

TALES OF THE NEVER ALONE



BETH GUCKENBERGER

WARNING: THESE STORIES MAY CHANGE THE WAY YOU SEE THE WORLD



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Tales of the Not Forgotten

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Tales of the Ones Led Out

Tales of the Ones He Won't Let Go

Tales of the Never Alone

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BOOK and SAMPLER CONTENTS



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ABOUT THIS AUTHOR



*The LORD will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;
the LORD will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore.*

—Psalm 121:7, 8



INTRODUCTION

THE GUIDE




"The LORD will watch over your coming and going."

—Psalm 121:8



I have always loved the water. I grew up on a lake, and whether I am walking around water, diving into water, or throwing someone into it, water makes me feel at home. As I write this, our family is finishing up an international adoption of a twelve-year-old boy. He grew up in an urban, international setting, without access to a pool, let alone a lake or an ocean. Recently I was able to introduce him to the sea. At first he only wanted to get his ankles wet. The waves were intimidating—relentless and powerful. He asked questions like, “Do they ever stop?” “What makes some smaller and others huge?” “What lives under the water?” “Why is it salty?” They were all good questions, and regardless of his initial fear, he was driven by his curiosity (and my encouragement), and by the end of the first day, we were bodysurfing to shore.



During that process, as we inched each time a bit deeper into the water, he had to learn to trust me. He'd grab my arm, or listen when I said, "Here it comes!" He eventually felt comfortable going to a place he couldn't stand, trusting that the waves, his mother, and his growing abilities would bring him to the shore.

As I watched him get more confident, I made subtle spiritual observations. We talked about his understanding of God while waist-deep in the water. I told him Jesus walked on the water (we can take risks!), and our sins are thrown into the sea of forgetfulness (we don't need to live in the past!). We talked about how water once covered the whole earth (God is powerful!) and a man named Jonah lived three days under the sea (God calls us to follow him). We talked about how Jesus used water to baptize (we can identify with him!) and how he described himself as living water (we find refreshment in him!). There are so many ways God has used this remarkable element to teach us about himself.

I thought while out there in the waves about my own spiritual journey. Sometimes I get into the deep waters (feel overwhelmed, or lonely or afraid) and wonder, *Am I alone? Does Jesus see me?* When I have those questions, I have to remind myself of what is true and let my head guide my heart. That way, regardless of how I am feeling, the truth I can stand on is this: I am never alone. God is always with me.

When I put my kids to bed, I share with them these verses. When I am feeling scared of anything—a car coming too fast, a doctor's appointment, a conversation, an upcoming test, whatever—I read Psalm 121:

I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
 where does my help come from?
My help comes from the LORD,
 the Maker of heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot slip—
 he who watches over you will not slumber;
indeed, he who watches over Israel
 will neither slumber nor sleep.
The LORD watches over you—
 the LORD is your shade at your right hand;
the sun will not harm you by day,
 nor the moon by night.
The LORD will keep you from all harm—
 he will watch over your life;
the LORD will watch over your coming and going
 both now and forevermore.



I am learning to trust the Lord as my Captain (even when I am in waters over my head), as my Lifeguard (when I feel those waves relentlessly coming), and as my Guide (when I've lost the way home). He is there for me and is there for you, in all circumstances, all the time. No matter what happens, he will never leave.

Is that hard to believe? The people you will read about in the coming pages have at one time or another felt like they were alone. As they voiced their questions to God—*Do you see me? Do you care? Have you left me too?*—God did for them what he does best.

He reached out.

He came for them.

He listened.



I am going to introduce you to some pretty spectacular young men and women in the coming chapters. You are going to meet Daniela, a Mexican girl I have known since she was young. Dani suffered a medical tragedy and waited and watched as God listened to her cries—the ones she said out loud and the ones she only whispered. He came for her in some surprising ways.

You'll also hear the story of Gervens, a Haitian boy who is blind, and who stole my heart the first time I met him years ago. His surprising gift of music has lifted his spirit and given him a vision for his future. When I read his story, I marvel that what is important to us is important to God. He is the God of details.

It will be a joy to introduce you to my Nigerian friend Happy and the American middle schoolers who made her life their priority. It's inspiring to hear how far she's come, and it's inspiring to see what happens when people lay down their lives for others.

One of the most dramatic stories you'll read is Tanya's. I remember everything about where I was when I first met her and heard her story. I couldn't wait to put it on paper and share it with you. It's an unbelievable testimony of God's attention to detail and his plan for our lives.

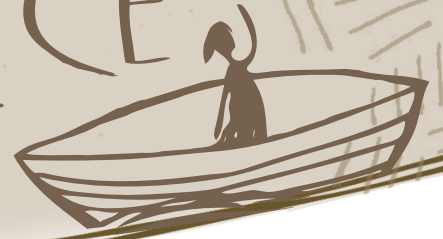
Finally, you'll meet Mario. I couldn't be prouder of him, working his way through college and growing through and from the tragedy surrounding his life. He took an enormous risk, and in reading his story, you'll be encouraged to do the same.

Regardless of who you are reading about and what they stir in you, I pray you'll be confident of this: God never leaves us alone. He is with you wherever you go.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'P. Kelly', located in the bottom right corner of the page.

Chapter 4

TANYA'S VOICE



I (Beth) sat spellbound in my seat. A young Ukrainian girl stood bravely on the stage and closed her eyes. Soon her voice filled the large Atlanta conference room, as she sang a song to Jesus with her whole heart. Blonde curls fell around her face, and her accent bore witness that this story we were seeing had not been unfolding in this country for very long. She finished singing and nodded her head to the audience. The applause was thunderous. I looked around the room and saw many people wiping away tears.


I wanted to know more about her, so I waited patiently in line for my turn to meet this remarkable young woman. Questions filled my mind. *Where is she from? How did she get here? What's her story?*





Finally I got my chance to find out more. “My name is Beth, and it’s a pleasure to meet you.” She smiled at me confidently, no doubt encouraged by the crowd’s reaction to her gift. “You were amazing. Thanks for singing to us tonight.” She thanked me in turn, and I continued, “I have been sharing for a while about the God who writes our stories. I can see a God-story in you, and I am dying to hear it. Would you be willing to share? Do you see him as the author of your story?”

“Oh, yes!” Her answer came swiftly. Then she giggled for a minute, hands covering her face. “How else can you explain . . . how should I call it? Well . . . all this.” Her hands spread wide—she gestured to the room, the stage, and back to a woman looking at me over her shoulder.



Encouraged by her response, I asked, “Will you tell me, slowly? How did it start? When did you know God was doing something extraordinary for you?”

Her eyes twinkled, and she broke out into a wide grin. “This is my favorite part, telling how God came for me . . .”

I pulled up a chair, and she started from the beginning.

Tanya was just a little girl when she lost her father—her *bat'ko*. She remembers him as hardworking and kind—working with her grandfather, who was a doctor. When Tanya was born, her *matir* said that her father had thrown rocks at the hospital window and brought them flowers. At that time in Ukraine, fathers were not allowed in the hospital to be with the mothers when they had their babies.



Bat'ko means “father.”
Matir means “mother.”

Ukrainian is a language with a very different alphabet from English. Ukrainian words in this story are written so you can have an idea of how the words might sound.




She had always been told that her father was happy to have a baby girl.

After losing him, Tanya's single mother cared for her as well as she could, for as long as she could. But several years later, Tanya's mother passed away as well, leaving the girl with few choices.

Life before this loss was marked by happy images—a carefree little girl playing with her cousins and climbing apple trees. Once she had climbed high in a tree and then fallen from a branch—landing so hard on her feet that she had fractured them. But she laughed as she told me about her injury. “I always know now when it's going to rain—my feet are better than a meteorologist.” She paused and looked down at the tips of her shiny black shoes. “It's just my little reminder that I sometimes go too far out on the branch.”

She was a little girl with a big spirit and a big heart—she loved being with people. When the closest people in her life were suddenly gone, her world was shattered. Her



Ukraine has a well-educated and culturally rich population, and is the largest state in Europe by area. However, recent political unrest has resulted in about 1.4 million people being displaced from their homes.

few things were packed up, and she moved to an orphanage, with an uncertain future ahead of her.

A few years passed. Tanya became settled into the routines of her new home. Sometimes she remembered glimpses of her life before, and she missed her family—the cousins she used to play with, and especially her mother’s face.



An apple tree in a misty Ukrainian field.

One day in the middle of a brutal Ukrainian winter, ice covered the ground and a big snow blanketed the country. Tanya and a friend stood looking out a frost-covered window in the room they shared with several others. Huge snowflakes fell before their eyes. Tanya remembered noticing how each one was different. As the girls watched the beautiful snow, they noticed three cars making their way slowly down the long lane to the orphanage—the cars seemed to creep along in an effort not to skate off the road.

The girls were immediately curious. Who was coming? What did they want? News spread fast around the orphanage as others witnessed the same scene. Everyone was asking questions. Visitors did not come often to the home, so to have three cars arrive all at once seemed a special event.




Andra sat in her Atlanta sunroom, soaking in the warmth of the rays. She stared out the window at the chilly, gray winter day. Though the year was quickly coming to an end, in her heart Andra felt so much was just beginning. God had been moving in her, bringing questions to her mind. The questions had come as she observed friends going through the adoption process. It was a familiar idea—adoption. Even as a child herself, she had dreamed of adopting a child in need of a family. To give a child a home—to share her heart and her family—it all seemed like such a good idea. The best idea.

Since her own family's roots came in part from Eastern Europe, her heart was naturally drawn to that area of the world. She started asking questions on her own: *Is it possible? How would we do it?* Then one day, sitting in the warmth of the sunroom again, she posed the question to her husband, "What would you think about the idea of adopting a child from Ukraine?"

Travis's eyes met his wife's. "I think . . . that's a great idea!"

The couple grew more excited as they began searching together for a child to welcome into their family.






Tanya and her friend heard the director greeting the guests as they climbed out of their cars. The strangers were shown into the front room. The two girls hid within earshot, trying to learn why the visitors had come. They certainly weren't the only children on this spy mission that day. But Tanya's heart thumped a little harder when she heard her name being called.

"Tanya, *pryyikhaty syudy.*"

She glanced at her friend in alarm. "Why do you think they are calling your name?" her friend whispered. "Who are they? What do they want?"

Tanya shrugged and raced away down the stairs. She didn't know any more than her friend did, but she wanted to find out.

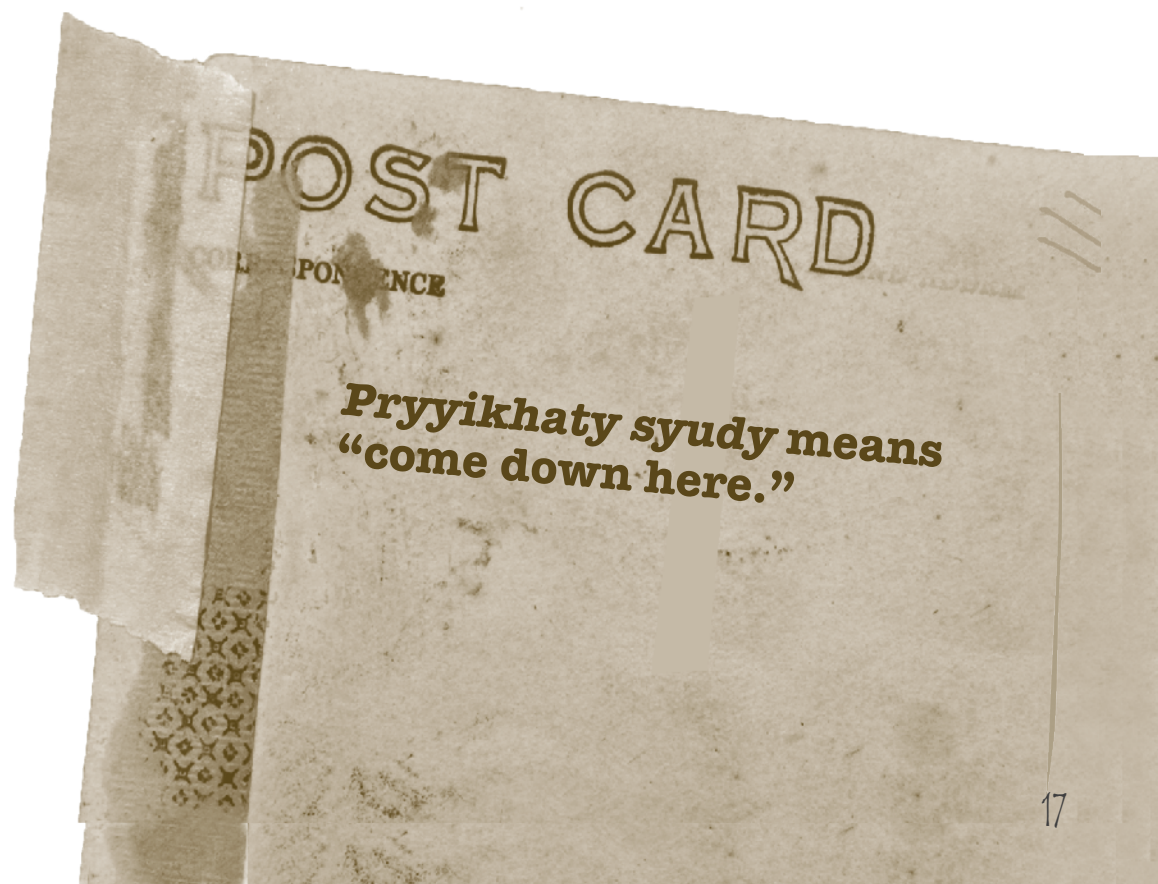
The director's voice bellowed, loud enough for everyone to hear, "Tanya, come meet our guests. They want to meet you and interview you."




Around 68% of children living in orphanages in Ukraine are considered "social orphans" — one or more parents are still alive, yet cannot care for the child or cannot be found. Social orphans usually cannot be adopted.

Interview me? For what? She couldn't imagine how they even knew about her, let alone what they could want with her.

One of the guests was speaking in a language Tanya didn't understand, but from the movies she had seen she knew enough to guess that it was English. Through a translator, the woman addressed Tanya. "We are here visiting, hoping to meet children who might be eligible (and interested) to go on a trip for a few weeks to the United States. Would you like to do something like that?"






Tanya just stared at the woman for a minute, trying to register what she was saying. Can you imagine? It was like a dream for her. This was the girl who liked to climb up tall trees. This was the girl whose dreams were far bigger than the story she was living out every day in this small Ukrainian orphanage. Did she want to go to the United States—to a place she had only seen in the movies and heard about in school?

"Tak!" Tanya nervously answered the rest of the visitors' questions, hoping she was saying what they wanted to hear.

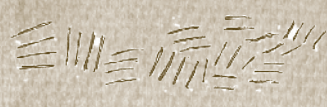
Nothing happened for a few months; then in the spring the director of the orphanage gathered several of the children together to announce that they had been chosen for the hosting program.





We'll be traveling to America in June! Tanya was so excited—at age fifteen, she was ready to have new experiences and meet new people. Life in the orphanage seemed monotonous—every day a repeat of the day before. A future life when she would be released from the orphanage was looming, and she had very little hope to hold onto about what that future looked like. She felt sure that the summer of 2012 was going to be an experience she would remember forever.

The departure date finally arrived, and Tanya eagerly boarded the plane with several of her friends from school. Her eyes widened as she painted this memory for me.



New Horizons for Children, Inc. (NHFC) is the largest, faith-based orphan hosting organization in the US. Twice a year—over Christmastime and in the summer—orphans, school-age children from Eastern Europe are flown to various locations throughout the United States to stay with Christian host families. The children normally stay for about four to five weeks. During that time, the host families help the children learn English and life skills, but most importantly, they provide an example of a healthy family and extend the love of Christ to children who often feel hopeless and unwanted. For more information about hosting or helping this Georgia-based organization, go to NHFC.org.



“Some of us were nervous because it was a new country, new people, and a different language. Forget all that—I was nervous about getting on that plane!” She managed to suppress her fear enough to walk onboard. They were on a nonstop flight from Kyiv (Kiev), Ukraine to New York City. There they would spend one night together before going their separate directions to their host families the next morning.

Tanya looked down at the ticket in her hand as she settled into her seat. *Atlanta, Georgia. I hope you are friendly!*

Later in that same summer, Andra and her husband also boarded a flight that would end up in a different country, where a foreign language was spoken. The woman felt the nerves tumbling in her stomach as she glanced at the itinerary in her hand: “Kyiv, Ukraine.”


After an uneventful flight, they arrived in the capital city of Ukraine and attended to the rest of their travel arrangements. They had a long trip ahead—both geographically and emotionally—as they journeyed to the region where an eleven-year-old girl was waiting for them.

They had traveled all this way from the United States to adopt the girl. However, they had been warned that this adoption could end up being particularly challenging due to some details about the orphanage where she lived. They were not afraid. They felt called to pursue the adoption and were determined to face the challenges head-on.

On the long flight to the States, Tanya was a curious observer of her fellow travelers. She noticed several Americans who seemed very kind. Someone spilled a drink near her seat, and several people piped up with voices of assurance: “It’s OK—don’t worry!”

Tanya was not used to that. “People didn’t talk to each other like that where I was from.” She hoped all the Americans she would meet would be as nice as those on the flight. Her mind turned again to wondering what her host family would be like.



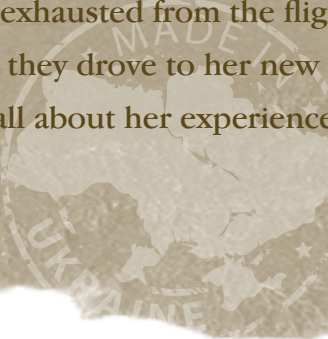


After what seemed like a hundred hours, the couple finally arrived at the orphanage. They were excited to meet their potential daughter face-to-face. But there was a problem. Through an interpreter they understood that forces out of the girl's control had made it impossible for her to go through with the adoption.

Travis and Andra were devastated. They asked questions and pushed for information, but in the end one thing was clear. They would be going home again. Without a daughter.

It was the worst news they could imagine hearing at that moment.


Tanya's host family picked her up the following day as scheduled, and they took her right away to a Russian grocery store. They had been learning what foods were typically eaten in Ukraine, and the host mother, Andrea, wanted Tanya to choose foods that would feel familiar to her. To Tanya it was yet another example of kindness, and she thought it was a good sign. Even though she was exhausted from the flight and all the excitement, she tried to remember every detail as they drove to her new home. She wanted to be able to tell her friends back in Ukraine all about her experiences once she returned there.



Among other outings, Tanya's host family took her shopping for new clothes that would suit the hot, humid summer days of Atlanta better. And Tanya quickly learned to use the computer to translate everything she wanted to say.

From Beth's Journal

Disappointment. That knot in your stomach that twists up when all your plans have come crashing down. You prayed, you listened, you followed—but now what? No one seeks to be disappointed, but I can look back and be amazed about the many times I've encountered God's overwhelming love when I've felt the most crushed. When my plans fall apart, I see how the path he has woven for me has never been broken. When what I've depended on crumbles, I can finally lay down on the solid truth that he is always there for me. God, I pray you help me to keep stretching and asking and trying to get to the places where I know I'm weak, and your love is so strong.



She felt an immediate connection with the young children in the family. It was easy to be with them and play with them. Tanya was happy and eager to learn about her new friends and what life was like in this city called Atlanta. So far, this hosting arrangement was turning out *exactly* as she had hoped.

But there was something else too—something working in Tanya’s heart. She had never really considered being adopted before. She knew some kids in her orphanage who really longed for it, but to her it just had never seemed to be a possibility, so she had put it out of her mind. Maybe it was because she still had memories of her own family, or maybe it was because she had an independent streak. Or maybe it was just because she knew older kids like her had very little chance of ever being taken in by a family. Who knows? Tanya herself wasn’t even sure. But for whatever reason, up until that time she had rejected the idea of being adopted.

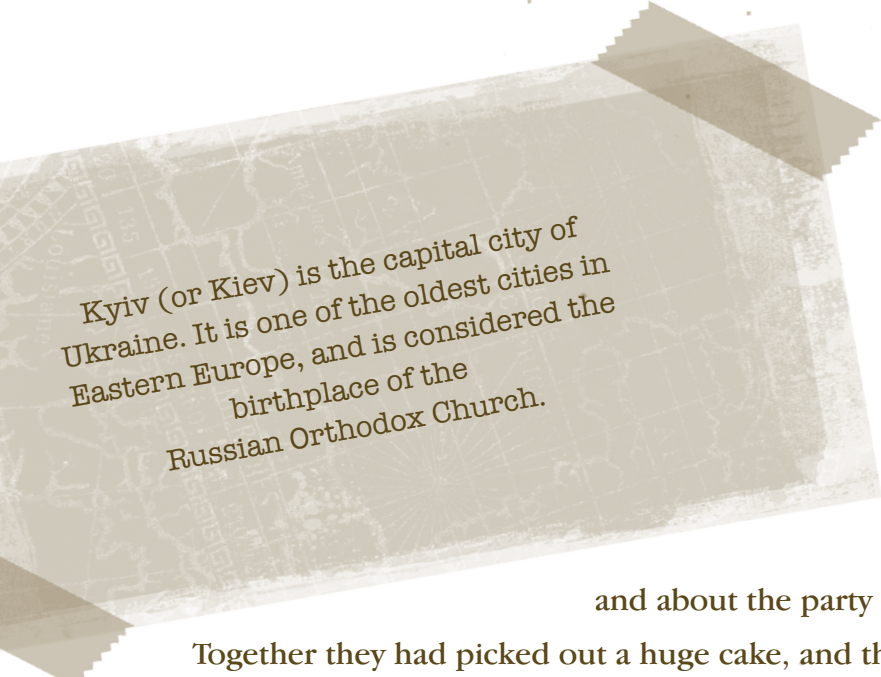

Now, sitting down with this family to eat dinner together, going shopping together, taking drives together—it all felt so right. So good. It felt like *dodomu*. And Tanya started wondering if there had been something more missing from her life than what she realized.



The husband and wife retraced their path back to the busy city of Kyiv. They had followed their heavenly Father to places they never even knew existed before, only to find the door closed. *What do we do now? Do we just go home?* It seemed impossible—to return home without a child. They had felt led to come, and led to adopt. They had so much they wanted to give to a child. But if they wanted to pursue another adoption, it would mean completely starting the process over.

With extremely heavy hearts they returned to their hotel in Kyiv. Andra sat on the edge of the bed and stared off into space, looking for answers that were not there. They both felt so confused and clueless as to what their next steps should be. Travis came and sat beside his wife, and they prayed together, asking God to show them what to do.





Kyiv (or Kiev) is the capital city of Ukraine. It is one of the oldest cities in Eastern Europe, and is considered the birthplace of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Tanya's sixteenth birthday fell on one of the last days of her visit in Atlanta. It was bittersweet. She was excited about being a year older, about getting presents,

and about the party the host family had planned for her.


Together they had picked out a huge cake, and the family had invited many people to celebrate her life. She had a lot to look forward to that day, and she definitely felt special. However, turning sixteen also marked another milestone for her—it was the time when she would no longer be eligible to be adopted. She would “age out” of the orphan care system and would be largely on her own soon after her return to Ukraine. Her hope for a permanent family would die on this day.

As she sat on her bed in this home that had become so familiar, and images of her time with this family flashed through her mind, she couldn't help feeling sad. *Being in a family wouldn't be such a bad idea after all*, she thought. *If only I had more time.*

Less than twenty-four hours after their return from the orphanage where their adoption had failed, Andra's phone began to be inundated with messages from several friends in the States. The messages all said the same thing: "There is a lovely Ukrainian teenage girl being hosted by Andrea's family who desires to be adopted. Only problem is, she will age out . . . today."

This was exciting news! Because of the unique timing, and because they were still in Ukraine, the couple had a feeling that God was moving in this story, but there were still lots of questions to be asked and answered.





During the party, Tanya noticed the adults talking about something. They seemed serious, and the long looks in her direction made her think they must be talking about her, but she couldn't hear or understand everything they were saying. She went on enjoying the party and her friends, and didn't think much about it.

Then Andrea, Tanya's host mother, called her into the house. She had her sit by the computer so they could use it to translate their conversation back and forth.

"Princess T, I have a question. I know this question will feel big and I don't ask it lightly, so take your time answering." Her voice quivered a little, and Tanya felt a chill go through her body. "You and I both know today is the last day you can be adopted into a family. I have a friend *right now* who is in Ukraine, trying to adopt, and she is wondering . . . would you like to be in her family?"

It was clear Tanya didn't know how to answer—stress and fear mingled with excitement as thoughts went running through her mind. It was such a shock, and she needed to think. But there was so little time! Andrea told her she could think about it overnight and talk to her in the morning.


Tanya spent her birthday night at a friend's house and dreamed about what it would be like to live right here, in the United States. And what it would be like to be part of a family.

Under the pressure of time, the couple thought through the new situation that had come to them. Andra knew the host mother, Andrea. But Andrea hadn't even known they were in Ukraine—or that they were trying to adopt—until some mutual friends relayed that message. Then Andrea and the couple started communicating back and forth. Andrea was able to answer some of their questions, but there were still more.

In various ways, they were not sure they were prepared to adopt a sixteen-year-old. Their current paperwork had only been approved for a child up to the age of fifteen. Could they get their documents amended in time? Would the adoption even be legally possible?

And what about the girl? Sixteen was a lot different from eleven. What if she wasn't certain? What if she changed her mind? Neither of them was sure they could handle another disappointment. Was it too much to do? Or was it too much to give up? How could they decide?





Tanya and her potential new parents communicated via Skype. Again, Tanya felt that this family seemed very nice. But she also wanted to talk to someone from her life back home—someone who could understand her voice, hear her concerns, and help her with this huge decision. She was anxious and eager as she connected with one of her cousins in Ukraine. He was the same age, and she had known him her whole life. She quickly laid the situation out for him and asked his advice.

“In my opinion, if you say yes, you are making the right decision. This will give you a better life,” he said, looking straight into the lens. “If you come back here and go out from the orphanage, you will just work your whole life. I know I will miss you—but it’s not about me, it’s about you.”

Her cousin was a Christian, and Tanya knew he loved her with a sacrificial love. Later as she looked back on this story, she could see how God used him to encourage her.



She ended the Skype call and sat there for a moment. This was a higher branch than she had ever climbed to, and she felt like she was walking far out on this limb. But God had given her an adventurous spirit and a longing for more.

She said yes.



To read the rest of Tanya's story, get your copy of *Tales of the Never Alone* today.

Visit www.ChristianStandardMedia.com, call 800.543.1353, or visit your local Christian retailer.



*But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted;
you consider their grief and take it in hand.
The victims commit themselves to you;
you are the helper of the fatherless.*

—Psalm 10:14

