

HEARTBEAT

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STEEL

HEARTBEAT



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MESSAGE FROM NAM

DADDY

STAR

ZOYA

KALEIDOSCOPE

FINE THINGS

WANDERLUST

SECRETS

FAMILY ALBUM

FULL CIRCLE

CHANGES

THURSTON HOUSE

CROSSINGS

ONCE IN A LIFETIME

A PERFECT STRANGER

REMEMBRANCE

PALOMINO

LOVE: POEMS

THE RING

LOVING

TO LOVE AGAIN

SUMMER'S END

SEASON OF PASSION

THE PROMISE

NOW AND FOREVER

PASSION'S PROMISE

*To Zara,
sweet heartbeat
of my life,
may your life be ever
full of love and joy . . .*

*and to your daddy, who has
filled my life to the brim
with love and joy and heartbeats
with all my heart and love,*

d.s.

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thumping,
pitter pat,
 wondering
 where it's at,
heartfelt,
 heart sweet,
 sweet dreams,
 heartbeat,
precious music
 in my ears,
hand to hold
to still my fears,
 loving footsteps
 in the night,
 treasured hopes,
 forever bright,
 brightest love,
 gift from on high,
gentlest
sweetest lullaby,

CHAPTER

..1..

THE SOUND OF AN ANCIENT TYPEWRITER SANG OUT STACCATO in the silence of the room, as a cloud of blue smoke hung over the corner where Bill Thigpen was working. Glasses shoved up high on his head, coffee in styrofoam cups hovering dangerously near the edge of the desk, ashtrays brimming, his face intense, blue eyes squinting at what he was writing. Faster, faster, a glance over his shoulder at the clock ticking relentlessly behind him. He typed as though demons were lurking somewhere near him. His graying brown hair looked as though he had slept and woken several times and never remembered to comb it. The face was clean-shaven and kind, the lines strong, and yet something about him very gentle. He was not a man clearly defined by handsome, yet

he seemed strong, appealing, worth more than a second glance, a man one would have liked to spend time with. But not now, not as he groaned, glanced at the clock again, and let his fingers fly at the typewriter still harder. Then finally, silence, a quick fix with a pen as he leapt to his feet, and grabbed handfuls of what he had been working on for the past seven hours, since five o'clock in the morning. Nearly one now . . . nearly air time . . . as he flew across the room, yanked open the door, and exploded past his secretary's desk like an Olympic runner, heading down the hall as quickly as he could, darting around people, avoiding collisions, ignoring surprised stares and friendly greetings, as he pounded on doors that opened only inches as he shoved a hand inside clutching a sheaf of the freshly written changes. It was a familiar procedure. It happened once, twice, sometimes three or four times a month when Bill decided he didn't like the way the show was going. As the originator of the most successful daytime soap on TV, whenever he was worried about the show, he stopped, wrote a segment or two, turned everything upside down, and then he was happy. His agent called him the most neurotic mother on TV, but he also knew he was the best. Bill Thigpen had an unfailing instinct for what made his show work, and he had never been wrong. Not so far.

A Life Worth Living was still the hottest daytime soap on American TV and it was William Thigpen's baby. He had started it as a way to survive when he'd been starving in New York years before as a young playwright. He had started playing with the concept and then the first script during a time when he was between plays in New York. He had started out writing plays on off-off Broadway, and in

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those days he had been a purist. The theater above all. But he had also been married, living in SoHo in New York, and starving. His wife, Leslie, had been a dancer in Broadway shows, and at the time she was out of work too, because she was pregnant with their first baby. At first he had kidded around about how "ironic" it would be if he finally made it with a soap, if that turned out to be the big break of his career. But as he wrestled with the script, and a bible for a long-term show, it stopped being a joke, and became an obsession. He *had* to make it . . . for Leslie . . . for their baby. And the truth was, he liked it. He loved it. And so did the network. They went crazy over it. And the baby, Adam, and the show had been born at almost the same time, one a strapping nine-pound baby boy with his father's big blue eyes and a mist of golden curls, the other a tryout on the summer schedule that brought the ratings through the roof and an instant outcry when the show disappeared again in September. Within two months, *A Life Worth Living* was back and Bill Thigpen was on his way as the creator of the most successful daytime television soap ever. The important choices came later.

He started out by writing some of the early episodes himself, and they were good, but he drove the actors and director crazy. And by then his career on off-off Broadway was all but forgotten. Television became his lifeblood in a matter of moments.

Eventually, he was offered a lot of money to sell his concept and just sit back and go home to collect residuals, and go back to writing plays for off-off Broadway. But by then, almost as much as his six-month-old son, *Life*, as he called it, was his baby. He couldn't bring himself to leave the show,

much less sell it. He had to stay with it. It was real to him, it was alive, and he cared about what he was saying. He talked about the agonies of life, the disappointments, the angers, the sorrows, the triumphs, the challenges, the excitement, the love, the simple beauty. The show had all his zest for life, his own sorrow over grief, his own delight for living. It gave people hope after despair, sunshine after storms, and the basic core of the story line and the principal characters were decent. There were villains, of course, too, and people ate them up. But there was a basic integrity about the show that made its fans unshakable in their devotion. It was in effect a reflection of the essence of its creator. Alive, excited about life, decent, trusting, kind, naive, intelligent, creative. And he loved the show, almost like a child he was bound and determined to nurture, almost as much as he loved Adam and Leslie.

And in those early days of the show he was constantly torn, endlessly pulled, always wanting to be with his family and yet keep an eye on the show, to make sure it was on the right track and they hadn't brought in the wrong writer or director. He viewed everyone with suspicion, and he maintained complete control. They understood nothing about his show . . . his baby. And he'd pace the set like a nervous mother hen, going crazy inside over what might happen. He continued to write random episodes, to haunt the show much of the time, and kibitz from the sidelines. And at the end of the first year, there was no point pretending that Bill Thigpen was ever going back to Broadway. He was stuck, trapped, madly in love with television and the show of his own making. He even stopped making excuses to his off-off-Broadway friends, and admitted openly that he loved what he was

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doing. There was no way he was going anywhere, he explained to Leslie late one night, after he'd written for hours, developing new plots, new characters, new philosophies for the coming season.

He couldn't abandon his characters, his actors, and the intricacies of the plot and its avalanche of tragedies, traumas, and problems. He loved it. The show was shot live five times a week, and even when he had no real reason to be on the set, he ate, drank, loved, breathed, and slept it. There were daily writers who kept the show going day by day, but Bill was always watching over their shoulders. And he knew what he was doing. Everyone in the business agreed. He was good. He was better than good. He was terrific. He had an instinctive sense for what worked, what didn't, what people cared about, the characters they would love, the ones they would enjoy hating.

And by the time his second son, Tommy, was born two years later, *A Life Worth Living* had won two critics' awards and an Emmy. It was after the show's first Emmy that the network suggested they move the show to California. It made more sense creatively, production arrangements would be easier out there, and they felt that the show "belonged" in California. To Bill, it was good news, but to Leslie, his wife, it wasn't. She was going back to work, not just as a kid in the chorus on Broadway. After watching Bill obsess about his show for the past two and a half years, she had had it. While he had been writing night and day about incest, teenage pregnancy, and suburban extramarital affairs, she had gone back to classes in her original discipline, and now she wanted to teach ballet at Juilliard.

"You're *what*?" He stared at her in amazement one Sun-

day morning over breakfast. Everything had been going so well for them, he was making money hand over fist, the kids were terrific, and as far as he knew, everything was just rolling along perfectly. Until that morning.

"I can't, Bill. I'm not going." She looked up at him quietly, her big brown eyes as gentle and childlike as when he'd met her with her dance bag in her hand outside a theater when she was twenty. She was from upstate New York, and she had always been decent and kind and unpretentious, a gentle soul with expressive eyes and a shy but genuine sense of humor. They used to laugh a lot in the early days, and talk late into the night in the dismal, freezing-cold apartments they rented, until the beautiful and very expensive loft he had just bought for them in SoHo. He had even put an exercise bar in for her, so she could do her ballet warm-ups and exercises without going to a studio. And now suddenly she was telling him it was all over.

"But why? What are you saying, Les? You don't want to leave New York?" He looked mystified as her eyes filled with tears and she shook her head, turning away from him for an instant, and then she looked back into his eyes and what he saw there made his heart ache. It was anger, disappointment, defeat, and suddenly for the first time he saw what he should have seen months before, and he wondered in terror if she still loved him. "What is it? What happened?" How could he have missed it? he asked himself. How could he have been so stupid?

"I don't know . . . you've changed . . ." And then she shook her head again, the long dark hair sailing around her like the dark wings of a fallen angel. "No . . . that's not fair . . . we both have. . . ." She took a deep breath and tried

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to explain it to him. She owed him that much after five years of marriage and two children. "We've changed places, I think. I used to want to be a big star on Broadway, the dancer who made good and became a star, and all you wanted to do was write plays with 'integrity,' and 'guts,' and 'meaning.' And all of a sudden you started writing. . . ." She hesitated with a small sad smile. "You started writing more commercial stuff, and it became an obsession. All you've thought about for the last three years is the show . . . will Sheila marry Jake? . . . did Larry really try to kill his mother? . . . is Henry gay . . . is Martha? . . . will Martha leave her husband for another woman? . . . whose baby is Hilary in truth? . . . will Mary run away from home? . . . and when she does will she go back to drugs? Is Helen illegitimate? Will she marry John?" Leslie stood up and started to pace the room as she reeled off the familiar names. "The truth is, they're driving me crazy. I don't want to hear about them anymore. I don't want to live with them anymore. I want to go back to something simple and healthy and normal, the discipline of dancing, the excitement of teaching. I want a normal, quiet life, without all that make-believe bullshit." She looked at him unhappily, and he wanted to cry. He had been a fool. While he had been playing with his imaginary friends, he was losing the people he really loved, and he hadn't even known it. And yet, he couldn't promise her he'd give it up, sell his control of the show and go back to the plays he'd had to beg to get put on. How could he do that now? And he loved the show. It made him feel good and happy and accomplished and strong . . . and now Leslie was leaving. It was ironic. The show was a

huge success, and so was he, and she was longing for their days of starvation.

"I'm sorry." He tried to force himself to stay calm and reason with her. "I know I've been wrapped up in the show for the last three years, but I felt I needed to control it. If I let it get completely out of my hands, if I let someone else do it, they could have cheapened it, they could have turned it into one of those ridiculous, trite, maudlin soaps that make your skin crawl. I couldn't let them do that. And the show *does* have integrity. Whether you admit it or not, Les, that's what people have responded to. But that doesn't mean I have to sit on top of it forever. I think in California things will be very different . . . more professional . . . more in control. I should be able to get away from it more often." He only wrote occasional segments now. But he still controlled it.

Leslie only shook her head with a look of disbelief. She knew him better. It had been the same when he was writing his early plays. He worked for two months straight without taking a break, barely eating or sleeping or thinking of anything else, but that had been only for two months and in those days she still thought it was charming. It no longer was. She was sick to death of it, sick of the intensity and the obsessiveness, and his mania for perfection. She knew that he loved her and the boys, but not the way she wanted him to. She wanted a husband who went to work at nine o'clock, and came home at six, ready to talk to her, to play with the kids, to help her cook dinner and take her to a movie. Not someone who worked straight through the night and then rushed out of the house exhausted and wild eyed at ten a.m. with an armload of memos and edicts and script changes to deliver by rehearsal at ten-thirty. It was too much, too ex-

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hausting, too draining, and after three years she'd had it. She was burnt-out, and if she ever heard the words *A Life Worth Living* again, or the names of the characters he was constantly adding and subtracting, she knew she would have hysterics.

"Leslie, give it a chance, baby, please . . . give *me* a chance. It'll be great in L.A. Just think of it, no more snow, no more cold weather. It'll be great for the boys. We can take them to the beach . . . we could have a pool right in our backyard . . . we can go to Disneyland. . . ." But she was still shaking her head. She knew him better.

"No, *I* can take them to Disneyland and the beach. *You'll* be working all the time, you'll either be up all night writing someone out of the show, or running in for rehearsal or to watch them air, or frantically rewriting something else. When was the last time you took the boys to the Bronx Zoo, or anywhere for that matter?"

"All right . . . all right . . . so I work too hard . . . so I'm a terrible father . . . or a bastard or a rotten husband or all of the above, but for chrissake, Les, for years we were starving to death. And now look, you can have anything you want, and so can they. We can send them to decent schools one day, we can give them everything we wanted to, we can send them to college. Is that so terrible? So okay, we've had a few hard years and now it's going to get better. And now you're going to walk out before it does? What timing." He stared at her, tears brimming in his own eyes as he held out a hand to her. "Baby, I love you . . . please don't do this . . ." But she didn't move toward him, and she lowered her eyes so she couldn't see the pain in his. She knew he loved her, and she knew better than anyone how much he

loved the boys. But it didn't matter. She knew that, for her own sake, she had to do what she was doing. "Do you want to stay here? I'll tell them we won't move the show. If that's what this is all about, to hell with California . . . we'll stay here." But a note of panic had crept into his voice as he watched her, sensing that California was not the issue.

"It won't make any difference." Her voice was low and soft, and she was very sorry. "It's too late for us. I can't explain it. I just know I have to do something different."

"Like what? Move to India? Change religions? Become a nun? How different is teaching at Juilliard? What are you saying to me, dammit? That you want out? What the hell does that have to do with Juilliard or California?" He was hurting and confused and suddenly, finally, he was angry. Why was she doing this to him? What had he done to deserve it? He had worked hard, done well, his parents would have been proud of him if they'd been alive, but both had died when he was in his early twenties, of cancer, within a year of each other, and he had no siblings. All he had was her and the boys, and now she was telling him that they were leaving, and he was going to be alone again. All alone, without the three people he loved, because he had done something wrong, he had worked too hard and been too successful. And the unfairness of what she was doing to him made him suddenly burn with fury.

"You just don't understand," she insisted limply.

"No, I don't. You're telling me you won't come to California. So I'm telling you that if it makes a difference, we'll stay here, and to hell with what the network says. They'll have to live with it. So what now? Where do we go from here? We go back to the way things were, or what? What's happening,