

RAYLYNN VAN OORT

*From  
Sh\*t  
to  
Sunshine*

A MEMOIR



From Sh\*t to Sunshine  
Published by Raylynn Van Oort  
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I dedicate this book to YOU.  
You who are reading this.  
You who are in need of hope.  
Every word written is dedicated to YOU.



**DISCLAIMER**

This book is a memoir based on true events. It reflects my recollections of experiences over time and as recounted from my journals. Some of the names of people mentioned in my story have been changed, some events have been compressed, and dialogue has been recreated.

**CONTENT WARNING**

My story is a way to shed light on my journey of survival.

My experiences include, but are not limited to physical, verbal, mental, sexual, and emotional abuse; loss and grief; brainwashing, manipulation, and coercion; religious or spiritual abuse; abandonment; mental health issues; eating disorders and body image; loss of autonomy; harsh conditions; incarceration and reintegration challenges; and controlling relationships. My intent is to offer hope if you, too, have had any of these experiences.

Please prioritize your well-being and seek support if needed.





## August 26, 1996—Havre, Montana

“LET HER GO!” I hollered as the cop handcuffed Jill. “She had nothing to do with this!” I was already handcuffed and stood by the side of the cop car with its lights flashing. My heart was pounding. Breathing heavy and sharp, I looked around frantically trying to find my daughter, Sunny.

“Oh God! Where is she?!” I couldn’t find her or the younger kids in my care. Nowhere. Fear and worry gripped my heart. *Dear God, please keep her safe. Keep all of them safe.*

Cop cars were scattered haphazardly around the motel parking lot located on the outskirts of Havre, Montana, where we had spent the night. The sting came in the early morning, hours before we could check out of the motel. We, the check-writing criminals, had been captured. But *I* was the one who was writing checks. They rounded us up, handcuffed, and ready for transport. Five women. Four kids. Two men had already escaped capture. They ran out the back door. They fled. Ran across the open field. No concern for the rest of us. According to Curly, they’d pay a price. For their freedom.

I stood beside the cop car, hands behind my back, staring at the official emblem on its side. Reading the word below focusing on each letter. One at a time. Slowly. P-O-L-I-C-E. I tried to decrease the intensity of my breathing, but this visual only heightened the panic. I looked up as the stern-faced cop opened the back door.

“Get in,” he said without emotion.

*A gentleman. Opening the door for me,* I thought, sarcastically attempting to inject a bit of jovial junk in my veins. *I’m a jacked-up jolly junkie,* I silently self-proclaimed. My internal dialogue was meant to diminish the dread of what’s ahead. Cushion the blow.

Yet, apprehension created a cascade of sweat down my back.

Seeping from my perspiring armpits. Plunging down my neckline. Between my breasts. My imprisoned hands. Clammy.

Bending slightly at the waist, I backed my butt in and plopped it on the seat. Twisting forward, I put one foot in at a time and pushed myself back as far as I could go. The cop car door slammed shut. The force made me jump. With my hands cuffed tightly behind my back, it was difficult to sit straight in the seat. The more I twisted to try to get comfortable, the more the hastily snapped shackles dug into my wrists. I'd never been in a cop car before.

It. Was. Terrifying.

As the siren began wailing, lights continued whirling, twirling, and emitting their standard red and blue strobe stream. We left the motel parking lot and headed to God-only-knew where. I squeezed my eyes tightly shut and said a silent prayer. *Please Jesus, help.*

I stared at the cage-like partition separating us from our captor. Claustrophobia flooded my brain. A rancid sweat smell from the seat filled my nostrils. Panic robbed my lungs of sufficient oxygen. My eyes flew to the door handle. *I've got to get out!*

Self-talk soothing did little good. I looked out the window as the buildings flew by. Counting them one by one. Self-regulation by simple thinking tasks I've learned over the years can help. 1-2-3-4-5-6. I continued watching. Counting. Detaching from the situation. My breathing slowed.

As a bit of sanity was restored, my thoughts turned to Sunny. Horrified at our situation, I prayed, *Lord, please let her be okay.* But my next thought. Terror.

Curly was going to be furious. And I'd be the scapegoat. For the screwup.

\* \* \* \*

Single file into the jailhouse. Literally a house converted for criminals. A convict castle. Across the drawbridge we went. Armed guards in the front. Armed guards in the rear. For the big, bad, check-bouncing babes. Clothes stripped. Convict coveralls donned. Fingerprints filed.

Click. Unlocked. We marched in single file through an entry door made of bars, then up a set of stairs. Ten steps. A landing. Ten more steps. A landing. There were doors on each side of a short hallway. A door straight ahead.

*Which would we get? Door one? Door two? Or door three? Which one holds the grand prize?* The prisoner prize.

Sharon and I were escorted through the door on the left. Jill, Loretta, and Lisa were taken through the door on the right. Our handcuffs were removed. We looked around at our new accommodations. A television sat on a stand in the corner of the small entry room with two stiff chairs facing it. In the dim light, we could see a connecting bathroom next to a doorless room with a bunk bed. Bare. Cold. Confining.

This was because I had written bad checks as commanded by Curly. His authorization was the key to the cash box. The credit cards. The checks on my account. Used for a holy purpose. Green light. Go for grub. Money for motel.

“It will be covered by the blood of atonement,” he had explained. “We’re cleansing the financial system.” Checks. Banks. Credit cards. Stores. Motels. Any place requiring payment was a target. For Curly. Ironically, it was always places that provided our “needs.” But most of all, his needs. His wants. His wishes. All bought with a price. And the price was us. No bank account or credit card ever displayed the name of Curly Thornton. We were the patsies. The pawns in his quest for the kingdom that he believed already belonged to him. And now we were prisoners.

*Now what, Lord?* I prayed. Dread overtook my thoughts. Panic set in. *What will Curly do?* He’s going to be spitting angry. It was the hitting angry I feared most. I slumped down in one of the TV chairs and put my head in my hands. As tears welled up in my eyes, I swallowed hard. I couldn’t fall apart now. Not here. Not in this place.

Maybe this is part of the plan. Atonement for the prison system? *After all, we must be here for a purpose.* Curly’s purpose. Which means it’s God’s purpose, according to Curly. *What do we do now?*

Sharon and I laid on the bunk beds. Exhausted. The key turned in the lock. As we sat up, the guard brought in trays of food.

“Dinner time,” he announced as he set them on the table. “I’ll be back shortly for the trays,” he said over his shoulder as he headed out the door. Click. Lock secured. I stared down at the bowl of unappetizing creamy-looking soup with gray chunks swimming in it. A hard-white dinner roll. A bowl of green Jell-O. A carton of two-percent milk.

*I might as well eat. There’s nothing else to do.*

When the guard returned to collect the trays, he counted the silverware before he left. Silverware, we found out later, could be used as weapons in the hands of these “dangerous” check writers.

Click. Room secured. Once again. Night one in the Hill County Jail.

The day before was such a relief to leave Curly in Minot, North Dakota, for a short while. Less stress. Less intensity. Less beatings. I liked the separation. The split. The freedom.

This freedom, however, would last several years. No hits. No punches. No bruises. There was safety. Behind these bars.