

“I guess it has come down to me. . . .” Casey said with a sigh. “Last but not least, here I go.”

“When I was younger, I lived in a little town in Pennsylvania. My family was very close-knit and we spent a lot of time together. My dad was an amazing person, a father of six children, all girls. Everyone told him he was crazy, living with seven women. It could get really tense when we all got moody, let me tell you, but my father put up with all us girls and our mood swings. In fact, I don’t think he even cared when my friend Jessica moved in, of course he cared about her, but the fact that she was another girl coming into his house didn’t really bother him at all.

Jessica and her mother lived across the street from me. She was a year and a half older than me, but she didn’t treat me like a child. She respected me as a person, and treated everyone else the same way for that matter.

The first time I met Jessica, being a pre-teenager, I made my childish assumptions from the way she looked, dressed, and acted. She was a really skinny, almost lanky girl; you could see her ribs through her shirt and her pants were constantly falling down. She was tall, almost giant, standing six feet barefoot. She wore big rimmed glasses and cheap looking clogs. Her clothes looked raggedy, like they were second hand.

Beyond her exterior, Jessica was the most beautiful person, although never really cared enough to figure that out. She had a heart of gold and a hand or

shoulder for anyone in need. She had a genuine love for all mankind, and was willing to bend over backwards if it benefited anyone. People liked her for those qualities, calling her up or eating lunch with her to complain or vent, but no one ever wanted to hear her talk, or become friends with her. They just wanted her help and advice on their own time.

Even with all the help she gave out, Jessica was a loner. No one wanted to spend any time with her if they didn't need to! She wasn't exactly popular, or good to look at, or good to be seen with. So Jessica spent her afternoons and evenings volunteering at the SPCA. She loved animals with her whole heart. She also volunteered at elementary schools. She would read to the kindergarten children. They loved her and her crazy voices, a different one for each character. They looked up to her, because it wasn't all about looks and popularity at that age anyway.

Entering my teenage years, I realized my 'I'm too good to be seen with *her*' attitude was extremely rude and mean. I began to think about what I'd feel like in her situation. I didn't even know her and I was making all these assumptions. I'd heard she was great to talk so and had a heart of gold. I was letting peer pressure keep me away from a very amazing person. I decided that I wanted to become friends with Jessica.

The next day at school, I found Jessica sitting alone at lunch time and I went up to her and started up a conversation.

'Hey!' I said, partly embarrassed, knowing people could see me talking to Jessica.

'Oh Hi Casey!' Jessica said cheerily. 'Do you need some help or advice?'

'No...I just...wanted...to, you know, talk to...you,' I said very hesitantly.

'Oh, ok then...what about?'

'Uhm, I'm not really sure to be honest with you...I just saw...I saw you sitting all alone, and thought, I don't know, maybe you might like some company. Would you mind if I took a seat here?' I said, completely uncaring at this point who was watching and what they had to say about me.

'Sure, that would be great! But don't you mind that everyone can see you? I know I must be bringing down your reputation right now.' she said, looking to the floor.

'Look,' I said while sitting down with my books, 'I made this decision that I wanted to sit here, and I'm going to. If that makes me less cool, then so be it. Life isn't about being cool anyway. There are so many more important things that I'd rather focus on than the drama and popularity game we call high school.

Jessica just stared at me for a few seconds, then flashed a huge smile my direction. She finally had someone that had similar beliefs about high school and being a teenager. All the drama and unnecessary teasing and cruelty. We both laughed and spent the rest of the lunch period talking and joking around.

Everyday, Jessica and I sat together. We would talk about our futures and

our families, and the cute boys. We would laugh about the stupidest things, and we could almost always tell what the other was thinking. We finished each others sentences all the time. I'd never had a friend like that before, and I know she never had either. She told me one day that she had always felt so lonely, until I came around that is. Only then did I fully realize that I had always been lonely too. Sure, I had friends, but only based on materialistic figures. I had never had a friend that cared about my thoughts and feelings until I started talking with Jessica.

Jessica and I became inseparable. I lost all of my other so called friends because I was spending my time with an unpopular geek, as they called her. Their loss. I didn't care what they thought, because I had what they secretly wanted, a friend that was about more than clothes, hair and nails. Jessica liked me for my thoughts and feelings, and my inner beauty. I knew that what my old friends wanted, but they were too cool and popular to admit to it. How not cool to want something like that, huh?

I invited Jessica to my house one afternoon and she jumped at the opportunity. 'I need to get out of *that house*.' she said, and I nodded as though I understood the emphasis she had put on the words 'that house.'

We spent the afternoon watching talk shows, baking cookies, and looking through magazines for all the hot boys. After talking and giggling for almost six hours, Jessica had to go home. So I told her I'd see her the next day on our way

to school, we hugged, and she went home.

The next day, Jessica and I were walking to school together and I could tell she had something on her mind. 'Hey Jess, what's going on? You ok? You look dazed and preoccupied.'

'Oh...sorry, I was just thinking...about...well I had a great time at your house last night. We should hang out more often together. I love your family, they were so welcoming to me.'

'Jess, they love you to death and so do I. It's refreshing for them to see a decent person come home with me. It hasn't always been that way you know.' I said thinking about all my old friends.

'Well we'll have to do it again soon then ok?'

'Sure, why don't we spend the whole weekend together?! If you get tired of me you can always walk home, it's not too far of a walk!'

We laughed and kept walking.

That weekend Jessica and I had an amazing time. We spent the weekend laughing and joking and hugging and being silly. We had a crazy girls weekend. When Sunday night came around, neither of us wanted Jessica to leave. We were both enjoying each other's company so much. I asked my mom if Jessica could stay one more night. After a while, mom finally agreed to it, as long as we went to bed early and if it was ok with Jessica's mother.

'Oh, believe me, its ok with my mother if I stay here another night,' Jessica

said sweetly to my mother.

‘Ok darling, don’t you two stay up too late ok?’ my mother said, hugging and kissing us both.

‘We won’t ma, I promise,’ I said rolling my eyes and we ran back into my room giggling uncontrollably.

‘Jess, ya might as well live here! Gosh, I could never get tired of you!’

Jessica got really quiet after I said that. I asked her if she was ok. She said she was fine, just tired and that she’d love living here. We both knew I could tell she was lying, but we both knew whatever was on her mind, Jessica did not want to talk about it. So I didn’t press the topic.

We put on our pajamas, brushed our teeth, and did each other’s nails for school the next day. We blasted the radio and danced around in our pajamas, jumping on the bed, and singing with our brushes as microphones. At midnight we finally settled down for bed.

Jessica was almost always at my house. We had an amazing time each and every time she came over. My family loved her so much, and she fit right in. Something was bothering me though. I’d never met her mother, or been to her house.

‘Jess, why don’t we ever chill at your house?’

‘Case, I love your house so much, mine’s nothing comparatively.’

‘I’d still love to see it Jess. Next sleepover at your house?’

Jessica began to cry. I made her upset, very upset. She wouldn't stop crying. I didn't know exactly what I had done to upset her, but I felt awful. I started crying with her. 'I'm sorry,' I told her through the tears.

'Why would you be sorry,' Jessica said sobbing, 'you're the one good thing that has happened to me here.'

'Awww, I love you Jess,' I said, hugging her.

'I love you too,' Jessica said, crying even more.

'I'm here if you want to talk, or need anything ever. You know that right? I'm not going anywhere.'

'I know Case, thanks. You're doing more than enough, more than you know. I just need to calm down.'

I sat there hugging her and letting her cry. The next morning I told my mom that Jessica was feeling sick and I was going to stay home with her. My mother panicked, and asked if she should call the doctors. I told her it was just girl issues, and that Jessica would be back to school by tomorrow.

When Jessica woke up she told me why she had been so upset the night before.

'Case, my mom, ...well...she drinks, *a lot*, and she brings home a lot of scummy men all the time, but ever since I've known you, it's only been one man, Ted. Mom says she's in love, but she too buzzed all the time to know any better. I hate Ted. I *HATE* him so much.'

‘Jess, why do you hate him? He’s not trying to take the place of your father. Your father has been dead for...’

Jessica interrupted me. ‘This has nothing to do with my father, or Ted trying to be like my father. Ted is abusive. He throws my mom around all the time.’

‘Oh my goodness,’ I said, in shock and not having a clue what to say, ‘I’m so sorry Jess, I didn’t know.’

‘I’m not done yet Case,’ she said slowly. ‘Not only does he hit her, he hits me as well. He also...’ Jessica started crying and couldn’t finish her thought.

‘It’s ok Jess, he also what?’ I said trying to sound brave, but feeling so scared for Jessica.

Through the sobs she said to me, ‘well...he...raped me, numerous times.’

I was shocked. I sat there and cried with her, holding her and petting her hair. ‘It’s gonna be alright, I promise Jess.’

‘Case, there’s more to the story. I think...that...I ma be...pregnant. I missed my period a few weeks ago. I am so scared Case, what am I going to do?’

I sat there speechless. After a few minutes we had both calmed down enough to talk about the situation.

‘Jess, why haven’t you told anyone?’

‘Where would I have gone Case? Before you, I had no one except for my mother and Ted.’

‘You have to get out of there. You can live here. Everything is going to be ok, it’s all going to work out. I promise you that.’

I told my mother that Jessica needed a place to stay for a while. My mother said it was fine for Jessica to live with us. So we went to her house and packed up all her clothes. As she was making herself at home in her new house, I walked to the pharmacy down the street and bought a pregnancy test for Jessica. After taking the test, we figured out that Jessica was in fact pregnant.

We sat down and discussed her options. Jessica had grown up as a Christian, and was taught that abortions were wrong, but in her heart of hearts, she knew she couldn’t possibly care for a baby at the age of 16. Having to see that child everyday would be like looking at the effects of the hell she’d been living. She couldn’t possibly look into that baby’s eyes, knowing she would see Ted’s eyes there. All Jessica knew was that this baby symbolized everything she wanted to leave behind in her life. She wanted to start new, but the baby would be a constant reminder of the old, painful life.

I told Jessica that no matter what her decision was I would support her. My family would be there for her no matter what, through thick and thin. Jessica spent the next few days making the hugest decision she ever had to make in her 16 years of living. She had her whole life to live. She just couldn’t deal with having a child, much less a child conceived by rape, unwanted. She didn’t want to have to look at her child with the same hatred she felt looking at Ted.

She decided that she had to get an abortion.

My mother and I accompanied Jessica to the clinic where she was getting her abortion. Jessica looked empty, alone, scared. I didn't know what I could do to make her feel better. We all prayed together, cried together, and hugged each other for what seemed like an eternity. Then Jessica went through the most emotionally painful time of her life.

After everything was done, we went back home and Jessica broke down. She was upset at herself for taking the poor, innocent baby's chance at a life away.

I said to her, 'Jess, it's ok. You have your life to live. You Don't need a constant reminder of the Hell Ted has put you through. I know it hurts, but I think you made a responsible decision. I don't think God is upset with you. Just stay strong Jess. You've got too much to live for to give up now.'

Jessica lapsed into a deep depression. She didn't want to go to school or volunteer anymore. She just cried and slept. One day we finally got her to come shopping with us. We came to the canned food aisle and Jessica saw the baby food. She began to bawl, picked up two jars of baby food, and threw them across the aisle, nearly hitting a woman. Then she ran to the car and sat there. I ran after her while my mother finished the shopping.

Jessica and I sat silently in the car for a good 20 minutes. Finally she said 'Case, I just cannot do this anymore.'

‘Jess you can. I know how strong you are. You are going to be ok. We will do this together. Have I ever let you down? Have I ever abandoned you? Why would I now?’

‘Case, I’m not strong, I’m weak,’ Jessica said, pulling up her sleeves to reveal the cuts on her wrists. ‘It would be so much easier if I just had the strength to end my life. I’m too chicken. Why can I take that baby’s life but not my own? I’m so selfish.’

‘Jess, stop thinking like that! You are not selfish. You were put into an awful situation. It was beyond your control. What good would it be to kill yourself? You’ve got so much to live for. I really care about you, and so does the rest of my family. We need you as much as you need us. We will not let you down, we will not hurt you like your mother and Ted have.’

We were both bawling by this time and my mother came back to the car and cried with us. Jessica finally said to my mother, “Mrs. Jones, can you please take me to the hospital? I can’t do this without help. I’m not trying to say that you guys aren’t helping me, you are more than you know, but I need to get some mental help. I don’t want to die, but I cant figure out any other way to solve this. I need some help.’

My mother was amazed at Jessica’s maturity. At the age of 16, Jessica was not only able to figure out when she needed help, but she was able to admit to it as well. We took Jessica to talk to an adolescent psychiatrist. Slowly, but surely.

Jessica began to get back to her normal self, one I had never seen. Each day, she'd make a point to find something worth smiling about, and a person to care about. She was so strong and she looked beautiful when she smiled. You could even see a twinkle in her eyes.

It would take years before Jessica could feel better, but she learned to cope quickly. She called upon the Lord for the help and it was given. Jessica really was strong. When she realized that, was when she really began to feel better.

I asked Jessica a few weeks ago at my father's funeral if she would ever change the past if she had the chance to. She said to me, 'Case, come on, that was almost 20 years ago now. I'm now a strong person, and I'm happy. I wouldn't even be the same person if I changed my past, your actions in life determine who you become. I've learned to never regret things in the past, because they are out of your control. All you can do is look to the future. I probably wouldn't have even become friends with you if that situation wasn't occurring at the time. I wouldn't have found the family that I belong to. I don't even want to think about changing the past. I love you Casey, thanks for everything.'"