

# The Ice Underneath

My Passage through Loss and Faith

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**Note:** the names of all youth in foster care mentioned in this book have been changed.

When you pass through the deep, stormy sea, you can count on Me to be there with you. When you pass through raging rivers, you will not drown. When you walk through persecution like fiery flames, you will not be burned; the flames will not harm you.

Isaiah 43:1-2



**The two of us, 1987.**

## PROLOGUE

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# Almost a Day of Rain

When he dropped me off at the train station, I don't recall if we kissed. That was our ritual—we never parted ways or went to sleep without saying “I love you” and kissing each other on the lips. But I can't remember if we followed our ritual on that morning, almost ten years ago.

Monday, July 11, 2011. It was cool, overcast, and threatening rain as I went through my usual routine. Up at five a.m., a quiet breakfast with Ted, and then the drive to the train station in Camden, N.J. He dropped me off for my 45-minute commute to Trenton, where I oversaw two units at New Jersey State Prison, a maximum security facility, which housed inmates who were in acute stages of mental illness.

During the drive to the station, Ted and I chatted about this and that. The gloomy sky didn't bother me; it was my preferred weather.

I love overcast skies and I love rain. Sometimes I wish and even pray for that kind of weather, but I wasn't always that way. When I was younger I didn't like being stuck inside on stormy days, but as I grew older walking in the rain or listening to its sound cleared my mind and cleansed my soul. Rain was a healing force, a chance to breathe in and out, to take stock of things and get a new start.

Yet it remained gloomy all that day and the rain never came.

Ted had gotten me so spoiled and comfortable in our marriage. As I settled in at my desk, I knew it would be only a couple of hours before he called me at mid-morning to see how my day was going. Another call at mid-day, and then a final call about an hour before I was on my way home: “*Hey baby, what would you like for dinner tonight? I’ll be at the train station to pick you up. Love you, honey.*”

But mid-morning came and went with no call from Ted. When I called him, he didn’t pick up. My message was short and simple.

“It’s me and I’m thinking about you.”

I didn’t ask him to call me back.

My work day at the prison went by fairly quickly with no major operational problems. I enjoyed working as the departmental manager for the in-patient unit serving inmates with mental health problems. I felt our department made a difference in stabilizing this vulnerable group, enabling their return into the general prison population to serve out their time.

Ted would call me in the middle of the day, every day. *What would you like to eat tonight?* When I came home the table was set, my cup of tea waiting for me. The meal prepared, with all the silverware in place. *Please sit a while, Wanda, and relax before we eat.*

But there was no mid-day call. In the early afternoon I called him again.

“Hey, where you at, baby? I’m missing you. Is everything okay? Call me when you get a chance.”

All through the afternoon I tried to concentrate on my work as I waited for Ted’s end-of-the-day call. Five p.m. approached and I hadn’t spoken to him in nine hours, since the train station. Very strange. So unlike Ted.

Just before leaving work I called and left another message.

“Honey, I haven’t heard from you. I’m on my way to choir rehearsal. I’m really concerned.”



Choir rehearsal was at six p.m. My sister Joan picked me up at the McDonald's near the prison and we drove to the church, about ten minutes away.

I didn't think about Ted again because our rehearsal was so dynamic. Our choir was cutting our first CD that night and we were high-spirited—our praise and worship were off the hook, as if we were flying. I was deeply touched in a way I hadn't experienced in a long while, literally filled with God's spirit, anointed by an angelic feeling that I can't adequately describe. I left the rehearsal in a spirit of lightness and joy.

I asked Joan if she would drive me to the Trenton train station for my ride back to Camden.

"I'm concerned because I haven't heard from Ted all day," I told her. "It's not like him." "Wanda, I'm sure he's okay."

Sometimes there wasn't good cell phone reception on the train, but I was able to call him on and off during the ride.

"Baby, I'm on my way to the train station. I'm concerned about you. Please call me."

The ride seemed so much longer that night. It was now around 8 p.m. and no Ted. As I stared out the train window, not quite seeing the darkening landscape, anxiety and worry, which had been nagging at me off and on all day, now entirely flooded my mind.

"Baby, I know you're going to pick me up at the train station, but something's not right. I'll call you once I get off the train."

When I got off in Camden it was pitch dark. The train station wasn't in a good area, with homeless and drug-addicted people hanging around. Ted would never let me wait alone, late at night, in such an environment. He was always in his car sitting by the curb, listening to his music, on time. Fifteen or twenty minutes ahead of time.

But no Ted.

I absolutely knew something was wrong. I walked back into the station and called my sister Penny, who lived nearby.

“Oh Penny, I’m so afraid right now. I haven’t been able to contact Ted all day. He must have fallen and hurt himself and just can’t get up.”

Penny and I were one year apart, the closest in age of my 15 beautiful sisters. We had always been inseparable: we went to school together, graduated together, lived in the same college dormitory, and shared so much laughter and heartbreak together. Not just a sister but my closest friend and transparent confidante. She loved Ted like a brother. We were always there for each other.

“Sis, it’s going to be okay,” Penny said. “I’ll come pick you up at the train station with the kids and Ruben will go to the house to see what’s going on.”

“Okay.”

“Just wait for me.”

“Penny, something happened.”

“Just relax, Wanda. This is going to be okay.”

I tried to do as she said but my anxiety level was through the roof. *Was he in the hospital? A heart attack? Why hadn’t I been contacted?*

I called Penny again. Ruben picked up.

“Did Penny leave yet? I’m really concerned. It’s not like Ted.”

“Penny’s on her way. I’m heading over to the house to check on him and I’ll meet you all there.”

I paced and prayed, waiting for Penny to arrive. *Please God, just let him be okay. Lord, please let my husband be okay.*

I knew he was hurt in some way, but my mind couldn’t go any further than that.

Somehow I felt it was appropriate that Penny’s husband Ruben was going to the house to check on my husband. The two of them were very close, speaking in codes of language that only brothers-in-law

could understand, an inside humor that kept the rest of the family in stitches.

When my 11 living sisters and I got together, it was hard to separate us. All the brothers-in-law were done with the conversation long before we were. Ted and Ruben would grab their coats and announce they were leaving, but the sisters kept on talking. Another hour would pass as Ted and Ruben exchanged exasperated looks: *We're still here? Will we ever escape?*

Ted would finally stand up and make his announcement.

“Okay, we’re leaving. The rest of you guys want to leave too, but you don’t have the strength to say it. The sisters got you in control!”

Ruben and Ted would burst out laughing.

One night after leaving a family gathering, Ruben passed us on the highway beeping his horn.

“Look at him!” Ted cried. “He’s finally escaped! He’s gonna break the speed limit!” The two of us broke up, nearly in hysterics.

No one could tell a joke or a story like my husband could.

**I** kept pacing. The station was deserted except for someone sleeping on one of the benches. I waited forever for Penny to arrive.

Finally her blue jeep pulled up outside.

I walked out. Her daughter Savannah, 17, was in the front passenger seat, and I got in the back with Ruben III, her 24-year-old son.

“Penny, something’s not right, something’s happened. I’m so afraid, so afraid.”

“Wanda, it’s going to be okay. Ruben’s on his way to the house.”

We got on the highway. My heart was racing. I was panicking.

“Penny, something’s not right.”

“Just breathe, Wanda, just breathe. Deep breaths, in and out.”

Penny’s phone buzzed. I held tight to my nephew’s hand. My sister was silent, the phone pressed to her ear.

“No way,” she said.

# PART ONE



## CHAPTER ONE

---

# Love Finally Found

I looked up and he was standing at the bar with a friend of his, having some drinks. My first thought was that he was part of the jazz band performing that evening because he had such a glow about him, a secure but open presence, an unmistakable combination of modesty and strength.

My girlfriend Jean and I had come to the hotel in Philadelphia to celebrate her birthday. We drank champagne and ate a great dinner. We hadn't planned to go to Zanzibar Blue, the jazz club adjoining the restaurant.

"Hey, we're here already," Jean said. "Why not make a night of it?"

So we got a table in the club, sat back, and enjoyed the live music and each other.

We were there for about an hour when Ted and I caught eyes. The atmosphere in the room changed. The way he held himself. The way he smiled at me. The shine of his shoes, which says so much about a man. I couldn't wait to meet him, to find out all about this handsome, middle-aged gentleman.

At that moment I knew he would be my husband. It truly was love at first sight.

I wrote a note and asked the waitress to take it to him: *What would your mamma say if she knew you were out like this, enjoying yourself?*

When I looked back to the bar, he smiled again. He sent drinks over for us. When he walked to the bathroom I got a good look at him, and knew I would be taking him home to meet my mother and father.

When Jean and I were leaving, he met up with us at the door. We made our introductions and he walked me to my car.

“Do you mind if I share my number with you?” Ted asked.

“I would love it.”

For our first date we had dinner in the same restaurant. He had reserved a table for us and ordered a bottle of champagne, because that’s what Jean and I had been drinking.

We talked about our families. He was born in North Carolina, but as a young boy his family had moved to Chicago, where he grew up. I was struck by the close relationship he had with his mother and how highly he spoke of her. I found out he was divorced and had joint custody of his 10-year-old daughter Khalia. I told him about my sizable family, my 15 sisters and five brothers, and how I was a preacher’s daughter.

I was impressed that Ted had a deeply loving relationship with his daughter and a friendship with his ex-wife, that he had made the divorce work for everyone. He was able to make sure his child was not affected in any way. You can tell a lot about someone from how they parent their children when a marriage ends.

We had this wonderful eye contact and mutual comfort level. Ted said he felt like he had known me for a long time, that he wanted to plan a life together.

“You know, when I met you that first night,” I replied, “you seemed so different from my past relationships. I could just feel that from the start.”

It was a done deal that we would see each other again.

**A**bout a month later I took him home to meet my parents and siblings. At the time I had 11 living sisters, and I think nine of them were on the couch when we walked in.