

## THE FATHER'S HEART

I ran away from home when I was fifteen. It wasn't actually my home, but it was referred to as one and it was where I lived. It was called "The Sunbeam Home," a most ironic name if ever there was one.

It was a place for juvenile delinquents whose parents had signed over custody of their child to the state. The place was old and cold and the atmosphere oppressive. It felt like a prison and I suppose it was, of sorts. Move over Oliver Twist.

Anyway, just before Christmas of 1973, I'd run away with the resident psychopath. The plan, which only made sense in the muddled minds of two teenagers, was to hitchhike to Florida and get a job picking fruit. Like I said...

Fortunately for me God had us firmly sighted on His cosmic radar screen and our plans were sidetracked by a little country preacher driving an old jalopy that had been born a brown Maverick. He offered us a ride and asked if we were hungry. We were. He drove to a nearby Dairy Queen and bought us a hamburger. He asked us if we were Christians. "Mmmhumph," I nodded vigorously, as I wolfed down the burger.

"I'm an American," I explained after I'd swallowed.

"I see," he said. He opened up a Bible in the same condition as his car and began reading and explaining Scriptures to us. Like an apple bouncing off Newton's head, it shocked me to realize that my definition of a Christian was apparently much different than his. I can be real quick like that.

When he dropped us back off at the highway I thrust out my thumb and prayed a silent, desperate prayer. "God, if You're really like that man says You are, I hope we get caught tonight."

It's a long story, as all the good ones are, but suffice it to say we were arrested and caught that same night and taken to a center for juvenile delinquents in Monroe, Louisiana. There was a Bible in my cell and I remembered the words of the preacher and my earlier prayer as I leafed through its pages. Kneeling down on the icy concrete floor, I gave my heart and my life to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Arrangements were made to fly me back to Oklahoma City but all the flights were sold out. The closest they could get me was Dallas. My parents were contacted and my father agreed to drive down to pick me up the night I left so I wouldn't miss a scheduled court appointment the next morning.

I don't think I'd ever been so petrified of seeing anyone in my entire short life. I loved my dad, as all kids do, but he could be pretty angry and quick to whip off his belt. Spontaneous affection was rare. Besides, it wasn't exactly Beaver Cleaver's world we lived in or I wouldn't have been where I was in the first place.

The plane bounced a bit as the wheels hit the tarmac, but I was too distracted by the pounding in my chest to notice. My palms were beginning to sweat and I was shaking like aspen leaves in a tornado. I was wishing we had crashed.

I'd been gone for several days. Until the phone call, no one knew where I was or if I was even still alive. My family was supposed to pick me up from The Sunbeam Home so I could spend Christmas with them and I'd ruined their plans.

A thousand possible scenarios crashed through my skull like rocks in a tumbler as I anticipated the reunion. The long, empty terminal seemed like a gangplank.

I spotted my father in the distance and somehow managed to keep walking toward him when everything inside screamed for me to turn and run. He saw me too, but I couldn't meet his gaze.

The closer we got to each other, the more terrified I became. I had no idea what I would do or say. Before I could react, my father grabbed me, pulled me to his chest and held me in a tight embrace.

"Welcome home, little girl," he whispered with relief as I clung to him and cried, a prodigal joyfully reunited with two fathers.