

CHAPTER ONE

WHEN LIFE FALLS APART

*If only my anguish could be weighed
and all my misery be placed on the scales!*

—Job 6:2

My life is so perfect, it's almost scary, I realized one crisp January dawn in 1985. From the quiet of my laundry room I slipped shirts onto hangers and counted my blessings: My husband was terrific, our two children were absolute joys, financially we were doing okay, my nursing career was satisfying, we belonged to a church full of loving Christian friends, and the home we loved sat on a hill overlooking central Texas. Who could ask for anything more?

I smiled at the breathtaking sunrise peeking over the hill. *Lord, only You and I are awake at this time of the morning*. I'd always loved being an early riser. It made me feel as if I was helping God turn on the bright lights that ushered in each new day. Closing the dryer door, I headed toward the kitchen to unload the dishwasher before leaving for work. Along the way, I peeked into our new game room.

Earl and I had decided to add this spacious area onto our house so our children—Christie, age fourteen, and Greg, age twelve—could invite their friends over and have a good time. This way, we would know who our children were with and what they were doing. Besides, we wanted a place where we could entertain young people from our church. I had been on the search

committee that had just selected a new youth director, and we had offered to open our home anytime he needed a place to fellowship.

We'd put the final touches on the game room just two weeks before, and it looked great. The large "fun zone" was equipped with everything we thought our children and their friends would enjoy—a jukebox, pool table, ping pong table, and (of course) a big-screen TV. Built-in shelves held rows of old classic movies, exercise programs, and home videos of our children. The walls were covered with 16" x 24" portraits of the kids participating in their various athletic activities: track, basketball, volleyball, football, cheer-leading. We had even chosen ceramic tile for the floor so visitors wouldn't have to worry about accidentally spilling refreshments.

One wall of the room was lined with lots of big windows, overlooking the volleyball poles and net we had set up on the back lawn. Beyond that, a refreshing view of the hills, trees, and wide-open spaces behind our home provided a picture-perfect backdrop. I tore my gaze from the game room and proceeded to the dressing room. Earl already had taken Christie and Greg to school, and I was putting the final touches on my hair before leaving for work.

As I peered into the mirror and brushed my hair, not really thinking about anything in particular, out of nowhere I heard a strange voice I'd never heard before. It was not audible, yet it spoke clearly and harshly as if it had been.

You're going to have to die, you're going to have to die, the voice seethed.

My heart raced. I knew Earl and the children had already left the house, but I found myself walking through each room to make sure no one had entered without my knowledge. I continued to glance around me, but saw no one. After a few moments, I calmed myself down, tried to shrug it off, and left for work. But I couldn't shake the uneasiness. It clung to me for weeks.

I'd never thought about having to die. I had no reason to die. I was healthy and had everything I wanted. What did this mean? And I couldn't tell anyone about the bizarre thing that had happened. Who would believe that I really "heard" the voice?

Finally in February, I called my friends Judy Lee and Susan Preston. “Please pray for me,” I said. “I feel like God is in the process of making some changes in my life.” When they asked what was going on, I simply said, “Oh, I can’t explain it. . . just a feeling or something.” Without further questioning, they both agreed to pray.

Symptoms Trump Self-Sufficiency

On week days I worked as a school nurse, which was both rewarding and challenging. I spent some weekends, holidays, and a few days during the summer at Brownwood Medical Center, where I had trained during nursing school. But now, a few weeks after hearing the strange voice, I began to notice strange symptoms in my body, such as shortness of breath, dizziness, sadness, mental confusion, headaches, and fatigue. I felt severe pain in my muscles and joints. Often I became sick to my stomach and started losing weight rapidly.

I didn’t tell anyone I wasn’t feeling well, because I didn’t want to worry them. After all, I was a nurse. I should be able to take care of this problem on my own, the way I had handled every other situation in my life. Independence and pride had taken root many years ago, deep in my childhood. I was brought up with an unspoken, yet very clear, message: Be self-sufficient. Never ask for help. Believe me, I had no intention of marring the image my family had so carefully built into me.

As the weeks went by, however, my symptoms grew more severe. My weight dropped even further. I tried to deny what was happening in my body and hoped and prayed everything would just go away. Instead, I became more ill with each passing day. Pushing myself and hiding how badly I felt was becoming more and more difficult.



Early March I had been invited to speak at a Christian women's conference in Houston. During this conference, scheduled for April, I would be speaking on nutrition in relationship to health. I had always been passionate about eating healthy and welcomed opportunities to teach others about the importance of a good diet. It was exciting to be invited, but now I was uncertain about my own health.

The date finally arrived. My symptoms had gotten much worse and I wasn't sure I could make it through my presentation. I felt I could barely stand, as if my whole body was trying to shut down. But I knew the conference attendees were counting on me and I couldn't disappoint them.

Earl and the children accompanied me on the six-hour trip to Houston so we could all visit my parents, who lived nearby. We arrived at the hotel quite late and went to bed right away.

The following morning I felt so ill I didn't think I could make it out of bed. I begged the Lord to carry me through the day.

During my entire presentation, a battle raged inside me. My body ached all over. I was so tired and weak, and felt like I would pass out. I fought to hold back the tears, but managed to make it through. After the conference my family and I headed to my parents' house, where Mom had prepared a large meal for us. But when she called everyone to the table to eat, I suddenly dreaded the thought. For some time, even the smell of food made me terribly nauseated and caused my chest to tighten. But Mom had prepared my favorites—baked squash, tossed garden salad, and baked chicken. Out of appreciation and respect, I loaded up my plate. But I couldn't bring myself to eat a single bite.

As a diversionary tactic, I engaged in lively conversations with everyone. But Mom noticed my plate remained untouched. "Why aren't you eating?" she asked. "I prepared all your favorite foods."

I forced down a few bites of salad. Within seconds, I started to hyperventilate; my chest felt as though it had a tight band around it, and I was sure I was going to pass out.

“Are you sick, Linda?” Mom asked, concern etched on her face.

“Everything’s fine,” I assured her. I got up from the table and hurried off to another room so she couldn’t quiz me anymore. I was afraid to let anyone—even my family—know that I was feeling so ill. I didn’t need anyone to take care of me. That just wasn’t my norm.

On Sunday morning we drove back to our home in Brownwood. The trip and the conference had really exhausted me. However, my sleep became very disturbed. I could only sleep for short periods of time. *How will I make it to work on Monday morning?* I anguished.

A Secret Revealed

Before long I was sleeping ten hours every night—twice as many as I normally needed. Day by day, my symptoms grew more intense. I experienced severe depression, increased shortness of breath, headaches, and my body twitched and ached. My excessive sleeping patterns later turned to insomnia. Several times, I had to consciously force myself to breathe. I almost passed out every time I ate anything.

Everyone noticed my extreme weight loss. When they asked about it, I simply told them I was dieting. But I knew I needed to do something soon. I felt as if my entire body was shutting down.

One day I woke up too sick to go to work and called my sister, Delores. “Pray for me,” I begged. “I’m not feeling well.” I didn’t tell her how serious my condition was. “Promise not to tell anyone,” I added. She made me agree to get medical help immediately. But I just couldn’t. I was determined to take care of this problem on my own. I refused to worry anyone. Besides, if I admitted the seriousness of my problem to anyone, then I’d have to admit it to myself. I just kept telling myself that I’d come up with a solution to the problem. I just needed a little time. I couldn’t admit how afraid I was and that I was losing my health. I couldn’t mar my image of being strong no matter the circumstance or situation.

Maybe I'd just wake up one morning and this was just a bad dream.



A few days later my husband, Earl, told me about a new clothing store that had just opened in town. "Let's all go," he suggested, so we hopped into the car and made the short trip into town. We had only been in the building a few minutes when suddenly I could barely breathe.

"Are you all right?" Earl asked, staring at me.

"I'm okay," I panted, gasping for air. "But can we go home?"

I walked toward the exit and my legs collapsed beneath me. Earl caught me before I passed out and helped me walk. He motioned for Christie and Greg to follow us to the car.

When we got home, Earl walked me to our room and helped me into bed.

"I'm okay," I tried to assure him. "Just go back to the garage and get my purse from the car." Seeing the fear in Greg and Christie's eyes, I hurried them off to their bedrooms to do their homework. "I'll be better by morning," I promised.

I slept briefly, then woke to the muffled sounds of sobbing. Struggling to pull myself up, I stumbled down the hall to my daughter's room. She was lying on her bed, crying. I sat beside her.

"Mom, I'm scared something bad is wrong with you," she moaned. "I don't want anything to happen to you."

We prayed together, asking for God's guidance. Earl came into the room and joined us.

As I sat there on my daughter's bed, my body started to tremble. I again felt like I was going to pass out and finally confessed to my family that I had not been honest with them about my health. "I haven't been well for a cou-