

WESTBOW
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Naked and Unashamed

DAVENIA JONES LEA



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A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

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C H A P T E R I

Tell It Like It Is

For the hundredth time today, I'm wondering why I didn't become a computer analyst. I mean, really, have you ever heard techies lamenting over ways to better relate to their mainframes or discussing the risks of being vulnerable with their keyboards? I should've gone after the money. But did I? No. I wanted to help people, to motivate them. I wanted to solve the world's problems. Now look at the fine mess I've gotten myself into. I'll be speaking to three hundred or so women about topics good Christian ladies dare not mention in public and I'm convinced this could make me or break me. Being in the counseling field for more than twenty years has been rewarding, but it requires a great deal of me, and on days like this, a computer screen and a cubicle seem so much more desirable.

I'm certainly capable enough. I've given advice to hundreds of parents on getting a colicky infant to sleep through the night or building confidence in an introverted fifteen-year-old. And I've advised women on balancing family, work, and church, and men on being the spiritual leaders of their homes. But this new ministry will beyond a shadow of a doubt test the boundaries of my skills and my faith. Why I agreed to this I'll never know. Well, too late now. I only have time for a quickie—a quickie prayer, that is. *Thank You for Your blessings. I'm in complete awe of how You've used little old, ordinary me to touch the lives of others. But I gotta tell You, these times of molding and transforming make me want to pull my hair out. So please, dear Father, just let me come out of this auditorium alive.* And so it begins—my long walk to the guillotine. Okay, I'm exaggerating, but it sure feels that way. Well here goes nothing.

“Ladies, we have been repressed for far too long. How many of you have been told to tuck it in, cover it up, and act like a lady, because good girls don’t do that? Well, I’m here to tell you this is not God’s plan for us. Let’s go straight to the source, since I know you won’t believe me but you can hardly dispute the Word of God. Let’s go to Genesis, right to the very beginning. Genesis 2:25 reads, ‘The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.’

“Did you hear that, ladies? They were naked and felt no shame! Can you imagine standing in front of a full-length mirror, naked as the day you were born, and feeling no shame? Can you imagine looking at the reflection in the mirror and thinking, *I love the curve of my hips, the swell of my breasts, and the pout of my lips?* Now, be honest, ladies. How many of you have ever had those thoughts in relation to your nakedness? I’m not sure about you, but I know those aren’t the notions that normally run through my head. My thought process usually goes a little like this, and let me warn you, I typically think in song, so to the tune of ‘In Right, Up Right, Down Right, Happy All the Time,’ here we go: *Oh cellulite and knobby knees, where’d that dimple come from? Breasts headed south and my tummy’s a pouch, six-pack abs no more. Crow’s feet and thinning hair; never mind it’s turning gray. I’d sing it again, but of course I can’t remember, ’cause my mind is going too!*”

The auditorium explodes with laughter and applause, and boy am I relieved. I’m never quite sure how the saints will respond to what many would characterize as unconventional. Some might even call it sacrilegious. Oh well I can’t stop now.

“So that’s my reality, and from your laughter, I’m guessing many of you feel the same way. Now I have another question for you, since we’re being open and honest. Ladies, when was the last time y’all had an orgasm?”

There goes the laughter. And the applause. You can literally hear a pin drop. Maybe I went too far too soon. This must be how Jonah felt and I can absolutely relate. I seriously want to run the other way and take my chances with the belly of a whale. I think that’d be way less painful than the hate stares coming my way. I’m so thankful for ‘prayer quickies’. *Help me out here, God. It’s Your message. I’m just the messenger. Please, please, please don’t let them shoot the messenger.*

“That’s right, ladies. I said it. The big O-word. What did y’all think, that orgasms were created for men only? Are they the only ones who get to experience pleasure? No, ladies, I think not. Sexual gratification was created equally for men and for women. What—you don’t believe me? Read it for yourself. Genesis 3:16 tells us we’ll desire our husbands. Believe it or not, we’re actually hard-wired to yearn for, to want, and to crave our husbands. I know, I know. I nearly fell off my seat too when I learned this. Glad y’all are already sittin’ down.” Well I thought it was funny. Apparently the ladies do not.

“Think about it. If there was no sin, we’d want to please our husbands all day long. But Eve bit that apple, and the rest is history. Sin keeps us distracted. With work, children, and health concerns, who has time to think about sex, let alone have any? And then we’re bombarded with distortions of the truth—desire and passion are wrong; desiring our husbands is a curse. With all the misinformation out there, we can’t help but feel discouraged—believing we aren’t beautiful, we aren’t desirable, we aren’t worthy of love, passion, and pleasure. Yes ladies, sin has us all confused, but don’t entertain the lies. God, our Creator, designed us to enjoy mutual sexual satisfaction. We are fearfully and wonderfully made and we are created to live life abundantly!”

The frigid stares seem less frigid, maybe just a little chilly now. But there’ll be no defrosting on this day. Nope, that’s never been my style. Leave ’em good and mad. That’s my motto. If I can get them feeling something—anger, sadness, compassion—they might be jolted out of their complacency and maybe they’ll be moved to change. Besides, this is all I prepared, this is all I got.

“Now I want you to write down these texts and look them up later when you’ve calmed down and gotten over your shock that s-e-x and d-e-s-i-r-e are in the Bible. In Genesis 26:8, Isaac fondles his wife, Rebekah, an act of intimacy. Read it. I’m not makin’ it up. And you can read the whole Song of Solomon. There’s some juicy stuff in it. Sometimes I have to put the Good Book down when I’m reading about ol’ lover boy Solomon and his lovely wife. It’s way better than that *Fifty Shades*. And some of you know what I’m talking about, but that’s another message for another day. We can’t read the entire book of Solomon today, but for the moment, look at chapter 5, verses 4 and 5. She is dreaming of her lover and is wet with

desire. Did you hear that, ladies? She is wet with desire. Pretty black and white if you ask me, and guess what, ladies? It's okay!

“As we close, I ask that you read the Bible texts shared and do a Scripture dig, seeking a greater understanding of intimacy and passion between husband and wife. Complete the Passion Barometer and ask yourselves, are you getting the satisfaction, the intimacy, and the passion you deserve? And if not, ask yourselves why and what are you willing to do about it.

“Join me, those of you who dare, and let's embark on a journey to sexual healing. It'll change your life as it most certainly changed mine. I encourage you to live naked, ladies, free from guilt, pain, fear, sorrow, shame, and the lies of the enemy. Let's be transformed, learning to live our lives naked and unashamed.”

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Taking Chances

“I cannot fathom that the church is endorsing such pornographic filth.”

“Amen, sister McMann. I have been to this retreat center twice now, and I must say I was so impressed with this little slice of heaven—until today, that is. I tell you what. I am plum-t embarrassed by that message you gave this morning, Mrs. Shula. Your message was not at all ladylike. In fact it was downright filthy.”

“Ladies, I do appreciate your concerns, and I—”

“Oh, we need you to do a little more than appreciate our concerns, Ms. Sadler. And as for you, Mrs. Shula, you would’ve been stoned if we were back in the Bible days. I can’t even repeat some of the things you said.”

“Stoned indeed. You should’ve just brought out the whips and chains and *Playboy* magazines. My great-grandma would turn over in her grave if she knew her granddaddy’s land was being used to lodge the ‘Best Little Whorehouse in Texas.’”

“Um-Hm. Not that I know anything about the whips and chains Mrs. Pritchett is referencing, but my goodness, forget not being ladylike. Didn’t we sign up for a Christian retreat, Sister Sadler? Sister Shula, do you even know what that means? Blasphemy is what it was, nothing more than dishonoring our God.”

“You absolutely did sign up for a Christian retreat, and everything I shared today I promise was biblical, and I—”

“We do not need to hear any more from you, Mrs. Shula. I think you have done enough damage for one day.”

“Ladies, I promise you that your trepidations are being considered and—”

“We certainly hope so. The church board won’t take kindly to such carrying ons. We’re watching you, Ms. Karen Sadler. We are watching you.”

I should say something, do something, but what? Say I’m sorry? Write a letter exonerating Karen from all responsibility? Cry? Give Karen a hug? Maybe I should steal a page from her book and be silent. That’s what I’ll do, sit and be silent. Karen obviously needs some quiet time. She’s so poised, so completely in control. I can learn so much from this incredible woman of God, this businesswoman extraordinaire, this first-class act. Her ocean-blue, cream-knit pantsuit speaks to her sophistication. Her sleek, quilted navy-blue purse with the gold-chain strap reflects her good taste, and her taupe, diamond-studded sling-back sandals point to her understated wealth. She’s so good at just being, eyes closed, breathing in and out at measured intervals. I’m going to try it too. After all, I’m the counselor. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe—

This is so not working for me. Karen took a huge leap of faith when she invited me to speak, and I’m positive my presentation is not what she envisioned. The ‘Concerned Elect’, in their floral-print dresses, wide-brimmed hats, and matching shoes and purses, certainly wasted no time sharing a good piece of their minds. These ladies make negotiations with Fortune 500 execs seem like a sunny afternoon walk through a field of tulips. With all my expertise as a licensed therapist, I think I handled this situation about as well as the on-going Middle East peace negotiations. I believe with all my heart that this message is inspired by God, but I don’t want my presentation to reflect badly on Karen. She’s the one the *New York Times* called “ever poised, chic, experienced, and sophisticated.” The one *Business Weekly* praised for her “keen business acumen, her attention to detail, and her ability to make everyone from the leading investors to the dining-room hostess feel as if they were her top priority.” Please, God, don’t let her become Karen, whose empire was toppled by Shula Taylor, the woman who couldn’t keep her big mouth shut. I need to get a grip. I’m gonna try this breathing thing again.

“So Shula, why don’t we grab something to drink and debrief?”

“Ah, sure. That’d be great. A cup of tea would be nice. Or coffee. Do you take tea or coffee? Maybe one of those fancy teas would be nice, although coffee’s good too.” Yeah, I know. I ramble when I’m nervous. I’m

working on that with my therapist. And yes I know, how cliché, but it's true. From time to time therapists need therapy too. So there.

"Tea sounds good, and I can't let you go without tasting one of Naaman's famous scones. Our chefs are second to none the world over. We can talk on the patio and soak in the scenery."

We order tea—white sage mint for me, red rock rooibos chai for Karen—along with cherry and hazelnut cream-filled scones, and sit in the sun on the garden patio, enjoying a little natural aromatherapy with a side of Vitamin D.

Perhaps I should prescribe myself a few weeks of Naaman's therapy—the clear, refreshing air; the pungent smell of juniper berries and the sweet fragrance of maple trees; birds dancing, squirrels scurrying, dragonflies whizzing; the sky's sultry colors reflected upon a crystal-clear stream. This place is helping me in ways hours of counseling hasn't been able to do.

"Shula, about this morning—"

"I know. I know. We need to talk, but Karen, let me start by saying I am so sorry. I was absolutely confident that God gave me a message, or more specifically this message, and it was not, is not, my intention to embarrass you or—"

"Well, your message certainly was unconventional and—"

"I know, not what you expected, right? I feel horrible, just horrible. I mean you took a huge leap of faith in making me the keynote speaker. And just three days ago I had a normal speech all prepared. I really did. You know the one—women, God loves you, and you're valued in the church; you just have to love yourself—but God was nudging me and He was quite persistent. There was no still small voice. It was clanging symbols and gongs, and I couldn't ignore Him. But I had no idea there'd be such grave consequences for you. Those ladies certainly had a few bees in their bonnets and—"

"Yes, the ladies were riled up. And that's what I wanted to talk with you about."

"You're right. And I unquestionably accept your decision not to have me back. In fact, I've already started writing my letter of absolution on your behalf. I am planning to let the church know that you had nothing to do with—"

"Yes Shula some ladies were upset and some voiced their concerns, but—"

“No need to say any more. I’m just so glad my keynote came at the end of my time here, giving me the week to experience a bit of paradise. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Shula, stop. Stop for just one minute. If you’ll give me a moment, you’ll understand that I think what you did is the best thing that could’ve happened for those ladies and for Naaman’s. Don’t you see, Shula? This is good news. We haven’t gotten this kind of response to any of our other workshops or topics, so it must mean that the discussion is long overdue. You’ve always said that change comes only when we leave our comfort zones. Well, these women are most certainly uncomfortable, and that’s good. I knew you were an outstanding counselor. You’ve certainly helped me in more ways than I can ever thank you for. And my suspicions were confirmed this morning. I have a feeling you’re just what Naaman’s needs.”

I’m shocked, absolutely shocked. She liked it. She really liked it. Who knew? Ever since my husband, Seth, died, family and friends have been eager to get me back to work. It’s just that nothing’s moved me. Nothing’s excited me until now. But instead of following God’s lead, what did I do? I allowed that old Satan to plant seeds of disbelief. Just when my passion was being rekindled, I allowed the flame to be squelched by the angry mob waiting to stone me. I was convinced that Karen was ready to show me the door—exit stage left and catch the next train out of town. I can’t believe I doubted God and was ready to throw in the towel. God just had to shut me up long enough so I could be reassured of His purpose.

“Shula, you were not wrong about God’s plan for you, and don’t you dare question the message He’s given you. However, you may want to consider slightly repackaging the message. Seek God and ask for further revelation about the depth and breadth of what He wants you to share. I believe that sex and desire and pleasure is a part of the message, but I think there’s more to it. Allow God to extend the message. Figure out the deeper message God has for women, but don’t let it go. Understand that you’re going to get pushback, but you’ve got to trust God and the intuition He’s given you. So what I need to know is, are you ready for what could be the most challenging yet the most rewarding journey you’ve taken in a long time? Are you ready to take a chance, to step out on that limb with me and God? Are you ready to live again? Shula, we want you to join our team here at Naaman’s. I just need to know are you ready?”

You've Got a Friend

"I knew I could count on you to find the perfect restaurant, Chels. It smells so good. I can't wait."

"The reviews said this place has the best fried fish and hush puppies this side of the Mason-Dixon Line. If the reviews and the smells are any indication, we're gonna eat ourselves silly."

Chelsea and Shula. Shula and Chelsea. That's how it's been since first grade. We're the consummate BFFs, and Chelsea has been on hand for every major and minor event in my life. True to form, she's here for me now when I need to unload and to sort out this whole Naaman's thing. And what better way to do this than over something battered and deep fried? Chelsea definitely gets an A-plus. She's found this insanely wonderful restaurant and I can't wait to dig in to my two-piece fried-flounder dinner with French fries, coleslaw, extra hush puppies, and of course every good southerner knows, sweet tea.

"This is the next best thing to an orgasm." Chelsea has such a way with words. Everything with her is *gasmic* or not. Listening to her over the years is probably what got me in the fine mess at Naaman's in the first place.

"Chels, I guarantee you, fried fish comes nowhere close. Can we talk about something else? I've gotten in enough trouble today using the O-word."

"Well, compared with the slicksters I've been dating lately, I'll take these hush puppies over a man any day. But did I just hear you say you used the O-word? I'm flabbergasted. Do tell."

“Chels, I’m usually so calm, cool, and collected, but not this morning. Girl, it took everything within me to remain upright. Nerves or an adrenaline rush? I’m not sure. But what I do know with every fiber of my being is that my message—correction: God’s message—is just what Christian ladies need. I just don’t know if they’re ready to receive it or if I’m the one to deliver it. You should’ve seen them sitting there all tight-lipped, nostrils flaring. They were worse than a bear with a thorn in his foot. They actually said I was spreading pornographic filth!”

“Now, that’s laughable. You and pornography?” How Chelsea managed to speak through fits of laughter and an overstuffed mouth I’ll never know.

“You think this is funny? Those ladies were horrid.”

“But you did use the O-word, right? What did you think would happen? You went before the saints and used the O-word right off the bat. And I’m positive you’re exaggerating. *All* the ladies were upset? *All* the ladies were ready to stone you?”

“I know. Maybe it was a bit much for a keynote, but I didn’t say anything that wasn’t Biblical. And no, not all of the ladies seemed angry, Miss Smarty Pants. But you should’ve heard the mob squad tell it. Anyway, you’d think Karen would’ve had enough of me. But guess what?”

“She wants you back for part two.”

“She wants me permanently.”

“Get outta town. Permanently? What does that mean?”

“She wants me to work at Naaman’s.”

“You, working for the church? This I gotta see.”

“I know, right? I’ve avoided working for the church or anything affiliated with the church like the plague. I love helping people, but I always supposed that the church caused more barriers with all the politics and the hypocrisies. At least out in the secular world you expect crazy, but in the church, it’s much harder when people stab you in the back then want to pray for healing over the very wound they caused. Ah, but that was Seth’s thing, you know. He loved being president of the church’s school, King University, and he was good at it too. Seth’s work for the church was such a blessing to him and to our family for almost twenty years. But that was his thing, not mine. Now it seems like this is where I’m being led, and I have no idea what to do.”

“You know Seth would be so proud of you and he’d want you to do this. Girl, if you can teach women how to get and keep a man like Seth, that alone is worth its weight in gold. You two had something special, and it’s worth sharing, so who cares what other people think?”

“You really think I can do it? It’s been two years since Seth’s death, and yes, I’m better than I was. But today’s talk was a one-time, hour-long presentation. I don’t know if I can do it full time. You know Seth was the wind beneath my wings. When he died, I wanted to crawl in that coffin with him. Thanks to friends like you, I’m slowly coming back to life. But this offer could be the thing that takes me back over the edge.”

“Or it could send you soaring again. Just look at you. You’re all lit up like a Christmas tree. You’re back in your glory. You’re like the old Shula, the Shula with passion, humor, and life. Trust yourself again. Besides, if you work at Naaman’s, I’ll be able to get all the ‘me time’ I can stand with the friends-of-Shula discount.”

“And that’s the other thing I’ll have to consider—moving. Charlotte’s been home my entire life. I considered commuting, but that would be a drag, yet the thought of packing and leaving stresses me out. Although a change might be just what I need. I’m so confused.”

“One more walk through the gardens at Naaman’s is all the convincing you need to get to gettin’. And we could hire some of those hot and handy men from that show *Built* to pack up your stuff and move you in no time. At least we’d be distracted by some delish eye candy.”

“You and your eye candy. That eye candy is what keeps you in trouble.”

“Now, now. I didn’t suggest we sample the candy. We’d only be looking, window shopping, if you please.”

“Actually, the movers will be the least of my worries. How in the world do I even have this conversation with mother dearest?”

Chels chokes on a hush puppy. “You’re on your own there. You’re the one with the degree in dealing with the deranged and insane, not that she’s deranged or anything, but you know Eva. I’m sure you’ll figure out a way to deal with her. You always do.”

“What happened to all of your support and encouragement? And to think I was just about to give you the Friend of the Year award.”

“You couldn’t pay me enough to tell Eva that her baby girl is moving. You nearly killed her when you stopped eating the sacred cow and the

anointed pig. And let's not forget when you took her to your yoga class and she was convinced you were involved in witchcraft."

"All right, all right," I sputter as I laugh uncontrollably. I'm sure we'll be asked to leave—if I don't choke on a fish bone first.

"Oh, we could tell a million Eva stories. My all-time favorite is when you were determined to give birth at home with Seth in a pool with that—what's it called, your dolly?"

"She was my doula."

"Right. Whatever." Chelsea leans back in her chair, drapes the back of her hand across her forehead, and delivers a flawless Eva impersonation. "And I quote, 'Shula darlin', for heaven's sake. How can you do this to your motha? Did I not burn my bra for something? I fought for your right to be drugged in a comfortable private room at Presbyterian Hospital. Not to mention all the money you pay to have good health insurance. You're killin' me, Shula.' So yeah, I think this one's gonna have her laying square eggs."

"Chels, stop it. I can't take anymore. You're absolutely crazy. First of all, who said I'm moving? And second of all, Eva's not that bad. And don't roll your eyes at me. You just gotta know how to charm her, and believe me I've had years of practicing ways to charm Mrs. Eva. I just pray my experience, not to mention my years of training, pay off. This is liable to send her over the top. Hey, you gonna finish that last hush puppy?"

We Are Family

Telling my mother about my possible big move shouldn't be such a big deal. After all, my new home would only be three hours away. For goodness sake, I'm almost fifty and am an accomplished professional with a grown daughter of my own, so you'd think I would've worked through my mommy issues. However, you don't know Eva. She has a way of orchestrating the lives of those around her, putting Brahms and Beethoven to shame. She sets the tempo, spins a web of suspense, ratchets up the intensity level, and wham! You have ascended to that Eva place. Without rhyme or reason, you're changing plans you made months ago, you're dumping the boyfriend you considered your soul mate, you're hosting a Christmas dinner for fifty, or tasting her chicken and dumplings even though you've been a vegetarian for years.

Eva will have you convinced that turning your life upside down was all your idea, and a good one, at that. Her technique is a work of art. If I hadn't been outwitting Eva for almost fifty years and if I weren't a trained therapist, I'm sure I'd fall prey like so many of her other unsuspecting victims. So today, I will approach her in a calm, rational, and authoritative way while reminding myself, *self, she's not the boss of you.*

"Mommy, why don't you think it's a good idea?"

Did I really just call her Mommy? Freud and Doctor Spock would have a field day with Mrs. Eva. How does she do it? Better yet, how does my dad do it? Living with Eva day in and day out. I don't understand why he hasn't slit his throat. Breathe, Shula, breathe.

Let's try this again. "Look, Eva. Just hear me out. I've prayed about this, and I know this is where God is leading me, as crazy as it might sound, as scary as it may be. God's been with me in the pit of my despair, and now He's telling me it's time to live again, to give again, and I'm finally ready. Besides, Seth would want me to spread my wings and fly. He'd want me to do this. It's time, and I hope you can support me."

"Oh baby, bless your li'l heart. Of course I support you, darlin'. I'm your biggest fan. But right now you clearly are not thinking straight, and that is understandable given the tragedy you've suffered. After losing a husband, especially one as good as Seth, well, it stands to reason that you wouldn't have all your wits about you, and that, my darlin', is why you have me, your biggest cheerleader. Now, I think it's a great idea, getting back to livin' and all. Why, just the other day I was tellin' your father—right, Allen?—I was tellin' him that it's time you got back to work. I even took the liberty of calling Bob and Faith. You remember them, right? You used to play with their son, little Chauncey. Your dad and I assumed you two would get married. He's still single, you know. Well, that's neither here nor there.

"Now, where was I? Oh, yes, Bob and Faith. They manage the Charlotte Family Counseling Center, and you know it's one of the most prestigious centers in Charlotte, probably in all of North Carolina. Well, you're such an esteemed therapist and they are in need of a grief counselor, and when I shared my ideas about how you could contribute to their practice, they said they would be absolutely overjoyed to have you. And that's a direct quote. Isn't it, Allen? Overjoyed indeed. So you see, darlin', this must be Divine intervention. I mean you bein' ready to work again, me inquiren' about a job for you, and the counseling center wantin' you. Glory be, I think this calls for a celebration. Allen, let's celebrate. Can you get somethin', champagne maybe? Or better yet let's pull out that Chablis we've been savin', and I can put a little something together for a celebratory dinner. In fact, Allen, why don't you call Lance and tell him to bring the family over for his sister's celebration?"

Incredible. Does she even breathe? I don't recall her inhaling. This was the perfect opening sonata to yet another *opera`a la Eva*, quick and lively, getting you caught up and carried away. Eva missed her calling. Anybody else would be walking out of here with a new job at the Charlotte Family

Counseling Center, and I'm coming pretty darn close. But I'm smarter and one step (okay, half a step) ahead of her. It's time to strike. Smooth, cool, and calm—that's me.

"Thanks for your support, Mom, I mean Eva. You have been my rock and my fortress, and I couldn't have made it through these past two years without you. I know you want what's best for me, and I'm so glad you believe in me (The suck-up right off the bat). And I also believe this is Divine intervention. I mean you believing I'm ready to work and you talking to Bob and Faith on my behalf (Affirmation always helps). God must definitely be in the midst of this, because I talked to Bob and Faith too, and while they think I'm ready to get back to work, they understand why working as a grief counselor would be difficult for me. If I spent all day listening to people discuss their sorrow and share their pain, can you imagine how that could send me right back into that dark, black hole of gloom, the hole I'm finally climbing out of (A little guilt is always good)?

"When I shared with them how I felt so alive at Naaman's and when I told them about this amazing opportunity that Karen has presented, they were overjoyed and supportive. They had so many ideas for workshops. We spent the whole day brainstorming and praying for Naaman's and the ministry there (Eva couldn't possibly disagree with her friends, the experts). Mother, this has got to be God's doing (The God card usually works). So I agree. Let's celebrate (Eva never could resist a drink and a party). I can't wait till you come for a visit. I think you'll absolutely love it. We can do a mother-daughter weekend (Time alone with her firstborn, daughter - this ought to definitely seal the deal). We could do massages and—"

"Now, Shula Lynn, you listen to me." Oh man, I thought I had her. But here it comes, the adagio, that slower, more calculated and dramatic portion of the opera. She used my middle name, so I'm sure it's about to get ugly.

"No daughter of mine is going to be working in that kinda place, in that, that, Neiman Marcus—"

"Naaman's, Mother. It's called Naaman's. You know, like the story in the Bible."

"That's what I said, and stop interrupting me, young lady. And don't think I didn't hear about that little speech of yours, the one that's made you feel so alive again. I mean for heaven's sake, Shula. You were talking

about s-e-x in public. What exactly did you expect to feel? Feelin' alive? You ought to be feelin' downright ashamed. Now, I was not going to bring this up, because I thought you'd come to your senses, the ones the good Lord gave you, and you'd repent for sayin' such shameful things in public, not to mention for the embarrassment and the disgrace you've caused this family. But this is just more evidence that you're not ready to make major decisions.

"You are right about one thing. I have been your rock, and without me, you'd still be curled up in a ball crying. Now yes, you have come a long way, but this is just too much. You need to get your head on straight, Shula. This position at the counseling center is a wonderful opportunity, and you shouldn't let it pass you by. Of course if you go babblin' on and on about feelin' so alive at this Neiman's place, Bob and Faith aren't going to stand in your way. You probably made them think bein' at the counseling center would be deathly. But they still want you and it's a respectable job. Now let's not argue anymore, darlin'. You know how the back-and-forth raises my blood pressure, and you know how frail I've been lately. Did I tell you what Doctor Proctor said? Just the other day he said I have to lower my stress. You know my heart is weak, Shula. Take this job for me, baby girl. You know I may not have much more time on this earth, and my last days should be peaceful and filled with pride for my children. And I don't take any pride in having my daughter get up in front of good Christian ladies and speakin' filth—like I didn't raise you to know better, Shula. Think about your dear mother, and Allen, I think I need that drink now."

My dad looks up from his newspaper and shakes his head. He has been trying so hard not to get sucked in, but he knows I need reinforcement. "Oh Eva, please spare us the Scarlett O'Hara melodrama. You're not dyin', woman. Your heart is stronger than anyone I know, and it's just a hunch, but that drink you so desperately need would probably be more harmful to your health than Shula's choice of career. You can be a little overbearing at times, my dear. Just relax and leave Shula alone. She's a grown woman, and a pretty intelligent one at that, and I'm sure she knows what's best for her. Support, dear, support. That's our role."

Gotta love my dad. You'd think he wasn't paying attention, but he knows everything that goes on and he's been my savior more than once. Still, I'm tired of this back-and-forth with Eva, so I cave. "I didn't accept

the offer at Naaman's, Eva. I just wanted to run it by you first. So forget it. Let's talk about more important matters."

"Oh, Shula, my love, thank you. Why you goad me on I'll never know. Yes, yes, let's talk about important matters—like your brother. You have to call him and talk some sense into him. He is planning to put my grandbabies in public school. Can you believe it? This is absolutely ghastly. I know it's the doin' of that little twit he's married to. I think she's waitin' for us to offer to pay for private school. Maybe you can talk to them, Shula while we still may have time to get the children into Christian Academy. They might listen to you. We have to save them, Shula. I don't want them around little hooligans teachin' them the ways of the devil himself. Now, come on. Let's strategize over that drink. Allen!"

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Live Like You're Dyin'

“Where’d you say you’re calling’ me from?” Chelsea sounds royally pissed off. Can’t say I blame her. I guess she’s having a hard time believing what I have yet to believe myself.

“I’m calling from my new home—my new home here at Naaman’s.” If I keep calling it home, maybe it’ll feel like home, and if I can convince Chelsea that I haven’t completely lost my mind, then perhaps it will be so.

“Let me get this straight. In less than three days you told Eva you were moving, she gave you her blessing, you packed and moved, and now you’re calling to invite tea? Have you lost your cotton pickin’ mind? When have you ever been Miss Spontaneous? When did you find the time to make all your little lists on Post-it notes, you know, weighing the pros and the cons, and analyzing the risks like you’re always telling me to do before making a decision? When did you pray and fast, and for Pete’s sake, why didn’t you call to consult my gizzard? Since when do you do anything without consulting my gizzard?”

The infamous gizzard, Chelsea’s version of a woman’s intuition. Chelsea’s right, I didn’t even consult the gizzard this time. “I’m sorry, Chels. I don’t know what I was thinking. I’ve lost it. I’ve completely lost it. And yes you are absolutely correct. Three days ago I did in fact stop by to tell Eva I was moving. And yes, I did pack and move without my lists and Post-its. I have not analyzed the risk and I have not weighed the pros and cons. You are, however, wrong about two things. Number one, I did pray. As a matter of fact, I’m still praying. Number two, Eva did not give me her blessing, because, well, because I kinda sorta didn’t tell her I was leaving.”

“Yep. It’s confirmed. You are out of your cotton pickin’ mind! Did I hear you correctly? Eva doesn’t know you’re working for Naaman’s? What happened when you went to tell her?”

“There’s not much to report. I got the typical Eva response. ‘Shula, darlin’, motha knows best. I’ve planned your whole life. Be a good girl and do what I say. My days are numbered. You don’t want to be responsible for killin’ your motha, do you?’ Same Eva, different day. So before I could start feeling guilty about her heart, or sorry I’d be leaving Daddy there to deal with Eva alone, or depressed that after years of freedom I had fallen under her wicked spell again, or nervous that I wasn’t up to the challenge, or uncertain without Seth’s guidance, and devoid of all intelligent thought, I left.”

“I need a drink. Eva is gonna lose it. So what does she think? Does she think you’re gonna be working at the counseling center? She’s gonna pass bricks when she finds out. This is some—”

“Don’t even say it. I do declare anyone hearing you would think you grew up in a brothel.”

“Say what? I’m offended. And tell me again what’s wrong with my language, because I don’t recall a commandment saying ‘Thou shalt not curse.’ So what’s the big deal again besides being an affront to your virgin ears?”

“The big deal is you should look and act like you love Jesus. And in case you forgot, your body is a temple, so what comes out of it should be holy and pure. I know those words cause you to recoil, but I also know that’s just an act, because deep inside you’re as sweet as licorice. And don’t look at me like that. I can feel your glare through the phone lines. Reason number three, it’s common and unbecoming of a lady, and that’s straight from my grandma Eloise.”

“Touché. It’s not ladylike and God is not pleased. Forgive me, Father. I have sinned and I repent. But right now I am in too much shock to worry about censoring my potty mouth. So spill it. I want details.”

“Well, you know how Eva gets. I didn’t feel like fighting with her, so I took the easy way out. I told her that I hadn’t accepted the offer at Naaman’s, which wasn’t a lie because at that time I hadn’t accepted the offer. And when I finally decided to leave, well, I just left.”

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“Shula, this is the most off-the-wall thing you’ve ever done. Are you sure you’re thinking straight?”

“Chels, not you too. Weren’t you the one who said working with Karen would be a good experience for me? Please tell me I did the right thing. I can’t bear to admit that Eva was right. I’d rather drink cyanide.”

“Oh please, Shula. You’re just as dramatic as Eva. Of course I’m on your side. I’m just hurt is all. How could you leave and not tell me? I would’ve helped you pack. I would’ve driven those hellacious Blue Ridge mountain roads with you. I would be sitting there with you right now drinking some horrid bitter tea. I would’ve missed *Duck Dynasty* for you, girl.”

Chels always finds a way to make me laugh even when I’m falling apart. “I can’t believe you watch that stuff. Why are you hooked on other people’s reality—which, by the way, can’t be that real with TV crews following them everywhere? And you, my friend, have enough drama in your life to make some Hollywood producer a billionaire.”

“Puh-lease, Shula. Let’s not compare dramas. And stop trying to distract me. I’m still hurt. I feel like you didn’t just leave Charlotte, you left me too.”

“Aw, Chels. I’m so sorry. You know you’re my girl. We’re the original Laverne and Shirley, for goodness’ sake. I just knew that if I didn’t go right then and there, I would become a fly trapped in Eva’s web. I had to do a Forrest Gump and run like the dickens. So I left Eva’s, headed home, grabbed my suitcases, and hauled tail. I didn’t stop to pee, I didn’t stop to eat, and as the needle teetered on empty, I prayed I’d make it up the mountain. I didn’t exhale until I pulled up in front of Naaman’s, bags in hand, sanity loosely intact. And here I am with no lists, no gizzard, not even my best friend.”

“Well, good for you, I guess. I’m mad as all get out that you left without even talking to me about it, but you did the right thing. Naaman’s is absolutely wonderful, and you and Karen will make a good team. By the way, what did Karen have to say when you showed up on her doorstep with all your baggage? No pun intended.”

“Have I told you lately that you’re crazy? As for Karen, luckily she couldn’t see all my internal baggage, just my matching Louis Vuitton. Anyway, she was pretty cool. We agreed I’d commit through the summer

and then decide the future later. But it was kinda eerie, like she knew I'd show up. My little cottage was all ready, candles were lit, a fruit-and-cheese tray with sparkling cider was on the kitchen counter, and music was playing quietly in the background. I asked how she knew I'd accept, and she said, 'I knew this position was meant for you. I just wasn't sure how long it'd take you to realize what God and I already knew.' Crazy, right?"

"Absolutely crazy. She knew before the gizzard. Incredible."

"Anyway, I can't wait for you to see my little bungalow in the woods. It's absolutely darling, all one thousand square feet of it. It's white with green shutters and has a wrap-around porch with two rocking chairs out front. And the window boxes are so cute. They're filled with hot- and light-pink zinnias and dichondra cascading down in a waterfall of colors."

"I take it that's some kind of flower." Chelsea doesn't exactly have a green thumb.

"Yes, Chelsea, they're flowers, and stop interrupting."

"Sorry. Go on. Tell me more."

"The redwood oak floors are to die for! They look hand-sculpted, and knowing Karen, I wouldn't put it past her. They help make the rustic elegant. I get to be a country girl with perks."

"This I've got to see—Miss Priss living in the woods, being one with nature."

"When you visit, you'll understand how not true that is. This place has all the amenities. But the best part is the large windows in every room. Light pours in from every direction. And the view! Streams and foliage and all types of critters and birds. This place exudes peace. Each room blends into the next. It's so open and airy. And I can't wait for an excuse to use the fireplace in the family room. Incidentally, there's one in my bedroom too. I can imagine it now—sipping my tea, curled up alongside a good book with a fire going."

"Oh, for crying out loud. You've been there for what, a day, and you're already imagining yourself curled up in front of the fireplace? I thought you said this was a trial run just for the summer."

"It is. I'm just sayin'. By the way, it does get cool some nights even in the summertime; I am in the mountains, you know. Anyway, you'd love the furniture. It's like country chic with large pillows and throws and burnt oranges, forest greens, and golden yellows, all our favorite colors. And wait

till you see the kitchen! It's small, and rightly so, since I probably won't be doing all that much cooking, not with the most delicious food cooked every day by the most amazing chefs here at Naaman's. Nevertheless, it's an adorable little kitchen. All the cabinetry and appliances are white, and there's a white bench sitting below the bay window making a quaint little kitchen nook. And the kitchen window looks out over a small sunroom that leads out to the garden and a creek and a panoramic view of the mountains. You know this is where I'll be spending all my free time. I caught the sunset this evening and it was breathtaking. I wish you could've seen it."

"Yeah well, Miss Wanna Be Impulsive, I could've seen it if you'd called me, and don't think I won't be up there next weekend. I hope I have a room in that little chalet of yours."

"Geesh, have some patience and let me finish. As I was about to say, there's an office with another huge window that looks out over the creek and the mountains, and in addition to a desk and a lounge chair, there's a daybed in the room. It's officially my office, unofficially your bedroom. And it's done in your favorite colors, brown and lime green. And Chels, the bathroom is nirvana. There's a high vaulted ceiling with skylights, and a traditional stand-alone tub with an overhead rainfall showerhead, and it's all white with blue accessories. And the scent of juniper berries follows me all around this sweet, charming little cottage."

"Check you out. It sounds like your little home could fit into the west wing of your waterfront mini mansion back here in Charlotte. Your shoe closet is probably bigger than that little bungalow of yours in the woods. I hope you know what you're getting into."

"I know. Me and my crazy self came flying up the mountain, and I don't even know what I'm supposed to be doing, how much I'll get paid, or what I'll do after the summer. Karen must think I'm a nut job, but I am here living in a cottage and preparing to start work tomorrow, so I guess she's okay with me being loco. I heard God's voice saying go, so I went. I'll sort out the rest later."

"Well, I'll tell you one thing: it'll be nice to see that old sparkle back in your eyes. You deserve happiness, even though you don't believe it. I think you'll find it again in the mountains of Hicktown, North Carolina. So have you told Sheridan yet, and how's she doing by the way?"

“Ah, Sheridan, my love. Sheridan’s great and loving Italy. You know she’s doing a European tour this summer before starting medical school at Georgetown this fall. She and her best friend, Addie, worked hard these past four years, and their work will only get harder once they move to D.C. in August. So this break is a well-deserved one, and last we spoke she was having the time of her life.”

“That’s my girl. You and Seth did an amazing job with her, and I know he’d be the proud, beaming papa right now. I think she’ll be cool with you at Naaman’s. She loves you to pieces, and if you’re happy she’ll be happier.”

My eyes filled with tears at the mention of Seth and the reminder of his unabashed love for his daughter. No doubt about it, he would be proud of Sheridan. She is, after all, patterned after his own heart.

“Absolutely,” I replied. “I can’t believe how close we are and how much I love her. I guess our relationship shifted after Seth’s death. I don’t have to tell you how much we relied on one another. I’ll never be able to repay her for sacrificing her dream of continuing in our footsteps by getting her undergraduate degree from Georgetown. I’ll always be grateful to her for coming back home after Seth died. I know it’s selfish, but having her near helped me, and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte wasn’t a bad second choice. We’re both ready now, and I’m glad that she can finally go to Georgetown, even if it’s a few years later than planned. She’ll be excited for me, and if she’s a little leery I can always bribe her with weekend getaways at Naaman’s.”

“I think my gizzard knew all along, but maybe I wasn’t ready for you to leave me. Truth be told, you were made for Naaman’s, and I’m happy for you.”

“Aw. I love you, man. I’m more scared than a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs, but I believe this is where God’s led me. And if He’s led me here, He won’t leave me here.”

“Sounds good, Shula, although I’m not quite sure God can help you if you don’t tell Eva. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“I hear you and I will. Promise. Just give me a day of tranquility. Thanks, Chels, and here’s to trusting Him.”

“Here’s to trusting Him, Shula. Here’s to trusting Him.”

From Here to the Moon and Back

June 24, Journal Entry No. 47

“From here to the moon and back. Who else in this world will love you like that?” After two years, I still listen to this song each night as I fall asleep. Dolly Parton has to suffice now, and although I love her to pieces, I still miss Seth’s nightly rendition. We’d talk for hours, recalling the events of the day—sharing the joys, frustrations, and worries of parenting; laughing at the latest Eva antic; discussing the Bible study topic for the week—and no matter where we were or how tired we might be, he always ended the night by serenading me with “From Here to the Moon and Back.” This was one of his many expressions of love. And no, Seth could not sing, but his slightly off-key version made it all the more endearing. Now I can’t fall asleep without hearing our song.

And tonight I may have to listen to it a few times because the adrenaline rush I had coming up the mountain is definitely gone. Now I’m left with my jumbled thoughts, my doubts, and my fears. On top of that, Eva’s got me all revved up. Again. No matter how many pep talks I give myself and no matter how well I understand the psychology behind her manipulation (diagnosis: crazy), she still pushes my buttons. She makes me so mad at times I could just scream. So I’m hoping that journaling and music will help me enter my calm zone, which is where I should’ve gone before I went off half-cocked and moved up here in the mountains by my fool self. But that’s neither here nor there. It’s done now.

So back to my calm zone—a cup of chamomile-and-ginger tea, a hot bath with lavender oil and Epsom salt, candles, and my “get me through, girlie” playlist.

Ah yes, this should do the trick. Much better. Now I can dissect Eva’s predictable reaction from a position of peace and tranquility. But the more I think the more riled up I get, because I can’t believe my mama’s gall! She has some nerve. First she went behind my back and contacted Bob and Faith. Really! How pathetic is that, my mother soliciting work for me, as if I’m incapable of getting a job on my own merit in my own time? I was, after all, the head of the women’s mental health clinic at Mercy Hospital. I’ve published more articles than I can count. I’ve presented all over the world, and I’ve secured millions of dollars in grant funding. I can only imagine what she said to them. “My poor darlin’ Shula. I think she had a nervous breakdown after Seth passed away, bless her little heart. I don’t know if she’s as good as she once was, but if you just have pity on her, maybe she could counsel a few clients for you. Or maybe you have some filing for her to do.”

Breathe, Shula, breathe. Inhale the sweet aroma of lavender and exhale the anger. Listen to Chaka. “And don’t bother asking, ’cause I’ve got it. Yeah. I’m every woman!” You indeed are every woman, Shula Taylor—you’re smart, you’re capable, you’re talented, and God is with you.

Okay, so maybe Eva was just trying to help. She did say she believed I was ready to return to work, and although I would have preferred that she talk to me first—breathe—I guess her heart might be in the right place. But how in the world could she think counseling widows would be a good thing for me? I can’t imagine talking about death, loss, grief, pain, confusion, and denial day in and day out. I’m sure those poor widows would be expecting me to encourage them, to give them hope, and to promise them that the sun would shine again. But how could I do that when I’m just beginning to believe these things myself? Yes, I’ve climbed out of the pit, but one foot’s still dangling in the darkness, and I’m terrified that someone else’s grief may push me back into despair. So while Eva’s intentions might be good, working as a grief counselor is not the best option for me.

“Just go ahead, let your hair down. You’re gonna find yourself somewhere, somehow.” Corrine, you hit the nail on the head. I need some

fun and laughter in my life again, and I like the idea of supporting and encouraging women as they strive to enrich their marriages and their families. God blessed me with twenty incredible years of marriage and with a beautiful daughter, and if I can share my experiences with others so that they can enjoy even a tiny fraction of what we had, I'd be delighted.

So perhaps Eva's motives weren't malicious, but how do I make sense of the drama? Her heart, really? Not much time to live? Give me a break. Daddy always says that Eva will most likely outlast us all. I'm more concerned about his heart. But as Seth used to say, "Your burdens are big enough for you. No need to carry everybody else's." Daddy has, after all, managed Eva all this time. Eva once made Daddy get his hearing checked. She swore he couldn't hear. Even she knew how difficult it must be to listen to her nagging and incessant talking all day and not react. She could not understand how his tests all came back normal. Of course, she pronounced the doctor to be a quack. She couldn't fathom the thought that maybe, just maybe Daddy was ignoring her. Now that I think about it, his silence seemed to allow Eva to talk her way right into his plans while believing it was her idea all along. So who's really been in control? He's the epitome of patience, grace, and love for his woman and his family. I guess instead of worrying about him, I need to learn from him.

"Oh no, not I. I will survive!" That's right, Gloria. Sing it, girl. I will survive! By hook or by crook, I will survive! And so will Daddy.

More hot water, a few more songs, and I should have it all figured out. If only our world leaders could deliberate in such a way. We'd all be far better off I'm quite sure of it.

Okay, on to the next issue. Maybe Eva's not enough to run me out of town, but the prospect of dealing with my brother's drama is enough to send me heading for the hills. I love my baby brother Lance to pieces, but he and his family are high maintenance and all-consuming. Baby Lance has always been spoiled rotten, requiring a lot of attention, which everybody gave him from the start. For me, he was like my Baby Alive doll, only better. Dad got the boy he always wanted, and Eva, well she's Eva and does everything big and over the top. I wasn't needy and I was way more independent than Eva would have preferred. And so when she got the chance to stop fighting with me, she poured her heart and soul into Lance, and she continues giving to him in abundance. Thus Lance didn't

marry Delilah—just kidding; her name is Reese—until he was forty. It took that long to find someone who could take care of little Lance while all of us were hovering over him and meeting his every need. But he found her. Reese fit right in and took over, no problem.

At the ripe old age of twenty-seven, Reese's biological clock was ticking away, and they wasted no time being fruitful and multiplying. Now they have the five-year-old prima donna Ryan (yes, she's a girl), the three-and-a-half-year-old diva Rain (yes, that's her real name), and the two-year-old hellion Racer. (Do you wonder why he's a hellion? Who names a boy Racer and expects anything less than a terror?) I pray Lance and Reese are done having babies, because these three make Chucky seem docile. Okay, I'm embellishing, but only a little, because they really are quite the handful. And when you combine these three little angels—come to think of it, Satan is an angel, albeit a fallen one—with Lance, Reese, and Eva, you have a recipe for mayhem. I don't think these children have ever heard the words *no* or *stop*, but they most certainly have mastered the use of said words.

Being with these people is like living in the middle of a sitcom. The three who are supposed to be the adults fall all over themselves trying to appease the three little menaces to society. "Racer, honey, what's wrong with my little man? Don't cry. You don't have to take a nap if you don't want to. Nana's sorry. Let's go get some ice cream." "Lancey pooh, don't forget to upgrade Ryan's iPhone. She's still using the iPhone 5, and the iPhone 12 has been out for two weeks now." "Rain, honey, Daddy loves those red glittery shoes you're wearing. They look so cute with the pink tutu, the emerald-studded tiara, and the orange-and-green stockings. And don't let those little girls at Gymboree make you sad, telling you your clothes don't match. They're just jealous. Tell them you're a little fashionista. Now give me a big smile. Who's Daddy's girl? You're so cute. Oh, yes you are. Kissy, kissy, kissy." Welcome to a typical day with the Sinclair family. Thinking about my family makes me want to gag and I seriously think that banging my head against a brick wall would be less painful than dealing with this crew. The Sinclair's really helped Naaman's look idealistic.

"Respect, just a little bit, just a little bit." Well, Aretha, you'll find no respect in that household. So maybe I am running, but after I lost my buffer, Seth, a grief-induced coma was my only means of tolerating the

Addams Family. Now that the fog is lifting, I'm afraid I would have shot somebody if I had stayed.

So let's recap. I'm talented and up to the job before me; I'm excited by the challenge ahead; I'm ready to begin the next phase in the trilogy of my life (life before Seth, life with Seth, life after Seth), and moving will most likely help me preserve my sanity given the fact that my family is certifiable. It will also help me re-discover Shula now that I'm no longer surrounded by memories of Seth at every turn. I think a change will be good.

Dear heavenly Father, I want to take this time to praise Your most holy name. You are awesome and worthy of all praise, honor, and glory. You said in Your Word that we ought to praise You because of who You are and for all that You've done. I want to thank You for leading me and for prompting me to follow. You have been with me in the past, and I know You'll be with me during this phase of my life. I trust You, but I also pray that You will continue to help my unbelief like the father in Mark 9:24. Although I have evidence that You have sustained me in the past, and although You've promised in Your Word never to leave me nor forsake me, I'm still unsure and afraid. Please don't let fear consume me. Help me to invest my energies in trusting You and not in fear or in worry. I believe dear Father, but I need you to help my unbelief.

I believe that You've led me to Naaman's, and so I'm asking You to align my will with Yours and I ask You to give me the energy, the courage, and the faith to do Your will even when I feel like it's too hard. Bless me with Your peace, protect me under the shadow of Your wings, and comfort me with Your love. Good night, sweet Jesus. In Your name I pray. Amen.

"Love everlasting, I promise you that. From here to the moon and back."

Count on Me

As always, my favorite aunt in the whole wide world, Auntie Helen, is a hoot. Just thinking of her brings a smile to my face. She is definitely eccentric, but she's been my rock, my confidante, my encourager, and my biggest fan (other than Seth). She's Eva's only sibling, and the two couldn't be more different. Aunt Helen has never married, but she has lots of opinions and advice for married couples. She lives alone on fifteen acres of land, but her home is about as big as my bathroom back in Charlotte. She has money stashed away, probably enough to resolve the US debt, yet she chooses to shop at Goodwill and is usually adorned in one of three brightly colored floral-print kaftans and her favorite pair of equally colorful Crocs. And get this: she still drives a hot-pink 1957 Cadillac. Auntie firmly believes in growing, raising, and catching her own food, and she still enjoys a daily puff of her home-grown hemp. You can't help but love her, and over time you learn not to question why she is but simply accept her for who she is.

"So tell me, Sweet Pea, how was your first day?" For as long as I can remember, Aunt Helen has called me sweet pea. She says I remind her of the colorful flowers that grow on her trellises, her sweet peas. According to Aunt Helen, sweet peas must hold on to something in order to grow; I'm similar in that I flourish with the love and support of my family. Sweet peas can grow to be six to eight feet tall; I have always been ambitious and driven. Sweet peas are hardy and can withstand the winters in the mountains of Asheville; I am persistent and a survivor. Sweet peas are beautiful, vibrant, and full of color; I am full of life and laughter. Sweet

peas are fragrant; I fill the lives of others with hope and joy. See why I love her? Who couldn't be confident with such praise and adoration?

"Well, Auntie, you know I've never wanted to work for the church, but I gotta tell you the first couple of days have been good. I keep thinking this is what it'd be like working on an adult version of *Barney & Friends*."

Aunt Helen snickers as she responds. "Shula, you can't mean that big purple dinosaur that Sheridan had to watch every morning? How can you possibly compare the two?"

"It's not a bad thing. It's just that everyone is so friendly and well, I don't know, nice. We pray before each meeting, we have devotion and sing songs, and there's always food. It's all warm and fuzzy and makes you feel happy. Don't get me wrong. The work environment is professional. We have a schedule and agendas, and believe you me, there's a lot of work to accomplish. But it's different. I don't feel rushed or stressed or pressured. The atmosphere is calm and peaceful, and it seems like everyone genuinely wants this place to work. And to think I'm working only with women. You know what they say about us in the workplace—catty, petty, conniving. Grandma used to say tryin' to get a group of women to work together was like tryin' to herd a bunch of cats. But so far this experience has been a pleasant surprise. I guess it goes to show you can't believe everything you hear or read. I'm praying it remains this way."

"Don't be surprised, Sweet Pea. God created us women to be caring, nurturing, giving, and intelligent. That sneaky, manipulative, and evil little serpent caused us to be otherwise. When we live as God created us to be, leading truly authentic lives, then you get glimpses of what you experienced today. Now tell me about these phenomenal women you're working with."

"Let's see. There's Karen, whom you know and who sends her regards."

"Oh my word, I am so proud of that girl." Only Auntie can call someone in her sixties a little girl. "She's been through so much, but to see her now? She is a walking testimony, I do declare."

Auntie is absolutely correct. Karen's been like a member of our family for years. We all went to the same church, but I became better acquainted with Karen about ten years ago when she sought counseling at the Mercy women's clinic. Although she was quite successful, she continued to deal with the demons of her past. By all outward appearances, Karen seemed

strong and capable, a woman completely in control. Inwardly, however, she was in many ways still a frightened, anxious, and unsure little girl.

Karen spent many of her early years bouncing from one foster home to another. Her mother was strung out on drugs, and she never knew her father. The courts intervened after Karen's mother was caught trying to exchange sexual favors with Karen, who was only eight years old at the time, for drugs with an undercover police officer. From that time until she graduated from high school, Karen lived with six different foster families. The last family introduced her to Christ and helped her cultivate a knack for business, her ability to care for others, and her drive to excel. Her life is a testimony to God's goodness.

Karen has come a long way in terms of healing. Because of patient-client privilege, I could never share her story with others, that's her decision to make. But I am hoping that her work at Naaman's will buoy her confidence and help her feel safe enough to share with other women who may have experienced similar trials. And I think it would greatly benefit her too.

"Auntie, I can't begin to tell you how amazing she is. I mean more amazing than I already imagined. And I will definitely tell her you said hello. She has a special place in her heart for you."

"Woo-wee. Don't get me teared up. Go on. Tell me about the other ladies."

"Right. Can't have you crying and carrying on. So there are eleven women on the leadership team including me. Two of us are therapists. I'll focus on marriage and relationships, and Ashley will concentrate on physical and mental health. And we'll oversee the development of workshops, train and work with the relaxation specialists, and coordinate workshops conducted by experts whom we'll pull in from time to time."

"Relaxation specialists? You got me there. I have my ideas about the most wonderful ways to relax, but I guess we're not talking about the same thing."

"No, Auntie. I'm positive they're different. I can't wait for you to visit. It's absolutely incredible here. When you pull up on the circular driveway, your bags magically disappear and you're whisked away to a relaxation room. Imagine that—a room devoted solely to relaxing! And it accomplishes its purpose. The room is dimly lit by the soft glow of candles

and a fireplace. Whiffs of jasmine and vanilla envelop you, and hymns play soothingly in the background.”

“Shula, you sound like a tourist brochure.”

“I know, but the place inspires poetry. Anyway, chaise lounges were strategically placed around the room and I was completely unaware of the other women nearby. They gave me a blanket and a weighted neck warmer, and I curled up on that chair like a baby. I was so caught up in my own personal moment. Just me and God. I thought I’d been translated, because this was how I’d envisioned my entrance into heaven would be. I can’t remember the last time I could just sit and be, doing nothing but relaxing and communing with God. I could’ve stayed there all day. It was absolutely awesome!”

“Sounds heavenly. So what happened next?”

“After I don’t know how long, my very own relaxation specialist, Julie, came to get me, and we spent thirty to forty-five minutes mapping out what my week would look like. I tried to hire her on the spot because I need her every day to organize my life. We set my retreat goals and a time to pray, scheduled a full medical analysis, planned meals and massages, and to my dismay, arranged time to exercise. Auntie, you know how I hate exercising, but Julie said it would do wonders for my energy level. Never thought I’d see the day when I’d be cycling and power walking. I worked muscles I didn’t even know I had.”

“Shula, I’ve been telling you for years about all the benefits of exercising. Why do you think I look younger than you? Tell me you didn’t love it. How could you not feel rejuvenated after working up a good sweat and raising your heart rate a little?”

“Yeah, I’ll admit the whole ‘I conquered the world’ feeling was nice—that is until I coughed up a lung.”

“You’ve always had a way of exaggerating. I’m sure your lungs are intact and are still thanking you for the extension of life. You’ll be ready to run that half marathon with me yet.”

“No. I still think you’re crazy, so don’t count on it. I’m taking baby steps, and if I can do twenty minutes a few times a week, that’ll be major for me.”

“I’ll keep praying for you. Okay, back to the ladies. Who else?”

“You’ll love this one. There’s Pastor Sara, who’ll focus on the women’s spiritual health.”

“Well, I’ll be. A woman pastor. I certainly never thought I’d see the day.”

“I know right. She’s been an advocate for women in the ministry, and she’s been very vocal and influential in support of women’s rights and equality. The church is finally recognizing the importance of women in ministry, and she is a true testament of how God can use men and women to spread His message and further His cause.”

“Well good for Pastor Sara. I’ve been sayin’ the same things for over fifty years. There’s so much work to be done. Who cares who gets it done as long as we’re changing lives and winning souls? Men and their egos are gonna be our downfall. Whew, chil’, don’t get me started.”

“I hear you, Auntie. Seth would be so proud of Pastor Sara. He took a lot of heat for allowing women into the seminary at King University, and she is one of the first graduates. She told me today how Seth encouraged her and always pointed her to Christ. Sounds so like Seth.”

“His legacy most certainly lives on. So do Ashley and Pastor Sara’s workshops have innovative titles like yours?” Auntie loves the workshop titles. I must admit I do too. I just hope the content can live up to the titles.

“As a matter of fact they do. I can’t remember them all, but a couple stuck with me, like ‘You Mean that Tart Rahab Is in Jesus’ Family Line?’ and one of my favorites, ‘Ladies Don’t Fart and Other Myths Momma Told Us.’”

Through hysterical laughter, Auntie asks, “Who comes up with these titles? The names alone are sure to draw a crowd. I think y’all are gonna be booked solid just ’cause women will be curious.”

“Well, that’s the hope. Karen came up with a lot of them, but then during the staff meeting, our juices got going and we were having a ball suggesting titles for the workshops and names for the spa treatments and some of the dishes. But Chef Genevieve wasn’t enthralled with some of the names we proposed for her concoctions. Another perk of the job is that we get to sample the chef’s new creations. Every night there’s a new theme in the main restaurant, and all the restaurants offer whatever you want or need—meat, vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free, lactose-free, etcetera, etcetera. Today we sampled one of the weekly signature vegetarian entrees,

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vadouvan-spiced lentil soup, Nicoise salad, eggplant ratatouille, duchess potatoes, and raspberry sorbet. I guess you can tell this meal is for the French-themed night. So we came up with names like wee wee veggie, but to no one's surprise, none of them made the cut."

"Oh my. Your meetings sound like more fun than work. So tell me, was this Genevieve upset? Is she a stickler? I hear that chefs can be temperamental. Let's just say I don't think you want to infringe on their turf."

"From what I can tell, Genevieve is very French and she does have a few peculiarities, but she is committed to Karen and to this mission. As I understand it, she's been with Karen for well over twenty years. She's helped get the kitchens up and running at all of Karen's other spas, and she's good at what she does. Genevieve is demanding and has high expectations, and she has a vision for what the culinary experience should be here at Naaman's. But she also seems fair, supportive, and approachable. Her biggest challenge, I think, will be working with Trixie, Naaman's down-home southern chef. The two of them are hilarious and couldn't be more opposite. They could have their own on the road comedy tour. Genevieve is prim and proper, the epitome of all things gourmet. She's about as big as a toothpick, always impeccably dressed, never a hair out of place. While she's elegant and leans toward Martha Stewart, Trixie is a regular Paula Dean. She believes that you nourish the soul by filling the belly. She's got a head full of gray hair cut in a cute little bob. She wears glasses or is supposed to because half the time she can't remember where she's left them.

"Trixie has unlimited energy. Watching her in action makes me dizzy. She calls everybody sugar or sweetie. She's as southern as they come, and she was not feeling Genevieve's fancy cuisine. You should've heard her, 'What in the dickens are vadouvan, ratatouille, and duchess sorbet? We are in the South, chil', and these ladies are gonna be lookin' for collard greens, yams, and potato salad. They ain't never had no fricassee potatoes.' Genevieve tried to explain that the ladies had probably had these dishes before but might not be familiar with the names. She said ratatouille is a vegetable stew, duchess potatoes are like scalloped potatoes, and sorbet is like ice cream. Then Trixie asked, 'Well, why can't we just say we're havin'

vegetable stew, scalloped potatoes, and ice cream?’ Auntie, it took all I had to keep a straight face.”

“You can’t be serious. Shula. You have got to stop. This is like one of those TV shows.”

“Auntie, what TV show would you be referring to? You haven’t ever owned a television. But you’re right. They’re hilarious. I almost split my side I was laughing so hard. They are a hoot for sure. But I think Karen’s trying to marry gourmet with down-home cooking; world-renowned cuisines with comfort foods women love, and healthy, nutritious options with tasty, pleasurable eating experiences.”

“You sound like a commercial again. You might even tempt me to leave hibernation and come give this Naaman’s a try. Okay, so finish telling me about the rest of the dream team.”

“Right. I digressed. Sorry. Now, where was I? Let’s see. So I’ve told you about Ashley, Sara, Genevieve, and Trixie. And then there’s Taylor, who runs the spa. She’s amazing and so is the spa. She is the most cerebral, in-touch person I’ve ever met. Taylor moves like a ballerina. She’s like, um, how do I describe her? I guess I would associate her with a whisper or a light breeze. If she weighs a hundred pounds I’d be surprised.”

“This really is sounding more and more like that purple dinosaur show. I think you’re going to fit right in.”

“I do feel like this is where I belong, and for the first time in a long time I feel that there’s hope for me. You know better than anyone how devastated I was after Seth died. He was my life, and without him, I didn’t want to go on. They could have put me in the casket with him for all I cared. But slowly God began to restore me, and now, even though I’m scared, I’m ready.”

Auntie indeed knows better than most how broken I was. If it weren’t for her, Sheridan, Chelsea, my dad, and I guess Eva in her own way, I don’t think I would’ve made it. They had to nurse me back to life. I quit my job, I stopped going to church, I wouldn’t see friends, and I wouldn’t go out. Grief clung to me like a second skin, and I couldn’t find my way back to the land of the living. The first six months were the worst. Not only did my loved ones have to cope with their own grief over losing Seth, but they had to grieve the loss of me. I was no longer the daughter, the mother, the

niece, or the friend they once knew. Fortunately, their love for me and their faith in God were strong enough to nurture me back to health.

“Okay, Auntie, before the waterworks start flowing, let me finish telling you about the leadership team. Just a few more. There’s Rachel, the grounds manager, who I’m sure is your kindred spirit. I’ve always believed your gardens were the best, hands down, but I think you have a little competition now. She’s designed gardens all over the country. I can’t wait for you to meet Rachel, and I’d love to bring her out to your place. She might be able to get a few pointers.”

“Absolutely. I’d love to meet her, especially if you give her such high praise. It’d be nice to have someone else to talk gardening with. And maybe I can give her a few plants and a few pointers on relaxing the way nature intended.”

“Auntie, don’t you dare. I declare, I keep watching *Women in Prison*, waiting to see you being locked up for marijuana manufacturing and distribution. You could put some Mexican drug cartels to shame.”

“Oh, don’t go getting your panties in a knot, Sweet Pea. Really. What does the Bible say? We should enjoy all plants and herbs of the field. Does it not say that right there in Genesis? Read your Bible, baby doll. And don’t go pickin’ and choosin’ what suits you. Hemp is not the only thing I grow. You know people come from miles and miles for my herbal remedies. God created something for everything that ails you. You need help for your adrenal system? Try licorice. Feelin’ stressed and anxious? Try lavender. Wanna boost your immune system? Try my elderberry elixir. Got high blood pressure? Try flaxseed. Wanna live longer? Try my chaga mushrooms. Wanna sleep? Try chamomile. Wanna little passion? Try yohimbe. Wanna escape? There’s nothin’ wrong with a little steamed hemp.”

“So let me see if I understand. Steaming hemp is not the same as lighting up a joint, and escaping is not the same as getting high?”

“Tomayto, tomahto. Six in one hand, half a dozen in the other. It’s all about semantics, my dear. And until you’ve lived to be eighty-three, you don’t get to judge. I’m healthier and in better shape than most of you young huckabucks. That’s what’s wrong with you young people today. You’re so uptight, so high strung. Let your hair down and relax a little. Let go and stop tryin’ to be in control of everything all the time.”

“You’re right, Auntie, or at least right about the need to relax and to let loose now and again. I’m still not convinced you could sell a jury on your theories about marijuana. Good thing the sheriff’s in love with you and overlooks the weed growing among your flowers and legal herbs.”

“Oh, fiddle faddle. It’s not love honey, believe you me. That Sheriff has an ulterior motive for helping me weed my gardens, and it has nothing to do with his adoration for me. Now finish tellin’ me about the magnificent eleven.”

“I get the hint. I’ll drop the subject for now, although we’ve had this conversation for as long as I’ve known you, to no avail. So maybe it’s time I accept my pothead aunt for who she is. You’re certainly healthier and happier than anyone I know.”

“That’s the spirit, lovey. Now, before I fall asleep, finish telling me about your team.”

“Actually, there are three more, I think. Let me see. There’s Kendall, the marketing guru. She’s dedicated to promoting Naaman’s. She designed the website and monitors it, keeping up with reviews and comments on sites like TripAdvisor. Kendall also visits hospitals, churches, counseling centers, and human services departments and tells women about Naaman’s. She’s like the Naaman’s cheerleader. And then there’s Kay, the coordinating women’s physician. She runs the health clinic and everything’s designed to address women’s health issues and to promote healthy living. You can get a health screening, and the health clinicians design plans for managing all kinds of illnesses that plague women, and they even help women make connections with doctors in their hometowns and they’ll coordinate care with the doctor you already have. It’s pretty awesome.

“Last but not least, there’s ChrisAnn, the hotel manager. She’s the glue that keeps it all together. I declare she has eight arms and three sets of eyes. ChrisAnn is very detail-oriented and intuitive. She oversees hospitality, housekeeping, entertainment, and lots of other things that I can’t think of right now. Our number-one job is to make the guests feel special and cared for, and you can’t imagine all that goes on behind the scenes to ensure that every guest has a memorable experience. ChrisAnn does it all and makes it look effortless. I think she also came from one of Karen’s other properties. I’m convinced she could run this place with her eyes closed. So there you have it, the Naaman’s dream team.”

“I’m so happy for you. The past two years have been rough, and you deserve a life filled with joy. Seth would’ve wanted that for you. He loved you completely and wanted nothing but the best for you, and you were such a good wife. I know you’re ready for this next phase of your life. Just take it slow and enjoy the journey. But be forewarned, Satan and his little imps will not be happy because this place is of God and can lead souls to Christ, and they’re gonna be busy trying to thwart that plan, believe you me. So beware of little imps dressed in their brightly colored satin suits. They’ll come in the name of Jesus, wantin’ to pray on your behalf and to anoint you with oil, but you don’t want everybody prayin’ for you. Don’t let them distract or discourage you, because that’s what little imps do. Stay connected, Sweet Pea, and you’ll be fine.”

“Thanks, Auntie. You always know just what to say. So I guess I need to start planning my session. This will be the first week-long session and while I’m nervous, it’s been exciting watching God work. He’s been speaking to me and helping me repackage the Naked and Unashamed message. I guess I just need a little patience. And at some point I guess I should call Eva back. She’s called what seems like a hundred times. I’m big and bad enough to run away from home, but I’m too chicken to deal with my own mother. I’m not scared of her. She just exhausts me. Well, okay, maybe I’m a little scared.”

Auntie, ever the optimist, replies, “Don’t let Eva get to you. She loves you and wants the best for you. She’s just quirky is all. Learn to laugh a little more, and if you treat Eva like one of your case studies, you just might land yourself on the cover of *Time* magazine. She definitely gives you lots of great data to analyze. So with that, I’m going to say good night. Sleep well and know I’m prayin’ for you always and love you much.”

“Night, Auntie. Love you too.”

Because You Loved Me

June 28, Journal Entry No. 48

Why, why, why didn't I listen to everyone who told me, "Tell Eva"? I should have returned her phone calls. I might have known she'd be tracking me like a hound dog given the scent of my Rose the One perfume and the command to sic. And what could be more embarrassing than to have your mother show up at your place of employment? Not only did she show up, but she showed out in typical Eva style. I'm trying to find the humor in Eva, but she continually tests my patience and gets on my last good nerve.

As I write, I'm still having a hard time believing what happened. There I was, sitting in my office, gazing out the window, receiving inspiration from the spectacular natural beauty—the sun just beginning to peek over the Blue Ridge Mountains; dew drops glistening from the tips of the pine trees; a stream cascading over jagged rocks and weaving its way through the dense forest; birds gathering twigs to shore up their homes and picking berries from the rowan trees for their morning breakfast. And just as I was about to take my first sip of steaming mint tea—wham! I heard that voice.

"Where are you hiding her? I know she's here, and just so you understand, I know people in the state attorney's office. Kidnapping is a federal offense, and you will be sorry if you don't let her go this instant. Shula darlin', can you hear me? Mother's here, baby. Don't you worry."

This is what I had to deal with growing up, but I had Daddy. And once married, she was more tolerable with Seth as my protector, but now I get Eva full throttle and apparently so will Naaman's. Sigh.

I nearly overturned three chairs and a sofa as I ran to the front desk. With my best death stare directed at Eva, I jumped into action. “ChrisAnn, I’m so sorry for the confusion and the commotion. This is my mother, Eva, who is apparently very confused right now. Perhaps she’s suffering an early onset of Alzheimer’s. No worries. I’ll take it from here.” I hurriedly escorted Eva (dragged her would probably be more accurate) out of the main lobby and into my office, and through clenched teeth I said, “Please help me understand why you are here at my place of employment and carrying on like a complete lunatic. Over the years I’ve been tempted to have you committed, but I’ve exercised restraint. This time, however, you’re going to have to do a lot of convincing to keep yourself out of a padded cell, so start talking, Eva!”

And bam! She hit me with the tears right off the bat, the full-blown waterworks. Usually they’re saved for catastrophic, desperate situations. I guess the sparks flying about my head showed just how dire this situation was.

Eva engulfed me in her embrace, soaked my Donna Karan blouse, and through hiccups and tears sobbed, “Shula darling, I’m so glad you’re okay. I’ve been so worried. When I couldn’t reach you and you didn’t return one single call, I knew something was wrong. And when you didn’t show up at work, I knew I had to find you and save you. And I see I’m just in time because not only have they taken you hostage, they’ve brainwashed you too. Oh darlin’, it’s okay. Mother’s here and I’ll make it all okay. I knew this place was a cult, but don’t you fret. Faith and Bob said anytime you’re ready, they’ll have you. I know you’re thinkin’ you messed up and now there’s no way out, but I’ve forgiven you and we can start afresh right now. I already called the movers and—”

“Are you kidding me? Please tell me you’re not serious. Do you hear yourself, Eva? Let me get this straight. You are at my place of work, telling me you believe I’ve been kidnapped, that you’re here to rescue me, that a moving truck is on the way, and that you have someone holding another job for me that I don’t want. Did I get that right? Please stop me at any time and tell me you’re working with Betty White and she’s about to come around the corner and say this is a joke and we’re going to be featured on *Off Their Rocker*—which I might add is a good description of you right now, Eva.”

I was so frustrated I wanted to scream or throw something or wrap my hands around Eva's skinny little neck and strangle her. But somehow I held myself together long enough to set Eva straight.

"Eva, I'm going to say this only once, so listen carefully. I work here at Naaman's, and I am here of my own volition. I was not abducted by aliens or forced into slave labor. I am here because I want to be here. I am not quitting, packing, or leaving. I am not going to work for Bob and Faith, although I love them dearly. I will not play these games with you. Now, dry up the tears and choose. You can go home quietly and stew in regret over having lost your only daughter because of your utterly foolish ways." I paused for effect. "Or you can conduct yourself like a civilized and respectable southern belle and join me on a tour of Naaman's, the place where I work. So what's it going to be, Eva? Go home and stew? Or join me on a tour?"

Eva opened her mouth to give a retort, but for once she was speechless. Then with a heavy sigh of resignation and with tears miraculously dried, she actually apologized, though in a way only she could.

"Shula, I just want what's best for you. I've nevah, evah wanted to hurt you, and you should know that, my darling. It was so hard to see you powerless and hopeless after Seth died, and for almost two years, I took care of you and you depended on me. And for the first time in a long time, probably since you were potty trained, you needed me. So I guess I haven't looked close enough to see that maybe you're ready to get back in the game. And maybe I'm a little sad that you won't need me anymore. I don't want to lose you, Shula. Despite what you think, my involvement in your life is not meddling. It's out of love for you. But now I guess it's time for me to return the reins to you. Can you forgive your mother?"

She looked contrite and sincere. And I was and am appreciative of her love and support, especially during my blackout. The problem is that she can be completely consuming and suck up all the air in the room. Sigh. But I have to remember that Eva loves and loves hard, and I guess I have to remember that blessings come in all different shapes and sizes.

I responded the only way I could. "I love you too, Mom. Oh, sorry. Are you old enough to be called mom yet?" This has been a running joke in the Sinclair family. From the time we could understand, it was ingrained in us that Eva Sinclair was too young to be called mom or mommy, and

so we've always called her Eva. And the grandkids wouldn't dare call her grandma or nana—though Racer could call her an old dirt bag and she'd be absolutely gaga. So Eva she has been, and Eva she will always be. Maybe the sooner I accept this fact, the better off I'll be.

"You know I look young enough to be your sister," Eva retorted. "No one would believe I'm your mother. Now, how about you show me around this five-star spa and resort? I can't believe my baby girl is working in such a posh place. You know Karen's spas are world-renowned, and to think you're affiliated with such greatness. I can't wait to tell my bridge partners that my daughter is the executive director of counseling."

"Eva, don't get carried away. I am not an executive director. I am a counselor on staff, but you are right about one thing. This place is five-star all the way. It's beyond posh, and I'm convinced it will be world-renowned in no time. And to think, it's a ministry of the church. Women are able to experience first class treatment on economy class prices. You can tell your bridge partners about the fabulous discount you'll get because I work here, and they better make their reservations quick or they won't be seeing the inside of Naaman's this year. They'll be jealous that you got a private tour, so come on and let me show you around."

As expected, Eva fell in love with Naaman's. The fabulous staff, always exceptionally accommodating, knew to pour it on extra thick for her. By the time I got Eva back in her car and headed home, she had made reservations for a weekend getaway for her and her bridge partners and had set up a time to meet with ChrisAnn to plan her church's women's retreat. Eva is the women's ministries director for the conference, so this would be huge in terms of revenue and publicity for Naaman's. It would also earn Eva another feather in her cap. A win-win for all, I'd say.

But how did I allow things to get so out of hand? I knew Eva would not be pleased, and I should have faced her early on. And having to deal with Eva delayed my work for the day. What's that saying about the best-laid plans? I had to set Eva straight and then take her on a tour. After that, I had to apologize profusely to ChrisAnn, who said she understood completely, since she has a mother too. She suggested that this would be a great topic for one of our workshops. Since I'd probably need to attend, I suggested Ashley conduct it. Perhaps Pastor Sara would be an even better choice, considering how much prayer would be required.

I spent the afternoon trying to catch up, but I couldn't get back on track. The workshop wasn't coming together, I hadn't read the needs assessments of the women who'd be participating, and I still had to get the outline of all the other summer workshops I'd be conducting to Karen. And then it hit me. It's like You spoke to me, my dear, sweet Jesus. Instead of pouring my energies into creating the right ambiance for work, I realized I needed to begin my afternoon with prayer, something I had not done this morning. Sometimes I get so busy and so caught up in my plans that I neglect to consult You, my Creator, the One who knows me better than I know myself. Maybe if I had spent time with You this morning, I wouldn't have been so discombobulated. So I'm taking these few minutes to write and to commune with You. With Jason Gray's "Remind Me Who I Am" playing in the background, I thank You for leading me to Your Word. Joel 2:13 reminded me that You are merciful and compassionate, slow to anger, and filled with unyielding love for me.

Thank You, dear Father, for being so patient with me. How easy it is for me to forget that You want me to come to You with everything big or small, good or bad. So while I've been pleading with You to show me the way, I have focused on the big picture and have neglected to continually seek Your guidance about how I should proceed each day. I got confident in self and gave You a, *Thanks, God. You got me this far. Now I can take it from here.* But in Philippians 4:6, You said that I shouldn't worry and that I should make my requests known to You by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving in everything, not just in some things. So please forgive me for neglecting You.

I'm committing this work to You, dear Lord. Allow me to be the vessel through which You speak to women who desire to be better wives, better mothers, better daughters and sisters, better employees, and better servants for Your kingdom. Help me to be Your faithful servant, always willing to heed Your call. Help me, like young Samuel, to answer, "Speak. Your servant is listening." Thank You for the gentle reminders and for working on my behalf even when I'm seemingly trying to make it all on my own. And thanks for all Your many blessings, even the blessing of Eva. In Your most precious name I pray. Amen.

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Anytime You Need a Friend

“Chelsea, I’m seriously on a professional high right now. I am so excited! I’m nervous too, but I’m more excited than nervous, and that’s good, right? I haven’t felt this energetic in a long time, and it feels pretty darn good, you know. It’s good to be back in the game. Girl, I’m happier than a pig on a rainy day.”

“Breathe, Shula. Breathe. And by the way, how do you come up with these little sayings, happier than a pig on a rainy day? Who still says things like that? You know you sound like my grandmother, right? So what is it you’re so happy about? Didn’t you say Eva showed up at Naaman’s? How can you possibly be this happy after a run-in with Eva? I think they’re putting something in all that tea you drink. Don’t get me wrong. I’m ecstatic to see you glowing again. I was thinking it’s all that Asheville sunshine you’re getting, but this is something radiating from the inside. So what’s up?”

Chelsea never fails to make me laugh. I’ve been at Naaman’s for a little over three weeks, and Chels is here for a girls’ night out. We’ve lived a little under two hours away from Asheville all our lives, yet we’ve seldom come to visit. Most people don’t think about close-to-home getaways, so vacations were always somewhere else. And Seth and I traveled practically all over the world—Thailand, Fiji, Brazil, Turks and Caicos, New Zealand. Funny, we never vacationed in Asheville. But in my short time here, I’ve come to appreciate Asheville more and more. Everything that I love is right here. The place has the most spectacular wonders of nature—waterfalls, mountains, lush greenery. People here have a respect and an appreciation

for the environment, so there are lots of food markets with locally grown produce. We also have natural springs and mineral baths.

There's also a cultural aspect to Asheville, which has surprised me. A plethora of boutiques, art galleries, and craft stores line Wall Street right in the heart of downtown, and the Biltmore Village looks like something out of an Oktoberfest. Even the McDonald's has a seventeenth-century feel. I've also met some of the nicest people and the most eccentric artists here. I'm a regular at the Bella Vista Art Gallery and already get the frequent-shopper discount. I've run out of wall space in my little bungalow and in my office. I'm always finding knickknacks, paintings, and pottery. At this rate my savings will be depleted by summer's end.

And I can't forget about the abundance of high-quality restaurants in the area. I'm in foodie heaven. Most days and nights I eat at Naaman's, but I try to get out a few nights a week to mix things up. I've been to the Laughing Seed, Bouchon, and Rezaz. Who knew there was so much ethnic diversity in Asheville? But my favorite so far is Firestorm Café and Books. Can it get any better than this? I can indulge my two greatest passions, reading and eating, under one roof. I was tempted to bring Chels there but reconsidered, knowing it may be a little too hippy for her. I figured we'd try something new, so we ended up at Mela's, an Indian restaurant.

Back to the question at hand. Why am I so happy? And I guess Chels asked with good reason. For the past couple of years, she witnessed my perpetual doom and gloom. I was a living, breathing Linus from Charlie Brown. On many days I didn't get dressed, let alone get out of bed. I didn't care about fixing my hair, getting my manis and pedis, or—I hate to admit this—taking a shower. Cooking, once my passion, became a thing of the past. Girls' night out consisted of Chels, Eva, and Sheridan force-feeding me soup and crackers, hugging me as I cried, and threatening to have me committed. I had become manic-depressive—crying uncontrollably, yelling, screaming, and throwing things, or sitting for hours staring listlessly out of the window. I'd also become addicted to daytime soap operas, immersing myself in the lives of Victoria and Victor Newman on *The Young and the Restless* and Brooke, Thorn, and Ridge on *The Bold and the Beautiful*.

I was angry with God and all the people in my life, and I don't know how they tolerated me. I certainly disliked me. They finally took drastic

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action and all but threw me into Sheridan's Rav4, depositing me on Aunt Helen's doorstep. After much weeping and gnashing of teeth, I began to heal at Aunt Helen's home. I again encountered Christ and surrendered my life and my will back to Him. Because Aunt Helen had no television or Wi-Fi, I did a cold-turkey detox on my soap operas. And I had no choice but to get up early and to work in the gardens. Besides, who could resist her hot chocolate and home-baked muffins? She also forced her many elixirs and herbs into me. Aunt Helen gave me space to just be, yet her presence brought me comfort and hope. I thank God every day for placing loving, caring, and patient women in my life.

"Why am I happy? That's a good question, Chels. I'm shocked myself. I didn't think I'd ever be happy again, but today I can honestly say that I am. It's been an adventure reacquainting myself with myself. I've started to reconcile the old Shula with the new, and I'm not so resentful and afraid of this new me anymore. For such a big part of my life I was defined as Seth and Shula, Shula and Seth, and now I'm learning that there was more Seth in the Seth/Shula combo. I have no idea where Seth began and where I ended. So when he died it was like a big part of me died too, and all that was left was a broken shell of who I used to be but couldn't be anymore.

"Discovering and redefining myself has been quite an experience, and I guess I'm happy with the me I'm becoming. I'm more intentional about my prayer life and about my connection with Christ; I'm rediscovering skills that I forgot I had and even discovering new ones; I'm meeting new people, identifying new interests, and doing something I really enjoy. Moving was the best decision I've made in a long time. I've put some distance between myself and the shadow of Seth's memory and all the people who knew and loved him, and that's been good. Being here has given me the space to smile without feeling guilty, to make mistakes without feeling judged, and to have an innovative idea without feeling I have to conform to others' expectations. I forget most times that I'm working. And of course I have all the benefits of working at a spa—the massages, and I do believe I've tried every one; the steam room and the sauna; the Pilates and the Christian Zumba class. I can't say I love exercise, but I do like seeing the progress I'm making, and yes, I love my tea. The whole experience has been really good. I can't believe I'm about to say this, but I am getting to happy."

“Girl, you gonna make me cry right here in my rasam soup. I’m so happy you’re happy. I must confess Aunt Helen and I have been holding our breath, thinking this move would either make you or break you. I’m glad I can report back that you don’t seem broken anymore.”

I should’ve known that Chels’ spontaneous girls’ night out was more like a mission to spy on me. “If you’re going to cry, it’ll be because the soup is spicy. At any rate, I’m glad you’re here even if it’s outta pity. But you can let everyone know I’m doing well. So what’s going on with you? We’ve been so consumed with me I don’t even know what’s going on with you and my beautiful goddaughter, Kennedy. I feel so ashamed. How’s she doing these days? Is she going to summer camp?”

“We most certainly have a lot to catch up on, and I’m thinking we’ll need a bottle of wine ’cause we might be here a while.”

Chels signals for the waiter, and flirts unmercifully, devouring him with her eyes, almost bringing him to his knees. Poor kid. He has no idea what hit him. Before she orders a bottle of wine, I save her from herself, again.

“We’ll have two mango lasses and two glasses of water, please. Thank you so much.”

Not sure if he heard a word I said, but at least Chelsea won’t be tipsy and primed to make some foolish choices. “Mango what? A glass of wine won’t kill us. They even drank wine in the Bible.”

“You’re right, a glass won’t kill us. But you’re more than enough without any assistance. Besides, you’ll love this mango and cream drink and it’ll help keep us in line with the whole Indian theme. And don’t think I didn’t notice your shameless taunt of that poor kid. Chels, he has to be at least twenty years younger than you. You could be his mother.”

“What? A girl can’t have a little bit of fantasy time every now and then? And please, I wish I had a twenty-something like you do, all footloose and fancy free. But no, I have a six-year-old. Can you believe it? I think I need something stronger than wine and mangoes. Let me find that beautiful apple dumpling and order us something with a little more kick.”

“You oughta stop it. You know you wouldn’t trade Kennedy for all the tea in China. Besides, I think you had her for me. God knew I’d need someone more helpless to take care of and to love, and Kennedy’s smiles and giggles did me more good than you could ever imagine.”

g u t t e r

“Well, I’m utterly delighted that my stupidity and horniness could be of service.”

At age ten, Chels had declared she’d never have children. Her life’s ambition was to be a princess married to a gorgeous prince, to rule over her castle and all her servants, and to live happily ever after. While I loved playing with my Chatty Cathy dolls—dressing and diapering them, pushing them around in a stroller, and reading them books—Chels was playing with her Barbie Dream House—arranging the furniture (or accessorizing, as she called it), kissing Ken, dressing Barbie in gowns and tiaras, and throwing parties. And did I mention kissing Ken? This became Chelsea’s mission in play and in life. She’s kissed a lot of men as she’s searched for her real-life Ken, having more potential sightings than I can count or remember.

Chelsea has a big heart and a romantic spirit, and she falls in love quickly and completely. The first three months of a relationship are absolutely blissful—the birds sing more sweetly, the moon’s so much bigger, the stars shine more brightly, and all is well in the universe. If only she could wait four months or so, she’d save herself a lot of heartache.

Chelsea found her first love when we were in sixth grade. Jake Turner was the one. She stared at his cute curly black hair all through math class, hung on every word he uttered at lunch, chased him at recess, baked cookies for his snack, and wrote “Jake loves Chelsea” in hearts on every notebook during math. Then one day about three months later, it was over. I tried to figure out what happened, not that I cared much about boys and about being in love, but all I could gather was that upon closer inspection, Jake’s hair wasn’t as curly as she’d thought, the words he spoke were suddenly stupid, she could outrun him so she no longer had to chase him, he was allergic to chocolate and nuts, limiting the kinds of cookies she could bake and she took great pride in her name, Chelsea Sterling, declaring that it was a name of power and prestige; thus the name Chelsea Turner didn’t have the royal ring she was looking for.

It’s been that way ever since. There was Todd, the aspiring actor who turned out to have dyslexia and struggled to read his lines in addition to having a hard time keeping the names straight of his two love interests, Chelsea and Suzette. Julius, the investment banker who ran off with her savings, which he was supposedly investing to make them a fortune for

their future together; Paul, the divorce lawyer who was immune to all schemes leading to the altar, and Neal, the professional football player who assumed his fan club came with benefits that Chelsea believed were reserved exclusively for her. In time, the broken hearts became fewer and fewer because Chelsea's heart became harder and harder.

Thank God she's remained disease-free and, up until seven years ago, child-free. Seven years ago, she met Ross—drop-dead gorgeous, built like a Greek god, charming, intelligent, and talented Ross. Chels was sure he was the one, and so did I. Ross is a successful Christian music producer and has a knack for spotting talent, transforming small-town artists into international megastars. He does everything in the music business. He writes number-one hits, plays the piano like nobody's business, and boy oh boy can he sing. Ross seemed perfect for Chelsea. He was well known, well off, easygoing, and was completely enamored with Chelsea. When they were still together after six months, all her friends were hopeful, and after a year we were all convinced there'd be a wedding soon. Chels was going to get her prince and her dream castle. Chels had finally found Ken.

But one afternoon Chels showed up at my job in tears. We commiserated over a meal at a local Thai dive, and she told me it was over. She said she couldn't do it. Ross seemed too perfect, and something that good had to be too good to be true. He wanted her to pack up her life and move to Los Angeles, and she just couldn't. So Ross left, Chels hit the dating scene again, and we were never to speak of Ross again.

Then one day I got a call saying that Chels was in the emergency room at the hospital where I worked. I rushed to be by her side. The doctors suspected that she had appendicitis. I called her mom and we were all planning for Chelsea's emergency surgery, time off from work, and recuperation at home with me and Seth. The nurse wheeled in a sonogram machine and said she needed to check to be sure that the appendix hadn't ruptured. And as the nurse rolled the ball over Chelsea's sticky, gooey abdomen, she proclaimed, "Well, at least the baby looks healthy and unaffected. Oh, look here. You see the yolk sac there? It's sitting over the baby's head like a halo. Look at your little angel."

Chels nearly fell off the table, and her wails could be heard throughout Mercy Hospital. It took me two hours to get her out of the hospital and into the nearest McDonald's. (Times like these always called for extreme

measures—a Big Mac, large fries, a caramel sundae, and sweet tea for Chels and a fish filet with extra tartar sauce, large fries, and a vanilla shake for me.) She cried, she cursed, she questioned, but in the end she asked, “How can I kill an angel?” Thank God she ruled out abortion. Two sundaes later we were having a baby.

“My little angel is gonna send me to an early grave. All I do is chauffeur her to ballet, to horseback riding lessons, to birthday parties, and to Mrs. Pettigrew’s etiquette class. I listen to the Jonas Brothers and One Direction, I have sleepovers with cacklin’ six- and seven-year-olds, I shop at Crazy Eights, and I sleep with sparkly pink, blue and green star-shaped illuminations on my ceiling from that Cloud B Ladybug nightlight. You should be asking how I’m doing, because Kennedy is living a charmed life for sure.”

“Chels, you’re insane and you know you wouldn’t change one curly hair on Miss Kennedy’s head. She can’t help being so darn cute and incredibly charming. She could sell ice to an Eskimo with that smile of hers. So I haven’t asked in a while, but have you considered telling Ross about Kennedy? He has—”

“Stop. We are not talking about Ross, ’cause there’s nothing new to talk about. He’s moved on and so have I, and Kennedy is doing just fine without him. We are doing fine without him. And you have to admit, I’m more than enough. Another parent would probably send the child into shock. There’s nothing he can give her that I can’t and don’t.”

“I agree. You’re an excellent mother—”

“Extraordinary mother.”

“Okay, extraordinary but children need both parents, and don’t you think Ross has a right to know he has a child?”

“I grew up without a father and I turned out just fine. Besides, Ross left me and he hasn’t looked back. If he was so concerned, he would’ve come back or tried harder to get me.”

“Chelsea, aren’t you being just a bit unreasonable? You sent him away, remember? He wanted to marry you and give you your heart’s desire, but you said you didn’t want him or the life he offered. So what did you expect him to do?”

“He could’ve fought harder. If he really loved me, he should’ve fought harder. So it wasn’t meant to be. You know, I’m thinking I liked you better when you were morose and self-absorbed.”

“Yeah, I bet you did. Well, too bad. I’m back, and you know you love me, so whatever. Who’s been keeping you outta trouble? I’m sure no one, so you oughta be glad I’m back on the job. And did you just change the subject? How are we back on me? I want to hear about you. What else is going on? Any new love interests?”

Chelsea sips her mango lasse and conveniently pops more palak pakoras, those oh-so-delightful pieces of fried spinach battered with green chili, spices, chickpea and rice flour, and curry leaves. They seem to take her an extra-long time to chew. I know something or someone is going on, but I suspect she’s not in the mood to talk about him.

After finally swallowing, she says, “Whew! These spinach thingies are good. Who knew spinach could be so delicious? I could move to Asheville for the food alone, although I wouldn’t be able to fit into my Red Bottom jeans and that would be absolutely tragic.”

“I can take the hint. I’ll drop the subject of your love life for now, but the case is definitely not closed.”

“I’m sure it’s not, but I want to hear about what you do every day. I know they’re paying you to do more than drink tea and sit in the sauna. So what exactly do they pay you for?”

“Well, I’ve been holding workshops and seeing clients on an individual basis. Right now the workshops are one to three hours long and have been on different topics. I’m trying to build a repertoire so I can spend less time developing workshops and more time tweaking them to meet the needs of a particular group. It’s trial and error, but so far the ladies seem to be receptive and Karen hasn’t gotten any more death threats, or at least none she’s told me about.”

“That’s a good thing. Wouldn’t want you whacked off because you offended some uppity, tightwad mother of the church. So how do the individual sessions work? Do they sign up or get some package deal?”

“Why? You thinking of coming for some counseling sessions?”

“Yeah, right. Why would I pay for counseling when I get to lie on your couch and pour my heart out for free?”

“Anytime, my friend, anytime, and you don’t need a couch to pour your heart out, you know. You could do that over—um, let’s see—right here over soup and fried spinach.”

g u t t e r

“Nice try, Dear Abby. We are not talking about me. I’m intently listening to you. So stop distracting me and tell me more about what you do.”

“Okay, okay. I’m just sick of talking about me when I want to catch up with you.” I raise my hand to ward off her protests. “But I respect your privacy, and I will take you at your word that you want to hear about my work. So as far as the individual sessions go, some of the women come for the themed specials, and the individual counseling sessions are part of the package. So let’s say you come for the ‘Pamper, Praise, and Pray’ session. Friday evening would start with a group praise-and-worship session led by Pastor Sara, and they usually bring in guest artists like Vicki Yohe, Krystal Lewis, Natalie Grant, CeCe Winans, or Amy Grant. Then you’d be scheduled for a health screening and spa treatments, and you’d have a choice of four two-hour seminars or workshops to attend. You could also schedule one-hour individual sessions with me, with the nutritionist, with the pastor, or whomever.

“All of this is mapped out with your relaxation specialist when you arrive. Before you come, you complete all these different surveys so the specialist knows you a little better and can make recommendations based on your responses. If you want to continue with individual sessions, you can schedule return outpatient visits or we can—get this—hold Skype sessions. It’s incredible. I’m in awe all over again as I sit here and describe it to you. Karen is more brilliant than I could imagine. Her experience, her knowledge and skills, her faith, and her uncanny understanding of women have been a blessing for Naaman’s. You really should check out Naaman’s and all that it has to offer. You might be surprised how much you enjoy it. There’s so much more beyond the confines of my little bungalow. Not that I’m complaining. You know I love having you here. I miss my friend. I’m just saying you should think about one of the sessions is all.”

“Geesh. I should at least sign up for a weekend session. Maybe when I get back to your place tonight I can look over some of the sessions, and who knows, maybe I’ll bring Mother with me. She’d love it. You know she’s the queen of pampering.”

Thinking of Mother Elizabeth brings a smile to my lips. Oh, how she loved dressing us up in frilly, ruffly girlie dresses, taking us to tea, and teaching us how to walk properly and how to discriminate between the

salad fork and the dinner fork. Mother Elizabeth was determined to teach us how to sit, to stand, to walk, to speak properly, and to hold conversation. We learned how to host a luncheon for two or a dinner party for twenty-five. We learned to cook, to speak French, and most important how to be an excellent wife for our Prince Charming.

I am eternally grateful for all that Mother Elizabeth taught us. She so desperately wanted us to have the life she dreamed of, the life her mother had wanted for her. And for a minute she had that charmed life. Elizabeth married Harvey, the man of her dreams. He was the idyllic husband; charming, loving, funny, handsome. And then in the first year of their marriage Elizabeth Chelsea was born, who was soon called by her middle name as having two Elizabeths in one house was way too difficult. For a time, the Sterling family emulated the Cleaver family to a tee. But when Chelsea was two, Prince Charming ran off with a younger Barbie, something that rarely happened in those times. Harvey and Barbie vanished and Mother Elizabeth was left with her dreams and Chelsea. Technically, she's still married since she refused to grant Harvey a divorce and he never pursued one. But this just allowed Mother Elizabeth to create several versions of the Harvey-Elizabeth tale and Chelsea and I heard them all growing up. So yes, Mother Elizabeth worked hard to prepare us for Prince Charming, but she had a hard time teaching Chelsea how to keep him once he was found.

"You are so right. Your mom would love Naaman's! This is so up her alley. Seriously, let's plan a weekend for you both. Maybe it's just what y'all need."

"Well, I can tell you now, I'll probably get there Saturday morning and skip the whole Friday night praise, worship, 'Kumbaya' moment. No offense, but you know that's not my thing."

"Chels, just give it a try. How do you know it's not your thing if you haven't tried it? Just trust me and promise me you'll give the whole weekend a chance. If you don't like it or if it doesn't work for you, then hey, you tried. At the very least you'll experience amazing spa treatments and have time to relax and unwind."

"All right, all right. I'll think about it. You're really becoming a pain in—"

I give Chels the eye, she lifts an eyebrow, sighs, and continues. “A pain in my butt. So have you done a weeklong workshop yet?”

“No, not yet, but my first one will be in two weeks. I’m so nervous. I’m excited too, but nervousness is outweighing the excitement right now. Only four women have signed up, but for the first workshop, I think that’s good. I’ve been reviewing their profiles, analyzing their survey results, and trying to decide on the format and the topics that can best meet their needs. Unlike the weekend sessions, the majority of the workshops will be with me, and they have to build on and complement each other. These ladies will be with me for three group sessions a day and one hour of individual therapy a day for seven days! Talk about intense. So I have to know them pretty well, plan sessions to meet all of their needs, work to make sure the group gels, keep them awake and happy, and hopefully help them to become better, happier, more fulfilled wives as God intended. How’s that for what I do while sipping tea in the sauna?”

“Whew, girl. Okay, so I don’t even know where you find time to get a facial or a seaweed wrap or to have dinner with me for that matter. How do you juggle it all?”

Chelsea pauses, her hands fly to her chest, and she exclaims, “Wait! Don’t answer. I am about to cry in my—what’s this we’re eating again? Samosas? I’m going to cry over my samosas! I can see it! You’re really coming back to life, aren’t you? I think I’m seeing a glimpse of the old Shula—the take-the-world-by-the-balls Shula, the queen of multitasking, the bring-home-the-bacon Shula. Oh wait, maybe trout would be more appropriate, since you don’t eat meat. Or do you? I can’t keep up. Anyway, I’m seeing the God-fearing, God-ordained Shula of old. Girl, these samosas are gonna be soggy if we don’t change the subject.”

“Guess I should thank you. Perhaps there was a compliment in there somewhere. But you’re only partially correct. Some of the old Shula is back, yes, but I can’t wait for you to get to know some of the new Shula. I’m getting to know her, and I’m kinda liking her.”

“Well, so far I like her too.”

We’re so out of control. We’ve already eaten two appetizers and soup with a meal on the way. But hey, I told you we were foodies, and I thank God that we only get together once in a while or we’d be as big as houses.

“So I want some dirt,” Chels says as she pops the last bite of samosa into her mouth. “Let’s hear about these four ladies who are in need of such intense help to keep their men. What gives? I want details, my friend, details.”

“You are most definitely obsessed with drama, and you know I can’t break their confidentiality. You remember that whole patient-client privilege thing. Although they are not patients in the traditional sense, the same rules apply.

“I am struggling to make all the pieces of this workshop fit. I have ideas and I have an outline, but it’s not quite coming together. I’ve read and reread their profiles and their responses to the interview questions, and I’ve read more books on marriage than I care to count, but I’m still waiting for that nudge from God. I want to give them a message that’s from Him and not from me or from the hundreds of self-help books out there. I mean they could purchase those books and do it themselves or they could go to any number of marriage counselors, but they’re coming here. So I’m trying to determine if there’s a common need, and I’m spending focused and intentional time in prayer for each of these ladies, waiting for confirmation from God. Reactions from my debut keynote and from suggestions from Karen have made it clear that there’s more to a good marriage than passion, desire, great sex and orgasms. And I mean I knew that having experienced a great marriage. But I need God to show me what’s important to share and how to share it best. And I know I should be patient, and I know that God’s timing isn’t necessarily my timing, but this workshop is scheduled to begin soon, and at the rate I’m going, I will be showing episodes of *Dr. Phil*. He has a lot of good stuff to say, but I want these ladies and all the others who will follow to hear from the Lord, not from Dr. Phil or from me for that matter.”

“That’s what I love about you. You genuinely care and you give your heart and soul to everything and everyone you take on. I couldn’t care less. I just need a paycheck to support my expensive habits. But you’re the real deal. So maybe if you tell me about the ladies—no names, of course—something will spark. I’m not saying I have any message for you from the Lord, but I do know that once we get to talking, we usually get answers. What do you think?”

Chelsea has a point. I can't count the number of times we've discussed and analyzed problems and issues, arguing, crying, or laughing. Even if we didn't get answers, talking always helped. So it might be a good idea to hear Chelsea's views. She is a lot more intuitive and caring than she lets on, but I dare not suggest such a thing, since she prides herself on being hard and indifferent.

"Chels, you're absolutely right. Maybe I'll read you their 'marriage autobiographies,' where I asked the ladies to share their perceptions of marriage in childhood and in young adulthood as well as now. The ladies also describe their upbringing and their perceptions of their parents, their beliefs, and external influences or experiences that might have shaped their views of marriage. I asked them to discuss their marriage or pending marriage and their hopes, dreams, fears, concerns, and joys. I also asked them to tell me why they are attending the workshop."

"Sounds good, but before you get started I better go pee. I don't wanna interrupt the flow once we get going. No pun intended."

I shake my head and laugh quietly. Only Chels could make such a production out of going to the bathroom. While I await her return, our meal arrives. The timing is perfect—nothing beats a good brainstorming session accompanied by a decadent meal. We are habitually indecisive, so as usual we order three to four dishes to sample and to share. That always guarantees leftovers, and nothing beats having a great meal twice.

Chels returns and over salmon tikka—done tandoori style, marinated in garlic, ginger, yogurt, and spices I can't even pronounce—spicy chickpeas, curry vegetables, basmati rice, and garlic naan bread, we deliberate the marriages of Alex, Barb, Lindsey, and Savannah.

How Can You Mend a Broken Heart?

Alexandra Olsen:

You asked, why am I taking this workshop? Well it's a last-ditch effort to salvage my dying marriage, which is only fitting since I'm the one who's carried the marriage from the beginning. I don't even know why I want to save it except I did love my husband at one time. Truth be told, I hate to lose. I've built this marriage and this family, and I'd hate to admit defeat. More importantly, I'm tired. Tired of being both husband and wife. Tired of being the breadwinner and the bread maker. Mostly I'm just tired of being tired.

Maybe you're wondering why I got married in the first place. That's easy. My husband was every girl's dream. He was handsome, charming, sexy, and he made me laugh. Oh, how he made me laugh. He was a walking, breathing stand-up comedian. We always had a good time. We ate at all the trendy restaurants, we were the life of every party, we got VIP treatment at the hottest clubs. We were footloose and fancy free and life was a non-stop, Kool and the Gang, celebration. I never questioned why I was the one funding all of these adventures. I was so caught up in his tales of our big, bright, successful future, a future where all of our hopes and dreams come true. I never asked exactly how he planned to make all this happen; I was simply too enchanted with the fairy tale.

Then I got pregnant and we decided to get married and start the fairy-tale life a little sooner than we had planned. So 'the man with the

plan' took a year off from college to work and to jumpstart our family, and I finished my bachelor's degree in marketing and then my MBA. And now, twelve years later, I am the senior vice president of marketing for a major retail chain. I supervise a staff of fifteen people and make \$350,000 a year. Impressive right? I know, I still impress myself, well at least where my profession is concerned. But my home life? That's a different story. I'm holding it all down while my charming and oh-so-funny husband is still figuring out what he'd like to be someday, a someday that never seems to come. He's pursued many dreams, and if just one of them ever came to fruition, I'd be married to Steve Jobs himself.

I guess it wouldn't matter that I make more money if he contributed in other ways like taking care of our three kids and the house. But nope, not my Casanova. I do everything or at least I make sure it gets done. I work long hours and have a lot of responsibility at work, and I've had to hire a nanny to drop off and pick up the kids, supervise the homework, and make sure that everyone is dressed, fed, and hugged when needed. I also handle the household budget, pay the bills, coordinate the kids' activities, and keep up with all the events in my family and his. I can barely stay afloat but don't let the king of the castle tell it, he's as happy as a lark.

And what exactly is Romeo doing while all of this is going on? Good question. It can be one of several things. Maybe playing Xbox or PlayStation or catching up with old friends on Facebook. Then there's the workout at the gym or the tennis match with equally shiftless friends. And my all-time favorite are the "business meetings" with his "business partners." They strategize and analyze hour upon hour, and they always come up with the idea of a lifetime that somehow never pans out. Thank God for Sylvia, the nanny of all nannies. Without her I'd go nuts, the kids would be raising themselves, and the house would fall completely apart.

I'm tired of this life. I want and deserve so much more, yet Romance-a-Lot seems stuck at age twenty-three. You know the saying, "I can do bad all by myself." Well, it's sounding pretty good right now. Me, my mom and my sister have this annual girl's getaway, and maybe it's divine intervention that they chose this place and that you have this workshop. Maybe I can learn some new tricks to get the man I married to become the man I dreamt he'd be, the prince charming I deserved. How do I get him to take action—to finish school, to get and keep a job, to assume some of

the responsibilities around the house, to be the man I need and want him to be for me and our kids? When I look at him I sometimes feel physically sick. Sometimes I seriously want to stab him in the neck. And he's not even funny anymore! Oh, everyone else thinks he's so charismatic and charming and a super husband and a great dad, but he just makes me sick. And he embarrasses me. I don't even take him to functions at work, because I don't want to explain that he's a nobody. If he lived up to his potential, maybe I could fall back in love. I know he put school on hold to get a job to support me and the baby, but I just assumed that once I finished, he'd go back and become the top dog on Wall Street. But that's not who he is, and I don't know if he even has the potential to be that man. How did he fool me?

And you asked about my childhood and my perceptions of marriage. That's easy. I have no perceptions of marriage, because it's always been me, my mom, and my sister. As far back as I can remember, we Harrison women have always had to take charge, and none of the women in our family could seem to find a man strong enough to handle us. Even though I was groomed to be independent, I always imagined that my life would be different. I believed that my marriage would be different, that he would be different. But it looks like my life is about more of the same. My mom and my sister think I should leave him. And they think I'm crazy for not signing up for one of the other workshops like "Relax, Renew, Rejoice." But as I said before, I hate to lose and I'd hate to admit that my sister, my momma, and my grand momma are right. I mean how hard can it be? I can run with the best of the best on Thirty-Fourth Street, downtown Manhattan, but I have little control over our home, my marriage, and our life on Long Island. This makes no sense to me but I'm hoping and praying that it can give me some answers about my marriage. Is it worth fighting for, and if so, how do I fight?

Barbara Anderson Whitman:

I don't know if I can go through with this whole thing, but maybe answering these questions won't hurt. So where do I begin? I am sixty-three years old, I've been married to David for forty-one years, and we have five children—Margaret, Rebecca, David Jr., Susannah, and Jonathan—eight grandchildren, and a beagle named Chap. We live in the same house where we've raised our children, David is retired, and I have always been a

housewife. I should be happy because I've had a really good life. David and I have had the typical ups and downs that come with any marriage, but he's been a good husband, our kids are all doing well, the grandchildren are an absolute delight, we aren't struggling financially, we have friends, we belong to a great church, and for all intent and purposes, life is good. I have what most women dream of—a faithful husband who's a provider and a leader in the church, I have beautiful children and grandchildren, I have a white house with a white picket fence and a reliable four-door sedan, both of which are paid for. We have little debt, we vacation once a year, we belong to the local country club so that David can golf, and I help with several charities. I should be happy, so I feel guilty for complaining.

You asked about my upbringing and my perceptions of marriage, and I guess I'd say that I had an average childhood. I was raised in a conservative, Christian home with my two siblings. My mother was a housewife, and my father worked for the local bank. I grew up in a small southern town, and pretty much everything was defined for us. Men were the providers and the leaders, and women took care of the home. We were encouraged to get an education, and I finished high school and went to college to become a teacher. I taught for two years before having my first child, and after that home became my full-time job. I guess this is what I saw, what I knew, and what I've lived.

I keep staring at the question you asked, "Why this workshop?" That's a really good question. Like I said before, life is good for me. And when I talk to so many ladies out there who are hurting and for good reason like cheating husbands, abusive husbands, illness in the family, wayward children then I feel even more guilty. They don't have all that I have, so why am I not content with the life I have? Why this workshop? Why not come for a week of pampering in one of the blissful spa packages or for one of the nutritional sessions, since, like most women my age, I could stand to lose a pound or two? But I keep coming back to this workshop, "Naked and Unashamed." How ironic that the title suggests being unashamed when I feel so full of shame for wanting more.

So why this workshop? The true answer, the one I've kept hidden for several years now, is that I'm not happy. I'm not fulfilled emotionally or sexually. When I read the description of the workshop and read your article about experiencing marital bliss in the *Journal of Christian Counseling*,

I finally admitted to myself that this is what's been missing from my marriage and marital bliss is what I want. I've been in a rut for so long, and because this is the only life I've ever known, I've not allowed myself to want or expect more. Maybe I don't think I deserve more, after all I have it all. And I am appreciative, I truly, truly am. But I'm not fulfilled. Should a woman over sixty want marital bliss, intimacy, and dare I say it, sexual fulfillment? I guess this is what I'm hoping to discover at Naaman's. By the way, my stay here is a birthday gift from my husband, and so I'm feeling even more like a heel—he's paying for me to complain about my marriage. But if there is any way that I can make our marriage better, for me and for him, then I'm willing to give it a try.

Lindsey Antoinette Williams:

I'm just gonna come right out and say it: I'm scared to death of getting married. I'm a virgin, I'm engaged to be married in six months, and I'm terrified of becoming a wife. When I was growing up, no one ever talked about the details of marriage and especially not about sex. I don't think I ever saw my parents hold hands or touch each other affectionately, let alone kiss. I never thought of them as husband and wife, only as Mom and Dad. I'm an only child and the apple of my parents' eye. I was raised in the church, and I went to church schools. And I never wanted for anything. I traveled with my parents. I loved their friends, and I loved being a part of everything grown-up. I was a miniature version of my mom and, I don't know, I guess I thought when you got engaged, some 'how-to-be-a-wife' gene would kick in but I don't think it has yet.

I've never been all that social with people my age except for my best friends, Jennifer, Brittany, and Heather. But unlike most girls our age, we weren't chasing after boys. We were the nerdy type. We loved to read, watched *Jeopardy*, and enjoyed the outdoors—hiking, biking, camping, rock climbing. And even in college, we still loved all these things, boys still excluded. And I was over the moon when I graduated with a degree in environmental science, got a job at a wildlife reserve, and an apartment with my three best friends. I had all that I wanted.

Then along came Eddie. He literally came out of nowhere. I was checking on some protected black-catbird eggs, and I collided with the

most beautiful man I'd ever seen. I don't even know how I knew that, because I'd never paid much attention to the opposite sex. But he captured my attention and my heart. I gave him a private tour of the protected bird habitats, and we talked for hours. I couldn't believe my luck. We liked the same things, we had the same values and beliefs, and yes, we both loved *Jeopardy*. I fell head over hills in love.

Even though Eddie was not a virgin, he respected my desire to wait until marriage before having sex, and that sealed the deal. Things happened quickly. We dated for about three months before I introduced Eddie to my parents, and they loved him as much as I did. After five months I met his mother and his stepfather, his six siblings, and I don't know how many nieces and nephews, and I instantly became a part of his family. Eddie proposed six months after we began dating, and in six more months I am to become a wife who is supposed to love, to cherish, and to have sexual intercourse with her husband.

I know this all sounds perfect, but there are two glitches. One, Eddie has a child by a former girlfriend, and while I knew he wasn't a virgin, I guess little Teddy, who's three and cute as a button, is a constant reminder that I won't be Eddie's first. And any child we have will not be the first he has conceived. And I'll have to deal with Gabriella, the former girlfriend, for the rest of my life, though so far that hasn't been too bad. Eddie has Teddy every other weekend, and he and Gabriella seem to have moved on and get along okay. But I can't help wondering what the future will hold. I hate to admit it, but I'm also jealous of Gabriella, or at least of what she and Eddie had, and I don't know how to deal with that.

The second glitch is I am scared out of my everlasting mind about becoming a wife and pleasing my husband in bed. When do you learn how to do these things? How will I know how to please Eddie and be a good wife, whatever that is? He grew up in a big family, one that readily shows affection and obviously has no problem reproducing. And what if I don't perform like the other women he's been with? What if he's thinking about Gabriella and not me? What if I can't have children, or what if I do and I'm a horrible mother? I desperately need help. I don't know if I can be the wife I should be, and I don't even know what that is. Anything that you can do to help me would be appreciated. I love Eddie, but what if that's not enough?

Savannah Smith Grayson:

I love my husband with all my heart and I have since forever. Reed has been my best friend since junior high school. We climbed trees together, went fishing, rode our bikes all over Charleston, and told each other everything. You'd think things would've changed when we got to high school, but our friendship didn't waiver. Even when Reed was dating McKenzie Davis and I was dating Travis Butler, Reed was still my best friend. Everyone knew it and accepted that fact as a given.

We were there for each other through thick and thin. I don't know how I would've made it through some of the toughest times in my life without Reed, and I was most certainly there for him during the darkest days of his life. When his father died, I held Reed as he cried, and we looked through photo albums together while he reminisced about the fun times he'd had with his dad. When I didn't get the lead in *Grease* during my sophomore year, Reed listened as I ranted, and he completely agreed that I would have been a far superior Sandra Dee than that little harlot Marsha. But that's another story for another day. He also shared in my joy when I got the lead in *The Sound of Music* my junior year and in *Evita* my senior year.

We encouraged each other to pursue our hopes and dreams—his dream to become an architect and my dream to perform on Broadway. And though we were separated by many miles, with Reed at Pacific Coastal University in San Francisco and me at Western University in Chicago, we kept in touch. We talked every Sunday morning, sometimes for two and three hours, and we looked forward to getting together during the breaks. So it came as no surprise when Reed proposed at my graduation. We were destined to be together and it made perfect sense. How could I ask for more than to marry my best friend—the person who knew me better than anyone else, the person I enjoyed being with more than anyone else in the world? We were the real-life *When Harry Met Sally*. Just like Juliet's love for Romeo, "My bounty is as boundless as the sea, my love as deep; the more I give to thee, the more I have, for both are infinite."

The wedding was beautiful. It was a mixture of what we had always dreamed of—a traditional autumn wedding at St. Luke's Chapel with its southern charm, its stained-glass windows, and its quaint gardens filled with oak trees covered in Spanish moss. Reed's three brothers served as

his groomsmen, and my two sisters and a dear cousin, dressed in fall colors, were my bridesmaids. The wedding was a storybook classic, just like Prince Charles and Lady Di's day. And just like Lady Di, I wore a silk taffeta ball gown with a twenty-five-foot train, I arrived in a glass carriage, and I carried a cascading bouquet of roses, lilies of the valley, stephanotis, gardenias, and orchids. It was one of the best days of my life, and I truly bought into the whole happily-ever-after, hook-line-and-sinker.

So two years later I'm here seeking the answer to my husband's out-of-the-blue confession that he felt I wasn't giving him my all. It all started when I innocently asked if he was happy. I thoroughly expected that he was, because I was doing all the things a wife should do. I cleaned the house, I cooked his favorite meals, I asked about his day and listened to his reply, I never denied him sexually, and I told him I loved him. So the response to my query came as a surprise. "Are you happy my love?" And of course I was expecting him to say, "Yes, my darling. You're a fabulous wife, the woman I've loved most of my life." But did I get that? No. Instead, Ross replied, "You know I've been thinking about this very thing, this notion of happiness. I know that I should be happy because you're doing all the things I guess a wife should do, and I treasure our friendship, but sometimes I kind of feel like our marriage is one of your stage plays. At times it feels like you're acting as my wife, you know playing another one of your roles."

Can you believe it? Reed said he felt that I was treating our marriage like a Broadway production and that he wanted more. He wants my heart. He wants entrance into my soul, that place that I've seemingly blocked off. Maybe because we've been friends for so long, we've gotten comfortable, though being his best friend has its advantages. Everyone says we're the perfect couple—we kiss each other good-bye every morning and good-night every evening, we talk on the phone once or twice a day while at work, we watch movies together, and we go to church every week and to Bible study most Tuesday nights. So I'm here this week to learn a new script so my husband feels happier. I'm hoping this week can teach me how to be more satisfying. "This bud of love, by summer's ripening breath, may prove a beauteous flower when next we meet." Romeo and Juliet have nothing on my Reed and me, I just need to learn a few more tricks to get him to happy.

C H A P T E R I I

Get to Know You

Good morning, sweet Jesus. This is the day I start a weeklong journey with Savannah, Alex, Barbara, and Lindsey. I ask for Your guidance as I attempt to share Your message of love. Thank You for sending Chelsea in the nick of time. Talking things through with her always helps, but can You help me to remember the ladies' real names and not Chelsea's made-up ones? I'd be so embarrassed if I slipped and called Savannah "Jeannie" from I Dream of Jeannie, or Barb "June Cleaver" from Leave it to Beaver or Lindsey "Laura Ingalls" from Little House on the Prairie or Alex the "Ball Buster Miranda", from Sex in the City. Savannah, Alex, Barbara, and Lindsey. Savannah, Alex, Barbara, and Lindsey. Okay, God, here I go, and here's to trusting You.

"Welcome, ladies. I trust that you've had time to unwind and to become acquainted with Naaman's, and I hope you've found everything to your liking. Naaman's is more than a five-star spa and resort; it's a haven designed by women for women. It's designed with you in mind, because we know how hard you work and how much you give. It's important to get away from the pressures and burdens of life, but many of us won't take that much-needed break unless we're forced to. So this is your well-deserved opportunity for physical, spiritual, and mental healing. Consider this your sanctuary for the next few days. Consider this your escape, a week where you have time to focus on nothing but you. Use this time ladies to reflect on what you want for your life, but more important on what God wants for your life. We give you permission to be selfish without guilt. Consider this your well-deserved selfie."

Ten, nine, eight. Wait time. Give them time to absorb that long, run-on welcome. Seven, six, five. Time for me to gauge their expressions, body language, and reactions. Four, three, two. Time to whisper a little prayer. One.

“So again I say welcome. Some of you may be feeling nervous because you don’t know what to expect, or perhaps you’re anxious because of your expectations regarding our time together this week. Some of you may be wondering whether you should be here. Others may be relieved at the opportunity to unburden and to unwind. Whatever you are feeling, I believe that God has brought you here for a specific purpose and that He has a blessing in store for each of you. This week is about transformation. It’s about restoring a rocky marriage, making a good marriage great or an empty marriage extraordinary. This week I will serve as your guide through the Word of God. An answer to every question you might have can be found there. We’ll explore God’s Word to better understand His plan and His purpose for us as women, specifically as wives, and we will spend a large portion of our time focusing on the forbidden S-word.”

“I knew it. I knew this was a mistake.” Barbara, while shaking her head and wringing her hands, is halfway out of the door. “Maybe it’s not too late to switch to another session.”

“I’m with you. Who wants to spend a week talking about all the ways we can please our men in bed?” If looks could kill, Alex would be facing first-degree murder charges. “This is not what I signed up for, and I resent being told that pleasing my husband in bed will solve all our problems. Isn’t this supposed to be for women by women? Sounds to me more like the same ol’ propaganda we hear all the time. Sounds more like for women by men.”

Savannah concurs. “Yeah, isn’t this supposed to be a Christian-based retreat? It’s definitely sounding more Christian Grey-ish to me. Does everything always boil down to sex?”

Alex chuckles and responds, “Girl, you got that right. The brochure shoulda been clear that we were in for some *Fifty Shades of Grey*-type therapy.”

Barbara pauses at the door, turns around, and asks, “Who exactly is Christian Grey? Is he a new Christian therapist? I haven’t heard of him before.”

“Are y’all talking about that book and movie that has everybody all worked up? My roommates are hooked and said all I need to do is read the *Fifty Shades* series before getting married and I wouldn’t have anything to worry about. But waiting till we’re married is hard enough without reading something that might add to the temptation, so I haven’t read the books. I didn’t think this workshop was gonna be like that or I wouldn’t have signed up either.” Realizing what she’s just shared, Lindsey turns fifty shades of red.

With one foot out of the door, Barb asks, “Are you all talking about pornography? Is this what we’ll be discussing? Is the plan to talk about s-e-x all week long? Oh Father, forgive me.”

We’re certainly off to a great start. No time for wait time this time or I’ll be spending the rest of my time alone. “Ladies, ladies, please. Let’s all calm down. Your reactions aren’t uncommon. Talking about the S-word can be uncomfortable. It can make us anxious and even angry, but that’s because society has convinced us to accept the lies and has distorted our perspectives regarding what is accepted and expected.

“Let’s take *Fifty Shades of Grey*, since y’all brought it up. The book, like so many others, has taken something defined, ordained, and sanctified by God and has made it twisted and convoluted. Things have gotten so bad we can’t even raise the subject without getting all outta sorts. But ladies, the truth of the matter is, it’s biblical. And until we address it, dissect it, understand it, and make peace with it, we’ll continue to be dissatisfied in our marriages. We can find peace only when we live within the Father’s will. His Word clearly states, ‘Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which He is Savior. Now, as the church submits to Christ, so also wives submit to your husbands in everything.’ We can’t continue to run from it, we’ve got to tackle this thing head on, beginning now.”

Silence. Blank stares. And then, “Wait a minute. What did you just say? What does that verse have to do with sex?” This from the outspoken Alex.

“I never said anything about sex, although that’s an important component of marriage. You all took it there, not me. I was talking about

the other S-word—the other one we hate to talk about, submission. There. I said it. Submission.”

“Submission? Are you serious right now?” says Alex, the group’s self-appointed spokeswoman. “You let us go on and on about sex, and you were talking about submission?”

“I have to say it worked far better than the typical icebreaker.” Lots of umphs and eye rolling, but at least they’re not leaving. “So now that we’ve cleared up that little misunderstanding, Barb, why don’t you come back and join us? Then let’s all take a deep breath and relax a little.” Five, four, three, two, one. “And please accept my apologies for leading you on. However, I can’t promise you won’t get worked up again, because this week we’ll be delving deeper into uncomfortable topics and we’ll experience many moments of vulnerability. But it’s when we’re vulnerable when we’re more open to examining the whys behind the feelings of uncomfortableness. And it’s my prayer that this examination will provide opportunities to change how we think and behave.

“I’m asking you to trust me. Allow me to take you on this journey, knowing there will be hills to climb, unexpected curves, rough terrain, and even some detours. But if you hang in there and give it your all, I promise the final destination won’t disappoint. Now, why don’t we backtrack and take some time to get better acquainted with one another since we’ll be spending a lot of time together this week. I’d like you to tell us your name, give one word that best describes you, and then tell us the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word *submission*. Don’t overthink it. Just say what comes to mind first. Why don’t we start here on my left?”

“All right, I guess that would be me. Well, my name is Savannah and I’d describe myself as artsy. As for submission, I have never given it much thought.”

“Welcome Savannah and if I can push you just a little, if you were to give it some thought now, what word comes to mind?”

“Well I really think that’s one of our problems, we ladies overthink things. I’m more of a go-with-the-flow, allow-life-to-happen kind of gal. But if forced to use the old noggin, I guess I’d go with destiny.”

“Ok. Care to elaborate a little?”

“This is going to be a long week I can tell. I haven’t exerted this much mental energy since learning my lines for my latest play.” Savannah sighs and seems

exasperated. “Destiny. You know, God’s will and everything. If that’s what He said we should do, then that’s what we should do. That’s our destiny. Simple really and I don’t think we should make it any more complicated than that.”

“Great Thanks Savannah. I’m looking forward to getting to know you better, and hearing more of your opinions about submission. Let’s keep going. Who’s next?”

“Hi. I’m Lindsey and I’d describe myself as earthy. And when I think of submission, I think of outdated and old-fashioned. And I know that’s two words, but they mean the same thing so I’m thinking they could count as one. Oh and excuse me if I’ve offended anyone.” There’s always one in every bunch reminding you that you’re further over the hill than they are.

“Thank you Lindsey and welcome. Who’s next?”

“I’m Alexandra but everyone calls me Alex. I would describe myself as determined, and when I think of submission, I think of slavery.”

“And my name is Barbara as you all know, but I prefer to be called Barb. I would describe myself as dependable, and when I think of submission I think of obedience.”

“See? That wasn’t so bad, and thank you all for sharing. I guess it’s only fair that I share too. You know, the whole practice what you preach thing. So here goes. My name is Shula. I’d describe myself as a survivor, and when I think of submission, I think impossible because I’m too independent. I also think a man invented the word *submission*, because it seems too repressive to me as a woman. It’s not for our time. As Lindsey said, it’s outdated. Women fought long and hard for equal rights, and in many cases we are the stronger, more capable of the two genders, which would be a great topic for another workshop.” That earns a few amens and chuckles.

“I think how can this be of God? Can anyone else relate?” And that produces the first visible sign of the women letting down their guards. Well slightly, but it’s something. I guess I’m beginning to speak their language. I’m no longer the enemy, at least not at this moment.

“But this journey isn’t about me. Oh sure, I could give you a week’s worth of Shula commentary about love, marriage, submission, and even sex, but then how would I be different from all the other therapists, specialists, and experts out there? Do I have anything more profound to say than Oprah, Doctor Phil, Doctor Oz, or Steve Harvey? I’m not foolish enough to think that I do. But what I am offering is a glimpse into the

inspired and authoritative Word, which ought to be our foundation, our guide and our standard. But for many, myself included at times, that still small voice of God has become a distant whisper that can barely be heard over the loud, demanding clamoring's of this world. So I am officially excusing myself from this process, and I welcome the Holy Spirit to lead, to guide, to correct, to affirm, to awaken, and to restore, for these things can only happen by His might alone. So let's explore the Word and see what God has to say about marriage and submission. Is that okay?"

The women look pensive, but at least they're not ready to bolt. I can see they have lots of questions and are still unsure about this journey. To be honest, so am I, but I'm trusting God and in time I pray they will too.

"Can I ask a question?" Lindsey wants to know. "What does submission have to do with making our marriages better? Sorry if I'm being too blunt, but it seems like submission would make marriage better for our husbands or my husband-to-be. They would be happier if we became their personal servants, but wouldn't that mean more work for us? I guess I was looking for ways we could both be happy."

She's greeted by a round of amens. "Excellent question, Lindsey. What does submission have to do with improving your marriages? How can submission make marriage better for you? This is a retreat for women, so it stands to reason that everything would be centered around our happiness, our enjoyment, and our betterment. So once again, what's submission got to do with it? Is that what you're thinking?"

There are lots of yeses and head nods. "Well, if you had asked me that question about fifteen years ago, I would've been wondering the same thing. But God did something amazing in my life, and over the next few days I want to share with you what I have learned. And it is my prayer that, just as God transformed me and took my marriage from great to mind-blowingly incredible, He will do the same for you. I pray that God will reveal to you His plan for your happiness." Wait time. Ten, nine, eight (don't flinch, Shula), seven, six, five (you can do this), four, three (better yet, God can do this through you), two, one.

After I see nods of agreement and exhale internally, I explain my plan for our time together. "This week we will focus on submission as a means to deeper, more meaningful, God-led marriages. We will examine six principles as we learn to submit. We'll explore our call to surrender, to

offer unconditional love, to be beholden, to motivate, to have intimacy, and to trust. Surrender, unconditional love, beholden, motivate, intimacy, and trust—submit.”

I let this sink in before continuing. “To better understand God’s perspective on submission, we’ll engage in several group activities, and you’ll also have several assignments to complete on your own. All I ask is that you be honest with yourselves. Lying to God does no good because He knows the truth, lying to me only hinders my ability to help you, and lying to yourself blocks the blessings of transformation and will result in a total waste of your money and time. So here we go. For your first assignment, I want you to choose a journal from the basket here on the table. Pick one that you feel best reflects your personality or your mood or one that speaks to you in some way.”

More wait time. This gives me a moment to take note of how the ladies choose their journals. Observing is just as big a part of my job as is talking. It’s funny what our behaviors can say about us. Take, for example, this simple activity.

“What if I have my own journal and choose to use that?” Alex asks.

“It’d probably be best to use one of the journals I’ve provided, since they include guiding questions, reflective quotes, and Bible texts. And starting with a new one could help get you out of your routine and your comfort zone and may facilitate looking at things in a different way.”

“You said spend quality time in reflection. How much time is that?” Alex wonders.

“It’ll differ for each person. I’m hesitant to give a set amount of time because I don’t want to restrict you. Why don’t you give it a try and see what feels right for you?”

“What if our responses don’t match your answers?” Alex asks.

“Try not to think of this as a test with right and wrong answers. Because of our experiences, our backgrounds, and our relationships with Christ, each of us will respond differently. Through the reflective process, the group sessions, and the individual sessions, you’ll have to apply what you’re learning to your life and to your situation. You’ll need to find what works for you. I’ll only be sharing my journey as an example, not as a standard.”

“Who will have access to our journals?” Alex asks. “Do we sign some confidentiality agreement?”

“Everyone has signed a confidentiality agreement upon arrival, and I will be the only one reading your journals. You can share during the group sessions if you’re comfortable with that. And I encourage you to do so, since this will aid you in the process of discovery.”

Once all her questions are satisfactorily answered (or at least I hope so), choosing a journal takes Alex all of twenty seconds. She goes for something plain and bright red.

Barb, on the other hand, analyzes each journal in great detail. She picks up one, runs her hand across the cover, turns it over, looks through the pages, puts it back, chooses another, and finally puts three aside. Then the examination process begins again. She finally settles on a pink- and-lilac, paisley print journal.

Lindsey and Savannah don’t take nearly as much time. Lindsey initially picks out a gingham print journal, but after a few minutes, she changes to a green solid-print. Savannah chooses the first journal she touches, which happens to be black.

“Now that you’ve chosen your journals, you have the rest of the morning to relax, reflect, and pray. There are several places within the resort where you can be alone. I love the tranquility gardens, the steam room, and the tea room. During your personal time, I’d like you to reflect upon the questions outlined in your journal under the heading ‘Day One, Reflection One.’ In addition, each of you has an individual session scheduled with me for thirty minutes this morning, so be sure to check your schedule. Any questions?” I’m surprised that Alex has none. Maybe because I gave no wait time. “Great. Let’s end in prayer, and then you’re off and I’ll see you after lunch. As the week progresses, I hope that you will feel comfortable enough to pray and to share testimonies or inspirational devotions when we begin and close our group sessions but for today I’ll pray. Why don’t we stand and join hands?”

I curl up on the chaise lounge on my sun porch with one of Trixie’s southern June bugs (for you northerners, that’s a blend of ginger ale, grenadine, orange juice, and sherbet) and with Karen Carpenter—okay, too depressing; let me change that—with my contemporary Christian

mix playing in the background. I believe in practicing what I preach, so I reflect on my first session.

July 5, Journal Entry No. 49

Today Alex, Barb, Savannah, Lindsey, and I embarked on a journey, and I must admit I have a serious case of the heebie-jeebies. I know I shouldn't be worried, because You're with me, but this is one of those times when the butterflies in my stomach overrule the assurances in my head. It's not because I'm unprepared. I've read more books about marriage and relationships than I care to recall. I have studied and analyzed the ladies' profiles. I have created PowerPoints, planned engaging activities, and developed thought-provoking discussion topics. Above all, I've prayed and prayed. Yet I am weighed down because I feel responsible for the success of the marriages of these four ladies, and that is a huge burden.

Alex seems angry and controlling, and if I'm not careful, she could dominate the sessions. Barbara appears unsure, and I'm afraid that at any minute she'll run for the hills. Savannah doesn't seem to care at all. And then there's Lindsey. She is so impressionable, so young, and so innocent. I don't want to jade her before she even gets started. They're all so different, and with so little time, how will we blend and all be transformed? Are the activities I have planned the right ones for this group? Maybe I need to change tactics. They're expecting a Doctor Phil or an Oprah moment, and I'm afraid they'll be disappointed because all they've got is me. What can I possibly say? My personal submission experiment and marriage transformation may seem revolutionary to me, but what if that doesn't hold water for anybody else?

I remember being where they are, questioning the whole submission thing, wondering about my role in the marriage, and trying to figure out what You had in mind for me. Before I met Seth, I was independent, a go-getter. I had hopes and dreams, and I was confident that I could have it all—career, marriage, motherhood. I didn't think it'd be a challenge. I'd juggle those things just as I'd juggled everything else. Then I met Seth and fell head over heels. I was ready to give up all my plans and follow him to the ends of the earth. But Seth didn't ask me to do that. He encouraged me, and we made an awesome team. We were the ultimate power couple.

He advanced in higher education, and I made strides in the counseling field.

Then I became pregnant and I couldn't have been happier. But life as I knew it quickly changed and it was a far cry from the life I'd envisioned. The life where I was super-mom, adoring wife, and a brilliant leader at work. But by the time Sheridan turned three I was on the brink of a nervous breakdown. I felt pulled in every direction. Home, work, family, friends, and church were a lot to juggle and I felt everything around me unraveling.

Nothing in the courses I had taken or in the textbooks I had read prepared me for parenthood. Sheridan had a mind of her own and no knowledge of or concern for my agenda. For example, I was off on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but without fail, Sheridan would shove a popcorn kernel up her nose on a Monday or would add her bright magic magenta artistic touch to my seashell sand painted walls on a Wednesday. And I had no clue how to comfort her as she cried inconsolably because little Jason had a penis and she didn't. "Why can't we buy one from Kmart," she'd scream, declaring I was the worst mommy ever. And let's not talk about the kitchen, that place where I was once the 'culinary rock star.' The place where I happily ensured that my family was appropriately nourished. Well guess what? This too became another area in which I began to fail miserably. How many more times could I pick up carryout from Beignets Bistro, make it look less pretty, and try to pass it off as mine? Not that it mattered much where Sheridan was concerned. That child wouldn't touch anything from there or anywhere else for that matter unless it was drenched in ketchup. Oh how I prayed that ketchup was a vegetable because that was basically the only one I could get her to eat.

But my biggest worry was whether I was the wife Seth deserved. Was I being the wife You called me to be? I found it hard to go from being the head at work—confident, calm under pressure, gifted—to being a submissive wife at home, especially when I didn't know what that meant or what that looked like. And I started to worry when I sometimes preferred to be at work, where I felt in control, rather than to be at home where everything was slowly coming apart at the seams. I knew I had to do something, so I embarked on a journey of discovery, seeking to understand Your definition and plan for marriage, especially Your plan for me as a wife.

It was a long, trying, and emotional journey, but living in Your will reaped benefits that couldn't be measured.

I want other women—particularly Barb, Alex, Savannah, and Lindsey—to have that same experience. I'm convinced that my discoveries, revelations, and experiences can be of value to other women, but maybe for my first weeklong session, this isn't the way to go. Maybe I should stick with the tried and true. I could easily give them tips for enhancing their communication skills (use *I* statements, listen purposefully, give nonverbal feedback), and I could provide advice on spending quality time together (plan a weekly date night, put the children to bed early and have dinner alone with your husband). If I switch gears, the women will be more comfortable, the reviews may be more positive, and Karen will have ammunition to support my unconventional workshops in the future.

And in this very moment, while I'm sitting here, sipping my cool, refreshing drink, listening to Twila Paris, and allowing the lyrics to speak to me, I get it. A word from You.

“There is one thing that has always been true. It holds the world together. God is in control. We believe that His children will not be forsaken. God is in control. We will choose to remember and never be shaken. There is no power above or beside Him, we know. Oh, God is in control. Oh, God is in control.”

Suddenly I realize this week is not about me. The ladies marriages are not mine to save, because You are God all by Yourself and You don't need my help. I have no power on my own. I am called only to sow the seeds and to trust that the vision You have given me is the one You want me to share. I am not in control, but You are Oh God.

God, help me every day to realize that You're in control and that there is no power above or beside You. Help me to understand that even with all my education, experience, charisma, and vision I cannot compare to Your greatness. I know that because it's Your message and I'm Your child, You will not forsake me so move me out of the way and use me as a simple instrument to share Your message of love, hope, healing, and restoration. Thank You for speaking to me through prayer, through Your Word, and today, through music. In Your name I pray, amen.

She Works Hard for the Money

“This morning’s devotion is taken from Isaiah 54, and I’ll be focusing on the first three verses. I’ll read in your hearing. ‘Sing, barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband,’ says the Lord. ‘Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes. For you will spread out to the right and to the left; your descendants will dispossess nations and settle in their desolate cities.’

“Sing, barren woman, you women who have never even had a child, sing. At first glance, this verse seems to be mocking women who’ve not been able to give birth. Can you imagine? As far back as we can remember, most of us as women have planned for that moment when we would bear and rear children. At least I know I did. I imagined my perfect family. We would have one boy and one girl—Chase Lucas and Charlotte Leigh. I imagined breast-feeding and making all of their baby food from scratch. We would join Gymboree and Mommy and Me classes. They’d attend the best schools, take piano and cello lessons, and be fluent in at least two languages. They’d grow up to love Jesus and to be responsible citizens and meaningful contributors to society.

“Imagine doing everything right, preparing for that special moment you’ve dreamed of your entire life. After a year of marriage, you and your husband plan to begin a family. Six months pass, and no pregnancy. A year goes by and yet another, and still no pregnancy. All of the doctors say you’re fine, he’s fine, it’ll just take time. Meanwhile, your bridesmaids are

expecting their first or even their second child, your parents are antsy for grandchildren, your nieces and nephews will no longer be playmates for your children but possibly the babysitters, and it seems as if your dreams of growing a family will never come true. You and your husband don't laugh like you used to, and intimacy has become "sex for a purpose," passion and desire long gone. You're anguished. Your heart is heavy, and you don't know if you'll ever stop crying. You feel like a failure, and you want to give up.

"To make matters worse, your pastor comes along and tells you to burst into song, to shout for joy. I'm reminded of the Israelites and how they must have felt while in captivity. In Psalm 137:4 they ask, 'How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' How can I sing and shout for joy when my dreams are seemingly being dashed? And in verse 2 of Isaiah 54, not only are we told to praise God despite our circumstances, no matter how bad they may seem, but we're instructed to prepare for the children to come. We are commissioned to praise and to prepare even though we've been barren for years—to praise and to prepare despite the fact that the fertility treatments don't seem to be working. How, Lord, how?

"Well, ladies, there is good news in verse 3. God tells us that our praise and preparation should be in faithful expectation of His promise that we will expand to the left and to the right, translated to mean that we will grow. Our coffers will be filled; our storehouses will overflow. So praise Him for the blessings to come, and be prepared to receive them. Look at the widow described in 2 Kings 4. Every jar that she provided was filled as Elisha promised. If she had brought him two jars, two would have been filled, just as fifty jars would've been filled if she'd brought fifty. She trusted the promise that her vessels would be filled, and she prepared by ensuring that she had an abundant supply of jars. And not only does God promise us expansion, but He promises that our descendants will inherit the nation. Though we are barren now, those who descend from us, our children, our heritage, will inherit the nation. Praise and prepare for your breakthrough, right now ladies because our breakthrough has been promised. Let's wait in faithful anticipation while giving God the honor and the glory. God's message to you all this morning is simply to praise and prepare now because His blessings are on the way."

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I so look forward to our weekly staff meetings. When I'm feeling stressed or wrapped up in the busyness of the job or when I'm lonely and missing Seth, I attend a staff meeting or read Pastor Sara's daily devotional and I'm reminded of the goodness of God, the promises of God, and the love of God. All the frightening tales about working for a faith-based organization and dealing primarily with women have not been my experience at all here at Naaman's. Being in such a spiritual environment, where God's presence is evident in everything we plan, do, and say, has helped me to grow spiritually. And I am inspired by the comfort, support, and encouragement I receive from the testimonies of the women who attend the retreats.

"Praise and prepare. What an awesome charge Pastor Sara has given us and how timely as we faithfully anticipate the blessings, the expansion, and the inheritance promised to us and to Naaman's," Karen says. "I just want to thank you again, Pastor Sara, for your insight, your wisdom, and your spiritual leadership."

"Well, praise God," Pastor Sara says. "This has been an extraordinary journey, and I am so glad and so blessed to be able to share it with such a wonderful group of ladies."

"Aw, we love you too, Pastor Sara."

"Yeah, ditto the love."

"This sounds like a group hug coming on."

We burst into fits of laughter as we gather for an awkward hug. I have three words for this place—adult Barney show. Our weekly leadership meetings are always full of surprises and laughter, not to mention a wealth of information. Listening to reports is the main purpose of the meetings, but we always leave with so much more, like hugs.

Karen restores order and begins with the business of the day with reports from each division.

"I'm going for the grand, elegant look and feel for the driveway entrance, so I'm thinking oak trees and lilies," Rachel says. "I'm thinking large peace lilies at the head of the driveway and Casablanca lilies closer to the entrance. The oak trees will give a sense of luxury and majesty. Do we go with smaller oak trees and wait patiently for them to grow, or do we invest in transplanting full-grown oak trees to accomplish the look we want now?"

“The spa is thriving,” Taylor says. “We are booked to capacity every day. I’ve hired new therapists, we’ve added new treatments, and we plan to enlarge the relaxation area where the saunas and Jacuzzis are located. Judging from the feedback, it seems women would like to have more privacy in these areas. We could create more private stations in the expanded relaxation area, or maybe we could add saunas and Jacuzzis to the guest rooms. What you think?”

Kendall jumps right in. “Targeting women’s ministries at the different churches has been the greatest source of filling the retreat center, and the themed retreats are a huge success. We are reaching out to the younger generation via social media avenues like Snap Chat and Instagram, but we need to make sure we have themes and activities that appeal to them too. Any ideas for how we appeal to the younger audience while making sure we respect the needs of the forty- to seventy-year-olds who are presently the demographic we’re attracting?”

ChrisAnn reports, “In housekeeping we’ve added to the check-in process an option for what time of day guests would like their rooms cleaned so that we cut down on disturbing guests or not having their rooms cleaned when desired. And we’re having a training session on how we can go green in our cleaning processes. The entertainment team is busy securing varying artists for the Freedom Friday worship experiences. So far we have Natalie Grant, Nicole C. Mullen, Jaci Velasquez, Mary Mary, Lynda Randale, Laura Story, CeCe Winans, Amy Grant, and Point of Grace. Sunday morning prayer brunches are a big hit, thanks to Pastor Sara, and we need more movie suggestions for movie night. We like *Fireproof*, *Courageous*, and *One Night with the King*, but we need more ideas.”

Karen recognizing her opportunity to respond says, “Rachel, purchase a few full-grown oaks and intersperse some of the smaller ones along the driveway. That way we can accomplish the look we want now while nurturing the smaller oaks over time. Taylor, let’s go for saunas and Jacuzzis in the suites in addition to smaller, individual relaxation rooms in the expanded area. Kendall, I’ll need to think about your concerns a little more, but off the top of my head, I think that the themes and the guest artist will drive the audience, so work with ChrisAnn to pair the themes with the right artist. I suspect if you have themes like “You’ve Got a Friend

in Me” or “Spiritual Boot Camp” and pair them with artists like Barlow Girl, you’re going to attract a younger audience. But let’s think about it some more. And ChrisAnn, let’s screen *What If*, *Grace Card*, *Message* and, oh, what is that movie that was a big surprise hit? I think it’s called *War Room*.”

How does she do it? Karen takes it all in, keeps every question straight, and provides answers, suggestions, and guidance without missing a beat. When I grow up I want to be just like her. Now that we’ve heard updates and plans for upcoming events, we’ll have to thrash out problems. And there’s always a problem in the kitchen. I know that Trixie and Genevieve are serious, bless their hearts, but they always provide comic relief.

“Trixie, I think you fail to understand that our primary purpose is to promote healthy eating, and we do that by being a model,” Genevieve says. “So we need to set a standard and ensure that the meals we serve are nutritious and aromatic, exquisite and decadent. And just so you know, food that is good for you can be all of these things. Unfortunately, if we offer fried, starchy, greasy options, our guests will pick what is familiar every time. Now I am working with your fish and grits and the fried green tomatoes and the barbecued beef tips. But Trixie, really, I draw the line when it comes to this fried chicken steak and those collard greens that you cook to death in oil and meat, and I won’t even start on the sweet tea and the desserts.”

“Well, Ms. Genevieve, you cannot expect these women to come to the South and be charmed by our fine southern hospitality but not experience our fine southern cuisine. And by the way, we’ve been eatin’ this way since we stepped foot off the *Mayflower*, and our ancestors lived to be one-hundred-and-two with no problem. Just because you have that fancy culinary degree and just because you studied in Paris under Jac Fu Fo does not mean that you are better than those of us who practiced at the feet of our grandmothers. We know how to cook good food ’cause we know what good food tastes like. I cannot make one more braised duck with raspberry sauce and not one more tart with boysenberry-infused balsamic glaze. For heaven’s sake, let them eat cake, Genevieve. Let the ladies eat cake.”

“Oh, you’re so dramatic.”

“I’m dramatic? Please. You, who thinks we’re competing on *Top Chef*? If that ain’t dramatic, I don’t know what is. Whoever heard of fennel

and juniper berries? What's wrong with using plain old garlic and onion powder? All your fancy knives and special gadgets. And for the love of Christ, why can't you just talk in plain English? All your fancy terms—chiffonade, blanch, butterfly, emulsify. You're drivin' me crazy, Genevieve."

"Well, working with you is no picnic either, but we are called to be Christ-like and that's what I'm striving to be, so I forgive you, Trixie."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Genevieve."

Karen looks as if she is warding off a major headache, but maybe it's simply her wheels turning. Remaining poised as always, she mediates. "Okay, ladies, okay. Let's all take a deep breath and calm down. Maybe this little experiment of mine needs a little more nurturing. You both are outstanding chefs and I had hoped we could marry the two genres, but maybe we should rethink this a bit. I still believe we can blend the two styles and end up with something extraordinary, but maybe blending doesn't have to occur in the same kitchen or in the same restaurant for that matter. We do have two restaurants, so what if each of you were head chef of your own restaurant, with each restaurant showcasing your individual cuisines and specialties?"

Karen never ceases to amaze me. The rest of us were gearing up for battle, and Karen once again has found a solution that doesn't involve weapons or blood being drawn.

I think Genevieve is near tears when she exclaims, "Bless you, my dearest Karen! Bless you. I've been with you for many years and we've weathered lots of storms, but I must confess I was seriously considering retirement as a possibility for me in the near future. No offense, Trixie. I just think we're so very different, and I couldn't see how we both could be captains of the same ship. Oh, Karen, you are like the wise judge Deborah."

"Well, Genevieve, no offense taken. I'm so tickled I could pee a rainbow." Did I mention how colorful Trixie can be?

Karen stifles a chuckle, reminding Trixie that the overall goal is still healthy eating and living and that her southern delicacies must demonstrate these principles. Trixie rolls her eyes but says she can create a mac-and-cheese that will make you wanna smack your momma but is also well under four hundred calories.

Now that all feathers have been soothed, Ashley and I ask for prayers for our weeklong retreats. We have worked very hard preparing, and we

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had our first sessions yesterday. Ashley's theme is 'You Don't Know the Cost of My Oil: Healing at the Feet of Jesus' and the workshop focuses on redemption through forgiveness of self and others. I am focusing on the big S of marriage in my retreat titled 'Naked and Unashamed'.

We close in prayer for one another as well as for the many requests submitted by the guests. How refreshing that the majority of our meetings are spent on our knees in prayer!

Later that evening, nestled in my bed with tea in hand and Natalie Grant ministering through song in the background, I reflect on Pastor Sara's morning devotion. I know that during my time of grief I most certainly didn't apply the principles she mentioned, and I certainly didn't think I had anything to praise God for. Talk about being barren. Losing Seth couldn't have left me any more barren, and I would have preferred to be dead too. But God in His infinite wisdom, His perfect timing, and His mercy and grace understood my sorrow and my pain, and in time I've seen how He has turned my pain into praise. What awesome memories I have. I couldn't ask for a better twenty years. I praise God now because He's not finished with me. I believed that when Seth's life ended mine did too, but God was at work in my life, molding me and preparing me for something greater. He's given me a testimony that I pray will serve as an example and as encouragement for women who might feel discouraged and hopeless.

"In humble adoration, I kneel before Your throne. In brokenness I seek your face alone. Above You there's no other who's able to restore my soul. Come and make me whole. Breathe on me. Power of God, come in and change me. You are all I need. Holy Spirit, breathe on me."

Seth was the very air that I breathed. If he had told me he could capture the stars and weave them into a tiara to adorn my head, I would've believed him. And just as Seth was the center of my world, I was equally the center of his.

But I'm slowly realizing that what I need, dear Father, is for You to please breathe on me, just like Natalie Grant asks. I acknowledge that fact that I need You to be my everything. I need You to be more important than the air I breathe. I know that I can't make it without You. I want to praise You for who You are and for loving me despite my flaws and all my mess. I praise You because You are worthy. I praise You because You are everything that I need. You are my Creator. Thus You know me better

than I know myself. You have a plan and a purpose for me, and in Isaiah 54 and 55, You've promised that if I'm obedient, I will be victorious and have abundant life. As you instructed the barren women in Isaiah 54 to sing and to praise You in expectation of the children to come, I too will praise You right now in anticipation of the breakthrough You have in store for Lindsey, Barb, Savannah, and Alex.

I praise You now for the revelations You will give regarding our roles and responsibilities as women, wives, and mothers. I praise You now for transformed marriages and families. In Isaiah 54 You also said that we need to be prepared to receive Your promises. Before the barren women had their children, You told them to enlarge the place of their tents and to stretch out the curtains of their dwellings in expectation of the expanded families to come. And so I too am preparing for Your blessings now.

Be with me as I study Your Word, as I seek Your guidance, and as I strive to know these four women more deeply. Be with me as I prepare this upcoming workshop. Deplete me of self and anything that might hinder Your message going forward. Create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit in me. Transform me by renewing my mind, and may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight. I love You, I praise You, and I am moving forward in anticipation of Your blessing. All these things I ask in Your name. Amen.

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Against the Wind

“Barb, I’m so glad you decided to stay with this session. I know you have your doubts, but I believe in the end you’ll be pleased. How are you feeling?”

I’ve chosen to hold the individual sessions in one of the relaxation rooms rather than in my office. I’m hoping the intimacy of the room—the fireplace, the plush, oversize chairs, the book-lined walls, the scent of lavender, the quiet hymns playing in the background, and the array of refreshments available—will give the impression of two friends chatting over tea. But judging by the strained look on Barb’s face, I may need to make chocolate valium available too.

“I won’t lie. I’m still very hesitant because I’m not convinced that my problems can be solved in this format. I’m so much older than the other ladies, and I’m at a very different place in my marriage. If we’re going to focus on how to be a submissive wife, well I’ve been there and I’ve done that for the past forty-some years. I guess I’m looking for something different.” Barb sighs and pauses, looking out of the window into the gardens. She finally continues.

“I was thinking that I could probably teach the session myself, but I’m not sure if that’s the message I would give to young couples today. I’m looking to be revitalized or maybe just to feel some excitement and joy. Advising me to submit to my husband doesn’t seem to be moving me along a new path but maybe suggests that I continue as I’ve been. Honestly, I don’t think I can continue this way much longer. I feel like I’m dying a slow death.” Barb’s eyes mist as she speaks. It’s obvious that this is the first

time she's verbalized her true feelings, and she seems relieved to have shared them but maybe a little fearful of my response.

"You say you've lived your life as a submissive wife. Can you tell me more about that? What has that been like for you and for your family?"

"Well, as baby boomers, submission was ingrained in us. It was part of our DNA. Wives were expected to take care of the home. We were expected to do everything—cook, clean, shop, sew, iron, wash clothes, manage the kids and the dog, oversee the finances, prepare lunch for our kids and our husbands, and make sure their suits were ready. I even laid them out each evening. We did it all. We were gourmet chefs, seamstresses, accountants, teachers, mediators, and negotiators. And I dutifully pleased my husband sexually at least once a week. It was always the same position, the same time and place. He never complained or asked for more, and it all seemed to work.

"I never questioned my life, and I was very pleased with the one we built. The kids were my joy. Our home was comfortable and welcoming. We had two cars and still do—Ford drivers for life. And David has always been good to me. He never abused me or cheated on me, not that I suspect, anyway. He's a good provider. He's active in the church and in the community—deacon, treasurer of the homeowners association, a volunteer for the Red Cross. He's a good guy." Barb begins to cry. I hand her tissues and let her get it all out. A couple of minutes pass before she continues.

"So you see that's why I feel guilty for being here and for seeming so ungrateful. I guess I was hoping that by coming here I'd feel justified for wanting more, but so far it seems as if the life I have is God's plan for me and I should be thankful." Barb blows her nose while rising to make a cup of coffee. As with the journals, she's deliberate in her selection, although this professional-barista coffee-esspresso-latte-cappuccino-chai contraption is pretty daunting. I haven't figured the darn thing out yet, so I typically stick with the tried and true—green tea, mint tea, and when I'm feeling daring, a hot chocolate.

When she returns to her chair and gets resettled, I ask, "Do you believe that there can be joy in a life of submission?"

"I don't know. But I do know that being a submissive wife seems pretty joyless at the moment."

"Do you believe that this how God intends for our lives to be?"

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“I hope that there’s more, but right now I’m confused. I know without a shadow of doubt that God has given me and my family a good life, but I can’t help but wonder if this is it. Is there more? I guess I hoped there was given the fact that I’m here, but now I’m not so sure.”

“You said you could probably teach the group about submission but you don’t think that’s the message you want to share with young couples. You have three daughters. Is that correct?”

This question produces the first sign of a smile. “Ah, yes. My three beautiful girls. There’s Maggie, my oldest, who’s probably the most like me. Then there’s Becky, who definitely lives up to every stereotype about the middle child. And then there’s my baby girl, Susannah.”

“I can tell they bring you happiness. Your face lights up when you talk about them.”

“My children are my greatest joy, and as a mother, I couldn’t be prouder of them. They are amazing, each in a unique way. I couldn’t have designed them any better if I had molded them from Play-Doh. And don’t get me started on my grandbabies. I think I enjoy them ten times more than I did their parents. Do you mind if I ask if you have children? I know therapists aren’t supposed to share intimate details about their lives, but I just wondered.”

Now it’s my turn to smile from ear to ear. I can definitely relate to how Barb feels about her children, since Sheridan is my pride and joy. “The unique thing about Naaman’s is that it’s not your typical spa or retreat center. Because it’s designed to foster more intimate, meaningful relationships with God first and then with one another, we absolutely can share with one another. My goal is to use my skills as a therapist as well as my experiences as a wife and a mother to facilitate a deeper understanding of God’s Word and His plan for your life. And I can foster a closer relationship with Christ only through a meaningful relationship with you.

“I know that was a long response to your question, and the short answer is yes. I too have a daughter, and Sheridan is the melody that fills my heart. I have only one daughter and so I can’t speak to being the mother of sons, but I can’t imagine anything better than being Sheridan’s mom.” Note to self: I can’t tear up every time I speak about or think about Sheridan. It’s just that I love her so much, not to mention the fact that she reminds me of Seth, which really makes me want to cry. A crying therapist

will definitely not be good for business. I definitely will have to work this through with my own shrink.

“You know exactly. It’s hard to explain to others who don’t have children, but they’re the one thing that can bring you to your knees faster than anything else. They hold your heart in the palm of their hands and they have the power to massage it and fill it with love or to tear it to shreds.” Barb pauses and contemplates something. Then she looks as if she’s had an “aha” moment. “It just clicked. I see what you’re saying about how our relationships with others teach us about having a relationship with God. My relationships with my children have definitely caused me to pray more, to trust more, and to depend on Him more. God knows I could not have raised them without Him. There were many times when I reasoned that God must have a sense of humor and that kids were one of His biggest pranks.”

“Oh, I know what you mean. I’ve certainly had moments when I wondered if I was the star of some reality TV show and at any moment someone was going to jump out of a closet and shout, “Surprise!” But your analogy about relationships is right on point. So if your life or your role in your marriage is not the message you’d want to share with your girls, what message about being a wife would you share?”

This question also gives Barb pause. I’m just relieved she’s no longer positioned to run. “That’s an excellent question and not one I’ve ever really thought about, at least not consciously. I guess I give them subconscious messages all the time just by living and doing, but as far as specifics, I’d have to think about your question some more. What message would I want to share with my girls? Good question. I’d like to think that one over some.”

“Well, that’ll be your first, no wait, your second homework assignment, and we can discuss it more during our next session. How’s that sound?”

“Sounds good.”

“As the saying goes, time always flies when you’re having fun, and our time together this morning is just about done. But what I’d like you to consider, or to reconsider, is this: God doesn’t do anything by accident, and so I believe He brought you here for a specific purpose. I’d also like you to consider that perhaps God does have a plan for you that far exceeds your hopes and expectations, and if you’ll allow yourself to be vulnerable

and open to the workings of the Holy Spirit, He will reveal His purpose to you. Finally, I'd like you to reflect on the following Bible verses: John 10:10, Jeremiah 29:11, Matthew 6:33, and Romans 15:13. That's now assignment number three, but no pain, no gain, right?" Barb writes down her assignments with an eagerness that I'm glad to see. "I want you to reflect on how these texts speak to you. And that is the last assignment for today. Do you think you can handle it?"

Barb responds with confidence and even a little excitement, "Sure. I think I can handle the assignment, and I think I can handle this week too. Thanks, Shula, for sticking with me. I am starting to feel better or at least more sure that God wants me here. What He has in store I have no idea, but I'm glad you're the one who'll accompany me on this journey."

"I'm honored to be a part of your journey, but let's be clear. It'll be God's leading. I'm just glad to be along for the ride. Would you like to pray as we close?"

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I Heard It through the Grapevine

“Welcome back, ladies. I trust your day has been a productive one. I’m sure you’re probably tired. Thinking or reflecting can be a lot of work, and I know I’m guilty of piling on the assignments, not to mention the discussions and the one-on-one sessions. But we have only one week together and we have a lot of ground to cover, so it’ll be intense. I do promise that you’ll have time to enjoy the spa, since the offerings here at Naaman’s are also a part of your healing. Before we get started, any feedback about how things are going so far?”

Silence. Oh, how I hate that quiet lull. I know it’s necessary but it kills me. I wanna know what they’re thinking, and I wanna know now! Breathe, Shula. Count, Shula. Ten, nine, eight, seven ...

“All I can say is that my brain hurts, and this whole marriage thing seems scarier by the minute. Maybe I should just close my eyes, dive in, and stop overthinking it.” I did wonder about including Lindsey, considering she’s the only unmarried woman and the youngest. But I took a gamble, thinking the ladies could all learn from one another. I sure hope I made the right call. I want to build marriages, not break them up before they even start. Oh, wouldn’t the saints have a field day with that one? I can see the headlines now: “Naaman’s: The place you go to be relieved of stress, burdens, and husbands.”

“I for one think this is the most important thing you can be doing. Asking the tough questions now will save you a lot of heartache later. So many marriages end in divorce because couples fail to do that. Couples

get caught up in the honeymoon phase, and when reality sets in, they're asking, 'Who is this person I just married?' Stick it out. You'll be glad you did. At least that's my humble opinion." Ah. Bless you, Barb.

"I wish I'd gone to premarital counseling. I probably wouldn't be married to the joker today. I was blinded by his charm and seduced by his humor. Now who's laughing? Sure ain't me. You should stay and learn all you can now before it's too late." Alex has such a way with words.

"I agree with Barb and Alex. But I just want to clarify that this is not premarital or marital counseling. This week we'll be focusing on you as women, as wives, and as mothers. I highly advise that after you spend this week gaining a better understanding of God's design for marriage, you take what you discover about yourself and, along with your husbands or in your case, Lindsey, your husband to be, participate in marital counseling. All right. Great advice, ladies. Lindsey, you still with us?"

Lindsey exhales and with resignation replies, "I guess so. It's just so much to think about. Why can't love be enough?"

"That, Lindsey, is the million-dollar question. Why can't love be enough? I hope by the end of the week we'll have answers to that question." God, I pray You reveal the answers or my name and Yours will be mud.

"This afternoon I'd like for us to spend time laying a foundation for the remainder of our time together this week. Let's start by identifying the authority figures who define marriage or the parameters for intimate relationships. Who do we turn to for guidance? What messages are we getting, and how do we know what's right and what's wrong? The floor's open for you to share, and also feel free to share your reflections based on the assignment given earlier today. Don't be afraid to shout out. Let me hear it ladies, what are some of the perceptions of relationships out there, and who or what are the driving forces behind them? Don't be shy."

"I hear a lot of ladies at my job talking about a ninety-day rule, and they make lists of questions to ask potential boyfriends to determine if they're worthy of getting the cookie."

Although blushing, Barb asks anyhow. "Alex, sorry to interrupt, but I feel so old and out of it. What exactly is the cookie?"

"The cookie? Well, the cookie is the new term for, how do I say it? It's the new term for 'it.' You know, the 'it' you give to your man."

“Oh. Got it. The cookie is ‘it.’ So there’s a ninety-day rule about, um, about it?”

Lindsey chimes in. “Yeah, I remember hearing something about a ninety-day rule. During the ninety days you’re like supposed to get to know each other, and if the guy is really serious about you, he’d be willing to wait at least ninety days before he gets the cookie.”

“I have a question,” Alex asks. “Are we saying there’s something wrong with the rule? I mean so many girls today don’t make it to the second date before they’re in bed with some man. The relationship lasts all of two months, and then they’re off in search of the next love. So what are we saying? We shouldn’t give practical advice and help girls make better choices, especially since they’re gonna do it anyway? Shouldn’t we at least help them be smart about it and safe for that matter? Should we not listen to anybody or anything that’s not sanctioned by the church or not quoted directly from the Bible?”

As I record responses on pieces of chart paper hanging on the wall, I answer Alex’s question with more questions. “What do you all think? How should we handle all of the information that we’re bombarded with, some of which seems good and makes a lot of sense?”

Barb responds with conviction. “I think the Bible should serve as our guide. It should be the barometer we use to measure everything to determine what’s right and what’s wrong, what’s true and what’s false.”

“And that’s what this exercise is intended to accomplish, assuming that we believe the Bible is true, that every word in it is inspired by God, and that God’s Word is the same yesterday, today, and forevermore. We do believe this is true, right?”

I see nods all around, so I continue. “Then our exercise is to measure philosophies, theories, principles, and practices regarding relationships against what we know to be true, the Word of God. Later on you’ll take the list of theories, messages, and practices and measure them against our barometer, the Bible. You’ll then need to determine whether a theory is true. And if it’s not, you’ll need to figure out what to do with the information. Does the biblical truth drastically contrast with what society calls truth, and is it possible to live biblical truth in this age and time? Is the information you’re getting from the world true? Can we use some of it or should we disregard all of it? You’ll most likely discover that you have

way more questions than answers, and that's okay. The point is to get you thinking. Does that make sense?" Again, nods all around. "All right then. Any other societal messages?"

"So I am like big into women's studies," Lindsey contributes, "and I just read this report, that just came out a few months ago and they had this special on the news and I think there's gonna be like some documentary but I—"

"We get the point, Lindsey. You like to read and you're pro women. We got it. So get on with it."

"Sheesh, Alex. Sorry. Anyway, I don't know if this is a theory, but today they're saying we should invest in education, job training, and career advancement for women, and then we'll have a stronger economy and that marriage and building a family should come later."

Barb concurs. "I saw a special about that on television and I thought the findings were interesting too. Still, though I can't quite put my finger on it, but something didn't sit well with me, and it's hard to say what it was exactly. The premise, bettering the lives of women, was good, but something gave me pause."

"I know," Lindsey says. "I felt the same way. The special talked about supporting single moms, not that I have anything against them and I do think they need help and support. But the report made me feel like we don't need men anymore or at least not as the head of the home. It seems it's expected that women can do it all on their own and that children don't need their dads. Believe me, I get it. There are lots of single moms doing a great job and lots of single moms who have no other choice. Makes me think of Gabriella and Eddie and little Teddy. The relationship didn't work for Eddie and Gabriella. But now Gabriella's a single mom, Eddie's a part-time dad, and little Teddy's getting a part-time stepmom. Is this ideal? It's our reality and we'll make it work, but I kinda feel like the world is saying, 'Embrace this as the new normal.' I feel we should still be sending the message that sex before marriage is biblically wrong, that marriage is a sacred institution, and that children need both parents. It's all so confusing."

"Well, we're not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy, because that message has certainly changed. And I'm not so sure I disagree with the new message. I think the days of depending on a man are over because there aren't many

dependable ones out there anymore.” I sense a theme emerging with Alex and that theme is screaming independence.

“Okay, so I’m hearing a few more theories. One is that single parenting is a new norm, that women should pursue career and financial stability first and family second, and that women’s independence is valued and their dependence on men is not always desirable or necessary. And the voice for these theories is recent research done on the state of women. Does that sound about right?” They all agree, so I move on. “Are there any others?”

Ah, Savannah lives and shares. “Well, we talked earlier about *Fifty Shades of Grey*, so I guess we can add that to the list.”

“Oh yeah, that’s the porn book you all were talking about, right?” Barb still blushes at the mention of the book. I wonder what she’d do if she read it.

Alex chuckles. “Yeah, Barb. I think they call it mommy porn. So what message does that book send about women and love?” Alex pauses and appears to be deep in contemplation. Could it be? Alex might actually be enjoying this activity. “I guess I never considered the meaning of the book. I didn’t read it to stimulate me intellectually. But some themes that come to mind are domination, control, and kinky, painful sex. Anastasia lost her virginity to a man who dominated, humiliated, and hurt her, but she believed she could help him work through the pain of his childhood. She assumed she could change and save him. And isn’t that just like most women’s way of thinking? We’re supposed to be the vessels that men dump all their pain into, and because we’re women we should be strong enough to absorb it and help them heal? We fix their problems, but nobody ever addresses our issues.” Alex takes a deep breath and continues. “I’m sorry for getting on my little soapbox. It just disturbs me to see women being used and abused by men and confusing this behavior with intimacy or, heaven forbid, love.”

I can’t tell if the reddened cheeks are embarrassment or anger, but Barb adamantly proclaims, “I definitely won’t be reading that book.”

“Okay, so we have themes of domination and control being touted as intimacy and romance, and that message comes from the book *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Anything else?”

Savannah can barely contain herself as she sits on the edge of her seat and excitedly contributes to the conversation, “Hey, what about movies?”

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My life is drama, well not in the way you're thinking, but I work in drama, you know the theatre. So anyway, I'm the ultimate movie buff too. I absolutely love movies. You've got the ultimate break-up-and-get-back-together movies like *Mr. Wonderful* and of course *The Break-Up*. Then there are the long-distance-love movies like *Sleepless in Seattle*. And don't forget the love-endures ones like *The Notebook* or the friendship-that-turns-into-love ones like *When Harry Met Sally*. I could go on and on forever, and oh how could I forget my all-time favorite, *Pretty Woman*?"

Everyone's laughing. Savannah's enthusiasm is contagious. "That's a lot of movies, Savannah, and I'm surprised by how many I'm familiar with. I'm a sucker for a good love story myself, and I'm sure many of you have seen some of them too, so let's talk about the themes or messages that we get from these movies. Throw your ideas out there and I'll write away."

"Love endures for better or worse: *The Notebook*." Even Barb's getting into the spirit of the activity.

"Money can buy just about anything—our bodies, our pride. And dress us up and teach us to stand straight, and voila, you've gone from lady of the night to love of his life just like that. Oh and that'd be from *Pretty Woman*."

Getting used to Alex's brashness will definitely take some doing. I suspect that Savannah feels the same way. "Wow, Alex. Isn't that a little harsh? I mean, there are so many themes that you can get from this movie. What about loving someone despite their flaws? Or what about doing what it takes to make it? What about learning to blend sexy and sultry with class and charisma? And don't forget about the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, even for ladies of the night, as you so eloquently labeled Ms. Vivian."

"Really, Savannah? You got all of that from *Pretty Woman*?" Alex is on the warpath now. "That's the problem with women today, we're still looking to be rescued by some Prince Charming. The man will save us, protect us, love us, complete us. And does this suggest that without a man we're endangered, vulnerable, needy, and incomplete? And don't get me started on the whole prostitution thing. Come to think of it, how different are prostitutes from most of us? And who knows, maybe they're smarter than we are. Many women just give it up and get nothing but heartache."

At least the prostitute gets paid, not that I'm advocating prostitution. Okay, I'm shutting up because I could go on all day about this movie."

"Great discussion, and remember: we're just brainstorming right now. I hope I've captured all of the themes and messages suggested. Let's see. I've added love endures, redemptive love, women as both sexy and classy, women looking to be saved and protected, the notion of a Prince Charming, and the need for a man in order to be complete. Any others?"

Anxious to end the heated exchange between Savannah and Alex, Barb chimes in. "Well, this isn't a movie, but I read a fabulous book called *Redeeming Love*. I just thought of it when Shula said 'redemptive love.' I liked the book so much I read it twice. It's a retelling of the Bible story about Hosea. It's also about a prostitute and the unconditional love of her husband, which does in fact save her and endures even when she messes up again and again. It's a beautiful story."

"I agree, and ladies, if you haven't read it, I highly recommend it. Okay, so I'm adding unconditional love is work and at times painful. What else? Just throw it out there."

"Marriage is no longer a requirement in order to have sex. As a matter of fact, a monogamous relationship isn't even required, and that theme is in tons of movies like *Friends with Benefits* or *No Strings Attached*." Savannah continues on her roll.

"And what about being unequally yoked or a father's view of what's suitable marriage material for his daughter as seen in—who knows it?" Blank stares all around. "Come on. It's only the greatest love story of all time. I can't believe you guys don't know it. How about none other than *Dirty Dancing*?"

Alex shakes her head in exasperation. "Savannah, where do you come up with this stuff? Unequally yoked? Why? Because Baby came from wealth and Johnny's a blue-collar worker? Love conquers all. Is that what you believe? Know what I think? I think Baby's still trying to help Johnny figure out what he wants to do with his life, while she's a doctor bringing in the money and taking care of the family and everything else. Oh and that'd be the real story, the sequel, *Dirty Dancing Two*. These movies aren't real, and they don't teach us about real life. Okay, I'm quiet again."

Lindsey plays peacemaker this time. "You're right, Alex. Most movies aren't about real life and rarely is there a sequel. Movies are intended for

our entertainment, a brief moment for us to dwell on the happily-ever-after. Movies just give us a two-hour break from reality. Relax a little. So what about *Scandal*, ladies? That show is hot, and I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I'm addicted. I seriously want to be a gladiator. But now that I think about it, what does this say about our society? We're rooting for the mistress, despising the wife, and giving the husband a pass because his wife's not nice and his mistress is the gladiator we all wish we could be."

"Wow! I love that show too, but this never crossed my mind." Savannah says.

"All right, ladies, let me check to see if I've got everything. As far as themes go, I've heard that you can be friends with sexual benefits, it's okay to have sex outside of marriage with no expectations, fathers shape their daughters' views of marriage, being unequally yoked in terms of class, religion, or finances can affect a relationship, if your wife isn't nice but your mistress is, it's okay to have an affair, and happily-ever-after is just a fairy tale. Have I captured the discussion so far?"

"Man, if I ever have children, I seriously have a lot to think about," Lindsey says. "Who knew there was all this out there? I listen to the stuff and watch it, but I never paid attention based on what y'all are sayin'. Just another thing to worry about. I'm gonna seriously suck at being a wife and a mother."

"I don't know you very well, my dear," Barb says, "but just the fact that you're here and that you care about being a good wife and mother tells me a lot. Back in the day when I got married, you didn't think beyond the wedding. The happily-ever-after was just supposed to fall into place. So good for you. Eddie—I think that's your fiancé's name—is one lucky young man to have someone who loves him enough to be the best that she can be for him."

"Thanks, Barb. Eddie's a great guy, and I guess I still can't believe he loves me, especially since he had somebody like Gabriella. I mean she's exotic and beautiful, and since she and Eddie have a child, she obviously, you know, puts out. What if I'm just the rebound love and once we're married he realizes that I suck and he made a mistake?"

Alex responds in typical form. "This is some real-life drama, just like the love triangle involving Don Draper, his ex-Betty, and his new young

love Megan in *Mad Men*. Maybe your drama could be called *The Virgin and the Vixen*.”

Lindsey and Barb look horrified while Savannah attempts to console the young woman. “Lindsey, don’t listen to Alex. Eddie loves you and you love him, and that’s all that matters. Yeah, you’ll have to work through some stuff, but you can do it. Believe in love, my friend.”

“I was just kidding,” Alex says, chuckling.

Savannah doesn’t let her off the hook so easily. “Yeah, Alex, you’re so funny, a regular Ellen DeGeneres.”

“I didn’t mean any harm, but I guess I’m still trying to get over the fact that Lindsey’s a virgin. How do you do that in the twenty-first century? You’re what, twenty-something, and you haven’t had sex, not even a ‘close but no cigar’ kinda pleasure. You’re telling me you haven’t seen a man’s, you know, or touched one or—”

“Alex!” the three of us shout in unison as Lindsey turns almost purple.

“What? Come on. Y’all aren’t curious? I’ve never met a real live virgin over twenty, and I’m just trying to understand how it all works. I mean do you have any theories about what it’ll be like or do you at least want it, you know, like feel hot or—”

“Alex, really. I can’t believe you. I think you’re seriously jealous because you didn’t wait and because you didn’t wait you ended up pregnant and then had to marry some guy you keep calling a loser. So worry about your own mess and leave Lindsey alone, you bully.” Savannah seems more upset than Lindsey.

Oh my. I’m losing control. In all my planning, I didn’t prepare a response to a cat fight. Help me, Father. “Ladies, ladies, ladies. Let’s all calm down. Take some deep breaths—in two, three, four; out two, three, four. Now let’s process what’s going on here. Lindsey was sharing her concerns, which are legitimate, and Alex, you felt the need to attack Lindsey and to make her doubt herself even more when she should be commended for living the way God intended. This is a perfect example of the point I’m trying to make with this exercise. Take sex for example. The world tells us it’s impossible to wait, it’s too hard to wait, it’s outdated to wait; therefore we don’t have to wait. So if we believe that God’s Word never changes, then does He still expect us to live according to His Word, and that includes remaining a virgin until you say I do—not a virgin until

a man says he loves you, not until you're engaged, and not until you feel horny—but until I do? Changing times doesn't mean we're given a 'get out of jail free' card. The challenge for us is to figure out how we are to live according to God's Word in these changing times. Living according to God's Word takes conviction, courage, and commitment and maybe Lindsey's figured it out. So Alex, what is it about Lindsey being a virgin that upsets you?"

"Didn't know I'd be spending the week with a bunch of tight wads. So touchy. I said I was kidding, as in he-he, ha-ha. Toughen up, little Miss delicate flower. Oh wait. Maybe that comes after you've experienced a nice dose of testosterone. Kidding. I'm kidding. You're such an easy target and since I'm probably already doomed, I might as well have a little fun. Not like I can go and undo that sin." Alex chuckles, but none of the others seem to find the humor in her tirade against Lindsey.

Lindsey pipes up to defend herself. "Look, Alex, I'm sorry you have an issue with me being a virgin, but I am proud of it. I chose to be a virgin because I want to live my life the way God planned it. And yes, it's hard at times, but didn't God say that He won't give us any temptation that we can't handle? So I pray about it, I trust God to help me, and I just deal with it. *Virgin* isn't a dirty word, but we let society tell us that it is. If that makes me a freak, then good. I'll be God's little freak."

Well, you go, girl. "Thanks for sharing, Lindsey, and you're absolutely right. This is good. This is what the exercise is all about. And Alex, just know that the God who gave us a template for how we should live is the same God who provided us with a plan for our salvation. He's the God of second and third and fourth chances. He's the God who forgives us over and over again, and He's the God who takes us as we are and sets us on a new path. He loves us all, and we have all been given the gift of salvation. So no, we're not doomed, Alex, not by a long shot."

"Y'all take everything so seriously. I was just kidding. Good grief. Poor Eddie won't be able to get it up if our little Lindsey doesn't get a little fire in her and lighten up for goodness sake. And before y'all crucify me, I'm just joking."

Savannah is furious. I wonder what's got her so riled up. Note to self: explore bullying and virginity in relation to Savannah. "Lindsey, don't let Alex ruffle your feathers," Savannah says. "You're a gift to Eddie, and

you're giving him the greatest gift a woman could give a man. If you have questions, ask them, and if Alex bothers you again, I might just punch her in the nose."

"Oh my, let's not have any nose punching. I'm sure Alex was kidding although I must remind you again, Alex, of the ground rules. We should feel free to share our opinions, but we are not to judge others or be demeaning, even if we're joking. And Savannah is correct. This week is about asking the tough questions and being in tune with Christ's leading for answers." Before Lindsey bolts or Savannah punches Alex in the nose or Barb hyperventilates, I change the subject.

"Ladies, I think we have a pretty good list. Not an exhaustive list, because that's not the intent of the exercise, but a good one. Remember that the idea is to consider the messages that bombard you each day, shaping how you think, feel, and act. We're off to a great start ladies, so let's talk about your homework assignment." Are they already groaning? It's only day one. "I told you it'd be a lot of work. I wouldn't want to disappoint you, and I sure want you to get your money's worth. So back to the homework. I want you to take this list that we've generated and compare it to what the Bible says about love, relationships, marriage, and family. Where are there similarities and differences? Then reflect on the question, what is truth? Does truth change over time based on circumstances? And finally, what has been your standard, what should it be, and is it possible to live according to that standard? All right, this has been great, especially for our first day. And we have a busy day ahead of us tomorrow as we begin to explore the ins and outs of submission. Do you remember from this morning what submission stands for? I have a prize for the person who can name all six principles."

Lindsey's hand shoots up so fast that I think she's about to lift off. "Okay, Lindsey, go for it."

"There's surrender, unconditional love, beholden, motivate, intimacy, and trust."

"Very good. You are the grand prize winner. You have a choice of the famous Naaman's teatime basket or the Naaman's relaxation basket, both designed to delight. So what will it be?"

"Relaxation all the way. Thanks so much." Lindsey claims her basket, and I think I see her finally beginning to relax at the sight and the smell of the goodies. That's good since she's obviously worried about her pending marriage.

“Surrender, unconditional love, beholden, motivate, intimacy, and trust. Tomorrow we will begin with surrender. As for the rest of the evening, we have another round of one-on-one sessions, you each have a spa treatment scheduled, there’s dinner at six-thirty, and don’t forget to make time for your homework. Actually, let’s change the name from homework. Don’t think of it as torture or drudgery. Rather, think of these exercises as meditation moments. So no more homework. Instead, make time for your meditation moments. All right. Any questions or comments?”

Glazed-over looks all around. However, I am beginning to understand that this look doesn’t necessarily mean they’re bored but more like being lost in thought. With the wait time over, I move to conclude the session. “Great. If you have questions later or need anything, don’t hesitate to contact your relaxation specialist or me. Why don’t we close in prayer? Savannah, do you mind?”

Savannah looks as if she’s been asked to deliver the State of the Union address. She stammers, “I, uh, well, I guess I—”

Barb to the rescue. “Savannah, how about I pray today and you pray tomorrow? I know how hard it can be to pray in public on call. David and I joined a new church when the kids were in their teens, and this church was so different from the one we used to attend. Everybody did everything, praying included. The kids loved being involved, but I was terrified. I grew up believing that preaching and praying were for the pastor alone. So I did everything in my power to avoid being called on to pray. I arrived at meetings late and left early. When the pastor asked for volunteers to pray, I gave no eye contact. But over time I learned that praying was simply talking to God and I didn’t have to have a title or use fancy words to pray. I could just talk to Him like the friend He is. So I’m sure in time you’ll be more comfortable too.”

“Thanks, Barb, but it’s not that. I’m not afraid to talk in front of people. I do that all the time. I guess it’s just, well, I don’t know, but thanks. Yes, if you could pray that’d be great.”

Note number two to self: why is Savannah hesitant or unwilling to pray? Is it as Barb described an unfamiliarity or a discomfort with praying in public, or is it something more? Hmm. So many layers to uncover in such a short time. Help me, Father. Help me.

I'll Stand by You

“Spill it, Chelsea Nicole. I know you better than you know you, and I know you’re up to something or more likely someone.” This has been Chelsea’s pattern for as long as I’ve known her. When she’s met some new beau, especially one she thinks I won’t approve of, she goes underground. When she surfaces, she focuses on me and my life, deflecting all questions about herself. Getting information out of Chelsea is about as complicated as separating Siamese twins.

“What are you talking about? Life’s good. I’m calling to hear how your first day went. I know you have some juicy gossip, and I know you need to unload and get my expert counsel. So let’s hear it. Have you helped June Cleaver find her inner sexy, maybe helped her pick out a new teddy and some stilettos? And what about the ball buster? She should’ve bypassed Naaman’s and headed straight to divorce court on her way to the White House carrying out her wicked plan to overthrow the king and assume his throne. She could’ve saved a whole lotta money. And please tell me you gave Laura Ingalls a little hand-held device to help her release some of that pent-up frustration.”

I’m trying so hard not to laugh, since this only encourages her, but if she keeps going like this, I’m sure to laugh myself a hernia. “Chels, I cannot believe you. Is this the advice you’re suggesting I give the ladies? I thought you were my friend and were happy for me. This advice will get me fired for sure. And just to set the record straight, I have not dispensed teddies, stilettos, or little vibrating toys. I am, after all, an upstanding, saved, and sanctified member of the church.”

“Yeah, right. Who do you think had to clean out that little private closet of yours while you were in meltdown mode? Girl, I discovered some stuff I know they only sell on the black market. Prim and proper? Tell it to somebody who doesn’t know you. All those ladies need is a good piece. You know you’re rippin’ them off, right? Give me one day with them. I’ll have ’em straight in no time. Hey, maybe I should open my own business and give Naaman’s a run for its money.”

While my kidneys may still be intact, my bladder is not. I have to move this conversation to the bathroom or I’ll have a serious puddle in the middle of my sunroom. Only with your best friend can you be on the toilet while talking on the phone. “You are such a fool. Forget counseling. You’d be sued for malpractice. You should, however, take your comedy act on the road.”

“You love me and you know you needed a good belly laugh. All right. Give me the prim and proper recap of your day. I’ll listen intently and be on my best behavior. Scout’s honor.”

“Yeah, Chelsea, and as I recall you got kicked outta Girl Scouts for giving the Boy Scouts a hands-on anatomy and physiology lesson. Anyway, I think the first day went well. I can’t believe how nervous I was, but I don’t think they could tell. Well, maybe BB could.” This mental conversion is going to kill me. I don’t know how I’ll keep the pseudonyms straight. BB’s short for Ball Buster, a k a Alex. Argh. “Chels, she scares me and don’t laugh. I’m tellin’ you I can feel the laser beam emitted from her death stare piercing me right between the eyes. She has a major chip on her shoulder, and she’d rather attack everyone else than deal with her own issues. And the way she talks about her husband! Whew! I can’t help wondering if she’s ever loved him. You know I don’t consider divorce as an option—well, only in some instances—so she’s going to need a lot of prayer and guidance because right now I don’t see any other alternatives for her. The venom she spews can’t be healthy for her, for her husband, or their kids.”

The silence on the other end is deafening. Maybe we lost the connection. Chelsea is never at a loss for words. Or maybe my description of Alex is hitting too close to home.

“Chels, you there?”

“I’m listening intently, remember?”

“Whatever, Chelsea. Keeping silent for two whole minutes must have killed you.”

“Why do you doubt my many skills and abilities? I can be serious when the situation calls for it. Now, if you want me to tell you what I really think of Mrs. Brass Balls, I can, but I’m trying to be objective, responsive, and brilliantly insightful.”

“Okay, all wise one, what do you recommend I do with her?”

“Well, it appears that BB is demonstrating man-envy psyttosis. She’s most likely deflecting to avoid inflecting, thus impacting her ability to reflect and affect.”

Now I think I really am going to lose my once intact kidneys or at least my dinner. “Chelsea, I’m hanging up right now. You’re crazy.”

“No, seriously. I’m really listening. Go on. Finish telling me about your day. No more jokes. I’m as serious as a nun directing the Easter pageant.”

“I’m telling you, you’re a regular Tina Fey. Anyway, as I was saying. I’m praying for a way to connect with BB and to have some kind of breakthrough. Every vibe she gives screams ‘I don’t want to be here,’ yet even when given the option of changing workshops, she’s still here. Anyway, she’ll require much prayer. Then there’s June Cleaver, who’s a real delight.” June Cleaver, a k a Barb. “She reminds me of a character from *Downton Abbey*. She’s the epitome of a woman from the fifties, and every time she speaks I think of tea and crumpets. She’s eager to learn though, and she really wants to make a difference in her marriage even after being married for over forty years. BB terrifies her, and I think she says half the things she says just to get a rise outta June. And June turns at least twenty-five shades of red and is such easy prey.”

“You know in a few years we’re going to be June. You think I’ll lose my mojo by then? Man, I hope not. I think I’ll have to shoot myself. What else would there be to live for?”

“First of all, I pray you’re living for more than your darn mojo. And for the record, I’ve had no mojo for the past couple of years, and you don’t see me curling up and dying. Life post-mojo does exist, you know. Come to think of it, you should know, since that’s the same thing you and Auntie Helen were selling me after Seth died. So are you now admitting you were lying through your pearly whites?”

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“No, no it’s absolutely true—for you. I’m talking about me now. You’re a saint. I, however, am not so angelic.”

“Just tell me now and get it over with. You know I’ll find out sooner or later. What’s his name, what does he do, and how many ways do you love him?”

“So tell me, what’s Mrs. I Dream of Jeannie like? She sounds absolutely gorgeous from the way you’ve described her.”

This mystery man must be a doozy because it usually doesn’t take this long to get the truth out of Chelsea. I guess I’ll have to do wait time just a little while longer. Well, on to Jeannie, a k a Savannah. “She’s absolutely gorgeous. I mean like Hollywood gorgeous. And not only is she beautiful, but I can actually picture her up on the big screen. I told you she’s an actress, right? Well, she’s the director of some community theater. She writes, she produces, she coaches and directs, and she even stars in the plays. I’ve heard she’s really good and people from all over come to see her productions. I found a tape of one of her shows, just to get a better feel for who she is and what she does, and I have to admit she’s Broadway material. On stage, she’s mesmerizing. I didn’t see Sa- ... I didn’t see Jeannie. I saw Sophie from *Mama Mia*. I don’t know how she does it, but she’s able to make the character that you read about in a book or in a script become a real, live three-dimensional person. She made me believe that Sophie was living on a beautiful Greek island, preparing to get married while longing to discover her father. I wanted to give Sophie a call and give her some advice and listen to all her problems. But when the play ended, I returned to reality, and I knew that Sophie wasn’t real.

“However, when you talk to Jeannie it’s like she’s still living the lives of her characters. There are traces of Sophie, Blanche from *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*. And that’s my challenge: to discover the real Jeannie. In her marriage autobiography she said that her husband feels like their marriage is one of her theatrical productions, and I’m beginning to see what he means. It’s like she’s in character all the time. And she absolutely loved the exercise we did today. I had them analyze movies and TV shows and identify the messages about relationships that those forms of media offered, and tonight they’re supposed to compare those messages to what the Bible says. She named movie after movie and she was so animated and engaged, but she revealed nothing about herself.

It's strange, but I have this feeling that there's something buried deep inside that she's protecting. It's like she gets lost in fantasy to shield herself from the world."

I realize I've been rambling on and on and haven't heard a peep from Chelsea. She suckers me in every time. It's therapeutic for me to talk things through, but I'm no closer to knowing what's going on in her life than I was yesterday.

"Chelsea, are you there?"

"I'm here. I'm listening. I'm just wishing I could join your group. It would be like being in the middle of a soap opera. What I wouldn't give to be a fly on the wall."

"It's fascinating yet frustrating, like a thousand-piece puzzle. It's challenging trying to figure out how to make all the pieces fit, but I am enjoying the process of putting it together. So anyway, before you ask, Laura Ingalls is like the daughter every mother wants. She's done all the right things, and you just want her to be happy. This kid deserves happiness, you know. But she's filled with self-doubt, and she feels cheated because she waited but she's fallen in love with a man who not only isn't a virgin but who also has a child by another woman. She's conflicted and afraid, and I pray to God this group doesn't scare her off. And I hope she gains confidence and strength. Maybe her hubby-to-be isn't the one for her or maybe he is. I just pray it's Gods' leading, not our warped views and persuasions."

I'm sick of the waiting. Time to be insistent. "All right, Chels, you've heard about the ladies, as you so affectionately call them. You've heard about my day, and I hope I've reassured you—and Aunt Helen, no doubt—that I'm moving well along the path of sanity. So nothing more about me. I want to hear about you and not some pat response about how life is good. I want full details and I want them now. I will not hang up until I know every single, solitary detail. And if you hang up, I'm headed down the mountain and I will stalk you. Start talking."

"Aw, Shula, you're so cute when you're mad."

"I'm not taking the bait. Talk."

"I really would love to see you. It'd be nice to have you stalk me."

"Talk, Chelsea."

"There's nothing—"

“Not buying it. Talk.”

“You know you’re getting on my last nerve.”

“You don’t scare me. Talk.”

“All right. Sheesh. His name is Santiago. You met him. He works at Mela, the Indian restaurant we went to in town. We’ve been seeing each other ever since that night. It’s no big deal, although his piece is pretty amazing, but there’s no reason for you to get your panties all in a bunch. He’s nice. We have fun and that’s all there is to know. Satisfied?”

Maybe I didn’t want to know after all. She can’t possibly be talking about the waiter.

“Please tell me you’re not talking about the waiter, who couldn’t have been more than twelve years old. Please tell me you somehow met the chef or maybe the owner, anybody else over the age of ten.”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong, Miss Prissy Pants. Santiago’s definitely all man. There’s absolutely no question about that. And if you must know, he’s twenty-two and he’s very mature for his age, and neither of us is looking for anything more than having a good time. And just in case you’re wondering, everything you’ve ever heard about the Latin lover is absolutely true. Girl, he whispers those sweet nothings in my ear, in Portuguese no less, and while I have no idea what he’s saying, I get excited every time. His hair is like the finest Arabian silk, his skin’s as smooth as butter, and I haven’t felt this alive in I don’t know how long. He does things to me that I’m sure are illegal. I had to join a fitness boot camp just to get in shape to keep up. We’ve almost done it all over Asheville. I know one thing. I’ll never be able to eat at Mela’s again, knowing my bootie’s been on just about every table, and when we—”

“Okay, okay, I’ve heard enough. Maybe it would’ve been better if I didn’t know. I’m in shock. Really, Chels. This one takes the cake. I knew there was someone, but I would never have guessed in a thousand years that you’d be with that little baby from Mela’s, the one who could very easily be your son. Chelsea, what are you thinking? I, more than anybody in this whole wide world, want you to be happy. You deserve to be happy, but you seem to be on this self-destructive path heading straight toward more heartache. And what gets me is you know the truth, you know right from wrong, and you definitely know what it feels like to have your heart torn in a million pieces. So what’s going on with you?”

“Oh Shula, please. What? You work for Naaman’s now, so you’re qualified to give me counsel? You’re no longer getting a piece on a regular basis, so now everybody has to be on lockdown? As I recall, you loved hearing about all my little escapades. I was inspiration for your counseling groups and your articles, remember? Now all of sudden you want to stand in judgment of me. Whatever, Shula.”

Oh boy. Chels is about as mad as a cat in a pale of water. Maybe I’ve gone too far, but how can I support and encourage such destructive behavior? And how can I give counsel to total strangers but silently stand by and watch my best friend live a life that’s headed straight to hell?

“Look, Chels, I’m the last person to judge you. You know all of my dirty little secrets, and you, better than anyone, know that I’m still a work in progress. We all are. But what kind of friend would I be if I wasn’t honest with you? I think that you’re still hurting over your breakup with Ross and that you’re still in love with him. To push him further away, you’re seeking love and pleasure with any cute guy with a wink and a smile. But the love you really need won’t be found in Santiago, no matter how many tricks he knows, or in Ross for that matter. The one you really need is Jesus, but you’re determined to push Him away too. And you know what, Chels? You’re not just hurting yourself. What about Kennedy?”

“How dare you bring Kennedy into this! You know I love my baby girl more than anybody in this whole wide world. Santiago has nothing to do with Kennedy. Those are two separate worlds. Kennedy’s at camp, has never met Santiago, and never will. And don’t you dare bring Ross into this either. How many times do I have to tell you that ship has sailed? It’s over. Finito. Done. Kaput. I’m starting to think you have a thing for him. Maybe you should track him down. I give you my blessing. Lord knows you could use a good lay. As a matter of fact, tell him I sent you and to give you the upside-down hand special compliments of Chelsea.”

Ouch. That hurt. The counselor in me knows she’s lashing out because she’s hurt, angry, and in need of a scapegoat, someone else to bear her pain. But the friend in me can’t believe she’s being so crass, so hurtful, and so utterly disrespectful. “Fine, Chelsea. Go ahead. Try to hurt me. Is it easier to live your miserable life when others are miserable too? So what, you prefer the broken Shula to the Shula who’s healing? Well, too bad. I’m not

running. I'm your friend unconditionally. And as your friend, I will speak the truth and will do whatever it takes to save you."

"And you wonder why I don't like telling you anything. You are so judgmental. Like you don't have issues and secrets. Just a few weeks ago you were seriously qualified to be committed, all curled up in a ball, not even able to wipe your own butt. And why aren't we talkin' about Seth's heart attack? Huh? Why aren't we talking about the fact that most men who have heart attacks in their early fifties have them for a reason? Hmm? Maybe there was a chick on the side, one of those pretty young college students flauntin' around all nice and firm and eager. Got everybody thinkin' he was perfect, but just like the rest of us, he had to put his pants on one leg at a time. Don't want to go there, do you? Don't—"

"How. Dare. You. You have reached an all-time low, Chelsea Nicole Sterling. This is beneath even you. I will not listen to another word about Seth. And I will not allow you to make this about me. You can try to hurt me all you want, but it doesn't change the fact that you need to leave Santiago alone and get your life together."

"Everyone's not you, Shula, all saved and sanctified. You need to get over yourself, get your own life together and stop worrying about mine. And I hope your approach with the ladies is better than your approach with me, because if it's not, they'll be leavin' Naaman's feelin' like dog mess. You know what, Shula? I'm having a good time, and when it no longer works we'll go our separate ways. End of story. So you wanted to know. Now you know. And now I'm hanging up before I say something I'll regret. And don't call me. I'll call you. Maybe."

The silence is deafening. I can't believe Chelsea just hung up on me, not that I'd have been able to say anything else coherent through the tears. We've had our disagreements in the past but nothing like this, and it feels so random, so out of the blue. Has she always felt this way but not shown her fury until today, or did I say or do something that pushed all the wrong buttons?

Sigh. I've got to pull myself together. Sitting here crying and trying to analyze the million ways I'm a bad friend and counselor won't help me make it through day number two with the ladies. Get it together, Shula. God'll have to work this one out. The only thing I know that might help relieve this pain is to write. Journal, tea, and Genevieve's apricot ginger

scone with streusel glaze in hand, I curl up on my chaise lounge and pour out my heart and soul onto crisp, lined pages.

July 6, Journal Entry No. 50

Reflections: Day One, Naked and Unashamed Session 001

- So far so good, I think. No one quit, and they at least seem to be getting along.
- The ladies
 - Barb: I really like Barb. She's so eager to discover, and she seems to take the exercises and the discussions seriously. It's also refreshing to see her wanting to enhance her marriage after so many years. Needs: Validate her role as wife and mother. Emphasize that retirement brought about change and although the adjustments can be nerve racking, the opportunities can be amazing. Also, help her to understand that her desire for something more or something different isn't a bad thing.
 - Lindsey: She's such a sweetie pie. She reminds me of Sheridan. Questions: Is Eddie the one for her? Can she handle being a stepparent, and will she always compare herself to Gabriella? What is Eddie's relationship with Gabriella like? Does he know how Lindsey feels?
 - Savannah: I don't have much to say because Savannah is so guarded. She maintains the pretense of being happy, carefree, and loving, but there's no depth. I'd almost be fooled except her eyes can't lie. Gotta give it to her though—she's an exceptional actress! Questions: How can we have a breakthrough in one week? What's she hiding? How do I push her without pushing her away as I have evidently done with Chelsea?
 - Alex: The best for last. She reminds me so much of Chelsea—that hard, tough exterior, the need to be independent, the belief that she doesn't need a man. She talks a big game of divorce, but why hasn't she left yet? Needs: I can't let her

get under my skin. Remember that she's still here, and she's looking for answers despite what she says.

- The media influence activity: I think this went really well. I'll have to keep it in the rotation of exercises. I learned a lot about myself from it too. 1) I'm highly influenced by music. My music is divided. There's my pick-me-up dance music, my girl empowerment music, my take-me-back-in-the-day music, and my Christian music. 2) I compartmentalize my life into the secular and the Christian. As for what I watch on TV, I must admit I love a good chick flick. I also love shows like *CSI*, and especially since Seth died, I've used television to fill the empty hours. So are my secular-world activities praiseworthy, true, and of good repute as Philippians 4:8 says they should be? 3) Lots of practices and beliefs are contrary to the Bible, including the ninety-day rule (Genesis 2:24, 1 Corinthians 7:2), career first, family second (Titus 2:5 GNT), husbands and wives having equal roles in the marriage (1 Peter 3:1), and role reversal in marriage (Ephesians 5:23). How do I help others see the relevance of the Bible today?

Chelsea: Okay, I know Chelsea's not a part of my work, but she's my best friend, she's a woman, and she's dealing with some of these same issues, so why not? Anyway, it's my journal, so I can write about whatever I want. Chelsea has always given the impression that she's strong and independent and doesn't need anyone. But in reality, she's still a little girl desperately craving her daddy's acceptance and love. Chelsea's mom worked hard to prevent Chelsea from missing or longing for her dad. She overindulged Chelsea, giving her everything her little heart desired. She filled Chelsea's days and nights with activities and friends and lavished her with gifts, and praise and compliments and an abundance of love. But even with all of that, Chelsea still inquired about her dad. What was he like? Why did he leave? Did he miss her? Was she just like him? Did he sing her lullabies at night or carry her on his shoulders at the zoo? But Mother Elizabeth became an expert at avoiding Chelsea's queries. Her most common response was to question Chelsea's loyalty to her. "Aren't I enough?" "Don't I

make you happy?” “Aren’t we complete, just the two of us?” And if Chelsea persisted, Mother would resort to tears.

During her teen years, Chelsea began to resent her mom and rebelled and boy, did she give Mother Elizabeth a fit. School suspensions, smoking, promiscuity, running away—you name it, she did it, always hoping to get her mother’s or, better yet, her father’s attention. Then on Chelsea’s sixteenth birthday, she recruited me to be a part of her private investigative team. Our goal was to find her father and to stage a reunion. We worked hard, and with persistence and a little luck, we found him—Harvey Sterling, age forty-four, born to Richard and Ellen, one of seven children, educated at Campbell University, where he met and married the former Elizabeth Carr. At the time, Harvey resided in Los Angeles and he was an aspiring jazz musician. Chelsea was determined to go. We saved and saved (I suspect Chelsea even stole) until she had enough money for a one-way ticket to Los Angeles.

Chelsea was convinced that her dad missed her more than anything and that it was her mom’s fault they were apart. She had this reunion fantasy that she would walk into the jazz club where he played, he’d recognize her right away, he’d stop playing his saxophone at mid-set, run to scoop her up in his arms, cry, and confess how his life was now complete. Then she’d live happily ever after with her dad. I had to swear on my firstborn child’s life that I wouldn’t tell a soul where Chelsea had gone, and with that, she was off to Los Angeles. I cried for days over the loss of my best friend, but at the same time I was thrilled for her. Finally, her dreams were coming true. I imagined the palatial house that she and Daddy Harvey were living in. I envisioned Chelsea hobnobbing with the rich and the famous, and I began saving my money so I could spend my summer vacation in Hollywood with Chelsea and Daddy Harvey.

After five days, Mother Elizabeth was frantic. Chelsea had never stayed away this long. The police were called in, my parents went to sit

with Ms. Sterling, and all the while I remained silent. Surely Harvey Sterling would call. Then on day seven, I got a call from Chelsea. I could barely understand her through the tears and the hysterics. I did understand “I need my mom and I want to come home.” I ran all the way to Mother Elizabeth’s house and told everyone that Chelsea had called, that she was in Los Angeles alone and frightened, and that she wanted to come home. Mother Elizabeth bought an airline ticket to LA and returned with Chelsea on day nine.

I spent day ten with Chelsea at McDonald’s over Big Macs, large fries, Cokes, sundaes, and hot apple pies. She cried and cried, but by the time we had consumed our meal, she had vowed never to shed another tear over her father. She declared Harvey Sterling to be dead, at least as far as she was concerned. I never learned what had happened in those nine days, and Harvey Sterling’s name was never mentioned again. Now, all these years later, Chelsea is still searching for the love of a father, but we still can’t speak of Harvey Sterling, and now apparently we can’t speak of Ross or her heavenly Father either. I think that Ross’s lifestyle reminded Chelsea of Harvey and that when she found out she was pregnant, she could only envision Ross hurting their unborn child the way Harvey had hurt her. How can I help my friend?

Dear heavenly Father, I come before You with praise and thanksgiving in my heart. Despite how I feel and despite my circumstances, I acknowledge how awesome You are. Your Word tells me that the best form of therapy is praise. You said that in everything I should give praise, and that means when things are going well and when things hit rock bottom. So here I am, kneeling before Your throne in full adoration and giving honor and glory to Your name. My heart is so heavy right now, but I praise You anyhow because You’re my God and You care about me. In 1 Peter 5:7, You tell me to cast all my cares upon You, and although the situation might not change, Psalm 73:3 tells me that You will be beside and before me, holding me in Your right hand.

I trust You because You’ve brought me through the darkest days of my life. You’ve helped me to be stronger, wiser, and more connected to You.

So I believe, but like the father in Mark chapter 9, I'm asking that You help my unbelief. Help me to trust You more. Help me to trust Your plan over and above my own. Help me to discern what it is that You'll have me do. Chelsea accused me of being judgmental and condescending, so please search my heart, and if You find these traits within me, please take them away. Help me to speak truth in love and with compassion. Help me to encourage and to uplift. Help me to be more like You.

Please show me how to minister to my ladies. Grant me wisdom. Help me to be like an open vessel willing to be filled by You. Give me Your words and allow me to be Your mouthpiece. Be with Barb, Savannah, Alex, and Lindsey. You know what they need. And please be with Chelsea in a special way. She's hurting, and searching for love in all the wrong places. Please help her to find You, the only true source of love. And please help me to be a good friend.

Like Peter, I ask that You perfect, establish, strengthen, and stable me (1 Peter 5:10). **Perfect** me so that I might be used by You. Perfect my heart (Psalm 51:10), and forgive me of all my sins (Psalm 51:2). Perfect me so that I might be presented holy and acceptable before You (Romans 12:1). **Establish** me so that I might be grounded in Your Word and Your truth. Help me to study to show myself approved (2 Timothy 2:15). Help me to grow in wisdom, knowledge, and understanding (Proverbs 2:6). Help me to be rooted and grounded in Your Word (Ephesians 3:17). Establish me so that I might be equipped for spiritual warfare. **Strengthen** me so that I can run this race with persistence (Hebrews 12:1). Hold me by my right hand and lead me along this journey. Help me to wait on You so that I may have renewed strength and mount up with wings like eagles and soar (Isaiah 40:31). Strengthen me so that I can accomplish Your work.

Finally, I pray that You **stable** me so that I balance work, home, church, family, and most important, Help me to seek You, the greatest good (Luke 10:42). Help me to experience Your presence and Your peace. Help me to know that no matter what comes my way, You are with me, and help me to find comfort in that fact. Please grant me Your peace that surpasses all understanding. Stable me so that I can better serve and encourage others. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight. In Your worthy name I pray. Amen.

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I Surrender All—Barb

I guess we won't be sleeping in this morning. Being retired has spoiled me, as I haven't had to get up this early in a long time. After a six o'clock wake-up call, we set off on an hour long bus ride with coffee and croissants in hand. I want to be grumpy, but I must admit the sunrise over the Blue Ridge Mountains is absolutely spectacular and well worth a few hours of missed sleep. After about 30 minutes, we stop at a scenic overlook, get off of the bus in pitch darkness, and accept blankets from Shula because it is still cold. I'm tempted to head back to the warm bus, but then, as if on cue, the sky is transformed right before my eyes. The veil of darkness slowly lifts as hues of pink, magenta, and orange emerge. The colors dance across the sky as the blackness fades into light. A majestic ball of fire begins its ascent over the horizon. The sun, decorated with streams of gold, fills the sky, and the morning bursts forth.

Not a word is spoken. The quiet is deafening. Savannah, Lindsey, and even outspoken Alex also seem in awe. If I weren't shy, I would lift my voice in praise— "Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord. Let the earth hear Your voice. Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord. Let the people rejoice" or "All hail the power of Jesus' name. Let angels' prostrate fall. Bring forth the royal diadem and crown Him Lord of all" or my all-time favorite, "Great is Thy faithfulness. Morning by morning new mercies I see." I don't think the other ladies know these songs, but these were the hymns I grew up with, are the songs that fill my heart and are the songs that have sustained me over the years. What an awesome experience! All I can say is, let the heavens declare the glorious splendor of the Lord!

“Good morning, ladies, and welcome to the Magnum Pottery Studio in the beautiful town of Weaversville, North Carolina. I trust that you enjoyed the sunrise, the ride through the mountains, and a light morning breakfast. I’m sure you’re wondering why you’re up so early this morning, but I assure you that there is a method to my madness. I ask that you keep an open mind and that you explore every little inkling and feeling you have. Look for the obvious and the not-so-obvious applications to your lives and to your relationships in what you will experience today.” Maybe we’re becoming more accustomed to Shula’s obscure utterances, since no one responds. Then again, maybe we’re all still asleep.

“Ladies, this morning we will have the pleasure and the privilege of learning about the craft of pottery from none other than Wilna Blenheim. I’d now like to introduce to you Wilna, a renowned craftsman known around the world for her pottery. Wilna is on tour this summer, and her work will be featured at the Ackland Art Museum. She is also serving as a guest lecturer at Appalachian State University.”

If we were asleep before we’re wide awake now. How Shula came up with this idea I’ll never know. For me, this is more rewarding than anyone could imagine. I absolutely love Wilna’s work. David gave me a set of her bowls for our twenty-fifth anniversary. Being in the studio with Wilna is surreal. She exudes peacefulness and is clearly a woman of God. She hasn’t even spoken, yet her calming presence washes over me like the gentle morning dew. Without effort or thought, my breathing slows, my circadian rhythm recalibrates, and I feel more at one with nature and thus with our Creator.

I know this sounds a bit spiritualistic, but years of walking with God have taught me what it means to embody His peace and His presence. Society says we have to be doing, moving, and working at all times. But God suggests that His peace and love should dwell in us. Anyway, I wish I could bottle this feeling and sell it, though I probably wouldn’t find many takers because most people don’t know how to be still. They aren’t comfortable just being. Take Alex, for example. This day may just kill her dead.

“Excuse me. Before we get started, can you tell us how this relates to our marriages? I don’t mean any disrespect, but this outing was not described in the brochure, and while it may be a nice excursion and it might be fun to meet a famous, um, pottery person, I’m anxious that we

get on with the sessions. We have only a week to learn from you, Shula, the expert on marriage. And this detour seems to be taking up more of our limited time. And please, I hope you're not offended, Ms. Wilma, because that is not my intent."

I am always intrigued when a person who has no intention of offending still manages to be offensive. I'm guessing Shula warned Wilna about Alex as she handles her so gracefully. "You must be Alex. Welcome and Alex, my dear, no offense taken. I'd also like to welcome each of you, Savannah, Lindsey, and Barbara. I'm sure you're all curious as to why you're here and wondering what in the world pottery has to do with marriage. And I hope that by the end of the day or perhaps by the end of your week with Shula, you'll understand. Now, I'm going to ask you to take a deep breath and allow the moment, your surroundings, and God to speak to you. Free your mind of anxieties, fears, and expectations. Cast all your cares upon God, because He cares about you. I live by 1 Peter 5:7. I invite you to do the same."

With that, Wilna sits at her pottery wheel, allowing the clay to glide through her wet hands, molding and shaping it and changing its appearance. As she works the clay, she shares her meditations. "And the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul. I imagine God kneading, shaping, and molding Adam into being. I imagine how the clay must have felt in His hands and between His fingers." The lump of clay starts to take form. "I imagine God using His divine thumb as He smoothed the clay into the form of a head, a torso, legs, arms, hands, and feet. I imagine the attention given to shaping the ears, the nose, the eyes, and the lips and the delicate care given to chiseling each strand of hair." A vessel begins to emerge.

"Before each of you is clay, a potter's wheel, a bucket of water, and some tools—an anvil, a rib, and a paddle. You also have headphones and your choice of music, if you want it, on the panel located on the table to your left. I'm not going to give you a formal lesson in pottery. I want you to watch me as long as you feel that's necessary and then begin. You may make mistakes. Actually, you will make mistakes, most likely many mistakes, and that's okay. Just begin again, like this." And as quickly as the vessel emerged, it disappears and Wilna begins reshaping the clay. "See?

Not only did God create us, making each of us a distinctive and treasured masterpiece, but He also has the power to re-create us. Jeremiah 18 tells us,

This is the message that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: Jeremiah, go down to the potter's house. I will give you my message there. So I went down to the potter's house and saw him working with clay at the wheel. He was making a pot from clay. But there was something wrong with the pot. So the potter used that clay to make another pot. With his hands he shaped the pot the way he wanted it to be. Then this message from the Lord came to me: Family of Israel, you know that I can do the same thing with you. You are like the clay in the potter's hands, and I am the potter. This message is from the Lord.

Another vessel appears before our eyes. It differs in shape from the earlier one, but it is a vessel nonetheless. Wilna continues to instruct us. "Relax and allow yourself to create without judgment, without boundaries, without inhibitions, and don't be afraid to make a mistake; you have the power to start over again."

Wilna immerses herself in completing her masterpiece. For a few minutes we all seem perplexed. I can see questions spinning around in the other ladies' heads. They are the same ones spinning around in my head. *How and where do I start? I'm not an artist, and I know nothing about pottery. How can I work alongside this master in her field? And for the twentieth time, what does this have to do with marriage?* Well I could spend the morning questioning this activity, or I could get started. No need to dawdle. I might as well jump in and get started. After selecting a classical music station, I experiment with the potter's wheel. I dry off my wheel, wet my hands, and attempt to throw a ball of clay as close to the center of the wheel as I can, just as I saw Wilna do. Several times it becomes a flattened blob, and I have to release my foot from the pedal, scoop up the clay, and form it into a ball again.

The clay is cold, wet, and smooth. Once I get it centered and figure out how to keep it from flying across the room, I build up speed on the wheel and form the clay into a cone. I use my thumbs along the outside

of the cone and my fingers along the inside. The cone takes the shape of a bowl. The more comfortable I become with the process, the more I am immersed in deep contemplation. Wilna's reflections remind me just how awesome God is. To think that in His infinite wisdom He created little old me with my wit and my warmth, my anguish and my anxieties. He purposely placed the tiny mole above my upper lip and the butterfly-shaped birthmark on my left hip. My Creator loves me.

After fifteen minutes, I take a break and look around the room. Seems like the ladies are immersed in their own little worlds too. All signs of distress and confusion have been replaced with serene dispositions. Pottery making seems to be right up Savannah's alley. Her face reflects pure bliss. Alex seems contemplative or at least more relaxed. And my little Lindsey (she's just like a daughter to me) seems lost in the moment, swaying slightly, hands floating over the clay like an expert. I do believe I'm witnessing the power of God at work.

We work for a couple of hours, becoming more comfortable with the craft. Gradually Wilna brings us back to the present. "Ask the animals of the land, the birds of the air, or the fish of the sea to teach you. Which of these does not know that the hand of the Lord has created them and sustains them? In His hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind. Each of you is special. You were beautifully and wonderfully made, and God has a plan and a purpose for your lives. I'm looking around the room at the masterpieces you've created. To think that just a few hours ago you were all amateurs and now you're potters. I'm in awe of your works of art and inspired by them. Why don't we take a moment to share our creations and the inspirations for them with one another? Lindsey, would you like to begin?"

"Absolutely. This was a totally amazing experience. I could imagine what you were saying about God creating us from the clay. I had the same feeling this morning that I have when I'm out on the wildlife reserve. It's so peaceful, and my mind is totally clear when I'm out in nature. I had no clue what I was making. I just let the spirit guide me. And I was thinking about when I first met Eddie. His eyes seemed to dance in the sunlight, my heart skipped a beat, and I knew the moment he said hello that I'd be his forever. So when I look at what I created, it reminds me of a cup overflowing with love. So yeah, that's basically it. It seems I made a cup."

“How beautiful, Lindsey. Your inspiration reminds me of Psalm 23. ‘He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters,’ and it goes on to say, ‘He prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies: He anoints my head with oil; my cup runs over.’ Excellent analogy, and thank you for sharing. How about you, Alex? Would you like to share?”

“Okay, but I didn’t have some spiritual awakening like Lindsey. I just set out to make a bowl because that seemed to be easiest thing for me to do. I watched what you did until I got the hang of it, and then I tried to copy you. I messed up a few times, but after a while I figured it out and I got a little rhythm going. So I made a bowl, and I was thinking it would fit perfectly in my office since I’ve done it in a Santa Fe sort of décor. I was wondering if we’ll have a chance to decorate our art and if you’ll give us tips on how to blend and match colors and maybe how to use stencils to create designs?”

A bowl to match the décor of her office. Is that all Alex got from this experience? How will Shula or You reach her, dear Father? Wilna, however, doesn’t miss a beat. “So out of your need for security and predictability, you watched me for a while so that you could establish a pattern or a method. And perhaps because of your desire for perfection, you started three times before you created your final masterpiece, and because you are a planner or a forward thinker, you created something that would serve a purpose and would have a place. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Alex, we all have an inner compass that guides our thoughts, actions, and responses. So use the time this week to get acquainted with your inner compass. What drives you? Why do you do the things that you do? And by the way, I love your bowl. It is absolutely beautiful, but besides creating beautiful art, you should sketch out your reasons for being here and explore what makes you tick. Does that make sense?”

“Well, that’s why I asked earlier about the point of all of this. Had I known you wanted us to have some grand epiphany, I would have adjusted accordingly. But for me there is nothing deeper to what I made and why I made it. I’m proud of this accomplishment, and I’m happy to be going home with a lovely bowl that I created in your presence, no less. For me it’s nothing more, nothing less.”

“Very well, Alex. I’m glad that you’re happy with your bowl, and perhaps we can find time to help you with decorating it. How about you, Savannah? You seem to be bursting over there.”

“Albert Einstein once said, ‘True art is characterized by an irresistible urge in the creative artist.’ This ladies, is true art.” And before our eyes, Savannah transforms the studio into her stage as she recites “The Creation” by James Weldon Johnson.

“Then God sat down on the side of a hill where He could think. By a deep, wide river He sat down, with His head in His hands. God thought and thought till He thought, ‘I’ll make me a man!’”

I’m stunned into silence. We’re all stunned into silence. She should definitely be on Broadway. I’ve never seen anything like it. I feel as if I am standing on the edge of darkness with God Himself. The room remains silent as Savannah slowly transforms back into herself.

“That was my inspiration, and I had no idea what would emerge as I molded the clay. But I knew that I would call it ‘The Creation,’ and every time I look at it I will be reminded of this moment. It has no use other than to serve as memorial of this experience.”

Well, it is definitely creative. It’s not a vase, a bowl, or a cup. Maybe a statue. A statue of what I’m not sure, so I guess Savannah is right in naming it “The Creation.”

“Savannah that was a powerful and moving rendition of ‘The Creation.’ And I can see how the clay, in your hands, has taken on the attributes of God’s creation. Your statue or memorial, with its many twists and curves and its edges jutting out in varying angles, resembles the brilliant rays of the sun or a tree with many leaves and branches or the crashing waves of a turbulent ocean. It might also be the mane of a lion, or two lovers intertwined in a moment of heated passion. Your work contains all aspects of the creation—light, land, water, animals, people. Thank you so much for sharing from your heart.” Wow, I’m amazed again by Wilna’s brilliancy and her ability to take the obscure and bring it back to God.

“Barb, that leaves you. Why don’t you share your masterpiece with us?”

“Perhaps I should have gone first. Really, there’s not much to share. I was listening to a beautiful song, one of my all-time favorites.” I begin singing, which surprises the ladies and me too. “I come to the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses, and the voice I hear, falling on my ear, the Son of God discloses . . . And He walks with me and He talks with me and He tells me I am His own. And the joy we share as we tarry there no other has ever known.’ Anyway, it goes something like that. I remember my grandmother singing this song when I was just a young child, and I remember that she had the most beautiful gardens.” I pause and smile. “Hmm. Maybe I got my green thumb from her.

“Anyway, when I was working with the clay I was reminded of my garden back home. And it just felt right to make a vase that could hold my flowers. David used to bring me fresh-cut flowers every week, and I’d have them on the kitchen table. Come to think of it, I haven’t had flowers on the kitchen table in a while. Maybe a new vase would serve as a reminder of how much I appreciated and enjoyed them, and perhaps I can begin the tradition again. This is nothing fancy, but it’ll do if for nothing more than a reminder.”

“Thank you, Barb. The Bible compares Christ to a rose, the rose of Sharon. Like a rose, He was pure and lovely amidst all the thorns. We should also remember that left unattended, weeds and thorns can destroy a garden and all its beauty. Gardens need our care and attention—weeding, watering, pruning, fertilizing. Sounds sort of like marriages, but I’ll leave that to Shula. Barb, by the way, your voice is absolutely beautiful. Do you sing in the church or something?”

“I sang in the church choir many, many years ago, but I haven’t sung in a long while.”

“Maybe you should consider ways you could share your gift with others again.”

“A gift? Hmm. I guess I never considered my voice or my singing a gift. It’s something I usually do in private. I sing to my children or sing in my garden. David used to say he loved to hear me sing. I guess it wasn’t a big deal to me.”

“Well, more food for thought for you, Barbara. Ladies, I must say job well done. Your works have touched my soul. I’d like to close with this. Each of you has created a masterpiece, at least in your own eyes. And that’s

all that art, the beauty of art and the appreciation of art means—beauty is in the eye of the beholder. I'm reminded of a potter who designed most of his works of art during the early 1900s. His name was George E. Ohr, and he created hundreds of pieces of pottery, all of which were obscure, asymmetrical, and abstract. Here's one example. Look at this bowl. The edges are rumpled like a brown paper bag. There are several indentations, and the vivid colors blend together in haphazard and chaotic ways.

“Well, back in George's day, his work was shunned and considered loony. And in the twenty-five years that his shop was open, he didn't sell one piece. Today, his pieces sell for as much as sixty thousand dollars. Can you believe it? A century ago they were worthless and today they're priceless. The other thing I like about George is the sign in his shop window that read: *Magnus opus, nulli secundus, optimus cognito, ergo sum.* Anyone know what that means?” Wilna looks around the room. Everyone is captivated by her story, but no one knows the meaning of the Latin. “Well, I'll tell you. Those words mean ‘A masterpiece, second to none, the best; therefore, I am.’”

“Maybe old George wasn't so loony after all. And I for one am glad that we are God's masterpieces, second to none. Psalm 139:4 tells us we are fearfully and wonderfully made. And Ephesians 2:10 tells us that we are God's handiwork, created anew in Christ Jesus. And we've already explained that because we are mere pieces of clay, like the pieces you've been working with, God can shape and reshape us as needed so that we shine like the masterpieces He designed us to be.”

Wow! How powerful is that? From the looks on the faces of the ladies, I think they agree.

“Now, as Alex requested, and I had actually already planned, we'll head to the back of the studio and complete our masterpieces. As with the molding of your creations, feel free to watch me decorate my vessel. There are objects and materials on the tables for your use—forks, feathers, rope, stamps, stencils, paints. Use whatever you like to make designs, and afterward we will glaze our creations and fire them in the oven and you'll be all set.”

What a blessing to have met Wilna. She has a way of making people feel at ease and an uncanny ability to read people and to draw biblical lessons from the most mundane occurrences. We spend a few more hours

with Wilna and are all ecstatic. After our departure, we stop at the Crescent Lodge Inn for lunch. The view is spectacular, the food is delicious (hope Trixie and Genevieve don't get wind of this), and the conversation is peppered with humorous anecdotes and comments on the lovely scenery. I can tell that we're bonding, but as we'll soon learn, today's mission hasn't been accomplished yet. What happens next will cause weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Shula goes in for the kill. "Ladies, this has been a wonderful day. We couldn't ask for better weather, our time with Wilna will be a treasured memory forever, and it's such a blessing to see you growing closer as a group. Our focus this week is on the concept of submission, and today more specifically we are focusing on the notion of surrender. One of my favorite hymns is 'I Surrender All.' Maybe we should ask Barb to sing it for us. Your voice is simply amazing." I blush but am pleased by the compliment. "Just listen to the words for a moment. Allow them to permeate your heart while you reflect on the meaning."

Shula will sometimes fall silent, waiting for us to react. I assume she wants us to enter a quiet zone where God speaks and reveals things to us, where we cast all our cares aside and focus on Him. I strive to get there as the music begins. "All to Jesus I surrender. All to Him I freely give." The only sounds now are the intermittent chirping of birds, the hushed rippling of the creek below, and the beautiful melody of "I Surrender All." Tears are rolling down Savannah's face, and Lindsey appears to be whispering to God in a somewhat anguished state. Alex has closed her eyes, but I can't tell if she's napping, praying, or silently cursing Shula.

"To live out the principles of submission in our lives and in our marriages," Shula says, "we must first willingly surrender everything to the will of our heavenly Father. That includes all of our hopes, our fears, our longings and desires, our most cherished possessions, our relationships, our plans, and those we love most. We must place our lives in the hands of our Father and depend on Him completely. 'I appeal to you by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.' So ladies, it is now time to exercise our faith by willingly surrendering our cherished vessels, crafted under the tutelage of Wilna Blenheim." Before we have time to react, Shula drops her

bowl, which had been beautifully wrapped and placed in a gift bag, over the side of the Cascade Bridge onto the jagged rocks below.

“What the devil? Are you out of your mind? Why did you do that? To make some point? We get it, Shula. Surrender all to Jesus. We get it. But did you have to destroy something so valuable? That was a Blenheim original, or at least something made in her studio with her clay. Do you know how much that is worth? I’m now convinced that you’re crazy.” Alex rolls her eyes, shakes her head, and sighs, obviously perplexed and annoyed by what Shula just did.

“Maybe you get it in theory, Alex. But do you really understand how hard it is to give up something you treasure? To give up something you’re proud of? To give up something that’s symbolic or meaningful to you? Just imagine how hard it is to surrender everything, to surrender things, feelings, attitudes, or beliefs that may be far more valuable than even a Blenheim original. Your first step in surrendering all begins right now. I’ll give you all a few minutes to let your creations go, and I’ll meet you back on the van.”

Oh boy. This will be hard. I understand where Alex is coming from, and I get what Shula is trying to help us understand. I can’t let go yet, so I watch the others. Savannah quickly swipes the tears from her cheeks and is the first to let go. She doesn’t even look as she tosses her sculpture over the railing. She hurriedly returns to the van, puts her earbuds in, and stares out of the window from her seat in the back. Lindsey stands beside me, as if waiting for a cue. Maybe she needs my strength to do this hard thing, so I take my vase out of the wrapping, examine it one last time, and pray for strength. I believe that God is with me, so I rewrap the vase, place it back in the gift bag, and I let it fall over the rail. I watch it as it descends and crashes, and then I begin to sing softly “I Surrender All.” Lindsey watches me for a while and then joins in singing. Our voices blend and echo through the valley, and Lindsey appears to gain strength as she too sends her cup overboard. She seems at ease, and we remain a minute longer, continuing to sing.

As for Alex, not only can she not release her anger or her contempt, but she’s also unable to let go of her bowl. She returns to the van, gift bag still in hand, bowl still intact, and as she passes Shula, she shakes her

head, muttering about the insanity of counselors, the underestimation of the worth of our creations, and the stupidity of those who follow lunatics.

Our journey back to Naaman's is just as quiet as our journey there although I suspect for very different reasons. When we finally arrive, Shula hands us discussion points and reflection topics to guide our journaling. We have the rest of the day to reflect and to sort out our jumbled emotions.

Dear loving Father, today we focused on surrendering our all to You, and while I understand the importance of surrender and think that Shula conveyed its significance, it's still something I struggle with daily. Yielding my will, my plans, my fears, my loved ones, my very life to You is a struggle. But I know that with You all things are possible. As You continue to break me, to mold me, and to create in me a clean heart, I pray that You do the same for all of the ladies this week. Help them to be receptive to Your Holy Spirit. Help them to yield to Your will and Your way, to Your plans and Your purposes for their lives. I'm beginning to understand why I'm here. I believe You led me here not just for me but for the ladies too. I lay my burdens at Your feet, and I close this prayer confident that my life is secure in Your hands. I ask all these things in the most precious and worthy name of Jesus. Amen.

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Just the Way You Are—Lindsey

1. Reflect upon the following verses: James 4:7, Romans 12:2, Isaiah 64:8, Matthew 16:24–27. How do they speak to you?

I've read these verses a hundred times (okay, maybe I'm exaggerating, but I've read them a lot), and I guess that before today they had more of a symbolic or metaphorical meaning. But after today, I think they're more like calls to action, something that I have to do or to have done to me. Isaiah 64:8 takes on a whole new meaning now. That whole process of shaping, kneading, and molding the clay? I discovered today that clay isn't all that easy to manipulate. It took work and time. So I guess if I'm like the clay, then molding me isn't an easy process.

And just when I thought I had perfected my little cup, I was asked to give it up. In fact, I was asked to throw it away and to let it shatter into a thousand pieces. I guess that's why God said it would be hard for a rich man (I'm guessing He meant women too) to make it to heaven, because it is hard to give up our things. And for goodness' sake, it was just a cup, and it wasn't even a well-crafted one. It wasn't something Wilna had created and given to me. But it was still hard to let it go, because it was mine. I had made it, I had given it meaning, and I had plans for it. So to toss it over the rail was hard. For a minute I thought I should have kept my cup like Alex did, but tossing it was a good lesson to learn about the whole surrender thing.

2. What are some things, beliefs, or feelings that are difficult for you to surrender to God, and why do you think it's so hard for you to let go?

That's a toughy. I guess I would have to say it'd be hard to let go of my cell phone and my laptop, 'cause that's how I stay connected with the world. They're like appendages. I spend at least 65 percent of my time (maybe more) on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. I'm always asking Google and Siri something or other. I share articles, funny quotes, and recipes. I even share pictures of what I ate for breakfast with family and friends every day. I send text messages to Eddie, my mom, and my three amigos all day long. I research my new discoveries at the wildlife reserve (most times learning they're only new to me), and I catalog and track the mating of the red-eared slider turtles and the sleep patterns of the fennec fox. I shop online. I use my phone to track the number of calories I burn and the number of steps I take each day, and I even make how-to videos for grooming cats. I think I'd have a hard time surrendering my gadgets.

I'd also love to surrender my insecurities about Eddie and his commitment to me, but every time I look at Gabriella, I ask, "Why me?" Her makeup is flawless—perfectly arched eyebrows, long, lush eyelashes, foundation that matches her skin tone to perfection, and how can I forget those pouty red lips? Compare that to me, the girl who thinks all that's needed for a made-up face is Chap Stick and on a good day, Burt's Bees shimmer and shine gloss. Where she's Prada and Michael Kors (and I don't even know how I know of these designers), I'm American Eagle and The Gap. Where she's exotic, sensual, and downright erotic, I'm that clean, fresh, and natural girl next door.

And have I mentioned little Teddy? Gabriella has given Eddie a son, the most prized and cherished honor, and I've given him what? A bunch of maybes, that's what. Maybe I'll be good in bed; maybe I can have children; maybe I'll be a good mother. I don't even know if all my parts work. And my subconscious thoughts always return me to the land of doubt, fear, and insecurity. So I'd like to surrender low self-esteem, insecurity, fear, and doubt. But I'm not sure how to do that, and honestly, I think it'd be easier to give up my cell phone.

3. Share your reflections on today's experiences with Wilna and on your one act of surrender.

Wilna is great and I can't believe I met her! I love her pottery, and I always said that one day when I have my new home, I'm going to fill it with Blenheim originals (after Eddie and I save some money and are comfortable enough to splurge a little). So it was a totally wow experience to meet her, to learn from her, to work smack-dab beside her in one of her studios, and to have her praise my little cup. She's so wise and seems to be at ease in her own skin. She exudes peace and contentment. I want to be like her when I grow up. And no, I don't consider myself a grown-up yet.

Come to think of it, I'm kinda like her when I'm in nature, when I'm surrounded by the trees, the animals, the sky, and the water in my little reserve. (Yes, I consider it mine.) But when I leave my sanctuary and am swallowed up by the real world, I get distracted and thrown off kilter. Maybe I need to spend more time in my sanctuary or learn how to create that feeling and experience wherever I am, sorta like Wilna. And don't get me started on giving up my cup. I know it wasn't great, but I thought it would remind me of this experience forever. I thought it'd be like a memorial, recalling those feelings of peace and tranquility. I thought it was a symbol of my love, or better yet, Eddie's love for me. And then you asked me to give it up just like that.

I kinda felt like Jonah. He didn't want to go to Ninevah, and then he got swallowed up by a whale. Then he surrendered and went to Ninevah, but he was upset that God saved those undeserving people, so he threw a little hissy fit. He got attached to this tree—feeding it, nurturing it, letting it calm him and sooth him—and bam, just like that, God killed the tree—another lesson in surrender. I guess he didn't get it the first time and I guess that's how we are a lot of times. God has to keep working with us. It's like when you talked to us about surrender, we got it. But then when you asked us to surrender our creations, well I kinda felt like Jonah. I wondered, how could she ask me to give up this thing that I've come to love? So I admit I was a little miffed at you, Shula. Alex said it out loud, but I was thinking the same thing. *Is she crazy?* But listening to Barb sing that song made me think of the words again—all to Jesus I surrender—not just some things, not just the easy things, not just the things I don't like so much, but everything including a cherished cup made at the feet of Wilna

Blenheim. So I watched Barb and I realized, *It's just a cup, Lindsey. Let it go.* Maybe that was God speaking to me like He spoke to Jonah, so I did it.

But unlike Jonah, I was able to release—or maybe I should say surrender—my cup not only physically but mentally and emotionally, and because of that, I was open to receiving something much better. And guess what? I did get something much better. I could've died and gone to heaven when I opened the door to my room this morning. To my surprise and absolute delight, there was a package waiting for me. I love getting presents, and I've never been able to open them gracefully, so no need to start today. I ripped through the paper and what did I see? My very own Blenheim original! And it was a cup similar to the one I made but a hundred times better! And not only did Wilna hand-craft it, but it seems as if she did it especially for me.

All my favorite colors—a sapphire blue like the ocean, a deep, rich brown like the soil of the earth, an emerald green like the grass on a beautiful spring day, and a burnt orange like the sunrise we saw yesterday morning—blended together, giving the illusion of a Hawaiian sunset over the Pacific Ocean (at least this is how I imagine it will be when we go to Hawaii for our honeymoon). And the intricately stenciled birds and the unique scrolled-end handle—man! It's just beautiful. I can't find the words to describe it. But the best part are the words etched inside the cup along the rim: "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want . . . He restoreth my soul. My cup runneth over." And Wilna signed the bottom with a message to me: "Give and it will be given to you,' Luke 6:38. With Love, Wilna." Love from Wilna. I'm still in awe.

This was a wonderful example of how when we surrender our hopes, dreams, plans, and desires to God, He might magnify them and give us something so much bigger and better than we could imagine. I know the other ladies were just as excited about their gifts too. Well, all except Alex. She was still pretty salty because she chose to keep her creation and missed out on the gift from Wilna. (It's hard to imagine her any angrier, but she was.) Anyway, thanks, Shula! It was a hard lesson to learn, but it was oh so very worth it!

4. Identify strategies that you can use to help you surrender your will and your life to God. What are some Bible texts that can help you?

From our one-on-one sessions, I learned that I should pray more. I need to ask God to help me, and every time a negative thought pops up, I

should stop and pray. And I guess I could create a special place that calms me and helps me be still and get connected with God. And I should focus on the important things and not get so caught up in the whole consumer mentality (although that's hard for me). Maybe I could volunteer in some remote tribal village, help people who have less than I do, and live for a while without all the trappings and the modern advances. Hmmmm. I'll have to mull it over some more. Maybe Eddie and I could go be missionaries for a while. Something to think about.

I never considered myself to be a Bible aficionado, but I did consider myself to know a little something. Well these exercises are making me feel like a heathen. I spent a good hour doing word searches and looking up the topics of surrender and of help for fear and insecurities, and I found texts I don't ever remember reading. I have to spend more time in the Bible, and I can even download the Bible app and use my phone more constructively. Go figure. Anyway, here are some of the verses I found: Joshua 1:3–9, 1 Chronicles 28:20, Matthew 10:28, Mark 12:30.

5. As you continue your journey of submission, make a commitment to surrender one thing, one belief, or one feeling to God.

I am surrendering my fear of the unknown to God. Every time a fear surfaces, I am going say that God has not given me a spirit of fear but of power, of love, and of a sound mind. I will repeat that verse over and over again until the fear goes away. Then I'm going to practice what you suggested and work to see myself as God sees me. I'll list all the positive traits about myself. (You think there are many, so I'm going to discover them too.) I'll surround myself with the positive—my music, the things I read, my friends. I'll journal so that I can get my feelings out. (I'm doing that now and I think I like it.) I'll also try something new just for fun and won't worry about being perfect but enjoy it. (That could be pottery.)

Most important, I'm going to pray, asking God to reveal to me His plans for my life and how or whether those plans include Eddie. I pray that God helps me work through my fears and my doubts, and if Eddie's not meant to be in my life, I pray that God will help me not to hurt too much. I pray He'll help me to surrender all.

Broken Girl

“So how’s my Sweet Pea doing? It’s been a month of Sundays since I’ve talked to you. Tell me everything.” Just hearing Aunt Helen’s voice brings me peace and puts a smile on my face.

“Well, Aunt Helen, where do I start? So much is happening, and I don’t know whether I’m coming or going half the time. But for the most part things are going well, and I’m excited to sit back and to see God work in my life at Naaman’s and in the lives of my ladies. But why don’t you go first? What’s been happening in your neck of the woods?”

“Your Aunt Helen is fair to middlin’. I’ve been experimenting with some new herb combinations, and I just secured a contract with the health-food chain and restaurant Green Goodness. Can you believe it, little ol’ me, a highly sought after organic herb specialist? That’s what they say in the *Charlotte Observer* anyway. I get a belly chuckle every time I read it, and I saved a copy for you, so whenever you’re back this way for a visit, I’ll give it to you.”

“Aunt Helen, that’s fabulous! I had no idea my auntie was famous. I’ve always known how great you are and how spectacular your herbs are, but now the world knows it, so kudos to you. But please tell me no one’s gotten wind of your special collection. I pray that your herb combinations don’t have a trace from that collection. I would hate for you to become known as the oldest drug lord, peddling marijuana in salad dressings and salmon rubs.”

“You’re too funny, Sweet Pea, and yes, my private collection remains private. As a matter of fact, I’ve gotten rid of the darn stuff. Now that more

people are nosing around and I'm getting more publicity, I don't want to disgrace the family name and be featured on *America's Most Wanted*. And I need a clear head to keep track of all these orders and deliveries, the packaging, and the money. All these years I said the scientists were wrong about marijuana killing brain cells. Well, since I've been trying to run a business, I can definitely say my brain is not as sharp as it used to be. I think I've been killing off brain cells and I now need every single one of them and then some. Good Lord, I never knew so much was involved in running a business. I'm so much happier out in the dirt. I am planning to hire me an assistant, but you know how picky I am, so I haven't found the right person yet. So pray for me, my dear. Pray that this old lady can handle her very own business, that I'll find the right partner, and that people from all around the world can enjoy my herbs."

Oh, how I needed to talk to my Auntie tonight. She always provides me with comic relief. Speaking with her re-centers me. "I can't believe you got rid of your stash. Did you have a yard sale? Whatever will your followers do?"

"You're so funny, and no I did not have a yard sale. But we did have one dynamite bonfire."

I can't take it. You have to have an empty bladder when you talk to Auntie, lest you have a major accident. "Well, God answers prayers, maybe not when you want Him to, but always on time. I knew He'd help you kick that yucky habit and show you the light! Auntie, I love you so much. You always lift my spirits. Seriously, I will keep you in my prayers. Hey, I just had an idea. What about asking Eva to be your partner?"

"Get thee behind me, Satan. I know that was meant to be a joke, but I don't find it at all funny."

"Just wanted to make sure you were listening," I reply, still laughing. "How's your lovely sister, by the way? I've been so busy here, and we've been playing phone tag. I know she's ready to disown me. Again."

"You're right about that. I spoke to my darlin' sister, when was that, Friday? I think it was Friday. See? I'm telling you I gotta keep this ol' mind sharp. I started doing those Sudoku puzzles. They take me all day and I still have no clue what the point is, but that Doctor Oz, he says they help ward off dementia, so Sudoku I do. I also have this great herbal blend of

rosemary, sage, and periwinkle that helps boost memory, and I tell you it sells like hotcakes down at the senior center.

“Oh yeah, so where was I? Eva. That’s right. Well, Eva’s Eva. Your dad is driving her crazy. Seems he’s found a voice of late. She thinks it’s his new volunteer work down at the soup kitchen. I bugged him and bugged him to join me in the work, and he finally gave in. I don’t know if he came to shut me up or to get a break from Eva. But now he loves it. Who woulda guessed, him being an accountant and all and not much of a people person. But they need him there and he feels he’s makin’ a difference, and truth be told, he really is. So I guess after seein’ how others struggle, he speaks out more about Eva’s pettiness and her meddlin’ so. He’s tryin’ to get her to volunteer too, but Eva is not having any part of it. And she’s just sick that he’s investing so much time and money in the soup kitchen. And you’ll never guess what he did to send her into a plum tizzy.”

“Do tell, Auntie. What did Daddy do?”

“Well, he invited a few of the patrons of the soup kitchen home for supper. And Eva nearly had a stroke. To hear her tell it, you’d think he brought home Ted Bundy himself. He invited me to dinner too. Well, actually he invited me and my lasagna to dinner, but I declare the look on Eva’s face was worth all the tea in China, and I’d whip up fifteen more casseroles to witness her squirm again.”

“Auntie, you have got to be kidding me. Please tell me you’re making this up. I have fallen off my chair.”

“If I’m lyin’ I’m flyin’, Sweet Pea. What I’m tellin’ you is the honest truth. Your daddy arranged this whole dinner and he was so proud. I made lasagna and bread and whipped up a salad with veggies from my garden. And I baked red velvet cupcakes for dessert. Your daddy told Eva he had a surprise for her. He told her not to worry about dinner, that he was arranging a special dinner party for a few friends and she didn’t have to do anything but show up. Lance and those bratty, I mean beautiful, kids came, and who knows where that wife of his was. Your dad invited two families from the soup kitchen. There were eight of us and nine from the soup kitchen, so the house was packed. Allen had appetizers—those little quiches and such from the Costco—and he served his best wine. The housekeeper had set the dining room table with the fine china, and he had things set up outside for the kids. It was a feast for a king, I tell you.

“Well, Allen had to go pick up the two families. They were—let me see if I can remember. They were the Smiths and the Howards. Yes, that’s it. And I’ll never remember all their names now, but anyway your dad used the soup kitchen’s van and brought them to the house. And we were all downstairs talking and the kids were out back playing, and Eva made this grand entrance. She had on her sunshine-yellow Oscar de la Renta dress and her Kate Spade sandals, and she comes gliding down that spiral staircase of hers like she’s the queen of England.

“She’s smiling like she’s on top of the world—until she sees the guests. She just ’bout fell down the rest of the stairwell. The rest of us were dressed casually, you know. I had on my usual capris and a flowery blouse, although I did buy a new pair of Sketchers for the occasion. And the two families had on shorts and T-shirts. So you can only imagine how out of place your mother was. And she didn’t have a clue what to talk about, not that she had the time to talk, since she was making sure nobody stole anything or infected her with some deadly disease. She spent the whole evening counting the silverware and rubbin’ her hands raw with that antibacterial hand sanitizer. Sweet Pea, I wish you could’ve been there. I know your dad wanted to invite you, but he figured you were busy.”

I cannot stop laughing. This was so classic Eva. “Oh, how I wish I could’ve been there too. You have made my day, Auntie, and good for Daddy. Glad to see him doing something he enjoys and finding something meaningful to fill his days. I have been so worried about him. I knew for sure Eva was going to kill him with her nagging and meddling and incessant talking. Maybe he’ll rub off on Eva. We’ll have to make that a matter of prayer too.”

“You said it. Only God can change that woman. She’s my baby sister and I love her dearly, but I still question if one of us was switched at birth. We are as different as night and day, and I have often wondered how in the world your daddy does it. All I can say is I’m glad you and Lance made it out alive with some semblance of sanity, although I question that brother of yours, marryin’ Reese, the spittin’ image of Eva. Both of them deny it and would have my head if they heard me say that. But they are two peas in a pod, I tell you. Well enough about us. I want to hear about your ladies. How’s it going?”

“Not nearly as exciting as what you all have going on there, but I must say, I think joining the Naaman’s team is one of the best decisions I’ve ever made.”

“Oh, Sweet Pea, I’m so thrilled for you. You deserve a slice of happiness. Now tell me how your innovative object lessons are going. I know you were worried about using such unconventional methods. What do you think? Are they working?”

“Well, it’s still early to tell, but I think they are. It’s challenging because we’re all feeling our way through these unconventional approaches of mine, and the trick for me is that I can’t let on that I’m feeling my way through along with the ladies. I have to appear calm, cool, and collected when all the while I’m counting and praying and reminding myself to breathe.”

I fill in Auntie on the whole pottery experiment, and for the first time today, I’m able to dissect innovative intervention activity number two.

“So the next intervention was centered on unconditional love. The ladies and I took a field trip to Second Chances where they provide a home to babies who were born addicted to crack and cocaine. Usually it’s harder to place these babies with adoptive families, so the belief is that they will be cared for and nurtured at the Second Chances home until they are adopted. Most are put up for adoption between the ages of one and two.

“Babies born addicted to crack tend to have numerous challenges—low birth weight, urinary tract infections, and developmental delays. The most common challenge is colic to the nth degree. To offer them the best chance in life, it’s important to provide them with the medical care they need, early intervention, and love, love, love! That’s what the people at Second Chances do, and because it’s tough to do it all with a limited staff, they are always looking for rockers, people who can volunteer their time to rock the babies, read to them, sing to them, or just to give them good old-fashioned love and attention. So that’s what we did. We spent about two hours just rocking little babies who were fussy, colicky, tense, sensitive to touch, hurting, and fighting to survive. At first, for most of us, it was difficult because we didn’t know how to hold them the right way and because some were fighting as if they didn’t want to be held. But after a while, each of us found our rhythm and we rocked away.

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I decide to stick with the nicknames that Chelsea and I came up with—June for Barb, BB for Alex, Laura Ingalls for Lindsey, and Jeannie for Savannah.

“June sang to her little guy, and he relaxed in her arms, like he knew he was in the hands of a seasoned grandma. BB preferred walking and bouncing as she hummed to a baby girl slung over her shoulder. Poor Laura Ingalls felt ill prepared, convinced that she was not mother material, but once she held a baby in her arms and began to relate to that child as broken and wounded, like many of the animals she rescues, she approached comforting more as a mission to save and to restore. And within no time, she was rocking and cooing and even praying over that little bundle of joy.”

“Now, that’s the most creative thing I’ve ever heard—using innocent little babies, who like little birds with broken wings are needy and fragile, to emphasize the concept of unconditional love. I declare, Sweet Pea—when I grow up, I want to be just like you.”

“Oh Auntie, be careful what you pray for, but how kind of you to say that. And you get the point exactly. I think the others did too. I wanted to demonstrate that unconditional love transcends the endearing attributes of the person to whom we’re extending love. It transcends our comfort with one another, and it’s consistent, persistent, and resilient and not dependent on the other person, who might be unlovable, undeserving, or unreceptive. I based my ideas on several Bible verses, like 1 Corinthians 13, of course, and 1 John 4:18 and Matthew 5:43–48, and on the beautiful story of Christ’s death and resurrection.”

“All sounds like good stuff, but I hear a *but* in there. Am I missing something?”

“Actually, I’m the one missing something. As you said, this activity seemed to make the theoretical alive and real, but something happened during our rocking session. I described to you the reaction of three of the ladies, but it’s Jeannie’s reaction that has me baffled. One minute she was rocking little Kayla and humming to her, and the next minute, she was sobbing uncontrollably. And when I went to her, hoping to comfort and soothe her and to find out what caused such a reaction, she thrust baby Kayla in my arms and fled. She ran like her life had been threatened. So I was trying to soothe two screaming babies who were upset by the abrupt changes, and their screaming upset the others. I was trying to restore calm

so I could get away to find Jeannie. Ms. Josie came right away and relieved me of my babies. She was able to calm them down quickly, and once they were calm, the other ladies were able to settle their little ones. I left, but I was unable to find my little runaway.”

“Oh dear. Poor thing. I hope she’s okay.”

“I worried and worried about her all day. What could have upset her so? But while I was worried, I was also grateful for the seeming breakthrough. This was my first glimpse into the real Jeannie, the glimpse I’d been praying for. I was anxious for our one-on-one session and for our group session so we could begin processing what had occurred.”

“Makes sense. So what did you learn, or is that confidential?”

“Well, it would be confidential if I had learned anything. But when Jeannie finally resurfaced for our one-on-one and group sessions, it was as if nothing had happened. The mask was back on. She was enveloped by the façade of being happy, content, and carefree. She joked and laughed again and entertained us with tales of performance mishaps, and she expertly deflected questions, avoiding any mention of what occurred earlier in the day. Quite frankly, I am at a loss.”

“Well, Sweet Pea, all hope is not lost. You glimpsed a little of her pain, and so now you know that something traumatic probably occurred in her life maybe when she was a baby or maybe to a baby. Or maybe she discovered she can’t have babies. But whatever it is, the experience was so wrenching that she is hiding it deep down inside. And being the expert that you are, I’m sure you’ll discover the problem and be able to help her through it.”

“You sure you weren’t a counselor in another life? You’re probably right. I guess when you’re so close to something, it can be hard to see it objectively. The situation is probably more stressful because she is such a good actress and she’s able to hide her true self very well. She’s a dynamic actress, one of the best I’ve ever seen. But under all those layers and masks, where does the real Jeannie lie? It’s so easy to get caught up in the theatrics, becoming immersed in the production and losing sight of my purpose—helping her discover who she is and breaking through the delicate barrier she’s erected around her heart.”

“Well, if anybody can do it, you can. And remember: you got the big guy on your side.”

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“Good thing God’s on it, because she’s quite perplexing. I know I told you that both Jeannie and BB have their guards up, but you see they are quite different from each other. Yes, they both have guarded their hearts, but the brick wall that BB has built is visible. I know it’s there, and I’m pretty much going to have to bulldoze my way through. But Jeannie, she’s different. Instead of a wall, I envision her heart tucked safely away inside a delicate glass Christmas ornament, and the layer of glass is so thin, you barely know it’s there. She appears fine, she appears to have intimate relationships, but if you look closely, you can see the glass barrier. If you go in with a bulldozer, the glass shatters into a million pieces. Delicate care and caution are the order of the day for my Jeannie.”

“Well, my dear, I know that you can and will. Pray about it and I know God will lead you.”

“Thank you, Auntie. It’s reassuring to know you’re in my corner. Well, Auntie, if I don’t get some sleep, I’ll be no good tomorrow.”

“My, my, time sure flies when you’re havin’ fun, and it is always fun talkin’ to you, my Sweet Pea. I better get to bed too. I signed up for a Zumba class at the senior center, so I’ll have to get these old bones movin’ pretty early tomorrow too.”

“Oh, you never cease to amaze me. Zumba, Auntie? Really? Why can’t you start off with something a little tamer, like Pilates? I should bring my ladies to watch you tomorrow. I’m sure I can tie Zumba over sixty into one of my themes.”

“Doctor Oz says movement is the key to longevity, and since I got a late start on finding my purpose, I need to be around at least another twenty years or more. So no time for wimpy classes. I’m goin’ all out. Maybe when you come for a visit, I’ll teach you some new moves.”

They say laughter does the heart good, and I concur. I wish she could bottle her humor like her herbs so many could benefit from the laughter and joy she brings. “Wonders never cease. And by the way, how do you know about Dr. Oz and America’s Most Wanted? You’ve been talking about an awful lot of TV for someone who doesn’t own one.”

“Oh, they have everything at that senior center. I’m pretty good on that Wii and I do love Dr. Oz so. But now with work, I don’t know how I’ll find time for such carrying ons. Well Sweet Pea, I gotta go. This old lady is tired. Nighty-night, and as always, it’s good hearing from you. And

I won't forget to video class for you tomorrow so we can Zumba together when you come visit."

"Sounds like a plan, Auntie," I respond with a chuckle. "See you next week."

Most Merciful and Wonderful Redeemer, I come this evening with praise in my heart. My spirits are always buoyed when I talk to Aunt Helen, and I thank You for placing her in my life. She's been my cheerleader, my comic relief, my rock, and my support, and I am grateful that You've blessed me with her. I ask that You continue to bless, keep, and sustain her. Be ever near to her as she ventures out into new terrain. Bless her growing business, and provide opportunities for her to spread Your message about living a holistic, healthy, and balanced life.

Before I petition Your throne on behalf of the ladies, I ask that You forgive me of my sins. Cleanse me of unrighteousness. Create in me a clean heart so that I might worship You.

This is day three of "Naked and Unashamed," and while it's difficult at times to see progress or to know which direction I should take as I strive to facilitate a breakthrough in the lives of the ladies, I do see Your hand at work. As always, I ask that You continue to work on the hearts of Lindsey, Alex, and Barb, and I pray for a special anointing upon Savannah. I don't know what she's going through, but You do. I don't know how to help her, but You do. I don't know how to ease her pain, but You do. So I present her before Your throne. In Your Word, in Isaiah 57:8, You said that You would comfort the hurting, heal the wounded, and restore the broken. So I ask that You cradle Savannah in Your comforting arms and hide her under the shadow of Your wing.

Be with me tomorrow as I share the message You have for the ladies about being beholden or of service to their husbands. Speak clearly through me so that they may effectively reflect upon their marriages and comprehend Your original design for their lives.

All these things I ask in Your holy, precious name. Amen.

Girl on Fire—Alex

Journal Entry 3: What does being beholden to your husband mean for you and for your marriage? How does this relate to submission?

Unedited/Uncensored Version

I knew this was a mistake. I knew it, I knew it, I knew it. Everybody tried to tell me that this would be affirming, motivating, uplifting, even inspiring, but no. This wannabe therapist, who isn't even married, wants to tell me that the problems in my marriage have to do with submitting and being beholden. Whatever. It's day four and all I've been hearing is what I need to do for him, how I need to please him. Beholden. Who even uses that word? Why not just say please or serve your man? How about be your man's slave? That's all any of this means. And when it comes right down to it, Miss Thang's Big S isn't about anything but sex. That's always the bottom line.

“And who is she to tell me about pleasing my man in bed? The idiot I'm married to definitely has no complaints in that department. He's got the best of both worlds. I'm a well-respected businesswoman, a church-going, born-again Christian, an awesome mother, and I can most certainly deliver the goods in the bedroom. I know that if I ever got laid off (only a hypothetical possibility since that will never happen) and if we were ever strapped for money, I could run a 900 fantasy line or climb a pole and make it rain with ease. So how does pleasing him in bed help me find happiness? If you can believe that stupid grin on his face, he's quite pleased,

but that's not how I feel. And yeah, according to Miss Wannabe Doctor Laura, we're not talking about sex but about submission, but it's really one and the same, isn't it? Serve him. Please him. Give him what he wants (and we all know what he wants), and he'll be happy, so therefore we'll be happy.

So what does beholden mean to me? A form of repression, that's what. A slight to all the advances that we as women have had to fight for and are still fighting for. A form of patriarchal, male-chauvinist, penis-worshiping bull. And no, I do not have penis envy, Doctor Freud. I happen to love my God-given vagina. I love being a woman. I love my beauty, my sensuality, my warmth, my ability to create and to nurture life, and I love my intelligence. I think the real problem is that my status as a woman is a threat to men. Women can do it all and so much more. We can be all those things that make us uniquely women and do all the things that men are supposed to do—make the money, take care of the bills, discipline the kids, be the spiritual leaders, protect the family—and we can probably do it better. This threatens men, and they perpetuate these lies about submission so we don't outshine them and they don't have to work hard.

This has been a long four days and I'm more than ready for these sessions to end, but I've already paid for them. Anyway, what's one more week outta my life before doing what I know I need to do—leave him behind and get on with my life. I admit I made a mistake. He is not the man I thought he was, and I don't see any possibility that he will become the man I need him to be whether I submit or am beholden to him or not. So I'm going to take advantage of a week away from the kids (husband included), enjoy the spa and the incredible food, and fake it in these sessions. No need to get my blood pressure up. Now that I've got that off my chest, I can delete my real thoughts and give Shula 'The Clean and Pretty Version'

Journal Entry 3: What does being beholden to your husband mean for you and for your marriage? How does this relate to submission?

Submission. This word usually stirs controversy. On the one hand, we are commissioned to surrender or submit ourselves to the will of God. We are challenged to deny ourselves and to take up our crosses and follow Christ. We are not our own. We were created to serve God alone, and we are to depend on Him completely for everything. On the other hand, the Bible also speaks of wives submitting to their husbands. However, I believe

that this passage is often misunderstood and misused. First of all, it was written by a man during a time when women were not valued and had no rights. They were dominated, used, and abused, and they had no choice but to be dependent on men—their fathers, their brothers, their husbands, or their sons. Take, for example, Naomi and Ruth. After Naomi lost her husband and her sons, she and Ruth were destitute and had no idea how they would survive without having the men to care for them.

That is not the case today. Women are recognized as being able to care for themselves and for the most part are considered as equals to men. Thus I don't believe that submission means what it did during biblical times. I feel the same is true for being beholden to my husband. Once again, the times call for both husband and wife to serve one another. If I were a stay-at-home mom like Barb, my whole world could center around my husband. But when I work just as hard or harder, I at least need an equal partner. And quite frankly, we don't have time to serve one another when we have kids to serve, bosses to serve, family members to serve, and a church to serve. We should be working together to serve all these other masters vying for our time and attention.

If two whole persons enter a marriage, together they can change the world. But when one is lacking (let's say my husband) and the other (me) has to try to fill that void, then yeah, I guess I could add him to the list of those I have to serve. I think I should be beholden only to someone who has done something for me, someone who is worthy of respect and honor.

There, journal all done. Now it's "me time" before another one of Shula's field trips. I love it when the biggest decision I have to make is whether to get a chocolate-mud full-body exfoliation or to have a rain-stick massage. Oh, dang it. I guess whatever I do better be no more than an hour. I don't dare miss my dreaded one-on-one with Dear Abby. Sigh. Well, I won't think about that right now. I'm focusing on me for the time being. As for the rest of this so-called retreat, I'll just have to take it one hour at a time.

Set Me Free—Alex

Journal Entry

I went with the rain-stick massage, and it was excellent! I wish I could take Anna home. I could use a massage like that every day. I was relaxed even while Doctor Laura tried to psychoanalyze me. At least the interrogation was only an hour. But now the effects of my massage are fading away. I don't know if I can make it through this field trip. I cannot believe that we are on our way to visit a penitentiary. I vowed I'd never set foot for any reason in jail, and here I am, sitting on a bus headed to prison for whatever Ms. Shula has cooked up. I should have declined this outing, but the ladies were so insistent that we experience this week together and it would've been too much work trying to convince them that my absence would be okay.

What can we possibly learn about marriage from a trip to jail? The whole stupid pottery thing, I get that—let go, trust God, yada yada. Cuddling little crack babies to teach us about love? Okay, got it. But prison? I don't even watch any of those TV crime shows, because I'm not interested in delving into the minds of criminals or in glorifying their evil. Why are we even giving them the time of day? They commit all these heinous crimes, they terrorize us hardworking, contributing members of society, and then they want rights and recognition. Let them serve out their time while the rest of us breathe a little easier, knowing that the dregs of society are where they belong.

Now can I say any of this? Absolutely not, because that would make me look cold-hearted and uncaring. I wonder how caring the ladies would

be after having a purse stolen at gunpoint by some two-bit thug. Hour by hour—that’s the only way I’ll get through this week. Right now I’ll pretend I’m asleep and try to return to that peaceful place I experienced earlier today in the steam room. I’ll look forward to the chocolate-mud exfoliation that I’ve scheduled for tonight. Why deny myself? I need some rewards for all the stuff I deal with. Come to think of it, I’ll schedule a detox wrap too. I’m sure I’ll need to rid myself of the stench and the filth of prison.

“Good afternoon, ladies. I’m delighted to be joining you again. This is one of the highlights of my week.” Pastor Sara is here too. This ought to be interesting.

“Pastor Sara, having you and Mrs. Shula come study with us is the highlight of our week too,” this from one of the prisoners in the room. Oddly she doesn’t look like what I had imagined. Yeah, she has on the clichéd orange jumpsuit, but she doesn’t have that hard, GI Jane look. She actually looks a little like me. This is way too eerie. I knew I shouldn’t have come.

“Well, we’re going to get started. We always run out of time, but I hope we’ll cover everything planned for today. Before we start, I’d like to introduce you to four ladies who’re also doing the ‘Naked and Unashamed’ study. We have with us Lindsey, Barb, Alex, and Savannah. Since we’re examining the same concept, we agreed that it’d be nice to study together. So with that, let’s begin.” Is Pastor Sara for real? They’re learning about submission in marriage? How can this possibly be relevant to them? I bet they only signed up just to get time away from the general population. Coming to the chapel for two hours must be better than sitting in a cell. And I guess Shula needed more clients, but she sure took a drastic route. Clients from the penitentiary? Can it get any worse?

“As we’ve studied the biblical perspectives on submission in our marriages, we’ve explored our need to completely surrender our thoughts, feelings, hopes, dreams, and desires to our heavenly Father. We’ve also discovered that to submit to God and to our husbands, we must learn to love unconditionally.”

Did she just say *our* husbands? These felons are married? How does that work exactly?

“We must love our husbands just as Christ loves the church. Today, we’re going to learn about an unusual concept. Now, I must confess that when Shula explained the acronym for *submit*, I completely got where she was going with the *s*, the *u*, the *m*, the *i*, and the *t*. But beholden? Even Shula admitted that it was the only word she could think of that started with a *b*. But as she and I prayed over this thing and studied the Word, God revealed to us that one of our responsibilities is, in fact, to be beholden to Christ and to our spouses.”

Shula jumps in. “Now, I gotta tell you: this was a hard pill to swallow. We tried with all our might to come up with another term starting with *b*—*benefit*, *be of service*. But we were directed back to *beholden* every time. We finally yielded to the will of God, and believe us when we say this message is from Him, because this concept can only be described in the spiritual realm.”

“Shula’s right. We couldn’t have come up with this on our own. So here goes. God’s word to us as ladies and as wives: *beholden*. It’s such a solemn and serious sounding word. What does it mean? What do you think of when you hear it? Anyone? Just shout out.”

Complete silence. I guess words with more than one syllable and four letters aren’t part of everyday vernacular in this place. And why are the ladies not answering? They’re probably scared to pieces, or maybe they don’t wanna seem like they’re putting the felons down by sounding superior. Well, too bad for them. I can’t have everyone thinking we’re all stupid.

“Pastor Sara, when I think of the word *beholden*, I think of being in debt or of owing somebody something.”

“Yes, Alex. That’s one definition and probably the most common understanding of the word. So let’s think about that. To be indebted, to owe someone. How does owing someone something make you feel?”

An orange suit speaks up. “I hate feelin’ like I owe anybody anything. It’s like they can hold something over your head ’cause you in debt to them. And when they know it, they feel like they can make you do whatever they want. Until you pay back that debt, they basically own you. And when you can’t pay them back, you spendin’ yo time duckin’ and dodgin’ them

'cause you know you owe them and they know you owe them. But what can you do if you ain't got the money? It ain't no picnic. That's for sure."

Well, maybe if people got jobs and managed their money better, they wouldn't have to borrow and be indebted to others. Is any rehabilitation going on in this place?

"Absolutely, Chantel. Thanks for sharing. Can anybody else relate?" Nods all around and even a couple of amens. I can't concur. Women need to be strong and independent so they don't owe anybody anything.

And lookie here. Lindsey finds her voice. "Yeah, I hate that feeling too. That's kinda how I feel now, like I owe Eddie, my fiancé, something for loving me and for choosing me over Gabriella. I feel like I have to keep doing something to keep his love. I hate feeling like this. And don't get me wrong, Eddie hasn't done anything or said anything to suggest this is how he feels, but it's how I feel and I don't know how to feel differently." Now why is she sharing this personal stuff with people she doesn't even know, and why does she seem so comfortable with them? I would've lost money on this bet. I was sure she'd be shaking in a corner. Aren't we here to set the example for them? She's just given more proof for my theory. Get a backbone. Be strong. And if anything, be the one who others are indebted to.

"Thank you for sharing, Lindsey. And I for one can definitely relate. Who wants to be indebted to someone and feel like someone else has control over you? It's a bad feeling, and it conjures up images of master and slave, of ball and chain, maybe even of guard and prisoner." Ouch. That must've felt like a slap in the face to the orange suits.

And another orange suit responds. "I used to think I was in prison in my marriage. Like everybody wanted something from me. Like everybody was pullin' at me. I felt like I had no control, like I had lost sight of me, of who I was. I would look in the mirror and ask, 'Who is that?' I felt chained to my husband and to my kids, and all I wanted was freedom. But I learned the hard way. There is no freedom in being free, and I would definitely exchange this prison for my family again. This prison is no joke. But y'all been teachin' us that true freedom comes from bein' free of the other things that have bound us, like the meth I was usin' and sellin' and my negative attitude and the resentment I had for everything and everybody. I wanted more. I believed I deserved more, like somebody owed

me something. Now I'm just hopin' I can earn a second chance with my family. I know I'll be indebted to them forever, but that doesn't seem like such a bad thing, not like it used to feel."

I don't know if I've seen Pastor Sara so excited. Imagine that, an orange jumpsuit had an "aha" moment. Go figure. "Amen, Angela. I think you got it. I might just have to turn this session over to you. God's intent for us as women is so different from what the world tells us. God never intended for us to feel controlled by our husbands, as if they were our masters and we were mere slaves. No, ladies, this was not God's intent at all."

Shula chimes in. "I couldn't agree more. We fail to realize that God established marriage so that man wouldn't be alone, so that man would have a companion. But when sin entered the world, that original purpose was altered. In the original plan, man, woman, and God dwelled together in peace, love, and harmony. The Garden of Eden was paradise. But you all know the story. Satan entered the garden, tempted Eve, Eve believed his lies, and life as Adam and Eve knew it was no more. So instead of marriage being a harmonious trinity—God, man, and woman—it became a training camp where man and woman would learn how to be in relationship with God. Adam and Eve originally had God right there to teach them all there was to know about being in fellowship with Him, but once that intimate relationship was lost, God had to teach us another way."

Shula certainly has a captive audience. They're practically eating out of the palm of her hand. This sounds good in theory, but what could my marriage possibly be teaching me about my relationship with God? Uh-oh. I better listen up. I do believe I hear another Shula and Seth story coming. Oh goodie, goodie. I think I'm going to strangle myself.

"I know this whole concept of being beholden is abstract and difficult to grasp, and in the beginning of my marriage, I was right where many of you are now. I too was an independent, strong, and capable woman. I had a degree from Georgetown University, I was a student fellow for a leading researcher, I supervised seven student interns, and I had job offers from top hospitals across the country. I was considered a rising star. Well, as it usually happens, I fell in love and I fell hard. I would've walked over hot coals and swum across the Atlantic Ocean to be with this man Seth. So when he got a position in North Carolina, I gave up everything and followed him there.

g u t t e r

“The first year or so was no problem. I couldn’t have cared less about my career and all my aspirations. Then our daughter was born and things began to change. Seth was going off to work every day and coming home filled with stories about his colleagues, his accomplishments, and his visions for the future. All I had were stories about Sheridan’s preference for peas over string beans, my preference for Raffi over Greg and Steve, and Mrs. Stevenson’s latest gossip about the neighbors on our cul-de-sac. Soon I became resentful. What about my career? What about my fulfillment, my success? Was this all my future held? And was I to be forever indebted to Seth because he was the breadwinner, the respected one, the man?”

Now we’re getting somewhere. Maybe Ms. Dorothy Do Right is real like the rest of us.

“I have to pause here and chuckle when I recall the ways God can change people. I was quickly heading down a slippery slope of anger, resentment, and dissatisfaction. And then one day my world fell from the slippery slope into the valley of despair. During a routine checkup the doctor delivered the bad news. Cancer had invaded my body and was spreading like wildfire. I was devastated, in a complete state of shock. My doctor had to call Seth and have him come immediately to her office, since we needed to make quick decisions.

“From the moment Seth stepped into her office, he became my saving grace. He took a leave of absence. He became mommy and daddy to Sheridan, and he became my caregiver. He bathed and fed me, made all kinds of concoctions that would supposedly cure me, chauffeured me to and from countless appointments, sat with me during chemo sessions, drew smiley faces on my socks, and found the most outrageously amazing head coverings. He wrote me love letters every day and read them to me at night, telling me how beautiful I was even though I had lost all of my hair and had dwindled down to nothing more than skin and bones, and he surrounded me with flowers to remind me of the beauty in the world. Most important, he earnestly prayed with me and for me.

“Initially it was hard for me to receive these gifts. I felt so unworthy. I felt as if I’d never be able to repay him. I felt helpless, and I hated being the receiver and not the giver. But as my physical vessel deteriorated and I finally reached a place where I had no more hope, all I could do was commune with God. And through this surrender to His will I began to

understand His unconditional love for me and how this love was being shown through Seth's unconditional love. As I surrendered, God and Seth restored my will to live. They made me fight, and when I was too weak to fight, they fought for me. I think they were even breathing for me some days. And despite what the doctors said, I began to heal. To this day, I'm beholden to Seth and to God, not because I owe them anything but because I will be forever grateful for my life renewed."

Not a dry eye in the room. Almost reduced me to tears. Almost.

"Through this experience, I learned the meaning of being beholden to Seth, yes, but more important, to God. I can never repay Christ for what He's done and continues to do for me, but I can worship and praise Him every day. I can spend the rest of my life living as He has asked, simply as a small token of my appreciation. I can love Him completely because I understand that He doesn't help me with the expectation that I'll repay Him. He helps me because He loves me. I can be free to love Him and others because He doesn't remind me of my faults, my inadequacies, or my debt. I am covered by His grace and mercy, and because of this gift, I can be beholden to Him without resentment or guilt. And just as the gifts of love, forgiveness, grace, and mercy are available to me, they're available to each of you today. You don't have to do anything to earn them. All you have to do is receive them."

Who knew Pastor Sara sang so well? She is singing one of my favorite songs, "My Chains Are Gone," or at least I think that's the name of the song. And if you weren't crying before this song, there is no way you couldn't be crying now unless you have a heart of stone. I really am trying to muster a tear.

"Ladies, I can't think of a better example of the true meaning of being beholden to our husbands and to our God. We'll offer one more example to drive home the point as we partake in the sacred act of foot washing." Glad to see I'm not the only one looking around in a state of shock. Pastor Sara can't be serious. Foot washing? Who does that?

"If you recall the story of the Last Supper of Jesus and His disciples, you might remember how, after a day's journey, they had retired to an upper room where they were to eat. Jesus wanted to help them understand the events that were about to happen. Now, what you might not know is that it was customary for a servant or a slave to wash the feet of the

homeowner and his guests. Walking was the primary way of getting from one place to another, and people's feet would not just be dusty but downright dirty. Imagine the disciples' surprise when Jesus, their King and their Lord, prepared a basin of water so He could wash their feet.

"Outspoken Peter would have no part of this. Foot washing was a task for a lowly servant, not for a king. Peter said, 'Lord, are You washing my feet?' And Jesus replied, 'What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this.' And Peter said to Him, 'You shall never wash my feet!' Jesus, still trying to help Peter understand, said, 'If you don't allow Me to serve you, then you won't have any part of Me.' Peter replied, 'If that's the case, then wash my feet, my head, and my hands too.' Jesus demonstrated what it meant to give without strings attached, motivated only by love.

"Now ladies, I know some of you are thinking, *You want me to wash her feet? She's so unworthy.* And others are probably thinking, *I'm so undeserving. I'm broken. I'm filthy. I don't want to be exposed. I feel ashamed. This act of foot washing will expose me.* Well, read it for yourselves, ladies. It's right there in John 13:1–17. To be great, we must serve others. To experience the gifts that God has for us, we must learn to receive without guilt and shame. Today, we're taking the first step. Shula has given each of you a number. Find the lady who has the same number as you. She will be your partner. After you finish washing one another's feet, please take a few minutes to pray for yourselves, for your marriages, and for each other."

Wow. Really? I would have counted this as a not-too-bad session had they ended with the song. They could even have thrown in a prayer. That would've been good. That would've been enough. But as always, our Ann Landers wannabe takes it too far. The orange suits don't look like they wanna wash my feet any more than I want to wash theirs. I get it—the whole beholden thing. I wish I could go. Now I feel like a prisoner too. This is so—"

"Excuse me, but I think we're partners. I have your water ready. I don't mind washing your feet first if you're ready."

I look up from my conversation with myself to find one of the orange suits standing in front of me. She's the one who reminds me of myself. I see a little physical resemblance, but there's something else I can't quite put my finger on. I guess I should get this over with. Sorta like bungee

jumping. Just throw yourself over the cliff. Don't think about it or you'll never do it. So here goes.

"Um. Yeah. Sure." Well, that was real smooth. So much for teaching them how intelligent, successful women speak. Orange suit begins to remove my shoes, my expensive—

"Nice Miu Miu T-strap sandals." Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle. The orange suit knows her shoes. Not many women know quality shoes, let alone Miu Mius. Maybe she's in for theft or for selling knockoffs.

Orange suit carefully places my shoes under the chair and begins to roll up my tailor-made slacks. And all the while she's speaking to me. "I bet you're wondering how I know that you're wearing Miu Mius and that these pants were probably designed by Moi-Meme. I also bet you're wishing you could be anywhere but here, because women like you don't end up in places like this to visit or to stay."

Holy cow. This one has me pegged. It's gotta be a set-up. Shula probably arranged time off for good behavior if the prisoner took part in some type of scared-straight plan.

Orange suit gently takes my left foot and places it in the warm water while massaging my heel, my arch, and my toes as expertly as Anna did earlier today. "I'm sure you see me as only an inmate in an orange jumpsuit, but my name is Jillian, and no you're not in an episode of *Punk'd*. This is, however, a reality show that happens to be my life, and if you're not careful it could very well be your life someday." Is she psychic? How does she know what I've been thinking? And whoever heard of an inmate named Jillian? I'm fighting it, but she continues to work on my foot while speaking in a manner that's just as soothing as the massage.

"I see the look in your eye—the hunger, the drive, the desire for more, because you feel you've worked harder than everyone else and you deserve more. I see the look of discontent, because you were destined for greatness, and so far all you've achieved is mediocrity. I see that look of desperation. That look of a lioness anticipating the next kill, salivating as you imagine the taste of your successful future—more money, a bigger house, a closet full of designer clothes, an expensive sports car, a luxury SUV, elite schools for your children, membership at the country club, and another husband who's rich, gorgeous, connected, and over the top in bed." For the first time I look into her eyes, and I see recognition and knowing. This is uncanny. I

want her to stop, but I want to hear more. I nod, bidding her to continue. She dries my left foot and places my right foot in the water.

“You’re wondering how I know your story so well, thinking perhaps Shula or Pastor Sara set you up and broke the confidentiality agreement. If only that were the case. I never got your name, by the way.”

I am so mesmerized by all that Jillian is saying that twenty seconds probably pass before it even registers that she is asking me a question. “Name. Oh. Yeah. Um, my name is Alex, short for Alexandra, but everyone calls me Alex.” I should demand a refund from all those Toastmaster classes. I haven’t put one coherent sentence together since she started.

“Nice to meet you, Alex. Anyway, as I was saying, I know your story so well because your story was my story. I see the shock in your eyes, but it’s true. I had it all—the house, the car, the wardrobe, the six-figure salary, the status and recognition. But I wasn’t satisfied. I wanted so much more. I wanted a bigger house, a better car, a seven-figure salary, and another woman’s husband.”

I’m about to fall straight off of this chair. This is some *General Hospital* drama, for sure. “Yeah, sounds like *All My Children*, I know, but I’m afraid it was my life. And it was my greed that drove me to get caught up in a Ponzi scheme with another woman’s husband, who I was convinced loved me and not her. We cheated hundreds of people of their money, including our spouses and our children. Wanting more landed me here for five years. I could be serving more time, but I cut a deal, selling out everybody. And not only have I lost my freedom, but I’ve lost my career, my money, my reputation, and most important the best man ever as well as my two beautiful children. When I got here I was scared, but more than anything I was angry. I wanted to curse God and to die. I wanted to know how He could do this to me. How could the loving, compassionate God whom I’d heard so much about let me wind up here?”

By now I’m crying without care or concern about who’s looking or what others are thinking. “Then one day they told us that if we took one of the classes being offered, we could get some time shaved off of our sentences. None of the classes appealed to me, but the idea of less time was attractive, so I signed up for this ‘Naked and Unashamed’ series. At first I thought it was a joke, but Pastor Sara and Shula have been ministering to me, and because my heart has softened, God’s been able to speak to me.

And since I have a lot of time to think and pray, I've come to understand that the 'more' I was searching for had nothing to do with stuff and status. The 'more' that I needed all along was Christ. And now that I've found Him, for the first time I feel free and at peace. And who knows what life holds for me when I'm released? But I'm not worried. I know that God will take care of me."

Jillian pauses while she dries my feet and puts my shoes back on. "Alex, I don't know your exact story, but I suspect you're on the brink of making some serious decisions. What I want to share with you is that God is all the 'more' you need. He loves you. He can take care of you, and life with Him is ten times greater than life without Him. I don't want you to worry about washing my feet. This is my gift to you. I want to pray for you, and then it'll be time for you to go."

I can't respond through the tears, but no response is necessary. Jillian envelopes me in her arms and begins to pray. "Father, it's me, Jillian, and I'm coming to You first to say thank You. Thank You for crossing my path with Alex's. You knew that we needed each other, and I thank You for being a wise God. Thank You for the opportunity to give to someone else, not because I could ever repay You but because I want to serve You and to live a life that's pleasing to You. So if I can be of help to someone else, I count it a privilege.

"I come to You, dear Father, asking that You be with Alex in a special way. I have no idea about the specifics of her life, but my core connected with her today. I sensed in her pieces of my old life and I got chills—not because I longed for that life but because I could see where she was headed and I knew all too well that this path leads to nothing but darkness, heartache, pain, and destruction. So I'm pleading on her behalf that You intervene before she goes through what I've gone through. Help her to accept You into her life in a real way, not just superficially and for show. Help her to give her life to You and to experience Your love, Your peace, Your joy, and Your wisdom. Help her, like You helped me, to be complete in You. We're both in prison, Father, but I have been set free. I am asking that You free Alex as well. I love You so much, and I ask all of these things in Your name. Amen."

Beautiful—Lindsey

Journal Entry—Day Five

As usual, I acted impulsively and signed up for this workshop. As soon as I pushed the send button, launching my profile through cyberspace, I was filled with guilt. How could I be so full of doubt about marriage, and how could I betray Eddie like this, telling some stranger my feelings when I hadn't shared them with him? So I was planning my escape before I even got here, looking for any excuse not to come. Then when I got here, I came up with every reason to change seminars. Now I gotta admit this retreat is turning out to be better than I imagined it would be. Now I'm thinking just maybe this is where I'm supposed to be. I've learned so much from you, Shula. Yeah, you're a bit unorthodox, but these little exercises are making me think about things in a different way. I can't wait to see what you'll have us do next. I know we're talking about motivation today. Maybe we're going to a football game. Oh wait, I don't think it's football season. Anyway, I'm sure it'll be interesting.

Now, for the homework. You asked us to think about a woman in the Bible who we can relate to or who we want to know more about. I chose my nemesis, the Proverbs 31 woman. This is the wife I've always believed I should be. She reminds me of my mother. She's perfect—the perfect wife, the perfect mother, the perfect citizen—and I always thought I'd never measure up to her. I always thought she was a figment of some man's imagination, a constant reminder of what I should be without much hope that I could be. So when I started to read the passage again, thinking about

the description of this extraordinary woman and about the wife I'm soon to be, I started to feel a little resentful. I'm a hard worker, I care about others, I'm a nurturer, and I can multitask. But this woman is like superwoman. "Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound."

I don't see how I can work any harder or do any more than I'm already doing. I'm tired before I even get started. So before I got too far down the pity party road, I did what you taught us to do—I stopped and acknowledged my feelings. So here goes, my feelings—I'm resentful because I don't think I'm good enough. I've compared myself to other people my whole life, and I never seem to measure up. I'm scared because I don't think I can be the wife Eddie wants. It didn't work with him and Gabriella, and she's amazing, so will it work for us?

Then you told us to commit our feelings and worries to God and to ask Him to give us clarity. So I prayed and asked God to take away my fears and my resentment and anything else preventing me from hearing a word from Him. I asked God to help me see the Proverbs 31 woman as He wanted her to be seen. I asked that He help me to learn from her. And guess what, it worked! As I reread the passage, I actually felt peaceful. I can't explain it, but instead of my usual 'grumpys', I started to actually respect this woman. No lie. It was kinda weird. Stuff like this never happens to me. Was God seriously talking to me? Suddenly I saw the Proverbs 31 woman in a different light. (I wish she had a name, but maybe that's on purpose to show she could be any woman. She could be me. Ha!) She didn't seem like this unattainable superwoman. I was starting to see her as a child of God just like me, accomplishing a whole lot through His grace.

So Shula, when I shared my feelings about my superwoman complex with you, you, go figure, gave me another homework assignment. You told me to read, Psalm 18:29: "For by You I can run against a troop, by my God I can leap over a wall!" When I read this, I was in total disbelief. Maybe Super Prov (my nickname for the Proverbs 31 woman) was a superwoman after all, but not like the ones we think of—Superwoman, Catwoman, or Batwoman—who do all these things by their power. And they're not even real so I guess I need to go back in my journal and add them to my list of perceptions society gives us, making us think we can only do these superhuman things by our own super-human powers. Off topic again, I

know. Sorry. I'll try to stay focused. So after I read that verse, I realized that Super Prov wasn't doing all that she did through her own might but through God's. I am so geeked, I read the verse at least ten times. Through God's grace and strength, Super Prov did amazing things, and maybe through His grace and strength, I can too! Maybe I can leap over a building or a wall in a single bound, and maybe I can be an amazing wife and mother and citizen too.

So I prayed more. I wanted to see Super Prov even more clearly. And as I prayed, read, and talked more with you, Shula, Super Prov changed right before my eyes! I started to see her not as this frantic, ultra-organized control freak but as a woman whose life was ordered by Christ. I saw her not as an overachiever but as more than a conqueror made perfect through the One who saves us. What a wow moment for me. So I prayed some more.

By the way, this whole prayer thing is new for me. If I get nothing else out of this week, this has been worth every penny! I've been pouring out my heart to God, sharing with Him my fears, my sorrows, and my burdens and asking Him for guidance. That's been better than talking with a girlfriend or with my mom. For the first time I'm beginning to understand this whole power of prayer thing. I think I've been distant from God because I never really believed that He cared about me with my superficial, insignificant problems. Just today alone, I've spent over thirty minutes in prayer, and it's been amazing. Oh, sorry. I digressed. I know this isn't what I'm supposed to be writing about, but I want to remember this moment forever, giving me reminders later, when I forget and fall back in my old ways, the wonderful power of prayer.

Back to Super Prov. I can't believe how into this I am. Anyway, I took Proverbs 31 and reflected on the passage verse by verse. In some cases, I rearranged the verses in a way that made sense to me. And although I'm learning a lot and viewing this text in a completely different way, I also have way more questions than answers, so I noted those too. I hope I'll be able to answer these questions by the end of the week. Here are my jumbled thoughts and scribbles.

The virtuous wife: "Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies" (Proverbs 31:10).

So what does this verse mean? Maybe it's supposed to give men guidance for finding a virtuous wife, suggesting they take their time and work hard to discover that hidden gem. Being a nature nerd and all, I got into researching the whole rubies analogy. Why use rubies? Why not diamonds? You know the whole diamonds are a girl's best friend thing. Well, I looked into the process of mining for rubies, and I discovered it's a pretty intricate deal. (Side note: Boy do I love Google!) The first thing I learned is that large rubies with a clear, consistent deep-red color are so rare that they're worth ten times more than diamonds. Second, you can't find rubies everywhere. You have to know where to look. The miners have to dig a pit at least nine feet deep. Then they tediously and meticulously sift through the dirt and the sand, looking for nuggets or rock. They have to break apart the single rock very carefully to see if a ruby's inside. Boy, that's a lot of work for one ruby.

What if a man went through a similar process to find his ruby of a wife? If he would first recognize her worth and didn't look in bars or nightclubs but in places where he'd be more likely to find rubies (perhaps a park or a wildlife preserve lol). Then he'd take his time to sort through the dirt and the fake stones to find what might be a ruby, rubbing away the layers to discover whether it was the real thing. And there's a message here for women too: we should value ourselves as much as rubies are valued. We should expect men to work hard to gain our love, trust, and respect. We should expect them to treat us like treasured rubies, and we shouldn't accept anything less. (This is great stuff and I'm the one writing it!)

Here are my questions: Am I as valuable to Eddie as a prized ruby? Am I the ruby of his eye? Did he think that Gabriella was a ruby but then discover she wasn't? Or did she dump him, leading him to feel he lost his ruby and I'm the consolation prize—a diamond, a pearl, or maybe even a cubic zirconia? Does he value, cherish, and love me above everything? Do I think of myself as a ruby? No. A better question: what must I do to see myself as the beautiful ruby that God designed me to be?

“Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land ... The heart of her husband safely trusts her; so he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life” (Proverbs 31:23, 11–12).

I think these three verses speak to the qualities a virtuous wife should have. They seem to suggest how important it is that wives respect and trust their husbands. A virtuous wife should be trustworthy. Her husband should know beyond a shadow of a doubt that she has his best interests at heart. She will not speak badly of him in front of others, she will support his interests and encourage him, and she will want what's good for him. His heart should be safe in her hands. He should be respected at home and in the community. He should not have to worry about what others are saying behind his back about his wife or his home. He should walk with his head held high. He should be proud to be her husband, and she should be proud to be his wife.

Questions: I know that I am trustworthy, but do I respect Eddie like I should? Will he be proud of me as his wife, and more important, will I be proud of him as my husband?

“She seeks wool and flax, and willingly works with her hands. She is like the merchant ships, she brings her food from afar ... She considers a field and buys it; from her profits she plants a vineyard ... She perceives that her merchandise is good, and her lamp does not go out by night. She stretches out her hands to the distaff, and her hand holds the spindle ... She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies sashes for the merchants” (Proverbs 31:13–14, 16, 18–19, 24).

I used to look at this passage like a long laundry list of all the things I was supposed to do—buy, sell, sew, plant. I viewed these things as burdensome chores, and my success as a wife was all wrapped up in how much of those things I could do. But when I group them like this, I see that maybe these verses are talking more about the traits of a virtuous wife and not about all that she should be doing. We don't have to work in a field or in business or know how to sew (and I certainly hope not, because I'd fail miserably). But we should discover whatever gifts we have and use them to make our families better. We should be wise like Super Prov and make good decisions, and our work should be top quality so that others respect us. And whatever the wife does should reflect well on her husband and on her family. (I told you this was straight from God, because there's no way I could come up with this stuff. He loves me enough to speak to little ol' me. Oh yes He does!)

Questions: Do I use all of my gifts the way God wants me to? Does my work bring me, Eddie, and God joy? Is my family (Eddie, little Teddy, and me) my priority, and will my work support us and make our lives better? What does Eddie think of my work and of me working if/when we have kids?

“She also rises while it is yet night, and provides food for her household, and a portion for her maidservants ... She makes tapestry for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple ... She is not afraid of snow for her household, for her household is clothed with scarlet ... She girds herself with strength, and strengthens her arms” (Proverbs 31:15, 22, 21, 17).

Her home is her first priority. This seems to be the theme throughout the passage. Take care of the home. If the home is stable and secure and built on a strong foundation, everything else will fall into place. She also takes care of herself. Strengthening the arms must involve exercise, and her clothes are fine linen, so she’s making sure that she looks good. She’s representing her home, so she’s careful about her appearance.

All I can say is, I have some work to do in this area! I have the exercise thing down, but I definitely need to focus more on my appearance. Sigh.

“She extends her hand to the poor, yes, she reaches out her hands to the needy ... Strength and honor are her clothing; she shall rejoice in time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness. She watches over the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness ... Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised” (Proverbs 31:20, 25–27, 30).

These verses might be the most important in the passage because they speak to a woman’s character. The virtuous wife should be about service to others. She should be compassionate to those in need and be willing to help in any way she can. She should have honor and integrity and hold firm to her beliefs. She should have inner strength and wisdom, and be kind. She shouldn’t be idle. She should love God more than anything, and she should always rejoice and praise His name. And at the same time, she should be watching over her home, not letting church, work, friends, or anything else interfere with her first priority, well her second priority after God, her family.

I’m so pleased with myself. I just wanna shout “Go, Lindsey.” That’s right, I’m high fivin’ myself because I stuck to my convictions. I’m a virgin

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and proud of it! And I'm super proud of the fact that I am loving, and kind, and giving. I do need to work on trusting God more, making Him my first priority and figuring out how to make my family-to-be my second priority.

“Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her own works praise her in the gates . . . Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: Many daughters have done well, but you excel them all” (Proverbs 31:31, 28–29).

Her children call her blessed, her husband praises her, she is respected in the community, and above all, God finds favor in her. A wife and a mother are not slaves or glorified maids (not that I think there's anything wrong with being a maid). A virtuous wife is valued, blessed, and praised. I have never shouted in my life, but this is definitely worth at least an amen or a praise the Lord!

Final questions: What do these verses mean for me? How can I be the ruby God created me to be? How can I be the wife God intends me to be?

If you've never had an encounter with God where He spoke to you or revealed things to you, go into prayer mode until He speaks, because this is an awesome experience! I can't wait 'til you read this Shula cause I sure would love to hear what you think. And I can't wait to tell the ladies! This might just blow their minds. Imagine, God speaking to me.

I'm Coming Out—Lindsey

“Lindsey, you’re about to burst. What’s on your mind?” Shula knows me so well, although I guess I’m not really being all that discreet with my jumping up and down and carrying on.

“Ladies, I did it! Alex, I really did it. You told me to call Gabriella, and I did. You told me to get a backbone, and I did. And the Proverbs 31 woman isn’t the Devil, and did you know that there was a real, live superwoman in the Bible, and—”

“Lindsey, stop! Take a deep breath and start from the beginning, because you’re confusing me.” What? Get outta town. Do I detect interest from Alex? What’s come over her? I’ll have to check later, but for now I need to share before I actually do burst! All right. Inhale, two, three, four. Exhale, three, two, one. (Shula taught us this too, by the way.)

“Sorry, ladies. You’re right, Alex. Why don’t I start from the beginning? It all started at the Special Olympics, which were awesome, Shula. I totally fell in love with Jack. After five minutes I didn’t even see the Down syndrome. I just saw this funny, determined, outgoing young man. And he so wanted to win. Correction: he wanted to cross the finish line. I loved his self-pep talks. ‘I can make it. I can make it.’ I enjoyed being his cheerleader. Correction: his coach.”

“Very good, Lindsey. You remembered.” Shula looks as excited as I’m feeling. She must be so proud that her ladies are getting it.

“Yeah, I got it. I heard what you said, but actually being there and living the difference between a cheerleader and a coach helped it click. Like you said, we always hear that we should be our husband’s cheerleader,

rooting him on, encouraging him. Rah-rah-rah. But I like thinking of myself as the coach way better. In case you haven't noticed, I'm not exactly the cheerleader type."

Savannah perks up. "Well, I wouldn't exactly say that. Alex and I could work wonders on you. Just give us an hour, a flat iron, and some Maybelline." Savannah and Alex have been itching to do an extreme makeover, but I happen to love being *au naturale*.

"I think Lindsey is beautiful just the way she is, and if we're going to be coaches, we don't need to worry about looking like Barbie Dolls, no offense to you two beauty queens." Well, look at Barbara getting feisty. "Seriously, though, I agree with Lindsey. Thinking of myself as a coach rather than as a cheerleader moves me from the sidelines into the game. Today when I was quote unquote coaching Shannon, I felt like I was playing a bigger role in helping her throw the javelin farther and helping her stay up on the balance beam. Sure I encouraged her and cheered her on, but I feel that I made the biggest difference when I was working with her before the events, helping her stretch, getting her warmed up, showing her new techniques. By the way, did I ever tell y'all I was quite the athlete back in my day?" Well, this certainly got our attention. "Oh, don't look so surprised. Women were allowed to play sports back in medieval times, you know."

"Oh Barb, we didn't mean—"

"We didn't say that you were old. We were—"

Barb chuckles. I think she enjoys watching us squirm. "I know what you all meant, and no offense taken. I like teasing a bit. Anyway, back then, especially with most of the men off to war, women played a bigger role in sports, and that's how a lot of the women's leagues got started. We were trailblazers. Today brought back a lot of good memories."

Barb is silent for a while, seemingly lost in the memory. Who knew Barb the homemaker was a pioneer in her day? Now I'm curious. "So Barb, what sports did you play?"

"I played basketball and softball, and I loved it. I also coached the high school basketball team for two years after graduation. The athletic director was also my mentor, and I'll never forget what he told me it would take to be a good coach. I remember like it was yesterday. He told me that my role was to help the players develop to their full potential and to create an environment where they could learn and thrive. I was to give

guidance, constructive feedback, support, and encouragement. And this meant I had to know the game and to understand each player, recognizing their strengths and weaknesses and the things that motivated them. And although I wasn't playing and was no longer the star of the game, as the coach, I had an important role to play in leading us to victory. Anyway, today I realized something important about my role in this marriage. I no longer have to sit on the sideline, cheering, "Go, David! Great job!" I can get in the game and be his coach, his helpmeet."

Wow! Now I think Shula's going to burst. Maybe her work hasn't been in vain after all. That's some powerful stuff Barb just shared! She's so smart. I really like her. Not that I don't like the others. It's just that I especially like Barb.

Barb continues to drop more knowledge on us. "I was flipping through this book during my devotion time this morning; it's by Wyatt or Hyatt somebody. I can't remember, but she has an interesting take on what it means to be a helpmeet. If I recall, the book is called *In the Spirit We're Equal*. She says that the word *helpmeet* didn't exist in the original Scripture translation, and that in the Hebrew—or was it in the Greek?—it meant something else. Forgive me for butchering this, but I think the original word was something like *exkingbo*."

"That's close, Barbara. It's actually *ezer kenegdo*, and the phrase is Hebrew." That Shula's a smarty pants too.

"Exactly. That's the term: *ezer kenegdo*. Wait one second. Let me pull out my notes. I want to make sure I get this right. Okay. Got it. I'm going to read it word for word. 'In the Hebrew translation of Genesis 2:18, the word *helpmeet* does not occur, rather the Hebrew expression *ezer kenegdo* appears, meaning one who is the same as the other and who surrounds, protects, aids, helps, supports.' When I read that, ladies, I couldn't help but wonder at the awesomeness of God. We're not subservient slaves or inferior little helpers meant to be on the sideline."

I think Shula's going to cry. "That's exactly right, Barb. I think you've got it! Ladies, pull out your Bibles and let's look at Genesis 2:18." Shula can barely wait to start. "Then the Lord God said, "It is not good for man to be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." So from the very beginning we were created to be helpers for our husbands. And I don't mean simply being maids or servants cooking, cleaning, and ironing clothes, not that

those things are bad or forbidden, but the text alludes to us being so much more. We are supposed to help our husbands reach their full potential, to help them be all that God created them to be. God designed you for your husband, meaning you're a perfect fit for him. You complement him."

Has Barb ever been so excited? I think Barb and Shula are about to lose it. "Exactly, Shula. That's what I got from reading that book. We are made to be more. Then I got to thinking about my sports days, and it came to me. I am the coach of my family's team! We're coaches, ladies! We are part of the team!"

"Coach Savannah, huh? I never played a coach before. Maybe I can be like Goldie Hawn and play a coach like she did in *Wildcats*." Well, look who's joined us. Savannah's been here physically the whole time, but I can't say she's been here in any other sense. At least we know she's alive. She's still in her world of fiction and make-believe, but she's alive.

"Please don't start down movie lane today. Who even remembers *Wildcats*? That was a movie from decades ago, and if I remember it wasn't any good." You can tell Alex is trying to mind her *Ps* and *Qs*, but Savannah is getting on her nerves.

"I know, but if I starred in it, I could make it better."

"Well, Coach Savannah, what do you think about the idea of being the coach in your marriage?" Shula keeps trying, but as always, Savannah is silent about her marriage or so off point. "Well, maybe I could do some role playing with my Ross. You know dress up like a cheerleader or in his favorite sports jersey. Good idea Shula. That should spice things up". She just doesn't get it. We've been together for four or five days, and I don't know Savannah any better than I did on the first day, except for the fact that she's a really good actress. Maybe she's not acting, and she's actually all those characters wrapped up in one schizophrenic package. This is so not my specialty. Guess I'll have to leave her for Shula to figure out.

"Or maybe I could be like Carla Gugino in *The Mighty Macs*." I've never even heard of this movie. Poor Savannah. She seems more lost today. I'm gonna add her to my prayer list. My mother is gonna flip. Her baby girl has a prayer list. Isn't that something? Anyway, I think it's time I hijack the conversation, which was supposed to be about me from the start.

"This is what I've been trying to tell y'all, the whole Proverbs 31 woman thing. That's what she was, a coach, though sometimes I think

maybe she was the lineman protecting the quarterback. Well it doesn't matter, because no matter her position on the team, everything she did was for the good of her team, her family. I started calling her Super Prov, but hey, Coach Prov would work too."

"Who is Coach Prov?" Poor, frustrated Alex.

"The Proverbs 31 woman."

"You call her Prov?"

"Yeah, long story, the one I've been trying to tell for the past ten minutes!"

Shula gets us back on track. "Sorry, Lindsey. We got sidetracked. So you were telling us about your newfound revelations, apparently precipitated by a conversation that you had with Alex at the Special Olympics about the Proverbs 31 woman, about superwoman, and about getting a backbone. Take it away, Lindsey. The mic's all yours."

I better do some more deep breathing. If I'm going to tell this story in a coherent way, I'd better slow it down. In, two, three, four. Out, four, three, two, one. "Okay. From the beginning. Alex and I were talking during a break at the Olympics. I was telling her about my new revelations regarding the Proverbs 31 woman and about the awesome Bible verse Shula told me about, the one about superwoman—"

"I don't mean to interrupt, but can somebody please fill me in on this superwoman in the Bible?"

"Barb, you'll have to look it up later. It's Psalm 18:29. If I stop now, I'll get on another tangent."

"Yes, okay. I'll look it up later. Go on."

"So, as I was saying, I was telling Alex all about my discoveries, and then I got on the subject of my doubts about myself and about whether I could be a good wife and about feeling threatened by Gabriella—"

"I thought you were starting to get beyond that, Lindsey. We talked about seeing yourself as God saw you and—"

"I do, Shula. I do see myself in a whole new light. I just had a moment's relapse. But Alex gave me a swift kick in the butt as only she can do."

"Lindsey, I didn't mean to be too hard. I promise I was just trying to help."

"The kick in the butt was a good thing. You were truthful, yes, but not mean. And it's exactly what I needed to hear."

“Good. Just trying to help.” What is up with this new Alex? Since when does she care about how I or anybody else feels? This is going to take some getting used to. Shula is definitely earning her pay with this bunch.

“Well, you did. Mission accomplished. You told me that if I was going to be the coach, I had to take charge of my family-to-be. I needed to decide once and for all if I trusted Eddie. I needed to decide how little Teddy was going to fit into our lives. And I needed to get a backbone and not let my perceptions and fears of Gabriella rule our future. I had never talked to Eddie or to Gabriella about my feelings, but I had imagined, well probably magnified what I thought their responses and feelings were.”

“And that advice was free of charge, by the way.” Now, there’s a trace of the old Alex.

“Well, it sure got me thinking. How in the world could I support and encourage Eddie and our family-to-be if I didn’t believe in myself or in his love for me or in a future us? If Eddie had to continually reassure me and prove his love to me, I’d be in no position to coach. As you said, Barb, I need to understand the game, understand the players, and have a game plan so our team can win!”

“Lindsey, you can’t be serious. Don’t you think you’re taking this coaching analogy a little too far? You sound like you’re about to coach your favorite football team for a Super Bowl win.” The Alex we’ve come to love and to hate is back!

“But it’s such a great analogy. So anyway, Coach Lindsey reviewed her playbook and consulted the general manager. You know, I read the Bible and consulted God. Duh? Don’t y’all get it? Okay, maybe I am taking this too far. Maybe the analogy is falling flat. Anyway, I read some of the texts Shula suggested, and I especially liked 1 Thessalonians 5:11, which talks about encouraging one another and building each other up. And I liked Hebrews 10:24. I even memorized it, and yes, I am totally psyched because I never thought in a million years I’d be quoting or memorizing Scripture. Anyway, this got me to thinking about the kind of team player I needed to be. I consulted God, my general manager. Oh stop rolling your eyes. Okay, plain English. I prayed and I came up with a plan. Right after we got back to Naaman’s and before I lost my nerve, I did it! I am so giddy and so proud of myself! Go, Lindsey, go—”

“Earth to Lindsey! What did you do exactly?” I see that Savannah is caught up in the tale. She sure loves a good plot.

“Sorry. I’m just so excited. I mean the Lindsey Antoinette Williams I’ve lived with for, well forever, would never in a million years and I mean never—”

“Lindsey! Spit it out!” Did they practice that or what? They like screamed at me in unison, maybe even in three-part harmony.

“All right. Sorry. So I took Alex’s advice and I—”

“What?”

“I called Gabriella.”

“You did what? No way. My little pep talk inspired you to call Gabriella? I said fight for your man, but I didn’t mean fight her for your man.” I don’t think I’m explaining this quite right.

“No, I—”

“This is like our very own real-life *Stepmom* movie. I’m picturing Julia Roberts and Susan Sarandon now. What did you say? How’d she take it? Are you all going to meet up and duke it out later? Does Eddie know? This is too juicy. Do tell.” Savannah is enjoying this a bit too much. I think she’s salivating.

“We didn’t—”

“Oh dear. I hope there was no fighting. If so, then our past few days together have been in vain.” Now Barb is upset. If I could get one word in, I could calm everybody before the situation gets more out of hand.

Shula attempts to bring order to the chaos I’ve caused. “Ladies, ladies. Why don’t we all settle down and let Lindsey tell us what happened? And Lindsey, maybe you should take a deep breath and stick to the details, okay?”

Well, geesh. That’s what I’m trying to do, stick to the details. In, two, three four. Out, two, three, four. “Sorry, ladies. I guess my millennial, spider-web brain is kicking in. You know, like you said Shula. The millennials’ mind goes all over the place and your brains are linear, sorta like a train track. I get so caught up in—”

“Lindsey, we know. How about you start from the phone call? You dialed the number, the phone rang, and you said . . .” Poor Shula. She must want to shake me. Okay, here goes, from the phone call.

“So Gabriella answered the phone, and I gotta tell you I was scared to—”

“Lindsey!” There’s that three-part harmony again. All right! Just the facts. Got it.

“Sorry. Gabriella answered the phone, and the conversation went like this.”

“Ha-lo.”

“Hello, Gabriella? I don’t know if you know who I am, but this is Lindsey Williams, um, Eddie’s, um, Eddie’s fiancé, and I was wondering if we could, could, well if we could talk about a few things.”

“Well, well, well dis is quite de surprise. Zu tink we have someting zu talk about? Maybe zu should be talking to Eddie. He’s, as zu say, zu fiancé”.

“Yes, Eddie is my fiancé but he’s also the father of your child, and that means we’ll be connected in some way, well, at least for the next fifteen years. And maybe everything is fine for you, for us, but I just want to enter into this marriage—”

“I’m not entering into any marriage, zu are. And Eddie and me have no problemas. He gets little Teddy every other weekend, holidays, and six weeks in za summertime. He pays za child support, and little Teddy is happy and—how do zu Americans say it?—well adjusted, si? So no problemas. Do zu have a problema? Zu have a problema with little Teddy cuz mi little bambina no can be in zu casa, zu home, if zu no like—”

“Gabriella, no that’s not it at all. I absolutely love little Teddy. I am glad that he can be a part of our lives, and I will do everything possible to add to his happiness. I know this isn’t usual and maybe I’m all off base, but I guess I was just hoping—”

“What is it? Zu think I want Eddie back? Zu are threatened by moi? Well, I can zee why you would be jealous, si? I’m beau-ti-ful, no, gorgeous and sexy, si? And zu, well. No worries. Mi no want Eddie. Not mi type, no? We had a—how zu say?—one-night stand. One-night fling, si? I could have him back. But no. Mi no want him. Mi finito. Eddie all for zu, si?”

Did she just say she could have my Eddie if she wanted him? Did she just tell me I don’t need to feel threatened, because she chooses not to have him? I have got to tighten up the defensive end and regain control of this game, I told myself.

“Look, Gabriella, I get that you are no longer attracted to Eddie, but let’s be very clear. That is not the reason you aren’t with him. I love Eddie more than anything in this world, and I am confident that he loves me just

as much, if not more. And I want to clear the air with you, not because I feel threatened but because I want to enter my marriage with nothing between us. I called only to assure you that I will love and care for Teddy, not as his mother—I could never replace you and will never try—but as Eddie’s wife. I will love Teddy as an extension of my love for Eddie. I hope that we can work together for Teddy’s well-being. And please understand that I am securer in the love Eddie and I have and in our pending marriage than ever before. I know that God has a plan for my family. With Him as the head of our family, I’m not worried about you or any other gorgeous, sexy woman who may come along.”

Gabriella giggled. Actually, it was more like a low, guttural chuckle. “Zu think I’m gorgeous and sexy, si? Zu are correct.” This followed by that chuckle, the one I’m beginning to despise. “Ah Lindsey, zu not so bad. Maybe a little lip color and a little shape to di eyebrows, si? No worries. Glad zu have, um, zu have guts, si? Eddie called and say di same ting, and I say to mi self, *how cute! Eddie’s in love, si? Eddie and Lindsey, cute, si?*”

The speech bubble over my head is reading, Wow! Eddie called Gabriella to declare his love for me? Wow!

“Si. He called to tell me how much he luuvved zu and he went on and on and on about how I must respect zu marriage and zu luuvve. Acch is what I say! He was all sappy, like a—how zu say—like a puppy in luv? Tsk. How we ever got together, I will never know. Eddie’s not really mi type, si? But after shots of tequila, dey all look like Adam Rodriguez from *CSI: Miami*. Um. Now, dat’s a man I’d love to have frisk and search—”

“Okay, okay. I think I get the picture. Thanks, Gabriella. I’m glad we could clear the air. I hope you feel better about the other woman who will be in Teddy’s life, and I definitely feel better knowing that you are clear about my love for Eddie. And I’m glad to hear that you will respect our marriage.”

I feel like I’ve just run a marathon, but I’ve gotten it all out and I stuck to the facts. I feel like I have an *S* on my chest, and I think I’ve stunned the ladies into complete silence. “So that’s it. That’s my story. Whadda you think?”

Barb is the first to speak. “That certainly took a lot of guts. I don’t know if I could have done that, but it seems that it was a good thing, a good way to start your marriage.”

“I agree. That took some real guts. You stood up for yourself and for Eddie, and you cleared up all those worries. How do you feel? I mean you must feel ten times lighter.”

“Oh Alex, I do feel so much better. And the best part is learning that Eddie had talked to Gabriella too. He loves me! He’s told me that a thousand times, but I was still so worried. And right after I hung up with Gabriella, I called Eddie and we talked and talked. I told him about all the stuff I was learning here, and he loved the idea of having a family game plan—you know, like Shula taught us. We want to have a family mission, to know where we’re going, and to plan how to get there together. It was awesome. I learned it was way better sharing with Eddie all the questions and doubts I’ve been discussing with you and working through them together. Go, Team Chase!”

Alex is staring at me like she fears she’s created a monster. Maybe she has, but a good monster, like the cute ones from *Monsters Inc.* But I don’t care. I love the new me, the new us, my new team, Team Chase. Shula, on the other hand, is beaming like a proud grandma. Not that she’s old or anything, but you know how proud grandmas can be.

“Good for you, Lindsey. You and Eddie are on the right path, recognizing that you’re a team and that all you do should be for the good of your family. And I absolutely love how you’ve come to understand the Proverbs 31 woman in a whole different way. I’ll have to borrow that wonderful, insightful journal entry of yours. Also, ladies, the family planning tool, or the game plan, that Lindsey mentioned can be found in the back of your packets. So often couples start their marriages without having discussed the plan for their marriage or for their family.

“The plan helps you, as a couple, answer simple questions. What is most important to you as a couple? Where do friends fit into your lives? How much together time do you want or need? How much “me” time do you want or need? How important is having a church family? What is your plan to grow spiritually? Where does service to others fit in? How do you envision your family five, ten, twenty, or fifty years from now? What’s your communication plan? What are your goals for parenting? Will you both work outside the home? What lifestyle do you want to live? How much money do you need to support your lifestyle? How can you contribute to one another’s careers and to the management of your home?”

“Most couples don’t think of these questions or plan for these scenarios, but think about the most common issues that arise in marriages. Don’t most of the problems center around money, children, and lack of communication? If couples develop a game plan early on, set regular times to review and revise the plan, support and encourage one another, celebrate the wins, and analyze the losses, many problems could be avoided. And, the good news is that no matter where you are in your marriage, it’s not too late to get a game plan going.”

I can see Barb’s wheels turning. “I want to share this with my children. I don’t think we ever talk about marriage quite like this. It sounds like you’re running a business, but maybe that’s what’s needed. Maybe if we put the same time and energy into managing our homes as we do into handling our jobs, our marriages would be just as successful as some of our careers.”

“I couldn’t agree more. By the way, it’s not too late for you and David to develop a plan. I think that it’s best to have a plan from the beginning, but it’s valuable at any stage of your marriage. Just something to think about.”

I think today has been the best day ever! “You’re right, Shula. It’s a lot to think about. I think my brain is gonna burst.” Shula smiles. Maybe she’s envisioning my busted brain. “It is a lot of information, but remember that you don’t have to do everything right now. I hope the information is sparking new ideas. Besides, you can’t do it alone. The work will begin when you get home or at least when you reconnect with your husbands. You’re a team, and if you don’t remember anything else, remember that it’s a team effort.”

Alex seems contemplative. I think Shula notices too. “So Alex, what’s on your mind?”

“A lot. I’m just trying to process it all. I came here with the intent of getting a divorce while being able to say I went to a marriage retreat and tried to save my relationship. I never imagined I’d learn something about myself. All this time I’ve been so focused on Wes and all his shortcomings—”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but who is Wes?” Savannah asks what we are all thinking.

“What do you mean, who is Wes? He’s my husband.”

“Sorry, didn’t mean to offend, but I do believe this is the first time all week we’ve heard his name.” Gotta agree with Barb.

“Get outta here. I’ve talked about him all week. What do you mean I haven’t used his name?”

The three of us stare at Shula. No way are we going there. Let Shula answer. She gets paid to be in the line of fire. “Alex, I think what the ladies are saying is that you’ve spoken about your husband, but you’ve never called him anything other than that joker, the bum—”

Savannah jumps in. “Romeo wannabe, Cassanova.”

Barb remembers a few. “That man I married or him.”

“And my all-time favorite, the sperm donor.” I pray she doesn’t kill me.

Alex stares at us in total disbelief. I guess she never listened to herself. “I honestly don’t know what to say. I can’t believe that I’ve called him, I mean Wes, all those names. You all must think he’s a real loser.”

“Yeah, you’ve called him that too. Honestly, I haven’t known what to think of your husband. You always seemed to be so angry and unhappy with him, with Wes.” Barb is speaking my mind.

“Well, why didn’t somebody say something?”

Four pairs of eyes stare incredulously at Alex, but I brave a response. “Are you serious? We were all terrified you’d flatten us or something. You don’t exactly give off warm and fuzzy vibes.”

“Double wow. So I’ve been a real witch this week? I am so sorry. I guess I am or was angry and unhappy, and instead of dealing with it, I hid behind my sarcasm and venom. But I’ve learned this week that maybe it’s not all Wes’s fault. Maybe we have different expectations, or maybe I’m the one who changed. I definitely haven’t been about Team Olsen. I don’t even think we have a Team Olsen. It’s been a singles tennis match—Alex against the world. I’ve been so focused on my career, my success, and my money that I haven’t thought much about my kids or about my husband, Wes.”

I think Shula’s gonna fall prostrate before the Lord and give praise. Alex has had a breakthrough! “Alex, what you’ve shared is quite perceptive and gives us a glimpse into the real you and the reality of your marriage. First, thank you for sharing and for allowing us to shoulder some of the burden and to be a source of support for you.”

“I should be the one thanking y’all. You’ve been incredibly patient and kind while I’ve been, well, impatient and unkind. And I know I’ve been fighting you, Shula, tooth and nail, especially with all those exercises. And I’m still annoyed about being asked to give up my Blenheim original, but

that little exercise showed me how controlling I am and how hard it is for me to let go. And yesterday's visit to the prison slapped me dead in the face. Talking to Jillian was like looking in a mirror. I got a glimpse of where I could be if I don't do something to turn my life around. Now, don't get me wrong. I'm still not sure if my marriage can be saved, but I am hopeful that I can be more honest about it and about me. And no matter what happens, I'll never forget this week and you ladies."

Oh my heavenly stars, is that a tear? Through my own tears, it's so hard to tell if Alex is actually crying too. "Aw, this is definitely a call for a group hug. Come on, ladies. Gather in. Show some love."

I'm sure they think I'm corny, but who cares? I love these ladies. After a few minutes spent hugging, Shula has to hand out the tissues and get us back on track. "Well, ladies, our group time is up for today, and I must say I wish we didn't have to end. We've made some incredible breakthroughs, and God's wonders never cease to amaze me. I can truly say He's been with us today, speaking to us, revealing His Word to us, and transforming our hearts and minds. And although we need to wrap up this session, we still have time to explore your ideas and questions in more detail during our private sessions. And don't forget to journal. So enjoy your day and remember, breathe, let all the information marinate, enjoy the experience, and pray that God gives you revelations about how all that you take in applies to you and to your marriage. Lindsey, would you like to pray for us as we go about the rest of our day?"

I'm setting all kinds of records today. Praying in public? But I don't know how I can fail to pray, even if it's to thank God for speaking to and working for pitiful little me.

"Yeah, sure. I'd love to. I don't quite know how to pray for others in front of others, but Shula, you said prayer is just talking to God, so, um, bow your heads, and yeah, I'm, well I'm going to talk to God. Hello, God. It's me, Lindsey, Lindsey Williams, and I want to take some time to talk to You before we get busy with the rest of our day. First off, I want to say thank You for showing me that You're real, that Your Word is real, and that even simple, plain people like me can talk to You. What's more exciting is that You talk to me too. You don't talk to me like You talked to Moses or to Abraham, but You talk to me through the Bible, in the books I've been reading, through these amazing ladies, and in prayer. So thank

You for that. And thank You for these ladies, who are like friends and my other moms.

“I’ve learned so much, and I am super excited now about getting married. And thank You for Eddie. Now I ask You to be with all the ladies—Savannah, Alex, Barb, and Shula. Speak to them like You spoke to me and help them figure out whatever issues they have. Show them how awesome You are so they can have the same excitement I do in this new love relationship between us. Okay, I think that’s it for now. Thanks for loving me and for loving us, and I say this prayer in Your name. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

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Secret Garden—Barb

“I want your lips to give me many kisses. Your love is better than wine. Your perfume smells wonderful. You my lover are like a collection of perfume. This lies all night between my breasts but your name is better than the best perfume. Take me away with you and we will run away. Bring me into your room. Blow on my garden, then its smell can spread everywhere. Come into your garden. Then taste its pleasant fruit.” Her lover responds, “I have drunk my wine and milk.” She continues, “I belong to my lover, and he desires—”

“Forgive me, Shula, but I don’t think I can listen to too much more of this.” I know my face is about as red as a pomegranate, and if Shula keeps this up, I may need to skip today’s session. “I know we’re supposed to focus on the intimacy part of submission, but really, what you’re reading sounds close to pornographic material, and I’m very uncomfortable with it.”

“Barb, I would never bring pornographic material into our sessions, and today, as I’ve done every day, I’m beginning our group session by reading a passage from the Bible.”

All the ladies look as stunned as I do, maybe not as red as I am, but equally astonished. “Are you telling me you found this intimate, arousing passage in the Holy Bible, the inspired Word of God? Is this some unpublished writing? I don’t recall reading any of that.”

“I’m with you, Barb. God knows I’m no saint and I’m definitely not inexperienced or prudish, but come on, Shula. You want us to believe that some woman in the Bible is talking about wanting kisses, and her lover’s perfume lingers between her breasts and she wants him to blow on her

quote unquote garden and taste her milk? You've got to be kidding." Leave it to Alex to tell it like it is. I'm thinking the same exact thing, but I am way too embarrassed to say it out loud. But not our Alex.

"Grab your Bibles, ladies. Let me prove to you that I'm not writing porn as a side job." I don't know if we've ever gotten our Bibles out this quickly. We are all eager to see what Shula was reading. I bet she's paraphrased the passage to get our goats.

"Okay, let's read it again and not from my notes but from your Bibles, and I'll be reading from the New International version." Shula looks around the room with a twinkle in her eye and a slight smile on her lips. "I see you all have your Bibles ready, so here we go. Let's start in the Song of Solomon, chapter 1, verse 2: 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth. For your love is more delightful than wine'. And then verse 13, 'My beloved is to me a sachet of myth resting between my breasts.' Now look at verses 3 and 4. 'Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes, your name is like a perfume poured out.' And then over to verse 4, 'Take me away with you— let us hurry. Let the king bring me into his chambers.' And chapter 4, verse 16: 'Blow on my garden, that its fragrance may spread everywhere. Let my beloved come into his garden. Then taste its choice fruit.' And over to chapter 5, verse 1, her lover responds, 'I have come into my garden, my bride. I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey. I have drunk my wine and milk.' And turn over to chapter 7, verse 10: 'I belong to my beloved and his desire is for me.' And finally verse 12 of chapter 7: 'Let us go early into the vineyard' and skip down a bit ladies to 'there I will give you my love.' It's all right there in the Holy Bible, the Word of God."

Silence. I can hardly believe I've never read these verses, and if I have, I've never read them quite the way Shula just did. It is right there in the Bible, but why do I feel so uncomfortable? Savannah must feel the same way too, because she expresses my exact musings. "Okay, Shula, I get that you're reading from the Bible, but did you have to recite these verses in such a sexy, sensual way? It is the Bible for heaven's sake."

That's exactly what I'm thinking. Seems downright sacrilegious if you ask me. But Shula doesn't seem put off in the least bit. "Who told you that Christian women can't be sensual or sexy? Who suggested that good girls wear skirts to their ankles and their hair in a bun and that the only thing our breasts are good for is feeding babies? Why is it that bad girls have all

the supposed fun while those who serve the Lord are destined for lives of sexual repression, unfulfilled fantasies, and untended gardens?”

Did Shula just say “untended gardens”? This conversation seems so wrong, but I’m not sure why. Maybe her questions are worth considering. Why do we feel this way, and why do we believe what society says when it appears as if the Bible is saying something different?

“You ladies are staring at me like I just sprouted horns. And that’s okay. It took me a long while too. But I did it. I questioned the lies and sought to understand God’s truth about my sexuality and about intimacy. And once I discovered and embraced the truth, I became one liberated, sexual, sensual girl on fire for my husband without diminished passion for God. If anything, my passion for God grew by leaps and bounds.”

“So are you telling us that your enhanced sex life improved your spiritual life? This is beginning to sound a bit too New Age for me.” Lindsey is just as confused as I am, probably as we all are.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying. I found it downright liberating to discover God’s truth and to recognize that ‘I am fearfully and wonderfully made,’ that I was ‘made intentionally and on purpose,’ and that God wants me to ‘live abundantly’ and to ‘have the desires of my heart fulfilled.’ And once I understood God’s true intent for marriage and accepted His gift of fulfillment and pleasure through intimacy and sexual relations with my husband, I gained freedom!”

Shula is beaming as if she’s discovered gold. Maybe she has. “So Shula, if I’m following you correctly, are you saying that, um, sex is a gift from God?”

“Yes Barb. I’m saying that intimacy with your husband is a gift from God and is more precious and more fulfilling than mere sexual intercourse. And it just blows my mind as I learn and begin to more fully understand that everything from the beginning of time until the end has been masterfully planned. As you dig into the Bible and the Holy Spirit reveals certain truths, you can’t help being in awe of our powerful, loving God.

“Pastor Sara and I just started a study and we aren’t finished making sense of it, but it’s just too good to keep to myself. I know we don’t have much time to go into a deep theological examination of these concepts, but quickly look up the following verses. Genesis 4:1 says, ‘Adam knew Eve, his wife,’ and Genesis 4:17 says, ‘Cain knew his wife.’ In Genesis 24:67,

‘Isaac took his wife into the tent and loved her.’ Now read Genesis 16:4, Genesis 38:9, Genesis 38:15–16, and Genesis 39:7. Abraham went into Hagar; Onan spilled his seed; Judah, thinking his daughter-in-law was a prostitute, asked to come into her, and Potiphar’s wife asked Joseph to lie with her. Why the difference? Why use the term *to know* in some instances and descriptions of sexual acts like ‘spill his seed,’ ‘lie with her,’ and ‘come into her’ in others?

For a moment, silence but I can see the wheels turning. And then the excitement of revelation begins to take hold. Lindsey responds first. “So are you thinking that to ‘know’ your spouse is different from having sex with your spouse? Is ‘knowing’ your spouse on a much deeper spiritual level? And if all this is true, how am I supposed to know how to ‘know’ Eddie? I mean I’m having a hard enough time trying to figure out what the sex’s gonna be like, and now I need to ‘know’ him too? And am I supposed to ‘know’ him before I have sex with him, or does that come after? Or will I automatically ‘know’ him when I sleep with him?” Poor Lindsey exhales a huge sigh. “I’m so confused.”

I want to laugh, not because her questions amuse me but laugh as if to say, “Aw, poor baby. I wish I could ease your pain.” Her confusion is so sweet and innocent and wonderful to see, but if I laugh, I don’t think Lindsey will know the difference, so I simply smile. I think Shula feels the same way as she tries to reassure our delicate little flower.

“Oh Lindsey, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to confuse or frighten you. Just the opposite, actually. This information should be exhilarating and liberating. It’s exhilarating because what this tells me is that God designed marriage to be sacred and special. God knows that anybody can have sex. As a matter of fact, animals have sex. The act of sexual intercourse is no great feat. It’s a part of our DNA. But to ‘know’ our husbands and to ‘be known’ by them, well that’s special. That’s what sets us apart from the beasts of the field and the birds in the air. It should also be liberating because God has given us this wonderful opportunity via marriage to practice knowing and being known by Him. Simply put, our earthly marriages are a training ground for our life in eternity.

“God knows us more intimately than anyone ever could. He knows the number of hairs on our heads, He knows our thoughts before we think them, and He even knew us before we were conceived. And just as

He knows us, He wants us to know Him. What does the Bible tell us? Know that He is God. Seek Him and He will be found. Keep your eyes upon Him, align your thoughts with His, and spend time with Him. Love Him with your whole heart, body, mind, and soul. And Lindsey, if the notion of ‘knowing’ Eddie and ‘being known’ by him is overwhelming, how overwhelming is it to consider such a relationship with the God of the universe? I believe that God, in His excellent wisdom, has given us the gift of marriage so that we can have a small sampling of the loving, intimate relationship we’ll share with Him when He returns. As I said, we’re still studying these concepts, but I think you should explore them too.”

“I don’t mean to be a doubting Debbie, but is that type of love or knowing or whatever you call it really possible? Maybe back in Bible times it was, and even that’s a big maybe. I mean, Solomon had a gazillion wives and yeah, he wrote some beautiful poems, but how could he possibly ‘know’ all those wives? And if such love did exist back then, I’m not so sure it exists today, or at least I don’t see it in relationships today.” Alex is right. It sounds beautiful and romantic, but is it realistic?

“As for Solomon, I think his life is an example of the struggles we all face. Most of Ecclesiastes is his reflection on the mistakes he made, missed opportunities to understand the true purpose of life, etcetera. I think the Songs of Solomon was written to exemplify what true intimacy and passion and desire in a marriage can be and to show us that this type of love and intimacy is okay. But King Solomon was human, thus flawed like we all are flawed. And hopefully, we can learn from his mistakes and the mistakes of others and strive to do better.

“I know you’re skeptical and I was too. But with God at the helm, He can help you experience love like you’ve never imagined.” Shula, pauses as if in the valley of decision about something, but she finally continues. “I was hesitant to share this, you know, another Seth and Shula story, but let me share just this last thing. I want to share one of the many letters that Seth wrote me during the course of our marriage. So indulge me for a moment ladies.

Every fiber of my being is connected to you; all five senses are fully engaged. Sweetheart, I see the very essence of your soul. I see beyond your mango-sweet lips and your

lilac-soft skin. I see the very core of your being —your strengths and vulnerabilities, your desires and fears, your joys and sorrows, your dreams and disappointments. I see the very heart of you.

And I know you often wonder whether I hear you. Well, let me put your mind at ease, because I do hear you. I understand what you say as well as all that's unsaid—the way you purse your lips when you disagree or sigh when you've had enough; the way you stare off into space when you're distracted or the way your smile lights up the room when you're pleased. Baby, I hear the very heart of you.

Being one with you has taken on a whole new meaning. Your aroma is ever present; you envelop me like a sweet yet sultry and sensual perfume. I inhale and my nostrils fill with a fragrance that reminds me of your laugh, your touch, your kiss. Whether it's your scent that remains after a morning embrace or the smell of your lingering love juices upon my lips, the very heart of you is ever present.

Oh taste and see. And oh baby, you are definitely good. I crave you. I desire you. I thirst for you. Like King Solomon, I long to come into my garden and taste its delectable fruits. The more I have of you, the more I want. When it comes to you, I'm insatiable. I delight in the very heart of you.

Have you ever been touched in a way that made you feel as if you were on fire? Touched so that your nerve endings prickled and the hairs on your body stood at attention? Touched and been assured of security, assured of love, assured of understanding? Well, that what's you do for me, babe. You've touched the very heart of me.

Did I say you engaged all five senses? Correction, my love. You even affect that sixth sense. The sense that's the very

core of me—my heart and soul—where only you and God dwell.”

Wow! That was absolutely beautiful. What it must be like to get a love letter like that from your husband. Even though David bores me to tears, I can't envision losing him or living the rest of my life without him. I can only imagine how much Shula must miss her husband. I guess the best alternative to being discontent with my marriage is for me to add some sparks to it and pray that David won't experience cardiac arrest or pass out from embarrassment.

I don't know if I could continue running a session after having read such a beautiful reminder of my husband's love, knowing that he's gone forever, but somehow Shula continues on.

“Alex, I know you are all probably sick to death of my Shula-and-Seth stories and—”

“Oh Shula, I'm so, so sorry. I must've been a real joy to deal with this week. I didn't mean to be disrespectful toward your marriage or toward you. I guess it was too hard to hear about a marriage that seemed so perfect while mine is not.”

“No need to apologize, Alex, and I completely understand how hard it must be hearing about marriages that seem to be going well. And hearing about my marriage that doesn't even exist anymore may be doubly hard. But learning about other marriages and what worked or what helped, can encourage you along your marital journey. It's taken time and prayer for me to be able to praise God for the wonderful years that Seth and I did have together and I am finally beginning to embrace the opportunity to bless others with tales from the Shula-and-Seth chronicles.” Shula smiles, and as if in answer to a prayer, a peace seems to wash over her. God is so good and I'm glad she's ready to share her stories. I love the Shula-and-Seth chronicles. They give me hope for what David and I could have. This week's been such a blessing.

“That said, I don't want to leave you with the notion that our relationship was perfect. Seth was by no means perfect, and God knows neither am I. And I didn't read that love letter to say, ‘Look at my wonderful marriage. Too bad yours isn't like mine.’ No, I read that letter to demonstrate what

two people committed to one another, and more important, two people completely dependent on God, can experience.

“I’ve said it a hundred times this week and this’ll make a hundred-and-one: marriage is work. But if you commit your work to the Lord, He will make sure it succeeds. The beauty was not in me or in Seth but in God’s work in us. Seth knew me—my curves and my edges, my merits, and my many imperfections. And I knew him, flaws and all. But oh what sweet joy we experienced getting to ‘know’ one another while also getting to ‘know’ our Creator on a deeper, more meaningful level. Can you ‘know’ and ‘be known’ by your husbands? Absolutely, but only insofar as you ‘know’ and ‘are known’ by God. Sorry. That was a bit off topic and a long explanation, but I hope it was a meaningful one.”

“Well, since you put it that way, I have nothing to fear, right? God will help me and Eddie figure it all out. I guess that what you’re saying is that I should just enjoy the whole ‘getting to know’ process.”

“Yes, Lindsey, just relax. You don’t have to have it all worked out on your honeymoon. You’ll please Eddie because you love him, he’ll please you because he loves you, and you have till death do your part to get to know each other. David and I are still getting to know each other and after this week, it seems that we have a whole lot left to discover. So just relax and enjoy the ride. Come to think of it, maybe I should take my own advice.”

“Well said, Barb. It’s a journey, and as you get to know Eddie and Eddie gets to know you and you both get to know Christ, your marriage, your love, and your commitment will grow and deepen more than you can imagine or hope for. And as Barb said, it’s a journey that should span the life of your marriage.

“Okay, ladies, back to the topic at hand. I want to ensure that we focus on this one fact before our time ends: God intended for us as women to enjoy intimacy and sexual relations with our husbands. Simple as that. I want you to let go of all the other messages you’ve received throughout your life—only men or very naughty and risqué women enjoy sex, or being a Christian woman means you have to sacrifice your desires and stifle sexual satisfaction, or God is punishing women because of Eve’s sin. These are a bunch of lies crafted and spread by none other than that old liar, Satan

himself.” Shula’s on fire again, but I’m encouraged. Maybe there’s hope for this old woman after all.

“Today, ladies, I’m giving you the opportunity to reclaim your ‘inner sexy’ or to discover it for the first time! We’ve arranged several activities for the day, all designed to help you get to know yourself more completely, to see yourself as God sees you, and to learn what you want, what you like, and what it might take for you to be fulfilled by and to fulfill your husband. Here’s a brief rundown on some of the activities you can indulge in today. First, you might want to experience a complete makeover—hair, makeup, fashion consultant, the whole nine yards. Or you can be a little more adventurous, you know, just a little edgy, and explore that tiger inside of you. You can take a dance class, learn to walk in six-inch stilettos, or attend the lingerie party. Ladies, I guarantee you’ll love any one or all of these activities. Then—”

“Excuse me Shula, I don’t mean to interrupt. The makeovers and dance classes, all right up my alley. But can you tell me what kind of music we’ll be listening to? We, after all, are at a Christian retreat, so I bet we’ll be listening to Christian music, but I can’t imagine twirling for my man to ‘Rock of Ages’. You know what I’m sayin?” Alex has a point. ‘Nearer My God to Thee’ and sexy don’t seem to belong in the same sentence.

Shula laughs. I wonder if she was prepared for all of our questions this morning. We certainly have a ton. “Yet another thing that Satan’s stolen from us, music. It’s a lie that if a song has a bass line, isn’t sung in an operatic style, and doesn’t mention the name of Jesus then it is secular and must be avoided like the plague. Read the Song of Solomon. Words of desire and pleasure can be spoken and even sung between husband and wife. It is okay. Have I said that this morning? It’s okay. But, that doesn’t mean that any ol’ thing is okay. We must retrain ourselves to be discerners of what is good and acceptable unto God. So when you select songs, you should listen to the lyrics and make sure that the messages are ones of intimacy, love, desire, and passion appropriate for husband and wife.

“I encourage you to review the lyrics of the all-time greatest love songs, like Bob Dylan’s ‘Make Me Feel Your Love’— “When the evening shadows and the stars appear and there is no one there to dry your tears, I could hold you for a million years to make you feel my love” or Etta James’s ‘At Last’— “The skies above are blue. My heart was wrapped up in clover the

night I looked at you. I found a dream that I could speak to, a dream that I can call my own. I found a thrill to press my cheek to, a thrill that I have never known”. And read the Song of Solomon again. Check out the lyrics, and then let’s talk again about appropriate love songs. Okay, ladies, I gotta keep going or you’ll miss all the fun. We also have a poetry slam session where you can express your innermost longings in sensual ways, ways that will make your husband—”

“Excuse my naiveté again. I know I’m old-fashioned, but I was raised to believe that the things you’re talking about are not becoming of good Christian wives and that our husbands would not want their wives to behave in such whorish ways. So please help me to reconcile what you’re suggesting we do with what is acceptable and expected of good Christian wives.” I’m so torn. I want to express my sensual side. At least I think I have a sensual side, because I want so much more from my marriage. Something propelled me to come here, and when I listen and read and pray and reflect, I feel that God wants me to enjoy that side of myself too. But it’s so hard to shed what I’ve been told for years.

“Barb, I completely understand the dilemma you’re experiencing. I was where you are many years ago. But through careful study of the Word and with a desire to experience all that God had for me in my marriage, I was able to distinguish between God’s intent and what society wanted me to believe was for me. And I’ll say it again: this week is not a miracle prescription for marital bliss. This week has been about self-discovery and reflection. You’ve looked at what you bring to your marriage and what you want from it, and I’ve given you new ways to think about love, submission, and intimacy to help you with the hard work to come. Over time you’ll have to figure that out with your spouse. What I can tell you is that just maybe there’s another way—a happier, healthier, more fulfilling way. All I can do is share the information. You’ll have to figure out what to do with it. And remember, I’ll still be here for you post our week together, we’ll just have to sort out the details of how I can be of continued assistance.” Shula always talks me off of the ledge. It all sounds reasonable. I just have to remember to breathe.

“Ok, back to the poetry. The poetry slam will renew your appreciation for sensual, seductive writing, the kind we read in the Holy Bible a few minutes ago, so that you use words as God intended, not as Satan has

twisted them.” I wish my David would write me letters like the one Seth wrote Shula. Well, maybe in time or maybe I’ll have to start by writing him love letters. So much to think about.

“Now, ladies, you absolutely must have your very own photo shoot or—”

“Excuse me, Shula, but did you say photo shoot? Now, that sounds intriguing.” All things glitz and glamour—that’s our Savannah.

“It is actually. My photo shoot was a great experience. Gotta admit I was as nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof, but it lifted my spirits, helped me appreciate and love myself more, and helped me see myself through another lens—the lens of the camera, yes, but also through God’s lens. I was able to look beyond stretch marks and scars and blemishes and see beauty and to appreciate everything that made up me. And the photographer was very good. She made me feel relaxed and beautiful and sexy. All the while, I still felt classy and very much like a lady.”

“So were you nude?” Savannah asks. “Are we going to be nude?” Oh my, I hadn’t considered that. Nude pictures? What is this, *Calendar Girls* or something? Imagine all my rolls and dimples in print. I think I’ll skip that session for all our sakes.

“No, not at all. As I said, my photo shoot was very tasteful, and yours will be too. There will be an array of outfits and props to choose from or you can bring your own outfits. The photographer goes at your pace and takes time to get to know you and to help you feel comfortable. You’ll be pleasantly surprised when you see the proofs. You will feel naked and exposed but not physically. It’s more like an internal exposure. I don’t know how she does it, but it’s an eye-opening experience. You can pick your favorite shots and have them made into a photo album. I gave my album to Seth as an anniversary gift, and he absolutely loved it.”

There is definitely more to Shula than meets the eye. Maybe you can be a sexy Christian woman on fire for God and be on fire in the bedroom too. Hmm. I’ll have to give this more thought. This is so scary, but I have to admit it’s a little exciting too.

“While there’s a sensual and sexual side to intimacy, as ladies, we must also consider our physical health and well-being, so there are sessions related to this topic too. There’s a nutrition class, and I think you’ll be quite surprised to learn what foods can boost your libido.”

g u t t e r

“Like what? Oysters? I detest the slimy little things. Anyway, I think it’s all a bunch of hooley, truth be told.” Of course you would, Alex.

“Actually, there’s scientific research that supports what our nutritionists will be sharing, but to spark your curiosity just a little, you’ll be learning about the benefits of basil and avocados and my favorite, chocolate!”

“Count me in. Anything chocolate and I’m there.” Food and movies, right up Savannah’s alley.

Lindsey looks completely flabbergasted. Our once-confident little superwoman of yesterday looks as if she’s about to lose her breakfast. “Shula, I’m terrified again. How in the world am I gonna know how to be sensual like that lady you were reading about in the Bible? Or like Gabriella or Alex? Maybe I can’t do this. Maybe I’m not cut out for this. Not everybody’s marriage material.” Poor Lindsey. This must be so hard for her. Maybe it does make a difference when you’re both virgins. I think David was just as afraid as I was, and we learned together. It’s true that God’s Word makes for happier, healthier, and less complicated living. Maybe Lindsey wouldn’t be so afraid if she weren’t always thinking about the perceived competition.

Alex beats Shula to the punch, attempting to comfort Lindsey. “Look, Lindsey, I know I’ve given you a hard time and I’ve probably given you some pretty bad advice—”

“You have given me plenty of advice. That’s for sure. Let’s see. I think you told me that all men are simple and that all they want is a hot meal and sex, and you even suggested that it didn’t have to be good sex. I think you said when we’re, you know, doing it, I should just moan and move a little and I’d have him hooked.”

We’re all staring at Alex like she’s Satan incarnate. How could she give such flippant advice to our fragile Lindsey? And did this poor girl’s mother tell her anything about love and marriage and sex? I could just pinch Alex.

“I know, Lindsey. I’m sorry. I wish I could have a do-over. Delete all that I told you or at least what I told you earlier this week. I was so angry at, well, at myself, at Wes, at our marriage, and it was easier to pick on you than to face my reality. Besides, you were such an easy target. You actually believed me. You were like taking notes. It was a tad comical, you must admit.” Will miracles never cease? Alex is showing remorse.

“The truth is, my marriage is falling apart, and I wanted so desperately to blame Wes. This week was supposed to affirm that divorce was our best option, but instead it helped expose the big part I’ve played in our crumbling façade of a marriage. I think Wes is cheating on me, and I’ve been so angry, wondering how he could do this to me. I should be the one cheating on him. I’m the prize in this marriage, and he has no reason to seek somebody else, especially since he has me. But this week, I haven’t been too happy with what I’m seeing. I’m beginning to see that Wes is the same man I married umpteen years ago. I’m the one who’s changed, and so I’ve been expecting him to change. He told me who he was and what he wanted, and I was the one who believed he should want more, be more. When did he become not enough for me? When did I stop loving who he was and start dreaming about who I wished he’d become? So maybe I’ve pushed him away and maybe it’s too late now. I’ve treated him horribly, and maybe he’s found someone who loves him for him.” Alex is being introspective. I guess that poetry slam will have to wait a bit longer. We can’t leave now.

“Anyway, I don’t wanna take up any more time. I’ll have all day to think about what a mess I’ve made of things. But listen, Lindsey, it sounds like Eddie loves you, and Lord knows you love him. And with love as the foundation, the rest will fall into place. You don’t need to swing from a chandelier to please him, although it might be fun.” Alex couldn’t resist sharing that little bit of insight. She did it with a wink though, so maybe Lindsey will know she’s teasing. “As Shula said, the pleasure will come as y’all get to know each other and as God blesses your marriage. I wish I knew all that before I got married. I think we booted God out of our home a long time ago, and on our own Wes and I have made a fine mess.”

Oh dear. Alex seems to need a hug. But I’m not that crazy. I’ll just send her a mental hug. Shula, however, is far braver than I am. She crosses the room and hugs Alex. I think Alex takes ten whole minutes to respond, but she finally breaks down in tears and hugs Shula back. Now we’re all crying. I’m not so sure any of us will find our sexy side at this rate. We’re a blubbering mess.

“Alex, a miracle is simply giving God our mess and watching Him transform it into something beautiful. When we live outside of God’s will and the Holy Spirit brings this to our attention, we feel shame. But we

have a Savior who bore our sin and shame on the cross. Give God your hurt and shame, Alex. Give Him your marriage and your family. Your marriage may seem hopeless and unsalvageable, and in your hands it probably is. But in God's hands all things are possible. You've made some major breakthroughs, and although it won't be easy, change is possible. As I told Barb, the hard work comes when you leave here, and the first order of business will be to talk to your husband. You've made a lot of assumptions about what he feels and wants and about what he's doing or not doing, but you don't know for sure. So you'll have to talk to him, to listen to him, and most important, to pray for him and for your marriage."

What will we do without Shula when we leave? She makes everything seem so simple. She makes us feel like everything is possible. Maybe that's why she always directs us back to God. We won't have her 24/7, but God will always be with us. I guess that's the most important thing she's taught us this week—to rely on God for all our answers.

"Now, dry your tears, and even though you don't think today's activities are for you, understand that they are because today is not about sex but about self-discovery. Go find out who Alex really is and what Alex really wants. Drop the façade of being impenetrable, unyielding, and independent. Get to know you. See Alex as God sees Alex. Ask the tough questions and listen for God's response. What makes you happy? What brings you pleasure? You've talked a lot this week about all the ways you can please a man. Today I want you to discover what pleases you. I want you to fully participate, expecting revelation and blessings. Think you can do that?"

Through snuffles and tears, Alex nods her head in the affirmative. "Good. Now, for the rest of you, ditch the tissues and go enjoy the day. There's a more phenomenal, more sensual you waiting to be discovered, and I pray that when you find her, you'll be on fire like never before."

I'll Be Loving You Always

July 10, Journal Entry No. 51

Dear heavenly Father: I knew conducting these sessions would be good for my continued growth and healing. And I believe I'm where You want me to be, doing the work that You've called me to do. But (yes, there always seems to be a *but* with me) I also knew that doing these sessions would be difficult, especially the first time around. So I get why this week, my first, is particularly hard. And I know that this will get easier, that time heals all wounds. But I wasn't prepared for how hard today's discussion of intimacy would be for me. I was trying everything I could to rush the ladies along and to send them on their way, but would they go? No, of course not. Today of all days they wanted to talk, to ask questions, and wouldn't you know it, today would be the day that Alex decided to have her monumental breakthrough. I didn't even close in prayer, because I knew if I had to utter one more word I'd collapse in tears.

Maybe I subconsciously planned less discussion and more activities for this topic on intimacy so I wouldn't have to deal with the wave of emotions that I knew could wash over me, threatening to drown me once again in a sea of despair. When you lose a spouse, you lose a lot more than a husband. I lost the love of my life, my companion, my best friend. But nobody talks about the intimacy that you lose. Let me be plain: nobody talks about the sex you no longer experience.

I find this especially hard because I am a living testimony that You designed women to be sexual beings, and I know firsthand that we women

can desire and enjoy sex just as much as any man. Oh, how I miss Seth's touch, his kiss, his scent, his strong arms wrapped around me. I miss the early-morning foreplay, the midday trysts, and the late-night rendezvous. But most of all I miss being able to express the lioness within me. Oh sure I look polished and professional on the outside, complete with tailor-fitted designer suits, hair in a loosely clipped bun, and glasses to boot. But Seth saw beyond the exterior and connected with my soul. Seth took me to heights unknown, and just when I felt we'd reached the peak, he encouraged and helped me go even higher. Our love was defined by new crests to conquer, unending summits to attain. We gave *climax* a whole new meaning.

Seth and I created extraordinarily marvelous memories. One of the things I miss most is planning secret get-a-ways and special indulgences for Seth. Each date revealed my naughty side, and he looked forward to "surprises by Shula." One of my favorites was a birthday celebration I had planned for Seth some years ago. I'd arranged for Seth to be off from work for an extended weekend. So when he showed up to work expecting his normal agenda of meetings, conference calls, and more meetings, he was pleasantly surprised to be greeted at his office door by a limo driver. This probably would have driven some men crazy, but Seth was thrilled. He could only imagine what I had in store for him.

That was something I greatly appreciated about Seth. Marriage and family were his first priorities, and because I knew this, I understood the late nights he spent at the office and the out of town travel. I knew that Seth did these things only out of necessity and that he wanted to be with me as much as I wanted to be with him. Anyway, I had left a note on the back seat of the limo telling Seth to relax, to sip a glass of champagne, and to enjoy the ride. All of our favorite songs were piped through the speakers as Seth was whisked away to the airport where he was instructed to catch a flight to a quaint little resort in Cancun, Mexico. Upon his arrival, another note directed him to the spa where lunch awaited him. This was followed by two hours of pampering (and yes, men need pampering too).

After Seth was sufficiently relaxed, another note directed him to our suite, and when he opened the door, he was treated to the time of his life. More than fifty candles lit the room, a Jacuzzi bath adorned with rose petals had been drawn, chocolate-covered strawberries and more champagne

were ready for his sampling, scents of sandalwood and amber filled the air, and Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing" played in the background. But what stopped him dead in his tracks was the sight of his beloved adorned in lace, silk, and glistening diamonds. The rest of the night was filled with swaying, bending, and twirling, with teasing, delighting, and tantalizing, with exploring and exciting, with climaxing and descending, only to soar again.

That was most certainly a weekend to remember: amazing food—chile rellenos, mole poblano, quince, coconut, and lychee fruits—moonlit walks along the shore, bonfires with guitar serenades, dancing under the stars, a view of the sunset from a nearby cliff. We were insatiable and uninhibited, and this is what I miss!

These memories sustain me, but more often than not they also plague me. What am I to do with these feelings of longing and desire? The memories comfort me, but at the same time they leave me frustrated. And today it was particularly hard to feel joy for the ladies, who despite their challenges, can go home to their husbands. I have nothing. I—. Hold on. I have to take a break. The phone's ringing.

"Good morning. This is Shula speaking."

"Good morning, Shula, my love. This is your mother speaking." Why didn't I check my caller ID? I love Eva dearly, but I don't know if I have the strength for her today.

"Hi, Eva. How are you? Is everything all right?"

"Of course. What could possibly be wrong? Can't a mother check on her most favorite daughter and call just to say hello?" Yes, Eva, a mother can call her favorite daughter—who happens to be her only daughter in our case—just to say hello. However, you are not typical. You do not call to chit chat. You're up to something. I can feel it in my bones, but it doesn't seem as if I'm going to get it out of you as quickly as I'd like. Sigh. I guess I'll have to surface from my pity party long enough to deal with whatever you've got going on today.

"Absolutely, Eva. It's just that it's the middle of the day when I'm usually working and you're usually busy with some charity or with church or your garden. So your call caught me by surprise."

"Well, believe it or not, I am only calling to say hello. I got this niggling feeling that you needed your mother today, and you know how I

hate to be niggled, so I decided to call right away. And I suspect the feeling is correct, because you sound horrid.” For as long as I can remember, Eva has had these niggling feelings, and as much as I hate to admit it, they’re usually dead on. Woman’s intuition, prophetic insights, or the guesswork of a champion busybody? You never know with Eva.

“Mom, really I’m fine. You just caught me on a break, and I really do need to hurry back to—”

“Mom, huh? You called me Mom. Shula, that’s a dead giveaway. You never call me Mom unless you’re in trouble, so let’s save time and end the back-and-forth dance of me trying to pull the truth out of you and you trying to hide it. I’ll find out sooner or later. I always find out. Let’s make it sooner rather than later so that I can get on with my day. Spill it.” So much for the warm and fuzzy. Sigh. I guess she’s right. She will find out, heaven only knows how, so I might as well get it over with.

“All right. It’s no big deal. It’s just that today’s topic for the group session was intimacy, and all that talk about romance and passion and, well, you know what I mean. Anyway, it just made me think of Seth, and I was missing him and the intimacy and the romance. And, you know, I was missing Seth. As I said, no big deal. I just need a little time to pull myself together.”

“Are you telling me you’re, you know, a little hot and bothered? If you are, that’s all right, dear. That’s perfectly normal. Why, just a few weeks ago I was watching this documentary about women back in the 1800s or early 1900s. It described this condition that women had back then called hysteria. This doctor found a cure, and women were coming from all over to see him. Then his finger got tired and cramped, and so he invented the manual finger. And that’s how, you know, those ‘private helpers’ came to be. They’ve cured so many women. What you’re suffering from, Shula, is a documented illness, and now you don’t even need a prescription. You can buy them in all kinds of sizes and colors and—”

“Stop it, Mother. Please just stop, because as lonely and as sad as I’m feeling, nothing, I mean absolutely nothing, has prepared me for this conversation with you. And even if what you said made any sense and had an inkling of truth to it, I still could not have this conversation with you, my mother.” I feel as if I’m in the twilight zone. I was just writing in my journal about missing intimacy and sex with Seth when my mother calls

because she had some sort of premonition that I needed her. And then she proceeds to tell me that the answer to my problem is a vibrator! Can this day get any worse?

“Shula, there is no need to get your britches all in a bunch. Well, maybe that’s a bad choice of words, dear. That’s really the source of your dilemma, isn’t it? Anyway, you can hardly argue that this is nonsense when you sound quite hysterical. Isn’t it amazing how God works? He led me to that documentary at the library because He knew I’d need to advise you through your hysteria. Simply amazing.”

“Oh, you’re hilarious this morning. I’m not having this discussion with you. And just to set the record straight, God may have nudged you to call me, but I guarantee you that what you’re suggesting is not His will. If I sound hysterical, it is not because I have some medical condition. And by the way, the real problem with those ladies in that documentary you watched had nothing to do with some disease. Dr. Feel Good took advantage of a bunch of sexually repressed women who should have been looking to their husbands to fulfill their needs. No, Eva, if I am hysterical, it’s because I’m having this conversation with you, *my mother*. Furthermore, Eva, yes, I do miss sex, but I miss sex with Seth. I don’t want or need a—”

“Shula darling, why are you so upset with me? I am only trying to help, and I’m trying to tell you that this is not something to be embarrassed about. Despite what you think, it is a documented medical condition. I watched the whole thing with my very own eyes. It only makes sense, Shula. After all, you have been without s-e-x for some time, and maybe this would help you be less ... you know, less uptight and less hysterical and less—”

“Enough, Mother, enough. I am going to hang up now while I still have a shred of dignity left. We’re going to forget that this conversation ever happened. Good-bye, Mother.”

Back to my journaling.

Why, dear Father, why? I did everything You’ve ever asked of me. I was a loving wife and I’m a good mother. I help those in need. I tithe. I serve on the family life ministry and the children’s ministry at church. And I’ve never asked for much from You or from other people. Yet here I sit in the middle of the woods, crying my eyeballs out while trying to get my mother and vibrators out of my mind. Please help me, dear Father.

And just like that you spoke to me. You spoke to me, dear Father, through the lyrics of the song “When I Cry” by my favorite group, the Gaithers Vocal Band. Just as clear as anything You spoke these words to me. “Shula, I am with you at this very moment as I was with you yesterday and will be with you until the end of all time. I’m aware of every single tear you’ve cried. I’m aware of your pain and your sorrow and your loneliness. I’ve cried every tear with you. I feel your pain and your sorrow and your loneliness, and as it pained me to lose my friend Lazarus, it also pained me to lose my child Seth.

“Shula, My love, there are many things that you won’t understand as long as you’re here on this earth, but I need you to trust Me. My Word is true. All things work together for good according to My purposes. I never promised that all would be good, but I did promise that all would work for good. Today you may not understand what good could possibly come out of Seth’s death, and you may never know until we meet in heaven. I know it’s hard and I know you’re still hurting, but you are healing. And as you get stronger each day and can handle it, I’ll reveal a little more to you.

“I have just two questions for you. One, are there any other gods in your life, any other gods besides Me? And two, are you willing to forsake all else in your life, willing even to lay down your life, for Me? I am the Lord your God, and I will never leave you. I love you, Shula, with an everlasting love. Allow Me to meet all of your needs and to fill all of the voids in your life. Allow Me to give you a peace that passes all understanding. Cast all of your cares upon Me because I care about you.”

And just like that, peace. Not a change in my circumstances, but peace. I’m experiencing Your peace and Your presence like never before. I trust You, God. I know that You love me and that You care for me and that You will continue to help me heal. Thank you for growing me, day by day.

And as always, You’re right. These are questions I need to address. Was Seth my god? Had I put him before You, the one true God? If I’d been given a choice, would I have chosen You over Seth? Had I put him on a pedestal, like Chelsea suggested? Had I become so blinded by my worship of Seth that my worship of You became secondary? And now am I simply transferring my worship of Seth to my worship of his memory? Would I give up Sheridan, my parents, my friends, or my accomplishments for You? Would I lay down my life for You? Maybe I have some lessons to learn.

Maybe I need to spend time pondering my responses to these questions. Maybe You, oh God, allowed me to lose Seth in order to save me. All I can say is wow.

Yes, I still miss Seth, and no, I don't understand why he's gone, but I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that You love me and that You're all I need. I also know that You're the same God who brought me through cancer, child-rearing, balancing career and church and family, and Seth's death, and that You'll be the same God who will sustain me through the loneliness, the frustration, and the questioning. Thank You for loving me. I know You're crying with me because when I hurt, You hurt. And I now know that losing Seth hurt You too. I'm going to stop whining and start worshiping, because You, oh God, are worthy of all my praise. Thank You for loving me. In Your name I claim all these things. Amen.

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When I Cry

“So Savannah, our week together is coming to an end. I hope it’s been beneficial for you. What do you think? Have you accomplished what you set out to accomplish?”

“Shula love, this week has been absolutely divine. The massages and the steam rooms are to die for, and those chefs could be at any restaurant on Fifth Avenue in New York City. That New Orleans theme they did, the whole swank-meets-country theme, I tell you what, it was absolutely fabulous. I can still taste that gumbo, and oh those beignets. Splendid, simply splendid.” A whole week of intense introspection and she’s thinking about gumbo.

“I agree. Our chefs, Trixie and Genevieve, are second to none. And if you think their culinary skills are amazing, you should witness their comedy act, not that they’d appreciate me calling them a comedy act, but they’re like Lucy and Ethel, a real hoot. So anything else? Did you learn anything new or have any new revelations about your marriage?”

“Well, I’ve really enjoyed the ladies. We’re all so different, but yet the same, you know. And I can’t thank you enough for all you’ve done to help us, to help me. I’m already a much better wife, and I can’t wait to get home to show off the new me.” Have I missed something? Which group has she been attending? What new her is she referring to? If anything, I think she’s more withdrawn than when she arrived. This is bad. She’s left me no recourse. I’ll have to pull out the big guns. “I’ve learned how to be a good wife, and the whole submission thing, how creative you are, Shula. I don’t know—”

We're interrupted by a knock on the door. My big guns are right on time. "Excuse me, Shula. I don't mean to interrupt, and you know I wouldn't do this if it weren't an emergency."

"No problem, Christine. How can I help you?"

"Well, you know Abby brought the baby in for a visit today, and I've been watching her while Abby helps Karen with something. But now I have an emergency that I have to tend to, and I was hoping that little Jessica could hang out with you for just five minutes."

"Sure. No problem. Let me see little Miss Jessica." Christine brings Jessica to me, and Jessica lights up like a Christmas tree. She's all smiles and wiggles and just as chubby as the Gerber baby. "Hi, sweetie pie. Look at you growing so fast. What a cutie pie. Oh yes you are."

I could play with her all day, but I'm on a mission. Focus, Shula, and pray this works. "Savannah, you want to hold Jessica for a minute? She's got her eyes on you. I think she wants to put her fingers in all that hair of yours. Here, why don't you hold her while I grab the diaper bag from Christine?" Savannah looks as if she might hyperventilate. She can hardly breathe, let alone reply. But drastic times call for drastic measures. I just hope I don't have to do CPR before I can unlock the door to the pain that's holding Savannah hostage.

"I can't. I can't. Please. I need to go. I can't do this. Please make her go away." I nod and Christine quietly takes Jessica away, closing the door behind her. I kneel in front of Savannah, who's sobbing uncontrollably, and I hold her, stroking her hair, reassuring her that she's safe and will be okay.

After about ten minutes, Savannah begins to calm down and I pray over her. "Father, I come before You, interceding on behalf of my dear sister, Savannah. In Ephesians 6:18 You instruct us to pray fervently and with perseverance for others. And so I'm praying that You comfort Savannah right now, Lord, because she's hurting. Let her know that there is nothing too hard for You. Let her know that You can grant her peace and healing. I ask that You draw near to her and let her know that You have been with her in the past, You're ever present right now, and You will be with her forevermore.

"I ask that You grant her courage to trust You. Give her enough faith to entrust her burden to Your care. Give her strength to let go of the weight that seemingly holds her hostage, keeping her down and preventing her

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from fully experiencing Your love and joy and healing. Let her know that You are bigger than any person who may have hurt her, any secret she may be carrying, any sin or mistake or bad choice she may have made. Fill this room with Your Holy Spirit, and let me be a simple vessel to be used by You, a conduit sharing a word from You. All of these things I ask in Your most holy and precious name. Amen.”

Savannah’s sobs have calmed and we sit, allowing the silence to wash over us like a soothing balm. I sense that Savannah is ready to share, but I allow her to set the pace. After some time, she speaks, recounting the events that have caused her such hurt and sadness.

“Reed was my soul mate. I knew from the moment I laid eyes on him in second grade that he was the one I would marry. Our life was a fairy tale. We were the perfect couple. We were homecoming king and queen three years in a row and were voted most likely to marry. Although we dated others from time to time and went to colleges at opposite ends of the country, I had planned our lives until death do us part because I knew we’d be together. I was completely confident in our love, and when others questioned whether our long-distance relationship could survive—with Reed in California and me in Chicago—we’d respond, “Love transcends distance. Our love will survive.” Many would find this hard to believe, but we had decided to remain virgins until our honeymoon. That was going to be my gift to him and his gift to me. I didn’t want any other man, period and he wanted me to be his first, his last, his everything.”

Savannah pauses and her eyes tear up once more, so we wait in silence until she is able to continue. When she finally speaks again, it’s barely a whisper, and I have to strain to hear her.

“I was studying theater and I absolutely loved it. I could have spent every waking moment in the hallowed halls of the Auburn Performing Arts Center. Many would say I did. We were warned, ‘Never leave the theater alone. Always walk in pairs.’ But that night, everyone had gone. And oh was it cold. That morning the weatherman told us to stay in, to bundle up, and to wait for warmer days ahead. In Chicago that meant anything above zero degrees. But I needed to go over my lines one more time because I was going skiing with friends on winter break and wouldn’t have time to rehearse. So I didn’t listen to the weatherman, who said to stay indoors, and I didn’t listen to my professors, the security guards, or my friends, who said, “Never leave

the theater alone.” But I rationalized, *what could possibly go wrong?* I mean, really, who, besides foolish me would be out on such a cold night?

I didn’t have the heart to ask someone to leave their warm quarters to escort me, so I decided to brave the cold and the five-minute walk alone. I had on a track suit and sneakers, my heaviest coat, a scarf, gloves, a hat—I was all set. So mistake number one, I took off by myself. Mistake number two, I decided to take a shortcut through the alley behind APAS, and mistake number three, I wore headphones so I could listen to the musical score for the play, one in which I finally had the lead role.” Savannah pauses, lost in her nightmare, reliving a night that apparently changed her life. She’s sobbing uncontrollably again, and I want to embrace her and to tell her everything is okay, but I know she needs to let go of this pain if she is ever to heal. She finally continues in obvious agony.

“I didn’t hear them. The stupid music drowned out their footsteps and their laughter and their swearing. The cold masked the stench of alcohol and vomit and sweat. And, oh God, they were right behind me, they pushed me, and I fell down on the cold, hard, snowy pavement. Before I knew what was happening, they’d kicked me onto my back, torn off my coat and scarf and gloves and thrown them all about, and one of the beasts was holding my arms down and leaning over me, laughing and drooling on my face. I screamed but no one heard me. The other beast ripped off my pants and my panties and he, he—please don’t. Please make it stop. Please make it different. I can’t do this again.” I hold Savannah again and stroke her hair, whispering words of comfort. I remind her that God was there and that He was racked with pain too and that He cried with her then as He’s crying with her now. I remind her that God promised He’d never leave her nor forsake her.

“It’s okay, Savannah. It’s time to let it go. Don’t let this consume or control you any longer. You’ve got to give it to God. Let Him bear your burden. He tells us in Psalm 55:22 to cast our cares upon Him and He will sustain us. You’ve got to trust Him.”

Consumed with grief and anger, Savannah lashes out, saying, “How can I trust Him when I’m so angry? Tell me that, Shula? How can I trust a God who let those beasts destroy my life? Tell me how, because when I allow myself to feel, all I feel is hurt and pain and anger. It’s so much easier to feel nothing. I don’t want to hurt anymore, Shula.”

“Savannah, I’ve asked the same questions. When my husband died, I might as well have died with him. And it hurt so badly. What I felt was more pain than I thought was humanly possible to bear. And I questioned God. How could He take Seth away from me? If He loved me so much, how could He let me hurt like this? Why would the Father do this to His own child? The anger and doubt and sadness nearly killed me. But in time I understood that the God who created me and who knew my beginning from my end was the only One who could save me. And Savannah, He’s the only One who can save you. That’s what trust is—having the confidence that God can do it and the belief that He will. I’m sure it was easy for the homecoming queen Savannah or the fairy-tale princess Savannah to trust Him, but what about the broken, hurt, and discouraged Savannah? That Savannah has to find a way to trust Him too.”

I hold her and allow the lyrics to “When I Cry” to wash over her, hoping they comfort her as they comforted me. “When I cry, You cry. When I hurt, You hurt. When I’ve lost someone, it takes a piece of You too. And when I fall on my face, You fill me with grace ‘cause nothin’ breaks Your heart or tears You apart like when I cry.” God is utterly amazing. Here I was thinking He sent this song for me, and it was actually meant to be shared with Savannah. I’m not sure how much time passes, but Savannah finally speaks again.

“The beasts took turns raping me. It was the most horrific, unbearable experience of my life. The feel of their sweaty, grimy skin. The burden of their dead and unyielding weight. The stench of their foul, putrid breath. The heat of their calloused hands upon my delicate, cold skin. I still feel the pain—not just the physical pain of being ripped apart but the pain of having my hopes and dreams snatched away, taken without my permission, shattered before my very eyes. There was also the pain of knowing that Reed would never be my first. I couldn’t see how he’d be able to love me, defiled and tarnished as I’d become. And how would I ever love again?” Savannah is silent for a while, but at least the sobs subside.

“The beasts left me for dead in the alleyway behind my beloved Auburn Hall. How ironic that this is where my dreams began and ended. I don’t recall how long I lay their half-naked, freezing, and in dire pain, but I knew that if I stayed much longer, I’d freeze to death or worse, the beasts might return. So maybe God was there, because there’s no other explanation for

how I got back to my apartment. And that's where I stayed for the next nine days. I was able to hide without question because my family and Reed thought I was in Aspen, and I pretended to have the flu to get out of skiing with my friends. Those were the longest, saddest, and loneliest days of my life. I even contemplated killing myself because I didn't know how I'd go on. Miraculously, somehow I willed myself to live and because all of my scars were internal at this point, I returned to school.

"But I lived in a fog. See I hadn't yet perfected acting as Savannah. No, that came six weeks later when I missed my period. To add insult to injury, I discovered I was pregnant. I was carrying the seed of Satan himself, and I knew I had to destroy it. There was no way I could give birth to a child of one of those beasts. I had planned to have an abortion, but it turned out I didn't have to. I miscarried. And that brought on a new grief because I realized I had seriously considered killing my baby, not a beast or a lump of cells, but my baby. I thought that God was punishing me for thinking of killing my baby, so He took the baby away from me." Savannah cries tears of grief over the loss of her virginity, her hopes and her dreams, and the baby she miscarried.

"At that moment I had a choice to make—curl up and die or survive. Reed was coming to visit during his spring break, and I had to get it together. So I chose to live. And from that day forward I knew that the only way I'd survive would be to bury that horrific night and all that followed deep in the recesses of my mind. That's when actress Savannah was born, and I've been playing this role ever since." Savannah looks exhausted, but she also seems to be more at peace or at least relieved.

"I've never told anyone, not one living soul, about this until just now. And I was fine, you know. I went through the motions of living. I'd wake up each day, kiss Reed, greet him with a "good morning, darling," make our breakfast—two egg whites fried, two slices of bacon, and whole wheat toast—send hubby off to work, piddle around the house, run errands, rehearse for a play, teach acting classes, prepare dinner, and welcome Reed home with a kiss and a "hello, darling. How was your day"? That was my life, and it was good, or so I thought until Reed suggested that he wasn't happy. And then when you had us rock those babies and—"

The sobs return. Savannah's pain is breaking my heart, and I can only imagine what it is doing to her. But I also sense God's presence and His

healing power. I know this memory is horrific, but finally acknowledging what happened will help her in so many ways. God says we should cast all our cares upon Him because He cares for us, so cast away, Savannah.

“Rocking those babies made it real. And to make things worse, Reed wants to have children, and I keep putting it off because I don’t deserve to be a mother. I don’t even know if I can be a mother, physically or emotionally. So what am I supposed to do?”

“Savannah, I won’t pretend to have the answers. Would I have felt the same way you did? I don’t know, probably so. But I do believe that you did the best you could, given the awful nightmare that you lived through. Does God care? Unequivocally yes. Can He heal you? Absolutely. Can God restore you and free you from the burden that you’ve been carrying for so long? Most certainly yes. All you have to do is give it to Him. Give Him all of it—your hurt, your anger, your confusion, your sense of loss, your doubts, your fears.

“You told me what happened that night, and I thank you for trusting me. And I’m here for the long haul to help you work through this. But right now I want you to spend time with God and not only tell Him what happened but let Him know how it made you feel. Open up and give God your heart, and then allow Him to free you. Allow Him to comfort you. Allow Him to restore and to heal you. He can do it, Savannah. I’m a living witness to that. So when you’re ready, I’m going to walk you to a relaxation room, give you your journal in case you want to write, and leave you alone with God. I can help but He can heal. Believe me, Savannah, this moment didn’t happen by my knowledge or by my power. God has been in control the whole time. He simply directed you here and used me, somebody who’s just as fragile and broken, to speak His words to you.”

I can already see God working. I want to shout and praise Him, thanking Him for allowing me to be His voice and for giving me the opportunity to witness His miracles and His mercies. “Thank you, Shula. I don’t know how, but I think I’m ready to let it go. I’m ready to be free. I want to be the wife Reed deserves, and I want to bask in his love, the love that I’ve been so afraid of all these years. I’m ready for God’s love and for Reed’s love too.”

Who Will Love Me for Me?

It's so hard to believe we've come to the end of our journey, and what a journey it's been. God has certainly answered my prayers for me and each of the ladies far beyond what I even asked for or even imagined possible. This morning Alex and I are the first to arrive for our final group session. Alex chose to use her time yesterday in prayer, meditation, and reflection. We are chatting a bit about the revelations she had and some of the many questions that surfaced when Barb arrives. My jaw hits the floor. I do a double take because the woman who has just entered the room sounds like Barb and sports the same bright smile as Barb but in no other way resembles the Barb who's been here all week.

I take it she went for the makeover. Nikki, our hair stylist, did an excellent job of softening Barb's hair color, adding a few highlights and cutting in subtle layers. The cut is much more contemporary, yet appropriate for a woman over sixty. And our makeup artists worked wonders too. I don't know how they did it, but it looks as if Barb has shed at least ten years. I'm definitely headed to the salon tomorrow! I can only imagine what they can do with me. And that dress? Who knew Barb had a figure under those baggy clothes she's worn all week? The fabric clings in all the right places but still leaves something to the imagination. There's definitely something to be said for life after sixty. You have the freedom to choose the simple, elegant, and classic styles, the ones that endure and work at any age, without having to worry about keeping up with the fads. Clothing by Oscar de la Renta for the more upscale, or Chico's for those like me, does wonders for women of all shapes and sizes and personalities.

But there's something else going on with Barb. No doubt about it, the clothes and the hair and the makeup are fabulous, but she seems more confident, and I think I detect a twinkle in her eye, a hint of mischief. Hmm. What other activities did she participate in? Wonders never cease. "Barb, you look absolutely fantastic. I'm speechless, and you know how rare that is for me. I had all kinds of hopes for this past week, but I never in a thousand years fancied this for you. You look beautiful, but how do you feel?"

I don't think her smile could be any brighter, as contagious excitement bubbles all over the room. "I can't find the words to describe how I'm feeling right now. Yesterday was wonderful. I mean all week was great, but yesterday? I felt like I shed a fifty-pound weight. I let go of all those lies about God's design for marriage, and when I asked God to reveal His truth, He gave me a better understanding of the depth of His love for me. He helped me let go of my misperceptions of what it means to be a Christian woman who's sixty-plus but by no means dead. I feel great! I keep looking in the mirror, and I can't help but giggle. It's really me."

Alex looks happy for Barb, and she offers praise in a way that only Alex can. "Barb, when your husband sees you tonight he's gonna bust a nut. You look hot!"

We all laugh, as we've grown accustomed to Alex's frankness. I'm gonna miss my ladies. "Oh my, Alex. After a week you'd think I'd be used to your, um, colorful language, but day seven and you still make me blush. So does 'bust a nut' mean you think David will like the new me? I've envisioned him bursting something, but I guess I was thinking more along the lines of an artery due to cardiac arrest or maybe a gasket, since he'll think I've lost my mind. I unequivocally love the new me, or should I say the rediscovered me? But David? Now, that's another story."

I understand that an inner makeover is way more important than an outer one. But I hope the outer one will give a boost to Barb's inner self. "Barb, you said you rediscovered yourself. So does this imply that at one time you considered yourself to be hot, as Alex put it? Was there once a tiger inside that became buried under motherhood, work, church, and everything else? If that's the case, perhaps David will enjoy rediscovering the passion, the thrill, and the spontaneity with you all over again. Whadda you think?"

“You have a point, Shula. David and I weren’t always like this. But it’s been so long I guess we’ve forgotten how it used to be way back when. I never considered things from David’s perspective—you know, trying to understand what he might want or need or miss. Who knows, maybe he’ll say, ‘Woman, what took you so long?’ or maybe he won’t even notice. But whatever the reaction, I’ve learned two things this week: God designed me to feel, and He gave us the gift of marriage to experience being fulfilled. And there’s one more thing I’ve learned. It’s okay to be a hot, old Christian woman. If David’s not there yet, then I’ll just have to work even harder to get him to join me in the garden, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh my, Shula, I think you’ve created another monster. We’ll definitely have to keep in touch. I want to hear the end of this story. How will David respond? Will he take his beloved Barb, his child bride, in his arms and ravish her? Or will he be so overcome with awe and wonder that he collects his tears in a perfume bottle to water the lush garden?” Alex giggles. She sometimes has a way of cracking herself up. “Heaven help us! I’m beginning to sound like Savannah. How is Savannah, by the way? I didn’t see her yesterday and she’s not here this morning, although we are a little early.”

I can’t help thinking about Savannah’s breakthrough yesterday. She has a lot of hard work ahead, but I think she’s gonna make it. “Savannah’s good. I don’t know if she’ll join us today or not, but I encourage you both to keep her in your prayers and to give her a call from time to time. I think she’d like that.”

“Who are we praying for and keeping in touch with? Weren’t we starting at nine or did I get the time wrong?” Another show stopper. This can’t be our little Lindsey, looking all grown up and stunningly sexy. I’m reminded of the last scene from *Grease* when Sandy steps out in her leather pants, big hair, and stilettos. Maybe Lindsey hasn’t gone that far, but anything more than lip gloss and flip flops is a noticeable change for her.

“Well, look at this. Lindsey, is that you underneath the foundation, the mascara, and the lipstick? And please tell me they didn’t have to hog-tie you to get you into that sundress and those adorable Cinderella slippers.”

Lindsey does a pirouette and gives a grin that outshines the sun. “It is I. It took me so long to get here ’cause I kept stopping at every mirror along the way, high-fiving myself.”

Uh-oh. Alex has that look that says an uncensored reaction is coming. Please be kind, Alex. “Lindsey, Lindsey, Lindsey. You look absolutely gorgeous. I knew there was a princess hiding beneath that Crocodile Dundee camouflage. That’s it. Naaman’s is a place of miracles. How’d they do it? How’d they get you off of your ‘makeup and perfume are of the Devil, pretty clothes are for the shallow, love me as I am’ soapbox?”

Whew. Maybe I can actually transmit subliminal messages, because Alex’s comments are tame. She asked exactly what I was thinking. “Well, it wasn’t easy, as y’all can imagine, ’cause I’ve fought the whole notion that the only way to get and to keep a man is to raise my skirt, lower my shirt, poke my rear end out, tuck my tummy in, and always smell like gardenias. But Pastor Sara helped me gain a whole new perspective, and it’s biblical too. So she told us the story of Esther, which I knew because I had heard it a thousand times. You know the whole ‘for such a time as this’ and ‘if I perish.’ I guess I had the image of this warrior woman who didn’t put up with nonsense and who was willing to fight and to die for a cause. I pictured her more like the old me, earthy and natural and unconcerned about appearances but all about the cause. So yeah, Pastor Sara shot that image out of the water.”

Barb is smiling at Lindsey just like she’d probably smile at one of her daughters, which makes perfect sense given how Lindsey has become just like a daughter to Barb. “Lindsey, sweetheart, that’s wonderful, and that’s how it should be or at least it is for me. Every time I read the Bible, I discover something new and I’m able to apply it to my life in a different way. But I do wonder how you came to visualize Esther as this hippie activist? Didn’t you know she was a queen?”

“Oh you too? Pastor Sara asked the same thing. I don’t know. That part got lost somehow. I guess I wanted to identify with Esther, so I made her be more like me. Anyway, that’s what Pastor Sara used to help me connect. She said that Esther was in fact an activist, a leader, a brave woman, and all that good stuff, but she was also a queen—and not just any old queen but one that a king chose out of hundreds and hundreds of women. Pastor Sara asked me to imagine Queen Esther, all decked out in army boots, baggy pants, a wrinkled T-shirt, chipped nails, her hair lookin’ crazy, and her feet all scaly, attracting any man, much less the king. And what really

did it for me was when she broke down the whole process Esther went through to get ready for the king. It was incredible!”

Alex seems fascinated. “Do tell. I want details. What was the ritual all about?”

“Well, if y’all didn’t get a chance to go to Pastor Sara’s session ‘Beauty Is Skin Deep,’ then you gotta come back. It was awesome. I wish I could remember everything and I know I’m going to butcher what she said, but first Pastor Sara talked about the whole engagement, betrothal, arranged marriage thingy. She said first the man’s father picked his wife, and then he went to talk to her father and the two fathers negotiated an agreement, which I can’t even imagine. That’d be like Eddie’s dad trying to cut a deal with my dad so that Eddie could have me. Would I like feel good about myself if I went for two cows and an ox and crummy about myself if I went for the bargain price of a chicken?” This gets a chuckle from all of us.

“Anyway, after the whole *Price Is Right* going-once, going-twice process ends, the daughter is notified. That’s right. All this happens and the bride-to-be doesn’t even know about it. I’m so glad I live in the twenty-first century. Anyway, after the soon-to-be bride is notified, a special meal is prepared in a hidden room. The husband-to-be knocks on the door and has to wait until the wife-to-be cracks open the door, which means ‘Yes, I’ll marry you.’ Then they share the meal, feeding each other and drinking wine from the same cup. I guess this is the romantic first date. It’s really the only date ’cause the meal is the thing that seals the deal. Then the husband-to-be leaves to prepare a home for his wife-to-be, and this takes a whole year. And the bride-to-be spends the year getting ready. A whole year! She doesn’t know the exact date he’ll be back, but she knows it’ll be in about a year.

“Pastor Sara showed us how we are like the bride and Jesus is the bridegroom. He’s preparing our home in heaven, and we don’t know the exact day He’ll return but we need to get ready. Okay, back to my point. Pastor Sara read from Esther 2:12 to show us what the bride-to-be did to get ready.” With pages turning, Lindsey finally takes a short breath. “Listen to this: Each young woman’s turn came to go in to King Ahasuerus after she had completed twelve months’ preparation, according to the regulations for the women, for thus were the days of their preparation apportioned: six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with perfumes and preparations

for beautifying women. This blew me away. I think anything more than twenty minutes spent getting ready is way too long. But those women back then spent twelve whole months getting ready for their groom-to-be. Like wow is all I could say.”

“Wow is right, Lindsey. This does sound fascinating. I wish I’d gone to that session. There were so many to choose from. But I’m glad I did the pole dancing class and the poetry slam.” We all stare wide-eyed at Barb, but before we can comment, she asks Lindsey, “Do you remember some of the rituals?”

“Let’s see. First she talked about this bath, a purification bath. I can’t remember the name of it but—”

“I think you’re referring to the mikveh.”

“Yeah, that’s right, Shula. How do y’all know all this stuff? Where do they teach it, because I never heard about any of this in my church.”

“That’s the beauty of research and ministry designed especially for women. Pastor Sara has a way of delving into the Bible from a woman’s perspective, and she helps you experience exactly what you’re experiencing now, Lindsey. Women-focused biblical studies provides the opportunity to re-examine Bible verses and stories you’ve heard before, while allowing you to read and apply them to your life in a new and more meaningful way. This is powerful stuff. Go on with your description of the mikveh.”

“Right. So this bath is supposed to help women enter the marriage in a pure state. The woman is completely naked, free of everything—rings, hairpins, nail polish. I think the pastor said this was to make sure there were no barriers between the woman and the water. Then they dunk the woman in the bath and say a special blessing over her. This sounds beautiful, kinda like baptism. And after that, there’s six months of a myrrh treatment.”

“A what?” Poor Alex is having trouble keeping up, because Lindsey talks so fast.

“Myrrh. Remember the three kings with their gold, frankincense, and myrrh? I didn’t know what it was either. Apparently it’s an ancient oil that was used to detox and to heal. Pastor Sara said it was great for the skin, making it soft and smooth, and even got rid of stretch marks. It also healed wounds, improved digestion and bad breath, and helped the immune system. She discussed the harsh living conditions back then—no

electricity, Internet, toilets, or refrigerators. And people were sick a lot more and had rougher skin, so they needed time to heal and to pamper themselves. So yeah, it took six whole months. And of course Pastor Sara made the spiritual connections. She told us that myrrh is bitter and that the purification process took time and was expensive. She compared this to 'God's beauty treatment' and said purifying us can take time and be bitter or painful and cost. She told us that a spiritual detox can cleanse us from bitterness, anger, and pain. I'm telling y'all it was amazing."

"Listen to you, Lindsey. You're becoming like a pastor in training. So what happens in the next six months?"

"Barb you're too kind but can you really picture me as a pastor? I think not, but I am definitely going to join a Bible study or book discussion group or something. Alright I need to read from my notes. There's so much to remember and to still learn. Okay, so the second six months is spent in a restorative process. The woman soaks in different oil baths. And we talked about the benefits of baths. They're peaceful, relaxing, and cleansing and make your skin smooth and glowing. The skin care lady told us it's been proven that oil baths can build your immune system and that the warm water promotes better blood flow, helps with joint pain, and reduces fatigue. The smell is therapeutic too. So all this aromatherapy you hear about today is not new. They were doing this centuries ago. And there is research that shows how oil aromas affect our emotions, calm us, and make us feel happy.

"Of course Pastor Sara made lots more spiritual connections. She said if we soak in God's restorative bath we'll be more pleasant, be able to serve with joy, and be freer to worship. We looked at lots of Bible verses and focused on the ones that mention perfume. Somewhere in Proverbs it says that oils and perfumes make us glad, and so our words should be sweet to our friends. Another passage says our offerings and sacrifices are received by God like a sweet-smelling aroma. And we read in the Song of Solomon how his bride's fragrance was a turn-on.

"We talked about how this week at Naaman's, you know some of the treatments and all, was like a shorter version of the bridal bath. The baths were personal and private times of cleansing and connecting with God. They were also times of pampering and focusing on self, just like this week. This was good stuff. I took so many notes. I'm definitely gonna focus more

on taking care of myself the God way. We've got it all wrong. We usually have a yearlong engagement to plan for the wedding when we should be taking a year to prepare ourselves for the marriage. Anyway, if women could go through all that back then, surely I can take a few minutes to pamper myself so I look and smell good for Eddie and for me too. So here I am, looking and smelling amazing!"

I have no idea how she's able to deliver her monologues in one breath and at the speed of lightning. We're all silent for a minute because clearly our brains don't process words as quickly as Lindsey speaks them. Ah, finally, a connection is made. "Lindsey, seeing you this happy and excited about your makeover and your newfound passion for being pampered and all dolled up makes me happy and excited for you. And Pastor Sara is absolutely correct. Your inner beauty cannot be enhanced or diminished by all the outward perks and polishings. They exist simply for your pleasure—and for your hubby's. So let this be a warning. The trappings of beauty can be one of the tools that Satan uses to ensnare us. Outer beauty can give us false confidence and can lead us down a destructive, prideful path. That's why we must focus on the beauty of our hearts and of our minds, ensuring that all we think, feel, do, and say is in sync with God. So good for you, Lindsey. If you like a little sparkle and shine, go for it. Just don't let it consume you or define you. And tomorrow if you put the scrunchie back in your hair and throw your cargo pants back on, good for you still!"

"That's right, Lindsey. Don't ever get lost in all the trappings or hide behind masks. Always be true to you—the hurt you, the happy you, the lost and confused you, the loving you, the you God designed you to be. The makeup fades, the masks crack, and eventually all you'll have left is you, so you might as well embrace and love yourself now!"

Savannah has come. I didn't think she'd be up for it, but God is good, and here she is. I'm in tears. I know I shouldn't show favoritism, but Savannah's makeover is clearly the most wonderful, the most beautiful, and the most special because hers has definitely been a transformation of the heart. The masks are gone and with them the wig, the false eyelashes and the pushup bra. The woman standing before us is the loveliest, most exquisite being ever—Savannah real, Savannah raw, Savannah ready. "Savannah, we're so glad you've joined us, and I must say you look stunning. Come on in and let us love you up."

On cue, the ladies swallow Savannah within our now-famous group hug. They don't know the details of Savannah's transformation, but they know something special has occurred and sense that she needs the comfort and security of their love right now. We hug and pray, and Barb sings the most beautiful hymn, 'Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling.' "Come home, come home. You who are weary, come home." We cry tears of joy for Savannah's breakthrough and for our individual victories. We look to the battles ahead with the assurance that we won't be fighting alone.

"Thanks, ladies," Savannah says. "Y'all are just what the doctor ordered. Now, no more tears. I've cried enough to stave off the drought in East Africa. We don't have much time left together, so fill me in on what I've missed. Barb and Lindsey, you two are knockouts. I know there's a story here. Makeup, new hairdos. I must hear it all." Everyone speaks at once, and the ladies gab on and on like old friends at a high school reunion. I think my heart's going to explode!

"And Alex, what's up with you? I mean, you're sorta slumming like me. I get why I let all that stuff go, and I must admit it'll take some getting used to—the real Savannah. I think I might like her, but we have some work to do getting reacquainted. But you, what's your deal? Where's Mrs. Corporate America, Mrs. I Am Woman Hear Me Roar? What'd I miss?"

"Well, thank you very much for putting me on display." Alex playfully tosses a pillow at Savannah, who smiles and ducks. "I guess, like you, I'm trying to get in touch with the real me. And I don't know what you've been through, but I sense it's some heavy stuff. And like you, I spent the day trying to figure it all out. Lindsey and Barb's hearts were already good. They just needed a confidence boost, and maybe they needed to see how the good on the inside could be manifested outwardly and that outward and inner beauty could coexist. I'm an entirely different story. I've had the outer beauty thing down to a science. I could run with the best of them. But inner beauty? I'm afraid that's been missing for a long time. And so for probably the first time ever, I spent time in prayer and in meditation and in some serious soul searching. And I gotta admit some of the stuff I discovered sickened me."

"Oh Alex, Barb and I aren't perfect. Nobody is. We all have stuff, and we all have to work every single day to make sure we're in step with God. At least that's how I see it."

"I agree with Lindsey. It's absolutely nothing I've done. I've simply allowed God to have His way in my life. I mean look at me. I'm a sixty-year-old woman having sexual fantasies."

"You what?"

"What did you just say?"

"Not Pollyanna having fantasies? If there's no hope for you, then all is lost for us!"

I think all the blood has drained from Barb's face. "Oh dear. That didn't come out like I intended. They're absolutely nothing. I mean it's all harmless, really. They're just innocent thoughts. But they did give me a big old wake-up call. My little secret fantasies reminded me that I'm not dead and that I want to feel alive again. And I want to feel alive with my husband, David, not with some younger man who has perfectly aligned pearly white teeth, golden skin, dreamy eyes, abs as firm as an ironing board, and—"

"Barb, honey, I think we get the point. You have needs and desires and perhaps because they haven't been fulfilled in the ways that you'd like, you've fantasized about how they could be fulfilled. And ladies, remember, none of us is perfect. Just think back to our time with Wilna. Think back to our time in the pottery house. We learned that our beauty results from our lives being in the hands of the potter. We must submit ourselves to God, allowing Him to mold us and to reshape us as necessary. In Isaiah 64:8 the prophet proclaims, 'But now, O Lord You *are* our Father; We *are* the clay, and You our potter; And we all *are* the work of Your hand.' That's what it's all about, ladies, acknowledging that God is the potter and that we are the clay. This week isn't the climax of your journey. This week is simply foreplay. The work begins when you leave the grounds of Naaman's."

"Yeah, so Shula, about the whole pottery thing. I get it now. So is there a Blenheim original in the back somewhere for me?"

"I'm afraid not, Alex. You'll just have to place that one-of-a-kind Alex original smack-dab in the middle of your boardroom conference table. Let it be a memorial, reminding you of your Naaman's journey—reminding you where you've been in addition to where you need to go."

"A lady's gotta try. Okay, I digressed, but I have not forgotten about 'Miss Fantasy Island' over here. So Barb, I wanna hear more about these fantasies. Shula was right. There's been a caged up tiger in you all along.

The whole Carol Brady act threw me, but I do believe there's a little fire shut up in those bones." Everyone laughs and Barb is as red as a beet. Poor thing. I know she didn't mean to let that little secret slip.

"Oh Alex, I think I'll regret that little faux pas till the day I die, now won't I? I think my thoughts are coming out all wrong because I love my husband. I really, really do. I just wish we could spice things up a little, that's all. Everyone has fantasies now and again, right? You gotta believe me. I love my David with all my heart, and I look forward to rekindling the flame we once shared. I know that was a long time ago, but Shula, you've taught me that wanting my husband and wanting to experience pleasure is not a bad thing, it's a God thing. All I can say is, 'Watch out, David.' I'm ready for the new us. I just hope he's ready too."

"No need to be defensive. I'm just shocked. Yeah, I think everyone has fantasies, but I guess I never thought that you did—well, I mean, not women like you."

"What does that mean, Lindsey, women like me? Old or prudish? Or heaven forbid, women like me, old *and* prudish?"

"Barb, you're not prudish and you're not old like old, old. You're, I don't know, I guess I think of you as saintly, not sexy. But that is completely my fault, not yours. Shoot, why not? Who was it in the Bible, Sarah? Wasn't she like ninety, and she and Abraham obviously were still getting it on. I mean she had a baby, so why not you? Not the baby thing, but you know what I mean. Go for it, Barb."

Poor Barb. I'd better get her out of the hot seat. "Proverbs says that gray hair is the splendor of the old. God honors our seniors and so should we. The Bible also suggests that old age is just a number. Pull out your Bibles and look at Psalm 92:12–14. 'The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree, He shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Those who are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bear fruit in old age; They shall be fresh and flourishing.' This tells me that even in old age, we can still bear fruit and are expected to do so and that through God's strength we'll stay young and fresh! So Barb, be an example for us young huckabucks.

"Regarding the fantasy thing, once again as long as your fantasies are about you and your husband and don't replace the intimacy shared between the two of you, then go for it. I like the website Christian Marriage Today,

which gives great advice about Christian marriages. The site recommends Ephesians 5:29 as a guide for determining what is acceptable in your sexual relations. Sex should always be God-honoring and should never bring harm, pain, or shame to your spouse. The site also suggests that you allow the Holy Spirit to guide your every thought, act, and deed. So ladies, I suggest you get connected with God and allow your thoughts, feelings, and acts to be intertwined with His. It'll be a wonderful thing when you're unable to determine where you begin and the Holy Spirit ends. It takes time and effort, but it is worth it."

"Well, there you have it. We all have issues—Lindsey needs to be more confident and not envious of the other woman, Barb needs to keep those little fantasies in check, Savannah needs to deal with some trauma or drama from her past and learn to live as her real self, and me? I need to get my priorities straight. I need to own up to my failures and shortcomings as a wife and as a mother. I need to let all of this anger and bitterness go. I need to learn to live a life of honesty. I need to honor and respect my husband. I need to figure out if my marriage is worth salvaging—"

Alex breaks down and cries. No words needed. We all give her a much-needed hug. After several minutes of hugging and much nose blowing, Alex speaks again. "I don't think I've cried this much in my entire life. 'Expect floods of tears' should definitely be listed as one of the outcomes of the Naaman's journey. Enough about me. I echo Savannah's sentiments—no more tears. We've come a long way, and while we have a ways to go, we have each other, we have Shula, and most important, we have God. We're ready, ladies. We can do this."

"I agree on every point, Alex. Each one of you ladies is ready, and each of you can do this. But you can't do it alone. This whole week has been about placing your life and your marriage in God's hands. Without Him, it's all impossible. The good news is, you don't have to do it alone. Trust Him—the *t* of *submit*. Trust Him to guide you. Trust Him to work miracles in your life and in your marriage. Trust Him to help you trust your husband as the head of your marriage and the head of your home.

"God gave us a plan for marriage, but we've allowed society to tell us that it's wrong, that it no longer works, that it's old-fashioned, and that there's no use for it today. I encourage each of you to trust God's plan. He tells us that His Word is the same today as it was yesterday and as it

will be forevermore. We change. Satan's tactics change, but God's Word never changes." I pause a moment to let this truth sink in. It's amazing to feel the Holy Spirit present and at work. Sometimes all that is needed is silence, giving the Spirit access to our hearts.

"Now ladies, you've gotten off easy today. I had planned for us to go bungee jumping or zip lining over the Blue Ridge Mountains, but I think you get the picture."

Are they cheering? Do I hear a woohoo? I know deep down inside they enjoyed my little activities, but they just don't want to admit it.

"Bless you, Shula. We took bets on what today's activity would be, and bungee jumping was on the list. We'd already decided to rebel. We decided that if we stood united, you couldn't make us all jump." Our dear Alex, ever the spokeswoman. And they're actually all high-fiving. I have to admit, it is great to see how my ladies have bonded.

"Yeah, yeah. Y'all know you loved every minute. I had to get your attention somehow. Seriously, ladies, my prayer is that each of you will recognize that this whole week has been about trust. We started the week focused on trust, on submitting our wills to the Father's will, and today we're ending with the need to entrust our marriages to Him. Our marriages can work only if they begin and end with God. I have just a few more points to make before we head off to one last breakfast at Naaman's. And ladies you don't want to miss out on today's spread—waffles with toasted pecans, salmon cakes, the creamiest grits this side of the Mason-Dixon Line, eggs Benedict, and cinnamon buns that'll make you want to slap somebody."

"Now, that's music to my ears. Don't get me wrong. We love you, Shula, but the food has been amazing, and the chefs have certainly pleased this crowd—vegan, vegetarian, gluten-free, the paleo diet, carnivore, and picky people like me. Jesus fed five thousand, but imagine trying to feed this bunch. My hats off to the chefs at Naaman's!" Lindsey's counterparts burst into another round of cheers and high-fives.

"I don't feel the least bit slighted. I knew from the start I'd be no competition for Trixie and Genevieve. And I sure don't want to stand between a woman and her food, so we're about to close, ladies. I just want to leave you with this. God does nothing by chance. He had a plan for our salvation from the beginning, and our time on this earth is just a

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dress rehearsal. This is where we get to prepare for life in eternity, and we get a little taste of heaven here too. Many would have you believe that it's a curse to be a woman, that we somehow got shafted. We're second-class citizens. We're less holy, less worthy, less connected. But I encourage you to read the Book and to discover what a gift God has given us as women. Because of our role and our position, we have a unique opportunity to be closer to God and to be better prepared to live with Him when He returns.

"I know it sounds farfetched, but stay with me for just a few moments more. If this life is a dress rehearsal and we are to learn how to be in communion with Him for all time, then what better way to learn this than through marriage? Take, for example, the notion of submitting our wills to God. Numerous verses speak to this. Write them down, ladies—Psalm 143:10, Matthew 6:10 and 12:25, John 5:3, Acts 21:24, Romans 12:2, Ephesians 6:6, Hebrews 13:21, and James 4:17.

"After you read these texts you'll understand that nobody is in a better position than women to submit to God. If we learn to submit to our husbands even when we don't agree or when we have an alternate plan or when we don't think our husbands are worthy, how can we not submit our lives more fully to Christ, who is perfect, who loves us beyond measure, and who knows us better than we know ourselves? Ladies, submitting to our husbands is the greatest gift given to us, because as we learn to submit, to yield, or to follow our husbands we are inevitably learning to submit our wills, our desires, our plans, our dreams, our very lives to Christ. Read your Bible. It's in black and white. There are no shades of gray with God. He's clear about our roles as women, wives, mothers, friends, daughters, servants, and leaders, and His Word never changes. Be clear whom you're listening to and commit to Him today."

Barb interjects. I don't think they're ready to go. "Shula, before you close. I just want to say one more thing. Well two. First, thank you for all that you've done. This week has been, well it's been spirit-filled and spirit-filled and I am so full right now with hope and love and a recommitment to my marriage and to God. So thank you." Now I think I'm going to cry. All the ladies clap and give nods and words of affirmation. All I can say is thank You, Father. This is all You. Barb continues.

"And the last thing I want to share is this. Shula, you asked me earlier this week about the message I'd give my daughters about marriage, and at

the time I didn't have an answer, or at least not one that I was comfortable with. So I had to really think about your question. But as this week's journey comes to a close, I think I finally get it. So the message I would give my daughters is that marriage is a gift from God, a gift for us to enjoy. And while I also understand that marriage is designed to teach us how to be in better relationship with God, 'getting to know' your spouse can and should be an exhilarating experience. God loves us more than anything and He wants us to be filled with joy. Marriage shouldn't be a burden but a treasured gift in which we delight. So I would tell my daughters to accept this wonderful gift from God and enjoy it with everything they've got. Enjoy the gift. That's my message to my girls."

Smiles and glistening eyes let me know that they get it and this fills my heart with joy. Thank You, Jesus, for the miracles of this week, not just for me but more importantly, the miracles you've performed in the lives of Lindsey, Barb, Alex, and Savannah. Thank You for doing abundantly more than I'd hoped for. "Ladies, our work here is done, and it is my prayer for each of you that you leave here filled with the Holy Spirit, ready to take your marriages and your lives to new heights. In closing, I want to read a passage from Genesis. I'll be reading Genesis 3, verses 6 through 11. 'So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. Then the Lord God called to Adam and said to him, "Where are you?" So he said, "I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself." And He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?"'

"Ladies, since the beginning of time, we have been trying to cover up our nakedness and our shame. We hide behind the fig leaves of fear, of lies, of hurt, of pride, of depression. The list goes on and on. But today, I implore you to remove the fig leaves and embrace the you that God created and loves. God in His infinite wisdom has a plan for our redemption.

We no longer have to live in hiding, hiding behind masks, hiding behind lies, hiding behind fig leaves. My prayer for each of you is the prayer found in Psalm 31:1 ‘In You, O Lord, we have taken refuge; Let us never be ashamed’. It is only through Christ that each of us can live a life naked and unashamed. So I challenge you ladies, let’s live naked! Let’s live our lives naked and without shame.”

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E P I L O G U E

Three Months Later

October 5, Journal Entry No. 52

It's been three months! I've been at Naaman's for three months, and so much has happened. I've changed. I've grown. I'm a new woman. And yes, I still miss Seth terribly, but I guess I always will. What I can say is this, now it doesn't hurt as much. I can breathe again. And I smile now, and I laugh! It's been so long since I've laughed spontaneously. You know that deep-down, from-the-belly laugh? I had resigned myself to the fact that my laugh had died with Seth. But with prayer and time and amazing people in my life, I'm happy to say I can laugh again and it feels good.

It's been a while since I've written and I'm so sorry. It's been a whirlwind three months and I've been praying to You daily, but I haven't taken a minute to write in communion with You. So please forgive me. Guess I have some catching up to do.

Why don't I start with my family? Sheridan, my pride and joy, is back from her Europe tour and is at Georgetown, our old stomping ground. Med school is kicking her butt, and she's kicking right back. She's a mini version of Seth, so I know she'll be fine. I can't wait to address our daughter as Dr. Sheridan Taylor. Or maybe it'll be a new last name by then. I hadn't even entertained the idea of my Sheridan married and with kids. Me a grandma—imagine that. But I better not get too far ahead of things. She's not even dating. Thank You for watching over her and for blessing her. I'm so proud of the young woman she's becoming, and I ask that You continue to keep Your hedge of protection all around her.

Now, onto my crazy family. Where do I even start? How about with the Addams Family? I still can't believe we're related, but they tell me we are, so let's talk about Racer, who got put out of preschool. Reese and Lance are frantically trying to find one that'll take him. He's a terror. But the funniest part is that they convinced Eva to watch him until they find another preschool. Can you say hilarious? Just imagine Eva in heels peeling little Racer from her custom-designed Neiman Marcus drapes, scraping pink bubble gum from her imported silk Persian rug, or trying to retrieve her cell phone from the toilet before being flushed away to never, never land forever and ever. And I can't even imagine the ER trips, one to surgically remove the crayon from Racer's ear and the other to flush the ingested Soft Scrub from his system after he tried to make his own Oreo cookie—Soft Scrub sandwiched between two mud cakes. I actually feel a little sorry for Eva. A little.

And don't think the other two are any better. Ryan and Rain are just as bratty, but the public schools can't kick them out. Eva wants me to secretly test them. She thinks they've got some diagnosable condition that can be fixed with a pill. So she arranges these dinners, winks at me every time one of them does something, and mouths, "Did you get that? ADHD, right?" And I mouth back, "No. B-A-D." She gets so mad. Watching them is a satirical comedy—funny but oh so sad. I hope my brother wakes up sometime soon, gets a hold of his family, and becomes the priest of his home as You designed him to be. His head is so far up Reese's big butt that he can't see his family falling apart all around him. I guess he's doing what he's used to—letting a woman lead him. Hasn't he learned by now? It didn't work in the Garden of Eden, and it won't work on Castleberry Street.

Before I leave the family updates, I can't forget Auntie Helen. She's now the budding entrepreneur. She went on *Shark Tank* and got two hundred thousand dollars, and now her herbs and candles and oils are being sold nationwide. And by the way, my aunt, a former pot smoker, is now a spokeswoman for the campaign to educate people about the dangerous side effects of marijuana. Aunt Helen says she can't believe she lived in a fog all those years, and now that she can see clearly, she feels a duty to preach the gospel far and wide. You sure work in mysterious ways, God. But whatever it takes, right? I'm just so happy for her and I pray

You continue to perform marvelous wonders in her life and her ministry. Eighty-three. Go figure. I guess You're proving that it's never too late to follow your dreams and your calling.

That's the family. Now, for a work update. I've decided to stay on at Naaman's. It's such a special place and I feel this is where I belong. Karen is remarkable and I learn so much from her. She's overcome a great deal and has accomplished twice as much. I do worry that she's poured her whole heart and soul into her career. She and I speak often about finding a balance. And I find it to be quite ironic that the business she started as a ministry in service to You might be the death of her. From watching Seth over the years, I knew that working for the church was a different animal. It can drive you to the brink of delirium. And being a woman in church leadership presents an even greater challenge. The church leadership gives Karen the blues—"The music's too worldly," "You're promoting self-esteem and not God-esteem," "You're teaching women to overindulge," "You're encouraging women to rebel against their husbands," "Stretching is of the Devil," "Be more humble," "Women can't lead; they follow."

I don't know how Karen does it, but she has the patience of Job, the wisdom of Solomon, the courage of Samuel, the faith of Abraham, the organizational skills of Nehemiah, the fight of David, and Your love, dear Father.

Remember when Sheridan got so upset because she couldn't buy that "thing" little Jason had and she didn't? Well, now I kinda wish I could buy a pair of those "things" to hang around my neck, just to even the playing field a little. You know, something to pull out at board meetings, and declare, "Hey fellas, guess what? We all have a pair so now maybe we can get down to business and stop competing, trying to figure out whose are bigger or who has a pair and who doesn't." I'm not complaining God. I know it sounds like it, but I'm really not. I love being a woman and I love You for giving me the opportunity to depend on You for everything. I also love watching You work in the lives of the amazing women around me. And I especially love watching You work in boardrooms and churches across the nation, as You show the world how You can and do use women to serve.

I digressed again. Sorry. There's so much more I could say about Karen. Who knows, maybe I should write a book about her one of these days. As

for the rest of the Naaman's 'Dream Team', everyone else is doing well. I absolutely love my extended Naaman's family and again, I can't thank You enough for blessing me in the ways that You have. This place is perfect for me and I am looking forward to the year ahead.

And don't think I forgot about my ladies. The groups I lead now have grown in number and I have dealt with many new topics, but I can never forget my first group, Alex, Savannah, Barbara, and Lindsey. They will always have a special place in my heart. I still keep in touch with them, some more than others, but the Skype counseling sessions are working well. Being old-fashioned, I had my doubts about this technology. But I think because I know them and spent an intense week with them, the follow-up via Skype seems to be working. I'm happy to say they're growing and still striving to be the wives, mothers, and women You designed them to be.

Let's start with my favorite, Alex. I am being slightly sarcastic because I so often wanted to strangle her, but I think I understand her better now, and she's let her guard down bit by bit, revealing more of her softer side. She and Wes are trying. They're going to marriage counseling through a church they've been attending and they are getting more involved in ministry and in the community. And Wes is finally working at a job he enjoys. It doesn't pay as much as Alex's, but the salary is decent and it's a respectable position in the world of IT and video-gaming (his passion). Alex shares that he feels more like a man and she's beginning to respect him more. He's striving to understand what it means to be the head of his home, and Alex is working hard to let him lead. And boy is that hard. She's been in charge for such a long time, so letting go of the reins is a challenge. She's working to balance leadership at work with her role as a wife and as a mom. But she's praying and seeking Your guidance now, and I know You're working with her, I can see evidence of it each week when she and I talk.

And being the sneaky little devil that she is, Alex did recently drop a bombshell during one of our Skype sessions. She revealed that there had been another man of interest in her life. According to Alex, it was nothing more than flirtation and innuendos and she now realizes that the 'little emotional affair' as she calls it, was her way of seeking affirmation and a little bit of happiness and maybe even one of the driving forces behind her pursuit of a divorce. Alex says it's over—no more flirting, no more phone

chats, texts and emails, no more crying on his shoulder. Alex has shared that she is going to give her marriage a fair shot, giving it all that she's got. She's not sure whether to tell Wes about her close friend and her feelings for him, and she's not sure whether her suspicions about Wes and another woman were correct, but she knows that there is no one else now. But she's trying and is relying on You more and focusing on growing spiritually and living the life that You intend for her. She still has many challenges, but working through them with You has made all the difference in the world.

Then there's Lindsey Williams Evans. Yes, she's finally married, and she couldn't be happier. During our week together, Alex suggested that we had created a monster, and I'm starting to think she's right. Our shy wallflower has blossomed. She loves being in love, she's enjoying 'getting to know Eddie' and 'being known by Eddie' and she absolutely, unequivocally loves sex (her words, not mine). She's even taken up belly dancing with some girlfriends, and owns stock in Maybelline (well not literally, but she should). I think she's finding her rhythm and I'm over-the-top ecstatic for her. And poor Eddie doesn't know what happened at Naaman's, but he sends me a weekly thank-you note. They are the cutest couple ever. Lindsey isn't expecting yet, but she's learning to become Teddy's "other mommy." And to no one's surprise, Gabriella was lying through her pearly white teeth—she's not over Eddie at all. She now regrets they "aren't a family" and feels it would be in Teddy's best interest if they were together. But Eddie and Lindsey are working together as a team and aren't being deterred by her antics. Most importantly, they have made You the center of their lives. Blended families come with challenges, but I think they can handle them. Correction, with You, I know they can handle them.

And who could forget Barb? She left Naaman's on such a high, ready to live life to the fullest. However, her debut didn't garner the response she'd hoped. Barb was slightly disappointed by David's reaction or lack thereof. I think she took him by surprise. It had been a long time since they'd been intimate in the way Barb desired, and I guess he'd gotten used to his routines. For weeks, Barb called and cried and felt ashamed and stupid and wanted to give up. But we talked and prayed and prayed and talked, and now she and David are slowly rediscovering the love and the passion they once shared. It's hard being in the position of wanting more sexually than your husband, but they love each other and are committed

to their marriage. David won't go to counseling, but he is open to trying the things I suggest to Barb and Barb is grateful for the small changes that she sees. According to Barb, she'll just have to tame the wild tiger inside a bit longer, but she's confident that tiger will be released and she's looking forward to that day (or night as it well might be). We'll just keep praying.

And now for Savannah. You know she has a special place in my heart because she was so broken and because it's been my privilege to be a part of Your healing in her life. She's come a long way, and while she has a ways to go, I'm confident she'll make it. Reed deserves the Husband of the Year award. Savannah was so afraid to tell him about the rape, but she knew it was time. She wrote him a letter, and at the end of the letter she told him she'd be staying at a nearby hotel. Savannah said she'd give him space and time to think and that if he wanted to they could talk the next morning over breakfast. Well, before she could even get settled and order room service, Reed was at the door with tears and love and compassion in his eyes.

Savannah said he held her all night long, telling her over and over again how much he loved her, that she was safe and that nothing could separate them—not death or life, angels or demons, the present or the future, height or depth, or any powers in all the world. Yes, Reed pulled out Scripture to express his love. (He definitely earned brownie points in my book and in Savannah's too.) They're in counseling together at their church, and Savannah and I still have our weekly sessions. She's blossoming right before my eyes, and I'm glad to report that she smiles now too. Reed wants to have children, and I think Savannah does too, but she's not ready right now. She hasn't told him about the miscarriage yet, because she doesn't want to unload too much on Reed all at once. They're taking life slowly, but the best part is that they're doing it together with You all intertwined in and throughout their marriage.

These are my ladies or should I say Your ladies, dear Father and I ask that you continue to work with them, guide them, love them, protect them, and bless them. And while my family and our ladies are important to me, I simply can't contain my joy over being reunited with Chelsea! We finally talked yesterday. (I guess this prompted the journaling. Forgive me again. I promise from today forward that I will honor, cherish, and protect our time together.) Oh the joy that floods my soul! I don't have to

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tell You how much she means to me. Going so long without Chels in my life was torture, but I knew she had to work through some things. There's too much to summarize, so here's a blow-by-blow account. I was sitting on my porch, sipping tea and watching the sunset. (I know I sound older than Aunt Helen, but it's peaceful on the porch.) Anyway, I saw Chelsea approaching in that bright red Jeep of hers, and it took everything in me not to fly off of the porch and smother her in kisses. But I know Chels and that would have sent her into a quick retreat, so I played it cool. I continued rocking as she approached, and I waited, knowing that she'd speak when she was ready. She always does.

"So can you call off the big dogs now? I think I got the message."

"And the big dogs you're referring to would be?"

"You know what I'm talking about. I know you, Shula, and I know you've been prayin' like mad, beggin' God to intervene and to save me from destruction—again. Well, it worked, so you can call Him off now. It's over with Santiago. You were right as usual, and I just came to say good-bye 'cause I'm headed to L.A. to find Ross."

I was speechless and not because of wait time but because I actually had no idea what to say. Chelsea never ceases to amaze me.

"Speechless, huh? Well, you shouldn't be. It's what you prayed for, right? So I just came to say good-bye, so good-bye."

The friend and the counselor in me were struggling. The friend said, *Hug her and never let her go*. The counselor said, *Play it cool and get her talking*. Forget it. Counselor, you lose.

"You're crazy. Let me go. You know I hate hugs. Shula!"

"Oh Chels, I've missed you so much. Come in. Let's talk. Tell me everything. What happened to Santiago? How'd you decide to go to L.A.? Did you talk to Ross? Does he know about Kennedy? And where is Kennedy, by the way"?

"Shula, what is in that mug? You are on a definite caffeine high. Seriously, though, I gotta go. I just wanted to say good-bye."

"Chelsea Nicole, if you just wanted to say good-bye, you could have called or texted or sent a note via messenger pigeon. You drove two hours along the cliffs of the Blue Ridge Mountains to say good-bye? Not buying it. So let's go inside, eat some Mississippi mud-cake brownies with vanilla ice cream and whipped cream, and talk."

“I didn’t even eat dinner yet.”

“Right. Life’s short. Let’s eat dessert first while we wait for dinner to be delivered. I’ll call up the restaurant and have some burgers and fries and onion rings and potato salad sent our way. I’ll have to call Trixie, of course, because Genevieve will have a heart attack if I suggest she deep-fry something. So let’s go.”

Just like old times. We shared our hearts over decadent food with no shortage of laughter and tears. Chelsea never disappoints. She’s always said I should write a book about her, as she contributed another tale for the Chelsea chronicles. “So what happened to Santiago? I thought you were in love?”

“Lust’s more like it. What happened was that he threw my life into a tizzy, and I realized I was too old for all the crazy, kinky, nearly illegal stuff he had me into. It was fun for a while, but girl, when I ended up sittin’ beside Big Bertha in an orange jumpsuit in a Mexican jail, I knew I had to get myself together.”

“Dare I ask how you ended up in a Mexican jail in an orange jumpsuit with Big Bertha?”

“Well you see, Santiago and I were in San Diego for a long weekend getaway, and we thought it’d be cool to visit Tijuana one night to check out the night life. Santiago had some business to tend to, so I decided to do some shopping. We agreed to meet at this club later. I decided I’d surprise Santiago with some Cuban cigars ’cause he loves ’em, and I loved buying him gifts, so I shopped around and found some—”

“Aren’t those—”

“Yes, Shula, they’re illegal, but everybody buys them, so I thought it was no big deal. We were in Mexico for goodness’ sake, you know, the place where everything goes. Anyway, I get these cigars and show up at the club. Little did I know the police had been following Santiago, who was a waiter by day and a drug smuggler by night. And because they were following him, they were following me. So I’m in this club in Mexico, can’t speak a lick of Spanish, and these big ol’ burly policemen start yelling at me and grabbing me, and I’m all freaked out. And of course they frisk me, and guess what they find? You got it—Cuban cigars, strapped down by my garter, which just happens to be under my skin-tight ‘I’m going to get some tonight’ dress. Oh and by the way, I’m panty-less. So off to jail

I go, and I spend a night there terrified out of my mind before I can get a lawyer who straightens everything out for me. I hopped the first plane leavin', came home, well actually not, home. Kennedy and I stayed with mom for a while, and I did a lot of thinking and a lot of crying. So, well, here I am, a changed woman, ready to settle down and do this thing right."

I was still speechless. What kind of response would be suitable for that story? But Chels was staring at me, so I had to say something. "Oh, my heavenly Father."

"Your heavenly Father is right. I'm sure the two of you are behind this, so as I said, I give. I'm doing what you wanted. I'm going to find Ross." Chelsea had managed to finish two brownies and a quart of ice cream. I was too stunned to eat, but our dinner arrived and I knew I'd better eat my share, lest I become responsible for her spontaneous combustion. We ate in silence for a while, absorbing all that had been shared. I finally felt sane enough to probe further.

"Okay, Chels, I'll admit this latest experience is definitely a doozy, and while I'd love nothing more than for you and Ross and Kennedy to be a family, do you think it's wise to just show up out of the blue on Ross's doorstep, professing your love and then dropping, 'Oh by the way, you have a daughter?' And no offense, but you've had some wild and crazy adventures before, so how's this different? If you wait say, two weeks, don't you think you'll be over the trauma and can maybe think more clearly?"

"These burgers are to die for, by the way. We've come a long way from our McDonald's and fries. Who would've imagined we'd be pouring our hearts out over burgers topped with Brie cheese, caramelized onions, sautéed mushrooms, and spicy remoulade sauce? I know, I know, I'm off topic." The cheese and the sauce dripped down our chins. This might not be so good for our arteries, but it was definitely good for our psyches. "Anyway, it wasn't that one thing. That was just the icing on the cake. The cake was the sex-crazed lunatic I'd become. I don't mean to offend your sense of righteousness and holiness, but I was becoming like a crack addict. Santiago was my kryptonite. The sex was good, I mean real good, but it was also really bad. I was in a pretty awful place, doin' things you couldn't even imagine. It was a little too much even for my risqué self. I'll spare you the details."

“Thank you very much. I can do without the gory details, though according to Eva, I could use some spice in my life, preferably in the form of mechanical happiness.”

“Get outta town. Did y’all really have that talk? She didn’t even have that talk with you when you were a teenager. Remember when you got your period and you were convinced you were dying of a hemorrhage, and the school nurse called home and your dad was the only person available, so he came and got you but made you wait till Eva got home? All that time you thought you were dying, and then when Eva got home, all she said was, “Shula, you’re a woman now. This will happen every month, so you’ll need these, and you can get pregnant now, so don’t let boys touch you.”

Why is Chelsea hysterically laughing? I didn’t think it was so funny. I mean seriously Eva, don’t let boys touch you? That was it, my big talk and launch into womanhood? I actually quit the intramural flag football team because I was scared I’d get pregnant if a boy touched me while trying to steal my flag. The things we do to our kids. I’m surprised I don’t need more therapy than what I get.

“Ha ha ha. You laugh, but just imagine the talk this time. Anyway, that’s a story for another day. Back to you. So the cake was that you became a sex fiend—well, a bigger sex fiend, because truth be told, you always craved it and lived life on the edge. But I get it. Santiago took you over the top. That’s the cake. The icing was the whole Mexican jail saga, which I’m still trying to wrap my mind around, but I see how that experience could cause you to pause and reassess some things. But I still don’t understand the whole off-to-L.A. thing, so help me out.”

“Ever the counselor, aren’t you? It really sucks that you know me so well. So here’s the thing. You know that my mom kept Kennedy for the summer, so I basically had two months to live on the wild side—renting motel rooms by the hour, having sexual scavenger hunts around the city—”

“Chels, again, I got it, wild and crazy, the icing on the cake. Tell me about the little iced flowers on the cake. The little flowers that are sending you cross country.”

“Sorry. I’m still working on this new way of being thingy. When you’ve lived one way for so long, it’s hard to just not feel or desire or want the old life anymore, especially when the old life didn’t seem so bad. It actually felt kinda good, you know? Okay, back to the little flowers on

the cake. So since Kennedy was coming home at the end of the summer, and because I was still salty about the whole being locked up and learning that my ‘summer boo’ was a drug smuggler, I had told Santiago that he and I could no longer see each other—you know, the whole ‘it was fun while it lasted’ speech. And it worked for a while, but when he called two days ago, I caved. My body missed him like crazy, and since he had no responsibilities and didn’t get the fact that I was a mom with obligations to my daughter, he had no qualms about begging me to meet him for five minutes in the parking lot of his apartment complex. He just had to see me. I’m so weak Shula. That voice had me hooked again, and I tried to fool myself into believing that no harm could come from seeing him for five minutes. I grabbed my keys and told Kennedy, ‘We’re going for pizza after I make a quick stop.’ We hopped in the car and were off.

“Santiago was waiting for me in his truck, so I told Kennedy, ‘Wait in the car. I’ll be right back.’ I hopped in Santiago’s truck and rationalized since the truck was high up and the windows were all tinted, a quickie could satisfy us both and Kennedy wouldn’t see or know a thing. We were kissing like there was no tomorrow, and his hands were all over me. But just as I was attempting to straddle him, I happened to look to the right and there was my baby girl, plastered to the side of the truck, looking at her mommy in utter disbelief. I scrambled to get myself together, bumping my head on the windshield, and just as I called her name, she fell backward right onto the pavement. Santiago was cracking up ’cause he has chick nor child to think about, but my heart broke into a million pieces. I flew outta the truck, scooped up my baby, and held her till the tears subsided—hers and mine.

“Anyway, try explaining to a six-year-old why her mom was straddling this strange man. I came up with a cockamamie story about how my door didn’t work and I was climbing across to get out of his door and I was making those sounds because I hit my back on the steering wheel. I think Kennedy believed me, but then out of the blue she had a zillion questions about her daddy. At that moment I realized I was becoming my mother—well, minus the whole out-of-control freak thing. But I was denying Kennedy her dad just like I’d been denied my dad, and I can’t do that anymore. Besides, I love Ross. It’s just that he scares me, and that’s why I ran. So I’m headed west to get our happily-ever-after started. That’s my story.”

Wow. Wow. Wow. “Oh Chels, I’m so sorry you and Kennedy had that experience, but I suppose that was the serious wake-up call you needed. I think you’re realizing that this has to be about Kennedy. And I agree that Kennedy should know her dad and that Ross should know her, but be cautious. First, it’s been more than six years; second, you have to separate Ross and Kennedy from you, Ross, and Kennedy, and third, you have to have a game plan. Take some time to think it through. And you know what I’m gonna say, but fourth, you gotta pray about it. What does God want you do? Let Him lead, Chels. You know all these things, but have you let Him into your heart yet? Have you given your life to Him completely? Or is your relationship with Him still based on acts? ‘I do good, so God loves and rewards me; I do something bad, and I’m punished and damned to hell. When life feels good, I don’t need Him, but when things are off kilter, I run to Him in desperation.’ He wants your heart, Chels—not your deeds but your heart.”

Of course the tears flowed from us both. I saw that Chelsea was hurting, lost, and confused, and I desperately wanted to help her, but I knew that wasn’t my role. I could only plant the seeds and pray that the Holy Spirit would nurture and grow them. “Shula, I’m so tired and I feel so unworthy. I really messed up this time, and I don’t know if I can turn it around. What if Ross doesn’t want me anymore or doesn’t want Kennedy either? What if Kennedy forever sees her mom as a slut, and what if I can’t be the mom she deserves?”

“Chels baby, let’s pray. That’s the only answer. Let’s just pray about it.” So right there in my kitchen, we knelt and I prayed Scripture over my sister and my friend.

“God promised that in the last days He would pour out His Spirit upon all flesh, and today I pray that God will anoint you, Chelsea, and infuse you with His Holy Spirit. I pray that God will fill you with His peace, hope, faith, truth, love, and power as you learn to love and to trust Him with all your heart and soul. God has blessed you with awesome gifts—the gift of humor and the gift of compassion—and I pray that He will lead and guide you as you learn how to use these amazing gifts to serve Him and others. You were wonderfully and marvelously made and were created for a purpose, Chelsea, and I pray that God reveals to you His plan for your life and for your family.

“The Devil is not happy because you recognize your need for Christ, so he is throwing every fiery dart in his arsenal your way. He wants to distract, derail, discourage, and destroy you because despite what you believe, you are anointed and chosen by God to do amazing things. So I claim God’s promises on your behalf that no weapon formed against you shall prosper and that you will refute every tongue that accuses you. I pray that you be clothed in the full armor of God so that you can stand against the Devil’s schemes. I pray that you will stand clothed with the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit. I love you, Chels, but more important, God loves you. I pray that you accept this gift and choose to live according to His Word. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.”

We rocked and hugged and basked in the presence of the Holy Spirit. I am so glad that we can approach Your throne in church or in my kitchen. “Thanks, Shula. I needed that. I love you so much, and I’m gonna get it right. And by the way, I just wanna tell you I’m so sorry for what I said the last time we spoke. I didn’t mean those things. You know how I get when I’m mad or I’m afraid that you’re right. And I didn’t mean those things about Seth. Please forgive me.”

“Girl, I’m not gonna lie. I was hurt. But you said some things that were true and got me thinking. I did idolize Seth, and God has used this time to work with me and to help me understand what it means to rely solely on Him. I’ve had to explore the whole ‘have no other gods before Me’ commandment and figure out where I stand with God. Because of you and your fiery little darts, God and I are really tight now and it feels good. So I forgive you, and I also apologize for being judgmental. You were right. Who am I to judge you or anybody else? First of all, I’ve got my own faults, and second, that’s God’s job and His alone. So we’re all good. And you don’t have to get it right for me, Chels. It’s not about me. I just want you to let God in and to allow Him to love and to lead you. I’m your BFF, and I love you from here to the moon and back.”

“Aw, Shula, I love you too. Here’s to trusting Him, Shula.”

“Here’s to trusting Him, Chels.”

So that’s the Shula the Chels update. I just want to thank You for friendship and for love. And I want to thank You for the gift of Seth and his love for twenty-some years. I know that my Seth is resting in You,

Jesus, awaiting Your return, but I thank You for allowing him to live in my heart now and always. He was my rock and my strength and an example of a Christ-centered man who was anchored in You. He led our family spiritually. And while I may have depended on him a bit too much, his relationship with You taught me how to be anchored in You as well. Yes, I had a moment of insanity, that moment where I felt distanced from You. But because Seth laid a solid foundation, I was able to return to something strong and secure. I was able to return to You.

I love You, God, more than anyone or anything, and I'm grateful for the amazing summer at Naaman's and for the blessings You continue to shower upon me. I also want to thank You for the message You've given me, one that I am now privileged to share with other women. And in Your infinite wisdom, by helping me teach others, You've taught me how to live my life free of fear and sorrow and sadness. You've taught me to live as the Shula You created me to be. So thank You from the bottom of my heart and I look forward to continuing with You on this amazing journey. More than anything, I look forward to living my life naked and without shame.

Love,

Shula

R E A D E R ' S R E S O U R C E S

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Book Discussion Questions

Naked and Unashamed			
Chapter 1: Tell It Like It Is			
Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you look in the mirror, what soundtrack plays in your head regarding your looks? • How would you describe yourself physically? How would you describe your personality? How does your description align with the following verses: Genesis 1:27, Psalm 139:14, Colossians 3:12-15, Romans 8:37, 1 Timothy 3:11, Jeremiah 1:5, Galatians 5:22-23 and Philippians 4:8? • Shula shared that it's in a woman's DNA to desire her husband but as a result of sin, we sometimes think that to desire and enjoy our husband is wrong. Shula suggests that it's not a bad thing, rather it is God's original plan and design for us. What are your thoughts about this theory? • What distractions, distortions of truth, and/or forms of discouragement keep you from pleasing and enjoying your spouse? • What are your views regarding mutual sexual pleasure? • Complete the Passion Barometer. How satisfied are you with intimacy, passion, and pleasure in your marriage? 		
Bible Verses	<table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genesis 2:23–25 • Genesis 3:16 • 1 Corinthians 7:2 • Genesis 26:8 </td> <td style="vertical-align: top;"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deuteronomy 24:5 • Song of Solomon 5:4–5 • 2 Kings 5:1–19 </td> </tr> </table>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genesis 2:23–25 • Genesis 3:16 • 1 Corinthians 7:2 • Genesis 26:8 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deuteronomy 24:5 • Song of Solomon 5:4–5 • 2 Kings 5:1–19
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genesis 2:23–25 • Genesis 3:16 • 1 Corinthians 7:2 • Genesis 26:8 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deuteronomy 24:5 • Song of Solomon 5:4–5 • 2 Kings 5:1–19 		
Chapter 2: Taking Chances			
Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you handle the nay-sayers in your life? • Is there a difference between a dream and a vision? • Have you ever believed that God was directing you a certain way but had people or circumstances suggest that you were wrong? If so, how did you handle the situation? • How do you know if your dream or vision is of God? • Has someone believed in you and taken a chance on you and your dream? • Have you ever believed in someone and taken a chance on that person? 		
Chapter 3: You've Got a Friend			
Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you a comfort eater? What's your comfort food? Are your indulgences healthy and balanced? • Shula has a big decision to make: should she accept the job offer at Naaman's? Have you ever had a big decision to make? What were some factors that kept you from going after an opportunity? What strategies have you used to help you make decisions? 		

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe your relationship with your parents. How has it shaped who you are today? • Do you have a best friend? How much influence do your friends have on the decisions you make?
Chapter 4: We Are Family	
Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your thoughts regarding the Bible injunction “Honor thy mother and father, so your days may be long” (Exodus 20:12) in relation to Shula’s interaction with her mother, Eva? • How do you balance knowing what’s best for you versus your parents knowing what’s best? • Discuss your family relationships/dynamics and their impact on your life. • Is there someone who can manipulate you or a situation to his or her advantage, leaving you with no clue as to what’s happened? Or are you a gifted maestro, able to orchestrate people and situations to your advantage? Discuss this form of communication and interaction and how it makes you feel or how you think it makes others feel.
Chapter 5: Live Like You’re Dyin’	
Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was a time when swearing/cursing was considered something that only a certain type of person did. Now it seems to be as common as saying hello or “Have a nice day.” What are your thoughts regarding the widespread use of curse words? As Christians, how should we respond when we hear others use these words? • Have you ever made a rash decision? What prompted you to do so? How did it turn out? Given the chance, would you make the same decision again? Why or why not? • How do you know when God is speaking to you or directing you? When He speaks, do you move? If not, what holds you back?
Bible Verses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 Corinthians 6:19 • Proverbs 31:26
Chapter 6: From Here to the Moon and Back	
Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there something from your past that you’re still holding on to? Why do you suppose you’re still clinging to that thing or that person? How does it help you or hold you back? • Do you have a calm zone, a place where you can reflect, relax, and/or deliberate?
Bible Verses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mark 9:17–24
Chapter 7: Count on Me	
Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aunt Helen compares Shula to a sweet-pea plant. What flower do you feel best represents you, and why?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your thoughts regarding women in the workplace? What are some of the stereotypes about women working together or working for a woman? How does society perpetuate these stereotypes? What are some ways to overcome them? • Do you have a friend or a relative whom you love but who is doing something immoral or perhaps illegal? If so, how do you balance your love for the person with your standards and beliefs?
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Bible Verses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genesis 1:29–30
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Chapter 8: Because You Loved Me

Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you begin every morning with prayer? Why or why not? • Discuss the importance of committing your work to the Lord each day. • What are hindrances to being in daily communion with God? • Can you identify a time when you trusted God completely and followed His guidance? • What does “Jesus, take the wheel” mean for you? • Identify strategies for embedding daily interactions and communication with Christ into your day.
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Bible Verses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psalm 139:14 • Jeremiah 29:11 • Psalm 5:3 • Deuteronomy 31:6 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Philippians 4:6 • Proverbs 16:3 • 1 Samuel 3:10 • Joel 2:13
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Chapter 9: Anytime You Need a Friend

Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does/would “happy” look like for you? • Are you happy? If not, why and what would need to change for you to be happy? • Chelsea is continually searching for her Prince Charming, her ideal man, her Ken. Discuss how expectations affect relationships. • Compare Chelsea’s version of falling in love with your version of what it means to fall in love. • Chelsea is a single parent. Discuss the challenges that single parents may face. • What do you think about Chelsea’s decision not to tell Ross about Kennedy? • Do you think that Ross should have fought harder for Chelsea? Do you think that Chelsea is being reasonable?
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Chapter 10: How Can You Mend a Broken Heart?

Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were your perceptions of marriage in childhood and in young adulthood, and what are your perceptions now? • Describe your upbringing and your perceptions of your parents’ marriage and/or relationship. How have your parents’ practices and beliefs shaped your beliefs, expectations, and practices?
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What influences or experiences have shaped your view of marriage? • Describe your marriage or relationship as well as your hopes, dreams, fears, concerns, and joys regarding your relationship.
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Chapter 11: Get to Know You

Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which topic are you more uncomfortable with discussing—sex or submission? • What are your thoughts about counseling/therapy? Have you ever received counseling/therapy? If so, what are your thoughts regarding the benefits or the drawbacks? If not, would you consider participating to help deal with a problem? Why or why not? • What are some ways that you can experience moments of relaxation, peace, and reflection in your daily routine? • Do you keep a journal? If so, how do you use it? Is it beneficial to you? Why or why not? If you don't journal, would you consider doing so? • Shula said that her plan for the sessions would have been vastly different from God's plan and much easier too. But she chose to heed God's voice and to follow His direction. Have you had a similar experience? If so, how was the experience for you? Can you think of a time when you followed your plan and a time when you followed God's? What were the differences? • Describe the similarities and differences between Shula's prayers in previous chapters versus her prayer journal response. How could journaling a prayer enhance your prayer life?
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Bible Verses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ephesians 5:22–23
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Chapter 12: She Works Hard for the Money

Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there barren areas in your life? Discuss this. • What are your thoughts about praising and preparing despite your barrenness? Is this a natural response? • Take a moment to praise God for an anticipated blessing. What are some ways in which you need to prepare to receive the blessing to come?
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Bible Verses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isaiah 54:1–3 • Psalm 137:4 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 Kings 4 • Isaiah 55
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Chapter 13: Against the Wind

Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barb feels guilty for wanting more, especially when she seems to have it all. What are your thoughts about being content with your situation versus longing for more? • What role does age play in how Barb is feeling? How did cultural and societal norms/expectations affect her view of marriage? How do they affect your view?
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shula said that relationships with others teach you to have a deeper, more meaningful relationship with God. What are your thoughts about this theory? • Reflect on the following verses: John 10:10, Jeremiah 29:11, Matthew 6:33, and Romans 15:13. How do they speak to you? 	
Bible Verses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • John 10:10 • Jeremiah 29:11 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Matthew 6:33 • Romans 15:13

Chapter 14: I Heard It through the Grapevine

Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is love enough for a successful marriage or relationship? Why or why not? • Alex asks a great question: what should we do with the information that we're bombarded with daily regarding love, relationships, sex, and marriage? What do you think? What do you think of Barb's response that the Bible should be the barometer that we use to measure everything? How feasible is this to do? • What messages do you receive from media, from societal practices, or from "experts in the field" about love, marriage, and relationships? How do these messages affect your perceptions and practices? Compare these perceptions with the Bible's teachings. • Do you consciously analyze the information and the messages that you receive, determining what's true and what's not true? What do you do with the messages you receive? 	
Bible Verses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hosea 1–3 	

Chapter 15: I'll Stand by You

Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you share truth without judgment? • What are your thoughts about honesty and friendship? Are some things better left unsaid? • What are your thoughts about Mark 9:24? Is it possible for belief and unbelief to dwell together? What are some ways you can grow in faith? 	
Bible Verses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Philippians 4:8 • Genesis 2:24 • 1 Corinthians 7:2 • 1 Peter 3:1 • Ephesians 5:23 • 1 Thessalonians 5:18 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mark 9:24 • Psalm 139:23 • 1 Peter 5:10 • Psalm 51:10 • Romans 12:2 • 1 Peter 5:7 • Psalm 73:3
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 Timothy 2:15 • Proverbs 2:6 • Ephesians 3:17 • Hebrews 12:1 • Isaiah 40:31 • Romans 12:1 • Luke 10:42

Chapter 16: I Surrender All—Barb

Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does God's creation speak to you? • How does God's creation speak of His majesty and His greatness?
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get some clay or some Play-Doh and work with it, making whatever you wish. How does this process make you feel? • How does your clay work compare to Jeremiah 18:1–12 and to Isaiah 64:8? • Do you have a talent that you aren't sharing with others? Why or why not? Read 2 Peter 4:10–11, 1 Timothy 4:14, and Matthew 25:14–30. How do these verses speak to you about using your God-given gifts? • Consider the lyrics to “I Surrender All.” Have you surrendered everything in your life to Christ? Why or why not? If not, what holds you back? What's most challenging to surrender? • Shula had the women create something and get attached to it, and she then asked them to let it go. Discuss surrendering the things we love. 		
Bible Verses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psalm 19:1 • Revelation 4:11 • 1 Peter 5:7 • Jeremiah 18:1–12 • Psalm 104:21–30 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psalm 23 • Genesis 1 • Psalm 139:4 • Ephesians 2:10 • Romans 12:1 	
Chapter 17: Just the Way You Are—Lindsey			
Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect upon the following verses: James 4:7, Romans 12:2, Isaiah 64:8, Matthew 6:24–27. How do they speak to you? • What are some persons, things, beliefs, or feelings that are difficult for you to surrender to God, and why do you think it's so hard for you to let go? • Can you think of a time when you let something go and in return got something much better? • Identify strategies that you can use to help you surrender your will and your life to God. Which Bible texts can help you? • As you embark on or continue your journey of submission, make a commitment to surrender one thing, one thought, or one feeling to God. 		
Bible Verses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • James 4:7 • Romans 12:2 • Isaiah 64:8 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Matthew 16:24–27 • Jonah • Luke 6:38 • Joshua 1:3–9 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 Chronicles 28:20 • Matthew 10:28 • Mark 12:30 • 1 Timothy 1:7
Chapter 18: Broken Girl			
Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are some perceptions or misperceptions about the homeless? • How would you define unconditional love? • How does the biblical meaning of unconditional love compare to society's definition of love? • What makes loving unconditionally challenging? • Describe the types of masks we hide behind to avoid facing our real selves or to avoid dealing with painful or difficult experiences. 		

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shula prays daily for her work and for her clients. Do you pray daily for guidance in your work or for those with whom you interact every day? 	
Bible Verses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 Corinthians 13 • 1 John 4:18 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Matthew 5:43–48 • Isaiah 57:8

Chapter 19: Girl on Fire—Alex

Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does it mean to be beholden within the context of marriage? How does this relate to submission? • What do you think about Alex’s definition of <i>beholden</i> and/or <i>submission</i>? How does it compare and contrast with your perceptions and with those of the world? • How have the many roles that women take on (often out of necessity) changed from the original design for husband and wife? • Can a woman make more money than her husband, assume more of the leadership role in her marriage, and live out the biblical principles of marriage? • Alex has a “real” and “clean” version of her journal entry. How does this relate to the notion of wearing masks? • Alex suggests that the Bible is not applicable to women today because of the culture in which it was written. What are your thoughts regarding cultural considerations or contexts in relation to the Bible? • Alex defines being beholden as having to serve another. What are your thoughts regarding serving your spouse? 	
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Bible Verses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ruth 1 	
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Chapter 20: Set Me Free—Alex

Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pastor Sara said that with the fall of man, marriage has become a training camp for being in relationship with Christ. What are your thoughts about this? • Discuss how Shula came to better understand being beholden to Seth and to God. Has this changed your perception of being beholden? • Jillian said that she and Alex were in prison, but Jillian was freed. Discuss this concept. Find Bible stories that are applicable to it. 	
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Bible Verses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genesis 2:4–3:24 • Matthew 26:17–30 • John 13:1–17 	
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Chapter 21: Beautiful—Lindsey

Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lindsey has learned the importance and the benefit of having a richer prayer life. She is excited that she’s spent thirty minutes in prayer. Describe your prayer life. Is it consistent? Is it meaningful? How can you strengthen it and make it better? • What are your thoughts regarding the superwoman complex? What are your thoughts about Lindsey’s revelation that she is a biblical superwoman? 	
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lindsey describes the Proverbs 31 woman as her nemesis. How have you thought of the Proverbs 31 woman in the past? After Lindsey’s analysis and her regrouping of the texts, what do you think of her now? • What if you or women in general thought of themselves as rubies? How might the dynamics in relationships be affected? • Discuss your thoughts regarding Lindsey’s revelation that a woman’s primary responsibility is her family and that if her family is taken care of, everything else will fall into place.
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Bible Verses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proverbs 31 • Psalm 18:9
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Chapter 22: I’m Coming Out—Lindsey

Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you believe that being your husband’s helpmeet is equivalent to being your husband’s coach? • What is the difference between being a cheerleader and being the coach? • What are your thoughts about this statement? “In Genesis 2:18, the word <i>helpmeet</i> does not occur. The Hebrew expression <i>ezer kenegdo</i> appears, meaning one who is the same as the other and who surrounds, protects, aids, helps, supports.” • What are your thoughts about Lindsey’s call to Gabriella? Should she have called? Why or why not? In blended families, should both sets of parents talk beforehand to clear the air and to set the tone? • What are your thoughts about having a family game plan—a plan for where you’d like to be as a family, an anticipated time line, and a strategy for accomplishing your goals? Do you have a family plan? If not, how might having a family plan help you?
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Bible Verses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genesis 2:18 • 1 Thessalonians 5:11 • Hebrews 10:24
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Chapter 23: Secret Garden—Barb

Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read the Song of Solomon. What are your thoughts about this love story? • How does the Song of Solomon compare to your perceptions of intimacy, sensuality, and pleasure in marriage? • How do you feel about the use of the term ‘<i>to know</i>’ in relation to intimacy? How might this term differ from other terms such as ‘<i>sexual intercourse</i>’ or ‘<i>making love</i>’? • Discuss what the world describes as sexual pleasure versus what Shula suggests the Bible portrays in the Song of Solomon. • Discuss the activities that Shula has planned for the ladies to help them discover their sensual, sexual side—dancing, a poetry slam, a photo shoot. • What makes you happy? • What brings you pleasure?
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Bible Verses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Song of Solomon 1:13 • Song of Solomon 1:2–4 • Song of Solomon 4:16 • Song of Solomon 5:1 • Song of Solomon 7:10, 12–13 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psalm 37:4 • Psalm 139:14 • John 10:10 • Genesis 16:4 • Genesis 38:9 • Genesis 38:15–16 • Genesis 39:7 • Luke 12:7 • Psalm 139:2 • Jeremiah 1:5 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psalm 46:10 • Jeremiah 29:13 • Hebrews 12:2 • Proverbs 16:3 • Ephesians 6:18 • Luke 10:27 • 1 Peter 2:24 • Deuteronomy 31:6
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Chapter 24: I'll Be Loving You Always

Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shula is a widow and misses her husband. Discuss what it might be like to lose a spouse. • Shula shares all of her hurt and her desires with God. Do you share everything with God? Why or why not? • Shula described her anniversary rendezvous with Seth. What are your thoughts about such a rendezvous? Is it okay between husband and wife? Are some things off limits? • Eva believed that the answer to Shula's dilemma was to purchase a vibrator. What are your thoughts about this? What does the Bible suggest about this? • Shula heard from God. Have you had a similar experience? • What are your thoughts about the Bible verse "All things work together for good"? • Do you believe that God cries with you and feels your pain? • What are your thoughts about Seth being Shula's potential god?
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Bible Verses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Romans 8:28 • Isaiah 41:13 • Joshua 1:9 • Jeremiah 31:3 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Philippians 4:19 • Philippians 4:7 • Psalm 55:22
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Chapter 25: When I Cry

Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Savannah hid behind a mask to protect herself from the traumatic experience of being raped. Discuss wearing masks as a protective mechanism. How can it help or hurt? • Women experience abuse and rape all over the world every day, yet we seldom discuss these topics and are unsure how to help those who have suffered. How might we as Christians help victims or have a bigger voice in the conversation? • Discuss Shula's response to the hurt, the guilt, and the shame that Savannah felt as a result of the rape and the miscarriage. What are your thoughts regarding her response? How would you have responded?
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Bible Verses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ephesians 6:18 • Genesis 18:14 • Philippians 4:7 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • James 4:8 • Hebrews 13:5 • Psalm 55:22 		
Chapter 26: Who Will Love Me for Me?				
Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you ever had a makeover or a spa day or time devoted just to you? If so, how did it make you feel? If not, why? Discuss the benefits and the challenges. • What are your thoughts about the process that Esther underwent to get ready for marriage to the king? • Discuss Lindsey’s observation that we should take a year to get ready for marriage vs. a year to prepare for a wedding. • Savannah suggested that she had to get reacquainted with herself. How acquainted with yourself are you? How alike or different are you from the you of your youth or from the you of five and ten years ago? What advice would the you of today give the you of your youth? • Discuss Alex’s observation that the good on the inside is manifested outwardly and that outward and inner beauty can coexist. • Discuss your thoughts about passion after fifty. • Discuss Shula’s assertion that being a woman is a gift from God. • Discuss Shula’s assertion that women are in a better position to submit to Christ because of our call to submission to our husbands. • Discuss what it means to live a life naked and unashamed. 			
Bible Verses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Esther 2:12 • Proverbs 27:9 • Genesis 8:21 • Song of Solomon 4:10 • 1 Peter 3:3 • Isaiah 64:8 	<table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="vertical-align: top; width: 50%;"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proverbs 16:31 • Psalm 92:12–15 • Ephesians 5:29 • Malachi 3:6 • Psalm 143:10 • Matthew 6:10 • Matthew 12:25 </td> <td style="vertical-align: top; width: 50%;"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • John 5:3 • John 7:17 • Acts 21:24 • Romans 12:2 • Ephesians 6:6 • Hebrews 13:21 • James 4:17 </td> </tr> </table>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proverbs 16:31 • Psalm 92:12–15 • Ephesians 5:29 • Malachi 3:6 • Psalm 143:10 • Matthew 6:10 • Matthew 12:25 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • John 5:3 • John 7:17 • Acts 21:24 • Romans 12:2 • Ephesians 6:6 • Hebrews 13:21 • James 4:17
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Epilogue: Three Months Later

Discussion Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discuss Shula's observation that our only role is to plant the seeds and to pray that the Holy Spirit nurtures and grows them when we interact with others.• Do you pray with and for your friends and/or family? What difference has this/could this make in your life?• What are your thoughts about Chelsea's statement, "I'm still working on this new way of being thingy. When you've lived one way for so long, it's hard to just not feel or desire or want the old life anymore, especially when the old didn't seem so bad. It actually felt kinda good, you know?" Have you ever experienced a similar challenge of trying to give something up, knowing it's for the best, yet you still miss it or crave it?• Discuss the role and the meaning of friendships in women's lives.• Discuss Shula's response to Chelsea in chapter 16 and her response now. Do they differ? If so, how?
Bible Verses	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Romans 8:31–29• Acts 2:17• Romans 12:6–8• 1 Corinthians 12:1–11• Psalm 139:14• Ephesians 2:10• Ephesians 6:16• Isaiah 54:17• Ephesians 6:11

Passion Barometer

Rate your feelings regarding your spouse in relation to the twenty statements below. Use the following scale to rate the intensity of your agreement or disagreement.

- 1 – Strongly disagree
- 2 – Disagree
- 3 – Neither agree nor disagree
- 4 – Agree
- 5 – Strongly agree

1	2	3	4	5	My body trembles with excitement just at the sight of my spouse.
1	2	3	4	5	I take delight in exploring the movement, curves, and angles of my spouse's body.
1	2	3	4	5	I have positive thoughts about my spouse at least three times a day.
1	2	3	4	5	I would rather spend time with my spouse than with anybody else.
1	2	3	4	5	I melt when my spouse looks at me.
1	2	3	4	5	I am aroused when my spouse touches me.
1	2	3	4	5	My spouse is my soul mate.
1	2	3	4	5	I enjoy planning romantic experiences for my spouse.
1	2	3	4	5	My spouse and I spend at least five hours a week doing something pleasurable together.
1	2	3	4	5	My spouse and I make love at least three times a week.
1	2	3	4	5	My spouse pleases me sexually.
1	2	3	4	5	My spouse and I engage in and enjoy foreplay.
1	2	3	4	5	My spouse fulfills my fantasies.
1	2	3	4	5	I fulfill my spouse's fantasies.
1	2	3	4	5	If I were separated from my spouse for more than five days, I would feel lonely.
1	2	3	4	5	My spouse engages me mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.
1	2	3	4	5	I trust my spouse with my thoughts, hopes, dreams, and feelings.

1	2	3	4	5	I want to know my spouse's thoughts, hopes, dreams, and feelings.
1	2	3	4	5	My spouse genuinely cares about me.
1	2	3	4	5	I experience intimacy within my marriage.
					Total

After recording your responses, add up your ratings to determine your level of marital passion.

100–80 Too Hot to Handle	79–60 Heated	59–40 Lukewarm	39 and below Smoke, No Fire
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Adapted from Hatfield and Sprecher, "Measuring Passionate Love in Intimate Relationships," *Journal of Adolescence*, no. 9 (1986), 383–410.

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Family Planning Tool

What is your family's mission/purpose?

How do you envision your family

- five from now?
- ten years from now?
- twenty years from now?
- fifty years from now?

What is most important to you as a couple?

- Where do friends fit into your lives?
- How much together time do you want/need?
- How much "me" time do you want/need?
- How important is having a church family?
- What are your plans to grow spiritually?
- Where does service to others fit in?
- Do you both work outside of the home? How can you contribute to one another's careers/goals?
- How will you both contribute to the management of your home?

What's your communication plan?

- How much time will you commit to discussing progress toward your goals?
- How do you communicate best (by writing, by speaking, by phone, by text)?
- How will you share concerns, worries, and/or problems with one another?
- What is your plan for dealing with anger?
- How do you feel about sharing events in your marriage with people outside of your immediate family (extended family, friends, colleagues, church members, pastor)?
- How will you make major and minor decisions?

What are your goals for parenting?

- What are your beliefs about discipline?
- What are your thoughts about schooling?

- What is/will be the role for each of you as mother and father?
- What will be the role of extended family members in the lives of your children?

How will you manage your finances?

- Will you commit to faithfully tithing? Are you willing to give more than 10 percent? What about a faithful offering?
- Who will develop/manage the budget?
- Will you have a joint bank account or separate accounts?
- How much do you think you need to support the lifestyle you desire?
- How do you plan to support your children through school/college?
- What are your plans for retirement?
- If the need arises, how will you manage giving financial support to family/friends?

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A B O U T T H E A U T H O R

Davenia Jones Lea has a doctorate degree in education with over twenty years of experience working with families of children with disabilities, as well as in higher education. She has extensive experience working in the family-life ministry within her church, in which she facilitates couples support groups and counsels new parents, including young and single mothers.

Davenia's madly in love with her husband, Derrick of twenty-one years and is grateful for the gift of her two adult children, Jonathan and Morgan. She is committed to living a God-directed life and is equally committed to living her life Naked and Unashamed.

Experience your own virtual retreat and visit TheShulamiteSeries.com for more resources, for an excerpt from Davenia's second novel, *Deliver Us From Evil*, as well as for additional opportunities to connect with Davenia. You can also learn about Davenia's availability for speaking engagements. Looking forward to connecting with you soon! In the meantime, here's to trusting Him as you begin your journey, living life Naked and Unashamed.

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