

chapter eighteen

Desperate

Parents

April - May 2004

Parents are the wild card when it comes to school bullying. Even the caring, loving ones sometimes feed off the drama and make the situation worse or they let their anguish destroy their good judgment. They can also be overly-protective to the point of smothering. Then, there are those parents who inspire me with their wisdom and restraint and who don't allow their personal baggage to get in the way of what's best for their child. All of them are kindred spirits doing everything possible to help their son or daughter only to keep hitting brick walls. By the time they turn to me, many of them are convinced I'm their last hope. I've learned how to cope with the pressure of their expectations and feel honored by their willingness to trust me. It's the emotionally absent parents that are hard to take. Whether they're burdened with severe problems of their own or they're simply self-absorbed, the reason for their negligence doesn't matter, because it's always the child who pays the price.

Eileen and I have been back on the road for nearly a week. We're in a gym at a school in Florida. It's early evening, and I'm about to take the stage for my parent/family seminar. This is always the hardest lecture because by nighttime, I'm weary from having given presentations all day and inter-

vening with kids in crisis. There are some nights when my vocal chords will be ravaged and I'll croak my way through the seminar.

The parent/family seminars are open to the public. Sometimes, like tonight, they're packed, with people having driven hundreds of miles to attend. Other nights, I'll be lucky to see ten seats occupied. A lot of it has to do with how aggressive the school district is in spreading the word, and Eileen and I are always grateful to those that make an effort. Typically, the audience consists of adult survivors, educators, and students who heard me speak during the day and who return with their parents at night. Sometimes kids will ask me during the one-on-ones if I'd telephone their mom or dad and urge them to come. Eileen and I always honor these requests. Once in a while, a reluctant parent will surprise us. But some kids still come back alone and I can see it in their eyes how much they wished their parents would take an interest in the pain they're going through. If those moms and dads only knew how much this small gesture of their time would mean to their child. After the seminar, I always do a book signing, and then sit down with anyone who needs me to listen. I usually start the evening seminar at 7:00 P.M. and rarely get back to my hotel before midnight.

Tonight, I'm on edge. Earlier in the day, I met with a large number of students in crisis. Some of them are dealing with dysfunction in their families on top of being bullied at school. Most of these kids aren't looking for answers as much as they're seeking an adult to validate their pain. I'm pleased they confide in me, but the responsibility grows more daunting every day. Earlier this afternoon at the middle school, a

group of girls approached me, saying that their friend Tammy was in trouble and they didn't know what to do. When I met Tammy, I could tell something was wrong. She was skittish and unsure. Her friends told her that if she didn't tell me what happened, they would.

"Tell me what?" I asked, growing more concerned.

"Go ahead, Tammy," they pushed.

Tammy pulled up her shirt. I gasped in horror. Across her chest down to her stomach, her skin was blistered and peeling from what appeared to be a serious burn wound. "Sweetheart, what happened to you?" I asked, shuddering.

Tammy's eyes filled with tears, but she wouldn't speak. "Tammy, please, you have to tell me," I begged.

"My sister threw a pot of boiling water at me," she finally managed.

"Oh, my God, honey. Why?"

"I don't know," Tammy stuttered. "She was in a bad mood, and sometimes when she gets like that, she does mean things."

"How old is your sister?" I asked, not sure I wanted to hear the answer.

"Fifteen."

"Do your parents know about this?"

"I only have foster parents now, but I told my foster mom," she replied. "Except —" She hesitated, her expression fearful.

"Go on," I gently pressed her.

"I told her it was an accident, that my sister and I were making soup and the pot fell," she said. "I was afraid they'd separate us if I told the truth."

“Tammy, your sister is troubled, and unless you’re honest about what she did, she’ll never get the help she needs,” I explained. “May I have your blessing to call your foster parents and see if they can come to my seminar tonight and then talk with me afterward?” This is where I feel as if I’m always walking a tight rope on tour because even if Tammy begged me to keep her confession a secret, ethically and legally I couldn’t, but I don’t want to betray her trust either.

“OK,” she answered meekly. *Thank God.*

“It’ll be all right,” I reassured her. “I’d also like to get your school counselor involved, too.”

“Please don’t let them take my sister away!” she cried.

“I’ll do everything I can to prevent it,” I answered.

I spoke with the school and with Tammy’s foster mom, who upon hearing what happened, was too stunned to speak. While I realize not all foster parents are what they should be, and that some only take on kids to bilk money from the government, there are also those foster parents who are genuinely in it for the love of children. Tammy’s foster mom was obviously the latter. I could hear her concern as I relayed my conversation with her daughter. “Anything, I’ll do anything,” she replied. “I love both girls with all my heart.”

I asked her why Tammy and her sister were in foster care, what had happened to their biological parents. She told me that the father disappeared from their lives long ago, and the mother was in rehab recovering from multiple addictions. As I stood there in the counselor’s office on the phone with Tammy’s foster mom, I couldn’t help but wonder how many more stories like Tammy’s I could endure before the sadness claimed my spirit. Then again, I told myself, I was a child

advocate now, and like it or not, this was part of the territory.

Eileen and I are also expecting a handful of other parents whom we called either at a student's behest or because we were able to persuade the student to give us his blessing to telephone them. Sometimes a student will be afraid I'll get him into trouble by telephoning Mom or Dad. Usually, I'm able to overcome that hurdle by telling the student exactly what I'm going to say to the parent — namely, that I want to meet the person who raised such a remarkable child. This puts the student more at ease and lessens the chance of a parent becoming defensive, but more importantly, it's the truth.

During my student presentation this morning, there was a seventh grade boy in the audience who kept covering his face, and I suspect it was because he was crying and didn't want his peers to see. He was slight compared to his classmates, many of whom were already on the brink of puberty. I made a mental note of where he was sitting so that I could locate him afterward, but it wasn't necessary. The moment I concluded my talk, he was making his way toward me, his eyes red and swollen.

"My name is Justin," he whispered. "Thank you for telling us your story."

"You're so very welcome," I replied, fighting the urge to scoop him up into my arms and hug his hurt away.

"There's something I need to share with you," he said.

Another old soul.

"I should only be in fifth grade, but I skipped two years," he explained. "Now I don't fit in anywhere."

"I'm so sorry you're going through this," I said. "It must

be hard.”

“It is,” he answered, solemnly. “What I want to tell you is I was going to run away this weekend, but since I heard your story, I feel braver and probably won’t now.”

I suppressed a smile. “Do your parents know that you’re struggling at school?” I asked.

“Yeah, but they say it’s because my classmates are just jealous of me and I have to ignore it and be the bigger person,” he responded.

“They’re wrong,” I said.

Justin stared at me wide-eyed. “No one has ever said my mom or dad was wrong before,” he stated, nervously.

“Part of what I do Justin is help parents who have kids that are being bullied understand what that feels like and what to do to make things better,” I explained. “I’d like to be able to help your parents, too.”

“I don’t think they’d come to your seminar tonight,” he said, sadly. “Dad always works until late at the office and mom is busy with my sister. She’s got autism.”

This poor kid.

“Tell you what,” I suggested. “Why don’t I call your mom and tell her that I’d like to meet the parents who raised such a remarkable son, and that I’m extending a VIP invitation for your whole family to attend my seminar tonight?”

“That would be awesome,” Justin said, smiling from ear to ear.

After getting his mom’s telephone number and promising to call, I send Justin off to class. As I watched him walk away, I wanted to scream at his parents, “please don’t forget about him because your other child is challenged, Justin

won't hold on much longer if you don't make some adjustments." When I talked with his mom, she was polite but reserved. I emphasized how much it would mean to Justin if she and her husband brought him to the seminar tonight. She insisted she would do what she could.

I also spoke with a single dad today, whose daughter, Sally read my book and has been emailing me for months. They live a couple of hours away. Sally is being harassed by a clique of Elite Tormentors who spray painted the word "slut" all over her locker, pushed her down a flight of stairs at school, and posted malicious rumors about her on the Internet, all because she decided she didn't want to do drugs or party with them anymore. What's interesting is that when I e-mailed Sally that I'd be in town and wanted her dad's phone number so I could call and invite them to the evening seminar, she said that her father was stubborn and not to be surprised if he hung up on me. But when I spoke to this dad, he was willing to do whatever it took to help her.

I see this often, where a bullied child, too lonely and frustrated to be rational anymore, makes a perfectly loving parent out to be a monster. One of the most challenging aspects of this work is to remain clear headed when I'm interacting with a hurting child and not get so caught up in his distress that I vilify an undeserving parent, or worse, assume the child's being overly-dramatic and miss the warning signs of abuse. That's why it's difficult when parents don't come because how can I ever know what's really going on unless I meet them? And even then there's no guarantee, but at least I know I did everything I could. Before I depart a tour city, I always review with each school counselor what I've learned

from the students who sought my help and offer suggestions for follow up. Though most of these counselors are dedicated, committed individuals who would take a bullet for their students, it's still painful leaving these kids, knowing that while I was able to touch their lives, I'll have to rely on others to take it from there. I'll never get used to that.

I hear the principal making an announcement that we're ready to begin. As people are taking their seats, I search for the faces of those kids who were desperate for their parents to return with them tonight. Several are sitting with one or both parents, and I notice Tammy arriving with her foster mom. Others are by themselves. Though I sometimes like to think I can predict who will and won't come, the truth is, whenever you're dealing with family dynamics, it's a crap shoot. The only way I've been able to survive my worry and disappointment over the no shows, is to tell myself that whatever happens is God's will. But there are days when despite how much faith I have, those words are little comfort.

The principal has stepped up to the podium to introduce me. I don't see Justin or his family yet and keep glancing over at the main entrance hoping they'll walk in. The large doors are still open and I can see outside into the parking lot. It's pouring rain and thundering. As the principal concludes his introduction, I see a boy pulling up on a bicycle. He's in a bright yellow raincoat.

Dear God, please don't let that be Justin.

Sure enough, it's him. No parents, no family, no nothing, just this little boy, soaking wet and alone. He catches my eye and smiles. There's a lump in my throat so large that I can't speak. I'm sure the audience is starting to think there's

something wrong because I'm standing here silent. I look over at The Little General to get her attention and then gesture toward where Justin is seated. She immediately understands and goes and sits down next to him.

Taking a deep breath, I begin the lecture.

"Hello, everyone. Thank you for being here. I see many familiar faces and I couldn't be more delighted." I wink at Tammy and Justin. They both grin. "Kids, it means so much to me seeing all of you here and I'm going to do my very best to help your parents understand where you're coming from and how they can make things better for you, OK?" The kids nod energetically. Then, I address the parents. "Today I relived onstage for your children what happened to me when I was their age, how I was tormented and rejected by my peers simply for being different," I explain. "My primary message was that it's not just joking around, that bullying damages you for life."

A father gently pokes his son, urging him to pay attention. A couple rows down from them, a girl is clutching her mom's arm. She approached me after my student presentation this morning saying that she thought she was the only person who ever wished for cancer until she heard me admit the same thing. She confided that despite how hard she tries to make friends, no one at school will have anything to do with her. She said that last year she tried to kill herself with an over-dose of aspirin, and that now, a group of her classmates keep teasing her about it, saying she couldn't even do suicide right. Both her school counselor and I called her mom and urged her to come tonight. Judging by the mom's strung out appearance, I wonder how much of her daughter's

stress is being further amplified at home.

“First, I’m going to do my student presentation because I think it’s important you experience what your children did today so you can talk about it together,” I inform the parents. “Then, afterward, I’ll give you advice on how you can help your child, whether they be a bully, victim or bystander.” People begin pulling out their notebooks and pens. Pleased, I continue.

I discuss Columbine, the same way I do with the students. I see dozens of parents nodding their heads in understanding. Then, I re-enact my school days, allowing myself to go back once more in time to the pain of my youth. The present starts to recede, and soon, I’m the struggling teenager again, lost in the power of the memories. As I chronicle my story, I look out into the audience and see parents whose kids didn’t think they cared putting their arms around them in a public show of support. By the time I get to the part in my talk where I recall how no one would let me sit with them at lunch, a mom toward the back quietly begins to weep. Her daughter, who sought me out today admitting to being a bully and asking for advice on how to make amends to her victims, is trying to comfort her. By the expression on this girl’s face, I doubt she realized until just this moment that her mom was shunned as a teenager the same way she’s been shunning her classmates. I press on, anticipating a long night ahead.

As I delve into the evening of my high school reunion, the students look at each other knowingly, their excitement growing. When I describe how Mitch kissed me in the parking lot, the audience bursts into applause. I notice several women exhale, as if they’d been holding their breath this

whole time praying for a happy ending. Next, I take everyone through the empathy exercise.

I read in a book once that “it’s easier to open a heart that’s already been broken,” and I realize as I watch everyone trying to resurrect the memory of the most humiliating moment of their lives, that all of us are the same. We are opening each other’s hearts because we’ve had our hearts broken. Our individual vulnerability is our collective strength. By the time the empathy exercise is complete, some of the adults are looking over at their kids, their faces portraits of their own unresolved adolescence. One bullied girl who confessed to me she’s been struggling with her mom reaches out and squeezes her hand. Another girl rests her head on her dad’s shoulder while he gently strokes her hair, his expression a mix of remorse and relief. Watching these parents and children finding each other again is overwhelming. School bullying just doesn’t damage kids, it damages whole families, and whatever I’m doing in this gym tonight is helping to heal those wounds.

Dear God, thank you.

I commence the second half of the seminar, explaining a significant portion of this information is also featured in the faculty workshop so that both teachers and parents are operating from the same perspective. “I can open the students’ hearts and enlighten their minds, but if what I do isn’t reinforced in the classroom and at home, that which has the potential to be a movement loses its wings,” I say

Enthusiastic nods. I forge ahead.

“I love my parents with all my heart, and though my dad is gone now, I think about him often and how remarkable he

was during those turbulent, lonely years that defined my school experience,” I say, wishing he was in the audience. “I can’t imagine what it was like for my parents watching me suffer every day knowing they were doing everything they could and it still wasn’t enough. I’m going to tell you what my parents did that didn’t work, what they did that was successful, and why,” I continue. I look over at Justin, who’s leaning forward listening intently, when all of sudden, he glances up at the clock, then turns his head toward the door, straining to see out into the parking lot. Could it be that his parents might still show up?

Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, I begin reviewing all the things you should never say to a bullied child from “Ignore the bully and walk away,” “They’re just jealous,” and “I know how you feel,” to “Twenty years from now you’ll look back on this and laugh,” and “Be patient.” As I’m explaining as I did to the teachers why each of these statements drove me nuts, I see delighted students grinning at their parents while whispering in their ear, “I told you so.” Some parents smile good humoredly relishing this camaraderie with their child. Others seem to be struggling, not wanting to accept that the clichés handed down to them from their parents like pieces of heirloom china passed from generation to generation weren’t the valuable treasures they thought.

I move on to the difference between authority and Emotional Credibility and how to earn the latter. I describe the steps for how to intervene with a bullied child one-on-one, and warn parents as I warned teachers about making sure that when your child confides in you, you play the role of friend and ally, and not the disciplinarian. Upon hearing

these words, Sally's dad stares at me, his eyes tight with concern.

"I know a lot of what I'm saying is hard for many of you to take," I acknowledge, giving him a reassuring smile. "And the more you hear, the more you're beating yourselves up," I add. "Please, don't lose sight of the fact that all of you are caring parents or you wouldn't be here." I pause and look from parent to parent, making sure this sinks in.

I launch into the definition of The Ancient Child, and why most bullied students fit that profile. It never ceases to surprise me how much that concept resonates with everyone. Next, I talk about Jerry to illustrate that the bully is bleeding, too, and that he needs love and patience as much as the victim. Just as in the teacher workshop, Jerry's story moves many in the audience. I address traditional punishment vs. Compassionate Discipline Driven by Curiosity, and cite examples. Then I discuss the warning signs a child is being bullied, like lethargy, depression, self-mutilation, extreme make over attempts, diminished personal hygiene, lack of interest in social activities, sudden change in weight, over-reacting, inexplicable fits of rage, and faking illness to avoid going to school.

"Not all the red flags are easy to spot, nor are they necessarily what you'd expect," I warn. "I never had to fake illness to avoid school," I recall. "Every week I was lucky enough to come down with something else, strep throat, mono, low grade viruses, head colds, bronchitis, you name it. I was getting sick so frequently that my parents started to think that maybe I *was* faking it, but fevers and swollen glands don't lie." I recount how they brought me to a specialist who

explained it was possible for someone to will themselves sick, especially when their immune system was already being weakened by chronic stress. “Address your daughter’s emotional health, and her physical well-being will return,’ he told my parents.” A woman sitting toward the back looks at me her cheeks flush with excitement, as if she’d just been given the missing piece to a puzzle.

“Another symptom that many parents don’t immediately recognize is a sudden *increase* in grades,” I state, watching all the surprised expressions. “When a kid’s grades go down, there’s predictable concern, but when they go up, parents tend to perceive it as a sign that everything is fine, when it can mean precisely the opposite for a bullied student.” I tell how a significant number of parents I’ve met whose child either committed suicide or attempted it told me one of the reasons they were shocked was because their son or daughter’s grades had never been better, and that they finally seemed to be ‘doing so well.’” I explain that while this is not an absolute, and that a drop in grades is the more common sign that a student is being bullied, you should still pay attention to any changes. “Some severely bullied students immerse themselves in academic achievement as an escape, and then feel even more hopeless when they realize they’re still lonely.” I also define Rejection Junkie Syndrome. As I begin describing its characteristics, I notice a husband turn and look at his wife with suspicion.

“I described some of the signs your child may be a victim, but what if you’re worried she may be a bully?” I ask. The mom who was crying earlier whose daughter is a bully sits up straighter. I describe the two types, the school yard bully and

the Elite Tormentor, and why the latter is dangerous. “If you suspect your child may be an Elite Tormentor, you may have to commit the one dreaded parental sin second only to embarrassing your child in front of their friends,” I say. “Yes, folks, you may have to invade their privacy!” A group of parents burst out laughing, “I’m not trying to make light of the right to privacy, but when that privilege allows a child to hide acts of cruelty against a classmate, it should be taken away until they earn it back.”

“Amen to that,” shouts an exuberant father, followed by a chorus of other voices echoing their agreement.

I continue with my advice on how to uncover a possible Elite Tormentor, urging concerned parents to try the following. Casually have a conversation with your child about who’s popular at school and who’s not, coaxing her into revealing the names of those students who struggle to fit in or who strike her as lonely. A week later, ask her if she’d like to host a party suggesting it might be nice if, along with her friends, she invited a couple of the forgotten ones, too. “If she agrees despite what her friends may think, she’s not an Elite Tormentor,” I say. “In fact, she’s probably an Elite Leader.” I explain what this is. “If she won’t because she’s fearful her friends would freak but feels badly about it, she’s most likely a bystander,” I point out. “But if she recoils at the thought or acts indignant, perhaps even laughs, chances are you’re living with an Elite Tormentor.”

A few kids are glancing at one another guiltily.

“When your child is on the phone, pay attention to her tone and demeanor,” I continue. “Does it sound like she’s making a joke at someone else’s expense or gossiping about

another student?"

"Lastly, and I know this may anger your child and make you uncomfortable but remember, if you suspect your kid is one of the mean ones, you may be saving a life by doing this. Keep an eye on her when she's on the Internet. When she instant messages her friends, is she bad mouthing others? What blogs does she frequent and what are some of the things she and her friends are posting? Does she participate in nasty e-mail-a-thons with other students? The more you know, the more you can protect everyone."

The Little General is pointing to her watch.

"Whether your child is a bully or a victim, if you think she needs help, these are my recommended guidelines for working with any mental health professional," I state. I use myself as an example, telling them how when my parents started dragging me from one doctor to another, how they'd remain in the waiting room while I went in for my sessions. "I always felt like I was walking the plank, and used to think not only did the kids at school think I was a freak, but now my parents did too." I emphasize that it's important that everyone in the immediate family attend the first few sessions together with the child, so that he feels like this is a problem you're tackling together as opposed to "I am the problem." "It also gives the therapist insight into any dynamics in the home that could be contributing to the bullying issue at school," I add. I warn parents to thoroughly vet their therapist: review articles they've written for professional journals; ask questions about their background and treatment philosophy; and then weed out any who are proponents of tough love techniques. "Bullied kids have it tough enough," I state. "They don't need their love to come that way,

too.” Several parents are nodding their heads somberly. I then tackle the subject of psyche meds. “I’m not saying there isn’t a legitimate need for these drugs,” I remark. “But before you let a doctor diagnose your child with attention deficit disorder and put her on Ritalin, or declare her clinically depressed and give her an anti-depressant, ask yourself this question. If I spent every day dodging insults and attacks, and cried myself to sleep every night because I was so desperately lonely, isn’t it possible I might be distracted easily too or not feel like washing my hair or going out?” There’s a collective gulp. “I advise that before you let any doctor prescribe anything, he screens your child for bullying or other daily traumas of this type, and even then, it wouldn’t hurt to obtain a second opinion.”

Now Eileen has removed her watch and is waving it above her head.

“Everyone, my manager is letting me know we’re nearly out of time,” I say, gesturing in her direction. The audience chuckles. Before I conclude this presentation and take some of your questions, there’s a group of people here I need to recognize.” Everyone begins looking around. Designating myself as an Adult Survivor of Peer Abuse, I briefly describe what that means and some of my struggles including the diagnosis of post traumatic stress disorder. I then ask those who would define themselves as kindred spirits to stand up. Nearly three quarters of the audience rises, including Tammy’s foster mom.

“This is my call to action,” I state, my voice strong. “No one knows the hell these kids face every day more than us. We need to use our experiences and the miracle of our survival to help them find their way out. Parents, adult sur-

vivors, I invite you to start an *It's Not Just Joking Around Community Coalition* in your district and help lead the charge in the movement against school bullying. Those of you that are interested, please see *The Little General* at the conclusion of tonight's presentation. "Now, are there any questions?"

"I know you encourage victims to stand up to the bullies, but what if you have a child who doesn't have the confidence?" asks a mom in the front.

I tell her to rehearse the confrontation with the child the same as if it were a scene in a play, writing a script, and memorizing the lines. "You or your husband could play the bully, your child plays himself, and someone else in the family acts as director." I explain that not only will this give the child a sense of control because he's practiced what he's going to say and do, but the mild disassociation of approaching it like an actor portraying a part makes him feel less vulnerable.

"Next?"

"My daughter is getting harassed by a group of Elite Tormentors," a woman says. "My husband and I have been getting the runaround from the school. What should we do?"

"Start with the counselor and work your way up the chain of command," I instruct. "If the principal and the superintendent are unresponsive, present your case at a school board meeting, and if that doesn't work, contact the education writer at your local paper. The same applies if you're dealing with a teacher who's a bully and are getting stonewalled by the school administration. You'd be surprised how quickly people come to attention when they start getting phone calls from journalists."

“Any other questions,” I say, vibrating with the energy of my second wind.

“What about the parents of bullies?” someone shouts. “What’s the best way to deal with them?”

I offer advice similar to what I gave teachers on how to approach them, that rather than initiating the conversation on an accusatory note likely to make them defensive, start out by emphasizing what you have in common as parents as opposed to what separates you. “You might try something along the lines of ‘our kids are struggling with each other — why don’t we get together and discuss how we can work together to help them both?’” I see parents taking notes. I’m about to conclude when I hear a tiny voice in the front row.

“Please, just one more question,” Justin begs!

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“My sister has autism,” he says. “A lot of kids at her school are mean to her and I was wondering if you had any advice you could give me to help her.”

The gym is silent. This little boy has just captured every heart here.

I pause for a moment to ponder my answer, when it hits me in the form of a memory of another remarkable child. I recount the story of a fifth grade girl I met on tour named Darla. I saw her chatting with her friends by the locker, joyous and full of laughter, and I could tell by the way they were hanging on her every word that she was one of the most popular girls at school. She was also afflicted with a rare form of primordial dwarfism and stood less than three feet tall. As I’m telling the story, people are listening wide-eyed.

“It was one of the most inspiring things I’d ever seen,” I tell

the audience. I describe how this example of unconditional acceptance for someone who was different was achieved. I explain how Darla's mom prepared a slide presentation which she gave in every science class explaining what primordial dwarfism is and why some people are born with it. Then, Darla answered all her classmates' questions about what her life was like, including some of the unexpected advantages of being tiny. The mom also wrote a letter to parents explaining the presentation, and asking them to reinforce the message of acceptance at home, which the principal printed on school letterhead and made sure was sent home with every student. "Kids tend to reject what they don't understand because it frightens them," I explain, looking at Justin. "When Darla and her mom took the mystery out of her dwarfism for her classmates, they also took away the fear."

"I'll tell my parents about Darla and maybe they can do something like that for my sister," he says, hopefully.

I announce that I'll be signing books in the foyer, and afterward am happy to sit down with anyone who wishes to talk with me. There's a flutter of activity as everyone makes their way to the autographing table and forms a line that soon reaches clear to the other end of the hall. As people come up to me to personalize their book, they begin pouring out snippets of their past. Sally and her father both embrace me, and then Sally's dad takes a picture of Sally and me. Next, Tammy and her foster mom reassure me they'll keep me posted on their progress. "Can I hug you goodbye?" Tammy says. I motion for her to come around the other end of the table. She wraps her arms around me, burying her face in my neck. "I'll never forget you," she whispers. One after

another, people keep coming, some of whom say they'll wait to talk to me. Justin is the last in line. He hands me a scrap of notebook paper and asks if I would sign it.

"Honey, why don't you let me autograph a book for you?" I say.

"I don't have enough money to buy one," he replies, ashamed.

I grab one off the stack telling the book store clerk as always that I'll take care of it, and then I sign it.

Justin smiles as he reads my inscription. "To Justin, I wish you were my son."

"Oh, thank you," he says.

Unable to even think of him riding his bike home alone at this hour, and furious that his parents aren't here, I grab Eileen who says she's already arranged it with the principal. He'll drive Justin home and drop off his bike tomorrow. I tell Justin goodbye, biting hard on my lower lip not to cry. I make him promise to stay in touch, assuring him that Eileen and I are never more than a phone call or e-mail away. These are the kids that haunt me. They're a paradox in my life because they validate and deplete my soul at the same time.

For the next ninety minutes, I do one-on-ones. As I suspected, the mom whose daughter tried to over-dose on aspirin is a piece of work. She goes on non-stop about her break up with her boyfriend, her gambling problems, her issues with weight control, until finally, I have to stop her and remind her that she's supposed to be focusing on her daughter tonight, who's sitting beside her, looking mortified. When I chastise her mom, her mood brightens. I give them both a heartfelt mother/daughter pep talk, encouraging them to

seek family and individual counseling. The adult survivor mom and the daughter who's a bully are the last two people waiting for me.

"Talk to me," I say, sitting beside them.

The daughter speaks first. "I'd like to start an INJJA Encouragement Club at this school," she says. "And mom wants to do that coalition thing you were talking about."

"Little General," I shout, so excited I could burst. Eileen comes running over.

"What is it?" she asks out of breath.

"I'd like you to meet two heroes."



The weeks following the tour are a blur with the National Catholic Education Association and FCCLA events approaching rapidly. Eileen and I are frantic preparing all the hand-outs and promotional packages both entities have requested for their members. The morning of the NCEA engagement, I'm vibrating with nervous energy, eager to take the stage. When Eileen and I arrive the convention center, I'm immediately impressed with this organization. It's one thing to read how influential they are, it's another to be standing in the middle of it. There are rows and rows of tables at the main check-in center, with hundreds of volunteers darting in and out of dozens of conference rooms where the various workshops will be held. This is the largest event I've ever been asked to participate in as an anti-bullying activist, and I'm enjoying feeling like Eileen and I are finally starting to get recognized for the strides we're making in schools. There's an

announcement over the PA system that the first round of workshops will begin in ten minutes. As Eileen and I are making our way to the room where I'll be hosting mine, she pulls me aside for a moment.

"You're competing with a lot of other workshops," she says. "I don't want you to be disappointed if there's not a good turnout."

The room has fifty seats and they're all empty when we walk in. I sigh, not wanting to face the embarrassment. Suddenly, people start filing in quicker than I can count them. Within minutes, the space is standing room only. There are educators sitting in the aisle. A group of nuns in habits, unable to find a seat, have plopped themselves down directly in front of the podium, their navy blue skirts hiked around their middle, their underwear peaking out from underneath. They're laughing and chatting. They remind me of my first grade teacher Sister Rose Agatha, who always makes me smile whenever I think of her. By now, The Little General has gone from worried no one would show up to sweating there may be too many. A priest standing toward the back asks if the adjacent conference room is being occupied. When no one seems to know for sure, he walks over to the slatted door separating the rooms and slides it open, the clacking of slats echoing down the hall. "It's ours now," he states triumphantly. Then, he opens the door to the foyer, peeks his head out, and says, "OK everyone, come on in."

To my utter amazement, more people begin filling the adjacent space until it too is packed. Eileen is euphoric. As the person who's supposed to introduce me is climbing over the people on the floor, making her way to the podium, the

fire marshal bursts in, announcing we're creating a fire hazard and need to disperse. The Little General, putting on her fiercest face, convinces him to look the other way. To this day, I have no idea how she did it.

With everyone settled, I do my teacher workshop. I have never experienced such an engaged crowd of educators. They cheer and during some of the more emotional parts, they cry openly, unafraid to show their feelings. At the conclusion of the seminar, Eileen and I are bombarded by grateful educators eager to bring us to their schools. It is a triumph unlike any other so far.

The rest of the day only gets better. Word of mouth about what happened spreads, and the NCEA, concerned the room they've reserved for the afternoon workshop won't be big enough, switch me to a conference hall, which also fills to capacity. By the time we leave the convention, we're the talk of the event.

The FCCLA keynote is equally successful. For this event, I'm scheduled to speak at a concert hall that seats five thousand people. I don't know this beforehand, and when I walk into the theater, I nearly fall over. The stage is enormous, and the sound engineer's booth is larger than my kitchen. After he mikes me up, the production engineer does a technical run-through making sure the cameras, which will be projecting my image onto two large video screens located at either end of the stage are in working order. After my speech, I'm scheduled for an autographing.

As I'm waiting back stage for my cue, I call mom, who says she's proud of me and to break a leg. Then, I dial Mitch, filling him in on what's happening. "Tell the Little General I

better not hear she let any groupies in your dressing room,” he teases. After we hang up, I close my eyes and imagine his face, the timbre in his voice, and realize, that once again, despite how excited I am to be here, I can’t wait to get back home to his arms.

An announcement is made that we’re about to begin. As people are making their way to their seats, vibrant, pulsating music is being piped in from huge speakers located throughout the theater. A hush falls on the audience as the FCCCLA president steps onto the stage. He introduces me, and takes his seat. I feel the heat of the lights bearing down on me. I walk to center stage, gaze out into the audience, and gulp. I’m staring at several thousand expectant young faces. I’ve been asked to give my student presentation with a motivational twist.

As I launch into the performance, I can feel a connection with the audience. For the next hour, I pour out my heart as never before. When I get to Mitch’s kiss, the crowd goes wild, my ear drums hurt from their enthusiasm. By the time I reach the end of my presentation, I’m damp with perspiration and utterly spent. I’ve also never felt so alive in my entire life.



When I return home, Mitch has a surprise waiting for me. He’s purchased two tickets to Santorini, Greece, knowing that I miss my friends there. The trip is wonderful, full of romantic firsts. The last night he tells me he has a few errands to run, and asks me to meet him at the jewelry shop of an old family friend. When I arrive before Mitch, everyone is staring at me, and I wonder

what's going on. Costa, who owns the shop and who grew up with me during summers on the island, places a diamond and tanzanite ring in my hand, saying that a customer was thinking about getting it for his wife, and do I think this woman would like it. "Costa, *eenai thauma*, it's gorgeous," I answered. "I think any woman would be foolish not to love it."

At that moment, Mitch walks in. Costa hands him the ring. Mitch approaches me, gets down on one knee, slips it onto my finger, and says, "Jodee, in front of your dad, who I know is watching us from heaven, here on the island that has long been the home of your soul, will you marry me?"

"Yes, yes!" I cry. Mitch picks me up and twirls me all over the store.

"*Opa*," Costa yells, popping a bottle of champagne. As Mitch and I toast our engagement, out of the corner of my eye, I could almost swear I see my dad winking at me, and my best friend Niko—who died tragically last year and who I dedicated my book to, looking at me and smiling.

The next day, on the airplane back home, thinking about all the wonderful things that have happened these past few months, I feel a contentedness I've never known before. It won't last long.