

# ONE

## THE YOUNGER YEARS

### HOW IT ALL GOT STARTED

On a chilly evening in Omaha, Nebraska, a 25-year-old woman prepared for a night on the town with her older sister. It was a Saturday night and she owned Saturday nights. She was queen of the night like Rachel Marin from the movie *The Bodyguard* sang about. She stood at 5-foot-7 with a slim build and beautiful brown eyes that seemed to open doors for her wherever she went, but especially at clubs, on Saturday nights. Her thick black hair teased to perfection, she figured this Saturday night would be no different. She'd head to the club with her sister, wink at the bouncer and get in for free. Of course she would never pay for her own drinks—that was unthinkable! This Saturday night would start like any other Saturday night, but the end of it would essentially change her life forever. She floated rhythmically through the crowds of people on the dance floor making her way to the club's restroom when she was interrupted by a stranger.

“Hey baby, come here. Let me talk to you for a minute,” he said grabbing her by the waist and whisking her away to a quiet corner. He was a bouncer at the club. All she wanted was to go to the restroom before she and her sister called it a night and headed home. Looking as good as she did every weekend was exhausting! This bouncer was putting a damper on her plans. She wondered where her sister was as he whispered sweet nothings in her ear. He was mediocre looking, she thought. However he did have a wondrous physique, which she could easily see through his fitted silk button down shirt. He seemed polite and charming enough—maybe she'd let him take her home.

“I need to find my sister,” she said trying to play hard-to-get as she got up from the booth they were nestled in.

“Sweetheart, I'm not interested in your sister right now,” he said pulling her back down.

Try as she might, she found his big, muscular arms quite appealing. Before she knew it, she was back at his place. After all, it was a Saturday night.

Nine months after (January 28, 1988 to be exact) that particular Saturday night with the bouncer, she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl whom she named Alexandria; she would call her Alex for short. While she was pregnant, she watched a movie on Lifetime about an angelic little girl whom, for whatever reason, was being raised by her grandparents. She fell in love with the girl's

character; she was polite, sweet and absolutely adorable. She was devastated when the movie took a dark turn; the little girl got sick and died. Emotional and approximately eight months pregnant, she cried her eyes out over the death of the little girl. Somewhere between her tears and a commercial break, she decided that she would name her soon-to-be-born daughter after the girl in the movie: Alexandria.

“So you named me after a beautiful, well-behaved ... dead girl from a movie?!” I asked my mother after she told me the story of how she came up with my name.

That is our inside joke. I tease her about it to this day, telling her that I’m glad I did not live up to the character after whom I was named. If you have not figured it out yet, I’m Alex and my mom and dad are the woman and the bouncer who met at the club that night.

For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated with the story of my origin, possibly because my life is quite different than statistics say it should be. I mean, think about it. How would *you* imagine the life of a child who was the product of a one-night stand? Illegitimate children, as we are called, are not usually welcomed to the world with open arms. Statistically, our stories do not begin or end well. By the grace of God, I can say that my story, although, nowhere near its end, has been amazingly spectacular. I hope that as you read my story, you feel the power of God’s love that has gently guided me through each peak and valley of my life. If you happen to be as hopeless and depressed as I was at my lowest point, I hope you find God’s saving grace and healing power as well. It is my greatest hope that you are blessed by reading about my journey.

For the most part, my childhood was full of warmth, love and fun. Although I was a surprise to my mother, I was very celebrated once I arrived. My mother’s youngest child and only daughter, I was always dressed from head to toe in pink. It didn’t take long for me to gain the nickname “Pretty in Pink.” My mother, Birdena Bell, did the best she could with what she had. To be clear about what she had, she did not have much monetarily speaking. What she *did* have plenty of was love for her children: me and my older brother Jacyn (pronounced Jason). My mom had Jacyn when she was sixteen years old with a longtime family friend named Daryl. She had me ten years later. Riddled with the stigma of being a single parent in the 1970s, mom was thrown into a cycle of poverty that would unfortunately plague her for the majority of her life. In her mind, poverty was one more thing to add to the pile of misfortune that had comprised her life. She had suffered at the hand of my grandfather since she was very young. Brutally beaten, verbally abused and sexually molested for her entire

childhood, my mother was no stranger to pain. She was placed on a path of destruction and she seemed to travel along that path for most of her adult life.

Although my mother struggled financially, she made sure we had everything that we needed. I remember the first time I realized that we were poor. I was about seven or eight years old and we were at the grocery store. At the time, we were on welfare and food stamps. I realized this when my mother pulled out money that looked different from the money that the lady in front of us paid with. Her dollars were green and my mom's dollars were multi-colored. When I asked her why our money looked different, she explained that we were on government assistance because she did not make a lot of money. As I got older I also realized that she did not receive much child support from Jacyn's dad or my dad. When I was a teenager, my father did start to pay child support, but for many years he did not. As I look back on my childhood, with the understanding of the world that I have now, I find it completely remarkable that my mother made such a good life for my brother and me on such limited means. We never went without food, and we may not have had all the latest toys, but I don't remember wanting for much ... other than an Easy Bake Oven. I'm still a tad hurt that I never got one of those.

My father, Absalom Franklin, was in and out of my life when I was a child. As a result of that, my relationship with him has always been strained. My mom used to tell me that when I was just a baby, he would lay me on his chest and pat me on my back until I fell asleep. I often wondered why he did not stay around throughout my childhood. As I got older I realized that he came around when he and my mother were on good terms. If they were not on good terms, he did not put much effort into spending time with me. This cycle got even worse when he got married. Although my father's absence has caused me great pain, the love of my mother helped to ease that pain. She let me know that I could still have a great life—even though my father was not around as much as I wanted and needed him to be. She also reassured me that it was not my fault that my father was not in my life. She told me that it was his decision and it was ultimately his loss. I will always love my father, but I have come to realize that we will never be close. Over the years, I've struggled with anger and bitterness toward my father. There were times when I wanted to talk to him and see him; there were other times when I felt like I would be content if I never saw or spoke to him again. My relationship with my father has taught me a very important life lesson: the relationship (or lack of relationship) between a parent and child is cultivated by the parent. For example, my mother was always available for my brother and me. She would make a point to communicate with

both of us daily. She was a very hands-on mother. There was *never* a time when she did not know what was going on in my life or my brother's life. Because she was such a consistent figure, I came to lean and depend on her very heavily. My father, on the other hand, was not consistent *at all*. Sometimes he would call or spend time with me, and sometimes he would not. Whether he realized it or not, he was setting the foundation for our relationship. His inconsistency taught me to never rely on him for anything. Needless to say, it also created resentment. I am thankful that God has helped me to deal with those feelings.

Currently my father and I have a cordial relationship; we talk on the phone every now and again or go for brunch/dinner when I am in Omaha, but I honestly feel as if he is a familiar stranger. He's familiar in the sense that we have memories of my early childhood, but a stranger because our relationship is what I would call surface-y. My dad is a very pleasant and polite man, but because of the fact that he was not around much, I don't feel I could talk to him about any and everything. We could talk for hours about things like the work, weather, sports, current events or maybe even a little bit of his family history. However I don't feel I could tell him things about my feelings and emotions or about the fact that he left me with a gaping hole in my heart when he decided to stop coming around when I was younger. Although his absence still hurts me, I cannot be upset because God blessed me with a substitute father—a stand-in, if you will. This father figure that I was blessed with is only a substitute biologically speaking. I'll tell you more about him later.

## JACYN

My older brother Jacyn was the perfect child. Ten years my senior, he was a huge help to my mother and an excellent role model to me. For most of my life, I affectionately referred to him as "brother." Jacyn adored me and treated me with great care. Mom says that he washed his hands several times before holding me when I was first born. I remember him cooking dinner and getting me ready for bed when mom was working late. I also remember him teaching me how to wash dishes. Perhaps my fondest memory of him is a conversation we had when I was about five years old. We were in the kitchen about to have breakfast together before school, as we did most mornings.

"Don't eat it all!" I said, watching him pour his bowl of cereal, worried that there would be none left for me.

"Alex, do you really think that I can eat an entire box of cereal by myself?" he shot back.

"It sure looked like you were about to pour it all in your bowl," I replied.

“Trust me, I could not eat this whole box by myself,” he said laughing.

“Maybe you can’t. I guess it would be OK if you did though, since cereal is magic,” I replied.

“What are you talking about?” he asked, chuckling as he shoveled a huge spoonful of Lucky Charms into his mouth.

“Well when you pour milk into the cereal, more cereal magically appears!” I said grabbing my bowl and following him into the dining room.

“No it doesn’t silly,” he said laughing even harder. “Milk doesn’t make more cereal, it just makes the cereal in the bowl rise so it looks like there’s more cereal,” he explained gently.

I was crushed to learn that my theory on cereal was debunked. It was like that moment when your parents tell you the truth about Santa; you feel as if the world as you knew it has ceased to exist! I always looked up to my brother. He excelled in high school, and was the vice president of his senior class at Creighton Prep, which is a very well-known school in Omaha. He played football and was a member of the school’s science club. During his senior year, we learned that brother had received a full-ride scholarship to college, namely the Peter Kiewit Scholarship to attend the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. This was a major achievement and definitely a very exciting time for our family. A few weeks before his high school graduation, brother started to experience headaches and pressure behind his eyes. This pressure was much like sinus pressure, but it was accompanied with a sudden laziness of his left eye. Brother had never had these kinds of problems before. Other than wearing glasses, he was perfectly normal and healthy. Concerned about these new symptoms, mom took him to an optometrist to run some tests and try to determine what was wrong. After seeing the optometrist, we were referred to see a neurosurgeon; the optometrist detected a problem that he did not feel qualified to discuss.

Preoccupied with brother’s upcoming high school graduation, we almost forgot about the visit to the optometrist altogether. We planned and arranged for all the festivities surrounding brother’s graduation. We were also focused on getting him ready for college in the fall. Mom had never been prouder and brother had never been more excited. He had his entire life ahead of him and college was the start of it all. He was a normal high school grad preparing for the excitement of his next step in life until tragic news struck. One day after his high school graduation in May 1997, he was diagnosed with a brain tumor; a nonmalignant chordoma to be exact.

“A brain tumor? How did I get it?” Jacyn asked the doctor as mom and I sat motionless in the examining room.

“There are many different ways that this type of growth can occur.

Without doing several tests, there is no way for us to know exactly how you got the tumor,” the doctor explained. Mom talked to the doctor for a while about what our next steps should be. I was too young to remember most of what happened that day. However, I do know that after that doctors’ visit—our lives changed forever. Reeling from the shock of brother’s diagnosis, we immediately wanted to figure out what could be done to cure or remove this tumor. We had to shift our focus from preparing for brother to go away to school and focus on his healthcare. Mom began doing extensive research on his type of tumor. In her research, she learned that most people diagnosed with this rare tumor only live about five years after being diagnosed. We did our best to remain positive in spite of what seemed to be a hopeless situation.

In July 1997, mom and brother travelled to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota for two weeks to see a highly acclaimed neurosurgeon. I stayed behind with a family friend. I missed them very much while they were gone; the three of us had never been apart for more than a few days. When they returned from Minnesota, brother was still recovering. His head was shaved bald and he had a huge scar from the surgery. It was hard to see him in such a weak and fragile state. After his surgery, brother had follow-up doctor appointments to tend to his stitches and monitor his progress. Mom and I did everything we could to make sure that brother was comfortable and had everything he needed. I remember him sleeping a lot. I was used to brother taking care of me, but now he needed me to help take care of him.

After about a month, brother seemed to be getting back to normal. He wasn’t sleeping as much and seemed to be in good spirits. We were so happy and relieved when he was cleared to resume all normal activity and most importantly—go to school! As mentioned before, he was awarded the Peter Kiewit Scholarship, but his college career was delayed by the diagnosis, surgery and recovery. Relieved that he was cleared to go to school, mom packed him up and sent him off. I missed brother while he was away at school. It was weird not having him at home because for as long as I could remember, he was always around.

About a month into the semester, Jacyn started experiencing symptoms again. He noticed that his eye started to drift again and the headaches returned. Frightened at what this could mean, he told mom. Brother had an MRI that showed that the tumor was starting to grow back. We were crushed by this news. It seemed as if we had just gotten back to our normal routine and had already started putting this behind us. Now we were hearing that it was back. I remember mom being very sad and I was trying to understand why brother’s sickness had come back again. With a

heavy heart, brother withdrew from his classes at UNL and we moved forward with plans for a second surgery. One thing that we did not understand before these surgeries was that any time doctors operate in the brain; it is a very sensitive operation. Tumors are often attached or very close to healthy cells, making it very difficult to not remove some good cells along with the tumor. What this meant was that every time they operated, brother could possibly change and/or lose some sort of function. Essentially, the surgeries were temporarily postponing his death. We had been informed of the statistics and we knew the risks involved with another surgery. However, we were trusting God to intervene in this situation.

During the summer of 1999, mom, brother and I packed up the car and headed to Rochester for six weeks. While there, brother would have his second brain surgery and four weeks of gamma knife radiation treatments. Mom tried her best to make this trip like a vacation. She took us to the Mall of America, we went out to eat all the time and she bought us a PlayStation. Although we did things to make the trip enjoyable, there were days that were very hard. Some days, brother was too tired to do much of anything other than sleep. It was also difficult to see his hair fall out; one day he was brushing his hair and it just started falling out in clumps. I wished that my brother did not have to go through so much. I wanted to do whatever I could to help him and to help mom take care of him.

After the second surgery, Jacyn had lost the use of the right side of his body. This meant that he would not be able to walk without a walker or cane. If he needed to walk for a long period of time, he would need a wheelchair. Although Jacyn was rendered disabled, he struggled to maintain his independence and wanted to live on his own in an assisted living facility. Skeptical at first, mom didn't want him to live on his own. She knew that our home was not the most conducive to his disability, but she also did not feel comfortable letting him go. He convinced her that this was what was best for him so we moved him to a facility that was not far from where we lived at the time, Quality Living Incorporated (QLI). Jacyn would go on to have yet another brain surgery in 2004. By this time, his condition was worsening. His speech had begun to slur, and he was having increasing cognitive difficulties. After his third brain surgery, brother lost his sight. When an employee at QLI informed mom that he would wake up in the middle of night yelling and confused about his whereabouts, she decided to bring him back home to live with us. At the time we were living in a two-bedroom apartment across the street from my high school, so the living arrangement was less than desirable. However, we knew that it was what would be best for brother.

Mom was working as a web developer at Mutual of Omaha when brother moved back home. Just a few years earlier she had bought her dream home in the perfect neighborhood. Unfortunately she could not afford to keep the home and keep up with the tuition at the private high school that I was attending. Mom made the tough choice to downsize so that I could stay at my school. Times were definitely tough for us financially, but we were a tightknit family and we knew that we would make it through as we always did. We were dealt yet another blow when mom was let go from her job at Mutual of Omaha. She decided that she would get her CNA license and be brother's full-time nurse. That way she could take care of him and still get paid. It was the perfect setup because no one can care for a loved one like family can.

As brother's condition continued to worsen, mom and I hoped and prayed that we would not have to face what we had managed to avoid for eight years, brother's death. Mom and I banded together to make brother as comfortable as we possibly could while he was with us. We eventually were able to move into a three-bedroom townhome. It was much more comfortable and handicap accessible, which was great for brother. Mom bought him a keyboard and would sit and listen to him play for hours. He would laugh and sing, making up silly lyrics to entertain us. To see my big brother, who was blind and not able to walk without assistance, play and sing at this keyboard put the biggest smile on my face. I could not even imagine how someone in such a horrible situation could have such a great attitude, but that was Jacyn. He would always say, "You gotta keep on keepin' on!" He was so upbeat and positive about everything. Of course he had difficult times and so did mom and me. Sometimes brother would get frustrated and lash out at mom or me, but who could blame him? He had a life of such great promise and now all of a sudden, that was all taken away from him. On a whole, brother had an amazing outlook and his positivity was contagious.

On November 29, 2005 Jacyn left this world and transcended into his next phase. Hours before he died, we called family members and let them know that due to brother's breathing patterns, his hospice nurse felt that he would not make it through the night. Everyone came to the house to say their goodbyes and comfort one another as we all prepared to lose our beloved Jacyn. We all gathered around him, telling him how much we loved him. I remember holding his hand and wanting so desperately for him to squeeze my hand back. I watched my brother take his last breath at 1:32 that morning and I will never forget it. That all too familiar rattling in his chest was possibly the worst sound I have ever heard. His hospice nurse explained that this was commonly known as the death rattle. This sound is horrifyingly final to anyone

who has watched a loved one die. That sound symbolizes the end of the world, as you once knew. From the moment that you hear it, it means that you will have to spend the rest of your life without someone you loved and cared for deeply.

In his 27 years, Jacyn impacted countless lives. Jacyn had a host of friends and loved ones to mourn him at his home going celebration. He will never be forgotten by those who knew him. It's been several years since brother's passing and I still can't think about him without crying. Every special occasion is missing something because he's not here to celebrate it with mom and me. For a long time, I harbored anger in my heart because I felt that he was taken from us far too soon. I was mad at God for not healing my brother. I often find myself thinking about what he would be doing if he was still alive. He always wanted to go to medical school; I can't help but think what a great doctor he would have been. He would've married and had beautiful children. I imagine that he and I would have become best friends, but because he's not here, I will never know. That's what hurts the most—the not knowing what could have been if he were alive.

Over the years, I have learned that we should not question God's will. Life without my dearest brother is something that I have learned to accept as my reality. In all honesty, I can't think about it for too long because the pain of not having him here is so deep. I am comforted in knowing that Jacyn lived for God during his short life. I could try to console myself by thinking things like "heaven needed another angel," but that doesn't help much. I would give anything to hug him one last time or to hear his voice. If I could say one last thing to my brother it would be:

*Jacyn, I love you more than words can describe. You are truly an angel and such an inspiration. I've never known life without you and honestly—I am not ready to. I wish that we could have more time together. I know that you have to go and that God has other plans for you—but my heart doesn't understand that. I also want you to know that my firstborn son will be named after you. Although he won't be fortunate enough to meet you, he WILL know about his Uncle Jacyn. He will know that you were one of the most honorable men who ever lived. He will know that you kindly helped anyone in need. He will know that you were smart and humble. He will know that you were a man of God who persevered till the very end. He will know because I will tell him. I will tell him because I won't ever forget. I promise to never forget your legacy, your smile and your infectious laughter. I know you are going to a better place, the place we all hope to see one day. Not a day will go by without me thinking of you and wishing you were still here. I hope you'll be standing at the gates waiting for me until we meet again. I love you dearest brother.*

