

Excerpt

Judge Me Not

**A True Story Of Tragedy and Loss That
Rocked A Family To The Core ... Yet
Opened the Door to Life On the
Other Side**

Eunice Rich

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Chapter One

A Mysterious Warning

It was a hot, humid July day. I was sitting in my rocking chair trying to move as little as possible. It was easy to overheat in our little house without air-conditioning. This was the far northern corner of Minnesota, famous for its many months of bitter cold, but today was one of those rare summer days when heat and humidity ruled.

I was watching TV, but I turned it off after a disturbing story I had just seen. I sat back and contemplated the horrific image of a shark that lay dead on a beach. It had been killed after attacking a handsome young boy. It ripped off the boy's arm with its powerful jaws and sharp teeth. I wondered what that poor boy must have been thinking at that terrible instant when he was locked in the beast's jaws.

Did he actually have thoughts, or did sheer terror, panic and pain empty his mind of all reasonable thought? I couldn't begin to grasp what he must have experienced in those frenzied moments.

I also thought about the boy's uncle. Incredibly, he wrestled the powerful, seven-foot ocean predator out of the water and onto the beach. Where did the superhuman strength come from to grapple with such a deadly and powerful creature? His horror and anger at seeing his nephew attacked must have pumped him full of adrenaline, but maybe something even more powerful was at work – his love for the boy, his precious nephew.

For some reason, the story gripped me: the heroic killing of the shark, the retrieval of the arm from the great maw of the beast, the surgery to reattach the severed limb. I kept wondering, *What were they thinking through it all?*

Lost in these thoughts, my mind went back to another boy, a teenage acquaintance of my daughter Kristen. He had died a year earlier. I had never met the boy, but my daughter told me his story. He had a lifetime fear of water. During his entire life, he refused to so much as wade into a lake or take a ride on a boat. He even refused to go into a swimming pool. Obviously he had never learned to swim.

About six months before he died, he became an ardent Christian. He studied the Bible and listened only to gospel music. But last summer he finally accepted an invitation for an outing on a boat. Incredibly, during that very first boat ride, there was a freak accident, and he drowned.

In the months before his death, the boy had developed a keen love for a particular gospel song that contained the chorus words, "When I am drowning, lift me up." He had listened to the song over and over again.

I started contemplating what the boy was thinking about as he was losing his life in the very water he had feared for so long. Was he thinking, "I knew I shouldn't have gotten on this boat!" Or, "I should have stayed away from the water!" Or did he simply surrender to the water with the knowledge that God would lift him up?

As I focused on these thoughts, I became aware of a presence standing by my chair, a little to my right, and facing me. I realized this was the very boy who had just been at the center of my attention. I was startled, and all I could think of was to say was, "Hello!"

"Hello," he said back.

There was a pause. I was uncertain about why he was there, and what more I should say to him. Finally, I said, "You've never been here before."

"No," the boy responded.

A swift insight flooded my mind. The boy had something to say to my daughter. "Is there something you want to say to Kristen?" I asked him.

"Tell her to keep going, 'cause it's gonna get rough."

With those words, he was gone. Despite my tremendous surprise, I felt strangely elated. This was the first time I had been given a message for someone. Still, the words were ominous. They came with a warning. I thought I understood exactly what the first part of the message meant. Kristen was to 'keep going' in her spiritual study. But the meaning of the second part of the message I couldn't decipher. Still, it didn't bother me too much. The message wasn't for me. It was for Kristen. I decided to call her immediately. When she answered the phone, I told her I had been given a message for her and that it was the first time I had ever been given a message this way. When I revealed who it was from, she became apprehensive. I repeated the words exactly as I had heard them from the boy.

There had been no emotion or emphasis on specific words. It was just a rather matter-of-fact statement. I also told her what I believed to be the meaning of the first part. Kristen was shocked. She told me she hadn't been doing any studying lately, and that she had come to a standstill in her spiritual quest. We speculated for a few minutes on what in her life might cause the 'going to get rough,' but we couldn't think of anything specific.

Before we ended our conversation, she vowed to get back to her spiritual studies. We didn't speak about the message again until Sept. 11, 2001, when she called me at work and told me about the first plane crash into the Twin Towers in New York. She was in near-hysteria and sobbing uncontrollably. While we were on the phone, the second plane hit.

Kristen was a basket case. What was happening was terrible to be sure, but she couldn't understand why she was so distraught. After all, she wasn't in New York. This was

happening hundreds of miles away, but Kristen believed this is what the message from her dead friend had foretold.

At about two o'clock my daughter Becky called from California. "Mama? Have you heard about what's been happening?"

"Yes, Kristen has been keeping me and everybody at my office informed. She even called to tell us about the plane hitting the Pentagon and the one that crashed in Pennsylvania."

But this was not the real reason for Becky's call. She had called to tell me about a lump she had found in her breast.

My heart dropped. This daughter of mine had already battled cancer three times. She said, "I'm going in for a biopsy. My doctor tried to assure me the lump could very well turn out to be benign."

After she hung up, I tried to locate my husband. We both worked in the same facility, and I wanted to tell him about Becky. I finally tracked him down at break time and told him Becky's news. "Take me home, Bob." I told him. "I need to get out of here."

"Are you serious?" he said.

"Yes! I just can't take anymore today."

We left work as soon as we got permission. I was sure this is what the message had been about – dear Becky with her three little boys.

Later that evening, Sam, my firstborn son, called. "Well, Mama, I think my marriage is over," were the first words out of his mouth.

"Why, Sam?" I asked, my heart knotting up.

Cheryl is seeing somebody else," he said. "Are you sure there is someone else?" was the only thing I could think of to say.

"Yes, I'm sure," he said. "She's been with him for about two and a half months. And it's all my fault. It's all my fault!"

He explained, "I actually suggested to her that maybe if she tried a new partner, it would rekindle her interest in sex. Her interest was getting lower for a long time, and it dropped to zero. My plan worked," Sam added. "Now she wants sex. She just doesn't want it with me-eee!" he said as he broke down into sobs. "I asked her to stop seeing the other man, but she refused. How stupid I've been."

I worked to calm him down. I told him, "You're not stupid, just desperate. It's not your fault alone. Just because you told your wife to try someone else didn't mean she had to act on

your words. If one of your sons misbehaved and his brother had told him to do it, it would still be him, the one who actually did something wrong, who would be in trouble. If someone tells you to do something wrong, that's no excuse to do it."

This seemed to calm him down. Still, I could hear the anguish continue in his voice. He added, "She wants to stay married to me, but she wants her own room to entertain her new lover whenever she wants to. I can't live that way, Mama."

I agreed it would be no way to live in a marriage. We talked over other options. Maybe he could move back to the house he owned in town and take the three boys, and let his wife keep the rental they had been living in for the past month. Or maybe he could stay in the rental and she could move back into town. The rental house was located in the countryside. Sam said, "I already suggested those things but she insists that we should stay together, that she should have her own bedroom, and she won't consider any other option."

I told Sam, "I love you. Your Daddy and I will back you in whatever decision you make." As I hung up the phone, I mused that this must have been the reason for the message to Kristen from the boy who had drowned. It certainly seemed like our future was going to get rough.

Sam called several more times. On Wednesday, he called late at night and explained, "I told Cheryl she had to choose between me and the other man, but she wouldn't make a choice. I told her she couldn't get in our bed until she made a decision. She started crying and then she left and went to his house." His voice grim, Sam added, "I loaded my shotgun, Mama."

Filled with alarm, I said: "Why, Sam?"

"Because she was crying really hard," Sam said. "I want to be ready in case he comes over with his roommates to beat me up."

"Do you really think he would do that?" I asked.

"I don't know," Sam said. "I want to be ready just in case."

"Sam, if you see anyone coming up your driveway, call us immediately, okay? Promise me. We'll get there as fast as possible."

He promised and we ended our conversation. Through the course of our conversations on Thursday, Sam had decided to move back into the house he and his wife owned in town, and take the boys with him. He was extremely upset over the prospect of going through another divorce. He had already experienced that hellish situation once before.

"I can't lose my boys," he kept saying. "I can't lose another family! I couldn't take it again!"

Sam had two children from a prior marriage. The kids had been kept from him for nine years. The loss of those children haunted him every day – every single day without fail, he often said. He had no connection with them. He wondered where they were, if they

missed him, if they were happy, how they looked, what their interests were. Questions like these tormented him. I tried to reassure him that it wouldn't happen this time. He was a good father, and any court would recognize that. But it was difficult to convince him of that. He had been a good father the first time, and he still lost two children to a system that had been fundamentally unfair to him.

I told Sam, "Your father and I are all set up to help you move. We're ready to help you in every way – financially, with child care, cleaning, laundry – whatever you need. Your sister has promised the very same thing. By working together, we will give you all the support you need."

We tried to make him believe that everything would be alright in the long run. We also told him, "We are behind you if you choose to stick with the marriage and try to make it work. Whatever you need, we will be there for you, 100 percent."