

## **EIGHTEEN**

### **WHAT DOESN'T KILL YOU MAKES YOU STRONGER**

Kendra Leigh Horn

My name is Kendra and I'm a 27-year-old writing from the Wyoming Women's Center in Lusk, Wyoming. I would like to tell you about my life experiences as a teenager and adult. I want to help you understand that you can overcome your hardships. I want to encourage you to never give up. I want you to empower yourself to be better than you are. I want to help you understand that you deserve the best in life if you have the courage, confidence and strength to make life great. Here is my life story to help you understand. There is some good and there is some bad.

I was born in Seoul, South Korea and adopted as a baby at four and a half months into a white family. They were a great family and I was very well taken care of. I grew up in a small town called Douglas, Wyoming. My brothers and sister never treated me differently. They loved me. My parents homeschooled all of us until I was in second grade, and my brothers were in middle school and high school. Then we were put into the public system. There I struggled, being teased and made fun of for being a different ethnicity and for looking different. My brothers and sister succeeded and were popular. All through elementary and middle school I was teased and had no friends. I didn't live the teenage life I wanted to. I didn't have activities to do with kids my age. I didn't experience sleepovers, going to movies and dinners with friends, or just hanging out. I spent most of my time with my family. To be honest, it was boring.

My parents took very good care of us. I grew up with both parents, which was good! We had a close-knit family and ate dinners together. We were raised Christians and we went to church. Even though things were usually good, my mom and I

always fought. As a family we went camping, on trips to see grandparents, to the Denver Zoo, and to Water World. In fourth grade, my parents took me to a Korean camp in Colorado for adopted kids. That was a great experience; it was nice to meet other people like me. There were about 600 other kids that were like me.

I learned that others were going through the same identity crisis caused by a lack of culturally and ethnically similar peers. I struggled growing up. Being from a different cultural background made me want to change the way I looked. The older I got, the more I grew to appreciate and love being unique. It's how God made me. But as a kid, I wanted to have surgery; I once saw a medical show about a Korean woman getting surgery to become Americanized. They showed her after and she looked totally different. Her eyes were opened and her nose was restructured. That's no longer how I want to look or be portrayed. When I look in the mirror now, I see a beautiful woman. My life is in my own hands. No one has control over what do or when I do it.

I was homeschooled throughout the early years of my life. It was hard because I wanted to be around other kids, but my life didn't turn out that way. I took the long road. I took the selfish road. I was self-destructive growing up because I didn't have friends. My family never knew how I felt because I didn't trust them with my feelings. Now, I wish I had told my family so I wouldn't be going through this heartache at age 27.

One of the greatest moments during my teenage life was when my sister got married in California, then my brother followed three months later in Douglas. At age 16 I was hurting, though. As my life started spiraling downward, my criminal activities began. I got busted for embezzling from my job. I wanted to drop out of high school and kill myself. I thought hard about it, thinking that no one would miss me. I know my family didn't know how bad I felt, and I refused to ask for help. I thought that they didn't care.

I encourage you: if you need help, please ask for it and don't suffer alone. There's someone who will help you.

Finally, my parents sent me to a Christian girls school called Happiness Hill Christian Academy in Mississippi. I was there for 14 months. I graduated high school and it saved my life. Other troubled teens and I went to churches all around the country and shared our hardships and how we had changed our lives. I gave my life to the Lord December 10, 2005. That was a great day! Don't get me wrong, there were many battles left in my life.

When I graduated high school early, my family came for that wonderful day. It was a big accomplishment for my family and me. Then I came home December 18, 2006, and my grandma got real sick. My mom and I went to be with her. My grandma's health deteriorated very quickly. She ended up dying on my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday: April 14, 2007. I was angry that God took her from me on my special day. I held a grudge, and that made me frustrated. The grudge affected my life. I did not go back to Mississippi to work as a staff member. I did not help other girls there.

I ended up ruining my life when I moved to Casper, Wyoming. I wanted to fit in and be liked. I hung out with the wrong people. I would steal from stores for my so called "friends" who were addicts. Then, I went from guy to guy—I thought it would make me happy. Also, I got addicted to online dating sites that allowed me to meet one man after another. I met this guy from Florida and we both fell for each other. Except for my grandma and aunt, my family knew nothing about the men. They kept it a secret from my parents.

I ended up buying a plane ticket to see him. I wasn't talking to my family at that time. Before I left, my childhood friend told her parents about my plan. They were scared for me. They had an officer talk to me about online predators, and I ended up not going. Instead, I reconnected with my family but I was still meeting guys online and keeping it a secret.

Circumstances led me to move back in with my parents. Things still weren't the greatest with them. We fought all the time. It wasn't fun living with my family. On a cold snowy night in December, they kicked me out of the house. As my dad held the door, I walked out. He didn't look at me.

I had a backpack, a duffle bag, and a grocery bag with my stuff. I walked around a little bit, and then I knocked on a door to see if I could use the phone. This old guy answered the door and let me use the phone. He gave me money for a cab ride. It's funny how you meet someone that you don't know, and they have skeletons in their dark closet, too. A year later, I found out that the old guy had molested young girls for years. I had recognized him because he used to come through my grocery store checkout line at Safeway and Albertsons.

That night, the cab drivers paid for my motel stay because they felt sorry for me. Next, I went to my friend's house to stay with her. I watched her little boy while she went to the bar night after night, coming home with different guys. I was hanging out with another girl I befriended and her boyfriend, who had just gotten out of prison and a halfway house. January 1, 2008 was the worst day of my life. My friend's boyfriend was drunk and we took a drive to see a buddy he did time with in prison. We came back and he got abusive with his girlfriend. That night I was raped by him and his drunk friend. My friend's boyfriend made her get involved. They both threatened to kill me if I told. I believed them.

Soon after I went back to my other friend's place and the cops came to question me about some forged checks. I didn't remember doing it, but I never denied it. I was arrested just 17 days after my parents kicked me out, and I went to jail for the first time on January 7, 2008. I was 18-years-old. I turned 19 in jail.

It took me three weeks to report the rape. In jail somebody encouraged me to, and an officer came and did a report. He believed me, but his supervisor didn't do anything about it. Both the rapists got off the hook, even with their bad records. One of the guy's girlfriends was in jail with me and she threatened me. She wrote that when I got released, I had better watch out. They were going to kill me. The other guy's wife was my roommate. So, I was scared to get out of jail and took a plea deal of probation.

Instead of calling my mom to come get me, a girl that was my roommate in jail came and got me. I ended up getting another felony charge that first week I was out. Then I wrote a check for a

car and left the state for Denver to be with another guy. He was 17 years older than me and had been in prison for murder, which I didn't find out until it was too late. I got to Denver and he introduced me to crack cocaine and alcohol. I did so much that first time, I should've died. He was very abusive and hit me several times. One day I got scared enough and left him. *Everybody makes mistakes but it is how we get back up that's important. Never let your struggles get you down; always get back up.* From there I went back to Casper and got arrested again. This time my sentence was two to five years in prison. I did almost a year in jail, then went to prison at 19 years old. My family supported me while I was there and visited me. I did 15 months, turned 20 and then got out on parole.

I went back to my hometown, Douglas, to a facility called Jubilee House. Everyone in town looked at me like I was a freak. I was judged because I came from a so-called "good Christian family." Once I was out of prison again, what did I do? Got in a relationship. I ended up going back to jail 17 days later. Then I was back in prison. I turned 21.

My family didn't want anything to do with me. It was like that for ten months. They would come see me unexpectedly, and I was angry. I thought, "You can't be *convenience parents*. I feel like I don't need you, then you think it's okay to come back into my life because it benefits you?" I let it go. My family started supporting me and visiting me again around the time I turned 22.

I did 15 more months in prison, got out and was out for 34 days this time. I got charged with misdemeanor larceny and went to jail again. I was living with a girl at a halfway house who was a drug addict and had two small children. We didn't get along. She thought she was better than most people. She knew it wouldn't take much for me to get sent back to prison, so she and her boyfriend threatened to kill me if I didn't do what they asked. They called my parole officer anonymously to tell her about my "crime," the one they got me to commit, and I got arrested. I just went along with it.

I was then enhanced to ISP, the Intensive Supervision Program. I was supposed to do a 10-day sanction. Charges came and I plead guilty to the misdemeanor for 60 days in jail. I did almost the entire sentence, and then I was relocated and sent back to prison. Then, I went in front of the parole board again. Thankfully they didn't believe my parole officer, but I told them I didn't want out again, that I wanted to finish eight months and walk out free. I turned 23.

My family didn't have much contact with me when I got out. Of course, I got back on the dating sites. I met a guy and went on a date with him. Turns out, one of the guys who raped me was also there, at the place we went on a date. I discovered that he was good friends with the guy I was on a date with; I was scared. He wanted to know why I called the cops on him. He thought that I was more beautiful now. He wanted me even more. I told the guy I was on a date with to take me home, and he did. From that point on, the guy who raped me kept appearing—stalking and sexually harassing me.

I got even more messed up, hanging out with drug addicts and alcoholics. Getting high and drinking eased the pain. I was still meeting guys online. I should've been dead towards the end, but God had saved me again from my self-destruction. Well, I started stealing again for my "friend." We ended up getting arrested. Ninety days of being out of prison then going back to jail because of our records. My parents came to see me. They wrote a letter of support for my judge. I ended up getting probation and my so called "friend" went to prison. She was mad at me. I was sentenced to the halfway house. *Today's struggle could be someone else's success, never give up. Never stop trying, giving everything you've got.*

When I was in jail, my District Attorney filed misdemeanor charges against me. Seven of them were dropped. As soon as I got probation I had a different DA. So it didn't look suspicious, he refiled these misdemeanors; because he didn't get his way, he got dirty. He told me to either plead guilty or he'd charge them as felonies, which by law he couldn't do. It scared me, so I took the

deal and did six months in jail. I lost my bed at Cheyenne Transitional Center and had to wait. I turned 24.

I finally got out and went to the halfway house. I had a great life starting for me and a job that I loved. Here I got back on dating sites again, meeting guy after guy. Before I got released from the halfway house, I started talking and getting together with my brother's old friend—someone who I had known for more than half my life. He was supposed to be my date to my brother's wedding. I fell in love for the first time, and we talked about getting married and starting our own family. He even moved back to Cheyenne for me.

Or so I thought. I'm pretty sure there was another girl involved. He wrote a breakup message to me on Facebook and it broke my heart. My family wasn't happy about it; he was the first guy I had told them about. My parents, especially, knew how much he hurt me. However, I didn't let them know it affected me as much as it did.

I was released early and completed the program to go to my brother's wedding in another state. It had been years since my family had been together. I got to spend my 25<sup>th</sup> birthday with my family. That was special to me. I was doing good. I had my own place and was succeeding. Then, I let my friend and her kids move into my new place. It had three bedrooms and two bathrooms. She was supposed to help with the bills and didn't. I took care of everything. They trashed my house, and I evicted them. *In this life, I only have myself. I realize that if I stand up for myself every day and show the world all that I can be then in the end, I will always succeed.*

And here come the online dating sites again. When I first met my daughter's father, Jeff, I didn't think I could fall in love again after my recent heartbreak. We met on Facebook. The day he came to Cheyenne to meet me we clicked. He understood me and I understood him. We come from good families. I have a hard time trusting people in my life, but I fell for Jeff right away. I believe Jeff did the same. We both told each other we loved one another. We had a connection.

I was still in ISP. I stayed with him and bought him his alcohol. I was enabling him and I shouldn't have, but when I realized it, I was already too involved. We talked about getting married, starting a family and living life together. He told me I was different from any other girl, and that's what he loved about me. I thought I could help him change. He planned to go back and finish his engineering degree to support me like I was supporting him. I even made him a special key to my house so he could come in whenever he wanted. Jeff was a good, loving guy. He meant a lot to me.

I had a court hearing to get off probation early on October 24, 2014. He was supposed to go with me. I was so excited! We were going to move on with our lives. Jeff told me he was going to quit drinking because he saw how good I was doing, and he wanted to have a good life with me. Well, on October 15, 2014, I had an appointment with my parole officer in the afternoon. Then on the morning of the 18<sup>th</sup>, I was in a hospital in Orlando, Florida. I did not know who I was, where I was, or who my family was. The hospital had me under a different name. While there, they told me I was pregnant. I was shocked and thought it was a dream. They had a detective, who was very nice, come up and finger print me. He asked me if I had been arrested in any state. He told me I must have been through something very traumatic.

They figured out that I was a victim of sex trafficking after being given a "rape drug" to blur my memory. I didn't know what any of that meant until I got back to Casper, Wyoming. I was scared. There was no missing person's report out for me, so it didn't make sense to the detectives. They decided to issue a missing person's report. When my fingerprints came back, there was a warrant out for my arrest.

On October 25, a week later, I was arrested and taken to the jail in Orlando. I waived my extradition still not knowing what had happened. On October 31, Kansas Transport Security was there to get me. We arrived in Casper November 1, 2014. I was in jail for six weeks until I was sentenced for five to seven years in prison.

Here I am, now on my fourth prison sentence, not proud at all. It took me two and a half months to remember Jeff.

I was four months pregnant when I got to prison. My family was not supportive at all this time. They didn't care that I was pregnant. I got to prison January 20, 2015. I ended up having my daughter at the prison in Torrington. I spent my 26<sup>th</sup> birthday there, too. I was angry that I was pregnant, and I was mean. I didn't say very nice things to others when I was pregnant.

I wrote Jeff a letter through probation and parole and told him about being pregnant, having a girl. I just wanted him to know. I never heard back, so I thought he was denying his daughter. I didn't know what I was going to do with her. My family didn't want anything to do with either of us. I contacted the Department of Family Services to see what I would have to do.

Stressing, I hoped that something would come up. I wanted to keep her. Luckily, a friend I have known for many years from being locked up together wanted to help find someone to take my daughter until I got out. Then, she thought of someone from Casper that goes to the jail and leads church services. She gave me the address; I wrote her on a Wednesday night, sent it Thursday and she received it Friday. She wrote me that day, and I had a letter back on Monday expressing her willingness to help. We started talking on the phone, and then got acquainted at the facility in Torrington. Her family discussed it and agreed to take my daughter. I granted temporary legal guardianship to them.

*Happiness keeps you sweet. Trials keep you strong. Sorrow keeps you human. Failure keeps you humble. Success keeps you glowing. But, only God keeps you going.* Days went by and finally, on June 23, at 6:18 am my daughter was born by C-section. She weighed 10 pounds 3 ounces and was 22 inches long. My whole world changed when I held her! I couldn't let her go. She was mine and I loved her. Beautiful, angelic, and precious, God gave me my daughter for a reason. Due to my C-section, I got more time with her in the hospital. Let me tell you, the hardest thing I have ever had to do in my life was leave my daughter behind and head back to prison. Because I am diabetic and my sugars run high, hers were

low and she couldn't be released immediately. I was a mess and the family couldn't contact or see her. That was hard, so they put her on the prayer chain at church. We prayed and God healed her two days after I left. She came home June 27, 2015. The family that has her has been the biggest blessing in our lives, and they are our new family. My family still hasn't contacted me. I get lots of pictures, visits and phone calls with my daughter, though.

When I was cleared to come back to the Women's Center in Lusk, I put Jeff's number on my calling list and he blocked me. I was even more angry, thinking he didn't want to take responsibility for his daughter. I wanted to hate him, but I still had love for him. Right before Thanksgiving, I thought of writing to him and sending a picture. I thought, "how can you deny a picture of your child?" A few days later, on December 1, 2015, I was pulled into my case worker's office and told that Jeff had died on March 17, 2015. This whole time he wasn't ignoring me; he was dead. I was angry and then I was sad. Well, we found his parents and told them. They were completely blindsided because Jeff had never told them about me, like he said he did. They didn't know what to do. They keep in contact with the family who has her and they see pictures of her all the time. We are waiting for the DNA results, but they want to be involved in her life now. This is their only grandchild. It's the last part of Jeff.

My daughter is one year old. She's my mini-me, and I love her to pieces. She's what's changed my life completely and makes me want to be a better person and mother. I'm going to raise her right and be a good role model. I'm so thankful for the family that offered to help us. They will be in our lives forever! God has blessed us all! I just turned 27, and I hope to be out soon. It's sad that, aside from my sister, who has been a big support, my family still hasn't seen my daughter.

I just want you to know that you can overcome the hardships and trials in your life. I am. God has us go through these things to make us stronger. We may not know why God chooses the times that he does, but God is great. He can conquer all our fears and problems as we put our trust into Him. We have so many

blessings. I hope to be a shining vessel to God. God is waiting for us to ask him for help and to heal our broken wounds. May God help me to help others in need. God Bless You All. *I'm not where I need to be but, thank God I not where I used to be.*

## DEAR MOM AND DAD

Kendra Leigh Horn

Dear Mom and Dad,

I'm writing this letter to help you understand how being adopted from a foreign country affected my childhood and identity. I also want you to know how grateful I am to have been chosen by you. I always knew you loved me and didn't treat me differently than my siblings. Both of you have always had a lot of love for me. But sometimes love is difficult to feel.

My first memory of not belonging was when you put me into the public school system. In second-grade the kids teased me and made fun of me for looking very different. This went on throughout the next few years. It got worse the older I got. I held grudges against the kids. I also held a grudge against you for not doing anything about it or caring about what I was going through. You always made jokes about it and I just went along with it. I hated talking to you about my troubles and that's when I grew to not trust you with my feelings. You always told me that I could come to you for help or to talk. But I felt you didn't accept me and that I didn't fit into the family, and so I eventually stopped coming to you

The closest I felt to having friends or a normal teenage life was during the short time we lived in Nebraska. It was in Nebraska that I met the girls at the church. It was a great church that fostered love, compassion, and kindness. The girls I met at church were my age and they exuded the church's teachings. I actually had friends my age! They were nicer and kinder than the girls in Douglas, Wyoming. We went to camp and Six Flags amusement park

together. I had so much fun with them. They made me feel like I was part of a community. When I was in Nebraska, I felt like I was safe. That's the only time I felt like I fit in and didn't have to work so hard to be accepted. That all ended when we moved back to Douglas and I was the social outcast again.

During middle school and high school we were back in Douglas and I did not have any friends. I felt like I didn't have a normal teenage life and I missed out. As a teenager I wanted to have friends to go dinner and the movies with. I wanted to go to prom but there weren't any guys who would take me. It made me sad that prom came and went and I never attended it.

You know, shortly after we moved back to Douglas is when my life and my ability to survive got worse. I really wasn't doing well. I had no life and I became more depressed with my surroundings and I thought you guys didn't care at all. I was already suicidal by then and when I got caught embezzling from my job my depression only got worse. Then I really considered killing myself thinking that nobody would miss me. Yes, I really thought that. I felt even more that my siblings wouldn't care. I was a troublemaker little sister! If I was out of their lives and everyone else's, there might be a peace in the family. I needed so much help growing up and you tried to help me.

Then you found Happiness Hill Christian Academy and sent me there. I struggled, as I thought you were happy to send me away. Then I finally got through it and graduated. It was the best part of my life. I was happy to go home because I was proud that I had graduated and earned my high school diploma. I felt that I had accomplished something in my life.

On December 27, 2007 you put me out of the house. It was cold, with eight inches of snow on the ground. I know you probably has a good reason for putting me out of the house; I was rebellious and stubborn. With nowhere to go, I went to the only "friends" that I had. On January 1, 2008 I was raped by two different guys. I later stole a check from one of them and forged his signature. I was incarcerated for my actions but no one believed

me when I said I had been raped. This was the beginning of my adult legal struggles.

I am now 27 years old, in prison. I am a mom to a daughter who is a year old. A daughter who was born in prison. I want a different life. I want a life with my daughter and my family. I want to love and be loved. I want a job – a job I can be proud of. I want to be proud of myself. I want you to be proud of me. One day, I want my daughter to know who I am and I want her to be proud of me also.

If I have learned anything, I have learned everybody needs somebody. No one can make it in this world alone. We, people, are not made to be alone. We are made to need and be needed by others. I need you! I know you aren't to blame for my choices. You tried your best. Most of the time, I also tried my best. Life is hard! We all did our best.

With Love, your daughter,  
Kendra