

DARING TO BELIEVE

A Memoir of a Living Kidney Donor

AMY GRAY-CUNNINGHAM

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Dedication

I dedicate this book to all the living kidney donors—past, present, and future. And to the families of the donors who experience this miracle with them.

And, to all those who have dared to believe in the impossible. Maybe you didn't donate a kidney, but perhaps God led you to build a school. Or, create a much-needed water supply in a foreign country. Or, build a homeless shelter. Or, take food to the elderly. Or, smile at the person next to you on the bus who thought about suicide but decided against it because you saw and acknowledged him.

Whatever you've been led to do, thank you for listening to your inner calling and daring to believe it was possible!

May your blessings be plentiful!

Acknowledgments

First, last, and always, I want to acknowledge and thank the Source of Everything—God. This journey we've been on has been incredible, and I look forward to experiencing many more miracles in this lifetime and possibly others. I will love You forever and always.

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To Alex, my first-born—my beautiful son. You came into my life just when I needed you the most. The moment I looked into your angelic blue eyes, I couldn't imagine loving anyone as much as I loved you. You've grown into a man a mother is proud to call her son. Thank you for choosing me to be your mom. It's one of my greatest blessings. I will love you forever and always.

To my second (bonus) son, Chase. Even though I didn't give birth

to you, I've always considered you my son in every way. I was blessed the day you and your father came into my life, and it's been a pleasure watching you grow into a loving man. I will love you forever and always.

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And to another special friend, Jessica Magnum. You always believed in me, even from the moment your dog "introduced" us on a walk, and I announced, "I'm writing a book!" You opened my eyes and challenged me to look beyond the obvious and always dare to believe. Thank you, and I will love you forever and always.

My transplant team at Carolinas Medical Center and the all the nurses on the transplant floor—you have my gratitude and appreciation for all that you did to make this experience amazing for me. Thank you!

There have been so many people who have allowed this book to become a reality. You know who you are—thank you and God bless!

Forward

My family and I had just finished dinner when I received a call from my sister, Jennifer Scoggins. She told me that I needed to call a young lady, whom I didn't know. I was shocked and elated as Amy announced to me she was my perfect match for a kidney transplant and that she wanted to give me the precious gift of life.

Diagnosed with Polycystic Kidney Disease (PKD) in 2000, I displayed no symptoms of the disease. In fact, I had gone to the doctor for a completely unrelated issue. In 2009, I was placed on dialysis, and subsequently, the transplant list.

My life and that of my family drastically changed as I began peritoneal dialysis. At night, I attached myself to a machine, and through a tube in my stomach it delivered clean fluid and then drained the waste from my body—essentially acting as an artificial kidney.

Within a year, peritoneal dialysis quit working for my body. I was placed on hemodialysis, and three times a week, I went to a dialysis clinic, which is when my health began to deteriorate.

Jennifer took to Facebook in hopes of finding a donor for me. It worked—Amy found me!

Amy's story is a testament to a life of redemption, faith, and triumph. Her continued commitment to the National Kidney Foundation reflects her character to make a difference.

Miracles do happen—Amy's book is the formula of such a miracle. Through the grace of God, and Amy's courage to believe, she changed the life of a stranger forever.

David Ensley
Amy's Kidney Donation Recipient

Forward

Unless you are a first responder, a practitioner of medicine, or a member of the military, you have probably never had occasion to say, “I saved someone’s life today.”

This book presents a captivating story where one woman, when given the opportunity to save a life with a living kidney donation, said “Yes!” Told with an endearing sincerity that will both entertain and inform you, Amy doesn’t pull any punches about the process of saving a life in this way.

There are lots of factors to consider when making the decision to become a donor. She will capture your heart as she details the adventure and the many unique, intrinsic benefits of choosing to donate life to another human being.

The need for organ donors continues to be outpaced by growing demand. Data from the Organ Procurement and Transplant Network and the US Renal Data System indicate that as of January 2016, there were 121,678 people waiting for organ transplants in the US, and of those, 100,791 were waiting for kidney transplants. On average, over 36,000 people are added to the waitlist each year, and as another point of reference, 17,107 kidney transplants took place in the US in 2014. To further dial

up the urgency, 13 people die each day while waiting to receive a kidney transplant.

If you're considering becoming a living donor, or would just like to learn more about organ donation in general, you can find a wide range of resources on the websites for the National Kidney Foundation (www.kidney.org/transplantation), Donate Life America (www.donatelife.net), the Organ Procurement & Transplantation Network (optn.transplant.hrsa.gov or www.organdonor.gov), or the United Network for Organ Sharing (www.unos.org).

Rob Hayden
Executive Director
National Kidney Foundation of the Carolinas

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

“I have been all things unholy; if God can work through me, he can work through anyone.” —St. Francis of Assisi

THE GROOM AND THE BEST MAN took their places at the front of the hall, and the DJ queued the music. All eyes darted to the back of the room. Dressed in an off-white lace gown with flowers in her hair, Mallory appeared with her father by her side. He wore a smile which lit up his face—a moment forever etched in my mind.

The room had been decorated just as in Mallory’s childhood dreams. The lights were dimmed, and a sweet fragrance of roses

perfumed the air. A spray of white flowers adorned the wedding arch where the couple would speak their vows and cement their life-long commitment with a kiss. But most important of all, the room overflowed with family and friends who came to witness the intimate joining of two precious souls.

Mallory glided by me on the arm of her father looking like a graceful swan streaming through the water. Tears flooded my eyes as I drank in the moment. Mallory's father—tall, healthy, and full of life—beamed with love and admiration for the little girl who had captured his heart many years ago.

Proudly, David Ensley presented his beloved daughter's hand in marriage to the second man she'd ever loved. For both David and Mallory, however, this day proved much more special than simply a happy dad offering his daughter's hand in marriage. For all of us, in fact, it was about savoring a joyful story that could've had a different ending, but thankfully didn't, because of those who dared to believe.

When our new bride, Mallory, was a teenager, her father, David, had been diagnosed with polycystic kidney disease, or PKD, which eventually put him in renal failure. Her wedding day most likely wouldn't have included her father, except that her Aunt Jennifer, desperate for a miracle, had courageously turned to social media.

Jennifer Ensley Scoggins had created a Facebook page, Looking for a Kidney for My Brother David, in hopes of finding a living donor. Neither Jennifer nor their older brother, Randy,

were eligible donors, and other family members were not a match. But Jennifer never gave up hope. She believed God would provide a miracle—an angel to help her brother.

Our connection began when Chuck, my husband, casually read Jennifer’s Facebook page aloud to me one evening. Something deep within me stirred and with all my heart, I replied, “I hope someone steps up to help him.”

My life then took a dramatic 180-degree turn when I heard—from out of nowhere—“*Amy, that person will be you!*”

I had been asking God to use me for His purpose. However, I never thought He’d ask me to do something so outrageous.

On July 6, 2011, I donated a life-saving kidney to David Ensley. It is this fantastic journey that I share with you now.

As an organ donor, I became a perfect match—a 1-in-20 million to be exact—to this man I didn’t even know. Our body types were such a close match that we could have been siblings. As a result, David now requires only a small amount of anti-rejection medication to keep his body from rejecting the new kidney I donated.

I initially decided to write this book to educate people about kidney donation and the process I went through. At the time of my surgery, there weren’t many books written about the procedure, and I just love books! The ones I found were clinical and boring. I wanted to write about my personal journey with the

intent of possibly inspiring others to consider becoming living donors, as well.

The book, however, has evolved into something much more than a story about a kidney donation. It has become a testimonial to daring to believe in the impossible and watching for the synchronicities in life leading you to your divine purpose.

Daring to Believe is an inspiring love story. But most importantly, it's about my ever-growing love affair with God—or “Papa,” as I call Him—and discovering that what I've been searching for my entire life was within me all along.

God, Allah, Tao, Source, Adoni, Papa—it doesn't matter how you refer to the Supreme Being of the Universe. God is not a thing, or a place, or a concept. It's the breath within each of us that connects us to the All and to one another.

God is accessible in everyone at any time. You'll find Him in the vagrant on the street or the CEO in the corner office. You'll recognize Him in the act of holding the door for the person behind you or the hug you give a friend. You may or may not find Him in a church or a synagogue or a mosque or a bar, but you will notice Him in the people who frequent those places.

I grew up as a Christian, and you'll find many references to the Christian way of life throughout this book. But I beg you, whether you are Christian or a non-Christian—no matter what your thoughts are about that aspect of your life, please continue reading!

My prayer is that this book touches people across all divides and religions. God is all-encompassing no matter the name He's called!

May you be inspired and Dare to Believe.

CHAPTER TWO

"There's nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come."—Victor Hugo

IT WAS THREE-THIRTY ON THE MORNING of July 6, 2011. The alarm shrilled. I had been staring at the ceiling for hours, as if dreaming with my eyes wide-open. I reached over to silence the noise, and a wide grin spread across my face.

Today was the day I'd been anticipating for months. All the testing, questions, and endless conversations had led to this moment. Today, I would donate my kidney to David Ensley, a man who, before this decision, I had never met. Today, God would use me for His miracle. Today, we were saving a life—David Ensley's life.

I hopped out of bed and scrambled to the bathroom to brush my teeth. I wasn't allowed to eat breakfast or even enjoy my

beloved morning coffee, but I would, at least, have fresh breath and clean teeth.

I yelled to my motionless husband, Chuck, “Honey, let’s get going. Out of bed!”

He mumbled, “I’m getting up,” and tried to pull the blankets back over this head.

“Now,” I commanded. How could he even think of sleeping in today? I wondered, shaking my head in disbelief.

“I’m up. I’m up,” he said kicking off the blankets as his feet hit the floor.

“Good,” I muttered, “I don’t want to be late.” Although if we were late for anything, it usually wasn’t because of Chuck. He had an annoying habit of always being 10 minutes early for everything. But today I must be early.

I pulled on blue striped shorts and a white cotton T-shirt I had laid out the night before. I wanted casual and comfortable. Remembering instructions not to bring anything valuable, I placed my wedding rings in the top drawer of my jewelry box for safe keeping. I hadn’t removed these rings since our wedding day, two years before.

Although, Chuck and I had only married two years earlier on September 26, 2009, our love story began twenty years before as high school sweethearts. As my first love, I can still remember the first time I laid eyes on him.

My brother, James, and I were walking to the store when this

old, dirty, brown Mustang pulled up beside us. Chuck, with a tan arm hanging out the window, asked if we needed a ride. We locked eyes, and as he smiled, the rest of the world vanished. He was beautiful. I blushed, and the air crackled with electricity around me.

I sat in the back seat, and Chuck positioned the rearview mirror to glance at me from time to time, as he and my brother talked. I didn't dare say anything for fear of words such as, "You're beautiful. I love you. We'd make gorgeous babies," escaping from my mouth.

Chuck dropped us off at the store and asked if he could wait to drive us home. James began to say, "No..." but I quickly interrupted, "Yes. Thank you." He drove us home and we saw each other every day after that for the next two years.

I always knew we would marry one day, and often told him, even back then. I just never thought it would take a lifetime to get him down the aisle.

Neither one of us really remembers why we broke up in high school, but I have a suspicion it had something to do with the blonde girl I saw him with at a restaurant, not long afterward.

He and I reconnected on Facebook twenty years later through the East Mecklenburg High School Twenty-Year Reunion page for the class of 1989. I sent him a friend request.

When we met again, it was as if we had never separated. I called to ask him to help a friend of mine who had to move

out of the house she and her husband shared. Chuck dropped everything—no questions asked. Our first “date” in over twenty years, and he moved furniture which wasn't even mine.

We were older now, with more wrinkles and heavier baggage, but he still had those luscious lips I loved to devour, and deep, brown eyes which held my attention for hours.

Over the years, many points of intersection had occurred in our lives, as though the universe had been pulling strings to keep us close until we were ready to connect.

For several years, we both worked in the same bank building in uptown. We were on separate floors and employed by different companies, but somehow, we never ran into each other on the elevators or even in the coffee shop on the main level. We also worked in adjacent buildings in another local complex, and again, never bumped into each other even in the parking lot.

But probably the biggest surprise of all was when we discovered we lived only a few hundred feet from each other. From my garage, I had an excellent view of Chuck's patio, though I didn't know it was his.

Also, we each had a son from previous relationships. The boys knew each other from junior high school and rode the same bus. They even looked similar—tall, with blonde hair and blue eyes, and both were born in June but one year apart.

God's ways are miraculous to me. He knew when Chuck and I were dating in high school that we were perfect for each other. We

just needed more refining before He brought us back together. He kept our lives parallel throughout the years, no matter what we were experiencing, as if to keep us forever connected.

Sometimes I wondered if Chuck and I hadn't reconnected, would I have met David or heard about his story? Chuck had been long-time friends with David's sister, Jennifer, and his older brother, Randy. Because of their friendships, I found out about David's need for a kidney.

And now, here we are—driving to the hospital today because I was David's 1-in-20 million miracle—his perfect match.

CHAPTER THREE

"God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him."—1 John 4:16

WE DROVE PEACEFULLY, SURROUNDED BY the deepest quiet I've ever known. The roads were deserted; not too many people are out at 4:30 in the morning. The sun would rise soon with its colors of lavender and radiant amber, but I wouldn't see its beauty on this particular morning.

I looked at Chuck, and he reached over to caress my hand, allowing his fingers to linger for a moment, his faced etched with worry. I could tell he preferred to reflect on his own thoughts in silence, leaving me to stare out into the silky blackness of the early morning.

My mind looped back to how this very unusual experience all began. It had been a normal day, like any other. I had worked and visited with my brother and his family, who lived behind us

in another town home. I had cooked dinner—just an everyday normal routine. But that day had altered my life forever.

As I cleaned the kitchen, Chuck had called to me from the living room.

“Honey, do you remember Jennifer Ensley from high school?”

I thought about it for a second and replied, “Nope. Doesn’t ring a bell. Should I?”

“We all went to East Mecklenburg together,” he replied, as though it was supposed to make a difference to me. I peered from the kitchen and shook my head.

“Well, I’m sure you’d remember her if you ever saw her again. Randy, her brother, got me the job at the Speedway as a security guard.”

“Oh, yeah!” I still didn’t remember her or her brother, but I did remember the job. I hated it because Chuck wasn’t around for my birthday. The Coca-Cola 600 was the second week in May along with my birthday.

“What does Jennifer Ensley have to do with anything?” I asked.

“I’m looking at a Facebook page she started called, ‘Looking for a Kidney for My Brother David,’” he said. Interesting, I thought.

Chuck continued on, telling me that David, the middle child in that family, had married his high school sweetheart, Susanne.

They had two girls, Mallory, who was in nursing school, and Leslie, a senior in high school.

Diagnosed with polycystic kidney disease in 2000, David was now in complete renal failure and on dialysis but would die if he didn't receive a kidney transplant soon. This was the reason Jennifer had created the Facebook page.

I pondered the story. My heart broke for those girls and his wife. I lost my father several years back, and I knew firsthand the pain of losing a parent. I would give anything to have my dad back.

"Wow," I said. "How sad. I hope someone steps up to help him."

Then I heard it. It was as audible as if I were talking with someone right in front of me. The Voice said, "Amy, that person will be you." An intense tingling sensation ran down my spine and burned within my soul. Instantaneously, I knew I would be David's donor.

I remember looking around the kitchen and screaming in my mind, "Um, excuse me? WHAT did you say? Where did that Voice come from?" I wondered.

I have heard about people hearing things from God, but never considered it would happen to me, much less in the middle of cleaning up the kitchen after dinner.

Although I have "felt" things before that I knew in my heart were from God, I'd never actually heard Him, as if in conversation.

The Voice didn't sound as I imagined "His" voice would sound—if, in fact, He would have an actual voice. It sounded like my tone and inflection. Yet, somehow, I knew God had spoken to me.

I was young in my faith, but my trust in God was growing. I had recently been praying, asking God to use me for His purpose, but donating a body part, I thought, that was too much to ask. Wasn't it?

Instead of telling Chuck, or anyone, I decided not to share my new revelation, at least not yet. I kept quiet, afraid Chuck would think I was kind of crazy and would want to send me to the proverbial ditch he often jokes with me about. Besides, I wasn't too sure about what had just happened, myself.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Give light and the darkness will disappear itself."

—Desiderius Erasmus

WE ARRIVED AT THE HOSPITAL that morning at 4:45 a.m. and checked in at the front desk. The receptionist, a small, older lady with grayish hair, pointed to a small room off to the right and asked us to wait there. "Someone will be down to escort you to the pre-op waiting room soon," she said.

As directed, Chuck and I moved into the small room. The room was completely barren except for a few cushioned blue chairs lining the walls and one TV hanging on the wall in the corner. The local news station had just started broadcasting the morning's news—except the TV had no sound, just words scrolling on the bottom of the screen.

Since we were the only people there, we had our choice of where to sit. Chuck picked a seat against the wall of windows,

and I took the one beside him. I turned and looked out into the lightless morning. Doctors and nurses meandered in from the parking deck, and a janitor mopped the entrance floor. Then, he laid out the day's welcome mat. Still quiet, the hospital slowly began awakening from its dreams.

As we waited to hear my name called, I wondered if David had arrived yet. Of course, he had, I thought. David's always early for everything. Like Chuck, they both lived by the motto, "If I'm not at least fifteen minutes early, then, I'm late!" Personally, as long as I wasn't more than fifteen minutes late, than I considered myself on time—the perfect catalyst for a few annoying arguments between me and Chuck.

I smiled as I remembered the first time I had spoken with David. Almost immediately, we felt a sense of familiarity and comfort between us. It was as if we had known each other our entire lives.

I had passed all the other tests and only the MRI remained which determined the kidney the doctors would use. But, since the test was expensive, they wanted to know David's opinion before moving any further.

Chuck had found the home number for Jennifer, David's sister, online, and called her. Sean, her husband, answered the phone. Chuck explained he'd known Jennifer from high school, and he had some important news he needed to tell her; could he please speak with her? Uneasy about a strange man calling his wife, Sean asked, "Can I tell her what this is about?"

“It’s about David,” and then, Chuck gave Sean our home number and hung up.

Jennifer called Chuck back within twenty minutes. He told Jennifer about how I had felt called to get tested as David’s donor and as it turned out we were a match. The doctors told us to find out if David had any objections about moving forward with me.

“Sweet Jesus, no, he doesn’t!” Jennifer exclaimed.

Chuck hung up the phone, not giving me a chance to talk. I gave Chuck an inquisitive look and he responded, “Jennifer will call David and have him call right back.”

About thirty minutes later, the phone rang a second time. Chuck answered and then handed me the phone. As I walked out onto our patio I said, “Hello.”

CHAPTER FIVE

"All the darkness in the world can not extinguish the light of one candle." — St. Francis of Assisi

AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN MAN IN GREEN scrubs with a big, toothy grin appeared in the doorway of the waiting room. "Amy Gray-Cunningham?" I looked at him and signaled it was me. Here we go, I thought.

He introduced himself as Michael and told me he would escort me to the pre-op waiting room. Then he grabbed my wrist to read the hospital bracelet I received the week before at my pre-op appointment and asked my name and date of birth. It struck me as funny that I had to answer the question when it was clearly printed on the bracelet. But I gave it anyway, "Amy Gray-Cunningham and May 13, 1970."

Michael must have read my mind because his voice contained a hint of humor when he said, "You better get used to answering

that question. You'll be asked it every time a nurse or doctor enters the room."

I smiled back and shrugged, "No problem. Just seems redundant is all."

"I know. Are you ready to go?"

"Without a doubt," I said.

Chuck grabbed my bag and we followed Michael down the corridor to the elevators behind the reception desk. As he pushed the button for the elevators, he said, "Once we get to the waiting room, you can have a seat until they're ready for you in pre-op."

I nodded. The elevator doors rattled opened.

Glancing at my husband with my overnight bag in his hand, his eyes glimmered with love. Smiling, I thought about the night I told him my desire to get tested as David's donor. Exasperated, he assumed I had finally lost it.

After Chuck told me about Jennifer's Facebook page, I couldn't get David's story and what I had heard out of my mind. Several times, I secretly logged into Chuck's Facebook account, so I could follow Jennifer's updates. After reading that David was O positive, I decided it was time to complete a donor application. I, too, was O positive.

Telling Chuck about my decision, however, was more complicated than I anticipated. At dinner, I finally found the nerve to tell him.

“Honey I’ve been thinking, and I want to get tested to see if I’m a match for David Ensley.”

Chuck looked up at me from his dinner plate and with a glaring eye, said, “You what?”

“I admit it’s crazy.”

“Crazy?” he interrupted.

Perturbed by his comment, I continued, “I feel I’m being led to do this. Besides, the chances I’m a match are slim. But I know it’s something I’m supposed to do.”

Dropping the fork to his plate, Chuck pushed back his chair and questioned, “And what makes you think this is something you’re SUPPOSED to do?”

I had already decided it was best not to tell him I heard God talking to me, telling me I was the one. Instead I said, “I haven’t been able to get his story out of my mind. It’s all I can think about. I even went on your Facebook page to follow Jennifer’s posts.”

Irritated, he said, “YOU DID WHAT?” annunciating each syllable.

“Oh, come on,” I replied, gulping my wine for courage. “You gave me your password, and it’s not like I haven’t done it in the past. I wanted to follow what Jennifer posted, but I didn’t want to “like” the page, yet. The most recent post said, David is O positive and, Chuck, I’m O positive. For me, it was a clear sign.”

“Who cares? It doesn’t mean you need to do this.”

“You said it yourself, if someone doesn’t step up, he could die. He has two daughters, and if I can help him dance with his daughters at their weddings, I want to. No, I need to do this. Besides, I’ve been researching kidney donation, and if for whatever reason I needed a kidney in the future, then, I move to the top of the donor list for a new one.”

“Well, just wonderful! But, what if one our boys needs a kidney? Have you thought about how you would feel if you weren’t able to give them one because you gave one to someone you don’t even know?” he asked.

I looked into Chuck’s eyes and grabbed his hand. I needed to make him understand. “I just have to believe and have faith God will provide for them. I can’t decide not to do this based on something which may or may not happen in the future. How selfish would I be?”

Chuck looked away—not because he didn’t have anything more to say. He just knew it would be pointless. The next day I called the Transplant Clinic to request an application.

The lady who answered the phone at the clinic had a soft, gentle voice: “And who would you like the application for?”

“David Ensley,” I replied.

“May I ask how you know Mr. Ensley?”

For a moment, I considered my reply because I wasn’t prepared to answer the question. What would she think if I told her David was a stranger? I decided to be honest and said, “David’s a high

school friend of my husband but I don't know him. Will it be a problem?"

"Oh, no," she replied, "I think it's wonderful you're willing to get tested. Not many people are as compassionate. It's just a question we have to ask."

At least she didn't think of me as crazy. She told me she would mail the packet immediately and I should receive it within the week. I said, "Thank you," and hung up the phone. Now all I had to do was wait.

I muttered a quick prayer, "*Papa, I've done as You've asked. Now it's in Your capable hands. Thank You.*"

Just as the lady from the clinic had promised, I received the application packet within a few days. Putting all the other mail under my arm, I attempted to open the packet while walking into the house.

I thumbed through the information when the front door opened and Maggie, our German Shepherd, barked with excitement. Assuming Chuck had come in, I yelled from the kitchen, "Hey, honey."

He came around the corner with Maggie at his heels and bent over to give me a quick kiss. "Hello! What's this?" he asked referring to the packet in my hands.

"It's the donor application," I said with a smile, as I held up the thick packet for him to see. "At a glance, I have a feeling it'll take me a while to answer everything. The questions seem very

detailed.” Feeling discouraged, I laid it on the counter and then turned and opened the refrigerator.

As he slipped his arms around my waist and nuzzled my neck, Chuck said, “Well, I haven’t changed my mind. I still don’t want you to do it, but I must admit, I’m proud of you for considering it.”

A much different response from the other night when I told him I was thinking about doing this, I mused.

“I love you,” I said patting his arms, still around my waist. “And, thank you.”

“You know,” he whispered in my ear, “If it meant I could save you from having to go through an unnecessary surgery, I would send in an application, but they would never approve me, not with diabetes.”

His words warmed me and made me feel safe in his arms. I turned to look at him and replied, “Thank you for wanting to protect me, but it’s in God’s hands, not ours. This is not something I have to do. It’s something I feel led to do. Does it make any sense?” I asked. I wished I could make him understand, but how could I, when I had a hard time comprehending it myself.

“Somewhat, I guess. But I still don’t like it,” he muttered.

“I know, and besides, I may not even get approved. They may take one look at my application and say it’s not happening. Now, let me get dinner ready. Maggie still needs to go for her walk.”

“OK,” he said, swatting my butt before grabbing the leash.