

## Chapter 1

It all happened so quickly. The realization. The impact. The wind knocked out of me. And then screaming from above. I couldn't see the faces, but I could feel the tension in the air. What just happened?

I lay on the ground, flat on my back, unable to move. Nothing was there holding me down, but when I tried to get my legs to bend, my quads to tighten, or my ankles to roll—nothing happened.

Two women rushed to the scene and kneeled over me as I looked up from the ground, fear rushing through my veins. I was fighting against the pain and shock as one asked, “What is your name?”

With barely a breath, I whispered, “Trish.”

As I was focused on answering the question, the other woman bent down and began to unfasten my helmet.

“No! Don't do that!” I said with as much force as I could muster.

The first woman went back to her line of questioning. “What day of the week is it?”

“Sunday,” I whispered.

“What is your friend's name?”

“Matt.”

She continued, “What color is your bike?”

That sent me into a tailspin. *My bike*, I thought. *My brand-new red and yellow bike*. It was my prized possession.

Earlier that morning I had been looking forward to showing off my four-month-old Giordana racing bike. Matt, a friend from my racing circle, was visiting from out of town. Instead of spending the day touring the city's landmarks and museums, we decided to go for a fifty-mile bike ride so he could enjoy the natural beauty of the city of Denver. The details of what happened next were slowly filtering through my mind.

It was a sunny day in autumn. The date was September 17, 2000, and instead of making preparations to ease into the cold of another winter, my life was in bloom. I had just returned from a summer of adventure and excitement, started a new job and was in the best physical condition of my life.

From my house, we rode down side streets, playing “dodge the obstacles” as we maneuvered around parked cars and pedestrians. Once we reached the bike path, we were able to ride side-by-side. We reminisced about the summer and the fun we had racing in Wisconsin and at a stage race in Pennsylvania. We talked about our plans for the new year and how we would come back stronger and more focused than ever in the coming season.

Eventually, the bike path ended and we were back on the road, heading for the suburbs. We rode in single file again, until I felt my bike becoming sluggish and bumpy. I looked behind me and saw that I was riding on a flat. “Not again!” I exclaimed. I had fixed a flat earlier that morning.

“Do you want to turn around?” Matt asked. “Maybe this isn’t your day.”

“No, it’s okay. I’ll fix it. Let’s keep going.”

Since Matt wanted to see Denver, I was going to show him Denver. I wanted him to get a taste of the hills and the Colorado elevation. I thought that what he needed was a challenge and I wasn’t going to be defeated in my attempt to impart the pain. A flat tire wasn’t going to stop our ride.

We finished riding through town until we got to Golden, and the foot of our destination—Lookout Mountain. We settled in our saddles and began our climb to 7,500 feet.

As we ascended Lookout, the city faded below. The road curved back and forth like a snake in a series of switchbacks. As we climbed, the road below, the houses, cars and all of civilization became miniature. The air got cooler as we peddled along the tree-lined ribbon of road. Even though the climb is only four miles long, it felt as though we had ridden miles out of town. Finally, we reached the top of the mountain climb and felt the satisfaction of yet another

small achievement on the bike. It was one of many workouts to challenge our bodies and build our fitness. Cycling is an adrenaline rush. It's addictive. And each workout, although at the time it may break you down, ends with a feeling of accomplishment and the reward of increased physical gain.

As I looked down over the city and across to the mountains, I felt like I was on top of the world. The only thing I could see in front of me was possibility. I felt, in that moment, invincible.

Heading down the mountain was our reward after the push and strain of riding to the top; though the journey down the winding and narrow hill isn't for the faint of heart. It's a roller coaster, a collection of dips and turns—and the added danger of a road open to cars. One wrong move could mean disaster. The descent requires one hundred percent attention at every moment and in every curve, but it's a rush to exceed twenty miles an hour with the wind kissing every part of your body and your brain fully engaged in the process of leaning, turning and keeping the bike upright.

As we reached the bottom, the air was fresh against our skin, and we basked in the glow of our ability to feed the fire inside us—to ride and be fit. I felt an exuberance I had never felt before. My bike was my freedom.

All of that changed in a brief instant. I remember the details of the accident as a slow motion movie in my head. We were returning home, riding east on 32<sup>nd</sup> Avenue in Golden almost a straight shot back into town. A car appeared on the other side of the road, heading west—toward us. The car maneuvered into its left turn lane. At that very moment, Matt and I were at the edge of an intersection with a side street—32<sup>nd</sup> and Crabtree. We were beginning to cross over Crabtree at the very same moment the car was accelerating through the turn lane and entering the same side street from 32<sup>nd</sup>. We had the right-of-way, so in that moment, we weren't considering that there could be a car coming in our direction. I entered the intersection as Matt was approaching the middle of the road. I was just far enough behind him to see him make a big swerving motion around the car to avoid being hit.

A wave of relief washed over me. *For sure the driver realizes we're here now*, I thought to myself about the near-miss. But then I realized that the driver had no idea that there were two cyclists on the road. I was far enough behind Matt to see what was happening, but not far enough to do anything about it. I went for the brakes, but it was too late. I crashed into the front corner of the car, soared into the air, turning, and slammed my back into the car's windshield. Rolling off the car after the impact and lying at the edge of the road, I felt as though my body were disconnected. My legs felt like they were floating in mid-air. It didn't feel right. In fact, it felt horribly wrong. I couldn't feel anything below my waist.

The sound of sirens brought me out of my daze and back to the present. I struggled for breath. I knew it was bad. Very bad. I wondered if I could be dying. In the background, I could hear that Matt was in a panic too, screaming at the driver. He was probably in shock. I knew he didn't see the accident, but I was sure he had heard it.

Swiftly, yet delicately, the paramedics encircled my neck with a brace, slid a backboard beneath me, shifted me onto a gurney and loaded me into the ambulance. A rush of commotion swarmed around me. Paramedics were taking my vital signs and firing questions and demands at me.

"What happened?"

"Can you wiggle your toes?"

"Can you feel me touching your leg?"

"How long of a ride were you on?"

"Did you see the car coming?"

I answered the best I could, but it felt like there was a stack of books sitting on my chest and a knife digging into my back. I was short of breath and anxious about what would happen next. I couldn't look to my left or right because of the confinement of the neck brace. All I could do was look straight up.

In my head I made silent bargains with God.

*Please don't let this be something that can't be fixed, I pleaded. Let me ride again.*

## Chapter 2

At the hospital things moved even more quickly. The paramedics simultaneously barked medical terms and conditions, while rolling me out of the ambulance and into the hospital. The trauma team gathered around me, taking notes, assessing my injuries and pushing me into my own curtained-off cubicle in the emergency room.

Matt sidled up beside the gurney. “Go call my mom and tell her we’re at St. Anthony Hospital.” I whispered the number into his ear.

Before I knew it, Matt was by my side again. “I couldn’t remember your mom’s number, so I just called your brother Andy. He said he would make some calls and be right over.”

The trauma team shooed Matt out of the way and went to work, prepping me for the series of examinations that were to follow. Large shears sliced through my cycling outfit. I knew they must have been cold, but I felt nothing as they glided along my skin. The staff continued undressing me, even removing my earrings and snipping out my belly-button ring.

My brothers Andy and Greg were the first to arrive. They entered the room together as if they were feeding off each other for support. “Sorry,” Andy said in a soft, gentle voice. “We got held up at check-in. They needed us to help fill out some hospital forms. I called Mom and Fred and they are on the way. Can you tell us what happened?”

I filled them in on the accident. I knew every detail. I was conscious the whole time.

“I’m in a lot of pain,” I told them as I fought back tears.

News spread quickly, and one by one, my family arrived at the hospital as they received the phone message relayed by Matt to Andy. Matt, who was in town just for the weekend and was due to leave in twelve hours, greeted each of them as they arrived. They were all strangers to him, but he couldn’t avoid making their acquaintances and telling the story over and over, answering

their barrage of questions. He was the only one who could give the true first-person account, and even then, he hadn't seen the accident, which happened ten feet behind him.

As I listened to him relate the tale, I realized I had been right. He had heard it. He had heard my bloodcurdling scream. He had heard the thump of my body as it ricocheted from the car to the ground. And he had seen the aftermath of the collision. He had seen me lying broken on the pavement. He had heard me gasping for breath.

I felt so small lying on the gurney, covered in crisp white sheets when my mom walked in. I experienced a rush of relief at the sight of her. It didn't matter that I had turned 31 six weeks before the accident. A mom is a mom no matter how old you are, and at that moment, I realized just how much I needed her. It was like I was back in the fifth grade when I broke my arm at gymnastics practice. At the time, I thought my world would come crushing down because it happened in May, just before the pool opened for the summer. With a cast on my arm, I wasn't going to be able to swim. As my mom and I sat in the hospital emergency room that night, I remember her holding me on her lap, smoothing my hair and consoling me through the trauma of it all.

This was a different time and a much more serious injury, but my need for her was just the same. I locked eyes with her and said, "Momma, I don't want to be paralyzed." Tears rolled down my cheek.

"Honey, don't worry," she soothed as she once again ran her fingers across my forehead and through my hair. "We don't know anything for sure yet."

But I *knew*. I couldn't feel my legs. I was paralyzed. I could see from her face that she was fighting that fear too. She looked like she wanted to take me in her arms and tell me that everything was going to be alright. But it wasn't going to be that easy. We both knew we were in for a lot worse.

"Honey," she said. "There's always hope. You must have hope."

*Hope.* How ironic. When I was born they named me Hope. Don't ask me who "they" were—I don't know. It could have been the college kids who had an "oops" one night and knew they couldn't keep me. Or maybe the secretary at the Department of Welfare who had to fill out my paperwork and figured I would need all the positive energy I could get. Whoever it was, how could they have known that what I needed right then, lying in that hospital, was hope?

Before I came along, my mom, Patricia, Pattie for short, had given birth to three adorable boys. From the top of their tow-heads to the tips of their chubby pink toes, they were all born healthy and full of personality. And Mom loved them with all of her heart.

But something was missing. My mom wanted a girl—a baby to dress in ruffles and lace. A daughter to watch through the years, grow from toddler to teen and experience the life events of prom, graduation and marriage. She wanted that bond that can only be shared by mother and daughter. For my mom, the family would not be complete without a little sugar and spice. Maybe that's not the dream of every father, but Dad already had his boys. She yearned for a girl.

One day, Mom found an article in the *Rocky Mountain News*, "Alone in the World," about a little girl named Rene, who was up for adoption. The article read: "Rene is just six weeks old, but she already has a winning personality. She loves to be cuddled and shows curiosity about her surroundings. Because Rene is of Negro-Caucasian descent it is difficult to find a home for this baby. She is one of about 50 children of special needs who have no prospects for adoption according to Denver Department of Welfare social workers." There was an address and contact person listed at the bottom of the article.

At that time in the late sixties, there was an abundance of mixed-race children up for adoption. It was still a period when people of different races weren't encouraged to be together, a time when these relationships could even be considered taboo. When a child came along, often the mother felt the only choice was to give the child up for adoption. There were enough of these cases that the Department of Welfare placed ads in the newspaper touting particular children who needed caring families and stable homes.

Mom clipped out the article on Rene and made up her mind. She was going to adopt a mixed-race baby. A girl! The more she thought about it, the more the idea appealed to her. She knew there were a lot of mixed-race babies out there who needed a home, and she liked the idea of being able to give one of those children a second chance. She also knew that if she wanted to have a fair-skinned child, she and Dad were capable of taking care of that themselves. As luck would have it, she had recently taken a course at the local women's college on Black History and found herself fascinated with the trials, tribulations and strength of the African American culture. Of everyone I know, my mother is one of the most kind and accepting people I have ever met. I used to tease her that she could strike up a conversation with a tree. She's not afraid to talk to anyone and she always takes an interest in what people say. She wants to know who they are and what makes them tick. She genuinely cares. And she doesn't discriminate. For Mom, race wasn't an issue. She just wanted a girl. A beautiful, brown baby girl.

She talked it over with Dad and soon they were filling out the forms. They went through family interviews with Social Services and put in their request for the type of baby they wanted. My mom's only stipulation was that she wanted a baby girl who was between two and six months old. My father, an obstetrician, had a great deal of knowledge about healthy versus unhealthy babies and was more concerned about the mother and her health history.

By the time my parents had completed the screening, baby Rene had already been adopted. But that didn't stop Mom. After starting the process in the heat of the July sun, six months later, in the dead of winter, my parents received the call. A five-and-a-half-month-old baby girl named Hope was waiting for them to take her home and love her. The entire Downing clan— including the boys, Sam, Andy and Greg— piled into the car and were on their way.

That was the day they met me. It wasn't a ceremonious exchange, but more like, "Here's the little girl you ordered." The cost of the entire adoption was in the neighborhood of twelve dollars—a fact my older brother Greg never lets me forget. His favorite insults when we were

growing up were, “You didn’t even cost as much as Barbie’s penthouse!” or “I hope Mom and Dad kept the receipt!”

My mother fell in love with me instantly. She loved my olive skin and my deep chocolate-brown eyes. She loved the little tuft of curly black hair that stood straight up on the top of my head.

After Dad went back to work at the hospital that day, she took me to the hairdressers, then to the church to show me off. I didn’t look anything like her or Dad, but Mom didn’t care. I was her baby girl and her late birthday present. I arrived six days after her 32<sup>nd</sup> birthday. And from that day forward, even though I wasn’t physically a part of her, I became an everlasting piece of who she is—her second half. She is Patricia Carolyn. My name is Tricia Lynn.