

JULIE B. COSGROVE

Liberated from her captor
but shackled by her past,
can she find the
freedom to forgive?



2015 GRACE AWARD
FINALIST



FREED TO FORGIVE

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Julie B. Cosgrove

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Editing by Susan Baganz

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Disclaimer: Though veiled in description, this novel portrays realistic incidences of human trafficking necessary for the plot's development.

ENDORSEMENTS

“This is a sequel to Julie B. Cosgrove’s other two books, *Hush in the Storm* and *Legitimate Lies*. Julie has done an excellent job of showing the hopelessness and pervasiveness of sex trafficking. And she does so without going into explicit detail. This is not a book to read for a warm fuzzy feeling, although it does have a happy ending. Read it instead to educate yourself, to stir up righteous anger, and for motivation to join the fight against human trafficking.” L. Hamilton, Author Rustic Knoll Bible Camp Series

“*Freed to Forgive* by Julie B. Cosgrove is an excellent weaving together of a heart-wrenching story line with a promise of hope and restoration. Marisol is a young woman who has endured more than anyone should have to—abuse and betrayal of the worst kind. She is also millions of other women throughout the centuries and around the world, even today, who are still held against their will in sex trafficking. For that very reason, the message of *Freed to Forgive* can speak to any heart, however broken or crushed, that is willing to listen...and let go.” Kathi Macias (www.kathimacias.com), a multi-award-winning author of more than 50 books.

“*Freed to Forgive* is the third book in Julie B Cosgrove’s powerful series on human sex trafficking. The book is heartwrenching with raw emotions and a serious case of a poor self-image. Following Marisol’s life from the very beginning until she is a responsible

adult opens the reader's eyes to the total devastation in the lives of girls who are imprisoned in sex trafficking. This book is hard to put down. I highly recommend it.”
—Lena Nelson Dooley, multi-award-winning author of the McKenna's Daughters series and most recent books *8 Weddings* and *a Miracle and A Texas Christmas*

“In Julie's novel, *Freed to Forgive*, the evil of human trafficking abusing girls is novelized. Julie connects our hearts to victims and reminds us that through God there is hope and redemption.” Peggy Sue Wells, author of *The Slave Across the Street*, a true story of a trafficked upscale Detroit teen

“Julie B. Cosgrove's new novel *Freed to Forgive* captures the struggle of survivors as they face the past and move forward to the future through forgiveness. Through beautiful writing it captures the heart of true freedom and is a must-read for all who need to forgive.” Joy Brooks, Executive Director for Prayer For Freedom Ministry to Combat Human Trafficking

DEDICATION

To the people I have learned to forgive so
I may receive forgiveness and healing.
Life is too short and precious to hold onto hurts and
grudges.

*“And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have
anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in
heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”*

Mark 11:25 (NIV)

CHAPTER ONE

San Antonio, Summer 2023

Marisol Hernández did a double take. An icy tingle slithered down her arms. She recognized the woman's face. One she never thought she'd see again. Jen Westlaw. Except now her name read Wilson?

She backstepped a few paces to peer into Jen's pixelated bluish-green eyes displayed on the Abundant Life Church's marquee as it flashed the latest posts from their social media site. The face beckoned her—once again. Yes, definitely the same woman.

They met in 2013. The year Marisol's life changed. Hadn't the news reported she'd disappeared without a trace and was presumed dead years ago? Yet there she gleamed in 3D color.

A man with a handsome smile stood next to Jen in the photo. Tom, it read. She'd never learned his name, but she recognized him all right. He'd helped Jen escape. He had appeared again at the shelter on that horrid day—held Marisol's hand, whispered she could trust him. She had, and part of her still regretted the decision.

Vivid memories flooded her thoughts, pressing against the emotional dam which she'd carefully constructed over the past decade. The hurt, once pooled deep inside, rushed from its stagnant state through cracks in her psyche. Waves of her secret

torment rolled and crashed within the walls of her heart, threatening to drag her under. She gasped for breath.

"Watch it. Other people use this sidewalk." A sharp male voice jolted Marisol back to the present. She'd absent-mindedly edged into the passenger's path.

She dashed her gaze to the concrete. An old habit. Never look a man in the eyes. That had been pounded into her brain. And her back. Her last *jefe* once beat her with a belt for doing it. Ten lashes. Obey, or suffer. A tough lesson learned for a spirited, angry teenager who'd fought so hard to survive. She twitched her shoulder blade, the old pain jabbing her once again. Some scars never heal.

In a low voice she apologized to the stranger. "*Lo siento*. Um, sorry."

"Yeah. Well, this isn't Mexico." Disgust vibrated through his words. "Give them some help and they think they deserve the world." His grumbling faded with his footsteps.

Her eyes lifted back to the photo of the woman who had changed her destiny. Marisol should be grateful. But she wasn't. The lady also represented every ugly, vile, and hurtful thing which happened to Marisol that year. Too many remembrances. So much shame. A tear trickled down her cheek. Oh, why did she have to see *that* face again? When could she finally forget?

With arms tight around her torso, the twenty-three-year-old Hispanic woman gulped back the emotions ebbing in her chest. That was not her life now. She spoke excellent English, carried a permanent green card, and held a good job...for which she'd be

late if she didn't pull it together. So why couldn't she break her stare? As if the eyes...

A hand softly pressed onto her shoulder. "Are you okay, miss?"

Marisol buckled in dread. Another old habit when any man touched her.

Shoes shuffled towards her. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you. You speak English?"

She bobbed her head.

He bent down to meet her face. A black shirt came into view as a whiff of woodsy men's cologne filled her nose. A small, wooden cross dangled from beneath his open collar. Marisol dared to raise her eyes, just a touch. They were met by a warm smile. Two strong hands gently touched her arms. "Come into the church. We can talk. Perhaps I can help you."

Alarms went off. No. Never go anywhere with a strange man—ever again. Marisol twisted from his grip, her gaze returning downward.

The man released his hands and held them out, palms up. "My name is Pastor Jake. You can trust me."

One eye cocked enough to peer into his. Honesty oozed from them, as did reverence, etched by slight crow's feet. He appeared to be in his late thirties. A gold band glimmered on his left ring finger.

A shudder raced under her skin. "No. I...I've got to go." She didn't deserve to be noticed by anyone who served God. She might taint him with her presence. She willed her shoes to move—away from the man, the marquee, and her memories. But they locked to the sidewalk.

His eyes narrowed. "Do I know you?"

Marisol inhaled a shaky breath. *Yes, you do.* She recalled him as well, though they only met twice

before...many long and difficult years ago. But she'd never reveal it. To do so would dredge up too much sorrow.

"I'm late for work." Bottom lip tucked into her teeth, Marisol backed away, forcing her legs to pivot. She shuffled quickly down the street away from the pastor and the photo. Both dredged up her painful past.

* * *

Jake shook his head. The young woman displayed all the makings of a trafficked victim. Should he call it in to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center? No, not unless he could be more sure. He lifted his eyes to the sky. "If I can help her, let our paths cross again, Lord. In the meantime, bless her."

As he jiggled his keys to find the one that unlocked the main doors of the church, the Hispanic woman's face invaded his thoughts. Where had he seen her? The workshops over the past eight years attracted quite a few girls. Perhaps she'd attended one recently. Yet, surely she'd recognize him.

Jake shrugged it off. In three days, the woman who opened his eyes would be back in his pews. His church agreed to host one of the many events Jen and Tom planned for their third visit to the United States. The Wilsons helped run a home for once-trafficked young women in England. During the summer, the couple held healing conferences in the United States for the sexually abused and those who suffered from post-abortion guilt.

This year, the Wilson's three adopted children would attend church camp in the Texas Hill Country while their parents lectured. Their last two weeks in

the U.S. would be a relaxed family time at Tom and Jen's vacation home on the Pedernales River. Jake smiled as he patted the invitation in his shirt pocket requesting he join them for a few days.

Memories of the screened-in porch cabin along the river filtered in. There, Jen confessed her secret shame. Jake gave her a pamphlet about the meetings—which he by providence attended a few weeks prior—designed to help women like her find healing. That one piece of paper catapulted Jake, Jen and Tom into a ministry which now reached into forty countries. When he left seminary for his first church assignment in 2013, little did he realize the path God intended to blaze. By His design, Jen had altered Jake's life as much as she had her own.

As he crossed in front of the altar, Jake couldn't shake the sense the young Hispanic woman on the sidewalk today was about to change it again.

CHAPTER TWO

Marisol's bilingual skills landed her a customer service job at the counter of a local satellite TV/internet supplier in San Antonio. She'd worked her way up to the respected senior representative position, a semi-supervisory one. She clocked in with a thumb wave over the indicator, thirty seconds before the top of the hour. She scooted to her station and shoved her purse underneath her stool. As she heaved a deep sigh, she caught her boss, Mrs. Jacobs, in her peripheral vision.

"Not a second to spare, Hernández."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Humph." Mrs. Jacob's high heels clicked across the shimmery, polished floors towards the front door.

The company's latest project, four-dimensional viewing, blasted onto the off-white wall to her right side. Clear, crisp 3D picture, top quality sound, and realistic aromas. No screen or monitor needed. The commercial of hot cinnamon rolls made her stomach growl. She wished she hadn't turned down the street by the church to pick up a chorizo breakfast taco at the corner stand. It now soaked up grease in the bottom of her handbag. Her appetite for it plummeted when she recognized Jen's face—then Pastor Jake's.

Thunder clapped as the illuminated ceiling tiles over her head flickered. A swoosh of water cascaded off the canopy outside the plate glass windows as the billowing, navy clouds let loose their built-up

moisture. The line of disgruntled, damp customers—who'd been waiting for the store to open—tumbled into the lobby, knocking Mrs. Jacobs against the wall. The forty-five inch gooey bakery delights glowed across her forehead. Marisol stifled a giggle and dropped her gaze to the tablet screen to log in her code via retina scan.

As her workday began, the memories receded back behind the dam of shame where they belonged. In her mind, she plastered over the crack with renewed determination mixed with the residual, deep-seated anger which helped her endure the months of abuse as a teen. It had fueled her tenacious energy to blast through impossible obstacles in order to change her life. Nine long years to break through the barriers, the heartaches and the prejudices, but she'd done it. What she'd set out to do at thirteen she'd finally accomplished.

She liked the tick of the antique battery-operated wall clock her boss hung near her station. Each minute pushed her further and further from the dusty streets of Ciudad Madera, her childhood home. No one at work knew of her past. Marisol intended to keep it that way.

* * *

Jen clutched her husband, Tom's, hand as their plane landed in Dallas. Back on Texas soil at last. Home sweet home. Though she loved England and their ministry, she relished a few triple-digit summer days to slough off cold and damp weather from her bones.

Theo, age seven, and Thad, nine, bounced in their seats as the sky outside their window turned into

tarmac. They'd already changed into shorts and t-shirts in the plane's sub-compact restroom, anticipating the four-hour drive to the Hill Country west of Austin where a week of canoes, horseback riding, and archery awaited. Their first experience with church summer camp.

Eva, the elder sister, rolled her green eyes as her thumbs danced over her video game. "Dad. Make them stop."

Tom cocked a parental glare. "Settle down, boys. Don't undo your buckles until the plane stops completely."

"Yes, Dad," the two chimed in unison.

Jen shook her head and smiled. Though unable to bear children of her own, she felt blessed because God crossed each of these three paths with hers.

Thad possessed the Black Irish traits of crystal blue eyes and thick dark hair. His mom, a trafficked teen from Kilkenny, had tried their program but couldn't adjust. Jen still prayed for her often.

Theo, the ashen blond with soft robin-egg eyes, was the product of a botched, late-term abortion in the back streets of Liverpool. One leg had been damaged during his horrific premature entry into the world. His slight limp, reduced by a wedge in his shoe, added to his charm as much as his impish, dimpled smile.

Ten-year-old Eva, with her olive skin, ebony straight hair, and unusual colored eyes, charmed anyone within eight feet of her. She had spunk, too. But then, so had her birth mother, and Eva resembled her more each day.

The screech of tires and rush of braking momentum singled the end of the airborne journey. The passenger restraints unclicked throughout the

cabin as the attendants announced, "Welcome to Dallas. Temperature 101 Fahrenheit, time 2:02 p.m."

After a shuffle through customs, then stops at restrooms, the food court, and to get a download of the latest GPS—Texas highways were always detoured and under construction—the foursome settled into their leased, twenty-nine-hour battery-operated car, which efficiently weaved through the traffic down I-35E via satellite control.

"When do we get to camp?"

Jen craned her head to the back seat. She knew Theo had asked. Besides his tendency for impatience, Theo's whine pitched a touch higher than Thad's. With a jovial tone, she eagle-eyed him. "We've been over this at least a dozen times in the past four days."

"Yeah, but I forget, now don't I?"

Jen sighed. *Will the other kids embrace these munchkins' British accents and colloquialisms or make fun of them?* Though Jen spoke with a slight drawl and Tom a defined Southwest Texas twang dashed with his grandmother's Irish brogue, the boys' heritage and surroundings had molded their tongues with a Southern England dialect. Eva possessed a more global accent, having spent her first two years stateside in Florida amongst Cuban-descent foster parents.

"First, we eat dinner and spend the night with your dad's Uncle Pat and Aunt Beth in Dripping Springs, a short drive past Austin. You remember staying with them last summer, right? Then, in the morning, we'll drive to the cabin for the weekend. Your camp will start in two more days, on Monday."

Thad piped in. "After that, we'll stay at Uncle Pat's and Aunt Beth's until you finish your lectures, right?"

Eva huffed. "Right, draino braino. Camp's only

one week long. Mum and Dad will be lecturing for six."

Theo swung his longer leg, bopping it against the seat. "Which are we eating first? BBQ or Mexican food?"

Tom grinned as his eyes focused on the kids through the rearview mirror. "Aunt Beth has already ordered from the Cow Lick for tonight." He leaned towards his wife. "I've missed a good mesquite-smoked brisket."

Jen raised her eyebrows. "Fried okra dipped in creamy jalapeño ranch sauce." She rubbed her stomach. "Yum."

"I want Mex'can." Thad laced his arms through each other across his chest.

"We can grab lunch tomorrow at the Taco Shack down the road from the cabin. Okay, bud?"

Thad bobbed his head back and forth. "Yeah. I can wait. As long as you don't make me eat coleslaw tonight. Yuck."

Tom winked in the reflection. "Deal. But, you must chomp four raw carrot slices and three celery sticks. I'll tell Aunt Beth to put some on your plate."

"I'll make sure he does, Dad." Eva scrunched her nose at her brother. He returned the gesture with a jutted-out tongue.

Tom cocked his head. "I saw that you two. The offer can be rescinded."

Jen dashed her husband a wide-eyed snicker. The identical conversation as the last time they'd visited. But, as she turned her head to gaze out the car window, a needling in the back of her conscience told her this trip to Texas would not be not the same at all—and not because the kids would experience summer

camp. The premonition unnerved her for a split second.

She lifted up a prayer to the One who knew for sure what these next two months entailed. Satisfied it lay in the right hands, she settled back for the congested, Friday afternoon trek down the highway amidst eighteen wheelers, RVs, cars loaded with rambunctious kids, and trucks towing boats or horse trailers. Yep, summer in Texas.

CHAPTER THREE

Ciudad Madera, July 21, 2013

A dog barked. The dust swirled in a haphazard dance a few inches above the road, sending shimmering heat waves into distorted wiggles. Marisol walked, head down, along the edge. Wisps of desert grass tickled her ankles as the rising sun heated her backbone. Droplets of sweat slid down her neck onto her spine. Warm sand oozed through her sandaled toes.

Last night had been rougher than normal. Still, she refused to cry. Another mile, and she'd be home, curled on her own pallet. She'd catch three, maybe four, hours of sleep before she prepared her brothers' lunch when they broke from laboring in the fields. What a way to celebrate her twelfth birthday, as if anyone cared.

Her mother never asked where her father took her at night. *She doesn't have to. She knows.* Marisol hated her mother for not speaking out. Surely there was another way to earn money for food without heavy-breathing men bouncing on top of her. Oh, why had her breasts begun to grow? As soon as her father's hands discovered them, her nightmare, previously reserved for him, began with his drunken friends. Now, even her brothers' friends paid to spend time between her legs.

A car rumbled and slowed. A gruff, husky voice

shouted in Spanish over Mariachi music. "Hey, pretty girl. Want to make lots cash in America? Nice clothes, bubble baths, and rich foods. All the sweets you can eat. Diamond jewelry to wear around your slender neck."

* * *

San Antonio, 2023

Marisol awoke with a start. Her heartbeat thumped against the wall of her chest. She grabbed her pillow and stuffed her mouth into it as the sobs began. She rocked back and forth, alone in her efficiency apartment. If only, ten years ago, she'd said, "No." How different her life might have been. Or would it? Her situation in her village had not been a pretty one, which was why she'd tried to escape.

The woozy disorientation of panic swept over her in waves once again. She blew through her cheeks to steady her breathing the way the counselor had told her. *Calm down. Calm down. It's not your reality now.*

Her body shivered in sweat. She shoved her bedcovers aside and paced the floor. Hands on hips, she willed her brain to slow her pulse and lengthen her short gasps for air.

Jen's picture had stirred up the long-past horrors of her youth. Days, months, years of hurt she'd packed up, taped, and tossed into the storage corners of her mind. None of it defined her now. Not her story. She worked for a profitable corporation, had benefits, and her own place, and yes, lovely clothes and some jewelry.

No thanks to those men who'd lured her into their car long ago. *No* man ever gave her anything nice. Except...no, she refused to even think about it.

Keeping the baby would have been impossible. She couldn't say it constituted a gift. More like a mistake, an unfortunate consequence of one night—one of many she'd endured.

"I did what I had to do. No one should be a mother at thirteen," Marisol mumbled through clenched teeth. "Besides, I knew who her father was. The devil incarnate."

Marisol tried once more to convince her reflection in the mirror she'd made the right decision to give her baby away. So why did the ache still haunt her deep in her gut? *She's better off without me. I'd never have been a good mother to her.*

She splashed water on her cheeks and returned to bed. Tomorrow was Saturday. No work. She could sleep a few minutes more before Alma, her younger sister, went to dance class while she attended her mandated counseling appointment. The one she dreaded every week.

As she brushed her hair, the catalyst of seeing Jen's face pushed the momentum of memories forward. The odor of the dusty shack, where the traffickers held her captive, returned. Vivid enough to make her cough. The images crowded in, each pleading to be examined, twisted this way and that, in a new light. It would most likely be the subject of her session, though she hated to bring it up.

The rest of the night ebbed into a fitful, dreamless sleep...until the alarm on the Bluetooth bud in her ear chimed. With a growl, she crawled into the bathroom. As soon as she clapped her hands three times, the showerhead spewed steaming water. She stepped in and let it envelop her, hoping to wash her past, once and for all, down the drain with the swirls of soap.