

Chapter 1

De Javu... again!

We'd no sooner walked through the front door than the phone began to ring. My husband Lee picked it up. It was my father.

"Hellooooo... What's hap'nin?" Lee asked with a smile.

I can usually tell when Lee's talking with my dad. He gets this little mischievous smile and starts joking with him right off. But this time I could tell something was different - something was wrong. His smile vanished, replaced by a blank stare.

"No... no... we just barely walked in the door. We haven't heard anything... why, what's happened?"

I looked over at Lee. I knew from the sound of his voice and his changing expression that this had to be something pretty serious. All of a sudden, his legs seemed to buckle. He collapsed into his chair. His face went pale, as he stared at the wall in front of him.

"It's almost ten now... yeah... we'll turn it on and see if they show anything. Okay... bye."

He looked up at our son Jeremy and me, his expression one of shock and disbelief. He tried to speak, but the words got stuck in his throat. It was like someone had kicked him in the stomach and knocked the wind out of him.

We'd just returned home from dinner at one of our favorite restaurants where we'd been enjoying a quiet happy evening together. I knew all of that was about to change. After more than thirty years of marriage, I know every expression Lee has. I knew this expression was the one I dreaded most.

Lee slowly set the phone back onto its cradle.

"Lee... what is it? What's the matter?" I asked.

"Casey and Rebecca have been involved in a head-on. Casey and Ethan are in critical condition in the hospital. Rebecca and the baby didn't make it." Lee muttered.

Now my legs buckled. I collapsed onto the sofa. My head started to spin and I felt as if I was going to pass out. I started to moan, closing my eyes as I sunk deeper

into the cushions. But closed eyes could not hold back the flood of tears that followed.

Casey is my nephew who we raised and loved as one of our own from the time he was just a little boy. He's an adult now, and just one year earlier he married a wonderful girl named Rebecca. Ethan was her five-year-old son from a previous relationship. Their little baby Tajan was just 19 days old.

By now, Lee had turned on the TV. There, in front of our eyes, were pictures taken at the scene of the accident. The devastation was unimaginable. The only thing even remotely resembling Casey's car was the color of the mangled metal on the road.

Jeremy was overwhelmed. As he sat there on the sofa, tears began to flow down his cheeks. His six foot plus, 100 pound frame quivering as he tried to comprehend what he was seeing.

All of a sudden, his own battles with muscular dystrophy and Caumrati-Englemann's disease didn't seem nearly as important to him. His eyes were glued to the surreal images flickering in front of us as a flood of memories came crashing into his mind. But he couldn't utter a word. Conversation seemed pointless.

It felt like the world had just come crashing down on top of me. I found myself looking up towards heaven, wondering if our troubles would ever end. How could such an awful thing happen to Casey's little family? How could God allow...

We were all so shaken by the tragedy of what had just happened that sleep was simply out of the question. All I could think of was getting to the hospital to see Casey and Ethan. We'd made the 300-mile journey many times before, but on this night the road seemed endlessly long.

My name is Linda Llewellyn. I've lived with pain all my life. I've experienced a fair amount of heartache and suffering in my personal life and I've learned to accept and live with that. But this time... this time it was somehow different. This senseless tragedy seemed especially hard to comprehend or accept. All I could think of was Casey and Ethan lying in some distant hospital barely clinging to life. What could I possibly say to Casey that could bring him comfort or relief? His sweet wife and baby... dead, in the blink of an eye. It was too much to comprehend. The pain was overwhelming.

I've experienced tragedy many times before in my life and deep down, I knew that I would have to be the one to remain strong for my family... again. I just knew

that I would have to be the one to eventually help wake the others from this horrible nightmare. I knew it would take every ounce of my strength to face this ordeal. I would need to draw from many lessons of the past if I expected to help Casey and the rest of my family make it through this one.

There have been times when I've questioned whether or not I've had the strength to make it through another tragedy. I admit there have been times in my life when, for a moment, I've thought that it would be a welcome relief if God would simply take me home and put an end to what, at times, seems to me to be a life of never-ending pain and suffering.

Then I remember the ones I love so much; my husband, my kids, my grandchildren. I think of all the wonderful memories we've made, the times we've shared together, and I realize that I need to come back to reality... for their sake.

Some of the questions I'm most often asked are... "How do you keep going? How do you find the strength to survive when so much sadness and suffering keep coming into your life?" As I've thought about it, I believe the answer is this; I keep going because I know that this is what God *expects* me to do. It's what I *must* do for those who depend on me. And I've learned to be a survivor through practice... lots of practice.

Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not boasting about the things that have happened to me in my life. I only tell you my story because I hope that it might assist you or someone you love to better weather the storms of life that we all must occasionally encounter. I want to help people understand that ***we can survive*** no matter what comes our way. I'm sure of it. I've proven it to myself time and time again.

In order for you to understand where I'm coming from, I'd like to take you back with me... to the beginning.

I was born February 22, 1951, the third child born to Floris and Eva Copier. At seven pounds eight ounces, I showed all the signs of being a healthy normal baby. Eventually, my mother would give birth to seven more children bringing the total to ten, seven boys and three girls.

Being the third of ten children gave me plenty of opportunities to develop baby sitting and mothering skills that one day would play an important role in my life. From very early on I've loved children, especially little babies. This was good

news for my mom, who came to rely upon me to assist her in caring for our large family.

Life seemed fairly uneventful for me in my early childhood years. I was, for the most part, just a normal child growing up in a small town. However, about the time I entered elementary school, a few troubling symptoms began to manifest themselves.

When we would go outside to play, I found I couldn't keep up with the other children. My legs began to hurt *all the time* and I didn't enjoy running and playing like the other kids did. I wondered why I seemed to be the only one who didn't like all of the physical activities. Didn't everyone feel the same way I felt? If they did, why was I the only one complaining?

I would trip and fall easily, and the pain for me at times was excruciating. At first, people thought I was just a little complainer, but I knew there had to be something wrong. It's just that no one could put their finger on it, not even the doctors. I eventually learned to just live with the pain, trying to ignore it, hoping it might just go away after a while.

The Rocky Mountain winters were especially hard on me. I had so little muscle and virtually no body fat to protect my legs as I walked to school. When the coldest days of winter arrived, my life was simply miserable. I hated getting up in the mornings to go to school. I would have been quite happy if I'd just been permitted to stay at home and do my schoolwork, but I wasn't allowed to do that. My dad told me I just needed to "buck up" and go to school like the rest of my brothers and sisters. After all, he'd been told by doctors that there was nothing wrong with me.

I remember one occasion when I was so terrified at the thought of walking to school in the cold and snow the next day that I decided I was going to be sick the next morning. I knew my parents wouldn't let me stay home unless I really *was* sick, so I devised a plan. I went to the refrigerator and collected some leftovers and mixed them up in a mason jar with milk and water. I hid my concoction in an inconspicuous place so no one would see it during the night.

The next morning, I took it into the bathroom with me. When my mother heard someone retching in the bathroom, she hurried to the door and asked if I was all right. I quickly tossed the mixture into the toilet before I opened the door. When my mother saw that I had apparently been throwing up, she told my dad that I'd better stay home in bed. I was so happy! But I knew that this was not the perfect

solution. It was only a one-time fix.

My mom was such a help to me during those hard years. I remember a few occasions when I was absolutely convinced that I couldn't make it to school, and so Mom would hide me somewhere inside the house until Dad left for work.

On especially cold days I'd sit for hours, huddled on top of the furnace vent wrapped in a thick blanket. It seemed to bring some relief to my aching bones and muscles. Some days just the minimal effort it took to get ready for school left me in such pain that by the time I walked outside, all I could do was stand on the corner and cry. Sometimes Mom would bring me back inside and let me stay home. She didn't drive at the time, so she couldn't drive me to school. Sometimes a kind neighbor lady would give me a lift.

Because of my less-than-average physical abilities, I soon became acutely aware that I would never be picked to be first, second or even third on any of the teams that were organized at school or in our neighborhood. I usually wasn't picked at all. It seemed like nobody wanted to be "teammates" with someone who was so different than themselves. Despite this, life around our house seemed pretty exciting to me. With seven active, healthy boys, how could it be anything but? My brothers kept me entertained. They were very inventive. They tied bicycle inner tubes together and fastened them to the highest branch of the weeping willow tree that grew in our backyard. They wanted to see what would happen if they jumped out of the tree and held on. I think they actually pioneered bungee jumping. Unfortunately, they didn't calculate correctly some minor details like weight, distance, velocity etc. They did learn, however, that human bodies do bounce!

Some of my brothers even tried to impersonate Evel Kanevil, and eventually became very proficient at motor-cross. They loved being "daredevils," and on one occasion, they even convinced me to join them. Here's what happened. My little brothers had taken two mattresses outside into our backyard. They placed the mattresses on the grass beneath the lowest part of the roof. Then they would take turns jumping off the house and landing on the mattresses. They soon tired of this, however, and decided to make it more fun by placing one of themselves in between the two mattresses and having someone jump off the roof on top of them. It didn't look very smart to me. What I hadn't noticed was that I was being set up. When they would jump onto the mattress, they would land *to the side* of the person sandwiched inside. Then they would climb out, have a good laugh, and do it again. They didn't seem to get hurt at all, and before long, they had me thinking that

maybe it actually was fun. They'd convinced me that since I was so skinny, and they were so light, that I would hardly even notice when they landed on me. So... I agreed to be "the sandwich." This time, when my little brother jumped off the roof, he landed right on top of me. All my brothers were just howling! They thought that was the best prank they'd ever pulled. It was the end of my participation in group sports. I was sore for days.

From then on, I had to be content to stay out of the way and watch most of the activities of childhood from the sidelines. Since I couldn't do most of the things the other children were doing, I was looked upon as a misfit, a loser. This was very hurtful to me, but I eventually learned to deal with this kind of rejection. I'd often find comfort and help by turning to a good friend I grew up close to during those early years. Her name was Susan Butler.

Susan was younger than I was and a grade behind me in school, but she liked to do the same things I liked to do. When I'd visit Sue, I could tell her mother felt sorry for me. She noticed that I was getting thinner and thinner as I grew older. She would constantly offer me food and candy... anything to try to fatten me up. She thought it was probably hard for me to get enough food to eat with all those boys living in the house.

Sue and I would play house and dolls often, and we vowed to each other that we would be each other's bridesmaid when we got married. She provided much-needed comfort and friendship during my childhood years.

It was about this time that I noticed all the other girls starting to change. They were starting to develop into young women, and I wasn't. I kept getting thinner, losing weight, especially from my waist down. It was getting harder and harder for me to walk, and I had no idea what was happening to me.

Socially I wasn't developing like the other girls either. They were starting to look at boys and wanting boyfriends. They were putting away their dolls and I still wanted to play with mine. My friends were all changing before my eyes, and I was being left behind.

I was not looking forward to attending seventh grade. For me, it only meant that I would have to walk *even further* to school. Elementary school had been hard enough, but now things were really looking bleak. My legs hurt more, I was losing muscle mass and my body was becoming more and more sensitive to cold temperatures. The pain increased as the temperatures decreased. I became a little discouraged about my future.

It was obvious from the beginning of my junior high school days that life was not going to be easy for me, especially during this “breaking-in period” when first impressions were lasting impressions. Labels got placed on some kids which were mean and hurtful and not easily removed. I was one of those unfortunates who was branded as a misfit because of my physical appearance and initiated into the ranks of the persecuted.

"You look like four toothpicks with a ball on top!" was one of the more familiar yet hurtful utterances I heard over and over again. "She's so skinny I bet she has to run around in the shower to get wet!" Or, "You're so skinny; if you turned sideways you'd disappear!" Or the ever-popular "You're so skinny, you have to stand twice to cast a shadow!" But the most painful wounds were inflicted by kids who were just plain rude... "You walk like you got a stick shoved up your butt!" This was one I often heard. This jab cut me deeply, and it was all I could do to not burst into tears. I knew my walk looked odd, but I was struggling just to walk at all.

Many nights were spent soaking my pillow with tears as I struggled to understand why I had been dealt such a cruel hand. While most girls lay in bed dreaming of boys they had crushes on, or wondering who might have a crush on them, my nights were taken up with more sobering questions. I prayed for an answer to know why I couldn't just be like all the other girls. Why do people judge me by my looks and not by my real self, my inner self? Will anyone ever love me? Will anyone ever even ask me on a date?

These were the circumstances I found myself in. I felt as if I'd jumped out of the frying pan into the fire with more embarrassments and trials just around the corner. One fear that was particularly horrifying to me was the prospect of gym class. It was not an elective. It was mandatory.

All girls were required to get dressed in *proper gym attire*, expected to go outside rain or shine and exercise, beginning with calisthenics. I couldn't do jumping jacks and I couldn't begin to do sit-ups. Running was literally impossible for me. I was doing good most days just to be walking. Then it was off to the "field," to run around the perimeter of the football or soccer fields.

I asked my gym teacher if I could be excused from running, since *I couldn't run*, but my pleading fell on deaf ears. "If you can't run, you can walk" was her response. "I don't care if it takes you the whole period, you'll do your laps like

everybody else." And so, I did. I would walk the prescribed number of laps around the field, quickly being lapped by all the other girls, who would then go off and play softball, or soccer or whatever was the "sport du jour." While most girls were enjoying their exercise time, I walked in pain and listened to the kids poke fun at "stick girl" and my awkward-looking walk.

Adding insult to injury, I was required to shower with all the rest of the girls as well. These weren't *private* showers. Here I was, exposed to the total view and ridicule of all my classmates. As I dressed for school each day, I gave a lot of thought and planning to my wardrobe in an effort to try and hide my body. We weren't given the luxury of wearing long pants or Levi's back in those days. The school dress code required girls to wear dresses or skirts. So, I wore long-sleeved sweaters to try and hide my skinny little arms and long dresses to hide my legs. But all my planning was for nothing when I had to strip down to shower.

This was very humiliating to me. I asked once again if I might be excused from P.E. class, but my requests were denied. My teacher insisted that the only way I would be excused, was to get a note from my family doctor, stating that I **couldn't** participate in gym class.

Mom took me to doctors many times, but their comments were always the same. They told me I was **too skinny** and that I needed to **eat more and exercise**. One doctor speculated that I may have had polio earlier in my life which went undetected at the time. Another said I probably had had rheumatic fever as a small child, and that these were just some of the long-term effects. Eventually, one of these doctors told my mom it was all in my head, and he believed it was just my way of "*getting attention*". My parents never believed any of their theories but didn't have any better ideas of their own. I could tell they were just as frustrated with my situation as I was.

Since all the doctors were now saying that there was no reason I should be like this, I started to doubt myself, wondering if it *really was* all in my head. If I really did have some type of mental problem, I wanted to find out what it was. I wanted to know whether or not it was really possible that my mental state could affect my physical body, causing me to look and feel the way I did. If it was possible, I wanted someone to fix my mind, so I didn't have to be like this anymore. I had reached the point in my life where I was willing to do or try just about anything to find some answers.

Dad didn't agree with my concerns that it might be a mental problem, and he wasn't willing to spend any money to send me to a "head doctor" either. My mom and I were very close, and I felt she truly understood what I was feeling and desperately wanted to help me. She was more sympathetic towards my situation and decided that she would save up enough money to take me to one of the best psychiatrists in town to get his opinion. She didn't control the purse strings in the house, however, and it took a great deal of time and effort for her to collect the money needed to take me in for a visit. I have often wondered what corners she must have cut or what the rest of the family may have had to do without in order for her to save all the money necessary to make this all possible. With such a large family it couldn't have been an easy thing to do, but I was so grateful she made the effort and sacrifice for me.

The day arrived for my visit with the psychiatrist. As I sat in the office with my mom, my anticipation mounted, wondering what he might say. Finally, he walked into the room. He asked if I would mind just sitting there for a bit, while he took my mother back into his office. They were gone for quite some time. Then it was my turn to go back into his office.

The doctor spoke to me alone for quite a while, asking me all kinds of questions and conversing about a variety of subjects. After he was finished with our interview, he called my mother in and gave us his opinion. He said there was nothing wrong with my mind but he believed it was a physical condition that the doctors just weren't able to identify. He was confident that someday they would discover exactly what was wrong with me.

He then gave me some advice that was very helpful and comforting at the time. He said that he believed I was very healthy mentally and remarkably well adjusted, considering the physical limitations my body had placed upon me, and that I ought to go forward with determination and hope. He believed that all my questions would one day be answered and then I would understand what had been happening to me.

I was relieved... at least in part, but still no closer to finding a cure for whatever it was that was causing my problems. I decided I would take his advice and just do the best I could... trusting that God would help me along the way.

