

LIVE TO FORGIVE
by Dean Smith and Rebeca D. Seitz
(Chapter One Excerpt)

Chapter One

I could bash his head in. Just grab the same Louisville Slugger he'd used on my mother and make sure I hit him more times than he hit her. It'd be a redemption not just for my mom, but for the bat. Sort of like killing two birds with one stone. Laughter curdled in my shredded soul.

I chewed on an egg salad sandwich and stared at the Formica top of the cafeteria table while considering other ways to murder the man who had just taken my mom's life. A twelve-year-old's imagination works way better than an adult's, so I had a lot of ideas to sort through while Mom's life-support machine continued its job just down the hallway. That'd be the machine that a doctor had informed my sisters and me was pointless. He'd already pronounced her brain-dead, with a 99% chance of no recovery.

Poison. But how was a sixth-grader going to get his hands on good poison? Not a workable idea. Drugs, then. The husband before this one had to know drug dealers. How else did he get his stash of pot? But then there'd be a link back to me and I was pretty sure I didn't need to end up in prison since Gienna, my older sister by four years, would need someone to blame things on. Hate for Gienna to lose her sidekick—emphasis on kick.

So, back to the bat idea. Could I swing it hard enough to take him out? Bob had a bad back when we first met him and his daughter, Kristina. It only got worse after a car accident left him in traction for weeks. The painkillers Gienna, Kristina and I constantly fetched for him had done nothing to ease his dissatisfaction with life. Mainly with my mother, who still went out dancing while he stayed in bed.

Mom won't dance anymore after today.

Yeah, I could hit him hard enough.

I took another bite of egg salad sandwich and chewed. Might as well have cardboard between my teeth. The police probably took the bat as evidence when they arrested Bob.

So not only did I no longer have a mom, I'd also lost my bat.

I get that the two thoughts are a bit illogical, coming on the heels of each other, but cut a kid some slack. Twelve-year-olds have ridiculous coping mechanisms. Through twenty moves and about as many boyfriends and husbands, humor proved a reliable go-to mechanism. Now, when things turned more horrid than anything my hyperactive imagination could conjure, I needed humor like a...well, like a starving man needs an egg salad sandwich.

I took another bite and looked across the table at Pastor Rex. Revenge continued crystallizing in my heart while my mind focused on our kitchen from a few days earlier.

Mom looked down at me. "I love you so much. You're a really good boy." She hugged me then and it occurs to me now to be grateful that it wasn't quick. She held me for a while, pressing me hard into her mid-section and I let a feeling of safety and happiness soothe the part of me that constantly wondered if things would ever be okay, calm, or peaceful.

We shared laughter—not such a common thing at our house—the next night during family time in the hot tub. A mosquito decided my shorts were the perfect home. Family time always gave me the opportunity to turn out a good comedic performance. That night, I think the mosquito was a divine prop sent to help me produce even more hilarity. Someone knew I'd need that memory later.

Like when I sat at a table chewing on a stupid egg salad sandwich, tears pouring down my face, plotting how to kill my stepdad while a preacher looked on. Yeah, that's a pretty good time to focus on something else.

But my thoughts wouldn't stay centered on the, "I love you so much," or the funny time we'd shared. Instead, I could hear Mom saying, "I hate you." It happened a few weeks before she died. Mom told me she didn't like some of Gienna's friends and that I should keep that information to myself. Because, of course, a 6th grade boy with a need for attention is the perfect repository for secrets.

After divulging the information to Gienna and witnessing the subsequent blow up between her and Mom, I wasn't too surprised to see Mom at my bedroom door. "I can't believe you broke my trust," she said.

"I didn't tell her everything," I defended.

"I hate you."

She never took that back. Didn't get the chance before husband number four decided he'd had enough of his wife out dancing with other men while he lay home and danced with a bottle of pain pills. I'm not sure she would have ever taken it back, even if Bob and my Louisville Slugger hadn't become partners in crime.

Pastor Rex kept looking at me across the table. What did he expect me to say? To do? To be? The untrustworthy kid my mom knew me to be? I looked back down at the table.

There was the crux of the matter. The moment it all crystallized within my being. Not only was I Dean, the kid whose mom's boyfriends and husbands could neglect or abuse and not ever be held accountable, the kid always getting in trouble at school for being a goofball or not

paying attention because I have the attention span of a gnat, the kid who would do just about anything for a little real love and safety—I was the kid who couldn't be trusted.

I'm not sure why that hurt more than the unloved and newly-orphaned parts did, but it did in that moment. Untrustworthy. My own mother thought me to be an untrustworthy kid. If she was right—and I had no reason to believe otherwise—then where would I go from here? Where would I live? How would I eat? Where could I sleep? No one wants a goofball kid around who is serious about as often as a circus clown and just as committed to forging an upstanding adulthood. Being goofy was bad enough, but untrustworthy? No one would want me.

The wetness on my shirt pierced through my thoughts and reminded me of new responsibilities. My sisters' tears. Right there, soaked into the fabric lying across my skin. I didn't think this morning, when I took a shirt out of my drawer and pulled it over my head, that I'd end the day at the hospital with my sisters seated on either side of me, soaking my shirt with their tears while a doctor told us we no longer had Mom. What would I have done differently if I knew I wouldn't see her again?

Maybe I'd have asked her to take back that untrustworthy thing. And, oh yeah, taken my bat to school with me.

Hatred coursed through my veins again and I pushed down the concern for my sisters to let hatred have full reign. I focused every ounce of my emotional will on hating Bob. Maybe if I thought hard enough, I could will a heart attack on him or something. Just have him drop right there in his holding cell, save the state some tax dollars in prosecuting him. That's me, Dean Smith, here for the state budget. I could have a career in politics.

My tears dripped onto the table and I thought again of my sisters. Where would they live? Would we stay together?

Pastor Rex's words came to me from a far away tunnel. I couldn't quite make out the sounds, so I ignored him and thought more about how to kill Bob when he got out of jail. Maybe drown him in egg salad. I saw Pastor Rex rise and walk over to my side of the table. He waited there, like I should get up and go with him.

I had nothing better to do. And sitting alone in a room filled with the smell of too many kinds of food mixed with antiseptic and bleach held less appeal than falling into step beside Pastor Rex with no idea where he was taking me.

The last time I walked blindly down a hallway with someone, it was with Mrs. Hirschel to the principal's office to learn something was wrong with my mother.

Maybe I should avoid walking with adults any more. None of them have anything good to say. One tells me there's a situation with my mother. Another says she's on life support with no hope of recovery. Wonder what the next one has up his sleeve?

I re-joined my sisters in the lobby. They hadn't moved from the chairs they were in when I went off in search of a quiet place to think. They still cried. My tears had dried by now. Time to man up, be the strong one for them.

"What do we do now?" Gienna's eyes were red.

I blanked. Since my only goal at the moment consisted of finding an executable murder with no attachment of punishment, I had no idea what to do in the immediate with my sisters.

"I've called the Piggots," Pastor Rex assured us. Then his voice melded back into the blurry hum that still swam in my ears. I closed my eyes, saw a vision of my mother's face, and opened them fast. No crying right now.

Pastor Rex, Gienna, and Kristina were moving toward the elevators. While I hadn't the foggiest notion of where they were going, I knew for sure I didn't want to be left here alone. I followed along...kind of like Mom had with whatever man popped up on the horizon.

Turns out we were headed to my best friend's house, Don Piggott. Don would be able to tell me how to feel. His own dad shot himself when Don was ten years old. That was after his dad tried to kill his mom by smothering her with a pillow. Don saved her by pulling his dad away. Suffice to say Don wouldn't let me down when it came to understanding tragedy.

I picked at a hangnail in the backseat. It didn't bleed. I wondered if Mom had. She had to, right? Did she say anything or did he knock her out with that first swing? Did she tell him to quit hitting her? Did he even hear her? Did he tell her no?

We pulled up in the driveway and I looked out to see Don's mom waiting at the gate. I was barely out of the car before she pulled me tight against her. She smelled like comfort, like a summer day perfect for throwing on some camouflage and scouting the woods for bad guys. I didn't want to move. Right there, with my cheek against her stomach and her strong arm around me, I could pretend that this was just another day of play with Don.

She let go and reached for Gienna and Kristina. I watched her hug them while the strange chill that had traveled with me since I walked down the hall at school with Mrs. Hirschel crept back over my skin. There were birds chirping somewhere. Stupid birds. Didn't they know the world had changed this morning and would never be the same? Don and I ought to go bird hunting later.

We trudged inside, Don's mom assuring us that she was here, that we were safe, that everything would be all right. Pastor Rex filled her in on the details from the hospital. I tuned it

all out and watched my shoes walk me to the door. That's all I had to focus on right then. Pick up one foot, push it forward, put it down again. Pick up, push forward, put down. Pick up, push forward, put down.

We got to the door before I was ready to change focus. I kept walking, pointing my body toward Don's room. He was sitting there. Waiting for me, I guess. Kind of like the swing on a front porch. Just sits there, waiting on you. I didn't have any words. "Sorry about what happened," he said. I nodded. It was enough.

We played with his toys and worked hard at pretending this day had more in common with all the days before it than any day in the future. He didn't ask questions. I didn't offer information. What could I offer? That I knew how he felt when his dad died? I didn't. My mom didn't kill herself, she was murdered. Don didn't need to plot revenge on his dad, his dad took care of that all on his own.

Pretending can be as exhausting as playing. I finally climbed up to the top bunk. Don turned the radio on and settled himself on the lower bunk, like he had a million times before. I breathed in and out and tried not to think about how Don's room didn't smell right. It didn't smell like home, like my room. Pretty soon, I could hear him breathing in and out over the soft sound of the radio. I stared at the ceiling. The tears came again then, rolling down my face, leaving hot, wet tracks behind. I tried to be quiet. At least the radio covered up most of the noise I made. Don slept on. Guess he knew that a parent dying won't stop the sunrise the next day any more than wishing brings a parent back to life.

I closed my eyes against the shadows of Don's room.

I woke the next morning and had one tiny, blissful moment that the day before had only been a nightmare. That the mother in my dream slept right down the hallway. Except, in my dream, she'd opened her mouth to tell me something and been unable to talk. I woke up staring at her open mouth, willing her to talk.

Don slept on.

I climbed down and grabbed my clothes from the day before, saw the clean t-shirt Mrs. Piggott had left right by the bed's ladder. Probably should put that on, but my hands reached for the t-shirt my mom washed, dried and folded. The one that had been in my dresser drawer the day before in a house where no one had ever been murdered. The one that soaked up Gienna and Kristina's tears at the hospital.

I found my sisters sitting on the floor in the living room, eyes glued to the television. Kristina glanced my way. "You're up."

"Is there anything to eat?" I said.

Gienna sat slumped against the coffee table with a blanket around her shoulders like a homeless lady. She pulled the blanket over her head. "I can't hear with you two yakking."

"We're recording the news," Kristina said to me, but I could tell she wasn't into it.

"The news?"

"About your mom. It's all over the TV."

"And your dad."

"Yeah, him too."

I hadn't thought about that. My big plan to kill Bob meant I'd be taking Kristina's dad away. Would she hurt then like I hurt now? If I beat her dad to death with a baseball bat, what would she think? Would she want to come after me like I wanted to go after him?

Gienna reached up and twisted the volume on the television a notch higher.

I studied Kristina. Her hair looked messier than my thought patterns. Her tee shirt was on backward and she wouldn't look at me. She glanced at the television and then out the tiny window. She mumbled something I didn't catch.

“Shut up, will you?” Gienna re-adjusted her blanket. “This one's almost over.”

I glanced back at the kitchen, hoping to see a plate of eggs or bacon or whatever just waiting for me like Mom used to do only she did it so rarely it was a surprise and always made everything taste better and the eggs yellower and the bacon smellier.

I didn't want to see the news story of my mom and Bob and whatever else there was to it.

“Is there cereal?” I asked.

“I can't watch this.” Kristina glared at the TV.

The story was short and to the point. Mom was dead. The hubby did it with a baseball bat. The news lady, a mousy woman with large lips, looked into the camera and for a moment I thought she could see me standing there watching her. Then the image cut to a commercial with a chubby chipmunk or a squirrel, whatever, shaking an acorn and a voice-over droning on about debt driving you nuts. Gienna rewound the tape and played four different reports of big murder in the little town of Enumclaw, Washington. One clip showed a pushy reporter with a big butt interviewing a neighbor. The neighbor lady, an old woman I used to wave to from across the street, said we were weirdoes. Another clip caught about seven seconds of Bob, handcuffed and head down, shuffling forward from the front door of our house to a police car. He had on his favorite jean jacket. I hated that jacket. The camera cut to a photo of Bob and Mom and Kristina where Bob had his fat arm around my mom and I was mad I wasn't in the picture and glad I wasn't on TV at the same time.

I stared at Kristina. “Why’d it happen?”

“Why’re you looking at me?” she asked.

“It was your dad.” I mean, seriously. If she didn’t understand the man, how were Gienna or I ever supposed to?

Gienna pulled the blanket off her head and swiveled around to face Kristina and me. We were silent for a long moment.

Kristina whispered, “It was *your* bat.” Big, dopey tears started gushing out of her eyes.

I wanted to say something hateful and mean. Something about the bat or how it wasn’t my fault, but I didn’t say any of these things. I said, “Yeah, I know.”

Kristina wiped her face with the sleeve of her shirt and marched off down the hall.

Gienna switched off the VCR and flipped the TV dial until she got the news. She turned down the sound and got up and sat on the couch across the room. I was hungry and tired, but instead of rummaging through a stranger’s fridge, I fell onto a couch that faced her.

“I don’t like seeing Bob on TV,” I said. “Or the house. Or any of it.”

“Who cares about Bob?” Gienna’s face was blotchy, her eyes pushed back into her head and she had a bruise around one eye, probably from mashing her palms into her face. She was a head taller than me and thicker and stronger and older and all of it meant she was in charge.

“What now?” I hoped she’d have an answer and remained terrified she didn’t.

Gienna stared at the television. “You’re still my brother. You know that, right? No matter what.”

“I know.” What I didn’t know was why she thought I’d suddenly forget.

“They can’t separate us.”

I considered being separated to be on par with me scaling Mt. Everest. Gienna obviously wasn't ready to take the reins and figure out our next move. "I'm hungry."

Gienna didn't look at me. She glanced at the TV, the overhead fan, at the books in a small bookshelf beside the television. Anywhere but at me. The ball of tension that had taken up residence in my stomach yesterday tightened further. She said, "I won't let them."

"I don't want to talk about it." The wall behind the television was covered in dark wood paneling. Some of the panels had warped and pulled away from the wall at the corners and the joints. The paneling was muddy-brown and oppressive and ugly.

"We have to be good from now on or nobody will want us."

"I *am* good."

"The jokes and the what all. It has to stop."

The day I quit joking would be the day I joined Mom, wherever she was. I said, "Who might not want us?"

"You're a kid and you're cute and everybody likes a cute little orphan kid. What about me?" She kicked the nappy blanket to the floor. "Who wants someone like me?" She covered her eyes with the palms of her hands and sobbed.

Something had just happened that wasn't good, but I didn't know what. Through her hands she said, "I can't live without her."

I had no idea what to say to my older sister. I *needed* her to lead and instead there she sat, crying, worried that no one would want her. *I* wanted her.

She let her hands drop and scrunched up her face and cried big hawking sobs. "I don't know how we're going to do this."

I wanted to be the strong one. The man. I wanted to comfort her. I did. Without Mom and Bob around to nudge us to do the right thing, I wanted to do it on my own. The right thing was to make the hurt go away, to tell my big sister it was all going to be okay. I got up off the couch and stood and noticed more places the ugly wood paneling had come undone. A few nails and some time and a little patience were all it needed. I looked at Gienna, her lousy posture and her shoulders heaving in little hiccups. I said, “Let’s get something to eat.”

She didn’t respond.

I tried again. “Stop crying. Nobody likes a crybaby.” It sounded meaner out loud than it had in my head. I didn’t say, “It’s all going to be okay,” because it wasn’t and now sure didn’t seem like a good time to lie.

“I can’t eat,” she said. “I think I’m gonna be sick.”

Okay, that one I could handle. “Not in here,” I said. “In the bathroom.” I felt pretty grown up for coming up with that so quickly—until I realized Kristina was in the hall bathroom and the Piggott’s were sleeping or dressing in the bedroom with the other toilet and it didn’t seem right to interrupt people you hardly knew just because you had to puke.

Gienna let her head slump forward, her chin resting on her chest.

“Did you hear me?” I said.

“Shut up already.”

I walked across the room and sat next to her. Her couch had a ropey feel to it like it was sewn together with a bunch of corduroy pants. The kind old men wear until the knees and butt are rubbed smooth. I put a hand on her shoulder like Mom would do. I tried to think what Mom would say but nothing came so I put my hand in hers. Gienna squeezed my fingers until they hurt, but I didn’t say anything.

She breathed hard and slumped deeper into herself. She moved her head just enough to look down the hall. It was empty and I could hear a man's voice, probably Mr. Piggott's, and a woman humming, I think, coming from one of the bedrooms. I heard the bathtub drain chugging dirty water in the hall bathroom.

Gienna whispered, "Can I ask you something?"

Mere inches separated our faces. I didn't answer. I didn't want to hear whatever it was.

"How do kids live without a Mom? How do we?" she said.

I looked up where the crummy paneling met the ceiling. So much for getting answers from my big sister. "It's okay." I squeezed her hand. "It's okay."

"You know what they do with kids like us?"

"It's okay," I repeated. "We don't have to talk about it."

"Dumped in an orphanage, that's what, where the other kids do bad things to you and the teachers are mean and I don't know what all."

"They can't all be mean."

Gienna sat straighter but didn't let go of my hand. "We're too old. Nobody will take us. I don't care. No one can ever replace Mom."

I thought about my dream. About Mom sitting up in bed, trying to speak but nothing coming out, and I thought about the real Mom in the hospital bed with tubes running up inside her and the doctor telling us it was all useless, that Mom's brain had already died. My throat hurt and my eyes watered.

"It'll never be the same," my sister said.

"Stop it." I looked away as big stupid tears ran down my cheeks. I wanted to be strong, but I didn't have it in me.

Gienna patted my hand. “It’s okay,” she said using my own words against me.

“What’s going to happen to us?” I said.

“It’s okay,” she said again.

“I need to know.”

We sat on the couch holding hands for a long time.

“Me too,” she said.