

Sample Chapter

Unpublished book by James Werning – the story of Ron & Toni Van Cise who were imprisoned for theft, prostitution, and cocaine

~~~~~

Melbourne, Florida – 2008

The pretty girl came running to my car as if I were her next trick. I fought back the tears.

She's so young. So helpless. So much like me.

I knew exactly what she was looking for: a hungry man with money, a sleazy hotel, some joints and booze, a painful hour of pretending, a trip to the crack guy, and the Main Reason for it all – a few hits to numb the pain.

That's what she was looking for when she first saw my car.

But what did I see in her innocent young face?

I saw myself. I saw the lies and deception. I saw the abuse and pain. I saw the babies I had aborted – oh God, they would be about her age if they were still alive today. I saw that starving vortex of men, money, drugs, and crime that slowly drags its victims into the jaws of hell. Death is not quick and merciful in the hood – it gradually taunts the life out of its zombie-like victims.

Yes, I saw myself in this girl – I saw myself many years ago when I was still naïve to the hideously destructive powers of addiction and despair. This girl was inexperienced and vulnerable. Her skin was still soft and smooth – not the ugly leather that comes with years. Her cute brown hair was clean, and so were her jeans and blue hoodie. Needles had not left their lethal tracks on her arms and neck. She had all her teeth, and both shoes. She wasn't wearing mix-matched clothing. Not yet. But did she even want help?

Her face went cold when she saw I was clearly not her “free ride” to the next high.

I rolled down the window. “Hi there, Honey. Are you okay?”

It's all I could think to say. You can't vomit out all that scary stuff about zombie-like victims, even though it's right there in your gut. Nobody on the street wants to hear that.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “I'm fine.” Her voice was sweet and innocent, but I could tell she was tired. I looked toward the river. I knew she'd been sleeping on the same benches I'd slept on.

“My name’s Toni. And Honey, I used to be out here too. I spent a lot of years on these streets, living like you’re living, doing what you’re doing.” Her face immediately softened. “I know what it’s like,” I said. “You don’t need to live like this.”

I offered my hand and she grabbed it tight. Suddenly my eyes flooded with tears.

“You are so young and so beautiful. Why are you here? Can I take you somewhere?”

Every one of her defenses melted away and she just started sobbing. I took her into my car and we sat and talked for the longest time. Kelly was a smart girl from a good family in a nice part of town. She had made some choices that her parents couldn’t condone, so they kicked her out. Now she was doing the best she could to survive. I told her about my own personal journey to hell and back. I told her about the things I learned along the way. I prayed with her.

“God loves you more than anything,” I explained. “He doesn’t want you to kill yourself out here on the streets. Do you believe that Jesus loves you? Do you believe he has something better for you than this?”

She nodded, wiping her tears. “I do. I know that’s true.”

“Then why not leave the streets today? I can help you make a new start.”

I watched her weigh the options in her mind. Her subtle facial expressions were a reflection of the enormous life and death battle in her heart.

“I know that’s all true,” she said. “But I’m not ready yet. I need to make some changes. But not today. Not yet.”

My heart broke for this precious girl. She reminded me of so many other people I knew who lost their gamble against time, who met death, AIDs, prison, or horrible violence when they least expected it. Time is not merciful in the hood.

“Honey, there may not be a tomorrow for you. You just never know, living the way you’re living.”

She shook her head. “I hear what you’re saying, but not now. It isn’t going to happen today.”

“Okay,” I said, respecting the finality of her words. “Then at least let me do what I can for you. Are you hungry? Or thirsty? I know what it’s like to be dying for a sip of water ... or even a 99 cent burger. Can I get you something? Anything?”

“Actually what I want ... are some cigarettes.”

I wasn’t surprised. I remembered the most “innocent” of my addictions: smoking. “I’m sorry, Kelly, but I can’t encourage that.”

She thought for a moment. “Okay. Then how about if you just give me five bucks for a drink and whatever else I need at the store?”

I chuckled. “Yeah. Okay.”

I took her to the corner market. She wouldn't accept my offer of a place to stay, saying she already had somewhere to sleep. So I dropped Kelly off on Highway 1 with a hug and a prayer.

I drive U.S. 1 almost daily, and I'm always looking for Kelly and other women I know who struggle to survive in one of the world's most inhospitable environments. To this day I haven't been able to hook up with Kelly again. I remember with tears the day we met. I can still hear her words, “It isn't going to happen today.” And God, I hope she survives long enough for the “right day” to come.

Her Story ... My Story.

As for me, I once stood at the same crossroads as Kelly. It's a brutal place to be. Put your foot down wrong and the landmines will tear you to shreds. To my shame, I chose the wrong path for too, too many years. It's a wonder I even survived.

Honestly, I know things today that I wish I didn't know. I know what happens when fathers take daughters as wives. I know what it's like to have your “strong defender” turn and beat the hell out of you. I know what happens when your natural desire for the opposite sex becomes distorted. I know what it's like to sell your body for not much more than a six pack. I know what it's like to live in utter poverty, or to make hundreds of thousands of dollars and have nothing to show for it but stale smoke and a sick lust for more.

I also know what it feels like to become an innocent little child again. I know what it's like to receive God's beautiful love and healing while in prison (of all places). I know what it's like to have a mountain of shame and guilt and pain completely washed away. I know what it's like to fall in love with and marry someone who loves you unconditionally; someone who won't use you, abuse you, and kick you into the gutter.

It's a miracle I survived long enough to meet Kelly. I feel as if I'm the veteran of a bloody war. Here I am, crawling out of the filthy rubble, screaming, “Get back! There's death in there! Don't believe the lies. They nearly killed me. Run to the Only One who loves you and can heal you. Listen!” Because after all is said and done, that's my message to every Kelly I meet.