

## ❧ CHAPTER 1 ❧

**T**he hot July sun was setting low in the west and gave the waters of Chesapeake Bay a warm red glow. The water was murky, and as my body broke the surface in a dive, its cold cleanness doused my skin.

In a jumble of actions and feelings, many things happened simultaneously. I felt my head strike something hard and unyielding. At the same time, clumsily and crazily, my body sprawled out of control. I heard or felt a loud electric buzzing, an unexplainable inner sensation. It was something like an electrical shock, combined with a vibration—like a heavy metal spring being suddenly and sharply uncoiled, its “sprong” perhaps muffled by the water. Yet it wasn’t really a sound or even a feeling—just a sensation. I felt no pain.

I heard the underwater sound of crunching, grinding sand. I was lying face down on the bottom. *Where? How did I get here? Why are my arms tied to my chest?* My thoughts screamed. *Hey! I’m caught!*

I felt a small tidal undercurrent lift me slightly and let me settle once more on the bottom. Out of the corner of

my eye, I saw light above me. Some of the confusion left. I remembered diving into the bay. *Then what? Am I caught in a fishnet or something? I need to get out!* I tried to kick. *My feet must be tied or caught too!*

Panic seized me. With all my willpower and strength, I tried to break free. Nothing happened. Another tidal swell lifted and rolled.

*What's wrong? I hit my head. Am I unconscious? Trying to move is like trying to move in a dream. Impossible. But I'll drown! Will I wake up in time? Will someone see me? I can't be unconscious, or I wouldn't be aware of what's happening. No, I'm alive.*

I felt the pressure of holding my breath begin to build. I'd have to breathe soon.

Another tidal swell gently lifted me. Fragments of faces, thoughts, and memories spun crazily across my consciousness. My friends. My parents. Things I was ashamed of. Maybe God was calling me to come and explain these actions.

"Joni!" A somber voice echoed down some eerie corridor, almost as a summons. God? Death?

*I'm going to die! I don't want to die! Help me, please.*

"Joni!"

*Doesn't anyone care that I'm here? I've got to breathe!*

"Joni!" That voice! Muffled through the waters, it sounded far off. Now it was closer. "Joni, are you all right?"

*Kathy! My sister sees me. Help me, Kathy! I'm stuck!*

The next tidal swell was a little stronger than the rest and lifted me a bit higher. I fell back on the bottom, with broken shells, stones, and sand grating into my shoulders and face.

"Joni, are you looking for shells?"

*No! I'm caught down here—grab me! I can't hold my breath any longer.*

"Did you dive in here? It's so shallow," I heard Kathy clearly now.

Her shadow indicated she was now above me. I struggled inwardly against panic, but I knew I had no more air. Everything was going dark.

I felt Kathy's arms around my shoulders, lifting.

*Oh, please, dear God. Don't let me die!*

Kathy struggled, stumbled, then lifted again. *Oh, God, how much longer?* Everything was black, and I felt I was falling while being lifted. Just before fainting, my head broke the water's surface. *Air!* Beautiful, life-giving, salt-tinged air. I choked in oxygen so quickly, I almost gagged. Gasping, I gulped in mouthfuls.

"Oh, thank You, God—thank You!" I managed.

"Hey, are you okay?" Kathy asked. I blinked to clear my mind and dissolve the confusion. It didn't seem to work because I saw my arm slung lifelessly over Kathy's shoulder, yet I felt it was still tied to my chest.

I looked down at my chest. My arms were not tied. I realized with a growing horror that my limbs were dangling motionlessly. I couldn't move them!

In the confusion, Kathy took charge. She called to a nearby swimmer on an inflated raft. Together they wrestled me onto it and pushed it toward shore. I heard the raft beneath me slide against the sandy beach.

I tried to get up but felt pinned against the raft. People began to hurry over to see what had happened. Soon there was a crowd hovering above me, faces looking down in curiosity. Their stares and whispers made me feel embarrassed, uncomfortable, and even more confused.

"Kathy, please make them leave."

"Yes, everyone stand back! Someone call an ambulance. Move away, please. She needs air," Kathy instructed.

Kathy's boyfriend, Butch, knelt beside me. His lean frame shielded me from the crowd, now moving back. "You okay, kid?" he asked. His large dark eyes, usually smiling and full of good-natured fun, were clouded with concern.

"Kathy—I can't move!" I was frightened. I could see they were too.

Kathy nodded.

“Hold me!”

“I am, Joni.” She lifted my hands to show that she was grasping them firmly.

“But I can’t feel it. Squeeze me.”

Kathy bent over and held me close. I couldn’t feel her hug.

“Can you feel this?” She touched my leg.

“No,” I said.

“This?” She squeezed my forearm.

“No!” I cried. “I can’t feel it!”

“How about this?” Her hand slid from my arm to rest on my shoulder.

“Yes! Yes, I can feel that!”

Relief and joy suddenly came over us. At last, somewhere on my body, I could feel something. As I lay there on the sand, I began to piece things together. I had hit my head diving; I must have injured something to cause this numbness. I wondered how long it would last.

“Don’t worry,” I reassured Butch and Kathy—and myself. “The Lord won’t let anything happen to me. I’ll be all right.”

I heard the wail of a siren. Soon the ambulance pulled up and doors opened. In less than a minute, attendants efficiently lifted me onto a stretcher. Somehow their starched white uniforms were comforting as they carefully placed me in the back of the ambulance. The crowd of curious onlookers followed.

Kathy started to climb up into the ambulance.

Butch took her hand and said softly, “I’ll follow in the car.” Then he nodded sternly to the driver. “Be careful with her,” he instructed.

The siren began to wail, and we headed away from the beach.

I looked up at the attendant riding beside me and said, “I hate to put you to all this trouble. I think once I catch my breath I’ll be okay. I’m sure the numbness will wear off shortly.”

He didn’t say anything but reached over and brushed sand off my face, smiled, and looked away. *I wish he’d say something to let*

*me know I'll be all right—that I'll be going home as soon as the doctors at the hospital check me over, I thought.*

But no comforting words were offered. I was left to my own thoughts and prayers as the siren wailed. I looked through the window at the city speeding by outside.

*The Lord is my shepherd . . .*

People on curbs stared curiously.

*I shall not want . . .*

Cars pulled over to let us pass.

*He maketh me to lie down in green pastures . . .*

The ambulance slowed and turned down a busy boulevard.

*He restoreth my soul . . .*

I could not collect my thoughts enough to pray. I clung to memorized promises from the Bible.

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me. . . .*

Suddenly the ambulance siren growled into silence. The driver backed up to the doors of the hospital, and the attendants quickly began to ease my stretcher out. As they swung me smoothly through the doors, I saw the sign:

EMERGENCY ENTRANCE

NO PARKING

Emergency Vehicles Only

By now the city sky was dark; the sun had set. I was cold and longed to be home.

Inside, the emergency area was alive with activity. I was taken into a room and placed on a hospital table with wheels. The light hurt my eyes. As I turned my face to avoid its glare, I could see all the equipment and supplies arranged in ready rows. Bottles, gauze, bandages, trays, scissors, scalpels, jars, packets with long, medical-sounding names, and unfamiliar shapes were all about. The antiseptic smells and pungent odors made me slightly queasy.

A nurse strapped me to the table and wheeled me into one of the many small cubicles. She pulled privacy curtains around me. Again I struggled desperately to move my arms and legs. They were still numb and motionless. *I feel so helpless. I'm getting sick. I'm scared.* Tears welled up in my eyes.

"Can't you tell me what's happened to me?" I begged.

The nurse merely shrugged and began to take off my rings. "The doctor will be here soon. Now, I'm going to put your jewelry in this envelope. Regulations."

"How long do I have to stay here? Can I go home tonight?"

"I'm sorry. You'll have to ask the doctor. Regulations." Her answer was emotionless and reminded me of a telephone recording.

Another nurse came into the cubicle with forms to fill out.

"Name, please."

"Joni Eareckson."

"Johnny? J-o-h-n-n-y?"

"No. It's pronounced Johnny—after my father—but it's spelled J-o-n-i. Last name is E-a-r-e-c-k-s-o-n." Then I gave her my address, my folks' name and number, and asked her to call them.

"Do you have Blue Cross?"

"I don't know. Ask my folks—or my sister. She's probably outside. She was with me at the beach. Her name is Kathy. Ask her."

The nurse with the clipboard left. The other put the envelope with my belongings in it on a nearby table. Then she opened a drawer and pulled out a big pair of shears.

"W-what are you going to do?" I stammered.

"I've got to remove your swimming suit."

"But don't cut it! It's brand-new. I just got it—and it's my fav—"

"Sorry. Regulations," She repeated. The heavy *ch-cluk, ch-cluk, ch-cluk* of the shears echoed off the plaster walls. She pulled the ruined scraps of material off and dropped them in a waste can. She didn't even care. The suit didn't mean a thing to her. I wanted to cry.