

“Committed to Love”©

A short story

Based on the Book

“Committed to Love”©

by

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A True Story

Boca Raton, Florida 1992

The movie opens up with Jeffrey, Susan’s husband, looking for all the world like a Greek God. Standing at the podium, he has summoned all of his energies and is giving tonight everything he’s got. He must. After all, his world has evolved into something wondrous and incredible. He is basking in the limelight giving a powerful speech to a prestigious audience, commanding all the attention he has sought to achieve over a long and fruitful career. He is at the top of his game and there’s no quitting now. He has climbed his Mount Everest and this is the dénouement, the time of fulfillment, and crowning professional recognition. However, little do people know that for many years, Jeffrey and Susan were keeping a dark secret and that their life is a great façade because nothing is quite as it appears to be.

Susan was never more proud of Jeffrey than tonight. They were celebrating 25 years of growth, success, adventure, and a whirlwind of worldly pleasure and pain. There she was in the wings, as always, hovering like a Jewish princess/mother. When he grew, she blossomed. Oh, what a perfectly matched team they were! Their togetherness showed with everything that was transpiring tonight. He had made it to the top and his partner was there helping him with each new level of success. However, what a terrible price she had had to pay. Her stomach ached something awful. Before the crowd, she is her usual self, composed and fun, laughing and smiling, joking, looking beautiful and happy. Yet, tonight she is being tested beyond all reason. Underneath, she is beyond distraught. How had she endured all she did? How could her heart continue to take the pain of knowing that so much of her apparently perfect life was just an illusion, but one filled with an absolutely perfect and unconditional love?

When Jeff calls her to come onto the stage, their friends and colleagues applaud, yell, and whistle loudly, showing unabashed expressions of admiration. They look every bit the couple everyone always believed they were. They were the team that many wished they themselves could be. Susan and Jeff were so much more and in a profound way and so much less than anyone knew. Standing arm in arm, they giggled like two little children. Jeff kisses her on the cheek and whispers loudly, “Bee, you are the best. I love you.” People scream with joy. Jeffrey says, “Goodnight, friends. See you next year.” And, so it seems.

They walk off the stage arm in arm looking like a million dollars, as real as life itself. The elevator door opens and they glide in. As it closes, Jeffrey collapses in her arms. He starts gasping, heaving, and wheezing in desperation for air. This is where all her training as a bodybuilder comes in handy. She cradles him tightly, yet gently as a mother holding her stricken child. Her muscled arms from years of weight training enable her to pull him up. She is as strong as an ox, yet she breaks down into tears as she looks deeply into his fading eyes. They are both crying and clinging to each other with all their might. In heaven's name what in the hell is happening?

The elevator doors swing open and she drags his slumping body down the hall and into the hotel room. His breathing is labored and convulsive. His color has turned ghastly pale and his voice is barely audible. Now, the man she loved since 1957 lay crumpled in her lap delirious with fever. She was always his backbone, his strength, his spine, and his emotional stability. She cries out, "Dear God, give me the strength NOW!"

She is having a problem keeping herself together as she fumbles reaching for the phone. She nervously calls their doctor. Susan begs him to come over right away! Susan goes and gets him a glass of water and a cold towel for his feverish forehead. He is burning up. He is coughing and heaving at the same time spewing his guts up. Her friend and doctor tells her, "I'll be right over!" She runs into the bathroom and falls on the floor, crawling into a fetal position clutching herself and weeping uncontrollably. The minutes seem like hours as she screams, "Oh, Jeffrey. What have you done? Why did you let this happen? We had everything."

FLASH BACK TO 1969

Jeffrey and Susan are standing on the altar. With their parents and the Rabbi officiating, they hold each other's hands as they recite their wedding vows. Susan radiates beauty and Jeffrey is the epitome of male handsomeness. Everyone looks on admiringly as they leave the temple. Susan does not look pregnant, but the people there know that she is. After all, it is the sixties, the time of free love, of sex, drugs and rock-n-roll. They had been having a full throttle go at it and had their fair share of sexual partners. She has been borderline promiscuous and he has been secretly having gay encounters. They have been the best of friends since the fifth grade, as close as friends can be, and they have clicked as pals from the very first time they met when he said to her in fifth grade, "I like your bobby socks." In that defining moment, she had an instant crush on this incredibly cute, sweet, nice Jewish kid from a small town in upstate New York.

All through high school, they hung out, all the while dating others. They slept around indiscriminately and who cared, anyway? But on one cold wintry night, Jeffrey stayed over and they got terribly drunk. They passed out in her parent's bed and when they awoke the next morning, naked and oblivious at first, they knew what had transpired the night before. A few weeks later, the

results came back and Susan finds out she is pregnant! They decide to do what they were raised to do. The only thing they could do. It was 1969. The town of Troy, New York was small. There was no other option. They would get married. They might be children of the sixties but this was serious. There was no legalization of abortion and they could not give the baby away. No sir, they must get married. However, nobody should know that she is pregnant, because that would be shameful and their families disgraced. So, they kept it a secret and got married. Besides, they loved each other anyway, so why not, "Right?" Right!"

FLASH FORWARD

Her sobs are so loud that Jeffrey pulls himself from the bed and crawls into the bathroom to be with her. He wants to comfort and console her. As they cry and hold each other, they know that even this horror cannot not tear them apart.

FLASH BACK TO 1957

Susan is eleven years old and transfers to a new school in another part of town. She comes into their fifth grade class and stops at the desk in front of where Jeffrey is sitting sideways. He looks at her, then at her feet and says, "I like your bobby socks." She swoons.

FLASH FORWARD

Susan is at home speaking with the doctor. She tells him Jeff's symptoms, but the doctor does not seem alarmed. He says, "Jeff probably has a virus of unknown origin." The doctor has no reason to suspect anything else. Why should he? He does not know the secret life of Dr. Jeffrey A. Mintz. She and Jeff have a hunch deep in their bowels as to what this virus of unknown origin is. With spiked fevers and night sweats, it is probably the dreaded AIDS. But, they are not ready to confront it aloud and not ready to come to grips with it. She had tended to him 24 hours a day for three weeks, nursing him with Tylenol, fluids, and vainly trying to get him to eat. His fevers spiked to 105 degrees. She lies on top of him waiting for the medicine to break his fever. She rushes to get cold compresses putting them under his armpits and behind his knees. His sweats drenched the bed, but they temporarily brought him respite from this hell. His coughing continues. His breathing is labored. Should she call 911? What should she do?

She feels lost and afraid. Finally, she gets Jeff to the doctor for blood work. After three weeks of excruciating pain, the phone rings. Her doctor's voice speaks coldly into the telephone. "May I come up," he says. The sound of his words only confirmed and validated what she already knew. Why would their doctor come to their home on a late Friday night other than to give Jeff heart crushing and horribly bitter news? Susan buzzes him in. The warm night embraces her body from the outside, but her insides are running cold as if death has shown up and wants to take her

love away. It is June 19, 1992 when the doctor tells Jeff he has pneumonia related to AIDS and should be immediately admitted to the hospital. A month ago, they were on top of the world. Now, they are in the valley of the shadow of death.

FLASH BACK TO 1969

They get married. She moves into Jeff's apartment in Albany. On Monday, he goes back to school for his Master's Degree while she went back to the VA Hospital as a dental hygienist. One week later, while giving him a birthday party, she starts to have cramps. Within a matter of minutes, she is bleeding profusely and has a miscarriage on the bathroom floor. In the hospital, the doctor does a D & C. Their parents are there. Two days later, they went back to work and to school. They talk it over and even though she is no longer pregnant, which is the reason they got married, they would try to stay together and make a go of their marriage. It was a commitment under God and it would be "TILL DEATH DO US PART." That was their vow. That was their commitment and whether it was the sixties or not, come hell or high water, they were going to do it the old-fashioned way. They were friends and in love. So what the hell! What's not to like? Why not? It was just the first time of many that they were bound by a secret that could serve as a door to an easy way out and yet, they chose, time and again, to stick it out, to stay together, to keep their sacred vow before God between them. So help them God!

But, her secret, their secret, is not the only secret in play. He has a secret that he has yet to share in the wake of her miscarriage and their fateful vow to stay together and stay married. It is a secret that will soon test their commitment for sure. In the meantime, there is a lot to handle. Between work, school, and play, they certainly have their hands full. The pressures of taking care of the business of their new life as newlyweds are more than enough to keep them busy. They strive to find the time to explore their new life as husband and wife that brings many challenges. There is a distance between them, yet an undeniable closeness, that keeps things in order. The usual adjustments come to the fore and they juggle the pressures as best they can. Yet, it is not all peaches and cream, but they are giving it their best shot.

Things have gotten serious and they quibble and squabble a bit. They always make up, make out, and get on with it. But, Susan starts to feel a bit like she is intruding on Jeff's space, at least he starts to make her feel that way. Little by little, he sometimes withdraws and retreats behind a kind of emotional wall, or so it seems to her. At first, she tries to overlook it, but it troubles her more and more. After a few months, they decide that they should take a break. Jeff loves to travel so he works out a deal to go to Spain for their belated honeymoon. They travel with some friends of their parents and Susan looks forward to the chance to get closer in the marriage with some quality time away from the pressures and tensions of living on a student budget, getting through graduate school, and finding a way to live together as man and wife.

Once they get to Spain, Jeff becomes even more distant, aloof, and remote. Susan ratchets up the pressure, pushing, needling, and probing. What is the matter Jeff? What is wrong? Why are you so cold? Are you mad at me? Did I do something wrong? Talk to me! This keeps building and building until one day Jeff explodes and screams, "I think I might be gay, ok? I've had a few gay encounters in college and I think I might be gay, I don't know but....." Susan says, "How can you be gay when you are married to me? We were in love. We got married, remember? I was pregnant with your child! No, you cannot be gay! How can you be gay? Jeff, you can't!" Repeatedly Susan screams the same questions back to Jeffrey. "How could you marry me and be gay? Why would you do that to me? You wanted to get married! That is why we're married. But, you love me, don't you?" Jeff says, "Of course I do."

Back and forth they go, yelling and screaming, slamming doors, on and on until the argument crescendos into a swirl of emotions. They are left crying in each other's arms, holding each other tightly, drowning in tears that turn into passionate love making, followed by a deep sleep. When they awake, their eyes are swollen and puffy but things are better. Jeff is looking relieved and relaxed, while Susan is positively ebullient. The day is bright, things are well, and they are off to see the bullfight. The matador is magnificent as he masterfully challenges and slays the bull with a deft grace that seems the very embodiment of their state at that moment. He slices the bull's ear off and tosses it into the crowd and in Susan's direction. It grazes her face, leaving a streak of blood on her cheeks as Jeffrey grins with a joy she had not seen since the day they were married. The blood trickles down her cheek and she smiles in a state of shock. She is just happy to seem him happy. They were together and they were going to be together. This sad business of being gay was going to fade away in the distance. Of this, she felt certain.

Moreover, it did, or so it seemed over the next two years as he pushed for his degree with Susan working as a dental hygienist, typing his papers, cooking, taking care of him and their marriage. They fought a bit but they shared a dream, a vision of success in the future and everything else came second. Even their passionate lovemaking was intense and their sexual chemistry always reunited them. They put it all on the line to reach their goal. They put their head down and did not come up for air until he got his Master's degree and was accepted in the doctoral program at the University of Florida, in Gainesville. They prepared and got ready to move there that fall. They had fallen in love and into their marriage. It could not fail!

Florida was more of the same, only hotter. There was school, work, bills, never enough money, or time to do much of anything except grind it out in the name of the future and a better life down the road. They were looking for somewhere over the rainbow and the proverbial pot of gold at the end of a long, protracted state of delayed gratification. It was tough sledding in a swamp full of gators nipping at their heels. Susan continued to bring the bacon home as a dental hygienist and dutifully cooking, ironing, sewing, keeping house, and typing papers incessantly until her brain, her fingers and her back aches. Jeffrey hunkered down with steely determination masked by a charm

that smoothed over the hidden torment he was going through wrestling with his homosexual urges, which he somehow managed to keep at bay. Susan thought that she did not really have to worry about his homosexual desires anymore, but little did she know about an affair that Jeff had struck up after the late night study sessions at the library.

When the library closed, Jeffrey was reignited with his passion to have sex with another man. Overall, he managed to keep it under wraps, concealed, and at bay, more or less. Susan was sometimes suspicious, but they were both focused on the bigger picture and the main goal, which was to have Jeff get his doctorate. They could and would move on to bigger and better pastures of bright lights and golden fields. Out there was a big city that was to be theirs and theirs alone. Finally, the day comes when Jeff got his doctoral degree. He graduated and was offered a teaching position at a residential treatment center for emotionally disturbed and delinquent youth in Houston.

This was the prestige and validation of their life together and it felt so good. In Houston, Jeff also set up a small practice and immediately started working his way up the ladder of success. Before they knew it, more opportunities came knocking on the door of ambition with a chance to make their life in Houston, Texas even greater. They had left the college town of Gainesville and were rolling over in the big leagues of Houston, Texas. Yahoo! The success they had been yearning and working for was right at their fingertips and they relished the chance to grab a hold of it and ride it to the top. They were young, beautiful, bright and energetic. They were ready come hell or high water for their new life. However, one should be careful about is wished for, because you might just get it.

FLASH FORWARD-TO THE BATHROOM FLOOR

Jeffrey is deathly ill. He is sicker and wasting away now. Susan is frantically doing all she can do to save him. Their parents and friends have been told. There is an air of despair filling the place. The parents are stoic; however, their care and concern is uplifting and profound. Some family and friends are still in a state of shock. They never suspected anything. This devastating news came as a bomb blast in the night awakening them with shock and awe. With so many questions unspoken and even more confusion, Susan soldiers on. But, she is deeply worried. Moreover, she is angry. She careens back and forth between tender loving care for this man, yet inside she has a mortified and raging desire to lash out.

Susan releases unexpected outbursts at Jeffrey confronting him over why he didn't use protection. "You knew this disease was running rampant in the gay community. Why were you so cavalier? So careless? You are a doctor. Why didn't you take better care of yourself? How could you be so selfish? What about me? What about us? What am I supposed to do now? How can you leave me like this? What is going to happen to me after you are gone?" Susan breaks down in tears and Jeffrey is overcome with remorse and guilt. As always, he takes her in his arms offering

what little solace he can. They sob until there are no more tears left to cry. Then, a deep peaceful silence comes over them as they cling together, man and wife, one bond, and one love. The comfort of their luxurious lifestyle in Boca Raton does not give them the respite they desperately sought. Was it better than the price they had to pay in Houston where they found all the material success their hearts desired for the longest time? It was the terrible cost that they had to pay.

FLASH BACK-HOUSTON

It was the 70s and the “ME” generation was alive and well. The “ME” decade and Houston was the go go big town of “ride ‘em cowboys” and where bigger was better. Houston was booming with gusto, crackling with energy, and everything seemed possible and was all within reach. No holds barred and if you wanted it, you went for it. Oil was greasing everything. It was squirting, gushing, and greasing the hopes and dreams of old timers and newcomers alike. And, not to be denied, Jeff and Susan fit right in. They hit the ground running, moving into a neat square suburb, setting up house, securing a great professional life, and getting on with their gold plated dreams. Once again their enormous ambition and drive caused them to begin to rocket to the top as a couple going places, meeting people, moving up, being paid more and more as time went by. There was more recognition, more wealth, more prestige, more, more, and more.

Yet, somehow for Jeff, this was not enough. The more successful they became, the more he hungered and yearned for that helping of a gay lifestyle that was all around him. In the drug-fueled, liberated, and hedonistic scene, there was a craving that was building up in him. Susan hoped that he had gotten over his conflicted desires, but soon realized it was actually the other way around. Jeff wanted to move from the suburbs into the Bohemian gay section of Houston where the bars were big, bright, and the men enticing. He became less and less interested in having sex with her and more and more interested in finding ways to do so with other men. Night after night, after he had finished working as a high-profile professional psychologist training and consulting in various social programs and Fortune 100 corporate situations, he slipped down to the gay bars in a certain section of Houston.

He had purpose and desires to have indiscriminate anonymous encounters with other men before coming home. Late into the night, Susan paced the floor. She was angry and full of rage. Her heart raced every time she wanted to confront him about what she knew was happening again. Frequently, they had vicious confrontations. Susan yelled, “Jeff you have to stop! What is so great about other men that I do not have? You should see a shrink! Why can’t you just be normal? Look at the life we have built! I put everything into helping you achieve and arrive in your profession! Everyone adores us. We are the perfect couple! We have it all now! What’s not to like?” Susan would ask these same questions for many months and years to come. “Dear God, what am I to do?”

Jeff's words would always pierce her heart and they would be the same. He would look at her and say, "Susan, we both really love and care about each other. We are best friends and I am so sorry, but this is something that I must do. I want to do it. I need to do it. I have to do it. If you can't take it then you must leave." Susan screamed through the tears, "Jeff, I am leaving. I cannot take this any longer. I am leaving." She stormed out, repeatedly, and raced over to her girlfriend Roz's home, a nervous and disheveled wreck. Roz was the only one in whom she had ever confided. Roz knew their secret, but would never judge or condemn. Susan desperately wanted to leave him, but she could not, and she knew in her heart that she would not. The truth was that she had too much invested in this relationship, even as flawed and difficult as it was. This was their world and their life. They had known each other forever and she had loved him from day one. They both really enjoyed each other's company totally and loved each other dearly. And, most of all, they had become dependent on each other more than they ever thought possible.

After all, she took care of him perfectly. She had enabled him to zoom to the top by focusing on his practice with laser-like intensity. Her abiding support and presence had permitted him to maintain a pristine image as a married man in an ideal couple situation that was picture perfect for his career. Plus, even though she was quite controlling in their alone time together, she still tolerated, however reluctantly and helplessly, his nightly dalliances in the neighborhood netherworld of gay Houston. She, on the other hand, had always loved him to death and had become addicted to being able to dominate him when they were together. The luxurious lifestyle he was now able to provide to her always managed to help her vainly cling to the hope that she would be able to fix him. She prayed that he could and would stop being gay and that they would ultimately hunker down for a long and lasting satisfying drift into the sunset for the rest of their lives. It was a co-dependent compact that from time to time blew up in their face because Susan simply could not handle the contradictory pressures of pretending to be the machine that she appeared to be. Still every time she flared up and lashed out at Jeffrey, somehow and some way she always came back. Either he came and got her or she came back when he left for work.

Over and over, from time to time, this dynamic repeated itself and it slowly but surely took its toll on both Susan and Jeff and on their union. The main saving grace was when they took time to travel. Jeff loved to travel and would plan these meticulous getaways for them that had a powerful restorative effect. And Susan realized that she had to get a life of her own, too. She couldn't just be only about helping Jeff climb in his career and socializing with other professional couples to make everything look good to the public. She turned to piano lessons and recitals. Then she started bodybuilding and turned her body into an unbelievable physical specimen. Then it was cooking. She became a master chef and began writing books on the subject. She was starting to gain recognition for her efforts.

But their sex life fizzled and Susan lost interest altogether as she began to sublimate her sex drive into these new and diverting endeavors. Jeff on the other hand had become more and

more promiscuous. The more successful he became the more Susan enabled his career to flourish. The more brazen and rapacious his appetite for fleeting high-risk sexual encounters in out of the way places with men he had never met before or would see again took over. It was a tale of two Jeff's. He knew Susan would be there with open arms or a wagging finger when he came back. And that was sadly their saving grace until things took a sudden turn for the better and ultimately the worse, in the early 1980's. It was 1981 to be exact.

Susan settled into a life in which she was the dutiful supportive wife, enjoying the amenities that a wealthy life could bring. She filled the vacuum Jeffrey left with friends and hobbies that gave her an identity and sense of self-esteem. These diversions helped her to heal the painful wounds she had to nurse masking Jeffrey's increasingly long and repetitious absences throughout the week after work. Slowly her interest in having sex with Jeff began to match his lack of interest likewise. By the beginning of the 80's their sexual bond was pretty much a memory, especially since she had contracted multiple STD's from his hypersexual gay lifestyle. A lesion here, a blister there. "How much insult can you add to injury? Have you no shame?"

One day Susan was watching the six o'clock news and Peter Jennings was talking about a new disease that had developed into a plague in San Francisco's gay community-something called AIDS. It was killing gays by the hundreds and had stricken so many men. Immediately, Susan had a convulsive reaction. She turned off the television and rushed into the bathroom to take a closer look at the latest sore she had been nursing. She had a full-fledged panic attack, spiraling into a fit of worry that sent her reeling to the floor. She became delirious. She knew that this was going to be the end of her marriage to Jeff and their sexual relationship. It was just too much for her to come to grips with. She started sobbing hysterically. She vomited dry heaves that left her gasping for breath. It was time for her to go for sure. She was certain. Then a voice in her head stopped her suddenly, "No. You can't leave now. You must stay with him because he will need you one day more than he has ever needed you before." With that, she realized that while the sex would have to stop, she could, would, and should stay. The marriage would go on, but things were going to be different from that point on. They had to be.

Jeffrey was in a state of denial. He thought that he couldn't contract this disease. He was safe. Susan could protect him. He didn't have to stop. He just had to be more careful, more selective, and less indiscriminate. He would cut back, cut down. Less is more. He began to look for a more personal connection. Susan went deeper into herself seeking a spiritual path that was not bound by the desires of the flesh. In a way, they were both trying to adjust to this screaming alarm but in different ways. Susan began a life of celibacy and Jeffrey sought a lover. He met Charles.

Charles was a sweet, nice, wonderful fellow who struck up an intimate connection with Jeffrey that was truly natural, authentic and solid. He was a really decent fellow who seemed

perfectly suited to Jeff's personality in every way. So much so that even Susan liked him, accepted him, and welcomed him into their orbit in a way that made for a kind of weird three-sided triangle that felt almost normal and pretty much comfortable, if not entirely comforting. Charles became an integral part of their lives and Jeffrey splits his time almost equally between Susan and Charles. There was no real static to speak of. A kind of peaceful *détente* was reached and everything seemed like it was going to be workable. All was quiet on the Western Front, until Charles found out that he had AIDS in 1986.

Charles got horribly ill and went through an agonizing demise and died within a few months much to Jeffrey's devastation and dismay. Susan was horrified, too. She liked Charles and the whole thing was just too surreal, complicated and disorienting to even try to pretend it was even close to a normal situation. They withdrew from each other in the wake of this tragedy. But the one thing that they agreed on was that they needed to get out of Houston just as fast as they could. Jeff tested negative for the disease, but Susan was deeply worried. It was time for a new scene, a different life and maybe Jeff would finally come to his senses and cut this whole lifestyle out. They could get a fresh start and put all this foolishness behind them, once and for all. Maybe Boca Raton, Florida was just the place. Jeff had a new opportunity there. They would pick up and go back to Florida. It was affluent, clean, and maybe it would work out all right in the end. Maybe there they could find each other and save each other before it was too late. Maybe.

FLASH FORWARD TO THE HOSPITAL-JULY 4TH 1992

Susan is checking Jeff out of the hospital. He has gotten well enough for her to take him home, but the doctor has instructed her that she must remain vigilant over the next few months to make sure his recovery continues. She puts her all into restoring his health and after days on end of round-the-clock care, he begins to stir again to the point where he is back on his feet and ready to go back to work, which he does. Susan is totally relieved and proud that she has been able to make such a difference. The doctor praises her dedication and skill. Jeff is deeply grateful and suggests that they take another one of their incredible vacations---this time for three weeks to Italy. The trip is a Jeffrey special, the best. They have the time of their lives, just like the old days. It's almost as though he is not sick at all or at least anymore and it is just the restorative palliative time their marriage has been sorely in need of. They revel in the moment and all seems right in the world.

FLASH BACK-MOVING TO BOCA RATON

Jeffrey and Susan packed to move to Boca. They were thrilled that Jeff's HIV test came back negative. They were excited about the chance to make a new start. Charles' death had been a sobering reminder that this AIDS epidemic was no joke and it chastened Jeff's attitude quite a bit. Susan's relief was palpable, too. She was praying that once they put Houston behind them there

would be clear sailing into the golden sunrise of the Boca milieu, where they could get their marriage on the footing that she had been desperately hoping for for a long time now. Everything seemed new and possible again.

Boca was just what the doctor ordered. It was bright, sparkling, clean and vivacious. The people were rich and beautiful and the lifestyle suited Susan to a T. She took up fitness training, then more bodybuilding and became quite the model of strength and beauty. Tanned and lovely she was full of vitality and simply flourished in Florida as paradise. Jeffrey showed no signs of missing his Houston haunts, maybe because business took him back and forth to Houston enough to satisfy his carnal urges. Susan was none the wiser, and went about her new life, her new world with gusto and glee. After all, this was the epitome of their dream. This is what they were striving for: the success, the prestige, the wealth, and the life they had worked so hard together to achieve. They had climbed the mountain and all looked well and seemed like it was going to be well indeed.

Then one day Susan noticed that Jeff's hair was starting to fall out. Then several months later, some dry, scaly splotches began to appear on the bridge of his nose that would not go away. And then came a dry cough that didn't go away, either. It was constant, unproductive and unnatural. Jeff and Susan knew in their heart of hearts what was going on but did not talk about it. Words couldn't capture the depth of emotion they were feeling. As the symptoms mounted, the 300-pound elephant in the middle of the room that nobody was acknowledging began to take shape. Things soon began to take a decided turn for the worse with Jeff. Susan's new found physical, mental and spiritual strength were going to come in handy in the days and months ahead, because as Jeffrey's health began to spiral downward, her time of respite, peace, hope and rejuvenation in Boca began to serve her and Jeffrey very well in the fight to save his life. She blossomed in the chaos.

He came down with a terrible bout of pneumonia and they found out that Jeffrey had come down with the virus. He had been stricken with AIDS and things did not look promising at all. As Jeffrey got sicker and weaker, Susan got stronger for the both of them. Her sublimation, training, and dedication to helping Jeff get well reflected a paragon of strength and resolve. This struggle drew them even closer than ever before. She was determined to follow the voice she had been hearing in her head since that fateful day back in 1981 telling her to stay, because he will need her more than ever in the years to come. It was the reason that she had silently but loudly renewed her commitment then to her vow to stay together "**till death do them part.**" And death may have come knocking, but the door was not open yet to let him in. And, she was not going to be the one to let it in, so help her God.

Jeff rallied with Susan's steady and steadfast care. He continued making the rounds in his successful practice, making appearances, giving speeches with Susan at his side, but his health was clearly and rapidly deteriorating by now. Finally, he was bedridden. It looked like his last stand,

but Susan appeared to be up for the challenge. She waged a long and valiant struggle, 24/7, night and day, and he was wasting away before her very eyes. From time to time she crawled into the bed and they held each other, often crying softly into the night. She prayed out loud and tried mightily to will him back to health, but to no avail. Finally, Jeff told her that he couldn't go on any longer. She protested, argued, pleaded, and implored, "fight, Jeff, fight! Don't leave me! Please don't leave me...us..."

IT HAD TO HAPPEN

Jeff props himself up and takes a long, deep, soulful look at Susan. Their fate was sealed in that one moment. His eyes say it all. "I'm sorry, I just can't do this anymore... I'm done... I'm out of here, my dear... this is it." Susan gets up abruptly, walks across the room, picks up the phone and dials Hospice, with tears dripping down her face, onto the phone and down to the floor. Then suddenly, she slams the phone down angrily, and walks back across the room to Jeffrey. "Not so fast, Buster," Susan says as she climbs into bed with him yet again. She looks deeply into his eyes and embraces him tightly. Giving him a deep, soulful kiss and hugging him tightly like she had so many, many times before, his eyes close. Then she closes her eyes just as he opens his again.

Susan pleads, "Jeffrey, please don't leave me. I'm scared." Jeffrey says, "Don't be scared, you'll be fine. That's what you always said to me, remember?" Susan replies, "Yes, of course, and if you had come out of the closet sooner you would have done so much better. You would have been happier. And, I would have loved you anyway, you know that. I already did and look, everyone you cared about still accepted and embraced you. You cheated yourself, and us, and look, it's killing you." Jeffrey says, "Well, there, I'm dying! What difference does it make to them now? Doesn't matter..."

Susan cries, "Stop it! Your secret life is what ruined everything." Jeffrey retorts, "No, that secret, my secret, was your secret, too! It was our secret and our secret was the glue, don't you see, Bee? It was our bond. And don't you see, you kept saying don't be afraid, but maybe if I wasn't afraid, I would have come out and jeopardized everything, my reputation, our life of luxury... we had a lot to lose... everything, if my business went down."

Susan says, "I think people loved and respected you so much it would not have made a difference one bit." Jeffrey says, "Easy for you to say, Bee, but I didn't want to chance that. To do that to you when I didn't have to, not when you have stood by me through thick and thin with a love I could never replace. You are my best friend. Why would I do that to you, just because you kept telling me to? I don't think so... Thank God I was afraid. Who knows, if I had come out and business didn't go down, who is to say I would not have done something foolish and stupid, like wandering off the reservation for good."

Susan says, "You wouldn't dare!"

Jeffrey says, "Well I did, a few times."

Susan says, "But you always came back." Jeffrey says, "Who knows? Bee, I would rather have been afraid and kept our secret until it was no longer possible knowing that that would be a way to be sure we'd stay together forever, **until death do us part**. Bee, it's ok to be afraid, sometimes. But there comes a time when you have to find the courage to face your fate. Your love has helped me find mine, even if it was only at the last minute. Maybe I had nothing to fear, and you did. Maybe not, who knows? But I do know this, in my own twisted way, I did what I thought would keep us together. And our secret did keep us together."

Susan says, "Oh my God!"

Jeff says, "I did what I felt was right for me, and for us. You're going to be okay, don't be afraid. God's going to protect you because you have loved someone with all your heart and soul and that kind of love will carry you along the way. Even death cannot kill our love, nothing will..."

Jeffrey's eyes close. Susan's eyes open.

Their family and friends are standing there silently, looking on, holding each other's hands.

Dr. Jeffrey A. Mintz succumbs to AIDS on August 17, 1994 at the age of 47 with Susan at his side.

THE END