

A true story of a birth mom's experience placing her child in an open adoption.

MacKenzie's Hope

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Chapter 1

Positive

January 2, 2000

It couldn't be.

Tara watched the double lines begin to form with shock and a dazed expression, though she didn't look in the mirror to see how truly dazed she looked.

She trusted it.

She stared at the stick for a long time before realizing what it would mean, as the realization traveled from her head to her heart.

Two nights ago, on New Year's Eve, she'd complained about being bored as she witnessed the multi-colored spectrum of parties on TV. And heard the rapid clicking of her boyfriend Alex's fingers flying across his beloved computer keyboard.

She had slept through Christmas amid family chatter and the loud pitter patter of her nephew's mini adventures along the massive hardwood floors of her sister Chelsea's beach house.

And now in a truly spiritual and terrifying moment of truth, the pink stick staring back at Tara with lines for eyes "told" her she was going to have a baby!

She had to tell Alex, a surly depressive whose apartment constantly buzzed with the sounds of computers and printers, his addiction. The only color in his place was the black and white of his computers and equipment, which constituted his entire life.

He was next door at his friend's apartment, chit chatting while her life changed before her.

After 14 years of being told there was no physical reason she hadn't gotten pregnant, she gave up on birth control long years ago. Since her dad sexually abused her with tools she figured he must have done something to her organs.

And now here it was. She and Alex were forming a life.

The door flew open downstairs now and she told Alex to come into the bathroom where she continued to stare at the double lines as if they were aliens beckoning her to join them.

He was in his happy-go-lucky mood, which irritated her since she was usually in a cynical, worrying mood. But now she thrust toward him the empty box that displayed the diagrams.

“You see this picture?” she asked as he smiled at her from the hallway.

She then pointed to the picture with the double lines next to it.

“Now you see this one?” she asked, anxiety rising in her voice. “This one’s me.”

It was not the way Tara pictured telling a man she was pregnant. It was going to be all romantic and warm with her ex-husband when they were trying.

Now he smiled wider.

“I told you, didn’t I?” he said and ran out the door to tell the “good news” to his friend next door, empty box in hand.

He rushed next door to give his friend and his friend’s girlfriend the news. Of course the girlfriend, in her usual critical way, would remark that Tara should buy at least two more tests just to be sure she was pregnant. But something in Tara told her this test was right, although she knew she’d get another test at the doctor.

Tara looked at her reflection in the mirror staring back at her as a suddenly pregnant woman.

She did look different, and had for a month, though she had denied it silently amidst Alex’s ranting through the entire holidays that he knew she was pregnant.

Suddenly the smell of food didn’t appeal to her.

She had met Alex three months before through his best friend’s girlfriend, who she also worked with. When she met Alex, a 52-year-old thrice divorcé, he told her he had his own computer consulting business. He was highly intelligent, very articulate, not handsome but charming and funny.

He came complete with business cards and even a business name to further his lies and deceit, a made-up life he lived vicariously through truly successful friends who had lives outside their Microsoft world.

She didn't know that his computer business was not a business at all, but simply a mask for his Internet/techie addiction, evidenced by his living room full of computers, monitors, keyboards, computer parts, shelves of files, notebooks of gibberish, disks, drives, and other junk. The reality was that he'd been drawing unemployment, his only source of income for months, and that he had a history of letting women support him.

His favorite job? Househusband, a role he relished and was made for, she found out later.

He told her he served in the Reserves during Vietnam but never set foot on fighting soil, unlike his close friend who collected veteran benefits.

The Vietnam vet was one of only two friends Alex had locally. The rest Alex communicated with through emails and an occasional phone call.

Alex told Tara he supported his son until he was four when his girlfriend took off with him after she got out of prison for embezzling her company's money.

Now Tara went downstairs and called Chelsea, who she'd always been close to. She knew Chelsea would be shocked, and her mom would too. Her mom wouldn't have much to say, whereas Chelsea would be full of questions and bewilderment. Her father she hadn't spoken to in years, although she'd attempted to reconcile with him last year – a big mistake.

Tara's father sexually abused her from the ages of 3 to 17, when she turned him in for the second time. She didn't speak to him for over 10 years.

Tara's dad put her in the shower with him when she was three. At 5 he put his fingers inside her vagina. At 6 he took half-naked pictures of her. At 8 he took seductive pictures of her and Chelsea. At 10 he used to come into Tara's room and kiss on her. He used to walk around exposed. Tara learned that sex was supposed to happen between a dad and daughter. She felt dirty. Her mom didn't talk about it and was ashamed of her own body.

None of the abuse ever stopped.

Tara turned him in for sexual abuse the first time when she was 15. When she turned him in for the second time, he sent her dead roses and black

roses with hate mail, and sent shredded baby pictures of her and Chelsea to Tara's caseworker. In those days, caseworkers in her state didn't go through mail or packages sent to foster kids, so who knows what the kids wound up with?

Tara remembered opening a package and being devastated by its contents. A note from her dad read: "Thank you for ridding me of you at last."

That single episode was burned in her memory for life and she never got over it.

Tara thought men were mean, but she expected them to give her what she wanted as her own act of revenge against her father. She remembered making a conscious decision at the age of 12 to make men pay for what she had been put through. She told herself later that it was like Timothy McVeigh killing all those people when his beef was with the FBI agent. Instead of punishing her father, she punished everyone around her, particularly boyfriends and herself.

She thought women were cold and expected to be submissive. She learned from her dad that sex should happen early. She felt unworthy. Her mom thought sex was dirty and didn't think of herself as attractive. Her dad thought his sexuality was normal. He thought he was attractive. Her mom and step dad didn't relate sexually in public. Tara always felt guilty and dirty, and would disassociate sometimes during sex when she was older. She disassociated every time her dad touched her. When she was in college, she found out her dad was molested by his brother. Her dad in turn molested his sister with the help of his other brother.

Tara's paternal grandma's family came from Sicily, and her paternal grandpa's family came from either Florence or Naples, making Tara's dad Italian.

Tara was the youngest, her parents' last hope for a boy. She didn't know how she got her middle name, only that her dad picked it. The whole family gave her her first name.

She had a half brother, a half sister, two sisters, two step brothers, and for a while two step sisters.

Janet was serious and quiet. Danielle was the scapegoat. Chelsea was the hero and the success. Chelsea was the one most special to Tara. She cared the most about her, she felt. Chelsea showed affection by hugging.

Her dad showed affection by fondling her. The rest of them didn't show affection at all. She wasn't close to Matt and Dan, Lewis, Janet and Danielle.

Her dad had ulcers and paranoia. Her mom had alcoholism and was always getting hurt by her dad physically. Chelsea had an over-achiever complex and didn't eat much. Janet had depression. Danielle got picked on in school and was hostile. Dan and Matt were potheads. Lewis was angry with Tara's mom all his life. Tara's stepfather was an alcoholic.

Tara's mom beat her frequently. Her mom gave her enemas from the ages of 3 to 16 for chronic constipation. Her mom would also use hairbrushes to hit her for punishment. Her dad pushed her down the stairs when she was 14 and tried to strangle her when she was 15. At 17 he burned her pubic hairs with a blow dryer. Danielle pushed her down and hit her that same year in front of the whole family. Tara was hit with a belt and a switch by her mom and occasionally by her dad. She was rewarded with food by her dad, usually dessert.

Tara was funny, honest, intelligent, persistent, responsible, compassionate, empathetic, sympathetic, creative, intuitive, generous, willing, and talented. She loved animals and thought she had a good work ethic. But she hated herself because she was abused.

The family was Catholic but only went to church on Sunday. When Tara got older she joked that they were "pseudo Catholics": they didn't eat meat on Fridays but Dad got to molest the kids on weekends. Tara went to the Church of Christ briefly at 18, but it wasn't her cup of tea, as church never was.

Her earliest memory was at 3 years old, toddling around the house while her mom napped. Tara was scared. It was unpredictable and scary to be a young child in her home.

When Tara was alone, she spent her time writing and reading. With other children she played outside and went swimming.

School sucked. Tara's grade school was round and big, and she felt like a scapegoat. The kids made fun of her clothes. Theirs were nicer. She played on the playground but didn't have anybody to play with so she played by herself. Other kids played with their friends, played games, and chased each other. Tara sat in front of the class, though not by choice. The small rooms were sectioned off sometimes. Tara felt small. Her teachers didn't spend time with her; they just scolded and taught her. Grade school was hard. The good parts were getting "As" on her writings.

The bad parts were being picked on. Her teachers would have described her as shy, and her classmates would've described her as awkward.

Her successes included getting an "A" on her first short story, and reading the most books in first grade. Her failures were her inability to do math and play well in Field Day. She spent her free time writing. She had colon problems and depression.

When Tara was 7, her grandpa died of lung cancer from smoking all his life. Her parents divorced when she was 8, after fighting for years. They tried to talk things out. Neither handled stress at all.

When Tara was 11½ she moved in with her mom and step dad, and Chelsea went to a foster home after reporting her dad's abuse. Tara's dad was fighting for custody when she was 12. Tara switched friends a lot but confided in Chelsea.

As a teenager, school was hell. The good parts were the writing and friends. She hung out with a delinquent. The bad parts were being picked on and changing schools all the time. Her teachers described her as unpopular, and her classmates said she was a nerd. Her successes were winning the Creative Writing award and passing her SATs. Her failures were math and doing drugs her junior year. She spent her free time writing.

Tara moved a lot to different institutions and back and forth between her parents. She was put in a children's home, three mental institutions, a group home, and four foster homes throughout her teen years. Her parents gave her up to the state when she was 17.

Her dad handled stress by blowing up, and her step mom handled it by working. When she was 15 her dad divorced her step mom after constant fighting and silent treatment, the latter of which was a method they used to settle their differences.

Her mom and step dad fought. They settled their differences by her step dad taking over.

Tara's mom handled stress by drinking, as did her step dad. Chemical abuse remained the same in her family always. Tara started drinking at 12 and experimented with diet pills, then at 17 tried speed for six months. Chelsea drank and smoked pot. Tara worked for her step dad as a secretary in the summers until she was 16, at Six Flags when she was 16, at fast food places when she was a senior in high school and in a church nursery at 18. At home she cleaned house, cooked, and did yard work.

Tara always wanted to be a writer and later a foster mom, too. She felt dirty, though. She was also interested in music and drama.

Two of her aunts died when she was 18. By that time she had moved 23 times. She barely graduated from high school, living in an emergency shelter during her senior year.

A year after she moved to Texas, Tara decided at her girlfriend's urging to become a PAL (Preparation for Adult Living) Mentor through Volunteers of America. She was good at it and garnered two awards before quitting, after deciding to let go of the past and go back to her writing. Staying a mentor for a year or more was a big deal for Tara since she never stuck with anything for long.

Tara wrote a character sketch of herself once. She felt ugly, defective. She noticed she was mixed up physically, projecting a five-year-old, a delinquent and a little adult. She responded to things extremely, either as a shamed five-year-old or as a defiant juvenile. Once in awhile the adult came through.

She noticed that whenever her mom and step dad visited she had physical symptoms beforehand, which stayed after they left, too. Tara's mom didn't get what she needed in her relationship.

What happened? At one point did Tara go wrong? Was it just being born? Tara wanted to finger paint the world with her words. She felt like she was drowning and she had to find another object to cling to. And sometimes she ran out of things to hold on to so she lost air and acted out in one of her addictions. Trying to fill that God hole with booze, sex, or food, money, or a better job. She felt like she was in a desert with no water or shade.

Karma was a bitch.

Alex walked in now as Tara was telling Chelsea the news. Perching on a stool, pleased with himself, he said nothing but watched her every expression and listened to every word.

There was a long pause on the other end of the line as Chelsea digested this new bit of information.

"You're kidding!" Chelsea said finally, worried and confused. "I didn't even know you were seeing anyone."

After a lengthy talk of options, she and Chelsea said their good-byes. Tara hung up, more confused than ever.

“So, what did she say?” Alex asked.

“Oh, she was surprised,” Tara said. “Supportive of course.”

“Are you going to call your mom?”

“No, not yet,” she said, thinking maybe she’d let Chelsea break the news.

She and Alex went to bed after receiving congrats from the neighbors and lay side by side in mostly silence until he broke the quiet between them.

“So, what are you thinking?” he asked, touching her hand.

Tara sighed. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Well if we won the Lotto we could raise it,” he said, matter-of-factly.

To Tara it was more than just about money. She was manic-depressive, a recovering alcoholic, unable or unwilling to be faithful to anyone, including Alex, with the exception of her ex-girlfriend.

“It’s more than just about money,” she said, tiredly. “You know my history.”

“Are you going to ask Chelsea about adopting it?” he asked, turning toward her.

“Yes, definitely. Probably by email tomorrow.”

“What do you think she’ll say?”

“I really don’t know. She and her girlfriend have been wanting to adopt, but with Chelsea it’s hard to say what her answer will be,” she said, pulling the covers up around her. “That would be my first choice.”

“I don’t know about that,” he said. “I mean if we put the baby with your family then you kind of hold all the cards. You might make it hard for me to see the baby in the future if things don’t work out for us.”

Things were already not working out, Tara thought to herself.

“I wouldn’t do that,” she said, truthfully. “It’s either that, keep it, or get an abortion. I mean I’m Pro-Choice but I don’t know if I could get ...”

“An abortion is out of the question,” he said, emphatically. “And we can’t keep it. . .”

“I know we can’t!”

January 4, 2000

Tara chose Gladney, the local adoption center. She went to turn in the paperwork and take a dorm tour, with Alex following glumly. Although Alex had agreed ahead of time to sign the papers, he backed out when the tour was to begin, saying he wouldn’t sign till after Tara signed. No matter how many times the admissions counselor tried to reason with him, he wouldn’t budge, and Tara broke down and cried. After asking Alex to leave the room briefly, the admissions counselor calmed Tara down, and then led them on a brief tour of the dorm and some of the grounds.

They exited the office building and the counselor led them through a covered walkway, past the campus greenhouse and flowerbeds. The grounds were beautiful, Tara noticed, as they passed by a fenced-in swimming pool.

She flashed back to being led on a tour of the children’s home when she was 14. It had also had a pool.

“A lot of the girls enjoy the pool,” the counselor told Tara. “It’s good exercise and very soothing when you’re pregnant. You’ll be here in the summer too, so you’ll be able to take advantage of it.”

The counselor pointed out the covered pavilion and gazebo, with grills and picnic tables for cookouts.

They made their way across the lawn, where Tara spotted a sandy area with a volleyball net and more picnic tables and chairs.

As they entered the huge dorm, Tara spotted a sunken living room with lots of cozy furniture, perfect for a pregnant woman to relax on. Down the hall to the left was a laundry room with three washers and three dryers, vending machines, and a large ice maker, as well as separate bathrooms for public use and offices where some of the caseworkers “officed.” Around the corner were bulletin boards filled with the latest news, pregnancy articles, and calendars of dorm events.

The last time Tara lived in a dorm, she was 18 and a freshman in college, majoring in Mass Communications and minoring in English.

That seemed like so long ago now.

“We have lots of activities,” the counselor explained. “We go to movies, out to dinner, to the zoo, on various outings.”

Tara was pleasantly surprised as she glanced over the sign-up sheets.

The counselor now turned the corner and proceeded to the dining room and kitchen where residents ate. The dining room was big and had a mural on the wall and a small TV. The kitchen was fairly large too, with overflowing baskets of fruit, and cabinets full of more food than Tara had ever seen in all the homes she'd been in.

They exited to a waiting area, full of activities and books that led to the house parents' offices. The counselor introduced Tara and Alex to the house parents, and then showed them a smaller waiting area for visitors.

"We don't allow visitors to go beyond these double doors," the counselor explained, showing them the softly lit area with plush chairs and a few magazines that led to the main doors facing a side street. Visitors were buzzed in and out for security purposes.

"People can call and they may ask if you're here, but we can't tell them without your consent. You'll give us a password/code word for your friends and family to know, that will protect your confidentiality," the counselor explained.

Leading them back to the living room, the counselor led them down the opposite hall, past the first-floor dorm rooms.

"We have residents with children living upstairs, and the other residents live downstairs," the counselor explained as they walked up the stairs to the second level.

The counselor opened a vacant dorm door to show them around.

"This is what your room would look like," she explained as they all went inside. "You would usually have a roommate, but because of your age you may not. We generally try to place residents with someone their own age or close to their age."

It was much nicer than Tara could have imagined.

There were two twin beds side by side, separated by a nightstand. Several lights in the room lighted two chests of drawers, a desk, and a vanity. Each resident had a bulletin board to put pictures on. There were two dorm rooms to a suite. In the middle of each suite was a large living room/dining room with a TV, lamps, phone, desk, loveseat, dining room table, chairs, and additional storage space. In the cabinets were puzzles, games, books, magazines, and writing and art supplies. The small kitchen

had a microwave, toaster, fridge, oven, stove, and sink, and cabinets holding dishes, pots, pans, and utensils. The bathroom was huge, with two sinks in a counter that stretched from almost one end of the wall to the other, and separate cabinets for each suitemate. The bathroom had one toilet and one shower without a tub. Residents could also use the bathtubs in a larger bathroom down the hall. Tara would later notice, as the other residents did, that the farther she got along in her pregnancy the harder it'd be to squeeze into the shower.

Leaving the dorm room, the counselor showed them more of the second floor – a game/computer/weight room complete with furniture, books, magazines, a pool table, and a Ping-Pong table.

Tara remembered playing Ping-Pong at camp and in the children's home. She liked it, even though she wasn't good at it.

There were phone booths on the first and second floors for residents who were making long distance calls or who just wanted more privacy.

Down the hall was a kids' playroom, complete with living room furniture, toys, and a TV.

January 18, 2000

Tara moved into the dorm at Gladney the weekend before Martin Luther King's birthday.

Three days after she moved in, the local paper published an article on Gladney, as it did every so often. In the months to come, Tara would notice many articles on adoption.

The article, entitled "The Changing Face of Adoption," stated that the center is "evolving with the time" by offering homes to children with special needs and children from overseas.

Gladney had roots in the orphan-train movement of the late 1800s, which brought orphans and abandoned children west from large cities like New York and Philadelphia, mainly to work on farms and ranches. The center's forerunner, the Texas Children's Home and Aid Society, was founded more than 100 years ago as one man's mission to find loving homes for orphaned children. The old name reminded Tara of the children's home she had lived in.

By the early 1920s the Society was the leading child-placing organization in the state. Back then the center matched couples wanting to adopt with young women seeking adoption for their unplanned babies.

Gladney stands today as a leader in international and domestic adoptions. By 2000, the non-profit center had placed more than 25,000 children in “forever” homes and assisted more than 36,000 women experiencing crisis pregnancies. It offered comprehensive flexible programs for birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees. The center also had an ABC program, which has grown in recent years, designed to help families seeking to adopt African-American or mixed heritage babies.

In the early 90s there were often more than 100 women living on campus. In 2000 Gladney remained the largest, most comprehensive maternity home in the U.S., but fewer clients were living on campus. The new facility, which opened in 2002, would house only 14 women.

The article that came out in the local paper in January 2000 profiled a former “Gladney baby” who was now placing her child for adoption.

She was 19.

She said she was thrilled when she found a family exactly like her own, a family of professionals willing to have her very involved in the adoption process. She wanted an open adoption because she still regrets that years ago the records of most adoptions were closed, including her own. She had never met her birth mom.

Tara was just embarking on her journey, one that would involve some people saying some insensitive things like, “Being a birth mom is kind of like your ex-husband has your child.”

It wasn’t like that at all, but non-custodial moms would swear it was the same kind of grief.

Tara wanted to shake them and say, “It is not the same. It is insulting, in fact, that you call it the same. It is insulting to other birth moms and me. You can pick up the phone and see your child and you have total access to your child. It is not the same at all!”

Luckily adoptive moms had a lot more choices today, which are still not well known at all in a society that isn’t very educated about adoption. Even well meaning people could ask the dumbest questions and say the most insensitive things.

Tara wanted to ask them: “Do you hear the words coming out of your mouth?”

Despite Tara's mom's many flaws, one of the good things she did teach her was that there were some questions you don't ask and some things you don't say.

The birth mom quoted in the article said, "The only thing I know about my birth mother is what was written in a single paragraph in a folder given to my parents."

Judging by this birth mom's recent experience, adoption had changed quite a bit. The birth mom in the article called her own parents and the adoptive parents when she went into labor, and got to see her little boy right after his birth, which in the old days wasn't heard of. Babies back then were usually swiftly brought to their new parents. The theory being that this was better for the birth mom, that she couldn't miss what she didn't see.

Now agencies knew better. They knew that it was better for birth moms to see their children when they were born. Still, some adopting parents and birth moms fear any resulting emotional attachment.

Adoptions have changed in that many of the birth moms are older, and far fewer live on campus before giving birth because there supposedly is no longer the stigma attached to being pregnant and not married.

Tara, who was still legally married to her estranged husband, Mark, due to lack of money to file for divorce, got questioned by young birth moms as to why she chose adoption.

Tara wanted to say, "For the same reason you did." But instead she told them, "For emotional and financial reasons." One birth mom who asked that of Tara said, "I won't bite" – to which Tara responded that she was just sensitive about being asked why all the time, and she that had been judged for her decision by many people.

Tara wasn't ashamed of her daughter and never would be. But she was ashamed that she wasn't fit to be a mom, something she swore she would never be (unfit). This was not in her plans when she used to imagine being a mom. It was never in the plan that Tara would be incapable of being a "real" mom, and she could never have foreseen loving her daughter from afar.

Those who do choose to live in the center receive food, housing, private medical care, counseling, access to in-house legal staff, and educational and recreational opportunities.

There were all kinds of adventures in the dorms, as Tara would soon find out.

Frequently the fire department came to put out yet another stovetop fire caused by a teenager who hadn't mastered the art of cooking.

They came so often that when they walked in the first words out of their mouths were "Who's cooking?"

Unfortunately when the smoke alarm went off, the fire alarm went off and the department was automatically called. The girls always liked drooling over the gorgeous firemen who came to put out the fire.

"Too bad I'm pregnant," some residents would say, not seeming to mind that they were hanging out in their robes or pajamas.

The firemen were not amused.

Tara flashed back to when an old newspaper writer she used to work with called her "the writing machine" while she worked as a reporter. Because of her bipolar disorder and alcoholism, she'd pissed away a whole writing career a little at a time like a tornado roaring through each opportunity, whipping the remains into smithereens.

Tara used to feel her old writer friend with her. He died in 1990 after five strokes and a heart condition. She dreamed of his hopes, his inspirations. She would pretend he was talking to her as she walked down the sidewalk after another interview. She talked silently back to him. He knew and felt her pain, desire, and yearning to write again.

Walking down the hallway of the local paper, Tara peeked into the composing rooms. The smells, the life, called to her. How she missed it.

She could hear a guy's voice, a copy editor that she'd had an affair with. She could remember their times together, and now it was so long ago and yet it wasn't. Each person giving her a shot only to be shot down later. She was full of so much regret.

She could never stay in one place. Her distractions often caused accidents, causing her to encounter the victim in her again.

And another jerk to go with it.

Like most bipolar alcoholics, Tara preferred fantasy to reality because fantasy was always better and never as good as reality. And when you tried to make a fantasy your reality, it was never the same. From the time

she was 11, she had lived in a rich fantasy world to counteract the hellishness that was her childhood and later her adulthood. She'd only met one other person who lived in the kind of fantasy she did, and that person was schizophrenic and went a little too far, becoming obsessed with Sting and flying to Bermuda to meet him.

Tara also had her own celebrity fantasy world that she turned to in times of need; only she never spoke to them out loud. She wasn't stupid at least.

She "went away" with these people in her head when things got to be too much which was about 98 percent of the time. She knew none of it was real but it was a comfort, although temporarily. She never told a therapist until she was an adult, and only one. She was too ashamed and scared they'd lock her away in a padded cell and throw away the key. Not until her late 20s did she discover she wasn't the only one in the world who used this survival mechanism. It was a great relief.

Emotionally she didn't know the war of her abuse was over, although mentally she knew. She knew it was safe to "come out" and not rely on her fantasy world. But her heart was still scared and scarred. It was easier to retreat.

Now Tara was reflecting back to a couple of months before when her baby was conceived. She had guessed her meds had quit working again after she'd had another Manic Sunday. It was amazing that her partners never wanted to be around her when she was "on top of the world" like that. Her dog liked it. Her cat liked it when she was depressed. She always thought her boyfriends would like the mania because she was in a good mood and high spirits, but they just averted their eyes and backed up. She always thought she could conquer the world when she was like this. Then she was tired and hungry from the crash. She cycled down when she needed to, but sometimes not in time. She would "get caught."

In November 1999 when her baby was conceived, Tara had lost another job. She was so tired of trying to fit into a round hole. It had been years now, 75 jobs since 1982. Actually she stopped counting. How did people keep their cheery attitude? How did they not just go postal? Humor and a Higher Power had always been her saving grace. She contemplated drinking that night in November. Alex had never seen her that way. Every time she thought she couldn't take any more, there was more.

Then she got a great card from Chelsea with a picture of Tara on the carousel at age seven. Tara remembered those scared eyes yet fighting spirit.

Tara knew now that it was lies. All of it. The notion that she was dirty and gross. The thought that she was an eternal victim. The words that wounded her soul. The physical abuse she thought she deserved. The sexual abuse she thought was her fault. The verbal abuse she thought she had to endure as an adult. The mental abuse she thought she caused. The emotional abuse she thought she made happen. That her spirit was dead. That she was unlucky in love. That she was just for sex. That her writing wasn't good enough. That she'd always be poor. That she didn't deserve good things.

It was all one big lie that caused her to see the world in a skewed way that trapped her dreams, spirit, voice, and song.

She was getting too old for this shit.

She had this crazy idea of opening a house for clueless women like her to show them how to live. Course she'd have to learn first wouldn't she?

God kept pushing her to write in the fall, but she was uninspired. What did she have to say? What point was she trying to make?

Screw surviving. She wanted to live. She wanted to have a day, a life, not centered on chaos, but just living. Like normal people. She wanted to have time, not do time.

She felt like she was serving a very long prison sentence with no chance of parole.

A friend of hers had relapsed after 13 years of sobriety a few weeks before that. Tara wasn't surprised. She saw it coming. Just like she knew she lost a job once before they told her.

Maybe one day she'd meet her fantasy person:

A writer combination jock, intellect, actor or artist/creative type who's good-looking, funny, compassionate, and built. A cross between an old flame Tara knew in Florida who was married and an unrequited crush from college who was also a writer with a splash of Robert Downey, Jr. without the addictions. He'd be between 35 and 41 years old, liked to eat at least two meals a day, usually lunch and dinner, wore jeans and T-shirts mainly and shopped at The Gap or Old Navy. He'd be a professional writer or maybe a manager somewhere, making about \$40,000 with some money saved, enough to live on for at least a year. As far as religion, he'd be non-denominational and believe in past lives, maybe, and only believe in heaven and hell right here on earth, like karma. He'd drive a sports car and drive fast like her. His ambitions would be to own his own company

and retire in style, maybe after inventing “the next big thing.” He would never plan to go without and may or may not want to have a family.

He’d make an impression and would be the life of the party. He’d be well liked and have a dry wit. He’d have the sense of humor of her favorite comedian, George Carlin or Steve Wright. He’d be amazing in bed and gentle in all things, yet be able to defend himself or her if need be. Not a woman, a mama’s boy or anything like a “scrub,” as referenced by a certain rap song. He’d be open to new ideas and be spontaneous. He’d be unpredictable when it came to romantic surprises, yet he’d be stable. He’d have a good work ethic and practice it. He’d be charitable but not a sucker. He’d be passionate and sexy, insightful, playful, and non-judgmental, forgiving, but not a doormat. And he’d like kids and animals.

Tara had learned to people please in so many ways:

At 3 she had to learn not to disturb her mom from her nap even when she was afraid or in need.

At 8, when her parents told her they were divorcing, she went to her room and cried and told them she was fine.

At 10 she posed seductively for her dad even though she didn’t want to.

At 11 she didn’t tell her dad she no longer believed in Santa after she saw him dressed up as the legend.

At 12 she let kids bully her instead of standing up for herself.

At 13 she was seductive with her step dad in hopes he wouldn’t be so strict.

At 14 she let a boy kiss her even though she didn’t want him to.

At 15 she got baptized because her foster parents wanted her to.

At 16 she acted like her fellow residents in the juvenile home so they’d like her.

At 17 she experimented with speed so her friends would like her.

At 18 she told jokes so her foster mom would like her.

At 19 she drank more so her college buddies would like her.

At 20 she had sex so guys would like her.

At 21 she became promiscuous to be loved.

Tara felt like a good relationship was like a good restaurant. The things that were important to her in a relationship were passion, humor, compassion, honesty, and variety but her expectations were lower than they were eight years before. The separation from her husband four years earlier is what changed things.

Now she found herself devouring every piece of literature she could get her hands on about pregnancy, as she always knew she would if she got pregnant.

She kept saltines by the bed the first month or so, at the suggestion of a woman who had been pregnant and had been through the nausea. Thankfully, Tara never actually threw up, just had the dry heaves. She was thoroughly conscious of everything she put in her body, including her beloved caffeine. She wanted her baby to be healthy and strong and worried the whole time she was pregnant that he/she wouldn't be because of something she did or didn't do.

A true story of a birth mom's experience placing her child in an open adoption.

MacKenzie's Hope

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