

FOREWORDS BY
ED SILVOSO AND PATRICIA BOOTSMA

DYING TO LIVE



Experiencing
God's
Redemptive
Power in the
Midst of Tragedy

BRYN S. ELLIOTT

PRAISE FOR *DYING TO LIVE*

“Bryn welcomes us into her life’s journey of brokenness, hopelessness, desperation, anger, despair, confusion, abuse, and many forms of pain to hope, healing, deliverance, and a complete metamorphosis.”

—**Kenneth Gill**, Apostolic Leader of Ripple Effect Ministries

“The perseverance, grace, courage, and beauty that radiates throughout Bryn’s story set me on my own journey deeper into the heart of God. I literally could not put the book down once I started reading it as it captivated my mind and heart! Although Bryn’s experiences were unique to her, universal themes were woven throughout the pages that will connect to teens and adults of all ages. Bryn imparts a treasure chest of practical truths, timeless wisdom, and powerful insights clearly depicting life with Jesus and the joyful hope and transformation God offers.”

—**Michele Okimura**, Executive Director of Explicit Movement

“It’s a crazy ride and more stimulating than the wildest theme park roller coaster! ...Allow God’s transforming grace to touch you through every page of this book. You will never be the same!”

—**Michael D. Pierce**, Cofounder of Christ For Your City

“Your heart will burn as you read Bryn’s heart-rending, authentic story of redemption... This book should be read by, and a resource on the shelf of, all those who want to see God’s powerful transformation.”

—**Chester and Betsy Kylstra**, Founders of Restoring The Foundation International, the Healing House Network, and Transforming Your Business.

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BRYN S. ELLIOTT

DYING TO LIVE



I want to dedicate this book to my sister, Abbe. I wouldn't have written this book if it wasn't for her. My heart breaks when I think about the fact that my sister never got to experience the fullness of what life with Jesus can be like. I also want to dedicate this book to a generation that my sister represents.

To the people like Abbe who feel hopeless and lost, to the people searching for more, for those who haven't had the chance to build an intimate relationship with Jesus... that is not life, don't be fooled.

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FOREWORD I

ED SILVOSO

I am deeply honored to have the privilege of writing the foreword to this incredible book by Bryn Elliott. It is a book that you cannot put down once you begin to read it because it speaks powerfully to wounds in your soul. It is indeed an oasis of liberating truth in the wilderness in which often we are driven to by the terrible things that happened to us, usually growing up.

This is material sorely needed all over the world by so many who have been abused, hurt, and crushed by evil leading them to believe that they can never accomplish anything relevant because of what they have gone through.

In the most elegant and well-articulated prose, Bryn brings us into the inner chamber of her young heart to share a story of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and how God turned those ugly, broken, disgusting pieces into wonderful and inspiring trophies of His grace.

This book brings hope to the hopeless and healing to the wounded. Every person is born with a divine destiny to make the world a

better place, to transform it. But transformation, to be sustainable and scalable, must begin with us. Once we experience redemption in our innermost being, there is no limit to what we can do for others. Bryn proves this. This is how she puts it:

“My past could be my weakness, and it was for a long time. I thought that I was a damaged and broken person, that no one would ever be able to love me or want me because of what I’ve been through.”

“I didn’t know I could make the choice to grow and let myself move past the lies I told myself about my life. I had created these thoughts in my head, and in the same way, I could choose to dismantle them by replacing them with the truth of who God says I am.”

And this is what she does in *Dying to Live*.

After telling her story, Bryn shares practical tools for the reader to overcome as she did, not as a self-help book but as a journey to discover God and access His power to turn evil into good as only the Creator can and wants to do.

It is definitely a must-read book. As you move from one page to the next, your life will be transformed, and at the end, you will be ready to make the world a better place.

Go for it. Your life will never be the same.

Dr. Ed Silvano

Founder and President of Transform Our World

Author of *Anointed for Business* and *Ekklesia*

FOREWORD II

PATRICIA BOOTSMA

I've met numerous people from various nations, yet I don't recall ever knowing anyone who went through a greater personal transformation than Bryn Elliott. Her countenance portrayed pain, anger, bitterness, and perhaps simply *lostness* at her sister's funeral just a few years ago. She wasn't exactly someone who exuded a desire to know God.

Then, it happened. The love of a relentless Savior broke through. A hard heart melted. The eyes like daggers turned into ones that now shine the light of purity. Her outward physical transformation of becoming amazingly beautiful now reveals the inner metamorphosis of a heart touched by the Beautiful One.

Bryn Elliott is a messenger to her generation and all who will listen. She has lived in the 'pig's trough' of addiction, rebellion, and bad decisions -- and came out to find the embrace of a loving Father who held nothing back when He prepared a banqueting table in her honor. She is gifted. She is anointed. She is a prophetic messenger. And I'm glad she is now my friend.

Haggai 2:6-8 (NKJV) prophesies of a time when the heavens and the earth will be shaken, leading to those who will come to the “Desire of All Nations” (i.e., Jesus Christ). The shakings of this present hour are intensifying in frequency and severity like labor pangs upon a pregnant woman. The greatest question raised to every soul on the planet is *What will you do about the “Desire of All Nations”? Are you going to ignore Him, reject Him, or embrace Him?*

That scripture goes on to describe the glory of what is coming as much greater than what has passed. “‘And in this place, I will bring peace,’ says the Lord of hosts” (Haggai 2:9). This world is longing for peace. The statistics of Bryn’s generation are staggering. Depression, panic attacks, loneliness, and addiction are rampant. Social media has only heightened fears of missing out (FOMO), not feeling relevant, or looking “good enough.” Families are splintered, trust is shattered, and inner pain abounds.

Yet, the Lord is raising messengers like Bryn Elliott, proclaiming that true peace is only found in Jesus Christ. Come feast at the banqueting table of His goodness. Why remain in pain?

Lately, Bryn has spent time at the world base of YWAM (Youth With A Mission). For many years their motto has been, “To Know Him and Make Him Known.” That is what Bryn is doing now — giving her life to know this God of power, grace, and forgiveness — and to make Him known.

I cheer on this prophetic messenger. This book is her story. May the Lord use it to change you just as she has been transformed by the One who defines true love.

Patricia Bootsma

Catch the Fire Ministries

Author of *Convergence, Raising Burning Hearts, A Lifestyle of Divine Encounters*

DYING TO LIVE

PART I

INTRODUCTION

We knew that if we actually wanted to get anywhere this time, we had to get away without anyone noticing. In a place like that with eyes everywhere, we had our work cut out for us.

We made a plan where I hung a blanket up during the day to cover the window beside my bed. I told the staff that too much light came into my room in the mornings, and it was bothering me. They didn't ask questions.

The next step was to cut a hole in the window screen. We weren't allowed any sharps—that meant no scissors, no tweezers, absolutely nothing with a sharp edge—because they thought people would hurt themselves. So, when I went to use the washroom during academics, I used a crochet hook to rip the screen of the window open big enough for us to jump out of it. With the blanket still hung up, no one could see the rip.

We also weren't allowed to have window cranks because the guys' dorms were underneath us. Girls used to open their windows and talk to guys when they were outside or sneak out when no one was looking. There was one shared window crank we could check out from a staff member as long as we turned it back in when we were done. The night we planned to sneak

out, we asked for the crank and then returned it 20 minutes later. We told them we had closed our window, and they believed us, the blanket still covering our evidence.

When we went to bed that night, it was cold and snowy outside. Usually, we left our coats and boots in the mudroom downstairs, but we made sure to hide them in our room earlier in the day. The walk would be long and cold.

We had also packed bags before we went to sleep so we'd be ready to go as soon as it was time. I set my alarm and slept with my watch next to my head, so I would hear it before anyone else. It went off around 3am. When it did, I woke Dani up.

"Are we still doing this?" I asked Dani.

"We got this far. Why not?" she replied.

Then we waited. Night checks were every 15 minutes, so we got back in bed and pretended to be asleep until the next check. As soon as the staff confirmed we were there and closed the door, we jumped out of bed to change our clothes. We got back in bed and waited for the next check, then jumped out again to get our stuff together. After the third check, we jumped out of bed one last time, made pillow bodies in our beds, put our boots on, threw all our stuff out the window, and then jumped. This was the most rushed and stressful 15 minutes of the whole process.

I jumped first.

The impact was so strong that I felt my whole spine crunch from bottom to top. My legs gave out on me after pushing myself off the thin ledge, and I fell right to my butt. The impact knocked the wind out of me, and both my legs throbbed. I lay on the ground for a minute to catch my breath while Dani looked down at me, worried.

"Is it that bad?" Dani asked.

"You'll be fine. Just jump. We don't have much time," I lied. I didn't jump out of that window for nothing. Now, it was time to run...

Running is a very natural human instinct. It is easy to run when things get hard. It is easier to turn your back on difficult circumstances or crippling pain than to face life head-on. I had been running for a long time... Nobody runs for no reason. To know why I was running, you have to go back to the beginning.

I was born on August 3, 1999, at Markham Stouffville Hospital in Ontario, Canada, to my parents, Shanon and Bryan Elliott. They had been married for about five years by the time they had me. My big sister, Abbe, was already two years old and just as excited as my parents for my arrival. We lived in Uxbridge in a cute little house with vines growing all up the sides of the red brick walls. There was a pool in the backyard, as well as a little play set with swings and a slide.

I have been told that I was a really happy baby. I often woke my parents up in the morning by standing in my crib and singing. My dad was an entrepreneur and an engineer, and my mom stayed at home with my sister and me. Both of them went to university and graduated with degrees. It sounds like the start of a perfect story about a perfect family, don't you think? Sadly, that is not the case.

In this book, I share the story of my life.

My story of overcoming isn't about anything that I was able to do in my own strength. Rather, it is about the strength of the One who brought me through. This isn't a sob story, and I don't want anyone feeling bad for me. I don't look at my life that way or think that way about my past. Every single thing the enemy intended for evil, the Lord used for His glory and as a part of His plan. I am so thankful to have gone through experiences that have shaped me into the person I am today. I wouldn't be who I am without the challenges and opportunities for growth that I have experienced.

This book is raw and about as real as you can get. I describe traumas and life hurts that may trigger some people, so if at any point you feel like you need to put the book down, please do. My goal is to help anyone who may be going through anything similar in their lives find the healing and freedom I've found. To do that, I share what actually changed my life. I'll tell you right now, it wasn't a certain amount of therapy, it wasn't drug counseling, it wasn't rehab... *it was a person.*

That person is Jesus Christ.

I tried to pull healing from the world, and I even tried to pull healing from myself or some "inner authority." The truth is, I tried everything there was to try... but nothing works without Jesus. Nothing sustains, nothing is renewed, nothing restores innocence and purity, nothing transforms people from the inside out like Jesus does. I owe everything to Jesus. He has my whole heart, He has my past, He has my present, and I give Him my future.

My hope is that through reading my story, you will see Jesus. I pray that my story raises questions and curiosity about a life walking with the Lord, that someone somewhere in the world will feel a little less alone in what they are going through. I hope that the truths, tools, and processes I share in this book bring those reading insight and new revelation about their own lives, and more importantly, about who God is.

If you can't relate to my story, that's okay. I admit it gets pretty wild. The tools in the second half are life tools that can help *anyone* in any walk of life. That's the thing about Jesus. If you are human, He relates to you and offers you the most extravagant gift that will ever be available to you.

If this book has an impact on just one person, that is enough for me.

I wrote this book for you.

I am so thankful to those who are taking the time to read my story, and it's a privilege for me to be able to speak into your lives in a way that will support your growth and bring you closer to Jesus. I hope this book is a seed planted in your life that will bear great fruit.

So, let's begin...

When I was just over a year old, my parents got divorced. I didn't know it at the time, but my life was about to turn upside down.

THE YOUNGER YEARS

I don't have any memory of my parents being together or part of the same family unit, so I never really felt like I was missing out or that my family was broken. I still had a dad and a mom who loved and cared about me, just separately. At the time, I didn't understand the effects that divorce and a broken family actually had on my life. That's just always how life has been for me, and I didn't mind it.

My dad has great faith and trust in people. It is a wonderful quality, but if that trust becomes naiveté, bad things can happen. And for my sister and me, that is what happened.

When I was two years old, my dad introduced someone into our lives he trusted, but shouldn't have. Her name was Andi.¹ I will not go into the dark details of what Andi did to us, but it is important for me to briefly cover this part of my story because the abuse we suffered at her hands for over ten years set in motion events that colored our futures forever. I can share this with you knowing that we are safe from Andi now, and today I have chosen forgiveness rather than anger.

One day, Andi came over to the house while we were having a play-date with some other kids. My sister, Abbe, and I were very excited. We were all running around the main floor of our house, playing tag. I was the youngest and smallest of the kids and was the slowest by far. I was the last of the four of us running through the kitchen and dining room. Everyone else had already turned the corner by the time I got there. As I ran past Andi, she grabbed the back of my hoodie. I felt the hood of my sweatshirt quickly choke me as I fell to the ground. My eyes started watering as I tried to catch my breath looking up at Andi.

She kneeled down with a crazy look in her eyes and said, “No running!”

I was shocked and confused because I had never had a violent interaction like that with an adult before. Also, everyone had been running, and Andi didn’t stop anyone else. This was the first hint that there was something very wrong, but at that point, I was more confused than anything else.

Occasionally, Andi would watch us overnight if my dad was away. On one of these nights, Abbe and I went to the table for dinner, and I started to feel sick. I knew from the smell in the kitchen that we were having fish, which always made me nauseous. As I sat down, Andi gave me an angry look and told me I wasn’t allowed to leave the table until I finished my food. She said I had to sit there while everyone else went about their nights hanging out, getting ready for bed, and going to sleep. Which is exactly what happened.

When everyone went to bed, Andi came downstairs and told me that if I moved or even attempted going upstairs, I would really regret it. I was afraid, and so I never moved. With everyone asleep and the lights turned off, I sat in the dark, alone and scared. I tried to sleep sitting up in the chair with my head resting on the table.

In the morning, I wasn't allowed to have breakfast. Andi said that because I hadn't finished my fish, which was still on the table in front of me from the night before, I would go to school without eating. This was fine by me because it meant I could get out of that house. Also, I knew when I got home, the fish wouldn't be there anymore.

When I was at my mom's, I felt loved and secure... for the most part. Strange men often came in and out. Sometimes, she had parties while we slept, but I still felt secure there. Many times, she stumbled into my bed and passed out. But at her house, I felt safer than at my dad's, where I never knew when Andi would show up.

I remember Andi barging into my room when I was in kindergarten. She had just come from Abbe's room where I could hear her yelling cruel things even where I stood outside. After hearing her talk to my sister like that, something deep inside me blurted out how much I hated Andi. In response, Andi grabbed me by the hair and threw me to the floor. I sat on the ground crying and looked up in shock, not knowing what to do or say. She grabbed me by the wrist, picking me up into the air just high enough so my feet couldn't touch the ground. Andi kept yelling and screaming at me to walk, but I wasn't quite tall enough for my feet to reach the floor.

When I went to my father crying, he assumed I had misbehaved and was unhappy about getting in trouble. I never told him what had happened. I didn't know how to. He sent me to my room, and that was the end of it. The hair pulling and dragging when Andi had us alone continued. Today, I have no feeling in my head if my hair is pulled. I guess my body somehow just adapted to this pain.

I remember one terrible day when Andi had been invited to a family birthday party. Andi held the knife that had been used to cut the cake and started chasing us all around the house. At first, it seemed like a game. Then I split up from everyone and went to the base-

ment. I ran down the stairs, turned the corner, and got halfway down the hall before I realized no one was running with me.

I stood there for a moment. Andi rounded the corner, holding the knife. Something in Andi's eyes changed—like a light switch flicked on. Andi started running at me full speed with the knife. I ran down the hall until I got to the bathroom, where I slammed the door shut, locked it, and hid in the bathtub behind the shower curtain. Andi pounded at the door for a while but then, after what seemed like an eternity, went back upstairs.

Tears streamed down my face as my body shook. I was terrified and couldn't move.

Then there was a knock at the door; I felt like I couldn't breathe. I heard my dad's voice call out, looking for me. I crawled to the door and asked if he was alone. He laughed and answered, "Yes." I opened the door and peeked through the crack to see only my dad standing there.

"What happened? Why were you locked in the bathroom?" my dad asked, picking me up from the floor.

"I was just scared," I replied.

He laughed and brought me back upstairs.

I couldn't imagine the abuse getting worse... but it did. Much worse.



THE SAME YEAR Andi started pulling my hair and chased me with a knife, Abbe started showing alarming signs that something was wrong. Abbe struggled with anxiety and depression throughout her life. Maybe it was a chemical imbalance but, today, I suspect it may have been at least partly due to the trauma Andi inflicted on us at the early stages of our lives. Her behavior at school changed, and she

was becoming very emotional around other people. Breakdowns were more frequent. One day, she told her teacher she wanted to die, which is not a normal thing for a fourth grader to say. The school called Child Protective Services.

When CPS got to the school, I was called to the office. I didn't know what was going on, but it wasn't unusual for me to be in the office, so I wasn't worried.

Throughout elementary school, I was in the office probably three times a week, on average. I loved drama, and I think it distracted me from what was going on in my own life. Even if I wasn't involved in an argument or a fight, I took it upon myself to get involved. Things became so bad that at one point, I was required to eat lunch with the principal in her office to avoid causing more issues. The truth was I really did like stirring things up. Plus, I liked eating lunch with the principal, who was actually a very nice person.

I walked into the principal's office, and I saw Abbe sitting in a room by herself. The door was partly closed. The secretary walked me to another room and closed the door. I was in there for what seemed like forever. Eventually, I started doing headstands against the wall just to keep myself occupied.

After the CPS workers talked with my sister, they came to talk with me. They asked me questions about my family, which confused me. I told them I loved being with my mom; that's where I was happiest and safest. They asked me about what happened at my dad's house. I told them my dad was always good, even though he was strict and scary sometimes. I knew he always had the best intentions. I didn't want to say anything that would make them think he was a bad father, but I also didn't like being at his house because Andi might show up. I had never told anyone about what was really going on, but I did tell them I hated Andi. I didn't explain why.

When CPS was done questioning me, I went back to class.

My dad was furious when CPS contacted him and assumed we had been dishonest because he saw no evidence of abuse. Andi's access to Abbe and me was not removed. The next five years felt like torture. What started as physical abuse soon turned into sexual abuse. No child, no human should endure the kind of torment we experienced.

I could share many, many stories with you about the ten years of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse my sister and I endured, but I will avoid going into graphic detail as I think you probably get the point. Even as a child, I knew what Andi did to us was not normal. However, I didn't know that it would have such devastating ramifications for our futures.

THE MIDDLE YEARS

Besides my dad, the men my mom chose in the past viewed her as an object. They did not love or respect her, and I don't think she truly loved or respected them either. I hated seeing her with men; it made me feel sick inside, and I always felt like I needed to protect her.

Even at a young age, I saw a connection between relationships and objectification. I didn't know that I could say *no* to being touched. By the time we were teenagers, Andi was still abusing Abbe and me physically and sexually when we were alone.

People in positions of authority around me made me feel uneasy, and I often acted out. I tested teachers and friends constantly before feeling safe around them. Like many girls in my position, my wounds from the abuse pushed me into unhealthy relationships with boys. Abbe was someone I could go to that wouldn't judge what I was going through and knew how to make me feel better. Even if her advice wasn't always the best, it came from a good place, and I appreciated it.

I have talked to psychologists about this, and they told me that usually when kids are sexually abused, it interferes with regular sexual development. Most of the time, there are two ways you can go: You either become hyper-sexual, or you find it difficult and have little to no sexual experiences. Abbe's way of dealing with her trauma was to become overly sexual to deal with her pain, and mine was the opposite. Either way, neither of us knew that we had a choice in the matter until later on.

Physical touch of any kind started to affect me. I didn't want to hug people. I didn't want to shake anyone's hand. I didn't want a pat on the back. I couldn't handle it. It made me so angry, and I felt like I couldn't do anything about it.

High school was not a happy experience either.

I wanted to go to Lawrence Park Collegiate Institute. It's where Abbe went, but she had fallen into the drug scene there, and my dad was worried I might do the same. He decided to put me into an alternative school called Blyth Academy. This school had a reputation for being a joke and a place where you paid for grades. I never struggled in school, so I didn't really need the extra boost. In my experience, their reputation proved true. I felt like I wasn't in high school, like I stepped back a few years. The result was crippling anxiety mixed with boredom. I needed friends. I needed a challenge.

When the year ended, I begged my dad to let me go to Lawrence, where my friends were. I told him that it wasn't a drug school. I told him that Abbe chose to get into the drug crowd, but that it was only a very small population of the school.

All of what I said was true... but when I switched schools, I followed Abbe's example. I found the small group of people that were into drugs and stuck with them. We were all struggling at the time, and we weren't confident in our identities.

Every lunch, I went across the street to one of my friend's houses to get high. If we didn't have weed, we got drunk. It didn't really matter to us as long as we had some kind of fix. Sometimes we went to class afterward, and sometimes, we would just spend the day chilling. We had a system where we would get late slips and then leave, so we were marked late in the system instead of absent and wouldn't get in trouble.

I remember one day, one of my guy friend's and I had a competition to see who could smoke the most weed during lunch. We smoked out of bonges because you could use less weed and get high faster. I ended up hitting 15 bowls that lunch break. When I went back to class, I was so high that I passed out with my head on the desk. One of my best friends at the time, Annabel, was sitting next to me. The teacher started walking over, and Annabel started to shake my leg to get me to wake up. I lifted my head off the desk and looked up at my teacher. My eyes were bloodshot, glossy, and I could barely open them. She asked me if I was okay, and I realized that I must have looked like I was crying. So, I told her I had been having a really hard day and put my head back down to pass out once again. I couldn't believe it worked, but I was happy I had escaped her notice.

Another time, after a weekend of partying, I had extra cocaine left-over. I forgot I had it, and when I opened my backpack at school, I saw the little baggie. I was in my science class (I always sat at the back of classes because I never really paid attention and didn't want the teachers to see my eyes). I wanted to do the last of my coke, so I opened my textbook, balancing it standing up in front of me to block my teacher's view. I carefully got my line ready, rolled up a bill in my backpack, and quickly snorted it.

By this point, I was so into drugs that I didn't even want to be connected to my friends that didn't want to get drunk or high with me. Abbe was just as deep into drugs, though she had her own set of friends who were even wilder than mine.

IN THE ELEVENTH GRADE, my friends and I started car hopping. We ran around the streets in the middle of the night, and every time we passed a car, we pulled on the door handles. Most of the cars were locked, but you would be surprised how many people forget to lock their cars. When a door opened, we rummaged through looking for money or things that were valuable. Usually we only found change, but a few times, we scored big finding a computer or phone or large amounts of cash. Sometimes when we pulled the handles, a car alarm would go off. When this happened, we all knew to stop whatever we were doing and run as far as we could. We never really had any close calls getting caught. We were lucky.

Occasionally when the car hopping didn't feel like enough, I went out with an older group of guys who taught me how to hot-wire and steal cars. We could only get old junky cars because the newer ones had technology that they didn't know how to get around. We brought them to a man who owned a garage that would buy them off us for parts. We never really made that much because the cars were old, and we split the money.

One night I took out my dad's car to pick up my friends. This wasn't unusual: Whoever could get out with a car would pick everyone else up. This particular night, I let one of my friends drive. I was running along the street, pulling door handles as he followed me with the car. A street with a lot of cars caught my eye, so I headed in that direction. Meanwhile, my friend continued driving. I was pretty high at this point. As I got onto the packed street, I heard a loud scraping noise behind me. I'm not sure why, but at that moment, I thought to myself, *That's not my dad's car*. I kept going as he caught up, not even checking to see if anything was wrong.

When I was done for the night, we hit a few bowls and then I drove myself back home after dropping my friends off. I parked the car

and quietly snuck back inside the house. I locked the door behind me, put the keys in the drawer where I had found them, and tip-toed past my dad's room, up the stairs and into bed. I always felt such a rush of excitement and relief when I lay back down in my bed after a successful night of not getting caught by the police or my parents.

The next morning, I woke up and went downstairs to get breakfast. When I got to the kitchen, I saw both my mom and dad standing around the table. This was weird because I was at my dad's house, so my mom never really came over.

"Want to tell us when you crashed the car?" Someone asked.

My heart sank, and I felt a huge pit in my stomach. "What do you mean? I didn't crash the car."

At that point, I wasn't lying because I really didn't know that had happened. They took me to the driveway and showed me the damage to the car. There was a dent and a serious scratch in the right-hand corner, and the hood was not completely centered anymore.

I started telling them that I did take out the car, but I never crashed it. I told them it must have been someone else, which made them even more angry because then they knew I had let other people drive the car. They told me that enough was enough and that they were taking me to a rehab center. They had already been looking for one for me, and this was the last straw.

I started freaking out and told them there was no way I was going anywhere.

So, my dad gave me an ultimatum. "We can't handle this anymore. You have two options, either go to rehab or stay in Toronto. If you stay in Toronto, we will not support you. That means you will be homeless in Toronto, and we will charge you with grand theft auto."

At that moment, I felt like my world was ending. I thought they didn't know about me stealing and selling cars. I didn't know how much they knew, I didn't feel like having to explain the situation, and I hoped it wouldn't come up again.

Grounded, I was sent home with my mom.

THAT NIGHT, I planned to sneak out again. One of my friends was going to pick me up, and we were going to get high and car hop. I reasoned that if I was getting sent away anyways, I might as well have fun while I could.

I would usually just walk downstairs and go out the back door. But since my mom was still awake, I couldn't go that way, or she would have heard me. Instead, I tried to go out my window. I guess she still heard me, or it was just a coincidence that she was in the bathroom next door, but I heard the window beside mine open, and she started screaming at me to get back in the house. I was halfway out the window, so I stepped back in and prepared for her to snap.

My mom came running into my room and started screaming at me, telling me that she couldn't believe I would do this to her and that I needed help. Then she pulled out what was always the biggest threat: "I'm calling your father."

My dad was never abusive or anything like that, but he is a big guy (nearly 6'7), and when he was mad, he got pretty intense. I thought about having to deal with my dad and said, "F**k that!" So, I kept getting ready to leave. At this point, my mom was on the phone with my dad and told him that I was still planning to leave. He told her to keep me there however she could and that he was on his way.

I ran to the front door, and so did she. She fought to get between me and the door as I tried pushing her away. When it didn't work, I

tried running to the back door. She chased me to the back, and as I grabbed the handle, she threw her body into the door to close it. We kept fighting with each other and running back and forth between the doors. It was crazy. I felt sick to my stomach for getting this physical with my mom. (We weren't hitting each other or anything, but we were shoving, pulling, and grabbing at each other. I see now that she was doing whatever she could to keep her daughter safe, which I appreciate more than anything.)

When my dad got there, he screamed at me to sit down and shut up.

Then, he told me to go pack a bag. I asked for how long. He told me only a few days, so I went up to my room and packed a bag. I was so anxious, I got my stuff together very slowly. I went downstairs and asked my dad where we were going, and he told me we were getting out of the city and checking out a rehab center in the morning called Pine River Institute.

When we got to the hotel, I smoked a cigarette and went to sleep. It was really hard to sleep that night; all I could think about was being sent away to rehab. I didn't know how long I was going to be there, where it was, or who was going to be there with me. Everything was so new, and my mind was racing.

When we arrived the next morning, I was not happy to be there and made that very clear. I was stubborn, rude, and angry. The rehab center was old, the furniture was outdated, and it was in the middle of nowhere. There was a big wood building and three metal portables used as classrooms. It wasn't a glamorous place by any means, but it was surrounded by the forest. The scenery was nice, and there were some pretty walking trails nearby, but that was about it.

I watched as the students walked back to the dorms (there were two of them, one for the boys and one for the girls) in their uniforms. I learned that there was a mandatory two-month detox period in the

beginning before you could actually go into the school because they needed to make sure everyone was regulated enough to enter into the school environment without disrupting the others too much. They told me we would spend the two months camping in Algonquin Park, one of Canada's national parks. I was confused when they told me because it was already October, and it was getting really cold outside.

"What do you mean, camping?" I asked. "It's winter." (These were the first words I spoke that morning. I had been giving everyone the silent treatment.)

John, the administrator, answered, "Yes, I know it's almost winter. We camp all throughout the year. It just gets a little different in the winter. In the summer, we do portaging trips where you canoe and hike during the day and set up camp at different sites along the way. In the winter, we have a yurt, which is kind of like a circus tent, but it's heated with a wood-burning stove. During the day, you hike and do group activities, and then you spend most nights in a little woodshed we call the cookhouse that's also heated with a wood-burning stove."

I hate winter, so this didn't sound like a good plan to me, but at least we didn't have to sleep outside... or so I thought. (The description John gave me was very far off from the actual experience, but I will get into that a little later.) I told him there was no way I was doing that, so we might as well end the tour now. My dad gave me a sharp look that was a mix of anger, sadness, and annoyance.

John told us that the average stay at Pine River was about eight months to a year and a half. He told me that I could most likely get it done in eight months. (This was also very far off from my actual experience. In my whole stay there, I didn't see one person who could finish the program in eight months.)

John continued to talk about the groups, programs, and therapy they offered and how the schooling piece was structured so I could get high-school credit. None of this sounded even close to what I wanted, but at that point, I didn't have a choice. I couldn't imagine being homeless in Toronto for the winter or being charged with grand theft auto.

My dad signed me up, and in the meantime, we drove to his mother's house in New Brunswick until rehab began a few weeks later.

Those were hard days. I found out that my best friend, Annabel, was also being sent to rehab. Everyone was leaving. Abbe was already in rehab in Los Angeles, California, and Annabel was about to go to one in the same area. And here I was, being sent to the middle of nowhere, in the freezing cold, to winter camp, and they got to go live in LA. I know, I know. It was still rehab, but theirs sounded more like a vacation to me.

I kept begging dad to let me say goodbye to my friends. He told me that if I behaved myself in New Brunswick, I might be able to say goodbye. That was better than nothing! I behaved, and I went back home one more time to see my friends.

Everyone wanted to smoke weed, considering it would be our last chance for a while. So, we made a plan and slowly opened the back gate and ran. We ran all the way down the street to a park. We stood around a corner where nobody could see us and smoked together for the last time. All of our parents started calling us after a few minutes, and eventually, we all said goodbye, and I walked home.

When we got inside, my mom started screaming at me, but I didn't really care about being in trouble because I was leaving the next day anyways. I hugged my friend. We both pretended to cry so that I could say my eyes were red from crying and not because I was high.

All my friends went home, and I went upstairs to go to bed. I could hardly sleep that night, knowing it was the last night that I would get

to sleep in my own bed for who knew how long. I didn't know it then, but it would also be the last night I would sleep inside for two months as I was about to plunge headfirst into my first experience with winter camping.

PINE RIVER

When I woke up the next morning, I remembered I was going to rehab that day. As a result, I immediately felt like I was going to throw up.

My plan was to stop at a drugstore for cold medicine on our way to check in. This was what we used to get high when we had nothing else, and I already had nothing to lose.

Just as I was about to ask my mom to pull over, I felt a pit in my stomach.

I've already put her through so much. I don't want her to worry about me even more, I thought.

So, I decided against it, which I regretted as soon as I got to the woods.

It was early in the morning, and we were on our way to a meet-up location where a car would pick me up and take me to an access point at the edge of the park.

When my mom and I arrived, there were two older people standing outside of an old silver RAV4. They weren't married but looked kind. I got out of the car as they talked to my mom, then asked if I was ready to go. I said no and that I wanted to smoke my last cigarette before I was going anywhere. That's when I took a cigarette from the pack of Belmonts I had with me and lit it. Feeling like that wasn't enough, I took out another one and lit that one, too. With a cigarette in each hand, I went back and forth, taking a drag out of each. I tried to enjoy them, knowing they would be my last for eight months. When I finished, I hugged my mom goodbye and got into the car.

The two people kept trying to talk to me, but I wasn't in the mood. I cried silently in the backseat and then fell asleep. They woke me up when we stopped, and I expected to see others from the woods program, but instead, we were at a big warehouse. It was full of camping equipment: sleeping bags, clothes, winter gear, etc. Someone handed me a huge green pack and told me it had everything I needed for the next two months.

Then I went through a strip search. Everything I brought, including the clothes on my back, went into a bucket. I got two pairs of long johns, a fleece, a rain jacket, rain pants, wool pants and a sweater, socks, a sports bra, and underwear; that was all. We had to pack light because we carried *everything* with us *everywhere* we went in the woods.

They gave me a small dry/wet bag for personal items along with a sleeping bag and a thin foam pad for sleeping. When they showed me how to pack my bag and helped me put it on, I almost fell to the ground. At 50 lbs, the bag was easily half my weight.

THE WOODS PROGRAM was run by a company called D.A.R.E., which stands for Drug Abuse Resistance Education. Typically they try to prevent drug use, gang relations, and violent behavior among youth and teens, but they also have a court-ordered program for men as an alternative to going to jail. After spending two months in their program, I can see why it's an alternative to jail.

When I finally arrived at camp, I was met by four other students in the woods program (two guys, two girls). This was their once-a-week time to exchange laundry, get new food, and swap out staff. Once all of that was done, we split up the food into our packs and walked down a trail to set up camp for the night.

I expected some sort of cabin heated by a wood stove based on what they had told me earlier, but when we got there, all I saw was an empty lot where the trees had been cleared.

"Where's the yurt?" I asked.

"We only use that in the winter when it's below -20°C. Get comfy," Mia replied.

I wanted to cry. I also didn't want them to think I was weak, so I stopped talking or else I would have burst into tears.

One of the girls told me that we had to start setting up tarps while it was still light out.

Tarps? Is that what they call tents? I asked myself.

I soon came to find out that tarps just meant tarps. One went on the ground to keep you from getting wet or dirty, and one went on top to protect you from I'm not sure what. There was about a two-foot gap between the tarp and the ground, which meant we were literally sleeping outside.

After we set up the tarps, we collected firewood to make dinner. The meals were not awful but also not very good. The first night after the

swap was always the best because we got rid of the heaviest food first—dirty burgs (burgers). I’m not sure why we called them that, but that was their name.

I slept awful that night and then woke up wanting to cry. There was frost on the ground, and it was already so cold, I couldn’t imagine what it would be like a month from now. I didn’t have much time to dwell on that, however, because we had to pack up camp before we could eat breakfast. They gave us our daily allotment of “breakfast cheese” and a granola bar to tide us over. The “first breakfast” was the best, too—dirty muffs. Egg sandwiches on an English muffin. I’m not sure how those got their name either.

Then we started our ten-kilometer hike. I had no idea how I’d make it with 50 pounds on my back, but I told myself to suck it up.

On the hike, I got to know the other two girls, Megan and Mia. They were nice, but Megan was a little crazy, and Mia was very self-conscious. We were only in the woods together for a few weeks before Megan got discharged after we got in a fight, and Mia transitioned to the school (rehab) program. I felt bad about Megan because I saw how much help she needed, but at the time, I was relieved to not have to deal with her anymore.

The day Mia went to the school, a new girl named Dani came to the woods. This was also the first day we started using the yurt to store and dry our wet clothes. We were supposed to sleep in the yurt whenever it was below -20°C. but sometimes we were on the trail and couldn’t make it back to the tent in time, even if it was bitterly cold.

The yurt looked like a circus tent. It had a wooden frame, and the walls were made out of thick plastic. There was a place to make a fire, but we weren’t allowed to use it unless it was cold enough. The walls were lined with bunk beds, one side for girls and one side for guys. Absolutely no crossing over. There were no mattresses, only

wood planks, so sleeping in some sort of shelter was really the only improvement from being outside (when they finally let us).

Dani and I got along immediately. The day she arrived, we made a plan to run away the following morning. The nearest town was over 40 kilometers away, and the only way to get there was on foot. Going AWOL (“Absent Without Official Leave,” as they called it) wouldn’t be easy, but we were committed. Being in the woods was too cold, and we were miserable.

In the morning, we woke up with everyone at the yurt, ready to go back out on the trail. We ate as much breakfast as possible to keep us going and then packed our dry/wet bags with whatever we wanted to bring with us. We saved our breakfast cheese and our granola bars, as well as a bagel each from the day before. We filled our water bottles and were ready to go. Dani wore Crocs because they were lighter, and I wore boots because they were warmer.

While Dani pretended to go to the bathroom, I sat on the steps of the cookhouse “journaling.” When she came out, we ran.

INTO THE WOODS

The path from the base camp to the trailhead was only about two kilometers. We ran until we got back to the trailhead and then debated which way to go. Dani remembered driving in from the right, so we started walking that way.

As we walked, we thought we had gotten away. But it wasn’t long before a van found us. The protocol for a student going AWOL was for the woods staff to split up—one would stay back with the other students at camp and one would walk alongside the road following the AWOL student until relief staff came.

We kept walking as we started being followed. Every time we came to a fork in the road and had to decide which way to go, we guessed.

We had no map, no idea of how to get to the nearest town, and no one to help us. When we started seeing powerlines, we jumped up and down, screaming because we knew we had to be getting closer to civilization.

A few hours in, we started seeing houses, so we knocked on doors asking for directions. It was hard getting anyone to talk to us because any time a door opened, the same thing happened. The woods staff jumped out of the car to tell the other person we were addicts who had run away from rehab or escaped convicts and they shouldn't help us. Whatever they said, it always worked.

At one point, Dani got pretty far ahead of me because she wanted to see what was ahead of us. I couldn't run as fast as her because my boots were heavy, so by the time I caught up with her, I was out of breath, and it was getting dark out. We'd been walking for about nine hours.

In the distance, we saw more houses that led to a small town. We asked a young guy to use his phone... he had to have been our age, but he only had an iPod. That's when we realized how small the town was.

By this point, there were about three woods staff following us. Dani and I tried to lose them by splitting up. I ran between two shops, and Dani ran the other way. When I saw her again, she was about to crawl under a car to hide.

Once we were back together, we ran into a post office and told the women working that we needed a phone and to not listen to the people following us. When one of the woods staff came in, they told him to leave, or they would call the police. We screamed, making a big scene until he left and the women locked the door behind him.

Dani called her boyfriend (the only number either of us could come up with besides our parents), but her parents had told him that they

would go to the police if she contacted him. He was 40, and she was only 17.

With no other plan, we sat outside, trying to think of what to do next. We'd already caused a lot of drama throughout the small town, so we knew no one there would help us. That's when we knocked on one last door.

An older man poked his head out.

"Hi, do you have a couple of cigarettes we could have?" I asked.

"Well, that might be something I could help you with, but you gotta tell me what's goin' on first," the man replied.

We told him our story, the real story this time, in exchange for one cigarette each. He told us he had been to rehab once too, and it saved his life. After our 12-hour journey, we knew that was all we were getting, so we smoked slowly and then walked to the van and climbed in.



A FEW WEEKS LATER, it got so cold out that we had to use a pickaxe just to get water from the lake. We dug holes in the ground to go to the bathroom, which now meant digging through snow and ice. "New" snowshoes made our hikes slower and more difficult. Especially since we had to start dragging our packs on sleds. Carrying them on our backs was no longer an option because the weight made us sink into the snow. Sleds might sound easier, but trust me, it was not.

Setting up and breaking down camp got a lot harder, too, because tying and untying knots was almost impossible. At temperatures of -10 to -30°C, your hands don't last long out in the open, but that was the only way to deal with the knots. I did it in 30-second intervals just so I wouldn't lose feeling in my fingers.

I hated it out there so much. Sometimes when we were on the trail, I woke up with the tarp stuck to my face and pressed against my body from the weight of the previous night's snowfall. I was claustrophobic, so I usually woke up screaming when this happened. If the snow was heavy enough, I couldn't even get it off by myself.

Dani ended up going AWOL again right before Christmas. I was already mad because I had just found out I would be stuck in the woods for the holidays, even though they told me I would be out by then. Dani was the only person I wanted to spend the day with out there. In the end, she didn't get far—another unsuccessful AWOL, as always.

Christmas wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. I was sad to not be with my family, but we each got a 15-minute call home, which was nice because our only other form of communication in the woods was through letters. My parents sent me a pair of leather gloves lined with fur. They were 100 times warmer than the gloves we got at camp, so that made the last two weeks in the woods a little easier.

When I finally finished my eight weeks in the woods, I couldn't believe I had done it. I also couldn't wait to take a warm shower and sleep in a comfortable (and warm!) bed. But as I walked down the trailhead on my final day, I started feeling nervous about going to the school where I wouldn't know anyone. Thinking about the unknown journey ahead of me, someone handed me the bucket I put my clothes in on my first day.

I changed my clothes behind the van, and then we did a transition circle where everyone shared their favorite memory of me from camp. We talked about some good times and some bad. One person mentioned the time I picked a fight with someone and got a peanut butter jar thrown at my head with full force (luckily, I was able to dodge it). My various attempts at escape were also touched on, as well as the relationships I built in such a vulnerable place. Then, I was off to school.

INTO THE WOODS

The same older people who drove me into the woods brought me to the school. As soon as I got there, I was strip-searched and drug tested in a bathroom off of an empty hallway. Getting strip-searched was hard for me. I knew rationally that I was okay, but my body responded otherwise because of everything that had been done to me.

After the strip search, I put my clothes back on, and they walked me upstairs to the dorms. I changed again, this time into clothes that fit the dress code. My mom and I had gone shopping before I got sent to the woods, but only a fraction of the clothes we bought were allowed.

The school had a really strict dress code. We had an academic uniform and a gym uniform. The clothes we wore during “free” time had to be navy blue, dark green, black, beige, or gray. No patterns, brands, or designs. Nothing with multiple colors. No tank tops, leggings, low necklines, or V-neck shirts. Shorts had to be knee-length. Hooded sweatshirts were also forbidden because they

thought students would isolate underneath them or try to do things without the cameras seeing.

Once I accepted my new underwhelming look in slacks and collared shirts for the next however many months, I met my mentor, Autumn. She was younger than me, and we already knew each other because she had come out to the woods to “reground.” In the woods, she told me she was nervous about meeting me because people said I was a b*itch and no one liked me. This made going to school even harder. (I later found out none of this was true and got a new mentor, Claire, who was a much better fit for me.)

As soon as I got to the dorms, I took a long, hot shower. It was the first one I had taken in two months, and it felt good to be warm and clean again. Sometimes I think that’s part of why they sent us to the woods first. So we wouldn’t complain about how bad the school really was.

The first few days at the school were overwhelming. I didn’t know anyone and felt totally out of place. The schedule was packed, and the routines were strict. Even though I didn’t want to be there, I made a choice to do whatever it took to get out of there as fast as possible. Really what this meant was showing up but not actually participating in anything.

We did two hours of school each day, but I did anything to avoid schoolwork for the first three months. I painted my nails, colored, sat around, and literally anything but academics. Eventually, I realized that if I didn’t do my work, I would have to go back to high school when I was finished with rehab, and there was no way I was going back to that place.

Once I made that realization, all I did was schoolwork. I think I was trying to avoid connecting with anyone and used it as a way to numb out from all the therapy I was doing. That’s when my therapist put me on a “schoolwork ban.” I was only allowed to do schoolwork

during academic hours, which was frustrating because I felt like studying was at least a productive use of my time.

A few weeks after my arrival, Dani came to the school from the woods. I was so happy—I had missed her so much. We were put in a room with two other girls: Claire, my mentor, and Kat, Dani's mentor. Claire and Kat were the most committed to the program out of anyone there at the time.

In addition to the dress code and the rigorous schedule, the program had a lot of rules. They didn't allow you to have romantic relationships or too close of friendships with anyone to help with healthy boundaries. You couldn't be alone with the opposite sex, miss any of the programming, dress out of code, or wear heavy (or really any) make-up. If you broke a rule or did anything sneaky, they called it being "underground."

Information was safe with no one because everyone was only looking out for themselves. If you were caught knowing underground information, you would get dropped a stage, which meant staying longer and losing privileges. Secrets were best kept to yourself. Claire and Kat were especially unreliable. No one was going to keep them there any longer than they had to be.

THE SECOND ESCAPE

When Dani and I planned our second AWOL attempt, we kept it strictly between the two of us. We knew that if we actually wanted to get anywhere this time, we had to get away without anyone noticing. In a place like that with eyes everywhere, we had our work cut out for us.

We made a plan where I hung a blanket up during the day to cover the window beside my bed. I told the staff that too much light came into my room in the mornings, and it was bothering me. They didn't ask questions.

The next step was to cut a hole in the window's screen. We weren't allowed any sharps—that meant no scissors, no tweezers, absolutely nothing with a sharp edge—because they thought people would hurt themselves. So, when I went to use the washroom during academics, I used a crochet hook to rip the screen of the window open big enough for us to jump out of it. With the blanket still hung up, no one could see the rip.

We also weren't allowed to have window cranks because the guys' dorms were underneath us. Girls used to open their windows and talk to guys when they were outside or sneak out when no one was looking. There was one shared window crank we could check out from a staff member as long as we turned it back in when we were done. The night we planned to sneak out, we asked for the crank and then returned it 20 minutes later. We told them we had closed our window, and they believed us, the blanket still covering our evidence.

When we went to bed that night, it was cold and snowy outside. Usually, we left our coats and boots in the mudroom downstairs, but we made sure to hide them in our room earlier in the day. The walk would be long and cold.

We had also packed bags before we went to sleep so we'd be ready to go as soon as it was time. I set my alarm and slept with my watch next to my head, so I would hear it before anyone else. It went off around 3am. When it did, I woke Dani up.

"Are we still doing this?" I asked Dani.

"We got this far. Why not?" she replied.

Then we waited. Night checks were every 15 minutes, so we got back in bed and pretended to be asleep until the next check. As soon as the staff confirmed we were there and closed the door, we jumped out of bed to change our clothes. We got back in bed and waited for the next check, then jumped out again to get our stuff together. After

the third check, we jumped out of bed one last time, made pillow bodies in our beds, put our boots on, threw all our stuff out the window, and then jumped. This was the most rushed and stressful 15 minutes of the whole process.

I jumped first.

The impact was so strong that I felt my whole spine crunch from bottom to top. After pushing myself off the thin ledge, my legs gave out on me, and I fell right to my butt. The wind was knocked out of me, and both my legs throbbed. I lay on the ground for a minute to catch my breath while Dani looked down at me, worried.

“Is it that bad?” Dani asked.

“You’ll be fine. Just jump. We don’t have much time,” I lied. I didn’t jump out of that window for nothing.

When Dani jumped, she really hurt her legs, too. As she lay on the ground to catch her breath, I walked around collecting our stuff that had fallen out of our bags. Dani got up, and we decided to keep going even though we both had limps and I couldn’t bend over. Nothing was going to stop us.

Hobbling down the driveway, about a kilometer long, we kept our lights off in hopes no one would see us. All we had with us were the reading lights we were allowed to keep in our rooms. I clipped mine to my jacket to keep my hands free. It was snowing outside, and the wind hitting my face made it feel much colder than it actually was. We weren’t sure how far we were going to have to walk.

About three hours in, we started seeing cars pass us. We jumped up and down, waving, trying to get them to stop. Finally, a black Jeep stopped. The man driving said he worked in the military and was on his way to work. He agreed to give us a ride to Tim Horton’s, so we jumped in the car.

On the ride, we told him some story about being at a party at one of the farms but having no way to get home. In exchange, he gave us five dollars and a couple of cigarettes before dropping us off.

When we got to the coffee shop, we went straight to the bathroom. We changed into fresh clothes so we didn't have to go into Toronto in the sweatpants and big sweaters we wore for the walk. We put a little makeup on and then shared a coffee.

Our plan wasn't exactly clear at this point. Usually, going AWOL meant getting followed at every turn, so we weren't used to actually getting anywhere close to freedom. Toronto was a two-hour drive away, so we knew we needed a car.

We left the coffee shop and stood on the side of the highway at a stop light, hoping someone would pick us up. After twenty minutes, our odds weren't looking good, so we walked to the gas station across the street, where we saw an old man in a beat-up white truck who had stopped to get gas.

"Dani, we have to ask. This is probably the only chance we've got," I said.

"I don't know. Do you *really* want to get into that truck? There has to be someone else," Dani whispered.

"C'mon. It's almost eight, and you know they're gonna realize we are gone soon. They probably already do!" I replied.

Dani rolled her eyes as I grabbed her arm and pulled her toward the truck.

"Which way are you headed?" I shouted.

The man was about 50 years old and rough around the edges. He wore dirty jeans and an old flannel with a baseball cap. It wasn't the perfect option, but it was our only one.

"East," the man replied.

“Well, we’re headed to Toronto. Do you think we could tag along?” I asked.

“Sure, but I’m not going that far. I’ll drop you in Brampton. There’s a GO train... that’ll get you the rest of the way,” he replied.

He finished pumping his gas, and we moved to get into the truck. When I opened the passenger door, garbage fell to the ground. I looked at Dani.

“I know it’s gross, but this is what we are doing, okay?” I whispered.

Then the man opened the door to the back seat and pushed over garbage and bags taking up the whole row so that Dani had somewhere to sit. She got into the back. I got into the front. My legs came almost up to my chest because of the amount of garbage piled on the floor.

The ride was quiet and awkward. A comedian made crude jokes on the radio, mostly about sex and women. The man smoked the whole way, taking only a few puffs from each cigarette before throwing it out the window. I wanted to ask for one so badly, even the used ones, but he was already doing us a favor, and I couldn’t bring myself to ask.

When he finally dropped us off at the GO station, we thanked him and walked inside. We didn’t have any money, so we decided to take our chances and get on the train anyway. The plan worked. No one kicked us off the train.

BACK IN TORONTO

We had not expected to make it this far, so we created a new plan to go to my old high school and wait outside until the end of the day. Then I could find my friends and go with them, and Dani could call her boyfriend to pick her up.

After waiting for an hour, the bell finally rang for lunch. I was so excited to see my friends that I ran to the entrance as soon as I heard it. Dani followed. When I finally found someone who knew some of my friends, I asked to use his phone. I called my friend Ben, and he ran out to see me. Dani called her boyfriend, and he came to pick her up.

Dani's boyfriend looked about twice her age (because he was). I felt bad about her leaving with him, but I really wanted to spend time with my friends. They drove off, and I left with my friends to go to our usual spot. I wasn't planning on doing any drugs or smoking weed during this AWOL; I just wanted a break from rehab.

The place we used to smoke in was a ravine close to school. It was hidden and protected us from the sun on warm days and the wind on cold days. Everyone started smoking as soon as we got there—that's what we always did. At first, I tried not to, and then I didn't care anymore. One of my friends passed me a joint, and I took a few hits. I hadn't smoked in three or four months, so it hit me pretty hard. I took a few more hits, and then I started feeling anxious. I've always had a strong conscience, but it had faded from drug use. I knew I was doing something I wasn't supposed to be doing.

It was cold out, so we went to my friend Ezra's house to keep smoking. We were in his room when all of a sudden I heard something downstairs. The door opened, and my mom stood there screaming and crying.

"Bryn! Where have you been all day? The police have been looking for you! We all have." Her voice was unsteady.

Immediately I was annoyed.

"MOM! Why are you even here? You know I'm not going back."

We argued for some time about whether or not I was going back to rehab. I was adamant that I was done with that place, that it was no

good for me, and I could figure things out for myself. Then all of a sudden, I found myself gathering what little stuff I had with me and walking right out of the room and down the stairs.

My friends followed after me, but my mom stayed behind. We ended up at one of our sesh spots for a while, but I was exhausted from being up all night. My friend Bryce said I could stay with him for the night, so we left.

I fell in and out of sleep throughout the night. Every time I woke up, I felt anxious and confused, not knowing where I was. At one point, I got up to go to the bathroom. When I got there, I looked at myself in the mirror and wanted to cry. I had huge black bags under my eyes and looked like a mess from the day I had just had. At that moment, I realized there wasn't anything for me in Toronto.

I had to go back. All in a moment, I was sad, lonely, defeated, frustrated, and mostly—broken. As much as I hated to admit it, I needed rehab.

My mom picked me up as soon as I called her. She was angry but relieved that I was safe and willing to go back to rehab. It took about two and half hours to make the drive. I fell asleep for most of it.

When we pulled into the long driveway to the school, my stomach dropped. All that work for nothing. I was back, and now I would be in trouble, and there was nothing I could do about either of those things. My therapist was waiting for me as soon as we walked into the lobby. I could tell she was disappointed, but it was late, so she said we would talk in the morning. I said goodbye to my mom and made my way up to the dorms.

Thankfully everyone was already asleep. I wasn't ready to be bombarded with questions and judgmental stares. Instead, everyone told me how proud of me they were for coming back at breakfast the next morning. It was hard to hear, but deep down, I knew they were right.

I really committed to the program after that AWOL attempt. I knew finishing was my only way out of the cycle I had been living in, and I wanted to be done. I wanted to live a normal life.

MOVING ON

It took me 18 months from the time I entered the woods until I transitioned out of school and was living at home full-time.

My therapist helped me do the real work I needed to do, not just move through the stages and graduate without seeing real inner-change. I worked around my childhood trauma and abuse, trying to gain control of flashbacks and triggers. I reflected on my behaviors and choices that led me to the place I was in. I looked deeper into family connections and the resentment I held toward my parents. I even got ahead in school, finishing grades 11 and 12 in eight months.

I was really proud of who I was when I left rehab. I felt strong, stable, and ready to take on whatever life had to throw at me, at least for the time being. But even still, something was missing. I felt like I was missing a piece of life and a piece of myself that would help me sustain these changes and give me hope while continuing to walk into the future. As it turns out, integrating back into normal life was a lot harder than planned.

TRYING TO FIGURE OUT LIFE

Before I could fully transition out of rehab, I had to get a job. The first job I got was at a place called The Starving Artist. It was a waffle house.

My time there didn't last long. I was quickly put on a rotation schedule: at home for a week or two, and then back at the center for a week or two. During a visit home, I ended up drinking at a party with some of my friends. This went against the rehab's policy to stay completely sober, so I had to stay at the school longer, making my commute to and from work practically impossible. The waffle place told me I wasn't able to "fill expectations" at work and let me go (in other words, they fired me).

In June, I graduated from the program, and I finally moved home full-time. I started looking for a job almost immediately because it was one of the conditions of me going home, and I thought staying busy would help me stay out of trouble. But after a few weeks of unsuccessfully handing out my resume, I grew increasingly frustrated.

NOT WHAT IT SEEMED

Around that time, I got a message from a guy on Instagram asking if I was interested in being a bottle girl or server at his restaurant downtown. He had blond hair and blue eyes and seemed about my age. We messaged back and forth, and somehow it came up that I was looking for a job. It didn't sound like the ideal job considering I had just gotten out of rehab, but drinking had never been my downfall... so I figured it was worth a try. He suggested we do an interview at a coffee shop, so we planned a time to meet that weekend at the Tim Horton's near my house.

The weekend came, and my mom left for Aurora with her boyfriend. I planned to meet the guy on Saturday afternoon.

It started raining around 2 or 3pm, and it didn't look like it would stop anytime soon. The guy texted me close to 4pm that he was stuck at work and would let me know when he could meet me. So, I waited.

Around 6pm, he texted to tell me that he was on his way to meet me. He apologized and offered to pick me up at my house because it was raining and starting to get dark. I knew I shouldn't get into a car with someone I didn't know, but I really didn't want to walk in the rain, so I agreed. Seeing his pictures and texting with him also made me feel more comfortable than I should have. I regretted everything about what was about to happen for a long time.

I texted the guy my address, and he told me he would pick me up in 20 minutes. When he got to my house, I looked out front and saw his car. I put my shoes on, held my coat over my head, and ran outside. I jumped into his car quickly and took the coat off my head. He was already driving. I looked over, expecting to see the blond mane and blue eyes from his Instagram profile, but instead, I saw a man in his 30s. He had a buzz cut and was balding. *This* guy was chubby and looked nothing like the person I expected.

I tried to remind myself we were going to a coffee shop where we would be in public—I could walk home any time. When we got to the main street in town, he turned the car in the opposite direction from where Tim Horton's was located. I was speechless. My body froze, and I didn't know what to do. When I finally told him he was going in the wrong direction, he said he had a better coffee shop in mind.

He started talking to me, told me his name (probably not his real one), and tried complimenting me. Everything he said made me feel sick.

That's when I started getting really anxious. I didn't know where he was taking me or if we were even going to a coffee shop. I was alone, and there was nothing I could do. We drove for about ten minutes while we talked about the "job," and he asked me questions.

The parking lot he pulled into was dark, and there was nothing around us. I didn't see a coffee shop anywhere, only an empty building with no lights on and no one inside.

"Why did we stop? There's nothing here," I said.

He turned his face toward mine, the look in his eyes sending chills down my spine. That's when he turned the car engine off and unclicked his seatbelt. Before I knew it, he had forced himself on top of me. I started crying and yelling as loud as I could, but there was no one around to hear me. When I tried unlocking the passenger door, it wouldn't open. I was trapped. He put my seat back and started kissing and touching me. I saw a flash on his phone and realized he was recording what he was doing.

Suddenly, I had a flashback to my childhood abuse. I couldn't see, hear, or feel anything that was happening to me in the car. Back then, I got flashbacks whenever I experienced anything sexual—even when it was consensual. But this was different. Being assaulted by someone so strong and aggressive made me feel even more

powerless than I had in the past. There was nothing I could do to stop him.

When the flashback ended, I remembered where I was, and I started crying again. My vision came back, and I tried as hard as I could to get him off of me. This made him even angrier, so he turned me around and held my head against the seat. The tears kept flowing.

BROKEN AND BRUISED

What happened to me in that car, *what was recorded*, I will never understand. I had been raped. My whole body hurt. At one point, he hit me so hard I felt like I couldn't breathe. Internally, I was suffocating.

After being shoved out of the passenger door to the ground, I grabbed my jacket that he had thrown on top of me and immediately searched for my phone. Thankfully it was still there, so I called an Uber to come get me and got picked up within a few minutes.

Sitting in the dark parking lot, alone, soaking wet in the rain and crying, I couldn't believe what had just happened.

Once I got home, I locked all of the doors and ran upstairs. Even alone, far from the guy who had just assaulted me, nowhere near Andi, I didn't feel safe. How could I? When I finally looked at myself in a mirror, I was covered in bruises. My body hurt, and I was exhausted, so I lay down and cried myself to sleep.

SUMMER

The summer before going to university started off much different from how it ended. At the beginning of the summer, I was sober. I had just finished my after-care program that followed rehab, so I was trying to be careful about my substance use. In no way did I want to go back to being the person I was before rehab, but after two years of restrictions, it felt good to have a little freedom. I thought I could keep it under control.

In the past, summer usually meant parties and getting drunk. Everyone was looking for a good time, and so was I. The first party I went to, I didn't drink. I went with two friends, and we left early.

Because the first party went so well, I thought I could handle going to more parties without getting wasted as most people did. My parents also randomly drug tested me, so I couldn't take any chances with that.

At the next party, I had a couple of drinks, thinking I would be fine because alcohol had never been my problem. Plus, I didn't really think drinking was an issue. Everyone drank, but not everyone did

hard drugs, so that was my line, “no drugs.” Once I started drinking, though, I gave in and ended up getting drunk, but I still didn’t do any drugs or smoke weed.

A FEW WEEKS later I went to a party with a few friends. I didn’t really want to go, but the party was in my neighborhood, and my mom was away for the weekend. We got ready at my house and walked to the party together. I didn’t know many people there, so I started drinking right away to calm my nerves. The more I drank, the chattier I got. I was having a good time until everything started getting fuzzy, and the room felt like it was spinning.

I was confused at first because I had only had two drinks. My drink looked fine—nothing smelled or tasted off, but with every passing minute, I felt more and more out of it.

At this point, I don’t fully remember what happened. Physically I was present, but mentally I blacked out. Later, I learned that people had seen a couple of guys putting pills in my mouth. Apparently, no one thought to stop them because I didn’t resist.

I remember wanting to go home because I couldn’t see straight and I felt so strange. My shoes were still on, and I didn’t bring a jacket, so I walked right out the front door, not even thinking about finding my friend to walk me home.

My house was within walking distance, and all I wanted was to be home. I have flashes of a guy holding me up as I walked to my house, but if you showed me pictures, I wouldn’t be able to recognize him. Those little flashes are about all I remember until I woke up the next day, naked in my mom’s bed.

When I opened my eyes, my clothes were thrown all around the room. I lay there confused, trying to remember the night before.

That's when I realized I'd been drugged. I didn't know who did it, I didn't know what they'd given me or how it had happened, but I knew I had been drugged.

I started moving around, and my body felt sore all over. When I finally had the strength to get up, I put pajamas over my bruised skin and walked through the house. No one was there, but the doors were all unlocked. Muddled memories from the night before ran through my mind. There was the guy who held me up on the way home, then someone on top of me—a face I could remember, but different from the person who walked me home.

Tears began to fall. I didn't understand what was going on. Why would someone do this? I was confused and angry.

I don't remember much of that day. I'm not sure what I did.

The next morning, I woke up at my dad's house. Everyone was angry with me because I had barged into a family dinner the night before, screaming and crying. Overwhelmed by embarrassment and shame, I didn't tell anyone what had happened. Instead, I was grounded for doing whatever drugs they thought I was on.

At some point, I looked at my phone and realized three days had passed. This meant I was blacked out for at least a day and a half before I ended up at my dad's house. Anything could have happened in those 36 hours. I was barely even coherent in the hours I remember after that. I know I was raped by at least one person, but there easily could have been more.

NUMBING AWAY THE PAIN

I kept what happened that night to myself for years. Mostly, I blamed myself. *I should have watched my drink. I shouldn't have gone to that party.*

While maybe both those things were true, *getting raped wasn't my fault*. Getting raped is not normal, even though I started rationalizing that it had to be. Since I was hiding all of my secrets, I figured everyone else must have been hiding similar secrets, too.

I was raped at least twice that summer. First at the “job interview” and then at that party. Coping with everything was starting to feel impossible. I had been trying really hard to do well when I left rehab, but it was too much now. I wanted to numb. I wanted to forget how much I was hurting, and drugs were the best way I knew how to do that.

Abbe was really good at numbing. I started spending more and more time with her because I felt safe and connected when I was with her. We could numb together. She didn't make me feel gross or used. I could tell her anything and didn't have to hold back. I knew it was hard when we talked sometimes because my experiences brought up her own traumas, but she was always there when I needed her.

We started smoking weed together every day, but that wasn't so abnormal back then. Everyone smoked. When that wasn't enough, we drank or did harder drugs. Xanax, cocaine, Oxy, perks, or whatever we could get our hands on. It was summer, a time to be care-free, and I told myself I would get it together before university. Of course, that was easier said than done.

BEGINNING OF THE END

At the end of summer, when I started at Ryerson University studying business management, my goal was to stick to just weed on weekdays so I could still study and function at school. Getting high was my norm. I felt off when I *wasn't* high. Taking business courses when I was high probably wasn't the best idea, though.

I kept my grades up, skipping class unless I absolutely needed to be there. Since I was still living with my parents, I spent a lot of time at

Abbe's when I didn't go to class. Her apartment was down the street from the school, which made coming and going easy.

When I did go to class, I usually shopped online, played on my phone, or slept. That's why I stopped going. If I could complete grades 11 and 12 successfully through independent learning, then I knew I could do university on my own, too.

Layla is the best thing I got out of university. We met outside of class while I was smoking a cigarette, and we've been best friends ever since. I didn't really make any other friends that year.

At the end of my first year, I applied to work for a company called Student Works Painting (SWP). Each year, they chose to train five students from each university to run their own home painting business (we painted the interior and exterior of homes). SWP helped with the financial side of things and also covered you under their insurance policies. I thought doing this would look good on my resume and give me the upper hand in my program.

From January to May, they trained me on marketing, sales, and planning our work for the summer. We were our own boss, which also meant we didn't get paid until production started. I was excited, though. I was working hard and smoking less. Finally, I was excited about something and thought it would help keep me on track. In May, we started work on the homes we had booked during the school year.

All my plans, however, came crashing to an abrupt halt. A few days into production, after five months of planning and preparation, something happened that shook my world.

My sister, Abbe, was murdered. My safe place was gone. Everything went dark.

A B B E

My sister was my best friend. She was the only real constant in my life. We had phases where we didn't get along just like other sisters. Sometimes, the fighting was almost unbearable for my parents, but it never lasted. Abbe was only two years older than me, so there wasn't much of an age gap between us. When we were young, the difference felt like a lot, but as we got older, we realized how similar we were. In the end, we didn't really fight—we had each other's back and spent almost every day together. I had other friends, and so did she, but we were true best friends.

When it came to faith, we were in the same boat. Abbe and I both believed in Jesus, but we didn't live like it. We went to church with my dad on Sundays when we were little, but as teenagers we did not have any idea what it really meant to be a Christian.

Now that I think about it, we really didn't know anyone as broken as the two of us. Maybe that's why we got along so well. We understood the pain in each other that no one else could see. From the outside, I was pretty normal. In reality, I was falling apart.

By 18, I was in university, dressing like everyone else and hiding what I didn't want others to see. I was pretty good at it, too. But Abbe was different. She had a unique sense of style... she had a lot of tattoos (including one on her knuckles that said "Baby Girl"). She always had her nails done with extensions so long that it was difficult to do everyday tasks.

I looked up to her. She taught me how to dress, I got tattoos like her, and I willingly and without any hesitation stepped in and out of the life she lived.

I lived one life where my days were spent in Abbe's apartment while people came over to cook crack. Or we went to trap houses, clubs, bars, or other people's apartments to use. Some days with her, I don't even remember because we were so messed up.

And then, I lived a totally separate life where I went to university studying business management and kept my grades up. I lived at home at the time, so I was still around my family a lot, hiding my other life. Somehow, I managed to continue living both lives without anyone noticing.

Abbe liked living her underground lifestyle, one hidden in the shadows. The people we invited into our lives were the people society looked down on: the drug dealers, the drug users, people involved in bank fraud, prostitution, and gangs. I knew it wasn't right, but I thought it was fun. We all had one thing in common: We were all broken, and we wanted to numb our pain.

We couldn't stand being conscious of the reality of our lives, or life in general, and we would do whatever we could to slip into our unconscious, doing the bare minimum to survive. Without any real value system in place, the rules of society felt pointless because we couldn't even begin to see our futures in a positive light. Living a whole life with that kind of pain following us around was unimaginable, as was the hope of doing anything even remotely meaningful.

The worst part is that, at the time, I enjoyed it. Living this way seemed better than anything else I had experienced so far. I felt connected, I felt seen, and I didn't feel alone in the way I viewed the world.

ABBE'S PLACE

Abbe's apartment was a small bachelor (studio), usually messy and filled with whoever needed somewhere to be. It was a place where you could do and be what you wanted. There were always different people in and out of her place because relationships with my sister didn't usually last long. She had a temper that some found difficult to be around. I was used to it, and I knew how to handle her. Abbe wasn't the kind of person who ever backed down from an argument (or even a fight). She was strong-willed, and she made sure people knew it. She wouldn't hold back from getting physical if anyone crossed a line with her. Sometimes it was scary when she got angry. It was like she actually gained strength when she started to fight. She didn't workout or study how to fight, but she could beat-up a grown man. I saw her do it more than once.

Abbe often let people stay at her apartment when they needed a place to crash, even if they were running from the cops. Some of these people were Abbe's friends we reconnected with from middle school and high school. Those people brought their friends, and they seemed nice enough.

One of Abbe's friends from middle school started bringing his best friend with him. I'll call him Senior. I thought Senior was nice. He would help me clean Abbe's place, he brought drugs and alcohol for everyone... and I thought of him as a friend. Abbe let him stay there when he was hiding out or didn't know where to go. Eventually, they started sleeping together. I didn't think anything of it because that wasn't unusual for our lifestyle.

SENIOR

One night, Senior was over at Abbe's place with a few other people. We were all drinking and smoking and doing lines of coke. It was a typical night for us, and it seemed like everyone was having a good time.

Senior kept calling someone and getting calls. I couldn't really hear what they were saying, but I could tell he was trying to make plans with someone. After about a half-hour, Senior abruptly said he had to go deal with something. Then, he looked at me and asked me to go with him because it was "less bait" if a girl was with him. He told me he just needed to talk to a few of his friends.

Nothing he said worried me, so I went with him. I followed him down the elevator and through a hallway to the side door of the building. In the hallway, before we went outside, he took a gun out of the waistband of his pants and started to wipe it down. Immediately, I started getting an anxious feeling in my stomach.

"Why do you need your gun? I thought we were just going to talk to your friends," I said.

He looked at me ominously. "They might not be friends anymore in a few minutes."

His "friends" turned the corner, and I could see there were two guys and a girl. Senior signaled a greeting and said hello in a way that didn't seem very friendly to me. I only said hi to the girl because everything about the situation felt tense.

Senior led everyone to the door at the back of the building, right beside the parking lot. It looked like a room where people might put their recycling, but there was also a stairwell that led to a dead end. He told them to go down the stairs, and I followed behind them. He made the two guys line up against the wall, and the girl stood with

me behind Senior. I can't really remember what they were talking about now, but Senior was getting angrier and angrier. It was a situation that was clearly going to end badly, so I stepped in.

"Let's just go back upstairs," I said, feeling the urgency of the situation.

I kept pulling at him, trying to get him back up the stairs. He shook me off saying, "Don't worry. I know what I'm doing. I'm good."

I didn't believe him, so I continued insisting that we go back upstairs. Thankfully, he agreed and let the two guys move from against the wall as we parted ways.

We watched them leave the building and get into a cab. Senior told me that he wasn't getting out of control and that everything was fine. I told him he was right just so we could go back upstairs with everyone. He had scared me. But I tried to put the event out of mind, and I didn't tell Abbe. I knew that it would set him off if I told her he had gotten out of control. People on drugs can be really unpredictable, and I had the picture of that gun in my mind. I think I was able to disregard the event because that kind of behavior came with the lifestyle I was living. That's why I didn't tell anyone else either... because it seemed like it didn't matter.

Soon after that strange night, we found out Senior had a girlfriend. I'll call her Girlfriend.

That was kind of sad to me because Abbe was sleeping with Senior. I didn't respect it, but I still thought nothing of it. Girlfriend found out about Abbe, though, and started calling Abbe and threatening her. As I said before, Abbe wasn't scared of a fight, especially with a girl.

After a few weeks of Girlfriend harassing my sister, Abbe had had enough. She told Girlfriend to come to her address and meet her

outside. When she showed up, Abbe went outside with a few of her friends (I wasn't there). Abbe and Girlfriend had a full-on fistfight. One of Abbe's friends stepped in and grabbed a metal pole lying on the ground and hit Girlfriend in the face with it. After that, Senior took out his gun and started shooting (before that, the guys had just been on the sidelines watching the fight). Abbe and her two friends ran back inside the apartment building, and thankfully, no one got seriously hurt. By the time Abbe and her friends were back inside the apartment, Senior was still trying to shoot up to Abbe's balcony from the ground. He left bullet holes in her porch cover.

MY SISTER

The next day, May 23, 2018, I went over to see Abbe and pick up my mom's dog (Abbe had been dog-sitting for a few days). When I got to her building, there were police everywhere. I parked my car in the parking lot, and when I stepped out, I was questioned by the police. I told them I was just picking up my dog, and they let me continue inside. As I got into the building and went upstairs, my mind started racing. I just knew that this had something to do with my sister, but I had no clue what had happened. When I got to her apartment, the police were leaving, so I waited until they got on the elevator to knock on her door.

As I opened the door, someone pulled me inside. Abbe was across the room with two of her friends. I asked what happened, and they told me briefly about the night before—the fight and Senior shooting the place up. I started getting really anxious, and I didn't want to get caught up in such a big mess. I had never been in trouble with the police, and I didn't want to start now. I grabbed my mom's dog and all of his stuff and was about to head out when I suddenly stopped to hug my sister.

"I love you so much," I said, looking deep into her eyes. "Please stay safe."

She smiled back at me and said, "You know I always do."

I didn't know it at the time, but those would be the last words I ever said to my sister.

The next day I called Abbe to let her know I wanted to stop by for a few minutes, but she didn't answer. One of her friends did. He was talking really fast, and when I said I was on my way there, he said, "Don't come here, go to the hospital, Bryn! Abbe just got stabbed!"

My heart dropped, and then I thought of all the other people we knew that had gotten stabbed and survived.

When I got to the hospital, I found my parents in tears. They looked shocked. My mom said, "She's gone."

I felt like I couldn't breathe. My legs gave out, and I collapsed on the floor, screaming. I couldn't believe that she was gone. My best friend, my only sibling.

When the doctors came in, I asked to see Abbe. They told me I couldn't because they didn't trust that I wouldn't touch her. One of them said callously, "She is not your sister anymore. She is evidence in a murder investigation."

The tears wouldn't stop falling, but somehow I managed to compose myself enough to promise them I wouldn't touch her, that I just wanted to see her one last time. They ended up changing their minds, and they brought my mom, dad, and me into a room where Abbe's body was lying on a stretcher. She was so pale, almost gray with dark circles under her eyes, and her face and neck were covered with blood. Her hair was matted and tangled. This wasn't the sister I remembered; she looked beaten and broken, her face and body lifeless.

That image still plays in my mind every so often. It was the worst day of my life... the day my sister Abbe was murdered.

THE AFTERMATH

Not long after viewing Abbe's body, a police officer informed me that I was requested to go to the police station for questioning. I was shaking so badly I couldn't drive. Some friends stopped by the hospital to bring me a pack of cigarettes. Smoking weed wasn't an option because cops were everywhere. In the end, one of the police officers drove me to the station in my car.

That dull, lifeless body lying on the cot would be the last time I saw Abbe. It didn't make sense to me. I could still hear her laugh and feel her hugging me and saying, "You know I always am [safe]." How could Abbe be dead? (By now, I had learned that Senior and Girlfriend, the two people involved in Abbe's murder, had been found, questioned, and jailed the night the murder happened.)

When I got to the police station, they put me into a room for questioning. Someone had set up a video recorder, and an officer told me to try my best to answer the questions and let them know when I needed a break. The room was cold with white cement walls, my chair was in the corner, and the two officers sat together across from me.

I tried to give them any information I had, but it was hard. This wasn't necessarily because of what had happened, though that was a factor. Rather, it was because I had Abbe's voice in my head that kept saying, "We don't rat. We don't go to the police... We handle our problems ourselves."

At the same time, I heard my own voice encouraging me that this was different because it involved family.

After an hour of questioning, they said I was free to leave, except I didn't know where to go. I didn't want to go home... I didn't want to be with my family. Instead, I went back to a house that two of my friends were renting for the summer. When I got there, everyone hugged me and said they were sorry before the room grew painfully quiet. I broke the silence by saying, "Let's get f**ked up."

We started to smoke weed, drink, and do lines of coke. I would have done anything to slip out of that moment and escape what I was feeling. I don't really remember that night, which was the point. If there was anything I knew how to do, it was getting out of myself and into an unconscious state.

The next day I went and got a tattoo for my sister. At the time, it seemed like the best thing I could do to remember her. I wanted a permanent symbol of what she meant to me. She had one of Picasso's sketches on the inside of her right forearm made of two lines intertwining to create two abstract faces. I had always loved it. I added the words "Baby Girl" underneath one of the lines... the same words from Abbe's knuckles.

I still didn't feel okay, though. It didn't matter where I went or what I did. I was anxious and on the brink of tears. I constantly felt like I had to leave, do something, or go somewhere. I was running from something, but I didn't know what.

MILO'S

In an effort to keep running, I wound up at Milo's place, a friend of Abbe's.

At the time, I didn't really think much about it, but he was the person that introduced Senior into our lives. Like the rest of our friends, he was also hurt and broken.

Milo was a drug dealer, the type of person who pretended he lived this way because he came from "nothing." In reality, he lived in a nice condo with his dad, a very successful lawyer. The main area of the condo looked really new and modern. It had big floor-to-ceiling windows that led out to a balcony overlooking an upscale area of Toronto. He had a supply of drugs that kept coming: Xanax, cocaine, lean, and probably others I can't remember. When I was there, I felt taken care of, maybe not in the most healthy way, but it worked for me at the time.

I stayed at Milo's for less than a week, but it was one of the darkest, scariest weeks of my life. Every time I felt anxious or any other emotion, he gave me Xanax (or at least a part of one). I was doing lines of coke all day with Milo. I didn't have to pay, so I didn't care how much I did. A few times in the morning before starting our day, he would sit in bed and smoke cigarettes with a bit of coke on the end. I had never done anything like that before; I wouldn't have even known how. It made me wired. My eyes would dart around the room, not being able to focus on one thing for too long. Everything sounded and felt like it was going too fast. That made me even more anxious, so I would pop another Xanax to calm my mind.

Over the course of that week, some of our old friends stopped by to smoke or do drugs with us. When they were there, I felt more relaxed and connected to my sister. I could see her face smiling and laughing with us. The memories playing in my head made me feel complete and whole again.

ABBE'S FUNERAL

On the day of Abbe's funeral, I was high on lean and Xanax. Her funeral was at the church my dad attended on Sundays. It didn't really look like a church, though—just a big dark building with rows of chairs. I sat in the front row with two of my sister's friends on either side of me.

I was supposed to speak at the service, but I couldn't bring myself to write anything in the days leading up to her funeral. I told this to my parents in the car, so my mom tried to help me put something together. It ended up being a terrible speech that really didn't speak at all to how important my sister was to me or how much her presence in my life had kept me alive.

If I had the chance to redo it, this is what I would have said.

Abbe was not just my sister. She was my best friend. Of course, like most siblings, we had our moments when we would fight or get mad at each other, but we were always there for each other at the end of the day.

Throughout my childhood, my sister was my protector, even though she didn't need to be, and it often led to her getting the brunt of the abuse we faced. Even though there was only a two-year age difference between us, she acted as a parental figure to me when we were young. When the world felt like it was all bad, and that is how it would be forever, we were each other's light in the darkness. It is hard to put into words how thankful I am for having such a strong and brave big sister.

Abbe was my rock. I knew that I would never have to endure anything alone because she had my back no matter what. Sure, she struggled and had her ups and downs, but her love and support for me were unwavering through it all. When I was scared at night, I would climb into her bed. In some cases, I would sleep under her bed or in her closet. Having her close to me always made me feel safe. I just hope that I was the same pillar of strength to her that she was to me.

I will never forget her laugh or the feeling of her hugs that felt like no one else's. It's hard to picture my life without her. Sometimes I can't. She is still in my future plans and dreams; I still close my eyes and picture our kids running around together. She was struggling probably the most she had over the last few months. The pain from the past never got healed or sorted out for her, and she lived her life trying to survive day-to-day. I miss her so much it hurts, but I know she's in a better place where she is at peace and no longer has to deal with worldly hurts.

I will live my life every day for you, Abbe. There is not a day that goes by where you don't cross my mind. I look forward to the day we are reunited in eternity to worship Jesus together and all the pain and tears will be wiped away. I love you so much.

MY DAD

There were a few hundred people at my sister's funeral, some close friends and some I hadn't seen in years. It was a beautiful service, and my dad did most of the talking. He stood up on that stage with strength and love pouring out of him. People that attended were in awe of how he kept himself together through the service. God was his strength. He knew that Abbe was in heaven, and that gave him peace. (Abbe knew the truth of who Jesus was, but had not received the healing she needed for her lifestyle to reflect that.) He was having spiritual encounters that solidified the truth and realness of heaven and the grace of God.

In all honesty, I felt a lot of resentment because of his peace. I felt like his strength and faith in God was a sign that he just didn't care all that much and that he wasn't hurting like the rest of us. That wasn't true at all. The fact was, Jesus got him through the hardest moment in his life with his head up, and I didn't understand because I didn't have the same relationship with God.

After the service ended, friends and family went back to my dad's house to have lunch and spend time together. I was able to eat a few pieces of pizza without feeling like I was going to throw up. That was the most I had been able to eat all week. I rolled some joints in the backyard and went for a walk with a few people to smoke because my dad didn't let me smoke weed on his property.

I started wondering what I would do next when I glanced back into my dad's house. It was a beautiful, open concept home with floor-to-ceiling glass windows and doors at the back so you could see all the way through the front windows and onto the street. Parked outside, I saw an ambulance and a police car. At first, I wondered what had happened. And then somehow, I just knew that they were for me.

Panic began to fill my body.

I knew that people were worried about me, and rightfully so. I hadn't been doing well since my sister was murdered, and I was coping in the worst ways possible. But that one day, the day of Abbe's funeral, I felt like I was doing a little better. I went inside and started yelling at my parents. At the time, I didn't understand why they would do this to me. The paramedics came in and said they just needed to take my vitals. I asked if that was all they wanted. They confirmed, and I believed them. They gave me a simple checkup—all my vitals were fine. The police said they had to take me to The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), a hospital located in Toronto. They told me I could bring a friend, so I brought one of my best friends, Jonas, with me in the back of the cop car. Milo was angry that I hadn't asked him to come and ended up storming down the street yelling.

I was so mad at my parents. I don't remember what I said, but I know it wasn't nice. My dad took my phone away because he didn't want me to contact anyone I had been doing drugs with, especially Milo. Then my dad tried to follow me and Jonas to CAMH and

come inside with us. I kept screaming at him to get away from me and leave me alone, so he did.

Jonas and I went into CAMH and waited a few hours before getting seen.

We sat in a locked room full of mentally ill men and women. Staff watched us through a window of an adjoining room. One guy was sitting in the corner talking to himself. Another was lying across chairs in and out of consciousness. One kept throwing up and shaking.

I was convinced I did not belong there and would not stay any longer than I had to. We were not allowed to leave at any point because they were waiting to evaluate whether or not I was suicidal. It was true, I really did want to die, and I had been saying that over the past week; my heart was broken. But I had also been saying that I would never do anything to kill myself. I thought the Bible said that you wouldn't go to heaven if you killed yourself. (But I had never opened the Bible and had no idea it didn't actually say that. I had just heard someone say that.) I needed to be able to see my sister again, and I wasn't going to jeopardize my eternity in heaven by killing myself. That thought really is what kept me alive after Abbe's death.

I can be a pretty manipulative person when I want to be, so when we did see the doctor, I convinced them to let me go in a matter of minutes. In the end, Jonas's mom, Honour, drove us back to Jonas's apartment. She helped me calm down and made me feel safe. Jonas has been such a faithful friend through the good times and the bad. Everyone in my life loved him and still does. I think it gave my parents some relief to know that I was with him that night. I was relieved to be there as well. Jonas was a safe and healthy friend; he was one of the few friends that I had at that time that really cared about my well-being. When we got to his apartment, Jonas and I smoked a little weed, and then I passed out and slept for a long time.

ON MY LAST day at Milo's, we sat in his room smoking cigarettes. He started to cry, so I put my hand on his back to comfort him. My head sank as I started thinking about my sister and said, "We all miss her... it's going to be okay."

When I looked back up at him, he was still crying. Then he said something I couldn't believe. He looked at me, and in between sobs, he replied, "No, it's not that. My best friend is going to be in jail forever." Milo was, of course, referring to Senior.

At that moment, my stomach twisted into a hundred little knots. The room started spinning, and I thought I was going to throw up. I got up and screamed at him, "YA AND RIGHTFULLY SO." I finished my cigarette on the balcony, and when I came in, Milo was still crying. That's when I realized I had to go.

It hit me that Milo was pretty messed up. In fact, he had a twisted sense of morality. He had known my sister since the seventh grade. He had met Senior less than a year ago. How could Senior being in jail for murder possibly compare to losing Abbe? I felt dumb and betrayed. I had been played.

PICKING UP THE PIECES

I tried to keep my painting business open for about a week after Abbe's funeral, but then I had to stop. I felt like a failure, but my sister's death was the hardest thing I had ever gone through, and I could barely function. I already had about thirty thousand dollars' worth of sales, so I gave the jobs away to other people operating their own businesses with Student Works Painting.

Usually, when you stop halfway through the SWP program, you have to pay a fine of close to \$3,000. This money goes toward the training and time they put into helping you start your business. I didn't receive a notice to pay the fine. I assumed because of my circumstance I was released from the payment.

Two years later, I found out my district manager had paid my fine because he was more worried about me being okay than haggling me for money. He knew I had spent everything I had getting my business off the ground. Not many people do things out of the goodness of their hearts without needing validation or praise. For that, I admire him.

After leaving the program, I went to stay with a few of my closest friends, renting a house in Toronto. I liked being there because all we really did was get high, and that was all I wanted to do. We did a different drug every night. Sometimes we did coke, sometimes we took Oxy, sometimes Xanax.

We were a sad sight to see. Eventually, two of the guys got to a point where everything we did wasn't enough, and that's when they started doing heroin. No one knew until they were addicted. That was a lot harder for them to hide. Thankfully, I never got addicted.

One night I was having a really hard time; no matter what I did, I still felt the same: I wanted to die. My sister was gone, and nothing was going to change that. So, I went upstairs, where one of my friends was getting ready to shoot up.

"Why do you do that?" I asked, looking at the heroin.

There was a pause. "It's literally the best thing I have ever felt. It's amazing."

I sat quietly for a few seconds, thinking about what he had just told me.

Am I really going to do this? I was desperate and eager to escape the reality I was living in. "Okay, I want to try it. Show me how."

I knew I didn't want to shoot up because that had always sounded scary to me and honestly a little gross. Somehow that made me feel like I was too far gone, and I didn't want to admit that. So instead, I ended up smoking it.

I was nervous as he showed me how to inhale the smoke using a straw from the tinfoil resting in his hand. Immediately after breathing in the line of smoke rising up, everything began to spin. My stomach felt queasy, so I ran to the bathroom and threw up a few times. When I went back into the room, I told him I would never do

that again. He said that was fine and continued to shoot up, slumping over and becoming unresponsive as soon as he did.

Thankfully I never tried it again. I've heard how easy it is to get hooked, but I'm lucky that's not my story.

After this experience, I stayed home a lot more often. My parents were worried and wanted to keep an eye on me. I still went over to see my friends almost every day but spent time at home, too.

A little later that summer, my two guy friends tried getting off of heroin. They ended up really sick from the withdrawals (one was prescribed medication from a doctor, the other went cold turkey). My friend and I went over to help them at one point; I will never forget the smell of vomit inside their house.

Their battle for sobriety was hit or miss for a while. At one point, one of the guys started getting really anxious because his family was coming to visit him. I knew if his family saw him like this, they would take him back home, and even though that would have been a good thing, I couldn't handle that emotionally. My friends had been a huge support to me that summer, and I couldn't lose any of them.

His room was a mess, and there were needles everywhere—all in his closet, his drawers, under his bed. I knew he wasn't going to do anything about it, so I spent all day cleaning and doing his laundry to make sure there were no drugs or paraphernalia anywhere in sight. It took hours. I also made sure he didn't do any heroin that day because I knew his mom would know if he did.

I stayed as late as I could until about 4am. When I left, he was already asleep, so I thought everything would be fine. He must have woken up at some point because when his mom got there, they couldn't wake him up. He was in bed with a needle beside him, passed out. She packed up all his stuff that day and brought him home.

It was a good thing. The environment he was in was toxic, and he was such a good guy. He was full of life, the kind of guy that could make you laugh at anything or make you smile even when you were crying.

I was really sad when he left. I think mostly because, whether he knew it or not, he was one of the only people who stayed close to me after my sister was murdered. He helped me escape reality, and not just because of the drugs. Even when he was using, he was a good friend, and I still love and care about him a lot.

He got a lot better when he went home. It wasn't normal for him to be on stuff like that. I think we all got a little lost that summer. He's doing really well now. We are still close friends. He lives close to his family who support him and won't let him go down that path again. He's back to his normal self. I feel so blessed that we were both able to come out of all that and still be in each other's lives.

My other friend wasn't so lucky and ended up dying of an overdose in 2021. I think about him all the time and it breaks my heart that he didn't get the chance to experience what life is actually supposed to be like. He is still so loved and missed.

ANOTHER DISTRACTION

My parents wanted me to do something with my time to keep me occupied, so I started working for someone from SWP running his own business. Layla and I made up a painting crew and worked every day together. We painted the inside and outside of houses. The work was boring, but I loved being able to work with my one of my best friends.

The guy we worked for said that we were his fastest crew. This really surprised Layla and me because almost every half-hour, we took a smoke break outside. Sometimes it was just a cigarette, but often we hit bowls in my car on our self-given lunch breaks.

We were always high when we worked. Some days my dealer dropped coke off to us when we called. The days we did coke, we worked the fastest. Our weekends were crazy, and we never really stopped doing drugs throughout the day, but I know I would have gotten into more trouble if I hadn't been working.

AN ANXIOUS START

After the summer, I went back to Ryerson University to continue my studies in the business management program. It was hard going back to school. That summer had been the hardest and worst season of my entire life.

At the beginning of my second year in university, I started getting really bad social anxiety. I have always struggled with anxiety stemming from post-traumatic stress disorder after being sexually abused, but never like this. All of a sudden, I didn't want to leave my apartment, I didn't feel comfortable in large groups, and I didn't want to be in public where there would be other people. That made school really difficult. The anxiety made me sick. Literally, I would throw up if I pushed myself too hard.

Before classes started, I needed to buy textbooks. I pushed off going to the campus bookstore because even the idea of it made me sick. The store would be packed, and the lines would be long. But I didn't have a choice. I planned on going with a guy I was dating at the time, so I wouldn't have to go alone. We found all our textbooks and then got in line. With at least 30 people in front of us and only two cashiers, I knew it was going to be a while.

As we stood in line holding our books, I started to sweat. I could feel myself getting hotter and hotter. My vision blurred, and I felt light-headed. I knew I was going to throw up. Quickly, I handed my books and credit card over to my boyfriend, telling him to buy them if I

couldn't come back. I ran out the door and went to the side of the bookstore.

The bookstore was in the middle of campus, so even being on the side of the building meant I was surrounded by people. I leaned against the wall with my hands on my knees, trying to catch my breath. I couldn't. There were still too many people around, so I closed my eyes, hoping to wish them away. When that didn't work, I found a curb and sat down and put my head between my legs. My whole body shook as I took in deep breaths. I needed to throw up but kept it down because I didn't want to vomit in front of everyone—that almost felt worse. Finally, my boyfriend came outside, and I eventually felt steady enough to walk back to his place.

Some days I felt anxious even before I left for class. On those days, I stayed home. Other days I would try to push through and go anyway. Usually, I only lasted fifteen minutes or so before rushing to the bathroom to throw up. After walking back to my seat, I would pack up my stuff and go home. This happened so frequently that eventually, it felt like there was no use in trying. I know part of this came from the trauma of the summer, but looking back, I know it also came from my drug use.

Between my anxiety and the constant drugs, I had lost about one-third of my body weight. I went from a healthy 135 pounds to a gaunt 90. Not only did I look sick, but I felt it. None of my clothes fit anymore, and I was embarrassed to go anywhere or see anyone because of how skinny I was. I didn't go to parties or clubs, I skipped class, and I avoided guys because I thought they would think I looked gross, too.

Just before the first semester of my second year ended, I dropped out. My grades were fine, but my mental health was declining quickly. It was hard for my friends to be around me because I was so depressed and negative. They were genuinely concerned about me.

Thinking back, I must have sucked the life out of everything. Nothing made me happy. The only time I felt truly relaxed or like I had something to live for was when I did drugs. Nothing about my life was working, and I couldn't function properly in school. I ended up getting a compassion refund from Ryerson, which reimbursed the tuition I had already paid that year.

My drug use, anxiety, and depression also led me to act out a lot. The smallest things triggered me, even though I had always been the calm one growing up. Abbe and I fought a lot when we were younger, but I could always control myself. I knew that getting angry and lashing out would only fuel the situation. I had to grow up fast, so for much of my life, people told me I was mature beyond my years. When Abbe died, it was like I lost some of those years. My emotional regulation was like that of a young child. I screamed, cried, punched walls, and pulled my hair. It was embarrassing, but in the moment, anything going wrong or making me feel any kind of way made it feel like the whole world was caving in on me.

Every day, I woke up screaming and crying because I was still alive. I hated doing life without my sister; it felt too hard. Sleeping was the only time I wasn't aware of being alive, so I tried to sleep as much as possible. I went to bed in the middle of the night and slept until 4 or 5pm every day. It didn't matter how much I slept because I still woke up and had to trudge through the next day. I hated waking up and wondered how many more times I would have to until I died. Sometimes, I even wished that I would get murdered, too. The idea of it actually excited me.

DOWNHILL FROM HERE

After leaving Ryerson, I tried to figure out my next step. I had been studying business because I wanted to go into nonprofit work. My dad founded a charity called *Bee Me Kidz*, which I planned on taking over one day. Since I couldn't continue studying business, I started looking at the programs offered by George Brown College (GBC). I found an Early Childhood Education program I applied for and was accepted.

This was also around the same time I moved out on my own. I was supposed to move out six months before, but when Abbe died, I went downhill so quickly that my parents wouldn't let me.

It took a while for me to find an apartment. Toronto is packed, and at the time, most buildings had both waitlists *and* insanely high rent. My only goal was to find a place within my budget that also made me happy. My parents were the ones who made the process more difficult, understandably. After Abbe's murder, my parents became extra aware of safety. They turned down most places in my budget because of location or concerns with the building's age or security.

Finally, my dad found an apartment near his office that he felt good about. After signing the papers, I waited a month to move in.

I was so excited about finally finding a place that I started making art to put all around my apartment. I looked for furniture and got everything I would need to settle in. Part of the deal for me to move out was that I couldn't do hard drugs. I was stubborn, though, and really good at hiding things. On the outside, I looked like I had a lot more together than I did. That's how I convinced my parents to let me move out in the first place. I knew if I was going to do hard drugs, I would have to be a lot more careful.

ONE OF MY friends from rehab, Chloe, had started living at my mom's house a few months before I moved out. Her family lived far away, and it was easier for her to stay with us than to bus hours to school every day. Chloe was incredibly sweet and one of the few people I kept in my life after rehab.

When Chloe first moved in, she was doing really well; she only smoked weed and was a really good friend. Not long after, my mom went up to the mountains with her boyfriend for the weekend, which meant we had the house to ourselves. That's when Chloe, Layla, and I started planning *our* weekend. All we knew was that we wanted to party.

I called my friend JP and asked what he was doing. JP was one of Abbe's friends with whom I kept in touch. We invited him and his friend Trevor over to get drunk with us later that night. I had seen Trevor on his Instagram before, but I never met him in person. I thought he was cute and asked JP about him. He told me not to get involved, but I didn't listen.

The night started out simply enough with music and drinking. Then they pulled out Xanax and coke. I wasn't supposed to be doing it, but

no one was home to catch me, so I joined in. Chloe joined in, too. I'm not sure if she had done any hard drugs since rehab, but she did that night. I remember it being really fun, especially when Trevor and I talked, just the two of us. Trevor was a drug dealer, but I found out later he was not a very good one because he did most of the drugs he had to sell.

What was supposed to be one night turned into a whole weekend. We did coke, Xanax, and smoked weed every day, so I don't remember much of it. I do remember Trevor and me getting closer as the weekend went on. On the second day, he told me that he had feelings for me. He said he knew it was fast, but he didn't feel like this often. I was skeptical, I didn't even know him, but it felt good to be wanted.

Every time I looked at myself, I was disgusted. The ribs in my chest poked out. I couldn't fit into any of my jeans or tight pants because my legs were too skinny. My face was sunken in. I truly hated myself and couldn't imagine how anyone else would love me. I had always been attracted to drug dealers—this part wasn't surprising. For some reason, they made me feel safe.

After that weekend, everyone left. My program at GBC started on Monday, so I had to get my life back together. Everyone else spent one more night partying at someone else's house and then went back home. Chloe went with them, but when she came back, she wasn't okay.

Chloe came home really messed up and then slept all day. She had bought Xanax off of Trevor, and when she woke up, she couldn't stop taking them. Her mom came to pick her up the next day to bring her home. Even though we had met in rehab, I didn't see myself as an addict back then. So when we planned the party, relapse had never entered my mind.

TREVOR

A few weeks later, I moved into my apartment. I was still seeing Trevor every few days since that first weekend we spent together. If we didn't see each other, we texted or FaceTimed. Layla helped me unpack all my stuff. There wasn't much to unpack, but also not much space to put it in. The apartment was small and also pretty empty because I was just getting settled, but I was happy.

The first weekend at my new apartment was fun. Trevor came and ended up staying over. We hung out with his friends, a drug dealer and his girlfriend. This also meant that we got really trashed. This was how Trevor spent nearly every day of his life.

A week later, Trevor showed up at my door with a hockey bag full of his stuff. I knew that he was coming over and would bring some stuff to stay but didn't realize he would bring everything he owned. When I asked why he had all his stuff with him, he told me he had gotten into a fight with his parents and needed to stay with me for a while. I shouldn't have let him, but I was lonely living by myself. So I let him in, and he started unpacking.

As soon as he started living with me, things started to change. Since he was a drug dealer, there was always coke on the table. He was either in the middle of scaling it, bagging it, or doing it himself. He also sold Xanax. There was a lot of that around because he made a lot of money on them; they also fed his addiction.

CRASH COURSE

Everything after that just got worse. One time one of Trevor's friends was coming over to hang out, but he called first to see if he could buy some coke. Trevor said yes and then started to scale it out in front of me. Then he asked me for something to cut it with. I was

shocked that he wanted to cheat one of his best friends just to make a little extra cash. But that's exactly what Trevor did.

When I was at school, I let Trevor use my car. I always made sure he hadn't done any drugs before he took my car out; I didn't want him driving my car around trashed because I knew he would wreck it, and I didn't have the money to fix it. He would tell me he only drove the car sober, but I soon learned he was lying. There wasn't a single day that went by that he didn't do coke or Xanax. When I did it with him, he made me feel bad about it and told me I was the one with the problem.

One day, Trevor had booked an appointment to get a tattoo, so I went with him. I was already high on Xanax, so I couldn't drive. Trevor told me he hadn't done any drugs that day, so he was fine to drive. I believed him.

The appointment was about thirty minutes away. Right as we turned into the tattoo shop's parking lot, Trevor smashed into another car—one that had the right of way. The shock of what happened was made worse by my fear of not being able to afford to fix the car. When I got out of the car, I started screaming at Trevor and the other driver. The car was drivable, but a tow truck driver who saw the crash told us we had to get it towed. I didn't know I had a choice in the matter, so I agreed.

On the way to report the crash, we talked with the tow truck driver. He said that if Trevor was driving my car, then we were screwed, and my insurance wouldn't cover the repairs. "People lie on police reports all the time. It's not that big a deal," he assured us. Thinking no one would know, much less care, when we wrote our reports, we both said that I was the one driving.

I went to hand my report in to the policeman at the desk, and then as I turned to walk away, he asked me, "You know it's a criminal offense to lie on a police report, right?"

I looked at him blankly. I didn't know that at the time, but I wasn't going to tell him, so I said, "I know."

I called my dad that night and told him what had happened. I told him the whole truth. About the accident, the police report, everything. He called the collision report center right away and told them what had happened. They said they might go easier on us if we went in the next day and were honest with them. So, my dad made Trevor and I go to the center with him the next day to fix things. I was so anxious, and I wasn't sure what they would say.

We fessed up and each told the truth. Thankfully, the authorities were merciful and let us off with a warning, because we had been honest and proactively came forward with the truth.

FINAL NOTICE

Earlier in the month, I had checked with the front desk at my apartment because I had extra money in my account and thought something had happened with my rent payment. They assured me I had paid and didn't owe anything. Trevor told me to take out the extra cash and put it somewhere safe in my apartment so that I wouldn't spend it. I listened because I thought he was looking out for us both, but in reality, he put it all up his nose.

One day after lending him some of the "extra" cash, I came home to an eviction notice taped to my door for not paying rent. First, I freaked out, and then I ran over to where I had stashed all the money. It was gone. When I called Trevor, he told me that he had spread the money around to different spots, but it was nowhere to be found. I told him he needed to come home immediately.

As soon as he walked in the door, I freaked out on him. He emptied his pockets, but there was only about \$700 left.

“Where’s the rest of it, Trevor?” I asked. Rent was nearly \$1800. He had spent some on a new tattoo and some on his re-up. I didn’t know what to do. Trevor liked to pretend he had money, but really he just stole from other people.

Between my car getting crashed, the money I owed on repairs and now rent, I felt trapped. I was angry at Trevor but more upset with myself for letting it all happen. Finally, I took Trevor’s hockey bag and started packing up his stuff.

“How am I supposed to carry all this back home?” he yelled.

I told him that I didn’t care. It wasn’t my problem, and I made sure he knew it.

Trevor finished packing his stuff and then left.

But he wasn’t out of my life just yet. Once Trevor left, he started sending mean, awful messages to me. He mocked me for how I looked and told me I wasn’t worth loving. The worst part was admitting he had slept with Abbe. When I read that message, I ran straight to the washroom and threw up. I couldn’t believe someone would do something like that. I felt disgusting. I felt like I was nothing.

The first few weeks after he left were hard. I had constant panic attacks that left me shaking and crying on the floor from withdrawals. I hated living in that apartment alone. But thankfully, it was the beginning of the end.

FAR FROM FINE

A few weeks after Trevor left, the pre-trial for Abbe’s murder started. A murder trial in Toronto usually takes about 2–3 years to complete. The pre-trial determines what charges you will go to court for; in this case, the goal was to figure out if the people involved would be tried for first- or second-degree murder.

I was told that I would have to testify in court, even though my parents tried to get me out of it. Once I received a subpoena in the mail, I knew I had no choice in the matter.

In the weeks leading up to the trial, I had to go into city hall once a week to meet with members of the Crown. The Crown is made up of government caseworkers and prosecuting attorneys appointed by the people in the province fighting for Abbe. In this case, these were the people on our side. The purpose of the meetings was to prepare me as much as possible for the day that I would take the stand.

The meetings were held in a small white room, just big enough for a table and a few chairs. It was plain and cold. Children's picture books lined the walls, each one meant to help kids understand what court was like and why they were there. The books made me sad. Thinking about the amount of anxiety I felt, I couldn't imagine a child having to go through something like this.

During two of the meetings, I had to watch the statement I gave on the night Abbe was murdered nearly a year before. It was about an hour long and hard to watch. The whole thing was too much, which is why I asked to watch it in two sittings.

Seeing myself and hearing my testimony brought all the emotions of that night back. When the video started, I didn't know what to expect, but then all of a sudden, I felt sick. To be honest, I barely remembered what I had said that night because I was in such shock.

On the screen, I could see myself sitting in a chair tucked into the corner of the room, my legs curled up into my chest. The camera pointed down at me from the opposite corner, revealing two police officers sitting in chairs across from me. I was surprised to see myself answer the questions because, on the surface, I seemed okay. I didn't sound like what you would expect after what had just happened. I was calm and steady. In reality, I know I wasn't okay; I was the furthest thing from fine.

ANYTHING FOR ABBE

When I received the subpoena, I was told that I had to go in for two days of questioning from both the prosecution and the defense. I knew the defense would paint Abbe in the worst possible light, which I hated. I didn't understand why this was necessary—she was already dead, why make it worse?

The day of the trial came, and while I didn't want to get up on that stand, I also didn't have a choice. *Why does it have to be me?* I thought to myself. Jonas came with me that day. He had been there for me through everything and knew Abbe well. My sister didn't get along well with a lot of people, but she loved him. He was always really honest and real, never afraid to be himself. I was lucky to have him with me.

As soon as I walked into the courtroom, I felt Abbe's presence. I knew she was there. It made me feel strong, and I wanted to make her proud. That didn't change the fact that I was scared and anxious, but it gave me the extra bit of strength I needed to keep my head up.

The courtroom was small. Smaller than I thought it would be. Looking around the room, I saw the Crown in front of me and the defense lawyers to their right. Further to the right sat the defendants. Blood rushed to my head as soon as I saw them and I got even angrier when I saw their families. The feeling of hatred was so strong inside of me that day. I didn't understand how people could turn out like them. Or how people could raise children who turned out like them. Then I saw my family sitting in the rows behind the lawyers and was reminded that they would have been there for me in a second if it were me on trial.

After identifying the defendants, the defense lawyers asked me questions about Abbe. As I suspected, they tried to make her look bad. I didn't want to answer; Abbe was my sister and my best friend. I

wanted to talk about how amazing she was, not her darker sides. But I didn't get that chance.

Throughout the trial, they asked if I needed breaks or time to get myself together, but I only agreed once. I was determined to get it over with. No matter what question they asked or how poorly they painted Abbe's life, behavior, or choices, I tried my hardest to keep calm. It wasn't easy, but I would do anything for my sister. She needed me right now, and I wasn't about to let my emotions get in the way.

I ended up finishing two days' worth of questioning in one day. The Crown (and my family) complimented me on how well I did and how eloquently I spoke, but I was mostly just relieved that I didn't have to come back the next day.

HITTING THE WALL

Not long after I gave my testimony, I decided to leave George Brown. My depression hit in such a way that I felt like I couldn't move forward. Once again, I stayed in bed every day until 4 or 5pm. I watched TV and smoked weed. Most of the time, I was by myself because I didn't want to leave my apartment. Daily breakdowns with screaming and crying became the norm.

My dad tried to help me in any way he could, but nothing worked. At this point, I didn't see my life ever changing. It's not that I didn't want to feel better; I just felt like I was too far gone. I had tried talking to different therapists and other mental health workers, but nothing they suggested "worked." The pain was still there after my sessions ended. Nothing made it go away.

My dad, however, was changing.

When Abbe died, my dad took hold of his faith in a new way. Some people thought it was weird. His wife thought he might be starting to go crazy. People didn't understand it, but they didn't have to. I

didn't understand it... and it gave me mixed feelings. Looking back, if he hadn't clung to God, my family would have fallen apart.

That said, I didn't really understand how he was doing so well because I didn't have a personal relationship with God at the time. And after a while, I started to feel angry as I watched him cling to God. For some reason, his hope and optimism made me feel like he didn't care about my pain.

No matter how angry I got, though, my dad hung in there with me. His strength led me to find true healing.

DELIVERANCE

When my dad first asked me if I was interested in going through deliverance ministry, I didn't know what to say. It sounded crazy, like an exorcism or something. However, the more I learned about it, the more I came to understand that the two are very different. Exorcism is a practice that uses rituals to cast out demons or evil spirits from a person or area believed to be possessed. Deliverance means releasing a person of any evil strongholds in order to address problems manifesting in their life as a result.

This type of ministry is not accepted by all Christians, and I was skeptical at first. Regardless, I was ready to be set free, and I would have tried anything to feel better. So, we booked a date and time for about a week later. When the day came, I felt so anxious and was sick to my stomach. I didn't know what to expect, and I didn't know what the outcome would be like.

When we got to the church, I went into an office and my dad waited in the main meeting room. The office was small; there were three chairs, a little table with a coffee maker, and a desk. Two women, one in her late forties and the other in her late twenties, started by asking me some questions about my life... I answered them honestly.

I was doing terribly. I woke up screaming and crying every morning because I was still alive. I was having fantasies of being murdered instead of my sister. I was addicted to drugs. I was anxious, depressed, and hated myself. The women handed me a book filled with prayers and had me go through each one and say it out loud. After I was done, they prayed over me for about 20 minutes. One of the women started praying over different traumas I had gone through in my life. I was shocked; I hadn't told her about any of this. There was no way she could have known what I had gone through.

I interrupted her and asked how she knew all of that, and she replied by saying, "I heard it from God. He wants to heal you today, so you are no longer held back by these things from your past." I immediately broke down into tears. I didn't understand. Part of me didn't even believe her.

We finished the meeting, and my dad and I went back to the car to go to our hotel not too far from where the ministry center was. When I got in the car, I burst into tears. Everything felt so overwhelming. And then, I immediately started to question everything that had happened. Should I really believe this woman? What if it wasn't true? So many things crossed my mind, but my dad helped try to keep me in the present.

The deliverance session, as powerful and deep as it had been, wasn't the automatic and instant switch that I thought it was going to be. I still felt the heaviness of depression on my shoulders. I was still hearing a little voice in my head saying that it didn't work and I still wanted to die. Discouraged, I tried to fight back and kept telling myself that I had received healing and that I did want to live, even if I didn't believe it.

When we got to the hotel, I felt anxious. It was a nice little place, quaint, like an inn. There weren't too many rooms, but they were nice and modern looking. Regardless, I didn't want to be there. I wanted to be at home. My apartment had become my safe place, and

I felt like I needed to be by myself and reflect after everything that had happened. I told my dad, but he insisted that we stay for the night because he was worried about me being in my old environment. I know he had good intentions, but it made me angry, and I felt trapped.

There was a glass door at the end of the room that led to a small and narrow Juliet balcony. I opened the door, stepped a few feet to the railing ahead of me, and looked out at the parking lot below. It was sunny out but still cold. I felt the breeze come in through the door as I gripped the rail; it was refreshing. I needed to breathe and calm down.

As I stood with the sun beating down on me, I looked down over the edge to the concrete parking lot. A voice in my head said loud and clear, "Jump."

It scared me, and I stepped away from the door as quickly as I could. Everyone talks to themselves or has thoughts in their heads; mine are always in my voice. Even in the past when I had told myself I wanted to die, I knew those thoughts were my own. But this was different. Someone else was talking to me. I started to cry and then hyperventilate; I was scared and didn't know what to do.

I did know one thing, though. I wanted to go home. So, I made that my mission. I refused to let up until my dad agreed to drive us home. It took an hour of very emotional convincing and negotiating.

At one point during the drive, we were on the highway, and my dad made a quick lane switch without looking over his shoulder. The car behind us honked loudly as my dad jerked the car out of the way. I suddenly yelled at my dad, "Can you please be careful? I'm not trying to die today."

I gasped sharply, looked at my dad, and said, "Did you just hear that?"

He wasn't sure what I was talking about and answered back, "What?"

"I just said I didn't want to die today. When's the last time you heard me say that?" I sat there, stunned. Truthfully it had been a long time since I had said anything even remotely positive about being alive. As the weight of my words sank in, my dad and I both started laughing. In that moment, it hit me that maybe God had delivered me. I wanted to live!

CLEANING HOUSE

The first thing I did when I got into my apartment was pray. The women at the deliverance ministry had given me a booklet of prayers to say, and one was specifically meant for the cleansing of my home. It was pretty late at that point, so after I prayed, I started to get ready for bed. I had been told to read my daily covering prayer every morning when I woke up and every night before I went to bed, so that's what I did.

It's kind of hard to explain what happened next, but I'll try. I remember walking out of my bathroom toward my room when my legs started to feel weak. The bathroom was only a few steps away from my room, but I fell to my knees and started to cry before I got there. I felt as though a great weight had been removed from my back. The past year I had experienced such a heavy depression that I had forgotten what it was like to feel okay. At that moment, however, I felt okay, and I didn't understand why. All I knew was that this feeling of divine peace and freedom was coming from the love and grace of God.

I stayed on my knees for a few minutes with my forehead against the ground, thanking God over and over for the emotional healing I knew was mine. I went to bed that night crying the tears of actually feeling and seeing God's presence in my life.

Lying in bed, God began to take me through all my memories of past trauma and showed me that He was right there with me through it all; crying with me, hurting with me, and healing with me. I finally felt like I was seen and loved. Any past resentment I had been holding onto, or the feeling that He had not protected me or seen me, melted away. I fell asleep happier than I had been the whole year since Abbe was murdered.

When I woke up the next morning, something had changed inside of me. I could feel it. For the first time in a long time, I woke up without screaming, crying, or wanting to die.

My healing was not instantaneous or complete, however. I still had to work hard to regulate my emotions. I still smoked weed. It felt like something I couldn't stop doing. I still had moments of negativity when I would go back into a dark place and start to question things all over again, but it was a start.

It was almost like taking a step up a set of stairs; there were many more to go for me to be fully okay again, but at least I had taken the first step.

THE ROAD TRIP

My dad wanted remove me from my toxic environment and lifestyle so I could start shifting my habits... So, he planned for us to go on a road trip across the United States starting a few days after my deliverance session. It was exciting, but part of me also didn't want to go because I couldn't smoke weed if I went, and I was still dependent on it at the time.

We knew we were going on a road trip around the states, but we had no real plan other than to fly into Denver, Colorado, and rent a car. The rest of the plan was just to drive, stop in any towns or cities that we wanted to see, and eventually end up in Monterey, California, for a conference my dad was scheduled to speak at.

As we made our way through the American West, I remember seeing the “Welcome to Las Vegas” sign in Nevada and looking around thinking to myself that this was not what I expected. There was so much poverty, and the wealth was so poorly distributed to only one tiny area of the city. I know wealth usually isn’t fairly distributed, but this was extreme. The houses we drove past on the way to the main strip were small and falling apart; the streets looked dull, and the homeless population was immense. Everywhere I looked, people were sleeping on the sidewalks or pushing carts with all their belongings inside.

Driving into the city, I started to feel sick to my stomach. As we got farther in, I felt worse and worse. There were so many signs and places that made money off of exploiting women and their bodies. It didn’t sit right with me. It’s not my place to judge or shame people for the choices they make, but it’s not what I would want for myself. For so long, women have been objectified and subjected to ideals that our bodies are all we have to offer. In my opinion, women’s empowerment is about realizing we have so much worth that is not linked to our bodies or sexuality. We have powerful views and ideals, we are driven to succeed, we are family and relationship-oriented, we are intelligent, we create life, we are innovative, we are designed in the image of God! I could really keep this list going forever, but I think you get the idea. All that to say, something about the ethos of Las Vegas really bothered me.

After so many years of sexual abuse and multiple rapes, I thought I could take my power back through being overtly sexual because, “It’s my choice, and no one can tell me what to do.” Now, I have come to understand that empowerment is actually the opposite of what I thought in the past; telling women that their power lies within sexuality minimizes who they are and all they have to offer. Sexuality is not a personality trait. It is a gift from God meant to be used as He designed. Of course, you are free to disagree with me.

Las Vegas is often referred to as Sin City. I did some research, and the city got that nickname in the early 1900s because it's an area that caters to many vices—prostitution, gambling, and drug use. These things probably wouldn't have phased me a few weeks before our drive, but it didn't feel right to be there on this day. I had been doing a lot of work connecting more with my spirituality, and everything I had been learning seemed contrary to what was going on in Las Vegas. I wanted to get out of there as fast as I could. The spiritual atmosphere in that city was toxic (if you are sensitive to things like that, maybe you understand what I'm talking about). In the end, we decided to skip lunch in the city and kept driving.

As we drove farther from Las Vegas, my stomach settled. I felt relieved to be out of that city; I would have rather been anywhere else. I had a new sensitivity to the spiritual atmosphere. Looking back, it's crazy to see how fast God was working in me.

MONTEREY

We stopped at a hotel in a little town off the highway for the night because it was starting to get late, and we had already been driving for almost eight hours that day. It was a nice hotel with an outdoor pool area connected to it. I got up early that morning to lay by the pool before we got back on the road.

My dad had to be in Monterey, California, that evening because it was the start of the conference he was speaking at called "Transform Our World" (TOW). I didn't know too much about it, but I knew it was a Christian-based global conference to show how God was moving all around the world.

Miraculously, these first few days on the road had been pretty calm for me. I didn't have weed. (It was illegal to bring it into the U.S. from Canada, and I wouldn't have known where to get it in the States.) When I was home, I still heavily relied on weed to function.

I would wake up multiple times a night to smoke, and I could never sleep through a night without it. I kept my bong right beside my bed and would pack a bowl in advance so I could sit up, barely even awake, hit a bowl, and go back to bed. Needless to say, because I didn't have any weed with me, I was finding it really difficult to sleep at night. It would take me hours of tossing and turning before I could fall asleep. And because we were waking up early in the mornings to drive and have time to sightsee, I was pretty tired.

That said, I was pretty anxious as we got closer to the conference center where my dad was going to speak. I had agreed to go, but now it was the last place I wanted to be. I sank into a sort of depressive-like state, and I felt sick to my stomach. Back then, I didn't understand why that used to happen to me, but now I can see that it was spiritual warfare (which I will explain more about in a later chapter). When we finally arrived, my dad went to check in, and I waited in the car. I didn't want to see or meet anyone. I knew that at a Christian conference, everyone would be positive and in a good place. I knew I wasn't on their level.

When we got to our hotel room, I had a breakdown. I started crying and yelling about how I wanted to be anywhere but there. I was in a place where my anxiety took over, and I felt like there was nothing I could do about it. I couldn't control myself. It's like I reverted to being a kid. I pulled at my hair so hard that some of it came out. I hyperventilated. I punched walls and felt like I was going crazy. Once again, I wanted to die, and I hated being alive. I know it was scary for my dad, but it was also scary for me. I had finally had a few good days, and all of a sudden the progress I had made disappeared. I went back to thinking that the deliverance wasn't real. I went back to believing that I would never be okay.

My dad just sat with me in the room that first night. He was pretty quiet. I think it was hard for him to see me sliding back. It took

hours of lying there and tossing and turning before I actually fell asleep.

I didn't listen to any of the speakers the next day. I didn't want to meet anyone or go anywhere because of my breakdown the night before. My dad asked me if I would come with him to see someone that had offered to pray for me. I agreed because, despite falling apart again, I would have tried anything to feel better.

THE TURNING POINT

My dad and I met with a woman named Lodes. She was in her 50s, and she seemed nice. We went into an empty conference room, and she spent about an hour praying for me. I felt no emotion, and no words came out of my mouth. Nothing changed, and I actually felt worse afterward. She was really real with me. I didn't appreciate it at the time, but I do now.

Lodes told me I was acting like a victim and that I had it so easy compared to her life. I understand that things could have been worse; I wasn't trying to play "poor me." But that's how I felt at the time, and I didn't know how to change it. Everything I had tried wasn't working. Angry, I had another breakdown. It was embarrassing. I told Lodes I wanted to die, and I couldn't control my emotions. (I took some of my anger out on her during our time together, which wasn't fair.) I think at a certain point, she didn't really know what to do, so she called others in to pray over me and talk to me. I knew everyone was coming from a place of care and concern, but it felt like crap. I didn't want to be the center of attention. I didn't want to be the girl that needed all this help.

Later that night, I met with another group of people who wanted to pray for me. There was a guy named Sunny who came with a group of people that he worked with, and they all talked and prayed with me as well. I started to hear prophecies about my future and what

God had in store for me. At the time, I didn't actually believe what I was hearing, but it also got me excited because I *wanted* to believe it. Their words over my life were filled with hope and joy. I was so surprised at how many people came to rally around me that didn't know me. Complete strangers who seemed to truly care about me.

Sunny told me that I was going to change lives one day and that I would be able to help people in the life circumstances I had lived through and overcome. I didn't feel like I had overcome anything yet, but it was encouraging to hear.

Throughout the rest of the conference, I was up and down. I didn't go to most meals because it overwhelmed me to be around that many people. I went to hear a few people speak, but not many. I was happy when it was over because I really just wanted to go home. My anxiety was so high.

What I didn't understand at the time was that I would have been anxious anywhere, so it didn't really matter if I had gone home or not. It was a season of baby steps and taking things day by day.

GLEND A

Three days after my dad and I got back to Toronto, we got on a plane headed for New Brunswick. Those three days were bad; I was still anxious and wanted to be anywhere else but where I was, and yet, back in California, all I wanted was to be back home. I felt empty in Toronto, like I had no one and nothing.

In reality, I did have people who were actually good friends: Layla, Jonas, and Zoë. I couldn't have asked for better people. After Abbe died, a lot of the people in my life distanced themselves from me. I think partially because what had happened freaked them out and partially because I became hard to be around. But Jonas, Zoë, and Layla never left.

To give you an idea of who they were, Layla was the brave one who was honest with me that I was dragging her down, and it was getting really hard for her to be around me because of my drug use. It was a hard conversation, but it also made me realize I had to change the way I was living or I was going to lose everyone. To this day, I am so grateful that she loved me enough to tell me she wouldn't support my behavior. I needed friends who would do that.

Jonas was friends with both Abbe and me. Abbe didn't like a lot of my friends, but she always loved Jonas. He had a special way of taking care of us. I can't even count how many times he came to see us at her place bringing a bag of groceries (or even a pack of toilet paper!). He was the brother we never had.

Zoë and I had a really special friendship. If I ever had a really hard day, she found a way to be there for me, or if she was having a hard day, I made sure to be there for her. She's the type of friend I could rely on and I would do anything for.

But even with Jonas, Zoë, and Layla nearby, I still didn't feel okay. They had a lot going on in their lives, too. Everyone was either in school or working, and at the time, I wasn't doing either. Once again, I fell into a deep depression and went back to smoking weed and numbing myself out. I was pretty out of it when we boarded the plane to New Brunswick and during the following three weeks spent at my grandmother's house.

NEW BRUNSWICK

My first few days in New Brunswick were awful. I was incredibly anxious and having breakdowns again. All I wanted was to go home. The plan was that I would spend my time helping out with the charity my dad started called Bee Me Kidz that helps develop kids' social and emotional skills. New Brunswick has the highest poverty rates in Canada... I love kids, and I had always thought that I would take the charity over one day.

Meanwhile, we got together with my dad's side of the family (my aunt, uncle, and grandmother). It turned out that all of them had started working with two Christian life coaches named Glenda and Doug (they were married) with the goal of strengthening our family unit. Everyone was willing and wanted to do the work it took to become a healthy family.

A few months before, I had tried talking to Glenda and Doug over the phone. My dad strongly encouraged me to have a session with them, but at the time, it wasn't something I wanted to do. I made that very clear to Glenda and Doug during our call. They responded by saying they couldn't work with me if I didn't want to do the work. I was happy about that and gladly stopped coaching.

But now, my family wanted me to start doing sessions with Glenda and Doug because they had made significant progress getting to the root of their issues. I was convinced that they didn't know what they were doing and that it wouldn't work for me. I had been in different therapy programs almost my whole life, and nothing ever worked for me, so at this point, I was over it.

One day went by after another... and then, I had a massive anxiety attack. I felt like I was suffocating and like I was trapped. I couldn't imagine staying at my grandmother's for another few weeks! That was too long to feel like this. I wanted to go home, but I had this sense that I would feel the same way there. I couldn't stop crying and screaming and going into every negative thing that had happened to me.

Eventually, my uncle, Darren, asked me to go for a walk with him and talk. (This was a smart idea because your mental state can change pretty quickly and easily by changing the physical state of your body. Whether that's going for a walk, doing jumping jacks, or even something as simple as standing up and putting your shoulders back.)

My grandmother's home is in a quiet neighborhood with lots of hills along a river. It's beautiful. Our walks and drives are usually quiet; it isn't uncommon to see deer walking along the road.

Uncle Darren and I walked for about 30 minutes while we talked. We talked about the pressure I was feeling to do well or make a drastic change in my life. We talked about Abbe and how much that

was still affecting me. We talked about my constant anxiety and fear of living. In the end, Darren suggested that I try to meet with Doug and Glenda again. He told me that he wasn't sure of them at first, but after a few sessions with them, he could honestly say that the tools they gave him were working. I think hearing someone other than my dad helped me be open to something new. (You know when your parents tell you to do something or not to do something, and you do the opposite? Even if it is the right thing or makes sense to do what they say? But when someone else tells you the same thing, you feel less resistant? Yeah, that's kind of what happened there.)

After that conversation with my uncle, I felt ready to go into coaching with an open mind, ready to do the work I needed to do to feel better. This decision was the start of the rest of my life. Never did I think that one decision would change the trajectory of my life so much, but it did.

DOING THE WORK

Glenda's first question to me was, "Why are you doing coaching now?"

I was doing coaching because I had tried everything from therapy to deliverance, and I still wasn't happy. I felt a glimpse of hope after deliverance, but I wasn't able to sustain it by myself.

I wanted to feel like myself again.

I hated that I couldn't control my emotions, that I was so depressed all the time, and that I constantly wanted to die.

I had already dropped out of two universities, lashed out at people, couldn't hold a job or even think of getting one in the state I was in, and to top it off, I looked sick because of how skinny I was.

I wanted to do coaching because I wanted to do the work I needed to move forward.

I had tried to do it by myself, and nothing worked.

“So...” Glenda paused. “You’re here because you want to be here this time?”

“I want to be here.” I nodded firmly. “I’m not here for my dad or anyone else. I’m here for me.”

After hearing that, Glenda agreed to take me on as a client.

Our sessions together started by simply getting to know one another. I told her about my past and my life, and she shared some of her past with me as well. This was important for me because I didn’t trust easily; I never have. I needed to know that the things I shared with her were kept confidential and that she was a safe person. I knew my mistrust of people was rooted and stemmed from my relationship with my abuser throughout my childhood. I had done work around it, but not enough to remove all of the triggers and sore spots.

Surprisingly, I felt an instant connection with Glenda. It didn’t take long for me to trust her and let her in. My family members who had been working with Doug and Glenda also solidified that trust for me. They always had such amazing things to say, and they were doing work on themselves and within the family that was helping all of us grow closer and communicate better.

This is where counseling and coaching differ. Coaching is proactive; it’s future- and goal-oriented. While counseling is reactive; it deals with past issues like traumas that might hold you back. Neither is better than the other. I think there’s a time and place for both. But, you can’t go into coaching and expect counseling (or vice versa). I had been in therapy for years already, and I didn’t feel like it was helping much or that I had anything else to talk about, so I had stopped going. Coaching with Glenda was different. It allowed me to share my story and feelings but not get stuck in them. I didn’t need someone to say, “That must have been hard” or

“I hear you.” I wanted results, and to get results, you need goals. In coaching, the goal was not to look at where I had come from or where I was. Rather, the goal was for me to choose where I was going.

Glenda helped me understand that “happiness” is not something that just shows up on your doorstep. Happiness comes from walking in alignment with God. A big part of that for me was setting goals and working toward them. That being the case, she helped me create daily and weekly goals for myself. She never gave me the answers or told me what she thought I should do. Instead, she asked questions that pulled out what I wanted for myself.

We made goals in every area of my life. Goals that would push me, but that were also attainable and realistic for where I was at. (Up until that point, I was just trying to live day by day, thinking I would magically wake up and feel better at some point.)

FACING BRYN

I felt a little stir crazy in New Brunswick as there was not much to do there, and I wanted go home. I told Glenda this in one of our sessions, and she told me that she thought it was a bad idea. She didn’t think I was ready yet.

“Bryn, you always do this wherever you go. At this point, it doesn’t matter where you are, whether you’re home or here, because wherever you go, there you are. You need to decide if you are going to stay or go back.”

I didn’t understand at first what she meant by “wherever you go, there you are,” but then it clicked.

I was always trying to get to the next place to do the next thing with the next person because I was running.

Specifically, I was running from myself.

I didn't like myself so much that wherever I went, I felt anxious and did anything to get away from *me*.

This is part of the reason why I turned to drugs. Being high separated me from myself, and they made me feel like I could breathe again. After taking a good look at these patterns and going deeper... I made a choice to stay for the whole three weeks because I knew if I kept on running from place to place, I would never stop. It was time for me to get to know myself for the first time in years.

Running is a very natural human instinct. It is easy to run when things get hard. It is easier to turn your back on difficult circumstances or crippling pain than to face life head-on. I had been running for a long time... even physically. Remember that first time I literally ran away from rehab in the middle of winter?

ONE SATURDAY MORNING, I woke up at 5:45am to get ready to help with the Bee Me Kidz weekend program. When I woke up, I checked my phone, and I saw that I had a text from Glenda that she had sent while I was asleep. The message read, "We have a year to prepare you, Bryn! I just saw you [in a prophetic dream] on stage at Transform Our World, speaking to people of all nations, sharing your hero's journey! I saw everyone in tears, giving you a standing ovation! And you were glowing in God's presence!"

I stopped and reread her words. The last time I was at TOW, I was in such a dark place, having temper tantrums like an 8-year-old. I still struggled and was having my moments even at that time, so it was hard to believe that I would get to a place where I would be able to share my story in front of a crowd. That said, when I was at that conference watching one of the speakers standing up in front of over 1,000 people, a part of me also imagined myself up there. That image popped into my head every so often when I least expected it.

It hit me that I had literally been imagining myself speaking at TOW, and someone just told me they saw me doing it, too. Everything started to feel surreal. The message said I had one year to prepare before the next conference. I woke my dad up before I left to tell him about Glenda's message because I was so excited. I couldn't help but share.

LOOKING BACK TO LOOK FORWARD

Glenda and I went over different processes and models that showed up in so many different areas of my life. We went over dynamics and patterns in my relationships. We went over communication models. She taught me the difference between a healthy relationship and an unhealthy relationship in ways that I could really understand and go back to. We went over my deep-seated fears in life in a way that helped me overcome them instead of dwell on them.

I got clear on my boundaries and what type of people I wanted to surround myself with when I got back home. (It was hard because I knew I would have to cut a lot of people out of my life that didn't fit with my new mindset. The people who wouldn't support me and help me grow had to be left behind. At least for the time being to make sure I was firmly rooted.)

I started learning more about how the human mind and body works, and why people do the things they do. I watched lectures of different psychologists and researchers. I started learning about Neuro-Linguistic Programming (which is about breaking down human behaviors, words, and thoughts to understand how we experience the world and control our outcomes). And as I did, I started to wonder what I was meant to do with my life.

After high school, everyone followed each other on the path of post-secondary education because that's just what you do. So, that's what I did as well. Now that I was at a crossroads in life and needed

to have some sort of an idea of what to do next, my first thought was that I would have to go back to university. But... deep down, I knew I didn't really want to go back to school, but I would if I had to.

I had always thought it was my calling to work with kids because of my childhood experiences. Growing up the way I did made me highly empathetic and I wanted to spend my time helping others. In the past, I thought I would stay at Bee Me Kidz... but over the last few weeks, I wasn't sure it was the right fit.

A CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

One day during a session, Glenda stopped me and said, "What if your calling isn't necessarily to work with kids, but to help heal people's inner child?"

Pondering her words, I pictured my whole life.

I spent so much time in therapy, in rehab, and now coaching, trying to fix and mend the broken little girl that I was carrying around with me as I grew older. I was beginning to realize that surrendering my life to God was the only thing that worked.

I realized a lot of the time that not having a relationship with God is what holds people back from reaching their full potential or growing into the person they are meant to be.

Then it hit me. I wanted to disciple others. (As followers of Jesus, we are ALL called to be disciples and to make disciples.)¹

Glenda had expressed that I understood the coaching material at a level and speed that most people never did and that I had a gift. I wasn't sure what that would look like moving forward, but I knew I would be able to use my story to glorify God. I was still a little anxious because I thought I already knew what I wanted to do before, but this time, something was different. There wasn't even

one small part of me that doubted that this was what I was supposed to be doing with my life.

Knowing that God had a plan and purpose for my life changed everything. Before, I didn't know how much God desired to be in connection to every single one of us or that intimate relationship with God leads you directly into the plans and purposes He has for you. As I started taking steps closer to God, things changed. Even though I wasn't perfect and I didn't walk in alignment with His will all of the time, He was still showing up in my life in ways that led me closer and closer to Him daily.

Glenda shared with me that she felt like God had told her that I would one day write a book. That was crazy to me because I had said I was going to write a book my whole life, but I hadn't said it to her. It sort of started as a joke when I said I was going to write a book and it would be a non-fiction horror story about my life. But now, after all this, I had a very different type of story. It wasn't a sad sob story anymore. It was a story of overcoming, a journey of redemption orchestrated by the power of God's goodness. The one thing that scared me was that I knew it was going to be a lot of work. So before committing to writing, I prayed about it. (Now, I do this with every decision I make. I pray and ask God, "Is this what you want me to do?")

That night my dad and grandmother had been gone at a church service for a while. I didn't know when it ended or how long it was supposed to be. I sat in my bed praying for some sort of sign if this was what I was supposed to do, and suddenly I felt the urge to get up and look out the window. I lifted the blinds, and when I did, the porch lights turned on. My dad was standing at the front door with his thumb up. I wasn't sure what more I could ask for in the way of a sign! I didn't know how to write a book... I didn't even know if I was any good at writing, but I thought, *How hard could it be?*

It took me a few weeks to start, but when I did, I would think of what life event was on my mind the most that day and just start writing about it. Surprisingly enough, the writing flowed.

There were still moments of highs and lows as the months went by. My emotional regulation was still not where I wanted it to be. But, sometimes healing takes time. The littlest things going wrong would set me off, and I would either get angry or depressed. Some days I woke up feeling great, and other days, I woke up feeling sad and hopeless. But I knew it was a process, and I would get there. I was staying—I wasn't running away.

Going back home, I felt strong. I felt like I would be able to go back and carry on with all the work I had been doing while in New Brunswick. I felt stable in myself and my ability to keep moving forward. I didn't want anything to change. I was finally happy again, and I wanted to keep it that way.

GOING THROUGH TO GET THROUGH

I was a little nervous about being home after New Brunswick, but I was mostly excited. On the way back to the airport, I picked Layla up from her place to sleep over at mine. (My mom ended up going on vacation while I was away, and Layla was taking care of our two dogs, Mickey and Bella. Mickey is a seven-year-old miniature pinscher, and Bella is a four-year-old mutt. They are both small dogs, and they look pretty similar to each other with their dark brown short coats. I have always loved dogs. These two are so cuddly and sweet that they can lift anyone's mood. The dogs came with Layla and me back to my place.)

Whenever we hung out in the past, we always smoked weed. We probably smoked the most out of anyone I knew. From the moment we woke up in the morning till we went to sleep at night, we smoked weed. So obviously, the first thing Layla wanted to do when we got back to my apartment was hit a bowl. But after setting goals according to what I wanted my future to look like, I had made the decision to stop smoking weed.

We were discussing how I wanted to become a life coach when Glenda offered me a piece of wisdom. She said, “Bryn, if you can’t even change your own life, you can’t try to help change other people’s lives.” That really stuck with me because she was right. I couldn’t expect people to take me seriously and put myself in a position of influence if I couldn’t live my life in a way that others could look up to. It was a hard decision for me because weed was such a huge part of my life, but it had to be made.

I told Layla, and at first she was proud of me. She was happy that I was choosing to do this, and she saw how good it was for me. We sat on the couch, and I started telling her about my trip. I told her about all the progress I had made and how much better I had been doing. I told her about the different prophetic words I had received concerning what God had planned for my future.

She always knew I was a Christian; we had talked about it before. (When we did, she told me she was a Christian, too, and had even talked about getting baptized.) I guess the difference between my faith before and my faith now was that I was actually trying to live according to what I believed. Something had changed where it wasn’t just about a set of beliefs anymore. I wanted to know God in a deep, relational way.

Intimacy with God comes first from obedience. I didn’t really know how to go about obedience at the time, so I started simply with the things I knew I was supposed to be doing.

I didn’t smoke weed. I didn’t sleep around. I started reading the Bible more and memorizing Scripture. I didn’t really want to party or go out to clubs like I used to. No one can ever be the perfect Christian; it’s not possible. But I wanted to be a good Christian, in that I wanted to try every day to even be a little bit more like Jesus than I was the day before. As the saying goes, it’s not about perfection; it’s about progress.

I really didn't have any friends that shared the same beliefs as me, and that was hard.

I was not prepared for Layla's reaction to me telling her all of this. I thought she would be excited for me, but instead, she got really angry. She started to take what I was saying personally, but in reality, it didn't have anything to do with her. These were goals and things I wanted to work toward in my life because they felt right for me. I wasn't trying to say that she should live her life this way, too. (I understand that everyone has different journeys, and I wouldn't try to impose my beliefs or choices on others. I think it's important to be open to sharing what Jesus means to you and what He has done in your life, but it's not my job to change others or push them into something they aren't ready for, especially in regard to a relationship with Jesus. That has to be personal. It has to come from the heart. It doesn't matter what anyone else says. You need to want it for yourself.) At a certain point, she started telling me that I was brainwashed. I was confused because I didn't see it like that, but it still hurt. We had always had the kind of relationship that was accepting and open to different views and opinions.

We let each other cool down for a bit, and then we talked about it. She apologized for saying those things and wanted to forget about it, and so did I. I accepted her apology, and we went to bed... but it was not how I wanted my first night home to go.

I didn't understand her reaction at first, but I get it now. It was probably overwhelming to see me completely changing my life. She might have felt like I was abandoning any sense of normalcy in my relationships. It was also potentially convicting to hear my story, and she might have felt judged, even though that was not my intent. Change is difficult to accept, even if it is a positive change.

Layla is still one of my best friends. She is supportive of my life and the path I have chosen. She is doing really well now and even recently graduated from university with a great job. She is more

than a friend, and she has stuck by me during my lowest lows. She has a beautiful heart and loves people so well. I am so blessed to have her in my life.

DAY TWO

The next day Layla's boyfriend picked her up, and I went to see my two other best friends, Jonas and Zoë, at Zoë's apartment. I already told them I had stopped smoking weed, and it would be helpful if they could not smoke while I was there, so I wasn't tempted to start again.

They both respected that and didn't mind it at all. I was excited to tell them about the past three weeks and all the work I had been doing. I had also gained some weight back, and I was excited to show them how much healthier I looked.

When I got to Zoë's, both she and Jonas were in bed watching TV. Zoë lived in a bachelor, so her bed was in the same room as her living room and kitchen. I walked in, and neither of them got up to say hi, so I went to the bed and hugged them both. I tried to start a conversation, though they made it clear they were watching a show. I quickly figured out they were both really high, but I appreciated that they put it away before I came over.

Awkwardly, I decided to sit and watch TV with them, and after a while, we all decided to order pizza. I thought maybe we would talk more over dinner. I hadn't seen them since I'd left; I wanted to let them know how I was, and I wanted to hear about their lives, too. I started asking Zoë how it was going with the girl she was seeing.

She paused the TV and said flatly, "I ended it. It was really dramatic."

I could tell she just wanted to watch TV again, so I didn't pry anymore.

As she turned the TV back on, I asked Jonas how work was going. He said it was good but that it was a busy week and he was tired.

After we ate, I walked back home feeling empty.

I understood Zoë was in a full-time midwifery program and that she was dealing with a break-up. I also understood Jonas worked really hard, and I loved that about him. But I also felt like no one had any interest in hearing about what was going on with me. I felt like I wasn't missed, and no one cared that I was back. I had a really hard night that night. Layla, Jonas, and Zoë were the only people I was really close with, and I didn't feel connected to them at all. My world had changed.

DAY THREE

The next day I felt just as anxious as I felt when I was in New Brunswick trying to get home. I realized that it was because I felt alone, and I still really hated being by myself. But because I lived alone, that happened a lot. (I was starting to learn about my identity in Christ but hadn't gone into it too much and really didn't believe it in my heart yet.) I started thinking of anything that I could do to feel better. My usual "go-tos" for feeling better were things I had cut out of my life, so they weren't options for me anymore. I had to sit in my anxiety and discomfort. That led to a few panic attacks, but in the end, I realized that going through it was the only way I was going to get through it. I needed to feel how I needed to feel in order to figure out how to move forward and help myself.

I called Glenda on FaceTime that night to tell her about my first few days home. I told her about what had happened with Layla and later with Jonas and Zoë. I cried to her, and it was hard for me to control my emotions. She talked me through it and helped me calm down. It wasn't a side of me that she had seen in a long time, so I think it surprised her.

DAY FOUR

The next day Jonas called to see how I was doing. I appreciated it, but I was still upset, and I told him how I felt. He was able to hear what I had to say and took accountability for hurting me and for not being very engaging. I had the same conversation with Zoë as well.

As we spoke, I realized I had been expecting them to read my mind and know what I wanted or needed from them, and that wasn't right either. I took responsibility for not being vocal about what I needed at the time. It was good to be back together as friends, but it was still hard.

After those first few days, I didn't see anyone else for a while. Layla and Zoë were both in university, and Jonas was working and lived on the other side of the city.

IN NEW BRUNSWICK, I anxiously felt I had to come back to Toronto and see my friends. Now that I was back, I hardly saw anyone. It made Toronto feel even lonelier than I had remembered.

I started having more panic attacks when I was at home alone. Sometimes I would just deal with it, and sometimes, I would call Glenda. She began to question if I was fit to start training to be a coach or get into public speaking. In fact, Glenda told me she wanted to pause the training because my behavior was showing that I wasn't ready for it. I couldn't let that happen. Seeing a future for myself was the biggest thing helping me move forward.

I had been home from New Brunswick for about a month. I was doing pretty well, making progress every day and consistently growing in my relationship with God through small but important steps.

As I said, nothing is ever an automatic switch, so I still struggled at times, but nothing compared to how I had struggled in the past. I was happy, I was more aware of myself and my behavior, I was better able to control myself, I was more connected to my family, and I was taking time every day to write my book.

I credit all of the above to God's consistent and never-changing love and faithfulness to me. I know He put Glenda in my life so intentionally when He did. The Lord used life coaching to change everything. I had purpose and goals. I was able to see a future I was excited about, and being able to see that really helped me to stay on track. This became essential to my continued development and progress.

Whenever I struggled to make good choices, I looked back at my goals to help me make the right choice. Temptations started to feel less tempting once I took a look at the big picture of my life; I wanted an intimate relationship with the Lord, I wanted to write a book, I wanted to disciple others, and I wanted to be able to share my story one day as Glenda saw in her vision (and I had seen glimpses of myself). I knew that I wouldn't reach any of these goals if I didn't live my life on purpose every day.

FULFILLING PROPHECIES

As time went by, I grew discouraged. I was working so hard, doing everything I was supposed to be doing, and yet I wasn't seeing the results I expected. Now, I was seeing dramatic changes in myself, but not in regards to the goals I had set for my future and career.

I knew that not everything would come at once, but I guess I thought that *something* would come. I was putting a lot of unjustified pressure on myself, and it was frustrating. I started digging myself into a hole, thinking things like *What am I doing wrong?* or *Is it even worth it to put in all this effort if I can't see any results?*

Today I know that this is a victim mindset that only holds me back. I also know that these moments are most likely a spiritual attack that often comes before a breakthrough. At the time, however, that's not what I was thinking about. I continued beating myself up for not being further along after feeling like I was putting in so much effort.

I called my dad and told him what I was feeling and everything that was on my mind. I'm not really sure what response I was aiming for, but I felt so overwhelmed I didn't know what else to do.

“Bryn,” he said kindly, “you are doing really well. You should be proud of your work. No one gets results as fast as you are expecting them.”

He was right, of course. But his words didn’t help. In fact, I had dug myself into such a deep hole of self-pity that his attempt of support made me angry. Out of nowhere, I started telling him there was no point and maybe I should just go back to how I had been living.

By this point, my dad had been doing a lot of work on himself and family relationships. There was no way he was going to feed into my drama or let me be a victim, and he said as much, “I’m going to be honest, Bryn. You have the choice to be a victim if you want. You should do what you think is right. I’m at work. I have to go now.” And that was that.

His words stunned me. Even though I was saying things like, “Maybe I should just go back to how I was...” and, “I’m doing all this work for nothing...” I didn’t actually mean it. I knew in my heart that all the work I was doing was so important, not only to fulfill my career goals but to set myself up to be a healthy, functioning member of society. But at that moment, everything felt so hard and overwhelming that I wanted someone to come to save me... I played the victim card. Luckily the people I lean on for support in my life could see through what I was doing and didn’t give in.

For instance, there was Glenda. I called her, and she explained to me how I was showing up as a victim. She helped teach me to dust myself off and get back up. Glenda doesn’t sugarcoat things. She tells me things straight up; there’s no “beating around the bush” of any kind. Some people see that as harsh or mean, but it’s not like that. She brings things up in a way that’s still caring and considerate but also to the point. As she spoke, I realized that the last thing I wanted to show up as was a victim because I had done that for so long. Almost without realizing it, I consciously chose a new, deeper responsibility for my own life, and it felt so good.

At the end of our call, she asked me if my dad had told me the good news. I told her that I had just gotten off the phone with him, and nothing had come up. She debated whether or not she should tell me for a moment, and then she said, “It’s about Transform Our World.”

I remembered how Glenda saw me in her vision on stage at TOW, sharing my story, and how she saw me getting a standing ovation and that I had most of the audience in tears. I remembered her telling me that we had one year to prepare for this huge opportunity.

Sometimes we don’t see prophecies fulfilled for a variety of reasons. Sometimes, God’s timing is not what we expect. Sometimes, the person delivering the message does so through a human filter, and the word is muddled. Sometimes, people give us “prophetic words,” and they aren’t actually from God. We have to use discernment. And sometimes, we just have to wait it out and see what God will do. This word felt so far off that I had no idea how or if it would even end up happening. That said, even though it was still so far off and a dream at this point, I thought about Glenda’s vision a lot. I couldn’t imagine how it would all come together, but I trusted God that if it was what He had for me, He would make it happen.

After my little daydream, I came back to reality and realized I was still on the phone with Glenda. Many thoughts were running through my head. I had no idea what she was about to say to me, but I was eager to find out. I asked her, “What do you mean about the news about Transform Our World?”

“Your dad was on a call with Ed Silvoso the other day, and you came up,” Glenda replied as I waited with anticipation on the other end of the line. (I knew that Ed Silvoso was the founder of the TOW movement.) She continued, “He asked if you would be interested in speaking and sharing your story at a TOW conference.”

I felt like my heart was about to leap out of my chest. It was happening! God was starting to work out His word over my life! I started

jumping up and down and practically yelled back to Glenda, “Are you serious? Of course, I would be interested! I know it’s happening next year, but do they know when?”

Glenda’s reply shocked me. “Bryn, they want you to come speak at the global leadership conference. It’s in four weeks. We have four weeks to prepare.”

“Not a year?” I asked, confused.

“Not a year anymore.”

“Wait, what do you mean I have four weeks to prepare?” I repeated. “I thought the prophecy was for next year?”

Glenda answered calmly, “I’m not sure, but Ed insisted that you come speak at this next one in four weeks. The conference is from January 12th until January 15th.”

I realized it was the middle of December, and in four weeks, technically, it would be “next year.”

A huge mix of emotions washed over me. I was so excited to speak at such an honorable event in front of so many amazing people from around the world. But, I was also in shock. I couldn’t believe that the prophecy was so accurate or even happening. With only four weeks to prepare and no public speaking experience, I had my work cut out for me. I hadn’t even shared my full story with many people I actually knew, much less with strangers. I didn’t know how to write a speech or speak in a way that people could connect and relate to my story. Out of all these emotions, however, I mostly felt a joyful sense of excitement.

Things were finally starting to happen; I was starting to see real results. I was also starting to see that my goals and dreams were attainable. More importantly, I was learning about God’s faithfulness to me, that He wanted me to succeed and to be able to glorify

Him. It was the affirmation and motivation that I needed, especially that day.

TRANSFORM OUR WORLD

The conference would be in California, so I was also excited for a mini vacation. I put my writing to the side for a bit so I could focus on my speech. I would have 15 minutes to talk. I knew I wanted to tell my story and share how I got to the point I was at in my life now.

I started by going over all of my defining life moments. I got them all down on paper and made bullet points underneath what I wanted to share about each experience. I didn't feel the need to go into much detail about each one. Overall, I wanted my speech to be on how I overcame the obstacles in my life so far, not about all the bad things that happened to me. I wanted to focus on the positives of what I was learning from overcoming all of these challenges.

After I felt like I had the bare bones of my life story on paper, I brainstormed all I had learned on the journey. There was a lot, and I only had ten minutes left to go, so I narrowed it down to the five key things I had learned that changed my life. Looking back on everything I have learned since then, it would sound very different, but essentially the takeaway from my speech was a testimony to God's redemptive power in my life.

I remember shaking as I got up on the stage, but thankfully, I got through my whole speech. It was just like in the vision. People were in tears by the end. Many stood and applauded. Afterward, people came up to me and told me how much it encouraged them. It was a little overwhelming, but also gave me a sense of hope that my story could touch so many. A few people came up to me with business cards inviting me to speak at other organizations, rehab centers, and churches. I wasn't ready to start speaking all over the place yet, though. I felt like God still had to prepare me for what He wanted

me to do, and that's what got the wheels in motion moving me to Hawaii and joining YWAM (Youth With a Mission).

(Interestingly, I had received a prophetic word in 2019 about going to YWAM. At the time, it seemed crazy. But by 2020, when the wheels were in motion to go to Hawaii, I realized that it was yet another prophecy coming true.)

HIS STRENGTH IN MY WEAKNESS

My past could be my weakness, and it was for a long time. I had so many presuppositions about myself because of the things that have happened to me. Because of my childhood abuse, I thought I wouldn't be able to trust anyone. I allowed that to affect me so much that I wasn't able to be in relationships or feel comfortable with being touched in any way. I thought that I was a damaged and broken person, that no one would ever be able to love me or want me because of what I've been through. That was such a victim mentality, but at the time, it was all I knew.

I didn't know I could make a choice to grow and let myself move past the lies I told myself about my life. I had created these thoughts in my head, and in the same way, I could choose to dismantle them by replacing them with the truth of who God says I am. It took me a while to do so because I had drilled these presuppositions into my head to a point where I actually believed what I was telling myself. Eventually, however, I was able to throw away these thoughts about myself and believe the truth. My strength comes from what I have overcome by the grace of God. I use that strength to help build people up and show them that there is hope in any situation for any person because of the price Jesus paid for us on the cross.

My past doesn't define my future in a negative way. It actually helped shape me into who I am today, and I am grateful for that. Everything I have been through has taught me something worth

learning. Romans 8:28 says, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” In all things, God has a purpose. Everything I have overcome has led me to where I am today. I am grateful for the people in my life who helped me through, and I am proud of myself for not giving up even when life felt impossible.

When you live your life committed to personal growth stemming from a real relationship with God, there is never a finish line. The journey with Jesus is a life-long learning process. No one is perfect, and there is always room for growth. With that in mind, my story is far from over. I am learning more every day as I grow in my relationship with God. And that is what the rest of this book is about.



Bryn (left) and Abbe (right)



Bryn at 6 (left) and Abbe at 8 (right)



Abbe at 21 (left) and Bryn at 18 (right)



Abbe at 19



Bryn (left) holding Wesley and Abbe (right) at park in Toronto, 2015

PART II

INTRODUCTION

The second half of this book steps out of my life story and into a key revelation that brought the greatest transformation to my life.

I wrote the second half of this book twice. The first time I wrote it, it was all about personal development tools. Throughout each chapter, I shared different ways that we can increase consciousness and try to change ourselves. Don't get me wrong. Those are amazing things to pursue—great tools can lead to great change, *but not on their own*. The world leads us to self-help, but the Lord leads us into freedom.

The chapters ahead were supposed to be a self-help book. Then, one day as I was in prayer, the Lord told me to delete everything I had written past my deliverance. I had worked really hard to finish those pages, so I was confused, but I knew I needed to be obedient to the Lord.

I asked God, “Why do you want me to get rid of these chapters?” to which He answered me ever so clearly, “Is this going to be a book that glorifies yourself or are you going to use it to glorify me?” That hit me right in my heart. I wasn't giving credit where credit was due.

As I reread the old draft of the book, it became evident that I had written a book that made it sound like I was walking in my own strength. That was and still is not the case.

Rewriting each chapter of this section was a different process. I made sure to invite the Lord into every step. The Lord gave me a template and plan for each chapter; He shared with me the topics He wanted in this book, and at times, the Holy Spirit took over writing. I wrote the second half of this book while I fasted from food. As I denied my flesh, the Spirit led. Every time I sat down, not knowing what I would write, my fingers began to move over the keyboard. The Lord would bring stories and revelation into my mind as I wrote from a place of full submission to Him.

The following chapters go into depth on tools and truths that bring transformation. It is impossible to truly meet Jesus and not experience transformation. I have chosen to share foundational pieces of my walk with the Lord that helped me get my footing as I pursued Him more and more. Laying this foundation was vital to getting me where I am today. The tools I give you are tools that God has blessed us with to help us understand Him. As a result, we also begin to understand ourselves and how to live better. In all of these areas, I am able to see God moving, and I hope you do too!

The next half of this book comes from my heart. I didn't write this because it is what I think is right or because someone told me to do it. These are all things that come from my personal convictions, founded in God's Word. Change starts from within someone, and personal change leads to societal change. Everything I write about I am actually living out in my own life. As you read the steps I've taken (and am taking), know that you are capable of walking in this same truth. No matter what temptations you face, you are capable of transformation. Jesus calls us into a life of holiness, a life for Him.

The transformation I experienced wouldn't have been possible without God. I can't take credit for the changes in my life, as I know

they came directly from the grace of God. All the worldly efforts of personal development and self-betterment are evidence that I couldn't do it alone. The years of counseling and different therapies were all done by my own effort to fix myself. (Counseling and therapy can both be great tools when you invite God into that space. I, however, did not.) I know that I am weak. My only strength comes from the Lord. I tried to do it alone, but none of it ever lasted.

None of this book was me. Taking credit would be a lie. All glory to God!

CLOSER TO JESUS

THE SIMPLE GOSPEL

As I was in prayer, it felt important to share the simple gospel before diving in to this chapter. I'm going to give you a simple outline of something that is far from "simple." Jesus is our Savior. He was fully man and walked among other humans on the earth, but He was also fully God. Jesus, at the right hand of God the Father, was sent to earth for a specific purpose. He came for the broken, the lost, and the hurting. Being fully God, Jesus walked in perfect holiness and righteousness. He was a man, and He was tempted by everything the world had to offer, yet He never sinned. He walked in the full and perfect will of God. Jesus came to break barriers so that we could have a personal relationship with the Father, something that we hadn't had since the garden of Eden before sin entered the world. He chose to give His life for us and died the worst death imaginable. He was crucified on a cross and buried for three days. After those three days, He was resurrected. Through the resurrection, Jesus conquered sin and the wages of sin, which was death. Jesus died for the past, present, and future sins of the world.

All fall short of the glory of God; there isn't one who is sinless. Jesus thought of every single one of us as He chose to hang on the cross and give His life up for us. After Jesus resurrected, He revealed Himself to many, and before He ascended back up to heaven, He told His disciples that it was better that He leave. When Jesus was here on earth, He was in one place at one time. When Jesus went back to be at the right hand of the Father, He sent His Holy Spirit to be with us (John 14:15-28). No matter what we do or where we go, He is with us. God wanted a connection with us. He wanted a relationship so deep and intimate that He chose to make His dwelling place within us. The Holy Spirit is not an "extra." The Holy Spirit is God, the third member of the trinity.

SUNDAY BEST

Growing up, my family and I were Sunday Christians. Basically, we called ourselves Christians and went to church on Sundays, but that was it. The way we saw it, we were the gold standard of what a Christian was, solely because we went to church once a week. What else was there to do? God would be so proud... right?

This is what we saw all around us. All the other families we knew that were Christian did the same thing. We went to church, worshiped, maybe listened to the sermon if we felt really holy that day, and then left. When we left after the service, we abandoned any connection we had to our faith. God stayed at the pulpit and our spirit in our seat until we returned the next week to pick it all back up again. In the days between, we did life on our own terms.

This is what I thought Christianity was. I thought it was for Sunday mornings. From those visits to church with my family, I developed views on religion and faith that are so common among many mainstream believers. I thought that giving the Lord half a day once a week was what He wanted. I thought that we went to church to try and please a God that was so far away, He probably didn't even care

if we were there. I thought that Christianity was dry and boring. I could see a lot of pain and hypocrisy within the church as well as from church leadership. I heard a lot of people talking about their faith on Sunday but not walking it out or letting it affect any other part of their lives the rest of the week. We were all checking “church” off our to-do list.

SUPERNATURAL PEACE

I held these views until I was about 18 years old. When I was 18, my dad started to walk out his faith. What I mean by “walking out his faith” is that Christianity was no longer just his religion or his Sunday morning; it became his identity and his way of life. I saw him changing his life to align with his faith. Jesus became the number one priority in my dad’s life. Seeing this transformation opened me up to a whole new world that I didn’t even know existed.

Not long after my dad started walking with the Lord, his life fell apart. His businesses and finances started losing millions, his daughter (my sister, Abbe) was murdered, the murder trial started, I was deep into addiction and walking a thin line between life and death, his marriage failed, and on top of that, he was hit with a one million dollar lawsuit. Every area of his life had been hit hard.

How one person could handle all of this, I had no idea. I was going through the loss of my sister and struggling with addiction; those two things alone were already too much for me. But my dad was a rock. I started paying more attention to what he was doing because it made no sense that he was stable, full of peace, and hopeful for the future. (I couldn’t even think about the day ahead of me without going into a full panic attack.)

Something was so different about the way I was coming out of trauma than how my dad was. Yes, he was older, more mature, and had more life experience, but I knew that couldn’t be it. The peace

my dad was experiencing during the worst downfall of his life was supernatural.

My dad led Abbe's funeral and used it as an opportunity to share Jesus with everyone who attended. He spoke with authority and glorified God with such conviction on one of the worst days of his life. Because of the way my sister had lived her life, the room was full of drug dealers, pimps, gang members, prostitutes, and drug addicts. On the other hand, because of the way my dad lived his life, the room was also filled with friends, family, business leaders, pastors, and members of the church. Everyone heard about where my sister had gone. They all got to hear about the love, grace, and mercy of their heavenly Father.

After the service, people didn't know what to think. Some people thought my dad was so calm and able to speak so clearly and with such peace because he was going crazy or about to have a psychotic break. Some people felt the Lord in the room as people from all different walks of life got to hear about Jesus, maybe for the first time. Seeds were planted that day in so many different types of people because my dad had a relationship with Jesus.

During all of this, I sat there feeling the exact opposite of my dad. All throughout Abbe's funeral, I was high on Xanax and weed, sitting in the front row sipping "lean." Part of me was angry that my dad was okay, while I felt like I was drowning. I thought that the peace he felt meant that he didn't care, but the truth was that he cared *so much*. The Lord took his broken and grieving heart and allowed him to feel an indescribable peace.

I continued to spiral downhill while my dad continued walking with Jesus. I could see that he had given his life to the Lord. I could see that he was different and that he continued to grow more and more into a man of God with each passing day. He laid down everything at the feet of Jesus because of the relationship that he had cultivated; he saw it as a privilege and an honor to do so.

CHRISTIANITY IS NOT JUST for Sundays. Being a Christian means that every area of your life will look different from the rest the world. Christianity doesn't start when you walk into the four walls of a church and end when you drive out of the parking lot. It's not about rules and restrictions. Being a Christian, being a true follower of Jesus, is about having a deep, intimate and personal relationship with the one true God.

I didn't know that this kind of relationship was possible. I thought that God was somewhere far off in the distance. I thought that He probably had enough to worry about. How could He possibly see (or care about) me? In my head, religion had always been about following rules, which seemed restrictive and unappealing.

By watching my dad, I saw someone's life transformed by the power of having a relationship with Jesus. When I started cultivating my own relationship with Jesus, everything changed. Jesus was no longer a figurehead of a dead religion. He was alive. He was close and personal. Jesus became my best friend. This is a relationship where you can put your highest expectations in the world on Him, and you won't be let down. It's a perfect relationship with a perfect God. He will never fail us.

A relationship with Jesus is the first step, not the only step. Being a Christian means laying down your own desires and taking hold of God's desires. I could sit here and write down for you all the things that must be laid down in your life, but that wouldn't do either of us any good. I cannot walk or talk you into a relationship with Jesus. I can merely point you to Him and help you prepare to seek Him for yourself.

This is something I have learned first-hand in my walk with Jesus. When I was at my low points, people often told me I needed to stop living the way I was, that I needed to change all of my behaviors and

actions before I came to Jesus. They told me I needed to stop using drugs, stop sleeping around, and start distancing myself from the unhealthy friends I had. They told me I should listen to different music and stop going to parties and clubs... the lists were endless. So many people gave me their opinions about my life, but their good intentions fell flat.

Here's the thing—all these behaviors, choices, and actions needed to change in my life. There was no doubt about that. But nothing about people giving me rules and guidelines was actually going to make me do it.

That's why in this book, I am not going to tell you what to do because it's not a list of dos and don'ts that matters most. It's having a relationship with Jesus. I want to share with you my experience of walking with Jesus and the transformation I experienced because of it. I want to point you to Jesus.

As a Christian, it's not my job to change people. It's my job to show others the love of Jesus and let Him take hold of their hearts. It's that process that leads to change. When we pursue God, we are drawn to become more like Him. By taking on our identity in Christ, we leave behind our old selves and the lives we built on who we were.

The reason I totally changed the way I was living was that in building a relationship with Jesus, I fell in love with Him. As I stepped into this relationship, I couldn't step back out. Once I got a taste of who God really is, I wanted more of Him. In fact, I started running after Him full force. My love for Jesus and His love for me is what changed my life. You don't need to have everything figured out and be sin-free to invite Jesus into your life. We will *never* be perfect. You can come to Him in your brokenness and in your mess. He will meet you where you are because His love is a free gift. A free gift that we do not and will not ever deserve. If you are walking in the fullness of your relationship with Jesus, there is no way you can continue living in ways that are destructive or dishonoring to God.

Jesus changes lives. Jesus breaks addiction. Jesus defeats shame, guilt, and fear.

Through seeking a relationship with the Lord and spending time with Him, I have experienced Jesus in ways that are so real and tangible, it's almost indescribable (ironic, I know). Seeing Him move in my life and in the lives of those around me brings me joy. Life has no meaning outside of a relationship with Jesus. When I fully understood that in my heart and was captivated by who He is, it was easy to walk away from sin. Sin is what separates us from God, and I didn't want *anything* to get between me and Jesus.

How do you grow in intimacy and relationship with someone? You talk to them, and you spend time with them. At first, I didn't understand how to do this. How could I spend time with someone who isn't physically here? How could I talk to someone who doesn't talk back?

The thing is, Jesus is always here. He is always with us. He never leaves us; He never abandons us. Even if we walk away from Him, He doesn't ever walk away from us. Not only that, but God speaks! We are His children, and we can hear His voice (this is something that gets easier the more time you spend with Him).¹ We were created to commune with God. We were created for this connection.

HEARING GOD

Talking to God... this gets me so excited! It's so crazy to think that during all those Sundays spent at church, no one told me that I could talk to God and that *He speaks back*. One of my favorite things to do now is talk to God and ask Him questions. Seek, and you will find, ask, and you will get answers!

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who

*asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who
knocks, the door will be opened.*

—Matthew 7:7-8

I was first introduced to hearing God's voice when my dad started walking with the Lord. He would tell me about it, but I didn't believe him. At a certain point, he started inviting me to intercession (prayer) meetings with people who had prophetic giftings. Prophecy is about hearing straight from heaven and relaying messages from God to others.

When I went to those meetings, people I had never met told me things about myself that I had never told anyone. They expressed God's heart to me about those things and spoke into my heavenly callings and my purpose. There was no way that any of them could have guessed about my life with this kind of accuracy. This was not luck; none of them could have known these things about me. I tried to reason through it and make sense of it, but it never did make sense apart from God. God was speaking through these people into my life.

Every time I went into a meeting with people who prophesied over my life, I learned more about who God is and who I was as His child. Certain words would be spoken over me two, three, even four times by different people, confirming what God was saying. I had no hope, and I still couldn't see a future for myself, but I was surrounded by people who heard the voice of God and, through it, called me higher and forward.

I left these meetings with awe and reverence for the Lord. I couldn't believe some of the things that were being said. God wanted to use me. He wanted to use my life. He didn't disqualify me because of my past. I was so excited to get closer to God and to keep building my relationship with Him. On the other hand, part of me left these meetings discouraged. Thoughts raced through my mind about

hearing God's voice, *You will never be able to do that; that's only for some people who are really gifted. He won't speak to you.* I thought hearing God's voice was only for the people who were "holy," the ones who hadn't made all the mistakes I had.

The truth is that we can *all* hear God's voice. It's not for select people. Living in sin separates us from God, which can make it harder to hear His voice. Where there is sin, there is a divide between God and us. As you build a relationship with Jesus and allow Him to transform your life, those divides are torn down, making way for you to walk in the fullness of the relationship that God wants to have with us and for us.

It's not about a big, booming voice calling down from the heavens, although some people do hear God audibly. God speaks in many different ways. It is up to us to be open to receiving what He is speaking. The more we pursue Him, the more familiar His voice will become. The question is not *if God speaks*, but rather *are we listening*? I want to know the voice of God and recognize it over anyone else's. As I am able to recognize my own mother's voice, I want to be able to recognize His voice. This can take time.

The Lord has individual and unique relationships with each of us, so the ways He speaks to us will be equally different and unique as well. When I first started to hear the Lord's voice, I would simply focus on Him. I entered into my time with Him with thanksgiving and prayer. I thanked Him for who He is and for His grace and presence in my life. I prayed that He would speak to me and that I would be able to hear His voice. I would close my eyes and put all my attention on Jesus on the throne. Any passing thoughts I put aside. At first, I might hear a whisper or see a picture. I would pray into whatever I felt the Lord speaking, asking for clarity and anything else the Lord might have for me. Sometimes, I would ask specific questions, and the Lord would come with answers. Sometimes He would answer right away, other times the next day or following week. His timing is

always perfect, and His plans never fail. It is so important to keep that in mind when we seek to hear God's voice.

God is always speaking to us. It's important to be aware of all the possible ways the Lord is probably already trying to speak to you. There are no limits on God. He can speak however He wants to speak, whenever He wants to speak, wherever He wants to speak. Here are just some of the ways God speaks:

- The Bible
- Dreams and visions
- Music, songs, and instruments
- Creation (nature, the world around you)
- Art
- His audible voice
- Emotions (this can be the Holy Spirit coming forth)
- Thoughts
- Signs, wonders, miracles
- Other people
- Physical sensations

STEWARDSHIP GIFTS

The way God speaks to me will be different from the way He speaks to you. For me, God speaks when I write. When I start writing, I don't even have to think about it... it just flows. I will often read back in my journal or something I typed and realize that none of it came from me. I have never been someone who enjoyed or felt confident writing, so the fact that I wrote a book is a miracle. This was not something that came from me. When I sit down to write, I pray, asking the Lord to have full control over the writing session and for His words to fill the pages, not my own. He asked me to write this book, not because I'm a great writer, but because He had

something to say and a message He wanted to share through my life and walk with Him.

God also speaks to me through dreams in the night. I get dreams most of the time that are very straightforward. I often wake up in the middle of the night to write them down in a journal I keep next to my bed because I don't want to miss how the Lord is speaking. These dreams are usually prophetic and sometimes end up playing out in real-time in the next few days.

Having these dreams is such a gift, and when you receive a gift from the Lord, it's important to steward it well. If I had these dreams and did nothing with them, there would be no point. I would be closing an open door to hear from God, ending a phone call, so to speak. I love getting dreams from the Lord. It makes me excited to go to sleep at night, even thinking about the possibility that God might speak to me *in my sleep*. If I steward this gift well, I know that the Lord will continue to speak to me in this way.

God often speaks to me through prophetic visions and thoughts. Images and visions will come into my mind that bring insight and answers.

The Lord also regularly speaks to me using physical sensations in my body. Living in Hawaii (where I am as I write this book), it's hot all the time. However, when I hear something that the Lord wants me to remember or pay attention to, my whole body gets covered in goosebumps. When the Holy Spirit is speaking through someone around me, it allows me to identify the Lord's voice in their words. It is my physical body reacting to what is happening in the spirit.

Every day I learn more about how God speaks to me individually or to the people around me. It is such a gift that the Lord has given to us to be able to hear His voice.

DISCERNING GOD'S VOICE

During some of the hardest moments of my life when I was overtaken by addiction, depression, and self-hatred, I was connected to the spirit world and could hear in the spirit world... but I was tuned into the voice of the enemy. I heard Satan's voice so clearly, without even knowing it.

The voice of the Lord is often described as a still, small voice speaking into the eyes and ears of our heart (1 Kings 19:11-13). When I was more tuned into the voice of the enemy, it was not still or small. It was a constant flow of harassment and torment. It came in the form of suicidal thoughts, thoughts of self-hatred, and overall disdain for life. When I started to walk with the Lord, I learned about the voices that speak to our spirit, and it helped me quiet the voice of the enemy so I could hear what the Lord was saying.

When you seek to hear the Lord's voice, there are three voices you might hear.

1. **Your own voice.** Deciphering your own voice from God's can be difficult sometimes, but not always. Be sure to ask yourself if a thought or word is coming from you or the Lord.
2. **The enemy's voice.** Satan's voice sounds like accusations, lies, deception, and belittlement. He will condemn whereas the Holy Spirit convicts. Satan brings shame where the Lord builds up and encourages.
3. **God's voice.** God's voice is loving and patient. It is kind but correcting. He is firm, consistent, and invites us into peace with Him.

Discernment is vital when determining whether or not you are hearing the voice of God. The best test that you are hearing the voice of God is if what you are hearing lines up with biblical truth. *What*

you hear from God should always align with Scripture. As you practice discernment, ask yourself:

- Does this align with the character and nature of God?
- Does this line up with the Word of God?
- Is this my voice or God's voice?

As you practice talking to the Lord and listening for His voice, it will become easier to discern what is from God and what is not. You can also take what you have heard to another trusted Christian mentor or peer and ask them to pray about it with you, using their discernment to distinguish whether or not what you have heard is from the Lord.

Above all, the most important thing is to cultivate a relationship with Jesus. Seek Him first with your whole heart, and then everything else will fall into place (Matthew 6:33). My relationship with Jesus is the most important relationship in my life. I want to continue walking into new depths of experiencing and understanding who God is as I sit in His presence. There is no finish line or destination; it's a life-long journey that we get to walk with Jesus by our side. No amount of Jesus is ever enough. I pray that I never grow stagnant in my wonder and amazement for who He is. God always has more for us. We only need to keep our eyes focused on Him.

IDENTITY IN CHRIST

Who am I?

I never really gave this much thought before giving my life to Jesus. No one ever really asked me who I was in a way that answering with my name wouldn't qualify as an answer. If someone wanted a more in-depth answer than "I'm Bryn," they would have been out of luck. I had ideas about who I was, but most of them were negative and not something I wanted to actually admit to myself or anyone else. My identity was rooted in what I had done, what others had said about me, and the voice in my head that screamed lies about me throughout the day.

For a long time, I hated myself. Imagine being stuck with someone you don't like 24/7. That's what my entire life felt like. I was stuck with myself, unable to get away from the person I hated most. The way I lived reflected this mindset and showed up as self-hatred, affecting so many of my decisions and my lifestyle. I think this ends up happening to a lot of people, although usually subconsciously.

My drug use and addiction played into fueling this self-hatred by allowing me to numb out and disassociate from myself by causing significant harm to my body and brain. Even though I didn't recognize it at the time, using drugs was a way to self-harm. These and other self-destructive behaviors continued to feed the distorted image of who I was in a cycle that perpetuated itself.

I can also look back at my relationships and see the same pattern. I didn't know who I was, and the little I did know about myself, I hated, so how could anyone else *possibly* like me? Everything in me said I had nothing to offer, which felt confirmed by the very few people who had stuck by my side. The friends I had who didn't do drugs had left me long ago, and the ones who did do drugs didn't want to be around me anymore either. I was so depressed from living life as a victim that they just couldn't take it.

In their place, I looked for emotional connection with men. I wanted to feel wanted because then maybe, just maybe, I would hold some sort of value. I think this was the root of my promiscuity. I saw no value in myself, so I treated my body the same way. I let myself get used by so many men because I thought it was what I wanted. I let myself get used because it felt good to be seen, even if it was just for their personal gratification. Deep down, I knew what was going on. I was still smart enough to see it even at my worst, but I didn't care. Instead, I chose to live in denial seeking validation from people who didn't care about me.

I was so lost for so long that I eventually realized I had no idea who I was. Lies had replaced truth. I believed I was worthless, too far gone, hopeless, and helpless. I believed what society said about me as a teenager (that my rebellion was to be expected) and as a woman (that I was just a sexual object).

But how could I know who I was if I didn't know *whose* I was? I never even came close to understanding my true identity before walking with Jesus.

A REINTRODUCTION

When I started to walk with Jesus and learned about my identity in Christ, the door opened for me to start accepting the truth about who I was as a daughter of the Most High. It helped me identify the lies I believed for years so I could stop speaking them over myself. I was able to replace how I saw myself and how others saw me with how God saw me. It wasn't an automatic switch, but little by little, I began to see myself the way He did.

Allow me to introduce myself, my name is Bryn, and I am a follower of Jesus. I am a Christian. I am a child of God.

Some people might say, "No, that's your religion, not who you are," or "Those are just your beliefs." I get what they are saying because I used to think the same way. What you believe to be true about religion and faith is going to largely impact your view on this.

I am a Christian. Christianity is not something that affects one compartment of my life labeled "religion," it influences everything about my life from the inside out. Being a Christian means that every part of my life is transformed by Christ and aligned with His truth. I was created in the image of God; I am an image-bearer of the one true living God, and I want my whole life to reflect Him. I want to know Him and be known by Him in every area of my life. I was created on purpose and for a purpose. I was created to worship God with all of me and further the kingdom of heaven here on earth.

Something important to remember while reading this chapter is that your identity doesn't come from anything you have or haven't done. It doesn't result from your behaviors and is not rooted in how you've treated people in the past or what others say about you. Your identity in Christ reveals God's original design for you. It shows you the person God created you to be. The person He knew you were before you were even born.

*We have become his poetry, a re-created people that will
 fulfill the destiny he has given each of us, for we are
 joined to Jesus, the Anointed One. Even before we were
 born, God planned in advance our destiny and the good
 works we would do to fulfill it!*
 —Ephesians 2:10, TPT

God knows us better than we know ourselves. He doesn't hold back either. He wants to show us our original design and reveals it to us in a divine instruction manual, one that is timeless: the Bible. The Bible is not just a story. It is God's story that includes us in the narrative. God intentionally designed it like this in order to speak into each of our lives, revealing Himself (i.e., His identity) to us. By doing so, He reveals *our* identity.

Consider this. Let's say someone delivers us a brand new type of car no one has ever seen or knows how to use. What would you say is the best way to learn how to drive it? Go to the source. Get an instruction manual written by the person who created the car because the one that made it knows how it works better than anyone else. The Bible is like that. Except instead of going to God's Word to tell us who we are and how we work, we often go to the world to tell us what to do and believe.

To get to a destination, we need to know where we are and where we are going. The Bible serves our identity to us on a gold platter all throughout Scripture. It tells us how God created us, why He created us, and how we should live to honor our Creator. It even reveals to us where we are headed. Knowing the end of the story helps define how we should live our lives on earth. When we understand our identity and our destination, we can better see, understand, and walk into our callings. All of this prepares us for eternity with Him.

IN HIS IMAGE

Understanding my identity in Christ has been crucial to the life-change I have experienced. I love sharing about my journey through these different topics, but writing this chapter carries extra weight for me. God doesn't just want me to reveal to you my identity in Christ. He wants to speak truth and identity over you.

God created you in His image. You were created to reflect the image of God (Genesis 1:27). God made you, loves you, and loves every detail about you. We are the only beings on earth created to host the presence of God. Read that again.

We are the only beings on earth created to host the presence of God.

You were literally designed to be in a relationship and commune with God. Can you believe that? It still shocks me that we get to be in partnership with God.

I know all of this because God's Word reveals it. As I read and become more rooted in Scripture, I understand better the truth of who God made me to be. I am no longer just Bryn, I am a child of God, and the same is true for you (John 1:12; Galatians 3:26). Psalm 91 and Psalm 139 are great places to start in Scripture to help you begin to understand your original design. When you know what the Word of God says about you and bury it deep in your heart, it is so much easier to stand against attacks from the enemy.

If someone came up to me and tried to tell me my name was Tom, there would be no question about whether he was right or wrong. That is not my name. I could easily pull out an ID or scrounge up my birth certificate to prove my name is not Tom. The same is true of the Bible. If the enemy or someone starts feeding you lies about who you are, you can look to God's Word to show them your true identity as a child of God.

Our primary identity is established in who we are in our relationship with God. We can be totally confident in God's love for us, even in our weaknesses and failures. God's love is not conditional; His love is not dependent on doing everything right. No matter how far we stray from God, it doesn't change the fact that we were created in His image.

For example, if I made a statue of a bird, it is not the bird itself but an image of the bird. No matter how much the statue deteriorates over time from neglect or abuse, that doesn't change the fact that it is a statue of a bird. The same is true for the way we bear God's image. If circumstances or past choices don't shift the way God views us, why do we let those things bear so much weight in how we see ourselves?

Before the foundation of the earth, God knew you. You are destined for a purpose on the earth and are worth the life of Christ and His great sacrifice. The God of the universe knows everything about you and cares for you. God loves us all the same, the sinner and the saint. Believing that in your heart is essential to stepping into your identity in Christ.

Our desires, gifts, and abilities reflect how we are uniquely created with a purpose. Often, we separate God from our desires, when in reality, He placed those desires in our hearts for a reason. (Beware of desires that don't line up biblically, for that is the test of whether they come from God or the enemy.) Every single part of you was specifically and intentionally chosen by God. There is no one like you and never will be anyone like you. You are a living masterpiece, His masterpiece!

Only in our complete surrender can we discover our true identity. In Christ, if we are not able to see ourselves as sons and daughters of the Most High God, we cannot walk into our purpose. This is who you are in Christ, a son or daughter, holy, a child of God, of infinite value, totally free, made with a purpose, completely forgiven and

unconditionally loved. These are biblical truths of who God created you to be and who we all are, even if we aren't fully walking it out in our lives.

Let me pause here to clarify something about your purpose. As believers, we have one ultimate purpose of praising and worshiping God, our Father in heaven. When we do that, we put Him back in His rightful place as the Lord and Savior of our lives. No longer will we flounder trying to understand our place or identity in the world. Our identity is in Christ. Our purpose is found in Him.

He guides our steps into unique callings He has placed on our lives. This is specific to who He made us be, the circumstances we are surrounded by, the people in our lives, and the unique passions and interests He has given us. Christians have one purpose but many callings.

Now I'll get back to where I left off.

In Christ, you are dead to sin. You are free. It is so important to know who we are and believe it because, as humans, we live our lives according to what we believe to be true. What we believe affects our actions and behaviors. Knowing even the simple fact that you are chosen by God and valuable to Him can completely transform your life.

You may be reading this and thinking, "That's not me" or "You don't know my story." The truth is, there is nothing any of us can do to earn these titles. Nothing can forfeit you from these titles either. We are who God says we are, not because of what we have or haven't done, but because of who God is and who He created us to be. Our past actions or behaviors cannot disqualify us from our true identity because it is not something we can qualify for in the first place.

REPLACING LIES

The lies outlined below are all forms of pride that separate us from God. Most of the time, when we hear about pride, we think of someone having an inflated view of themselves, but pride is also having a deflated view of one's self. These lies often come from past wounds, which allow the enemy to have a hold on you by using those wounds against you. These enable something called an *orphan spirit* to operate in our lives. The spirit of sonship is what Jesus died to give us. (We will go into this more in depth in the next chapter.)

These are the three big lies:

- I am not lovable
- I am not enough
- I am not worthy

In Christ, we have full status as sons and daughters of God, our Father. The enemy will do everything he can to make you believe lies that separate you from God. Without exception, these lies are believed by all people to greater or lesser extents at various points in their lives until they are revealed and healed. The spirit of adoption results in sonship, which destroys the power of those lies forever, thus solidifying our identity in Christ.

Typically we believe one of these lies a little more than the others at different points in our lives until the lie is brought to the surface. But remember, they are all lies! The enemy is not creative; he doesn't come up with new strategies. He uses the same attacks over and over. Once we are able to identify the lies, we can combat them using the Word of God and owning the truth of who God says we are.

The lie I believed most about myself through my past abuse was, "I am not worthy." When I looked at myself, all I could see was

someone used and abused. This was how the enemy kept a hold on me.

I wasn't consciously aware of this lie (or Satan) operating in my life. But once it came to the surface, it all made sense, and I made a choice to renounce the lie by speaking truth into my life. When I learned about my identity in Christ, I had to make a decision. Was I going to side with the enemy's lies about who I thought I was or the truth of who God says I am? Jesus gives us our identity, but it's our choice whether we want to walk in it or not.

Once we uncover the lie, it begins to lose power as the light shines into the darkness. Sharing your feelings and these lies with another safe person is even more powerful. Verbally break agreement with each lie. A lie has no power until we agree with it. Satan uses fear, secrecy, and shame to empower the lie. Vulnerability and humility allow us to express how we are feeling, allowing light to shine in.

While writing this chapter, I came across a list of lies that I believed about my identity from August of 2018. I had written out this list and then went through each false belief, asking God to replace each lie with the truth of who I am as a child and image-bearer of God. Below is a copy of this list.

LIE (THE ENEMY SAYS I AM...)

- Unfixable
- Unlovable
- Worthless
- Unimportant
- Not good enough
- A problem
- Used up
- Ugly
- Bad

- A victim

TRUTH (GOD SAYS I AM...)

- Complete and clean
- Extremely lovable
- Priceless
- Unique and irreplaceable
- Worthy
- A solution
- Renewed and recharged
- A beautiful woman of God
- Created to be a reflection of God
- More than an overcomer, a victor

If you feel led, I encourage you to make a list for yourself. Which lies have you believed about yourself? Who does God say you are? Processing through these questions allowed me to combat each lie from the enemy in a tangible way. I consistently went back to my list of truths at the beginning of my transformation until my true identity was so firmly rooted within me I didn't need to look at it anymore.

Write out the list of lies that come up for you and then pray and ask the Lord to reveal how He sees you. God will show up in this place. He loves to reveal true identity to His children!

These lies not only showed me where I wasn't seeing myself clearly but also showed me false beliefs I had about God. I believed that I wasn't good enough, but God created me perfectly in His image. God doesn't make mistakes; He doesn't create things that are "not good enough."

If I really understood this about God, I would not have had these misconceptions about myself. I was created in the image of God. I do

not reflect a God who is any of the lies stated above. I reflect a perfect God. What I believed to be true about myself showed me what I believed to be true about God as my Creator (and vice versa), even if I was unaware at the moment.

Knowing our identity is vital. After coming to terms with the lies you have believed about your identity, I recommend building a list of scriptures declaring the truth of who God says you are. Read them over yourself daily and commit them to heart through memorization. These are some of my favorites verses:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
—Romans 8:1

And to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.
—Ephesians 4:24

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.
—2 Corinthians 5:17, ESV

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”
—Jeremiah 29:11

We have become his poetry, a re-created people that will fulfill the destiny he has given each of us, for we are joined to Jesus, the Anointed One. Even before we were born, God planned in advance our destiny and the good works we would do to fulfill it!
—Ephesians 2:10, TPT

VICTIM VS. VICTOR MINDSET

(ORPHAN SPIRIT VS. SPIRIT OF SONSHIP)

In every circumstance, you have the choice to embrace the positive or negative. Regardless of the situation, no matter how bad things are or what has happened to you, you always have a choice.

Someone with a victor's mindset will embrace the positive, and someone with a victim's mindset will choose to embrace the negative. Mindsets are displayed through our attitudes. Attitude, mixed with what people believe to be true about life, determines what a person will or will not embrace on their journey.

This doesn't take away from how awful some experiences in life are. Pain, trauma, suffering, and the effects of sin are very real and have real consequences. But God is bigger than all of it and empowers us to choose how we will move forward.

As you know, some of the things that have happened in my life were out of my control, and the situations I unknowingly found myself in were horrible. I wouldn't wish them on anyone.

How I move forward, however, is a choice, and it is up to me.

VICTIMHOOD

I lived a lot of my life as a victim. I think this was at least partially because I wanted to; I was used to it, and resting in victimhood was comfortable. In my experience, people often make choices that serve them in the moment. At the time, playing the victim served me, or so I thought. It allowed me to blame my current behaviors on my past experiences. A victim makes excuses for the condition of their life, whereas a victor makes commitments to change and move forward.

When I lived as a victim, I wasn't worried about my future; I didn't care about growing or changing. I was surviving. Sure, maybe that was the easiest thing to do; I didn't have to look at myself or hold a mirror up to see who I really was. I didn't care to understand the role I had to play in my past, and I didn't hold myself responsible for anything. *Anything*.

I also wasn't happy. How could I be happy when I blamed the world for everything that had happened to me? How could I be happy when I felt powerless over my own life? How could I be happy when the world was "out to get me?" I couldn't. I wasn't. There was no chance I could be happy thinking any of those things.

A victim is someone who lets life happen to them, someone who lets circumstances and events in their lives control their outcomes. After letting life become the enemy, victims often blame others for what is going on in their own lives. They are so focused on what they think others should be doing that they don't see what *they* should be doing.

Victims are narcissistic, meaning they think or act as if the world revolves around them (whether they realize it or not). This usually leads to a mindset of... "everyone is out to get me" or "why does everything happen to me?" or seeing others as threats. Victims are selfish, self-focused, and unconcerned about the well-being or lives of others. They are only worried about themselves. Victims will

often deny the truth, leading them to a point where they are trapped in their own lives.

I showed up to life as a victim through all of my teenage years. After being abused throughout my childhood, my whole view of the world was skewed. I often felt sorry for myself, and that was all that mattered to me. When I started using drugs at 12 years old, it was because I wanted to numb myself. I couldn't handle the emotional burden my childhood had put on me. The abuse I experienced, I thought, gave me an excuse to use drugs. It was like I had a *right* to do drugs because of what someone else had done to me.

Claiming that "right" was me showing up as a victim and living in self-pity. I made excuses for my behaviors and let my past dictate my future.

I believed the world was a scary place and that people were inherently bad. I carried that mindset with me throughout my whole life until I was 20 years old (I am 22 as I write this book). Because I carried this mindset with me for so long, I got what I was looking for. I fed my unconscious mind the idea that the world was a bad place, so that's exactly how I saw it. By feeding myself these thoughts, I unknowingly made them true. Everywhere I looked, I hoped to find proof that would validate my internal ideals of the world. My perspective was my choice, therefore how I lived in the world because of it was my own doing.

AT THIS POINT in my life, being a victim doesn't serve me. Really, it never did, but my motives in life were different then. A big reason I kept living with a victim mindset for so long was that I didn't know I had the power to change. I didn't understand that being a victim was a choice. A choice I was making every day. It's impossible to change

something you aren't aware of, so once I realized what I was doing, I had no excuse.

A victor realizes that they have control over both their outlook on life and their future. A victor doesn't let life's circumstances take control of their outcomes; no matter the situation, we have a choice. A victor takes responsibility for their own life, whether that means for their actions or their behaviors. A victor has an inward focus, not in a selfish way but in a reflective and mindful way. This means that they aren't looking around at what everyone else is or isn't doing and passing judgment; it means they are focused on what they themselves should or shouldn't be doing. A victor will always look for where they can grow, develop, and improve *themselves*.

As I said before, when a victim faces challenges, they feel like the world is against them. On the opposite end of the spectrum, a victor sees life challenges as opportunities to grow. A victor is in control of their life and directs themselves where they want to go instead of letting life call the shots. Overall, someone living with a victor's mindset will live free and empowered versus trapped and controlled.

An example of when I showed up to life as a victor is when I started life coaching. Abbe was killed about a year before I began meeting with my life coach. At this point, life was a rollercoaster that I didn't want to be on. It felt like I didn't have a choice or a chance to get off, and I had been living like that for a long time.

I was unable to cope with my emotions, and ultimately, I let my emotions dictate my choices and behavior. Even the smallest inconveniences took me down a wild spiral. If an egg dropped while I was making breakfast, I'd be on the floor crying right alongside it. If I couldn't open a jar, I'd get angry and yell at myself or sometimes even at the jar. I never felt settled, and my anxiety was on high alert at all times. I reached a point where I just couldn't take it anymore.

That's when I gave life coaching a chance for the first time. I kept hearing how different it was from therapy. I had done years of therapy for trauma, but I felt like I was going in circles. I'd talk about things with my therapist, and the therapist would say things like "I hear you," or "Wow, that must be hard." In my head, all I could think was, *How does that help?* Oftentimes, it didn't. If anything, it helped me stay in a victim mindset.

There is a time and place for both therapy and life coaching, and I was ready to get off of the hamster wheel I had found myself on. It was time to take control of my own life. Get out of the cage and go take a real walk to get some fresh air and a change of scenery.

What I really wanted was results. I decided I wanted to change how I was living and that I was committed to working as hard as I could to shift my mindset from victim to victor. I looked at this challenge as an opportunity to grow (victor's mentality) instead of being angry that I had a lot of work ahead of me (victim's mentality).

A TOTAL SHIFT

Starting coaching was like making a commitment to live my life with a victor's mindset. Even when it was hard and uncomfortable, I stuck with it. It was my chance to learn and be curious about myself. One huge factor that impacted my coaching experience was my life coach herself. She was a Christian who made a point of letting the Holy Spirit lead when we were in session. The Lord walked me through this shift of mindset in a way that I could grasp. I will forever be grateful for this experience.

After changing my mindset, everything else aligned. I was able to control my emotions, my anxiety was no longer in charge of my life, and I could respond rather than react to situations.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, we have no control over some situations in life. Some things just happen, and we don't get a say.

That doesn't mean that we have to be a victim of the situation, though. Even in situations that we can't control, we still have a choice. We have the choice to either receive it as a victim or a victor. We can feel bad for ourselves and wallow in our suffering, or we can choose to learn, grow, and be positive about how God can use our story moving forward.

Interestingly, mindsets all relate to biblical truth! Remember what I said previously about truths that line up with Scripture? Well, this one definitely does.

The Bible talks a lot about sonship, the opposite being an "orphan spirit." This is the root of the victor versus victim mindset. Wounds and identity issues make it difficult for anyone to receive the inheritance of true sonship. It was impossible for me to walk in a spirit of sonship (same for daughters) until I was able to identify the lies I believed about myself and replace them with my true identity in Christ. We all start out as creations of God, but we become sons and daughters when we accept Jesus into our lives and become born again in the Spirit. We are new creations.

We all start as orphans, separated from God. (This is due to the fall of man, which you can read about in Genesis 3.) Only when we accept Jesus into our lives, declaring Him as the one true God, do we become adopted into His family. This is sonship! Even after giving our lives to Jesus, a lot of people still operate as orphans. This is where we need to invite the Holy Spirit into our lives, asking Him to heal us of past wounds or misguided beliefs that cause us to remain in an orphan spirit. Some indicators of an orphan spirit are:

- Feeling anxiety
- Feeling depression
- Feeling shame or guilt
- Comparing
- Feeling self-hatred

- Being judgmental
- Lacking peace
- Having difficulty receiving feedback/correction
- Seeing God as distant
- Not relying on God to meet your needs
- Living by the law instead of the Spirit

Oftentimes someone operating in an orphan spirit gets their worth from feeling needed and wanted by others. Our validation should only come from the Lord. Anything less is bondage.

Most people and many Christians think all of the thoughts that come into their minds are their own, which is not true. We must understand that accusatory and condemning thoughts look to kill, steal, and destroy our faith, identity, hope, and love. These don't come from God. When we are filled with the spirit of adoption, these thoughts (lies) bounce off of us. As a son or daughter, the indicators are very different:

- Having a right view of self
- Exhibiting humility
- Operating out of a place of love for others
- Seeing yourself (and others) how God sees you
- Receptive to feedback
- Serving others
- Seeking the Father for validation
- Relying on God to meet your needs
- Offering and receiving forgiveness
- Giving grace
- Living by the Spirit instead of the law

This is freedom and abundant life. This is the truth of walking in a spirit of sonship. You are a victor because Christ said so!

God's love is a gift. He doesn't love us because of what we have done or who we are. It's a gift that we do not deserve, we cannot earn, and cannot be taken away. All we need to do is accept that gift. The Bible is a resource God gave us to know Him, but Jesus is the way we get to know the Father's heart. He is an exact representation of the Father. When we know Jesus, we know the Father. By walking in sonship and seeking His presence, we are changed by His grace and His glory from the inside out.

Ultimately, through faith in Jesus, we become children of God and an entirely new creation born into His family. The heart of the Father has always been turned toward His children, and Jesus perfectly modeled the heart of the Father. God grants us the spirit of sonship. Our serving comes from sonship. Obedience doesn't come from a sense of duty but out of a response to God's love and faithfulness to us. It is about falling in love with Jesus, who will lead us to the Father. God is longing for us to embrace Him. When we find Him, we will find ourselves, and that is sonship!

STRONGHOLDS

Imagine walking through a field of grass. It's a nice day, the sun is shining, and there isn't a cloud in the sky. All of a sudden, you step on a landmine. You had no idea it was there. How could you? It wasn't expected, it wasn't planned, it doesn't make sense. The same is true with strongholds.

The Lord allows us to live in full freedom. He gives us the ability to live life to the fullest. Sometimes when we think of freedom, we think of being able to do whatever we want, whenever we want, but this is not true freedom. True freedom is found walking in an honest, real relationship with the Lord. To do this, we need to get rid of anything that gets in the way of walking in the fullness of life that Jesus has for us. Breaking down strongholds is essential to this process.

Ed Silvoso defines strongholds in a really simple way in his book, *Strongholds*. He defines them as “incorrect thinking patterns that form when we listen to—and believe—the lies of the enemy.”¹ Strongholds show us the posture of our hearts toward truth and ultimately toward the Lord.

Often strongholds are there because we are unaware of them. They are formed over time, they are dangerous, and they are hidden in our minds. Just like a landmine, these things are usually buried beneath the surface. Although the strongholds themselves may be hidden, they allow the enemy to operate openly in our lives. Strongholds are one of the most common weapons of the enemy. Operating strongholds are a form of bondage. The enemy wants us in bondage to hold us back from being able to walk in the fullness of the relationships, life, purpose, and destiny the Lord has for us.

BY HIS POWER AND GRACE

God will never force us to do anything, but if we are in a place where our aim is to walk in alignment with the will of God and live in obedience to Christ, it allows God to move in our hearts in a way that in itself delivers and purifies us.

The week or so before I got on a plane to Kona, Hawaii, to start my discipleship training school, I slipped back into some of my old habits. I hadn't been using drugs for several months leading up to my arrival, and things were really looking up. I felt like I had more of a handle on my addiction, and although it was hard, I had been making a choice every day to not use. Even though I wasn't using, I still wanted to. It was an everyday battle. The enemy didn't want me to go because He knew that I was in the process of surrendering my life to Jesus. So the attacks came... and it wasn't something I expected or prepared for.

At this point in my life, I had labeled myself as an addict. I thought I was an addict because it ran in my family, and I thought I had a predisposition for abusing substances. Part of my identity had become wrapped up in my label as an addict. Addiction wasn't just something I dealt with. I *was* an addict. It was also something I thought I could never get away from. I thought I would *always be* an addict.

There were so many false beliefs wrapped up in my drug use that all came together to form the stronghold of addiction in my life. I had such a twisted and distorted view of what drugs were at that time. Yeah, I knew they were bad for you, but mostly I saw them as a comfort. I thought they were fun, and they made me “happy.” I thought that nothing else in life could bring me that kind of happiness or comfort. I had stopped searching because I thought I had found what I was looking for in drugs.

THE BATTLE IS WON

There is a spiritual battle over your life, one that is unseen. The enemy wants to keep you from God and will do whatever it takes to do that. But here’s the thing—the battle is already won.

*But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our
Lord Jesus Christ.
—1 Corinthians 15:57*

Jesus already claimed victory, but it is up to us to walk in that victory. Because the battle is won, the enemy has no power over us. He only has what we choose to give him. You might be thinking, “How do we choose to give the enemy power?” By simply agreeing with him. The enemy is looking for agreement. When we agree with the enemy, we empower him, and we give him access to our lives.

Sometimes we place blame on Satan for the operation of these strongholds in our lives, but agreement is *our choice*. Agreement with Satan’s lies invites his jurisdiction over the area surrounding the lie.

Agreement can come in the form of a thought that doesn’t align with biblical truth (a lie) that we adopt as truth. (This is often how I notice strongholds starting to operate in my life.) It could be a lie about who you are, about God, about someone else, literally anything. The moment we adopt that lie (anything counter to the Word of God) as

truth and believe it, we open the door to the enemy, which opens the door to sin, which leads to more lies or other areas of compromise in our lives, which creates a stronghold. Once a stronghold is formed, you no longer see it because, at this point, you see it as the truth. The moment you recognize the lie as truth, you start to live out the lie.

Even unhealed traumas and hurts can create an open door that allows strongholds to operate. This can happen through any bitterness, unforgiveness, or resentment that we hold in our hearts.

An easy access point into our lives would be any type of sin. When you choose to sin, you are actively agreeing with the kingdom of darkness, and that empowers the enemy. This can come from using things like drugs or engaging in any sexual sin. Gateways can also include lying, gossip, ungodly judgement of others, self-hatred, or self-pity. Even using things like ouija boards, tarot cards, or any objects/symbols related to the occult (or related to any false religion) are direct gateways for the demonic to operate in your life. This includes the music you listen to and the TV shows and movies you watch.

Anything that can open doors of influence can eventually lead to strongholds. Generational sin (sin in your family line) can also allow ground for the enemy unless it is dealt with. I encourage you to look back at your family history with the Holy Spirit to try to uncover any ungodly patterns or open doors to the demonic (known sin or sin patterns). Confess, renounce, and repent to remove the hold of generational iniquity on your life. (This could be a whole book in itself, and it is beyond the scope of this chapter, so I'll leave it at that.)

THE SPIRIT REALM

Spiritual agreement results in natural manifestations in our life, both positive and negative. Often when strongholds come into the light, we are seeing a natural manifestation of spiritual bondage operating in our lives. On the other hand, if we hold godly beliefs, we will see good fruit in our lives.

Agreement with the enemy will align with a demonic spirit. Examples of demonic spirits we can align ourselves with include the spirit of fear, the spirit of perversion, the spirit of infirmity (sickness), the spirit of death, the spirit of poverty, the spirit of rejection, the spirit of addiction, lying spirits, and so many more. Some examples of natural manifestations of partnering with these spirits include feeling anxiety, insecurities, irrational fears, substance abuse, social addictions (co-dependencies), bitterness, depression, victimization, anger, hopelessness, mistrust, insignificance, self-consciousness, etc.

We are often unaware of strongholds until they are uncovered or, just like a landmine, they explode. The Holy Spirit will reveal your blind spots, mercifully showing you a way forward to freedom. Strongholds can also be uncovered by other people, people that are in a relationship with Jesus, Holy Spirit-filled, and walking in alignment with God.

BREAKING OFF STRONGHOLDS

Breaking off strongholds does not have to be a big, confusing process. To put it simply, there are four main steps. The first is simply revealing the stronghold. The second step is to discover the roots and lies that have formed the false belief system currently operating. (Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you what lies you have believed, as well as welcome the outside eyes of another trusted Christian. Often, others can see our blind spots!) The third step is to

confess, repent, and renounce every lie that makes up the ungodly belief system and cover any sin that may have been committed as a result of holding this belief system. Lastly, go through every individual lie and replace it with the truth. This step is vital. You must replace deceit with the truth. If this step is missed, it is easy to fall back into old patterns of thinking.

When I go through this process, I write a list of the truth statements found in Scripture and keep them somewhere I will see them every day. I would suggest speaking them out loud over yourself daily for at least 40 days (modeled after Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, who each fasted for 40 days as a test to their faith and to achieve a goal). This is roughly how long it takes to form a habit. Just as Jesus fasted to resist the devil, speaking truth over lives is how *we* resist the devil and submit to the Word of God. This is where the battle is won. This is how we can break strongholds through the power of the Holy Spirit.

RESISTING THE ENEMY

Sin is enticing. Otherwise, there would be no pull to engage in it. Sin operates directly from your flesh. When sin is pulling on you, it is a telltale sign that your flesh is in control and that you need to turn back toward God (deny yourself). Sin can seem fun and even intoxicating for a season, but ultimately it brings death. Usually, there is a delayed reaction or consequence to sin, but it always comes, sometimes after death.

Now I can see how my beliefs were filled with lies. I can see that there were so many little pieces that built up the stronghold of addiction in my life. At the time, I couldn't see the stronghold operating, partly because I didn't really know what strongholds were, but partly because these didn't seem like lies to me. This is why we must be filled with the truth, the Word of God, and the Spirit of God.

Deception is one of the ways the enemy can trick us into agreeing with him. We even see this through the first sin ever committed in the garden of Eden (Genesis 3). Eve was deceived by Satan. The enemy is not creative; he has been using the same techniques as long as he's been around. Once we are able to identify the few and simple-minded ways he attacks, we are able to let things like lies slide off of us. As we partner with truth through the Word of God, the lies become easier and easier to spot and reject.

I used cocaine every day for the whole week leading up to my discipleship training school. I was also still smoking cigarettes, so when I got to Hawaii, I started to withdraw. It was in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, so we were all isolated in our rooms for two weeks upon arrival. That meant going outside for a cigarette wasn't even an option (and that was really hard for me). I went into a full breakdown. I was crying, and I felt like I couldn't breathe. Some of the school leaders came to talk to me, and I told them I needed a cigarette. Obviously, that wasn't an option, so then I asked for a vape. One of the requirements of participating in their school was not using substances of any kind. I already knew that, and I was planning to stay sober for the five months I would be there, but at the time, I didn't really think cigarettes were a big deal. So they gave me a choice: I could either use this time in isolation to quit, or I could choose to go home and smoke cigarettes. Seems like a pretty simple choice, but at the time, it was really hard for me. Cigarettes did the same thing for me that drugs did. It was another false sense of comfort. It gave me a short-lived artificial sense of peace. It was yet another thing I turned to instead of God.

When I got out of quarantine, I bought a vape right away. I kept it hidden from most other people, and I thought it was fine because I didn't personally feel convicted about it. That is a really dangerous thing because ultimately, it doesn't matter if I feel convicted or not. Truth is not determined by my feelings. God is clear about addiction and how to treat your body, a temple of the Holy Spirit.

I didn't feel convicted at the time because I wasn't aligned with the truth. Our beliefs influence our choices, our choices result in actions, and our actions make up our lifestyles. Our beliefs are the root and the starting place for the fruit our lives bear. That is why it is so important that our beliefs align with God and truth.

THE POWER OF COMMUNITY

Living in a community rooted in truth, my beliefs started to shift. The Holy Spirit was moving in powerful ways, and lies were being uncovered almost daily for everyone. I was surrounded by people who helped me uncover areas of my life that weren't aligned with the Lord, and there were many.

As I continued to walk with the Lord, my life and my heart started to transform at a rapid pace. I remember one speaker who started talking about compromise. She said that when you make compromises in the little things that "don't matter," you will make compromises in the big things too. Right away, I thought about the vape in my room, and it struck a chord in my heart that hadn't been struck in a long time. Then, even though about 30 people were listening to the woman speak, she looked right at me. We had never met or talked before, but I knew she was making a point to look at me. She kept eye contact and said, "Yeah, you can smoke. You can make that choice, but you aren't going to be able to impact girls and young women all over the world with a cigarette hanging out of your mouth. You can choose to smoke, but the moment you walk off a stage and light up a cigarette, everything you have just said loses its value, and your words will mean nothing."

My smoking stronghold was uncovered. From that point on, I really started to notice the natural manifestations of the stronghold of addiction operating in my life. As I continued to walk in agreement with all of the lies I had adopted, I was able to see the resulting fruit

of this belief system in my life: I was in a place of constant anxiety, I could feel it deep in my chest, and it put my stomach in constant knots; I felt hopeless for my future; I was angry with myself and those around me; I wasn't happy, and I would often glorify using drugs in my head. Ultimately these natural manifestations in my life only led to one place—falling back into sin.

Right away, I knew what I had to do. After class, I went back to my room and got my vape and everything that came with it. I went down to the beach, I prayed, repented, and proclaimed freedom from the stronghold of addiction, and I smashed it with a rock.

As I walked back to the base, I was flooded with truth. I felt thankfulness and joy that I was given the opportunity to be in such an incredible place that encouraged me to run after Jesus. I felt a new conviction that I hadn't felt before. I had asked to be a part of this community, and it was a privilege to be there; the least I could do was honor the rules set in place. So, I went to some of the staff and held myself accountable and repented. The next day I held myself accountable in front of the students and repented to them as well.

This didn't make me not have cravings, and this didn't make it easy to quit nicotine, but it was a start. I was able to see that smoking allowed the stronghold of addiction to continue operating undetected and unseen. At that point, I had to choose every day whether or not to smoke, to choose God over addiction.

Over the next few weeks, the Lord continued to reveal the truth to me to replace the lies that had set up camp in my mind. The renewing of the mind is a constant process, and it's one with no finish line. I chose to side with God and truth every day, and He gave me the strength to let go of addiction. I was getting rooted in my true identity as a daughter of the Most High and as a sister in the body of Christ, not as a drug addict. In the past, addiction had felt too big to overcome, but now I could see clearly that Jesus was

bigger. It wasn't about what I could or couldn't sustain on my own. It was about fully surrendering to God. To use His strength to deny my flesh instead of dwelling on my weaknesses.

Strongholds cause us not only to see ourselves wrongly but also to see God wrongly. We can't expect to understand the character and nature of God correctly if we are living and operating out of a place of ungodly beliefs (lies).

NO LIMITS

It is always the power of God that breaks strongholds. He is not limited. He can bring you into freedom whenever and wherever He wants. He listens to the cries of our heart. It brings God such joy when that cry is for the freedom to walk in alignment with Him.

As I continue to walk with the Lord, strongholds continue to come to the surface. When that happens, I thank God (even if it's hard) because it's an opportunity for me to get closer to Him. There is always more freedom to be had in a relationship with Jesus. God will continue to reveal areas where we need alignment or realignment. His timing is perfect, and His grace is abundant. Be aware. Sometimes when we feel weak or disappointed, Satan may circle back around and test to try and get agreement once again.

Ultimately, the end result of breaking down strongholds is a life of submission and agreement with God.



A FEW WEEKS after breaking my vape on the rock, I felt discouraged. Temptation hit hard, and to be honest, I felt like a victim of addiction. This attack on my newfound freedom and clarity made it feel like all of a sudden everything the Lord had done in my heart was

gone. Not only was I feeling a pull back to cigarettes, but for the first time in a while, I felt a pull back to using drugs.

In a place of desperation, I cried out to God. I was real with Him. I told Him I couldn't do it, that I wasn't strong enough. I told Him that I needed Him to come through. God loves it when we are real with Him when we cry out to Him. Strongholds aren't broken because of anything that we choose to do or not do; they are broken by the power of God.

The next day that is exactly what the Lord did. Someone laid hands on me and started praying. Almost immediately, I was knocked over by the power of the Holy Spirit. At the time, I had heard of people getting "slain in the Spirit," but I never thought it would happen to me. I was on the ground for about 45 minutes. I knew where I was, but I couldn't move any part of my body.

While I was on the ground, the Lord started speaking to me. First, He showed me visions of all the awful things I had done with my hands. It wasn't condemning, but it was convicting. As He brought me through visions of hot-wiring cars, cutting lines of coke, and cooking crack, I began to weep. As I wept, I felt God weeping with me. He wasn't mad at me, He was heartbroken. Then, clearly, softly and gently, He said to me, "Look at what you have done with what I created." At that moment, my heart broke, too.

Then I saw huge, thick, rusted chains that connected the memories to me. I visually saw the chains of addiction in my life. They were massive; there was no chance I was ever going to be able to break them on my own.

In a second, God took the chains and snapped them as if they were little twigs. It looked as if it took no effort at all. In the same moment, they were gone. Then the Lord spoke again, "How could you ever go back to that after experiencing me like this?" Again I

started to weep. There was no chance I was going back to that lifestyle after experiencing the power and love of God in such a real and tangible way.

From that day forward, I have claimed and walked in freedom from the stronghold of addiction, not because of my own strength but by the strength of the One who set me free.

FORGIVENESS

A victim can't be a victim without something or someone to blame for what has gone wrong... and I had a lot of people to blame for the trajectory of my life.

I blamed the person who mentally, physically, and sexually abused me for ten years throughout my childhood. I blamed both my parents for giving me a skewed sense of what a relationship should look like. I blamed the person that raped me in the car. I blamed the people that drugged me and raped me after the party. I blamed the people who got me into using drugs. I blamed the people who murdered my sister. I even blamed God for dealing me this deck of cards.

There's no chance I was going to be happy or be able to move forward when I was so focused on what other people had done wrong instead of focusing on myself. As I've said before, I had a role to play in almost all of these circumstances. I was putting myself in negative situations and around people whose behavior was a negative influence. What did I expect to happen? Thrive? No chance.

LEARNING TO FORGIVE

True forgiveness is rooted in God's love and does not come from how you feel. It was really hard to get to a place where I truly forgave everyone in my life. Forgiveness doesn't work if it's coming from your head; it has to come from your heart for it to truly take hold.

Learning to forgive was one of the most powerful things I have done for me to move forward in life. As long as I lived with a victim mentality (or an orphan spirit), I couldn't forgive. I could not have truly walked into forgiveness without the Lord leading me and changing my heart.

Forgiveness is necessary to move on with your life in a healthy way. Sometimes the people who hurt you don't care whether or not you forgive them. In these situations, it's not about them; it's about you. In other words, not forgiving others will only hurt you in the end. The undealt with resentment will eventually harden your heart, building up anger and pain inside of you that will only weigh you down. It could open the door to thoughts of revenge or other toxic behaviors that may spill out onto others.

As a Christian, I had to learn what it meant to truly forgive. Forgiveness is a decision to let go of any bitterness, resentment, and judgment toward another person. This doesn't mean you have to forget what they did. Every circumstance and situation is an opportunity for growth and learning.

Forgiveness does not mean that we don't recognize the severity of what happened and our emotions around the situation. When we forgive others, we allow God into the darker places of our hearts, and He is able to shine a light that renews and transforms the place of pain. Whatever "it" is, you will need to invite God in and allow Him to help you release the person you want to forgive to be freed

and shift your behaviors so you can move forward in health and wholeness.

THIS I COMMAND YOU

As I grew closer to the Lord, I realized that forgiveness is not really a choice; it is a command. God is loving and merciful with enough grace to forgive the worst of the worst, but to receive that forgiveness ourselves, we must forgive others (Matthew 6:14). That said, even though we are commanded to forgive, we still have the free will to be obedient or disobedient to the Lord.

For me, this meant choosing to be obedient to forgive rapists, child abusers, and murderers.

At times, God may prompt you reconcile with the person who hurt you. He also might not. Being open to hearing the Lord through this process is so important. Forgiving those who hurt me did not mean I had to invite them back into my life. Rather, it meant stretching my heart and capacity to love others in a way that brought me closer to accurately reflecting Jesus. I was not supposed to “make up” or grow in a relationship with these people, although if the Lord asked me to, I would be obedient. My forgiveness process was about the Lord and my heart.

Forgiveness has so many benefits in one’s life. It’s so crazy how toxic and unhealthy holding a grudge can really be. Forgiveness can help you build healthier relationships with others in the future, whereas holding a grudge can lead to trust issues. When you hold resentment in your heart for any period of time, it will start to produce anxiety and often hostility toward others. As you let go and forgive, those feelings are released, too. It’s shown that when someone forgives, the signs of depression are diminished. Overall mental health can be improved through the simple act of forgiveness.¹

So often, we feel stuck when Jesus offers us all the freedom we could want. Unforgiveness chains us to our past. When we forgive, we are breaking those chains no matter how thick or ugly they may be. The craziest part is that God wants to take them. He asks us to give them to Him! Instead of dragging all these burdens around with us, we can give them to God.

There are so many reasons I could choose not to forgive the people who have wronged me, but I know that would only hurt, negatively impact, and ultimately separate me from God in the long run.

Why would I forgive someone who abused Abbe and me for ten years? Because I don't want to be held back by it, I don't want to fear people in positions of authority, and I don't want to live a life affected by my past.

Why would I forgive the people that murdered my big sister? Because I don't want to be so wrapped up in the past that I can't ever enjoy the present. I don't want life to feel like it has no meaning and push away from my spirituality.

Why would I forgive the men that drugged and raped me? Because I want to have healthy relationships. I don't want to live my life in fear of this happening again. I don't feel the need to carry that baggage into my future. Again, I'm not going to forget; I don't think I ever could. I'm going to take my learnings with me into the future because I can see that they are useful and will help me stay safe. In the future, I'm going to be smarter about what situations I put myself in. I am going to be more conscious of my environment and who is around me. But I will not live in fear.

I want to please the Lord and keep my heart open toward Him and toward others. I want to continue to allow the Lord to transform my heart and life to become more like Him. Unforgiveness is a poison that directly opposes God.

(If the Lord leads me to tell those who have hurt me that I forgive them, I am committed to being obedient. Asking for discernment in knowing what obedience looks like in sharing forgiveness is key.)

I'M NOT SAYING that it is easy to forgive, so often it's not. The hardest people to forgive are those who have wronged or hurt us the most. When we look at others, we should seek to see them as God sees them. We should seek to love them as God loves them. I couldn't ever understand the extent and magnitude of God's love for His children, but even just trying to has helped me walk in forgiveness. We are all sons and daughters of God, and His love for me is no less than His love for the people who murdered my sister. Unconditional love means that He loves without limits, without borders, and without standards. His love is a reckless love.

Something the Lord showed me through all of this is that *I also needed forgiveness*. That sounds obvious because we are all sinners, and we all need forgiveness. But I specifically needed to ask the Lord's forgiveness in how I reacted to each of the bigger traumas in my life. I even needed to ask forgiveness for holding unforgiveness!

Within the process, I began to realize I needed to offer myself the forgiveness that God was offering. True repentance leads to change. God doesn't even remember our transgressions, so why do we hold onto them so tightly ourselves?

I don't want to live my life defined by how I've been wronged, and Jesus doesn't want that for me either. That's why at the beginning of this book, I told you that this isn't a sob story and that I didn't want anyone feeling sorry for me. I don't feel sorry for myself; I am not a victim to my life. My past experiences have shaped me into who I am today by the grace of God, and I wouldn't change any of it. The only reason I am able to have this mindset is because of the relation-

ship I have with Jesus. He has led me to forgiveness, to grow and move forward, and to take what I have learned from each situation and use it for His glory.

When we forgive, we emulate the love of God to the world around us. I have as much empathy as possible for the people who have hurt me because my strength is in the Lord. He is my source of strength. He is the ultimate judge. I know they are broken, and I pray they will come to know Jesus.

Forgiveness has given me a freedom that I have never felt before. We don't have to carry burdens from our past. We don't have to be chained to the people who have hurt us. Jesus gave us an out for that; all we have to do is forgive.

THE MYTH OF LUKEWARM CHRISTIANITY

What is Christianity?

What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus?

People often wrestle with these questions, but we don't have to. God is not a confusing God. That is something we can count on and rest in. We can know exactly what it means to be a Christian because we have been given a model that shows us a divine standard of living through God's Word.

We get to see what it truly means to be a Christian through the accounts of Jesus' life. Jesus sets the bar high. A Christian is someone whose heart reflects Jesus. As a result, their actions will reflect Him as well.

Jesus didn't come to create a new religion. He came to create a family of believers, disciples that reflect Him. As His disciples, we are called to heal the sick, cast out demons, and raise the dead. A follower of Jesus not only reflects His heart but carries the authority to do these things and more.

HOT OR COLD

Our beliefs determine the way that we live our lives. A common false belief, known or unknown, is that we create our own destinies, that we give ourselves all the power and control over our lives. That is not what it means to be a Christian. Our future, purpose, and callings were all written in the Book of Life before the creation of time. It is our choice whether we will walk it out or not. It is our choice whether we want to say yes to what the Lord has for us or not. Being a Christian is making the choice to give God control. It is about knowing who He is so well that giving up control and laying down our lives at the feet of Jesus is not a scary thing because we know who we serve.

There is a passage in Revelation 3 where Jesus addresses Christians in a city called Laodicea. In His letter to them, He says:

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.

—Revelation 3:15-16

Most people believe this passage to reference lukewarm Christianity, those who are one foot in, one foot out of their faith. On the contrary, Jesus was speaking to the Laodiceans in their own language. You see, history tells us the city of Laodicea received its water from about five miles away. Their water came through wooden pipes that, as you can imagine, cooled hot water and warmed cool water. Lukewarm. In other words, it was useless.

If you pause to think about it, lukewarm water doesn't serve any real purpose. Cool water is refreshing on a hot day, while warm or hot water can be used for bathing, cooking, or sterilizing. Room-temperature water? Doesn't do much.

Therefore, Jesus is telling the Laodiceans they are like their water. That the kingdom of God needs people who are willing to put their all into their faith. It's not that they are one foot in, one foot out; it's that they have feet in both worlds. "The lukewarm Christian is the guy who leads in both settings, and his own activity convinces him he's a Christian. But Jesus comes and says this guy is deceiving himself, and He is about to spit him out."¹ There are either those who follow Jesus or those who don't.

In reality, I had no relationship with Jesus. In a previous chapter, I explained growing up as a "Sunday Christian." I believed that Jesus was Lord, but I didn't make Him the Lord of my life. My family and I did just enough to call ourselves Christians, but none of our lives reflected His. Our beliefs didn't lead us anywhere, and we didn't allow Jesus to take control of our lives. No one around us called us higher or forward because that was the norm where I come from. Everyone was living the same way we were living. But that is not the sort of life God intended for us when He created us. It certainly wasn't the intention of the sacrifice Jesus made for us on the cross. The intention was for us to be in a relationship with the Creator of the universe.

Here in Hawaii, the community I live in is full of people that are on fire for the Lord. But where I'm from, I had never been told any of this. I'm writing this book for those people, the people who were not told about the joy, fullness, and beauty life can have walking with Jesus. I'm writing this for people like me. I'm writing this for people like Abbe.

IT'S NOT UP TO YOU

Today's society is all about subjective truth. We have a "whatever feels right to you" mentality. People are searching for *their* truth, not The Truth. Again, God is not a confusing God. He gives us objective truth. I'm not someone who likes to sugarcoat things; I like things to

be straightforward. We shouldn't have to sugarcoat the gospel. Sometimes the truth is offensive. The gospel directly confronts sin. That is uncomfortable. Like Jesus, we are called to speak the truth in grace and love. Even then, some people will get offended by the truth, even though the message of Jesus is the best news we could give to anyone.

The reason this chapter is called "The Myth of Lukewarm Christianity" is that we don't get to decide what Christianity is. There is already an objective truth outside of ourselves that is bigger than our feelings or opinions. I call it a myth because God defines what it means to be a Christian. Anything outside of God's intended design for what it means and looks like to follow Him is simply not following Him.

Lukewarm Christianity is simply not Christianity. "Choosing what it looks like to be a follower of Christ..." is the start of a sentence that doesn't even make sense. We cannot "choose" what Christianity looks like. Christianity reflects a life transformed by Jesus; it reflects Jesus.

As believers, we are called to deny ourselves every day and follow Him (Luke 9:23). We are called to conform to the person of Jesus Christ, not accepting our sinful nature. Life is about the pursuit of Jesus, not the pursuit of happiness or comfort. Although, thankfully, God promises both comfort and peace when we lean on Him (John 14:27, 2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

IT'S YOUR CHOICE

As a follower of Christ, I do not live for myself; I live for Jesus. People don't like that. People like what "feels right" to them. This makes sense because we live in a constant battle of the flesh against the spirit. Our flesh doesn't want to be tamed or conformed to the desires of our spirit. We are so wrapped up with what the world tells

us that we reject or get offended by the truth. (But again, Christianity isn't about what feels right or best to you, which is why it's so offensive.)

I can't make you change your life. I don't even want to—that would be disingenuous. What I can do is tell you what it looked like when I hadn't given my life fully over to God. It was meaningless. Looking back, I understand why I didn't experience the fullness of life in Jesus: I was only giving Him a tiny compartment of my life.

If I wanted to experience all of Him, to live with purpose, I had to give Him all of me. I had to make a decision that I was all in, that I wanted every area of my life to conform to Jesus. This doesn't mean I was perfect or still don't make mistakes; I'm human. But with my eyes focused on Jesus, my heart and life transformed by His love for me, I seek to glorify Him with all that I am. Each day as I pursue Jesus, I become more like Him.

Salvation is a free gift. Although we can do nothing to earn it, we get to work out our salvation in a way that defines what our eternity looks like while we are here on earth. This gift is available to you, too. When I made the decision to fully live for the Lord, my life looked completely different within just a few short months. People who knew me then are often surprised to see what I'm like today.

That transformation is because of who God is and what He did for me. He pulled me out of a hopeless situation. He took me off a short road to death. By choosing Him, I finally got to experience what it means to be truly free.

LESS OF ME, MORE OF HIM

As I sit here and write this book, I get to look back and see everything the Lord has done in such a short time. Not long ago, I was controlled by my flesh and chained to so much darkness that hope seemed nonexistent. I learned how to live by what the world said and what people around me did. The only “happiness” I ever felt came from feeding my flesh. My flesh wanted instant gratification. It wanted the easy way out.

The life I lived accommodated all of this, and I got used to living in my own selfish world. It was all about what *I* wanted. The world tells us that anything that brings personal pleasure and satisfaction is good. The world tells us to live a life focused on ourselves because no one else cares.

We live in a world that is so self-focused. Adults act like children, and children are constantly indulged. “I want what I want when I want it, and I don’t care who I hurt to get it” is a mindset many people function in. This mindset leads to broken communities, broken relationships, and ultimately, broken people.

ROCK BOTTOM

I probably wouldn't have admitted it at the time, but when I was at my lowest, I was living for myself. I had no real care about the world or the people around me. All that mattered was that I was able to do whatever I wanted whenever I wanted to do it. Living this way gave me no drive or desire to change. It didn't give me a set of standards or values to live by. I was the final authority in my life, which led me into a life of pain, anger, and unmanageable anxiety.

After Abbe was murdered, I hit rock bottom. Every part of my life came crashing down with me, and I was confident that getting out wasn't an option. Hitting rock bottom revealed to me new depths of pain and suffering. My mental state was in no condition to help me out of the place I was in, and my emotional regulation reverted to childlike tendencies.

Screaming, crying, pulling my hair, and punching walls led me to believe my mind was against me, and I had no control over any of it. I was suicidal, and the ideation of death was the only thing that brought relief. I wanted to die and constantly spoke that over myself, saying things like "I hate being alive" and asking God to take me.

I had no grid for truth. I was filled up with and pulled by the world, and oftentimes the pull of the world is the pull of the enemy.

A healthy mind is full of truth. Truth is found in the Lord. I needed to be filled with that truth. I needed less of me and more of Him.

FEEDING OUR THOUGHTS

Through life coaching, the Lord took me through a process that enabled me to start making this shift. I look back now and see that the Lord was revealing to me the complexity of how He created me; He was giving me the understanding to make the changes that needed to happen.

We all experience life through a filter. This filter is made up of beliefs, values, memories, opinions, past experiences, culture, personality, and preferences. These filters create our unique perspectives and views of life and the world around us. It may seem like something out of our control, but when we gain awareness of what creates these things, that's where we hold the power to shift our perspective and even change our filters.

The mind is incredibly powerful, created by God with such complexity. In it, we have a conscious and an unconscious mind. Our conscious mind processes and holds 11 million bits of information per second.¹ The role of our conscious mind is to make decisions; it's where our thinking and our reasoning happen. Our conscious mind works only while we are awake and aware.

Our unconscious mind can store up to *four billion bits per second* and is responsible for our emotions, storing memories, bodily functions (like digestion, blood flow, etc.), and anything we don't think about consciously but happens every day. Our unconscious mind works 24/7... even when we are sleeping. It controls the body's internal systems and vital actions like breathing, which happen without us knowing what's happening.

An example of how the unconscious mind takes over is when you drive a car. Once you are comfortable driving a car, you naturally stop thinking about simple things like where to put your feet, how hard to press on the pedals, or even your control over the steering wheel. Have you ever driven somewhere, and by the time you get to your destination, it feels like hardly any time has passed? You might not even remember every stretch of road or maneuver you made. This is your unconscious mind taking over.

Something else to know about the unconscious mind is that it does not choose to accept or reject thoughts; it can only accept them. The conscious mind can choose to accept or reject thoughts because that's where our reasoning and decision-making happen. Since your

unconscious mind can only accept thoughts, whatever you feed it will affect your outcomes and results.

In other words, the unconscious mind is like a genie in a lamp. It says, “Your wish is my command.” So, if you feed your mind negative thoughts or poor self-talk (things like “I hate myself” or “I’m not good enough”), then the genie says, “Your wish is my command” and accepts those thoughts as reality.

Before I was aware of the impact of the conscious and unconscious mind, this showed up a lot in my life. Like I said before, after I lost Abbe, my emotional regulation took a hit for the worst. I spoke so much negative self-talk to myself. Things like:

“My emotional regulation is at the same level as a child.”

“My emotional regulation is gone.”

“You have more emotional regulation in your little finger than I do in my whole body.”

Our worldview, what we think or believe, will define how we see the world and what we will see. Speaking those things over myself constantly and then expecting anything to change was pointless. Our bodies are a tool for our mind, which means our thoughts have power over our outcomes. We must be aware of our perspective.

For months, I wanted to die. I spoke death wishes over myself in word, in thought, and even told other people how I was feeling. My unconscious mind said, “Your wish is my command.” And what happened? I woke up screaming and crying every morning because I was still alive. My depression worsened, and I hated myself more and more every day. When I learned the power of my mind and thoughts, I was able to change this as well. I was able to submit my own thoughts or even the thoughts of the enemy to the truth of what the Lord says about me.

*We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself
up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive
every thought to make it obedient to Christ.*
—2 Corinthians 10:5

The first step for me was to change the way I thought about myself and spoke to myself. I started by changing the negative self-talk in small ways:

“I’m working really hard on my emotional regulation.”

“I’m trying my best to get my emotional regulation back to where it was.”

I saw things start to shift pretty quickly. I was having fewer anxiety attacks. I was acting out less. I was able to think and respond to situations rather than *react* to them. It wasn’t an instant switch, but I finally started to see progress.

TODAY, I am back to my normal state. My unconscious mind accepted the new reality that I am able to control my emotions and know how to handle situations. No longer do I need to act out or break down when things don’t go as I expect them to. I don’t have to tell myself what to believe anymore; I just believe it!

My body is a tool. My mind makes the decisions that affect how I use my body. When I realized this, I experienced a conscious shift in my behaviors. When I felt myself get riled up, I knew that I had control of my actions. I understood that each reaction was a choice I had the ability to make. Unlike before, I could breathe and think through things in order to keep calm and make better choices for myself.

I made a conscious decision to change my thoughts every day and align them to the truth. Walking through life angry because I was alive had become a habit. While this didn't stop right away, I worked really hard to say out loud, even in my anger, "I want to live; I want to be alive."

Whenever a suicidal thought entered my mind throughout the day, I tried to catch it and replace it with a positive, life-giving thought. I also made a point to stop saying those negative things about wanting to die out loud. Even if that was how I felt at the moment, I wouldn't give into it.

After a few weeks of consciously changing my thoughts, my unconscious mind started to accept this new state as my reality. And a few weeks after that, those thoughts stopped entering my mind at all. I didn't need to constantly tell myself I wanted to live. I just did. It was so crazy to me; I consciously changed one thought, and my body and emotions shifted with it.

My whole life started to change simply from changing my thoughts and aligning those to the heart of Christ. People don't understand the mind's power over outcomes and results. I was no longer being held by my negative self-dialogue. I was happier in general, and my more positive outlook on life started opening doors and bringing new opportunities to light.

Within all of this, what the Lord really taught me was that a healthy mind is a mind *full of truth*. Giving Jesus authority over everything in my life means taking every thought captive. It is full trust and surrender that leads us into a place of peace and a calm mind.

The battle is in the mind, and it's our job to take the ground and keep it. There may be a struggle to change old habits and thought patterns. The enemy will try to recover the territory he's lost, but he only has authority where we allow him to have authority. It's our job to continually reject the thoughts that don't align with the Lord's.

Every day, I practice surrendering and giving Jesus His rightful place on the throne of my life. The shift in my thoughts, emotions, spirit, and even my physical body is tangible and ongoing. I know what it means to be filled with truth, and I never want to go back.

SURRENDER

I am the kind of person who is either all in or not in at all. Once I knew who God was, once I heard His voice and had a relationship with the Creator of the universe... it wasn't even a question. I was all in.

Before building the foundation I have now, I didn't even know it was a choice. I didn't know what surrendering to Jesus meant or looked like. That's why there is such an immense need for people to recognize their role in the Great Commission—to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth and make disciples of every nation.

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

—Matthew 28:19-20

That passage comes from when Jesus spoke to His disciples after He was crucified on the cross, spent three days in a tomb, and then rose from the dead. Before He ascended to heaven, He commissioned His disciples (and subsequently us) to share the good news (the gospel) with everyone across all nations.

We need more people in that discipleship role. We need more people being raised as spiritual mentors to help guide others into a relationship with Jesus. A personal relationship with Jesus is the only thing that will lead you into an abundant life. That is what we were made for; that is how we are able to be fully alive.

UNCHANGING LOVE

My journey to full surrender is unique to me, just as your journey is or will be unique to you. That's okay! We are all on our own path. This book isn't a "how-to-live" manual, and it surely isn't a step-by-step guide to the perfect life. I wrote this book to share the transformation that happened when I entered into a real relationship with Jesus. I hope that in this book, the heart of the Father is being revealed to you in new and fresh ways.

One beautiful thing about God is that He meets us where we are at. We don't have to come to Him in our strength with everything figured out. He invites us into His presence in our brokenness. His love for us isn't conditional. The love of the Father is unchanging. He loved me as much in the worst parts of my battle with addiction as He does now in a place of full surrender.

My heart to surrender fully to the Lord doesn't come out of a place of striving or a sense of duty; it comes out of my love for the Lord. A love so deep and so intense that I don't want to be away from it for a single second. It is a love that draws me into new depths every day.

I know that sin separates us from God, but sometimes we need to go one step further. Today, instead of asking myself, "Is this sin?" I ask, "Is

this pleasing to the Lord?” I don’t want any separation from the Lord, but I also want my choices to draw me closer to Him. I want the way I live to reflect who I am as a woman made in the image of God to show His goodness to all of humanity. Only God is perfect. But that doesn’t mean I cannot have a high aim. God loves us unto purity. He loves us unto holiness (1 Peter 1:15-16; 2 Timothy 1:9). My goal is to be immersed in His love so deeply that I reach His best by His grace.

FULL SURRENDER

God’s love has brought me into a place of full surrender.

Full surrender means letting God be the authority over every part of your life, walking in complete submission to Him. So often in today’s society, “submission” is a fighting word. Freedom, in the world’s eyes, has such a different definition than what freedom actually is.

The world tells us that freedom comes from personal autonomy. That we must set the standards in our own lives. Freedom to the world is to be submitted to no one. But if you think about it, you are always in submission to something or someone: school, work (your boss), your family, in a relationship, as part of a community, under government authority, etc. What you do comes from whose authority you are under, and what you do reflects what (or who) you worship.

True freedom in Christ does not equal personal autonomy. It does not mean that we get to do whatever we want. Rather, it means we have the freedom to commune with our Creator. It means we can freely submit our wills to His because His will is what brings freedom! That is why true freedom only comes from a place of submission to the God of the universe, not the “god” of ourselves.

Submitting to the Lord means we no longer carry the weight of the world or our sin (and the guilt and shame that comes with it). God

never intended for us to live that way. By surrendering our lives to Him and submitting to Him fully, we are ultimately unified with God. That is where we experience grace, mercy, and freedom.

As a believer, I want my actions to show the world around me who God is. I am a representative of Jesus; everything I choose to do in response to that is an act of worship. We cannot serve two masters (Matthew 6:24).

When I came into a relationship with the Lord, I knew more or less what was expected of me as a Christian. But what I really wanted was for Him to show me what He expected from me personally. To start, I asked the Lord some questions:

- What in my life does not align with You?
- Will You show me where I am missing the mark? (i.e., the sin in my life)
- Will You reveal to me anything in my life that is not pleasing to You?

These might seem like simple questions, but they are actually dangerous prayers. They are dangerous because they require action on our part. When you ask God these questions, you are inviting Him to speak into places that might be blind spots, intentional or unintentional.

When we ask, the Lord answers. He answered these questions for me in love and in a way that He knew I would be able to handle. The Lord took it one step at a time. As He continued to reveal things that didn't align with who I was created to be, my response was to lay them down at His feet. My surrender hasn't come from my own strength but directly from God, who is my source and strength.

This was so important for me in aligning my life with the Lord. I gave Him every area of my life: my community, my health, my finances, my hobbies, my family, my spirituality, and my work/ca-

reer. I asked Him to come into every area of my life, not just the “spiritual” parts. I had done that before as a “Sunday Christian” when I tried to keep God in a box. God does not live in a box, and I was tired of trying to keep Him there.

God showed up in ways that, at the time, felt big. Some of the things He asked me to surrender felt like really big sacrifices in order to follow Him. But God doesn’t give us rules or standards just for the sake of giving them to us. Like I said before, He loves unto holiness. In the process of surrender, I learned that what He asked me to lay down was not because I needed more rules in my life; it was because He had so much more for me.

In Mark 10:17-27 NASB, when the rich young ruler asks Jesus what to do to inherit eternal life, He responds by telling him, “One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (verse 21). The man “went away grieving” (verse 22) because he had a lot of money and property.

Jesus goes on to tell the disciples that it’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (verse 25). It’s easy to focus on the money here, pointing out that money is the thing that will keep us from pursuing God. You might be thinking, “Well, I don’t have a lot of money, so I don’t have that problem.” But that’s not the point of the story.

The point is, the rich man had done all these good deeds, but he came to Jesus with his hands full. He relied on himself. He was unwilling to surrender all that he had in order to depend fully on God. When your hands are full, it’s hard to receive what God has for you.

You might not be coming to God with your hands full of money, but I am sure you have stuff. We all do.

A NEW CHOICE

For me, one of the first and biggest things I had to lay down was my addiction to and reliance on substances. That might seem obvious to you, but for me, it was new and intimidating. Drugs were a safety net. Whether I wanted to numb, dissociate, or even feel just a little bit better, I knew I could always go to drugs.

When I laid substances down, the Lord asked me if I would commit to Him that I would never use them again. At first, it scared me, but I trusted the character of God, and I knew that using would never align with the life He was calling me into.

Up to this point, I realized I had never actually made a commitment to never use drugs again. It didn't even seem like an option. Even when I was in rehab, I didn't dare make that commitment because it didn't seem like a choice I had to make. I thought I was a slave to drugs and that I would eventually go back to them. Using again was all just a matter of time.

Every time I tried to get better on my own, I knew it wouldn't last. I went through so much back and forth with the Lord before committing to sobriety; my biggest fear was that I wasn't strong enough, and I feared letting Him down. In that place, He showed me that it wasn't about what I could do or how strong I was. It was about seeing my own weakness and being able to cling to the Lord in *His strength*. In an emotional prayer, I committed to the Lord that I would never use drugs again.

ANOTHER BIG THING God asked me to surrender was the music I was listening to. Before I gave my life to Jesus, I mostly listened to rap, trap, and some R&B. Not that all music in those genres is wrong or inappropriate, but almost everything I was listening to was. Even at

the beginning of my walk with the Lord, I would experience the presence of God in worship, and then afterward, I would go back to my room and listen to everything that went against the life I lived and who I wanted to be. I didn't think it was a big deal. I didn't think it had any real effect on me, but that was so far from the truth.

God made us physical beings with a spirit. This doesn't turn on and off. That means that everything that we do in the physical has spiritual implications whether we realize it or not.

The truth is that our ears (what we listen to), our eyes (what we see), and our mouths (what we say) are all gates to our soul. What we allow in directly impacts our lives.

When I was listening to music that so obviously opposed my walk with the Lord, there were consequences. It took a while for me to realize this, but God eventually revealed it to me in a way that He knew I would understand.

One day when I was in prayer, the Lord asked me to only listen to worship music for the next two weeks. That didn't seem like such a big ask, so I agreed. In those two weeks, I felt so connected to the Lord and my own spirit. Not only was I able to hear His voice clearer and experience His presence in new ways, but I also felt no pull back to my old life.

I had no temptation to use drugs or go back to old relationships that the Lord had brought me out of. In those two weeks, the Lord started to show me that the way I was living was not normal. The things I had experienced were not things experienced in a typical life. I saw different parts of myself that had been affected by this "norm" I was living in that was, in fact, very broken and *not* normal. I was heartbroken for my past self and felt a deep sense of gratitude for the freedom I now experienced in my relationship with God.

After the two weeks ended, I decided to play one of my favorite rap songs. As soon as I hit play and the music started streaming, I felt

immediately sucked back into temptation. I felt tempted to use drugs, tempted to smoke, and tempted to reconnect with people I had walked away from who were not healthy for me. I didn't understand why I felt that way in the moment, but as I prayed into the feelings, I realized that the music was the trigger. The music was getting through my ear gates, gates that led directly to my spirit.

By listening to one song, I allowed the enemy back in without even realizing it. This music normalized and even glorified my old life. It pulled me back in and separated me from the Lord. As I prayed into that and repented, the Lord asked me to lay down rap music. I did and made a commitment to using my new biblical worldview and discernment when choosing what music I listen to.

People had always told me how awful my choice in music was. At the time, I didn't care what people said. I could have listened to those people and evaluated it when they told me, but I needed the Lord to tell me. I needed Him to tell me what He expected of me instead of changing because of someone else's convictions.

Of course, it's really important to have trusted mentors, pastors, and even friends or family who will speak into your life. But for me, I needed conviction from the Lord, not from other people (especially at the beginning of my walk with God). I needed God to transform my heart and show me how to walk more like Him. He did not disappoint.

HIS PLANS, NOT MINE

Living in surrender is a life-long journey. Jesus laid His life down for us once and for all so that we could live in freedom with God. He paid the price for our sin; all we have to do is declare Him Lord over our life. And as we lay our lives down at the cross, as we empty our hands to receive more of Him, He will continue to reveal more of Himself to us. In the process, He will show us new places of

surrender.

Even as I write this chapter, the Lord has shown me new ways to fully surrender my life to Him. Today that meant surrendering to God any expectations I have for this book. It meant laying down anything and everything that I hope or want for this book and walking in full submission to *His plan* for it. It meant laying down how many copies might go out into the world, any money made from it, and what kind of impact it might have on the people who read it.

I know the Lord asked me to write this book for a reason. Even in a place of not fully knowing why, I trust His plans and purposes for me. I know that He will put it into the hands of those who need to read it, even if that's just one person.

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

—Matthew 6:10

WRESTLING WITH YOUR FAITH

Everyone has faith. Even an atheist has faith. Maybe they have faith in the theory of evolution, or maybe their faith lies in the belief that there is no God, but even those views require faith. As Christians, our faith lies in Jesus. Essentially, that He is who He says He is (Exodus 3:14).

In some seasons, our faith is strong, while in others, it feels shaky. Doubt is something that every Christian will deal with at some point in their walk with God. Sometimes we let doubt overtake us, and we choose to walk away from the Lord. This often occurs because we have big misconceptions about faith and doubt.

Faith is not the absence of doubt. It's the ability to walk through troubling seasons of confusion and fear, standing firm in what we know to be true of God even when we don't see it or feel it.

Doubt doesn't have to be a place where faith dies. Doubt offers a huge opportunity for Jesus to meet us exactly where we're at. And He will, every single time. Wrestling with God can spur us on and grow our faith. In fact, it's where faith is strengthened.

DOUBT IN THE DARK

The topic of doubt feels particularly important for me to address. It came to my attention as I struggled through a season of wrestling with my faith about a year after starting to walk with the Lord. Anything that I could possibly question, I did. From the choices I made to the way I was living, all the way to the existence of God Himself.

It was a hard place to be in. The whole point of my existence, the meaning of life, is to have a relationship with Jesus. So when I started to question my faith, all of a sudden, life seemed dull and meaningless. The thought of living without Jesus pretty quickly put me into a state of apathy.

My whole life, by this point, was submitted to God. Every choice, every decision I made was to please God. That was my “why,” my purpose. That’s why I dropped everything in my life and moved to Hawaii. That’s why I laid down a lot of friendships. That’s why I stopped using drugs, why I changed the music I listened to, and why my boundaries with men shifted. It’s why I even changed the way I dress.

From the big things all the way down to the tiniest, most minuscule details, I had given my life to the Lord. Jesus was no longer just my Savior; He was the Lord of my life. And as I continued to pursue Him, He continued to reveal to me things I needed to surrender and things I needed to repent of so that I might become more like Him.

During this time, I also started experiencing doubt. With it, my days began to feel more and more void of meaning. I began to question all the changes I had made in my life. As I did, temptation started to creep in. I hadn’t told anyone that I was struggling with my faith. I was living in a Christian community, and all of my friends were missionaries, on fire for the Lord. I couldn’t bring myself to tell them what was going on in my life. How could I tell people who had

laid down their lives for the gospel that I was questioning my faith? The answer was simple: I couldn't.

I rationalized my doubts by telling myself, "These thoughts will go away. I don't have to tell anyone. I just have to wait this out and deal with it on my own." As I kept this struggle with my faith a secret, I felt worse. The temptations got stronger. Sometimes I would think about smoking a cigarette for *hours*. Thoughts kept coming: *What's the big deal? It's just a cigarette. It's not like I'm going to use drugs. What's the point of denying my flesh if I'm questioning the existence of God?*

So often, as Christians, we hide our doubts. We don't really talk about it because we think it's not allowed. We wonder how people will respond to our questions or what they will think if we tell them. This is a direct tactic of the enemy. When we keep things hidden in the dark, it allows Satan to come into those places and begin to speak and move. When we talk about it with people (especially other Christians), it invites the light in and allows God to move.

As the enemy's voice got louder and clearer, my thought life got worse and worse. It took me a few days of struggling in secret before I realized I couldn't do it alone. Eventually, I opened up to my dad and started talking about it after that. To be honest, sharing my doubts didn't make me feel better right away. There was no magical moment where everything disappeared. There was no epiphany that made it all better. But it was a first step. I was being real with my emotions, my thoughts, and my fears. Most importantly, I realized I needed to take my doubts to the Lord.

WEIGHT OF THE WRESTLE

As I continued to dive into the Bible, looking for answers, I came across the story of Jacob in Genesis 32. The whole story is about Jacob physically wrestling with God.

So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

—Genesis 32:24-26a

It surprised me to find this passage at the very beginning of the Bible. I think God knew that this was something He needed to address from the start. You see, God wrestled with Jacob until *daybreak*. Did you catch that? Go back and read the passage again. God was in it with Jacob through His whole struggle from dusk to dawn. And then God blessed Him (verse 29). There is a blessing in the struggle.

Not only does this tell us that God allows wrestling, but it shows the weight of this fight. You see, Jacob walked away from this fight with a limp (verse 31). He wasn't wrestling with someone who was weak or fragile. He was wrestling with God almighty, all-powerful.

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."

—Revelation 1:8

From the beginning, God normalizes wrestling seasons and reminds us that He is right there with us in our struggle. It is in wrestling that we walk away not just with a limp but with growth, strengthening of our faith, and transformation.

PRESSING IN

After doing life with Jesus and experiencing true transformation, I wasn't ready to walk away from God. So I made a decision that I

would use this season of wrestling to press into the Lord. I was not going to let my doubt become a dead end.

I started thinking about what it would look like to wrestle well, to really give it everything I had. It was a slow start as I found my footing. Each day, I pushed myself to read my Bible and spend time with the Lord in prayer. Often, it felt dry, and I would cut the time short. My prayer life was weak at best but mostly nonexistent.

It was summer, and I had just finished a community outreach program. I was in an in-between season and didn't have a lot going on. Most of my time was spent on social media and watching TV throughout the day. I wasn't very active, and I wasn't eating well either. As I started to learn more about faith and doubt, I realized that this would not get me anywhere.

There is a constant battle between our flesh and our spirit. This battle is so much more real than most things we are able to see. It is a spiritual battle, and the battlefield is usually in our minds. When we wrestle with our faith, there is often a direct correlation that can be seen in our wrestle with the flesh. If your spirit is winning this battle, your faith will be strengthened. Faith in God is impossible when operating from the flesh; it cannot exist. This is because faith is born of the spirit and is a direct fruit of the Spirit.

Jesus is the only one who has lived fully in His spirit, in full submission to the Father. He is our perfect example of death to self. As He walked the earth, He walked fully in His spirit. This is why we see all of His prayers being answered: healings, miracles, signs and wonders. By living in His spirit, in relationship with the Father, Jesus was able to call forth the perfect will of God in His life.

FAITH VS. FLESH

Wrestling with my faith felt like something that wasn't allowed in the context of my community. My mind told me it was something

that shouldn't be happening. It brought up feelings of guilt for doubting not only the goodness and faithfulness of God but even His existence. I felt like a bad Christian, and it was a lonely place to be.

My feelings did not stem from anything anyone did or said, *per se*. Because no one else had opened up about struggling with their faith in the past, I assumed it wasn't normal and that it was something that just shouldn't be happening. When I finally did open up to others, no one was shocked or upset with me. In fact, everyone understood. Several people shared they had been through similar seasons.

I know now that Satan was trying to isolate me in order to keep his hold on me. No one had done or said anything to make me feel so ashamed. Rather, they had probably gone through some of the same things I was going through; I just didn't know it. A lot of wrestling happens in the dark, quiet corners of our lives (until we release it and Satan's grip). However, I didn't know all of that right away. My first step toward breaking ties with my flesh was to look over my life and my daily habits. When I did, all I could see was provision for my flesh to operate. I knew that faith and flesh oppose each other, and something needed to give. I needed to give my spirit a fighting chance. If I was going to strengthen my spirit, I was going to have to make some changes in my daily life.

This was the key to coming out of my wrestle with God stronger, not crushed. I needed to seek and recognize the faithfulness of God in my life.



THERE ARE SO many ways to strengthen our spirit, and they are all rooted in the choices we make in our daily lives. The strengthening of our spirit comes from spending more time with the Lord and less time in the world. When I was in this place of doubt, all of a sudden,

it felt like I didn't know how to spend time with the Lord anymore. It was like a light switch flicked off in my brain. That's when I started looking at things a little more practically. I asked myself, "What can I do that I know will strengthen my spirit?"

One practical way to pursue God is to enter into a fast. Fasting is a way we can deny our flesh to live more in the spirit. Fasting is removing things that encumber our spirit. It's looking at what we find comfort, security, or distraction in before we look to God. It's realigning our life so that God stays our top priority with nothing else above Him. It's speaking directly to our flesh and putting it in submission to the Lord.

Fasting reminds us of our dependence on God. Done in our own strength, it becomes distorted and self-seeking. Fasting is a discipline that is not self-seeking but so beneficial when done unto the Lord. We fast because we need to.

Fasts look different for everyone. They are personal and impactful. However, to be successful, they must be done in partnership with the Lord because we will need God's grace and mercy to be able to carry it out.

Nothing changed in me when I was living in obedience to my flesh. I felt sad and disconnected from the Lord. As I mentioned before, I was spending a lot of time watching TV and on social media. I wasn't taking care of my body well either.

About a week before I started my fast, I knew I was being called into it. Every day, as I scrolled through Instagram or sat on the couch bingeing another show, I heard the same thing, "You need to fast." I didn't want to do it. No one fasts because it's fun or easy or because they like doing it.

At the end of that week, the Lord spoke very clearly to me: "Do you want to get on a fast track with me? Then fast." So simple, so clear, so obvious that I almost laughed when I heard it. So I prayed and

asked God what it was that I was supposed to fast. It was pretty easy for me to see where my flesh had taken over my life, so it wasn't hard to determine my next steps. For one month, I committed to fast sugar, simple carbs or flour, television, and social media.¹

The first morning I woke up on my fast, I already felt different. The wrestle wasn't over, but I had a newfound sense of hope. My quiet time spent with the Lord that morning was filled with His presence, words, and revelation. The Word of God was coming alive again. My spirit was being strengthened as my flesh was being denied.

In the big picture, my sacrifice wasn't all that big. Sometimes God asks us to make big sacrifices, but for me, He just wanted my time and attention. Too many things had been getting in the way of my relationship with God, and it was time for me to get rid of the distractions I'd been filling my time with.

PRACTICAL MATTERS

Through this experience, the Lord called me into a fasted lifestyle. This doesn't mean fasting 24/7, but it does mean that I fast regularly as I submit to God, breaking ties with my flesh and being reminded of my dependence on Him. Until this point, my whole life had been controlled and directed by the indulgence of my flesh. From drugs to food, my body had a hold on me. When I stopped doing drugs, I switched to smoking cigarettes. When I stopped smoking cigarettes, I switched to food and snacks. I moved from false comfort to false comfort, trying to fill a void only He can fill.

Then God showed me how important fasting is in my walk with Him. For the last year, each week, I have done a 24-hour water fast where the only thing I consume is water. The Lord usually reveals to me at the start of my fast something He wants me to contend or intercede for, or sometimes He just wants me to focus on Him and allow my spirit to connect with His. Prayer and spending time with

God is a vital part of fasting and your everyday walk with the Lord. This was pivotal to me reconnecting with God through my season of doubt.

The Lord calls me into other types of fasts all the time (not always food-related). They aren't always easy, and I don't always see obvious "results" at the end. But that's not the point. The point is choosing Him when we don't feel like it—choosing to submit to Him, to worship Him, to give Him our time, our flesh, our thanks, our life. Anything we can do to deny our flesh will strengthen our spirit. Starve the flesh, feed the spirit.

Another very practical way to strengthen your spirit is by spending time reading the Word of God. Reading the Bible feeds your spirit with truth. We also strengthen ourselves by the people we surround ourselves with. If you are around people who are living from their spirits, you will start to feed off of them. Community in the spirit is life-giving. Who you choose to spend your time with is who you become.

So, the question is... Are you spending time with Jesus and others who reflect Him?

Choosing to strengthen my spirit invited God into my doubts. It allowed Him to speak the truth with love and remind me of His power. Looking back, I could have walked out of that season with weak or even forgotten faith. Instead, I came out of it in a deeper and more intimate relationship with the Lord. My faith had actually grown as a result of the wrestling I endured. I was more trusting of who God was in my life and excited about my future with Him.

If we want to build a strong foundation with the Lord, there will be wrestling. It won't be constant, but it will have a purpose. I know I am in a season where I am building a history with the Lord. I am creating memories, experiences, and stories that will become the foundation of my relationship with Him. Building a history with

God is part of a strong foundation. As we grow in spiritual maturity, we are growing with God, creating a solid ground for us to hold onto in good times and bad. And there will be bad times because our world is fallen and broken, and Satan wants us to give up. He wants our complacency. But in the bad, God is still good.

GRACE

What is grace?

Grace is the unearned, undeserved, unmerited favor of God.

This means grace is for those faithful to the Lord, and it is for those who are not.

I don't even really know where to start when I think of God's grace. Grace doesn't make sense to our human minds. It opposes our natural instinct, and that is what makes it so beautiful. We have been programmed to believe that we get what we deserve, but grace says the opposite. It's a gift from God. He gives us what we could never earn because of His profound love for us.

Most of the time, I don't feel equipped to talk about weighty subjects like grace. But, the little bit about grace I do know is a message the Holy Spirit wants me to share because it's really not about me. It's about Him.

The extent to which we understand grace is the extent to which we understand the gospel. A limited view of grace will lead us to a

limited view of the gospel. I know from personal experience the harm a limited perspective of grace can have on your life. I spent a year and a half living my life for Jesus without fully embracing His grace. It led me into legalism, and I quickly burned out.

KARA'S STORY

The Lord interrupted me one day during my quiet time (by His grace!) and revealed a powerful vision of me standing outside of huge beautiful golden gates, the gates of heaven. These gates were wide open, but I stood outside of them, feeling trapped. I stood there looking through the gold bars blocking my way, and I started to jump up and down. I waved my arms back and forth, trying to get the Lord's attention, yelling, "Look, Lord, I'm not smoking weed, look, I'm not having sex, look, I'm not cursing!" (In real life, I was white-knuckling my way through life, trying my best not to sin.)

Just as I finished shouting out a whole list of the things I had held myself back from doing "in the name of Jesus," I looked to my right and saw my friend, Kara. She walked right past me through the big golden gates. I couldn't believe it. How come she could go in?

I was so confused, and I started listing the areas where Kara had fallen short lately, "But God, she did this, and she did this...."

Then in a soft, kind voice, the Lord spoke, "Kara gets it."

The vision ended, and I felt so confused. What could He possibly mean? How could Kara *get it*?

Then the Lord reminded me of a story that Kara had told me recently. She was on her way back from being a staff member on a missions trip in Turkey with YWAM. They had just spent two months sharing the gospel wherever the Lord opened doors for them. They saw people getting saved, healed, and the Lord moving in daily life.

Then came the flight home. One of Kara's students was sitting next to her on the plane, and the flight attendant passed by with the drink cart. The flight attendant told them that drinks were complimentary. The Lord had told Kara to stay sober from alcohol at the time, but since it was there and it was free, she thought it would be fine to have one beer. One beer turned into taking shots with her students and getting off the plane drunk.

She had two more flights before she was home. She sat at her next gate drunk, waiting for her plane to board. As she waited, the Lord spoke to her and told her that He was going to seat someone next to her on the plane that needed to hear the gospel. Immediately she questioned it, "But Lord, I'm drunk." In one instant, the Lord drastically sobered her up.

On the next flight, a paraplegic man was wheeled in and seated next to Kara. She started to share the gospel with him. She received words of knowledge from the Lord about this man's life and his past, and she prayed for him to receive the Holy Spirit. The whole time this man listened to her, he sat in tears as he encountered the love and Spirit of the Lord.

When Kara told me this story later, I couldn't hide what I felt. "Kara, you got drunk with your students? How could you do that? You're their leader. You can't be doing stuff like that."

As the Lord reminded me of this story, again He said, "Kara gets it." And at that moment, I was overtaken with reverence and awe for the Lord. The Lord spoke to me again and said, "Kara is my daughter, I love her, and she loves me! I will use her life, whether or not she messes up. I am sovereign."

At that moment, I realized that it's not about Kara never messing up again, and it's not about Kara always being perfect. Kara stayed open and receptive to the Holy Spirit. God used Kara because she was open and willing to say yes to His call. I realized I had become so

legalistic that even in an amazing story about the Lord touching a paralyzed man's heart on a plane, I was stuck on the mistakes that Kara had made instead of the miracles God had done.

What actually keeps you out of the gates of heaven?

Living out of a place of religion and law, outside of a true relationship with Jesus.

The gates were wide open, waiting for me to walk through, but instead, I stood in the one place that kept people from moving forward. The place where we are so focused on ourselves and our works that we aren't focused on Jesus anymore.

*For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not
under the law, but under grace.*

—Romans 6:14

I felt like the only way that God would want to use me, and the only way that the Holy Spirit would operate through me in powerful ways, was if I behaved perfectly in my own strength. My faith had become about checking off my list of dos and don'ts. I wasn't allowing my relationship with Jesus to be at the center because my "good behavior" had taken His place. And in relying on my own strength to get it right and not mess up, I was completely missing the point. *I was missing the beauty of His grace in my life.*

Up until that moment, I was making the story all about me: what I could do, what I couldn't do, how I could be better, etc. But it's not about me, and it never has been! I am so grateful that Jesus understands our humanity.



GOD ALREADY KNEW every time each one of us would let Him down, every time we would disobey Him, and every time we would fall

short in life. Even still, He chose to send His Son to die for us. He bought us for a price, and He paid in full for what was done (sin) and for what had not yet been done (more sin). So often, people look at grace and use it as an excuse to sin, but really it's the opposite. *Grace is what allows us not to sin.*

Jesus came to give us freedom from religion and invite us into a relationship with Him. He knows we will only get so far in the “good behavior” zone on our own. But, when we set our gaze on Jesus, nothing else matters. When our eyes are on Him, certain things will naturally stop appealing to us. We will start to love what He loves and hate what He hates. The more we know Him, the more we become like Him, the more we act like Him.

Grace isn't an excuse not to have a high moral standard in our lives. Sin shows up when we rely on ourselves. Jesus gives us the grace to not sin by relying on Him in everything. Grace allows us to fall and get back up and try again, and again, and again.

We are empowered by grace to be able to walk closer to Jesus, and as such, sin less, becoming sinless, to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48). Our salvation, by grace through faith, isn't just for when we die one day (Ephesians 2:8-9). It's for right now. We don't get to go to heaven because of what we do or what we don't do. We get to go to heaven because of God's grace.

PERFECT PEACE

Before I started to understand the grace of God, I spent my whole walk with the Lord thinking that I was not enough and that I was not doing enough. I was in a place of striving, trying to deserve God's love and even my salvation. I thought that if I just did this better or controlled my thought life a little more, the Lord would use me more. I grew anxious and upset. Without grace, there is no peace because, on our own, we will never achieve God's standard. Striving

is self-focused and steals an authentic relationship with the Lord. It takes away the point of the cross.

Our human minds have a tendency to get angry at the idea of grace. When we work really hard, we tend to stop seeing His favor and blessing as the gifts they are and rather as something we worked for. Then, we become like the elder brother in the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). We get angry at the party God throws for the returning lost child. We get angry when we feel forgotten. We get angry when we see the murderer receiving God's grace and salvation. They didn't work hard! They didn't live right.

And yet, Jesus's answer to us is the same as the landowner in the parable of the workers in the vineyard, "But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'" (Matthew 20:13-16).

No matter what we do or what we don't do, we will never warrant the grace of God or dictate whether or not He will use us. We are not entitled to grace, and we can never be worthy of it. It is a gift from God because He loves us. And this is why it is so powerful.

In my mind, the only possible response to the gift of God's grace is gratitude.

Thank You, Jesus, that it is all about You!

CALL TO MY GENERATION

It's still so crazy to me that while I went to church nearly every Sunday growing up, I never understood the power of the gospel. I was never taught the power of the cross in a personal, tangible way. At most, the gospel was a series of historical events. It was "good news" that was far away in the past, not active or living. It was not presented as what it is—the BEST news on earth.

What Jesus did on the cross was directly for me. What Jesus did on the cross was directly for you. It was and is personal. Jesus hung on that cross so that you and I could have a personal relationship with God. A relationship that, as humans, we weren't able to have since the fall of man in the garden of Eden (remember, Adam and Eve's sin against God is what separated us from Him—the same sin that separates us today when we let it).

Jesus came and made a sacrifice that was sufficient for every single sin of every single person ever born. He was crucified so that we can intimately commune with God for all eternity. It was not just so that we would have a nice fuzzy relationship. Salvation is a free gift. Jesus went through the worst death imaginable so that we would be saved

from hell and spend eternity with Him. He didn't do that so that we could continue with life as usual.

THE HOLY SPIRIT

When Jesus ascended to heaven after His resurrection, He said that it is better that He goes (John 16:7). For a while, this really stumped me. How in the world would it be better for Jesus to not be here? But as I studied Scripture, I started to understand.

The Holy Spirit is everywhere, all the time. The Holy Spirit lives inside each and every one of us if we invite Him. Imagine the line we would have to wait in to get a glance at Jesus while He was on earth! Because of the Holy Spirit, we have access to Jesus, anywhere, night or day!

The Holy Spirit is God. As we invite the Holy Spirit into our lives and become aware of His presence, we carry His power into our everyday lives. What's more, the Holy Spirit allows God to live through us in ways that we don't have a grid for. Jesus left us with an insane gift.

Jesus raised the dead, He healed the sick, He opened blind eyes. In John 14:12-14, Jesus tells us that if we believe in Him, we will do *even greater things* and that whatever we ask in His name will be done! This doesn't mean that we can flippantly ask for a brand new car, and expect to get it (although I have seen that happen).

But the more we become like Jesus, the more our desires will reflect His.

In John 5:19, Jesus says, "Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does." When we listen and hear the voice of God, we can align our prayers directly with His will. When we do that, the authority we walk in as living tabernacles (houses of worship) of the Holy Spirit is unbelievable.

SO MUCH MORE

I believe that I am called to witness signs, wonders, and miracles in my lifetime. I believe that God wants to use me to do greater things than we even see written about in the Bible. Not because of who I am or what I can do, but because of the authority I walk in while in a place of full submission to God. I don't think that this calling is only true for me. I think the Lord has placed this on every believer, and specifically my generation.

So often, I see young people turning to drugs or other distractions for stimulation or in an attempt to feel alive and find meaning. I did this myself, so I understand the rationale, although thankfully, I'm on the other side of it now. I think my generation is so susceptible to this sort of behavior because we are called to so much more. We were created to host the presence of God and to operate in signs, wonders, and miracles. Even if we are not aware of our high calling, our spirit longs to operate in the fullness of what God has for us. No wonder "normal life" isn't enough. No wonder we turn to distractions, no wonder we turn to drugs, no wonder we turn to what the world has to offer. Of course, people are searching. We were made for so much more than this!

This world is in desperate need of people willing to walk in the power available through the Holy Spirit. The world is in need of people with the faith to move mountains, heal the sick, cast out demons, and so much more. I believe that this is our inheritance as sons and daughters of the Most High King. My generation will keep searching until they rest in their true identity in Christ. They will keep searching until they are able to realize and walk in submission to the Holy Spirit.

It's not about what we can or can't do, it's not about what we want, it's not about who we are.

It's all about Jesus.

It's about His plans, His purposes, His ways.

GOOD PLANS

Jesus has unimaginable plans for each and every one of us. Being the loving God that He is, He has given us free will to choose to love Him back. God doesn't want slaves; He is not interested in that. If He wanted slaves, He would have made us slaves. God wants sons and daughters, people whose hearts are so on fire for Him that they will obey without blinking. People who believe, trust, and know that whatever He asks or calls us into is our highest and best, even if it doesn't make sense to us. God doesn't want mandatory obedience. *He wants our hearts.*

If we make Jesus our focus, we will walk right into everything He has for us. If our eyes are fixed on Him, it is impossible to miss what He has for us.

My focus is to walk in the center of the Lord's will and nowhere else. I want everything He has for me because I know it is so much more than I could have ever imagined for myself. Every day I ask for an increase; I ask for more of Jesus because I want more of Him, I need more of Him. I ask for His eyes and His heart *every day*.

I'm committed to going where the Lord calls, no matter what that means. I don't care if it makes sense to me or anyone around me. Jesus has my *yes*. He honors my *yes*. He knows the desires of my heart because He put them there. He delivers. He keeps His words and His promises.

I am made for such a time as this, and so are you (Esther 4:14). I am made to host the presence of God and walk in the power and authority that comes with that, and so are you. He has created all of us for such a time as this. I can say with complete certainty that you have a purpose that comes straight from heaven.

God has plans for you to be alive here and now for reasons that are far beyond anything you could ever imagine for yourself. God doesn't call the qualified. He qualifies the called.¹

I am not qualified to write a book, but Jesus is. I'm not qualified to speak on stage at world conferences with global leaders, but Jesus is. I am not qualified to raise the dead, but Jesus is. It's not about what we can do; it's about what God wants to do through us.

Give Him your *yes* and see what He does.

THE END

My life is the way it is today because of Jesus. The person I am, what I am doing now and what I will do in the future, I credit all to the favor of the Lord. Every day, Jesus grows me and stretches me as a person to conform more to His image. There is no finish line with Him.

Every day I wake up and choose Jesus, I choose life. I know that I was saved at a pivotal moment. The Lord intervened at a point in my life that if I had walked just a few more steps in the direction I was headed, I wouldn't be here today. I am on this earth today because Jesus intervened. I was on a very short road to death. He brought freedom, healing, love, grace, mercy, and salvation just in time.

Life isn't about the pursuit of happiness; it's about the pursuit of Jesus. When you are in constant pursuit of Jesus, the joy of the Lord follows. It is a fruit of the Spirit, a gift—we just need to reach out and grab it.

Today I am able to say that I walk in the joy of the Lord. This joy is not just happiness; it totally surpasses any and every satisfaction that

I've ever experienced. For a long time, I thought I would never be happy. So many times, I just wanted to end things and give up on life. It felt too hard, like I was on a ride I didn't want to be on and couldn't get off. I felt trapped, scared, and alone. I wouldn't have ever imagined that I would become the person I am today, doing what I am with my life.

As of writing these words, I am 22 years old, and I am officially finished with my first book. I am not a writer, and even as I come to these final lines, I still couldn't tell you how to write a book for yourself. The Lord led me through every step of the process. All I had to do was rely on Him.

Today, I have a relationship with the Creator of the universe. It is the relationship that sustains and fulfills me in life.

Today, I know exactly who I am because I know *whose* I am. I am able to walk in my true identity and get closer and closer to being the person I was created to be.

Today, I walk in victory, not because of who I am but because of the God I serve. He invites me into His victory. I am no longer a victim of my own life and circumstances. I am not held captive by resentment and unforgiveness. God gives me His heart for others.

Today, I know what it means to walk with Jesus and live for Him. I am on fire for the Lord, and anything outside of His plan just won't do. I am no longer a slave to sin, and by God's strength, I have been made new. As I abide in Him, I become more like Christ every day.

Today, I walk in the full freedom that Jesus offers every single one of us. Every day of my life, I will continue walking into new depths of freedom because I serve a God that loves the journey more than the destination.

Today, I am walking in full surrender.

Today, I allow God to have full control over every aspect of my life.

Today, I have a stronger and closer relationship with my family. My family has done the work they need to do to create a healthy family unit, and I am so grateful for that. My parents are my biggest supporters, and I wouldn't be where I am or who I am without both of them standing behind me. There are so many people that I owe my thanks to for being obedient and helping me in my walk with the Lord. Some planted seeds, some watered them, and some helped foster my transformation and growth. The Lord loves using His people, His body, to get His will done here on earth (Matthew 6:10).

Today, my story isn't one of fear and sadness but one of hope and overcoming. It is a story that shows the redemptive and restoring power of Jesus Christ. In any situation, there is hope, but it's your job to seek it out. If you feel like your life is in a dark place, allow Jesus to be the beacon of light for you and for the people around you in the midst of darkness.

I am so thankful that I am in a place in life where I am excited about the future. I went from not even wanting to see tomorrow to feeling excited to get up every day to experience more of Jesus. I know that this is because I found purpose in my life. I work every day to follow my purpose, even if that's just taking one small step.

I hope that this book has touched your heart in some way. Whether that be through my story or from anything you learned in the process. If you are that person, I wrote this book for you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It's hard to figure out how to write this acknowledgement. God used so many people in His pursuit of my heart and my life. I feel so grateful to all the Spirit-led people God surrounded me with who walked in obedience to the role He had them play in my life.

I want to thank my family for standing by me, even when I did not deserve it.

I want to thank my dad for showing me what it looks like to live for Jesus, to be fully and relentlessly in love with Him, and for using everything the Lord gives him to lead others into radical freedom.

I want to thank my life coach, Glenda Osness, for being led by the Holy Spirit in her work and leading me to the source of all healing and life.

I want to thank the Transform Our World family and Ed Silvos for fighting for me in prayer, for believing in the call of God on my life, and for helping to champion me into my purpose.

I want to thank everyone that supported God's call on my life to write this book and to all those who wrote endorsements. There are many more people who have poured into me on the journey so far. I am grateful for each of them in ways I can hardly describe.

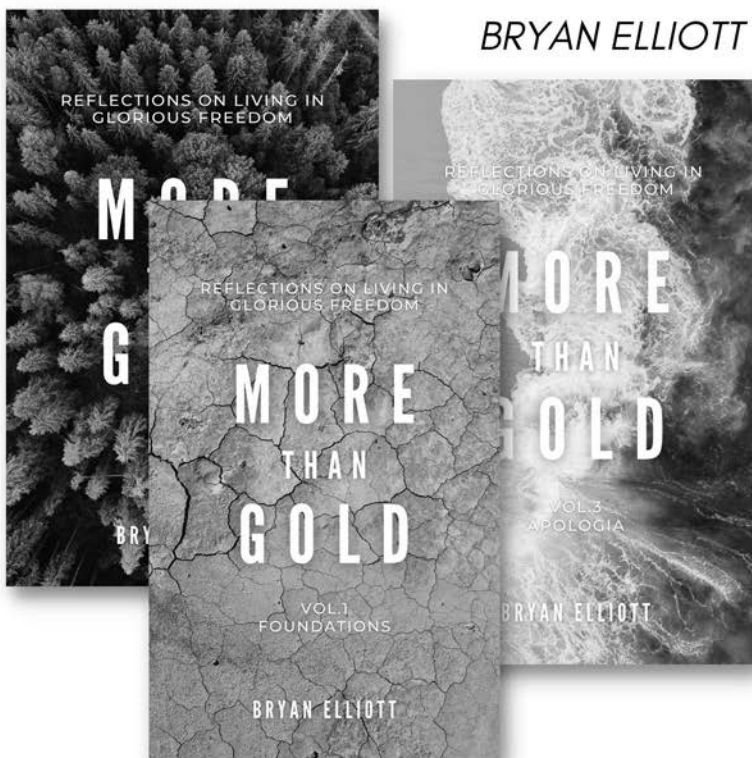
Truly thankful and blessed,

Bryn

BE THE FIRST TO KNOW

REFLECTIONS ON LIVING IN GLORIOUS FREEDOM
MORE THAN GOLD

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"BRYAN ELLIOTT'S BOOK, *MORE THAN GOLD*, IS A MUST READ IF YOU WANT TO WAKE UP EVERY MORNING WITH A SENSE OF EXPECTATION AS TO WHAT GOD HAS IN STORE FOR YOU. BRYAN SHOWS IN PRACTICAL WAYS, AND USING PERSONAL EXAMPLES FROM HIS WALK WITH GOD, HOW TO TAKE THE POWER AND THE PRESENCE OF GOD TO YOUR SPHERES OF INFLUENCE, PARTICULARLY TO THE MARKETPLACE WHERE WE SPEND THE BULK OF OUR TIME. GET READY TO BE TRANSFORMED SO YOU CAN MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE!" -**DR. ED SILVOSO** FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT, TRANSFORM OUR WORLD

NOTES

1. THE YOUNGER YEARS

1. *While details and names have been changed to protect certain individuals, the essence of this story is true.*

12. GLENDA

1. Matthew 28:19-20

15. CLOSER TO JESUS

1. Deuteronomy 31:6, John 10:27-28

18. STRONGHOLDS

1. Ed Silvoso. *Strongholds*. Chosen Books: 2018.

19. FORGIVENESS

1. "Forgiveness." Hopkins Medicine. Accessed 1.6.2022. <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/forgiveness-your-health-depends-on-it>.

20. THE MYTH OF LUKEWARM CHRISTIANITY

1. Aaron Cline Hanbury. "You're Probably Misunderstanding What It Means to Be a 'Lukewarm' Christian." Relevant Magazine. Accessed 1.6.2022. <https://www.relevantmagazine.com/faith/youre-probably-misunderstanding-what-it-means-be-lukewarm-christian/>.

21. LESS OF ME, MORE OF HIM

1. "Understanding Unconscious Bias." NPR.org. Accessed 11.24.2021. <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/14/891140598/understanding-unconscious-bias>.

23. WRESTLING WITH YOUR FAITH

1. Fasts are specific to each person and vary in length. We get the model for fasting from the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments. Even Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights (Matthew 4). Biblically, fasting is specific to food, but God may also ask you to refrain from other things like media or social activities. Many people also practice a rhythm of fasting in their week, month, or different times throughout the year.

25. CALL TO MY GENERATION

1. Mark Batterson, *The Circle Maker*. Zondervan, 2016.