

PASSPORT THROUGH DARKNESS

A True Story of Danger
and Second Chances

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transforming lives together

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Some names have been changed for privacy purposes.

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EVERYONE HAS OCEANS TO FLY, AS LONG AS
THEY HAVE THE HEART TO DO IT.
IS IT RECKLESS? MAYBE, BUT WHAT DO
DREAMS KNOW OF BOUNDARIES?

Amelia Earhart, from *Amelia*

ESPECIALLY THE ONES OUR CREATOR BREATHES
INTO THE CHAMBERS OF OUR HEARTS.

Kimberly L. Smith

Chapter 1

AT THE END OF ME

I stood at a precipice, a crag of rock in a parched, thirsty land that mirrored the condition of my heart. From where I stood, I looked down upon the riverbed that rendered the jagged cut reaching from the left corner of my mouth down to the bottom of my chin, and my right eye purplish black.

I recalled the day these marks came upon me and considered how many of the women I saw laboring in the current below who shared my experience. Fifty percent? Ninety percent? Had any woman been spared the hand-delivered scars of violence birthed in the tomb of this brutal, war-torn land?

Sickly cows wove around and between the women in the river. As the cows did their business in the water, some of the women bathed. Others washed rags they donned as clothing. Still others drew cans of drinking water from the soapy-feculent murkiness.

Taking stock of the last few months spent here at the border of Darfur, Sudan—the cusp of hell—I savored how God had knit these women into the fiber of my soul in ways that I'd never imagined possible back in the day of my corporate-ladder climbing. Love for them had changed my whole world. It had changed me. Now it was time for me to take what I'd been shown here back to my home in America with prayers that it, too, would be transformed.

My soul felt as restless and insecure as my feet did shuffling at the edge of the cliff.

A part of me felt so dark, lonely, and overwhelmed, I wanted to

throw myself from the spire and be done with it. That would be the easy way, though, and my life had never seemed to be about finding the easy path. In fact, something in me seemed to like making life as difficult as possible.

A sprig of hope, a mite of faith encouraged me to stand down. Wait. Be expectant, but don't jump. Pray. Help was surely around the corner.

Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) had promised to send someone to witness the persecution, rape, mutilation, and genocide I was documenting on the southern border of Darfur. Knowing it had taken me months of preparation, followed by endless fieldwork, to find and accurately record this data—information that I was still just beginning to comprehend—I didn't see how I could possibly help the VOM rep to grasp it in just three days.

Sudan is the tenth-largest country in the world; the region of Darfur is the size of France. The southern half of Sudan has a grand total of about three miles of pavement. Darfur has none. The reality of war, insecurity, violence, and lack of infrastructure, combined with the fact that we had no vehicle to speed up our maneuvers, rendered the task of sufficiently covering the vast territory in such a short time frame all but impossible.

I'd taken it upon myself to take the time and risk of walking from village to village or riding our sole motorbike to the death camps, what I'd come to call the Internally Displaced People's camps (IDP). I started calling IDPs death camps after my first visit over a year ago. Before that trip, the word *camp* always conjured an image of security, even if the conditions were rustic. Visiting one stripped me of my penchant for naiveté, showing me

thousands of people squatting in the desert with no food, water, or security—just waiting for death. For most, the wait wasn't long.

I wanted to make sure I would be able to adequately expose the VOM rep to the same kind of reality. To do that, I would need transportation to cover vast amounts of ground more quickly than walking would allow.

Late yesterday a brainstorm hit me. We'd ride donkeys! James Lual Atak, our indigenous director, laughed at my *kawaidja* (rich white person) notions, calling me a Sudanese wannabe. But he humored me. Since the VOM rep would be here in just a few days, early this morning he'd brought several donkeys to our camp so we could test-ride them before the rep arrived.

Always ready for action, I was the first to climb on. An old man we called Peterdit held the end of the rope tied around the neck of my donkey, which I'd named Blue. The sharp ridge of spine rising from Blue's bare back cut into me in all the wrong places, and I squirmed to make a seat for myself.

Peterdit kept overenunciating two Arabic words for me, one for stop and one for faster. As Blue reared up, alternately kicking his hind legs and then his front legs high into the air, he let me know he wasn't happy about my squirming on his backside.

Blue's outburst jerked the rope from Peterdit's grasp. Blue set off toward the village, bucking like a horizontal kangaroo.

In my hysteria I could only summon up one of the two words Peterdit taught me. I screamed it as firmly as I could, "*Harach! Harach! Harach!*" over and over again trying to make Blue obey my limited grasp of the Arabic language: "Stop!"

My head thrashed back and forth, and I flopped to Blue's side, squeezing my legs around his girth as tightly as I could, while clinging to the frayed rope now burning the palm of my hands as it ripped through my fingers. As I blitzed by, I caught a glimpse of James laughing uproariously from atop his donkey, his long legs conveniently reaching his feet flat to the desert floor. At the time, I found no humor in Blue's fit, or my condition!

After my whirlwind tour of the village via Blue's conniption, Peterdit boldly stepped into Blue's path and grabbed the rope flinging freely in the air as I clung to Blue's short tuft of mane. He yelled a word I did not recognize in such force that the beast calmed himself, and I fell to the ground. Although my body would yell its trauma to me through deep musculature aches for many days, my only serious injury was to my pride.

Apparently the one Arabic word I had been yelling was not the word "Stop!" but rather "Faster, faster, faster!"

The comedy of my barebacked-donkey ride at this morning's sunrise seemed a millennium away, and a stark contrast to the bleakness of what followed. As waves of heat swelled from the desert floor, I wrote off the whole donkey deal as another one of my romantic inclinations, and James and I opted to walk, not ride, to the death camp.

While there may be few good days in a death camp, this one was particularly brutal. We'd been out of medicine for a month, out of food for a week, and today, we ran out of water. All of those life-giving commodities were gone, except for the private stash we kept at our compound for James and me, the kawaidja.

Although at home in the United States, people often thought of

me as a poor missionary, I was coming to understand and grapple with the fact that I was, in reality, wealthy for simple things like never running out of water.

Up to this point in my life, what had I chosen to do with my riches? Standing on that cliff, I painfully acknowledged how I'd squandered so much of what God had given me, most painfully my entire life. Many times throughout this journey, this awakening, I have come perilously close to throwing it all away.

Through God's grace, I slowly stepped down from the precipice and began to face the end of the me I'd created for myself. I wanted to live the life—be the *me*—He dreamed of.

I remembered a prayer I'd cried out many years before, begging Him to use me. I wondered, if I'd known where that prayer would lead, would I still have prayed it? Deciding the answer was yes, I uttered a new prayer: "You can have whatever You want from me, but please, God, just show me what difference one person can make in the darkness of this broken world."

The following is His story, as lived through me to this point.

Chapter 2

THE ROAD TO A LIFE THAT MATTERS

When our lives aren't what we long for them to be, we often fall into blaming someone else. At first glance all of our problems appear to be because we didn't get something—or someone—we wanted. It often takes years of life chipping away at us before we're willing to peek inside ourselves for the source of our discontent.

For me, the motivation to stop blaming others—and look inside myself—came at a great cost. My first husband and I labeled each other as the source of our own discontent. Tragically, after almost ten years of marriage, we divorced. Broken pieces of our family's heart were grounded into the street of despair like a shattered Coke bottle under the steamroller of anger, blame, and bitterness.

As I carefully examined the cesspool I'd made of my life back then, I spotted a stone God had carefully placed under my feet, keeping me safe and dry. Through His mercy and bountiful grace, He'd given me a second chance at a home, a marriage, and a family. A life.

Milton, my husband of more than twenty years now, is both ferocious in battle and gentle in ways of the heart that even few women embody. He is the perfect mate for me.

Both of us had emerged from failed marriages that mirrored our upbringing. So we entered our marriage together with gusto, coming at each other with fierce determination to weather the blur of life's mixer with eyes wide open.

We each threw our three children into the family blender, hoping to create something beautiful out of all the slicing and dicing. With five girls and one boy ranging from toddler to teens, there would be plenty of nosh to tempt us into closing our eyes—or worse—our hearts. At times, we fought for one another. At times, against. Other times, we squeezed our eyes shut in fear, anger, or pain—but never our hearts.

Soon I began to see God's stones everywhere. Having grown up on the wrong side of the tracks, I'd since worked hard to achieve the lifestyle I imagined to be on the other side. At the top of my game I became a successful executive in corporate America.

I had a good life. But it wasn't enough. Something essential was missing. Even with my feet dry and secure on those perfectly placed stones, a nagging sense of futility needled away at me day and night.

When I first became conscious of this emptiness, I thought maybe it was just because I was getting older, and all of the "big firsts" were behind me. I wasn't going to have any more children. I couldn't keep climbing the corporate ladder at the same pace forever; that high was gone. My marriage was good, but not the hot romance it was at first.

I dragged in from the office late most evenings, struggled to keep the kids on track, strove to keep the house in order, fought crow's-feet and cellulite, and scored check marks beside church attendance and Bible reading. Things looked pretty good ... on the outside.

I thought living the "good life" would make my family happy and secure.

I was wrong. It wasn't working.

Something was missing. Even when nestled in my own bed in the arms of my loving husband in a house full of beautiful children, I often woke up in the middle of the night lonely, with a haunting feeling in my stomach. Pursuit of the American Dream was eating me alive.

Asleep at the Wheel of Life

By the late nineties, we were living near Birmingham, Alabama, and had two children left at home. Life was a lot less demanding, and I began to listen to that restless growl in my soul a bit more.

Early one Monday morning, before the fog had time to clear the basin between the twin peaks of Double Oak Mountain, I cut through the murkiness in my company-supplied Mercury Grand Marquis. As usual, I clipped off the miles of my forty-five-minute commute from our home in the country to my urban office by alternately talking on a cell phone and speaking notes for the day into my handheld recorder.

While I multitasked and watched for flashing taillights ahead and reflectors along the white lines at the edge of the foggy mountain road, images filled my mind as if a movie were playing in my head.

In this movie, I saw myself dressed in my typical business attire, sporting manicured nails and flawless makeup, talking away on my cell phone. It was just like any other workday commute—until I reached intersecting County Road 43. Rarely traveled by the public, County Road 43 was favored by large logging trucks. They could barrel through the twists and turns, confident no sheriff would catch them, or even care. County Road 43 had not

yet caught the eye of developers as most of the county had, and the few shacks it hosted were filled with long-forgotten families of once-upon-a-time sharecroppers. A tangle of overgrowth obscured the intersection.

The drama playing in my head suddenly intensified, with images so vivid I felt as though I were really living them:

A Mack truck barrels along County Road 43, unaware he is approaching a busy highway. The driver of the truck thinks he is tunneling through one more cluster of low hanging trees along a winding stretch of county road.

He sees the bush, but he does not see the stop sign ensnared within it. The truck runs the stop sign. I don't even see him coming. He plows right through me.

The moment of impact. The deafening sound of crushing metal, twisting, grinding. Glass shattering. Pieces of both vehicles tumbling through the air, scraping across the road. And me, flying slow motion through the windshield, tumbling across the slick metal hood, then sprawling onto the dirt like a rag doll, bloodied and broken, coming to rest facedown and split asunder on the shoulder of the road.

Startled by the scene as it unfolded in my mind, I broke into a cold sweat. Mercilessly, the movie played on:

Quick cut to our home in the country. Milton, still in his bathrobe, getting the kids ready for school. The phone ringing. Milton reaching for it, listening. An officer breaking the news to

him. His face going slack, growing pale. The news hitting him like a punch. Pushing the receiver into his stomach, he curls over, crying, "No. No. Kimberly. No."

He drops the receiver. The children run to the kitchen where he is crying. Milton pushes out the best words he can find, "A truck hit Mom. She's dead. Mom is gone."

With tears streaming down my cheeks, images continued to flicker through my mind as I kept driving:

The office where I worked. My boss's phone ringing. Getting the news, shaking his head. A tear sliding down his cheek.

Later that afternoon. My boss sending out a corporate memo about my death. Everything stopping, for a day. Everyone stunned, for a day.

The day before the funeral, the local paper posts my obituary. My life reduced to three column inches of type, along with a photograph. A younger, more flattering picture, followed by a thumbnail sketch of my accomplishments, and a list of who survived me.

The day of the funeral, my boss gives my staff the day off so they can attend.

The day after my funeral, human resources places an ad to fill my position in the same newspaper that—just a few days earlier—announced my tragic death.

That was it.

Life went on.

At least for everyone else.

I had worked hard for what I thought was the right thing for me, and for my family. Now, I was dead. And with my death, everything in which I had invested the majority of my time was gone too. It left no lasting value of any kind.

Death revealed my life to be a well-concealed Ponzi scheme. A swindle. A farce. A compromise. I had fooled everyone.

Even myself.

Wide Awake

Shaken by this unsettling vision, I considered my children. They were great kids and good students, but kids whose main concerns were to be popular athletes, pretty cheerleaders, or to drive cool cars. They were excellent students of every stride I'd made chasing the American Dream—collecting things, pursuing achievements, and looking great on the outside. All of this at the expense of what their hearts most deeply longed for—to know the exact reason God created them and how to spend their entire lives from that sacred place. It hurt to realize the values I handed down to them.

Even in our church we didn't teach our kids about being a part of something bigger. We tried mostly to make sure we provided enough entertainment in their religion to hook them into our church so we didn't lose them to the competition. Sometimes we feared the competition would be a boyfriend, other times a drug pusher, still other times another church.

Sure, we did soup kitchens and extracurricular goodness, but these activities were tack-ons, not a way of life.

To be honest, we adults in the church weren't a whole lot different. We, too, seemed to prefer "fun" over transformation—only our

definition of fun was just a little more refined. Over time, it had been diluted to something more like comfort.

In a heartbeat, I knew: *This is the emptiness that wakes me in the middle of the night, the ravenous hunger inside me that howls and growls but nothing seems to fill.*

I longed to know that not just what I *did* mattered, but that *I* mattered—my *life* mattered. I longed to feel God’s pleasure as when He first delighted in Adam and Eve, saying, “It is very good.”

I couldn’t imagine God looking at my life and saying, “It is very good.” At best He might say something like, “Well, at least she’s trying to check off the right things. It’s just too bad she doesn’t see how I made her to shine, brighten the world, and live free.”

That’s when it hit me.

Nothing could fill the emptiness.

Not work, no matter how many promotions I achieved. Not money, no matter how much I earned. Not family, no matter how proud they made me. Not power, no matter how much I acquired. Not vacations, no matter how exotic they were.

The “movie” I experienced on my early-morning commute looped through my head so many times that I gave it a title: *The Mack Truck Syndrome*. Unfortunately, Angelina Jolie wasn’t the star; I was. And I was dying inside. I found myself stuck in a meaningless plot that was going nowhere, moving through empty scenes that made no sense, reading lines that fell flat.

Can you blame me for wanting to walk off the set?

I longed to make a bold move with my life. Yet I had no clue where to begin. Or how. With each passing day I grew more desperate. Nights were the worst. Awake and crying my way through

most of them, I had only one prayer: “God, use me or take me out. Please, I am begging You. I don’t want to live this way. I can’t live this way any longer. I’m desperate to know why I’m here. Use me or take me out.”

Although I was blind to it at first, over time—painstaking time—doors began to open. One tentative step at a time, through that prayer of desperation, I inched my toe across the threshold into a new way of living and began the journey of finding the life where I would discover the exact reason He created me and know His delight in me.