

Darla K. Landers



*Living in a Dark House*

a novel

# CHAPTER 1

The small block building across the alley from the dark house where I lived was in full production making body bags to send to Vietnam. A white powder remnant of the creation, looking akin but definitely not baby powder with its indescribably foul smell, floated through the air and landed on cars and our bicycles. This gritty white talc, coupled with the black soot from the rubber factories making tires, kept food on our neighbors' tables, so we didn't really mind or complain. We were a working class town; we understood hard work and sucking it up.

Richard Nixon had just resigned as president of the United States on that hot August day in 1974, when my father strategically positioned himself and stood in the middle of the white wooden bleachers, directly parallel to where I was located in my peewee cheerleading uniform on a football field in Akron, Ohio. I was ready to perform a half-time cheer on the dry and crunchy brown grass. He was the pendulum, ready to topple me, a small and fragile mountain of dominos.

Of course, he was immune to the moms who were sporting platinum blonde hairdos and modeling Daisy Duke cut-offs, as he began to move his right pointer finger from his belt to me, belt to me, over and over; this movement continued for about thirty minutes. His legs were spread like Clint Eastwood in some cowboy movie, as he stared intently at his prey, not even aware of the people who wondered, by the looks on their faces, exactly what it was that he was doing.

My best friend Kathie, who stood next to me in the red and white cheerleading skirt, first noticed his performance—excitedly for me. “Hey, Del,” she whispered, her voice rising. “Your dad is here! He must have come to watch the half-time cheer!”

It would have been the first and only time he attended anything for me, after all the games, outings, and practices that the other dads had sat through and endured. My father, however, was never associated with the word “cheer.”

“Yea,” I replied as my heart started pounding in my chest, and the blood pulsated through my ears. My shaky knees began to buckle under my heaving chest as I tried to understand the commands from the coach, but the words were in slow motion. “Kathie, after the game, will you r-r-race me back to my car? Just start running, as fast as you can; I need you to do this for me, OK?”

Being always interested in news and pop culture, thoughts about the sound of a new president's name, Gerald Rudolph Ford—especially the middle name “Rudolph”—whirred through my mind. But at this particular moment of decisiveness, I had changed course and had started thinking, thinking, strategizing, and trying to come up with a plan: I needed to avoid being beaten by his belt in my short cheerleading skirt, full throttle, in front of my ten-year-old classmates, in the middle of a football field or on bleachers.

The other parents were still sipping coffee from Thermos cups in slow motion, nudging each other, and wondering about the man with the cowboy stance. I knew what was about to happen, but nobody else did, so I needed a way to avoid the scene that was about to unfold. If Kathie would run with me, it would appear like we were having an innocent race to our family's Chevy Impala in the parking lot, and I would only be spectacle to the people there, not the whole football team in the middle of the field. The car, parked wherever, was a better location for his performance than the fifty-yard line, so I scanned the parking lot to find it.

“It's by the concession stand,” I told Kathie. Kathie did run beside me. I wish we could have just kept running forever, four yellow ponytails swinging back and forth. I allowed her to win; I was at least six inches taller than her, and then I ushered her back to the team,

where I could hear our cheerleading coach asking about our abrupt departure. I told her to hurry back to the coaches, and I was safe inside the unlocked car, huddled in the backseat, when I heard the crunching of the gravel on his work boots and the “shhhht” sound of his belt as it started painting stripes on my legs and arms.

Inside that melting car, I could hear other parents talking about football plays with their sons. I could smell hot dogs and popcorn as players squeezed by in their cleats, holding shoulder pads. As time was whirling by in my head, I still remember my father’s piercing blue eyes and that blonde triangle of hair on his forehead, as he opened the long door in slow motion. He removed his belt like a gunslinger. I guess he felt it was a great skill. “Do you know what you did?” he asked.

“No, I don’t know! I’m sorry! Don’t hit me here! Please!”

“Don’t know, huh?”

“I really don’t know,” I nodded. I could feel tears mixing with sweat on my freckled cheeks.

“Well, we’ll see if we can learn ya,” he pronounced, slinging his weapon.

“I r-r-really don’t know. T-t-tell me! I’m sorry! All these people, please!”

Parents were walking by, talking by, and gawking by, as the swishing continued mostly across my legs. I could hear a discussion in the distance about President Nixon’s resignation, but everything else became a blur as I heard cars starting, doors slamming, and goodbyes yelling across the parking lot. Soon, hurry up, everyone would be gone.

This would continue until he got tired and bored when the proclamation would come: I fed our dog Mickey a piece of bologna before I left for the game, and the rind was still on the kitchen floor—testimony to my sin.

This was my life. I am Delanie Daye and I was living in a dark house. My days and nights were filled with the uncertainty of when, where, and why the belt would lick my arms and legs, and I would be forced to repeat some inane statement about how I had failed to live up to his standards, and why everything was a waste of money, why women were useless, and why everyone and everything was wrong except him.

This time, I had to say, “I’m really stupid. I won’t play my Elton John records,” over and over until he got tired of this little game in



which he would always win. The belt always attacked in the midst of a word and broke it in half.

One by one, cars disappeared down the road, the scars multiplied, and the bars around my heart went up. The fun was over. I was shaking and crying in the backseat, wondering if Kathie and her dad Andy had seen me become the spectacle. I was wondering if my coach had seen it, or if Jeff Farnsworth had witnessed it; he was the quarterback who sat next to me in my fourth grade classroom.

Meanwhile, on the AM radio, Seals and Crofts were telling the “Hummingbird” not to fly away, but I wanted to fly away with them—or anyone who would take me. Some news about the “peaceful transition of power” of the presidency was on the radio. These words, about this organized place out there somewhere people lived decently and comfortably, soothed me as we wheeled back to our little, safe neighborhood where everyone was living his or her life as usual: lawnmowers buzzing, bicycles flying by, dogs barking.

I spent that afternoon in my bedroom, listening to the radio reports about President Gerald R. Ford, as I tried to avoid Kathie, my across-the-street neighbor who was also my cheerleading sidekick, my confidant, and my best friend in the whole wide world. The aftermath of these scenes was the most difficult because explanations

were confusing and humiliating. Do I explain or just pretend that nothing happened? If I could avoid her the rest of that day, the event would pass unspoken; we would have President Gerald Ford, and Kathie and I would just proceed to some fun adventure that we had created in our tiny corner of the world outside the dark house.

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Darla Knight Landers grew up in Akron, Ohio, when the city earned its name as the Rubber Capital of the World. She holds a BA in English from The University of Akron (1987) and an MA in journalism from Kent State University (2003). Currently, she is a high school English and journalism teacher. Before teaching, she did indeed work at York Steak House at the now defunct Rolling Acres Mall and at Li'l Joe's Pub in Bath, Ohio, and as a newspaper journalist at The (Wooster) Daily Record. She lives with her husband Bill and her beloved pets in Ohio. Her two daughters are currently in college, and she travels to see them frequently. In addition to reading and writing, she enjoys travel, history, gardening, exercise, research projects, word games, and spending time with family and friends as they enjoy good food!



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