



Chapter 2

The Footling

Year after year she was a footling; a picayune distinction with very little potential for anything.

—Unknown

We remained a short time in Mississippi, but then my parents wanted to move. I called it the itch.

Shortly after I turned four, my parents got the itch, and we moved back to Oklahoma. This time it was because my parents decided to go back to school. That's when my brother and I became known as latchkey kids. If you're unfamiliar with the term, it refers to children who spend most of their time alone and unsupervised.

Now don't get me wrong. My parents were loving, and they provided for us. But because of work and school, they were not home a lot.

It wasn't unusual to come home to an empty house. They were always working. Ever since I can remember, I was cooking, cleaning, and waiting for my parents to come home.

Gradually, I began to develop a strong-willed personality, otherwise known as rebellion with lots of anger. At some point, I had become my own boss. Basically, I thought I knew it all.

We continue to moving at least once, sometimes twice a year until I was about twelve. It had become second nature for me to be the new girl, and being the new girl made much of my young life tough at times.

However, no one could say I was shy. I loved to talk. Let's say it came naturally to me. I could talk to anyone—well, anyone who would listen.

I was always curious about everyone and wanted to find out everything I could—almost like an investigator. My curiosity was so strong I usually annoyed most people. But I wanted to fit in, get to know people and make new friends.

I love telling stories about what happened to me that day. Most would find my stories trivial, and at times I added a little sweetness to them too.

That's when Mama would remind me: "Stop your prattling, Jeraldine."

But I needed some icing on the cake, if you know what I mean. I was creating a new me or a new something. I thought that if I kept talking, I might just become friends with whomever I was talking to.

I was about seven years old and in the second grade when I came up with the idea to change my name. I was no different than any other kid; I hated my name. But there was one difference: When I made up my mind, there was no stopping me.

It went kind of like this ... During school enrollment time, we were asked: "Do you go by any other name? If so, let us know." I struggled with my name a lot, writing it over and over again. There were letters hidden in my name, and I tried putting them together like a puzzle. Maybe I could go by J. Nah, I didn't like it. Then I decided to use my middle name, but I didn't like it either. I thought, and I thought, but nothing seems fit. Then one day,

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one of my girlfriends walked up to me and said, “Hey, Jetti.” She called me that sometimes, Jetti. I like that name, “Jetti.” After saying it a few more times, I decided from that day I would be called Jetti. I had found my new name.

Now, my last name ... Well, that’s a different story. But either way, I wanted a simple name. I couldn’t change my last name yet, but I could start with my first name.

I started telling everyone my name was Jetti. I thought that would be easy enough, but then Mama found out. Oops ... I had forgotten to tell her.

Mama attended a parent-teacher conference meeting and gave the teacher my name: Jeraldine Barby.

“Mrs. Barby, we don’t have a Jeraldine.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, surprised. “Yes, you do. My daughter is in this class.”

“I have a Jetti with that last name, but not a Jeraldine.”

Mama was furious that I’d changed my name and not told her. I had forgotten.

To sum it all up, I can’t remember my parents calling me by my nickname, and when they did, it sounded weird. To this day, most of my friends and family call me Jetti, so I guess you could say it finally stuck.

In addition to struggling with my name and feeling as if I were insignificant, nothing came easy for me. This was particularly true in academics, specifically reading and math. My struggles resulted in me often cheating. I found myself behind in school and usually refused to turn my work in. My report cards reflected a *U* for unsatisfactory. Thinking back, I can’t remember ever seeing an *S*-plus on any report card.

Let’s just say that I had become a bit difficult—argumentative, and on the defense most of the time. I thought people didn’t like me. Well, they probably didn’t. It might have seemed that I didn’t care, but I never gave up trying.

Even though everyone around me had their fixed ideas of who

I was and what I would become, there was something inside me that wanted to be different. The constant put-downs gave me the drive to fight back, although not always in the right way.

As I grew older, I continued to spiral out of control. I was failing most of the time and would do anything to get out of going to school. Even at a very young age, I was overcome with despair. *If only I had ...* and I started wishing my life away instead of appreciating what I had.

Then there was this secret I kept from everyone. I was suffering from fear and nightmares. As if things couldn't get any worse for me, I was tormented with crazy nightmares and thoughts. Almost every night I had dreams about snakes or that someone was going to get me.

I hated bedtime, but it's what would happen next that put me over the edge. After I put my pajamas on, those inner thoughts and torment would start. As soon as my head hit the pillow, the anxiety and fear would rise, because I knew I was alone. I slept with every light on in the house.

Bump ... I heard something ... There it was again. I could see a shadowy figure beyond my room. Then I listened; there was another noise coming from the living room.

I couldn't move. I scooted down in bed, tucking myself under the covers for protection. "I hope they can't see me," I whispered.

But then there were those pesky snakes that lived under my bed. I saw them in my dreams and thoughts. I wanted to move, but the fear kept me paralyzed.

Our minds play tricks on us, and mine was playing tricks on me. I couldn't breathe. It felt as if someone was choking me. My heart raced, and all I wanted to do was hide and wait for someone to save me. But no one would come. I was alone.

I had to get up. I eased off the bed, putting my feet out as far as I could reach. I didn't want the snakes to bite, or the man under my bed to get me. My imagination was crippling at times. Then I took off running as fast as I could, hunched over so no one

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could see me. I began sneaking around the house, easing my way closer to the noise as I hid behind a chair. I looked around every corner. What was it?

Nothing ... It was nothing! The air vent was blowing. It was moving the curtains. Funny, huh? It scared the bejeebers out of me!

But that's how I became known for the phone calls. See, I was notorious for calling Mama. I called her so many times it had become a joke. It got to the point where the people she worked with hated to hear me call. They knew it was Catherine's sassy daughter. It was a good thing we didn't have 911 back then because I would have called day and night.

That's about the time I got a new best friend. It was a thirteen-inch black-and-white television. I can't remember exactly when my parents put the television in my room, but it was a lifesaver during that period.

Before falling asleep, I would make sure there were no creepy shows on. Then before I knew it, I was fast asleep. For years Satan tormented me with dark thoughts. By the time I was ten, I knew I couldn't watch scary movies because the fear would cause me to have nightmares.

Then one night, I found the Christian television channels. I started watching PTL at first and then TBN. Those channels changed my life, and still today, I find myself watching preachers all night long.

Now when my parents were home, you could find me in their bed or on their floor. I would wait until they went to sleep and then make my way into their room. I did this until I was probably thirteen or so. My brother would make fun of me, calling me a baby and telling everyone I slept with Mama and Daddy. But I didn't care. I felt safe with them and went right to sleep.

I loved it when Mama was home. I genuinely felt loved by my parents. I knew they would do anything for me, and they did. My parents loved each other but were both workaholics. My mother

was easy when it came to discipline. She hated confrontation. But my father was not so gentle.

Dad had enlisted in the US Navy at seventeen and left home. After returning, he went back to high school at the age of twenty-one, graduated, and received his high school diploma.

Mama always said the only reason why Dad went back to high school was so he could see all the girls wearing short skirts. It was in the sixties.

Our home was filled with the usual conflicts and would be considered a dysfunctional home by most. R. J. and I had our typical sibling rivalry, mostly because my father played favorites.

Daddy liked to call me Pumpkin. Being I was his little girl, he spoiled me rotten. But R. J. had a few other names for me. Because I usually annoyed him, he often called me motormouth. There were a few other names too, but let's not say them.

Our summers were filled with fun. Mama would take us on vacation, but traveling with me in the car wasn't so fun. Our trips lasted a week, which usually required two days of travel in the car with me.

R. J. would beg Mama, "Please shut her up!" But nothing seemed to work. My lips kept flapping. I know I must have been unbearable at times.

Then Mama would offer to pay me. "If you are quiet for five minutes, I'll give you five dollars," she'd say. That wasn't happening. Somehow, I would be still for a few minutes, but it never failed I would start talking again. I couldn't be quiet. I had to say something, and it would be paramount.

Those days were hectic. Mama was always trying to hold things together, but I wasn't much help. Our punishments never seemed to stick. Mama tried to ground me, but she always gave in.

When the weekend rolled around if Mama was off, it was a church Sunday. Those Sundays were the best. Mama had been saved when I was a young girl, and she had an unyielding belief in Jesus.

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Her desire was for her family to know Jesus. Mama tried several different types of churches but mostly liked the Spirit-filled churches, so I was raised mainly in a Pentecostal-type church.

The services were long but exciting. There were lots of hands raised and praying in tongues. There was peace and calm that would come over me as they played my favorite song, "There's Something about That Name." Then there was the tugging I would feel. Perhaps it was nothing, or was it? Could it be the presence of God? I felt safe there.

There was a banner that hung in the front of the church. I read it every Sunday. It said: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Hebrews 13:8 NIV." At times, it seemed like everything in my life was constantly changing, and I found comfort in those words. God was the same, and he didn't change.

One Sunday morning, the pastor gave an altar call. "If anyone needs prayer, or if you haven't accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior, come quickly so that we can pray for you."

I ran down to the front and asked Jesus to forgive me of my sins and come live in my heart. I was in the fourth grade when he became my Savior that day in the little four-square church on the north side of the city.

Years later, Jesus reminded me of that banner that hung in that church. He would whisper, "I am the same yesterday, today, and forever."

The music continued to play, and tears ran down my face. I looked at Mama, and she had tears too. I wondered why she had tears. Why was Mama crying? Was it because of me? Maybe it was Daddy or maybe R. J.?

I could see joy, but I could see the sadness in her eyes too. My heart ached for her, and I wanted to fix it, but I didn't know what to do.

After church, I asked Mama, "What are those people praying? I can't understand what they were saying."

The Gift

Mama said, "They are praying in their prayer language."

"I want that. How do I get it?"

She said, "When you get older, we can pray and ask God."

"I am older," I explained.

"Jeraldine, you are always wishing your life away and thinking you are older than you are."

I whispered under my breath, "I am."