

Chapter 1: The Question

I knew something was wrong with our Suburban for a while. But, like most things, until it was an emergency, I was not going to do anything about it. My husband was still in season working 16 hour days when it started sounding funny, so I didn't have his help to diagnose the problem. I thought that maybe there was some debris stuck in the wheel or tire. Surely, the squeaking sound I was hearing off and on was eventually going to resolve itself, right? After a month or so of rationalizing the strange things I was hearing from my car, I finally caved after Dave commented that it was driving funny. When we returned from our annual post-season vacation to Hawaii, I made an appointment to have it checked.

The 15-minute drive to the mechanic was peaceful, the bright winter sun warming my face as we laughed and sang along to the music, still in vacation mode. The mood changed in an instant as I went to hit the brake, and my foot slammed all the way to the floor. The whole car shuddered as I vice-gripped the steering wheel, willing the car over to the side of the road. When I finally had the car pulled into a safe space, I realized time had warped to a standstill. As I relaxed my hands and took a few deep breaths, time began to move forward again. My entire body was shaking as I unloaded the kids and the stroller, still reeling from how quickly it all happened. Dave drove the final two blocks to the repair shop while I waited at the park, still trembling as I watched the kids happily racing around the playground, unaware of the miracle that had just occurred for us to walk away unscathed.

An hour later, the mechanic called. "Well, I have good news and bad news. The bad news is the entire wheel bearing came clean off, and the brake on that side failed as well. The good news is, we can get the repair done today, and you'll be back on the road!"

Are you kidding me?! I thought. What if we had been driving down the freeway when that had happened? What would I have done if I was alone?

Overwhelmed with relief, we turned the day into a family adventure. We played at the park, got coffee, and went for a long walk by the creek. The glorious and rare sunny February day felt idyllic considering the circumstances, and we made the most of it. We picked up the car after dinner, grateful that we were safe and relaxed after a fun, spontaneous family day. It wasn't until we got home that I allowed myself to acknowledge that the wheel was coming off our family, too.

Unloading the kids from the car, exhausted from the roller coaster of a day, Dave jolted me back to reality. "Hey, Jason and I are going to go grab a beer."

The joyride of our post-vacation glow and the relief of a near-catastrophe turned unexpected adventure came to a grinding halt as I stared down the face of how I really felt. Sure, the season was over, and his hours were better for family life, but he was still going to be on his own program when something came up that he didn't want to miss out on. I was left to take care of *our* home. Alone. Again.

"So, I'm just going to put the kids to bed by myself then?" There was no doubt my cutting tone revealed the anger I felt at yet another night left to manage on my own. He paused, looking at me for an indication of what his next move should be.

"No, it's fine. Just go."

He waited, gauging my reaction and words for their merit. I felt the icy claw of resentment slowly replace the heat of seething anger coursing through my body. Knowing that my feelings had not made a lasting change before, even if I spoke them aloud, I turned on my heels and started the bedtime routine.

It wasn't until later that night, as I lay in bed trying to sleep despite the million thoughts in my head, that I began to process what I was feeling. In my anger, I wanted so badly just to roll over and go to sleep; to somehow make him pay for his decisions with a few days of distance and silence. I had done just that many times before, and although it didn't actually fix anything, it made me feel better, and I knew how to manage that response. The problem was, I had started the book *The Power of a Praying Wife*, and I couldn't shake what I was learning. I had opened it a few months earlier in my desperation and loneliness over a long away-game weekend. Looking for anything that would fix my silent struggle, I reached again for the book that had been a wedding present but sat collecting dust on our shelf for years.

The very first chapter made it clear that in order to pray for your husband, you have to first start "by praying for his wife." The book is filled with topical prayers to pray for your husband, but I never got to any of those. I kept rereading the first chapter, unable to move on. On those late nights during the season, I had started asking the Lord to show me what I needed to change. Laying there again this night, I felt the distinct impression that I was not supposed to go to sleep, that I wasn't to retreat to my old way of handling it. Tired and frustrated, I went to the next place of comfort: the fridge.

Staring blankly into the glowing light, I heard the guys talking downstairs. They had decided to stay in for drinks and cigars instead of going out. Curious, I crept to the top of the stairs to listen in. *Were they praying?* Now I was really confused. What was going on? After a few minutes of trying to hear what was being said, I settled back into bed. Staring up at the ceiling, I waited for whatever it was that I was supposed to be staying up for.

A little while later, my husband lumbered into bed, smelling strongly of cigars and beer. I think he was surprised to see me awake. Normally I would have gotten into bed and willed myself to sleep so I didn't have to deal with his coming in late. If he felt my resentment, he certainly didn't let on. Instead, he excitedly launched into how great it was going to be having the players over to our house. "You know, to witness our marriage and family; to see how we do it here."

Then the whisper in my heart changed everything, just as the brake failure on the Suburban had earlier. I waited quietly for a minute, gathering up the courage for what was about to come out of my mouth.

"*This marriage?*" I breathed out.

"You don't think so?" he scoffed.

"I mean, I think we love each other. I think we have fun together. I think we do day-to-day life together day well. But, do I think we have the type of marriage that the Bible talks about? Not really."

The silence lay heavy in the darkness. I didn't dare move, afraid if I rolled away, we might pretend I hadn't said anything, and the conversation might end.

"Are you happy?" I asked, somewhat bracing myself.

His response was immediate, hitting like a ton of bricks.

“No.”

It was flat. Truthful. Stark.

My relief was immediate. I wasn't crazy. All this time, I thought that I was the only one feeling this way. I thought that something must have been wrong with me for feeling unsatisfied when so much of our life was good. This? This was new. Acknowledging that we were both profoundly dissatisfied had never happened before.

Nothing more was said after that. I think we both knew something deep in our marriage had shifted. As we drifted off to sleep in the silence, I could feel it. The tiniest spark of hope was kindled, beginning what would eventually turn into a wildfire, burning down the old marriage and bringing something entirely new from the ashes.

Chapter 2: The Open Door

There it was again—that same feeling. The one I wanted to push back into the farthest place my mind could wander; the place reserved for ridiculous middle-of-the-night fears that became clearly illogical as soon as the morning sun hit them. I knew how to manage *those* fears and how to tell myself they weren't true. Besides, there was so much to be happy about: Dave and I had two beautiful kids, a good job, two homes, and a loyal dog. We regularly attendance at church, and somehow, in the midst of raising a family, I found the time and passion for getting fitter than I had ever been.

Yet, I was still plagued by the feeling that there was something missing—some piece that was the key to this complicated puzzle. Something keeping us from the life we really wanted, and the terrible sensation that it was somehow my fault.

It kept happening no matter how far I tried to push the thoughts away. So, I did what I knew how to do—I worked out harder, focused my energy on our fixer-upper house, had another glass of wine, and took the kids on adventures. I allowed the constant wave of *new* and *more* and *fun* and *better* to keep the tide of fear at bay. On the outside, we were building the life that I always wanted, but on the inside, I was left feeling empty and alone.

The buzz of the phone brought me back to the present. Dave was driving, so I reached down to check it for him. A woman's name I didn't recognize flashed across the screen, so I opened the message and read it aloud to him.

"How's life in the Pacific Northwest?"

My shoulders tightened as I braced myself against those familiar feelings.

"Who is this?" I asked as nonchalantly as I could muster, hiding the fear and anger I felt rising in my throat.

"Just a reporter I met at the combine. She's a friend of another coach from his time in New York."

"Why is she texting you?" My ability to hide the edge in my voice was failing.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe she just wants to know how the team is doing now that we're back in off-season, and the loss is behind us?" he responded coolly.

"Is she married?" All attempts at covering my distress were now gone, replaced by a smoldering exasperation. I stared out the window, tensely holding to the door handle as if I were bracing myself for what would come next.

"I think so?"

"She doesn't sound married." It was a familiarity in the tone of the text that I had grown to recognize and detest. It was a cutting familiarity that said, "Yeah, I know him. I have access to him, too." I was tired of it. Maybe it was the last few months of finally telling myself the truth, even if only in small doses. Maybe it was the fact that we were stuck in a car for a few hours, and I was too tired to pretend

the rest of the way. Whatever the reason, the crack in the door was there, and I took a deep breath and pushed my way in.

“Maybe it’s not her, but I feel like you have a door open.”

Silence. Suffocating silence. Hot tears spilled down my cheeks as I fought desperately to control the emotions threatening to upend my happy little life. Then, almost at once, that same peace that allowed me to push into the hurt and tell the truth kept the words coming.

“I am tired of this feeling. I am tired of wondering. I don’t feel safe in this marriage, and I can’t keep feeling that way.” The tears continued to fall silently as I willed myself not to disturb the moment and draw more attention to what I had just allowed to leave my lips.

More silence. My body buzzed as the adrenaline surge subsided. We rode that way for a few minutes before he reached over and took my hand. Undisturbed in the backseat with headphones on and a movie rolling, our oldest glanced up with a searching look as I wiped the tears away. The conversation was over, but the words could not be taken back.

For months, Lizzy and I had been planning a trip to Orlando, Florida, to visit her younger sister Katie once football season was over. I was looking forward to our time together to decompress after a long, exhausting season. But my wife had other plans. After she called me out that night in bed, asking if I was happy in our marriage, I knew that there was a “Where do we go from here?” conversation looming on the horizon like a stormy rain cloud. Right before we left Seattle, she asked me a question that would eventually change *everything*.

“What do you think of going to a marriage conference together after we get back from vacation? You’ll have the time off, and it’s only three days. Can we commit to going?”

“Of course. That sounds great,” I said, already panicking inside. By now, I was an absolute professional at pulling myself together when things were falling apart internally.

To make matters worse, my friend Chris, a pastor at our church, found out that Lizzy and I had signed up for the event. Not thinking anything of it, he asked, “Would you and Lizzy want to be a lead couple at a table to help facilitate the breakout sessions?”

The last thing we should be doing is trying to help other people with their marriage, but if I decline his invitation, he’ll have a feeling that our marriage is “on the rocks.” We can’t have that happen, I thought to myself.

We had been to several marriage conferences before. In fact, we averaged about one every other year. We were typically invited to go for free as a way of promoting the event to other high school, college, and professional coaches who could see this as a networking opportunity. At the bottom of the advertisement for the event would be a list of notable coaches.

Coach Dave Canales (and family), Wide Receivers Coach, Seattle Seahawks.

I knew this song and dance all too well, but this conference was going to be different. Ever since that conversation in our bedroom, I knew there was no turning back. Something had to change.

I had resolved that I was going to tell Lizzy the truth—the whole truth, and nothing but—about the man she married. And it was hands down the scariest decision of my life. Even as I'm writing now, I can feel my stomach starting to tighten and the hollow feeling beginning to reappear in my chest and legs. After I decided to tell the truth, it felt as if my feet were no longer on steady ground. How was I supposed to keep this mask on for an entire week?

Well, I did what I always did: *I faked it*. I put on a smile and desperately tried to act as present in conversation as I possibly could so that no one would suspect I had something to hide. I had discovered that if you look interested enough in what other people are saying, doing, or showing you, they are less likely to start prying into your personal affairs. I mean, we all want to be heard, seen, and felt, so I simply offered that in exchange for privacy. Just a little trick I learned growing up in church.

Lizzy's sister and her husband Robbie had been married the previous June and were settled in a cozy little cinder block home in Lake Forest, a suburb of Orlando. We had a free place to stay, Katie and Robbie to act as tour guides, and some extra spending money from our conference championship season. It had all the makings of an intimate time of celebration for both our career success *and* their new marriage. However, a "celebration" is a far cry from where my heart and mind were. On top of the mountain of shame and lies I was hiding, I was going to have to wear the mask for an entire week in Florida. It was incredibly exhausting to live that way, to say the least, and I had been doing that, well... all my life, really. So, what did I do in an attempt to hide my inner turmoil?

I drank. A lot.

On this trip, every meal was an opportunity for me to stay buzzed enough not to feel. It was two or three beers at every meal, and sometimes a quick shot at the bar on the way to the bathroom. It was also a lot of fun signature drinks at Katie and Robbie's house. I mean, we were on vacation, after all! Besides, I was much more willing to put up with Lizzy's questions about my drinking habits than I was answering questions like, "What's on your mind? You seem distant. Is there something you need to tell me?"

It turns out, that is what I feared the most: being found out as a fraud.

While on our trip, a good distraction from reality was reconnecting with a coaching buddy of mine named Luke. Luke and I coached together in Seattle for two years, and Lizzy and his wife Nici had become like family. Luke and Nici had since accepted several promotions, the latest one landing them in Jacksonville coaching for the Jaguars. We arranged a day and a half long reunion for our young families, which was especially exciting because their son Barrett was born weeks before they left Seattle.

They lived four hours away from where we were staying, but Lizzy and I loved driving together, especially in places that were unfamiliar. We saw road trips as a chance to connect. We talked about the future and did some bird watching as mile after mile of highway scraped away the callouses of the daily grind we had left at home. With two little kids in the back of our rental car quietly watching a movie, it was the perfect break amidst the nonstop action of our vacation. We popped in and out of conversation, only taking breaks to comment on the landscape or the wildlife. As I drove along during one of these

breaks, staring out of the window to catch a glimpse of the native Floridian birds, I received a text message.

"How's life in the Pacific Northwest?"

Lizzy glanced at my phone, reached into the console, and read it out loud.

"Who is this?" My gut tightened and my neck tensed, all the blood drained from my face, and I started to panic.

Who was it? I thought, trying to conceal the anxiety rising in my chest as I looked at the number.

It turned out to be a female reporter I had met at the NFL scouting combine a few weeks before.

"She's a friend of a coach's agent. I met her at the combine," I said, wondering if she could see the beads of sweat forming around my eyebrows.

"Just a friend? She sounds like she knows you pretty well. Why is she texting you?"

I took the authority figure approach and said, "In my profession, I'm going to have to talk to lots of female reporters. It comes with the territory."

"I understand that, but I do not see why she is reaching out to you in the off-season. This just doesn't add up."

We went back and forth for a few minutes, getting louder and louder until I finally stopped. I waited a moment and softly said, "I promise you, Lizzy, I'm telling you the truth."

And just like that, the fight was over. With tears silently streaming down her face and a look of utter betrayal that might as well have said "all is lost," she looked directly into my eyes and said, "You may be telling the truth this time, but I also know that you have a door open."

My heart sunk. *You've lost her*, I thought to myself, feeling the mask of my false identity starting to crumble. I was no longer the "Golden Boy" who could do no wrong. All the old tricks I had used in the past to try to win my way back into her good graces were not going to work anymore. The devastating part about this argument was that while my conversations with the reporter had obviously been way too friendly, for once, I *was* telling the truth. That's how I knew she was done.

As I looked out of the window at a loss for words, I panned to the rear-view mirror and met the eyes of my little girl staring at me above the iPad. The thought that this could be our last vacation together hit me like a ton of bricks, and reality became all the more present. The moment I looked at my little girl, the anxious feelings I had were gone, replaced by a deep sadness and utter hopelessness that I had never experienced before. I felt my feet firmly on the ground now, but they felt so heavy.

What had I done? I imagined moving out of the house and into an apartment. I thought about the statistics of broken marriages and the effect it had on the kids. I thought about the long road back to finding out who I really was underneath the façade. And I was devastated.

That night, instead of pressing into the tension with Lizzy and figuring out what we were going to do next, I went out with my buddy. I left Lizzy at the hotel with the kids and got as drunk as I possibly could in an effort to forget all that had just unfolded.

But I couldn't.

Chapter 3: Telling the Truth

When we returned to Seattle after our vacation in Orlando, I went back to work at the football office for the week. With the marriage retreat around the corner, it was a pleasant distraction. Every time I thought about the retreat, I felt like I was staring down the barrel of a shotgun.

I started to have second thoughts about coming clean to Lizzy. In my mind, I still had a chance to do what I always did: act as if the text message from the female reporter was an isolated incident and promise never to let that happen again. I could admit to struggling with pornography or having an emotional affair with someone. That type of issue would hurt for Lizzy to hear, but at least it would force us to connect. Then, we would at least feel like we were doing hard work. As horrible as it sounds, this was the approach I had taken for the entirety of our nine years of marriage—not to mention the two years we dated beforehand.

The problem with this approach—or, rather, one of the many problems—is that, much like visiting the doctor, if you do not reveal *all* of your symptoms, it is impossible for them to correctly diagnose the issue. Forgiveness works that way, too. If someone forgives you for *part* of your wrongdoing, are you truly forgiven?

Over the years I was living a secret life, I would somehow always come back to a place of brokenness and repentance before God. I often found myself in this place when I was alone in a hotel room or working out at the stadium before a game, asking Jesus to wash me with His blood. The heavy burden of shame would press down on my chest, consuming my mind about the sinful choices I had made the night before. I would attempt to verbally beat myself up, as if this mess could be fixed by being stronger and more disciplined.

But every time, without fail, Jesus would whisper, “Where are your accusers? I don’t accuse you. Your sins are forgiven. Go and sin no more. I have something so much better for you.” *That* was the love and acceptance I was so desperately looking for. It was as if I was deliberately trying to ruin my life, and Jesus just would *not* let me do it. The second part was harder to hear.

“Now go and make yourself right with your wife.”

There was always some action, some step of faith that Jesus required me to take to test whether I trusted that His way was better than mine. That is the part that scared me the most. I was hoping that I could confess to the Lord, who is full of grace, and move on without having to involve Lizzy... who may not be as understanding as God.

From time to time, my dad would preach a sermon out of Matthew 5, focusing on verses 23 and 24. The Scripture says, “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” (ESV). My dad taught about how, in those days, people sometimes traveled for hundreds of miles, taking up to a week to get to the synagogue. This was a major financial decision for the families involved—imagine all of the money that went into preparing a caravan and traveling with your entire household! Now, imagine having to come up with the unplanned expense of an extra trip home right after you had just arrived at your destination. *That* is how strongly Jesus felt about reconciliation.

The day before the marriage conference, as I was driving home from work along the shore of Lake Washington in our quaint little neighborhood called Kennydale, I was thinking about Matthew 5 again. I remember taking a slight left turn up the hill, driving past the public parking spots that face the Lake with the Olympic mountain range serving as a backdrop. As I gradually climbed the hill, leaving the Lake behind me and heading for home, it was as if the Lord spoke to me in an audible voice. Again, I heard the words I didn't want to hear.

“Go and make yourself right with your wife.”

God knew that I was battling two competing emotions. The primary feeling that I had was the fear of losing my marriage. God knew that I was trying to figure out the right words to say to Lizzy to minimize the damage—which was going to be impossible, given the nature of what I was about to tell her. He also knew that I was excited about all that was going to be unlocked in my life once I was able to reconcile with Lizzy.

“But what if I tell her the truth and she leaves me? What if I lose my job after I worked so hard to get it?” I fought back. His next reply was a lot less like a whisper; in fact, it much more closely resembled a roar.

“Dave, I don't want your marriage, and I don't want your ministry. I just want you!” The response felt like an arrow piercing straight through my calloused heart. “I'm not promising you that you'll keep your marriage and raise your kids together. I'm not promising you that your career will be successful. But I AM promising you that I will never leave you. I will help you to become the man that I made you to be, and I promise you that no matter what it may look like, it will be better.”

As I continued my drive home, I felt like I imagine Abraham must have felt walking up the mountain to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. You know, the one he had been waiting for all of his life. The one that God had promised him. I was about to risk everything—my career, my family, my livelihood—by being obedient to the call I had blown off for the past 10 years. It was the call to be honest with my wife and ask for forgiveness and reconciliation, and it was terrifying.

There is a cartoon that went viral a few years ago that depicted Jesus lovingly asking a little girl to give Him her tiny teddy bear. The little girl was scared because it was her most prized possession, and she really loved it. The cartoon also shows Jesus with a nearly identical teddy bear behind his back, except it was about 10 times the size. Though the girl can't see the blessing to come from her obedience, she is asked a simple question: “Do you trust me?”

At that moment in the car, I felt Jesus asking me the same thing.

“Dave, do you trust me?”

However hard it was going to be, I wanted God's blessing on my life, and I was willing to sacrifice my most prized possessions to receive it. I decided that I was finally going to tell Lizzy the truth, risking it all with the hope of what God had in store for me on the other side. Like any person embarking on a high-risk adventure, I was frozen with uncertainty. But, at the same time, I had never felt so alive.

Chapter 4: The Truth

Only two days after the conversation in bed where I finally told my husband I was deeply dissatisfied with our marriage, I joined my weekly mom's group on a Wednesday morning. All was normal until our host invited a guest to make a special announcement. Like a white-hot spotlight shining directly on my chair, I knew with immediate certainty that this was meant specifically for me. I sat trembling in my chair in a cold sweat as I listened to the pastor talk about the marriage conference our church would be hosting. Phrases like "the hardest weekend of my life," and "the best thing we've ever done" reverberated in my mind when he finished. I felt like this was a sign pointing to what seemed the only way forward for us.

Later, when I asked Dave if he wanted to go, I made it clear that I didn't need an answer right away. After all, the last thing I wanted was to drag him there. I still couldn't really believe he had agreed; I was surprised he was willing, a passive admission that we needed help. He didn't even balk at the application process that required answering in-depth questions about our marriage and personal lives. I tried not to think about how he might be answering, choosing to focus on what I was experiencing in our marriage. Being honest with him had galvanized me into being truthful about what I was feeling, so I used the application as a chance to only answer for myself.

It should have come as no shock that we were asked to be table facilitators for the conference—we looked and acted the part from the outside. However, fresh paint and immaculate landscaping couldn't make up for the deeply flawed foundation our marriage was built on, hidden below the surface to those looking from the street. I didn't know we were bracing for a hurricane that was just out of sight, lurking on the horizon. The conference opened on Thursday night, and while the format was similar to other conferences we had been to, this was more intimate and honest from the beginning. The facilitators jumped immediately into an invitation to use this weekend as a time to really talk about our issues and a challenge to not stay on the surface.

Our first activity Friday morning was to spend some time journaling about areas we needed to reconcile with our spouses. Quiet music played as I sat on the carpeted floor searching my heart, hoping to find answers to what was so tragically flawed in our relationship. I was open to any answer and desperate to find what I needed to fix, but mostly I felt bewildered and lost, as if the answer were just out of my reach. Meanwhile, my husband wrote furiously in his journal a few feet away.

After some time passed, they asked us to partner back up with our spouses. We sat leaning casually against the wall, facing each other, the sunlight streaming down on us from the third-floor window. Feeling guilty that I hadn't found the answer to moving forward, I asked him to go first.

He didn't waste any time getting straight to the point, taking a deep breath as he spoke.

"Babe, I've been unfaithful to you." No beating around the bush, no excuses, just a straightforward statement. He looked me full in the face, the tears welling up in his eyes as he waited for my response.

The world around me faded to grey as I sat waiting for the air to come back into my lungs. My heart shattered into a million pieces in a split second. And, in so many ways, so did our marriage. I finally

had concrete evidence that there was a reason for my growing unhappiness in our marriage. Something was tragically broken, and that something was our covenant. Here he was confessing the one thing I had said I would never forgive. Time stood still. I understood *what* he said, but the reality was slow to sink in.

As we sat there quietly, I realized I actually had known, albeit in some deep-down place I wasn't ready to go until that moment. The tears began to fall silently as I closed my eyes and breathed in the full weight of what he had just revealed. I waited motionless, unsure of what to do or say next. I felt bewildered, like I had woken up in the middle of a faraway forsaken land, completely lost with no idea of what to do next or how to get home.

Much to my surprise, in the stillness, my heart began to change. Like a flower in the middle of a fire-ravaged forest, something new was beginning to grow.

"I know," I breathed, barely above a whisper, my gaze fixed on my hands in my lap. "But I don't want to do this life with anyone else."

The words left my mouth the same moment I realized that my heart truly meant them. This was the man I had vowed to love forever, and, somehow, I knew I had no option to turn back now. Instead of recoiling in pain, I reached for him, and we held each other and cried. The tears unleashed a wave of indescribable emotion, revealing overwhelming feelings of shame, disappointment, and abandonment we had been silently riding for years. This was no quick fix, but more a dismantling of the lie we had been living. We really wouldn't understand our way forward until much later when the dust finally settled from this great implosion.

My decision to stay wasn't an act of heroism to prove that I was strong and could handle anything. It was an act of desperate hope; one that would alter the course of my life. I had no idea how difficult it would be, or what it would bring, but this I knew for sure: it was the only path I wanted to take. The following months would prove to be the absolute hardest of my life, but even in the midst of the pain I could cling to hope that we were going somewhere new. We had started a new trail, down into the valley of the shadow of death that would eventually lead to a brand-new life.

* * *

In preparation for the marriage conference, Lizzy needed to make arrangements for our kids, Ashby and Ben, to be taken care of. While the marriage conference was held at our home church in Bellevue, just seven miles away, Lizzy, in her wisdom, felt it was important to stay at a hotel down the street. I think she could sense that some pretty heavy work needed to be done and wanted to create some space for us to do the lifting. So, we went to our tribe for help. She called her parents to ask them to stay at our house with the kids for two days.

Lizzy is a Seattle native, and her parents, Bob and Margie, lived only 30 minutes away. Her parents graciously accepted our request and showed up at our house on Wednesday evening, the first night of the conference.

We were expected to show up early the first night because we had accepted the role of table leaders. This meant we would facilitate the breakout sessions with the other couples at our table. If you're wondering what on earth I was thinking when I accepted that role... you're not alone. When my buddy Chris asked me if we could facilitate, I said, "Absolutely!" as if I were confident we had a lot to offer. The truth of the matter was, I didn't want to mar the image Chris had of our family and let him down. After all that happened between Lizzy and me in Jacksonville, we should have called Chris to tell him that we were going through some hard stuff in our marriage and could not (*should not*) continue with our role as table leaders as planned. Of course, that would mean admitting that our marriage wasn't perfect, and we weren't about to do that. So, I gave myself a fresh haircut, we packed our bags, and drove over to the church.

When we arrived, the lights were down low, candles were burning, and worship music was playing. The conference leaders huddled up all of the table leaders and asked the Holy Spirit to move in the lives of all of the couples that were coming. I was in tears immediately, both feeling the weight of my guilt and burdened by what I knew I had to tell Lizzy. I knew that prayer was for me. The leaders walked around our huddle, praying for each couple, and when the woman got around to us, she said, "There is so much grace in her." Then, she leaned in and whispered, "More than you know." At that moment, it was like Jesus himself grabbed my burden, lifted it off of my shoulders, and nailed it to the cross. I felt so safe and free in the palm of God's hands. I knew this was the perfect time and place to lay it all down. As much as I would have liked to just confess everything to Lizzy in that tender moment, I had to move on, trusting that God would provide the right opportunity for me.

That night, we watched some videos, asked questions, prayed, talked, and got acclimated to the rhythm of the sessions. The conference leaders were intentional not to take us too deep into the wounds of marriages yet, just tilling the soil for what was to come. As the night came to a close, we were given homework to do when we each got back to the hotel, so Lizzy and I explained the exercise to our table, and we all left for the night.

The hotel we were staying at just so happened to be our Seahawks team hotel we used on the night before our home games, which felt intentional—this was the first of many things the Lord wanted to redeem for us. While I tried to be engaged in conversation with Lizzy that night, there was one line on the agenda for the next day I had my eye on. It was a breakout session on reconciliation. Though I didn't know what it was going to look like, I knew it was the time to tell Lizzy the truth.

The next morning, the leaders opened up the floor for couples to share what they had talked about in their hotel rooms the previous night. There were a lot of tears and some incredible breakthroughs shared. We then watched a few video testimonials of couples talking about their experience during the reconciliation session, and my heart started racing. I knew it was time. Our leaders informed us that we would have an hour to break out as couples, and we were given the option of walking around the church campus or finding a quiet corner in the chapel. We opted to stay inside and chose a space next to a window looking out on a beautiful spring Seattle day.

We sat down on the floor, and when I looked into Lizzy's eyes, I started to cry. With as much of my voice I could muster up through the tears, I eked out, "I've been unfaithful to you, babe. I'm not the man you think I am."

With tears pouring down her own face, she said, "I know. I've known for a long time."

I knew what she meant by those words. Though she didn't have physical proof, I knew that she knew intuitively that my heart and mind were somewhere else. Then she took my hand and said, "But I don't want to do this life with anyone else." I had never experienced the love of Jesus so tangibly in my whole life. In a split second, I understood what the Apostle Paul meant in Romans 5:8 when he wrote, "...while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." What an incredible picture of grace and unconditional love. If Lizzy, as a human, could show me that kind of grace, I could only imagine how much more Jesus poured out (and continues to). I sobbed in her arms as time seemed to still, and heaven and earth collided full speed.

I felt immensely free and, for the first time in my life, truly known. Later on, a friend asked me an intriguing question.

"Are you open to the fact that you may have become a Christian that day?"

I have to say that it certainly felt like that was the case. I was saved at a "Power Team" event when I was 11 years old, but that day, at age 33, I felt truly sanctified. Lizzy has since told me that she felt wholly freed on that day as well.

The healing process of infidelity—or any lies within a relationship, for that matter—is a very complicated one, that's for sure. What we would learn a few years later in counseling is that my healing began the day that I confessed to Lizzy. However, though I had grieved all of those past experiences in the moments they happened, for Lizzy, who was just learning about all of my secrets, it could take years to work through all of them. Lizzy would now have to go back to the beginning and reframe every memory of our relationship for the past 10 years. Her grief would come in devastating waves as she realized the layers of deception that I had built up in our marriage.

The fact of the matter is that neither of us really understood how long the road would be. The two years after the marriage conference felt as if I were sitting in the car with my bags packed, keys in the ignition, ready to head out on a new trip... while Lizzy was just starting to unpack her bags from our last one.

You might be wondering what it felt like the moment he told me we'd been living a lie. I had never caught him red-handed, but when he finally came clean, I felt two things: relief and shame. Looking back, I realized the signs were all there, yet I also realized how good I was at ignoring them. Mind you, he didn't go out often, and he covered his tracks well, but when he did go out, it felt like he could turn off the "partner switch" in his brain and totally disregard me. It was the little things like going to the next bar with our friends and sending me home alone when I was ready to call it a night, or continuously not checking in on the road when I knew he was going out.

How could I spend nine years wanting to believe we had a good relationship only to have his devastating secret life come tumbling out of the shadows in a mere minute? Even more terrifying to me was that somewhere deep down, I always knew, but I had never really wanted to find out the truth. How could I have so little self-respect that I was more comfortable ignoring this behavior instead of confronting him, despite how much I hated it?

The truth is, his behavior just inwardly confirmed what I already believed. While Dave wrestled with the decision to expose his secret shame, I wrestled with another giant: the fear that deep down, the reason he was out galivanting like a single man was because, ultimately, I was a disappointment. I believed that if I were better looking, sexier, or more adventurous, if I did more and brought more to our marriage, then he wouldn't want to be out drinking with the boys. Yes, his decisions were despicable. No marriage should ever have to overcome the devastation infidelity brings. But, I would have struggled with some of these feelings even if he had never stepped out—fear that I could be replaced, that I would ultimately end up alone.

With each experience in which I was left to fend for myself, insignificance ate away at my sense of security. Like stones being added to a backpack, it was becoming heavier and heavier with the weight of living this mostly happy but tragically flawed journey. I rationalized his behavior and looked for the positive, trying desperately to keep my head above water. I lived from one vacation to the next date night, clinging to the Instagram reel of highs that made this shaky, heavy load seem worth it.

So, why didn't I come to some sort of ultimatum or dig deeper into what was really going on? Well, more than I feared uncovering his suspicious actions, I was afraid I would find out I really wasn't worth changing for. I was terrified that what he was seeking when he was out doing whatever I was not invited to be a part of was more valuable than protecting me and my heart. Deep down, I think I truly believed he thought he had made a tragic mistake by choosing me. If I were enough, he wouldn't have a desire to be anywhere but home with us. And day by day, these "ifs" were slowly and secretly eating me alive.

From the get-go, I knew our marriage wasn't going to be perfect, but I was convinced we had enough to figure it out together. I figured if I could just work hard enough, sacrifice enough, love enough, and *be* enough, it could see us through. However, nothing could ever be "enough" to overcome his addictions. Only one thing is strong enough to free people from the bondage of sin, and that is **the blood of Jesus**. My love was never going to be enough to free him from his slavery, but God's love could. I was looking for my husband to save me from my own prison of loneliness and insignificance, when what we both needed was to be set free from our wounds, lies, and brokenness.

This brokenness kept us locked in a vicious cycle of disconnection. The first few years, the dream of a career in football kept our eyes forward, shoulder to shoulder, chasing after success. We hoped together, played together, worked together, talked about almost everything together, but never turned *toward* each other to do the deep inner work of reconciliation. Then we added kids, moved up the career ladder, and were busy creating our dream. The more responsibility we had, the easier it was to ignore our shallow relationship. We wanted to be out in the deep, but we were stuck running around in ankle deep water. We were missing the most valuable gift marriage has to offer: being fully known in the middle of our ugliness and somehow, still being unconditionally loved.

I didn't know how to be vulnerable with my fears, so I ignored anything that pointed to my inadequacy in hopes I wouldn't be found out. Like a child who thinks shutting their eyes will make the scary monster go away, we ignored the symptoms of our deteriorating marriage while every chance we had at true intimacy disappeared into the hidden world of secret shame.

Chapter 5: Together

Coming from a secular high school, I was pleasantly surprised to find handsome “Christian” guys that didn’t think I was a square for my innocence. I spent my first year of college chasing after boys and a life of significance. I was constantly on the hunt for “the one.” *Ring by spring* is a joke on many Christian college campuses. By the second year, I was tired of competing with other women for attention. Around the time Dave and I started spending more time in the same group of friends, I was going through a stage in my life of trying to figure out my identity. Prior to my freshman year, I was mostly uninterested in that lifestyle of dressing up every day, making sure I looked the attractive, interesting part. I have always been pretty comfortable in my own skin, choosing what I liked instead of whatever was popular around me. After a year of experimenting with significance, I decided I would take some time off from that life. I wore my hair in a messy bun, threw on a tank top with my favorite thrift store gym shorts, and flopped around in my favorite worn-in rainbow sandals. My look wasn’t exactly screaming, “looking for a relationship.” I *thought* I was playing it safe and wanted to be the girl who was just every guy’s friend.

It was during this time that Dave and I became friends. Dave had always been cool. Don’t get me wrong; I was comfortable making friends and enjoyed the social scene in college, but I just wasn’t the big fish in a small pond like him. I had seen him around campus and was happy to look at him from afar. He was definitely easy on the eyes. We didn’t become friends until his little brother transferred to Azusa. Where I avoided initiating interaction with Dave, Coba and I instantly fell into an easy, platonic friendship. His wife and I still laugh about how confused people were about the nature of our relationship. On the other hand, Dave was always really nice, but never communicated any romantic interest. So, I casually hid my attraction and enjoyed being around him as a bonus to my friendship with Coba.

In the middle of this shift in my identity, I felt strongly that I needed to switch my major to Global Studies. Part of my program for this degree included a term in the inner city of Los Angeles. This was a full urban immersion program. Each student moved in with a family in the heart of Los Angeles. We had a cohort that met for classes on urban globalization at the top of a high-rise looking out over Mid-Wilshire. I exclusively rode public transportation and worked with a non-profit. I ended up interning at an after school hip-hop drop-in center for youth, helping the staff create a safe and positive environment for local kids to practice emcee cyphers, mural art, and dancing. I loved immersing myself in the melting pot of culture that is Los Angeles.

Dave had since graduated, and we hadn’t spoken since I had left for my urban term. Despite having no contact, I found myself thinking about him regularly in a way that really bothered me. I had never met anyone I had been attracted to in quite that way, yet I thought he was too good to be true. I felt grossly preoccupied with conversations we had in college and silly that our interactions still had such a grip on me.

A few months into my term, walking from the redline station to my favorite bubble tea spot before work, I got a phone call out of the blue.

“What’s going on?! How is LA term?” It was Dave.

We caught up for a few minutes, and then he asked, “I was thinking you would want to get out of your house, hang out and see some of the city?”

Was this a sign that maybe, just maybe, he felt some of the things I was trying so desperately to ignore? After catching up for a few minutes, we agreed on a time to meet that Friday night. I tried not to read too much into it.

Imagine my shock when he showed up in the huge church van... filled with half of his family. It felt like being on a date with 12 chaperones, only I spent most of the evening with everyone else and not actually talking to him. As we walked around Olvera Street, peeking in the stalls of charming cultural vendors, eating churros, and reading about the history of original Downtown Los Angeles, I got to know his cousins, tias, and even a few out of town family members they were showing around the city. In my mind, this was clearly further indication that our relationship was platonic. “He must feel sorry for me being alone on this urban adventure in a part of town that I couldn’t really be out after dark,” I rationalized. In actuality, this night was an audition to see how I would handle his family.

Further confirming my suspicion and secret sorrow that we were just friends, I didn’t see or hear from him until my surprise 21st birthday party more than a month later. My roommates planned a sweet party in a back room of Buca di Beppo in Pasadena. Over pasta and way too many other carbs, we laughed at memories of bodyboarding trips gone wrong and other crazy adventures we’d had under the Southern California sun. As the evening was winding down, he and Coba casually walked in as if they had been in the area and thought they would drop by. Just in time for dessert, they joined the table and jumped right into the conversation. I prayed my surprise at their arrival seemed nonchalant. Before they left, Coba invited me to come to a Memorial Day barbecue at their parents’ house.

“Oh, that would be really fun, but my parents are in town to celebrate my birthday and see me off on the second half of my studies abroad in Bolivia,” I waved off the invitation casually.

“Bring them! It’s all family, and you know we have a big family.” He insisted.

This made the invitation all the more awkward for me. I wrestled with whether or not to go, not wanting to entangle my heart any more into a dead-end fantasy. My mom finally talked me into it, saying it would be a good way to see if there was more there than I thought. Upon arrival, I was invited to sit down and help with chopping veggies for salsa in the kitchen while he spent the day outside on the grill with his dad and my parents. The day was fun, the food was amazing, and my parents seemed to really enjoy their time with him. When we left, they all wished me well on my next adventure living in Bolivia for my Global Learning Term. He told me not to “forget about him” with a quick hug in front of his family. I was certain then that what we shared was friendship at best, and probably one that would fade into the past of college days.

Sitting on the plane two days later, listening to the engine fire up as I looked out at the city I was leaving for the foreseeable future, I opened a gift my roommates had made for me. It was a book filled with pictures and notes from my people—something to hold onto while I was half a world away in South America. My heart stopped when I turned the page to see a picture of Dave and me and a handwritten note from him. I had intentionally not asked for his email address (my only form of contact while there), nor offered mine when I had left. I wasn’t about to be vulnerable enough to let him know I wanted to

stay connected! As far as I was concerned, if we were going to stay in touch, it was going to be on his terms and at his expense.

“I love you and I miss you a lot,” he signed off. What?! Our friendship was sweet, and we had maintained occasional contact, but this was a huge shift to me. Heart racing, I was unsure what he meant and terrified of what it would do to my already fragile heart.

Those words haunted me in the late hours of the night when I lay in bed exhausted from days trying to learn Spanish and take in the realities of life in the third world. I was too busy mentally during the day to think about anything except basic communication and not getting lost, but at night, the loneliness of isolation was suffocating. Living in an unfamiliar city with a Bolivian family who spoke almost no English while wrestling with the painful reality of poverty all around me was taking a toll. I craved community. I would reach out to my roommates to hear about how life was just marching on back in LA. They were working catering jobs, had found a new church, and were spending their free time in the sun at Seal beach eating breakfast burritos.

This was supposed to be *my* summer! I had arrived in Cochabamba in the middle of South American winter to the harsh reality of high plains dry cold, and I had not planned for this. After a few months of struggling through each bewildering day, I reached a breaking point. I was in my room for the evening when it all came to a head. I lay freezing on my floor, despite wearing every layer of clothing I had, and sobbed. I cried until I simply couldn't cry anymore.

Back home, I could go on for a long time without facing these scary feelings. Here in a completely unknown place, where everything about daily living was different and hard, I couldn't ignore the fearful emotions of loss and loneliness. When they finally broke over me, I was consumed. Consumed with fears about being left behind, being alone forever, and the feeling that I had been running from these fears for a long, long time. Like a dam breaking, my tears released a flood of consuming sadness that I had pushed down as deeply as I could for a really long time. Crawling into bed, completely wrung out, I prayed that Jesus would just be with me before I fell asleep.

When I woke up, the cold desperation from the night before was thawing into joy as the sun shone through the window onto my bed. Everything ahead of me looked different in the golden morning light. Even the broken glass bottles cemented to the walls surrounding my house for a security system had changed from menacing to brilliant jewels in my newly-opened eyes. I spent the day in wonder at the amazing experience; a chance to live in a reality so different from my own. I ate at the street corner salteña stand without fear of getting sick. I rode the crazy bus, smiling as we weaved dangerously through crowded streets and laughed at my faltering Spanish with my host family at dinner. In place of the fear and loneliness that had been so consuming, a new feeling of lightness and excitement changed the way I saw the details of my day.

As I closed my door that night, I felt free. I sat down at my desk and opened my computer to check my email. I literally laughed out loud.

“Hey girl! I have been trying to get your email for a while now, and I finally tracked it down. How are you doing? What is life like there? I was wondering if you need a ride from the airport when you get back into town? I was hoping we could start spending more time together when you get back?” Literally everything I could have wanted in an email from him staring me back in the face, and on the day after I

had relinquished my heart and future to the Lord, no less. Even more astonishing to me was the freedom I felt to just enjoy this surprise correspondence without needing to understand its significance.

For the rest of the time I was in Bolivia, we exchanged emails almost daily, getting to know each other without the confusion of any kind of physical contact. By the time I returned to LA, we had established a deep, significant friendship. I still didn't know if we would turn that into a romantic relationship, but I was no longer afraid of interacting with him for fear that my secret crush on him would be exposed. Greater than that, I knew that God had a plan that I had not manipulated. Whether or not our relationship ever blossomed into something romantic, our friendship gave me hope for whomever God had in store for my future. Across the equator, something really special was happening, and where dread had been, I now felt excitement for whatever was to come.

During my junior year at Azusa Pacific University, I went to a basketball game with my roommate (and best friend) Lou. I'll admit, I was semi-interested in the game, but the real reason Lou and I were there was to heckle the opposing team and check out all the girls on campus. It was a ton of fun and provided a much-needed break from writing papers and reading for our classes.

In 1999, Lou and I were freshmen watching basketball and volleyball games in the "Cougar Dome." As impressive as its name might sound, the Dome was actually the equivalent of a 1960s middle school P.E. gym. It looked more like a WWII airplane hangar than anything else. But that didn't stop us from cramming about 1,000 screaming students, faculty, family, and friends into what more closely resembled a sardine can. For special rivalry games, the student council asked everyone on campus to wear black t-shirts to intimidate the other team. The football coach gave us black game jerseys to wear to give the event a little more juice. Wearing those tight jerseys gave us meatheads a chance to show off our "guns" and gave the other students a chance to put a jersey number with a face, and I *definitely* enjoyed the attention. We would cheer so hard in the Cougar Dome that steam would literally fog up all of the windows and pour out of the doors when they opened.

Needless to say, we had come a long way from the Cougar Dome. Lou and I were now sitting in a brand-new event complex called the Felix Event Center, named after one of our school's great presidents. This place could fit several thousand people, although, most of the time, just the lower rows of the arena were filled. While it was a less intimate venue than the Cougar Dome, it was equally fun, and its newness and grandeur were something to be proud of. As Lou and I were sitting there, panning the crowd, the sound of the referee's whistle reminded me why we were there. It was the first timeout of the game, and out came the APU Cougars cheerleading squad.

As football players, we were never able to see the cheerleaders because they lined up behind our bench on the track, facing the stands. But, during basketball season, we finally had a chance to see their faces. With an undergraduate population of about 3,500 people, we knew most of the girls on our squad, but I was always interested to see who the new girls were. As the cheerleaders bounced onto the court, my excitement turned to butterflies. To this day, my heart still races when I think about this particular game.

The typical college cheerleader is a cute, petite, ex-gymnast or dancer with a bright smile. However, one of the girls came trotting out with a longer stride and immediately stood out from the rest. She was a head taller than her teammates, with dark brown hair and these exotic (almost Latino) looking eyes. She barely fit into her uniform; her chiseled arms, quads, and hamstrings were popping out everywhere I looked. It felt as if time stopped, and what was supposed to be a 30-second timeout felt like an hour. I was in love. I turned to Lou and said, "Man, she's bad."

It was Lizzy.

I had just started dating a girl when I noticed Lizzy the first time. We were together for the better part of the next two years. Still, I needed an excuse to become Lizzy's friend, and I found out that a friend of mine named Lisa was Lizzy's roommate. I casually invited myself over to their place from time to time to do some recon. However, I never pursued a relationship with Lizzy during that time. I just observed her from afar, and the more I watched her, the stronger my feelings grew.

Finally, two years later, I was single during my last semester at APU. My last relationship had ended badly, and I wasn't interested in entering a new one. Still, I couldn't help but notice how amazing Lizzy was. I watched her help lead an on-campus bible study that we both attended, and I noticed how the other girls always seemed to look to Lizzy when they were going through hard times. In fact, when one of my ex-girlfriends came to me torn up about her current boyfriend breaking up with her, I directed her to our bible study and recommended that she talk to Lizzy. Lizzy also organized a few of her friends to make care packages for members of the football team to take with us when we played on the road. And, on a college campus where a lot of the girls dressed for attention, she remained modest. I was falling in love with her—and *hard*.

Unfortunately, the timing of my newfound feelings for Lizzy was horrible. I was graduating from APU in a few months and would be moving home to work. Although I would only be 45 minutes away, I would have to try hard to stay connected with her. Fortunately, Lizzy had sort of adopted my younger brother Cobra as a little brother, which kept me in the loop. He was my informant on all things Lizzy. In fact, that is how I found out that she was going to study abroad.

No!! This was a major problem. I felt like our QB Russell Wilson in scramble mode trying to find an open receiver with a pack of wolves chasing him. I started to get desperate. We were going to have a BBQ at my parents' house for Memorial Day, and I asked my brother to invite Lizzy. Her parents were also in town to help her pack for her study abroad term, so I told my brother to invite them, too. My plan was back on track (and getting better, as I would have the opportunity to meet her parents, too).

Keep in mind here that Lizzy had *no* idea that I liked her. Her parents would tell me later that they were a little confused about the dynamic between Lizzy, Cobra, and I. They weren't quite sure which, if either of us, was interested in Lizzy romantically. At the BBQ, it was as if the heavens opened when Lizzy said, "The first part of my study abroad is actually here in L.A. I get to stay with a host family, work as a volunteer at a non-profit of choice, and take classes at a satellite classroom downtown. I just have to use public transportation to get around town."

Yes! I thought to myself. *I can offer to pick her up from time to time since she doesn't have a car.*

A few months later, I called her to see if she wanted to come with my family and me to Olvera Street in L.A. It is an iconic little alley adorned with all of the colors and cultural decorations of a small town in

Mexico. Combine that with my big Mexican family, and it was a great test to see how Lizzy would respond around us. The day that I picked her up, I got dressed up, did my hair, put a little cologne on, and drove to the host family's house. I arrived around sunset and waited out front with my cool black Spy shades on, leaning on the hood of my newly washed, cherry red 1987 BMW. I was laying it on thick. We joined the rest of my family and piled into one of our big white church vans. They were crazy and loud as usual. Lizzy didn't even blink.

She's perfect.

After our unofficial date to Olvera Street, we didn't talk or see each other much. The last time we did talk was before she left to Bolivia for the second part of her study abroad term. We exchanged email addresses and said we would keep in touch. However, we didn't. In fact, I actually started dating someone that summer. I can't really explain why I did this, other than wanting to test the strength of my feelings for Lizzy. After going on a few dates with this new girl, my feelings for Lizzy were stronger than ever. After our third (and final) date, I told the girl the truth about my feelings for Lizzy. She was gracious and thanked me for my honesty. That night, I sent my first email to Lizzy.

I sent an email to her once a week, every Sunday night, for the rest of her time in Bolivia. My last email to her was a week before she was due to return to the U.S. In it, I said, "When you get back, I would like to take you out... alone."

She casually responded, "Okay, that sounds great." I think I even offered to pick her up from the airport. I wasn't going to give any other guys a chance to get involved!

The week after she returned, I took her on our first date to a restaurant called Onami for sushi. We had a great time. We talked every night after that, late into the almost morning. We alternated visiting each other in Azusa, where she lived, and in Carson, where I lived with my parents. After one such visit to her apartment, as I was leaving, I stopped in the doorway. I saw her roommate Lisa in the background, and she, sensing that this was a private moment, slipped away into the kitchen. Looking deeply into Lizzy's eyes, I said, "I like you a lot." I felt like Jim Carrey in *Dumb and Dumber*. Even so, she smiled and said, "I like you, too." Then, we had our first kiss.

Over the next nine months, we spent every spare minute we had together. She started coming to our family church, and she came to my first football game as a coach. We were in love. Secretly, I was saving up my pennies for an engagement ring. I had even talked to her sister about the type of ring Lizzy would like. Without her knowing, I took her parents to dinner while they were visiting from Seattle. After some appetizers and small talk, I said, "The real reason I brought you here is to ask you for your daughter's hand in marriage." They chuckled, undoubtedly at my awkwardness of my abrupt shift in our conversation. Bob, Lizzy's dad, looked at me with a big smile on his face and asked, "What took you so long?"

After getting her father's blessing, everything felt settled. A few months later, in June, I took Lizzy to our favorite restaurant, El Torito, at the Redondo Beach pier. I was so nervous I barely touched my food. I was trying to time up the sunset, which usually lasts for quite a while in southern California. But, on this night, I noticed it was diving down quickly into the Pacific Ocean. I made sure we left the restaurant as soon as possible, and I took her to Hermosa Beach, where we had one of our first dates. It was the place I had made up my mind that I was going to marry her. We had had so much fun laughing and playing in

the sand that night. I gave her a piggyback ride, and we played “Hot Lava,” staying in the tracks of the lifeguard’s ATVs. It was a special place for us.

When we arrived, right at sunset, I parked on the street and got out of the car to get her door. I was trying to play it cool, but internally I was scrambling to make it to the beach before the sun went down. I had the engagement ring in the front pocket of my jacket when Lizzy, to my surprise, reached towards it to put her phone and wallet in the same pocket. My football training came in handy, and I jumped quickly to the side and grabbed her stuff. Whew! I guess it would have just made that sidewalk a special place.

I put a few quarters in the parking meter, and we walked out onto the beach with my plan being to propose to her at the same lifeguard tower we had sat in the night I knew she was the one. As we walked in silence, I remembered sitting in the tower, snuggled up, staring at the waves as they rolled in one by one. I remembered dreaming about what our life could be together—forever. That forever thought must have gotten the best of me as we walked right past the tower... and another one, and another one after that. By then, it was nighttime, and I finally stopped, realizing that I was going to keep walking because I was nervous. I turned to face her and asked, “Do you remember our first time here?”

Unsuspecting of my intentions, she coolly said, “Yes, I do.”

“I remember thinking to myself, ‘I want to marry someone I can have fun and be myself with.’ I decided that night that I wanted to marry you.” She started to smile. I put my right knee down in the sand and said, “Will you marry me?”

“Yes!” she said, tears streaming down her face.

Something unexpected happened after that—we started laughing uncontrollably. We laughed to the point of tears, knowing that we had found deep, deep joy. This happens to us occasionally, and it always takes us by surprise. It feels like Lizzy and I are exactly where God wants us to be, and we cannot believe how good it is. The beauty of it is that we cannot manufacture this feeling; it just happens from time to time as we walk together, hand in hand, pursuing God’s plan for our life.

For as hard as I fought my feelings towards Dave, we transitioned into a relationship almost seamlessly. Once he confessed his real intentions, it was unarming how quickly it felt like we had always been together. Early on, Dave made it clear that he wanted to treat our relationship differently than he had other relationships in the past. He wanted to move slowly, on both a physical and emotional level, and I tried my very best to keep my heart in the moment and not think too far down the road. For me, when there is a possibility on the horizon, I have a hard time not moving into hypothetical logistics. However, I was still somewhat in shock that we were even dating after playing it cool about my crush for so long!

We set up and maintained good boundaries and focused on fun and spending time together. He lived in his hometown 45 minutes away from where I was still finishing up school, but that didn’t stop us from seeing each other every few days. We were like teenagers, talking on the phone late at night while

one of us made the drive back home. I watched him coach his JV high school football team, hung out with our friends and his family, and went on dates in his quirky 87 BMW. It was a constant decision for me to not try to figure out where we would end up because this life was so easy together and we couldn't seem to get enough time with each other. We didn't talk about marriage, but we were quickly integrating our worlds together. As hard as I tried to keep it easy in my mind, the stakes felt really high because I had liked him for a long time. In many ways, our dating relationship mirrored our marriage; lots of fun, easy to be together but we didn't talk about the scary things.

We had been dating for six months when I finished college. I decided that I would stay in Southern California and find a job, not knowing that Dave had already asked my parents for their blessing during graduation week. My fears of abandonment were resurfacing as I felt my love for him growing steadily deeper, but we were keeping our relationship appropriately light. That summer, his family invited me to come along on vacation, which felt like a step toward my unspoken longings. He showed great restraint with me while we were there but was secretly pulling out the ring and making plans for our engagement when we returned.

During that vacation, we went out miniature golfing with a friend from college. He jokingly asked when we were going to get married, and Dave casually shrugged off the question. My heart stopped, and my reaction was fear disguised by fierce anger. Was this seriously so casual for him that he didn't have any other response than to laugh it off? I spent the rest of the evening avoiding contact and trying to protect myself. I contemplated packing up and heading home that night, as I was incredibly overwhelmed by the thought that I was in way deeper than he was.

Eventually, the night quieted down, and we were alone, walking the hotel grounds. We ended up sitting out by the pool, the cool, damp air a welcome relief to the blistering desert sun.

"What's going on with you?" He gently probed as I sat brooding.

I guess the months of trying to pretend I was enjoying this relationship casually took a toll because I broke down and confessed my fear. "What is the point of dating if we don't see a future together? I'm not saying we need to know today, but I don't want to do this if we're not at least thinking we're headed in that direction." My words came out abruptly, and silence hung between us.

He reached over and hugged me. I felt myself melting, despite all attempts to keep my walls up.

"Of course I see a future with you, but that isn't anyone else's business. I really want to enjoy this time right now and let that come when it is supposed to. I wouldn't have brought you here on vacation with my family if I wasn't thinking about a future."

A few weeks later, we had a good hard laugh about the whole thing as I gazed at the beautiful diamond he put on my finger.

Our engagement will always be a beautiful reminder of the intention we started out with in our relationship. He took me to dinner and then we went down for a walk on the beach. This was something we had done before, so I didn't think twice about it. I took off goofily skipping down the beach and didn't notice anything different until he pulled me to a stop and turned me to face him. I had a habit of seeing what I wanted to see, not necessarily what was *really* going on. He was serious but happy, and

the moment suddenly became high-definition as everything else faded into the background. I knew what was about to happen, but I was also completely caught off guard.

“I made you a promise that I wouldn’t tell you I love you until I meant it, and I plan on telling you I love you today and every day for the rest of our lives.” He dropped to one knee and pulled out the little box concealed in his pocket. I felt the protective walls I had tried so hard to keep intact around my heart dissolve. All of the angst and waiting did not leave me disappointed. I was going to marry this man! Before I could stop it, deep, joyful laughter erupted from the bottom of my soul as I threw myself into his arms. From here on out, it was going to be he and I together. We didn’t have to hold back from each other anymore and I was so excited.

Later on, I would look back at our early days together and wonder how we had gotten so far off course. I now realize that all of our efforts to make this relationship good simply could not cover up the deep wounds we carried and the habitually sinful response we used to deal with these unseen injuries. Our issues were already there, even in the beginning with the simplicity and excitement, we were just good at hiding and pretending. Our love and intention, as pure as it might have been, didn’t make those go away. Looking back on our dating and engagement during the dark days reminded me that God had brought us together in a beautiful, intentional, and timely way. Maybe somehow we would be able feel like that again, to find that purpose together in the future.

Chapter 6: Climbing the Ladder

After my second year of being the head coach for the JV football team at my alma mater, Carson High School, Lizzy and I sat down to talk about my career—and our future.

With an apprehensive look as if she was walking out on to thin ice, she said, “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re really good at this coaching thing. You can take this as far as you want to go.”

I knew exactly what she meant, and my heart leapt at the thought of it. Excitedly I said, “Do you really think so? I mean, from what I have heard about the coaching profession it takes a lot of time away from family.”

“I will do whatever it takes to support you and get us there,” she said.

The reason she felt the need to qualify her first statement was that she knew what my dream was and it felt small to her. She could see that I was made for something bigger and that I was holding back. I wanted to be the next head coach at Carson High School and build a “Power House” program. I had also told her of my intention to open a sports performance facility, all while serving faithfully at my dad’s church as the worship pastor.

I had it all planned out—or so I thought.

What Lizzy had ignited in me that day was a fire that still burns red hot deep in my bones. That conversation changed the trajectory of my career, as my wife had given me the green light to take my shot. Being the dreamer that I am, my wheels immediately started turning. This was the beginning of a pattern in our relationship where I offered several dreams to Lizzy and watch her reaction to see if anything stuck. I am the type of person who is living the dream while chasing the next one. Lizzy is the type of person who wants to know what the dream is so that she can start planning for it.

We decided to give ourselves a five-year window to get an entry-level job at a major college. The thought was that if we tried hard to get a break for five years and came up short, we could always fall back on a local job with a lot more expertise.

Shortly after Lizzy and I had talked, I was walking across the campus where I was a substitute teacher when I ran into my former high school head coach, Mike Sakurai. Coach “Sak” and I started talking, and it eventually led to football.

“You ever think about coaching college football?” he asked.

“Funny you should ask! My wife Lizzy and I were just talking about that.”

“Well, our tight ends coaching position is open, and we could use some help on special teams. Are you interested?”

“Absolutely. Do you think I have a shot at getting the job?”

“Coach Featherstone just looks for people with solid character and lots of energy. We can teach you the rest.”

Coach Sak's word was good enough for Coach Featherstone. I was hired at El Camino College a few days later without an interview. I was incredibly excited about the new opportunity because El Camino was one of the best junior college football programs in the country. I could feel the momentum building up for the launch of my career in coaching and it did not feel like a coincidence. It was clearly God's timing that Lizzy and I talked and then I was approached by Coach Sak about El Camino and I was ready to take full advantage of every opportunity that God placed in front of me.

The position at El Camino would end up teaching me everything I needed to know about running a successful college football program. It provided me with a mentorship from one of the brightest football passing game minds in the sport, John Featherstone. "Feather" was our head coach at El Camino College, and he was a legend. He had played for and been tutored by the inventor of the modern-day passing game, Don Coryell, and I was about to become a part of that coaching tree.

Along with the tremendous football education came an expected perk of being a part of the El Camino coaching staff and that meant exposure to major college football teams. Because of the success of our program, we had a lot of players that were highly sought after by the major teams in NCAA football. When the coaches came to see our players, they mostly talked to us to get information. This allowed me to forge relationships with them, which then opened the door for me to visit their schools to learn about programs.

The most meaningful connection I made turned out to be with Coach Pete Carroll and the University of Southern California staff. Because Feather had trained one of the coaches on their staff, we had unlimited access to them, which was nothing short of incredible. I took full advantage, making it a point to visit them once a week in the spring for the next three years. During my visits, I made a friend in a guy named Yogi Roth. Yogi knew the program inside and out and was tremendously gracious with his time and knowledge. He kept me connected to the USC family, and when it was time for him to step down, the door opened that I had hoped for: he recommended me to be his replacement.

Three years into our five-year plan, Lizzy and I found ourselves employed by arguably the greatest program in college football at the time—the University of Southern California. While this adventure started off as *our* dream, it was quickly reverting to *my* dream once again... and she was there to help finance it. When we look back at the first five years of my coaching career Lizzy sees it her way of investing in our future. She jokingly tells people, "I had to put Dave through medical school." Even though we can laugh about it now, the serious matter is that she had to sacrifice any professional goals she might have had to help me achieve mine.

I was the one going to coaching clinics and conventions. I was the one visiting colleges to meet new coaching staffs and present myself to them. Ultimately, I was the one with my name on the luggage tags and credentials. As I was climbing the American football ladder, I was leaving my wife behind. I guess I always thought that someday, when I became a head coach, I would find a way to get Lizzy involved in what I was doing professionally. What I had failed to realize was that Lizzy's involvement in my job was not contingent upon the growth of my career, but on the growth of our marriage

I always envisioned my life after graduating would look wildly different than where I found myself in my early 20s. College was a jumble of studying, living off of tips from waiting tables, road trips up and down the coast, beach days, and the independence of being unattached. Until I started dating Dave, I thought I would end up on a beach in Hawaii for a couple of years, working just enough to chase an endless summer. When our lives intertwined, his visions became mine, and I wholeheartedly jumped on board to becoming a coach's wife. Friday night lights replaced the sun-soaked beaches, and we fell into step with the beat of a literal marching band.

It's not that I didn't think I was made for something more, but this dream of a life in college football was ours together. Instead of pursuing a career, I worked excitedly to support the start of his. I loved watching him come alive as we dreamed about the future and breaking into the college ranks. Armed with business cards we made at a copy shop and hope for a big break, we went to the National Coaches Convention in Texas together. He went to the daily sessions and networked while I walked the city and watched TV in our hotel room. At night, a sea of male coaches descended on the bars of San Antonio Riverwalk, with only one other wife and me awkwardly in tow.

We had no idea what we were doing, but all that mattered was that we were doing it *together*. On the final night of the convention, there was a Coach of the Year banquet. The man who accepted the award made a speech about how "he couldn't do it without his amazing wife." It was as if I were peering into the future at that moment—I just knew one day I would be sitting at a table watching my husband give that same speech, and I was inspired for the road ahead.

Dave began to work various camps put on by college teams. Some were local, but often he would travel to volunteer at these events. Over time, I began to realize that I was not quite as integral to the world of coaching as I naively thought I would be at the beginning. I didn't go on coaching trips with him. Instead of a life of excitement and victory, I was mostly alone while he worked longer and longer hours and chased the next promotion. The dream and the vision remained the same, but in the football world, I was only invited to be a *part* of the dreaming. It was my job to make sure that everything else went off without a hitch. There were no end-of-the-year banquets or speeches. Just the weekly hug down on the field after the game and the 10 minutes I felt important when I got to pick him up at the locker room.

On top of the college camps, Dave also worked at the annual summer camp for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. I had changed jobs from working as a manager at Nordstrom to substitute teaching, so I was free to come and volunteer as a soccer coach. We arrived at camp and headed to the dorm we would be in for the week, excited to finally share this with him. My excitement dissolved into discouragement as we walked up to the door. "Dave Canales" stood in big, bold letters on the sign on our door... with "and family" written in smaller letters underneath. The people putting on the camp didn't mean to make me feel bad by any means, but it highlighted the increasing reality I was living. I didn't have a name; didn't have an identity in that realm, outside of him. In the football world, I was his accessory. During football season, I had to make sure everything else in our life kept functioning, but there was no badge of glory like I thought.

Don't get me wrong; it's not that I wish I was more involved in football. As much as I love cheering for our team on Saturday or Sunday, I don't live or die by the win-loss ratio. I was just learning that my reality would be vastly different than what I had always imagined. Instead of being caught up in a life-changing adventure I was an integral part of, I felt like support staff. I was hungry for something

that celebrated me and *my* talents, not just my ability to help facilitate his dreams. The further up the coaching ladder my husband climbed, the more disconnected and isolated I felt. He was traveling to different cities while his teams played in big stadiums, his network growing with all of the pomp and circumstance of the collegiate and NFL football world.

Meanwhile, I was home with a new baby in a new city mostly alone, without the salary I'd imagined would come with all of this as some kind of solace. It was almost as if we lived in two different worlds. The divide between us continued to grow as we learned to stay on our own side and deal separately.

Where I once dreamed of all that could be in the future, I now found myself asking, "Is this really IT? Is this really the life I signed up for?" I would push it away with reason, looking at all of the boxes I could check that were supposed to make my life satisfying: healthy kids, handsome husband, success, fitness. But the question was always there, hidden away in that place that I could seldom allow myself in moments of raw honesty. This same question would be the very spark that would ignite our marriage—once I finally allowed myself to say it out loud. For now, it smoldered in deep, secret resentment, widening the growing chasm between us.

"Is this really it?"

Chapter 7: Finding Our Way

During our engagement, Lizzy and I took some time to think about where we wanted to live. One of our main focuses was to find a place that was close enough to work, church, and my family, but far enough away to give us a retreat from the pressure to be at all the family events. We settled on a city called San Pedro, the southernmost part of Los Angeles. The allure of this town was that while it boasts some of the most beautiful coastline of Southern California, it was still fairly affordable. Many of my friends from church and sports were from San Pedro, and they raved about the amazing restaurants there—a key selling point for Lizzy and me, considering how much we loved a good sandwich or burrito!

We found a quaint little detached apartment at the back of a music school. About a five-yard walk across the cottage-like backyard (which we were in charge of watering, using an old school metal wand that you had to stick in the spigot and turn) was a washer and dryer, with roses and bougainvillea growing along the fences. It was a tiny house, but we loved it. And the best part about it? Over time, as the dirt settled, the entire free-standing bungalow tilted to the northeast corner. So much so that there were three fewer wooden panels on the exterior of the lowest corner of the house. The living room was so slanted that when we sat on the sofa, we slowly slid into one corner of it, always forcing us to snuggle tight whether we wanted to or not. It was so messed up, but it was *perfect*.

There was only one door inside the “Pedro” house, as we lovingly called it, and it belonged to the bathroom. We separated the living room from the bedroom with 1970s style beads—the only privacy we could afford. Living in such tight quarters meant that we were unable to retreat to any part of the house regardless of what we were going through, forcing us to be together... *all of the time*. The only place to hide to get away from Lizzy during a fight was the closet, and there was a little five-and-a-half-foot doorway to get into it. By the time I looked at the Alice in Wonderland door, I was already in a better mood!

What we didn’t know at the time was that we were forging a great foundation of communication that would serve us well later on in our marriage. A friend of mine named Scott said to me a few years ago, “One thing I’ve always admired about you and Lizzy is that you communicate so well together. You’ve always had that, even when times were hard.” He was right, and it started in that little house. Lizzy and I were becoming our own entity. This was exciting because our vision for our marriage was that we would become our *own* family and bring who we had become into eventual parenthood. We felt this was important because our families were so different.

An example of our family differences is their ideas about the definition of “personal space.” I come from a very big Mexican family where we had five houses in the same neighborhood. It was a common occurrence for members of any of the five houses to just show up at dinnertime—or any time, for that matter—unannounced. We all knew each other’s business and helped one another out with any and every part of our lives. I remember my cousin Chiquita, who is 10 years older than me, helping me with science projects into the wee hours of the morning while she was teaching science classes at another high school. I have fond memories from my childhood of always being together, crammed into one house that could have passed as a sauna with all the body heat. The smell of beans and tortillas filled the room, and the TV was always turned to the highest volume setting to rise above the constant noise.

To paint a picture of the contrast between our families, let me share one of my early experiences with Lizzy's family with you. We went to visit Lizzy's Aunt Molly (also known as "Auntie Grandma") and Uncle Tom ("Uncle Rocks") in Glenwood, WA. They have a beautiful cabin on five acres at the foot of Mt. Adams with vaulted, stained wood ceilings and an indoor/outdoor river rock fireplace. I expected that we would all be in the great room together the whole time, playing cards, eating snacks, and watching a movie or two. While we did have some great "family" moments like sitting on the porch by the fireplace in the cold mornings with Pendleton blankets and coffee, what I experienced next was a shock to me.

Margie, Lizzy's mom, came to me and said, "Molly and I are going into town to let you and Lizzy have the house to yourselves." It was not the only time they offered us "space" during that short trip, and I began to realize that they were doing this on purpose. In California, when someone offered or asked for space, there was usually something seriously wrong. This was a revelation to me, and I loved it. Her family made me feel individually respected in a way that I did not know I needed to be.

Back to my family. We did everything together, and since the church was our family business, it was all hands on deck during services and activities there. It was perfectly normal for me to be at an activity at the church six days a week and twice on Sunday. This type of heavy church involvement would become one of the most challenging dynamics of our early marriage. I was trying to balance teaching, coaching, and coordinating the music at church with my brand-new marriage. Our plan to retreat to our cottage in Pedro was under attack. In fact, the only time we spent there was to go to sleep, wake up, take a shower, and head right back down to Carson where all of the family action was.

With our two worlds on a collision course, it all came to a head on New Year's Eve going into the year 2008. Our church held an annual New Year's Eve celebration that was a massive production. Much like the movie *Step Brothers*, it was the "Catalina Wine Mixer" of events for my family and church. We had a potluck, live music performances, a skit and ended with a message from our Senior Pastor—who just so happened to be my dad. Our countdown tradition was that at the end of my dad's message, minutes before 12 a.m., we would begin praying. Then, with seconds left, we all opened our eyes and counted down together as a church family. This year would be the second consecutive time that I would miss the New Year's countdown, having been in Seattle the year before.

Lizzy and I decided to go early to the church celebration, help set up, and then go to our friend's house to bring in the New Year with them instead. We were having a great time with our friends and feeling very "grown-up" with our new tradition—that is, until I noticed several missed calls on my phone. I started receiving text messages from family members asking where I was at, which I ignored until I noticed a voicemail from my dad. The voicemail was hostile and threatening, which, in hindsight, was my dad not knowing how to express his hurt that I would choose to be somewhere else for what was historically a special night for our family.

It felt like I was being torn in two. I was struggling with a sense of loyalty and duty to my family traditions, but I was also obligated to this new life my wife and I were trying to create together.

It was a miserable night for me, although I kept on my best face in the presence of my friends. At the end of the night, as Lizzy and I were pulling into the alley entrance of our home, we sat

there in silence for a moment, knowing that we had to talk about what had just transpired. On the drive home, I had been stewing on all of the ways I was failing to be a “good son” and contributing member at the church, and I started to unleash my thoughts on Lizzy. It was not until I aggressively said, “If it weren’t for you, I would’ve been there tonight at the church!” that things got ugly quick.

Lizzy, now fed up, replied, “Is that where you want to be? At the church more and spending time with them? Then go!”

She stopped me dead in my tracks. As I was fishing for my next point in the argument, I realized something. She was courageously taking a stand, not to defend herself, but to protect our marriage. I immediately realized the decision that was in front of me.

Did I want to live the life that my family expected me to live, or did I want to pursue what God had for Lizzy and me?

After a sobering silence that felt like an hour, I simply said, “No.” With tears in my eyes, I continued, “I don’t want to be working at the church at all.”

She knew that I didn’t want to be at the church as much as I had been, and she wasn’t about to allow me to pass the buck of disappointing my family on to her. Then I said, “I want to coach football, and I want to spend more time with you.” As you may have noticed, there is a popular theme in this book: a wife who loves her husband so much that she stands up to him and tells him the most difficult truths, regardless of the consequences. Because of Lizzy’s courage, she catalyzed a clarity of vision for our family.

Over the next few years, we started making strides towards our dream. I only helped out at church when I could. We showed up at family functions but made sure we left early enough to spend time together. We traveled more together, partied a little, and made sacrifices for our future. At one point, while pregnant, Lizzy was substitute teaching during the day, coaching cheer at the junior college, helping out with music at church one night a week, and working on her Master’s in Education. While we were completely exhausted and broke to boot, we were living our adventure. And more importantly, it was an adventure that was just “ours.”

We had an easy excuse to get out of premarital counseling. We were attending church where his dad was the senior pastor, the church where he was raised and was now on staff as the praise and worship director. We didn’t really want anyone Dave had grown up and worked with knowing our business. We looked briefly into other outside options, but we didn’t see much need for counseling. We were in love, and we were going somewhere together, and I think we both thought that was enough. I loved his family and the church, jumping headlong into the life of the coach and pastor’s wife. Our time was consumed with school, followed by practice, then straight into a rehearsal or a service of some kind—most nights of the week.

A year into being married, the differences between our expectations for what our relationship would look like became too vast to ignore. I had always imagined that we would spend more time together, carving out a life that we shared. In many ways, I was starting to get the feeling he expected me to become a part of the life he lived *before* me. When New Year's Eve rolled around, our friends invited us out for the evening. However, there was a long-standing tradition of Dave's which involved a youth service at the church, beginning with a big potluck. We decided to go to dinner with our friends first and then end the night at the service. We didn't have any direct responsibilities in the program, so it seemed to me like an easy compromise between our own life together and tradition.

The night was great—good food and conversation with our friends, followed by the last few hours of the youth service. After the countdown, all the chairs were stacked, the floors vacuumed, and the trash thrown away. We headed out the door, and I felt happy at the way we had found a way to do both. As we hopped in the car, Dave noticed a voicemail he had missed from earlier in the evening. Halfway through the message, he pulled the truck over, listening quietly, his body still. He hung up the phone, stone silent, jaw clenched. After a few minutes, he shared what was said, and I immediately defended our decision to skip the potluck in order to also spend time with our friends. What I didn't realize at the time was just how intensely he was struggling with expectation and his desire for a different way.

He pulled the car to a stop outside the gate at our tiny rental cottage, the cold air and dark skies surrounding us in the alleyway. With his hands still on the steering wheel, he stared silently out the window. Still not clued into his inner turmoil, I continued to defend our decision to do both, thinking that we were on the same page.

"I don't think you don't understand what it takes to run a church. You didn't grow up in a pastor's family," he quipped back, now defending the accusations from the voicemail.

In a last-ditch effort to support our decision, I reminded him how many nights a week he was already committed to various rehearsals and services. "Isn't that enough?" I questioned in frustration.

The volume of his voice rose, and he almost yelled, "Well, if it weren't for you, I would be at church more!"

Suddenly, I realized that he was directing his anger at me, not at their disappointment. I sat in the car, blindsided, feeling like I had been slapped across the face. Clenching my hands, I felt the anger burning in my chest and fire flushing up my cheeks. I wasn't about to let him blame me for what he was feeling.

"Then don't come home! If you would rather be there, don't come home for me!" I seethed back at him. I had had enough. I wasn't going to be the scapegoat for his struggle. I paused for a moment, knowing that the next thing I said was really important.

Lowering my voice, I proceeded carefully. "But I don't think that's what you really want."

His face softened, and he dropped his head in his hands as he fought back tears. "That's not really what I want, but I don't know how to tell them I want to do something different." My own tense body relaxed as I was flooded with understanding and compassion for the confusion and shame he was feeling.

We sat in silence for a long time. Eventually, we began to talk about what that would mean. It was the first time we really acknowledged his struggle to hear his own desire amidst the voices of expectation and assumption. I had finally called him out for making this about me and what I was expecting, and instead, he acknowledged that he wanted to find his own path forward. What was meant to separate us created a space for us to finally have a conversation we desperately needed to have. It was the beginning of us intentionally carving out space for our *own* dreams for the future. I felt my husband let me into his mess and ask me to be a part of the solution. Now, we could move forward knowing we were wearing the same jersey, playing for the same team.

Chapter 8: The Osprey

When Dave finally got a chance to work at USC, Coach asked that we both come in for the interview. He knew that Dave was the type of person he wanted to find a space for on his staff, so it was more of a formality. What he really wanted was to make sure that I knew what we were signing up for. I was ready to do whatever it took to help Dave get the opportunity to break into division one football. Coach Carroll was honest about what that would mean for me, telling me that Dave's success wasn't going to happen without me making huge sacrifices. It was an entry-level job with brutal hours and an abysmal salary, but it was a foot in the door. This position at USC was the beginning of his "football residency," and we would have to power through.

In the midst of all of this, Dave's dad had a medical emergency that he miraculously survived. We told his family of his job offer the day his dad made a turn toward survival, and it was a glimmer of hope in the midst of a very scary time for our family. This position meant that Dave would no longer be able to hold any sort of role at church. We had been building toward this moment for a long time. His brothers and cousin stepped in to fulfill the role of senior pastor while his dad was on his road to recovery, and Dave made the transition to full-time coach.

Though we were warned ahead of time, his hours were still shocking—the recruiting fanfare and spring ball made for an in-season schedule of seven days a week. I was finishing my Master's in Education, teaching high school during the day, and coaching at the junior college in the evenings. Because we had purchased our first home right before all of these changes, I took over some of his responsibilities at the church so we could continue receiving a housing stipend. To add one more element to the crazy exhaustion, I found out I was expecting our first child.

Looking into the future, I knew that all the hours I was working to achieve this football dream did not complement my dream of motherhood. I began to pray the word "ridiculous" over our circumstances. In my mind, God could do something crazy like getting Dave a job as a position coach that would allow me to stay home when our daughter was born. We were in way over our head owning a home, compounded with debt from living beyond our means, yet I wasn't willing to sacrifice the early years with this baby to keep working the way I was. Instead of acknowledging why we were in this situation in the first place, I was desperate for a way out of our hole of debt. I needed God to come through with a better way than I was living now, and I knew that His solution would be better than anything I could orchestrate.

Early January of the following year, we were sharing a rare afternoon off together. Nearing my due date and feeling increasingly uncomfortable regarding our future, I was beginning to wonder whether I was going to get an answer to my prayer. Instead of sitting around brooding in our fear about the future, we decided to get lunch from Busy Bee, our favorite sandwich shop near the beach. Just as we were preparing to leave, Dave got a text message from his mom.

"What's happening with Coach Pete?" she asked.

"I don't know; I just saw him this morning. Everything seemed normal," he texted back, slightly uneasy.

“Check ESPN.”

We looked at each other, clicked on the TV, and watched as headlines immediately started flashing across the screen: *Pete Carroll to become the next head coach of the Seattle Seahawks.*

The drive to pick up our order in San Pedro was quiet and thoughtful. Stunned by the announcement, we were trying to figure out what that meant for us. Did we have a shot to go with him on staff at Seattle? Did we even have a job at USC anymore if he didn't call him up to the NFL? Moving back home was not something I envisioned—not even in my wildest dreams and prayers. Unsure and a little afraid, we headed to the cliffside park to eat.

After some tearful prayers, we settled in to eat our food. Still ruminating over our circumstances, the vast expanse of Pacific Ocean spilled majestically away into the distance when something caught my attention a stone's throw away: an Osprey. In case you didn't know, let me explain the symbolism here by putting it simply: an Osprey is a *Seahawk*. I couldn't believe it. In the dozens of times we had visited this place, I had never seen one of those birds. We both started laughing, overwhelmed by this “ridiculous” and immediate answer to our prayers. We knew the Lord was speaking to us about his provision for our needs.

“This is crazy, but I think we're going to Seattle,” Dave said as we walked along the cliffside, palm trees swaying in a gentle breeze.

Dave had been coaching at USC for less than a season. His official title was Weight Room Assistant, but it was clear to us that somehow, a transition to Seattle was going to happen. I can't explain how we knew, but we just felt a certainty that we were headed to the NFL. Dave didn't have a football pedigree or enough experience for any job in the NFL, but his energy and work ethic gave him a foot in the door. Deeper than that, I think God knew we needed to go to Seattle for all that was to come.

Within the week, Dave was offered an entry-level position as Offensive Quality Control with the Seahawks, and we were now making plans for a new life in the NFL. In my imagination, God was answering all my prayers, and life was going to get easier now that we had broken into the elite ranks of the NFL. We were going to have a fresh start in my hometown, with nothing but possibility on the horizon. I was going to be able to stay home with Ashby and fulfill my dream of being a stay-at-home mom. Little did I know that this would not be a life of ease and glamour like I was imagining. In fact, life would inevitably get way harder before it got better. The darker life got, and the harder we struggled in our new life in Seattle, I could always look back to that answered prayer as evidence that we were still somehow right where God wanted us to be.

My first and only year coaching at the University of Southern California seemed like a whirlwind. The season was finally over and Lizzy and I finally had a chance to take a deep breath. I was definitely in need of some healthy perspective after finishing my first year at the major college level—it felt like I worked

every day for a full calendar year without a break. Some coaches were able to take a summer vacation before the season started, but I worked in the weight room with the strength staff and players. As a young guy on staff, I had a variety of requirements like this that allowed me to earn a decent salary. The season was the hardest part of the year, in which I worked 18-20 hours a day, 7 days a week for 6 months. After our win in the Emerald Bowl, we were finally finished with the 2009 season. On top of that, we were also nine months pregnant, and Lizzy was about to pop. Combine all these life-changing events, and you can see how it had been a tumultuous 2009 for the two (almost three) of us.

In the world of college football, however, the end of the season does not mark the end of your work. Recruiting high school football players is the lifeblood of every great college football team, and we jump right into it after the season. It was in January of 2010 when I got a text message from my mom on an unusual day off during recruiting season. Now, you need to know that my mom is a sports fanatic in every sense of the word. She was usually the one who kept me current on all the sports headlines around the country. This was before ESPN could send auto-notifications to your phone, so I guess you could say that my mom was my first version of “The Bottom Line.”

Her text message said, “Any truth to this headline? ‘Pete Carroll is taking the head-coaching job for the Seattle Seahawks.’”

I replied, “Coach always gets interest from NFL teams every year. It’s probably just fake news.”

But when she started to share the terms of the contract, I knew that this time, it was real. Shock came over me as we were sitting there on what seemed to be a near-perfect day. That old familiar feeling—the knots in my stomach and lightheadedness as if the ground were disappearing from under my feet—was quickly overwhelming me. I wanted to cry at the thought that this position at USC was supposed to be my big break, and it was gone in an instant. After three years of trying to find a job at the major college level, I had finally found one. I started to think about Plan B, which was to go back to teaching and coaching at a high school or junior college. As I began to jump to conclusions, I realized that what Lizzy and I really needed to do at that moment was pray. It also seemed like the perfect opportunity to get some comfort food to help us sort out life’s big problems, and I knew the perfect place.

We went to our favorite sandwich shop in San Pedro called Busy Bees and bought a couple of “Gut Busters.” This sandwich is made on a perfectly baked French roll, oozing with mayonnaise, oil, and vinegar and stuffed with about a pound of turkey, ham, salami, and provolone cheese. Our favorite thing to do after ordering these sandwiches was to sit at Point Fermin Park, which is located on the cliffside in San Pedro, looking out at Catalina island off the coast of Southern California. Sitting on the high bluffs with the waves crashing into the rocks below has a way of putting life into perspective and always makes me feel small in a good way, as a reminder that I am not in control.

Upon arriving at Point Fermin park, we found a concrete picnic bench unoccupied, close to the cliffside, and joined hands to pray. Thinking about the year that had just ended and the recent news about Coach Carroll leaving USC, we closed our eyes to pray. I said, “Lord, I don’t know what you’re doing, but I trust you, and I know that this is a part of your plan for our lives. Give us a sign so that we know what to do.”

The minute I said that prayer, relief washed over me like a wave, and I could sense Lizzy’s anxiety dissipating as well. That prayer allowed me to think practically about the next step. As I was gathering my thoughts and thinking about how to put them into words to reassure my pregnant wife that I had a plan, Lizzy’s voice pierced through.

“Look up in the tree. Is that an osprey?”

In case you’re missing the significance of this bird sighting, the osprey just so happens to be the bird that the Seahawks franchise uses for the logo. As I turned to look, there it was, sitting on a tree growing out of the side of the cliffs just below us. Judging by the size of the raptor-like bird and the stark white stripes on its head, it was definitely an osprey. We both looked at each other with tears in our eyes and mutually accepted it as a sign that we were going to Seattle.

Being a “mystic” myself, I can see how this story may sound a little far-fetched for someone who thinks a little differently than me. I expected that some people might be skeptical about Jesus’ ability to permeate our reality through signs and wonders, so I used my phone to take a picture of the osprey. I did not do this just to corroborate the story, but I had a sense that someday I would be using that picture as a part of our testimony to Jesus’ faithfulness—and playfulness! I truly believe that if we are paying attention, Jesus is trying to communicate with us like that *all the time*.

I went back to work at USC with a feeling that I can only describe as a deep sense of “knowing.” It felt like I was playing with house money. The news was confirmed about Coach Carroll taking the Seahawks head coaching job, and I was eager (and a little bit nervous) about meeting my new bosses at USC. The anxiety I was feeling seemed temporary because of where I believed I was headed based on the mystical promise I thought I saw at the park. I still worked hard to show the new staff what I could do and create some value if I was going to stay there after all. It wasn’t until two weeks later that I finally received the call I had been waiting for.

I was working late at USC in the old Heritage Hall (I can still smell the red brick building) preparing for a recruiting weekend when Coach Carroll called me. When my caller I.D. read *Pete Carroll*, I took my phone and walked outside to answer the call. I took a deep breath and casually answered.

“Hey, Coach. What’s up?”

“David, I’m sorry I couldn’t keep you in the loop with the Seattle thing; I had to move pretty quickly on that. Anyway, I’m at the Senior Bowl, and I have another great opportunity for you in Seattle if you want it. The job is called Quality Control, and while it’s a hard job, a lot of great coaches have started off this way.”

I wanted to tell coach that I knew he was going to call, but I thought that would be too weird, so I simply said, “Absolutely! I’m fired up! This will be great!”

“I can’t officially hire you for another week, so keep on the hush until I let you know,” he said, thankfully unable to see my jaw drop to the floor.

After accepting the offer, I called Lizzy and said, “Want to go to Seattle?”

It just so happened to be where she grew up, so she emphatically said, “Yes! When?” Her question was loaded. You see, our move was a little time-sensitive, with Lizzy being nine months pregnant.

“Coach said it’ll take about a week for the offer to be official.” Changing gears, I said, “I gotta call your mom!” I got off the phone and immediately called Margie’s cell phone.

When she answered, I got straight to it. “How would you like to see your daughter and new granddaughter a lot more?”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re coming to Seattle with Coach Carroll!”

“Oh, stop it. Are you being serious?”

“Yes! I’ll be up there in about a week, and Lizzy will come up as soon as she’s cleared to fly with the baby,” I said, the words rolling off my tongue with promise in the air.

It has been an incredible blessing to start my coaching career in Los Angeles with my family and to continue it in Seattle with Lizzy’s. Not only did her parents live in the Seattle-surrounding, but she had an older brother and his family as well her older sister Amy and her family living there as well.

Chapter 9: Ballin' on a Budget

It was the first round of the playoffs, known as the wildcard round for the 2010 NFL season. There I was, coaching in my rookie year in the NFL, watching a playoff game from the box. My primary responsibility was to chart our offensive play calls, as well as track the defensive coverages and tendencies of the opposing team. We were hosting the defending World Champion New Orleans Saints, even though they had more wins than us. With a 7-9 win to loss record, we still managed to win our division, giving us one guaranteed home playoff game.

The atmosphere was electric as Drew Brees came running out of the tunnel with a deadly passing attack. Our team had found a good rhythm late in the season by giving the ball to “Beast Mode” Marshawn Lynch in a run-heavy offense. By the fourth quarter, we had gained a good lead, but not one that you could call “comfortable.” Our defense made a big stop and gave us the ball back, and our strategy was to run the ball, get tackled in bounds, and keep the clock running so that the Saints would not have enough time to come back into the game.

And that’s when it happened.

We handed the ball off to Marshawn and would’ve been happy with two yards and a cloud of dust, with the clock continuing to run down in the waning minutes of the game. Instead, what happened was one of the most historic moments in NFL playoff history. The play call was “34 Power,” which was a pretty basic call that most teams have. However, on this play, Marshawn decided that he was *not* going to get tackled. A few broken tackles and stiff arms later, Marshawn was marching down to the end zone. Sitting up in the box, I could feel the entire stadium swaying as the fans jumped—not to mention the near-deafening noise. Later, we would learn that the celebration during that run registered on the Richter Scale, forever naming the play “Beast-quake.”

The Beast-quake play sent us to Chicago for the divisional round of the playoffs against the Bears. To make a long story short, we lost in a freezing cold game. On the bright side, I was about to experience one of the greatest perks of coaching for an NFL playoff team—the playoff bonus.

Some of the veteran staff members had been sharing with us NFL “newbies” what the playoff bonuses looked like. So, I started planning our vacation based on a certain amount of money I *thought* I was getting. Lizzy and I made some phone calls and connected with someone in our organization who coordinates travel and asked if they could find us a deal on the island of Maui. They found an awesome hotel for us, and even though we had \$40,000 of debt, we thought we “deserved” this kind of vacation. We were feeling good, after all. We had a little extra money in our pocket, and with the right connections, we felt as if we could go anywhere.

The other factor in our vacation planning was that my coworker in a similar role had just received a substantial raise, so I was expecting something similar. As it turns out, this would be the moment I got my first lesson in leverage because what I didn't realize was that he had another job offer... which called for our organization to match the offer. I, on the other hand, didn't have any other offers and, therefore, I had no leverage.

Upon arrival, we frivolously started spending money under the assumption that our playoff bonus and new raise would be enough to cover all our expenses. In our excitement, we went down early in the morning to the pool to ensure we would get one of those cabanas with towels and shade and fresh pineapple-vanilla-infused water. We set up camp right in the middle of the swimming area. It was a great spot that had this big rock fixture with a few cabanas up at the top, and you could kind of see down into the pool with a slide and a waterfall. While we were sitting there, I got a phone call from the general manager, John Schneider. I was expecting his call to discuss my contract, so I was a little nervous. It was the first time in my career that I had to do this.

"Hey, Dave. Wish we could do more, but your raise for next year will be \$5,000," he said, cutting right to the chase—and my pride. So much for the cabana with the fancy water!

With a look of embarrassment, I turned to Lizzy and, in a low tone, said, "We need to pay our tab and go sit down closer by the pool. Immediately."

When I shared with her the amount of the bonus, she was confused.

"Is there room for negotiation?" she asked.

"I'll ask."

So, I called my boss back, and after a short conversation, the answer was no.

Then our bill came.

When I saw the charge of \$200 for the cabana itself, it might as well have been \$200,000. I was not ready for that one. While I had ordered some fruit and a couple of drinks, I had no idea they charged you for the cabana, too!

Now, looking back, the embarrassment from the cabana scenario was such a classic picture of what our marriage and life were like at the time. We were trying to live a lifestyle that, number one: we couldn't afford; and, number two: may not have been what we really wanted to do anyway. We learned the importance of budgeting for sure, and, maybe, more importantly, we learned the importance of being true to who we are and what we love. We have found that we're a lot happier in hiking gear, muddy and sweaty on a trail somewhere than sitting poolside with drinks in our hands. I'm sure that you can relate to finding yourself on vacations, at parties, or on kid's sports teams because you thought that was what you *should* be doing to keep up with the Joneses. Now, don't get me wrong: I'm not bashing any lifestyle choices here. But what I *am* saying is that we didn't know who we were as a family, and it took some trial and error to find what really filled our cups.

Lizzy and I can now look back and laugh at ourselves, remembering how naïve we were. It has even become a tradition of ours while on vacation to look for a "cabana" expenditure.

Ten years later, as I'm writing this, we find ourselves at Disney World. I'm with the two older kids, Ashby and Ben, paying for them to build way overpriced, custom-made droids in a Star Wars workshop. As I walk out of the shop, slightly embarrassed about the money I just spent, Lizzy looks at me with a quizzical grin and simply says, "Cabana?"

We never should have been there. We had no business spending a week in Maui (nor did we have the money), but after that first season in the NFL ended, we were desperate for a vacation. We hadn't even gotten our playoff bonus yet, but since we knew it would come while we were away, we went for it. Truth is, we were upside down financially. Since Dave left his life of teaching and working at the church to coach full time, we had taken a pay cut every year in order to pursue advancement in his career. At this point, with our entry-level salary in the NFL, we were still below the poverty line for the State of Washington. We were living in debt and barely making ends meet month to month.

But none of that mattered that day because we were on a beach... and we were really good at putting off the truth to live in the moment.

On our morning walk along the boardwalk, ocean waves crashing and humpback whales breaching on the horizon, we had a genius idea. *We should rent a cabana!* The sun was just peeking over the mountains as the bustle of preparation for hotel activities went on all around us. This would give us a chance to stay poolside all day instead of having to spend the afternoon inside for a nap. We stopped

at the rental hut and asked about renting a cabana. After giving our name and room number, we were all set.

Back up at our room, Dave got a call from the Seahawks' general manager and went out onto the Lanai to talk while I lathered Ashby in sunscreen. He came back in with a disappointed, slightly exasperated look on his face. We had been expecting that after a year of proving he was a fit for the NFL, he would be rewarded with a more sustainable salary. Instead, the paltry raise would mean a couple hundred more dollars in our pocket each month.

"Trust me. Hang on a few more years, and you and I will be sitting down for a beer somewhere, looking back on this time and laughing," he had said to Dave before he ended the phone call. Let's just say that I wasn't chuckling when he relayed the conversation.

"I asked him if there was any wiggle room with that amount. I guess we have a lot of coaches on staff, and that's all they could do right now," Dave offered, resigning that this was just the way things work. I, on the other hand, was not so convinced, taking the offer personally. The entire season I had been surviving on the hope that the next contract would allow us some breathing room. Swallowing the taste of continued financial insecurity, we left the room and put the disappointing news behind us.

After a swim in the pool and a few drinks, we were beginning to feel better. The Hawaiian sun melted away some of the anxiety and harsh reality threatening to ruin this idyllic moment. We reminded each other that this would pay off; that God had brought us here for a reason.

And then the gentleman that we had reserved the cabana with that morning came with the bill.

In our naivety, we had no idea that a cabana cost money. Embarrassed, yet still trying to keep up the appearance that we were a young, upwardly mobile not-broke couple, we accepted the check as if we knew all along. The pit in my stomach returned. The cabana was as much as our new raise would pay after taxes in the upcoming month, sucking us dry in one fell swoop. We finished our vacation still pretending that we could afford this type of luxury. However, we ended up back home in the same place we had been before the playoff bonus: painfully broke and inevitably stuck.

After months of insomnia over our deepening financial pit, I finally invited my mom into our troubles. She thoughtfully did some research and connected us to a debt consolidation company that would prove to be a gamechanger for Dave and me. We had to forfeit our credit cards while they managed the repayment of our debts, making sure that we learned how to live only on the cash we brought in. Slowly and ever so surely, we began to see a tiny pinprick of light at the end of the tunnel.

During that season, the support of our families bringing groceries and spoiling us when we came to visit made the season seem less scarce, but the growing pains of learning to live on only what we had were tremendous. We sold both our cars, humbly and gratefully accepting two old work vehicles my dad had available. I began working on job placements with my mom's staffing company and bartered a gym membership for childcare services. We hardly ate out, and we made our coffee at home, but each month, I would gratefully open the statement that showed the red number ever so slowly decreasing.

I will never forget the moment I had to fully accept our reality. Having waited all week for payday, I planned a big grocery trip on my way home from the nanny job I had taken to supplement our

income. Ashby and I literally walked up and down every aisle and filled our cart to the brim. We were tired and hungry, but happy to be heading home as we made our way to the checkout line.

As the bagger loaded our mountain of groceries into the cart, the checker turned to me and asked, "Do you have a different form of payment?"

"No, this card should work. Let me try again. Maybe I bumped the wrong numbers for my pin," I responded, shifting my daughter to my other hip. My card was declined.

No, I don't have another form of payment. Today was payday. There should be money in there. The thoughts shot rapid-fire through my brain as I scrambled.

"I'll save this transaction. You step right over here and call your bank. We can run it easy once you clear this up," she offered to me kindly.

The banker looked up my account and said that the paycheck was on hold but would be available in 24-48 hours. It was bank policy, so there was nothing they could do. Mortified, I picked up my toddler and walked out of the store empty-handed. I cried the entire way home.

My husband was now an NFL football coach, and yet, we still couldn't afford groceries. I knew it was our own fault. We had made so many poor financial decisions in a short amount of time that eventually, we had to start over. Everyone around us seemed to have newer cars, live in nicer houses, go on more vacations, even eat out more. It was humbling to have to navigate a truthful way of looking at our finances, living within our means when it seemed that we *should* have much more than our bank statements read.

It would take a few more years before we would allow this authenticity to permeate the other areas of our life, but the practice of admitting our financial brokenness undoubtedly prepared us for the work to come in our personal life. I am incredibly thankful that we were in a healthy financial space when the rest of our world came crumbling down around us.

Chapter 10: The Real, Real Housewives

Dave and I have a running joke that one day, we will pitch an idea for a new reality show called “The Real, Real Housewives of the NFL.” It sounds hilarious, and I think the pilot would undoubtedly draw people in, but after the first few episodes, I have a sneaking suspicion they would be disappointed.

Imagine this: I’m pulling into Dave’s parking spot underground at the stadium on Sunday morning, whisking past the throngs of fans crowding the streets and funneling into the stadium. They pan out, only to reveal I’m getting out of my 1999 Suburban, doors creaking among the pristine luxury SUVs. Sure, we could afford something newer, but I have a deep appreciation for what my old tank has seen us through. Once inside the stadium, I’m just another person in a sea of jostling fans. They would show footage of me juggling a baby clawing at oversized ear protection while shuffling my toddler past drunken and unaware people, mostly just sweating buckets and hoping for a win (while also wanting the game to be over so we can go home already).

After the game, whether win or lose, I press through the crowds to an unassuming door where I flash a wristband to the security guard and am let back into the elite world of the players and staff. I wait for my husband to come out from the locker room in a roped-off area with other players and coaches’ families. With our favorite fried catfish and red rice and beans from the team caterers, we head home to unwind from the craziness of a Sunday game day. Come Monday morning; the whole crazy week will start all over again, 16 hours a day for my husband while I try to hold everything else together. The final scene will show us collapsing together on our hand-me-down couch or falling asleep on the floor of the kids’ bedroom while reading stories.

During the season, I have to think on behalf of our family in the day-to-day practicality, all while holding up most of the parenting responsibilities on my own. Long after the glamour of wins and perks that come with his job, all the real, mundane stuff of our everyday living is not so flashy after all. When football is in season, Dave can only do his job and nothing—I repeat, nothing—outside of that. His workweek is no exaggeration: 80-90 hours, depending on the travel schedule. Barring an emergency, I cannot just make a phone call to my husband for help making a decision about what I should do in a parenting situation or a quick financial decision. He is simply not available to answer the phone. The depths of exhaustion I experience in season are rivaled only by my husband’s physical and mental deterioration after 16-hour workdays for weeks on end. That, and maybe crab fisherman on the Behring Sea.

One of the hardest parts about his job is how isolating it is. Sure, I have a lot to manage on my own, but more than that, it is the perception that because of his title, we live a charmed life. The flicker of awe I see cross people’s faces when they learn I’m married to a professional football coach reminds me of how tempted we all are by fame, fortune, and relevance. Don’t get me wrong; I have experienced some incredible VIP-type moments, but this is not at all a life of ease and notoriety. There are far more seasons of chauffeuring kids to and from school and practices, trying to cook dinner while managing homework and toddler chaos, overseeing bills, groceries, laundry, yardwork, vacation planning, family visiting, and choreographing the intricate dance of conflicting schedules.

Subconsciously, I kept expecting that, as we climbed up the success ladder, the practical challenge of everyday life would somehow melt away. Feeling the burden of perceived expectation that

I should have it all together, especially because we have found worldly success, weighed heavy on me. For so long, I feared being seen as a failure if I didn't make it look like an effortless endeavor to carry my family through the ebbs and flows of football life. In a strange way, one of the greatest gifts to come from our crisis was being forced to stop the charade. My pain made it impossible to be anything but a "really real housewife" of the NFL.

The reality is, marriage, raising families, and engaging in meaningful work is challenging for everyone, regardless of our circumstance or job title. Add in the crazy challenge of living through a global pandemic, financial instability, and any kind of emotional or physical trauma, and none of us are able to hold it all together. Eventually, something will have to give, no matter how strong or practiced you are at making it look like everything is okay. The freedom I found during this incredibly painful season of life is something I think most of us crave: the chance to be unapologetically right where we are—a skill I am still learning. Juggling all of the things is a talent I have honed over the years and it is a gift to me and my family, but there are days when I just can't. On these days I have found true freedom.

I can be exhausted, I can ask for help, I can mess it all up, take my frustration out on my kids, and still, I know that I am enough because I am loved by God. I have also seen in the midst of my failure, when we were living our life so backward and not asking for any guidance, God was able to weave those events into a beautiful story that has brought us up and out of a *very* dark pit. If you are feeling exhausted, hopeless, and afraid that there is no way out, take heart. In death, Jesus brought life forever—abundant life that can never run dry. In dying to your need to be in control, He can create the most unbelievable miracles from the ashes of your self-protecting and self-promoting schemes. Let him write your story.

One of my coaching mentors, Carl Smith (affectionately known as "Tater"), perfectly captured the NFL environment when he said, "Do you know how good you have to be in the NFL just to suck?"

It's funny because it's true. The same players and coaches that get roasted on ESPN are the best of the best at football... in the *world*. Tater's quote describes the wealth of talent and experience on each of the 32 NFL football teams. Major college football would be our closest rival, and to give you some perspective on the huge gap between our leagues, let me share some numbers.

In college, if you are one of two teams that go all the way to the championship game, you play a maximum of 14 games. In the NFL, you are guaranteed to play 20 games a year, with a possibility of playing 23 or 24 if you go to the Super Bowl. The energy and effort it takes to play six more games a year against highly-trained professionals is so intense, it could be compared to going through a Ph.D. program! On top of the incredible physical and mental stamina this takes, you are competing in a high-stress environment with the expectation to *win*. Now you have an uber-competitive cauldron that can only produce high performance.

I heard another coach once say, "The first rule of coaching in the NFL is 'win.' The second rule is 'don't lose.'" Even when the statistical odds are in your favor, you still have to try to beat a group of

incredible athletes with the same goal in mind. You might have heard the phrase, “Any given Sunday.” This means that on any given Sunday, any team can win. As I am writing this, I’m on a plane coming back from a close win against the Atlanta Falcons. The NFL “experts” in Las Vegas had made us two touchdown favorites to win the game even before it started, and we were winning by a score of 24-0 by halftime. But by the end of the game, the Falcons (with their backup QB playing, might I add) had brought the game to a score of 27-20 and were attempting an onside kick with a chance to tie or potentially win the game. In the end, we were able to get the ball and take a knee to end the game. The point I am making is that there is little disparity in the talent level between 90% of the NFL teams, and the advantage goes to the team who prepares the best.

The preparation is a grueling process on the entire coaching staff, and at the bottom of this totem pole is Quality Control. I held this title for the first five years with the Seahawks. Back in 2010, I was struggling to keep my head above water in all areas of my life, but *especially* in my new role. At the end of Training Camp from late July to August, after pulling 17+ hours a day for a month straight, we were finally going to play our first pre-season game. As Quality Control, I was essentially responsible for the end result of every presentation and practice because I had to double-check all of the coaches’ work for accuracy, punctuation, etc. For example, we have a playbook with everything you need to know about running a successful offense. The playbook is thousands of pages long and ranges from simple things such as properly lining up in the huddle to intricate pass plays at the end of the game with only seconds left.

Among other tasks, my specific responsibility in creating the playbook was to use a Microsoft product called Visio to take hand-drawn passes and turn them into aesthetically pleasing computer diagrams. While this may not seem like that big of a deal to you, to me, it was a great honor as it is a rite of passage that many famous head coaches today had to navigate early on in their coaching career. It requires great attention to detail (not to mention flat-out grit) to turn out hundreds of these play diagrams at a time. The job gets even more challenging during football season, when you are asked to produce these diagrams overnight in preparation for presentations to the offensive team the next day.

Another responsibility I had was monitoring the computer data connected to our practice film every day. This data had to be corrected in the 15-20 minutes from the end of practice until the offensive staff sat down in our meeting room to watch it. Each play that is run during practice has a play description that shows up on an overlay on the computer screen, which then gets projected up on a big screen so that the whole staff can watch it simultaneously. What this meant to me was that any mistakes I made would serve as a reminder of my incompetence, and at times, provide an opportunity for a superior staff member to ridicule me. While this may seem like your ordinary “ribbing” by co-workers, it felt like a gut punch to me—the guy who was running on no sleep and questioning whether he had what it took to make it as a coach in the NFL. I felt like I was running up a steep sand dune that seemed to be devouring every step the harder I ran. My job was hard enough... and then disaster struck.

The power in our facility went out the night before the game.

Since I was responsible for printing out game day documents, I had no other option than to go to FedEx Kinkos. It was rush hour on a Wednesday afternoon in Seattle, which is arguably one of the most poorly planned road systems in the country. I needed the documents to be done within an hour, so I picked up Lizzy with our 6-month-old daughter Ashby and used them to access the carpool lane. Lizzy had her own struggles raising our first child and basically doing it alone, but she could sense that I might

be in a worse place at the moment. For starters I was not talking very much which was and is a tell-tale sign that something is wrong. I usually can't stop talking in the car with her and regularly miss my turns being lost in conversation.

I was trying my best to keep it together emotionally when she asked, "Are you okay?" Her simple question was enough to push me over the edge and send me spiraling into a complete breakdown.

"I just want to be good at my job. I've been great at everything I've done up until now, but this is crazy. My boss hates me, I can't keep up with the workload, and now the whole office is down. I think I might get fired," I said through tears. "I mean, after messing up a drill, my boss literally told me, 'I should f****ng fire you, you're an a**!'

That was my "Welcome to the NFL" moment.

By God's grace, over the course of the next two years, I got organized and wound up doing well at the Quality Control job. I was promoted to "Assistant" Quarterbacks Coach, which eventually became Wide Receivers Coach. I am writing this book as the Quarterbacks Coach, which makes me primarily responsible for physically training and mentally preparing our quarterback, Russell Wilson, for the game. On average, this preparation takes about 100 hours a week. The hardest days are Monday through Thursday, where I arrive at the office at 5 a.m. and go home at around 10 p.m. It is a 7-day work week for 6 months straight, with just a single week off during the season. There isn't a single day that will kill you, but waking up every morning knowing that you have a long list of projects waiting for you is like a small crack in a windshield that, over time, spiderwebs across the entire thing. Just the other night, another coach on our staff shared something his 2-year-old son said to his wife: "Mom, can we go to Daddy's house to see him tonight?" He was referring to the football office.

With this being my 10th season, I have learned how important it is to take small breaks and make time to connect with my family and friends. These small windows allow me to "take a walk down by the creek" to regain perspective about the reason I am here. It is food for my soul. I'm far more productive and less resentful about the demands of my job when I make it a point to turn off for a bit. I first began doing more reflection and praying like this in 2015 as the Wide Receivers coach, and in concert with a lot of positive change and personal growth. My figurative "walks down by the creek" have become my lifeline.

While my colleagues and I are asked to sacrifice a lot of family and personal time, I have found great purpose and mission in this challenging schedule and workload. There was a great man and missionary to Africa named Dr. David Livingstone who, when asked about the "sacrifice" of being away from home so long, had this to say:

"For my own part, I have never ceased to rejoice that God has appointed me to such an office. People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa ... Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blest reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter? Away with the word in such a view, and with such a thought! It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, or danger, now and then, with a foregoing of the common conveniences and charities of this life, may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink; but let

this only be for a moment. All these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall be revealed in and for us. I never made a sacrifice."

Even though at times it is difficult for me to feel "blest" in the midst of the high stakes, self-serving environment of the NFL, Dr. Livingstone's ability to find joy in the life-threatening ministry and calling to Africa serves as a reminder to me that it is a rare thing for a person to find purposeful work—and sometimes, it's flat out fun! I believe that God will keep His promise that if I do things His way and hand my family over to Him, He will provide everything we need. My buddy Josh asked me once, "Man, I don't know how you do it. How can I pray for you?"

"Pray that God will multiply the little time that I do have with my wife and kids," I said.

Even now, as I picture Jesus feeding the 5,000 with just a few fish and loaves of bread, I believe that He will do the same thing for my family and me. I believe that our "fishes and loaves" will be quality time that is multiplied exponentially. In fact, I expect God to do it every off-season. Jesus did enough on the cross for my eternal soul that I would never be able to even try to repay him in service, but I do have an expectation and trust that He will provide for us in every way. The Apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 1:8, "For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction... that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength." This is a great reminder that, at times, God will stretch us beyond what we can handle on our own so that we are fully reliant on Him. So, if you are reading this chapter feeling overwhelmed, thinking, "I don't know if I can handle this," you're probably right. This is precisely the place where Jesus meets us and asks that we take His hand and walk out into the dark.

Chapter 11: The One Thing

I cheated on Lizzy for the first time at my bachelor party... one month before we got married. At that moment, I opened up a door that got kicked wide open five years later when we moved to Seattle. I was traveling around the country to play different NFL teams, which gave me an opportunity to go out and explore the nightlife. As I write this section now, I am on a plane heading to Cleveland, OH, to play the Browns. The team gives us an envelope with per diem for food, a hotel room to sleep in (alone), and a travel itinerary that is wide open after 9 p.m.

Don't hear me wrong: I'm not saying it was my profession that was at fault for my waywardness. However, it definitely gave me more opportunities to make bad decisions. Lizzy would frequently ask me to call her when I got back to the hotel, and I promised that I would. Most of the time, however, I would get back late, so drunk that I wouldn't dare call her for fear of being found out. Instead, I would pull out an excuse: "I didn't want to wake you up." I could tell that this song and dance was getting old, so I started talking to her on the phone until about 10 p.m. Then, I would tell her that I was tired and ready to go to sleep. Once I got off of the phone, I would get dressed, call a cab, and go meet up at a bar with friends. After a while, she stopped asking me to call, and I got the sense she knew I was lying to her.

One night in the off-season, Lizzy and I were talking about the strain that coaching can put on marriages. The topic that triggered this conversation was a well-known football coach whose private life had gotten out of control. After having an affair and struggling with alcohol, his wife was divorcing him, and the whole thing quickly became public knowledge. Knowing my own issues, I was not about to "cast the first stone." So, I mustered as much empathy (well, let's be honest, it was actually sympathy) as I could and said, "You never know what issues a person is dealing with. I don't want to judge him simply based on what the media is saying." I felt sad for him, but it also terrified me that this could soon be my reality if I didn't change my ways.

"I can put up with a lot of things, but the one thing I don't think I could ever forgive is if you cheated on me," she replied, sending a dagger straight into my stomach.

I felt sick. It felt like an indirect threat based on all of the patterns that were showing up during the travel of football season. Knowing that I couldn't show her how much shame I really felt from that comment, I scrambled to find words to cover up my rising anxiety.

"Growing up in church, I saw lots of people work through these kinds of problems." I was trying to give myself some hope that we would be able to survive if she ever found out about my infidelity. I thought taking an authoritative approach would put her on the defensive and keep her from asking any further questions. I could sense that she knew something was going on in my private life and was trying to scare me out of doing anything further.

The truth is, after we had that conversation, my shame brought me to the conclusion that I was never going to come clean. Turns out, the decision to stay silent was the worst mistake I would ever make in our marriage. It was like trying to put out a fire by pouring gasoline on it. It seemed to me that by not bringing it up, I was making the best decision to keep our marriage and family together. I rationalized that if I told her what I was doing, she would leave. How was that going to be *good* for any

of us? However, instead of protecting our family, the decision simply separated us further. What I had actually created was a private island where *I* could do whatever *I* wanted to do.

By choosing to keep my private life in the dark, I created the perfect environment for my sin and shame to grow. I heard someone once say, "Shame is the shovel that the devil uses to dig us into an ever-growing pit." This describes perfectly what happened during the next few years of my life. No matter how hard I tried by going to church, reading my bible, and praying, I always had a secret, dark place that was just mine. Unfortunately, the pit I was digging kept getting deeper, wider, and easier to fall back into.

Chapter 12: What Else?

The conference happened to fall on the very last weekend before the offseason normally picks up speed. Reality hit like a freight train that very next morning as Dave headed back to the office, and we found ourselves trying to balance the demands of the spring football schedule while bearing the weight of the painful truth of our broken marriage. Other than the few people we opened up to at the conference, nobody close to us knew what was going on. I did *not* know how to ask people into my pain. Involving anyone else was terrifying, and I vacillated between wanting to protect my husband from what people would think if they knew and wanting to run away and hide myself. I questioned everything in my life. Nothing seemed to be true or certain anymore, like the rest of my world could evaporate into a mist at any point. I was fragile and consumed with surviving the trauma of my broken heart, but I had to march on. I had two young kids that couldn't understand what was going on, and I wanted life to feel the same for them. Most days, it ached just to breathe. It was even more painful to smile and carry-on polite conversation when everything inside me felt shattered. I wore my armor of pretending it was all ok until the kids were in bed and I could let the whole charade go for a few sweet hours. I was bone-weary and depressed.

I had never experienced anxiety before, but suddenly the last place I wanted to be was in public, especially if there were other women around me. I remember wondering if every beautiful woman I encountered was someone he had secretly had an affair with. Anytime we were out, even something as simple as running an errand together, I was afraid he would be recognized. I was on high alert constantly. We went to a Mariners game together one sunny evening and the minute we walked through the stadium gates, I wanted was to go home. The laughter around me felt like a jeering insult, my pain distorting this happy family event. All I could see around me was a seething mass of destruction in the form of beer, flirting and people grasping for relevance. To his credit, Dave was nothing but gentle with me whenever I was overtaken with fear. He never made me feel guilty, just took my hand and tried to be there with me.

In his initial disclosure, I learned enough to know that when we weren't together, whether at home or on the road, he had been open to the possibility of someone else. He was willing to answer whatever I asked, but instinctively I knew I couldn't handle much more detail than a vague picture of his other life. Life moved forward, but I was lost in the vague mists of broken trust, not knowing which way to go.

This shrouded understanding lasted for two months until late one night, right before the start of vacation. I was up alone, packing for our annual summer kickoff road trip to the Ketchum Calf Rodeo. In the silence of my sleeping house, the chaos in my mind slowed. Dave was going to be home for the next month, and we would finally have space to process beyond the nightly tearful conversations as we collapsed into bed exhausted. Suddenly, I wanted to know *specific* details about the events and memories that I had long forgotten but never made sense to me. I made the initial decision to reconcile at the conference, but now I needed to know what it was I was actually forgiving. Going forward, I didn't want any secrets, and I was could no longer live without a clear understanding of his life, our life, for all of those years.

As we loaded everyone into the car the next morning, I knew this drive would be different. The thing I most looked forward to about our trip every year was the way it took us away from the busyness of the city. It felt like we were able to take a deep breath for the first time, climbing up through the majesty of the Cascade Mountains before descending into the quiet rolling hills of Eastern Washington. An hour into the 5-hour drive, winding through the canyon carved by the Yakima River, I felt the urgency to ask the questions that would piece together who I had been married to for the past nine years.

“Did your cheating only happen while you were away, or was it here, too?” the first question tumbled out of my mouth, sucking the air out of the car. Gripping the steering wheel, he slowly, truthfully, and painfully answered.

“Do I know any of them?” The questions came one after another, his answers severing every hope I was still holding onto that some intimate part of our marriage had been a sacred place. The heaviness descended upon the car, and our sadness grew. Tears streamed down both of our faces as my husband confessed and relived the life that he had kept hidden. As the 45-minute drive along the river merged back onto the main highway, I exhausted my list of specific questions and asked, “What else?” It was as if he had been given a key to unlock the dungeon of his deepest secrets, the doors flung wide open to expose the shame locked away in his heart for many years. Eventually, his words gave way to quiet worship music playing softly on the radio. We rode in silence, and I wept until I had no more tears to cry.

Despite the devastation of that conversation, there was a new freedom emerging between us, and it was beautifully lifegiving. Peace mingled with the pain as I realized that, for the first time, I really *knew* my husband. No longer was I in love with an idea of the man I hoped he was—an image he allowed me to believe was true. Now, I was free to love the man underneath the mask, brokenness and all. Not once did he try to excuse himself; he just spoke the unabashed truth, and it was like a breath of fresh air. The further we got from home, the further we traveled from the old life we knew of leaving things unspoken. By the time we arrived in Glenwood, we were utterly spent, emotionally and physically. However, I felt at peace that I now knew enough. Not that there wouldn’t be more questions, but I finally had what I needed to move from the agony of grief to the next (and equally as challenging) step: forgiveness.

After the marriage conference, I had no choice but to hit the ground running. Mid-April for the Canales family means spring football, and I was back to long hours at the office. It means two months of intense training and meetings, preparing for the upcoming summer camp and fall season. To add additional stress to the situation, I was promoted to wide-receiver coach—a promotion that I had been working towards for years, but one that meant a lot more responsibility. Lizzy and I spent every night for the next six months talking, crying, and praying. However, we didn’t have any big blocks of time to process all that had happened.

As spring football was coming to a close, we started to look ahead to the summer months, which were always kicked off with our annual Father’s Day weekend family trip to the Ketchum Kalf Rodeo in

Glenwood, WA. Lizzy's Aunt Molly started the tradition a few years before, and we always looked forward to it. The rodeo was the perfect break from the nonstop action of work and school. Fresh mountain air, wild cow milking, and Indian fried bread tacos—what more could you ask for? The week leading up to Father's Day was also the last week of school for Ashby. This year was a bigger deal for her because she had a "Moving Up" ceremony, going from pre-school to kindergarten. It was a cool, perfect, sunny day in Seattle, in the mid-70s. It might shock you to hear a Southern California boy like me (who knows good weather) call a 70-degree day "perfect." Let's just say my standards have dropped since living here. All we are looking for here in Seattle is no rain. After a short ceremony for Ashby, we loaded up into our 1999 Suburban (affectionately known as the Millennium Falcon) and hit the road. With a 5 hour drive ahead of us, my joy and excitement for Ashby quickly turned into a sobering anticipation of the heavy conversations that lie ahead for Lizzy and I. Different than our last long drive in Jacksonville, I was not nervous or afraid because I had nothing to hide. As we left "the city" in the rearview mirror and headed into the mountains, I was ready to go deeper with Lizzy.

Driving on I-90 East through the densely treed Snoqualmie Pass, trading skyscrapers for evergreens, feels like the pine needles are scrubbing away, mile after mile, at the muck accumulated from living the "City Life." The further we drive east, the more I can feel my hands on the steering wheel loosening up, my shoulders relax and my mind starts to expand beyond the Franklin-Covey planner on my desk in the office. By the time we reach the Yakima River Canyon, the highlight of the drive, I feel relaxed enough to take in all of it's splendor. There is a certain reverence about the canyon I feel every time we drive through. The speed limit of the highway slows down to a crawl at about 45 mph, forcing you to take it all in. Regardless of the weather, you *have to* roll the windows down. You can both hear and feel the silence, interrupted only by the sound of the rushing water. From bald eagles to osprey and an occasional deer, and even mountain goats scampering on the high golden hills on both sides, it truly is a sanctuary.

By a sure act of providence, there couldn't have been a better place for Lizzy and me to have been than right there in that temple. We were about to have a conversation that would change everything. You see, a few days after the marriage conference, I told Lizzy that I was willing to answer any questions she had about my secret life. I also asked her to pray about the level and depth of detail that she wanted to know. While I knew that the truth needed to come out, I also knew intuitively that excessive details about what had actually transpired could cause unnecessary (and lasting) damage.

Lizzy was ready to go deeper, and I was ready to press into her. Up to this point, she had not asked me many of the details of my unfaithfulness, but it felt like it was time to talk about it. Enough time had passed from the initial shock of finding out that I was cheating on her, and I was ready to answer any questions that she had.

She mentioned that, at different times over the years, when I would come back from road trips, she could sense I was hiding something, and it was as if the Holy Spirit was directly guiding her as she navigated through her memory bank. She nailed every event. I told her what happened and with whom. Some of the women I was involved with were close to home, and some far away. I told her the darkest and ugliest secrets of my life—some so dark I don't want a single other person to know. The winding road rocked us tenderly, worship music playing through the speakers as we cried and talked all the way to Glenwood.

The last thing we needed to address before we saw Lizzy's family was how and when to tell both of our parents.

"The rodeo is *not* the best place to tell my parents. I want to avoid becoming the center of the weekend," Lizzy said. There was a lot of new to celebrate in the family: babies being born, marriages, job promotions and retirement. Lizzy was being thoughtful about not putting a damper on all that was happening.

"I want to be the one to tell people. I feel like it is important for me to own up to my decisions." She gave me her support. This was moment was so important because it was another chance for me to carry my own burdens. I could sense that as I made more decisions like this, I would continually build up emotional currency with Lizzy.

"The first ones I want to tell are your parents. Since I asked them for your hand in marriage, I should be the one to ask them for forgiveness in breaking my vows to you," I continued, sure it was the right decision. We agreed that we would tell them when we got back to Seattle.

As we pulled up to the long, half-mile, gravelly drive to the cabin in Glenwood, I parked the car. As is our tradition, I let Ashby sit on my lap so that she could drive up to the house. We usually honk the horn obnoxiously, announcing our arrival, while Ashby or Benjamin clumsily try to keep the Falcon on the road. In the midst of the commotion, a flood of mixed emotions overwhelmed me. At first, I felt a lot of shame, having the nerve to show up here again to one of her family's most sacred weekends. At the same time, I felt lucky that Lizzy was willing to give me another chance to do this the right way.

Even though we decided not to talk to the family about all that had happened between us over the last six months, I still felt nervous, wondering if my mother-in-law was going to use her intuition to figure out that something was very wrong. In spite of all of the negative emotions, there were two thoughts that comforted me. The first one was that *Jesus loves me, and He'll never leave me*. And the second one was that *Lizzy loves me and is committed to working things out*. Whenever those fears welled up in my head again, those two thoughts made me feel hopeful that this marriage was going to work.

In retrospect, what was so special about that weekend was that our story belonged to just the two of us for a little while longer. If you are going through a hard time in your marriage, maybe even struggling through the aftermath of unfaithfulness like Lizzy and I were, I want you to know that your story belongs to the two of you and no one else. It may seem hard to believe, but Lizzy and I are strengthened by the memories of the hardships we have been able to overcome with God's help. In fact, some of our best memories have come from weekends like the one you just read about.

There's a photograph from that weekend in Glenwood I love because it's the perfect metaphor for our marriage—both then and now. It's a picture of Lizzy and I right outside of the cabin in our workout gear, running in full stride with huge smiles on our faces as we look up at kites 10 feet over our heads. What the picture doesn't show is that it was a windless, hot afternoon, and our kids were crying because the kites we brought from Seattle would not fly. But Lizzy and me, instead of just saying, "Too bad, I guess it's not kite weather," decided to do something about it. We sprinted around the house to keep the kites in flight, in hysterics, for about an hour. While I am sure everyone in and out of the house was entertained, that's not why we did it. Lizzy and I were making a statement to each other that even

though we may not always have kite weather, we will be committed to finding a way to make them fly.
With our marriage in God's hands, we knew that anything was possible.

Chapter 13: Dave's Parents

With the summer months coming, there was another difficult conversation on the horizon. Lizzy and I had a trip to LA to see my family coming in three weeks, and we would be staying at my parent's house. It was important to me to tell my parents about all the change in my marriage, and to be honest, I was *terrified* of having this conversation. It was important to tell them because we wanted to form authentic relationships from here on out. We wanted to start with being truthful with each other, then to our kids, then our family, and then let that way of doing relationship overflow to anyone we meet.

My plan was to tell my parents everything. Not the unnecessary graphic details or anything like that, just the truth about my unfaithfulness and that Lizzy and I were walking through a really tough time in our marriage. While I was terrified of telling my parents, feeling like a little boy who was in trouble, the conversation Lizzy and I had on the way to the rodeo gave me the courage to commit to it. After telling Lizzy my deepest, darkest secrets, I felt brave enough to talk to anyone about anything. This was a major growth moment in my life. I had always talked a lot, but now, I was speaking from my *heart*.

Though it was new territory for me, to be truly known was an indescribable feeling. Lizzy's Aunt Molly once told me, "The truth is when your head, heart, and mouth are all saying the same thing." After the drive to the rodeo, I finally began to understand what she was describing.

Looking back, I realize I was more nervous about talking to Lizzy's parents than I was about telling my own. With her parents, I thought it would have been reasonable for them to reject me completely. At the very least, I thought they might hold a long-lasting grudge for what I had done to their daughter. I imagined it might even cause irreparable damage to our relationship. With my parents, however, I expected to receive loving support and compassion. As a parent myself, I know what it's like when my kids are hurting. So, I figured that my parents would hurt *with* me. This was one of the first mistakes I made leading up to seeing them. I had the conversation going a certain way in my mind. If I could do it all over, I would have tried to enter this conversation with a blank slate—not attempting to figure out what their reaction might be ahead of time. Unfortunately, when you tell someone intimate information, there is no telling how it will be received... and it is not up to you to decide how they receive it.

As we got closer to traveling to LA, I had a lot of resentment building up towards my parents. I was going through an all-too-common season of soul searching, and it led me to question my upbringing and whether my parents had really done all they could to prepare me for life. This is a common part of maturity which, I have to admit, was happening for me a lot later in life at the age of 33. I was finally learning how to accept total responsibility for the pain that I had caused. To be honest, I was looking for someone to blame other than myself, and at the time, my parents were the target.

My thought process was that my dysfunction had to come from somewhere so my logical starting point was my parents. One of my close friends is a psychologist, and he told me that infidelity is not the biggest reason for divorce. Instead, he said, "It is a couples' inability to communicate, empathize, and repair from offenses that severs intimacy and ultimately leads to separation." Realizing that I learned my marital communication skills, empathy and repair from my parents, it was easy for me to blame them. It was as if I was going through one last teenage rebellion that was 15 years overdue. I was so desperate to separate from my family and become my own man. But the confusing part was that

I also loved the family that I came from. Ideally, I would become a combination of the richness of my upbringing along with the uniqueness of my own life experiences. To do that, I felt it was necessary to include my family on this painful journey of discovering where my life went wrong. So I got my family on a plane and we flew to Los Angeles.

As soon as my parents picked us up at LAX, Lizzy and I asked to take them to dinner. We chose a Mexican restaurant called El Torito at the Redondo Beach pier, mostly because it is our favorite place to eat when we are down there. It is also the place I took Lizzy for dinner right before I proposed to her on the beach. In fact, we sat a few tables away from where we sat that night. As we settled into the table, I was getting nervous, waiting for the right space to start an incredibly difficult conversation. We made small talk, eating chips and salsa and tableside guacamole. Once we got our food, things started to quiet down. The kids were busy coloring, and I saw my window.

As I started telling them about the marriage conference, I began to well up with tears. Immediately, I felt like I was five years old, telling my parents about losing something precious and in desperate need of a hug. I pictured my dad getting up from the booth we were sitting in, wrapping his arms around me, and saying, "Mijo (my son), I am so sorry. Everything is going to be okay." I imagined my mom reaching across the table for Lizzy's hand to console her as we cried and prayed together. I'm getting teary-eyed again as I write this, because that is *not* what actually transpired.

The tears kept flowing as I confessed. To my dismay, both of my parents looked shocked, embarrassment quickly spreading across their faces. While I was hoping for compassion, I saw from their body language that they were carrying a sense of failure as parents. Almost as quickly, their faces turned to sadness and confusion, which made me realize that I had completely misjudged how they were going to respond.

My dad spoke first. "I feel like you're telling me something I'm not supposed to be hearing." I was angry and confused at his response. I was inviting him into my heart and it felt like he didn't want to go there. Then my mom said, "Those poor girls," referring to the women that I had slept with. I couldn't even look at Lizzy, knowing just how devastating their responses were to her heart. Then my mom asked, "What about your testimony?"

Words cannot adequately describe the depth of abandonment I felt at that very moment. Underneath the feeling of being completely unseen, I started to get angry. I was sad because of my own hurt, but I was furious that my wife had not even been acknowledged for what she was going through. I knew I had to try to defend her.

"What testimony?! How could you even talk about those other women when we are the ones hurting, sitting right here in front of you?" That's precisely when it hit me. My parents had built up a false image of me, much like the mask I had worn to make it appear that I was everything they thought I was. They saw me as a Christian influencer; a young coach on the rise with a perfect little family, and I had just shattered that picture. I took off the mask, and it was too much for them to handle. I felt completely misunderstood, as if the real me wasn't good enough, and it was something I was getting accustomed to as people began to find out who I really was underneath the façade that I had put up for most of my adult life. It wasn't all my parents' fault I had become this tortured young man, struggling to find his identity, but I knew it started at home—with them.

That conversation confirmed a lot of my resentment. I grew up in a home where it wasn't safe to talk about hard things until something snapped, and it was clear now that had played a huge role in how I dealt with conflict. My parents' reaction reminded me that as a family, we were only allowed to show each other the best version of ourselves, without ever dealing with our shadow side. There is a lot of pressure growing up in a house where everyone was the expert of their craft. It was exhausting to feel like I was competing to be in the right, all the time. Being wrong was just not encouraged in our home... that is, until it was inevitable to admit it. That type of home environment does not produce people who can easily be vulnerable with each others.

Now, I had re-created that model in my own family, and Lizzy was suffering the most from it. But I had already decided that I was done living the life that others expected me to live. I was finally okay with not living up to the false image that other people had of my family and me. It was a critical step for me as an adult.

"A big reason why we do things so much differently than you is because I don't feel like you prepared me to have a healthy marriage and family," I said, unable to hide my anger.

This comment was completely unfair and came out of a place of confusion and hurt on my part. While I was not trying to be intentionally hurtful, it was something that did not need to be said. The silence that followed was almost deafening; as if someone had pressed a master mute button, and you could no longer hear the margarita shakers or sizzling fajita skilletts.

"Are you guys okay now?" my dad asked, breaking the silence.

"No," I replied. "But we are going to stay together."

My parents and I have since talked about that day, and I apologized for my immaturity and lack of empathy. After writing this section, I realized how selfish it was of me to just dump all of that on them in that kind of setting. If I could do it all over again, I would have met with just the two of them at home; not at a crowded restaurant. We needed so much more time and space, physically *and* emotionally, to properly process something as traumatic as infidelity and serious marital issues. I would have also gone in with the understanding that I cannot control how someone reacts to the things I share. And I would have tried harder to put myself in their shoes.

We waited until we visited Southern California that summer to share our struggles with Dave's family, knowing this was information better received in person. When his parents picked us up from the airport, he asked to go to lunch before heading back to the house. Up until this point we had given no indication that there was anything going on, so it was going to be coming at them out of left field. We both felt it was best to tell them immediately and give them space and time to react without any other family around.

We were all tucked into a booth, one child on either side of me, resting on my lap after our flight. The table was just tall enough that I couldn't lean into it. I sunk awkwardly into the cushion, feeling small and apprehensive, thankful for the sweet sleeping forms of my 2- and 4-year-old snuggled warmly beside me. I was pretty sure it would be almost as devastating to them as it had been to me.

Dave didn't waste any time. Over a bowl of chips and tableside guacamole, the story began to unravel. He spoke candidly, starting with the conference and his confession to me. As we listened to him retell the events of the last few months, a wave of heaviness washed over the table. Yet again, everything that we had successfully hidden gave way to the truth of our broken relationship. His words were like a brick, shattering the image his parents had previously held of their son. Their reaction was a mixture of sadness, disappointment, and confusion.

I remember pieces of the conversation, but mostly I recall feeling far away, as if I were watching this scene unfold from afar. As Dave finished recounting the last few tumultuous months, we all sat motionless and silent, no doubt trying to be present but each dealing with our own inner distress.

"Are you guys ok?" his dad asked cautiously after a few moments, snapping us all back to the present. As Dave began to talk about the work we were doing to repair our relationship, I ached in desperate, consuming grief. This wasn't a conversation to wrap up neatly. Nobody could say anything to make it go away or find the silver lining to end on a good note. It was just raw and ugly and hard. Like unwanted guests who arrived when no one was looking, shame and loneliness crowded silently into the booth with us.

No one really knew what to do or say next. We pushed our food around our plates, appetites and conversation lost in the awkward silence, the only noise emanating from the buzz of restaurant activity in the background. After a few minutes, I made myself busy making sure the kids had eaten enough and took them to the bathroom. We awkwardly gathered our things, someone paid the bill, and we emerged from the dark, quiet restaurant into the dazzling California summer sun. We walked slowly along the pier to the car, the beautiful weather a stark contrast to the storm of emotions we just weathered at the table.

This was the first of many truthfully hard conversations. Looking back, I can see that was a conversation Dave and his parents should have had alone. It was unfair to ask them to respond to this life-altering information on the spot. At the time, we were desperate and broken, stumbling through this confusing fog, trying to find our way into a new life. Nobody is really ever prepared for this kind of lost. In our longing to be united, we assumed that we should just have all of these conversations together. Finding out your son has been living a double life is hard enough, much less having to do it in the presence of your daughter-in-law and grandchildren.

Not to mention the fact that *I* was in the middle of grieving the pain of my *own* shattered heart. I now know we complicated the healing process by asking other people into it, and yet we didn't know what else to do. We were simply riding the waves of overwhelming emotion, each day bringing a new challenge with harrowing, heart- and soul-threatening decisions to be made. We were bound to make mistakes as we navigated a storm we were totally unprepared for. This wouldn't be the last time we wished we would have handled conversations differently. Thankfully, we were surrounded by people

that were willing to be gracious to us as we stumbled through, their love and forgiveness helping usher us into a new place where brokenness gave way to growth, and the lessons learned in our darkest hours became shining beacons of hope for the good to come.

Chapter 14: Lizzy's Parents

In the early months after my husband disclosed his secret life, he felt an incredible sense of freedom from being finally being known. I, on the other hand, was terrified of people knowing what was really going on.

Even though we allowed a few people in to see the full reality of what we were walking through, I was still struggling with major anxiety concerning what people would think of me for choosing to stay with Dave after his disclosure. I imagined all the things that might be going through their heads:

Of course, she is going to stay. How is she going to get anyone else that amazing to choose her? He loves her because she didn't leave him. He made a mistake, but he can't leave her now—not after she decided to stay.

These thoughts were irrational, yet they were mentally and emotionally debilitating.

Clearly, his choice to step out was not my fault, but I felt certain that it wouldn't have happened if something wasn't really wrong with me. He had obviously looked to other people for excitement, beauty, adventure, and pleasure. *If I were enough*, I thought, *he would not have made those decisions*. My deepest fear had been confirmed: I was not worth fighting for. For so long, I had assuaged those fears by going along with the happy image we were projecting. While our relationship was fun and some parts of it were even really satisfying, I had been living with this hidden dread throughout our entire marriage.

On top of the mounting anxiety, I felt isolated. I was afraid to talk to my mom on the phone for very long for fear she would ask too many questions, and it would all come tumbling out. A month after the marriage conference, his parents came to visit to surprise the kids and me, and I spent a good majority of the time hiding in my closet crying. I was hurting deeply, yet I couldn't let them see it because of all I knew it would open up. I wasn't equipped or prepared to handle the fallout. To make matters worse, most of the people I interacted with on a daily basis had no idea about this inner turmoil. The few people that *did* know were incredibly empathetic, but they couldn't carry my pain. Without experiencing the ravages of betrayal, there is no way someone could understand what I was going through, much less have any idea how to help. With so many raw emotions, I constantly felt as if I were on the verge of a breakdown.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I didn't want to tell people because I knew I couldn't manage their responses. My life was in shambles. As a person who avoided personal pain to a fault, I really didn't want to also have to feel my people respond with *their* pain. It was hard enough to be in constant contact with my own, and I needed as much normal as I could find. I went to CrossFit, took the kids to school, made meals, walked our dog, and worked on house projects. I held my babies, counting down the hours until Dave got home. When he was there, I could finally be real with how I was feeling. I wasn't afraid of his reaction, and I didn't have to filter my emotions or wonder what he was thinking. We could just sit in it together, as raw and messy as it might have been.

The one voice that felt true and safe enough to trust in the middle of this time was Jesus, through the words of the Bible. God felt closer and more real than ever before. Worship music gave

words to my pain, and I played it all day long. Every time I turned on Pandora, without fail, it was as if the unspoken cry of my heart was coming through the speakers, my wounds laid bare through the music of the artist's utter desolation. I spent a lot of money on iTunes that season, carefully crafting the playlist of both my hurt and hope. As I let the word and worship wash over me, a little seed of hope started to grow. I didn't know how, but I was beginning to truly believe that one day, I was going to heal and be whole.

I couldn't explain why, but I was desperately afraid to tell my family. Of course, I was afraid that they would be angry with Dave. But what I feared the most was what I was supposed to do when they turned all their attention to me. All my life, I had been the one to bring wisdom in situations riddled with pain and confusion. Self-confidence, however false it had been, was my calling card. My sense of humor buoyed people when they were feeling helpless, and I could find a silver lining in just about every situation imaginable. I learned early on that my skill of rolling with whatever punches life threw at me was valuable to people; however, that also made me feel like it wasn't safe to be messy or undone. Now that I was the one underwater, I had no idea how to call for help. I had built my identity on having it together, and now I was a spiderweb of cracks, ready to shatter at any moment.

After the rodeo weekend, we decided it was time to invite my parents into our journey. Dave was off for the summer, so this was our best chance at having space and margin to process with them. We asked them if we could come up to their condo to have dinner; that we had something we wanted to talk to them about. They knew our time at the marriage conference had been powerful, but we hadn't told them much more than that. Though they had been around us enough to see that things were different, they hadn't pressed or asked for more than our vague descriptions of how good the weekend had been and how we were doing in the months that followed.

After the meal, we settled the kids into a movie and moved outside onto their deck with a sweeping view of Puget Sound and Whidbey Island. The setting sun cast glorious golden light around us, and the moment felt sacred. I braced myself as Dave opened himself up and began telling my parents our story. I sat quietly as the truth unfolded, perched high in the barstool chair. I let out the breath that I had inadvertently been holding, my fingers tracing circles around the rim of my wine glass. They listened intently as he disclosed the man that their daughter had really been married to all these years—the one underneath the mask.

When he finished, there was a pause, and I cautioned a glance up. I was surprised not to see any malice or anger on my parents' faces. I was even more shocked when my mom reached across the table and took Dave's hands. Looking him squarely in the face, she said with tears in her eyes, "I'm so excited for you! This is the best day of your life! Now Jesus can really do his healing in you." His shoulders softened, the grace and relief of her response cutting through any lingering fear and shame.

My mom's experience of grace as a young woman—when her life seemed to be over because of the choices she made—colored her response. She knew just what it felt like to be at the brink of everything collapsing and having grace and mercy open to a life full of more joy than she ever dreamed possible on the other side. Now that he had bared his soul, she was finally free to be honest with him. Dave had kept her at arm's length for as long as she had known him. Knowing her past, he was afraid she would be able to see through the mask, and it made him uncomfortable, to say the least.

“There is nothing more freeing than being fully known,” she responded. Without blinking an eye, she continued. “Also, I never trusted you fully. I’ve told Lizzy that, and now I know why.” She wasn’t being mean, just honest. I could see from his response that Dave felt that it was a fair statement.

Amidst the tears, apologies, and joy, my dad’s response was gentle. “All of us have struggles. Your sin is no worse than anyone else’s. We still love you. Nothing has changed because of this new information.” He responded to Dave as a dad to a son, not a father to a wounded daughter. He was concerned for me but did not try to step in and protect me. They have always made it clear that this was our marriage and that we had to figure out what works for us. Even in this, my dad respected the boundaries of a married couple and didn’t try to rescue his little girl. The healing at the table was immediate, and their acceptance was a gift to both of us. I realized I didn’t have to prove I was making the right choice.

Over the next few weeks, we planned to tell each of our immediate family members in person. My sisters, brothers, aunt, and uncle responded authentically from a place of deep love for both of us; love, anger, and hurt all mingling together with the new revelation. People rallied around us in ways we could never have imagined, and for the first time, I could sincerely feel how important my people were on this journey. Despite how broken we were, we somehow knew there was incredible value in inviting people into our mess. It scared me to death when it came time to do it, but I knew it was the right plan. Our purpose for telling them wasn’t to have anyone fix it. We just didn’t want to tell people in 10 years what we had survived. We wanted to invite them into our journey to heal and grow *with us*. We were deeply longing for the relationships that would be forged through the fire of what lay ahead, and now, I can confidently say that this terrifying process has produced some of our richest, most gratifying relationships.

While we were at the rodeo, Lizzy and I decided that I would talk to her parents when we got back. We knew we wanted to meet Bob and Margie (Lizzy’s Parents) up at their place in Mukilteo, WA. On the way home from the rodeo, I called them and invited ourselves over and told them, “I have something I want to talk to you about.” Margie would say to me later that I left her in great suspense, waiting to find out what was so important to talk about. You see, the last time I asked to speak with them without saying what it was about was the time I asked them for Lizzy’s hand in marriage!

The Mukilteo house was a special place for us. It was our getaway when family life was crazy. We drove up there on a beautiful summer afternoon. From their main floor, you could see miles and miles of the Puget Sound and the south end of Whidbey Island. It was a comforting reminder from God that there was an abundance of grace here. I was beginning to understand what King David said in 2 Samuel 22:20. It was after God had given him a great victory over the Philistines when David said, “He brought me out into a broad place; He rescued me, because he delighted in me.” (ESV)

Imagine being in the heat of battle, where you are constantly on high alert. People are dying all around you, and danger seems imminent. Then, imagine you are suddenly transported to an open

prairie on a warm afternoon, much like the scene from *Gladiator* where Maximus is running his fingers through golden waves of wheat in perfect peace. That's a pretty radical change of scenery, right?

The Mukilteo house had always represented a "safe harbor" for our little family, whether it was through financial crises or work-related issues. It was a place I always felt at peace. That being said, I was definitely nervous, but at this point, I had 10 years of relationship with her parents to lean on. I knew their scars and how long it had taken each of them to get to where they are now. I was going to "cash in" on our 10 years together in a few minutes, hoping that they could find it in their hearts to forgive me and walk alongside us as we began the journey of healing and restoration. So, Jesus, being the romantic that He is, set the backdrop just perfectly. Bob and Margie were sitting on the back deck, enjoying the sun setting over the Olympic mountain range with a glass of wine. The kids were downstairs playing, and suddenly, I was in that "broad place" again.

I joined them outside, just by myself, and took a deep breath. Without much small talk, I cut to the chase.

"I've been unfaithful to Lizzy."

As I explained more about what that meant and how the marriage conference had been the catalyst for this conversation, their faces remained surprisingly calm. I told them that Lizzy and I wanted to stay together and work it out, and we were on the same page moving forward. As I shared this, tears began to well up in the corners of their eyes. I did not take Bob for the kind of guy who was going to throw me off of the balcony or anything like that, but I half expected him to calmly ask me to leave! Margie was the one I expected to have a more vocal, if not aggressive, response to what I was saying but when she did respond, I was shocked.

"I am so happy for you, Dave! That's all I can say. I am so happy," Margie said joyfully, tears welling up in her eyes.

Wait, what? I just told my wife's parents that I had cheated on her, and they were happy for me?! I was expecting anger, hurt, and disgust, but instead, I got empathy. Bob spoke next, and it was equally as surprising.

"We all have our stuff. I'm just so happy that you want to stay," he said, calmly and lovingly. "In fact, I was afraid you were thinking about leaving Lizzy." Their responses made me feel incredibly loved and seen. I knew then that they loved me for who I was, not just because I loved their daughter. Wow.

Here were two people who have lived a lot of life, walked through some truly trying times as individuals, and made it through with God's help. It was as if they were passing on the grace that was shown to them. On the drive home, I heard that echo again in a whisper: "I just want you."

How fitting that we spent our last night up at the Mukilteo house while I have been writing this chapter. Bob and Margie (now Pops and Gigi) are moving on to new adventures, and they asked for our help packing up the house. On the last night before they had to move out, we all sat out on the back deck one last time. We crammed our now family of six on that deck, along with Lizzy's pregnant sister, Katie, her husband Robbie, and their 3-year-old Harper. We thanked God for that place, remembering all of the good and bad times. As I started to say my piece, I choked up. With my voice quivering, I thanked

them for being a safe harbor. A place where we could get out of the storm and tie up our wreck of a ship without judgment. I am forever grateful.

Chapter 15: Family Doctor

That night at the restaurant launched a very different vacation in LA than the ones we were used to. I was hyper-sensitive and critical about the way my big, beautiful Mexican family did things, and Lizzy and I had circled the wagons around our little family as we tried to do something new. The old way of doing marriage and parenting had failed us in my mind, and I was ready to change everything. Looking back, I feel sad about the way we did it. I know that we put a lot of strain on our relationship with my family in our attempt to do things differently. We were operating out of a spirit of fear and insecurity, which stemmed from going into uncharted territory as a married couple.

The surest way Lizzy and I thought we could change things is by making everything very black and white in our commitment to seeking the truth. A better way to say that is we became legalistic, meaning that if anything in our life was remotely immoral, we erred on the side of taking it out completely. A good example of this is how strict Lizzy and I became in monitoring the type of music we listened to or the movies we watched. We couldn't tolerate anything crass or sexual in nature as it brought up too much pain for the sexual promiscuity that I had been involved in. I know that we offended my family in many ways by what we blatantly avoided participating in. I am sure it felt, to them, as if we were judging them.

As we returned to Seattle, more "hard" was waiting for us. The healing process for Lizzy was still in its early stages, and the more we talked, the more layers were being peeled back. Our conversations were like a river steadily eroding the bank away, exposing the roots and rocks beneath it. The next layer was exposed when Lizzy asked me a question that had an easy answer, but one that was incredibly hard to say out loud.

"I have something hard to ask you. Was any of your sexual activity unprotected?"

My heart dropped. "Yes," I said, taking a breath. "Lizzy, I am so sorry."

I could see Lizzy struggling to hold back tears as she remained focused on the point of asking the question. There was not much more to say. I was still buried underneath a ton of shame about the decisions I had made, and I got a sense from her that she could feel the weight of it. She didn't ask me any of the details about what had happened, and as her face relaxed, she said, "After talking with Etol, I think we should set up an STD test with our doctors to make sure we are both okay."

I agreed, of course. Not that I had a choice, but I knew that this was a tremendously wise, practical decision. I immediately called my doctor and set up an appointment. In retrospect, it wasn't super painful for me to go to a clinic filled with people I didn't know. In fact, my doctor wasn't even going to be there! But, for Lizzy, it was a different story. She was going to see her regular gynecologist, whom she had known for years.

On the way over to the medical office, Lizzy stared out of the window and said, "I want to tell my doctor exactly why I am coming up to have a full STD panel done." In hindsight, there are two things that I realize were happening here that make my wife so amazing. The first thing is that Lizzy was asking for my consent to tell her doctor the whole truth about what happened. She did not have to, but she included me in the process, which made me feel loved and respected. This has become a regular

practice of ours—to check with each other before we involve anyone else. The second thing about my wife here is that smack dab in the middle of her fear and shame, she wanted to share our story with her doctor. She was thinking beyond the patient/doctor relationship; Lizzy wanted to connect with her as a *person*. While most of us could only think about ourselves in a situation like this, she was thinking about the long-term relationship she had with her doctor and wanted her to know the full story.

Before we arrived at the clinic, a phone call came through. It was my dad. I answered the phone and found that it was both of my parents calling to see how we were doing. After some light conversation about the kids and football, my dad asked casually, “What are you guys doing?”

“We’re on our way to see Lizzy’s gynecologist to get a full STD panel done,” I said, matter-of-factly. My mom launched right in.

“That’s smart. You know...” she started, clinically explaining the risks and percentages involved with STDs. Fortunately (and at times, *unfortunately*), my mom is an expert in all things medical. She had been a nurse for over 40 years, which means that she has seen *everything*. I remember coming home as a teenager to all of her presentation posters on childbirth, venereal diseases (that one still haunts my memory), and the like laying around the kitchen table. My sexual education happened through osmosis, and the downside was that talking about sex was merely clinical to her. Most of the time, I felt like a patient instead of a son. This was not all bad for me as I was, and still am, very interested in the medical field and sort of geek out on all of our bodily functions.

My dad’s response to hearing about our appointment was rather victorious. “Praise God!” he boomed, celebrating us for doing the right thing. This made me feel angry and unseen, but instead of reacting that way, I somberly said, “Dad, this isn’t a happy or victorious thing for us. This is embarrassing and humiliating. We are sad right now.”

To his credit, he understood the pain that caused me right away and apologized, saying, “I’m sorry, Mijo.”

Then, something amazing happened. It was as if a long, rainy Seattle week was interrupted by five minutes of sunshine. He opened up about his life and marriage struggles with my mom. Don’t get me wrong; my parents told my two brothers and me about their childhood, how they met, and their early financial struggles in marriage... but they never told us about their *personal* struggles.

There was something different in my dad’s tone that I had never heard before. He was talking to me not as his baby boy, but as a man who shared the same struggles. We had something real to talk about beyond our kids and our jobs. It was as if the sun was shining fully in my face, but I didn’t want to blink or look away for fear of losing it to the clouds again.

As I got off the phone, my joy quickly turned to sadness, and I turned to Lizzy.

“Why didn’t he ever tell me any of this before?”

I felt alone again, and I was downright angry. I was mad at the fact that my dad chose to allow me to believe that he had never struggled. It felt like he chose his comfort over my growth. I figured since he never talked about his struggles, that I shouldn’t either. It made me feel like I was just supposed to talk to God about them and move on, never fully sharing what was going on.

It makes me think of a recent hike I was on with my buddy Brett. When we reached the vista point, we were both hit with a metaphor for our relationships with our dads. Normally, on a beautiful day, you can see the snowcapped peak of Mt. Rainier, the mighty Olympic mountain range, and all of Lake Washington at once—and the skyline of downtown Seattle settling in the foreground. On this misty, rainy day, Brett and I saw a wall of white clouds. I mean, we were literally in the clouds, and we had about 10 feet of visibility. The vista point felt like standing at the edge of a cliff with no idea what was beyond it. As we were standing there staring into the abyss, with a look of deep understanding, Brett said, “My relationship with my dad feels a lot like this. Like he’s brought me as far as he can, but he’s not willing to or doesn’t have the tools to go any further.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” I said, no further words necessary.

As I sat there in the car after hanging up with my parents, I thought about what I really wanted. I didn’t want a dad anymore; in fact, I hadn’t needed one for a long time. I wanted a friend who was uniquely qualified to give me perspective on the things that might come up next as my life unfolded. What was my dad thinking about when he was 33 years old with all of the irons he had in the fire? He was trying to keep the church afloat, working his tail off to finish his Ph.D., and raising three little boys. What about his marriage? My mom worked like crazy, helped direct the church, gave my brothers and me everything we needed, and all of this while my dad was battling underlying health issues. As I tried to put myself in his shoes, I realized what a challenge this time of his life must have been. My resentment started to melt away in light of the newfound empathy I felt. Then, a hopeful thought hit me, and I realized I had unearthed a deep longing welling up from the depths of my soul.

“What if we can do this next part together?”

That’s what I really wanted.

It hasn’t been an easy process with my dad. I’ve learned that it isn’t fair to expect someone to walk the same path as you or at the same pace. That type of expectation will only make them feel judged and alienated. It’s unrealistic to think that any of us can walk stride for stride with another person, but, at the same time, it shouldn’t keep us from trying. Now, I have to warn you, though: it is extremely exposing and vulnerable to ask someone to walk alongside you in a truthful, authentic way because you’ll run the risk of being rejected or, even worse, betrayed. But it is the most rewarding part of authentic relationship to be able to truly celebrate someone’s growth when you’ve shared your respective struggles along the way. That is the type of love that Jesus models for us. I hear him saying, “I will meet you where you are, and I will never leave you.”

Over the years, I’ve realized that loving like Jesus is what matters most. Accepting people for who they are, where they are, and meeting them there consistently, always willing and ready to go deeper. That has been my approach, not just with my dad, but with any other relationship. I have committed to meeting people where they are, and I will always ask these two questions:

“What’s next for you?”

“Is there anything you need from me?”

That conversation with my dad helped me crystallize some thoughts about my relationship with our children. I turned to Lizzy and said, “I want to share our story with our kids in doses in an age-

appropriate way.” Lizzy agreed that it would serve as an opportunity to make us more human to our kids—imperfect and in need of grace. We did not want our kids to grow up with an incomplete understanding of who we are. We hope that by the time they become sexually aware, they will know our whole story.

And with that, she agreed, got out of the car alone, and walked into the clinic. Then we waited for the results.

The call from Dave’s aunt came after we returned from our trip to Los Angeles to tell the family. Knowing full well the long-term health effects of promiscuity from her career as a midwife, she wanted to make sure she talked to us as both a loving aunt and a medical professional.

“You guys know that I love you very much, and I am proud of you for the decisions you have made to stay together. But you need to go see a doctor and get checked for STDs. And don’t go to a clinic, please go see your doctor. They need to know what you have been exposed to.”

It was a punch to the gut. Her courage to challenge us to know this part of the long-term consequence was a gift, but also incredibly heavy. I knew she was right, but deep down, I was also afraid. What if they found something? What if we wound up with more to deal with than the already exhausting emotional consequences? We made appointments for both Dave and I with the realization that this was the next step in moving forward, but our new freedom felt tainted and overshadowed by the possibility of even more devastation.

Dave and the kids waited in the car while I went in to see the doctor. Sitting in the exam room felt stark and impersonal, and the drafty chill through my hospital gown went much deeper than my skin. This was the same office that I waited to hear my now three-year-old son’s beating heart for the first time; a place of joy and comfort, a place I planned to come to have more babies. Now, I was waiting to hear if I even *had* a future that included more children.

The nurse practitioner bustled in happily.

“So, what brings you in today?” she asked, scanning my charts.

“I’m here for STD testing.” I felt hollow and small.

“OK...” She paused. “What is your level of exposure?” Her question begged for more of the story. I took a deep breath. She needed to know so she could be thorough, but I still wasn’t prepared to share my pain yet again.

“Well, my husband recently confessed to cheating on me off and on for the last nine years, so I guess pretty much everything?” The tension that followed seemed to immediately suck all the air out of the room as she looked at me sadly.

“What is it with these men?” she seethed under her calm exterior. I understood her disgust. Up until the last three months, my reaction would have been similar. Until it became my reality, I didn’t have to see someone who cheated as anything more than a selfish, insensitive jerk either.

I took a deep breath and squared my shoulders as best I could. “I want to tell you that we have decided to stay together. I don’t want you to feel bad for saying that. I get it. I feel that way sometimes, too. But I really know that we’re supposed to be together, as painful as this is. And he is asking for help. That is part of why I am here today.”

She looked me straight in the eye and gently said, “Well, I think that is very brave. I don’t know if I would be able to make the same decision. You are an amazing woman.”

The rest of the visit was as routine as possible. Instead of judgment, the nurse had seen me and entered into my world for our brief interaction. She gave me the instructions that the test results would take up to a week, and not to worry if I didn’t hear something right away. I knew that my anxiety would not dissipate until I knew either way. She was polite and kind, and we both lingered, not knowing how to end the interaction in a way that gave gravity to what had taken place in that room. Giving my hand a gentle squeeze as she left the room, she offered her hope that we would indeed find our way to something better. I dressed quickly and headed back to my waiting family, still feeling sad but thankful to have the appointment over with. The rest of the week was to be spent grieving the need for these appointments, anxiously awaiting the results.

Before we knew what this week would hold, we had scheduled new family photographs for the end of this incredibly sensitive week. This was Dave’s idea, wanting documentation of these days, photos to look back on one day when our kids were grown and we could what God had used this all for. I was a tangled mess of emotion. On the one hand, I was thankful that my family was still intact. But, on the other hand, there was so much uncertainty about the future, including our physical wellbeing.

We chose St. Edwards Park as our backdrop. It is both majestic and rustic, a little slice of tangled wilderness in the midst of suburbia. Originally a logging site turned catholic seminary and retreat, it was finally converted into a state park. As we explored one of the many well-worn paths through the woods, we stumbled upon the perfect place: an old prayer grotto more than 100 years old made of large river stones carved into the hillside. Our photographer, who would eventually become an intimate ally and friend in our journey, perfectly captured our family. My favorite picture is of Dave holding the kids on his lap, looking together at her ornate oversized Orthodox Bible. It will forever remind me of the weight of that day: uncertain of so much, but desperately hoping for a chance to heal and move forward into something better.

As we packed in the car to leave, we got a phone call from the doctor’s office while we were still in the parking lot. Holding our breath, we listened to the results: negative for HIV. The nurse continued down the list of everything else we had been tested for, each with another negative result. The floodgates of relief broke as tears flowed freely down my cheeks; a fully clean panel was more than I had been hoping for. I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the unseen protection I received when I was unaware that I even needed it.

With this report, we had a renewed sense of possibility. The spark of hope was now a small flame, and the beginnings of the fire that would burn away the old life and make space for something

altogether new. We began to make plans for the future again, daring to believe we were, in fact, going to make it. A short time later, we got more surprising news.

I found out I was pregnant.

Chapter 16: Hornet's Nest

Even though our life drastically changed in a single weekend, most of the daily details of life remained the same. Dave went back to work the Monday morning after our marriage conference, and life clicked on. After dropping the kids off at school, I came home to a house full of dishes, piles of laundry, and a garden full of weeds. The house felt stifling, and I needed fresh air, so I headed outside. I noticed an area of newly turned over ground where we were hoping to grow grass had been taken over by weeds, and I knew it was the perfect project. Gloves on and ponytail swinging, I set to the mindless task of ripping out the invaders.

I was beginning to see some real progress when a text came through from Dave. "Hey, babe. I just put a chew in, and I know I have lied about that in the past, but I wanted to tell you because I didn't want to keep it a secret from you. I'm not ready to quit yet, but I wanted you to be a part of it."

Instead of feeling compassion, I looked down at the weeds crawling across the dirt, and I felt my jaw tighten. I reached down and pulled the first tendrils of seemingly innocuous morning glory from the fresh brown dirt, only to find that it was the only visible part of the vine. The root snaked its way halfway across the lawn, finally coming completely out on the other side of the yard. Each time I grabbed a small handful of the weeds, I ended up with an armful of roots, and the pile steadily grew larger. The smallest ones had the longest underground trail, and those that were beginning to blossom were the hardest to pull out.

As sweat beaded on my brow, I became more and more infuriated with the hostile takeover of unwanted growth. I wasn't going to leave anything in that dirt, and I knew why. I wasn't attacking the weeds. I was attacking the lies and habits that had threatened to ruin our relationship. I literally began speaking out loud, in my garden, a mantra with each section I annihilated.

"Nothing left to grow. No place hidden. Everything turned over," I breathed aloud as I obsessively raked my hands through the soil. I was committed to whatever it took to get these weeds out.

When I spoke to him that afternoon, I didn't hold back. "You've been set free. No longer a slave to fear. You don't have to keep anything of that old life. You don't need tobacco. There isn't any room for any of that anymore." I was angry that we had been duped for so long, buying into the lie that half-truths or omission wasn't that harmful. The lies were invasive, the intensity and freshness of the entanglement fueling my bold attack of anything hidden. I wasn't condemning him; I wanted to speak truth and life. To my relief and gratitude, he responded by throwing away the tobacco and the willingness for any other stronghold to be exposed.

As life continued to unfold and more reminders of the old way popped up out of the freshly overturned soil, we were ruthless about yanking them out before they had any room to take root. On a hike one afternoon, Dave received a seemingly innocent text from a female acquaintance we both knew. His phone was in my backpack, so when I handed it to him, I saw her name on the marquee across the front screen. He deleted it on instinct. That same anger flickered inside me, questions about their involvement and why he deleted the text without saying anything swirling in my mind. Instead of seething by myself, I caught up with him a little further up the trail and asked him about it. He took my

hand as we kept walking, his warm hand anchoring us to each other. He invited me into his inner turmoil, describing *his* reaction when he saw the text. His disgust for the old way of casual familiarity with other women and the shame of his past made him want to hide reflexively, fleeing as quickly as possible from the sickening feeling of being caught.

These conversations led to a decision that no matter what either of us were feeling, no matter what he had hidden before, it was best to just talk about it when something else that we had buried came up. This was not an easy process for me. Each admission, each uncovered lie was a fresh wound. Just when I was starting to feel like one was beginning to heal, I was scraped raw again. But I knew we had to expose these raiders of intimacy. As painful as it was to expose long-forgotten lies, covering them again would have interfered with the healing process, allowing secrets to fester and eventually maybe even grow into habits again.

Lizzy and I love to go hiking. For us, living in the Pacific Northwest is like being a kid in a candy store; you could hike a different trail every week! One of our favorite hikes is PuPu Point in Issaquah, WA. It is a short but treacherous hike about 1.5 miles to the top, lined with old-growth evergreens and ferns. The smell of the fresh damp earth and the trees, especially on a misty day, is infinitely better than diffusing eucalyptus and pine oil! Having grown up in LA, I fully believe the fresh air is slowly reversing the damage done to my lungs from all of the pollution!

On this particular summer day, Lizzy and I loaded up the Millennium Falcon with Ashby, Ben, and our dog, Kuma, to hike up PuPu Point in the late morning to beat the heat. The hike was challenging, as usual—we had just finished climbing “steps,” which is a stretch of the trail where forest rangers used native rocks to dig in two-foot-high steps, which is basically like doing 200 box step-ups in a gym. We were breathing hard and loving every minute of it. After winding around a few bends, we were stopped by a 30-something-year-old couple.

“Just a heads up, in about 500 feet, there is a massive hornet’s nest off to your right. It blends right into the branch it is hanging from, so be careful,” the man said.

“Are the hornets active?” I asked.

“No, but I’d have the kids stay on the trail and not throw anything in that direction.”

Lizzy and I thanked them for being so kind and proceeded slowly past the nest, keeping Ashby and Ben on the far side of the trail. As we continued at our kids’ pace up the trail, I explained to them how kind it was of that couple to warn us of a potentially deadly situation for us, given that I am allergic to those kinds of stings. We all walked in silence for a while, and suddenly, a thought popped into my mind. It was like a vision of the future for Lizzy and me that I could see clearly in my mind’s eye.

I saw Lizzy and I walking along a trail together with our hiking packs on, and we were looking for people to talk to. We had scars all over our arms and legs from a bad run-in with a hornet’s nest and were stopping married (and unmarried) couples to warn them about the danger ahead. I kept walking

over to the men, saying, “See that scar right there? You are heading to the same place where I got that one. You do not have to go down this path; there is a better way.” While I was warning the men, Lizzy talked to the women and showed them *her* arms and legs.

The thought of sharing our scars with people was so energizing that it seemed like a calling that we were headed towards. In real-time, the vision that I had on the trail happened in the span of about two to three minutes, but it seemed like much longer. I think it was the significance of the moment that made it seem like time stopped moving. These types of moments, I have come to learn, are like traveling to another dimension—you think you were there for years but return back home to find it’s only been a few minutes. Like going into the magical wardrobe in the Chronicles of Narnia or Platform 9 ¾ in the Harry Potter books. As we continued hiking, I turned to Lizzy, excited and out of breath, and said, “That’s us!”

“What do you mean?” she asked, not understanding what had just transpired.

“Lizzy, we are going to be just like that couple. We will stop people who are heading toward the same danger that we just came out of—we’ll show them our scars!” I shared the rest of the vision with her as we neared the top. As she looked at me, I could sense the fear and excitement in her eyes. While there is eternal purpose in sharing our scars with others, it would take great courage to tell our story. We had to really think about how exposed we would be as a couple who already existed in a very public profession. Sharing our scars meant being willing to tell people the truth of how our marriage failed. The challenge for Lizzy, which I did not fully understand at the time, was that she felt like a fool for not seeing what I was doing behind her back. She felt stupid as she looked back, knowing that there were women in our social circles I was involved with sexually while she walked around as if we had this great life. If we made our story public, what else would come to light that would make her feel even more like a fool? She confessed to me recently that she was even afraid someone was going to show up someday with a child saying, “Dave, this is ours.”

I had no idea how scary this proposition was to Lizzy. I was too caught up in my excitement to help couples just like us—couples who needed to know that there was hope. My enthusiasm for sharing our story also came from wanting to make sure that my mistakes were not made in vain. I knew that there were millions of men out there who were stuck, hiding because of the wrongs they’ve committed and the lies they’ve told. I wanted them to know that I didn’t wake up one day and decide to cheat on my wife. It happened over time, starting with little white lies hidden in the dark that grew like a fungus. I wanted to be able to say, “I’ve been down that trail, and I got stung pretty bad. You don’t have to go that way.” I wanted them to know that there was another way—the way of truth. I wanted them to know that although the trail is steeper and more challenging, it will all be worth it when they get to the top. Most of all, I wanted them to know that they are not alone

It started the very first night we got home from the marriage retreat: reclaiming enemy territory. Earlier that morning, we basked in the warmth of a glorious Pacific Northwest spring morning, looking out at the glass top lake. The scent of wisteria floating around us mingled with the peace we felt from knowing

we were no longer hiding from each other. The hollow echo of the truck door slamming brought me back to the icy reality of what we were facing, and the earlier peace I felt began to unravel like the edges of the blankets covering the seats of his vintage Chevy. The sunshine of the spring day was quickly fading, and I felt a new chill creeping in through my fractured reality.

We arrived home to our 4-year-old daughter in hiding, the result of an unexplainable meltdown with my mom. Dave crawled under the bed with her while she ranted and raved. I waited outside the door and heard him gently praying for her as her yells turned to sobs, eventually slowing to sniffles. Soon after, they quietly joined us to eat dinner on the porch, Daddy with his daughter perched peacefully in his arms. We gave my parents a vague explanation of how great the weekend had been, thanked them for babysitting, and settled the kids into bed for the night.

The darkness of what we were now facing descended on me as I climbed into bed that night. I sat staring at the closet, feeling nauseated by the realization that my husband's wardrobe—clothes that I had purchased for him—had been a part of my violation. I suddenly had an overwhelming desire to start a bonfire. Images began to flood my mind of darkness and deceit, and the unraveling continued. I was frozen in dread, as if a heavy blanket had been placed over my shoulders. It had been one thing to talk about the brokenness in our marriage at the conference, tucked away from the rest of our life, but now I realized I really wasn't equipped to handle everything I had learned.

My husband could sense me sinking into the pillows, the oppressive weight of darkness paralyzing my thoughts. Neither of us had any idea what to do now, alone in our room without any outside help. How did we begin the process of repairing what was so tragically torn? He began to pray quietly. I sat numb beside him, overcome with the desire to run as far from that house as I possibly could, but unable to move a muscle. After a few minutes, he paused. Turning toward me, he said, "This is going to sound strange, but I have a picture in my mind right now of Jesus trying on my clothes."

I was shocked, snapped back into the moment by his words. I hadn't said a word to him about the thoughts racing through my mind, and yet here he was speaking directly to them. I unclenched my fists and jaw, willing my stomach to settle and relaxed my shoulders. Tears spilled onto my cheeks as I released the pain of returning home. We weren't fighting against the things hanging in our closet or the bottles of alcohol in our pantry. This was a far more sinister enemy strengthened by the choices we had made and the lies we believed about our true identity. We were in for the fight of our lives.

The days and weeks following that first victory were more like tactical, hand-to-hand combat as we sought out the traps of the old way and found our way forward into the new life. Slowly, our home was becoming our safe haven—the place we could control what came in and out. Out there in the real world, we were bombarded by the remnants of the old decisions, hidden mercenaries seeking to entrap us in the past. We knew the past wasn't going to go quietly, and we were fighting for our lives.

Each season in football brings familiar patterns, events that reoccur annually, and a chance to reclaim enemy territory. We weren't cavalier. There was no bar table ministry, late nights at the club talking to people about Jesus, or beers with the guys. These places are straight-up landmines for my husband, and we couldn't afford any more casualties. Instead, we decided to be intentional with reclaiming the unavoidable hangouts that had become pitfalls because of addiction and division. We started reframing those times into what God had intended them for all along.

Road trip weekends became virtual dates for us. While I would love to travel more with him, we have four young children. But, thanks to technology, what was once a chance to check out and go about our own agendas is now an opportunity to experience intentional connection. I put a movie on for the kids, and Dave and I spend time on the phone going over the week and whatever else we have missed in the midst of the crazy hours of his job. I still feel the fear rise up at times—the sadness at what we lost during the other years—when he goes on the road. Now, I have the fullness of what we experience on this side as balance.

We've been intentional to reclaim memories that were tainted by the past. Family vacations with renewed meaning, birthday parties gathering our tribe without the entanglement of overwhelming alcohol, reframing relationships with former accomplices to shame, even having children together again. We find incredible joy in remaking memories in places (and with people) that once held secrets and pain.

The lingering sting of infidelity remains. In many ways, I hope we always remember the pain of being prisoners of the war for our true identity. It makes waking up without a hangover all the more sweet, and the battle worth fighting every time some adversary comes seeking to distract us from where we are headed. Sometimes I wish healing was a once and done process, but I know now that a life of ease is not truly what I want. We are, all of us, caught up in this epic fight for justice, and it is a gift to see that clearly now.

Chapter 17: April 15th

To be perfectly honest, I spent most of that first year merely trying to survive the constant bombarding of heartbreak while somehow finding a way to maintain a “normal” life for my kids. It was harder when Dave was gone at work, mostly when I was going through my regular daily routine. I’d be doing the dishes or folding laundry, and, all of a sudden, a wave of grief came crashing in over me. While driving down the road headed for a school pick-up or a quick trip to the grocery store, faces and dark memories would take over my thoughts. I tried to stay as busy as possible because the quieter the world got, the louder the truth of what my life was now mocked me.

The greatest sadness for me was all that had been lost, namely joy and security in everything we shared the first ten years we were together. He had a hidden life for as long as we had been together, fighting his own darkness far before we ever met. Now that I knew what his life had really been like, every memory we had together felt tainted. I would be thinking back on a birthday or a trip, driving through a part of town we loved to go, or recalling a conversation when I would realize that even in those times, he had been lying to me. The color would slowly drain from the memory, and I would be left feeling lifeless and fractured. In those moments, nothing felt like it had ever been or would ever be true again.

One cold January morning, I was home picking up the kitchen after the whirlwind of making breakfast, packing lunches, and getting out the door for school. I had music playing quietly in the background when my ears perked up to the lyrics swirling softly around me. Rushing to make it to the chiropractor before preschool pick-up, I quickly downloaded the song without listening to it fully, grabbing my journal and purse as I headed out the door. With my headphones in, I put the song on repeat as I wordlessly checked in for my adjustment. The sagging office chair in my treatment room became a sanctuary as the words pierced through the protective layers of my pain. I scribbled the lyrics into my journal while I waited, knowing something was happening that I couldn’t quite explain.

“Let this be, where I die. My heart with thee, crucified. Be lifted high, as my kingdoms fall. Once and for all. Once and for all.” Her powerful voice sent waves of understanding through all the hurt and confusion. I held back my tears, not ready to share the sacred transformation that was happening in my heart. As I drove the familiar route to school on autopilot, I sensed the holiness of this moment. I knew I had a decision to make. This was the crossroads of everything I had dreamed my life would be and what it really was. God wanted to use this to do something miraculous, but I had to choose to let go of what I wanted it to look like. No more fairy tale.

“Let this be, where I die.” All that had happened, all that was revealed, all the pain, all the lies, all the shame, all the brokenness of our story was where the crucifixion mattered.

“My heart with thee, crucified.” If I didn’t surrender to the death of my marriage; if I kept looking for a way to make this all not true, it would never have a chance to come back to life. This idol had to be smashed to pieces. This was the place where I had to share in the suffering of losing it all in order to be a part of the beauty of rebirth.

“Be lifted high, as my kingdoms fall. Once and for all. Once and for all.” I felt my heart break as the reality of dying to my plans, my experience, my dreams, my comfort, and my expectation became

undeniable. I turned the car onto the same exit I had taken every day for the last two years on the way to preschool, and yet, that day, it was all new to me. I had passed through some invisible but very real barrier, ushering me into a place of surrender.

In the quiet of this place, I understood what the Lord was telling me. "This will always be your story. It is no longer your future, but it will always be where you came from. You can't run from that. You can't run from this pain. But you can let me make that into something beautiful. You can trust me to see what I can turn this into, in *my way*."

I had asked Jesus into my heart as a tender 3-year-old on the way to preschool many years before, but this was different. This was the moment I truly gave my life to Christ. This was the moment I exchanged pursuing my happiness and comfort above all for the chance to be a part of something bigger than me. It was the moment that changed my trajectory and brought my heart back to life.

After what felt like an eternity, Lizzy and I finally got our STD test results back. By God's grace, everything came back negative. It was a great relief to both of us, but it still seemed like such a small victory in light of the real healing that needed to take place in our souls. With football season just days away, everything got put on hold. We weren't going to have time to sit together and process life with the hourly and daily demands of the season. And, honestly, I was looking forward to a mental and emotional break from all of the heaviness in our home at the time.

Coaching football, just like many other jobs, has a way of consuming your time and energy and can completely take over your life if you let it. For some, it is a great place to hide from the reality waiting for you at home. Instead of an escape, what came next was about two years of long, sleepless nights. Both of us alternated staring up at the ceiling from our bed, wondering how on earth to move forward when all we had was six hours a night.

The way I remember most of that season is it was mostly Lizzy who couldn't sleep. You see, while I was the one living the secret life all of those years, she had to relive every memory with new eyes. I knew that my role was to fill in the blanks she had as they became evident. She cried almost every night. And when she wasn't crying, she was depressed. She would talk to me about the things she saw every day that triggered her emotions. For example, Lizzy could drive by a certain part of town that she knew I used to go drinking at, and it would cause her to painfully imagine me sitting in one of the bars hitting on other women. All I could do was be there with her in that bed. There was nothing I could say that would fix it, so I simply rolled over towards her, put my hand on her back, and tried my best to comfort her.

Those sleepless nights felt as if we were looking at a 10-year-long photo album, altering the background of every picture. The new information Lizzy had about me forced her to change all of our memories. However, the memories didn't change much for me because I was secretly tormented behind the manufactured smiles. I suppose the pain I had caused Lizzy was finally starting to affect me the way it was supposed to. **NOT**

only was I incredibly sad for Lizzy, but I was sad for the scared, lost little boy in the photos. But, as my empathy grew for Lizzy, it also started to grow for myself.

When I found out I was pregnant with my third child Bea, it seemed like every buried fear I had began to bubble up to the surface. Was I making the right decision? Shouldn't I make him prove to me that he was worth trusting first? Did I really want to have a relationship built on conditions? How would I ever know if I could trust him? What was the balance of faith in God's protection and being downright stupid? What were people going to think? All of the questions swirled together in a fog of unknown. There was no way to truly know what the future would hold, yet I did not want to live afraid and miss the opportunity for the family we both wanted if everything did indeed work out.

Dave began the process of reconciling with my family that summer. When he told my big brother, Todd was gracious to my husband but also made it clear that he was angry about the decisions he had made. Dave was thankful for his willingness to forgive him, yet he also understood my brother admitting that, in the moment, his first response was wanting to punch him in the face. I mean, I didn't blame him.

My brother reached out to me to meet for lunch at his office a few weeks later. Todd is a fairly reserved person, so I was thankful he was honest with Dave and intrigued by his offer for lunch. As we sat eating at the conference table on the 17th floor downtown, I was surprised at how direct he was.

"I think it is really cool that you guys are trying to work through this, and you are willing to forgive him," he paused before continuing matter of factly. "Just please do me a favor and don't have any more kids while you are figuring all this out."

I swallowed my tacos dryly. I knew I had a decision to make. Should I tell Todd the truth and risk his disapproval and judgment, or should I stay at surface level and not invite him into my current turmoil? I didn't want to make him feel uncomfortable, but surface-level relationship, especially with people I really love, wasn't an option anymore. All of this flashed through my mind in an instant as I sat pondering my next move.

I couldn't figure out how to say it with any more tact, so I let the words tumble out of my mouth before I could stop myself. "Well, here's the thing. I'm seven weeks pregnant already."

Without skipping a beat, my brother's body language shifted. He smiled, relaxed his shoulders, and sat back in his chair. "Well, ok, then. This is good. I'm happy for you, and I'm totally behind you and Dave having this baby."

His response was sincere, and I could sense his genuine willingness to let go of his idea of how we should handle the future and shift to what was at hand. While his anger at my husband and loyalty to my protection made me feel seen and loved, his immediate switch to love and support was equally powerful. Watching people respond to Dave's deception made it clear just how deeply we were all

affected by the lies. My sisters both cried, the elder also confessing that she couldn't imagine our family without him while simultaneously promising to kill him if he did any more damage to me.

The reality that I knew—that my family and friends experienced from us—was unraveling with each retelling of the story. As we invited people into our new life, the consequences of the hidden hurt we both carried reached much further than our personal experience. No one in our circle was left unaffected. It was as if a bomb went off in our family, uncovering different hidden hurt each of us carried, our transparency triggering the same process in the ones willing to engage in *our* process.

Even though everyone had different opinions and reactions, the chance to experience having a child together again, this time without the guilt and shame of his secrets, gave me joy. In spite of the fear, the tendrils of hope were beginning to spread from the start of the new marriage we were growing. I had spent nine years facing only the parts of my marriage that felt good or didn't scare me too much. In choosing to stay, I couldn't ignore our brokenness, but it also meant moving forward with life, leaving the old behind without conditions and punishment. As we shared the news and my belly grew, people responded across the spectrum, from tears of joy to deep concern.

April came quickly. I began to dread celebrating our anniversary. I wanted to celebrate that day at the conference as our new beginning instead. Our willingness and ability to turn toward each other and examine what wasn't working had grown exponentially in the last year. It was still too painful to spend much time thinking about our first nine years of marriage. I felt foolish when I recalled my life before, to think of how I had poured myself into what I wanted to believe was a good marriage. All of those memories felt tainted now, and I didn't know how I could honor a day of hollow vows—and pretend that it made me feel happy.

Early on the morning of April 15th, I woke up to the first wave of a contraction. My due date wasn't for another three weeks, so I wasn't sure that these contractions were actually the beginning of labor. As I lay in bed, timing the rhythms of my body, it became clear that they were not going away. I woke up Dave to help me monitor what was happening. As we laid in bed, praying and thanking God for the miracle taking place, the contractions came closer and closer. What was even more miraculous was the fact that I went into labor on this day. Just ten years earlier, I was having breakfast with my dad on the last morning I would wake up a single woman.

Every detail of the rest of the day could not have been planned more perfectly. We cleaned the house, got our oldest off to school; we even coached a CrossFit class (my husband, not me) in between contractions! After the class, we hopped in the car to get groceries, but quickly turned around to head to the hospital as the intensity made a quick shift to hard labor. A friend picked up our youngest son Ben at the grocery store across from the hospital, and within the hour, we were in a delivery room readying to meet this new baby. Dave pulled out my phone to turn on worship music, and soon enough, the words of "Once and for All" filled the room as we heard the first cries of our beautiful baby girl, Beatrice Jane.

We both wept at the gift of this moment. Redeemed. In one moment, there was immediate reconciliation for this day I didn't know what to do with. The tears continued to flow as we realized that new life could exist alongside the first fragmented nine years we shared together. We didn't have to have one or the other; joy could hold hands with grief here, and it was beautiful. Our story was messy and complicated and painful... but it was still incredibly good. A beautiful reminder that God works all

things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. April 15th was a reminder of all that He was doing, and all He was yet to do.

Chapter 18: How Did We Get Here?

During the first season, the pain of betrayal was raw and fresh, like touching an open wound; searing so hot it could take your breath away. Most of our emotional energy went into reprogramming our time apart so that it actually created more connection between us. We created a game plan for his time on the road to prep for all of the tempting scenarios of his old life. His new routing included staying in the hotel after dark, hanging out with fellow coaches in the meal room instead of a bar, and checking in with the front desk to block postings to his room as soon as he arrived. It was intense and exhausting, but it was the first time his travel made our relationship deeper and our communication stronger. Early on, the tragedy and intensity made me feel safe somehow—mostly because we were on the same side now, side by side, fighting anything that threatened our relationship.

During the second football season after our marriage conference, paranoia silently took up residency in the back of my mind. We were a year and a half removed from the initial trauma of exposing his infidelity. While our game plan was still in place, the feeling of being on the front lines of an epic battle had diminished. The urgency of those first months had been dulled by the routine of life. We still had all of the same security plans in place, guarding our marriage from outside invaders. I was increasingly afraid if we moved on from everything that had happened, if he let his guard down to even the smallest form of temptation, that I would have to live this whole tragedy again. I didn't think I could survive that.

By the time we reached “bye week,” a break with no game that each team has once in the season for a short respite, I was lost deep in a world of “what ifs” in my mind. Every small deviation from the extreme measures we were taking to protect our relationship felt like a sign that something was seriously wrong. If Dave didn't call me at the time he would normally call, or if he was distant and tired when he got home, I wondered who else he was thinking about or talking to. However, I didn't want to address these fears because I was afraid of coming across as controlling or judgmental. I was living with the fall-out of broken trust, but I didn't know how very real PTSD is for the betrayed. It is a dark, lonely, and deceptive place. I had no idea how to talk about what I was feeling and ask for help. My insecurities continued to grow, twisting my perception of reality. Underneath the newfound joy at our changing life together was a deep, lingering pain.

When those few precious days off came, we headed for the sanctuary of Glenwood. Instead of taking in the rugged beauty of the Cascade Mountains and Yakima River Basin on the drive, I was haunted by the recent memory of all Dave had disclosed to me along this same road our first trip after the marriage conference. With each mile, dread and uncertainty grew in the back of my mind. By the time we arrived to the quiet house, nothing but stars and trees surrounding us, I was exhausted from trying to block out the voices whispering inevitable doom. Completely unaware of my internal struggle and overcome by the exhaustion of midseason and travel, Dave collapsed into bed in relief. I quietly climbed in next to him after settling the kids in to sleep. As I tuned into his deep rhythmic breathing, I almost willed myself to sleep, but I knew that if I pushed them down again, I might not find the courage or a window to ask him.

“Babe, can we talk for a minute?” I ventured quietly, almost hoping he was too deeply asleep to respond.

“Sure, what’s up?” he sighed, rolling over toward me.

Staring up at the slatted ceiling, distancing myself from the vulnerability of facing him in my fear, I fumbled.

“Are you cheating on me again?”

A wave of heat crept up my face as I braced myself, trembling silently in the dark. I waited for his answer; an answer that I was almost certain was going to be the end of me.

“No,” he responded flatly. “What makes you think that?” It was an ambush. In my right mind, I would have known better than to ask him that in the middle of the night, but indeed my mind was *not* right. All of the unhealed, unspoken emotional damage that comes with betrayal was eroding my sanity.

I don’t really remember how I answered his question, but it didn’t have much bearing in reality. I gave a number of reasons that seemed to make sense at the time. I could feel his body tensing away from me, the condemnation of my words furthering the space between us in the dark. He listened graciously, but I could sense his frustration growing as I tried to make sense of the battle I had been fighting in my mind.

“Babe, I don’t really know what to tell you. I haven’t had any interactions with women except the times there wasn’t an option, and in those I have had, it’s been professional.” Like inviting someone to watch the final scene of a movie and asking them to understand the entire plot, he was confused and felt attacked. We were both dog-tired and he knew nothing he was going to say was going to fix what I was feeling. While he was trying hard to understand me, his patience and understanding were as worn out as his body from months of minimal sleep.

In the silence that followed, he gave in to his exhaustion, but I lay awake for a while longer. I realized the insensitivity of my timing, but also still felt justified for my concern. While my initial evidence trailed off into the oblivion of my endless fears, something deeper was trying to find a voice. I knew he was telling me the truth, but I didn’t feel any better. As long as I was looking to his behavior to give me peace, I would be restless. Regardless of how much pain he had caused me, my healing wasn’t his weight to carry. Even as his life changed and he grew into a new man, I needed to do my own work of inner healing. The answers would not be found in the present, nor the certainty of the future. They lay in the past, in the uncovering deeper of the wounds we had no idea how to access. Wounds that still needed to be uncovered, and grace we still needed to receive. The scars were a roadmap, pointing us toward the next steps we needed to take to truly move into a healed and whole marriage.

Football season had wrapped up once again, and we were back to finding a rhythm together as a family. We were up early reading, spending evenings together, sharing the load of responsibility around the house, and heading to sports games and events as a whole crew. We seemed to be connected in a way that we never had before. Yet, in the middle of so much growth and good and new, there was a shadowy, dark presence that wouldn’t disappear, no matter how hard I tried to ignore it. It was always looming just out of sight, and it was the question of *how*.

How in the world did we get to the desperate, dysfunctional, broken, lost place we found our marriage almost two years ago? How did I continue to live that way, somehow knowing there was something deeply flawed, yet never saying anything?

I barely had time to acknowledge the lurking questions during football season. I had moments—usually late at night or when Dave was on the road—when I couldn't seem to escape the crushing menacing grip of dread. This usually led to conversations between us about specific instances of behavior that mimicked the past, but never addressing the bigger questions formulating in my subconscious. Now that the season was over and life had slowed to a more manageable pace, I realized just how exhausted I was from carrying the questions in my head and heart.

My husband was charging forward into the new life we were creating, free from the bondage of hiding and shame, but I just couldn't shake the feeling that we were being followed. We were running after the family we finally believed we could have, but I was beginning to see that we were also running away from the one we had before. The problem was, our old life wasn't going anywhere. No matter how much good I saw now, there was no light coming from the shadow of our past. And the further we got from there, the more clearly I saw how much landscape it covered.

You would think by now I would have trusted that having a hard conversation as soon as I realized it was needed was the best practice. But you have to remember that we had years of hiding things, sweeping them under the rug or pretending they weren't there, as muscle memory. We still mostly waited to dig into areas we were disconnected when the breakdown between us was affecting our daily interactions, and we couldn't ignore it anymore. We had changed some obviously destructive patterns, but it was becoming increasingly clear how deeply we had woven avoidance into the fabric of our marriage.

We had been to see a counselor early on when I was pregnant with Bea, but it was quickly apparent that her approach was just not right for us. We left her office feeling overwhelmed by how quickly she wanted to go to the darkness of our story with little connection or compassion for where we were starting. I'm sure some people really need that harsh reality check, but we had plenty of reality already. It didn't feel safe, and, at the time, safety was a top priority for both of us.

One of my dear friends, a woman who had lived through the same situation as ours, told me about her experience with therapy. She spoke of the freedom it brought and how loved and seen she felt, and that was all I needed to know that it was time to try again. Sitting at the kitchen table one morning, bulletproof coffee in hand, I tested the waters.

"What do you think about seeing a counselor again?" I asked him. It seemed like a fair request, and I tried not to make it an accusation.

He took a long deep breath in, his hand reflexively reaching to rub his chin in thought. "I mean, I guess I just don't see the point. Therapy hasn't been around for very long, and as long as we have Jesus, I don't really know what it will do," he responded. I knew he was trying not to be defensive, but by the flare of his nostrils as he took a deep inhale, I could tell he was wrestling with the question. These were his honest, matter of fact feelings at the time.

I took a deep breath. I knew I had a choice to make. I could stick with what I knew, holding it together and finding the silver lining in this apparent dead end. Or, I could speak up and be open about what I needed and what I saw was possible, risking the vulnerability of my fragility.

“I know we have talked a lot about what it was that went wrong, but I am wondering if we really understand how we got there. There is just so much I don’t understand.” I paused searching for the right words. “I am really not doing well.”

The words were out. I could feel my shoulders relax, finally having released carrying this weight in silence. “I want you to go to counseling with me if you will, but I have to go either way.” The resolve in my words confirmed how my heart felt the second they left my mouth. It wasn’t an ultimatum. I would have gone alone because it felt like the way forward. There wasn’t much else to say. We were on a different page and arguing wasn’t going to help. He said he would think and pray about it.

The next day, during our daily lunchtime check-in, he totally surprised me. “I called the counselor. We talked for about ten minutes. I briefly told him our story, and he said he wanted to meet with us. We have an appointment on Sunday night if that works for our schedule?”

I was floored. Shocked by this sudden switch, I asked, “What made you change your mind?”

“I prayed about it, and I felt like God was telling me that, as long as this guy is basing his knowledge in the Bible and really is a believer, it isn’t going to hurt anything. I think we should go and just see what he is about.”

I held the phone to my ear for a minute before I found the words. “Thank you babe. This feels really good to me.” A wave of relief mingled with a tinge of fear passed through my body. I knew we had crossed yet another threshold in this journey toward new life.

We had no idea what we were opening ourselves up to, but we were going together and that was a great place to start. With trepidation, we took the next step in the direction of healing. Little did we know that this small decision would open a door into a wide-open country we had never known before. The result would not always make life easier; in fact, it did quite the opposite in many ways. Nevertheless, it would take us to places we had never imagined

“David, you are doing a good job of narrating what happened, but you are telling the story as if you were not there,” our counselor, a 70-year-old man with a strong build, a silver flat top, and the biggest smile with a gap between his two front teeth said. Sitting in his tiny office with the peaceful sound of his desktop fountain gurgling in the background, I felt stuck. Like most men, I felt at a loss for words. I learned that there is actually a name for this: Alexithymia. Simply put, it is an inability to put your feelings into words. I felt as if I were having one of those nightmares where you try to scream for help, but your voice box doesn’t seem to work. All I knew was that I felt stuck in my past with no tools to get me out of there.

Imagine a digital geography map with red pins on it that represent traumatic experiences from your past. Then, imagine that just above each of these points on the map is an icon of a key or lock. The experiences you have fully felt and dealt with have the key icon hovering over the top of the red pin. The

experiences that you have just moved on from and forgotten, on the other hand, have the lock icon hovering over the top of it.

Let me clarify: when I say you've "dealt with" these traumatic experiences, I don't necessarily mean that you have a full understanding of what happened; I just mean that you have at least looked at it from a different perspective, with new information, and remember what it is you felt at that time. The saying "history repeats itself" comes to mind—any problem we failed to deal with properly will emerge again in a different way later on in our lives.

My problem was that up to this point, I had no desire to even acknowledge how important an emotional map was, let alone address the red pins of trauma waiting to be dealt with. As a man, I wasn't taught to connect with my emotions. When Lizzy approached me about going to counseling, I gave her a hundred reasons why we didn't need it, when all I was actually doing was trying to avoid the work it would take to recover from the trauma of my past.

I was committed to changing my behavior, morally speaking, but I could not see the importance of looking into the past to connect the dots to see how I came to this place. Lizzy could see that I was committed to changing my ways, but sensing that there was another growth step coming for me, she brought up the inevitable.

"It seems like you are doing really good, but you had some seriously bad habits. Aren't you curious about how you got there?" I hated it when she would bring that up. Truth be told, I don't handle being bad at much of anything, and I definitely didn't want to be exposed for my lack of emotional intelligence. In any case, I knew where her comments were heading, and I knew she wanted to go to counseling.

The night before, after mentioning that she would go without me, I knew I had a decision to make. I decided to go with her because I was committed to restoring our marriage. Little did I know that it had less to do with our relationship and way more to do with my own psychological and emotional well-being. In my mind, I had pictured counseling as the two of us sitting side by side, scrutinizing our marriage together. I imagined it to be very clinical, just narrating the story of our marriage from our own perspective and assessing the issues we've run into along the way. But after our first session, being completely drained by the emotional heavy lifting that took place, I could sense that I was very wrong about my assumption. It was humbling to find out that I was exercising a muscle that was very weak.

I remember one of our weekly sessions about a month in that shook me to my core and made me realize that I desperately needed help. Lizzy was talking about how betrayal had made her feel when I noticed our counselor looking at me. He gently stopped Lizzy and asked me, "David, I want you to look at Liz. What do you think she is feeling?"

I turned to look at Lizzy, studied her face for a few seconds, and said, "She's sad and hurt."

With his lips pursed together, he tilted his head to the side, and said to Lizzy, "Liz, you are angry, aren't you?" She started sobbing even harder and nodded, unable to speak through the tears.

It's hard for me to admit that my initial reaction to Lizzy's emotional breakdown was embarrassment that I answered wrong. My selfish inner critic immediately brought a wave of shame in an attempt to keep me from seeing Lizzy in this moment. But before I could go into defense mode and

try to explain my response away to protect myself, I was overwhelmed by a deep sadness for her. I realized that I was trying to control her emotional responses in our relationship. I saw her sadness as an acceptable emotion because it seemed more submissive and didn't require any further action by me other than comfort. Anger, on the other hand, meant that I couldn't just hug her or sweet-talk her into a better emotional state. Anger required a different set of skills to resolve, skills that I did not possess at the time. Even writing the last two sentences feels indicative of the fact that I thought it was my responsibility to help her to cope with her emotions. As hard as this was for me, I knew I was in the right place. It was uncharted territory, but I had a great guide in our counselor.

After that session, Lizzy and I went for a walk along Lake Washington, conveniently across the street from the counseling office. It was a beautiful spring evening in Kirkland. There was hardly anyone at the park we walked to, and it was the perfect setting for us to process the session we had just left. Lizzy, in a very loving but straightforward way, unloaded years of resentment on me. I remember her saying, "I have felt so unseen and unheard by you. I feel like you have never given me permission to feel any of the pain you have caused. As soon as I want to talk about something hard, you want to move forward to what is next." It made so much sense. As I listened to her process, I was struck by the truth in her words. It all started to make sense as I really heard her—perhaps for one of the first times in our marriage.

"I am so sorry," I said, unable to say much else. My mind felt scrambled, kind of like the empty, lightheaded feeling you get after taking one of those long tests like the SAT or ACT. All I could do was listen.

Then, something astounding started to happen. I realized that as we were walking and talking, I began to notice micro-changes in her facial expressions. It was as if I were on an emotional roller coaster *with* her. When she felt sad, I noticed and began to feel sad with her. When she felt angry, I noticed and began to feel her anger and accept that I was the one who had caused it. When she felt compassion towards me because of my sadness, I felt loved. I realized that I was exercising a new muscle called empathy, and like trying any new type of exercise, it was exhausting.

As stressful as that counseling session was, I felt a deep sense of peace and compassion, not only for Lizzy but for myself as well. The problems in our marriage—and especially in my personal life—were starting to make sense to me. I had been purposely ignoring emotional cues my entire life. To me, emotions showed weakness, distracted me from achieving my personal goals, and represented a place that I was severely deficient. Emotions attacked the masculine identity I had formed for myself up to that point in my life. But now, with these new tools, I felt a sense of hope that I could make more sense of my true identity.

I found my emotional map that day, and I had been given the key to unlocking all of those red pins.

Chapter 19: Don't Export It

It was time for Dave and I to make a decision about Kindergarten. On the heels of the marriage conference came the end of the registration window for the upcoming year. Instead of feeling excitement about this step for my oldest, dread gnawed at my heart and mind. The glaringly obvious potential for harm chafed the raw edges of my already tremulous frame of mind. My instinct at the time was to protect my children at all costs from anything that would eventually lead them to the pain we were experiencing, and going to school meant new people having a stronger influence on our daughter than I was prepared for. Sending her away to learn from other people all day no longer felt like a luxury to look forward to so I could enjoy some precious productivity and autonomy; it felt like forfeiture of the ability to protect her from the pain and destruction that could be lurking around every corner. I had never been a helicopter mom, but at that moment, my protective instincts were on overdrive.

Now, let me preface this by saying both Dave and I are on the same page here: we both believe that education matters in as much as it helps prepare our kids for their purpose. Not *my* purpose or plan for them, but whatever it is they were made for and find joy doing. We weren't concerned that they wouldn't get a good enough education at the local elementary school. In fact, my years as a teacher taught me that a critical factor for success is the support they receive *at home* to supplement their education. I was confident that we could help our daughter academically, no matter the class size or resources available. Instead, what was causing me the most anxiety was what she would be taught about life, people, relationships, and herself. I did not want the voices shaping her identity to come from pop culture, and I wanted her to continue to be taught about the world with gospel framework.

"What do we want our kids to be equipped with when they leave our home?" Dave asked in our discussions about school.

Our entire decision-making process was on the table for examination at that time. Choosing a school for Ashby was a chance to talk in depth about what we both wanted instead of operating off of assumptions and unspoken opinions. In all of our conversation we came to the conclusion that the heart of what we wanted our kids to learn by the time they leave our home is the answer to this question: "Who does God say that I am?" The answer was beyond our plans for them. If they felt confident in the answer to this question, we knew they had a chance as adults. Truthfully, we were just beginning to ask that question for ourselves, and we wanted to help them learn to ask that question as early as they could.

So, we set out and scheduled tours of local private Christian schools. We didn't know if this would be for one year, or her entire education, but what we did know for sure was that this was important to us at the time. We took recommendations from friends and started visiting. Each school seemed wonderful in its own right. At one, we loved the church community surrounding the program, although it was not our community. At another, the education was top-notch, the classrooms were small, and she could ride a bus to and from school, saving me a ton of time. Both of these schools were great and would have served her well, but we had one more to visit.

When we arrived at ECS for our visit, we were warmly greeted by the enrollment director. The facilities were not as new or polished as the other schools, and somehow, I really liked that. We weren't

looking for a place to quarantine our kids from the rest of the world; we just wanted the school to reinforce what we were teaching them at home. As we walked the halls and observed different staff and students, I noticed everyone seemed happy to be there. It was incredibly peaceful, and there was a pleasant ease about the place. We stopped on our way back to the main office to see one of the kindergarten classrooms.

We quietly entered through the door, trying not to disrupt the organized chaos of 5- and 6-year-old learning. The next thing that happened was nothing short of miraculous. The commotion around me faded into the background, and my eyes came to a sharp focus at the back of the room. Plastered across the entire wall was a banner with “Who does God say that I am?” written in bold letters. Underneath the banner, the wall was filled with artwork the students had done throughout the year, answering that one question.

I was dumbstruck. Word for word, I had my answer. I brushed tears of gratitude away. I was beginning to see that God’s love is so extravagantly personal, that He hears and speaks directly and intimately in a way that is full of love and compassion. In my distress, I asked for precise direction, and he answered in direct and affectionate detail. I didn’t need to see any test scores or programs—I didn’t even speak to another person. I knew that this was where I wanted her to start full-day school—not because it was more elite than the other schools, but because it felt like a hand-picked gift for me in the middle of my own turmoil. Yes, sending her to school was scary, and a lot felt out of my control, but there was so much good available to us—if only we were looking for it.

There were many days in the years that followed when I was hustling everyone to get in the car to make the commute that I wished I were walking the kids the four short blocks to our neighborhood school. I know they would love to go to school with their neighborhood friends, and I do believe they would flourish there as well. But then I pay attention to the conversations we have to and from, and I know this is a precious window we have together daily. I hear evidence of what is being cultivated in their lives, and I am reminded once again why it is we’re making these decisions.

I don’t think we are going to protect them from all harm down the road, or that they will follow everything we’ve offered them. I don’t want that for my kids. I want them to struggle, wrestling with what they know and are taught, and have to figure out what they are going to choose for themselves. Still, I do know this is the window in which we have to show them with what we believe. We have chosen to be open with our kids, in an age-appropriate way, about our story. We want them to know our biggest struggles and the dangers of keeping sin hidden, and simultaneously to offer them the hope of Jesus in the midst of it. We’re not planning to cover our scars, but instead want to offer them to anyone we love and anyone that could benefit from the truth of our journey, starting with our kids.

In the spring of 2016, I was helping my then 5-year-old daughter Ashby (who I call Sissy) learn how to ride her bike at a park. We were struggling to master the concept of coasting by sticking her legs out to the side for balance. Over and over, she would start to put her legs out and get scared, putting her feet

down on the ground to regain balance but losing momentum in the process. This is a critical skill in learning how to stay up on your bike when you lose balance.

“Sissy! If you’re gonna be scared to stick your legs out, you’re never gonna learn how to ride your bike. Is that what you want?” I yelled angrily. I hated my tone, my body language, and the negative reinforcement I tried to use to shame her into compliance. Sissy threw her bike down and started to cry. I ran over to her and said, “I’m sorry. Let’s take a break.”

Walking back to the car, something hit me that made me feel like such a fraud. I realized that as a professional wide receivers coach for the Seattle Seahawks, I never talked that way to my players. With them, I was patient, respectful, hopeful, and encouraging, especially when I was teaching them a new skill. Why was I being so harsh on Sissy? As I drove home thinking about it, some wise words from my friend Tom Lamphere came to mind. He told me, “If it doesn’t work at home, don’t export it.”

What struck me about his saying was that I lived as if I were two totally different people. Although I had changed a lot of the self-destructive lifestyle habits that I had, there were still so many ways that I was living two separate lives. I can’t be Mr. Patience at work and an intolerant tyrant at home. If I wanted to find the rich life that God had for me, I was going to have to find a way to bring all of me under one roof.

The best word to describe what I wanted is authenticity. This is one of the most popular topics of discussion in my wide receiver meetings when we would take 10-15 minutes to get our minds off football. During one such meeting, a player asked, “How do you even start to build an authentic life?”

“If it doesn’t work at home, then don’t export it,” I said, stealing Tom’s quote in a moment of clarity.

“But what does that look like?” the player pushed.

Sensing that I had not given them a tangible and practical image they could sink their teeth into, I answered with a short story. “It’s like the concentric circles of a tree. You practice your principles with yourself first, starting at the core of the tree. Then, you move to your immediate family and inner circle of friends. These are the people that tell you the truth, even if it’s hard. The people that you really trust. The next circle is your extended family. Then, you move out to your casual acquaintances and coworkers, and so on.”

I had the guys take this a step further by doing an exercise. I asked them to draw concentric circles, just like we had talked about, and write some names that belonged in each. As they were working on their circles, I realized I had stumbled on something transformational. This was a tool that Lizzy and I used subconsciously when we were going through those first difficult months of reconciliation. We had just never turned it into an exercise like this before.

The real gift in this story was that I started putting names into my own circles. I was doing the work right alongside those young, hungry men, and it just so happened that I was transformed for the better—just as they were. This would happen a lot those first few years; that by serving those men, I would be forced to do a lot of soul searching on my own. I was candid with them during that time, confessing that I didn’t have the answers to the questions I was asking. I was discovering some of the answers in real-time. Our discussions were fueled by curiosity and vulnerability. Those questions brought me to the end of my rope, and where I did not have answers, I sought out some godly men in my circle who I thought might.

It didn't take me long to realize that it was God who had placed two men on the football staff whom I admired greatly. Although they were not a part of my "inner circle," I certainly wanted them to be. Sherman Smith and Rocky Seto are true disciples of Jesus Christ. Sherman was in his 60s at the time, and his kids were my age. Rocky, on the other hand, is five years older than me, and his kids were a little older than mine. Both Sherman and Rocky embodied the kind of man I wanted to be, and it was as if God had placed them in my life to allow me to get a glimpse of what I could become if I put Him first.

The funny thing is, at first, I tried to avoid Sherm and Rock as best as I could. They stood for everything I *should* have been but was afraid to be, and it made me profoundly uncomfortable with myself. I remember one Monday morning, Sherm called me into his office. The chat happened after a weekend on the road where I had been out drinking and must have been visibly hungover.

"Dave, you played QB, right?" Sherm asked me.

"Yes, in high school."

"Did you ever go out looking to throw interceptions?"

At this point, I could tell he was going somewhere with all of this. "No, I didn't."

He looked me dead in the eyes and said, "Then stop going out looking to throw one."

He was comparing being unfaithful in my marriage to throwing interceptions, saying that going out drinking was like purposefully trying to throw an interception. It was conversations like these that made me realize that Sherm really did care about me. He risked the harmony of our relationship by telling me a hard truth. And, in the end, I loved him for it.

Another time, Rocky asked me, "What are your thoughts on Christians drinking alcohol?" In hindsight, I know he was asking me this not out of genuine curiosity, but out of a concern for my lifestyle choices. I replied, "As long as no one is suffering because of your drinking, then I think it is OK." He listened to what I had to say, quoted a few scriptures about leading others away from God, and that was that.

Again, Rocky was another man who possessed the courage to get messy with me as I faced my battles. While their styles were different, their hearts were the same. They both saw me, a professed Christian, struggling in my personal life and risked getting rejected by me by calling me out. *That* is real love.

Knowing that they genuinely cared about me is what gave me the courage to be vulnerable with them about my struggles. I could tell they cared because they told me the truth even though they knew I didn't want to hear it. I needed that kind of tough love in my life. I met with them in their offices and asked them for forgiveness. I apologized for trying to make them think I was a perfectly put-together Christian and hiding my personal problems. Then, I told them the truth about who I was and the depth of what I was walking through. Just as they took a risk to get involved in my life, I took a risk by letting them in. Thankfully, each man embraced me with open arms. Where I expected shame and judgment, I received the grace and love of Jesus. They were genuinely excited about my decision to walk with Jesus and assured me of their full commitment to walk alongside me.

While Sherm became a cherished mentor of mine, Rock and I became inseparable. We spent almost every road trip together. We made it a tradition to find a coffee shop in the town we were playing and break out our bibles, pray together, and talk about life. I still get emotional thinking about what a huge

support Rocky was to me during a really tender time in my life. I truly cherish the two years that the Lord gave us to become friends closer than brothers. I wish I would have come to him sooner so that we could've had more time together. What was even more remarkable was how our wives hit it off, too! Lizzy and Sharla are like family now, as well as our kids.

One of the coolest things we took from the Setos was how intentional they were about protecting their family time. They included us in one of their family traditions, which we now call "Swim Sum"—short for Swimming and Dim Sum. Our coaching schedule during the season is a seven-day work week with some windows of time on the weekend open to spend as you see fit. When we play at home, that means that Friday night and Saturday afternoon are family time.

The Setos would check into our team hotel on Saturday afternoon, two hours before our night meetings, put their swimsuits on and play at the indoor hotel pool. Sharla would then order takeout from Dim Sum (a Taiwanese restaurant specializing in dumplings) and take the food up to their hotel room for dinner and a movie. The first time we heard about Dim Sum, Lizzy and I loved the idea so much that we crashed the party. They were gracious to share that sacred time with us, and we have faithfully continued the tradition ever since they left.

When I think about how blessed my family is because of my relationships with Sherm and Rocky, it is a reminder that identifying our circle of people is critical to our growth. I would challenge you to look around, start closing in and identify the people whom you admire. Work your way outward from there and see if there is anyone you would like to get to know better.

If you really want to get to know someone better, then you have to be willing to share your story. Don't let fear of rejection or exposure keep you from the blessing of deep and meaningful relationships. We were not meant to do this life alone. In fact, isolation is one of the enemy's greatest weapons against us because when we are alone, he can tell us lies without being exposed for the fraud that he is. Surround yourself with truth-tellers who are deeply connected to you because they know your story and you know theirs.

I would encourage you to pray and ask God to show you who these people are. Go to them humbly and with an open heart to both receive and give whatever God has for you. I truly believe that you will find people who are more than willing to share their life experiences with you. Maybe more importantly, they will model for you what it looks like to disciple others that will seek *you* out someday, just like Sherm and Rocky did for me.

Chapter 20: It's Always the Right Time

Lizzy

It's never the right time; it's always the right time.

This has become a mantra in our home—the declaration Dave and I try to embody when dealing with whatever comes up between us. It is never going to be easy or feel like perfect timing to uncover how we offend each other, so we try to talk about whatever we are struggling with as soon as we can. It used to take us weeks, months, and, in many cases, years to bring up hard conversations. Usually, we avoided them and found a work-around in the form of a fun date, a family vacation, or even a few shots over ice. We were even skilled at talking *around* an issue to give us the sense that we had faced it. But the truth is, avoidance only ever delayed the inevitability that the same issue would show up somewhere else. Like a giant game of whack-a-mole at the fair, we kept trying to pop those little arguments back underground instead of just calling an exterminator.

It is a practice that has taken much trial and error to shift from avoidance to authentic vulnerability. It requires offering up your own pain and failure to your partner for a chance at finding a better solution. Most of the time, we still make a mess of it, clumsily running into each other with harsh accusations and defensive responses followed by humble apologies. Still, our response time is quicker, and with a shorter interval between offense and resolution, the damage of each violation is diminished. Moving toward each other when we are offended is a muscle that needs to be exercised over and over to become a reflex, gaining strength each time we use it.

We really got to put this muscle to work navigating our new normal during the restrictions of the global pandemic.

Seattle was the epicenter of the first outbreak of COVID-19 cases in the country. In an effort to slow the spread of the virus, the governor had enacted stay-at-home orders, mandating all non-essential business shut down for a time. By March 23, 2020, life looked drastically different than it had two months before when we were cavorting around Disney World for a week of Pro Bowl fun. The kids were adapting to online education, and Dave was working remotely from our basement. We had decided to use our playoff bonus to do some work around our house that year. One of the pressing needs was to level up and plant grass in a large area in the backyard so it would be easier to mow, and thankfully, there would be less mud. We love working in the yard, and I knew I could be a part of finding an easy solution.

As I walked by a huge mound of earth where two new homes were being built at the top of our hill, an idea popped into my head. I had a quick conversation with one of the men running the excavator, and 30 minutes later, they were dumping a load of dirt onto the tarp I had spread across our front lawn. Invigorated by my quick thinking and seeing the planning come together, I stood proudly watching. I knew this much dirt would have taken my husband at least four trips in his old truck. In the unknown of stay-at-home orders in the State of Washington, I felt like I had given us a chance to complete our project quickly and save money. There was just one problem.

Dave did not see it the same way.

The next morning, while I was inside supervising school and toddler play, Dave got started wheeling loads of dirt to the backyard. When I came out an hour later to check in, his frustration boiled over.

“This dirt was a terrible idea! There is way too much of it, it’s full of rocks, and nothing is going to grow in it. It’s all clay,” he fumed.

I stopped, all of the energy in me draining away as I felt my defensive walls snap up like a steel cage around my heart. I stood still in the middle of our yard, the cool of early spring a stark contrast to the heat rising in my cheeks. I knew I had a choice for my next move: turn on my heels and flee, or open up about the feelings of blame and shame that I was feeling. Drawing in a deep breath, I turned toward my husband.

“I wasn’t trying to make more work for you. I was trying to help,” I said, fighting to control my voice, anger and fear mingled in my response.

“I was just being honest.” His reply wasn’t sharp, but it stung just the same.

Another chance to be truthful. “Well, it really hurts my feelings!” I responded, this time turning away and marching inside. There was nothing more either of us could say at that moment. We both continued our work until I had a business question that needed an immediate answer.

DAVE:

The second Lizzy walked away, I said to myself, “You idiot! She was just trying to help.” I imagined Lizzy triumphantly walking down the street, guiding the dump truck to the tarp she laid down on our lawn to save the grass. I imagined the sense of pride she must have felt and the joyful anticipation of seeing my face when I thanked her for taking the initiative to get the dirt for free. It must have felt like she made herself vulnerable to me, and I betrayed her.

I rounded the gate and found him adding another pile next to the row of mounds lining the backyard. He set the wheelbarrow down, walked straight to me, and gathered me into a hug. “I’m sorry I made you feel bad. I was feeling sorry for myself.” In an instant, the walls between us dissolved, his humility and my faltering honesty creating space for us to reconnect.

He went on to explain that he was planning to use the rest of the dirt to fill in a huge hole in the ground our son had created from years of digging for buried treasure. We had recently lifted our shed as well, and the ground around it needed to be leveled. He pointed out the tally marks where he was keeping track of each wheelbarrow load. He led me to a growing pile of large rocks next to the original pile out front. “We can use these to finish the rock wall in your garden over here.”

The best part of the resolution to this conflict came the next day when it was my turn to work on moving dirt. I was determined to make the second half disappear into the yard. I marked my tallies in a different color, each load creeping closer to the total he had marked the day before. I was bent on beating his number until I heard the gentle whisper in my mind, “Why did you want this dirt in the first place?”

To bless my husband and to help him.

I kept the tally going, but now I was counting the total number together, the marks becoming a monument of the work we were doing together.

As I rounded out the second hour of digging, my back was really starting to hurt. Each shovel felt heavier and heavier, and I began to wonder if I was going to be physically capable of finishing the task. Just when I was getting ready to stop, Dave showed up with renewed energy and another shovel. For the next 30 minutes, we were a whirling dervish, culminating with a team deadlift of one last giant load. It was the perfect amount. We rolled up the tarp, raked the rest of the rocks back into the garden, and put up the tools. Not 10 minutes after we finished, a torrential downpour started, tamping down all the new earth and washing away any evidence of the dirt in the front lawn. The tally marks disappeared, leaving behind a yard ready to grow something new.

We always have a choice. We can choose to stay in a world of self-protection and self-promotion, or we can put aside our pride and make our way toward each other. When we choose our own comfort and insist on being right, we remain two people separated and alone to fend for ourselves. The much harder decision is to engage with our conflict, each of us doing our own work alongside each other, until we come to a solution for our team. This is where the gold is. This is where we find our way into something truly beautiful in our marriage.

Chapter 21: Emotional Education

Dave

Becoming emotionally aware has been the greatest challenge of my life. Looking back, I can see the wake of damage I left in my relationships because I was unwilling (and mostly incapable) of seeing what I was doing to the people around me. As a young, single man, my unhealth was not as urgent or as costly. I felt free to go whichever way the wind blew. But nothing exposes your deficiencies more than being married and having children. For starters, if you abuse your spouse emotionally (and neglect is a form of abuse, by the way), they will eventually call you out or leave you. Your children will let you know in a different way. They will simply be a mirror that shows you the truth of your emotional well-being. This was especially true in my case as I was unhealthily enmeshed in my children's performance.

For example, my oldest child Ashby and I have had a tumultuous relationship when it comes to sports and performance. By the time she was 4 years old, I would regularly take her into the backyard for a little father/daughter time, which usually turned into a one-on-one sports clinic. I was not the most patient coach either. In fact, I could be downright shaming towards her and harsh with my words.

In our backyard time together, we worked on catching a baseball, kicking a soccer ball, or dribbling a basketball. While these basic ball skills are important, there is one skill that, in my opinion, is critical to great performance in every sport: running. The two main components of running are cardiovascular conditioning and form. On the track, you cannot hide your conditioning level, and there is nothing more beautiful than watching someone run with graceful form. From a psychological standpoint, track and field is great because you are always competing against *your* best, not the people in the lanes next to you. I learned some of my greatest life lessons on the track, so when track season comes around, I can get pretty serious about training.

In our family, track and field is mandatory. As a 9-year-old, Ashby had run most of the events in track and field, and this particular year, she would be running the 1,600-meter (1-mile run). I had a plan to increase the distance of the events they competed in every year until they reached the 1-mile run. After that season, Ashby could choose any event she wanted to. There are running events such as sprints and distance, and there are field events such as throwing and jumping. Since the kids are allowed to pick three events at each meet, my requirement is that two out of the three events are on the track, so that running is the emphasis. Since I knew that the mile was going to be challenging, I worked on a conditioning plan for Ashby that was designed for longer distances, and we trained for a month before the season started.

A few track meets into the season, Ashby was hitting some impressive marks for a 9-year-old. I could see how proud she was on the track as her friends commended her for running the daunting mile. She seemed to like the attention. But as soon as she was away from her friends, I could sense that she was unhappy. Her discontent became apparent one day when I said to her, "I was thinking you could run the 400-meter along with the mile this week to get some more conditioning. What do you think?"

I could see the frustration in her face as she replied, "Fine."

I walked outside to grab my running shoes and heard Ashby scream from inside the house.

“Why do I have to run the stupid 400?!”

I walked back inside immediately. “What’s going on?” I asked Lizzy.

Cautioning me, she said, “When you went outside, she started balling, screamed at the top of her lungs, and ran into her room, slamming the door. You might want to go check on her.”

When I entered the room, Ashby was curled up in a ball on her bed. Tenderly I asked, “Sissy, are you ok?”

“I don’t want to run the 400. And I don’t want to run track. You always make me do it,” she whimpered.

This statement cut me deep, but I was set in my conviction that running the 400 would be good for her. Pushing past her tears, I coldly said, “You know why track is so important to me. You do have to run. Is it because the 400 is too much on top of the mile you are already running?”

Between sobs, she said, “I hate running. I just don’t mind it because I get to be with my friends.”

I was struggling with how to respond now, so I said, “We can talk about it some more later. We still have a day left before the next track meet. I’m sorry that you’re sad.”

In God’s perfect timing, Lizzy and I had a marriage counseling session scheduled that night, which I knew would help me navigate the difficult dynamic with Ashby. Our counselor was able to help me understand what was happening to me emotionally and get to the root: I was having a hard time separating my identity from Ashby’s performance. I couldn’t handle the embarrassment of my daughter looking unprepared for her track meet, so I put a lot of pressure on her to train hard. Since track is all about effort, and no kid really likes to run anything longer than 50 meters, I felt it was my job to be the grit that she needed in order to win. Basically, it was not her but *me* competing out there, and that is too much pressure on anyone—let alone a little girl struggling to find her identity.

Even after I learned about the unhealthy pattern I had with Ashby, I was still unconvinced that I should just back off mid-season. After the counseling session, Lizzy and I were at Whole Foods getting dinner when I said, “I know I might be pushing her hard, but I don’t think it’s a good idea to just give up now. Especially since she’s been running such great times!”

This “how much is too much” argument about our kids was a regular one for Lizzy and me.

Lizzy calmly asked me, “What are you afraid of?”

I thought for a second and said, “I am afraid that if I don’t push her to do really hard things that she’ll never find her best. It takes hard work to be awesome.”

“She is doing so much hard right now. Think about it. We have her in private school with an intense workload. We’re doing a lot of emotional heavy lifting at home, feeling and dealing like we’ve never done before. We don’t allow her to eat gluten and sugary snacks, which are all around her every day. Do you really want track and field to be another thing that we ask her to carry? Why don’t you just let her pick all of the events for the rest of track season?”

Lizzy had a point. She usually does. I realized that, because I lacked empathy, I wasn’t thinking about the other factors Ashby was dealing with. The only thing that was important about the situation

was what was important to *me*. In this case, it was her track times. When we got home that night, I found Ashby and apologized for being insensitive to all of the hard work she was doing in her life.

“I’m so proud of you for taking on all of these challenges. Thank you for telling us what you were really feeling. Even if you had to scream to make us hear you. Why don’t you pick your track events for the rest of the season?”

She was elated. For the rest of the season, she picked the shortest races, did mostly field events, and ran the relays with her friends. And she did it all with a huge smile on her face.

It has taken years for me to grow as a listener and emotional connector. Thanks to my counselor, my wife, and people like her Aunt Molly, I have learned much about the art. Over the last couple of years, people have said the thing that they appreciate most about me is that I’m a good listener, which is a total shock. I’m a verbal processor and have talked for most of my marriage, but I’ve had a lot of help and am learning how to ask generous questions. In fact, it has become my relational philosophy.

I am understanding more and more about what it means to feel “felt” by someone else. Feeling felt is about recognizing, understanding, and confirming what someone else is feeling. I am sure you know what it is like to be misunderstood emotionally. It can make you feel unseen and unimportant, which is the opposite of feeling felt. You see, feeling felt is the most basic human need. Usually, destructive behavior is directly connected to people not feeling seen or heard, and so they feel like they have to do something extraordinary to get attention. This really helps me as an NFL football coach. It is also a big reason for why I was sabotaging my personal life—I didn’t feel seen or heard or important enough, so I was trying to get in trouble for attention. And then I became addicted to the behaviors that were getting me in trouble because, at the end of the day, they kept producing pseudo-intimate experiences.

Growing in emotional intelligence has helped me to be more truthful in the way that I look at my insecurities. The enneagram has been a great tool to help me to identify the problems that come up for a person like me. I am a 3, so I want to perform. I’m happiest when I have a stage. That also means that I can be a scene-stealer, so I have to be aware in social settings to make sure that I don’t try to steal too much of the spotlight. It has been very powerful to acknowledge that I am high on the narcissistic spectrum. I like to joke about the fact that I am a recovering narcissist. It helps me to be aware that I can have a tendency to be oblivious to other people’s issues.

In turn, I have chosen to err on the side of self-deprecation, which makes people feel more comfortable around me. For example, I am able to admit and laugh about my doomsday tendencies when life gets hard. I can get tunnel vision when I’m faced with adversity like a flu bug or soft tissue injury from running. Lizzy can attest to this as she enjoys watching me in my misery. It’s funny because I am able to realize that I am starting to go down that path, and my wife and I can have a good laugh about it.

Lizzy and I do suffering really well as a couple. We are no strangers to pain. Because my attunement to my own feelings has grown, I am able to empathize with people who are hurting. For example, in a male-dominated sphere such as the NFL, I'm able to quickly recognize the signs of a man who is hurting and reach out to them quickly. Players will often seek me out just to talk, knowing that I will simply listen.

I've struggled as a man with articulating what I feel. Alexithymia is a condition that describes a person who struggles to feel their emotions. In my past, I had done a good job of retelling stories but not remembering how I actually felt and how different situations have impacted me.

I've had to learn how to sit down and have conversations with male authority figures. It scares me every time.

I've had to learn how not to use qualifying statements to diminish the hurtful things that I've experienced in my life. I have a tendency to want to save people—my parents, myself—from the full weight of the consequences for things that were done or said to me.

I've learned how to enter into conversations with my hands down so that I'm not automatically in a defensive posture, trying to protect my identity. I really struggle with being wrong.

After reading this short list of my emotional problems, does any of this ring a bell in *your* emotional life? If you are like me, you probably didn't even know you struggled with them until I wrote them out for you. I thought they were just a part of my personality that people had to deal with. It wasn't until I went to counseling that I learned about the havoc my issues were causing. For too long, I chose the "ignorance is bliss" approach to relationships, and I am still repairing the damage I caused.

The good news is that there is help out there. There are some qualified, wonderful counselors that cannot wait to help you navigate your emotional world. In my experience, my counselor was willing to go at my pace. He could sense when enough was enough, and he never pushed me to dig too much further than I was willing. A good counselor, after all, does not aim to make you feel bad; they simply act as a mirror of your emotions so you can see the truth of what you are feeling inside. By connecting with me, my counselor was modeling what healthy emotional connection looked like as well.

If you take only one thing from this entire book, let it be this: Go. To. Counseling.

Chapter 22: The Next Mystical Ridgeline

Dave

In the Pacific Northwest, there's no shortage of beauty. You can practically step outside your front door and be inspired. When asked about the state of Washington's beautiful Mt. Rainier (or as our local Puyallup people first called it, Tahoma), the conservationist John Muir called it "The most luxuriant and most extravagantly beautiful of all the alpine gardens I ever beheld in all my mountain-top wanderings." This is coming from a guy who spent most of his time in the breathtaking Yosemite Valley in Central California!

However, when you hear someone mention Seattle, you probably think of grey skies, the space needle, Pike Place Market, and lots of rain. But to adventurers like Lizzy and I, it is an emerald green wonderland of ocean wildlife, mountain trails, rivers, and lakes. Coming from a southern California boy who knows a good sunny day, I wouldn't trade a hot day at the beach for a misty, rainy hike up one of our lush trails in the Snoqualmie pass. The Pacific Northwest is my home now.

Over the years, hiking with loved ones in our PNW paradise has become one of our favorite things to do. When Lizzy and I started sharing our marital struggles with family, her aunt Molly and uncle Tom invited us to go on a hike called Sleeping Beauty, located in the Mt. Adams wilderness area. Sleeping Beauty is a trail that is well off the beaten path. In fact, we had to drive the last five miles on an unpaved (and quite bumpy) road. I personally think it adds to the experience because you're all shaken up by the time you finally reach the trailhead!

After a challenging hour and a half of hiking, we finally reached the top to enjoy the view. I was thankful to be with them, honored that they would share one of their favorite places with us. It felt incredibly sacred. We all sat down, taking in deep breaths and the astounding scenery. Tom brought out a Tupperware container with hard-boiled eggs, baby oranges, and some nuts for us to share. As we ate, Molly asked an intriguing question.

"So, guys, if life is a trail, where would you say you are right now?" (Aren't trails such good analogies?)

"I feel like I've finally found the trailhead, and I have no idea what to expect next. But I'm ready to go find out."

"That's good." She didn't offer any anecdotes or advice; she and Tom just sat there with us in our excitement and uncertainty, staring out over the basin.

While we were sitting there, Tom pointed off into the horizon and said, "See that kind of jagged looking ridgeline off to the north there? That is Goat Rocks Wilderness. I used to get dropped off on one end and arrange for someone to pick me a few days later on the other end of it. You should do it sometime."

My eyes lit up at the thought of a new adventure. "We should do it together—the four of us. That would be so fun!"

The thought of finding a new peak to summit was invigorating, and I was excited to get back down the trail to start preparing for it. When you really think about hiking, it's pretty amazing how we travel so far and physically exert ourselves just to get to the peak and enjoy the view for only a few minutes. As we all sat there, I realized that I enjoyed sharing the view with people I love more than the view itself. The Sleeping Beauty viewpoint is only special to me because Tom and Molly took us there.

This shared moment was especially special to us at this stage in our marriage because Lizzy and I were considering how to involve our friends in our story. We decided that as we shared the truth of our struggles with our close friends, we would give them a chance to walk this journey with us. I loved the thought of reaching the mountain top together not just to enjoy the view, but to celebrate the obstacles overcome along the journey. Especially because I believe that the strength of any relationship can be measured by the hardships it has endured.

My hope was that by opening ourselves up and being vulnerable, we could find out who was willing to dive into the mess with us, cultivating the authentic relationships we longed for. We were committed to going deeper with anyone who wanted that kind of relationship with us. This was not an exclusive agreement reserved for a few people we liked. This was an invitation to do life with anyone who had the courage to tell the truth, hear the truth, and grow at all costs to our pride and ego.

Being vulnerable was (and still is) scary business because I knew that I could lose a lot of friends along the way. As I started telling people that I had been unfaithful to Lizzy over the course of nine years and that I had come clean and we were committed to reconciliation, I received many different reactions. Some people were hurt that I pretended to be a good Christian guy. They felt lied to and betrayed. It has taken years to mend some of those friendships, and some of them we've never regained. Other people acted happy for us in the moment, but suddenly stopped calling because either they felt awkward getting into our personal lives or because it brought up shame in theirs.

On the positive side, there were those who lifted us up in prayer and still do today. We have received an extraordinary amount of support and direction from people. We were often surprised at the wisdom and perspective that many of our friends offered us—perspective that we would have never known about had we not opened up to them. We were especially encouraged by a few couples who had struggled through infidelity, and their feedback was like gold to us. It was relieving to know that we could make it through this and that it didn't have to stop at just surviving. These were couples whose marriages we admired. They share a deep trust that can only come from overcoming betrayal. God has blessed us with so many people that have opened their lives to us along the way, and we are so grateful.

Telling the truth and sharing our story has helped us to identify the people that God has called us to walk alongside. I believe that God has tailor-made specific people to pour into your life (and for you to pour into theirs) during challenging seasons. These people have experience you can learn from—experience your parents can't offer. And you have experience for others that only *you* can offer. The only way to find them is by being willing to tell your story.

Lizzy and I are looking for friends who are willing to hike the trail with us. They will do the hard training in advance to make sure they can get to the top. The kind of friends that can celebrate your mountain top moments without a hint of jealousy. And after catching our breath for a few minutes, getting our legs back, we'll start looking for another mystical peak on the horizon together. When we

find one that looks difficult enough to try, without saying anything, we'll share a look of exhilaration that says, "That one is next."

Chapter 23: House of Healing

Lizzy

Like a sneaky little minion, it had a grip on Dave and I before we were ever married. Once we had a home together, it moved in and got really comfortable. Hiding behind the assumptions and lies that threatened to keep us silent and locked away in our own separate dungeons of isolation, it whispered threats of losing everything. We avoided exposure of our frailty, painting an attractive picture for the outside world—one that we even believed for ourselves most of the time. It had us right where it wanted us, stuck in what we *should* be, afraid of letting anyone in. We had made an agreement with the lie that it wasn't safe to be broken. We were tragically unprepared to have an authentic, profound relationship, desperate to get out from the stony grasp of living a lie and feeling helpless to do anything but pretend.

And then the truth came in like a cool, refreshing breeze on a sweltering day. “Even if you lose everything, you will still have Me. I will never leave you.” The promise was like oxygen, seeping into every corner of our life. Finally, we were ready to open the doors and let in the spring. Freedom began with one jarring question from a desperate wife after another lonely night. Brick by brick, the fortress walls crumbled, each question pushing us one more step toward the adventure of a lifetime. With the light flooding in and the breeze blowing through, we saw this agent of darkness for what it really was: a weak, sniveling liar that only had power because we thought it did. It had to flee.

After the marriage conference, the change in the climate of our house was immediate. Not only were we free from the grasp of the lies, but pretending we had it all together was no longer an option. Starting with friends who had also attended the marriage conference, we began inviting people into the midst of our suffering and asking for help. In the early days, we didn't have many answers, just a painfully honest look into our own situation. Our friendships began to transform as we shared our story with the people we loved. With each new telling, we began to realize an amazing truth: people didn't want answers to their problems. They didn't want friends who had a perfect life. They wanted somewhere to be messed up, too. In sharing our brokenness, we created a haven for people to take an honest inventory. Just like us, they wanted to be seen and heard and feel safe to admit that life is hard.

One of my dear friends, a seasoned coach's wife, paid me the ultimate compliment the last time she was here. “I just love coming here,” she said as we were gathering coffee cups at the end of one of our coaches and players bible study. “I'm so glad you are hosting here because it is just so normal. It's lived in and messy, and people can come and just *be* here.” In what feels like another lifetime ago, I might have been offended as she called my house “normal,” but instead, I heard her say “safe.”

However, the more we invite people to know about God's miraculous rescue of our marriage, the more we have to stop and take an inventory of ourselves again. To be totally transparent, I've done a better job of being gracious with broken people *outside* of our family than I have with the ones right under our own roof. In the years since the marriage conference, it saddens me to think about how, in the upheaval of my world, I fought for control of my children. Instead of admitting that I was helpless at the mercy of this process, I tried to make sure that they didn't go anywhere near anything I perceived as leading them down a path similar to ours. I had been distracted with my own pain, snapping back into reality to correct and control. I had spoken to them in ways I would never speak to someone else, not

even my husband. I had asked them to make my life feel better, to make the emotional chaos disappear by keeping the rest of my world orderly.

That is a weight too heavy to bear for anyone, especially a child.

I am realizing that I have a hard time attuning to their needs when they feel lost because I don't know how to do that well for myself. I am still learning that I don't have to have it all together. When I am hurting, I can stop and ask myself what is really going on instead of punishing anyone else with my overwhelming feelings. Grace for myself becomes grace for my family. Nothing compares to the joy I feel when I hear my kids apologize to each other on their own after an offense; the hope I have knowing they are learning to bring their brokenness to each other to be reconciled. We still don't have it all figured out, and we are never going to. But with each failure, we can honestly come together to find restoration and healing. Just as I learned with our friends early on, my kids just want to know that even in their mess, that they are safe and loved.

We have a picture in our living room of a man standing at the door to a lighthouse. Just as the photo was taken, a huge wave crashed around the building behind him, threatening to sweep him away in the fury of the storm. The story behind the photo is that he was outside looking for the rescue helicopter coming to take him to freedom. He ducked back inside the building only to be safely flown to shore a few minutes later. All of us will face a storm that we cannot wait out—one that we must be rescued from. By sharing the truth of our story, our deep desire now is to offer hope to other people when the tempest breaks. We hid too long in a crumbling lighthouse, trying to be a beacon of hope when we were in imminent danger of being swept out to sea. How sweet it is to be on the helicopter now, searching for people who need to know of their true rescue, just waiting for them to peek out long enough to know God is just waiting to take them to a better home.

Chapter 24: Facing the Lion

Dave

A few years ago, I read a story of an unhappy man who kept having the same nightmare every night: he was being chased by a fully grown, male African lion. The man dreaded getting into bed at night because he knew as soon as he fell asleep, the lion would pick up right where he left off the night before, hot on his trail. He tried everything in his power to lose him. He ran faster, ducked and dodged quicker, and tried hiding in hard-to-find places, but nothing worked. The lion would always find him and continue his chase. Eventually, the man started strategizing during the day about how he was going to avoid the lion at night. Once in a while, while dreaming, he would remember the plan he came up with during the day, but the fear of the lion made him forget his strategy, so he just ran harder.

The most interesting part of the dream was that the lion could never quite catch him, which frustrated the man *and* the lion. They were both exhausted and angry. At times, he even wished the lion would just eat him, hoping that the chase would end.

The nightmare continued for weeks, and the man realized that his lack of sleep was taking its toll on his waking hours. He was growing mentally and emotionally absent at home with his family, and the quality of his work was suffering. The comfortable life he had created was in the balance. His wife, being concerned for the man's mental health, suggested he see a psychiatrist. He did not like the idea, convinced that counseling was for weak-minded people. But after his wife pointed out the bags under his eyes, his unshaven face, and the way he mumbled to himself subconsciously during the day, he finally relented and arranged an appointment with a psychiatrist.

During his first session, he dove right in and described the nightmare to the psychiatrist. In his mind, he didn't have time for the psycho-babble mumbo jumbo. He wanted a quick fix, like some deep-breathing techniques or a sleeping pill to help him get rid of the nightmare. The psychiatrist listened to the man's request but clearly had other plans for treating him.

"What color is the lion?" The psychiatrist asked casually.

The man was shocked at first but quickly realized he knew the answer. "Its coat is a rich gold, and the mane is reddish-brown."

"What is the expression on its face?"

Annoyed, the man answered, "He looks... solemn." His tense posture relaxed as he leaned back into the sofa.

"Have you tried talking to it?"

"No, of course not. It's a lion," the man replied, irritated.

"Yes, but it's a dream. Your dream. You make the rules. Ask it what it wants from you, and then come in tomorrow. I'd love to hear what it says."

The man left the office more frustrated than when he came in, feeling dismissed by the psychiatrist's reaction. But as the day came to an end and he had another sleepless night ahead of him, he decided to give the psychiatrist's recommendation a try. He was going to talk to the lion. The man laid down in bed, and as soon as he fell asleep, there was the lion, stalking him and getting ready to pounce. Instead of standing his ground, the man immediately abandoned the psychiatrist's plan and started to run again. He ran and ran for what seemed hours as the lion steadily gained on him. The man was out of breath, and his legs were starting to give way as they always did at this point in the nightmare. But somehow, in the midst of his terror, he remembered the calm words of the psychiatrist.

"Ask it what it wants."

So, in an act of hopeless despair, the man suddenly stopped and faced the lion. He mustered the little courage he had and cried out in a shaky voice, "What do you want from me?" Ashamed of his tears and still afraid, the man looked down towards the lion's feet. It was so close now he could feel the hot air on his legs as its giant rib cage expanded and contracted with each breath.

With a perplexed look on his face, the majestic lion asked, "Why are you running? Don't you know that I am your strength?"

For most of my adult life, like the man in the story, I have been running from my strength. It's a slightly terrifying thought to imagine myself operating at my full potential. Have you ever wondered what you would look like at your best in all areas of your life? It's scary, isn't it? I have boiled down my fear to two main things:

1. Fear of hard work.
2. Fear of rejection.

A practical example of my fear of hard work was as a high school senior running track. I was above average in my event: the 400-meter dash. I ran a fast enough time to qualify for the district track meet that was a qualifier for the city championship. Leading up to the district meet, I was contacted by the football coach at Azusa Pacific University. He wanted to come and watch me run. At hearing this news, I was overwhelmed by both of my greatest fears. Because I had the flu leading up to the meet, I was running slower times than I had all year. With just 10 days to go, I knew how hard I was going to have to work to get back to my best times, and I did not want to do it.

The other factor was that I was afraid of disappointing the college coach by running a much slower time and being rejected as a potential scholarship candidate for their football team. Instead of facing my fears, doing my best, and standing by my performance, I faked an injury leading up to the meet. I rationalized that if I had an excuse for my poor performance, the coach would not be as disappointed with me. The injury also took the pressure off of me to perform to the best of my ability at

track practice leading up to the event. I was sabotaging my performance before the event even started. I was running from the lion.

In contrast, in the spring of 2020, I set my mind on breaking five minutes in a mile run. Since all of our gyms were closed indefinitely due to COVID-19, I shifted my fitness goals away from weightlifting and CrossFit benchmarks to exercises that I could improve on at home. I set my goal at 5 minutes because in 2014, at 32 years old, I ran a 4:59 mile. I was in the best shape of my life that summer, and that mile time was one of the greatest physical achievements I had ever accomplished. Lizzy and I (along with her sister Katie and her husband Robbie) came up with a 30-day running plan to reach our personal best. This was my idea because I wanted to have some accountability to follow through on my goal. We told each other our personal best times and committed to striving for those goals together.

Our plan was to have weekly benchmark mile runs as a way to track our progress. On the day of the first run, I woke up dreading the pain I was going to feel in the middle of it. Even as I warmed up, I started to feel anxious because the whole group knew this first benchmark run was going to reveal if I had a shot at breaking the 5-minute mark. I ran 5:34 that day, and the run absolutely sucked for the last 2 minutes of it. I was excited because I had a shot at breaking my personal best, but I also had a sinking feeling in my stomach when I considered the pain it was going to cause me to get there.

After 4 weeks of training and a 5:26 benchmark the week before, our last run was finally here. I woke up the morning of the run so nervous. I thought, “How am I supposed to shave 27 seconds off of my time?” As I got to the trail to warm up, I just kept saying to myself, “Do your best today”—over and over. This had such a calming effect on me, I started saying it to Lizzy and Katie. Robbie was not there as he had to work and would run later that day. I gave it everything I had from start to finish. I had a great race strategy and executed it to perfection. I crossed the finish line without an ounce left in me, and when I look down at my watch, it read 5:29. What?! I couldn’t believe it. I was incredibly upset. I mean, I truly went for it. I knew that breaking the 5:00 minute mark was a long shot, but I at least expected to run faster than my last time trial.

As I caught my breath, I asked myself, “Did you do your best today?” It almost caught me off guard, but I could honestly say to myself that I had. I was proud of facing my fears daily, no matter how my body felt or how hard the workouts were. I was also proud of facing potential disappointment and embarrassment at the end by falling short of my goal. I took it one day at a time and gave everything I had that day.

I waited at the finish line for Lizzy and Katie to finish their run. I was proud of what I had accomplished, not just for myself but also for the people around me. They both ran personal bests, running in the 6:30s, and I was a part of that. In fact, Robbie ran a personal best that afternoon, too! While I may have fallen well short of breaking the 5-minute marker, I got myself into amazing shape while encouraging three other people to find their best mile times ever! Facing the lion is having the courage to find personal growth daily in every facet of your life so that you can find the best version of you. Living this way is infectious, and the people you do life will also be enriched because of it.

I used the physical goal of running my fastest mile as an example here because it is easily measurable as long as you have some sort of watch to time yourself. People set physical goals like this all the time, such as losing weight, going to the gym more regularly, and going for daily walks. While physical goals can be difficult to attain, the more challenging goals have to do with the head and heart. Emotional, psychological, and spiritual wellness can be much harder to come by, often requiring a lot of outside help. It is easy to avoid talking about hard things in these areas because they are so painful and, to be honest, exhausting to deal with. I have learned (the hard way) that when these areas are neglected, the problems do not go away or improve. They get worse if they're not given the attention needed.

The most pressing challenge that was staring me in the face was to have a great marriage with Lizzy. At the time, I could not define what a great marriage looked like. However, to get to the point where I could, I knew it was going to require some very humbling truth-telling on my part... and a lot of growth. I was going to need to change the bad habits that were toxic to our relationship. An obvious problem that I had was putting myself in situations where I could be tempted to pursue sexual relationships outside my marriage. Sexual promiscuity is the type of behavior that, both inside or outside of marriage, will prevent you from having an intimate and authentic relationship with someone. I certainly knew that monogamy (having sex with just one person, my wife) was a critical change that I needed to make, and an obvious one. The more difficult changes happened in the truly private places of my life that no one knew about.

Pornography, for example, played a huge part in the severed emotional and sexual intimacy that I was experiencing with Lizzy. I was addicted to pornography, and I had a hard time admitting it to myself. Even after I told Lizzy about my struggles with porn, I still didn't call it an addiction. To most of the world, pornography is seen as a very normal thing. It is very common for a man to have a porn collection or, in more recent times, to frequent pornographic websites. While it is still a shameful and private topic, there is a sort of "wink-wink" type of understanding between men.

Try telling that to your wife. There is no way around it—pornography is a destructive habit that damages a person's sexual identity. Pornography dehumanizes the people involved and takes away the emotional intimacy of sex, creating pathways that allow you to use sex to get what you want and degrade other people and take their value away. I became desensitized by the videos I was watching, making it easier for me to use other people to fulfill my sexual desires without feeling bad about it. How could I find a deep and meaningful marriage with all of that going on in my mind? And this is just one example of what I had to face.

As I gained the courage to take a truthful look at all areas of my life, I felt like I was constantly putting out small fires. The minute I felt like I was gaining ground on one problem, another one would show up. I realized I needed a way to systemize my self-evaluation so that I could start living proactively, pursuing my best, instead of living reactively, just trying to keep my head above water. It felt like such a daunting task to keep a complete inventory of all of the areas of my life. I knew that if I could create a

few “buckets” that most of the areas of my life could be thrown into, I could manage that on a daily basis. This led me to create a personal growth model that I call “The Five Stones.”

The Five Stones is a reference to the story of David in the Old Testament. He chose five smooth stones to defeat Goliath in battle. I am in love with this image of David slowing down to thoughtfully walk down to a brook, fully aware of the battle to come and intentionally picking stones that were just the right fit for his sling. He knew that he would not have time to think about which stone to select in the heat of battle. He had to quickly and randomly grab any stone in his pouch, and it would have to fit and fly straight because his life depended on it. I likened the Five Stones to five areas of my life that needed attention daily. I thought that if I could walk down to the brook in the calm of the morning, methodically taking an inventory of these areas, when life happened, I would be prepared to respond appropriately. The areas that each stone represents for me are: physical, mental, relational, emotional, and spiritual. While there are more categories that need attention, these are five general areas that can get you started on the process of connecting with your true identity on a daily basis.

When I talk about taking a walk down to the metaphorical brook, I am referring to carving out time in my day to devote to prayer, scripture reading, meditation, and writing. I have seen the fruit of this discipline informing my true identity and life philosophy. As I get to know myself better, I have seen my empathy grow for my colleagues and players as we share our life struggles together. When I am asked to speak on culture and leadership to groups ranging from high-level management teams at Amazon to high school football teams, the depth of my answers comes from the time I have spent alone, thinking about my life. Facing the lion has helped me to become intentional about my personal growth.

Writer Florida Scott-Maxwell’s famous quote says it best:

“You need only claim the events of your life to make yourself yours. When you truly possess all you have been and done, which may take some time, you are fierce with reality.”

That is precisely what facing the lion looks like to me.

Chapter 25: Going First

“The thing is, real leaders aren’t the ones with all of the answers; they’re the ones willing to go first,” he said with a knowing smile, the slightest twinkle of pain mixed with the joy in his eyes. He was a pastor from our church. We had always liked him and his wife from our casual interactions with them, but they soon became trusted friends. Ten years down the road, while on their journey toward a vibrant marriage, their experience and friendship were a beacon in the storm for us. As some of the first people to hear our story, his encouragement to us that weekend at the conference became one of the cornerstones of how we choose to live.

It’s the reason we decided to write a book about our story in the first place. Not from years of professional case studies or the discovery of a magical formula that will foolproof your marriage. We are not counselors, nor are we pastors. We cannot give you 12 steps that will prevent you from further failure or running back after your own demons, although if you are looking for a way to stop being addicted to your own comfort, those steps might be a great place to start.

Instead, it is our hope that by reading the truth of what this process has looked like for us, you will find the courage to *go first*. Your journey will look different than ours, but there are guidelines that will help on the way.

- One of you will have to decide that what you’ve done up until now isn’t enough.
- You’ll have to commit to doing your own work, regardless of what your partner chooses to do.
- You’ll be exposed, it’ll bring up pain you wanted to forget about, and you’ll probably want to run like hell more often than not.
- You’ll need people around you that have been where you want to go (and those who are trying to go that way, too).
- You’ll need professional help, whether in person with a counselor or through the writing of people that are professionals and have taken the time to put their knowledge into books. The scariest part of counseling for us was making the decision to go, and it has been nothing but an incredible gift since we’ve gone. We’ve included a list of resources in the back of this book—including books that have changed the way we see each other and relate to one another.
- You will need lots of prayer and likely a lot of coffee.

But for today, for this moment, you need only one thing. You need to know that wherever this journey takes you, no matter the outcome, you will not be alone. God is right here with you. He didn’t reveal himself to Elijah in the gale or the earthquake or even the fire, but in the quiet whisper when the chaos had passed. Elijah didn’t have to find God because he was already right there, so close he barely had to speak. God is right here, asking you to take his hand and step out into the darkness—somewhere you have never been before. It’s your only chance at the life you were made for... *together*.

So, where do you begin? It’s not complicated. It’s the hardest thing you’ll ever do, but it’s not all that mysterious or grand. It’s small and doesn’t move you very far, but over the course of a lifetime, it will make all the difference.

“Take the next right step, the one closest in, the one you don’t want to take.”

—David Whyte

We’re guessing that you probably know the next step without having to dig very deep. Maybe you need to admit something you’ve been hiding. Maybe you need to share something that is hurting you, but you’ve felt afraid to say anything. Maybe you just need to ask an honest question of yourself, or you need to decide to be the first one to go see a counselor. There is no key to unlocking the secret door to a better marriage; you just have to be willing to take the first step toward the marriage you want. Then, take another step, followed by the next one after that. If you don’t move toward it now, it will be waiting for you down the road when you have to stop running again to take a breath.

Laying there in the dark, scared and lonely, we were lost. How could we have known that one question would begin a chain reaction, and everything would change? “This marriage?” was simply a response to take the next right step—to tell the truth of where we were that night. Leaving the comfort of self-protection, we stopped trying to survive in our relationship and began the quest to thrive. There have been many deep valleys, times we wondered if we would ever leave the swamp. There have also been incredible peaks, the sheer magnitude of what is out there to explore overwhelming us as we reach the summit of some of our biggest victories. The depth of intimacy we share is something we only ever dreamed of, and yet we know this is only the beginning.

Take away the question mark and replace it with a period. *This marriage.* A statement instead of a hesitation. A place we have come to trust where we can do the hardest work because of our foundation of authentic vulnerability and forgiveness.

Are you ready to find out what yours can become? Take the step. We promise it will be worth it.

