



It happened once upon a time—although I must tell you that it still happens today more than anyone realizes.

A lovely little six-year-old girl lived on Indigo Island, right in the middle of the Indigo Sea. She loved to play next to her home on the white, shimmering sand, which glistened like sugar when the sun's rays caught it just right. Yet this sand wasn't coarse like sugar; it was so pure and soft it felt like finely ground powder. The little girl never burned her feet walking on this shore—not even on a very hot day. And the waters of Indigo Sea were a deep azure. It was as if someone had dumped giant bottles of blue dye into the sea. Indigo Island's shore was an idyllic place. The kind of place one only dreams about finding.

The little girl would sit playing in the sand on the beach for long stretches of time. Often a kind friend would join her. Together they sculpted grand castles and dug moats around the base of their creations. Blue seawater would eventually seep into their moats and, to their satisfaction, fill them to overflowing. Though the water would stand in their moats only a short time before being absorbed back into the sand, it didn't matter. She and her friend would laugh with bubbly joy at this sight.

The little girl's delight, in fact, went beyond playing with her friend and the beautiful blue water that filled her moat; she was curious and joyous about all of life. Somehow she knew, even at

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her young age, that she was loved and treasured, particularly by her adoring father. She felt secure, even though she didn't know the meaning of that word. She just knew she felt safe and happy and very loved.

But one day as she sat contentedly all by herself creating a bridge of seaweed across her moat, a stranger stumbled across the private shore of Indigo Island. As his shadow crossed over the little girl, she wondered what blocked the radiant sunshine that had warmed her as she sat on the sand.

"Oh, you scared me," she blurted out to the stranger standing over her. And then as she peered intently up at him, a shudder went through her. The stranger's eyes seemed to narrow into slits.

As if sensing her fear, the stranger quickly changed his tone. "Oh my child," he said soothingly, "what are you doing out here all by yourself? Don't you know hirudins can come out of the sea and gobble you up?"

The little girl knew she shouldn't talk to strangers, but she couldn't help herself. As she picked up a cup to make towers for her grand sand castle she decided it would be okay to talk to him—just this once.

"That's silly, sir, there is no such thing as hirudins. Besides, my father keeps his eye on me at all times. I live right over there," she informed him as she pointed her finger toward her home.

Once again seeking to divert her attention, the stranger debated with her.

"I don't like telling you this, but hirudins truly do exist. They are very real. I suppose your father just hasn't told you about them yet because you are so young. Either that or he is not fully aware of their danger during this time of the year. Come; let's go talk to your father. He will thank me for bringing you back home."

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Reluctantly she put down the cup she was using to make the towers and challenged the stranger. “If the hirudins are real and as bad as you say, why does my father let me stay here? Why wouldn’t he come for me himself?”

“It’s like I said, little one, he doesn’t know about the dangers. So come with me before it’s too late. I noticed your father as I walked toward you on the beach. He was seated in your rose garden talking quite intently to a neighbor. I did not want to interrupt him. You know how he has been teaching you not to interrupt him when others are talking?” A perplexed but slight nod of affirmation came from the little girl.

“You know my father?” she asked a bit bewildered.

“Yes, my child, of course I do. Everybody knows your father.” The stranger tried to reassure her. Noticing her name embroidered on her beach towel, he reached out his hand and said, “Jule, you will have to trust me.”

Jule’s head jerked up. “You know my name?” she said with surprise.

Seeking to ease her fears again, he smoothly answered, “Yes, of course I do. Like I said, I know your family.”

With innocent trust, she finally stood up and put her small hand into his oversized one. He seemed to be genuinely concerned for her. *Besides, Jule reasoned, I am supposed to obey grown-ups and he knows me and my father.* His grip tightened as they began to walk. But soon Jule noticed they were walking away from her house.

Jule’s thoughts and feelings began churning inside her. *I should stay on the beach and wait for my daddy. I shouldn’t go with this man.* Panic set in and her words stuck inside. Try as she might, she could not speak up for herself. Jule was scared and confused. The stranger’s grip tightened even more as he led her farther away from her home.

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“Ouch, you are hurting me!” Jule cried out when she had gathered her wits. She was not used to being treated this way. “We are going the wrong way. I want my daddy. I want to go home.” She could not unlock his hold, and tears began to stream down her flushed cheeks. But no amount of tears released her from his grasp. Jule was powerless and defenseless. Tremendous fear gripped her. The stranger continued to pull her along. Jule frantically searched the island for any sign of her father.

“Jule, we’re going to get my dinghy, leave the island, and head for the mainland of the Valley of Baca. Perhaps we will find your father there.”

Jule began to plead again. “I don’t want to go with you. I want to go home.” Jule had never ventured this far from her island home before, so nothing looked familiar. In fact, a startling thought struck her—she didn’t see any people. Where was everybody?

Jule began to wail, but with no one around, nobody heard her cries for help. The stranger suddenly and mysteriously changed. He no longer spoke with a calming voice. His voice was deep and husky. Instead of holding her by the hand, he quickly snapped tight handcuffs on her small wrists and dragged her along by a long chain attached to the cuffs.

“Ouch,” Jule howled, “you keep hurting me. Why are you doing this to me?”

“You shall see,” rasped the stranger. With the limited strength of a six-year-old, Jule pulled and pulled to free herself, but to no avail. The stranger only laughed as he watched her struggle. He knew she was powerless. Sadly, Jule knew it too.

She remembered having this feeling before. Once she had been pulled along by an undertow in Indigo Sea. The current had been too strong for her, and she couldn’t free herself. She was experiencing that same sensation, only this time on land. When she’d been caught in the undertow at sea, however,

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her father had come for her. With courage and agility he had reached her before she was pulled out to sea. He had whispered comforting words as he swam with one arm and held her limp body tucked closely to him with his other arm. Peace had washed over her as she rested against him. Her father knew the secret of swimming out to the sides of the undertow instead of trying to fight through the middle of it.

This time, however, she couldn't see her father. Every so often the stranger who trudged a bit ahead of his prisoner glanced back at the chain-leashed little girl. There was no compassion in his eyes or voice. Once again she thought she glimpsed narrow slits glowering at her as their eyes met.

Later, after what seemed like she had been walking for hours in chains with the stranger, Jule knew she must be far from home. Twilight had replaced the warming rays of the sun. A penetrating coldness slipped in, and Jule shivered as a chill cut through both her body and soul.

"Please let me go home," she weakly cried out again.

"Never," rasped the stranger as he untied the dinghy in the bay. Jumping off the dock into the boat, he yanked her along with him. Jule, who by now had lost her voice from all her pleading and crying, could do nothing but scream silently for help. No one came to her rescue, even though she had finally seen some people not too far from the dinghy.

*Why doesn't anybody help me? Can't you see me? Somebody, please, please help me,* she repeatedly cried out in her head.

The dinghy sped away in the midnight blue waters, and the noise of the engine drowned out all but her inward groans. Farther out in the sea, the stranger cut the engine. Except for the occasional cry from a passing seagull, eerie silence surrounded them.

Suddenly the stranger shoved Jule down on the floor of the

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boat. He pinned her legs with his powerful knee. Since her hands were still chained, she could not use them to defend herself. His rough and calloused hands made contact with her soft and innocent skin as he aggressively stripped off her clothing along with her modesty. Jule was trembling violently from fear and exposure. Her eyes were filled with terror even as the stranger's were filled with invasive power.

Jule struggled repeatedly to twist her body away from him, but he was too strong for her. "Go away, go away," Jule screamed with what little voice she had left. It was no use. Her arms were chained, and she was pinned down by his body weight. She was totally powerless as he invaded her body, soul, and mind. If only people could have heard Jule! As the stranger tormented her, the little girl's cries of terror and pain might have brought help.

The pain was so great she passed out. Later, after many hours of sleeping and stirring restlessly on the boat, Jule woke, feeling disoriented. Her entire body throbbed with pain. *Where am I? I want my daddy. I want to go home.* And then the motor stopped again. Jule felt herself being lifted from the boat, but she had no more strength to fight back.

"Put her on the dock," said a gruff, unfamiliar voice. *Thud!* It was more like she was dropped on the dock. Her entire body ached, and her heart cried for her father. She wished that it was only a bad dream and that her father would come and comfort her. *Daddy, please find me,* she wished with all her heart. She knew, however, this wasn't just a bad dream; the cuffs that dug into her wrists were bracelets of harsh reality.

As her eyes adjusted to the strange and unrecognizable surroundings, she saw that the Valley of Baca was a dark place. The skies were cloudy and overcast. Only a few rays from the sun penetrated the dense clouds. There was no shimmering sand or blue water, only barren, rocky ground.

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Jule begged for mercy in her six-year-old way. "Please, please let me go home."

"Stop it; this is your home now. You don't live on Indigo Island any longer. The Valley of Baca is your home," snarled the stranger. At once, Jule knew for sure that she saw his eyes turn from human to snake. "Who are you?" she shrieked.

"My name is Bane, and I serve Prince Beelzebub, the ruler of this world. With his permission, I've changed your name to Mashber. You belong to me now."

"No, no, I want to go back to my house by the blue sea. My name is Jule, not Mashber. I want my name back," she wailed as she pleaded in vain.

"Never again can you go back," Bane said with venom lacing his words. "You must never speak of life on Indigo Island again. I am placing a lasting curse on you so you will never tell anyone about our trip over to the mainland. If you ever even try to mention this to anyone, you will be in worse trouble than you are now. Do you understand? Your father will never know. It is our little secret."

Bane continued his rantings, but Jule sought to turn inward to try to silence his words. Needless to say, Jule, now known as Mashber, did not understand what had happened to her. She was so confused. One minute she was a happy little girl playing on pristine sand, and the next minute her whole life was horribly changed. The memories of her happy home were fading and in their place new painful memories were seeking to fill those empty spots.

"Mashber, did you hear what I just said?" Bane asked, jerking her from her thoughts. Looking up, she realized that Bane was standing over her crushing a granite rock in the palm of his hand. The rock easily succumbed to his strength and fine granite powder crumbled and fell on her head. As it did, he mumbled this curse over her:

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*You belong to me now. Your name is Mashber.  
I will forever have a hold on you as long as you live on  
earth.*

*You'll not be able to speak about this—it will be our  
little secret. A secret you will lock up inside of you.*

*You will believe that you are not good enough and you  
will never measure up to what you think people want you  
to become. These thoughts will restrict and bind you like an  
ancient heavy metal chain.*

*Even though, at times, you may feel like this bondage  
is unfair and undeserved, you will continue to manage to  
live under its intoxicating influence. This is a curse you will  
secretly carry for life.*

*How does one break free from this wretched curse? There  
is not one thing you can do.*

*You will come to believe the lies about yourself more and  
more. These lies will take away your confidence and cause  
you to feel shame.*

*Shame will never allow you to rest—you will always  
think that something is wrong with you. You, Mashber, are  
trash; you are worthless. This curse will last as long as you  
live.*

With a loud, hideous shrieking sound, Bane seemed to vanish into thin air as the granite powder curse completely covered Mashber. The stinging in her eyes brought back a fading, distant memory of the occasional fine grain of sand that would get in her eyes at the beach. Only this was much, much worse. No matter how hard she tried, she could not brush off the granite powder. It stuck to her, just as she knew Bane's curse would forever stick to her. She would never be Jule again.

Even in her young heart, Mashber believed that Bane was



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right. *I can't tell anyone what happened to me on that boat. Never!* she promised herself. And how could she ever tell? She didn't fully understand what had happened herself. It was too horrible to talk or think about. What she did know was that she had never been treated like that before.

While she didn't understand it, she felt dirty, but not just from the granite powder. She felt dirty inside. *I don't think I'll be able to get clean again even if I have lots and lots of baths. As much as I know my daddy loves me, I don't think he would be happy with me if I told him what happened. Maybe he would never love me again.*

"So," Mashber concluded out loud, even though no one was around to hear, "I'd better keep this secret." Tears rolled down her dirty cheeks, forming streaks of mud.

And keep it a secret she did! She lived on the mainland, the Valley of Baca, for many years. As time passed, the inward lies she believed about herself grew. By the time she was in her teens, the pleasant memories of the azure blue waters of Indigo Island had completely faded. If life had ever been happy, she had no recollection. She experienced only feelings of sadness, abandonment, and pain, and she believed that something was very wrong with her. *I must either be a mistake or it was a mistake that I was ever born,* she concluded.

Mashber learned to survive by taking one day at a time. She was a slave to Master Bane, and she dreaded the hour he returned to their decrepit shack each day.

"Oh, if I could only escape from this dreadful life," she daily lamented. "I am just a piece of garbage that is rotten and infested with maggots. If only I could fly away somewhere—anywhere—like the birds." But Master Bane was in control and had stamped his influence on her very deeply. In fact, so great was his power over her, she no longer needed chains to keep her from escaping—she was chained in her head and heart.

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One day while Master Bane was out, Mashber was toiling in his dry, withering garden. It was difficult to tend a garden in this land of gloom and clouds. The sun shone only partially, and the clouds seldom let down the rain the garden needed to thrive. Once in a while thoughts of a beautiful garden full of roses and luscious fruits would come to her mind. But as quickly as it came, the image would fade.

“Oh, what is the use anymore,” Mashber cried in frustration. “There is no such thing as a beautiful garden. My garden here is like my life—hard, unproductive, and dying. Nothing is going to change. I’m stuck here!”

It was on that very day, however, that something did happen. As Mashber was on her knees pulling weeds, she said in an exasperated voice, “Why is it that these weeds do not seem to have any problem growing even though they get so little water and sun?”

“That is interesting, isn’t it?” said an unfamiliar male voice behind her. Startled, Mashber spun around to see who was talking to her. A man, a kinder-looking man than she remembered ever seeing before, stood by the edge of the garden. As he spoke, he adjusted the satchel slung over his shoulder.

“I’m sorry, young lady, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but you’re quite right, weeds seem to thrive everywhere.” Mashber noticed an immediate difference between this man and Bane. There was gentleness mixed with a sweet sadness in his eyes and voice.

“Sir, where did you come from?” Mashber asked with hesitancy and caution.

“I live in a far-off land, a much gentler place than this.

“Pardon me,” the kind stranger continued, noting Mashber’s guarded expression. “I should probably explain why I am here. I’ve been on a long journey looking for someone. In fact, I have a whole army here helping me scour the entire Valley of Baca.”

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Mashber began to let down her guard. “Oh, I probably won’t be able to help you much, sir. While I have lived here for many years, I really don’t know anyone except my master. I pretty much stay close to home.”

“Do you not have any friends?” the stranger queried.

“No, my thoughts are my closest friends. They are all I have.”

“You haven’t any family then either?” asked the stranger.

“No, I am only a slave to Master Bane.”

A glimmer of recognition flickered in the kind stranger’s eyes.

“Master Bane, you said?”

“Yes, he is a hard-driving task master. In fact, I must get these weeds pulled before he returns.” Mashber wanted so much to ask the stranger more questions. It was good to talk to someone who listened, who seemed to care, but she knew Bane would be returning home soon. Horrible things would happen to her if she did not finish the work he had assigned to her.

“Sir, I’d best be getting back to these weeds. It was nice talking with you. I do hope you are able to find the person you are searching for.”

“Ah yes, thank you. I shall not return to my beautiful home by the blue waters until I have found her.”

*Blue! Why does that color always evoke such peaceful feelings inside me?* she wondered with a growing curiosity.

“Sir, just a minute. I hope you don’t mind, but may I weed while we continue to talk? I must finish this chore, but I do wish to know more about this person you are looking for.”

“Why, yes, of course. In fact, let me help you,” the gentle stranger offered. “You have done a fine job in this garden, in spite of the soil being so poor.”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Mashber murmured. “I’m not really good at much of anything.”

A flicker of sadness seemed to cross the stranger’s face, but he

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said nothing. Instead, he bent down and began helping her pull the stubborn weeds.

Mashber couldn't help but notice his scent as he knelt by her side. He smelled so clean—like the fragrance of pine trees. Bane smelled foul. She always had to hold her nose when he was near.

“The girl I'm looking for would be a young woman now,” the stranger said, “but I haven't seen her since she was taken away as a little girl.”

“Taken away?” Mashber asked perplexed.

“Yes. We were friends. I used to play with her on a sunny beach when she was little and I was just a boy. I was on my way there to play with her one day when I walked past her father talking to a stranger in their rose garden. It was obvious that the stranger was quite agitated. I couldn't help but hear a bit of their conversation. Unfortunately, the stranger noticed me and was furious that I had overheard part of his discussion. He quickly ordered me to draw some cool water for him from a distant well.

“I reluctantly did as I was told, but when I returned with the water there was no one in the rose garden. Something wasn't right. No one seemed to be around and my friend was no longer playing on the beach. Later I learned that the little girl was missing and that her father and a large search party had gone out immediately to look for her. Sadly, she was gone. No one ever saw her again. Only a towel with her name embroidered on it was left by a crumbling sand castle.

“Eventually her father, who was deeply grieving for his little girl, commissioned me to pursue her to the ends of the earth. I have searched many kingdoms looking for her and have endured many hardships on my travels. I, too, have been heartsick since her disappearance. If only I had gone to be with her as she played on the beach instead of listening to her father's conversation with that stranger. Perhaps I could have protected her. I am

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certain,” he said with a pained voice, “that it was the stranger who took her from the island.”

Mashber was dismayed to know this poor man had suffered so much. She knew what it was like to hurt, to be alone, and to feel no hope. As she gave a final tug on a deeply rooted weed she told the stranger, “I’ll watch for any young women who may pass this way, but I am almost certain I won’t be of any help to you.”

“I understand,” the kind stranger remarked. He looked around at the barren landscape. “You truly do live in the outer region of the Valley of Baca, don’t you?”

Mashber nodded. “Whom should I say is looking for her if I find her?” she asked.

“Tell her Lathan is searching for her, although she will most likely not remember me.” With that Lathan helped Mashber finish the weeding and then stood to leave.

“I’d better be on my journey now. I need to get back to the main city in the Valley of Baca right away and join up with the army that is waiting for me. Good-bye, Mashber,” Lathan called as he started down the lane leading back to the main city.

“Good-bye,” Mashber called back. “I hope you find her,” she said under her breath. Reluctantly she turned and made her way back to the decrepit shack to start supper for Bane.

Mashber, however, kept looking over her shoulder to see if she could catch a glimpse of the kind stranger as he went down the road. He was so intriguing to her! All at once, she tripped on a tree root and fell facedown, hitting her head hard. For how long she blacked out she had no idea.

“Strange,” she exclaimed while coming back to consciousness. “I just had a thought of blue, calm water.” The thought reminded her of the calmness of the kind stranger. As she regained full consciousness, her eyes hurt and she bit down on something gritty. She realized she had landed facedown in a pile

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of sand left over from a work project Bane had forced her to do. The sand . . .

“What was with the sand?” Mashber wondered as she tried to spit it out. She fought hard to put her conflicting thoughts together. The next instant Bane was standing over her.

“Get up, you lazy, ugly fool,” he demanded angrily. “How dare you take a nap in my absence? And why didn’t you start cooking supper after you weeded? I can’t leave you alone even for a few minutes, can I? You never do anything right! You just never quite measure up, do you?”

Struggling to get up from her knees and then falling back down again, Mashber begged Bane for mercy. “I’m sorry; it’s all my fault. I tripped. I’ll tend to your supper right away.”

Bane glared at her, pulled out his whip, and left a wallop of a welt on her bare legs. Writhing in pain, Mashber instantly pulled up her legs to shield them from further blows. Bane watched her as he let out a string of destroying words that knifed her heart even more than the whip had damaged her body.

Mashber pleaded hoarsely, “Please stop, I’m sorry. I won’t do it again, I’ll be good.”

But suddenly Mashber realized something had happened to her in that fall. Her memories had returned! Memories that had been cursed and pushed down somehow filtered through her foggy mind. She remembered a deep blue sea, she remembered soft powdery sand, she remembered that her name was Jule, she remembered her father. She remembered what seemed like a young boy who used to build castles out of shimmering sand with her.

“Lathan!” Jule cried out as she continued kneeling in the dirt. Bane was now swearing at her to stand up and get moving.

“You’re a good-for-nothing, foolish, lazy girl. Shame on you! I leave you alone for a short time and you quit working. You need constant beatings to remind you to do your jobs.” His voice was

loud and cantankerous, but it didn't faze her. To Jule, Bane's voice paled in comparison to the thunderous voice of her thoughts.

"Lathan!" she cried aloud again.

This time Bane paused, his whip in midair and glared at her. "*What* did you just say?" He demanded.

"Lathan," Jule said, but this time in a hushed voice.

You would have thought Jule just said the most vulgar word in the whole world. Bane was livid, and his face showed it!

All at once, Jule got up and starting running. It didn't matter that Bane was right behind her, cracking his whip with every step. She ran with an unusual amount of strength and swiftness along the lane she had seen the stranger take earlier. Up ahead, in the distance, she thought she saw the kind stranger and he was running toward her.

*Could it be Lathan?* she hoped. Behind her she heard hissing breath and venomous words spewing from Bane. "You are cursed Mashber and don't you forget it!"

"My name is Jule, not Mashber," she yelled back to him.

With that, Bane was like a wild-eyed, roaring lion bent on devouring her. Jule, however, kept on running as fast as she could toward the kind stranger. It was all she could do not to listen to Bane. He was so very strong, in fact, stronger than ever.

"Remember you are mine! You belong to me now. You will never be any different," he screamed as Jule ran ahead as fast as she could.

Jule almost felt like giving up. But Lathan was also getting closer to her, which gave her renewed courage. She knew, as painful and frightening as it was, she had to take this journey. Faintly at first, above the roar of Bane, she heard Lathan call encouragingly to her with every step he took toward her.

"You are the one I am looking for! You are my lost friend. Jule, you are the one I used to call Little Pearl!"

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Deep down, Jule knew Lathan was speaking the truth. She felt it. She was delirious with joy as she continued running toward him.

“Lathan! Lathan!” she called out.

Jule reached Lathan and fell into the safety of his arms. The moment she did she noticed a whole army of warriors who stood stretched out across the horizon. Bane saw it too. He stopped in his tracks right behind Jule and Lathan. The blood drained from his face.

“You’re done, Bane, you cannot fight against all of them.” Lathan’s voice was authoritative and commanding.

“You’ll pay for this, Lathan. Mashber belongs to Beelzebub, and you know it. He’s given me rights to her.”

“No, Bane, she is not yours, and she does not belong to Prince Beelzebub. You have no birth certificate or servitude contract for her, do you?”

Bane turned a deep shade of red. He balled his fists tightly and cursed angrily.

“I thought not,” said Lathan. “She belongs to another kingdom, and in fact, my master gave me a certificate of redemption to present when I found her so she could leave the Valley of Baca. So, as you can see, she is coming with me.”

Bane glanced at the certificate, and confronting Jule he began to screech, “I have a supernatural hold on you. Even when you leave me you’ll continue to be under Prince Beelzebub’s curse. You’ll always feel worthless. You may be free of me physically, but not from the thoughts Prince Beelzebub will put into your head. You will always believe my words because you are mine. Remember you are cursed and your name is Mashber. I will return, I will return!” he shrieked. Then instantly he dissolved right in front of them. All that was left of Bane was a small pile of gray powdered granite lying on the ground.

Jule stared with astonishment at the granules on the ground.



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Her eyes quickly riveted back toward Lathan and then to the paper he held in his hand. There was no mistaking it; the legal document was authentic, and it was binding. Jule was free! She had been incredibly and wonderfully delivered from Bane.

“There is so much I want to know, and so much I still need to understand,” Jule said to Lathan.

“I know, my dear. I will explain as much as I can and as much as you are able to take in.” Jule nodded in agreement. Suddenly, Jule noticed that the army slowly dissipated back into the horizon.

“Lathan, where did that army come from?”

“They are from my island kingdom; the one I told you about. They were here to help me against Bane.”

“Which kingdom?”

“The kingdom on Indigo Island—where you are from.”

“Lathan, is that where the water is very blue?”

“Yes, it is my dear one. And it’s the place you belong.”

“Then those are the happy memories I just remembered. I was a good little girl who used to play on the seashore, basking in the golden sunlight.” Jule’s breath caught. “I—I used to play with you! It’s true, isn’t it?” Jule’s eyes were bright with joyful memories. Then she paused. Her bright eyes darkened, and her smile melted.

“Wait, Lathan, I am so sorry, but I cannot go back with you. I have changed. I am not who I used to be. I’m not good anymore. I am different. I’m lazy and ugly. I can’t do anything right. I would disappoint you.”

“Who told you all those things?” Lathan asked her.

Letting out her breath, Jule responded, “It’s simply who I am.”

“My child, those ideas were not yours when you lived on Indigo Island. Someone evil has planted those ideas in your head. You can, however, be free of those lies.”

“But Lathan, I was cursed by Bane. You heard him, that curse

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will remain on me the rest of my life! There is no way to undo it. It's a curse of shame."

"Oh, but there *is* a way out of Bane's curse, dear one! He was wrong! In the kingdom you came from there is a proverb that says—"

Suddenly, before Lathan could continue, the pile of powdered granite on the ground—the pile that had once been Bane—began to move. Jule gasped. It started to form into words right before their eyes. When she read the words, she was horrified.

"Lathan, look!" Jule wailed, pointing to the words on the ground. "That is the curse Bane pronounced over me years ago. He said he would return. He also told me he would always have a grasp on me. Oh, it's true," groaned Jule. "Bane *does* have me under his power!"

"Listen, my sweet child. Go ahead and read that curse again." With hesitation at first, Jule forced herself to reread the curse of the powder words on the ground.

"Lathan, it's still the same awful curse," Jule lamented after she read it. "It makes me shudder!"

"Dear one, that curse is invalid for two reasons."

"It is?" asked Jule incredulously.

"Yes, number one, you did not *deserve* that curse. What happened to you was not your fault. You were innocent, my child. Do you hear me? Innocent!

"Second, powerful words from your kingdom—words that override that curse—are interwoven into the curse. As I was starting to tell you before that curse reappeared on the ground, there is a good and reassuring proverb in your kingdom. That proverb is hidden in Bane's curse." Lathan pulled something out of his satchel.

"Here, look through these binoculars so you can read what the curse *really* says. Read only the words in bold print and

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ignore the others.” Jule tentatively lifted the binoculars to her eyes. Immediately black, bold words appeared in the text of Bane’s curse on the ground:

*You are mine now.*

*I will forever have a hold on you as long as you live on earth.*

*You’ll not be able to speak about this—it will be our little secret. A secret you will lock up inside of you.*

*You will believe that you are not good enough and you will never measure up to what you think people want you to become. These thoughts will restrict and bind you like **AN** ancient heavy metal chain.*

*Even though, at times, you may feel like this bondage is **UNDESERVED**, you will continue to manage to live under its intoxicating influence.*

*This is a **CURSE** you will secretly carry for life.*

*How **DOES** one break free? There is **NOT** one thing you can do.*

*You will **COME** to believe the lies about yourself more and more. These lies will take away your confidence and cause you **TO** feel shame. Shame will never allow you to **REST**—you will always think that something is wrong with you.*

*Mashber, you are trash, you are worthless. This curse will last.*

“What does it read, my child?”

“It says, ‘An undeserved curse does not come to rest.’”<sup>1</sup> Jule said hesitantly as she read the words in bold print.

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 26:2, NIV

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“You see, an unfair curse will not land on its intended victim,” Lathan said.

Jule’s heart began to beat wildly with joy. “Can it really be true, Lathan? I don’t have to live under a curse?”

“I am telling you the truth. You are free from the curse.”

“But why won’t this curse rest on me?” Jule asked.

“Because it’s not a true curse. Let me explain. Bane works for Beelzebub, the one who first brought evil into this world through his deception. When that happened, a stronger king than Beelzebub cursed him and the ground he crawled on. This powerful king, did not, however, curse man and woman.”<sup>2</sup>

“*You* are not the cursed one, Jule. Beelzebub and his helpers are the cursed ones! He just wants you to think you are cursed because *he* is! He wants you to *think* his curse has power over you, but it really doesn’t. Bane wanted this false curse to become your self-fulfilling prophecy.”

At that moment an insidious, evil laugh was heard. Bane seemed to have reappeared again out of nowhere and was standing next to the granite powder curse words.

Jule grasped Lathan’s arm and screamed. “I had hoped he was gone for good, but he keeps coming back—just like he said he would!”

“Listen, dear one,” Lathan whispered in her ear. “Quickly grab the powder on the ground and throw it into my bag.” As fast as she could, Jule scooped up the curse words and threw them into his satchel. As she did, Bane seemed to grow bigger and more powerful.

“Now,” Lathan continued evenly, “walk over and hand the bag with the curse words in them to Bane.”

“Oh Lathan, I can’t do it. I’m sorry, but I am so afraid.”

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<sup>2</sup> See Genesis 3:14-19

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“You must my child. I am here with you. I will help you know what to say to Bane. And once you hand him the satchel I will explain the reason. But hurry, time is of the essence.”

With a boldness Jule had never known before, she confronted Bane. Looking up into his yellow eyes, which had narrowed into slits, she shoved the bag into his hands.

“Here, this is yours,” she courageously told him. “This does not belong to me. It belongs to you, and I am returning it to you.” With that, Bane’s eyes went wild as he collapsed and disappeared with the most earsplitting howl she had ever heard.

“Oh Lathan, what just happened?”

“Let me explain, dear one. The satchel illustrates a point I want you to grasp. The curse words and the vile things that were done to you produced *shame* in your life. That shame stuck to you like the particles of Bane’s ground granite. Consequently, that shame clouded your face, your thoughts, and your actions. It paralyzed you from becoming all that has been planned for you to become. When you took those shameful granite words, put them in the bag, and handed it back to Bane, you were giving shame back to its rightful owner. You don’t have to carry shame any longer! Any time those shame-causing thoughts come back, quickly give them back to the one who shamed you.”

Jule pondered his words. “Is—is Bane gone for good now, Lathan?” she asked tentatively.

“Yes and no, dear one. Unfortunately, the things he said and did to you will show up every so often and you will be tempted to think he still has a hold on you. But don’t you believe that for a second!” Jule listened carefully to his words.

“You are free from Bane now,” Lathan continued, “but remember that Beelzebub works through other dark princes too. Some day Bane and the likes of him will receive the punishment he and Prince Beelzebub deserve.

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“You see, Prince Beelzebub is known as the ‘father of lies.’ Lying is his native language,<sup>3</sup> and he wanted the ‘lie language’ to become your primary language too. Beelzebub will seek to accuse you unmercifully of anything he can think of—whether or not Bane is around.”

“You mean,” interrupted Jule, “like when my thoughts tell me I can’t do anything right?”

“Exactly! But it’s all a show on Beelzebub’s part; he has no true power over you. He gets his pseudo power only if you believe him. Does that make sense?”

“Yes, I think so,” said Jule hesitantly, trying to take it all in. “Lathan, can I ask you another question?”

“Yes, my dear one, what is it?”

“Bane mentioned hirudins on the day he found me playing on the shore many years ago. He said we would go find my father so he could explain them to me. What are hirudins, anyway, Lathan?”

Her friend’s face saddened at that word. “Hirudin is actually a chemical that a leech produces and secretes to destroy its victim.”

“A chemical from leeches!” Jule cried with horror. She had seen leeches in the dirty pond near her shack in the Valley of Baca. They were wormlike and had mouths that sucked blood from their victims.

“My child, Bane is the very characteristic of a leech who secretes hirudin.”

“How is that?” Jule asked in a shocked tone.

“He preys on people like a leech does. Bane sucks the blood, the very life, from his victims. He prefers darkness and avoids light. Bane is secretive so he covers himself with darkness.”

Lathan studied Jule’s face before continuing. “Bane is like a

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<sup>3</sup> See John 8:44

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leech in another way. You see, the leech secretes hirudin at the same time it is sucking the blood.”

“Why does it do that?” Jule asked with a shudder that even Lathan noticed.

“The chemical prevents its victim’s blood from thickening.”

Jule looked confused.

“As you may know, my dear, when a person’s blood won’t thicken, he or she continues to bleed. That makes healing very difficult. *You* have been Bane’s host. He has, in a sense, been secreting hirudin into you so you will continue to bleed and not heal. You have bled many times in your heart from his deep wounds. Consequently, as he sucked the very life from you, without realizing it, you fed your abuser more and more power.”

“Oh Lathan,” Jule said with a cold chill running through her body, “do you think I will ever heal from my heart wounds and all the blood loss?”

Again, a sad look came across her friend’s face.

“It will require time to replenish the loss of blood. It will also take much time to heal the deep wounds of your heart and your crushed spirit. But it can be done. Just being able to talk about this for the first time and bringing it out in the open is the beginning of healing.” A slight look of hope emerged on Jule’s concerned face.

“Enough said for now, dear child. Come, we need to leave this Valley of Baca and make our way back to the ship so we can return to Indigo Island.” As they walked over the barren, rocky soil to the ship, they talked of many things.

“You are leaving this land for another land so there is much I need to share with you, my child. It will be different for you when you return to Indigo Island. You see, dear one, you speak a different language than we do.” Jule looked totally surprised.

“You mean the *island* adopted a new and different language

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while I was gone?” Jule asked, trying to clarify what she thought she had just heard.

“No, *you* speak the different language. Remember how we spoke about Bane’s lie language?” Jule nodded. “Well, while you lived in the Valley of Baca you picked up the language of shame, which is really a dialect of the lie language.”

“I don’t understand, Lathan. What have I said that reveals I speak a different language?”

“Someone speaking the shame language uses such phrases as, ‘I’m not good enough,’ ‘I am worthless,’ ‘I’m inadequate.’ These are really lies, Jule. So when you buy into the shame language, you end up with an accent—a lie accent.”

He continued, “The shame language is also noticeable when you continually apologize. Jule, your language is foreign to me when I hear you apologize profusely for wrongs you have not committed.

“I can also tell you speak the shame language because you don’t know how to receive a compliment. You cast off compliments. Remember when I told you that you had done a good job gardening in Bane’s garden?” Jule nodded slightly. “You responded by saying, ‘Oh, it’s really nothing.’

“Do you know, Jule, what the opposite of shame is?” Lathan asked, taking a different approach.

“No, I haven’t really thought about that before.”

“The opposite of shame is confidence. When there is shame in your life, your face is clouded and there is a tendency to hold back. You lack confidence. When shame is replaced with confidence, however, your face is radiant and you’re more open to trying new things. You are even willing to consider taking a risk.

“The island people speak the language of confidence. That doesn’t mean we know it all or that we are arrogant. But we know we are valued and loved, so we speak up and try new



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things. We know that if we happen to fail, it is okay. We get up and get going again.”

“I’m beginning to understand what you mean. Instead of saying, ‘I can’t do something,’ I should learn to say, ‘I’ve never done that before, but I’ll try.’ And instead of refusing a compliment I need to say a simple thank you and leave it at that.”

“Yes, my child, you are getting the island language!”

“I’m sorry. I guess I do apologize for everything, don’t I?”

Lathan only smiled as Jule quickly realized her error of apologizing once again.

“But I feel I must take the blame for everything.”

“Why do you think that is so, my dear?”

“I’m not exactly sure. I do know that whenever anything goes wrong—even if it’s not my fault—I somehow feel like I caused it.”

“I see,” her friend gently said. “You have picked this up from Bane, as well. The language of shame is also full of accusational phrases. Remember how Bane loved to accuse you? Even if you didn’t do anything wrong, he would try to make you feel guilty. He picked up this bad trait from his master Beelzebub, who has the reputation of being ‘the accuser of all people.’”<sup>4</sup>

“Lathan, I don’t think I will ever be able to change the way I view myself. I think it’s too late. I’ve given up hoping for change. I have been crushed by Bane’s powerful words and consequently have molded myself to my abuser’s desire.”

“Yes, I can see why you feel that way, but there is a way out. It will require some time. You are just now coming out of the shame language and culture you have been raised in for many years. But you are not too old to learn a new language. We will all help you. It’s easiest to learn a language when you are immersed in it all the time.”

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<sup>4</sup> Taken from Revelation 12:10

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Jule sighed, hoping her friend was right.

“My child, let’s sit here on the shore for awhile. We have walked quite a distance and our ship will be here soon to take us back to Indigo Island.”

There was silence between them as Jule tried to take everything in. She was hot, tired, perplexed, and overjoyed all at the same time. It was a strange yet wonderful combination of feelings. Thankfully, every so often the cool sea breezes gently stirred and lifted her hair off her sweaty neck and lifted her spirits as well. At last she saw the ship come into view, just as her rescuer had promised.

As Jule and Lathan reached the dock, he held out his hand to her. As he did, Jule abruptly stopped. Fear gripped her and her stomach churned.

“The boat!” Jule said thickly. She had not been on a boat since the day she arrived at the Valley of Baca. It brought back memories she did not want to think about. Lathan saw her fear.

“Jule, I know this is hard for you, but please let me help you climb aboard the ship,” he gently coaxed. She looked into his deep and searching eyes. She was so afraid of being betrayed.

“Dear one, I know it is hard, but you can trust me, and you must if you want to leave this place and move on.” She knew he was right. It was just so difficult to put her trust in anyone. *Will I ever be able to trust again?* Jule wondered silently.

“Take your time, and when you are ready to leave for Indigo Island, let me know,” Lathan said reassuringly.

Jule thought of her life in the Valley of Baca.

*It is really all I know,* Jule said to herself as she looked back at the Valley of Baca. *Could I make it in another place?* But the more she thought about remaining in this frightening valley, the more she realized it was not an option.

Turning back to Lathan, she held out her hand to him. “Very

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well, I will get on the ship, but it is very difficult for me.” Lathan nodded knowingly as she tentatively placed her hand in his so he could help her up the boat’s ramp.

His kindness, however, helped put her at ease. *I think Lathan is a safe person*, Jule concluded to herself a while later. *I just need to be able to fully believe that.*

Jule watched as her friend took command of the boat. He seemed to know just what to do. She began to relax. There was something good about him. She was beginning to feel safe and increasingly secure with him.

After a few minutes at sea, Lathan turned the wheel over to the captain. “Let’s continue our talk as we sail the open sea, Jule,” Lathan said, interrupting her thoughts. “We have so much catching up to do.” He and Jule moved to the deck to find a quiet, but scenic, spot to talk.

“Jule, when we were back in the Valley of Baca, I heard Bane call you Mashber.”

“Yes, you are correct, but I hate that name. I don’t ever want to be called that name again.” With a sympathetic nod, her friend agreed to her request.

“Let me share some things about the name Bane gave you, though, before we put it to rest. You probably didn’t realize that the name *Mashber* has several meanings.<sup>5</sup> One meaning is ‘crisis.’ Bane named you that because he wanted you to live in continual crisis mode.

“Bane also knew that the word *Mashber* means ‘to break.’ He sought to break your spirit in hopes that you would become embittered.

“There is, however, another meaning behind the word *Mashber* that Bane probably didn’t know about.”

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<sup>5</sup> In the Hebrew language

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“What?” Jule asked.

“It means ‘birth stool.’”

Jule looked mildly amused.

“The birth stool was used by women in ancient times to sit upon as they gave birth. I see you as one who is now entering a new life—a new birth. You have a resilient spirit, Jule!”

“What do you mean?” Jule wanted to know.

“Even after all that has happened to you, you have the spirit within you to bounce back. You can be the person you are supposed to be! So if memories of Bane calling you that old name come to your thoughts again, remember you are a new person with a new birth and a new name.” Jule smiled as she thought about his comments for a few moments.

“Speaking of names,” she said, “I wonder why my father named me Jule? I don’t mean to be disrespectful to him,” she said, smiling, “but the spelling reminds me of an old stubborn mule.” Lathan threw back his head and laughed.

“Oh my dear, when we were together on the beach when you were young, I would try to teach you to spell your name in the sand. You insisted on writing out your name ‘J-u-l-e.’ But your name is really spelled ‘J-e-w-e-l.’”

“Oh,” sighed Jewel. “Well, do you know, by any chance, why I was named Jewel?”

“For several reasons,” Lathan replied. “When you were born your father was so delighted. He wanted you and had waited a long time for you. Your little face was radiant as if angels had kissed your cheeks and left a bit of their glow on you. You sparkled like the shimmering sand on Indigo Island’s beach. Plus your eyes shone and glimmered just like jewels in his crown.”

Immediately Jewel looked bewildered. “What did you mean when you said, ‘like jewels in his crown?’”

“Jewel, your father is the king of Indigo Island. That makes

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you royalty, my child! You are a princess! Did you not remember that?”

“But, but,” Jule stammered. “I am nothing, I am trash, I . . .”

“Hush, my sweet one. That is your old shame language coming through again. You must learn to recognize it and refute it. You are indeed a true princess, Jewel. Did you hear me? A princess! Bane tried to take away your identity. He never wanted you to know you were a child of the king. He knew that would give you worth and make you desire to discover who you really were. He wanted your true identity hidden.”

*I am a princess.* That knowledge just about took Jewel’s breath away. As she stood on the deck of the boat, a gentle breeze blew in her face almost as if to try to give her back her breath. “I am a princess, I am a princess!” she began saying out loud, hoping the truth of those words eventually would sink in.

“Yes, yes, you are a princess!” Lathan confirmed with smiling eyes. “You are your father’s jewel, highly cherished by him. You, my dear, are a royal gem in his treasury of loved ones.”

It all seemed so surreal to Jewel. All she could do, however, was whisper over and over, “I am a princess, and my father is the king.”

“Jewel,” Lathan said suddenly, interrupting her newfound declarations, “we are now some miles out from the mainland of the Valley of Baca. Turn around and look back at the mainland. What do you see?” Reluctantly, she turned around and looked back. “I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but I really don’t want to look back at that horrible mainland.”

“I know. But sometimes we need to take a long look back to prepare for the journey forward. Now, tell me, dear one, what do you see?” Lathan whispered again.

Jewel hated to admit it, but actually from this faraway vantage point, the mainland looked rather nice.

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“Well, from here I see the tops of the balsam trees up on the cliffs. They’re swaying easily in the light wind. Down below in the valley, I see tidy white houses. Everything looks clean, and sunbeams are lighting up certain sections of the town.”

Everything seemed to blend together in a picturesque way. The roads and buildings looked well maintained. She couldn’t see the dilapidated shack in which she’d lived or the rats that normally ran freely in the streets. The whole mainland scene would have made a lovely postcard picture.

Puzzled, Jewel asked Lathan about this. “Why does the Valley of Baca look so differently from here?”

Again, Lathan flashed a knowing smile.

“It is distance that now gives you a different perspective, my dear one. If you were up close you would see the dirt, the shabbiness of the houses, the rats, and the garbage. But from here, miles out at sea, distance has erased the harshness of that reality.”

“But I will never forget the horrible conditions of the Valley of Baca!” she cried, pounding her hand on the railing of the boat. “It may look okay from here, but it’s really not!”

“Jewel, I am not saying you will recall this place with fondness or that you will forget the pain, but if you choose, the bitterness will fade and eventually the memories will lose their biting sting. Now you see only the cruelty of that place, but in time, with distance, your perspective will soften and change. Oh, you’ll still remember, but if you *choose* to let go of the bitterness—your attitude and the passing of time will help blur some of those memories together so they will not be so harsh. You will not remember *all* the flaws of that place because of an ever-increasing perspective from a distance.

“You will also acquire a deeper understanding of the mystery of pain. Do not let your terrible sorrows go to waste, Jewel.

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If you allow it, your sorrows will one day enable you to help others who have deep heart wounds like you.”

Jewel was quiet.

Still looking back at the mainland, Lathan continued. “Jewel, did you know that the name *Baca* actually means weeping. You have wept long and hard in the Valley of Baca. But there is good news; *Baca* also means balsam. You just described to me a few minutes ago how you saw the balsam trees swaying in the breeze. Those particular balsam trees can grow in the most arid and barren of places, yet in spite of this, they have a very fragrant perfume.

“Jewel, you have walked through the Valley of Baca, a place of weeping, but you have come out with an incredible fragrance. It is a precious fragrance, a costly fragrance. You are of great worth!<sup>6</sup>

“Now, Jewel, turn and face the other way. Look!” he pointed, “What do you see?”

Putting her hand up to shade her eyes from the sun, she saw what Lathan was pointing to. Excitedly she exclaimed, “I see a sparkling shore.”

“What else do you see, Jewel?” he asked.

“I can see a magnificent castle, and I see a lovely fence surrounding it.” Jewel was filled with joy like she had never known before. Tears streamed down her face. These were good tears, tears of true release. Jewel was crying for all the lost years. These weren’t like the tears she wept in the Valley of Baca. When her teary eyes finally cleared, she looked again.

“I can make out a garden and a gate,” she joyously cried, “and the water is so blue over there!” While Jewel did not remember actually living in a castle, she could recall sitting on

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<sup>6</sup> Taken from Psalm 84:5-6

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the sand building castles. She definitely remembered the deep azure water.

“That is your home,” Lathan declared, “the home that has been waiting for you.”

Jewel looked from the castle back to Lathan. She felt something tug at her heart as he tenderly looked into her eyes. What did she feel? It had been so long since she had felt cared for by anyone. As if reading her mind, Lathan gently pulled her to his side. For a brief moment, Jewel soaked in the comfort and love she had longed to receive for so long. Just as quickly, though, she abruptly pulled away.

Suddenly they were in the harbor, and the captain steered the boat toward the dock. Lathan grabbed the boat ropes and helped secure the ship in the slip. Immediately Jewel flew off the ship, down the wooden dock, and onto the shimmering sand.

She had to get away. As much as she longed for people to care for and love her, it was so hard to accept. Even though Lathan’s concern for her was pure and bathed in kindness, it made her uncomfortable. While Jewel craved that kind of care and longed to be cherished, she didn’t feel she was worthy of such love. Jewel just didn’t know how to open her heart and receive love.

The journey on the boat and her first few minutes on Indigo Island were almost too much for Jewel to take in. Her emotions were heavy, and her body felt weary. She dropped to the sand and waited there while Lathan finished gathering his things off the ship.

Absentmindedly, she began scooping up handfuls of shimmering sand, watching it sift through her fingers before it fell back onto the beach. While doing so, she inadvertently picked up a shell, which had been hidden in the sand. Immediately Jewel felt her throat constrict as she peered at the shell.

“I see you’ve found an oyster shell,” Lathan exclaimed with



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a grin as he caught up with Jewel on the beach. "One of the island's fishermen must have dropped it as he made his way to the fish market."

"Yes," replied Jewel, but her face quickly darkened. "But I never want to see one of these shells again!" She threw the shell down. Noticing Jewel's obvious anger, Lathan sat down beside her on the powdery sand and took hold of her shaking hand. Patiently he waited for her to speak.

"I'm sorry," Jewel lamented. "It's just that the shell brought back a bad memory, and it caught me off guard. Bane often came home with a bucket of oysters that I had to use to make soup."

"I see," said Lathan with empathy. "Bad memories can be rather difficult, can't they? Perhaps, dear one, painful memories surface to our hearts at times so that an even deeper healing will be able to take place." Jewel nodded yet remained silent as she sought to process what Lathan had said.

Carefully, Lathan reached over and picked up the shell Jewel had cast aside. Turning it over and peeking inside of it he said, "Hmmm. It is as I suspected."

"What did you suspect?" Jewel inquired.

"This is no ordinary oyster shell; it is a very special one. Look," he said as he used his pocket knife to open the shell all the way, "there is a pearl in it!" With a soft, faraway look in his eyes, Lathan whispered, "I often called you Little Pearl when you were young."

"I heard you say that when I was running away from Bane, but I'm afraid I don't understand," said Jewel. "What is a pearl? And why did you used to call me Little Pearl?"

"When you were making oyster soup for Bane, did you ever find anything in an oyster shell besides the oyster?"

"No," Jewel said with surprise.

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“Sometimes,” Lathan continued, “when you open a special type of oyster, there is a beautiful, white, round type of stone. It kind of has a faint rainbow on it. It is called a pearl. But again, it takes a very special oyster to produce one of these.

“As to why I used to call you Little Pearl,” he continued, “it’s because we would look for oyster shells when you were young. One time we found an oyster shell lying on the beach. I cracked it open and found a little pearl hiding inside. Even though it was tiny, you were so happy and excited. I began calling you Little Pearl on that day.”

Jewel smiled, thinking how good it felt to be called an endearing name as opposed to the names Bane used to call her. Quickly, not wanting to dwell on those horrid names, she glanced up at Lathan.

“What determines whether or not an oyster has a pearl?” Jewel wanted to know.

“When something like a grain of sand or a little piece of food gets in the soft tissue of the oyster it quickly secretes a protective fluid around it so it will not hurt or irritate its soft tissue. It puts on layer after layer of this cushioning fluid around the irritant. Eventually, a beautiful, valuable pearl forms inside the shell.

“If you were to cut a pearl in half you would see many layers, just like a slice of an onion. And in the middle, Jewel, you would find the irritant that caused this valuable and exquisite pearl.”

Jewel listened intently. “Perhaps Bane found pearls in the oysters he brought me but removed them before I cleaned them for the soup,” she exclaimed.

“That would make sense,” Lathan acknowledged. “The likes of Bane always seek to steal the inside worth of any of its victims. Bane sought to do that very thing to you, Jewel. He believes he has stolen your pearl of great worth from inside you, but that is not true. Now, it is true that the sands of life

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have worked their way into your once-protected shell and have invaded the soft tissues of your body and mind. However, my dear one, you now have an option.

“You can either stay in pain from those harsh and horrible irritants, or you can pour on the soothing fluid of forgiveness around them. The latter is very hard work. You will have to continually put layer upon layer of forgiveness around your hurt because it is a process. If you do this, however, two things will happen. First, you will actually feel better because that irritant will no longer be able to pick at you. Second, you, like the pearl, will be of great worth because of the valuable treasure inside of you. But this cushioning process known as forgiveness is tough to do. Just as it takes years for a pearl to form inside an oyster, it also takes time for forgiveness to do its healing work.”

Jewel listened as best as she could before she blurted out, “Forgive Bane? How can you tell me to forgive the one who worked for the evil Beelzebub? How can I forgive him for what he did to me? How can I forgive one who has robbed me of so much life? No, Lathan, it seems unfair for you to ask that of me. To forgive is totally disgusting, unthinkable, and utterly impossible.”

“I admit it is very, very difficult to forgive the likes of Bane. Under the influence of the evil prince Beelzebub, he did horrible things to you. But believe it or not, Bane, too, is a victim. He was once mistreated in many of the same ways he mistreated you. Somewhere he gave his allegiance over to evil and sided with the enemy.

“By forgiveness,” Lathan went on, “I do not mean that you try to make amends with him and reconcile. In this case that would not be good. The forgiveness I am talking about is a relinquishment of bitterness that you have toward Bane. Forgiveness is the best thing you can do for *yourself*,” Lathan said. “And it is the only way to unlock the chains Bane had so tightly wrapped around you.”

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“But I see no chains, Lathan.”

“That is true,” he concurred. “But if you go through life without forgiveness cushioning your soft heart, you will hurt worse than if actual chains were wrapped tightly around your arms and legs. You see, extending forgiveness to another person helps *you*—just like the oyster cushioned the irritant to help itself. Without even knowing it, the oyster created a valuable pearl that not only benefited itself, but others as well.

“Someday, Jewel, there will be a pearl produced from all the pain you have endured,” he said, taking her hand. “A pearl represents those who have been through great tribulation and have overcome.”

Jewel, who had been looking down at the pearl while Lathan was talking, caught sight of the scars from the chains that had bound her wrists. When Lathan had reached for her hand, her sleeve had moved up, revealing her hideous scars. The memory of being dragged away from Indigo Island was fresh again. Quickly, Jewel reached over with her other hand and pulled her sleeve back down, hoping Lathan hadn't noticed. As she did so, however, she saw Lathan's left arm clearly for the first time. She saw scars on his wrists as well. Gingerly, she brought his arm up for a closer look. They stopped walking. Jewel turned his hand over and with horror realized his scars were also from chains.

She grabbed Lathan's right wrist to inspect it. An identical scar!

“Jewel, I have not hidden my scars, and neither do you need to hide yours.”

Jewel gasped. “You know about my scars?”

“Yes, and they are beautiful to me. They are not repulsive.”

“How can you say they are beautiful? They are ugly and disgusting to me.”

“Jewel, scars are full of purpose and meaning. They are left to

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remind you that your wound has healed. There is a big difference between a wound and scar.”

Once again Jewel gently inspected his wrist.

“My Little Pearl, now listen to me, I want you to hear this. I’ve spent years searching for you and was once even taken captive. Like you, I was bound in chains for a while. I managed to escape only when my enemies were distracted by an unexpected ambush. Yet I’ve forgiven the ones who did this to me.”

Jewel was stunned and could not find words to describe her thoughts. She took hold of both of his hands and let her own tears drop softly on top of his scars. “I wish my tears would erase your scars, Lathan.”

He smiled, “Jewel, I do not want my scars erased. No, these scars are reminders of victory. You see, I know what it’s like to experience shame, as well. I felt like a failure for so long because I couldn’t find you. There was also a part of me that felt responsible for your being kidnapped. I tortured myself daily with inner thoughts of ‘if only.’ Now these scars are reminders that my search for you has been worth it. These scars are beautiful to me, Jewel.” Again, Jewel was speechless.

She had plenty of time to think as she slipped her hand back into Lathan’s hand as they walked silently up the sand dune toward the castle.

As they crested the dune, Jewel suddenly cried out, “Lathan, look, there’s that beautiful garden and gate I saw from the ship.” With that, Jewel stopped speaking, let go of his hand, and started running toward the gate. He let her run, smiling as he watched her go.

She reached the gate and stopped. “The gate! It’s white and it’s also iridescent,” Jewel called out to him between taking gulps of air. “It’s almost like a rainbow. Isn’t it incredible!” she asked as Lathan caught up with her at the gate. Suddenly it came to her.

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“This is a pearl, isn’t it?” Jewel’s voiced trailed off as she looked at Lathan incredulously. He took a deep breath.

“Yes, it’s made from one pearl, my dear. When you enter that gate remember it was produced by intense suffering. It, too, has layer upon layer of a soothing ointment called forgiveness.”

Jewel felt like she was on holy ground as she gingerly ran her fingers over the smooth finish of the pearl gate. Still not daring to walk through the gate, Jewel turned to look at Lathan and asked, “This pearl represents me and what I’ve gone through, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, my Little Pearl.”

“Lathan, I feel free for the very first time that I can remember. I am now free to be me, aren’t I? I am free to be the person I was supposed to be!”

“Yes, dear Jewel, it is as you say. Now believe that with all of your heart. If you hear Bane’s whispers telling you otherwise, command those lying thoughts to leave. Then, look at the gate as a visual reminder that you have overcome great hardships. You are not just a survivor; you are now a victorious overcomer. You deserve to be here!” Jewel tried to let the truth of his words sink in.

With tenderness Lathan took her face in his hands and lifted it until her eyes looked into his turquoise blue eyes. “Jewel, you are beautiful and your face is radiant.”

Instantly Jewel looked down.

“Jewel,” Lathan whispered waiting for her to once again look up. “I love you.”

Jewel’s face continued to sparkle with joy, and her eyes glistened with tears.

“Do you know how long I have loved you?” Lathan asked as he tenderly embraced her.

“No, how long?” Jewel asked with hope shining in her eyes.

“Since the first time I called you Little Pearl.”

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For a while Jewel and Lathan simply held each other. He was holding his first lost love, and she was holding her first found love.

“Remember, Jewel, you are a true princess,” he whispered over and over. “It is in your blood. Remember *who* you are and to *whom* you belong. You are royalty! No one can change that. You are a true daughter of the king, and you are loved.”

Jewel buried her head on Lathan’s shoulder. “Oh, how can you love me with such an extravagant love? I don’t even have that kind of love for *myself*.” In the back of her mind she instantly heard whispers of sneers. *Lathan doesn’t really love you. How could he? He hasn’t seen you for years, and he doesn’t know all the ways Bane abused you. You are damaged goods.* It was as if Bane’s words were trying to get to her again, just as Lathan had told her would happen. But this time she recognized the language!

Quickly Jewel looked at the pearl gate in front of her again as a reminder of all Lathan had explained to her. *No, those are lies, she told herself. I am an overcomer! Bane has no hold on me any longer.* The words and sneers were instantly silenced.

Right at that moment, an azure wave crashed up on the shimmering sand close to where they stood and brushed across their toes. As it receded back to the sea it left a smooth wet path on the shore that sparkled like silver glitter.

“Lathan, that smooth, wet sand represents me, doesn’t it?” observed Jewel as a smile began to play upon her lips. “The rough places in my life will eventually be smoothed out as I begin the process of starting over again.”

“Yes,” answered Lathan with deep tenderness. “Look at it as though your shame is being carried out to sea.

“Jewel, are you now ready to go through the pearl gate and see all that is waiting for you?”

Jewel was silent as she first watched another wave lift up and

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then recede back into the blue sea. Slowing, she turned toward Lathan and smiled.

“Yes, I’m ready.” She slipped her hand into Lathan’s and walked with him through the pearl gate.

As they stepped to the other side, Lathan stopped and pulled her close. He tenderly looked into her soft brown eyes. Eyes that had once been filled with fear and pain now reflected a soft glimmer of peace and tears of joy. He traced a tear down her cheek with his thumb. “I have found you, my Little Pearl, and I will never leave you. You are the one I cherish.”

Jewel looked away. “Jewel, please look at me,” Lathan pleaded softly. “I would like you to try to remember something.” Turning her face to him again, Lathan continued. “If you seek to both *believe* and *consent* to being loved—even while you may still feel unworthy—you will have discovered a great secret to overcoming shame.”

“I’ll try, Lathan, but you may need to remind me. I truly do want to believe I am loved.”

“Oh you are, my dear Little Pearl!” Then slowly lifting her face to his, and with no resistance on Jewel’s part, he gently kissed his princess.

Gingerly, but with a new confidence, Jewel reached up and wrapped her arms around Lathan’s neck. While gazing into his smiling eyes, she returned the kiss.

“Jewel,” Lathan whispered, “You are loved by me. Now listen very carefully and try to comprehend what I am going to say next. You have lived with woundedness for many years, but Jewel, *your wounds no longer need to define, control, or shape you*. You are free—free to receive love and free to give love in return.”

“Oh, Lathan, you’re right! I *have* allowed my wounds to dictate who I am and how I act. I thought that I could never change, but you’ve helped me see that my wounds do not have



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to define me anymore.” Jewel buried her head in Lathan’s chest to help soak up her sweet tears of surrender.

When Jewel finally lifted her head she caught sight of movement over Lathan’s left shoulder. “Look!” she cried out in delight. Lathan turned and in the distance they could see Jewel’s father and all the people of Indigo Island running toward them. They were laughing and cheering with open, welcoming arms.

This all happened once upon a time (although I am pleased to tell you that it still happens today). And they lived happily ever after—because their shame had been lifted away.

