

# ELIZABETH

*Wednesday, July 3, 2012*

Morning

Lilly's bedroom door slammed shut for the second time in ten minutes. Controlling my breaths, I attempted not to let her attitude affect me, which was easier said than done. God knows how much of a painful knot my daughter had tightened around my heart since we moved to Spokane last summer. I took another deep breath and the moment passed, but it wasn't long before the door slammed again, unhinging my last nerve. *This has to end.* Setting the dish towel on the counter, I bit my lip and turned, heading out of the kitchen and straight upstairs. I needed to confront her, tell her this behavior was not okay and that it needed to stop.

Since the move, I played both roles of mother and father, which was no easy feat after a divorce, but I'd had no other choice. I couldn't stay in Oregon, not after what Bruce had done to me, to our family. He took the truth our family relied on—the truth *I* relied on—and turned it into lies.

Unfortunately, Lilly was getting worse by the day. I knew exactly what was wrong, which made it harder: Lilly was losing her grip on her boyfriend, Marcus. While she was still a senior in high school, just a few months away from eighteen; Marcus was twenty and already had been graduated for two years. They were living two different lives. If I didn't understand her relationship problems, maybe I could have shifted blame onto teenage angst and chalked it up as a phase or something else that sat much prettier than

the truth. All the truth I knew came through muffled sounds of yelling I overheard through the bedroom wall. I couldn't understand the words, but you don't have to when people yell. She was sad and hurt, blaming everything on the nearly five hundred miles between them. She used to talk to me about the struggles in her heart and mind, but it had slowed over the years, especially after the move.

Arriving at Lilly's door, I leaned a shoulder against it. My bleeding heart was sewn together with threads of hope, threads of love for my daughter. Even though it wasn't realistic, I just wanted her to be happy.

Taking a breath, I knocked lightly and raised an eyebrow. "Lilly?"

She finally opened the door. Smudges of mascara on her cheeks, red swollen eyes, and a look of hopelessness sat in her expression. Any anger I had left within me evaporated at the sight of my broken daughter. I assumed she had gone through another rough patch with Marcus.

"What?" she asked, her voice soft and devoid of emotion as if she were wrung dry.

"What's wrong?" Though I knew she wouldn't respond, I had to ask. I had to make sure she knew I was always here for her, even if it meant nothing to her in the moment.

"You wouldn't understand, Mom . . ." Her voice tapered off. Before she could close the door, I reached out and caught it.

"Try me." My eyes connected with hers. Her pretty green eyes looked back at me with a brokenness that rattled me to my core and reminded me of my own throes of pain. There was something deeply wrong with Lilly. I could feel it.

"You know what would be great, Mom?" Her voice lifted, sounding like I could

possibly help. I was elated at the opportunity.

Raising my eyebrows, I felt this could be the moment we reconnected, the moment we regained the relationship we'd had when she was younger. For a moment, I envisioned her requesting to go to the mall like we used to when she was ten. Maybe even stop for Chinese food on the way home and have a good laugh over a cup of egg drop soup. The reflective moment slipped away as reality shifted back into focus.

"If you would just let me go to Jess's house. That's what *I* need right now. A little space, Mom." She turned sharply and went back into her room, letting the door swing wide. I stepped inside and looked at her walls covered with pictures of boy bands and actors. Random notes between her and her friends sat on the vanity across from her bed. Then I saw the letters on her nightstand. Marcus sent one every week, a tribute to their puppy love. They had phones, computers, and every possible way to communicate, yet the guy still sent handwritten notes. I guess it was romantic in a way, but I knew it was young love, and I saw the tears of their relationship in my daughter's eyes daily. It would never last.

"If I let you go to Jess's house, can you meet Jordan and me down at the fireworks tomorrow?"

"Yeah, totally." Lilly was smiling now, a hopeful sign, but really, I was just caving to see her smile. It's not like when she was younger. Back then, to get a smile, all I had to do was tell her I loved her, walk into a room, or simply look at her.

The most painful truth was she was growing up, and I didn't want that to happen. She'd be eighteen at the end of October, and graduating the following June. Then it'd be

off to college the year after that.

On her nightstand, I saw the collectible quarter Bruce and I had given to her for her sixteenth birthday. It was in a protective plastic coin holder slip and lying beside a picture of me and her. It warmed my heart seeing the photograph of us. She had put the picture away last month after a big blowup. Seeing it back out reminded me that she really did care despite all that teenage anger brewing inside her. My eyes welled with tears. I knew I would soon have a mascara-smearred face as well if I didn't get a handle on my emotions.

“What’s wrong?” She took a step closer to me.

“That picture of us . . .” I pointed then wiped my eyes. “Sorry. I just . . .” Peering into her eyes, I smiled. “You’re just growing up, Lilly.”

“I’ll always love you, Mom.” She hugged me, and my heart crumbled into a million pieces as the tears continued to flow.

### Evening

Texting Jordan, my twelve-year-old son, I let him know it was time to come home for dinner. He was next door playing video games with his friend Brock. The two had instantly become friends on the day we moved in. Brock later admitted he spotted Jordan carrying in the Xbox. He worked up the courage to come over and asked if Jordan wanted to game. Since then, they'd bounced between houses, hanging out all the time. It was good to see Jordan adapting so easily to our new life.

Hearing the screen creak open, then the front door, I hollered over my shoulder from the kitchen, “That you, Jord?”

“Nope. It’s me, Stacy.” Stacy and I had started hanging out six months ago. We met at a coffee shop when she caught me checking out the guy making my caramel macchiato. She was a cutesy blonde girl who was obsessed with boys and fashion. Our conversation about the male barista continued over to a table and flowed fluidly, so we exchanged numbers and had been friends ever since.

“Oh, good. You’re off early,” I said as she walked into the kitchen. “I need you to mash these potatoes. I’m getting the salad put together.” I handed her the potato masher with a smile, and she mashed while I tossed.

“How was your date?” I asked.

“It was okay. Nothing noteworthy. Just another loser who lives with his mom. You what? We should go out tonight. Have a little fun.” She shifted her hips over, bumping mine.

Smiling, I shook my head. “Not tonight.” She flashed a fake frown in response. I pulled out shredded cheese from the fridge as Jordan walked in and sat down at the table. His shoulders were hunched, and his hair was partially in his eyes. “Sit up straight, please,” I said. He adjusted.

“I thought you said it was ready.” A shake of his head revealed his chestnut-brown eyes that reminded me of Bruce every time I looked at them. It panged me.

Shrugging a shoulder, I turned back to the salad. “I’m almost done, Jord. Chill. How was your time with the Ericksons?”

“It was fine. Brock’s dad was gone most of the day, and his mom just got home a little bit ago. It was kind of nice having the house to ourselves. We gamed in the living

room on the big screen.”

Furrowing an eyebrow, I said, “Home alone, eh? Where was Logan?”

“I don’t know, Mom.” He laughed. “Am I in trouble or something?”

Shaking my head, I turned and grabbed the salad tongs from the counter. Jordan was old enough to be without constant adult supervision, but it didn’t make it any easier.

*Wednesday, July 4, 2012*

Morning

Hearing pounding on the front door the next morning brought me out of my light sleep. I had been hitting snooze on my alarm for the last hour. I was supposed to get up early to make a green Jell-O salad and some pies for the block party barbecue at Chuck’s house down the street. All the neighbors would be there to eat and mingle before walking down to the fireworks show at the park on Jefferson and Francis.

Rolling over, I glanced at the clock to see the red lights read 8:40. Covering my head with the comforter, I drifted back to sleep until another round of pounding came a moment later. I moaned as I rolled out of bed and grabbed my bathrobe from the bathroom door in my bedroom. As I wrapped it around myself, I heard another knock.

“I’m coming!” I shouted with an edge to my tone as I hurried down the stairs. Finally opening it, I saw it was my sister, Debbie, holding several grocery bags.

“Why so early, sis?” I asked with a whine in my voice as I let go of the door and

headed into the living room. Letting myself melt into the couch, I watched as Debbie walked into the kitchen with the bags. I had texted her last night about picking up a few things at the store, but she said nothing about coming to my house so early.

“It’s the Fourth of the July. You have that cute little block party thing that most neighborhoods don’t even do anymore. I’m excited!” She pulled out a white paper bag full of apples and set it aside, then pulled out flour. “You going to chat up that Cole guy today?”

“Oh, jeez, Deborah,” I said as I stood and came into the kitchen. “We’re *just* friends. You know that.”

She laughed. “Yeah. Friends. You’re just scared of Cole because he’s relationship material.” She turned and put the apples into the fridge. She was right about Cole. He was someone I could see myself being in a relationship with, and I was worried about that. He was kind, God-fearing, loved kids, and was attractive. Why would I want to get to know him and find out he’s not perfect? I’d rather remain on the sidelines.

“When are you heading out to the Inn at the Lake?” I asked as I watched Debbie maneuver around the kitchen. She and her husband, Doug, had reserved several nights at the inn for a nice getaway. With no kids in the house since their son Jonathan went off to college, I wasn’t exactly sure what they were getting away from, but she had heard from a friend that the place was exquisite. How I longed for a good husband like the one I thought I’d had, like the one she now had.

“About seven. Doug had some last-minute work he had to do before they release the new software.”

I nodded as I opened the cupboard, pulled down a glass, and turned on the faucet to get a drink of water. Jordan came downstairs a moment later. I stopped him on his way by me with a gentle touch on the shoulder. “Good morning.”

“Morning.” He took a step closer to the cupboard and opened it, grabbing a bowl. Silence followed as he went about making a bowl of cereal.

“I thought you’d be a little bit more pumped for today.” Jordan walked with his bowl to the kitchen table. “It being the fourth and all. You get to light off all those cool firecrackers you bought.”

“I guess.” He sat facing the sliding glass door that led to the backyard.

My sister leaned into my ear. “Why are kids always so sad these days?”

“I don’t know.” My eyes fixed on my son. He was becoming more distant by the day, and I worried how the teenage years would treat him.

### Evening

My eyes fell on who I suspected to be Jess and Lilly as they went through the food line at the block party, but I only could see the tops of their heads. Watching, I saw them go off and join the other kids to eat. I joined the end of the food line once it slowed and took my plate to accompany the adults at one of the tables. After the meal, we all made our way down to the park to see the fireworks. Jordan was laughing and playing around with Brock as they lit firecrackers and waited for the big show. Seeing Lilly standing next to Jess, I hesitated to go up to her and ask what time she planned to be home. I knew it would embarrass her, but I didn’t want her out too late since she’d stayed at Jess’s house



last night. I walked up behind her as the fireworks began going off and tapped her shoulder.

She turned around, and I saw it wasn't Lilly, but just a girl about the same height as her with the same color of hair. Mortified, I furrowed my eyebrows and tapped Jess's shoulder. "Where's Lilly?"

Jess and the other girl shook their heads, confusion overtaking their expressions. Jess said, "I don't know. I haven't seen her."

My stomach flipped. "She wasn't with you? She was supposed to come to your house yesterday."

The fireworks boomed as the lights of red, blue, pink, and yellow reflected across the faces in the crowd.

Jess raised her eyebrows. "I'm sorry. She never came over. Maybe she's with someone else?"

Pulling my phone out of my purse, I called her—it went straight to voice mail. Leaving the sea of people, I walked down the street and called her again to no avail. A tremble started in my heart and made its way to my hands and soon overwhelmed my whole body. I called the only father she ever knew—her stepdad, my ex-husband, Bruce. No luck. Then I tried calling her friends and her boyfriend Marcus. Nobody was answering.

She could have still been with a friend at the fireworks, and the show was just too loud to hear a phone ringing, but I knew in my gut that wasn't the case. Something wasn't right. Closing my eyes, I prayed I was wrong.



# LILLY

## THIRTEEN MONTHS AGO

*Thursday, June 9, 2011*

### Morning

Yesterday was harder than I anticipated it being. Sure, I was happy to no longer be a sophomore, but that did little to cheer me up about moving. My heart felt like it was twisting tighter and tighter into a knot that would never loosen. All my friends in youth group, my boyfriend, and even my father were all going to be left behind. They'd be but a distant memory of a life I once knew, a life I truly loved. Those summer youth group camps at Twin Rocks were the best times of my life and now were being stolen from me.

I tried telling Mom that she and Dad could work it out, that I hadn't seen anything bad enough to justify a divorce. It wasn't right what she was doing to our family. She was ruining everything and I made sure she knew it. Last night was my last stand, my last attempt to make her see the truth. If she could only understand . . . but she didn't.

Lying in bed that second to final morning, I looked at the boxes stacked against the wall. Beside them was the final box my mother had left open for the remainder of my belongings. There was no motivation in my bones to move from underneath the comforter, but a Scripture came to the forefront of my mind.

*2 Corinthians 12:9 . . . My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*

A knock at the door stole my attention. My mom walked in.

“Lilly”—her eyes fell to the box— “please finish packing. The movers will be here in an hour.”

Rolling over, I exhaled. My hopes of her changing her mind ran dry. My mother walked further into my room and over to me on my bed, just a mattress on the floor. Taking a seat, she smoothed a gentle touch over my face, pushing my hair away from my tear-soaked eyes.

“I know this is hard for you, Lilly. It’s hard for me, too.”

Jerking up, I shot out my hands. “Then let’s stay, Mom. *Please . . .*” She pulled away and stood up, but I grabbed her hand. “Seriously, Mom. Let’s just stay here. There’s no reason—”

She gave me a cold, hard look. “There are some things you won’t understand until you’re older, and there are some things you’ll never understand.”

My hand loosened and she left.

### Evening

Lying on a blanket in the back of Marcus’s truck, we stared up at the stars. The air was warm and I never wanted the night to end. His arm was around my neck, my face in close against his chest. If heaven were real, I had found it right there in that moment. Marcus had always been good to me. He made me feel pretty, made me feel alive. He made life a dream. He took me cliff diving for the first time last weekend in Shanook Landing, and last October, he took me for an icy cold dip in Devil’s Lake. It was crazy. We’d had so

many firsts, but now it was all coming to an end. Marcus called it a detour. I called it a construction zone with the bridge out.

“Everything’s going to be okay, Lilly,” Marcus said as he gently traced up my arm with his finger.

“How do you know that?” I asked, turning over and looking in his eyes as I lay my arms across his torso. If he could give me a guarantee, that would make me feel somewhat better about moving.

He shifted so his back rested against the cab of the truck, pulled me in close, and kissed me gently. Pulling back with a grin, he said, “That’s how I know, Lilly.” He kissed my cheek, then my neck. “You go to church, don’t you?”

“Yeah.” Tilting my head, I stopped him from kissing my neck. It felt awkward having his lips on me as he spoke about church.

He looked into my eyes. “Do you believe in it? Like the whole God thing?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Don’t you think God wants us to be together?”

“I know He does, because you make me happy, Marcus.”

Leaning in, he kissed me again.

*Friday, June 10, 2011*

Morning

Waking early due to the uncomfortable night's sleep on my bedroom floor, I awoke for the last time in my room. Sunlight streamed in through the curtains, illuminating the nakedness of the white walls. Where posters used to hang, there was now nothing but stark white with nail holes covered in putty. It was more than depressing. It was reality.

Pushing my covers off, I stood and went over to the window. Looking down to the street, I saw Mr. Long walking his dog like he did every morning. Never in a million years did I ever think I'd be happy to see him, but I was. He was a part of my life, him and his little dog walking by my house every morning. Checking my phone, I saw it was only six. Still early. Mom said we'd be leaving town at eight, so I decided to go for one last walk along the beach.

Parking at the beach access near the casino, I got out and headed down to the shoreline. It was the one place I felt most alive outside of Marcus's arms. It was here we used to come down and have family picnics, but even those were something of the past ever since Mom and Dad started having problems a few years ago. Though I didn't know the exact details of what was wrong between them, I knew it had to be painful enough for my mom to leave this all behind. I knew she loved it here, too.

Last night while I tried to sleep, I recounted the changes I could see. Along with the picnics, there was the fact that my father used to kiss my mom when he got home and randomly take her into his arms and dance with her as he serenaded her with compliments and sweet *I love yous* while at the same time grossing Jordan and me out. That stopped years ago. I knew I should give her a break, but I couldn't help but worry about my own love life. Long distance freaked me out. I didn't see why Mom couldn't just

let us stay here in Lincoln City, in a different house. Why did we have to uproot everything and move hundreds of miles away? Why?

Slipping out of my flip-flops, I strode down the shore and wiggled my toes in the sand. The breeze and the smell of the ocean were parts of who I was. I could hardly imagine a life without them. Thinking of all my friends going to school next year without me caused a sharp pain in my chest. A part of me wanted life to stop in Lincoln City once our U-Haul pulled out of town. That was silly, though. Mr. Long would still go for his walks and my friends would still go to school and continue on without me.

Only my life would be put on hold once our U-Haul left town.

### Evening

Stopping in a town called Kennewick for dinner, Jordan, Mom, and I all sat down in a booth at a diner and ordered food. My stomach was twisting and upset so I didn't eat much of my breakfast platter. I always preferred breakfast food to any other, but I couldn't eat. I pushed my fork around the hash browns as my thoughts drifted to Marcus, my Dad, and all of my friends back in Lincoln City.

"Please eat, Lilly," my mother said as she lifted her final bite of pancakes to her mouth. She was trying to be gentle with her tone, trying to make the best of the situation, but I was angry. I felt entitled to a little selfishness. I was being removed from everything I knew and transplanted into a city I'd only heard about in stories from my mother's past. I felt like I could die from how much sadness I was holding inside.

"I'll eat her food if she doesn't," Jordan offered with a smile.

I let out a dry laugh and shook my head as I glanced at him, then her. “This is your fault, Mom. All of it. We had a life in Lincoln City. I had the love of my life there, too. And Dad! You’re so selfish, taking us away from that life!”

“Lillian Dawn Dudley!” she said in a loud whisper as she leaned in. “I am your mother, and you *will* respect me. I’m doing what’s best for our family. You have to trust me on this. You’ll be able to visit, and you’ll make new friends in Spokane.”

“Ha. Sure. *New* friends. You act like friends are dispensable. Run out and get some new ones whenever you want. Do you know what it’s like trying to make new friends? Especially at my age? Ugh.”

She leaned back in the booth and her shoulders slumped. The next moment, she excused herself from the table and went to the bathroom. Jordan leaned in after Mom had left.

“You’ve got to cool it, sis.”

“Whatever, Jordan. You don’t—”

He dropped his fork onto the plate, causing a loud clanking sound. “Sorry, sis, but I lost my life there, too. You can’t play that card with me.” I knew he was right. I shouldn’t be so hard on him.

My shoulders slouched as my heart went out for my brother. “I’m sorry.”

“Just cool it with Mom. Okay?”

I nodded. “I’ll try.”



# ELIZABETH

## ONE DAY MISSING

*Thursday, July 5, 2012*

### Morning

The only relief from crying came in the wee hours of the morning in the form of falling asleep from sheer exhaustion. The police let me file a missing person's report, but they were anything but helpful. The officer I spoke with, Officer Kennedy, was straight-faced and void of any emotion. He left me feeling like I was just another mother of a runaway, a bad seed, a kid who couldn't deal with life. He asked invasive questions about our family life at home. I had to tell him about the fighting that had ramped up recently. I had to divulge personal details like the fact that she never knew her real father before he passed, and her stepfather, Bruce, hadn't spoken to her in months, now that he had no obligation to her. It was horribly painful to share these details with a stranger knowing they painted a picture of a likely runaway and nothing more.

The first night she went missing, I could only manage three hours of sleep. Lying in bed, I thought about last night. I must have driven down her friend Jess's street a dozen times. Every neighborhood was lit up in glows of celebration while I desperately prayed I'd find my baby girl.

Grabbing my phone from my nightstand, I saw a half dozen missed calls from my sister, Bruce, and a few others I had attempted to contact. My eyes welled with tears and

the knot in my chest returned with a vengeful force, gripping my soul and clenching my heart. A squeezing, suffocating feeling consumed me, and I felt as if I could barely breathe.

Finally deciding to get out of bed, I headed into my bathroom to shower. The shower drained away the smell of smoke from the barbeque and fireworks, but it did little to ease my suffering. I couldn't shake the feeling Lilly hadn't run away like the police thought, but that something else had happened. Something worse. She was a pretty girl—is a pretty girl. After I got dressed and grabbed my phone from the nightstand, I looked out my bedroom window.

Mr. Hendricks was outside mowing his lawn. He was a middle-aged man, odd and quirky with his lawn care habits, but he seemed nice when I first met him. My mind drifted to the negative. *Could he have done something to Lilly?* He was single and kept to himself. Then, recalling my father's quirky habits after my mother passed away, I pushed away my suspicions and succumbed for a moment to what the police suspected. *She probably did run away*, I thought as I headed downstairs.

Calling Bruce back, I got his voice mail. He was probably already elbow deep in a surgery. It was Thursday, one of his surgery days. Phoning my sister Debbie next, I learned from speaking with her that she had left her cell phone in the hotel room while she and Doug went to the docks to watch the fireworks. She hadn't checked her phone until the next morning.

"I'm heading over right now," she insisted.

"No. Please don't, sis. Enjoy your time at the inn."

“I can’t enjoy myself with Lilly missing, Liz! She’s my niece! I need to help find her!”

Pressing a hand to my forehead, I felt overwhelmed with guilt for ruining her weekend. “I feel bad. You’re there with Doug and having a good time.”

“Oh, hush. *It’s fine*. It’s time someone helps you out. You’ve been killing yourself trying to make a life for you and those kids. You need help right now. The least I can do is stay with Jordan.”

Jordan. I had barely thought of him since Lilly had vanished. Truthfully, I hadn’t thought of him at all aside from the short conversation we had about whether he knew where Lilly was. Walking quickly upstairs, I came to his door and pushed it open. My heart found a minuscule jolt of joy seeing him asleep in his bed.

“Hold on,” I said to Debbie and brought my phone behind my back. Hurrying into his room and over to his bedside, I nudged his shoulder, causing him to wake up.

“What, Mom?” he groaned as he adjusted his pillow.

“Have you heard from Lilly at all?”

He shook his head and pulled the comforter overhead. Within moments, he had returned to his slumber.

My shoulders sagged and I left his room as I brought the phone back up to my ear. “Jordan hasn’t heard anything from her . . .”

“Okay, I’m in the car and heading out now.”

Evening

No tips, leads, or information came from the police department. They put out the missing persons report, but would not actively look until forty-eight hours had passed. Even then, it wouldn't be a top priority. That didn't stop me, though. I had continued my routes around the city through most the day, frequenting many of the same spots I had visited the previous evening, including places she didn't frequent often, like the mall and the movie theater. Anywhere and everywhere I could think of, I searched.

That evening, Jordan and Debbie were eating leftover spaghetti at the kitchen table while I sat on the couch, taking a moment to watch the evening news to see if there were any incidents that *could* have involved her. A story came on about a string of killings stretching from North Dakota to Washington State, and my heart suddenly felt heavy.

A knock came from the front door. I leaped.

Standing, I kept my eyes on the TV as I walked over to the door. Opening it, I finally took my eyes off the television to see a welcome sight standing on the other side of the screen door—Cole.

“Cole?”

He flashed a straight-faced smile, one of those “I'm sorry for your loss” kind of looks. “May I come in?”

I loosened my fingers from the doorknob and let the door open. “Sure. What's up?”

“I heard you asking around last night about Lilly. Earlier today, I talked to a buddy at the radio station, and he said he'd make a few mentions of it on the radio. Then today, I found an article online of a girl who I think could be her. Thought you might want to take a look at it.”

“Thank you.” My heart jumped at the unexpected kindness. Pulling out a piece of folded paper from his back pocket, he opened it and handed it to me. I shut the door, and we walked over to the couch and sat.

The article detailed a group of homeless people living under a bridge in a part of Spokane that was less than desirable, somewhere my Lilly would never go. It went on to explain how younger teens were joining the group, that it was a “safe haven” for those who felt they needed to escape their home life. I was skeptical. It was so farfetched, but then I saw her name. *Lillian started spending time with the group after troubles with her mother escalated at home. She finds the community to be inviting and met them a month ago.* Could it be my Lilly? My eyes watered at the possibility. Peering up at the corner of the printout, I saw the date was July 3. Shaking my head, I looked at Cole. “This can’t be her. It’s *not* possible. She wouldn’t go live under a bridge. But I would love to think this is what happened as opposed to a serial killer taking her. There was just a news story on TV about one.” Shuddering, I looked toward Debbie for her thoughts. She had walked into the living room sometime during the conversation.

“Doug ran away when he was a kid. He didn’t make it long, but he did hang out with a homeless guy. Those homeless people are some of the sweetest souls you’ll meet, Elizabeth.” I could hear her words, but they still didn’t sit right. I tried not to judge people, but the homeless, in my mind, were drug addicts and alcoholics who’d thrown their lives away. Cole must have sensed my displeasure. He placed a hand on my shoulder.