the same house with him?” asked Kelly.

Jean looked up at Kelly to acknowledge her question. After a second or two, she said, “He came to me that afternoon. ‘Jeannie, I’m sorry about last night.’

“‘Go away,’ I said. ‘What did I do to you to deserve that? You hurt me, Bobby. I can’t trust you anymore.’ I ran up to my room and closed the door. A while later, there was a knock on the door.

“‘Jeannie, I’m so sorry. Please forgive me.’

“I was so angry with him. ‘Go away. I don’t want to see you,’ I told him. I just couldn’t forgive him.

“‘It was the alcohol, Jeannie,’ he pleaded. ‘Please forgive me.’

“‘No!’ I shouted back. That night, he committed suicide. His death destroyed my parents. I couldn’t tell them. I was crazy with guilt. It was my fault he committed suicide. It was my fault.” Jean began to sob, big wracking sobs.

Emma hurried over to Jean and put her arms around her. “It was *not* your fault. He took advantage of you. You were only thirteen years old.”

“I’ve never told anyone. I felt so lost without him and his friendship. I still miss him.”

“Of course, you do. That was a tough loss to deal with, and for so long. Not only did he rob you of your childhood, but he took your brother and best friend from you.” Tears wet Emma’s cheeks as she held Jean. There was not a dry eye in the room.

Suddenly, Emma didn’t know what to do. Jean was in deep distress. She needed help. How could Emma help her? What could she say?

“Did you ever tell your parents?” Emma asked.

“No. How could I? They adored Bobby, and so did I. They kept asking, ‘Why?’ I couldn’t tell them he died because of me, because I wouldn’t forgive him.” Jean began to cry again, her body trembling with sobs.

Emma held her close. “Oh, Jean.” Emma hugged her tighter. “Cry it out. Let your tears wash away the pain.”

After several minutes, Jean’s crying eased. “Thank you, Emma, and thank you all of you for listening to my story. I really appreciate it. It’s been a burden for so long.”

Emma could tell that everyone felt drained by the experience.

“Does anyone have any comments?” asked Emma.

“You have carried an enormous load for so long,” said Ruth. I can’t even begin to imagine the guilt you felt.”

“I hope revealing what happened has helped ease your pain,” offered Tia. “The suffering you endured boggles my mind. I don’t know how you survived.”

“He was your brother, but he was so wrong,” said Kelly. “He placed a burden on you that no child should bear.”

The women sat quietly, each deep in their own thoughts.

Finally, Emma said “Thank you for sharing your story with us, Jean.” Looking outside, she could see the sun was shining brightly. The snow, still on the ground, glistened in the sunlight. “I think this is enough for today. Your question for this week: How did you feel while Jean was telling her story? Also, let us each surf the Internet and see what more we can learn about how a family might begin to heal from such trauma.”

Emma stood and hugged each of the women again in turn. “Thank you for coming. I feel this has been a good meeting. And Jean, thank you so much for sharing with us. You’ve moved us to the core, and you have helped each of us realize that we are not alone. There are so many survivors out there, each in pain.” She gave Jean another hug. “See you next week.”

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Emma returned home and went immediately to her favorite chair—her recliner. It fit her body perfectly, and when she sat in it, she felt so cozy and settled. It had been an emotional meeting. She thought of Jean and the hell she had lived through for so long. The guilt. The shame. Emma wondered how Jean had coped all of these years, but that was for another day. Emma wondered how Jean’s story had affected the other women. She could tell they had been visibly upset. Were they emotionally strong enough to handle the accounts they would hear? Was she? Was she even capable of working with these women? Once again, Emma thought that maybe she had taken on more than she bargained for.

She closed her eyes and thought of the question she had asked the group to consider: how they had felt while Jean was telling her story. How would she, Emma, answer it? How did it make her feel? All she could think about was Jean and her feeling of responsibility for her brother’s death? Emma felt such deep sorrow for her. It was a weight too heavy for any human to bear, let alone a child.