

ANGELA'S SECRET
Written By Kelly Welser

The heat was almost unbearable as Angela crawled into bed and wrapped her comforter around her as tightly as possible. It was a bedtime ritual. She would get under the covers, pull her legs up so that the bottom of the blanket tucked under her feet, then frantically push all the sides underneath herself. She slept in a cocoon – when she slept. Her nights were filled with listening to every creak in the apartment, searching the darkness of her room for what she prayed she wouldn't find, and fearing what she might.

Angela Blakely lived in a world that no twelve year old should ever have to face; a world where trust, comfort, and security were replaced with fear, pain, and confusion. She felt as though the future of her whole family rested on her shoulders, on her decision. Should she live in fear to keep her family together, or should she tell and risk tearing them apart?

This particular night was stifling, but the heat didn't bother her. She had other things on her mind. As she lay in her bed, she could hear the familiar sounds of her mother getting ready for work. The shower would turn off, the small compartments of her makeup drawer would rattle, and then the hairdryer would turn on and then off. Laura Dixon was a good woman, a loving woman who had her share of bad times, but always tried to provide a good life for her family. That family consisted of Angela, Jamie, Angela's younger brother, Laura's mother, affectionately referred to as Gram, and now the most recent addition to the family, her new husband, John.



Illustrations for Angela's Secret created by Angela L. Glass

From the smell coming from the living room, she could tell John had just lit a cigarette, probably the last of his second pack of the day. He practically lived on coffee, cigarettes, and the couch.

Before leaving for Bendric Memorial Hospital, where Angela's mom worked as a night nurse in the maternity ward, Laura would always check on her children – first Jamie and then Angela. As her mother opened the door, Angela gently closed her eyes and pretended to be fast asleep. With a smile and a soft whisper of "I love you," Laura kissed her daughter goodnight. Mom's was the goodnight kiss she loved.

The front door closed. Her mother was gone. Angela was no longer safe. She felt her heart race and her stomach sicken as she wondered if it would happen again tonight.

The almost silent squeak of the bedroom door opening immediately answered her question. Even with her eyes closed she knew that he was watching her. She could hear him breathing, felt him getting closer. She wanted to scream, but what good would that do? If she woke up Gram and Jamie, what would he do to them if they tried to help her? It was no use.

The mattress seemed to sink from his weight as Angela felt her stepfather sit on her bed. Trying to mentally escape what was happening, Angela tried to let her mind wonder, but that first incident kept creeping into her thoughts. It was like a fly buzzing around her face, unresponsive to her swats. She remembered that night when she was five, and John was drying her after her bath. She sat on the bathroom floor as he kneeled behind her drying her hair. Then she felt it. At first she didn't know what it was, but she felt something traveling up and down her back. She tried to look, but he wouldn't let

her. He made it into a game, and one of the rules was that she had to look straight ahead.

"What are you doing? Are you listening to me?" The harshness in John's voice flung her back to reality. "You do what I tell you, when I tell you." John grabbed her hand so hard it hurt and shoved it down his pants.

"Okay, now do it just the way I taught you." He treated this like a game too, but it wasn't a game. It was cruel and harmful and Angela knew it. She closed her eyes, did what she was told and prayed for it to be over.

The morning alarm clock was always a welcomed sound. With it came school, her retreat, her chance to escape. The nightmares were getting worse. She rarely woke up feeling rested, but getting out of bed to go to school was never a problem.

As the warm water of the shower hit her back, she tried to wash away all remnants of the previous night and think about her upcoming day. Cassie Zales, Angela's best friend, had spent the weekend at her dad's camp, and Angela couldn't wait to hear all the details. She had been invited to go along and begged to be allowed, but John said no. He said she was too young to spend an entire weekend away from home. Her mother reluctantly agreed.

Cassie and Angela always walked to school together and were in all of the same classes. They were practically inseparable. Cassie's parents had never been married. She lived with her mother, but spent most of her time at her dad's house. Her mom seemed to be sick a lot, and even though she loved Cassie as much as any mother could, she needed to be alone sometimes. Cassie was very well adjusted to her parents not being together. She had wonderful relationships with

both of them, and it showed in the kind of person she was. She was always happy, always able to put a smile on Angela's face and she talked about what was on her mind. She never held back. Cassie's mother had taught her when she was very little, that the only secret worth keeping is a good secret – like a surprise party. If something is upsetting and seems wrong, it is best to get it out in the open and talk about it. Living by this philosophy meant that Cassie walked around with very little stress, and that was exactly her mother's intention.



After a quick piece of toast and a kiss from her mother, Angela ran to the corner that was the designated morning meeting place. It was three blocks from both of their houses, and it was on the way to school. As she approached the meeting place, she noticed that Cassie wasn't there. Angela glanced at her watch to see if she was early or perhaps a little late. Maybe Cassie had gone without her. No, it was 7:40, the exact meeting time. She decided to wait for five minutes before going on ahead. It wasn't like Cassie to be late. Even if she stayed at her dad's house, he would drop her off at this corner by 7:40.

She waited until 7:50, and then had to run the whole way to school just to make it there on time. Angela reached her seat in homeroom breathing heavy from the exercise, and wondered why Cassie wasn't sitting next to her. She wasn't there. She never missed school. Angela started hoping that she didn't have something horrible like the chicken pox. After the bell rang, Mrs. Brady had the answer, and it shocked the whole class.

"Good morning class. I need to talk to you about something very important. Cassie Zales will not be in school for a while."

Mrs. Brady looked so sad, and Angela started feeling really nervous for her friend. Was she in an accident? Was she in the hospital? Angela had to know, and Mrs. Brady just wasn't getting it out fast enough.

"There has been a death in her family." A death? Angela had to know but seemed too numb to ask the question. She was relieved when Tommy Kretz asked, "What one in her family died?" Mrs. Brady knew this question was coming, but was not yet prepared for their reaction to the answer.

She paused for an instant then quietly spoke two words, "Cassie's mother."

The whole class gasped, as if each child was imagining that it was happening to him or her. Angela's heart broke for her friend. With tears in her eyes, she asked to be excused to go to the restroom. She stayed in there for a long time thinking of Cassie and wondering if she was crying somewhere at that precise moment.

All day long, Angela walked around in a daze. She wished she could talk to her, but didn't know what she would say. Walking slowly up her block, she was shocked to see Mr. Zales' car parked in front of

her house. When she opened the front door, her mother was standing there with tears in her eyes and an overnight bag for Angela.

“Hi, Mr. Zales,” Angela said almost inaudibly. She liked him. He was a handsome man and a great dad, the kind of dad that she always wished she had.

He walked over to her and with a solemn tone in his voice he explained why he was there. “Angela, something terrible happened. Cassie is very sad and needs her best friend right now. Your mother has been good enough to allow you to spend a few days with us. Is that okay with you?”

“Yes, Sir.” Angela would have done anything for Cassie, but she was surprised that she was allowed to do this. John wasn’t home and must not have known anything about it. He never would have agreed.

“Here, honey. I packed this for you. It should be everything you need. I love you.” Angela wrapped her arms around her mother’s neck as tears ran down her face and touched her lips.

“I love you too, Mom.”

When she first saw Cassie, Angela noticed her swollen eyes and face and knew she had spent a lot of time crying. She wasn’t crying now though. She was reading. When she saw her friend, she got up and ran to her as a few tears did spill over onto her cheeks. “I’m so glad you are here. Dad said it might help if I had you to talk to.”

After a few minutes of tearful hugs, Cassie handed Angela the paper she had been reading. She read the first sentence and wondered if she should continue. This was a letter from Cassie’s mother to Cassie, and she didn’t know if it was any of her business. It seemed so personal. Cassie, realizing her hesitation, urged her to read on.

My Darling Cassie,

Please know that you are the love of my life, and I have treasured you since the first time I felt the tiniest of kicks against my stomach. It has been you that has kept me going this long, you that has brought me the only joy in my life.

Your father is a good man and he loves you very much. I know he will be everything you need him to be.

I have been living with a deep pain in my life that has finally become too much. I have left you my journal, because I need for you to understand.

I want you to know that I am so proud of the person you have become. I will be with you always.

Love,

Mom

Angela put down the letter. She was speechless. Cassie had spent hours the night before reading the journal that her mother had left her; and just like her mother had taught her, she needed to talk about it. Angela felt uneasy about knowing such personal things. She had always been taught that family life was not to be discussed, but her friend needed her.

For the next two hours, Angela listened horrified as Cassie described the years of sexual abuse her mother had endured when she was very young. This explained why Cassie never had any contact with her mother's family. This explained a lot of things. Why her mother had never married her father. She loved him, but was so scared from her abuse that she could never have a nurturing relationship with him.



Cassie went on to describe the violent panic attacks brought on by a certain sound or smell that reminded her of the abuse. She spoke of the nightmares that haunted her mother until two days ago when she took her own life. The abuse had ended long ago, but the pain and anxiety never did. It worsened. It had destroyed her.

As she listened to the details that described her own life so well, Angela's head started reeling. She was getting dizzy and felt as though she were going to vomit. Her life was being destroyed the same way Cassie's mother's life was. John had made her the villain. If she told, it would tear the family apart. But she was not the villain; she was the victim. By not telling, she was allowing him to continue the abuse. What he was doing was wrong.

Cassie was physically and mentally exhausted when she fell asleep that night. Angela drifted off to sleep finally knowing what she had to do.

A few days later, tears rolled down Laura Dixon's face as her daughter described the abuse she had been enduring. Angela searched her mother's eyes as she told her story. There was no sign of disbelief and no fear of the family falling apart, just the determination to remove this monster from their lives. When Angela was finished, her mother held her tightly, and promised that she would now be safe. After a few moments, her mother got up, walked to the phone, and dialed for the police.

