

*Ella has spent her life building a wall around her heart. Megan, Jill, and Anna have a surprising connection. When the women are forced together, they learn that faith, forgiveness, and friendship can bring healing to heartache.*

## **Ella's Absolution**

By Cassandra Hungerford

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# ELLA'S ABSOLUTION

CASSANDRA HUNGERFORD

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Print ISBN: 978-1-959620-29-7

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-778-8

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.  
2024

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data  
Hungerford, Cassandra  
Ella's Absolution by Cassandra Hungerford  
Library of Congress Control Number: 2024913501

# Chapter 1

*Dear Ella,*

*I know I have not always been the best of mothers. I have hurt you in more ways than I can possibly imagine. The cancer has spread and the doctors aren't giving me much time.*

*Two years ago, you told me you would never speak to me again. But would you let me see my only grandson one time before I die? I'm not asking for your forgiveness or even your friendship, but Jeffrey deserves to meet his grandmother.*

*Please, Ella, don't let me go to my grave with these regrets...*

Ella folded the letter from her mother. Looking at Jeffrey's unmarked face, Ella brought her hand to her scarred cheekbone. The faded blemish assaulted Ella with memories she had long ago placed behind her scarred heart.

Her mind flashed back to the day after church.

*"You wretched child," Eunice barked, pushing ten-year-old Ella to her knees. "How dare you leave church without properly shaking the pastor's hand? You are sinful and wicked. You must ask the pastor for forgiveness."*

Ella peered at her hand, naked of jewelry. She didn't wear rings, not now and not ever. The thought of wearing rings turned her veins to ice, bringing back the horror of her mother's five pieces of jewelry-turned-weapons she used to slash Ella's face. "The punishment you deserve," her mother always told her. The woman was all of five feet tall but appeared gigantic to Ella. Somewhere over the years, her

mother's face had taken the shape of a monster, with teeth as sharp as her tongue.

*When she was nine years old, Ella awoke one Monday morning, wincing, as her hand swept over the crimson gash below her eye, evidence of Ella telling her mother that "communion bread was gross." Her mother's hand didn't stop her assault until droplets of crimson made their way down her arm. It was as if each time Eunice hit Ella, she relieved some of her own aggression. At that point, her mother kicked her one final time—a punishment, she believed, for not fighting back.*

*After her mother left for work that morning, Ella sat outside, tears streaming down her face. She didn't want to walk to school like this, afraid of teasing from classmates. With a wince, she recalled what happened the last time she went to school with marks on her face. Susie Gallato took one look at Ella and called her the clumsiest person on earth.*

*"Graceless Ella" she teased. Now all of her other classmates chanted, "Graceless Ella, Graceless Ella..." whenever she walked into a room.*

*Drops of water fell from the sky, as if aligning with Ella's fear. Now her clothes would be all wet when she got to her class. Ella's thought about skipping school for the day. But she shuddered, imagining what her mother would do if she found out.*

*"My mom said I should walk you to school." The neighbor boy, Brady, with his shaggy hair and dimpled face peered down at Ella. At first, he was grinning, but then, as he moved closer to Ella, a look of concern covered his face. "What happened to you?"*

*"Nothing." Ella lowered her gaze as her hand touched her cheek, "Leave me alone."*

*“Ella, that’s bad.” He indicated her face. “We should go tell my mom.” Bradly grabbed her hand, attempting to pull her up.*

*“No! You can’t!” Her fingers tightened with his as she pulled her hand back. The boy’s feet gave way as his body hit the ground next to her. “Please, you have to promise. You have to!”*

*Ella sensed Bradly’s hesitation. She knew he suspected something bad was going on. Would he end their budding friendship because of her mother? She couldn’t lose another friend because of the lies she had to tell. It had happened before; she couldn’t let it happen again. The very thought flooded her with fear. Her friend was the only thing in her life that made her smile. He let go of her hand and stood up, a look of confusion on his face.*

*“Ok.” He bit his lip. “How about, after my mom goes into the kitchen, I sneak you into her bedroom and get some makeup to hide...that?” Ella winced as Bradly’s hand touched her cheek.*

*Ella wiped her hands on the ground, a feeling of determination in her soul. If Bradly was on her side, she could handle anything, “Thank you.”*

*After that, Ella and Bradly became inseparable. Even though Ella was young, she knew she really cared about the blue-eyed, brown-haired boy who lived next door.*

*Each time he found Ella after her mother got out of control, Bradly encouraged her to let him tell his parents. Fear clogged her throat, “No,” she whispered, her voice catching. “Bradly, if you tell, she might hurt me...and then I’ll never see you again.” She wasn’t ever completely honest with Bradly about the real reason her mom hit her, because she knew that Bradly would never talk to her again if he knew the truth.*

*The truth that she was as sinful as her mother claimed.*

Ella sighed as she remembered how she always messed up, especially at church. *One time, she was wearing a pretty purple dress with black leggings. As she pulled up the stockings, she snagged her nail. That day, her mother left a gash on her right leg, telling her she should have been more careful.*

Eye contact proved another problem.

*“Hold your head up,” her mother told her. “Look people in the eye.” She also really hated eye contact with people at the church, especially the pastor. Something about him made her feel like he could see into her very soul and was judging her. He’d tell her things like “Little girls must always respect their elders” and “One day I’ll get you to like me.” Pastor Mikey’s “come hither” grin sent a shiver down her spine. She knew if Bradly told, then the pastor would send his people to take her away, just as her mother threatened.*

Ella spent as much time as possible at Bradly’s home. It was more than the red front door, the soft pastel walls, and the comfortable furnishings. Things were different over at Bradly’s house. His home was filled with pictures of smiling faces, a family that truly loved each other. A huge piano sat in the living area, where Bradly and his mother took turns playing music and sharing songs.

But one day, everything changed. Ella clasped her hands together, recalling the confusion and pain of that moment. She remembered Bradly’s father walking in the door one evening, his shoulders drooping.

*He looked at his wife, “Honey, they downsized the company. I lost my job.”*

*Bradly looked up from the card game he was playing with Ella. His eyes widened. “What are we going to do?”*

*His father looked at him, his eyebrows raised, obviously surprised that Bradley was paying attention, "Son, this is not an easy thing, but I know one thing."*

*Ella mouthed the question as Bradley said it, "What?"*

*"Somehow, God will take care of us."*

Something about Bradley's family was different because of God. This God they knew somehow made them happier and more loving. Bradley's parents spoke about a God of love and joy, not one that hated people. It made her question whether Bradley's family and her mother served different gods or, if perhaps, this God just didn't love Ella as much as he loved Bradley's family.

She discovered the answer on her thirteenth birthday. *The leaves had started falling from the trees and swept around her in beautiful shades of orange and yellow. Walking home with Bradley in the fall felt romantic, like one day they would be so much more than friends. It was about the only thing that brought Ella happiness. But that day, she noticed Bradley wasn't saying much as he walked beside her. Ella bit her lip, her throat tightened as she feared he'd tell her he didn't want to walk her home anymore. Instead, Bradley put one hand in Ella's and with the other moved her hair behind her ear. She began to wonder if he was going to kiss her, preparing herself for the moment that she had been dreaming about for a year. Instead, he found her gaze and said, "Dad got another job."*

*"That's great!" Ella leaned towards Bradley, only to have him lean away. "Ella, it's a five-hour drive."*

*Ella's gaze fell to the ground. This couldn't be happening. "When are you leaving?"*

*Bradley's gaze found Ella's "My mom and I have to leave tomorrow to find a place to live. My dad has to fly somewhere for*



*training.” His hand found hers, lingering over her fingers, “Ella, I’ll miss you.”*

*Ella’s eyes met Bradley’s. She had started to feel more than only a crush on Bradley, believing if they were older, they would have shared a relationship. Now they wouldn’t get to grow up together, date and eventually get married. Ella’s heart shattered and with it—her dreams. That day, she knew the answer about God.*

*If he was real, he hated her.*

Ella observed Jeffrey as he played, his unmarked face and gentle expression made her promise herself, once more, she would never hurt him. Jeffrey would never know the feeling of pain and abandonment that came when a mother took out years of frustration on her child.

It was Ella’s mission that Jeffrey would never live in a world where he didn’t feel like he measured up. She didn’t ever want him to have to worry about waking up with bruises for minor mistakes.

It took Ella years to realize what happened to her hadn’t been her fault that her mother had been an abusive, hateful woman. Whatever god her mother served; he was a wicked tyrant who used his children for his own personal amusement. Were these two gods different? Or did this God just favor Bradley’s family and hate Ella? Had Ella messed up in a such a horrible way she wasn’t worthy of God’s love?

Ella’s legs bent as she sank to her knees, remembering how she had been taught to pray. She hadn’t talked to God in years, hadn’t felt the need to communicate with some being in the sky that used his children for his wicked amusement. “God,” Ella mumbled, “Do you hate me?” She heard nothing. “Should I let my mother die without seeing us?”

She still heard nothing. Ella got up from the ground and pulled open the drawer to grab Jeffrey's pajamas. He needed to get ready for bed, and she needed to stop messing around with someone that either didn't exist or was unusually cruel. It must be what she suspected all along. God didn't exist, and if he did exist, he certainly didn't care about someone like Ella.

Instead, her thoughts turned to her mother's letter. It disturbed her more than she wanted to admit. Ella's mother did not deserve any type of relationship with Jeffrey. For all Ella cared, her mother could go straight to hell without seeing any of them. Her mother deserved nothing less than the pit of hell.

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Matt fiddled with the bridal magazine as he observed his fiancée, Megan Anders, and her mother, Eileen, developing a list of possible caterers. His gaze wandered through the Anders' picture window where miles of snow covered the several acres of the Anders' estate. He briefly glanced at his fiancée, her long black hair falling to her waist, slender legs providing a supermodel appearance. No one was more beautiful than the woman who sat before him. Megan's perfection was one of the reasons Matt didn't always feel comfortable opening up about his own flaws.

Matt looked forward to his weekend with Megan. They planned to drive to Colorado so Megan could try out in a singing competition. He knew she always dreamed of being a professional singer and was more than happy to support her in this dream. He wondered if this was the weekend he should tell her the truth he had been hiding since the beginning of their relationship.

“Penny for your thoughts,” He was jolted out of his daydream by Megan’s teasing smile that lit up her whole face. “You seemed to have left us for a minute.”

“Sorry.” Matt’s hand wrapped around Megan’s as he reached for the catalog she held, “Show me the flowers.”

“Actually, we have another more important thing to discuss. Eileen enfolded her hands in her lap.

“Megan, we have to figure out who is going to walk you down the aisle.” He watched Megan’s face blanch as her smile faded.

“It has been a good morning, Mother, don't spoil it. I do not want to talk about that. Not now”

Matt well knew Megan was having trouble coming to terms with her father’s death and had no idea who she would want to walk her down the aisle. But any time the subject was brought up, she ran away-physically and mentally. Megan’s need to run away whenever a conversation got too tough continued to give Matt pause over opening up about his secret.

“I need a minute.” Megan shot to her feet. Matt steadied her as she almost stubbed her toe on the table when she rushed past. “Fresh air sounds good.”

Matt’s apologetic gaze met Eileen’s as he followed Megan outside. He noticed pain in Eileen’s eyes as she shrugged. “She needs to deal with this reality even though she’s hurting.”

Matt nodded at Eileen, “I’ll take care of it.”

Matt walked through the door, feeling the crisp air as his feet met the porch. Winter arrived last week, bringing with it several inches of snow and the classic Midwest chill. His arms surrounded Megan as her cheek nuzzled his chest. Matt held her close. She fit right against

his shoulder. He stared down at her soft, silky head of hair from his 6' 5" frame as she glanced up.

Her heart pounded against his chest as she snuggled against him. "You always make me feel safe."

She paused, gulping as tears trickled down her cheeks. "Why does she always have to bring it up?" Megan mumbled, "I never thought I would have to do my wedding without him.

"He wouldn't want you to be doing this to yourself." Matt held Megan a little tighter as he wiped a tear hanging from the edge of her eyes, ready to fall. "Your father would have wanted you to enjoy this time."

As he soothed Megan, the memory surfaced. One year ago, Matt asked her father for her hand. Matt winced at the memory of that encounter with a man who knew, short of a miracle, he'd never walk his daughter down the aisle.

*The man's fists clenched the deep cushioned chair against the pain Matt recognized in his eyes. Megan's father knew he didn't have much time as the disease made its way through his body. After spending the day in the sterile room with Megan and her mother, Matt dropped them off at home and found his way back to the hospital.*

*Every time he walked in the room and saw the small, shriveled man, once alive and vibrant, Matt was caught in a whirlwind of understanding the brevity of life. Jim Anders' gaze caught Matt's as he encouraged him to walk over.*

*Matt hid his shaking hands behind his back. "Sir, I was wondering if I could ask you for your daughter's hand in marriage?"*

*The man's face lit up, but then darkened. "Son, I already love you as one of my own. I believe you are the man to win Megan's heart." Matt's throat caught as the man paused. "But you can't marry her as*

*long as you live in deception. I know you hold something back from her."*

*Matt's eyes widened as he sat on the couch, facing Megan's father. "How did you know, sir?"*

*Mr. Anders struggled for breath. "You are a good man, son. But I can tell something has been eating away at you for as long as you have been dating my daughter. I give you my permission as long as you tell her the truth. No marriage should be started with lies."*

*"What if she doesn't love me anymore?" Matt locked eyes with the man he considered a father-figure. His stomach clenched and dread spread through him at the thought.*

*The man breathed out before whispering, "Shouldn't that be her choice?"*

*"Son, one more thing," Mr. Anders' face held a lifetime of wisdom. "Megan may not be ready to forgive you for whatever it is right now. But know the Lord is still working on her heart as well. She may go through a dark period before she comes out in the light. Always fight for her and she will eventually come back to you."*

Shortly after the meeting, they lost Mr. Anders to lung cancer, even though he never smoked a day in his life. As Matt remembered the promise he made to always fight for her, he moved his lips over Megan's forehead, soothing her soft skin. As he did, he realized today had to be the day. He could no longer live with the secret that spread through him like a poison, destroying all Matt wanted for their future.

"Megan," Matt loosened his arms around Megan and stared into her eyes. "I have something important to share with you."

Megan's body stilled, as her hand clenched his arm.

“Kids, we still have to pick out some of the wedding décor and only have an hour to do it before my book club comes over.” Eileen shouted through the window, startling both Megan and Matt.

Matt jumped away from Megan at the interruption. She grabbed his hand, “Wait, what were you going to tell me?”

“Nothing,” Matt folded his other hand over Megan’s, grateful for the distraction. “Now isn’t the right time. It can wait.”

As Megan made her way inside, firmly gripping Matt’s hand, he sent up a whispered prayer, “Lord, how do I tell her?”

*“The truth will set you free,”* Matt heard deep within his soul.

Matt knew he couldn’t keep this secret locked in his heart much longer. He only hoped he still had a fiancée when the truth came out.

## Chapter 2

Ella glanced around the grocery store. Bright colors overwhelmed her senses. The smell of rotisserie chicken wafted through Ella's nostrils, making her consider buying one for the evening. It was so much easier than cooking from scratch. She stared at her grocery list, seemingly expanding with each month that Jeffrey grew. She considered her limited budget and sighed. The chicken would have to be a treat for another day.

She shuddered, wishing she'd picked another time to shop, a time when the store wasn't overly crowded with families. Children ran around the aisles as their moms tried to keep their little ones from the snack bins. Amid the chaos, Ella's phone beeped, alerting her of a blizzard moving into the area. That explained the crowded store. Ella frowned, hoping the bad weather didn't move in too quickly. She had plans.

A slender woman with blonde hair furrowed her brow at Ella, momentarily, while waving her hands in an animated conversation with another blonde woman. The similarity in hair color and build made Ella wonder if they were sisters who ran into each other at the grocery store and were catching up on their day. Ella wondered what it would be like to have a family close by, loved ones to run into at the grocery store. As her hands gripped the cart, Ella's imagination turned negative as it so often did. From experience, she expected the worst when others gave her a sidelong glance or when they paid attention to her at all. Her mother's image filled her mind.

Each slap of her mother's hand chiseled away at her self-esteem, leaving her expecting judgment from others. With those glances, did those women wonder why she didn't have a ring on her finger or worse, did they assume she slept around? Deliberately, she turned away from the women to find the groceries on her list.

While she pondered whether she wanted to buy a small package of chocolate chips, Jeffrey perked up and tiny fingers landed on the pyramid of cereal boxes in the middle of the aisle. Ella leaned forward, hands gripping Jeffrey's arms, but not in time to avoid the catastrophe before her. As she watched the tower of crunchy munchies collapse in a heap, Ella froze in place, still gripping the cart and her son as humiliating tears trickled down her cheeks.

"Let me help you with that." She jerked up her head to see a striking woman with auburn hair picking up the boxes.

"Thanks." Ella swiped at the tears as she sought for some semblance of dignity. After all, what might the woman think of her? The woman had an air of superiority about her. The dark pencil skirt and matching blazer reminded Ella of the wealthy businesswomen that regularly schedule appointments at the chiropractic clinic where she worked as a receptionist.

She had always been envious of such women and dreamed of taking corporate lunches and vacations, and having the money to do whatever she pleased. Ella's face reddened as she stared down at her sweatpants. Absently, she plucked a piece of lint off her T-shirt she purchased during her freshman year in high school.

"How old is he?" The stylish woman's gaze met Jeffrey's, brightening as Jeffrey responded with a grin.

"Eighteen months." Ella heard the edge in her tone. The woman was being perfectly nice, but Ella's throat tightened as she attempted



to keep the tears from falling down her face. This woman represented what she once dreamed of being, but would never be—not now, not ever.

“Thanks for your help, but we’re late for, for an, an appointment.” Ella knew her stutter sounded like a lie as she took the cart and headed toward the checkout. Surprise filled the woman’s eyes as Ella scurried away from her. Ella hated her rudeness, but she needed to get out of this place as soon as possible. As she observed all of the “perfect” women who probably never needed to worry about money, self-loathing filled Ella.

Near the checkout line, her heart pounded, and she stopped abruptly. “Not here... please, not today,” Ella whispered.

He stood in the wine aisle, those soft, but masculine hands reaching for a seemingly expensive bottle. She tried to calm the shiver that ran through her body as she remembered those hands holding her, making her feel as though she mattered more than anything else in the world. It was no secret he was handsome. It didn't surprise her that his blonde, carefully styled hair and muscular build attracted women.

Even now, Joe had the power to turn her insides to mush. Ella watched as women walked by him, admiring what they saw. Joe met one woman’s eyes and winked, snapping Ella out of her walk down memory lane. Joe may be handsome, but he knew it and flirted with almost any woman that caught his attention.

Ella grabbed Jeffrey and started scouting for the nearest exit. Forget buying groceries. She couldn’t let him see them. Her lip curled. He was probably planning a romantic evening for the new love of his life. Ella cringed at the thought she had not been enough for him. Somewhere deep inside, anger stirred—and hurt when she thought

about that other woman. A tightness drew her expression into a mask of pain, anger and confusion.

All that drummed up in her mind was the knowledge that Joe's new love was a dirty, rotten thief who stole her future.

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Anna glanced at the clock for the fourth time as she heard the door creak open. Finally. She cleaned the entire house from top to bottom in the last day, just to keep her mind from wandering into areas she had no wish to explore at the moment.

Reaching for her phone for the fifth time that hour, she scrolled through her text messages to see if she had missed anything. Just as she was about to reset the phone, Joe walked through the doorway, his arms filled with two bags with their local grocery stores' logo on them.

"Hi honey," Joe strolled over to Anna to plant a kiss on her mouth. Anna turned away and his lips landed on her cheek.

"What are you doing back now?" Anna clenched her jaw. How could he act as though nothing was wrong?

"I thought we could have a romantic evening together." Joe's brow furrowed as he quickly turned away from Anna and began unloading groceries.

"Joe, this is the first time I have seen you in 24 hours. You didn't come home last night." Anna heard the anger in her tone and moved to where she could watch his face. She grew tired of watching Joe's feigned expression of innocence when she'd already guessed the truth.

"I told you I was at the office." He scowled. "It got late so I slept on the couch."

“I’m not stupid, Joe.” The tension in Anna’s face spread to her clenched hands and stiff shoulders. She was not about to let him make a fool out of her. Not anymore. “I know you’re seeing someone else.”

“There you go, making accusations again.” Joe banged the refrigerator door closed, his hand smashing against the handle hard enough to make him growl. “You can’t leave it alone, can you? All you do is whine about me all day every day. I chose you, Anna. I left my girlfriend and child for you.”

*Was that supposed to be some kind of prize?* Her mind twisted around what Joe said. He acted like she shouldn’t be upset because of what he gave up for her. “What kind of man leaves his child?” She mumbled, but loud enough...

Joe stiffened, his body betraying his anger. “I’ve had enough of this.” He grabbed his coat. “Call me when you decide to trust me.”

Anna watched Joe slam the door behind him. “I wonder where he’s spending the night this time?” *When had she become so cynical?*

Anna winced as she recalled the night at the bar the group of lawyers from their firm decided to go out for drinks. She was new to the firm. Straight out of law school and having recently passed the bar, she was eager and ready to make her way in the world.

Joe, handsome and full of confidence, was on track to become partner. She’d observed him enough at the office to know she wanted a mentor like him, a man who understood how the law and the politics worked in the firm. She wouldn’t mind some of his charm focused on her either. Taking a chance, she sat down next to him as he downed glass after glass of bourbon.

“Can you take me on?” Joe surveyed her up and down until she gulped and almost walked away. She didn’t need that. Then he winked and offered to buy her a drink.

Not one to back down from a challenge, Anna straightened her shoulders and eyed Joe. “Oh, I’ll take you on.” She then matched him shot for shot until she was light-headed, her guard knocked down by a mix of bourbon and rebellion. When Joe leaned over and offered her coffee back at his place, she wasn’t about to turn him down.

The next morning, Anna turned over in a strange bedroom, blinked, saw Joe lying beside her and sighed. Her eyes squeezed shut as she moved her hand around the floor, feeling for her clothes. *No. No, it couldn't be. She hadn't. Had she?* She opened her eyes again. *No!*

Silently she berated herself for sleeping with her new coworker so quickly. Nevertheless, Anna quieted her conscience about sleeping with him by convincing herself that she had real feelings for the handsome, dynamic...and romantic Joe.

Soon Anna and Joe became the power couple at the office. Their swordplay displayed a dynamite duo in the courtroom, winning cases for everyone who asked to work with them. This only heated things at night, exploding into fireworks in the bedroom. It seemed like the perfect relationship, until she discovered Joe had cheated on his pregnant girlfriend with her.

“That relationship was basically over.” He alternately paced the room and glared at her.

Her heart twisted for the unknown woman left with his child as she exclaimed, “Joe, you had relationship that produced a child. A child!”

Joe stopped, caught her arm. “I know. I will do right by the child. All right. Promise.”

Anna managed to contain her disgust at both herself and her boyfriend. “I’m glad, but how could you just leave them, Joe?”

“Chill Anna. It’s not like I tried to get her pregnant. I’m sure she tried to trap me.” Joe put his arm around Anna, attempting to comfort her. Anna pulled away and scowled at the man she thought she knew.

“Joe, children need their parents. You can’t just abandon them.”

“You’re so sweet Anna,” Joe replied softly but firmly, as if attempting to end the conversation quickly. “I’ll make sure the kid has everything it needs.”

Anna winced as she heard him refer to his child as “It.” She bit her lip, “What about your girlfriend?”

“We weren’t that serious anyway.” Joe cleared his throat. “It was more of an open relationship.”

At the time, because she wanted to believe him, Anna accepted Joe’s explanation and his promises. She convinced herself his ex-girlfriend was “just a casual” relationship. Because, if Joe’s previous relationship wasn’t casual, she broke up a child’s home. That recurring thought, made it more and more difficult for Anna to look at herself in the mirror. She wasn’t *that* sort of woman—was she? She couldn’t be the mistress. Could she?

Over a year later, Anna still questioned whether Joe had any involvement in his child’s life. He left every Sunday afternoon and claimed he spent it with his son, but when she asked if she could come along, he always waved her off.

“When do I get to meet him?” Anna asked one Sunday morning as she drizzled syrup over the French toast.

“Honey, you know I want you to meet my son more than anything.” Joe leaned his head toward Anna and brushed his lips against her cheek, “It’s that his mother is so strict. She refuses to let him meet you. She’s not happy I found someone else.”

“Joe, we’ve been living together for over a year.” Anna turned to face him, hoping to catch a glimpse of what was really going on in Joe’s mind, “At some point I’m going to need to meet him.”

“You have such a kind heart that you want to meet my son.” Joe kissed the top of Anna’s head. “I’ll talk to his mother and get back to you.”

Two months later, Joe still left for his Sunday outings without inviting Anna along.

Anna sat down at the table and reflected on her life. How did she become this person? Her parents didn’t raise her to live with a guy before she was married, much less cheat with him. They’d be so disappointed in her.

She thought about her father, good ole’ Jack Eastman. He was a high school teacher and basketball coach out in Denver, Colorado. He went to church every Wednesday and Sunday without fail. He led a men’s Bible study every Monday morning. Her father lived his faith at home as well as at church. In fact, he spent the last 35 years loving Anna’s mother and being faithful to her.

“Anna girl, you deserve a man who loves Jesus and honors you.” Her father told Anna whenever she left on a date. Back then, Anna believed God would provide a man who would be as amazing as her daddy. Now look at her. Anna scoffed to herself. A God who loved her? That was a fantasy.

Suddenly, Anna’s cell phone started vibrating on the table. The curves of her mouth turned up as she saw the name, “Dad,” on the screen. Anna swiped the talk button.

“Hi dad.”

Warmth radiated through Anna as her father said, “Hi honey, how are you doing?”

“It’s been kind of a rough day.” Anna swallowed. “Joe and I had a fight.”

Anna could hear her dad sighing on the other end of the phone. She knew her father did not like Joe, even though he had never met him.

“I’m sorry honey.” Her dad paused. “Maybe now would be a good time for a visit. It’s almost the holidays, and we would really love to see you.”

Anna paused. She hadn’t been home to see her parents for a long time. Ever since she lost her sister, things hadn’t been the same. She hadn’t been the same.

“It’s time.” Anna heard her father say.

Before Anna could give it permission, the sentence came tumbling from her mouth. “Ok, I can be there in a couple of days.” She paused. “After I wrap up this last case.”

Since starting at the firm, Anna hadn’t ever taken vacation days. She worked until her mind was fuzzy with exhaustion, hoping to move up the ranks as quickly as possible. Her immediate boss even told her she needed to have more of a work-life balance. She knew he was right. Taking some time off shouldn't be a problem.

“It will be good to see you again, Anna,” her father replied softly.

“I’ll be excited to see you guys too,” Anna said to her father. “I’ll text you when I leave...and dad,”

“Yes,” he replied.

“I love you.” Anna held back her tears.

“Ahh, baby girl, your mother and I love you more than you know.”

Anna put down the phone and went to start packing. She felt nothing but relief. It was time to get out of here.

## Chapter 3

Jill cradled the identification card, hand trembling as she realized the magnitude of what she was about to do. She pulled her worn jacket over her shoulders, the air seemingly ten degrees colder in the last few minutes. “Are you sure that no one will know this is fake?” She tilted her head to the side, noticing the piece of plastic said she was 21.

“My ID’s have a 100 percent success rate.” Jill’s friend, Romeo, waved her away as if she was crazy for questioning him. “What do you need this ID for, anyway?”

“Just the regular stuff,” Jill’s mind wandered to the possibility of being able to stop running, of finding a real family. What if her life could be different than the one that she had been living all of this time? Maybe she could finally stop worrying that one day she would find herself along the line of the homeless on the street, not knowing where her next meal would come from. She exchanged glances with Romeo, her eyes falling on the scar on his forehead from when he defended her in seventh grade. “Buying beer and going to clubs.”

Romeo pursed his lips. Jill knew he wasn’t buying it. Romeo had been her friend since elementary school, which was possible only because her foster homes remained in the general area of where he lived. They used to spend time in detention together after talking too much in class. Many days after school, she would grab Romeo’s hand and show him her newest “treasure.” Sometimes it would be something she found in her current home. Many times, it would be at the nearby park. Romeo was always willing to explore with Jill.



He seemed to enjoy the adventure as much as she did. They spent hours playing on the swings and talking about what might happen to them if they both ran away. They envisioned a life better than the one they lived now. They often hung out for hours without being missed, since Jill was in foster care and Romeo lived with his sister and nephew who paid little attention to his activities.

“What’s really going on, Jill?” His curly brown hair bounced as though seeking to part ways with his head. Romeo swiped his long locks out of his dark brown eyes as he stepped closer to Jill, meeting her gaze with his own piercing gaze.

Jill once believed when they were old enough they would be together, maybe start the sort of normal family neither of them ever had. But for now, Jill had to take care of things herself. She couldn’t drag him into the mess that was her life.

Jill contemplated lying to him, but then she thought she'd tell Romeo just enough to keep him at bay. “Remember that picture we found of my birth mom’s parents?” Romeo nodded, “I thought it was a good time to go to Denver and meet them.”

Jill’s mind drifted to the hours they spent as young kids, going through the box from her biological parents. The orphanage gave her the box of personal items her father had left when he abandoned her. Jill flinched as she thought about her father just “dropping her off” as if she didn’t matter.

*“Look, Jill, these people kind of look like you.” A young Romeo seemed captivated by the photo in his hand.*

*Jill’s hand shot out to grab the photo, turning it, she read the description. “These are my grandparents.” After that, Romeo and Jill’s conversations started or ended with, “Someday, when I meet my grandparents...”*

Romeo's eyes narrowed. "I thought we planned to do this together once you reached your eighteenth birthday."

She read hurt in his dark eyes as he continued, "Why not wait? This was always going to be something we did together. Why not wait for that?"

Jill blinked back at Romeo, narrowly avoiding his gaze as she realized she was cutting her best friend out of her plan, "Romeo, I just need to do this...ok. Please trust me."

Romeo crossed his arms, his lack of enthusiasm obvious. Jill knew he didn't believe her, but she wondered if he would let her go anyway. Eventually, he took a deep breath and gathered Jill in his arms for a bear hug. His six-foot muscular frame dwarfed Jill's.

He always made her feel safe, even when she was twelve-years-old and sobbing into his jacket. The black eye she received that day from her foster brother, Marcus, scared her because his frequent blows caused some temporary vision impairment. Telling on him did no good. No one ever believed her—except Romeo.

"I've always got your back, Jilly Bean," Romeo loosened the hug and looked her in the eyes, "If you need anything at all, you call me."

Jill nodded at Romeo and grabbed her bag. If Romeo only knew the real reason she was running, he'd kill her foster brother. She couldn't let Romeo get into trouble for her problems. Jill thought back to Marcus' threatening voice yesterday.

*"Jill, you have a choice. You can steal Mac's vehicle for me, or you can take the heat for the drugs. Or else..." Marcus made a gun motion next to his head, a threat he'd been using for several years now. She wasn't sure if he actually had a gun, but she knew he had access to one.*

*“Marcus I’m trying to go to college.” Jill locked Marcus’ gaze. She wasn’t backing down this time. “I can’t be involved with your side business anymore.”*

*Marcus grabbed Jill by the collar. “You will do what I say, or you will find more trouble than you can handle.”*

Jill knew Marcus meant business. With a slight smile, she gulped. “All right then, I’ll take Mac’s car—after school today.” He nodded; his gaze narrowing as though not quite believing her. But after a lengthy stare, he loosened her collar. Jill knew she only had a small window of opportunity. If she was still around after school, she’d have no choice. She’d learned that lesson well.

The ID exchange would get her where she needed to go, and hopefully Marcus wouldn’t come after Romeo. With a self-deprecating shrug, Jill glanced up at the God who hadn’t protected her before—and yet she whispered a prayer anyway. “Keep Romeo safe, please.”

Before school, Jill gathered her meager belongings into her backpack, leaving them in her locker during school hours. After school, she left her books and papers in her locker, stuffed the rest of her belongings back into her backpack, slung it over her thin shoulder and sauntered off, not glancing back as fear gripped her. Time to leave town, permanently.

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Ella balanced Jeffrey on her hip in an effort to keep him from moving around. He’d been cranky and holding his head in his hands. But he had no fever. Jeffrey had woken her up at 3:00 am, causing excessive sleepiness. Dark circles shrouded her eyelids as she placed the last bag in the trunk of her car. With hands that trembled, she

placed Jeffrey in his car seat before buckling him in. The promise of a ride perked him up, and she melted under his smile and hug.

Ella surveyed the house one last time. It was a tiny two-bedroom place she rented a couple of years ago. One last time, she pictured her legs dangling off the porch swing as the soothing taste of coffee filled her taste buds, and sighed at leaving a backyard that held a small swing and slide just right for Jeffrey. She had made a home for herself here. Ella was no longer the little girl who sought her mother's approval, only to find her body bruised and bloody, bearing the weight of a pain no child should have to face.

The trees overhead swayed with the rising wind. The storm. She must beat the storm. Her legs moved almost of their own volition as she climbed into the driver's seat. Placing her face on the steering wheel, she sighed, knowing it would be easier to stay home. The letter fell out of her jeans pocket, forcing her to remember its existence. She reached for the piece of paper, unfolding it as if it carried a virus. Why was she planning on taking this trip?

Her body moved, as though surged on by some power beyond herself, to seek out her mother. She closed her eyes and surrendered to the inevitable. She was making this trip and would have to deal with the consequences when she got to her mother's bed side.

As Ella started the car, she remembered one Easter Sunday when she excitedly got dressed up for church.

*An eight-year-old Ella bounced out of her bedroom, her blond hair in pigtails, wearing a bright purple dress that made her feel like a princess.*

*"Look mommy," Ella's mother eyed her suspiciously, "Don't I look pretty?"*

*“Pride goes before a fall Ella. You shouldn’t care so much about how you look.”*

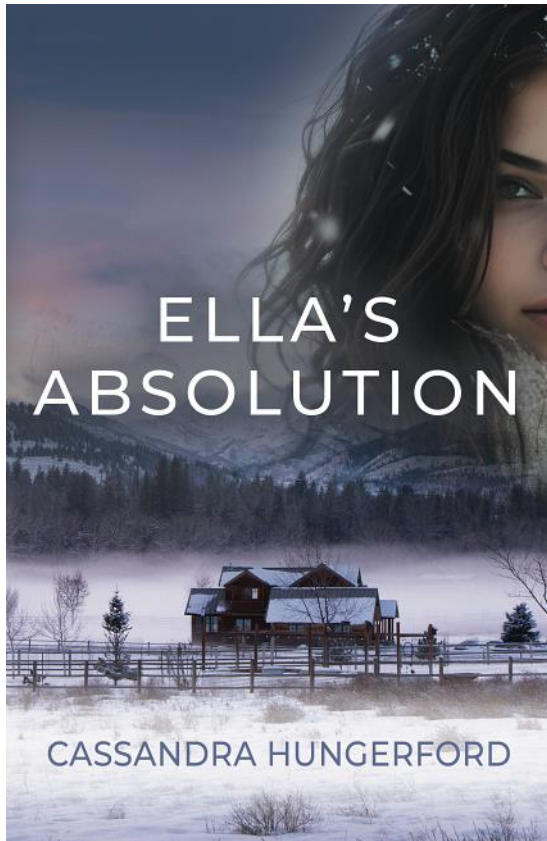
*Ella’s smile vanished.*

*“Now get in the car,” Ella’s mother indicated the door. “We don’t want to be late to God’s house.”*

Ella beat her hand against the steering wheel as she started the car, backed out of the driveway, got onto the Interstate, and headed the car west to Denver and a mother who frightened her. If this did not go well, she would never talk to her mother, or this so called “God” ever again.

“God, you obviously are a hateful, spiteful God. Do you even care about me at all?”

Ella tried to ignore the still, small voice that whispered to her soul.  
*My darling, I have loved you through everything.*



*Ella has spent her life building a wall around her heart. Megan, Jill, and Anna have a surprising connection. When the women are forced together, they learn that faith, forgiveness, and friendship can bring healing to heartache.*

## **Ella's Absolution**

By Cassandra Hungerford

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