

# **The Other Side of Love**

**By**

**Magali Ortiz**

## Chapter 1

Donovan was in his room, listening to music while studying for his upcoming math exam. He was on his first year of college, eighteen, and he had always been an honor-roll student. He was one of few to graduate high school with a 4.0 final average. Now his first year of college was almost over, thus he graduated at seventeen. He wasn't a genius or anything of that sort. He just studied really hard, but he was strange in a way compared to other students because rather than distracting him, music would help him study better. It would transmit him to a zone unknown and set him apart from everything else, where he could only think about what he was studying because it was classical music with no lyrics, and he would play it on a low volume. Unbeknown to him, he had studied for three hours now, and he was really tired. Therefore, he closed his textbook and his three-ring binder with his notes, went out of his room and into the bathroom, took a quick shower, and changed into his pajamas. Minutes later, he went to sleep in his bed, but he forgot to turn the music off. The radio was battery powered now and when the battery would die, it would go off by itself, no problem. Most of his devices were battery-powered for him to save a little energy. He lived in a two-room apartment that, had it been a hotel, it would've been considered four-star. His rent was really expensive. He worked as a secretary for a powerful attorney since age sixteen because he'd always been more than a computer freak, and there was nothing about computers he didn't know. He even knew how to remove malware without the help of any computer programs, take computers apart, repair them, replace parts—everything. He'd been kind of forced to become a computer technician without a license because every time his father would buy a computer, he would destroy it in a matter of months, and tired of watching his father waste his money on computers every six to eight months, when his father was on his third computer in less than a year and a half, Donovan spent his allowance on all sorts of computer manuals to do everything under the sun and he started repairing his father's computer for him at age ten, and because of that, it had been almost eight years and that damned computer, although old, was still up and running. It was a desktop and Donovan would help his father Daniel upgrade all of his computer's hardware and software every time that Daniel felt it needed an upgrade, about every two years or so. Donovan didn't mind spending his money on hardware all in one blow. It was preferable than buying computer after computer every time Father, as he would call Daniel, needed an upgrade. After all, computers weren't made to last forever, but they sure were meant to last more than two years. Daniel's computer was old on the outside but new on the inside, and Daniel was thrilled. He had the latest of everything. Every time he told someone how old his computer really was, no one would believe him, unless they saw that same model of computer on eBay. Daniel would keep his computer crisp clean and there were no scratch marks or dents on any of the parts, at all. Even the keyboard was clean as fresh linen.

The phone rang that night. Although Donovan was dead tired, he picked it up. He wasn't the kind to cut a call or reject it because he was sleeping, and he would always pick up and talk as long as necessary even if it were his dorky best friend, Scott, drunken as a cat, talking utter nonsense. After all, Donovan was always the only one that would listen. But it wasn't Scott. It was his older sister, twenty-three-year-old Diana. Her husband of three years had just beaten her to a pulp for the zillionth time because she was talking to her cousin, Tony, and stupidly, Langston thought that even though this was her first cousin, with whom she'd grown up and spent most of her days, she was cheating on him with Tony. Diana would never cheat with anyone, much less with kin. That was flat out disgusting, but Langston was so whacked out he just couldn't see things the way they really were most of the time and there was a good reason for this—Langston was a heavy meth user for many years. Diana thought that by being by his side she could help him rehabilitate. After all, she had helped many people, even total strangers, pull through from the worst life-situations. She just learned the hard way that her husband was literally a lost case. He couldn't be rehabilitated because he didn't want to be, and if his parents couldn't help him get better, what in the world made her think that she could?

"Donovan, oh, God..."

"Let me guess. He beat you up again."

Hyperventilating, she said, "Yep!"

"What was it this time?"

"He saw me talking to my cousin Tony and he thought I was starting something with him. He thinks that I am having an affair with my cousin, Donovan. That's not cool. He's crazy."

"And you've figured that out just now. I know I was only thirteen at the time, but I've always told you not to marry him, not to even have a relationship with him. I told you that he was bad news from the start. I guess you were thinking with your heart and not with your head."

"Donovan you've never really fallen in love, and by that, I mean you've never had a relationship, not even a fling, so you don't understand."

"Oh, my dear, I do understand. I understand that if I saw one sign of my girlfriend being physically abusive, I would dump her. If I notice that she is possessive, jealous, sees me talking to a woman, just talking, like I would one of my friends or a relative, and she's jealous about that, I would dump her quicker than it would take you to say my name."

"You don't know what it's like to be in love."

"And that's why you accept this nonsense, because you're 'in love'. Nice. If I help you out, promise me that you're going to leave his ass. I can't stand this crap anymore."

“Fine, I promise I will walk out of here to never come back. Now, please come get me and take me to the hospital.”

“I’ll do better than that. I will just call 911. I’m afraid that when he comes back and sees you there he’s going to finish you off. If he damaged your lungs this time rather than just slapping you, this time he means business. He is going to *kill* you, my dear. I am hanging up and calling 911 before he can even get there.”

Donovan did as promised and a few minutes later, the ambulance arrived at Langston and Diana’s house. Just then, Langston got back home because he’d snapped out of his meth-induced madness and he came back to apologize and try to provide his wife with the medical attention that she needed. This time, he made a promise to himself, he would stop using meth. He noticed, having flashbacks of all the times he’d attacked Diana, that he would only put his hands on her when he was high on meth, and when he was not under the influence of the drug he was normal and he behaved the way he was supposed to. Perhaps this was the reason why Diana wouldn’t leave him no matter how many times he would slap her or punch her in the face. She understood his situation. She loved him. He had to do something, otherwise he would lose her forever. One good thing about Langston was that when he would promise something to himself or someone else, he would keep that promise, no matter what. That’s why so many people in town loved him and trusted him. They didn’t know about his problem. When he would go to work as the PRESIDENT of a preeminent computer company, he would be cheerful and positive. His employees always referred to him as the best boss ever, and not even the ones with the lowest positions in that company would quit their jobs. They thought they wouldn’t find a better boss than Langston. When they would ask for an advance, he would give it to them and not get it back until three months after giving it. He would deduct one third of the advance every month until it was paid in full. He would always compliment his employees just for being there. He would never penalize those who came to work late. He would never even ask them why they came to work late, he would just let them work like nothing, and to compensate for this, they would stay and work for the time that they were late. Everything was good everywhere Langston went except home. The reason why Langston would binge on meth was because his mother died seven years before, they’d never gotten along, and she had a heart attack after an argument they had. He felt guilty for his mother’s death and he wanted to punish himself in some way. He had no idea that he had put his foot down and decided not to use any more meth just in time. A few more hits would’ve killed him, and he wouldn’t have had the chance to try to fix everything he’d done wrong and be a good husband and father to the child he and Diana were expecting. Thinking that Diana had lost her child, he went up to the paramedics as they were putting her on the gurney and connecting her to the respirator, without saying anything to the paramedic, he checked Diana’s pants to see if there was any blood between her legs. As crazy as he was, he didn’t strike her in the belly or in the back, which would’ve caused the miscarriage. Then he said, to the paramedics, shocking them, “I know my brother in law only sent the ambulance here, but I need the police here. I need to report myself for domestic violence and aggravated assault. I almost killed my wife and I deserve to be locked up. Maybe then I will learn my lesson. It’s been going on all throughout our marriage, and it’s got to stop.”

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Hours later, Langston was at the police station while his wife was being cared for at the hospital. He couldn't stop crying.

"I must say this is a first in the twenty-three years of my career as a police officer and detective," Detective Martin said. "Never have I seen a criminal reporting him or herself for his or her offense. I've seen them give in, but never report themselves, much less a husband for beating on his wife. I'm stunned."

"It was all because of the stupid meth! I thought I could never stop using it and being an asshole. I strangely don't feel addicted to it because it makes me feel good, but because of what it does to my body. I wanted to self terminate since my mother died. I wanted a slow, painful death. I figured a simple gunshot to the head or in the mouth, a stab or an overdose of pills wouldn't do. I wanted to make me suffer."

"Man, you really need help. You know we're dropping the charges because your wife's the victim and she said she didn't want to press charges, right? We're giving you another chance. You're going to go to a rehabilitation center, get the help you need, rid you of your addiction and at the same time get you some professional help to take from you the desire of killing yourself and making yourself suffer. Withdrawal is a bitch. You're going to regret deciding to stop using that stupid drug during that period of withdrawal. When meth grabs a hold of its user, most times it won't let go until the victim dies. I'm warning you right now. It's not going to be that easy. You're going to be in this program for as long as the judge decides, depending on how severe your addiction is, and then you'll take it from there, I guess, but the next time you lay your hand on your wife, even under the influence of any drug, you're going to be incarcerated for the next five years. Second offense after this one, ten years, and then the third offense after this one, it's the big three-o. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, I understand. I will comply fully with the program."

Two hours later, around six o'clock in the morning, while Donovan was getting ready to go to school, Langston was visiting his wife at the hospital. Unless she would visit him at the rehab center, she wouldn't see him again in a while. He held his hand and said, "Sweetie, I'm going away for a while."

"What, you want to separate?"

"No! I am going to rehab, and I am going to get help with my mental issues, too."

"Oh. I thought you wanted to leave me."

"No, you're the one who should leave me. If you didn't want to put me in jail you should've divorced me, but you dropped the charges and you stayed with me. You didn't even attempt to leave."

"That's because I made a vow, 'til death do us part."

"That vow can be broken if one of the parties doesn't comply with his or her vows of respect, honoring your wife..."

"Yes, that may be true, but I chose to give you another chance."

"I didn't deserve it, but thank you. You don't have to come visit me."

"Langston, there's a huge reason why I didn't file for divorce or separation, and that reason is the baby. I can't let this baby be born without a father because we know that a child born outside of a marriage is an illegitimate child, and then we're going to have to make arrangements to change that."

"I didn't know that. You don't have to stay married or together because of the baby. I will claim paternity and do what I have to do now that you've dropped the charges and my career didn't get ruined. I am going to support that child and be there for the child..."

"It's better for us to do all that together, Langston."

They hugged. "Thank you. I will see you again if you can visit me, after you recover."

Langston was taken away. As unbelievable as it may sound, Diana started crying. She'd never been away from him. She'd only gotten slapped and her face had gotten bruised, but he'd never gone beyond that. She would always forgive him and give him another chance. And another. And another. Until she called her brother for help and her brother decided not to give him a chance. Diana thought that Donovan was going to be angry and he wouldn't speak to her again for a long time. She didn't know Donovan as well as she thought. Donovan could be angry as the devil defeated, but he would never turn his back on his family and friends, and to prove that, when Donovan's school day was over, he went to visit Langston. He brought him a whopper meal, his favorite, just to show there were no hard feelings.

They hugged. "How are you doing, man?" Langston said. "This is a surprise. I thought you hated me."

"I am mad at you, yes. Very mad. That I can't deny. Nevertheless I don't hate you. Never have, never will. I can't. I could punch you out right now and knock you out like you've done my sister so many times." He placed his hand on Langston's shoulder. "But I can't do that no matter how much I am burning to. The day you married my sister, you became part of my family. Your family loves us, and if I hurt you, I'll be hurting all of them. Your mama died, but she left your father and your brothers and sisters behind. I couldn't hurt your family like that. I love them. I couldn't possibly hurt you in any way after all they've done for us."

“My family is also very disappointed in me, and just because you love my family that doesn’t mean you should put up with my shit. From now on nothing’s going to be the same. I am never going to come back here.”

“How’s withdrawal?”

“No withdrawal for me. I am sick of this shit. When you have withdrawal it’s because you yearn for something you know you shouldn’t get any of. I don’t want any more meth. I’ve been praying, meditating ever since I was on my way here, and I really think God hasn’t stopped loving me and though I’ve been a total asshole, He’s still there for me and He’s going to help me. I know He is. Otherwise I’d be in freaking withdrawal right now.” He still wasn’t done unpacking his stuff, and he went right back to that. He then placed his food on the nightstand. “I’m going to eat this in a minute. Thanks for bringing it over, spending your money on this prick.”

“You really hate yourself, don’t you, Langston Abel?”

“How could I not? I keep fucking up. I keep being given chances and fucking up again, like a three year old, totally unable to learn from his mistakes. I am twenty-six, damn it! It’s damn time I grew up and became a real man!”

Donovan hugged him again. “You know what?” he said, still holding him. “I didn’t know you were this ill. I’m not angry with you anymore. You just concentrate on getting better, all right?” Donovan let go of Langston. “Become the father your son’s going to be proud of for the rest of his life, and teach your son that one *can* learn from his or her mistakes and become a better person.”

“Son?”

“That’s right, your son. Di just found out that it’s a healthy boy. Congratulations, papa.” They shook hands. “Get well soon, man. Di and I will visit you often. She loves you more than ever now that she knows you’re doing everything in your power to right your wrongs and make a real change instead of making empty promises. There’s nothing better than trying to fix your mistakes.” Donovan walked away, closed the bedroom door behind him, and left Langston sitting in his bed, shedding tears of happiness for the first time in his life. That night, Langston ate his whopper meal in a slow manner, like he would always do with his food, chewing it until it would disappear from his mouth, just for fear of his stomach getting too full too soon and him getting a big stomach ache. He didn’t know that was the reason why he would only earn ten pounds per year, and when he exercised the way he did, he would lose all those pounds. He just now started going to the gym. He was always big-boned, so within the next year, he would become as big as a wrestler or a body builder. Right now, in the month that he’d been going to the gym, he was getting quite muscular, and although Diana fell in love with him because of his beautiful face and his stunning aquamarine eyes, he wanted to look great for her, look great and be great. As soon as he finished his meal he got out of his room and joined all of the other people that were in rehab. It was time for the new people to introduce themselves and

tell everybody why they were here. After the first twenty newcomers did just this, Langston left everyone speechless with his speech. "I am Langston Abel Ainsworth and I am a meth addict. My addiction started when my mother died seven years before. We'd never had a good mother and son relationship. She loved me, but I hated her because she would rarely give me what I wanted, and then my little brother got sick and she paid more attention to him and gave him more affection and more care..." He gave a sigh of pain. Then he continued. "So resentment grew and grew until she and I couldn't even stand being in the same room. We would argue and scream at one another all the time. My father would always intervene but then one day when we went at it again he knew there was nothing he could do and he let us battle it out. I said something to her, don't remember what it was, and she slapped me. I started screaming louder. Said things that got more and more horrendous by the minute. I guess I literally broke her heart because she started feeling pain in her arm and her chest. She was having a heart attack."

Some of the people that were present shed thick tears and the others simply looked down, reflecting on their own relationships with their parents. Some had lost their parents and others weren't getting along with them so well. That gave them an overwhelming desire to call them and apologize for everything they'd done to their parents before it would be too late, so they got up, left the meeting, excusing themselves one by one and the nurses took them straight to the phone. The ones that stayed there listening were awed.

"I thought she was faking it." He started to cry silently and his voice got more broken by the minute. "I thought she was trying to manipulate me into leaving her alone or into apologizing. Then she collapsed. I got on my knees and checked her pulse. It was almost nonexistent. I called 911. They took her in the ambulance. She died before arriving at the hospital. You guys have no clue how I felt when I received that phone call." He repeated word by word what that nurse told him that day. She said, 'Mr. Langston Ainsworth, I am sorry but your mother has just passed away'. I dropped the phone and I collapsed, too. Next thing I knew I was at the hospital, same hospital my mother had been taken to. I was disconnected from the world in a matter of minutes and spent the next year of my life in a psychiatric hospital. I couldn't handle losing her and not having the chance to say goodbye or tell her how sorry I was." He broke down crying and the male nurse had to console him, but Langston just couldn't calm down. The nurse had him sit down on a chair and minutes later, Langston continued summarizing his story. "That's when I started getting high on meth. I wasn't stupid. I knew what it does to people and as ludicrous as it sounds, that's precisely why I started using it because I wanted it to destroy me. Sure enough I got my wish. Meth would never make me feel good. It would make me feel miserable as it destroyed my brain, and the more I suffered, the more meth I wanted. Like I told a police officer the other day, I wanted to die a slow and painful death and then have no one at my wake or funeral, absolutely no one. Die alone, lonely, and die like a worthless animal, like a pig. That's what I deserved. Then I met Diana and I decided to change. We married. It was the happiest day of our lives. I wish I could show you my wedding pictures. You see me right here? On my

wedding day I didn't look like this. I used to be handsome, incredibly handsome, everyone would tell me. Now I look like a bum. A bum looks better than me right now. I couldn't change. I couldn't stop. I was so hooked, despite the fact that it didn't make me feel good. Didn't help me deal with the pain but by the time I got married it had its claws so deep in my skin that I couldn't let go. I became uglier and uglier every year that passed and my wife still wouldn't fall out of love with me. All the while I would slap her, but my hands were so big and strong that I bruised her face so bad it looked like I'd hit her with a freaking baseball bat. She wouldn't go to work until she would recover, but her boss cares about her so much that to this day my wife still has her job. Mrs. Stevenson never fired her. I don't think she ever will because I know that Mrs. Stevenson knows what's really going on. She knows that Diana is a victim of abuse, and she'd never fire her no matter how many days of work she would miss. I don't understand how no one reported me, not even my neighbors when they heard her screaming, how no one did anything to stop it. That's beyond me. I think that everybody thinks that Diana is so used to it that she likes it. I am a...well, I can't say that because I can't insult my mother more than I already have after apologizing to her after her death so many times. I am an asshole. I don't think I deserve to live, but I am going to keep trying, and I am going to get better. I am not going to leave my unborn son without his father. I know I will have to get plastic surgery. Just cross your fingers, if you feel any sympathy for me, so that the procedures will help me become the man that I used to be on the outside. I've never been that eye-pleasing on the inside, but I am going to try. That's all for my speech. I wish you the best in your endeavors, and may you all get better and be useful to society, make your loved ones proud. You can do this, so don't give up."

He left the center of the room and everyone applauded him. They didn't say anything because they were so shaken. Most of them dared to go after him and surround him in a group hug, showing him their sympathy and their support. One by one, they promised to be there for him and stay close to him even after leaving rehab. From that day forward, Langston got a lot of friends and now he had all their phone numbers, home and email addresses in his big, book-style phonebook. For the next three weeks, all of his family members, including Diana and her entire family, visited him. The most impacting visit was Tony's visit. Tony looked saddened, depressed. He didn't want to lose his sibling-like relationship with Diana because of Langston's unjustified jealousy, so he just had to talk to Langston and tell Langston how he felt. "Look, man, I know it's going to be hard for you to believe this, but there's no romantic relationship between *my first cousin* and me. Family's sacred to the Garcia family. I just hope you can get that through your thick head someday. I am sorry if I sent the wrong message, if I hugged her the wrong way, or..."

"You don't have to say these things. I can see it all crystal-clear now. You never hugged her the wrong way or did anything that might suggest there was incest between the two of you. It was the meth talking and acting, not you. I know I was wrong, and I am sorry. I was crazy, out of my mind. Dr. Rivers said I might need anti-psychotic medication, that just quitting the meth might not be enough to keep me living reality. I am sorry that I was a threat to the relationship between you and your cousin. No husband or wife should ever come between his or her spouse and the spouse's family. Family's sacred, that's absolutely right. I hope we can finally be friends

after five years.”

“Man, what do you think?” Tony said, hugging Langston, patting him on the back, like hugging his brother. “If everyone else is willing to put the past behind them, give you another chance and let you back into their lives, start over, why should I not do the same?”

“You are an amazing person, you know that?”

“So are you. It’s just that you’ve let resentment toward others and self-loathing get in the way. When you love yourself, you can love everybody else. When you hate yourself, you hate everybody else. I hope that you get better and have a real relationship with us. You don’t know what you’re missing. It’s a thrill being around the Garcia family. You just never hang out with us.” As he and Langston laughed together, Tony added, “*What’s wrong with you, man?*” They were hysterical. “Oh, and one of your peers commented to me that you talked about having plastic surgery done?” Looking at him closely, Tony said, “Well, you might not need as many procedures as you think. I think botox and new teeth would do the trick.”

Langston laughed even harder.

“I don’t know. Talk to your future plastic surgeon and see what he thinks. I think that if you are hell bent on never using meth again, you will not have to worry about getting those wrinkles back ‘til you’re like sixty. You’re only twenty-six. You should look your age. I will pray for you, man.” Tony left. Every word that he said was buried in Langston’s wounded heart like a stake. He would never forget Tony. Now he knew why his wife was so wonderful, so loving. So forgiving. It ran in the blood.

Langston had to call his father, London. London was in the dining room, drinking coffee, waiting for his son to call. Despite everything that had happened, London Ainsworth never stopped and would never stop adoring his older son, just as much as he adored all of his other children, thirteen children. Some of Langston’s siblings were in diapers, but incredibly, all those children were only from two women, London’s late wife, Justine and his second wife, Naomi, who was twenty years younger than he was and had always had a thing for other men. So far, London was the most handsome and young-looking older man she’d ever had, so she just had to marry him. Unheard of, London looked exactly the way that Langston was supposed to look, like a man in his late twenties. He would take very good care of himself, and Langston was the only child that looked exactly like him. All of his boys looked like him up to eighty percent, some sharing features of both parents, and some of them looked exactly like their mothers, like Langston’s younger brother from both parents, Liam, for example. Naomi’s two sons looked exactly like her, but had London’s eyes. “Hey, Langston, what the hell do you think you’re doing? I’ve been waiting for your call, man!” London would talk to his adult children like he talked to his buddies.

“We talked yesterday, Dad. I call you every single day. You act like we haven’t spoken since months before I got here.”

“I expect you to call me at least three times a day.”

“Man, I don’t know if they let us do that.”

“I think they let you call whoever you want as much as you want as long as it’s not long distance.”

“I’m not sure. I’m going to talk to the nurse and ask him. If it’s a no, I’ll just keep calling once a day and then I’ll email you for the other two times I can’t call you. How does that sound?”

“My computer’s going to be on all day waiting for that notification of new email.”

Langston laughed, moved. “Oh, Dad...”

“You know how I am with you, especially since we lost Justine. You still feel responsible for her death and you need your family’s support.”

“Your support I know I can count on, but my brothers and sisters... I am sure they abhor me right now. Wilbert has always expressed his disgust and utter hatred against men who beat women, and Norman feels the same way against those who prey on the defenseless. They just came to see me but that doesn’t guarantee we’ll get along again the way siblings are supposed to.”

“If I were you I wouldn’t be so sure about that. Your brothers just arrived here, they heard me talking to you, and they have something to say.” London put Norman on the phone.

“Hello?” Langston said.

“Langston, it’s Norman, the one that hates those that prey on the defenseless with a passion.”

“Oh, Lord...”

“You should know me by now. I never say things I don’t mean. I said I know why you abused my sister in law all these years, although I don’t condone or justify it, but I can’t fight against you or tell every member of my organization to stone you because you’re my brother. My blood. When your blood is involved, it’s different. I am going to be there for you, walk this through with you and help you be the man that you’re supposed to be. Then, rather than becoming the target of our hate, you will become one of our members, the vice-president of this organization even.”

Langston laughed, surprised. He expected reprimands, reproaches and insults. “Thank you so much, man. I always knew, no matter how much you abhorred these dimwits that target and destroy the innocent, you would come through for your blood and help a family member if he were going through this situation, if he were the abuser. Man, I promise you that I will never lay a hand on my wife or any other woman ever again, and that I will only unleash my wrath on those who are threatening or hurting the ones I love.”

“Yes, those are the people you should get angry with and beat the hell out of, not your woman, man.”

“I promise. And you know me. I am a man of my word.”

“Yes, that I know, and despite everything you did in the past, I am very proud of you because I know for sure that you will work on correcting all of your mistakes.”

“I’ve heard those words or similar words so many times it’s not even funny.”

“Because everybody sees it, man! Everybody knows that you’re trying. We can see it in your eyes. You’re determined. For the first time in your life, you’re finally putting your foot down and decreeing that from now on you will let no one or anything control you. You will be you, Langston Abel Ainsworth, and from this day forward, you will be making your own decisions and doing what you want to do and should do, not influenced by anything other than passion. You will be in control of you, and no one and nothing else. That’s the man I wanted to see, the person you used to be when you were a child; not giving in to peer pressure, always doing what you wanted to and should do, like I said, man...I’ve always wanted that little guy back, my brother! And now it seems that he’s coming back as a grown man.”

Wilbert took the phone from his brother for a minute. “I really have to go, so I don’t have time to say anything besides I am proud of you and keep up the good work, man. You’re finally walking forward. Don’t go back, man. Go back to being that person that Norman just described on the phone, not that meth junkie who’s always beating on his woman and seeing things that aren’t there, intervening in other people’s relationships and lives.”

“I will make you proud of me, you and my son.”

“I have to go pick up our little brothers from school. I will see you next week, man.” Wilbert hung up. Then, father and sons shared a true bear hug.

Donovan had finished his school day and he was getting into his car after loading all his school stuff and his laptop in the back seat. Out of the blue, just as he was turning the key, a girl knocked on his window. She was a senior, and she’d turned twenty-three three months before. She was five behind in school because she got depressed when she was in the seventh grade, brought her grades way down, and got held back. Her parents opted for her to get held back instead of having to enroll her in special classes, pushing her behind everyone else that was in her class when it came to the material that she was studying. Her name was Annalia Henley and she’d heard that Donovan was a computer whiz. She wanted to talk to him and see if he could fix her computer. Her hard drive was almost fried and she still had a chance to recover her important files before the hard drive would give out, but for some reason, she couldn’t access her Windows account to back them up. Donovan put the driver window down. “How may I help you?”

She put her head down to be at eye level with him. Smiling, she said, "Hi. I am Annalia Henley and I was wondering if you could fix my computer, or help me back up my files at least, because my hard drive is about to give out, and if it gives out, I am going to lose all my files," she started crying at the thought, "manuscripts, reports, electronic notebooks for class, everything, and then I won't know what to do. We're talking about ten books that I've poured my heart and soul into, composing draft after draft, and perfected, and they're about to go bye-bye and I will have to start all over. I know I don't know you, but..."

"It's ok, it's ok. I'll help you out. Why don't you start by getting into my car right now and calling whoever's going to pick you up to tell them not to pick you up today?"

"How did you know that my car is ruined," she asked as she walked around the car, opened the door and got on the passenger seat, laptop on her lap, and fastened her seatbelt, "and I have to have someone pick me up every day."

He didn't know what to answer to that question, so he said, "I. Don't. Know." And she laughed her heart out. "I guess I just guessed since I didn't see you getting into what would be your car before you noticed me and came to ask me for help with your laptop and files.

## Chapter 2

They pulled out of the university parking lot and Annalia was calling her best friend, Emily at the moment to tell her she didn't have to worry about picking her up today. She and Emily studied in different colleges, but they'd known one another and been like sisters since the first grade. "Hello, Emily. How are you?"

"I'm doing great, Anna. How about you?"

"Remember that guy I was telling you about, the computer freak?" Donovan looked at her with a weird smile on his face when he heard the word freak and she looked back at him smiling apologetically. Almost. "Well, not only is he going to take me to my house, but he's also fixing my computer! Can you believe it? He's going to help me backup my files and everything. I have less than six hours, according to my hard drive, to retrieve my files, so I hope he can come through fast. As it is, I can't even get into my Windows account to save my files. That's why I need his help. I think my computer got hacked and locked, or something, and I'm really worried."

"No one hacked you," commented Donovan, still focusing on the road. "You can't get in because your hard drive is as corrupt as a policeman who's always breaking the law rather than enforcing it. Your files are still safe. About the six hours? No problem. I can get in and retrieve them in about twenty minutes, so you'll be all right."

"Oh, my God, that's Donovan Thornhart, the computer whiz everyone's talking about! There are many 'computer freaks' in that university, so I never suspected you were talking about him!"

"Donovan Thornhart, yes, that's the one. He's got the name of a spoiled rich boy."

"Yes, he does. That name is somehow fancy. Ok, so I can go straight home then."

"Yes. As always, Emily, thank you for everything."

"That's what friends are for, remember? I tell you every time you thank me for something." She laughed. "You're such a dork! You know you don't have to thank me! I'd do anything for you."

"Same here. I'll see you tomorrow, God willing."

Donovan looked at her again. He'd never heard a girl his age talking like that.

"See you tomorrow, baby doll. Call me and keep me updated on your adventures with the computer freak."

"Adventures, ok..."

"Oh, come on, cheesecake, I know where this is going. You can bring any guy to his knees,

especially white-winged doves like Donovan.”

“White what?”

Emily hung up with an evil laugh. “That’s why I love her because she’s such a dork!”

“Ah...ok...” Annalia hung up.

“What did she say? Did she offend you?”

“No, Don, she said something that threw me off the wall, but not because it was offensive toward me. She said something about you being a white-winged dove and that I could bring any guy to his knees, ‘especially white-winged doves’ like you.”

“How poetic.”

“Yes, but that stunned me. Is it true?”

Looking her in the eyes, blushing, he said, “Yes, it is. Don’t tell anyone. Everyone thinks I’m this playboy and not to be vain but all the girls are chasing me ‘hoping to be the next one’.” He laughed. “It surprises me how someone can’t see something like this.”

“It’s obvious in women but it’s not always obvious in men, Donovan. Come to think of it, I don’t think I want to be more than friends. I’m Christian...”

He cut her off without intention. “I knew that the moment you said, ‘God willing,’” and then looked back at her and back at the road.

“But that doesn’t necessarily mean I’m a virgin. I’ve made mistakes. I’m telling you that I don’t think I want to be more than friends because I noticed that you were star struck the moment you first looked me in the eyes. I don’t know if you noticed it, but you gasped and then smiled before asking me how you could help me. I fornicated with a guy for over two years. Luckily it was only one guy in my entire life, but going by what I’ve learned since the moment I got saved, what I did was wrong. Now I’m celibate. I swore off sex until my wedding night. I don’t think I can corrupt you or any man like something corrupted my hard drive. I think that if fornicating again is wrong, corrupting an innocent man or woman, in the case of men, is unforgivable.”

“I am not Christian, but I have read the Bible, and it says that the only unforgivable sin is blasphemy. I just haven’t given in because thank God no one has approached me asking me the million dollar question, whether or not I believe Jesus Christ died for my sins... yeah, because if someone asks me that I won’t say no. I do believe. It’s just that luckily it hasn’t happened. I don’t think I’m ready for that. I think that once you make that prayer, from that moment on, you can’t goof off. You have to work to renew your mind and all that, and though I believe, I am still not

ready, you know what I am saying? When I embark on something, I give it my all. I can't just make the commitment, start working on renewing my mind, start living a holy life and all of a sudden just drop everything and go back to my old ways. I don't know if the backsliding thing and losing God's favor, I don't know if any of that's true, but once I make a commitment, I start working my butt off for it and I never drop it and never look back or go back. I am a novelist, too. I haven't been published yet. I have three completed novels and I am slowly working on my fourth one, but when I start a novel, I don't stop working on it till the novel or story is finished and I type THE END. No matter how much I think it may suck, I don't drop it and start working on another one."

"I get your drift. When I was younger and I thought a novel sucked, I would stop working on it, delete it from my hard drive and start working on another one. Then I started reading books about the art of writing, creating stories. My two latest novels, which are finished, were started after I got saved and they all contain a beautiful message. People of all ages can read them, as my other novels pre-salvation. It's just that none of the novels that I wrote before being saved contain that beautiful message. They're just like any other novel you can find in a secular bookstore. I plan on publishing them so that people can read what I used to write before Christ changed my life, and noticed the woman I've become and how my way of viewing life has changed."

"So you're not publishing your pre-salvation novels under pen names."

"No. I am publishing all my work under my real name, Annalia Henley. I have a middle name but I don't like saying it or writing it down because it's foreign and it's really strange."

"Oh..."

"So I just write Annalia C. Henley on all my title pages."

"I get you."

"It's pretty, really, I just don't like saying or using it. What I like the most is the meaning of it. My first name is a combination of two names, Anna and Malia. Anna is my mom, Anna Christina Henley, and Malia is my dad's sister, his only sister and that's why my parents named me after her."

"So you'll leave me wondering what your middle name is."

Smiling, she said, "I'll never tell you. You'll have to find out on your own if you really want to know."

"I'm going to find out when we get married and I see it on our marriage certificate, but don't worry, I won't tell anyone and I won't ever say it."

“So you know for sure that one day we’ll get married.”

“Yes, believe it or not, I do. You’re the most beautiful and sweetest woman I’ve ever met and I can’t let you go. I fell in love with you at first sight, something I never believed in until today. I don’t know, perhaps you can get me on my way toward making the most important commitment in my life.”

“I don’t know. Perhaps. We’ll see what happens. I like you, too. I can’t deny you’re drop-dead gorgeous.”

“Then we make a cute couple, don’t we?”

“I think we do, but like I said, we’ll see. For now, help me with my predicament.”

\* \* \* \*

Donovan and Annalia arrived at her house.

Annalia’s mother, Anna Christina went out to the driveway to know who this strange person was bringing her daughter home. She became concerned that Annalia was starting a relationship with a stranger, and although it was only friendship, she didn’t want her daughter to make a habit of it because not all people were as nice as it was more than obvious that this young man was. Five younger than Annalia. If they took things further and became a problem, that would be hard for the Henley family to digest and accept. It would take them time, and in the meantime, Annalia and Donovan would have to break up their relationship, if they ever started a romantic one, and even stay away from each other to keep those feelings from rekindling.

Annalia and Donovan got out of the car at the same time. As always, Annalia greeted her mother with a big hug. “Mom, this is Donovan Thornhart. He goes to the University of Florida, as well. He’s eighteen. Don’t get the wrong idea. I only brought him here because I heard he was one of the best computer guys in school. He’s going to help me get into my user account and back up my files.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Donovan,” said Anna Christina shaking his hand, smiling. “I hope you don’t think that my daughter brings guys home regularly because it’s not true. After she broke up with her ex boyfriend, Larry, you’re the first guy she’s ever brought here.”

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Henley. Your daughter is a very sweet woman and I would never think those things of her. I am sorry but we can’t talk more till after I take care of her problem because as of now, she only has,” he was looking at his watch, “five hours and forty-five minutes to back up her files or she’s going to lose them forever and they’re essential, critical to her.”

“Ok. I hope you can stay for dinner. Shawn and I would like to get to know our daughter’s new

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