

HOPE'S LEGACY

One Girl's Journey: Surviving Family, a Rape and the Trial

A Fictional Account Based On True Stories



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April 2011

Life is a progress and not a station.

--- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Emerson was right. Life is a continuous progression of ups and downs, rather than a level or station to be stranded upon. Without those inevitabilities for change, anyone suffering hardships would never have reason to harbor hope. In our work with abused young people, we see that hope stretched very thin at times. But we also see it blossom. The importance of that burgeoning hope, no matter how delicate its perch, is the reason behind this story. Because a fictional spin on true stories is sometimes a better way to tell the truth, we combined elements of three real cases and worked them into one young lady's semi-fictional story. We chose to call our heroine Hope.

We changed or mixed some story details to protect all of the 'players', but we feel the true nature of this story is eerily on the mark. 'Hope' is an appropriate pseudonym for this story's main character, in spite of the fact that some victims are males. The general elements of their stories are the same in any case. For those of us in the field, hope finds its way into our hearts for every one of the sexual abuse victims we help at Kids' Advocacy Place and our parent organization, Hill Country Cares. Through this story, we pray Hope finds her way into *their* hearts.

Family History

In this particular case, one might say the odds were stacked against our girl for generations. School was never presented at home as something essential, because it hadn't been important in the past. Oh, it had its place, as a babysitter or a weekday warehouse for kids, but never more than that. This was the family's standard view of education in particular, and self-improvement in general – for generations. Apparently, living, partying, and having sexual relationships were more important. Hope's grandmother gave birth to her mother at the age of fourteen, and struggled in predictable ways. Her mother gave birth to Hope at sixteen, and as a family unit, they're still struggling.

It seemed the cards were laid out for Hope to follow that path, too. Early on, she was into all the classic symptoms of a teen with an edge. She was sexually active, had body piercings, listened to radical music and wore provocative clothing for such a young teenage girl. It seems that

her parents were simply too caught up in their own lives to invest much time with Hope. Guidance and healthy structure were not readily available from her family and Hope resisted those elements when they came from school officials.

Her relationships with adults in general and her parents in particular were historically strained. She and her mother, “Jane,” struggled to communicate with each other due to Hope’s rebellious, disrespectful attitude and that was complicated by mom’s alcoholism and drug abuse. Her father, “Leroy,” had a long history of drug abuse and was in prison for drugs and assault. He had virtually no contact with his children.

Like most humans, Hope needed someone to relate to and it was apparent that she wouldn’t find that person at home. Naturally, she ran with other young people who shared similar circumstances and interests. And in that number of Hope’s running buddies, there weren’t many student council presidents, star athletes, or college-bound standouts on the UIL debate team. No, Hope’s friends typically came from home situations similar to hers. They were children of chronic conflict and chaos and were in many ways the *Outsiders* of their generation.

In spite of her precarious upbringing and family history of early pregnancies, low motivation, and a father who was a convicted felon, Hope was proud of at least one thing about her life. She was once asked about her interest in sex at an early age, and was questioned about the risks involved. She responded, “You know, at sixteen, I’m not pregnant. I think I’m doing pretty good.” This quote speaks to the conditioning of the environment and the lack of healthy modeling from home. The comment exposed the fact that her being so young and not pregnant was a surprising accomplishment rather than an unquestioned expectation.

Nevertheless, Hope had a good heart. She offered good support to her few friends, and frequently looked after her three-year-old brother. Her few troubled peers would come to her with their problems because Hope would listen and try to help them. Her good heart, it seemed, existed in spite of her edginess and in spite of a family that perhaps tried to raise her well, but struggled to know how. Some parents lack the ability to connect with their children. After all, what more could be expected from a struggling alcoholic mother and an imprisoned, non-communicative father?

Entangling the circumstances even further, Hope’s mother took in a female friend as a paying boarder to live with her family. Hope’s mom – Jane – was in her mid-thirties and so was her new roomy. The friend, “Lee Ann” had a troubled history of her own. She had problems with Child Protective Services and her three children had been removed from her care. She filled that

void, apparently, with a young stud boyfriend and brought that 22-year-old boy-toy into the home with Jane, Hope, and the little brother. We'll call Lee Ann's boyfriend "Jake."

Jake didn't bring much to the table, save his youth, a willingness to take advantage of anyone for any reason, and a penchant for partying with older women. He also got along with Jane's bar-running boyfriend of the month. At first blush, it seemed the two women had a good deal working. They enjoyed each other's company on a regular basis since Jake was virtually living with the family and Jane's boyfriend was over regularly. Work and raising children did not get in their way. This was the sort of setting where the adults tended to their own agendas and the children were largely ignored.

This backdrop describes Hope's home that fateful night when all of the worst elements of her world combined to form a perfect storm, and as that storm blew out of control, a nightmare of the worst kind was born.

The Rape

She probably didn't know that her unwanted twenty-something house mate had already amassed an impressive rap sheet with law enforcement. I'm sure he was "cool" and "edgy" and probably bad-mouthed authorities for sport. But Lee Ann loved the fact that he was a young, rebellious stud with rugged good looks. That went over big with her. Whatever the appeal, Lee Ann was happy to be his companion and play the role of the older woman. It was Hope and her brother who had to suffer his self-indulgence and juvenile disrespect for everyone. Hope's mom, of course, was oblivious.

On the night in question, Jane and her bar buddy had been partying with Lee Ann at home while she waited for Jake to return from work. Another man, a stranger to everyone but Lee Ann, had joined them and the four adults were partying. Alcohol flowed and marijuana burned. Meanwhile, Hope and her little brother were watching television in the living room. They were basically trying to stay out of the path of the revelers.

The storm clouds formed when Jane and her bar buddy decided to go to a local club. They enticed Lee Ann and the other man to join them, but Jane had to wait on Jake to come home, and the other man decided he would stay to finish a joint that was currently burning. Hope's mother left her children home in the care of her friend. Lee Ann and the other man were entrusted to hold down the fort and, oh yeah, as an afterthought, watch after her children.

Later that evening, having reached saturation with alcohol and weed, and having reached her limit of patience in waiting for Jake, Lee Ann and the other man flirted with each other until they decided to retire to Lee Ann's bedroom. They had sex and passed out in the bed. Through it all, Hope and her brother quietly watched television late into the evening. They were thankful for the rarely observed peace and quiet.

Around midnight, Jake finally arrived at the little pre-fabricated house where they all lived and discovered his "girlfriend" and the other man in bed together. Jake, who had only known Lee Ann for two months, reacted like a rejected middle-school lothario. He stormed out of the room and proceeded to numb his hurt feelings with more alcohol and more weed, as if the buzz he brought home wasn't enough. His anger was simmering in the kitchen while Hope and her brother continued to watch television in the living room.

Then, around 1:00 am, Jake decided that he was going to find a way to pay Lee Ann back. He walked into the living room with a bit of a stagger and sat down next to Hope. He offered her a beer, which she took without question, and they both puffed on a joint for a few minutes. She wasn't crazy about the idea, but it wasn't Hope's first rodeo and as long as Jake just watched the movie, she didn't plan on doing anything radical.

Her plans changed when the joint was finished and Jake started kissing her. Before she could squirm away, he grabbed her shoulders and continued kissing her cheeks and forehead. In a growing frenzy, he moved to her ears and the back of her neck and his drunken slobber left a trail everywhere his lips moved. Then his hand began to slide onto her stomach.

By this time, Hope's three-year-old brother was starting to react to what was happening and Hope was angrily telling Jake to leave her alone. But nothing was going to stop Jake from his plan. Hope finally bolted up from the couch and grabbed her brother and they disappeared into her bedroom where she locked the door so they would be safe. One would think that was pretty brave and very smart for a fifteen-year-old girl. It was. But she was still a fifteen-year-old, and relatively naïve about the ways of the world.

For almost an hour, Jake pounded on the door and got very agitated that Hope had locked him out. He angrily threatened her to open the door for some time. Then, he shifted strategies and begged her to be reasonable and assured her that everything would be all right. When that didn't work, he banged on the door again. Hope was amazed and frightened that he was so persistent. Finally, after what seemed like a long time, silence fell over the little house. It seemed that Jake had given up and the house might be peaceful for the rest of the night. Nothing more would've

happened had they been able to stay in the room. But Hope's little brother got hungry and started asking for cereal.

Hope was reluctant to open her door, but her brother insisted. Since it had been a while since she had heard from Jake, she assumed he'd gone to bed, so she opened her bedroom door ever so slowly. No Jake. As she hurried to the kitchen, she nervously grabbed her brother's favorite cereal and started back to the bedroom. She stopped on a dime, frozen by what was in front of her.

Jake was standing in her path with an evil smile on his face. He was wearing only boxer shorts and what some people call a white 'wife-beater' undershirt.

"Now," he said in a low voice, "we're gonna have some fun."

He grabbed Hope by her wrist and led her to the couch in the living room. Hope dropped the box of cereal as he started groping her breasts and kissing her. The teenager tried to resist, but she had heard the stories about Jake's temper and she not only disliked him – she was very afraid of him. As he started to tug on her clothes, Hope tried to bolt again, but this only enraged the young twenty-two year old. He reaffirmed his grip on her wrist and grabbed her hair with his other hand. As Hope began to whimper from the force, the fear, and the pain, Jake dragged her into the bathroom.

"Don't say a ***** word," he whispered in a sinister growl, "stop fighting me, or I'll hurt you and your brother and your ***** mother, too. They'll all be squirming in a pool of blood."

Hope was frozen by his words. Jake took her pants off, then her blouse and bra and piled them on the floor. Then he slammed Hope against the wall a couple of times to soften her resistance, and pulled her onto the floor of the bathroom. He calmly took his boxers off but left his wrinkled undershirt on as he positioned himself over the terrified girl. Jake raped her on the floor of the bathroom while her little brother wondered what happened to his cereal.

Everything was a blur for Hope, but while she recovered on the floor in the aftermath, she noticed that the hanging mirror on the wall had been knocked off during the rape and broken pieces of glass were everywhere. She couldn't remember how the mirror got broken, but it was obvious that it was a result of the violence spinning around her in that bathroom.

When Jake finished, the only sounds that could be heard in the house were Hope's whimpers. The young predator slipped his boxer shorts back on and strolled back into the living room as if nothing ever happened. Hope was dazed. She was covered in his dried slobber and could feel the evidence of his assault all over her body. She slowly, almost mechanically put her clothes back on and gingerly made her way into the kitchen to find something for her brother to eat.

The Reaction

As the two o'clock hour rolled around, Jane and her bar buddy returned from a night of partying and walked into her home almost giddy. Suddenly Jane stopped short. Something was wrong. As much trouble as Jane had seen in her life, she could sense it in the air.

Hope was dressed in the same clothes, but they looked wrinkled and ragged and she was obviously upset. She appeared to be going through the cabinets of the kitchen in search of something. When her mother saw Jake sitting on the couch in his wrinkled, soiled boxer shorts, she went ballistic. Jane started yelling at Jake about being half-naked in front of her daughter. She called him names while he tried to defend himself. He said he was "out of it" because Lee Ann had slept with another man. They argued, and eventually yelled at each other like maniacs. Obscene words rolled into screams as chaos ruled the little house during the next few minutes. When the dust settled, Jake had been permanently kicked out of the house, Lee Ann had stumbled out of her room in a daze to see what was going on, and her latest conquest was making a very hasty, somewhat bewildered exit from the house.

Hope felt exhausted and helpless. All this craziness emerged from Jake being in his underwear late at night. Hope couldn't muster the energy to shower, much less say anything about the rape. Everything eventually quieted down and the dazed remnants of the family found their way to beds and everyone went to sleep.

The next morning, at the breakfast table, Hope was still wearing the same clothes she had on the night before, her hair was all over the place, and her face and eyes looked reddened and tired. Nobody looked good that morning. The events of the night before came up in conversation and Jane questioned Hope about why she had seemed so upset last night when she arrived home.

There was a long pause, and then Hope sighed, but didn't respond.

"I went to the bathroom this morning," Jane grumbled, "and nearly cut my foot on glass. What the h*** was going on?"

"Something happened last night, Mom," said Hope. "Something really bad."

Hope's voice went into a monotone and she slowly, carefully described what she remembered about trying to protect herself and her brother. Step by painful step, she described the rape in the bathroom, the broken mirror, and the ugly blur of events in the aftermath. Jane was at first in shock, but that quickly shifted to rage. After a few minutes of ranting and cursing Lee Ann

and her choice of boyfriends, Jane got on the phone and called the police to file charges. Suddenly, even surprisingly for Jane, she was the angry protective mama Grizzly going on the attack to protect her female cub. Some would argue it was ‘too little, too late’ but at least she made the call.

While she was on the phone, the police asked if Hope had taken a shower or a bath since the rape.

“Hope,” Jane asked her daughter, “have you taken a shower since – last night?”

“No momma. I haven’t even thought about it.”

The police requested an immediate SANE exam to determine if physical evidence might still be present on the victim or on her clothes. Within an hour they were in the SANE office, and they were able to document bruising from the attack and found some leftover DNA from the young predator. This would prove to be his legal undoing.

Investigations ensued and an arrest came knocking at Jake’s door before long. In an uncharacteristically short amount of time in the legal eagle world, Jake was stewing in jail and the prosecutors were pushing the case forward.

The Trial

It only took a few months for Hope’s case to come to trial and that was likely a result of luck, other unrelated cases getting bumped, and various other elements lining up perfectly. The prosecutors usually get aggressive when they have DNA from a crime scene. More times than not, it’s a slam dunk from their standpoint. In Hope’s case, they also had the victim who was old enough to testify. Everything was lining up just right and the prosecutor’s office was eagerly moving forward with their preparations.

However, as often is the case, not much attention had been paid to the victim since the first days and weeks following the crime. Prosecutors frequently wait until the last week or so before the trial to start the process of preparing the victim to be a witness in court. That’s when agencies like Kids’ Advocacy Place and Hill Country Cares get involved. At the request of the District Attorney’s office, they help with the details of transportation, trial preparation, general logistical support, and answering questions for the curious, nervous family of the victim.

In this case, not much attention had been paid to the fact that Hope hadn’t been doing very well since the rape. She had received no counseling support, was still struggling to get up each morning and go to school, and was growing more difficult to manage by the day. She also didn’t

give a plug nickel about testifying. She just wanted this entire mess, including her family, to leave her alone and go away. To her dismay, that wasn't going to happen. On top of that, word had come through her family that her father had just been released from prison and he was apparently going to come in for the trial. Leroy was a wild card, and nobody knew how that would play with Hope if he showed up in the audience.

Finally, some advocacy staff got in touch with Jane and found out what was happening with Hope. The picture wasn't pretty and the DA was preparing to fly her into town for trial preparation. Hope was already saying she was not going to fly. The DA was getting frustrated with her reluctance to cooperate and things were beginning to spin out of control again. It was about then that we found out Hope's cousin had died two weeks before... in a plane crash. Her reluctance was more understandable with that news and a new plan was needed.

A nine-hour bus trip was suddenly on the table. Advocacy staff got more involved and made arrangements to pick up Hope and what most of us thought would be her mother. All of us were amazed that Jane was not going to travel with her daughter. They were at odds with each other, Jane was mad, and it wasn't clear that Hope would even appear for the trial.

As the trial approached, the day came where this fifteen-year-old girl in the role of a rape victim got on a bus and rode nine hours to the little town where the trial was to take place. She was greeted by advocacy staff that she didn't know, housed in a shelter for battered women because it was safe, convenient and offered constant monitoring.

Advocacy staff from HCC began to assist the girl in getting ready. They took her shopping for clothes that would be appropriate for court because the ones she had would never do. They told her to remove the visible piercings, which aggravated Hope, but she ultimately went along with the program. She was away from home in a strange environment and she didn't know anyone she was dealing with at the time. She was fighting depression, anger flashes, and was about to be forced to walk into that courtroom and face the young thug who had raped her only months before. On top of that, she would have to tell her story in front of an audience and twelve strangers in a jury box.

For any young teen, that kind of emotional load would be a daunting task. Even when they're angry, want to do the right thing, and eager to testify (though very few are), it is a tough assignment. Hope was all but alone, reluctant, afraid, and trapped on a very strange turf.

This is where the importance of advocacy help becomes so essential. Spending time with her and giving her a place to rest and be safe was critical. When the court prep had been done and the day of the trial arrived, everyone was concerned that Hope might not be able to testify, or might

possibly refuse to take the stand altogether. The prosecutor and advocacy staff offered all kinds of words of encouragement, and a few were even designed to nudge.

“Hope, you know it’s a very brave thing you’re doing. When you testify, they’ll put this guy away and you may be saving a lot of other young girls from being attacked.”

Hope sat quietly and stared at the staffer. No response.

“Because you’ve already been brave enough to tell us what happened, we know he’s a bad news guy, Hope. Don’t you want to see this through? Don’t you want to see him punished for what he did to you?”

Still no response. Hope was numb and it wasn’t clear at all that she would be able to survive being in front of a judge and a jury.

The DA was already revamping his strategy regarding her testimony. He’d decided that since they had DNA, perhaps it would be enough to get Hope to testify to the fact that they had sex. That alone would bring the hammer down, and they didn’t actually feel they needed her to testify to the intricate, horrible details of the rape. In fact, they felt that it was a reasonable bet she wouldn’t make a very good witness.

When the DA called her as a witness, the advocacy staff and the DA escorted her into the courtroom and her body language reflected her inner desire to run. Hope sat down at the witness table in front of the microphone and immediately put her hands over her face. She rubbed her face so intensely that it appeared she wanted to erase her face from her skull, and her presence from that chair.

Though Hope didn’t make a great witness due to her fear and overall reluctance, the DA managed to get the facts established that a sexual act had occurred and that her attacker was guilty of sexual assault of a child at the very least. They knew that they would never get Hope to accurately describe the events of that night, so they focused on getting the bare facts of a sexual encounter. Even if Hope never used the word ‘rape’, there would be enough testimony to convict Jake.

What the defense attorney didn’t realize was that the DA only had a very few questions for Hope and once those basic facts had been established, he was done. After only a few minutes worth of testimony, the prosecution finished and turned the witness over to the defense for cross examination. One could’ve heard a pin drop in the courtroom.

The defense attorney was so shocked at the quick turn around, he was obviously unprepared. His voice quivered a bit, he stumbled for the right words, and then sheepishly, he managed to address the judge.

“Uh, your honor, we weren’t – I uh – well, the defense will pass this witness on cross, your honor. But we ask the court to sequester her.”

The judge dismissed Hope to her handlers and told her she would wait just outside the courtroom in case she was needed later. Hope had no problem leaving the court and quickly retreated to the door. The advocacy staffer met her in the hallway, and they retreated to the small waiting room in the back. The staffer was with Hope to keep her company, but there was also a general sense of relief that someone was watching this young girl. Everyone knew there was a chance she might bolt right out of the building if she got half the chance.

Meanwhile, the court process continued through the prosecution’s phase of the trial, the DNA was introduced and explained, other witnesses testified. At one point the prosecution put the Jake’s mother on the stand. He asked her about the police reports she had portrayed her son, Jake, as an assaultive, even violent son. She tried to soft pedal the domestic violence complaints that she had made over the years, and tried to paint her son as a hard-luck kid. For the most part, that little song and dance didn’t play well to the jury.

“So you’re trying to tell this jury that your son didn’t beat you, didn’t put you in the hospital on at least one occasion?”

“I’m not saying he didn’t do it,” Jake’s mother said. “There were some other things going on that sort of tipped the scales. That’s all.”

“Was there alcohol involved in that incident?” the prosecutor asked.

“Yes.”

“Was your son drunk?”

“Yeah. I guess he was.”

“And were you drunk at the time?”

“Probably.”

Finally, having painted a pretty accurate picture of the defendant’s true nature, the prosecution rested and the defense was allowed to start calling its witnesses. The defense’s only possible defensive strategy at this point would involve either proving the DNA was tainted or otherwise inadmissible, or convince the jury that Hope was lying. Those were the defense’s only prospects. Considering the DNA evidence looked pretty solid, the defense attorney quickly asked

for the court to recall Hope to the witness stand. It was dangerous attacking a teenaged victim on the stand, but he had to make a run at her and somehow find a way to discredit her testimony.

Word came into the little waiting room and immediately Hope began to show signs of massive anxiety. The advocacy staffer started by taking Hope's arm in support. As the girl's reluctance grew, her resistance escalated and the staffer started almost pulling Hope into the hallway and toward the little door that opened into the courtroom. As they entered the door, she stopped like she'd hit a brick wall. The bailiff noticed the difficulty of their entrance and he began to make his way over. The staffer was whispering into Hope's ear to encourage her to take the stand. Hope was whispering back that she wasn't ready, and the entire show at the door was catching everyone's attention.

Finally, the bailiff, after seeing what was happening, explained to the judge loudly enough that everyone in the courtroom could hear. "She's just afraid, your honor." As far as the prosecution was concerned, that scene couldn't have been scripted any better.

As the bailiff and the staffer *helped* Hope to her place on the stand, witnesses in the courtroom audience that day was a young teenage victim being pushed into the courtroom. The bailiff didn't need to say that she was afraid. Everyone could see it. Hope was petrified.

The defense put that little girl through the ringer for over three hours. And though she struggled at times, it seemed to some that Hope began to gather herself once the newness of the moment wore off. She even seemed to gain strength through fatigue and irritation from what the attorney was obviously trying to do. Ultimately, it didn't go over very well with the jury and Hope finally walked out of that courtroom beleaguered and numb, but successful. She was not jumping up and down or celebrating that her part was completed. She wasn't all smiles. She was just tired and wanted to go back to the shelter where she had been staying.

Throughout the trial, Hope had been telling the staffer that she wanted to see her mother, who had come down for the trial. Hope had even seen her sitting with her father in the courtroom. Her uncharacteristic remarks about wanting to see her mother seemed out of place, considering their history together, but that's what she kept saying. Even so, when her part of the trial was over, she didn't even want to stay for the verdict and had no interest in being in court for sentencing.

"I just don't give a ****," she said. "I just don't care."

The End Game

Ironically, after so much lip service about seeing her mother again, Hope opted to spend a short period of time visiting with her father right after she left the courthouse. After all, it had been ages since she had any contact with the man. Nobody knew what they talked about or what degree of support and nurturing he provided, but apparently it didn't alter the girl's ultimate plans for the immediate future. When the day was done and the parents had departed, Hope was back in the shelter and awaiting a bus ride back to her grandmother's the next day.

Around ten o'clock the next morning, the advocacy staffer picked Hope up at the shelter and drove her to the bus station. Hope seemed, quite out of the blue, to be a different girl. Her manner of carrying herself seemed more controlled and measured. Her stride was confident. She had cleaned up, brushed her hair, dressed in the more conservative clothes they had purchased for court, and avoided putting in her lip ring for the trip home to her grandmother's house in the Texas Panhandle.

"You know," said the staffer, "there's something very different about you today."

"You just like that I'm not wearing that ***** lip ring," Hope said with a grin.

"Nooooo, it's more than that. I watched you walk to the car and I can hear it in your voice. There's just something different about you. I guess you're just glad the trial's over."

"I don't really care about that," she replied. "Oh, I'm glad this whole thing is over, for sure. But I don't give a **** what happens to that jerk."

"Did it have anything to do with seeing your parents together?"

"I don't think so. I mean, it was kinda nice seeing Dad again," said Hope. "He said he was proud of me. Like, I know it's no big deal, but I liked hearing it."

Hope squirmed in her passenger seat for just a second, adjusting her position as she pondered the source of her good mood.

"It is neat. I do feel good today. Maybe it is because this freakin' trial is over. Or maybe it's seeing Dad again." Hope paused, and then looked at the staffer as she drove them to the bus depot. "And there is one other thing, maybe."

"What's that?"

"I think I finally get the deal with Mom. I'm probably never going to have a good thing with her. I guess I finally get that. And it's weird, but it's okay. A relief, kinda. But I don't know. I just feel good."

The staffer smiled. “You know, a friend of mine once said that the days we feel good and don’t know why are the very best days of all.”

“Yeah,” said Hope. “I like that.”

Hope’s face was bright, but not giddy. Her eyes were clear and alert, but not excited. Her posture was more erect and attentive. She seemed to be ‘glowing’ from some sort of radiance inside. Others might describe it as a spiritual glow.

We like to think it was the birth of hope, whether the reasons were clear or not.

Whatever the cause, it was obvious and undeniable.

In the microcosm of the moment, there were little victories in the air. The trial part of Hope’s nightmare was over. She connected with her father again, and realized that she didn’t need to be responsible for her mother. Since her parents were showing signs of reuniting, maybe her father would take on that task. But in the bigger picture of Hope’s world, very little of her outer environment had really changed. There was much that she still had to overcome down the road and her future was far from being set.

She was still on her way back to the Texas Panhandle to live with her maternal grandmother. Jane was basically homeless since Lee Ann bailed out on her and the entire question of what her father and mother were going to do was up in the air. Hope’s latest failed attempt to make her grades at the Charter School meant that was not really an option, much to the chagrin of her grandmother. And though Hope had some half-baked notion about going into the military service or joining Job Corp, there really wasn’t a well-established plan in place.

Certainly none of those facts explained her good mood.

It was simply an indescribable spark that she was experiencing. Maybe it was the birth of hope in her heart. And just maybe it would be lasting and carry her into new realms and new ways of being a better person and living a better life. All of these possibilities were floating around in the car as the staffer pulled up to the bus depot, parked, and began helping Hope gather her things.

In their last few minutes together, they stood in front of the bus while the other passengers were boarding. The brave little teenager stepped forward and hugged the staffer.

“Thank you for everything,” she said.

“It was our pleasure, Hope. I’m glad we could help.”

As they stood there, in the haze of an impending departure, the last of the passengers had taken their seats, the scheduled time had arrived, and the bus driver tactfully called out to Hope that it was time to go.

With that, our little hero spun around, skipped up the steps into the bus, and handed her ticket to the driver. As she waited for him to check it, the staffer couldn't resist asking her one last question.

“Hope – are you going to be all right?”

Hope turned, tilted her head in a funny sort of way, and produced a subdued but striking smile.

“You know what – I think I am.”

