



Life,
In Spite of Me

Extraordinary Hope After a Fatal Choice

Kristen Jane Anderson
with Tricia Goyer

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MULTNOMAH BOOKS
12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved. Names and identifying characteristics of some people have been changed. For the sake of narrative flow, time lines have been condensed or modified.

ISBN 978-1-60142-252-1
ISBN 978-1-60142-253-8 (electronic)

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Published in association with the literary agency of Janet Kobobel Grant, Books & Such, 52 Mission Circle, Suite 122, PMB 170, Santa Rosa, CA 95409. www.booksandsuch.biz

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Anderson, Kristen Jane.

Life, in spite of me : extraordinary hope after a fatal choice / Kristen Jane Anderson, with Tricia Goyer.—1st ed.
p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-60142-252-1—ISBN 978-1-60142-253-8 (electronic) 1. Anderson, Kristen Jane. 2. Christian biography—United States. 3. Suicidal behavior—Patients—United States—Biography. 4. Amputees—United States—Biography. I. Goyer, Tricia. II. Title.

BR1725.A342A3 2010
248.8'628092—dc22

[B]

2009051643

Printed in the United States of America
2010—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*To God. You are the reason that I live.
Thank you for everything you are. I will love you forever.
To anyone who has ever questioned the point to life
or wondered why you're alive,
and to those who want to help the hurting.
This book is for you.*

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Life

Dear reader,

This is my story. Sometimes it gets a little crazy...you'll see, but my guess is that in many ways my story and yours are not that different.

Between some of the chapters you will find personal notes from me to you. These include things I wish I had known, things I wish someone had told me back then. I hope you will find what I've shared encouraging.

I am praying for you.

Kristen

Life

Just Let Me Die

Numb. The cold Illinois wind chilled my body.

Numb. My mind, my heart.

At just past 6:00 p.m., the sky was black, and the icy January air hovered over the ground as a thick, misty fog. Snow clung to the dirt in patches, and my heart felt as dead as the wintry world around me. Silently, I trudged through the park and tugged my knit gloves tighter. I wanted only to be happy and for life to be a little easier, but everything seemed to be getting worse.

On one side of me, the park was dark and silent. Once full of life and laughter, my soul was the same. Play equipment, empty and laced with frost, sat motionless. In the other direction, lights from the town attempted to

penetrate the fog. The idea of going home caused a heavy weight to sink in my stomach. I didn't want to face my parents.

Or my life.

Cold seeped through my jeans and coat as I sat down on the hard wooden seat of a nearby swing. Frozen chains creaked softly, and my thoughts took me back to all the times I'd played at this park during happy childhood days—too many to count. Now I was seventeen; those days were long past.

Why does life have to be so painful?

I turned in the swing, twisting the chains above my head tighter and tighter. Then I released. My body unwound in a slow turn. If only the invisible chains wrapped around my heart would free as easily.

A car drove by, and my body tensed. The park closed at dusk. Policemen patrolled the area, and I knew if they found me they'd send me home.

I don't want to go back... I just can't do it.

I'd never hung out in this park at night before. I didn't like being there, but I had no idea where else to go. I just needed time—time to figure out what to do next.

My gaze turned to the two sets of railroad tracks at the edge of the park. The first set of tracks was empty. A cluster of six cars sat on the second set. I knew the cops wouldn't be able to see me there.

Sluggishly, I made my way over to the line of railroad cars. My eyes zeroed in on the last car. I climbed up the side of it and sat, dangling my legs. I'm not sure how much time passed. Maybe an hour, maybe two. The danger of sitting on the train car put me on edge. After all the years living so near the railroad tracks, I'd never ventured this close.

I blew warm air into my hands, trying to thaw them, but it did little good.

What's wrong with me?

Everyone else seemed to be able to handle the burdens, the struggles of life, better than I could. All I wanted was to be happy. To have the perfect life I always thought I had when I was a kid. But my arms had grown tired from trying to hold my fantasy world together.

Lately, it seemed I couldn't do anything right. I wasn't there for my friends and family when they needed me. I was doing horribly in school, and I'd become a worry to my family. Now I was "grounded until further notice." I pushed the most recent argument with my parents out of my mind. And then there was the pain that ran even deeper than that. Memories too painful to think about. I pushed them back below the surface, as I had for months. In the past year I'd started smoking, drinking, and partying with my friends on the weekends, futilely trying to escape the pain.

I looked down at the railroad tracks and remembered a time I'd realized the power of a train. *A train would kill anyone in an instant. No one could survive that. If I ever wanted to take my life, if ever...that's the way I'd do it.*

The cold air around me brought me back to the moment. A deeper chill settled into my bones—and my thoughts grew darker; I knew I didn't want anyone to worry about me anymore. More than that, I wanted the pain to stop.

If I ever want my life to end...this would be my chance.

It's not going to get better. There's no reason I need to be here. There's nothing I'm supposed to do here. They'd be better off without me.

I tried to think of a reason to stay around, to live, but I could think of only one, my two nephews.

I'm not a very good example anymore. They're probably better off without me

anyway, and I don't have any kids of my own. No younger brothers and sisters either. There's nothing important I'm supposed to do. My family, my friends... They'll get over me, right? I'm just causing pain and problems.

I looked around again at the cold, dark night.

This night is icky.

The world is disgusting.

My life sucks.

It could all be over soon, and then I won't hurt anymore.

I thought about school the next day. The homework I hadn't done.

I'm such a failure.

Do I want my life to end? If the train comes, should I end it?

Conflicting thoughts ping-ponged, faster, faster.

It's going to get better.

It isn't going to get better.

There's a reason I'm here.

There's no reason I'm here.

There's something I'm supposed to do here.

There's nothing I'm supposed to do here.

I was cold, and it was late. I wanted to leave, but I didn't know where to go.

Suddenly, a train whistle split the air. My heart pounded. I hadn't expected the train. Not yet. I still hadn't decided what to do.

I knew it would be a long time before the next train. *This is my chance.*

The thoughts came as fast as the train speeding toward me.

I'm so cold. This might be the only train for a while.

If I did it, the pain, the heartache, the numbness would be over.

I'm gonna do it. Soon it will all be over.

I stood between the parked train cars. I glanced across the dip between the tracks I was on and the ones the approaching train was speeding down.

I waited until the train got closer. I didn't want the engineer to see me. I didn't want him to stop the train. The large outline of the train's engine was barely visible beyond the bright headlight. It was almost here.

Heaven waited for me. I was sure of it. I was a good person.

Heaven has to be better than this life.

My heart pounded as I ran up the small bank. The train's headlight illuminated me. Its horn blared. I tried to push down the fear and shame, turned my face away from the train, and lay facedown.

I clenched my fists, crossed my arms under my head, and braced myself, closing my eyes tight. My head and body lay between the tracks, my legs hung over the rail. I could feel the cold metal against my thighs and the wood and rocks under my stomach. As the train closed in, the ground shook so much that my whole body vibrated. Then the train was upon me, over me.

Pain overwhelmed me. The train roared.

The momentum of the cars pulled at me, as if the train were trying to suck me into itself. The wind tugged harder, wrenching at my jacket and yanking my hair upward. My body rose, lifting slightly.

Then, even more powerful than the wind and the momentum of the train, another force pushed me to the ground. My head and chest hit first, then my hips and legs. Again I felt the power of the train, the shaking of the ground, the roar of it moving over me. The force of the weight pushing me down hurt more than anything else.

Fear coursed through me. I squeezed my eyes tighter.

It's going to be over now. The pain is going to end. I'll be in heaven soon.

As the whistle blew again, the vibration of my body stilled.

The sound stopped. The wind stopped. The train stopped.
Am I dead yet?



I opened my eyes and looked around. All I could see was train—beside and above me—dark, dirty, oily, but not moving.

Train cars stretched endlessly down the tracks in both directions. To my left, the closest train wheel was two feet away. To my right, an opening between the wheels revealed something next to the tracks. My jeans. And the bright white tennis shoes I got for Christmas.

Disbelief filled me. I was looking at my legs...lying about ten feet away.
This is a horrible nightmare. I need to wake up.

Suddenly, I had to get out from under the train. I felt claustrophobic; everything was closing in. The smell of hot metal and smoke was suffocating. I didn't know what was real, what wasn't. I couldn't think. I didn't know what to do.

I tried to move my legs to propel myself out. I couldn't. I lifted my right knee and tried to crawl out, but fell flat.

I have to get out of here...

I sucked in a breath, placed one arm in front of me, and then pulled my body toward it. I did it again with my other arm—army-crawling off the tracks. The pain was dull and deep.

I crawled off the tracks to the large black rocks that sloped beside them. I swung the bottom half of my body around, positioning my legs downward. I leaned back, half-sitting. Sharp rocks poked my back. Even in the cold night, I felt hot all over.

Behind me sat the ominous presence of the train.

I looked down, first to my left. I couldn't see anything except the ground. I looked to my right, and it appeared as if my right leg ended below the knee. Seeing only half my leg confused me.

I ran my hand below my knee. Nothing was there. My lower leg was gone. As I brought my hand back up to my face, something dark and shiny reflected off my knit glove.

Blood. The train must have cut off my legs. They are gone.

With that realization, the pain hit. It shot through me, sharp and deep, consuming all that was left of me—more pain than my mind could bear. Fear filled my heart.

I'm alive, and I don't have my legs.

Cries choked me, filling my throat and pouring from me.

"Mom. Mom! Mo-o-o-o-m!" I knew she couldn't hear me. No one could.

My body shook, and my cries became a scream. My hands trembled, my teeth clattered. Cold air hit my face. Heat consumed my body, especially my legs.

My cries became whimpers. "Help me," I mouthed.

I'd never felt so helpless.

I couldn't help myself even if I wanted to. And I did want to. I wanted to move. I wanted to run away from this nightmare. Heaviness settled over me, a mix of fear and disbelief.

My body felt heavy too, as if I were chained to the ground and couldn't stand up. My stomach sank deeper. My heart ached.

Then a new fear struck me. What if someone was looking for me? The engineer must have seen me, because he had stopped the train. I didn't want anyone to find me. I didn't want help. I just wanted to die.

I knew I must have been losing a lot of blood. Surely death would come soon. *God, let me die; just let me go to heaven.*

Frustrated tears overwhelmed me. Intense pain continued to course through me. The sobs came harder. I crossed my arms and laid my head on them, just as I had on the tracks. I turned onto my stomach, clenching my fists once again, and cried into my arms. Suddenly, a peaceful sensation flowed over me, as if a warm blanket had been wrapped around me. The comfortable presence was indescribable. I sensed that everything was going to be okay.

I could still feel the pain in my body, the aching of my heart, but it was in the background. The world around me was muted. *I must be dying. Maybe I'll be in heaven soon.*

A song filled my mind. There was no clear voice, yet there were words, sharp and clear, playing ten times louder than the music.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found.
Was blind, but now I see.*

The song played over and over and over. I knew the end was near. It could only be music from heaven.

As the song ended, the peace remained. *This is it. This is the end.* I prayed I was a good enough person for heaven, hoping that I was. My body relaxed, and I felt lighter...lighter...

Then...a whisper of a touch on my face pulled me back to reality. Back to the moment. Back to the pain.

I opened my eyes, and they met with those of a rescue worker. His eyes widened, and his mouth dropped open. He stepped back slightly, as if unsure he believed what he saw.

Pain surged, and a war erupted within me. I was close to death, and I didn't want to come back.

Confusion filled my mind. *How can I still be alive?*

In an instant the man gathered himself, as if realizing what he needed to do. He looked toward the park and then slipped the radio off his belt. He spoke into it, giving his location and my status.

Anger coursed through me. I didn't want anyone to come. I didn't want anyone to save me.

"Over here!" he called.

Just let me die. I opened my mouth to speak, but the words didn't come.

The pain was unbearable. *It has to be over soon.*

A half-dozen rescuers hovered above me. Their intent, focused faces mirrored how serious my injuries were.

One man used scissors to cut away my coat. My favorite, yellow down coat. Small feathers fluttered everywhere, covering me.

Stop, leave me alone. Stop!

"What's your name?" A paramedic in a blue uniform approached.

"Kristen. Kristen Anderson."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"What happened?" He leaned over me, looking into my eyes.

I swallowed hard, wincing from the pain. "The train... It ran over me."

The man turned away. "We need to stabilize her."

"An ambulance is on its way."

“Careful...watch her neck.”

“She’s lost a lot of blood.”

“Call ahead and tell them it’s a young, female patient. Legs severed...”

Watching everything, I was powerless. I felt like I was part of a television show, a movie, or a nightmare. It was surreal. This wasn’t me. This was someone else. This wasn’t happening.

I will wake up. But the pain told me it was real.

I felt vulnerable, helpless.

A radio crackled.

I couldn’t see where the sound came from because of the fog.

My mind felt like that fog—cold and too thick to penetrate.

The voice on the radio cut in and out.

“On the count of three, let’s get her onto this stretcher.”

No! Don’t help. Just leave me alone. Let me die.

“One, two, three...”

I braced to be moved, braced for the pain.

My body moved, and they carried me to the ambulance and loaded me inside.

Two people climbed into the ambulance with me.

I thought about my parents. I thought about the hospital bills. I didn’t want my family to have to pay for the doctors to save me, especially when I didn’t want to be saved.

My heart pounded as I looked around the inside of the ambulance. Someone took my hand. A woman’s kind eyes peered down at me. “You’ll be okay. Stay with us. Everything will be fine. Just hold on, sweetheart.” Her words were gentle, concerned, motherly. A part of me clung to those words. Yet another part of me rejected them.

I looked away.

“You’re going to be okay.” Her voice was like a soothing balm, but I didn’t want to be okay. I didn’t want anyone working on me. Didn’t want to go to the hospital.

Before I knew it, we were there. They quickly removed the stretcher from the ambulance and rolled it into the hospital.

A police officer hovered over me. “Why were you at the tracks?”

“I laid down in front of the train.”

“Why?”

I hesitated. “My parents?”

Anger rose inside me. I knew it was so much more than that. It wasn’t their fault. But how could I explain? I just wanted this man to leave me alone.

I glanced around as I was wheeled through the emergency-room doors and into a room on the left. It had large, yellow tiles on the walls. Medical equipment and machines filled the room. People hovered over me, touching me.

Go away. Leave me alone.

They moved me to another table. More needles. With their every effort I felt my space invaded, my body violated, my plans destroyed.

“Someone needs to call her parents.” I couldn’t see the woman who was speaking.

“What’s your parents’ phone number?”

I gave it to her, and she hurried away. I couldn’t see her, but I could tell she was using a phone in the corner of the room. A minute later she was back.

“No one is answering at your parents’ house. What’s another number we can call?”

“You can call my sister, Stacey.” I gave her that number too.

The paramedics had braced my neck, so I could only look straight up. Around me doctors and nurses worked. They stuck IV needles in me and hooked me up to various machines.

What is Stacey going to say? What is everyone going to think?

I pictured my sister picking up the phone, and my stomach turned. I imagined her being worried about me, scared.

The nurse’s voice carried from across the room. “Yes, we have Kristen here. There’s been a train accident. Please inform her parents. We suggest you get here as soon as possible. We’re taking her into surgery.”

A few minutes later, they wheeled me down the hallway toward the operating room. Everything smelled medical, disinfected, sterile. My mind raced back and forth.

Is this real or a horrible nightmare?

I watched the ceiling above me. Tiles and lights. Tiles and lights. They flashed by as we hurried on. Tiles and lights.

The doctor and medical personnel jogged at my side.

“Am I going to live?”

The doctor looked at me. “I don’t know. You’ve lost a lot of blood.”

If you're struggling with suicidal thoughts...

I know how you feel. Life is harder and more painful than you ever thought it could be. You're not sure if it's worth it, but I'm telling you there is so much to live for—more than you have ever experienced or imagined. Somehow, I hope my story will show that to you.

Please don't give up. You are not alone. There is a God who made you, and he's not as far away as you may think. He is always near. Wherever you go, whatever you do, he will be with you. He loves you, and he wants to comfort you, heal the hurt in your heart, and carry you through this life. Let him in.

God has an amazing plan for your life, even if you don't have a plan for yourself. He has hope for you, even if you don't have hope for yourself. He loves you immensely, even when you don't love yourself. And he sees beauty in you, even when all you see is a mess.

Suicide is never the answer. There is too much to live for. Keep fighting. Please don't give up. Reach out for help. You won't regret it. Your heart can be filled with hope, just like mine and so many others have been.

Love, Kristen