

# Chapter 1

## STUMBLING IN THE DARK

I couldn't wait for my 30th high school class reunion.

Reconnecting with classmates excited me, not only because I hadn't seen them in so long but also because making that effort felt as if I were allowing certain pieces of a puzzle to slide into place. I needed to merge the person I used to be with the person I had become. My travels had changed me.

I had only one misgiving; how would I get around in the dark?

*I'll just stay where it's well-lit, I told myself. It'll be okay.*

Lorraine, one of the few friends I'd kept in contact with, picked me up in her van. When I got settled, I heard another voice coming from the dark form in the back seat.

Lorraine gestured. "You remember Carol, don't you?"

"Carol. Yes. I didn't see you there. How are you?"

I hadn't seen Carol since our tenth reunion.

"You both look so young and chic," I exclaimed, fiddling with my earrings and checking my lipstick.

"Yeah, real chic," Lorraine said with a smirk. "You notice we're all wearing Bermuda shorts, right?"

"Our clothes may look different but none of us has gained a pound since graduation. That's our story, and we're sticking to it," I said.

Carol reached over the seat to examine the jewelry on my arm. "I love that bracelet!"

"It's from Kenya." The tiny, luminescent pink shells coiled three times around my wrist. The bracelet felt light and summery on my arm, perfect for the occasion.

It was a treasured gift. After the village children sang to welcome me, a little girl had darted over to offer it. She hid behind a tree, peeking through her fingers to see my reaction. But I didn't tell Carol and Lorraine. Sometimes people don't know what to say when I talk about my life overseas. I've found it's best to keep my stories to myself.

The sweet perfume of honeysuckle and other mid-summer blooming flowers filled the air along with the laughter and stories my classmates told. I smelled the barbecued pig as I waited with the others, plate in hand.

Basking in the warmth of meeting up with so many classmates, I called out, "Hey, if you need someone to help at the next reunion, I'd be happy to join the committee."

"You're it!" Terry cried. "It's a done deal. No backing out."

Was I the only one? What did I get myself into?

We lingered over dinner, a casual affair, reminiscing over big football games, proms, wondering whatever happened to classmates who moved away, praising the best and bemoaning the worst teachers.

After dinner I stayed close to the picnic tables, which were lit up. Only when I needed to use the restroom did I venture away from them. I excused myself and made my way over to the port-a-johns at the far end of the property. I fixed my eyes on the dim light, which kept wavering as it slipped in and out

of my field of vision. It was like seeing a mirage.

You think it's real. You hope it's real. But you don't know until you get there if it's really what you think it is.

I prayed. What would I do? What would I say? Flickering lights often played tricks on my eyes. What if this light turned out to be the horseshoe pits? My gaze shifted to the uneven ground. One leg caught on something. It buckled, and I stumbled and rolled.

*It's a...bush.* I jumped up and brushed off my clothing. I hoped no one saw that. Would I ever find this toilet?

An arm came out of nowhere to steady me. "It's me, Patty. Let me help you." *Thank you, Lord,* I thought fervently, *You sent someone to guide me in the darkness.*

"Just a little further." My classmate linked arms with me, almost as if ... she knew. "I need to use it, anyway." She stopped and pointed. "That's the Women's. You can go first."

"Thanks."

I took a deep breath. *Nothing happened,* I told myself firmly. I hadn't embarrassed myself. I wasn't lost. I needed to take it easy.

Ten minutes later, we made our way back to the picnic tables, reminiscing about our school days. Too soon the long-awaited night was over, and we headed home.

I clasped my hands together. "Everything was perfect. I'm so glad I didn't miss this one."

That's when I learned my stumble in the dark had classmates buzzing, and not in a good way.

“I can’t believe Tom really thought I was drunk.” The heat rushed to my face as I sank back in my seat, covering my eyes with both hands. If only I could block out the words as easily as that. “He must have seen me stumble around in the dark and just assumed...”

“Appearances aren’t everything,” Carol consoled from the back seat.

But they are important when you’re trying to impact people for Jesus.

“Besides, I told them you had an eye problem and couldn’t see in the dark,” Lorraine said, “so don’t let them ruin your evening.”

But for me, the evening *was* ruined. Even after thirty years, I still cared what my classmates thought about me. “I shouldn’t have come—”

“Amy, you had a great time. I saw you chatting and laughing with everyone,” Carol chided.

That was before I knew what they really thought.

I sighed. “Everything is distorted in the dark.” As we rounded a curve, I reached for the dashboard.

“Your seatbelt,” Lorraine reminded. “Amy, why don’t you tell more people about your eyes?”

As I fastened my seatbelt, Carol leaned forward. She shook her head, “She shouldn’t have to. It will be our secret, ladies. No one else needs to know.”

Unsure how to respond, I kept silent, chafing at Carol’s words. Why would I want to keep it a secret, as if I were hiding something bad about myself? I couldn’t help what was happening to my eyes. It wasn’t my fault both my parents carried faulty recessive genes and I inherited one from each.

Carol explained that she had suffered a serious, lengthy medical condition of her own. “It took time to recover, but that’s no one’s business but mine.” Was that why she was so sensitive to my situation?

It seemed Carol barricaded her private matters behind the high walls of the fortress where she lived. Funny I didn't see the irony in my own life when I bristled at her words that evening. I rarely confided in anyone about my vision problems. I, too, lived behind high walls.