

CHAPTER NINE
A Mother's Desperation - Set My Daughter Free
by Judith Ingram

Until now I haven't been able to express this experience out of love and respect for my daughter. Until now she never wanted to speak of it. It's been nearly 4 decades and just recently she opened up to me, wanting to know what happened back then. She only remembers bits and pieces and has been afraid to open that door, until now. We finally had our first conversations on this horrible time in our lives. Though she doesn't remember much, she wanted to know the whole story - she was ready to face what she had buried so long ago.

This isn't a story I have looked forward to sharing, and it was one I contemplated I may have to leave out. There will be, obviously, parts I will not disclose for personal reasons ... but here it goes.

Dani was one year old when we moved back to Oregon and set up the living situation with Ben. I tried to keep my downline Herbal Life business going that I started in California while starting to build it up in our new surroundings. I was quite successful in California with a very large group of people. Sales were off the chart my first month of sales and it continued to grow rapidly. One of the higher up guys from Los Angeles came to meet me with a company award. He wanted me to come to LA and give a speech at their annual gathering. I declined because of my girls.

Unfortunately, the whole business fell apart after I left California. I discovered the people in California lost motivation when I left, as I was the one who kept them pumped up all the time, and the people in Oregon were not interested in health or weight loss ... so I took a job cleaning rental properties.

Ben was the manager at the Dunkin Donuts and he worked, as usual, around the clock. I didn't see him that much and he wasn't spending much time with Dani either. When we did see each other we both felt uncomfortable and tension began to build. After about three months we were both irritated at each other, having arguments to the point I finally decided to move out. Lea and Karey were very happy about that. When one of the rentals I had cleaned came available I was able to jump right in it. It was a two-story duplex and we had the upper unit.

I didn't see Ben after that for months. Eventually I started bartending at the golf course and at that time I met John. Him and his logger crew stopped in for a beer one late afternoon. It was, as it's been said, love at first sight. From that moment on we spent every moment we could together. After our relationship grew deeper, and when the unit below became available, he moved in downstairs. There was a door between the two units that we opened and made it one big house. John spent a lot of time with the girls, and Lea became very bonded with him - the first man she had ever bonded with in our lives. He really loved Dani too, but Karey was very quiet and not the kind of kid that warmed up easy to people, so she took a lot of longer to come around.

Everything was going really well with our relationship when we decided to rent a three-bedroom house together that offered a nice backyard in a nice neighborhood. As soon as we did that, it

wasn't long after when Ben found out where I worked and one day came to see me. He wanted to start visitation with Dani, telling me he had quit his job and started buying fixer upper houses, remodeling and reselling them, so he had more free time to spend with her. He wanted to set up a every other weekend schedule, but at first I didn't let him take her until we had a few meetings together so she would feel comfortable around him. That seemed to work pretty good, she didn't seem afraid or confused. She was a happy, trusting little girl. Eventually I let her go for weekend visits. That seemed to be ok for a few months. Dani was two and half years old by then and fully potty trained, which is why I think he chose that time to start being a daddy.

Though I was happy she would have that time to spend getting to know him, she still called John daddy too. I thought it might be somewhat confusing for her at first to have two daddy's but she seemed to adjust fine. Then, in time, I began to notice that she came home from her weekend visits with dark, baggy circles under her eyes, which I assumed was from lack of sleep. But she also seemed very quiet, withdrawn, and not her happy self. It would take a couple of days for her to get back to normal after each weekend visit.

Summertime had come and up until then she would play in the sprinkler out back running naked through the yard, like toddlers do, and she seemed happy and normal that way. But then one day, after she had come home from the weekend, she refused to play outside, even with the neighbor kids she always played with. No longer would she run through the sprinkle naked, but she would run through fully clothed. She would even scream if I tried to put her bathing suit on, clinging to her clothes tightly and saying no. She started sitting alone and staring at the TV but not showing any interest. She seemed to be getting depressed. I wasn't the only one to notice as John and girls also expressed concern. My suspicion was it had to do with Ben somehow.

When it came time to for her to go to Ben's again, she said she didn't want to go, but he had some big family plans that weekend so I felt I had to send her off. When he brought her home that Sunday late afternoon, she walked into the house and went straight toward her room without even a hug. Just as Ben left the phone rang. Dani disappeared down the hallway as I answered the kitchen phone. I was on the phone for a couple of minutes before going to check on her. I found her in the bathroom sitting on the toilet fully dressed. I asked her what she was doing but she just sat there quietly. I then realized she had gone pee and poop in her pants, which I was so surprised because she hadn't had an accident in over six months. I didn't want her to think she was in trouble so I tried to get her off the toilet to remove her clothes, telling her it was ok. But she held on to her pants tightly and started crying. I kept telling her she wasn't in trouble but mommy had to clean her up. She just kept crying and holding her pants so I couldn't get them off. Then she broke away from me and ran into her room.

Just about then Lea and Karey had come in from seeing their friends and heard Dani crying. Lea came into the bedroom to see what was wrong and I told her what was going on. Lea went over to her and put her arms around Dani and told her she needed to get cleaned up. Dani calmed down and let Lea take her to the bathroom and give her a bath, then got her dressed.

However, when John arrived, she didn't run to him like she always had when daddy got home. When he tried to pick her up, she pulled back. We tried not to make an issue of it and went on

with the evening. When I was getting her ready for bed and was putting her pj's on, I laid her on my bed and took her clothes off, which she let me do, but then while she was lying there, she began to say something very strange. I couldn't understand what she meant so I kept asking her what was she trying to tell me. She kept repeating the words, "Daddy poke," and then finally pointed between her legs to her privates and said it again. I was so shocked by what she said, so I looked her over carefully to see if I could see any signs of something going on but I didn't see anything to cause alarm. I asked her if she was hurt and she said no. I didn't know what to say or how to react, so I just played it normal and put her bed with kisses.

After I tucked her in, I went to tell John what happened and he didn't seem to think it was anything to be concerned about. I explained to him my concern how she'd been acting lately being quiet and withdrawn, and he thought it had to do with her adjusting to the situation, saying she'd be okay. The next day I called my friend Ellen and told her what happened, and she became highly alarmed. She suggested that Ben might have done something sexual to her and encouraged me to call Children's Services, but I was afraid I was jumping the gun. Such an accusation was serious ... and oh my god what if I did and there wasn't anything ... the thought of what that could do to someone's life was horrendous. For the next few days, I didn't do anything but continued observing her behavior. Her refusal to sit on John's lap like she always had, as he tickled her and made her laugh, or just watch TV cuddled up was something I could tell bothered John, as it did myself. It seemed every time he tried to touch her she shied away. I tried to get her to go to him but she refused, like she was scared. He didn't want me to push her so we just let it be. Before that, she was all over him, she loved her daddy John and they had a lot of fun together. It felt like a normal relationship between a father and daughter, and it brought me a lot of joy to see.

Then, a few days later, I caught her in the living room one morning sitting on the floor next to our dog, Lucy, with an object in her hand, poking it at the Lucy's privates. I was alarmed at what I saw and went over and took the object away telling her that wasn't a nice thing to do, explaining that she could hurt the Lucy. In that moment I felt she was acting out what had happened to her and I really didn't know how to react, what to say, so I just picked her up and took her into the kitchen and made breakfast as we went on with our day. When she went to her room to play, I called Ellen and told her what happened. This time she was really mad at me for not making that call and demanded that I call right now, telling me to let them check it out. If there's nothing there, at least it would put my mind at ease, she said.

I was still so torn on what to do. I went into her room to clean up, putting her toys away in the closet. She started acting scared and said the monster was in the closet. I told her there was no monster, and then she pulled it out of the closet where she had hidden it and threw it on the floor. It was a toy monster which was shocking to see. I asked her where it came from and she said daddy gave it to her, but she wasn't supposed to tell me. She seemed very fearful of it. I told her I was going to throw it away and she seemed to get even more fearful saying 'No mommy, no'. I asked her why mommy can't throw it away and she said, "Monster will get me." Then it suddenly hit me. He must have told her that to keep her quiet. What else could it be?? I told her that the monster could not hurt her and mommy will make it all better and I took that toy and

stomped on it, then tore it apart to show her mommy would protect her, and I threw it to ground and stomped on it more telling her to step on it too. She began to jump up and down on the torn, cut up monster toy and then we threw it in the garbage.

After that I made the call to Children's Services and told them what was happening. They set up an appointment for the next week to bring Dani in. When I went to the Children's Services, I didn't know what to expect, what they would do. First, they had someone sit with Dani while I went into a room to talk to two people, a man and a woman. I told them everything that had been happening, expressing my concern that I might be over reacting. Then they said they wanted to do some tests with her to determine if there were signs of sexual abuse. They took Dani into a room where they talked to her, asked her some questions and played with dolls, and what they determined was that something had happened to her, indicating it appeared to be in the beginning stages, expressing they wanted to pursue it further. Needless to say, I was so shook-up, so very ill about it, that after this my life became a basket case. I can't describe how or what I felt, or the thoughts in my head, but I was just sickened. I knew I had to keep it from Dani. I couldn't let her know how sick inside I was, or what was really going on. I had to keep giving her all my love and support and try to keep things normal, as John and the girls had to do as well. But John had a very hard time with it and I could tell he felt uncomfortable with her after learning the awful truth. He no longer tried to get her to sit on his lap, or give bedtime kisses, or anything - he felt uncomfortable - at least at first. Well, none of us knew how to respond really.

I received a call from Children's Services telling me that they had talked to Ben and something didn't seem right there, so they were going to do further investigation. This is when the police and District Attorney 's office became involved. I didn't hear anything from anyone for a week, perhaps, and then I was called into the DA's office where I met Roberta, one of the District Attorney 's, and told to come alone. She was an Asian woman, very focused, no emotion, all business, somewhat hard and no nonsense. She told me that they had enough suspicious evidence to issue an arrest warrant and said the charges would not be from me but from the State. She said they gave him a lie detector test which he failed. She told me what would happen, and what I should be prepared for and she said this was the first sexual abuse case of a minor, the youngest in fact, that the County had ever done that the child them self would not testify, saying the entire case would rest upon my testimony and their evidence. She assured me she would try her best to keep it from blowing up in the papers, to protect Danielle, saying she had connections (and she kept her word which I know could not have been easy to accomplish as this was big front-page news).

Ben was arrested after that and released on bail. He got an attorney and then requested his own lie detector test, saying the test he took before was incorrect, but then he failed his own test too. He didn't see Danielle after that day he had brought her home, and he hasn't ever seen her since. A restraining order was put on him.

During this whole ordeal I had left my job at the golf course and John and I found a house to buy and we moved in. We had talked about marriage many times but now it seemed more important than ever to follow through. The DA said it would be better if we were married so we got married. The ordeal went on for months, as we tried to keep Danielle's life normal. But she

started having terrible nightmares. I was so paranoid all the time that I wouldn't let her out of my sight for a second. I had the most terrible fear a mother could have. I thought he would try to kidnap her and run. My life was living on pins and needles every day. Things just kept dragging on and on. Danielle's nightmares kept getting worse. I had taken her to a children's psychologist several times during the ordeal trying to help her but that didn't work ... the nightmares kept coming. Her sisters tried to help her as well, spending more time with her, and one point Lea even had her sleep with her. By now, Dani was nearly three years old.

Ben hired a private investigator and was trying to say it was John who did something to Dani but the investigator did an entire search on John and came up with nothing. I even caught a woman peeking in our window one day with a camera and when she saw me see her, she ran to her car and quickly drove off. I knew we were being watched and that itself was very difficult to deal with. John's family was outraged at it all and didn't want to get involved. They started treating Danielle like she was untouchable or something and that began to cause more problems.

In the meantime, I had many meetings with Roberta as we grew closer. I saw this woman go from hard to compassionate. Sometimes she had me bring Danielle and I could see she was getting very emotionally involved. Even the other DA's told me that Roberta was so focused on this case that she'd been handing her other cases to other DA's so she had more time to work on this. One DA told me she wasn't hardly sleeping or eating because this case had consumed her like no other. She told me she would do everything humanly and legally possible to convict Ben and put him away, so he never could touch her again, or perhaps another child. Even the sitting Judge in the trial, according to Roberta, said he was one of the vilest men he'd seen in his courtroom. A lot of things were kept from me so I never knew all the details. But it was apparent that if these professional people had that much information and gut feelings about him then I had to put my ultimate trust in them ... and I did.

Finally, the court date was set and I was so scared. The entire case rested on me and I was fighting for my daughter's life with desperation, so I had to be strong. I can't tell you how many times I met with Roberta and spent hours with her going over the case, preparing me for court. She told me to answer yes or no and don't say anymore that I don't have to. She said his attorney will try to discredit me using my past history and tear me apart. And that is just what he tried to do, but I held it together through the whole thing. They brought in people I barely knew that got on the stand and out right lied about me, telling stories that I told them that I never did and were totally untrue, that's how far they went. His family was there too - his mother and grandmother even testified for him giving a bogus story to protect their son, saying Dani was on an exercise bike and had slipped and might have injured herself on the bar. If they had known the evidence, they may have not told that lie, as there was no visible signs to verify that. His dad, however, sat through the trial with his wife, who had refused to testify for his son. I saw his dad in the hallway at the courthouse and he came up to me to say how deeply sorry he was that this happened. He didn't seem surprised and that surprised me. The fact that he didn't testify for his son really shocked me. He said he feared something like this might happen, and he truly seemed sickened by it, apologizing for his son.

Roberta called in the police officers who were on the case, the Children's Services staff who met with Dani and I, along with the court experts, as well as a few of my own close friends to testify. The trial went on for three full days that were very long and emotionally draining. John took off work to be with me, because I really needed his support. Roberta told me that Ben sat there the entire time with a smug look, a halfcocked grin throughout the entire trial as if he thought he had it in bag to win. Overly confident. That seem to really give Roberta all the more motivation to lock him up. She'd seen many criminals of the same demeanor countless times.

During the trial everything began to form the whole hideous picture. The horrible awareness had fully begun to unravel and reveal who and what he really was. My eyes were finally fully opened, and what I saw was the devious plan he had cleverly crafted ... even before she had been conceived.

Though I wasn't allowed in the courtroom to hear all the testimony, many of the police and investigators, along with my husband and myself all sat in a room talking, as one by one each of us were called into the courtroom for testimony. They shared with me some of the things they heard and some of those things shocked me so powerfully, but the one thing that has always bothered me is when one of the officers who returned from testify came back into the room acting totally blown away. Shaking his head, he said something to the effect that he wished they had asked him the question. He seemed very upset because they didn't. He sat down just shaking his head in amazement that the DA didn't ask him the question, and the guy next to him asked, 'What question?'

The officer said, "I'm not supposed to talk about this, I'm sorry, but I hope they lock that sick son of a bitch up." No one said anything, and he was still shaking his head in disgust, and I'm feeling really ill, really ill wondering what could be so disturbing that I had to ask, "What do you mean?"

He looked right me and said, "You know what, I think you have a right to know," then he proceeded to tell me that when they gave Ben the lie detector test and he failed, they questioned him about why he lied on the sexual questions, and Ben said it wasn't because of his daughter, admitting he had sexual acts with a dog. The others, as myself and John, were shocked. Some were gasping and mumbling in disgust. The officer, who was present during the lie detector test, also revealed Ben had admitted to also having sexual relations with men, trying to explain why his test failed, denying he ever touched Dani in a sexual manner.

As this officer spoke, and I heard his words, they hit me like a thousand-pound sludge hammer right in the gut and I instantly felt like I was going to throw up. My face must have turned white. I hunched over the table and began to shake. John lifted me up and walked me out of the room. The officer said he was sorry, he thought I should know.

John had to hold me as we walked down the hallway as my legs were like rubber. We went outside to sit down and I just broke out in tears. I could not believe that I had lived with this man for years ... even had his child. I was shaking and crying and saying over and over and over again, "Please, God help me." I didn't know if could even pull myself together to continue on but I thought of Danielle and how evermore stronger I had to be to make sure he never could touch

her again. So, John and I went back and sat in that room and I got through it, but when they put me on that stand and I had to look at him sitting there (which I tried not to even glance at him), I felt so utterly sick - just being in his presence I could feel his evilness that everyone kept telling me about. I saw it, I felt it for the first time right there in that court room.

In that moment all doubt was consumed with the truth that brought a twisted emotional torment brewing within. The facts, the evidence, the testimony, the private investigators, the Children's Services, the police, attorneys, the press, all of it was part of the battle. It was such an exhausting, in-depth and tiring court trial, one that Roberta had protected Dani from any involvement. I praise the District Attorney for she took a strong and personal attachment to my little girl – she fought to set my daughter free. This case took every ounce of strength she had, so much so that when she was leaving the courtroom after the guilty verdict, she physically collapsed. I saw her assistant catch her before she fell, helping her walk away.

Finally, the trial was over and on that last day I just knew he'd be convicted and taken away, but that's not what happen. Yes, he was convicted, every jury person convicted him and in one hour. The Judge gave the juror's guilty verdict and then everyone got up to leave. I was so upset that Ben was able to walk out of the courtroom that I went up to one of the officers to ask why, why he wasn't taken to jail. He said that's not how the court system works explaining that when he's sentenced in a few weeks he'll go straight to jail then. I saw one of the DA's in the hallway as we were leaving and asked him if Roberta was okay. He told me she would be okay but that she had worked so hard on this case, that she was totally exhausted - and I could clearly see she was - but I also knew she was also overwhelmed with relieved to have won the case, knowing Dani would be safe.

Yes, it only took an hour for the jury to find him guilty. The outcome that followed was not what I, the DA, and all those involved had hoped for, on the day of sentencing ... several weeks later .. which I was able to attend. But the Judge who gave the sentencing was not the Judge who sat through the trial. He was suddenly killed in a hit and run motorcycle incident before sentencing had been set. So, the Judge who heard every word spoken in that court room and was appalled, telling Roberta, who told me he was going to lock him up and throw the key away, was suddenly 'taken out'.

Unfortunately, the new Judge, who had stepped in, admittedly said he hadn't reviewed the entire case. He seemed uninterested in knowing anything more about the case by turning a deaf ear to hear the DA's outrage at his sentencing being far too lenient. He only gave Ben thirty days in the county jail and three years' probation.

Too many strange things were involved in that case, but knowing the ties were severed between him and my little girl, was of some great comfort, though the thought and worry never ceased that he was out there lingering somewhere. That fear left me in a state of constant of paranoia ... until she was much, much older.

Perhaps winning the case may have set her free from Ben ever having any rights in her life which seemed to bring some satisfaction ... but what a toll it took on us all. At first there was a welcomed relief, assuming it was all over. It wasn't ...

The real battle begins.

I felt creepy for a long time after that thinking of what else I didn't know. I was so very grateful that he hadn't really ever touched me in any intimate way. At least I had the knowing that him and I never shared a sexual relationship, and whereas it pained me so deeply at one time for not having that bond, it became my mental and emotional salvation in the end. Yet, most importantly, I was able to prevent things going any further with Dani, and knowing I did something to stop him was the greatest outcome.

When the trial was over John adopted Danielle. Ben had lost all his rights that day. From that day on I have never seen him. The last day Danielle saw him was that Sunday when he brought her home, which had been at least six months, I think, maybe more. It was a long ordeal. And that was the end of him ... I thought.

I was so upset and sickened inside that I finally called my former sister in-law, Sharon (my brother Rusty's former wife). I hadn't called her before because I was worried what she might do when she heard what Ben had done. Danielle was her niece and she was a hot headed, half mountain, half biker woman - a stoner all the way to her death bed. She and Rusty both knew Ben long before I did, as they had lived in the same area for a couple of years before they came and moved the girls and I there. They didn't like him much for some reason, calling him an asshole. I told them, after Ben and I got together, that they just didn't know him like I did. Ben didn't seem to care for them either, mainly because they were stoners, and he was straight as an arrow.

It had been years since Rusty and Sharon were together and by then she had a biker boyfriend when I finally called her. She was upset that I hadn't told her what was going on, and mentioned how Mike could have taken care him. I let her know that's why I didn't tell her. I knew if anything happened to Ben the fallback would be on me. I asked her to let it go, saying it's over now. I felt I could share it with her since Ben was in jail and all his rights to Dani were taken away. I wanted to just move on and get back to living. I thought she would understand and honour my request. Her and I always had a strong sister connection, but as I was telling her about the ordeal, she was cussing up a storm, saying "That mother fucker needs to suffer," and scary stuff like that. She just came unglued and hit the roof. I tried to calm her down, but then she screamed, "I'm gonna castrate the bastard." I kept telling her no, please don't do anything. I told her he's in jail, and she said they know people who work at the jail and a baby raper are worse than murders. She said he won't last there long. I begged her, no don't do anything. They will think it's me. "Please don't do anything," I kept saying. "We just want this to be over."

Finally, she said "Don't worry about it. We'll take care of it."

When I hung up, I was so upset and worried that I went to John and told him. He was really upset. For the entire 30 days Jerome was in jail I feared something was going to happen but nothing happened. I didn't talk to her again after that call and she had not called me back either. When he was released, I felt nervous that he was out and probably lurking around, but after a month and no sign of him, I started shaking the feeling off. One night we had just finished having dinner, it was getting dark. Lea and Karey were upstairs in their room and Danielle was

watching TV cartoons in her room when a knock came on the door. When I opened it up, I found two police officers standing there. They asked if I was Judie and I said yes. They asked me if I knew Ben and I said yes. Then John came to the door, puffed up in his macho logger attitude and asked what this was about. The one officer said they wanted me to come down to the police station for questioning on an assault that took place earlier in the day. John asked what assault. The officer said we can talk about that down at the station but John said his wife isn't going anywhere and if they had questions, they were welcome to come in and ask their questions. So, they came in.

The same officer proceeded by asking me where I was at that time and I said at home. I asked him what happened and he told me that Ben was working on his fixer upper house out in the country when he had a call from a guy who was interested in buying it. They made an appointment to meet out there. The officer said two guys showed up with baseball bats and nearly beat him to death. Apparently, Ben indicated I was involved and they asked me if I knew anything about it and I answered honestly saying no. They were very intimidating with their questions and I was getting nervous but I wasn't giving in. How could I tell them about Sharon? I couldn't do it. I just sat there rightfully stunned. I really didn't know anything about it, and I said why would I do such a thing knowing it would point to me. I tried to reason with them like that and then the officer said, "OK, we're going to check out some other leads, but if we find that you're not telling us the truth, you will be held as an accomplice and we will come back and arrest you."

When they left, John was mad as hell and told me to call Sharon right now and tell her to stay as far away from us as possible. I was really freaked and scared. For days I was a nervous wreck but I just couldn't call her. I felt it best to keep a distance. Then a few days later, again toward the early evening hours, a knock came on the door and there stood those two police officers. I invited them in and John accompanied me as we all stood in the dining area where one of them asked me if I knew Mike. I hesitated, then said no. "Are you sure?" he asked, saying "If you co-operate it will make things a lot easier for you."

Just then John spoke up and said, "We have to tell them." At that point we all sat down in the living room to have a chat after I let the girls know to stay upstairs with Dani. So, we sat down and John proceeded to tell them about my conversation with Sharon. He told them I didn't have anything to do with it, and that I had asked Sharon to let it go. At that point, the only thing they wanted from me was where they lived because there was no record. They said they found Mike through his license plates from Ben's car description. I was very scared to tell them where Sharon lived because I was afraid of what Mike might do to me for telling, especially after the officer said he had a rap sheet. I didn't know Mike, and had never met him.

Oh God, I wanted to call Sharon and tell her, to warn her they were coming, but I could not. I was so afraid to tell her that I gave her up like that to save myself. I felt so horrible about it. But I told her not to do anything. I was already trying to recover from a near mental breakdown. One officer said they would not reveal that the info came from me, so I didn't have to let her know I knew.

When the officers had showed up at her house, they were both arrested. Mike, for the aggravated assault, and the both them for drug possession. They were in a lot of trouble. Mike went to jail, but Sharon got off, since Mike took the fall. After that, I didn't hear from her for a long, long, long time. I later found out that she had broken up with Mike, and after we re-connected many years later, she was all alone and dying. I spent her last days with her at Hospice. I loved that lady. I finally confessed to her what I had done, and how terrible I had felt about it, and she said she forgave me. She knew I had, she just wished I'd made that call so they could have been prepared – meaning they could have stashed the drugs. Her and I we went clear back to 1977 and she died in 2001 from hepatitis C, which was something she had suffered with for decades of time. Sharon lived a hard life ... perhaps harder than me.

Once Ben was out of the hospital, I received a call from Roberta. She wanted to let me know that his parole officer had informed her that Ben moved to Portland, so I could put my mind at ease. But a mind of ease was far from what I received in the days and weeks and months ahead, and very far from what Danielle would experience in the aftermath.

The truth is, we hadn't even seen the worst of it yet!