

Darkness is dispelled by the light of a single flame. Susan Miura, via a cast of characters so easy to love and root for, addresses the trials of life, some profound, others daily, with the singular light of God's love for His children, the animals, and all the world. Filled with the flame of hope, *Surviving Carmelita* tells the ages long story that with God healing is possible, for the Creator's compassion will meet us wherever we run.

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An inspiring tale about dealing with death and the transition from guilt to healing.

~*Readers' Favorite*, Reviewer VINCENT DUBLADO

Surviving Carmelita

Susan Miura



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SURVIVING CARMELITA
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For more information on Susan Miura, please visit — SusanMiura.altervista.org

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To everyone who has a heart for Christ
and lets it shine brilliantly in a world prone to darkness.

Chapter 1

Josie

My brass teapot gleams in a shaft of autumn sunlight, but as I pour juice for the kids, it fades in the wake of a hazy memory that creeps up my spine, lingering at the base of my neck. The cup overflows with the strawberry-mango mixture. It drips from my hand, down the counter, pooling on the kitchen floor. Instead of grabbing paper towels, I stand frozen, staring at the crimson puddle while trying to grasp that memory. Fog, a white shadow, flashing lights. Not a memory at all. It is last night's dream. A nightmare, actually. Void of details, yet the weight of it bears down on my heart like a tombstone.

"Earth to Mom."

Funny that I didn't hear Mitch come downstairs. His thirteen-year-old feet normally trumpet his arrival. I move into action, wiping the sticky mess as Ashley joins him at the table and pours herself a bowl of Life, scowling because it isn't the Choco Crunch I refuse to buy. Any minute now she'll tell me yet again that she's "the only nine-year-old on the planet who doesn't get to have it."

Instead, she pops a crunchy square into her mouth before dousing the rest with milk. "The grass is all frosty, Mom. What if it's still cold after school?"

"Then you'll just have to trick-or-treat with a jacket." I might as well have said Halloween would be cancelled.

The fourth-grade drama queen stops mid-bite as horror drains the

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color from her face. “That’ll ruin everything!”

Kids. Don’t they know it will all work out? By the time heads hit pillows tonight, bags of candy will crowd our kitchen counter, along with popcorn balls and plastic spider rings. Just like every year. I stash Rob’s empty coffee cup in the dishwasher and join them at the table. “We’ll check the forecast and go from there, okay? Now finish up. That bus will be here before you know it.”

As I wrap sandwiches, Rob calls from the living room. “Josie, weather’s coming on. You don’t want to miss your boyfriend.”

So predictable, but it doesn’t stop me from laughing. The weatherman has been “my boyfriend” since I chaperoned Ashley’s class tour of Chicago’s NBC station and he told Ash she had a pretty mommy. My boyfriend. I smile to myself. As if my heart could ever stray from that goofy guy on the couch. “Be right there.”

Weatherman Kurt says a warm southwest current will arrive in time for the afternoon’s Halloween activities. Perfect! I leave to tell my soon-to-be zombie and hippie the good news while Kurt rambles on about cold, moist air moving in later in the evening. Doesn’t matter, though. By that time, everyone will be safe and sound at home.

I return to the kitchen...and the usual montage of morning conversations.

“Where’s my math paper? It was just here.”

“Dad, can you fix my bike seat tonight?”

“Honey, did you see my keys?”

I pluck Ashley’s math paper from the counter, which uncovers Rob’s keys, and smile, knowing we’ll do this all again tomorrow. Two hugs later, Ashley and Mitch traipse down to the corner as their big yellow “limo” pulls up. I grab my coat and head to my other world, the Riverbank Public Library, to start my three-hour shift in the children’s department.

Maples shade the parking lot with crimson leaves that glow beneath the morning sun. I head through the main entrance framed by cornstalks and grinning pumpkins perched on haystacks. Even after all these years, it’s still my privilege to work with books and children. Somewhere in life’s blueprint for Josie Caruso, the word *librarian* is

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stamped in bold capital letters. And maybe that blueprint was drawn on crumpled paper, but no matter. The final plan led to a place where I can introduce children to the stories that formed a lifeline for a friendless, only child way back when.

By the time my stomach starts growling for lunch, I'm off to watch my kids in Lincoln Elementary's costume parade. The lot is packed, so I squeeze into a space better suited for a go-cart than my Camry, but there's no time to search for something wider. I make it work.

"Josie, we're here!" Ana waves me over to the sidelines, where parents ready their cameras and cell phones. She presses a granola bar into my hand—triple nut crunch with cranberries.

"I could never survive without you." I sink my teeth into sweet, nutty chewiness, my empty stomach dancing with joy.

Dressed in a silky white dress and feathered angel wings, Ana's daughter, Carmelita, wraps skinny arms around me. Her cubby bear hug sends waves of warmth to my heart, but lasts only a moment as she proudly spins to spread her wings. "Look, Mrs. Caruso! Look at me!"

A halo gleams. Wings sparkle. Neither outshines that Carmelita grin.

"Is that really you, Carmelita? I thought I was getting hugged by a real angel!"

She dances on tiptoes with an aura radiant enough to ward off the damp, dark night ahead. "Guess what, Mrs. Caruso. I got a kitten! Her name is *Pantera*. That means panther. Now you know a new Spanish word. Tell Mama what I taught you. 'Member? About the sky."

The child has more energy than a puppy on steroids. Her enthusiasm inspires me to make her proud. "Alright, here goes." I clear my throat dramatically. "*El cielo es azul*."

Ana claps. "Bravo. The sky is blue." Her eyes tear with giggles. "That will come in very handy, I'm sure."

As the double doors open, the crowd moves forward like a school of fish. Ashley, donning a tie-dyed shirt and peace sign necklace, marches proudly with her fourth-grade peers. Carmelita's halo bounces crazily as she waves wildly to Ashley. In her exuberance, she loses her balance, falling against her mother's protruding belly.

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Ana catches her before halo hits concrete. “*Cuidado!* You bumped your baby brother and you almost got hurt.”

Carmie kisses Ana’s tummy. “Sorry, Juanito. Don’t worry, you’re safe inside Mama.”

More pirates, pumpkin heads, presidents, and mummies march by before Carmelita’s renewed bouncing tells me the eighth graders are up next.

“Here come Savanna and Mitchell!” She waves both hands to prevent the remote possibility of being overlooked by her big sister.

We raise our cell phones for pictures as our kids parade around the lot, pretending not to know us. My blond-haired, blue-eyed zombie couldn’t have contrasted more drastically with the beautiful Savanna Gutierrez in her glittering gypsy dress. I watch them share a smile, wondering if their friendship has become something more.

Carmie squeezes my hand. “Mrs. Caruso, can Pantera meet Clover?”

The image makes me laugh. My bun is probably quadruple the size of her kitten. I hadn’t taken the name of the breed seriously until Clover outgrew her first cage. Oh. Flemish *Giant*. “Sure, bring her over tomorrow. Then you can get the Barbie you left at my house.”

Propelled by the good news, Carmelita becomes a human pogo stick. “Mrs. Caruso found my Barbie!” Boing, boing boing. “And Pantera’s gonna meet Clover!” Boing, boing.

In a whirl of color and noise, the kids head back inside for sugar-loaded parties. Ana and I linger on the playground as Carmelita swings next to us, legs pumping madly as she strives to reach the heavens. As for me, no swing is necessary. The autumn sun warms my face, Carmie’s laughter fills the air, and my kids are excited about the fun night ahead. Challenging days will ebb and flow, so I am savoring this little slice of paradise.



Dinner finished, Mitch heads out to pick up Savanna and his buddies while I drop off Ashley at a Halloween party. Driving home, I spot the Dobson twins leaning against their porch. Malevolent grins

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tell me they're plotting something and it better not be a repeat of previous Halloween escapades—tossing pumpkins from porches and blanketing the street in slimy orange mush. No doubt their parents are out for the night. Again.

Silence fills the house as I enter, broken only by the soft thumping of Clover's feet as she pads over to greet me. I scooch down to stroke her soft, furry patches of caramel and white.

"Come on, let's find some spinach." She hops along behind me on the well-worn path to the refrigerator. With the kids out and Rob at another late-night meeting, it's just the two of us. But as she's about to nibble her leafy treat, Clover's head jerks toward the living room. The bell rings and she runs to the safety of her cage as I grab the candy bowl and swing open the door.

"Trick or treat!" Miniature fairies giggle and prance, holding pumpkin buckets out for candy bars. Beyond their sweet faces, a pea soup fog obscures everything past our oak tree. I shiver. The last thing I want to do is drive in it, but Ashley's party is nearly done and it's only a half-mile, that's all.



Ashley sits in the back seat rustling through her pumpkin bucket while I inch through the dark mist. It has swallowed the moon and stars, reducing streetlights to muted glimmers incapable of accomplishing their task.

"Almond Joy, Mom. Your favorite. You can have that one." The residue of party giddiness still echoes her voice.

"Thanks, honey."

"Oh, Mom! A dark chocolate, your other favorite. I'll save that one for you, too."

Please let her always stay so sweet. "Ah, the perfect meal. Almond Joy for the main course, dark chocolate for dessert." I hope my levity is working. No point in Ashley joining this stress-a-thon as I strain to see past the front bumper.

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A giggle from the back. “Oh, sure. You’d never let *me* have a dinner like that!”

The car’s brights do little to provide visibility. As our street sign creeps into view, my fingers relax their grasp on the wheel. Almost there...finally. Gentle pressure on the pedal ups my speed to a whopping fifteen miles per hour. How I long for the safe harbor of my garage. Squinting does nothing to cut through that endless mist.

A flash of white. I slam the brakes, which grunt and groan as my Camry skids like a drunken hockey player. What is this? Ice? Oil? Why can’t I...

Thump.

Tires finally grip pavement. The sliding stops. Silence envelops us even more densely than the fog.

For a moment.

“Carmie?” A voice cuts through the mist.

Goosebumps prickle my arms. Was that Ana calling from the sidewalk?

“Carmelita, where are you?” Her pitch and volume tangle together and rise. “Carmelita!” A shadowy figure appears at the edge of my headlights and stoops down, out of view.

Ana.

I can’t move. Can’t breathe.

A primeval sound, born of pure terror, rises from the ghostly silence to a full-blown scream so gut-wrenchingly painful it shrouds my body in chills. With hands frozen to the wheel and my heart pounding insanely, I stare into the murkiness, waiting.

“Mom?” Ashley’s shakes can be heard in that single, whispery word. “Mom, what happened?”

I take a breath, unable to turn my head in her direction. Unable to move at all. “I don’t know, Ash.”

But somehow I *do* know, beneath skin chilled by the breath of demons, that whatever just happened will change everything.