

My first love, you stay in my heart
And forever in my soul
I know this is real.
And the love that we share
Will always be there
A love that will last all our lives.

It's a miracle of love
That you're still by my side.
The wonder of it all
True love can't be denied.

A Miracle of Love

Artist: Amy Hotaling

Album: *A Miracle of Love*, by Amy Hotaling

Music and Lyrics by: George Small & Sarah Larson

*Available on iTunes and at CDBABY at
<http://www.cdbaby.com/amyhotaling>*

Learning to Live Again...

A Day at a Time

The sections in the book that are in *Italics* are the thoughts and feelings of Amy.

Chapter One

My New Life Begins

Just an Ordinary Day

What happened on just an ordinary day changes my life forever.

As I begin to follow Mario through the steel fire door to head toward the stairway going down to the street, everything comes to a sudden stop. My world goes black. In the distance I hear my name being called. It starts as a whisper and gets progressively louder and louder. As if abruptly wakened from a deep sound sleep, I am thrust back into an atmosphere of hysteria. As I open my eyes, Mario is leaning over me shouting out my name. Flat out on the floor, I am submerged in the noise of the alarm and the students rushing out of the building. It's all a blank. I don't know what's happened.

Friday-October 22, 1999

I am walking to the corner to catch the commuter bus from New Jersey to mid-town Manhattan with my wife Amy. It seems like just another fall day. I tell her good-bye at Port Authority; we exchange smiles and I see the same warmth in her face as when we were college sweethearts in upstate New York. Amy turns to walk down 42nd street towards her office and I begin my daily trek towards my school where I work as a guidance counselor. I pass by shop owners sweeping up in front of their store entrances, restaurant staff arranging sidewalk café tables, produce company workers loading their delivery trucks, and children playing in urban parks that dot the city landscape. I make a quick stop at my favorite breakfast cart parked by my school and grab a bagel and hot tea.

I enter the building, check my messages in the school office with breakfast in hand, and join my colleague Mario in his office one floor above mine. We are the counseling arm for one of the scholastic institutes in a high school with a student body of approximately 3,500.

My school's population is an inner city blend of students, with some focused on succeeding and preparing for college and others projecting the typical urban "hardcore" low achieving image; restless, troubled kids who seem to have given up on themselves. Those that act out, do it all too often. Minimizing failure rates can be daunting at times. Somehow, I don't mind the challenge.

This year, I am responsible for the freshman and juniors; Mario is responsible for the sophomores and seniors. When I am not in guidance department meetings, institute meetings or any other unexpected meetings that come up during the course of the day, I am busy working with freshmen on a variety of guidance issues, focusing on their adjustment to high school life.

As we swallow down breakfast, Mario and I start to talk about individual students and administrative issues before the inevitable deluge of student problems and bureaucratic emergencies begin. Even though our students see that we are in a meeting they filter in and out asking us a variety of questions.

A Fire Emergency

Around 9:15 a.m. we hear the fire alarm go off. This is all too common in our building. False alarms are frequent. You never quite know whether a student pulls the alarm or if it is a real emergency. So, following standard procedure, we sit and wait to see if the alarm is re-set before heading out of the building to our outside checkpoints. The alarm continues and suddenly Thomas, one of our students, bursts in and in a panic shouts "It's a real fire, I can smell the smoke!"

Mario and I immediately tell him to stay calm and exit the building. We head down one flight of stairs to my office and I quickly grab my coat. It is a chilly fall day and I don't know how long we will be outside. Leaving my office, we see students and teachers evacuating through the double steel doors that lead to the exit staircase. There is a sense of panic. The thick smoke is bellowing at the other end of the hallway making its way towards our exit. I follow behind Mario joining the procession of students heading through the doorway that leads to the staircase to exit the building.

My world suddenly goes black. In the distance I hear my name being called. It sounds like a whisper and progressively gets louder and louder. "Chris, Chris, wake up we have to get out of here!" My eyes open slowly and I see Mario leaning over me shaking me calling my name. Flat on the floor I slowly regain my senses and hear a fire alarm in the distance. Abruptly I awake from my deep sound sleep and thrust back into a world of hysteria and chaos. "Come on Chris we have to get out of here!" I'm dazed and confused. It's all a blank. I ask Mario, "What the heck just happened?" Mario tells me that Thomas struck me in the head with the door and I was unconscious for about five minutes. As he helps me to my feet I don't feel sure footed. I am having trouble walking straight and steady so Mario puts his arm around my waist and we begin our descent down three long flights to the street. I grasp the steel railing bringing one hand over the other to further guide me on my journey to the outside.

Hit on the Head

I'm in a fog. Mario props me up against a parked car to keep me from falling over. Dazed and stunned, my heart starts pounding and I feel nauseous. Trying to understand why I feel this way, I say to myself, "Of course you're going to feel rotten; you were just hit on the head by a steel door."

Mario frequently comes over to check on me. He seems very anxious but tries to disguise it with sharp one-liners. I can't help but laugh. Meanwhile, Thomas approaches me with concern and relief on his face and says how happy he is to see me alive. "I thought I killed you Mr. Chris!" He cannot stop apologizing. I reassure him that everything will be alright.

The fire alarm finally stops ringing. The building is deemed safe and students and teachers make their way back to their classrooms. Mario helps me back into the building and tells me that we have to report the accident. I don't think it is necessary, but he insists on it. The assistant principals' office is buzzing with activity. Mario tells Donna, the acting assistant principal, what has happened. She comes right over to me, but I don't understand what she actually says. My nausea has increased and my head is pounding. Dean Perkins comes over and gives me an accident report to complete. I pick up the pen in my fingers and begin to write down what happened. Hmm, this is strange, I have the pen in my hand ready to write but my hand is frozen. I cannot write at all. There is a disconnect between my brain and my hand. Something has gone very badly wrong! I keep on trying to write, but I am unable to do it, no matter how hard I try. Mario and Dean Perkins try to help me. They look scared. I am scared.

They help me to Donna's inner office, which is quiet and subdued. Following school procedure the school police officer, a friendly no-nonsense guy, requests a Statement for his police-report. I try to tell him what I could remember, but he has to rely on what the others say. I am too shaken up and don't have a clue what happened. I mainly depend upon Mario's account.

Eventually, EMS shows up and strongly recommends a trip to the emergency room. I understand their rationale, but I am reluctant to be taken out on a gurney. It could get back to Thomas and the other students, maybe causing further trauma. After some exchanges between myself, EMS, Mario, Donna and

others, I am put on the gurney and driven to the emergency room. Mario rides in the ambulance with me. At some point he calls Amy to meet us at the hospital.

The doctor, perhaps Indian or Pakistani, in the course of his examination asks me some basic questions with a broad foreign accent, “What happened? Who is the President of the United States? How many fingers am I holding up?” He’s brisk and to the point. I think I get all the answers right. He examines my neck as I lay on the gurney. He tells me that I am going to have a good size headache and orders two Tylenol for me. He instructs me to have my wife wake me up periodically to make certain I am okay. There are no X-rays or MRI’s; no CAT scans, no tests at all. Evidently, there were higher priorities. And that was it. Guiding myself with my hand along side the wall to help me balance, I slowly make my way down a long corridor to the waiting room to meet Mario. I hear Amy’s voice. Thank God she is here. I see them both look at me in surprise. Amy rushes to help support me and gives me a big hug. They both help me walk out of the hospital and while Amy is holding on to me Mario hails a cab. As Amy helps me into the cab I say to Mario, “I’ll see you tomorrow.” He responds, “At least wait till Monday Chris!” “Oh yeah... I forgot that today was Friday.” Never could I imagine that I would never return.

No Tears

“No tears,” I tell myself. You have to stay in control and get to the hospital in a hurry. I anxiously leave a scribbled note on my supervisor’s desk and head for the elevator. Once on the street I try desperately to hail a cab. Frustrated that no cabs are available I decide to sprint to the hospital.

My mind floods with fear and concern of what I will find once I reach Chris. Only a couple of hours ago we were saying our good-bye’s at Port Authority. I was walking up 42nd street to my office. My mind was deep in thought about a morning

meeting with corporate executives regarding a new merger. I was heading to the merger meeting at around 10:30 a.m. when the phone rings. I pick it up and it is Chris. I say to myself; why is he calling me; he knows I have a busy schedule this morning. We talked last night about how crazy my day is going to be and how I am looking forward to a relaxing weekend. Then I hear, "Aim?" Immediately I know something is wrong. He slowly says something about not wanting to go to the hospital and "don't worry, I'm okay". He isn't making any sense. I tell him "Chris, go to the hospital, there must be a reason they want you to go." He says "okay, I love you," and then someone else comes on the phone. My head is starting to spin as if I had just exited a twirl ride at the carnival. I sit down in my chair as I hear a distant voice telling me EMS is taking Chris to the hospital and a police officer will call me as soon as possible with details. I get off the phone and slowly sit in my chair feeling numb.

Like most women, I always think of the worst-case scenario when the man you love is late or does not call when they are supposed to. What if he is in a car accident? What if he is mugged on his way to the train? What if he is hurt, lying somewhere? I mean really hurt. How can I survive without him?

"Amy, come on, you're late for the meeting, everyone is waiting for you," my supervisor exclaims. I jump back to the present. I am in shock and I tell my boss what just occurred. Stunned, she tells me to stay by the phone and heads to the meeting.

Approximately thirty-five minutes later, which feels like a lifetime, a police officer calls me. I learn that Chris is on his way to the hospital and I take down the directions.

I am about three avenues away from the hospital. Stay in control... stay in control, I tell myself. I arrive at the hospital and see Mario, Chris's co-worker, and ask what happened. As he is explaining, I see Chris slowly moving towards us using the

wall for support. I am so relieved and puzzled at the same time. From what Mario tells me had happened, I am surprised to see Chris walking. We all sit down and Mario completes his story and tells me to take Chris home. He helps us get a cab and after Chris is safely inside he tells Mario he will see him tomorrow. I say to Chris, "Tomorrow is Saturday." Mario urges Chris to take it easy over the weekend, Chris agrees, "See you on Monday."

No matter what scenario rushes through my mind on our cab ride to Port Authority, nothing prepares me for the realities that unfold in the days, weeks, months, and even years ahead. My predictable life and normal routine has come to an abrupt end.