

The best way out could be straight through

DEBORAH PIERSON DILL

NOT SO FAR AWAY

...I RECOMMEND THIS BOOK TO ANYONE
AND ENCOURAGE ALL TO READ IT.

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ON *PERFECT SHELTER*

Not So Far
Away

Deborah Pierson Dill

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Dedication

For my family.

What People are Saying

Ransomed Hope

"Ransomed Hope is a rock-solid story with an engaging plot and characters that tug at the heart strings." ~ Mary Manners, best-selling author

Perfect Shelter

"I recommend this book to anyone and encourage all to read it." ~ Brenda Talley, book reviewer

"This books rings with the truth that, though your heart may break, and all may seem lost, there's always a pathway home, to goodness, faith and love." ~ Marianne Evans, award-winning author

The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.
~ Exodus 14:14

1

This was the worst part of every day.

Laurel pulled hamburger casserole out of the oven and set it on the stove top as the truck door slammed outside. She took a deep, fortifying breath, gathering plates, knives, forks and napkins along with her courage, stomach churning as she wondered which side of his personality she'd be faced with when he came through the door.

Tommy's footsteps sounded heavy on the front porch. Angry. And the silence when they stopped seethed with fury. Or maybe not. Maybe she just imagined it. But, no. Her heart stopped for a second as she remembered.

This morning Tommy told T.J. to pick up the mess left by a neighbor's dog when it over-turned their garbage can in the night.

Laurel closed her eyes and expelled a breath.

T.J. came home from school with a fever, and a last minute trip to the doctor confirmed her suspicion that he had the flu. She'd sent him to bed, not giving a thought to the mess outside.

Lord, help me...

"T.J.!"

Laurel jumped at Tommy's shout from the living

room, even though she had expected it. Footsteps came down heavy on the old hardwood in the living room.

"Laurel!"

"In the kitchen." She didn't dare not answer. That would only make things worse. Setting the table gave her something to do and provided some activity that would, hopefully, deflect his anger.

"Where's T.J.?" Tommy stalked into the kitchen, shouting despite the fact that there was nowhere in this tiny house one couldn't hear the quietest of whispers. "Why didn't he clean up that mess outside?"

"He's in his room." Laurel kept her voice calm. Not rising to his level of intensity usually cooled him down. Usually. Sometimes it sent him over the edge. It was so hard to tell which way his fury would go. And right here is where it would probably go one way or the other. "He has the flu, so I sent him to bed."

"You just..." Tommy waved an arm, "...sent him to bed?"

"I'll clean up the mess outside after supper." She put two loaded plates on the table alongside napkins and flatware.

"That's right, you will." Tommy grumbled as he grabbed a beer from the refrigerator and took his seat at the table, more expletives streaming out of him. "That boy's not sick, he's just lazy."

"He is sick, Tommy. He has a hundred and three degree temperature, and he can barely stand."

Tommy took that in, seeming to consider it seriously; seeming for an instant to feel some actual fatherly concern for one of his children. "Where's Joshua?" He downed half his beer, temper cooling.

Laurel breathed a quiet sigh of relief and took her seat. "I dropped him off at your mother's when I took

T.J. to the doctor. He's spending the night."

"You took him to the doctor?" Tommy's angry glare struck her seemingly from nowhere, then it pinned her.

"Y...yes," she said, hesitantly. "He had a pretty high fever."

"Did you see Boyd Wendall? Is that the doctor you went to see?"

Too late, Laurel realized her mistake.

"Is T.J. really sick at all, or did you just make it up so you could go see *the doctor*?"

"Tommy—"

"I've seen you with him, Laurel. And it's clear to me that he likes you."

"You haven't seen me with him. I've never been with him."

Tommy's fist came down on the table, and she flinched as dishes rattled.

"Don't lie to me!" He rose from his seat, sending the chair toppling backward as he rounded the table to loom over her. "You think I didn't notice the two of you together last weekend? At the hardware store, where he just *happened* to be at the same time as us? I saw the way he looked at you. And I didn't miss the way you looked at him."

"Tommy, that's—"

"That's what?" He latched onto her arm and pulled her out of her chair, propelling her toward the wall, and then shoving her painfully against it. His hand slid up to her throat.

"That's not true," she said softly.

His hand tightened slightly as his eyes narrowed. It had been stupid of her to bring up the doctor. Her natural inclination to defend T.J. had overridden

common sense. She and Tommy had this same fight on Saturday, when they had indeed run into Dr. Wendall at the hardware store and she stopped to chat for a moment. The bruises were healing. But still, she should have known better than to bring it up. Her husband never needed a reason to hold a grudge—even if it was over an imagined offense.

“Is it not?” his voice was low, like a growl.

She shook her head and turned her eyes to the floor so he wouldn’t see anything there he could use against her later. The meeting with Dr. Wendall had been innocent. He was the kids’ doctor, nothing more. But how could she resist the temptation to stop and converse with a man who always treated her with respect, warmth, and kindness? What was so wrong about interacting with someone who would talk to her instead of swear at her...someone who would shake her hand rather than slap her? Clearly, Tommy had sensed the longing in her heart for dignity and respect, and it terrified her that he could see her feelings so plainly.

His hand slipped up to her jaw and he forced her to look at him, his fingers dug into her flesh and brought the sting of tears; tears which he instantly misinterpreted; probably as guilt.

Laurel didn’t even have time to raise her arms in reflex before Tommy’s vise-like grip closed around her arms. He threw her to the floor where she slid into chairs and table, overturning dishes and sending at least one crashing to the floor. She scabbled to her feet, but he was on her again immediately.

“You’re nothing but a whore.”

“Then what does that make you, Tommy?”

He shoved her hard, and the impact her back

made with the wall nearly took her breath.

"I'm not the one who's been unfaithful in this marriage. I took T.J. to the doctor because he is sick. And I don't know what it is you think you've seen between me and Doctor Wendall, but it's all in your imagination."

Tommy's hand, poised to strike, came down slightly.

"But you've never been faithful to me. And you call me the whore."

There was no point expecting him to see reason, though she prayed daily that he would. And she prayed now as she saw renewed rage contort the face she had once thought so handsome. *Lord, where are you? Deliver me from this, somehow.*

Tommy's hand, curled into a fist this time, drew back, and Laurel squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for the blow. But the sound of a shotgun's action behind them was unmistakable, and it stilled her husband.

T.J. stood in the doorway with the firearm pointed at his father. His color was paler than Laurel had ever seen it, and perspiration filmed his face, but he held the weapon firmly in his lanky arms.

"What do you think you're gonna do with that gun?" Tommy took a step toward T.J., and T.J.'s finger went to the trigger.

Laurel edged her way along the wall until she was as far out of range as possible.

"I'm gonna shoot you with it if you don't leave this house now."

"You think you can kick me out of my own house? Tommy took another step, and T.J. countered by pulling the gun tightly into his shoulder, preparing to fire. "Maybe I'll go to the police and tell them that you

pulled a gun on me? That you threatened to shoot me in my own home. Then you can have your very first taste of prison."

"You won't."

"How do you know?"

"Because they'll want to know why, and then you'd have to explain that you were beating up my mother, which won't be hard for them to believe."

Tommy's glare travelled from T.J. to her, where it took on an accusatory aspect, as if this was somehow her fault. A string of profane remarks punctuated each of his footsteps as he stalked back through the house and out the front door, slamming it so hard the walls shook.

T.J. stood, strong and ready with astonishing coolness under the circumstances, until the sound of his father's engine faded into the evening. Then, suddenly, the adrenaline seemed to drain away and he leaned against the wall.

Laurel made it to his side quickly and took the shotgun from his trembling hands. She followed him to the living room, where he pulled back the lace panel and peered out the window. He sank onto the couch, holding out one hand for the gun.

Laurel stared at his outstretched hand, clutching the weapon in both of hers. Only yesterday if he had wanted to handle his father's shotgun she would have absolutely refused to let him. But today, he had saved her with it.

"You should be in bed." Hesitantly, Laurel handed the weapon back to him, and he set it gently on the floor at his feet.

"I'll sleep in here."

She stacked a couple of pillows at one end of the

sofa, and T.J. sank onto them, suddenly a teenage boy again, checking the position of the gun. Laurel spread a quilt over him. "Do you need anything? Are you hungry?"

"No." T.J.'s eyes closed. "Maybe a glass of water."

She went to the kitchen to get him a drink.

"Do you think he'll go to Grandma's?" T.J.'s question followed her.

Laurel knew what he was concerned about. "He'll probably end up there. But I don't think he'll go there first." She took a deep breath and carried the glass of water to T.J, setting it gently on the table beside him. "I'll drive over and get Joshua."

T.J. nodded, eyes drifting closed. Her oldest son had experienced a good share of beatings.

Laurel always stepped in, frequently diverting Tommy's anger to her instead—trying to, anyway. But this was the first time ever that T.J. had stepped in on her behalf, preventing what was turning into an attack that might have left her needing medical attention. She smoothed shaggy brown hair out of her fourteen-year-old's face. He wasn't a man yet. But he wasn't a boy anymore. Laurel had often wondered if the day would ever arrive when her sons would fight back against their father's abuse.

Evidently, today was the day.

~*~

The shrill chirp of the alarm clock woke her. Laurel's hand shot out automatically to silence it before it could wake Tommy. But he wasn't there. Memory edged sleepy fog from her brain as the details of last night's confrontation reemerged.

She pushed to a sitting position, her Bible still clutched against her chest, open to the book of 1 Peter. In the four years since becoming a Christian, she'd spent every day praying that her unbelieving husband might be persuaded by her conduct to turn to Christ. She didn't scold or nag. She didn't insist that he accompany her and the boys to church—not that he would even if she did.

She set the Bible aside and pushed hair behind her ears. Calling him on his infidelities last night was probably not the best way to accomplish her goal. But he always accused her of behaviors he himself was guilty of. And she was so tired of taking the blame.

She pulled on her bathrobe, donned slippers, and stepped into the hall, pausing at the thermostat to bump the temperature up. Maybe it would take the chill off this February morning. This old house was always so cold in the winter.

Joshua sat at the kitchen table eating a bowl of brightly colored cereal as he worked a game of some sort on the back of the box.

"Good morning," Laurel said softly, kissing the top of his head, and then tousling the mop of tobacco brown hair—the same shade as his father's. "How did you sleep?"

"Fine." He shoveled another spoonful into his mouth.

The train blasted its horn as it reached the railroad crossing less than four blocks from the house, and Laurel paused, waited until the noise subsided and allowed them to finish their conversation without raised voices.

"Are you all ready for school?"

"Mm hm." Joshua affirmed as he chewed.

Laurel pulled out all the fixings for a ham and cheese sandwich and got started on his lunch. The bus would be here in about fifteen minutes, and her shift started at the grocery store a half hour after that. T.J. would need to stay home today, and she would spend the entire day at work worrying. She couldn't drop him off at his grandmother's house because that was probably where Tommy was. And after last night's confrontation...she didn't even want to think about what might happen when the two saw each other again. T.J. would have to stay here, and Laurel would just have to hope that Tommy would go to work today.

Lord, please let him go to work today.

Not only would work keep him out of the house until after she got home, the paycheck was always helpful. Tommy worked a lot. And he worked hard. That was something to be thankful for.

The low rumble of the train faded to nothing except the distant sound of the crossing signal which ended a moment later.

Lord, bless him at work today, and change his heart toward You. And please change his heart toward me and the boys, too.

She tucked the sandwich into Joshua's insulated lunch bag alongside a water bottle, pretzels, an orange, and a few chocolate chip cookies. Then she went to the living room to check on T.J.

Her oldest son snored softly, deep in sleep. Sweat filmed his face and saturated the neckline of his t-shirt, and he'd kicked off his cover. His forehead felt cool to her touch, and his eyelids fluttered open.

Laurel sat on the edge of the sofa beside him, handing him a glass of water.

"Feel better?"

He shrugged and chugged the water. "A little."

"Do you feel up to eating something? Some toast?"

He shook his head. "I'll get something in a bit."

Joshua came in, pulling his backpack on over his coat. "I hear the bus."

"OK." Laurel zipped his coat up to his chin, and he promptly lowered it a few inches. "Have a good day." She stood and walked him to the front door. When she opened it, the storm door fogged immediately.

Joshua slipped out, and Laurel wiped away a circle of condensation to watch him walk to the corner bus stop, getting there just as the bus was coming into view.

She didn't know how he did it. She'd never once heard the bus until it was lumbering down the street in front of their house, but Joshua could always hear it a minute or two before it arrived. She wondered what else her boy had heard that she'd hoped to keep concealed.

"Why don't you leave him?"

Laurel sighed silently as Joshua climbed into the bus and found a seat. Then she pushed the front door closed and turned to face T.J.

He sat up, propped against pillows, but still looking weak and ill. His hair was crimped at strange angles, reminding her of the little boy she'd spent the last fourteen years raising, but a few fine whiskers glistened on his jaw renewing her awareness that he wasn't so little anymore. And if he was old enough to seriously ask that question, then he was probably old enough to hear at least a few of her answers.

"Where would we go?"

He lifted one shoulder and pulled the blanket

higher. "I don't know. Somewhere else."

"If we were to leave," Laurel spoke slowly, calling to memory all the times she'd asked herself the same futile question. "We'd have to leave town completely. We'd have to sever all ties with your grandmother, and anybody else we ever knew here. Because if your dad ever found out where we went, he'd come get us and bring us back. I'd have to leave my job here. And jobs are not easy to come by these days, especially for someone like me with no college education."

"I could get a job."

She smiled. "Soon enough, T.J., you'll be old enough to get a job, and then you'll be working for the rest of your life."

Silence fell between them for a moment as the chill settled anew within her soul.

"Uncle Bobby left." T.J.'s voice rose softly to remind her. "And Aunt Hope. They both seem to be doing fine."

"We don't actually know how Aunt Hope is doing." Laurel corrected him. "No one's seen or heard from her since your grandpa's funeral. And then we only saw her from a distance."

"She's doing fine." T.J. insisted. "She's in school. Working on a degree in graphic design."

Laurel sat up straighter. "You've heard from her?"

"We're friends online."

She didn't know why tears sprang, but they did. "And she's OK?"

T.J. just nodded.

"Where is she?"

"I promised her I wouldn't tell."

Laurel nodded, swallowing the scratchy ache in her throat. "Are you connected with your Uncle Bobby,

too?"

He shook his head. "No."

The thought of Bobby raised a wave of resentment. She tamped down the emotion, immediately repentant. The last time she'd seen Tommy's brother had been at his father's funeral. He'd looked as good as she'd ever seen him—transformed. And it was clear that his new girlfriend, Meagan, had never seen the violent side of his nature. She had burned with jealousy. Not because she had feelings for her brother-in-law—that had never been the case. But rather because it had seemed so unfair that he should be the one transformed. Tommy had a family, her and the boys, always at the mercy of his unpredictable, violent temper. Why shouldn't he experience the Lord's grace and become a new creation too?

"Son, I pray every day that your father will turn to God. I pray that he will change and that we'll be delivered from his..." She let her voice trail off and shook her head, not even wanting to say the word. "I pray that God will make him into the husband that I've always wanted him to be, and the father that you boys deserve to have. I pray, and I hope. If it could happen to your Uncle Bobby, there's no reason why it can't happen for your father too."

She left unspoken her silent anguish that her prayers remained unanswered and, as far as she could tell, unheard. Maybe drawing close enough to God that He would hear her prayers was too much to ask of Him. She felt like the dog eating the crumbs of His grace that fell from the table where His children dined, and she knew *that* was way more than she deserved.

T.J. nodded and seemed to think for a moment. "I just pray that he'll go away. That he'll leave one day,

and we'll never see him again."

Laurel hated that she understood how he felt. Although that was not the nature of her prayers, she could see how their lives would be, if not better, at least peaceful, if Tommy would decide to leave them. She made enough to cover the bills, although Tommy's paychecks certainly made life more comfortable. But his leaving was not what she wanted.

She loved her husband, despite the hateful man he had become. She had committed her life to him fifteen years ago for better or for worse. So she prayed for deliverance—for him and for herself.

T.J.'s eyelids drifted closed as chills began to shake him. He reached for the bottle of ibuprofen she'd brought him last night and took two, then sank back down into the warm comfort of the sofa.

Laurel rose and covered him up, then pressed a kiss to the top of his head. "I have to go to work," she said softly. "Call me if you need anything. OK? I'll come home if you need me to. And I'll come home at lunch and check on you."

He nodded and rolled onto his side. "I'll be fine."

"I love you, son."

"Love you, too."

~*~

He picked her line on purpose.

Boyd Wendall unloaded the contents of his basket onto the conveyor belt and smiled at Laurel as she totaled the order for the customer ahead of him. Two more of the small grocery store's five checkout lanes were open besides hers. But he had picked hers intentionally, and he shouldn't have.