

Stepping Out in Faith: One Woman's Journey of Resilience

"God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged."

- **Hebrews 6:18**

It was a cold evening in January 2019 when everything changed for me in an instant. I was standing in between the TV stand and the sliding closet doors in a small room in Richmond, California. When the bedroom door of my attackers slammed shut, my body responded as if a light switch was being turned on in a dark room. This was my last hope to escape.

So, I started scanning the room for only my most important items. That's all that would fit into the small backpack that I was about to carry with me out the door, as I left this house one last time. Just a few minutes earlier my abusers told me they were going to take a nap. That wasn't unusual for them, but when they said it that day, I decided to leave.

I wrote a note as if I was coming back—*I am going to the library*—but in the back of my mind, I knew I would never return. I left the note on the dining room table, and kept telling myself, *This is your last chance to escape with your body intact.*

It was difficult to walk. From my waist down to the bottoms of my feet, I was slightly numb from the physical abuse from the night before. I used my hands to

pull each leg forward, moving slowly around the room. I was also still a little loopy from the opiates that were given to me in my coffee cup. But I was able to gather my most important items one by one: my ID, \$15.00, a credit card, and my EBT card. Slowly turning the doorknob so I wouldn't wake up my abusers asleep in the next room, I opened the door and quietly left. **Freedom.** I turned right towards the bus stop and never even glanced back to take one last look at the house where I had been held captive for six months by my mom and grandmother.

The first night out, I ended up in Berkeley, California, an hour-long bus ride away from where I'd been. I didn't have anywhere to sleep, so I spent the night in the doorway of a Vietnamese restaurant, lying across the doorframe with my hoodie pulled over my head. The next day, I made it to an emergency shelter for human trafficking and domestic violence survivors near San Jose. The shelter felt like I was back at my abusers' house. I was trapped. In total, I was there for seven months. I wasn't able to take legal action, or even find opportunities for employment. I wasn't able to move forward.

In September, they told me I had to find a new place to live. I had three days to pack up my things and find somewhere to stay. I remember sitting at the dining room table one morning, thinking hard about what to do. First, I called the 1-800-human trafficking number to find programs that specialized in recovery for human trafficking survivors. As soon as I got some references, I started dialing the

numbers right away—around six to seven places in all, including a San Diego number. San Diego was far—and I had never been there—but none of the other shelters had any space. It was my last hope, so I gave it a try.

I took a deep breath before moving forward with the call. I remember thinking, *It's 3:30 PM on a Friday, no one is going to answer my call.* But I called the number anyway—I had nothing to lose. On the third ring, a woman answered the phone.

“Hello! This is GenerateHope; Susan speaking.”

“Hello, Susan? My name is Nala. I'd like to know a little bit more about your program.” My heart was pounding so loud I thought she could hear it through the phone.

Susan told me about Generate Hope—or GH, as I would come to call it. She asked me some questions to determine if I would be a good fit for the program, and told me she would call me on Monday to let me know if I was in.

When Monday rolled around, I was sitting in my bedroom at the shelter, looking at the floor and wondering what my next move would be. Pondering what Plan A, B, or C could look like, I took in a deep breath and sighed. Then, my cell phone rang.

“Hello?”

When I realized who it was, I cleared my voice and said, “Hi Susan. How are you doing today?”

“Pack your bags, Nala. You are coming to San Diego.”

I felt like a balloon being poked with a needle so the air can seep out slowly. My body sunk onto the floor and tears started to flow down my face. Gathering up energy to speak, I simply said, “Thank you.”

I continued to cry softly as she laid out the details about what I needed to bring with me. I would leave out of San Jose Airport on Saturday, but that was all the information she had at the time. She did not know the flight number or the time that I would leave. As soon as I hung up from the phone call, I kicked into high gear and started to prepare.

On Thursday night, I texted Susan to see if she had any updates. She responded, *not yet*. My heart dropped. I said to myself *ok calm down* and continued to pack my bags. The next day, I woke up in good spirits. My energy began to change—I was feeling encouraged.

Around 1:30 PM, my cell phone rang. I ran to pick it up - It was Susan with the flight information. I scrambled to find a pen and a piece of paper. She gave me a specific address for the part of the airport where smaller planes take off and land. I would be leaving on a private plane no later than 12:30 PM on Saturday. She also told me what she would be wearing. I hung up the phone with a sigh of relief.

Friday night seemed to be the longest night ever. I did not sleep, I tossed and turned all night, my thoughts racing. It felt like cracking an egg open before you scramble it. *Am I walking into the same situation? Will my abusers find me? Is she working with them? Is something going to go wrong? Will I miss my flight? Maybe she won't show up?*

Next thing I knew, my alarm was going off. My head was pounding hard and my ears were ringing.

What a way to start my day!

The Uber driver arrived around 11:15 AM. I loaded my luggage in the car and we were off to the airport. On the ride there, I asked him, "Can you tell me exactly where you're taking me?"

He responded with a different address than the one I had been given.

At this point I was completely paralyzed with anxiety. I thought to myself, *I knew it. I knew it was too good to be true. I'm not going to make it on time to meet Susan.* The Uber driver dropped me off, but I had no idea where I was. Plus, my phone was dying. That's when I started pacing back and forth.

I called Susan but she didn't pick up. Thankfully, she called me back a few minutes later. I explained to her what had happened. "I don't know how to get to you," I told her.

"Calm down, relax," she said. "I will find you, no matter how long it takes."

I went into the waiting area and sat down to collect my thoughts. My body started to fill with dread, endless doubts, and heaviness. I shook my head thinking, *No, I'm not going to go down that road. Let me just take a deep breath and wait.*

Suddenly, I saw a woman wearing a black baseball cap with a red heart on it—exactly what Susan had said she would be wearing. She told me that's how I could recognize her. That made me feel safe. No one had ever come through for me other than my grandmother, and now, Susan.

Susan rescued me from daily torment. There were no differences in being with my abusers in Richmond or at the shelter in San Jose. In both cases, there was heavy oppression. In both cases, I couldn't leave. Not only that, but for more than a decade, I hadn't known anybody I could trust. To see someone actually keep their word was a sign of hope; it's something that I hadn't felt in years. When she walked through the door, I started to sob uncontrollably. I was only able to catch my breath when Susan hugged me.

We grabbed my luggage and left the building, headed towards the private plane that would take us to San Diego. It was hot, sunny, and dry outside. I had to squint because of the way the sun bounced off the buildings, but I could see a small plane, just 15 steps away from the exit. There was a woman standing next to the plane with a smile on her face. Susan introduced the woman to me as the pilot. I was shocked. She was around my height—five feet even—and I couldn't believe she would be the one flying the plane. But her face was glowing, and I knew I could trust her.

I don't like flying and I'm afraid of heights, but none of that mattered. We got ready for takeoff and buckled our seatbelts. When we started to move forward, Susan looked at me to see if I was okay. I nodded and said, "Okay, here we go."

As we started to take off, I could hear the wheels lock underneath the plane. We soared in the air with no turbulence, and the higher we got, the more free I felt. I was going to another place where hope was possible.