



ocean star

A Memoir


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Christina DiMari

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Ocean Star

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LIST OF CHARACTERS



Christina and her siblings from oldest to youngest

Angela
Anna
Gino
Christina
Carrie

Christina's parents

Agostino and Loretta

Christina's paternal grandparents

Frankie and Lily

Other family friends and relatives

Karen, family friend
Joey DiMari, Frankie's youngest brother and Christina's godfather
Ginger, Lily's sister
Ricky, Ginger's son

Christina's childhood friends from San Francisco


Chip
Rosie
Elena
Katie

Christina's friends in Mt. Shasta


Tashina
Carolyn

Christina's family

Michael, husband
Jake and Trevor, sons




AUTHOR'S NOTE



I've been an "older friend" to many girls over the course of my journey. I know what it's like to have to carve my own path and learn my lessons from bits and pieces of wisdom along the way.

The girls don't want me to tell them what I think they should do or how they should live their lives. They like to ask me questions about what I did so that they can step back and decide for themselves if that is something they want to do also. The girls are most often looking for someone who will tell them, "Oh, that happened to me too," and "I understand what you're feeling." They work things out on their own by sharing stories with each other and with me. As we get to know each other better, the question they ask me most often is "What helped you the most as you look back on your journey so far?"

When a friend of mine in the publishing world realized how many girls around the country were asking me questions about how I made it through my life, he encouraged me to write a book to answer the questions. Since I learn best from listening to people's experiences, I decided the best way I knew to share the lessons



I'd learned was to take my readers with me, back into my story. I didn't want to tell them, I wanted to show them. I hope this memoir will become a mirror for my readers to look at their own lives: where they came from, who they have become, and who they are still yet to be.

In order for me to show some of my journey, I needed to be open enough to share with my readers how my "star" got broken in the first place. Enter the hard part: bringing in other characters. In this story, I share only enough of other characters to make my point. I have used all liberties in the creative process of writing a memoir to weave scenes, characters, and lessons into a story that flows smoothly from one scene to the next. Please note that this is not a documentary of every detail of my life; rather, it's a memoir—a telling of particular events to bring to life certain themes and messages.

All this said, in order to protect the privacy of friends and family, some details—names, chronology, dialogue, details, and so forth—have been changed. Some of the characters are the composite of two people.

Before you begin, let me ask you to hold on tight. The road through my journey gets a bit bumpy and dark at times, but don't give up. Light shines through in the most unexpected ways, and the end is full of hope.

WHAT IS MEMOIR ANYWAY?

Is it autobiography? Is it creative nonfiction? Is it straight nonfiction? Is it memory?

Hope Edelman, a writing teacher in Los Angeles and the author of *Motherless Daughters* and *Mother of My Mother*, defines memoir this way: “Memoir is an artistically rendered, nonfiction narrative about a portion of a life, based on memory and the author’s interpretation of the past. As opposed to biography and autobiography, where the ultimate goal is the obvious linear truth, the ultimate goal of memoir is something much more emotional and creative and interpretive.”





PROLOGUE

destiny: anna's story

Panic gripped me as I pushed my brother and sister up the stairs. I had to find a safe haven for them—an escape from the terror erupting below us in the kitchen. I motioned for them to go into the bathroom, where we huddled, wide-eyed and frightened. We waited for the silence that would signal the end of the fighting. Yet this night, silence never came.

Screams of terror and cursing continued to echo up the stairs, piercing my tiny heart. Though only four years old, I extended my trembling hands to my eighteen-month-old brother, Gino. I pulled him close to my side and cupped my small hands over his ears. Five-year-old Angela huddled close beside me. An eternity seemed to pass. The three of us clung to each other on the cold bathroom floor.

Suddenly, the sound of a siren overpowered Daddy's angry voice and Mommy's cries for help that burst from below. Torn between fear and curiosity, I quietly crawled to the top of the staircase, followed by Gino and Angela. I looked in horror at the scene unfolding below us. The living room was a beehive of activity, filled with men in uniforms like the one Daddy wore to work.

Blood covered Daddy's hands as he knelt on the kitchen floor.

“There’s Daddy!” I whispered. “Why is Daddy crying?”

We watched from the darkness above as someone lifted Mommy onto a stretcher. The blanket covering her enhanced the silhouette of the soon-to-be-born child she carried.

“My baby! My baby! Don’t let my baby die!” Daddy shouted as the men whisked Mommy out into the darkness to the waiting ambulance.

Daddy nervously paced the living-room floor waiting for the policemen to stop talking to each other. His hands trembled as he traced his steps over and over.

A policeman finally came over to Daddy and said, “Your wife is hemorrhaging severely. It doesn’t look good. The doctor said the baby might not survive.”

“No! Not my baby!” Daddy screamed desperately. “You must save the baby!”

Later that night I closed my eyes and wondered if God would give me the little sister I hoped for. The baby wasn’t supposed to be born for two more months; would she live or die? In my mind I imagined the baby’s life, her very destiny, hanging in the balance. There in my room, kneeling beside my bed, I gently folded my hands and whispered, “Dear God, please let my sister live.”

They were only seven words. Simple words . . . and spoken by a mere child. Yet the next morning I found out my prayer was answered. My little sister, Christina, lived.

This book is her story as she remembers it.

Anna



PART I

into the chaos

I KNOW WHAT
I'M DOING.
I HAVE IT
ALL PLANNED
OUT—PLANS
TO TAKE CARE
OF YOU, NOT
ABANDON YOU,
PLANS TO GIVE YOU
THE FUTURE YOU HOPE FOR.

Jeremiah 29:11 (The Message)



CHAPTER 1

believe

I grew up in the middle of San Francisco, not far from Little Italy. As a Catholic, you start out with a simple name but it gets longer over time. When you have your First Communion and Confirmation you get to choose the name of a saint to be added to your birth name. Some people even add an additional name for good luck. The irony of it all is that in Little Italy, when you're in trouble, your full name is invoked, I guess in hopes of summoning the saints to save you. I heard my full name quite a bit growing up: Christina Alisa Isabella Theresa DiMari.

My dad's parents, Frankie and Lily, came from Sicily, which is a hop across the Mediterranean Sea from the boot of southern Italy. When I was growing up, they lived in the Sunset District in San Francisco, where all the houses look as if they belong on Main Street in Disneyland. Each house is connected to the one next door and is painted a different color.

The house I lived in with my parents and siblings was white. That is, white on the outside. On the inside, it was a different story. The stuff that went on inside looked whatever the color is for wrong. It was the kind of stuff that's not supposed to be—but we didn't know that yet.

If only a few days had been difficult, maybe it wouldn't have been so hard to handle. But it went on day after day after day, the same scene repeating itself over and over again.

"Get out of here!" Dad's voice boomed. "You don't want to be a mother! Every bit of this is your fault, not mine! For cryin' out loud, I had to force myself on you to get these kids. I'm different from you. I wanted my children! I will never leave them. I'll work five jobs if I need to."

"I'll get out of here all right! I'll go straight to my father and tell him everything!" Mom screamed.

"Go ahead. What's he going to do about it?" Dad hollered, slamming some dishes against the wall. "It's no one's f— business what goes on in this house!"

"Christina, move! I can't see anything." We sat at the top of the stairs, and my little sister, Carrie, pushed me to the side so she could get a better view of the fighting below.

Mom did whatever she could to tip Dad over the edge. I wished she would leave our house for good and never come back. Dad was calm and fun, and he enjoyed being our dad. He was good—that is, until my mom did something stupid, and then everything would change, and the things he did weren't good anymore. We all blamed her. It was as if she did it on purpose to make our life sad because she didn't want to be our mother. That was one thing we knew for sure.

"Dad, stop it!" Angela yelled, stumbling upon the heated scene. Dad swung at my oldest sister, striking her. Blood ran from the back of Angela's head as she slammed into the corner cabinet. She retreated to the corner of the kitchen, crouching in fear.

Max, our German shepherd, barked relentlessly, and my brother, Gino, rushed to calm him.

A phone call interrupted the violent scene. Dressed in his police uniform, Dad's powerful presence filled the doorway as he answered the phone. Chasing all the robbers and gangsters in San Francisco aided his already athletic build. His short, dark brown hair was combed straight back with gel. Sometimes his dark brown eyes sparkled so bright the whole room lit up. Other times, like when he was flaming mad, they looked dark and spooky.

“I need to go out on a call!” Dad announced as he hung up the phone and ran out the door to his police car.

Anna immediately ran to Angela, trying to stop the bleeding on her head.

Mom grabbed my arm and dragged me to the bathroom, locking the door behind her. “This is all your fault!” Reaching for a bar of soap, she shoved it into my mouth, holding my jaw so I had to bite down on it.

I didn’t understand why everything was always my fault or why I was the only one she dragged to the bathroom for a beating. After seven years of living like this, the only thing I did know was how to make sure she didn’t kill me.

Gagging from the chunks of soap, I tried to spit them out onto the floor. “I’m not listening to anything you say!”

She grabbed my arms and pinned me against the wall. “I wish you were never born!”

Closing my eyes tightly, I tried not to listen to her words or look at the anger in her fiery eyes. I wanted to disappear as she slapped my face over and over again with her cold hand. The words she screamed at me were words I was too young to hear.

“You’re nothing but a little s—!”

The more I struggled to free myself, the harder she struck me. I fought back so she couldn’t break me. No matter what, I wouldn’t let her win. I knew how to fight, but I didn’t know what to do with all the hatred about to explode inside of me. So when she started beating me on my back, I closed my eyes and pretended she didn’t exist, that I didn’t have a mother. I did this until it hurt too badly. Until I thought I might die.

Struggling to free myself from her tight hold, I screamed, “Anna, help me!”

“No one’s ever going help you!” my mother sneered as she slammed my head into the wall.

I tightened my muscles as the blow of her wooden spoon struck my small back over and over and over again.

Closing my eyes tight again, I pretended I was somewhere else, far away from her. Somewhere where she couldn’t hurt me with her words, her spoon, or her hand.

“Leave her alone!” Anna screamed from outside the door. “Stop hitting her! Stop it!” Anna pounded on the door over and over, frantically turning the knob, trying to get in.

Still struggling to get away from my mother, I fell backward as Anna and my brother, Gino, managed to unlock the door. Although Anna was only eleven years old, she charged right at Mom. Gino, nine years old, stood there looking at me as if he’d seen a ghost.

“I’ve got to get out of this house!” Mom screamed as she pushed Anna out of the way and stormed out of the bathroom. Then she ran out the front door.

I doubled over on the cold floor, feeling as if I might throw up.

Anna’s face tightened as she surveyed the marks on my body. “I hate her!” Anna yelled. “I hate her so much!” With tears streaming down my face, I latched onto Anna’s hand as I had done many times before while she led me to her room.

“Don’t worry, Christina. I’ll protect you from her until Dad gets home.”

That made me feel better. Dad was my protector. When he was home, my mom wouldn’t even think about messing with me.

Turning toward the mirror, I looked at my tear-streaked face. My light brown hair was highlighted naturally with strands of yellow Anna called gold. My dark brown eyes reflected a hint of hazel green in the right light. I had Anna’s thin frame, but my cheeks appeared full enough for my Italian grandfather, Frankie, to affectionately grab hold of.

Looking past my tears, I looked deeper into my eyes.

“Who’s in there that is so bad?” I asked Anna. “What have I done to make her hate me so much?”

“Here. Lie down on my bed. I need to put some medicine on you.”

“Ouch!” I cried as I tightened my muscles. “It hurts too much for you to touch it.”

“I have to get the bleeding to stop; stay still. Close your eyes and try to go to sleep for a little bit.”

“I can’t fall asleep. If I fall asleep, the snakes will come after me. They come every night—big ones, bigger than my bed. They crawl under my sheets and try to choke the life out of me. I try to kill

them, but I can't. As soon as I grab one and throw it to the floor, two more appear. I can't sleep anymore. I don't ever want to go to sleep again."

Although I didn't realize it, I was holding my breath. Anna's hand gently rested on my shoulder. "Christina, is she coming after you in the night again?"

I didn't answer her. I didn't want to talk about it.

Anna knew, though, the way she knew everything about me.

After rubbing the medicine all over my face and back, Anna brushed my hair and began to tell me a story.

"In a small village out in the countryside lived five children like us. One day while the children ran in a beautiful meadow full of pretty flowers, a big, bad dragon came over the mountain. Chasing the kids, the ugly dragon bared its sharp teeth, spewing fire from its mouth. Suddenly, the kids remembered a hole in the ground by a steep cliff on the far side of the meadow. Reaching the edge of the cliff, they ducked down in the hole just as the dragon reached them. As they planned, the dragon plunged over the edge of the cliff into a deep, dark pit, falling to its death."

"Anna, I like how all the kids in your stories find a way to escape. That's it! I've got to escape! I'm going to run away!"

"You can't do that. You're only seven years old! It's going to be dark in a few hours."

"I've got to get out of here. I'm going to run away before she comes back."

Anna looked at me a long time before she stood up and marched over to her piggy bank. "I'll give you all the money I have." One by one she counted out thirty-two dollars.

I ran to my room and grabbed two books I had received from my neighbor and a strand of dime-store pearls my grandma Lily had given me for my birthday.

Anna rushed into the kitchen and threw a bunch of food into a bag. She handed me the packed bag and a warm coat and hurriedly sent me out the door. "You better go now before she comes back," Anna said, her voice betraying the urgency she felt. "Go far, so she can't find you."

I turned to wave good-bye to Anna. Standing solemnly on the

front porch, she reluctantly waved back and watched me walk down the street until I disappeared around the corner. As I looked over my shoulder studying every car that drove by, I hoped no one would kidnap me.

The smell of saltwater grew closer as I rounded the bend leading to the place that had always been my refuge.

Climbing down the steep hill blanketed with chunky ice plant, I found my way to a tiny secret alcove that had been carved out of the cliff by the strong winds.

She'll never find me here, I assured myself. Curling up with my knees to my chest, I glanced at the waves crashing onto the rocky shore of Ocean Beach.

Several hours passed as I watched families enjoy the summer activities on the beach below. Some walked their dogs. Others splashed in the waves and built elaborate sand castles along the water's edge. But soon the sound of children's laughter faded, and I heard only the solitary echo of the changing tide.

Rubbing my warm hands softly on my reddened cheeks, I tried to make the hate inside my mind and the sting of Mom's slaps go away. *Why does she hate me so much?*

My anger slowly turned to sadness as the soothing rhythm of the waves began to quiet my spirit. I reached to pick up one of the books I'd brought with me. The front cover displayed a picture of the nighttime sky, brilliantly lit up with a zillion sparkling stars. Inside the first page was the same picture as the one on the front, but here a circle surrounded one of the smallest stars. The caption read, "If God knows about each one of the stars in his universe and knows them each by name, how much more does he know about you?"

I stared at the picture for a long time. Reaching deep into my pocket I carefully pulled out my strand of dime-store pearls. Laying them on the book, I delicately arranged them to form a circle around the star.

Does God really know about me? Does he circle me down here on earth like he circled that one star way up there among the other stars? I don't feel circled. I only feel alone.

I wondered if God really knew me.

Well, if you really know me, I thought, then you would know I'm always getting into big trouble for stuff that's not my fault. And if you were real, then you probably wouldn't let that happen to a kid. But then, maybe you're not real. Maybe you don't know me. Or maybe you live up in the stars, and you have so much to look after in the whole world that you can't possibly see everything.

I wanted to believe God was real and that he was nice. I decided that he probably lived up in the stars. That made sense to me. That's why he didn't come and help me. I wanted to fly beyond the distant stars to where he lived. Standing up, I placed my feet carefully at the edge of the cliff and slowly leaned forward to look down at the long drop below. *If only I had wings, I could fly away from here and never come back.*

As I looked out at the wide-open water, I wished I wasn't a kid. If I couldn't fly to where God lived, then I wanted more than anything else to dive into the ocean and be a mermaid for the rest of my life.

A seagull landed a few feet away, hoping I'd give him some of my snacks. As I looked out at the waves rolling onto shore, a story began to take shape in my mind. I turned to the little bird and began to tell him my tale.

"A long time ago, I was really a mermaid girl. I spent all my time with my friend Azalia. Together we danced in the rhythm of the waves under the bright stars. There was only play, only laughing, only happiness, until one night, all of a sudden, a bad, terrible war broke out under the sea. Azalia's mommy was gone for good. I knew I had to protect my friend, or she would get eaten by a shark and die. I thought long and hard until I came up with a plan. I found a secret mountain that no one knew about but me. I put Azalia inside a cave and covered it with seaweed so no one would know she was there. Then I said good-bye to Azalia. I swam away, promising I'd come back and get her when everything was safe."

After a while I grew tired of making up stories. Sitting back down, I picked up the second book. On the cover was a drawing of Jesus surrounded by children who all looked my age. He looked straight into the eyes of one of the little girls, cupping her face with his strong, yet tender, loving hands. He gently tilted her face so she

looked directly into his eyes. *I wish I were that girl*, I thought to myself. *That's what it would be like if I could fly to where God lives.*

Immediately a calm feeling swept over me. Something warm and tingly filled my face and then my whole body. Closing my eyes, I saw a blazing light. Full of wonder, I looked into the brightness and watched the light take the form of a serene being dressed in white. Pure white. His eyes were like deep blue water, and as he looked at me, it was as if everything inside of him flowed into me.

As I looked into his eyes, I sensed one simple message.

Believe.

I froze, not wanting the moment to end. *He doesn't live up in the stars!* I thought, as hope filled my heart. *He lives down here too.*

After a few moments, my eyes couldn't see the light anymore. I closed them and whispered, "Believe." With my eyes closed, the light was clear again, but this time only in my mind. When I opened my eyes everything was just as it had been before the light visited me. But the message was clear to me: I had to believe even though I couldn't see. The place inside my heart that had felt all alone now had a new friend.

Daylight faded. *Everything's going to be all right*, I coached myself as I wrapped my arms more tightly around my knees, trying to stay warm. The big orange ball gradually dropped from its lofty place in the sky and sat slightly above the water's edge far out at sea. I watched the sun slowly disappear into the water as if it were tired and wanted to go to sleep. I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and fought the urge to close them.

Nightfall finally won its battle with the receding daylight.

"I don't want to be here anymore," I whispered, staring out at the ocean. "Now what am I going to do?"

I didn't want to stay at the ocean all night, but I didn't want to go home either. Wrapping my coat around my shoulders, I tried to make the shivers go away. I didn't want to cry. I wanted to be tough. I pressed my hands against my eyes and bit my lip, but it was too late. Water filled my hands and streamed down my cheeks.

"I forgot to ask Anna," I said aloud to the stars above, "after I escape from the dragon, where do I go once I'm free?"

ENDNOTES

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