

# BATTLES AND TRIALS

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A FIGHT FOR DELIVERANCE

RENIKKO BIVENS





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Graced to Write LLC  
P.O. Box 5813,  
Sandersville, GA 31082



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# INTRODUCTION

## STRONGHOLDS ARE PRISONS

Have you ever been to a close security prison? It has to be one of the most intimidating experiences. Without ever taking a foot inside and just viewing the prison from the parking lot, you can get an idea of the type of offenders held within the prison walls.

Two sets of gates surround the prisons, and both are lavished with rows and rows of razor wire. The only thing that separates one set of gates from the other is a ground that has been covered with bales and bales of more razor wire. Just the thought of someone getting caught in them is enough to make you cringe.

There are also huge guard towers where armed officers stand at a post. Then there are armed perimeter guards that drive around the prison perimeter for their entire shift, looking, waiting, and watching. This is all seen before you ever step foot out of your car, leading you to have second thoughts about whether you'd care to go on the inside of such a place.

Before entering the prison, there's an intercom on the outer gate. You can't gain entry past the first gate without stating the purpose of your visit. Once you're allowed in the gate, you walk to a secure area where you must provide ID, and you're then given a visitor's pass. You proceed to be searched, which requires you to take off your shoes,

belts and I've witnessed some women having to remove their wigs. You and your possessions are thoroughly searched for contraband, and once cleared, you are met with an escort, which is also an officer.

If you're lucky, your escort will double as both security and prison tour guide, giving you a play-by-play of where you're going and what you're looking at as you get there. The escort will have many keys, opening and closing doors, and gates as you get to them. The control room has sole control over some of the gates and doors, so the officer has to use their radio to have someone else provide the access they need.

By the time you finally arrive at your destination, you understand why few inmates ever escape. The place is designed to keep inmates confined through controlled movement, tight security, and other methods. It doesn't matter how much an inmate desires to leave; they can't until they've served their time. Those that end up escaping are captured and brought back with more charges. So, for most, escaping is not an option to even consider.

Unfortunately, spiritual bondage is a lot like being an inmate in prison. Those who realize they are in some form of bondage often desire to leave the situation without the ability to make it happen. You want to be free but, your circumstances have you confined.

Some inmates have spent so much time in prison that they become institutionalized. An institutionalized person has found life and purpose in prison and has no desire to live outside the prison walls. I'll never forget this one inmate that I had an opportunity counsel. He told me that he knew it sounded crazy, but he loved prison. He said he never had to worry about what he was going to eat, he had medical care, and the other inmates were like family. He told me that they remembered his birthdays, they comforted him when he was sad, they were the family that he never experienced outside of prison. He said he would come back if he were ever released because he considered prison as home and his fellow inmates family. On the day of his release, his parting words were, "I'll be back soon."

What would it take for this inmate to value freedom? He could only value freedom if the benefits of freedom outweighed the perceived benefits he received from incarceration. Believe it or not,



this isn't too far removed from those of us that have found ourselves spiritually entangled in the destructive vices of the world.

I, for one, struggled many years with alcohol, pornography, same-sex attraction, and suicidal thoughts. People that knew me during those times can honestly attest to the God-given change in my life. Some have even asked about me talking to their relatives struggling through some of those same things.

*Battles and Trials: A Fight For Deliverance* is a response to their request. This is a story of my deliverance and what it took for me to be free. Spiritual strongholds are a real thing, and strongholds are prisons. You don't get in them overnight, and you can't overcome them overnight. During the process of my deliverance, I often felt like I was going through constant battles, fighting for freedom.

My goal is to give you an honest depiction of what it's like to lie under the influence of these spirits. This book will help you understand the trauma and rejection that often lie at the root of those that battle these entities. Like many others, the traumas I experienced began in my childhood, which caused me to be influenced by deception and destruction early. Yet, deliverance was possible.



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NIGHTMARES

The smell of oil, rust, and dirt filled the air. I scanned the yard for help, but it was impossible to find anyone through the mountains of dilapidated cars smothered in thick fog amid dimly lit floodlights. The sunset hours ago, and with no watch, if I had to guess, I'd say it was about 1, maybe 2 AM. I could hear the panting of the Dobermans as they paced back and forth, while their chains eerily clashed against the gravel, reminding me of the sound of prisoner ankle shackles, dragging across concrete floors, like in one of those prison movies.

I searched for an exit as I kneeled close to the ground, peering between a pile of old school bus tires. I just wanted to go home, but I saw no exit anywhere. With no exit in sight, I felt helpless and defeated. Finally, after gaining enough courage, I stood up and began walking. As I walked, I heard stomping boots shuffling behind me. Acting off first instinct, I ran as fast as my legs would allow me to go.

The boots behind me took on a speed of their own, getting faster and closer. I glanced over my shoulder to see how close they were, and I saw a black smokey shadow with three sets of white eyes rushing towards me. I kept running until I realized that there was no safe place to run. I couldn't find an exit, and I was too tired to continue.

My calves stung with pain. I searched endlessly for a way out, but there was no way out. My body began to fail me, so I knew that I couldn't run forever. My lungs burned with every breath, and tears started streaming down my cheeks. I realized that I could go no further. Collapsing to the ground, I gave up. I curled up in a ball on the ground and waited for the shadow to overtake me.

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THAT'S WHERE THE DREAM ENDED. I STARTED HAVING THIS DREAM shortly after my parents separated. I would wake up with my clothes drenched in sweat and the bed soaked; this went on for years.

My parents separated just weeks before my eighth birthday. The abuse had taken its toll on their marriage, and I knew that my mom loved my dad, but sometimes love isn't enough. So, my mom, sister, and I left my dad in California to return to Georgia.

My dad accomplished so many things at such a young age. In fact, as a U.S. Army Sergeant, my dad was highly regarded where we lived, Oakland Army Base. He was the epitome of confidence. Never meeting a stranger and always willing to go the extra mile for his soldiers; tough yet fair, firm yet flexible, and everyone in the community loved him.

At the heart of the accolades and accomplishments, I believe he was a broken and rejected man. It seemed that he validated himself through his achievements, never really seeking true healing. So, his overindulgence of alcohol was frequent.

When he drank, life was anything but peaceful. He often reminded me of a real-life depiction of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The world saw and met Dr. Jekyll, but we lived with both. When he was in his Mr. Hyde states, I would watch how he treated my mom. I always wondered if that was how all men treated their wives. As I would listen to them argue, I would say that I'd never treat my wife that way.

My mom would always tell us that if we ever needed help, pray to God, and He would be there. So, during nights where my dad was angry, I would lie in bed, hug my baby sister, and ask God to help my

dad to stop hitting my mom and to help him stop drinking. I was young but understood that my mom would get tired one day.

If I knew then what I know now about addiction, I might have looked at him in a different light, a better light. The day that we left was a confusing day for me. My mom, my sister, and I sat in the living room with our bags packed, waiting on my dad to get off work in time to take us to an airport. I don't think he truly believed that my mom would leave him because he was late picking us up and was very casual, as if it was a minor misunderstanding. My mom became upset about him potentially causing us to miss our flight.

My dad held a one-sided conversation to the airport. So, the full breadth of what was happening had not set in for him. My sister and I sat and watched as the world we knew disappeared in the rearview window.

I remember thinking, "Did Stacy feel this helpless?" Stacy was my best friend, but our friendship was cut short after her dad received orders to move to another state. The day her family left, I stood in the middle of the street and waved goodbye. Stacy got out of her seatbelt and looked out of the rear window, and waved at me until their car was no longer in sight. That was part of military life; you make friends and lose friends. Maybe we should've been used to all the moving and adjustments, but it still hurt.

It was hard for my mind to wrap around the fact that just the day before, I played with my friends for the last time and interacted with my classmates for the last time. I wondered how life would be without having my dad in the house. I thought about how the new school would be, would my parents eventually get back together, would these changes be forever?

We arrived at the airport and made it to our gate early. While sitting and waiting for our plane, the truth finally hit my dad. I guess it was because he realized that my mom was leaving; we were leaving. She'd stayed so many times in the past, but I knew this time that my mom had etched her decision in stone. It wasn't like before where dad would do things, apologize, and she would try to make it work. Something about her eyes and how she tilted her head said she cared but was tired and couldn't do it anymore.

I can't imagine how many sleepless nights my mom battled, grappling with leaving. But it's a mother's nature to protect her child. So, if not for her own sake, I believe she understood that children needed to be in a safe and emotionally stable environment. We witnessed many things that children our age should not have to, and I know the move was my mom saying that enough was enough; loving someone with an addiction is challenging. When they finally called our gate, my dad walked with us as far as the airline would allow. I looked back at him one more time before leaving; he was still crying and waving as we boarded our flight.

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## WHAT'S AN OREO?

We moved back to my mom's hometown of Dublin, Georgia. I remembered that we lived there before moving to California, but I didn't remember much more about it. We were young when we left, so most of the immediate memories were of life in California.

It didn't take long for me to miss our old life. Dublin was different. It was like walking into the twilight zone, such a vast difference from the Bay area culture. There was no racial diversity, and everything seemed black and white, literally. There was unspoken segregation that permeated the environment, with a quiet understanding of one's place in that environment.

I never had issues academically, but my new school was very intimidating. It was miserable for me because life's dynamics had changed, and I didn't know where I fit. I know they showed me where I should be, but I wasn't comfortable there. I longed for my friends. I missed my school full of artwork, the colorful hallways, and painted sidewalks. I missed playing dinosaur games at recess and even staying after school for reading and literature to catch the late bus with the big kids.

One night my mom called my sister and me to her bedroom to talk

about the things we were experiencing, how we were adjusting, and to see where she could help us adjust better. I didn't feel like how I felt mattered, so I told my mom I was okay, and everything was fine. Deep inside, I was sad and angry at my dad. I felt like if he tried harder to get himself together, our family would still be together.

My mind drifted off for a moment, but my mom kept talking to us. She said, "I want you ladies to learn how to pray." She told my sister and me that one of us would lead the prayer every morning before leaving the house, and we would pray again before bedtime. She wrote each of our names on a scrap sheet of paper and put the paper in a cup. She said she would draw the order of who would pray first.

In today's world, we have so many books and lessons you can study about prayer. Before all of that, we had to go through our mom's school of prayer. I remember thinking, this should be easy, a quick "Jesus wept" or "Now I lay me down to sleep..." and it's over. I was sadly mistaken. My mom taught us and coached us to "pray right." She would tell us, "Oh, you're not saying now I lay me down to sleep, ya'll going to pray right."

I didn't understand the overall goal of praying or learning to pray, so I created my expectations. I expected prayer would fix everything. Life was going to be incredible, and God was going to come to our rescue like in the movies and fix everything instantly; I had so much to learn.

By my fourth-grade year, I realized that this new life was permanent. I made good grades, but I wouldn't say I liked school. I never got in trouble; I just always felt alienated and lonely, as if I just couldn't fit in and my teachers didn't make it any better.

I could never forget the worst Christmas project ever. Our teacher walked into the room, so excited. I thought it was going to be something amazing until she gave the details. In the most annoyingly chipper voice ever, she said, "Okay, class, we will do a class project. This is one of my favorite projects, and I do this project every year with all my classes; they all seem to love it! I want all of you to bring in a baby picture, we will hang the pictures on the board, and then we will guess who the picture belongs to." Everyone, except me, was so excited about that project.



Going home, I remember asking my mom, what was the point of me taking my baby picture for this project? I mean, I was the only black girl in the class, so who wouldn't know my baby picture?

In our school system, they placed children in classes based on their standardized test scores. "A" class or advanced, "B" Average, "C" may have difficulties in reading or Math, and "D" classes needed a lot of help; kids maliciously termed the "D" classes "dumb."

The biggest issue with this structure is that it never failed that the higher-level classes were predominately white, and the lower-level classes were predominately black. That year, I was one of three black (the only female) students placed in the advanced class. While there were no overt acts of prejudice, subtle things always seemed to be in place that reminded you of your differences.

While my school situation wasn't the ideal situation, it wasn't the worst. Ironically, the first derogatory slur I recall ever receiving came that same school year, but it was from a black girl. I had a hall pass to go to the library. On my way, I had to pass by several classes lined in the hallway for restroom breaks.

As I walked by, I saw a little girl pointing at me. She leaned over to her friend; I guess she was trying to whisper, but she was horrible at it. Or maybe she wanted me to hear it. Why else would she point at me so I could see her? She told her friend, "look at her; she's an Oreo."<sup>1</sup>

I'd never heard that term before that day, but by her tone, I knew it couldn't be something good. When I got on the bus that afternoon, I asked an older kid that I trusted, what does it mean when someone calls you an Oreo? They told me it was a black person who "acted" white. They said that a person could be black on the outside but white on the inside, like an Oreo.



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MONSTER

The closet smelled like old motor oil from a car engine. Ironically, this is the place that the monster forced me. The closet was always pitch black, and I remember it being the most oversized closet I had ever seen. It wasn't your average walk-in closet; it was shaped almost like a room. A twin-sized mattress could easily fit towards the back, with plenty of walking space.

I was soft-spoken, shy, and wasn't confrontational, so I guess I was an easy target. The monster started off being aggressive. The monster was always bullying and picking fights with me. I made it easy for them because I didn't fight back; I just accepted it. After they determined I wasn't a fighter, the circumstances quickly progressed to being violated in other ways.

That's when the closet came into play. The closet is where the monster would make me go. The closet was dark, very dark. The overwhelming smell of old motor oil reminded me of a mechanic's shop. I would concentrate on that smell, and it became the most calming thing that I could grasp or focus on at that moment.

Even today, I have a keen nose for the smell of motor oil. It used to surprise my husband how I could smell a minuscule amount of oil on his clothes. Over the years, he has grown to understand the effects of

such an experience. While I'm now in a place of safety, security, and peace, it seems like that is one of the residual effects that has lingered with me.

Back then, I didn't know how to handle the situation. Since my parents were divorced, I watched my mom work hard to support my sister and me. I didn't want to stress her with what was going on with me, so I decided to deal with it as best as possible for a 9-year-old kid. I drowned myself in reading, writing poetry, drawing, and other artistic methods of expressing myself.

I had a collection of VHS tapes where all my favorite shows would be recorded. I loved watching the show "Living Single."<sup>1</sup> I would binge-watch the episodes on the weekend and think about what it would be like when I finally went to college and began my career. Our teachers loved to ask us questions about what we wanted to be when we grew up. I was caught somewhere between an artist, a paleontologist, and any career that would allow me to carry a briefcase like the ladies on the show.

After the Oreo incident, I came up with the craziest idea that I would ruin my standardized test to make friends with more of the black students. That year, I took my standardized test and alternated "B" and "C" answers for the entire test. It shocked the teacher that I finished the test so quickly, not realizing what I had done to my test. I just wanted to make friends and not be seen as the person they thought I was. I would learn later that many people didn't share in the little girls' thoughts about me, and me not having friends had more to do with me being shy more than anything else.

It ended up working out because after the year I had been through, I wasn't much in the mood for school the following year. Trying to deal with all of my situations on my own had led me down a confusing and uncertain road. I was having nightmares, and my self-esteem began to suffer. While the other kids talked about getting their first boyfriend or first girlfriend, it confused me; I didn't want a boyfriend.

I had been eyeing these green Duck Head shorts that my brother had in his room. I couldn't help but imagine how good they would look with my hunter green Ivy Crew collar shirt. I asked him about them a couple of times until he finally gave in and gave them to me.

I ran to the bathroom and put them on. I also tried on my matching shirt and white K-Swiss sneakers. I tied a band around my head and began looking at myself in the mirror. I tried different facial expressions and poses. I pulled my shorts down just a little so that they would sag; this was the style. I kept looking at myself, wondering if I could pass for a boy. I loved my clothes because they made me look like a boy; I felt comfortable.

There was an episode of *Living Single* where one of the major characters found out that her college best friend was engaged to a woman. As I looked in the mirror, I thought about that show. I knew I would have a girlfriend and get married one day, at least I hoped I would. The lady on the show seemed to be feminine, but I'm sure there were some women out there that looked like boys, right? I never saw one before in our small town, but I knew they must exist somewhere.

Coincidentally, it was around that time that I heard my first "Adam and Steve" sermon. It would be a sermon that I would hear countless times being screamed from the pulpit like a cheerleader at a Friday Night football game, "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve!" quickly followed by "Thy shall not lie with a man as you do a woman, it's an abomination!"

I grew to hate that sermon. Not because of the message that same-sex relationships were a sin, but I never understood why the pastor never talked about molestation being wrong. I couldn't understand how a gay person would go to hell, but there was no mention of people touching you and harassing you when you didn't want to be touched or harassed. I continued to keep the secret to myself, believing that I was the only person in the world that had experienced it. People talked about me wearing baggy clothes, but the clothes were like my security blanket in some weird way. I thought, maybe I wouldn't draw "that type" of attention, and I would be left alone.



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## THE PROPHETESS

*M*y mom's philosophy was that anytime the church doors were open, we would be there. After she accepted Christ and became an usher in a local church, we were, in a way, obligated to be there.

Some Sundays, it was 4 or 5 o'clock before we left service, and that's after being there since 9:45 that morning. Revivals were the worst because we knew we would be there all evening, and my mom gave us the before church speech where she would tell us, "I know you guys have school tomorrow, so we will leave before service ends if it gets too late." This usually meant that we stayed at church until bedtime, and when we got home, we would only have time for a snack, a bath, and go to bed.

One night, I guess the anointing "was high," as the old folks would say. Once the organ started playing in the holiness church and the drums began beating, the entire church looked like a concert where the guest of the hour finally hit the stage. People would dance in the aisles, scream, and run laps around the church as if they were trying out for an Olympic gold medal; they called this a praise break.

On this particular night, I sat quietly in my seat as I watched my mom rush sheets back and forth as people fell to the ground, 'slain in

the spirit' (another old folk term). I watched as the musicians played the sixth round of praise music, and the lady from the front pew took a lap around the church. At one point, I questioned if it was ever going to end, but then the guest speaker finally signaled for a microphone.

She stood at the podium, but I could barely see her because either the podium was too tall or she was short. I can't remember her name, but I remember that she was a Prophetess. She made her way across the pulpit, so she was in full view of everyone. She looked towards the musicians and told them to hold the music. Then she asked everyone if they could have a seat. She spoke and said that the Lord told her to share her testimony.

Tears began to stream down her cheeks as she gave an account of what it has cost her to follow Christ. It was something about her that gave me chills. Even with the tears streaming down her cheek, she spoke with so much boldness and conviction. She told us about her financial losses, the hurts she faced as a child, health issues, and so much more. I remember her talking about her childhood and how things just seemed so hard, and she wondered if things would ever get better for her. Then she began speaking on how God had restored her from that place. She said that she didn't know who the testimony was for, but God told her someone needed to know that God can restore.

I sat, staring at the lady. Thinking, surely, God wouldn't have someone share a testimony for a child, would He? I asked God, "Are you saying my life is going to get better?" I didn't want to keep going through issues my entire life like the Prophetess. Shortly after speaking, I saw many people going to the altar to get prayer and deliverance.

Maybe three or four weeks after that night, mom came home and told my sister and me that she needed to talk with us about a situation. She told us that a student at our school had passed, and she knew we knew her because of how close they lived to us. I knew what my mom was saying, and I understood what she said, but I could not understand how someone I had just spoken to earlier that day was not here anymore.

That weekend, my mom took me to the funeral home to show my respects. When I entered the funeral home, I noticed that they built it



like a church sanctuary, and if you looked to the front, you could see her casket on the altar. I was afraid, so I stood away as far as I could and saw her from a distance.

Our bus driver was there, and he watched me as I looked towards the casket. He told me it was okay to walk closer. So, I walked down the aisle until I got close enough to the casket to see if it was her. My bus driver came and got me and walked with me the rest of the way to the casket; it was her.

She had on a white dress with white gloves. Her hands were lying one on top of the other, and her eyes were closed. "See, she looks like she's sleeping," my bus driver said. Yes, she looked like she was sleeping.

The Prophetess never mentioned it, but I wondered if losing a friend was part of her battle as well?



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VHS TAPES

While going through a box of recorded VHS movies I found in the back of an old closet, I stumbled across a blank tape with no writing. Thinking that someone had forgotten to label the shows on the video, I played it to see what had been recorded. As it began to play, I quickly learned why it was unlabeled. There was a woman in a bikini and the highest pair of heels I'd ever seen in my life. She was dancing on a pole that appeared to be in a living room. Well, I assumed it was a living room because a man was sitting on the couch watching her. Out of curiosity, I kept watching; this was the first time that I ever watched pornography.

After watching the tape, I felt like I would get in trouble if anyone knew I had watched it. So, I rewound the movie to where it was when I began to play it. Hopefully, if anyone came looking for it, they would assume that I had never touched it.

No one ever came to look for the tape, so any time I had an ounce of alone time, I would pop the video in and watch. I already had sexually confusing dreams before discovering pornography, and I was well into adulthood before I learned about the spiritual, physical, and mental effects of molestation. I did not know about transferring

spirits, and I honestly thought children had immunity against those spiritual issues.

The sexually confusing dreams became more sexually explicit. I would have fantasies about the man and the woman on the screen. Sometimes I fantasized or dreamed about the man, while other times, I would fantasize and dream about the woman. Sometimes I would visualize what it was like sexually performing as a man, and other times I would imagine being the woman in the video.

As mentioned before, I began battling issues with my sexuality at a young age. I had many questions, and because I wasn't comfortable seeking help from an adult, I created my own answers. The God that they spoke about in church seemed mean and distant from me at that time.

God became even more distant because my mom decided that we would leave our place of worship. Although she found a new place of worship, it wasn't the same for me. I'd go just because we had to, but I'd watch the clock and pray that the service would be over really quick. When service let out, I'd go to the car and wait on my mom so that we could leave.

I eventually stopped going to church with my mom and began going to my mom's "home church"; it was within a mile of our home. It was our family church, and I loved that all my cousins attended there. The preacher didn't preach about anything outside of telling stories in the Bible, but I didn't care because I had heard them all, and I wasn't there for the preaching; I just wanted to hang out with my cousins. Some cute boys attended the church (who were not relatives). They were older, so I doubted they even noticed me or knew who I was; I wasn't popular but awkward.

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BASKETBALL MARCH MADNESS BROUGHT ABOUT A CHANGE OF routine. That was the one time of the year I knew my weekends and some weekdays would be full of college basketball games. Basketball Saturdays (what I called them) drove my mom crazy. She could never figure out why I had to go in and out all day long while the games were

on. During each game, I would watch the different moves that the players made on the court, and if I liked a play, I would go outside to practice. I'd go to the basketball court and practice every move until I could do them correctly.

I used recess and physical education at school to play and practice against other kids. It would usually be one other girl playing with the boys and me; that's where I was comfortable and seemed to fit in.

My mom felt like I was becoming too "tomboyish," so she took me to the hairdresser to get my hair styled. I was perfectly fine with my ponytail, but she insisted that the stylist put finger waves in my hair. I know finger waves were the style then, but not for kids.

As soon as we left, I messed my hair up, so I didn't have to wear that ugly hairstyle. My mom plucked it out, so I had this box topped shaped hairstyle and told me I was going to Bible Study like that since I had messed it up. It embarrassed me because the other kids teased me that night. I was told that I looked like a boy and asked who did my "fade."

My self-esteem was already bad, but that night made it so much worse. I believe that my mom thought that embarrassing me would deter me from repeatedly messing up hairstyles. Or maybe even encourage me to be more girly, but it created a wedge between us. I felt she cared more about my looks than what I was experiencing, thinking, and feeling. Then again, if she had sincerely inquired about me, would I have felt comfortable in opening up to her?

After a while, I felt guilty about looking at porn; it was like a part of me knew that it was wrong on a deeper level than just getting caught by my mom. One day, while cleaning my room, I took the VHS tape and broke it so it couldn't play anymore; I threw it in the trash.



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DAD

*A*fter my parents separated, my dad finished his orders out in Oakland. He tried to get stationed as close to us as possible, so they sent him to Mobile, AL. The court ordered that we spend the summers and part of the holidays with him. It was an 8-hour ride from where we lived to Mobile, and we'd sleep most of the way when it was our turn to go with him.

My dad met his second wife while stationed in Mobile; she was in the military like he was. I remember little about her, except she wasn't the nicest lady. Looking back, I don't think it had anything to do with us, but more with the fact that my dad didn't treat her any differently from how he treated my mom.

We'd hear them arguing and fighting, things being knocked off of the walls, banging and screaming. I remember sitting down next to her, and I'd ask her if she was okay. She'd always say, "I'm just tired, baby, just tired." I doubt she could say what she wanted to, given that I was his daughter, and wisdom probably told her to leave it at that.

Sometimes when they had a terrible time. My dad would take us over to his friend's house. His friend had a son around our age, and he seemed to have every video game you could think of. I enjoyed going

over there. His mom was always in the back room, so she left us all alone to play and have fun with the video games.

One holiday I could never forget. We went to play video games at my dad's friend's house. The little boy was holding the cutest baby. He asked me if I wanted to hold her, and I did. She was too pretty not to hold. As I held her, my sister laughed and joked that the baby looked like me because she had my complexion and ears.

The boy laughed and said, "yea, she does have your dad's ears." We all stopped laughing and looked at him with the most puzzled looks. What did he mean, "she does have your dad's ears"? He looked back at us with the guiltiest face ever. He said, "Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you guys knew. She's your dad's baby. She *is* your sister."

It turned out that my stepmother had also had a son three months before the little girl was born. So, we had a new baby brother and a new baby sister. I wish I could tell you more about either of them, but I haven't seen them since they were babies.

I don't recall any more trips to Mobile after that one. My dad eventually moved back to his hometown of Macon, which was a 45-minute driving distance from where we lived. So, we would spend our summers and holidays in Macon for the rest of our childhood. I'm very grateful for my dad moving back to Macon because it was there that he began his journey to the man he is today.

Despite all the chaos that seemed to follow my dad, he always made sure that he told us how beautiful we were. He would always encourage us and tell us we could do and become anything we wanted to be in life, and he never left or hung up the phone without telling us he loved us. It was important to him that we understood he loved us. I think it was most important for him to know that we also loved him.

My mom encouraged us to love our dad and have a relationship with him. As kids, a part of us felt like we needed to be loyal to one parent over the other, but that's not how my mom wanted it. She sat us down early and told us that what happened between her and my dad was between them, and as children, we will have a relationship with our dad, pray for our dad, and love our dad.

In her wisdom, I think she knew that my dad needed it. One night I had a dream. I was walking in the forest, and I saw what appeared to



be angels flying in a circle. This voice started talking to me and telling me it would help me if I let it. I continued to walk in this brightly lit forest, telling the voice about all the things going on and how I felt about it. I treated the voice like it was a counselor, and I was a client. The only difference was that I was walking in a forest, and I couldn't see the face of the person I was talking to.

The voice told me it was okay to cry about things, and while the voice never mentioned it, I felt that the person I was talking to wanted me to pray for my dad more often. After lying down every night, we said our prayers as a family then I would lie on my back and talk to God.



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LADY IN WHITE

Middle school came quickly, and with it came talks of having crushes and who was dating whom. I grew more self-aware and uncomfortable with the changes, which ultimately led to me being more self-conscious. If you couple being shy and chubby with low self-esteem, it wasn't the best combination.

Part of me wanted to see what the hype was; I mean, what was the point in getting a boyfriend or girlfriend? It was one thing to think and imagine but acting it out in actual life was a different story. Not to mention, I was still a bit of a tomboy and doubted that any boy would want to talk to me. Where I had previously thought about girls, my attention was focusing more on boys. Maybe the whole idea of liking girls was just a phase I went through. There was this one time during a class break, they allowed us to go outside for free time.

I was sitting with a group of girls when one girl pointed to a guy and asked me if I thought he was cute. He was a very handsome boy, always nicely dressed and intelligent too. I told her I thought he was handsome. She then asked me, would I date him? I told her I didn't know; I guess I would. I don't know; maybe she thought it was time for me to come out of my shell, I'm not sure. It turns out she was asking me questions to play matchmaker.

After I said, “I guess I would,” she got up and ran towards him. I watched as she spoke with him; I hope she wasn’t doing what I thought she was. When I saw him look in my direction, I knew exactly what she was doing. She came running back to where I was sitting and shook her head. She said the boy told her he didn’t like me because I was too fat. I knew I carried a lot of extra weight, so it didn’t surprise me that he would call me fat. It still didn’t hurt any less, but I tried to play it off as if it didn’t bother me. That incident became part of the reason I started dieting. I tried to convince myself that the real reason I wanted to lose weight was that it would make me feel better. I wanted to be pretty, and I felt that my weight kept me from being pretty.

TLC was popular and one of my favorite R&B groups. They recorded a song called “*Unpretty*.”<sup>1</sup> Which came from a poem that one of the group members wrote. They had an overweight girl in the video and depicted her battling with her weight. I loved that song so much because it perfectly expressed what I was fighting.

I knew I wasn’t the only one having issues and secretly wishing that life was just different or better. There was a girl in our school that took her life. She wrote a letter about what she’d been going through with bullying and other issues. It was too much for her to bear, and she gave up on life. The loss affected many people, and I believe that more people valued her more than she knew. Others tried to rationalize what was the tipping point for her. Why would she go so far? I never questioned it because I understood it.

I think her suicide may have resonated with me too much because I also begin to see suicide as a way out.

It wasn’t too long after all of that transpired; that I went to a church anniversary service. After the service, I went out front and sat at the entrance to kill time, hoping that the line in the dining hall would be clear by the time I went to the back of the church.

After enough time had passed, I stood up and went through the church sanctuary because it was quicker than walking around the building. When I opened the front door to the building, someone was coming out at the same time. I quickly saw that it was an older

woman, so I held the door for her. She was very short in stature, wearing a giant white hat, and she moved with a slow shuffle.

I patiently held the door for her. While exiting, she stopped and looked at me. She smiled and told me, "You're beautiful; I don't care what anyone says, just know that you're beautiful." I said, "Yes, ma'am," and continued to hold the door for her.

Instead of going to the back to eat, I sat in the church for a moment. I began to feel good, and something told me to thank the little lady. I went back outside because as slow as she was walking, I figured she couldn't have made it that far. She was nowhere in sight.

I combed the parking lot, but she wasn't there. I eventually went to the back of the church and asked one mother if they knew who the little old lady was. I told them that she was wearing a big white hat; she was very petite, dressed in all white, and walked slowly. I asked other people if they had seen her as well. I described her to them, and no one recalled anyone who attended the service that fit that description. One person told me that if a person matching that description had attended service, someone would've noticed because the church was small, and anyone wearing what I described would have stood out. I didn't ask any more questions, and I quietly concluded that maybe I had come in contact with an angel. How else could I explain it? Those words, "You're beautiful, I don't care what anyone says, just know that you're beautiful," carried me through. I used to hear older people say, "I just need a word from the Lord" I don't know if that's what they meant, but it was enough for me.



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MALCOLM

*M*y mom had a lot of concerns about Malcolm and me dating. Although he was the most respectful and well-mannered boy, word got around about him being expelled from school. She was also concerned that I was 14 years old, and he was 17. She would always ask me why I couldn't find someone closer to my age, but I was no longer interested in guys my age.

It may have crossed my mom's mind to forbid me to talk to him, but I believe she knew that I would sneak and find other ways to stay in contact with him. I mean, we went to the same church (that's how we met), and she couldn't monitor every single move. Ultimately, she allowed me to date him but came creative in her approach to keep a check on our relationship.

Back then, if you had over one landline phone in the house, there was always a possibility that your parents would try to eavesdrop on the line to make sure you were having appropriate conversations. I don't care how careful our parents were, you could always hear the phone click from them picking up the line, and the extra breathing was still a dead giveaway.

So, we'd talk where we didn't have to worry too much about them trying to figure out stuff. Because of the age difference, I guess

everyone assumed that he was this sex-crazed guy ready to jump into bed and take advantage of his young girlfriend, but it wasn't like that.

Malcolm and I attended the same church for years. I knew him in passing but never really had a conversation with him. I didn't even know that he knew my name.

Every year, the church went on a trip to the Georgia State Fair. Rumors started flying amongst the church kids that Malcolm commented about me being pretty and liked me.

It wasn't a week later that I found that the rumors were true, and we began a litany of letter exchanges, writing back and forth passing notes through anyone that could get a letter from me (Middle School) to him (High School).

Eventually, he got in some trouble and ended up not being able to complete school. So, our letters went to talking on the phone and seeing each other on Sunday. We had so much in common that it was so easy for us to click. His smile was electrifying, and he was very kind, something I'd never experienced before.

We both struggled with our weight, but he knew that my weight was the source of self-esteem issues. He would always say, "I love it, but if you don't like it, then do something about it." It was his encouragement that caused me to lose a lot of weight.

A year went by before the topic of sex was brought up. Malcolm did not press the issue, but it became a part of our conversations from time to time. I wasn't completely turned off to the idea because I was curious. More and more of my peers talked about sex, and it seemed natural that that would be the next step in our relationship. So, with a host of black cinema out during the '90s, I would watch movies that I knew had some form of a sex scene, trying to amp myself up and prepare myself for that time.

I also had an idea that I would go online for tips and pointers. I was hoping to find one of those "how-to" articles that the magazines wrote about. Instead of finding articles, I found myself reintroduced to the world of pornography. I received a pop-up window that asked me if I was 18 or older, and after seeing the pictures, I lied and selected that I was 18 to enter the website.

There were so many categories to choose from, so I looked at as



many categories as possible. Going from page to page and video to video, it was nothing like the porn I watched before. It was animated, and my imagination had stretched in so many ways, with so many ideas. I seemed to gravitate to the porn that included multiple women with men.

It quickly became an obsession, to where I would wait until the entire house was asleep, and I'd wake up at 2 AM to get on the computer. The pornography led to me going to chatrooms talking to perverted men and women all over the world. Until I eventually came across a US chat line for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and bi-curious teens.

When I entered the room, I immediately got a message from someone asking a/s/l? Which meant age, sex, and location. Then I was asked if I was a "fem" or a "stud." Of course, I didn't know what it meant during the time, but the person messaging me didn't mind explaining the terminology. She told me that a fem was a feminine woman, and a stud was more masculine.

She taught me a lot of things that I would use. The curiosity I had about women was increased through those late-night chats. The pornography allowed me to explore what a guy being with a girl would look like, but there was also pornography that gave me a visualization of what a girl with a girl would look like.

Sometimes I had questions, and the girl I was chatting with seemed to always have the answers. She was more experienced than I was, and she was open to answering any questions that I may have had.

Eventually, I became comfortable with the thought of having sex with a guy and open to the idea of being with a girl too. I didn't know any girls in my town that were lesbians or even bisexual, but I still had my boyfriend. Apart of me felt that somehow if I were intimate with Malcolm, I would find that I didn't have an interest in women.

I didn't tell Malcolm about my feelings because I didn't want him to think our relationship was in jeopardy.

So, one night while talking on the phone, I told him that I was ready. I heard the excitement in his voice as we made plans on what day would be the best for us. He asked me if I needed him to bring anything, so I told him to make sure he got the weed and music.

A few nights later, he arrived at my house just as planned. He

flashed his headlights at the end of the driveway to let me know that he was out there. I peaked in my sisters' room to make sure she was asleep and quietly crept out of the back door. I ran to his car and jumped in the passenger seat, and rode off into the night.

He parked the car in the middle of nowhere, and we were surrounded by trees and woods as far as the eye could see. I was a big Xscape fan, so he had a CD made with my favorite songs. The sounds of "Do You want to"<sup>1</sup> echoed in the background as he pulled out a pre-rolled blunt, lit it, and gave it to me.

For a while, we sat in silence, smoking and listening to music. He eventually broke the silence, "We don't have to do anything if you don't want to; I'm happy just spending time with you." While his words were comforting, that wouldn't be how the night ended.

It seems like everything changed after that night. Our relationship was different, and I began feeling uninterested in him. He wanted a relationship, but I wasn't sure anymore. I didn't know why; I just felt like something was missing. So, our relationship just transitioned into us being best friends with benefits.

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## THE DOWN LOW

The books of Sister Souljah, Omar Tyree, and Eric Jerome Dickey were all the raves. No matter which class you were in, you were guaranteed to see someone with one of these authors' books. Often giving a chapter by chapter, play-by-play synopsis of the book they were reading. While visiting the local library searching for one of the popular authors, I stumbled across a collection of books written by E. Lynn Harris.

Singer Peggy Scott Adams had everyone singing a song called "Bill."<sup>1</sup> "Bill" was about a husband cheating on his wife and ultimately leaving his family to be with another man. E. Lynn Harris's books had the same concept as the song but offered a unique perspective of the situation.

There was a sect of men that led heterosexual lives in public but slept with other men in private. They did this because they did not want to risk the public backlash that could come from them openly being with other men; they said the men that lived this double life were on the "down-low." E. Lynn Harris's books spoke from the man's viewpoint on the down-low and the man who was secretly with the man on the down-low.

As a girl, the books felt comforting because I was still exploring my

sexuality, and I wasn't in a place to decide what I wanted. Malcolm and I were no longer in a relationship, but most people didn't know because we continued to give the appearance of dating.

Malcolm was the first that I ever spoke to about how I was feeling and the desires I'd had. He was okay with letting me explore, and he understood that I was younger and was trying to find myself.

I continued to visit the chatrooms and talk with other teens about their experiences on how life was, being gay, or questioning their sexualities. Some of their stories were so horrible.

One night, a girl sent me a message to talk. She told me that she was on her friend's computer because her mom had kicked her out of the house. She said that her mom was a Christian, and when her mom found out that she was a lesbian, she gave her an ultimatum. The girl said she tried to date guys, but she didn't like guys, and her mom kicked her out when she learned she was dating a girl.

I remember the girl telling me she couldn't help who she loved and couldn't help that she was born that way. I remember her asking me, who would choose a life of being ostracized?

It had never crossed my mind that perhaps I was born the way that I was, and maybe that the reason I felt attracted to girls was that I was born that way. She gave me an argument that I would use hundreds of times later in life.

I met another girl in the same chatroom that was a sad person. She told me a similar story of being kicked out of her home for being a lesbian, but she now lived with her girlfriend and her girlfriend's mother. She told a story of being raped by several guys to convert her to being straight. She asked the same question, "who would choose this life"?

Their stories stuck with me, and I didn't want to be bi-sexual, lesbian, or anything. I was so afraid of experiencing the same rejections they faced, the bullying, and being deserted by their families. My mom was a Christian, and my dad had changed his life around, and he was also a Christian. What if they disowned me as well? So, I decided that I would keep everything a secret until I could figure out life.

Then I met Raven. We chatted online for a while, which led to talking over the phone. I loved how free she was in her life. We had a

bond that neither of us could deny, the sort of thing that happens when people with similar mindsets get together; the connection was strong. She lived about four hours away, and we knew that we would meet one day.

Raven wasn't afraid to explore her sexuality, whether she was with a male or female, which I truly admired. Our conversations went beyond sex or sexuality talks, but we talked about life issues, school, frustrations, dreams, and desires. Raven became my good morning conversations and my good night conversations. I confided in her about everything, and she helped me become comfortable with who I was. We both knew that we couldn't be together, but I honestly loved her, and I'm pretty sure that the feelings were mutual.

After all the horror stories I had heard about people coming out of the closet, I didn't feel the need to talk about Raven outside of our daily conversations. We talked about marriage and having a life together, but I didn't *really* believe that it would be possible. I'd never known another gay person outside of the computer, and where I'm from, you didn't see any same-sex relationships, and gay marriage was still illegal in all states.

I maintained the best friends with benefits relationship with Malcolm and kept everything else a secret. Maybe that's why I loved E. Lynn Harris books so much, my situation was different, but it was all about secrecy. I mean, that's what the down low was about, secrecy.



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FORCED OUT

Hot Summer Days with my dad in Macon meant that we spent most of our time indoors. We would usually do something after the worst of the heat would pass, but our main focus was to stay indoors where it was cool and comfortable. To pass the time, I did a lot of reading and watching daytime television.

On some days, if I just had to get out, I would have my dad take me to the local library or go with him to his AA meetings. He'd made so many life changes for the better, and I wanted to support him in his recovery. Not to mention, I loved hearing some of the old heads talk about their past lives. I learned a lot, and it helped me understand my dad's journey.

Other days were filled with my sister and I fighting each other. I don't know how or when our sibling rivalry developed, or maybe it was just hormones, but it seemed that we were always fighting about something. The vindictiveness in one of those arguments would set the foundation for some of the worst days of my teenage life.

While I had come to the personal decision to keep my feelings and emotions about my sexuality a secret, it was short-lived. The highlight of most of my days was watching the Ricki Lake Show. I don't know,

maybe that was my biggest mistake, but talk shows in the late '90s and early '00s were the best. I especially loved the makeover shows.

One day Ricki had a lesbian stud makeover show. The show consisted of lesbian couples where the feminine woman wanted her masculine girlfriend to be given a feminine makeover. I thought the show was hilarious because most of the studs on stage were put in dresses and heels that no one knew how to walk in. So, even though they were dressed up, they did not have the feminine qualities to match their new look.

During one of the reveals, one of the ladies came out 'pimp walking' in a dress. This caused me to break out into a hysterical laugh. I guess my laughter irritated my sister, and she came to see what I was watching. After a few seconds of looking at the television, she became furious and began yelling.

"Why are you watching dykes?!?! What's so funny about dykes?!?!" she screamed. She went on a whole tangent, "The only people that would think this show is funny are gay people!" she continued.

I turned the t.v. up to drown out her voice, so she directed her insults to me, "I guess you're a dyke, too," she said. Her words led to us getting into a heated argument, then she outright asked me, "Are you gay?" I remember hesitating for a moment and then responded, "Yes, maybe; why does it matter?"

I thought, was this the real reason for the argument? Was she angry because she felt like I was gay, and what did it have to do with her even if I was? I didn't want to argue anymore after answering her question; I just figured I'd let it be. Unfortunately for me, that wasn't the end for her. Before leaving the room, she told me that she would tell them if I didn't tell my mom and dad that I was gay.

Not really understanding her motives and still wanting to be somewhat in control of my own life, I made a decision that I would tell my dad as soon as possible before she had a chance to make my decision for me. I decided I would tell my mom at some point when we returned to Dublin after the summer break.

So, that night, I took a notebook and wrote a letter. I never thought there would be a potential issue with my family at the time, with me exploring my sexuality and learning who I was, but after the



interaction with my sister, I couldn't imagine what things would be like if they felt the way she did.

I didn't know what to say or how I would say it, but I wrote a letter. I can't remember what the letter said verbatim, but the letter's whole intent was to let my dad know about the feelings that I had been experiencing.

My dad had given his life to Christ and was becoming more involved in church. He would sit at his table, study the Bible, and then go to his room for prayer throughout the day; that helped him maintain his sobriety.

I didn't know what type of reaction I was going to get from him. After I finished writing the letter, I sat and waited for my dad to go to his room for his prayer time, and I asked him if he would read the letter while in there.

It had to be one of the longest waits of my life, but I sat outside the door and waited. So many things went through my mind, and I found myself anticipating what reaction I would receive. I wondered if this would be a deal-breaker for him.

Up until that day, I always felt like my baby sister was my dad's favorite. She was a daddy's baby, and I was a mama's baby. She looked like him, walked like him, and loved the things he loved. She was almost the "spitting image" (as the old folks would say) of him. I don't look like my dad, so I always wondered what he saw when he looked at me.

So much was going through my head until I saw the door open. My dad walked out of his room and said, "This is what I think about your letter." He opened his Bible and showed me two scriptures:

"22 Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is an abomination." *Leviticus 18:22*

AND

"26, For this reason, God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. 27 Likewise, the men, leaving the natural use

of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due."

*Romans 1:26-27*

He said that he believed what the Bible said, and he showed me those scriptures to understand his point of view. Then he said something that I have never forgotten to this very day; he said, "Baby, that's what the Bible says, but I want you to remember that I love you, and there is nothing you could do or be that would stop me from loving you. You're my Neki" (that's what he called me at the time). Then my dad gave me the biggest hug and kissed me on the forehead.

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SCHOOL PAPER

Months had passed since I told my dad about my sexuality. My sister and I had returned home to my mom, and school had started for the year. Everything appeared to be going well, so I disregarded my sister's threat of exposing me to my parents. She was taken aback by my father's response, so initially, she didn't press the issue concerning my mom. I still didn't understand her motive, and it seemed that she was hoping that my parents would be harsh. If that's what she wanted, she eventually got her wish.

I can't remember what we were arguing about, but we got into a heated altercation one weekend. We were probably as close to a physical fight that you could get without actually hitting each other. My mom ran into the living room where we were and asked what was going on. As I tried to explain to my mom what was happening, my sister interrupted me and screamed, "That's why your daughter is gay."

For a moment, there was an awkward silence. As if our fight no longer mattered, my mom turned to look at me and asked if it was true. I hesitated but answered, "Yes, I guess."

After I answered my mom, I watched her eyes gloss over as if she was about to cry. I didn't know what to think as my mom began to scream, "No, please, Nikko, it's not true?" I kept looking at my mom

and her reaction, not realizing the next thing out of her mouth would cut me more than anything, ever. My mom began walking away, crying, and I listened as she continued to beg, "Nikko, please, you can be anything, just don't be gay." Then as if she was in anguish, she screamed, "I'd rather you be a whore, than be gay."

I spent many days and nights trying to wrap my mind around her words. My mom and I were close before that day, but afterward and for a long time after, I held resentment in my heart towards her. Life became so stressful, and I always felt like my sexuality was always the breaking point. It didn't matter what I did or accomplished; I felt like I was always on trial for admitting my sexuality.

That school year, my English teacher gave the class an assignment to write a paper on an event that changed our lives. Part of the assignment was that we would have to read the paper to the class for full credit. I guess you probably know what I chose to write about.

I took the assignment seriously, and I used that moment to write about my experience of telling my parents about my sexuality. After my teacher read the paper, she gave me a 94, only docking for spelling and grammatical errors. She wanted me to share the story, but I didn't want to read the story to the class.

A classmate volunteered to read my paper for me, so I let her. By the end of the day, the topic of my paper had spread throughout the entire school. Dublin is a small city, so I'm guessing many of the students went home and told their families about the paper I had written. It didn't take long for the word of my paper to get back to my mom.

My mom was upset about what I had written. It was more because she was embarrassed by my lifestyle, as if it meant something about her as a parent.

My relationship with my sister suffered even more than it was because she was embarrassed to be known as the sister of the gay girl. I was the only openly identified lesbian (more quickly came); this came with its own set of issues.

Many students would tell me they admired my courage because it took a lot to be open about something like that in our school. I didn't want to be that student, but I felt I didn't have a choice. I had never

dated a girl outside of the internet or even met another bisexual or lesbian girl. That quickly changed after my paper.

I started receiving letters from other girls who were questioning their sexuality. A lot of them wanted to experiment with their sexuality, so guess who they came to? I also received cruel looks at times from those that were extremely against same-sex attractions. Often, I felt it was unfair for kids and adults alike to tell me I was going to hell. I thought it was unfair because I felt like I was a victim of life, and I was being victimized even more for being who I thought I was at the time.

The look on my mom's face would always replay in my mind. A part of me was angry with her, but there was still this other side of me that wanted her approval. The only way I felt that I could gain her support was if I was straight. So, I began praying for God to help me only be attracted to men, not for me, but so my mom could be happy with me.

I thought God had answered my prayers because someone told me about a revival that was going on. I overheard talk about the Apostle and how he was such a 'great' and 'powerful' man of God. He was in town and was having a healing service. That weekend, I begged my mom to let me hold her car and told her that I would be home by 9.

I was surprised when she said yes. I know she probably thought that I would be at a local football game or the movie theatre since it was Friday night. I didn't go to either; I went to the revival. I sat in the church and listened to the entire message, talking to God and telling God that I was going to the altar as soon as they called for prayer. I even found a seat on the church's front row because I was determined not to back out.

I was wearing a polo-style shirt, khaki pants, and some boots. Everyone else was dressed up, but I didn't care. I know I was dressed like a boy, but I was there to get delivered, so I didn't care.

After the Apostle preached, he started praying for people. I saw him pray for this lady in a wheelchair, and she got up and walked across the front of the church. Then there was another lady that couldn't hear; I watched him pray for her. He began whispering questions to her, and her ears were opened. The lady started screaming and crying. I became optimistic and excited because I knew I was in the right place to get the deliverance I needed.

I continued to watch as the Apostle was making his way through the room. He stopped and looked at me, and then he started preaching again. This time his entire message was about same-sex attractions. He told a story about how two lesbians were holding hands and how he won't allow a 'homosexual' to disrespect him. By the time he finished his tangent, I felt like I had been targeted.

Going to church for deliverance suddenly felt like I'd made the wrong decision. I remember looking to the back of the church to see how far I was from the door, and I noticed several people were looking at me as the Apostle continued. I didn't care to attend any church after that. I began to hate church and judgmental church people.

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SHANNON

After the night at church service, I still longed for something, but I lost sight of what I was searching for as time went by. I began falling away from the ideas of the existence of God. I smoked a lot of marijuana and drank a lot of alcohol to help me cope with things I didn't want to deal with. As much as I loved to smoke, something about drinking seemed to make me feel my best. That's how I handled my situation until Shannon came into the picture.

I met Shannon during my Junior year. Our lives were so similar that our connection was almost instant. We'd hang out, go on dates, or talk for hours at a time. She was very charming and seemed to know all the right words to say. We had the rest of our lives mapped out, where we would live, careers, and everything.

Shannon was the first girl that I was ever intimate with. She also confirmed that my attraction to women was incredibly stronger than what I had for men. All the feelings I expected to have during my first time with a male were experienced with her.

Before Shannon, Malcolm and I still were close and saw each other from time to time. So, when Shannon and I started to take a more serious approach, I knew I needed to talk to him. I was looking for a

reason to stop the situation he and I had, but I could never seem to leave him alone entirely.

I was hoping that by me being in a new relationship, it would be easier to break things off with Malcolm. We met and talked about it, but he asked me why I couldn't have a girlfriend and boyfriend at the same time. It never crossed my mind to have both, but I knew that there was no way that Shannon would ever go for anything like that. So, I told Malcolm no, but nothing changed between us.

I should've completely cut Malcolm off, but both Shannon and Malcolm became entangled in my ball of confusion. It wasn't that I didn't know who I wanted to be with because I wanted to be with Shannon, just Shannon. I felt that if I were with Malcolm enough, it would change how I felt about Shannon, but it didn't. Everything I felt for Shannon was the feelings I thought I was supposed to feel for Malcolm because he was a guy. No matter what, I still wanted Shannon.

That was another reason for me wanting to leave home after graduation. I wanted to explore who I was without the fear of judgment or the thought of shaming my family. Our town was so small, and it's hard to fully embrace yourself when trapped in a little place with so many opinions about what you're doing wrong. I didn't want to rock the boat, especially when it came to what other people believed; I just wanted to live in peace until I could leave for good.

Malcolm helped me to project an image, though it was inauthentic, which portrayed me in a favorable (hetero) light to those around me. He knew me better than anyone, so Malcolm was confident that I wanted to be with Shannon when it came to matters of the heart. At times, he even questioned why I wanted to be with her.

Shannon was artistic; like me, we both shared an extreme love for art. She could draw such incredible pictures with elaborate details like I'd never witnessed; she could have easily been an illustrator for children's books. On the other hand, I loved drawing wedding dress designs and had a real affinity for writing poetry and short stories.

We both had plans of going to art college. She wanted to move to Savannah and attend SCAD (The Savannah College of Arts and Design). Being a year older, I had already been in contact with The Art



Institute of Atlanta. They were waiting for me to submit my portfolio for a scholarship; the scholarship would fully cover my tuition. So, I figured that I could attend school in Atlanta for at least the first year and always transfer to Savannah to be with Shannon.

Ultimately, our dream proved to be just that, a dream. I had never considered the gall of me to make plans with someone I wasn't honest with. A lot of things happened that I chose not to discuss with Shannon. I chose to run from those things by joining the military.



## NAVY

I never completed my art portfolio, and my backup plan was to go to the military. I didn't want to go to the military; I just wanted to leave Dublin and start a new life in a new place. The military was the quickest way to become self-sufficient, so I entered the Navy's Delayed Entry Program. I set a date of exactly one month after high school graduation to leave for recruit training command (RTC).

During the month that I prepared for RTC, I ended all of my relationships. I didn't want to have any unfinished business in Dublin, and I was honest with everyone about my intentions of exploring life outside of our town's confinement. I wanted to be free to express myself fully, date, party, and everything else that I wanted to without the threat of hurting someone. Not to mention, I always heard that you didn't thoroughly learn yourself until you left home and had the chance to explore.

On June 22, 2004, my plane pulled into the O'Hare Airport. Before leaving Atlanta, I was instructed to report to The United Service Organization (USO) upon arrival. From there, we were all placed on a bus and road to Great Lakes, IL, to complete eight weeks of Navy R.T.C.

RTC was a lot easier than I thought it would be. The issue I had was that I began to regret my decision to join the military. I didn't care for the rules and found a way to break them at every turn. I remember a fellow recruit and I leaving our quarters one weekend to walk across the campus to the Exchange. I had a taste for chocolate and couldn't get permission to go. It wasn't like I could go to the petty officer and say, "Can I go to the store to get something sweet because this structure and discipline isn't working for me?" They would've laughed in my face and probably made me do those stupid shark exercises; so, we snuck to the store. Then there were the arguments and fighting, which led me to speak with the psychiatrist. I'd never spoken with a therapist before RTC, but the person I spoke with said I showed signs of PTSD. A guy had sexually assaulted me during my relationship with Shannon, and instead of telling anyone about it, I kept living life. Still, I didn't realize how it had begun to affect me until I started having issues adjusting in RTC. I couldn't sleep in the open bay barracks because I had so much anxiety that I would toss and turn all night. I end up being discharged before I went to Accession training (A school) in Mississippi.

I didn't have a backup plan for the Navy because the Navy was my backup plan. It took a while for me to decide what I wanted to do. So, in the meantime, I was back home with my mom. I knew that my main goal was to find work to get out on my own and not depend on anyone, including her. I knew she wanted me to go to college, but I wanted to work.

About two months after returning home, I was hired as a Juvenile Correctional Officer at a local Youth Detention Center (YDC). They weren't the best, but it was more than enough for an 18-year-old. Before starting, I wanted a new look to go with my new job, and I wanted something easy to maintain during my four weeks of Basic Juvenile Correctional Officer Training (BJCOT). So, I went to the stylist and had my hair cut to a short afro.

After the cut, I looked so much like a guy that my mom threatened to kick me out. Me looking like a guy continued to confirm some of the worst fears she had about my sexuality. She didn't kick me out, and

that is the last time I recall her having such a strong and adverse reaction to my life.

I overheard her on the phone with a pastor one night, and because she had the phone on speaker, I could hear both sides of the conversation. I would knock on her door to tell her I had made it home, but I heard her mention my name to the pastor. So, I stood and listened to my mom explain to the pastor how I was still in the 'lesbian lifestyle' and had recently cut my hair. My mom sounded distressed and defeated, and she began to explain my behaviors to the pastor.

What shocked me was the answer that the pastor gave my mom. He told her to leave me alone and that God knew what he was doing with me and how He would use me for His glory. He told my mom to love and pray for me.

I walked away to my room, relieved that he told her to leave me alone; I didn't care about all the other stuff the pastor was talking about. That wouldn't be the only conversation that I would overhear of my mom discussing me. Looking back, I think that maybe God intentionally wanted me to overhear those conversations.



## KIERA

I met Kiera by accident. I thought she was someone else and was quite embarrassed when I realized that she was the wrong person. That simple mistake turned from an awkward situation into an instant friendship.

We shared a weird and sometimes dark sense of humor; our tastes in music and television were also very similar. During this time, she told me that she was kind of in a relationship with a guy, but she had feelings and attractions for women. She'd never dated a woman before, but she was curious.

For me, I had not dated anyone, male or female, since my senior year in high school. It seemed that after graduation, I also graduated from the idea of me ever being with another guy. I lost interest in pursuing men, and with the freedom of adulthood, I began accepting my true identity. I was grown, I liked women, I wanted women, and there was no one to tell me who to be or what to do.

I liked Kiera, but several things about her made me a little hesitant. For one, she said that she was in a relationship with a guy, but the biggest reason was that she had never dated nor been with a woman. Despite all my apprehension about Kiera, I hoped that our friendship would grow into something more.

One night, after having a few drinks, I got the courage to ask her out. I was surprised to get an immediate yes. I asked her about her guy friend. She quickly admitted that she wasn't in a relationship and was free to date.

She attended an HBCU in Albany, so I made plans to go down there for the weekend. With it being a college town, I intended to stay and party for the weekend. If she and I didn't hit it off, I would still have fun and find something to get into.

On the day of our date, we went to the park, an art museum, and out to eat. I'd never been to Albany before, and I wasn't particularly impressed with the area. I guess I expected a little more. There wasn't much to do, but I enjoyed Kiera's company. There was a strong attraction between us. At the end of the night, I told her that I would be leaving out first thing in the morning (a three-hour drive to my home). Before taking her back home, I invited her back to my room; she accepted.

On the way to the room, I told her that I had weed and alcohol in the room and asked if she still wanted to go. I would smoke and drink either way, but I knew that everyone wasn't a smoker or drinker. She didn't care, she still wanted to go, and from that night on, Kiera and I were inseparable.

There's a joke that says, "What does a lesbian bring to a second date, a U-Haul". Suggesting that lesbians tend to move quickly in a relationship. While Kiera and I didn't immediately move in together, we were both sure that we were in love and would be together. Kiera made me want to do better with my life. So, as we continued to date, I resigned from my job as an officer and enrolled in college as a full-time student. Kiera and I talked about building a life together, and I wanted us to have a good life. I wanted a career and knew I needed to go to college to do what I wanted to do in life.

Kiera dropped out of school and moved back home with her parents. She was still three hours away, just three hours in a different direction. She wasn't "out" to her family, so there were many uncomfortable days as she waited on the right day and time to tell her mom that she was dating and in love with a woman. I don't know the full details of her coming out to her mom, but I knew that the



experience wasn't the best for Kiera. Whatever happened drove Kiera and me closer; we developed a bond because it seemed that we were all that we had.

I know that her mom was a Christian, and she may have used the Bible against Kiera. I remember Kiera saying that she never attended church much coming up, and she didn't understand this newfound life that her mom had discovered. Kiera was skeptical when it came to religion. So, religion didn't play a big part in our relationship early on. I had renounced my own beliefs and lived a "spiritual, but not religious" life; that's what I would tell people that tried to preach to me, that I was "spiritual, but not religious" so basically, "leave me alone and get out of my face."

Kiera and I dated for over a year before we hit our first significant relationship issue. One day, my anger got the best of me, and I had a momentary lapse in judgment. Although it was an accident, it resulted in me getting arrested. The officers who arrested me did not thoroughly search me because there was no female officer available, so they overlooked my cell phone in my pocket. On the way to the county, I called my mom and Kiera to explain what happened. The last thing that Kiera told me before hanging up was, "Nikko, you're better than that."



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PROBATION

*A*fter the arrest, I transferred schools from Dublin to Macon to stay with my dad. The judge sentenced me under the First Offenders Act and required me to complete one year of misdemeanor probation. In addition to paying fees, the judge gave me special conditions, one of which was that I stayed enrolled in college as a full-time student for the duration of my probation. I didn't argue with the judge's decision, even though I still felt indifferent about the entire incident. That's the main reason why I left Dublin so that I wouldn't get in any more trouble. There weren't too many more times that I was going to accept being racially disrespected. I was wrong for hitting the manager, but at the time, I felt that it was justifiable.

It seemed that racial issues began to become even more pronounced and overt. I started gravitating to consciousness and studying Afrocentrism. I took a strong stance on being pro-black and began despising things that I thought were oppressive—one of Christianity's main issues based on my opinion. I especially did not want to share a religion with some of the most hateful people; it was a 'slave master's' religion.

When people asked me about my personal beliefs, I always said I was "spiritual, but not religious."

Moving to Macon allowed me to meet and socialize with other like-minded people. I was hired at a convenience store in downtown Macon, where the hiring manager was a part of the Nuwaubian Nation. He allowed me to wear my kufi hats and African garb to work. I also liked that they didn't drug test, and I could play music for my entire shift. I worked the 11-7 overnight shift, and people loved to come to the store after the club because we kept such a laid-back, mellow atmosphere.

Making sure to abide by the conditions of my probation, I would work, get off at 7 am, catch a nap, and be in class by 10 am. Kiera and I were still together, but our relationship became strained because of the obligations I had to fulfill. She had also hit a rough patch in her relationship with her mom, so she moved back to Albany to restart her life. We didn't get a chance to see each other or talk on the phone like we once did, but we had a mutual understanding.

Everything flowed well for a while, but work became stressful because many people were being fired for stealing, which left us short of help. My manager hired a lady close to my age and asked me to train her. Her name was Niecey, and she told me that she was engaged to be married and was working to have personal money because her man paid all of the bills. The more I trained her, the more she became comfortable with me and finally admitted that she was engaged to marry a woman, but her fiancé was transitioning from female to male (transgender).

There's an old saying, "don't get your honey, where you make your money." That would eventually go out of the window for both of us. It seems that all those late-night conversations led to a very intense fling. She found another job at a novelty sex shop and stopped working at the store, but that didn't end our relationship.

One day, while riding, she began talking about her upbringing and how religious her family was. She went into detail about her conflicts with her lifestyle and said she always wondered how a person resolves their beliefs and lifestyle when they conflict. Then she asked me about my beliefs and how they reflected on how I was living. My response was, "If I'm wrong, God gotta come to get me. He gotta show me."

We laughed it off, but I was serious. If God had a problem with

how I was living, He was going to have to come down and tell me personally because I refused to hear it from anyone else. As I write this book and reflect, I truly regret, and I'm sorrowful for the mindset that I held. Those were painful but honest words, and I know that I meant them when I spoke them.

Niecey and I had several more rendezvous after that, but it came to an end once I left for trucking school in Waxahachie, Texas. Going to trucking school was an excellent excuse to get out of our situation because it had indeed ran its course. Feelings were starting to come into play, and I was beginning to miss Kiera. I'd pretty much thrown her to the side, and I didn't like too much of Niecey's in-depth talks. She was falling in love, but I didn't believe it to be realistic.

She was in a relationship, and I knew her type; we were alike. Even if we did manage to become a couple, we'd both end up cheating with someone else. "Hurt people, hurt people," and I was good at that.



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OVER-THE-ROAD

*I*n trucking school, I met a guy from Louisiana. We became close friends and decided that we would become team drivers. Being a team driver meant that our truck would always move, which was constant money flowing. It was a great idea, but being young and inexperienced, we foolishly leased a truck without realizing the financial effects it would have on us.

The country was on the brink of a recession, and diesel prices began to soar. A vast majority of our income was going towards keeping fuel in our truck. We also had a truck note and had to pay for our truck maintenance, and we took every expense from off the top of our check. Some weeks we were clearing checks with negative balances. On other weeks we would make maybe \$120 between the both of us.

At times I didn't have money for basic necessities, and many nights I would fall asleep wondering if I would have enough to eat for the week or how I would budget to get a shower that week; it was rough. While on the road, a bridge collapsed in Minnesota. My mom had been watching the news and panicked because I was in the area of the collapsed bridge the last time I spoke with her. So, she called to make sure that we were safe. She asked if I was okay and if I needed

anything. I needed some things, but my pride wouldn't let me ask. So, I just asked her to pray for me.

My mom got quiet for a second, then she said, "I taught you how to pray when you were young, and there comes a time where we all have to go to God for ourselves." She never said that she wouldn't pray for me, but that's how my mind interpreted it. I became upset with what she said because I felt like she was saying that she wouldn't pray for me. I now realize that she never said she wouldn't pray for me; she only told me that I needed to pray for myself. I had not prayed in so long that I didn't know what to say. If the circumstances had not been so dire, prayer would've been the last thing on my mind.

A few nights later, my teammate was driving overnight while I slept in the bunk. I heard him screaming, "Nikko, you gotta see this." When I went to the front of the truck that he parked on the side of the road, I saw that we were surrounded by snow. We were at a high elevation on the mountain, it was pure white as far as the eyes could see, and snowflakes were flying everywhere. It was so beautiful and so peaceful, far beyond anything I had experienced.

I don't know what it was specifically about that moment, but as I returned to the bunk, I remember thinking that only an amazing creator could create something so beautiful. When I sat on the bunk, I heard something hit the floor. When I looked down, it was the Bible that my dad gave me, staring at me. I thought it was strange, but I picked it up off the floor and went back to bed.

There was a small window over my head in the bunk area; wanting to get one more look before going back to sleep, I peeled back the curtain. I stared out of the window for what seemed like forever. At that moment, I felt the urge to pray. I didn't have the words to say, but I attempted to pray for the first time in years. I said, "Lord, help me."

After that night, I wouldn't say that I prayed in the sense that people would think of prayer, but I'd drive and have conversations with God, sometimes just an entire gripe session. I would tell God how I felt about things and why I stopped believing in Him. I even told God what I needed and desired, but I knew I probably wasn't living the way I needed for Him to do anything about my situation (yes, I told God all of that).



One day while driving across the desert and looking at the sunset, during one of my conversations with God, I remember saying, "Am I talking to myself? How do I know if You hear me?" I had been talking to Him a lot more, but how was I going to know if He was hearing me or if I was talking to myself? I didn't want to talk to Him if I was wasting my time.

Then the strangest thing happened, I got a random call from my dad with a message. He said that he had been to church revival, and a prophetess called him up to give him a message for me. My dad has several daughters, so I asked him how she knew it was me and not another daughter. My dad said he verified with her, and she told him the middle girl, which is me. I asked my dad, "What did she say"? My dad said, she told me to tell you that God said: "He hears you and that you would know what it meant." Then my dad asked, do you know what she's talking about? I was in shock, but I told him that I did understand. After I got off the phone with my dad, I continued to drive in silence. I could not believe that God would take the time to send a message to me. I mean, didn't He know who I was?



## SAVANNAH

*K*iera and I reconciled our relationship while I was on the road. After ending the fling that I had with Niecey and decided that I wanted to be with Kiera. As we approached what would be the anniversary of our third year, Kiera had gotten an apartment and wanted me to come off the road so we could move in together.

I didn't mind moving in with Kiera, but I did not want to live in Albany. For me, Albany wasn't the type of city I wanted to settle down in permanently. I had concerns about the diversity in the city because we were a lesbian couple. Also, Kiera was feminine, so people did not give her a second look. Usually, when I was out in public, I would get many stares because I was a woman with a low haircut in male clothes. Sometimes it reminded me of Dublin, and we both knew that I had no intention of returning to Dublin.

Still, Kiera begged me to move in with her. She asked me to move in for a few weeks, and if I did not like staying with her, I was free to return to driving trucks. Wanting to do anything to make her happy, especially after the situation with Niecey, I decided to stop driving trucks and moved to Albany.

It took about two weeks for me to find work, which was quick for a

recession. I worked at a local call center, where I had to provide technical support for business customers. I hated that job so much that I took smoke breaks, even though I didn't smoke cigarettes. I'd walk outside to talk on the phone, then went back in when the smokers did.

After about seven months, I'd had enough with the call center and felt that it was a dead end job. We both wanted more opportunities and wanted to move to a place where we could live and build roots. We talked about eventually getting a house and even having kids in the future, so we wanted to live somewhere where we could make our desires a reality. We both decided that Albany wasn't the place, and she and I both loved Savannah. So, that's where we decided to relocate.

I secured a decent-paying job in Savannah, working for an armored car company. We were still packing when I got the call confirming a start date. It was such a poorly planned and impulsive decision—we only had about \$2000 in savings and no idea where we would be living. Still optimistic, we got a U-haul, packed, and drove from Albany to Savannah all in one weekend.

After arriving in Savannah, we found an inexpensive hotel to stay. Little did we know that we would be there almost a month before finding somewhere to stay. U-haul gave us a free month of storage, so we put our belongings in storage until we could find a permanent place to stay.

While I was at work, Kiera would research apartment complexes, make calls, and put in applications. We never received a callback, and as the days passed, I realized that we were running out of money. Our finances had gotten to a point where we had to sit down and talk about what we would do. We decided that if nothing had come through by the end of the week, she would temporarily go home to her mom, and I would stay in Savannah until something came through. I didn't want to return to Dublin, so I figured I could sleep in my car and shower at the truck stop until something came through. I had my first check on the way, and I knew it wouldn't be a full check because I started mid pay-period.

The end of the week seemed to come quickly, and we had not heard from any apartment complexes. We packed everything we had in

the room so that everything would be ready for us to check out when I got off. The entire ride to work, I racked my brain, trying to think of a better plan than what we had. I had not prayed since I stopped driving trucks, but I felt so desperate. I started talking to God, apologizing, and explaining my situation. One of the last things I said before getting out of the car was, "I know I probably don't deserve it [Your help], but I need it right now."

That day, I was the driver for the Carolina route, which wasn't a long route compared to our other money routes. Stop by stop, I drove. Every other stop, the guard in the back of the truck would ask me what was wrong or if I was okay. I didn't eat lunch. I just watched the clock all day.

As we were bringing our route in for the day, I took a deep breath and said, "Well, this is it." When we were about ½ mile from our office, my cell phone began to ring. When I answered, there was a lady on the line from one of the apartment complexes. She apologized and said that they had approved the application more than a week ago. She said she had the flu and thought someone else would call me, but they didn't. Then she asked if we were still interested and asked when we wanted to move in.

I told her I would get the keys the same day if I could, but the office would be closed by the time I got off. She said that for the inconvenience we experienced that she would wait. The same day we received the keys and moved our things out of the hotel to the apartment. The lights in the apartment were on, and we had a week to switch them over. So, we spent the night, on the floor, in the new apartment.

I knew Kiera wouldn't understand, but secretly, I began to have questions about God. With the experience I had while driving trucks, then the experience with the apartment, I was curious. I mean, didn't God know that I was a lesbian? Why would He answer a prayer to give me a place to live with my girlfriend? Didn't He know I wasn't going to pray anymore until I needed something else? Did He not hear all the wicked things I've said about Him and His believers? I had so many questions because His actions were counter to what I believed His nature to be.



## PROUD EUNUCH

*K*iera was excited that I had given in and went to the gay pride festival. Forsyth Park was full of decorated booths, music, drinking, and dancing. I hated the heat but found a bit of relief every time we walked under one of Savannah's low-hanging Spanish Moss trees. The atmosphere was a bit flashy and uncomfortable for my taste. Kiera said I was melodramatic when I said the scenery was too gay. After a couple of drinks, I was a little more relaxed.

The thing I found most surprising about the festival was the number of ministry booths. You can imagine how uncomfortable it was walking by a church booth, drinking a cup of liquor. I felt like a heathen drinking and holding hands with my girlfriend. I remember seeing that weird church out of Kansas that protested veteran funerals and gay rights, so I hoped this wouldn't be one of those situations. I'd had enough to drink to know that I would need bail money if that were the case.

Fortunately for us, they were all incredibly nice. We met a lesbian pastor passing out flyers with her partner. We stopped to talk with them for a brief moment, and while they were fascinating, I had no

plans of attending their place of worship. After Kiera and I got home, I threw the flyer and other souvenirs in the bedroom closet.

From time to time, I would think about my time driving trucks and the day I prayed for our apartment. I wanted to know why God answered me. Then I thought about the lesbian pastors and wondered how they reconciled their lifestyle with their spiritual beliefs. The Christianity that I'd known all my life was a very judgmental and hypocritical community. Why would anyone, especially gay people, want to be a part of such a community?

Kiera could always tell when I was pondering something or had a lot on my mind. I found it so strange that she knew me so well, almost like she could read my mind. So, I wasn't surprised when she asked me if I wanted to visit the church of the pastors we'd met at gay pride. Kiera made it clear that she wasn't religious and didn't care for going to church, but she would go with me if it would help me with whatever I was trying to figure out.

Soon after, we decided to attend a service. I was impressed with the service because the pastor seemed to have a wealth of biblical knowledge. I later learned that she had a seminary degree and possibly was a theologian. She studied Hebrew and other biblical languages to understand the original language of scripture. Growing up in rural Georgia, I didn't see people like her. She was the first person I had ever met to have such a love for scripture that she was learning other languages to aid in her understanding of scripture. I guess you could say that I began to idolize her knowledge.

After attending the church for the first time, we became regular attendees. We weren't there every Sunday, but we attended church more than we did in the past. The Sunday I decided to talk to Kiera about joining the church was after the pastor preached a sermon on eunuchs. I'd never read the Bible outside of a few scriptures, so I'd never heard of a eunuch. The pastor explained the eunuchs as castrated males that served the queens and possessed effeminate qualities. I was even more blown away when she read Matthew 19:12:

"For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by



men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it." NKJV

She then would pose a question to the congregation, who are the eunuchs of today? I looked around the congregation and saw a few more "aha" expressions like my own. It seems that all of these years, I'd been fooled and misled through Christianity, but now I knew that I was not only a lesbian but the eunuch of the modern-day.

Kiera and I joined the church, and I wanted to go to every service and Bible study. Our new pastor stressed the importance of reading and knowing scripture for yourself. So, I set out to read the Bible and learn scripture. My pastor encouraged using different Bible translations, a dictionary, and the proper use of the concordance. I always made sure to take notes during services to help me when I was alone and learn to navigate scripture independently.

My pastor wanted us to know why we believed what we believed and to be able to defend our biblical beliefs. So, that meant that a lot of my studying revolved around me wanting to biblically prove to others that same-sex relationships were not a sin. I wanted to prove to others that I was not going to hell for loving another woman.

Kiera and I were approaching our 6th year in our relationship. I loved her and had plans to spend the rest of my life with her. I would study and search for scripture because I wanted to find the peace that the pastor and her partner found. That peace where they serve God as well as nourish a healthy same-sex relationship. The more I read scriptures; it seemed that I had more questions. One night while talking to the assistant pastor, I asked her some biblical questions. She suggested that I enter seminary because I wanted to know so much that she felt the school would benefit me. I would attend seminary for a brief period, but that would be a couple of years after this conversation.



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PROPOSAL

Gay marriage was not legal in Georgia, but they still conducted weddings to symbolize a union between life partners. So, when Kiera and I were asked to be bridesmaid and groomsman (respectively) at our friend's wedding, we were both excited to support them.

We met the Lopez family at church and grew pretty close to them. They were in a long-term relationship like we were, and we welcomed the company of other same-sex couples. I knew that Kiera was happy for them, but occasionally she threw hints suggesting she was thinking about our future. She had no idea that I had been paying on an engagement ring for her and only had a few months left on the payments.

Our friend's wedding came and went, but the silent tension with my relationship with Kiera continued to rise. Some days I wanted to break down and tell her I'm paying on a ring and that she needed to be patient so I could pay it off. It wasn't like I was going to get her just any ring. I wanted her to have something that she would love and was proud to show off.

In the meantime, I continued to faithfully attend church, although Kiera was definitely over going to the Sunday services and Wednesday

Bible studies. The pastor had approached me about being a part of her staff, which meant that I would go through a consecration ceremony. Not really considering Kiera's thoughts on the request, I told the pastor that I would.

I invited my mom to the consecration and was surprised that she and a friend came to support me. Kiera had been in the picture for over six years at that point, so I was happy that the night of the consecration was a cordial, loving, and respectable event.

While leaving the consecration, they stopped me with a message. I was told that there was a prophetic word spoken specifically for me. The message was, "Whenever my destiny and purpose finally line up and collide, that I was going to be a force in the kingdom of God." I never knew the person who sent the message, and during that time, I didn't understand it either.

After the consecration, I took on more responsibility at church. It caused a strain on my relationship. I was not doing too much; it was more so that Kiera didn't care to go to church and wanted things how they were before I started going to church. During an argument one night, Kiera told me I was putting the "God stuff" before her, and she felt like she was competing with God for my love. Her statement put me in a place where I felt like I had to choose her or God.

The argument revealed that her gripe wasn't against me going to church, but it was the fact that she felt like she was playing the second fiddle to God in my life. She felt like she should be number one, and everything else was secondary. I couldn't argue with her feelings because that had always been our relationship dynamics; we placed each other above everything else.

I felt so bad for making Kiera feel like she was feeling. So, to show her she still meant a lot to me, I went to the jewelry store on my next payday and paid her ring off early. I hid the ring in the house until I could find the perfect time to propose to her.

My proposal was probably one of the corniest proposals ever, but I wanted to do it as quickly as possible to smooth things over in our relationship. One weekend, I impulsively drove us to Tybee Island for relaxation and a walk on the beach. We'd only been to the beach two

times since moving to Savannah, so I felt that it would be the perfect place for a proposal.

When we arrived, I began collecting seashells and putting them in my pocket as we passed them in the sand. Kiera didn't feel like walking, so she sat on the beach and watched the waves as I went for a walk; I continued to pick up every seashell I found. Once I had walked far enough and collected enough shells, I found an open space on the sand and spelled "please marry me" in the sand with the seashells. I walked back to where Kiera was sitting and told her how pretty the sand was on the other end of the beach.

At first, she didn't want to go for a walk, but I coaxed her with talks of the sand's color and beauty. She eventually admitted that she needed to stretch her legs and went for a walk with me. Once we got to the spot where I'd laid the seashells, I pointed to the spot and asked her what it was. After studying the shells, she said that it looked like they spelled something. She stood back and attempted to read it. She said, "I think it says, please marry me." She stopped and turned around to look at me. When she turned around, I was on one knee with her ring, asking her to marry me. She smiled, cried, and said, "Yes."



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SEMINARY

I started praying and talking to God every morning. I didn't know if it worked; I just knew that my days were going better once I started praying every day. I did not completely understand everything I was feeling, but the effort was worth it. I didn't have anyone to tell me that God was listening to me like I did when I drove trucks. I had no immediate needs, so I just had to trust that I was reaching God with whatever I was saying.

Kiera and I decided that we were ready to buy a house. We began the house searching process that would lead to us buying our first home. Being engaged, we wanted to work towards a solid foundation and felt that we'd outgrown our apartment.

I'd gotten a job with the City of Savannah, working at the police department 911 call center. She was promoted, so our finances had grown substantially; we were ready to be homeowners.

I still attended church, but it wasn't as frequent as it had been. I tapered off my attendance a bit because I wanted to keep peace in the house with Kiera. One night I received a call requesting an emergency prayer meeting at the pastor's home.

I told Kiera that I would be back quickly, as the pastor only lived about 5 minutes from our home. When I pulled into the pastor's yard,

I noticed that other vehicles were already there. When I stepped on the porch, I felt a strange feeling in the pit of my stomach. There was a strange, eerie feeling at the pastors' home. The sense was so strong that it made me uncomfortable.

When I entered the house, I noticed that the pastor looked strange. Her countenance was something that I'd never witnessed before. Everyone was talking, waiting for others to arrive, but I couldn't help but watch the pastor and how she was moving. I wondered if I was the only one witnessing it, as everyone else did not appear to be as tuned in to her as I was.

Once everyone arrived and we circled to pray, they asked me to pray first. As I opened my mouth to pray, another language came out instead of my words. I stopped praying and tried to choke down my words, but the language continued when I started praying again. It seemed like the lights in the room brightened up, and I heard voices scream. One voice I recognized was the pastor's voice, and it was screaming, "What are you doing that for?" referring to the other language.

It shocked me that the pastor would say something like that, so I opened my eyes. To my surprise, everyone, including the pastor's head, was still bowed. As I looked at them, I continued to hear the voices, although no one changed their position.

Part of me felt exposed in a way. The hairs on my arms stood erect, and I felt something in my gut that let me know that something wasn't right. I felt uneasy, and I had so many questions. I'd experienced nothing like that before, yet I felt some vital spiritual significance to what was happening.

After everyone else had prayed, we all sat down to speak for a moment. The question was asked, who had the interpretations of the tongues I spoke? I listened to the others speak on what they felt God was saying, but nothing aligned with what I'd experienced, so I sat quietly.

On the way home, I had so many questions for God. As the weeks progressed, I lost my interest in the church. Eventually, I became lax on paying tithes and progressed into leaving the church altogether.

Kiera was happy that I had Sundays and Bible study nights free



again. We went on many dates, and it seemed like we were down in Jacksonville every time we had free time. She was originally from a small town in Florida called Quincy, so we spent a fair bit of time in Tallahassee for family functions.

I kept my prayer time, but my Bible reading severely tapered off. I remembered the assistant pastor's suggestion for me to take seminary classes, so as I neared the completion of my bachelor's degree, I searched for an online grad program for theology. I found a small school in Kansas that offered a MA in Theological Studies, which I enrolled in the following semester after graduation.

The program was short-lived because I dropped out after the first year. The classes were not what I thought they would be. It was filled with students who loved to debate scripture and philosophically ponder the meaning of scripture. They gave us the statistics that only 10% of professed Christians had read the Bible in its entirety, they encouraged us to read the entire Bible, but it was never a requirement. I took the survey of the New and Old Testaments, but there was no detailed biblical study.

The professors would all tell us that most people leave seminary not believing in God because the factual truth was too much to embrace. I'd perfected not believing in God in the past, so I was trying to figure out who God was. I didn't want to be a part of something that would confuse me, and after a major class debate in which several classmates said they studied the letters of Paul because novices studied the gospels, I quit. I could no longer take the pretentious attitudes. My classmates were active ministers and pastors, and their debates disturbed me.



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## THE CALL

We found a friendly community on the Southside of Savannah to build a starter home during a boom in newly constructed subdivisions. I was still working at the police department for the City of Savannah, and being a city employee had its benefits when being a first-time homebuyer. I would have to take a few classes, but they would assist in our down payment and other closing costs.

Kiera and I had fallen in love with an unfinished structure that would be a cottage-style home. We met with the developers and were informed that since the home was only partially built, it could take several months to complete the construction and all inspections. We didn't mind waiting, as long as we could move by our anniversary; we were approaching the seventh year of our relationship, which was a milestone for us.

We were so excited about getting a new home. It seemed like everything was falling into the perfect place for us. We always stayed informed on the laws because it appeared that the world was becoming more progressive on legalizing gay marriage. So, we were optimistic that we would be getting legally married sometime in the future. We

planned to get the house situated, and hopefully, once we got settled in, we would begin saving and planning for our wedding.

Being aware of all our upcoming plans, I always kept our finances at the forefront. I wanted to make sure that we had lucrative savings. We never found ourselves in the situation we had experienced a couple of years prior when we initially moved to Savannah. My job had a high turnover rate, so, on many occasions, I had the opportunity to work overtime. I wouldn't say I liked working in communications, but I saw it as a stepping stone to work where I wanted to work, which was with the forensics unit.

I finished school and had my bachelor's degree, and the minimum amount of time working with the agency needed to apply for the forensics unit. I spent two years making sure that I was prepared to apply and transfer when a position was available in the department. I had a plan to retire from the City of Savannah, but I did not want to be a police officer nor work in communications. Luckily for me, you did not have to be a police officer to work forensics.

I never made it to the forensics unit. During the process of having our new home construction completed, my work life began to destabilize. I probably should've quit my job, but part of our home loan criteria was that we had to have a certain amount of time on our job. Meaning if I left my job, not only would it mess up my loan, but I would also be ineligible for all the loan incentives I received as a city employee. It's amazing how one bad night can almost destroy your life.

One evening, while working the 911 call line, I received the worst series of calls that I'd ever taken. I wasn't familiar with terms like vicarious trauma or secondary trauma, but they would quickly be the main topic of life. I still remember the call so vividly.

The phone rang, and I was known for how quickly I answered the phone. So, I picked the call up on the first ring:

**Me:** "Metro 911, where's your emergency?"

**Caller:** \*\*\*screaming\*\*\* "My neighbors' kids are here, they are covered in blood, they said their stepdad stabbed their mom."

**Me:** What is the address?

**Caller:** \*\*\*gives address\*\*\*

**Me:** Are the children okay?

**Caller:** Yes, they're just covered in blood

\*\*\* line disconnects\*\*\*

Soon after I got off the phone, my coworker screamed, "oh my God, listen to this call!" She pressed the playback on the call, and it was a male voice. You could hear her voice answer the phone, "Metro 911, where's your emergency?" the man replied, "Me and my wife, we're going to die tonight."

Then the phone rang again, and I answered, "Metro 911, where's your emergency". The caller began to scream, "My sister has been stabbed; we need help." It turned out that all of those calls were connected. The man who called saying he and his wife would die had already stabbed his wife in front of their children. I learned that the children had blood on them because he committed these acts in front of them. The blood on their bodies wasn't because he hurt the children but was the result of the splatter from where the stepdad repeatedly stabbed the mom.

When I got home from work that night and turned on the television, there was a news story about the woman; she didn't survive the attack. Working at a 911 call center, you rarely have a face to go along with the calls you receive, and even more rare are pictures of the victims. In this case, the woman was a pillar in the community and very loved amongst many people. I remember seeing newspaper articles on her life and tragic end, and it was the talk of the city for a while.

Her husband didn't die, so that meant he would have to stand trial for killing her. Not only did I have a face to the victim, but I had a voice and face to her killer. I hoped that he decided not to take the case to trial because I would be subpoenaed to testify if it went to trial.

I'd testified in cases before, but there was no way that I wanted to be in the same room as the guy.

After the day of that incident, work took a stark change for me. My work shifts became torturous. Whenever a call would come in on the 911 line, my heart would start beating bad, and my hands would start trembling. One evening my chest began to hurt so badly that I couldn't breathe, and my left arm began going numb. I was too young for a heart attack, but I was taken to the emergency room because although a heart attack was unlikely, it was possible.

The hospital ran many tests and took so much blood to figure out what was going on, but all of the tests came back good. The doctor said that I might be tired and in need of rest. So, they gave me an excuse from work for a few days.

During those days home, I tried to get myself focused. Going to work was rough for me, but I had to tough it out. Kiera and I were literally in the middle of buying a home, and I didn't want to mess anything up for us. I didn't want to be the reason that everything fell through.

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PTSD

The episodes at work continued and became so bad that it would interfere with my ability to perform my job. I called out a lot more, and even my appearance had become more unkempt than usual. It wasn't that I had lost interest in grooming, but I was tired due to all the sleep I had been losing.

Not too long after the episodes began, I also started to have repeated nightmares. So, to keep from having nightmares, I would stay up all night. It seemed that every time I fell asleep, the nightmares would come, and this overwhelming feeling of fear would overcome me. When you're not getting enough quality sleep, you don't care how you look or come off to others; all you know is that you're tired and couldn't get any rest.

Between episodes during the day and sleepless nights, I always looked for over-the-counter medications and other vices to help with what I was experiencing. Before the work issue, Kiera was having problems with the amount of alcohol I drank when I did drink. I didn't want to cause any issues between us, so alcohol wasn't my initial go-to for a sleep aid. I began taking over-the-counter medications that were known for making you sleepy. I took a lot of Benadryl and would drink half a bottle of NyQuil to fall asleep.

On the days I didn't have to work, I would have a drink. I would drink enough to get that mellow feeling. Once I started feeling mellow, I knew I was going to sleep well. The problem with drinking was that I didn't realize how easily my body was adjusting to using it on the weekends as a sleep aid. I quickly went from just drinking on my days off to drinking daily, from a few shots at bedtime to a half a pint, a whole pint, then a fifth.

I had it down to a science; I knew that if I got off and drank from the work parking lot to the store, the liquor would have "kicked in" by the time I got home. All there was left for me to do then was eat, relax, and pretend that the small glass of brandy I had while at home was my first glass of the night. I wasn't the best liar, so I highly doubt that Kiera didn't realize that something was off. I think she never brought it up because she didn't want to cause an argument.

Kiera tried to suggest that I see a therapist or "talk to someone," as she put it, but I dismissed it because I felt like she was calling me crazy. That's what people called folks that went to therapy or struggled with mental health issues. I didn't understand what she was trying to tell me until a coworker also suggested the same thing. My coworker gave me a flyer with an 800 number for our EAP (employee assistance program). She told me how they helped her and how they may help me. She was so convincing that I called the EAP the very next day. They set me up an appointment with the company's social worker and said that I would be excused from work during the appointment.

Upon meeting the social worker, she conducted an assessment that consisted of many questions about me, why I was there, and my needs. She explained that any completed sessions would be strictly confidential and that the city covered eight therapy sessions. She educated me on what to expect out of the therapy relationship, and she began doing some form of figuring on her notepad.

After she completed her figuring, she asked me if I'd ever heard of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)? Then she explained that I was showing textbook signs of PTSD. While she wouldn't give me an official diagnosis, she referred me to a local psychiatrist for further evaluation. She explained that it wasn't that she didn't want to work with me but that a resolution for PTSD could take more than eight



sessions depending on the circumstances. She explained that she didn't want to start the therapy process only for me to have to transfer care; I understood.

The psychiatrist diagnosed me with PTSD, Major Depression Disorder (MDD), and Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). The psychiatrist was honest with me and told me that my drinking had exacerbated my symptoms. I would have to commit to not drinking while on the anxiety and depression medications because the mixture of the medicines with alcohol was dangerous and could trigger suicidal thoughts or behaviors.

He paired me with a trauma therapist, a psychologist with over 20 years of working with trauma and PTSD patients. The psychiatrist said that he paired me with her because of her experience and the number of successful cases she has had amongst first responders, soldiers, rape victims, and natural disaster victims. The original plan was for me to have weekly, one-hour counseling sessions with her.

Once I started counseling with the therapist, the sessions proved to be way more intense than I initially thought. So, she began to recommend that I come to the office twice a week until we get over the intensity. Trauma work caused me to relive the day at work over and over. Initially, the therapist was puzzled as to why I was so emotional when talking about the children. I guess most people would've been more fixated on the stabbing itself, but not me. The therapist said I acted as if I was personally experiencing everything along with the children.

During one session, she began asking me about the nightmares that I'd been having. I told her about the reoccurring dreams that I would have of me sitting in a dark room. While in the room, I could hear the sound of bodies hitting the wall. I could hear things being thrown and screams on the other side of the door. I would try to get to the room to help, but I could never make it.

The therapist asked me if my dreams had any significance or reminded me of a particular time in my life. I told her about some of the incidents I experienced in my childhood. She looked at me as if she was about to cry, and she said, "I understand what's going on."

She began to explain to me about my childhood experiences being

trauma in themselves. I was confused and reminded my therapist that my mom was alive and that my dad didn't kill anybody. She said, "No, he didn't, but did you ever have fear growing up, on the worst-case scenarios?" I told her I did. As a kid, I always feared that one day my dad would kill my mom or severely hurt her during one of their arguments. My therapist told me, "those kids lived your worst nightmare."

## TRICKED

While attended therapy, we closed on our home, and I was transferred to a different unit at work. It felt like things were getting back to normal, and the new unit proved to be less stressful than working in the communication center.

One evening as we boxed up items in our apartment, Kiera interrupted the silence to ask me if I still loved her. Part of me felt like it was a rhetorical question, but it was also random for her to ask such a thing; I answered her and told her, "Yes, of course, I love you." I thought that was the end of the conversation, but she kept going and asked me how much I loved her. I told her that I loved her enough to spend my life with her. Even still, she wanted to know if I was sure.

I assumed that Kiera knew how I felt about her because we'd been together so long, and we were packing our things to move into our new home. I don't know; maybe she needed reassurance because all the changes were making her question where our relationship was going. The effects of having a partner with PTSD takes a toll on everyone, not just the person with the diagnosis. In my web of treatment, I imagine she would often go lacking.

Not to mention that the medications they had me taking for depression and anxiety affected my libido. I didn't know until after

taking medicine for a while that my sex drive had decreased significantly. I built quite a collection of pornography and had several subscriptions to online channels to help with the issues I was having. This could easily be misinterpreted as me not having any interest in her anymore, but it was the medication.

Eventually, I did speak with my psychiatrist about the issues I was having with the medications, and he changed them. The only problem was that the medications that screwed up my sex drive were working for me therapeutically. Once my medications were changed, my libido returned, but so did the depression and anxiety that the previous medications remedied.

I couldn't handle the intense depression and anxiety every day, so I began to increase my drinking again. I remember what the psychiatrist said, but I never really stopped drinking; I just scaled back some. It didn't take much for me to increase my drinking, just a little bit not to have to deal with those intense emotions.

Some days, if I didn't have anything else readily available to drink with my medication, I would take my pills with alcohol. I loved the feeling of mixing my Klonopin with the brandy. I loved the laid-back, mellow feel of not worrying about anything.

I don't believe we'd been in our new home an entire month when the voices started. It started as a simple voice saying, "You know you could just kill yourself, and everything would be better." That voice grew into this mantra in my mind, to where some days it would be so loud that I couldn't think.

During a time, I should've been extremely happy; my mind was tormenting me. I couldn't enjoy our new home because my mind was blanketing me with a pillar of darkness. I couldn't control it, and I didn't know where these "kill yourself" voices were coming from. I would drink more, and they'd stop for a while, but then they'd return as soon as the alcohol began to wear off.

I missed a few therapy sessions, which caused my therapist to become concerned. During a session that I attended after missing two weeks, she told me that she noticed that my countenance had changed, that I had a "gray hue." I had no idea what she meant by a "gray hue,"

but she explained that my skin had changed and taken on a gray look that I didn't have before.

Because of her concern, she asked me if I would be willing to check into a hospital for observation. I guess they call it therapist intuition, but she begged me to go to the hospital to ensure that I was stable. I rejected the idea of going to a hospital because she wasn't talking about a regular hospital. I watched television and heard the stories of electroshock therapy and straitjackets. She promised me that she would send me to a nice place and that it would be nothing like the horror stories. I was reluctant, but after talking with Kiera, I agreed to go. My therapist set everything up to go to treatment at a location about an hour from our home. Kiera was to take me and drop me off, and it was understood that since I voluntarily checked myself in, I could freely check myself out if I decided that I didn't want to be there.

Once we arrived at the hospital and my admission was complete, they excused Kiera to leave. After we said our goodbyes, they took me to my unit. On the way to the unit, we stopped by the room, and the admissions lady gave me two books. One of the books said Emotional Anonymous (EA), and the other book said Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). I asked the lady what I needed an AA book for, and she told me that I would need it for my meetings.

I was livid! My therapist had sent me to rehab. I felt like she had betrayed me and that if she thought I had a problem, she should've said something to me, not trick me into attending some rehab. I felt that Kiera and the therapist were in cahoots with each other. I couldn't wait for my first meeting with the doctor because I would sign myself out; it was my choice.



## REHAB

On the first day of rehab, I stayed in my room all day long. I didn't socialize, I refused group, I didn't eat, and I didn't want to be bothered by anyone. I figured I would wait until my appointment with the doctor, and I'd be released to go home. Now, I honestly knew how Amy Winehouse felt when she sang "Rehab".<sup>1</sup> I would sit on my bed and hum the tune to the song.

The technicians would come to check on me during their rounds, but they didn't force me to participate. I know I wasn't the only one on the floor feeling the way I was feeling from the sound of things. I could hear the techs checking on other people that had stayed in their rooms as well. I wondered if the others had been tricked too or if they wanted to be there.

I had plans to stay in my room during my second day of rehab, but the doctor called for me to come to her office first thing that morning. I was so excited to see the doctor because I would explain to her how much of a mistake it was that I was sent there, and then I would sign my release and go home.

When I entered the office, I saw this little old lady sitting at the desk. She had to be way beyond retirement years and probably older than my grandparents. She was old school in her approach, and the

way she stared at me, I felt like a little kid about to get reprimanded by their grandmother. I knew the technicians told her about my attitude from the moment she started talking.

She asked me why I thought I was there. I told her how my therapist had lied to me and told me I was coming to get rest and observation. I expressed that there had to be a mistake because I wasn't on drugs or anything; I just had a drink from time to time. I let her know upfront that I wasn't an alcoholic if that was what they were trying to suggest.

She didn't try to convince me otherwise; she just gave me a crash lesson on alcohol. It was the first time that I heard that alcohol was a depressant and about the long-term effects of drinking. I felt uncomfortable, and she told me about withdrawals and shared that some people died from alcohol withdrawals. I later learned that some were in their rooms like I was detoxing from different drugs, and some were detoxing from alcohol.

After her spiel, I was afraid I had not been honest about my drinking and was worried that I had done something wrong with my body. When she started the actual assessment, I was open but so embarrassed with my answers. When she finished her assessments, she told me that I did not have a severe alcohol disorder yet, but showed many signs of episodic alcoholism. With episodic drinking, it could quickly become an extreme case.

We talked about the suicidal thoughts I'd had and the role that drinking and mixing medication play in those thoughts. She diagnosed me with Bipolar II disorder due to the psychotic experiences that I had with the voices resulting from my behaviors. She told me how people experience substance-induced mental health symptoms and asked if I would give groups a chance. She assured me that I wouldn't be in the hospital long, and they were observing me to make sure that I was stable before being released.

After meeting with the doctor, I attended my first 12-step group at the hospital. I didn't like being there, but I sat quietly and listened to everyone else's story. Some of their stories made me want to drink because they were so depressing and sad.

After the group, I sat at a table in the living area. I saw a guy,



probably the only other person close to my age, sitting at the other end, completing a puzzle. He got up and came to introduce himself. He said his name was "Ishmael like in the Bible," but I could call him Ish for short; his friends called him Ish. Ish asked me if I wanted to hear something that came to him while putting his puzzle together. That had to be the strangest question I'd ever been asked upon meeting someone, but I told him that he could tell me. Ish shared that while he was putting together the puzzle, he noticed that the puzzle looked weird. He said that after further investigation, he discovered that one of the puzzle pieces had gotten mixed up, but he didn't notice because it fit the one he was working on. Ish smiled after he told me that as if I was supposed to get what he was trying to say. I was lost. I figured he'd just find the correct puzzle piece, and that would be it. Ish laughed and told me that I didn't get it, and he was right.

Then he said, "That puzzle piece is like us and life. Just because we fit doesn't mean that's where we are supposed to be." He continued, "that puzzle piece fitted perfectly, but it was connected to the wrong puzzle; that's why the picture was off. We're the same way, we may fit into certain situations and even get comfortable, but when you look at the complete picture, that doesn't mean that we belong there."

After seven days of being in inpatient treatment, they deemed me stable enough to be released. I never forgot that conversation with Ish. Looking back, I know that those words were meant for me, "just because we fit doesn't mean we belong."



## RAELYNN

*A*fter being released from rehab, I told my therapist that I no longer wanted to work with her. I did get something out of my inpatient stay, but I felt that she had tricked me, and I couldn't trust her. My case was then transferred to another therapist in the same office. My new therapist also specialized in trauma, but most of her cases were sexual assaults, molestations, rapes, and things of that nature.

I respected her because she always asked me what I wanted to talk about that day. The only issue was that I never knew what I wanted to talk about. She'd read the notes from the previous therapist because it was all in-house. It seemed that my new therapist was more interested in my history of molestation and rape.

I'd never talked about either incident in detail before meeting this therapist. I didn't think it was necessary since it had happened so long ago. I had to deal with a lot of self-images and accepting myself. I didn't realize how much I despised myself until I started counseling with her. I learned that I had perceived myself as weak because I couldn't defend myself through those events. Not realizing that, I compensated for my perceptions of myself by exuding an over-aggressive approach to life. The therapist was sharp, and she helped

me learn how to cope with situations instead of burying my head in the sand or completely dismissing things I did not like nor had power and control over.

Also, when I came back from treatment, I was cleared to return to work. While I was gone, there had been several new hires for my shift. Being that I had worked longer, I was bumped up to the supervisor for my shift.

Raelynn was one of the three people that was hired. She had a thick accent, which I quickly learned was Trinidadian. She had a sweet personality, was very mature for her age, and was a devoted wife.

She proved to be an amicable person, but initially, I thought she wasn't too fond of me due to my sexuality. Still, we managed to have a conversation one night about the Bible, which would ultimately turn into a weekly Bible study at work.

During one of those nights, Raelynn admitted that she could see that I studied and understood the word well, but she could not understand my lifestyle. How could someone that studied the Bible so much and knew scripture could explain living a life that justified homosexuality?

I was offended at her statement, but we'd had biblical debates before, so I tried to fight through my offense to hear her explain her perspective. As I heard her out, she said something that stuck with me. She told me that I couldn't just read the Bible like a regular book. She explained that the Bible wasn't a history or philosophy book like what we read in school. She explained that when she read the Bible, she heard what God had to say about a scripture or passage.

During my brief time in theology school, I heard of God's *logos* and *Rhema* (revelatory) word, but the emphasis was always on *logos* (written).

Raelynn explained the need for the *Rhema* word to see what God is saying through the written word. Before that night, I had gloried in my ability to study, memorize, and even manipulate scripture to a certain extent, but Raelynn was teaching me about a different dimension of understanding scripture through revelation. There were things that I did not understand because, God doesn't reveal the mysteries of the kingdom heaven to everyone. So, you can read, quote

scripture, and comprehend what you read, yet fail to have a Godly understanding of what scripture truly means.

This is why I speak to them in parables:

**“13** Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. **14** In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. **15** For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.” Matthew 13:13-15 NIV

Raelynn told me that my interpretation of scripture was erroneous because I treated the Bible like a textbook and not a spiritual manual. I've tried to understand and explain spiritual things with no spiritual understanding and void of the Holy Spirits' counsel. Ouch!

I wanted to be aggravated with Raelynn's truth, but there was something about what she explained. I didn't want her to be correct, yet I knew she was speaking the truth. I had not considered that reading scripture without God's power to reveal the scripture to me could lead to error. I had grown accustomed to my erroneous beliefs because they made me feel comfortable in my life. When you can make scripture validate your lifestyle, you can scripturally manipulate people into accepting your lifestyle as well. Raelynn was genuinely beginning to disarm me. She said she would be praying for me to learn the truth.



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DIVINE DREAMS

I fell asleep in the living room one night. I usually didn't sleep on the couch, but I was watching television, and the last thing I recalled having, was a drink and then telling God that I couldn't stop drinking unless he stopped me.

It might sound crazy, but I would drink and talk to God. On this particular night, I was watching Mike Murdock on television. He went on talking about, "if you let go of what's in your hands, then God will let go of what's in His hand."

I looked in my hands and saw my glass of brandy. At that moment, I was honest with God. I couldn't control my appetite, so if I were going to stop drinking, He'd have to help me.

I fell asleep in the middle of the broadcasting only to be awakened by a strange sound and a weird feeling. When I opened my eyes, I saw the most bizarre thing. I was surrounded by what appeared to be giant, opaque-looking wings. The wings had formed a circle around me, and they began to rotate around me; it felt as if they were washing me. Thinking I was hallucinating, I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, the wings were still rotating around me. When I finally woke up, I went to the kitchen and poured my alcohol out. I chalked it up to

maybe I had too much to drink, even though I'd only had one glass (which was a tiny amount for what I usually drank).

The very next night, Kiera and I went to bed. I didn't stay up late, nor did I drink because I still wondered about the things that happened the night before. Midway through the second night, I experienced a brightness in our room. I thought Kiera had gotten up and had the light on for some reason. The only problem was that it seemed that after a while, she had forgotten to turn the light off.

I got up to tell her to turn the lights off, but I saw that the light wasn't coming from our room when I opened my eyes. I saw this male-like figure standing at the podium. The figure looked in my direction, and once he saw I was paying attention, he began reading from a scroll-like document. I could not understand his words because he was speaking in another language. I kept telling him that I didn't understand what he was saying because I didn't speak his language. He kept reading, but at one point, I could make out the word "prophecy" as he kept talking in the other language.

When he was done, I woke up. I stayed in bed, but I couldn't sleep. I couldn't help but believe that my dreams had a connection, but I didn't have anyone to talk to about those experiences except my mom or Raelynn.

Strange things seemed to happen from the moment I met her. She was the one who said she would pray that God reveals himself to me truthfully. I eventually told my mom about the experiences. She wasn't sure either but said that maybe God was dealing with me about me.

Those experiences continued to stay on my mind, so much so that I asked Kiera if I could turn our free room into a temporary workspace. She didn't mind as long as I understood that the room was to be used for a nursery whenever we decided to have children.

I'd wait for her to leave for work, and I took my Bible in the room and closed the door. I sat on the futon and held the Bible. While holding the Bible, I told God that I would read the Bible from cover to cover. I said to Him that I was a blank slate, and I was reading with no plan or preconceived notion about who He was as I'd done so many times before. I told God that I'd been dealing with a lot for a long



time, and if He was real, and felt that the way I was living was wrong, then this was His chance to show me.

I told God that I was going to meet Him and read at the same time every day. I told Him that I wasn't sure how much sin I was in, if any, so I'd repent for the known and unknown before I read, "just in case." I guess you could say I was making a deal or bet with God.

At first I was apprehensive because I'd read the Bible before and never seemed to get anything different than what I'd always gotten, which was usually sharpened arguments for debating professed believers. So, I don't know why I chose this way or any way for God to show Himself to me, but I did.

It took me about three months to do a cover-to-cover read. During that read, it seemed like every question that arose, there was an answer too. I began to learn about God and know God in a way that I had never experienced. I was convicted for living as a lesbian and even convicted for drinking and viewing the porn websites, channel subscriptions and memberships (which I would have to write a whole book just centered on porn addiction).

You would think that a person who had come into the truth would be delighted, but I wasn't; I was sad. I was sad because I didn't know what to do with the truth I had learned. I was sad because I didn't know what it meant to see the truth and still be comfortable where I was in life. Indeed, God wouldn't require me to leave my relationship, the love of my life, and the best thing that I felt ever happened to me. I did what I knew to do and what I felt was best for Kiera and me. I told God that I know the truth, I see the truth, but I still would stay with Kiera and keep my life the way it was.

I didn't know the spiritual darkness that attaches itself to you when you see the truth yet chose to go another way. I had not experienced anything compared to what was going to transpire in my life suddenly. Often, we don't realize the magnitude of the things God shielded us from. There is nothing like living a life where rebellion removes you from the covering of God.

"And even as they did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge,

God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting,” Romans 1:28 NKJV

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TORMENT

Marriage still wasn't legal in Georgia, so Kiera and I decided to have a legal name change as a symbol of our union. We wanted an identity that was uniquely ours, so we combined three letters from her maiden name and three letters from mine to create a new sir name for both of us.

We paid for the legal change in our name, and I called Kiera, my wife. With an understanding that once marriage was legal, we would make our union official.

Several cases were scheduled to go before the supreme court, and we were hopeful that the ban on gay marriage would be overturned in one of those cases, making it legal to marry. Optimistically, as we waited for the outcomes, we began preparing for a wedding.

A name change meant that all of our legal documents would change, which meant that I would go by my new last name at work.

My coworker Raelynn and I continued to have discussions about God and the Bible when we worked together; I never told her about the dreams nor the experience I had with studying the Bible. She was very outspoken, so I knew she would ask me why Kiera and I changed our names.

Raelynn did ask, but she went a step further and asked me what

was it about Kiera that had made me stay with her so long, why I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her knowing that I was intentionally defying God? It was a very uncomfortable few seconds, but I told Raelynn about all the things Kiera and I had overcome and survived together and that I just felt she was the one that I was supposed to be with.

Raelynn asked me if I'd ever heard of soul ties; I had not. She explained to me how people stay in relationships that aren't for them, not because of love, but soul ties, and if you don't know what love is, it's easy to believe that you're in love when you're illegally tied to someone because of sin; it's spiritually destructive. She told me that there are Godly soul ties that build people up in the ways of God, but an unGodly soul tie would draw you further away from God. Then Raelynn said that she knew that I knew the word; that's why she brought it up.

She was saying that I had an ungodly soul tie with Kiera. I couldn't accept what she was saying as accurate, although it made perfect sense, just not in my case. I chose Kiera over God like I'd done so many times. I had already told God how I felt and what I planned, so I appreciated the talk with Raelynn, but it wasn't going to change my decision. We already had the name change and were planning a wedding; we were too deep to turn back over a conversation.

In the weeks following the name change, I had one of the quickest declines in health ever. Out of nowhere, I stopped sleeping. My sleep was so disturbed that I couldn't sleep. I began to go days at a time suffering from severe insomnia. The doctors gave me a pill for sleeping, but I had an adverse reaction to the pill; I was sleepwalking, sleep talking, sleep cooking, and sleep eating. I was taken off the medication and placed on another. That medication didn't work either, so when the doctors attempted to give me yet another pill, I refused because I started to feel like a lab rat; I stopped taking all prescribed medications at that point.

Then the voices came back. This time they were different; they were more aggressive, loud, and nonstop. I would sit in my car some days after getting off work and wonder what was going on with me. Why couldn't I control and stop this?

One night the voices were so bad when I got off work that I took off my uniform shirt, went to the store around the corner from my job, got the biggest cup with the biggest beer I could find, filled my cup, and drove home as I drank. I stopped by the liquor store on the way home and got a pint of brandy for later. It only took that one night for me to fall back into old drinking habits. There's a recovery quote from AA that says, "one is too many and a thousand is never enough."

From that night on, I stopped by the store to get a beer, threw my cup away before getting home, and finished my brandy in time to eat something to mask the smell of alcohol from Kiera. She didn't want me to drink anymore because of I was different when I drank.

Before, when I drank, the voices would stop, but they didn't stop this go around. Whether I was dry or intoxicated, they were there. I would try to drink more and more, but they never left. All I heard were them continually saying things like, "do you feel like killing yourself today?", "if you kill yourself, we'll leave you alone," "you know you will be at peace if you die," "If you die, you wouldn't know that you failed because you would be dead," "Why don't you get your gun, only one trigger pull to the head." They were nonstop!

I kept drinking more to stop the voices; I drank so much that I began to lose time. There were complete blocks of time unaccounted for; I could not remember anything. The scariest blackout was when I woke up on the kitchen floor to Kiera screaming and my loaded .40 sitting in my lap. I didn't know what was going on, nor how I got on the floor. I just knew that she was screaming, crying, and shaking me to make me snap out of whatever I was into.

She called my therapist, and all of my weapons were taken. I was told that I would get them back once I was stable and was no longer drinking with suicidal ideation. This also led me to be admitted into another facility, strictly psychiatric, for depression and suicidal ideation. I stayed a week at this facility, but I didn't feel any better when released. The voices were still loud, and I knew no one would be able to help me. It felt like I was stuck in a never-ending nightmare. I felt helpless and hopeless, so, I gave up on therapy.

Over time, my anxiety became so debilitating that I began having panic attacks in public places like malls or grocery stores which caused

me to stop going to public places. I became so paranoid that I bought a camera system for the house to keep a watch over its perimeter. I was scared to leave home except to go to work or the liquor store. I was losing my mind, and I didn't know how much more or how further it would go. I was going through severe mental distress; growing up, we called it a nervous breakdown. In case your were wondering, this is what it's like to live outside of the peace of God; there is no peace.

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SUICIDE

I woke up one morning in one of the gloomiest hazes I'd ever experienced. I felt defeated as things would never get any better. I felt like my mind was gone for good, and every thought that I would ever have again were the thoughts I'd been having, and nothing or no one could stop what I was experiencing. I rehashed how therapy was no help, the medication made me miserable, and the drinking made me even more miserable.

I saw what my mental issues were doing to Kiera, and I wanted so badly to be the loving, humorous person that she fell in love with. I knew that waking up to me every morning, for her, meant facing unpredictability and emotional roller coasters. She even commented that she felt like she was treading on thin ice or walking on eggshells around me because she never knew what type of mood I would be in for the day.

I knew that life for her had become stressful, and I felt guilty to see that I was the cause. I didn't want her to have to deal with me forever, but at the same time, I didn't think I could live without her. I wouldn't be able to live if she left me because she was my everything, and I needed her like I needed air or water. I knew she was getting tired of

all the problems that had hit our relationship, and I wondered, how much should a person have to take?

As all of this crossed my mind, I felt a heavy burden as I went to work. Even sitting at my work desk, there was an over-saturation of gloom and despair. I can't explain; I was just tired. As I racked my mind on what to do, I heard a voice say, "you can end it today and be done with this torment." For the first time, something within me resonated with the voice; maybe that was the solution.

So, I told Raelynn that I was leaving, and I walked off my job. I didn't have a plan or anything. I didn't know what I would do; I just got in my car and began driving around in silence. As I passed a dollar store, I remembered someone telling me that overdosing on acetaminophen was fatal if you took enough. I pulled into the parking lot of the dollar store and went into the store.

I searched up and down the medicine aisle until I came across a bottle of extra-strength pills. Before going to check out, I did quick math inside of the store. The bottle had 50 pills, and at 500MG a piece, I came to the total that I would ingest 25,000MG, which should be more than enough for me to die. I got back in my car and drove until I came to a grocery store with a huge parking lot. I parked my car at the far end of the lot, and I sat in silence.

I asked myself, "Do you want to do this? Is this the answer?" I could not find one reason not to take those pills, so I made peace with my decision. I opened the pill bottle and noticed that the pills were a lot bigger than I thought. Instead of trying to take a lot of them at once, I sat in my car and swallowed pill after pill. After a while, I took the entire bottle and turned it up like a glass of water to swallow more quickly.

My phone began to ring; it was Kiera. After talking to her for a few seconds, she realized that I wasn't at work and became concerned. I apologized to her for all the trouble I'd caused her and the direction that our relationship had taken. I apologized to her because it was my fault for getting sick.

She asked where I was, and I told her. We continued to talk, and in a matter of minutes, she pulled into the parking lot. When she got to the car and saw the pills, she called 911.



There happened to be a paramedic somewhere in the area; I later learned they were on a lunch break. They arrived super-fast and searched to see how many pills I'd ingested. I didn't finish the entire bottle, but a good bit of the pills were gone. I was tired but well aware of what was going on around me.

The medics put me on a gurney and then in the back of the ambulance. The paramedic asked me questions and explained what they were doing and various equipment on the way to the hospital. I had to unbutton my top shirt, and when I did, my cross shaped necklace was exposed. When one of the medics saw the chain, he stopped working and told the other medic to hold on.

The medic then asked me if he could pray for me. I thought it was strange, but I agreed to it. The paramedic never hooked up my IV or did any more work; he began praying and prayed all the way to the hospital. When we arrived at the hospital, the medic looked at me and said, "we all have to die, so you will die one day, but it won't be today."

The nurses gave me two bottles of activated charcoal. They ran tests on my blood, and the results showed that I'd ingested a lot. Even with the activated charcoal, the acetaminophen level was dangerously high in my blood. All the rooms were full, so I had to stay on a gurney in front of the nurse's station with nurses and a guard watching me all night.

All night long, they tested my blood to make sure that the medication was leaving my system. They put me in a room during the early morning hours, and a doctor and several residents came into my room. They surrounded my bed like I was an art exhibit or something.

The doctor checked my liver and kidneys, asking if I had pain in any of those areas; I did not. She also ordered tests to make sure that everything was functioning as it should. She returned a few hours later to do the same check, but this time she was alone. She told me that my tests were OK and that I would be discharged soon. As she was leaving, she turned back around and came to my bedside.

She looked at me with really stern eyes and told me how blessed I was. She said I had taken enough medicine to liquify my liver, which would've been an excruciating death. She said that whatever I had going on in life, I needed to figure it out. She had me committed for a

72-hour mental health observational hold and encouraged me to pray and do whatever I needed to do to figure it out.

I found myself in psyche inpatient treatment for the third time in less than a year. This time I arrived, I was given a book. I looked at the book and realized it was a Bible. I was taken to the day area with the other patients; I sat alone on the floor.

The supervisor of the residential unit came to talk to me. I knew he wanted to know what had happened because I had not too long left. He sat down beside me and sat in silence. I broke the silence by telling him everything that I'd been dealing with and how I felt. I didn't want to be in the hospital because it was just a reminder of everything else. He looked at me and said, "we're going to help you, but you've got to give yourself a chance."

At the hospital, I continued to recall that medic, his prayers, and his words. I thought about the doctor and her words. I knew all of that wasn't just some weird coincidence. During this hospital stay, I made up my mind that I was going to try.

They gave me a single bedroom, something I'd never had during an inpatient stay. Late at night, I would read the Bible they gave me. Every night, I'd ask God, "Now, what?" I couldn't live peacefully, and my suicide attempt had failed; now what?

## TIRED

*"While cleaning my house today, I got the word: 'Try Jesus, what else do you have to lose?'" I began thinking about my life and all the changes that have taken place. Sometimes I feel as if I've gone as far as I can go, then I'm reminded that the battle was never mine to begin with. It was never God's place for me to stress myself almost to the point of giving up. Now that I've reached the end of the road, what do I have to lose? I have nothing to lose but everything to gain. I'm not a betting woman, but I'm going to take a chance and allow God to direct me."*

— AUGUST 18, 2013 , 1:56 PM SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

I wrote that as a Facebook status exactly five months after the suicide attempt. After I was released from the 72-hour hold; I stayed a total of 7 days. I was enrolled in an intensive outpatient (IOP) treatment program, which meant that my entire summer was spent in group therapy four days a week, for a minimum of three hours a day. On the fifth day of the week, I met with my therapist (I had to restart therapy).

I used a lot of leave from work, so I had concerns that I would not be allowed to return if I ran out of FMLA. My therapist did not believe that I was in a place of mental stability and thought that work would be added stress. She was honest and told me that her recommendation was for me not to return to work. She and my treatment team felt that I should resign from my job and seek disability because I wasn't functioning in a way that said I was mentally sound to deal with daily stressors.

They were saying that I needed to focus on my health because my mind was unstable and that they didn't believe that I would ever be stable enough to work again. It could take years to get approved for disability, and I felt I was only experiencing a few life challenges. I also worried about finances, with a new house and two car payments. Kiera worked, but my job covered the majority of our financial obligations. Not working would mean that we would possibly lose our home and our entire livelihood. Not to mention, I felt that I was too young and had too much to offer to spend the rest of my life not working. My entire life was flashing before my eyes.

Since the suicide attempt and having late nights at the inpatient facility, I was pushed back to establish a stronger prayer life. I didn't immediately leave my job, but that day, I left the treatment feeling defeated. I broke down in the car, and I prayed. I begged God to heal my mind so that I could function. I begged God to take away the taste for alcohol and give me back my life and sanity. I begged God not to take my job and let me work.

At that moment, I began to recall all the times I chose Kiera and my life over God. I remembered how I used to tell people that God would have to come to get me if He wanted me to change. I felt an overwhelming feeling of guilt and shame about all the things I had said and done. How could I ask God for anything, knowing that I had pretty much disowned him?

One day I was cleaning. I was talking to God, feeling helpless; I asked, "what am I supposed to do?" Everything was happening so quickly, and I was on the brink of losing everything. I had not been cleared to return to work, and my life was disintegrating in a way that

made me feel like I had no control. That's when I heard the words, "Try Jesus, what else do you have to lose?"

For most of my life, I had accepted living life with a form of God. I never desired to give up anything or surrender anything to God; I didn't feel I needed to. Life was never perfect, but doing my own thing wasn't bad. During the times that I flirted with trying to follow God, there were always stipulations as to how I wanted to worship and serve Him.

Even in attending church, I thought about the sermons like the one I heard about the Eunuchs. Something in me didn't agree with the sermon, but I went with it because it made me feel comfortable in my own beliefs. At the place I was, I felt like God was saying, leave my agendas and manipulative ways, and allow Him to govern my life.

I was tired of suffering, so that day, while cleaning, I chose God. I asked God to teach me what I needed to know and help me where I had missed it. I told God that I felt the only real thing I had left to lose was Kiera, and I love her, but if we weren't meant to be together, to help me get where I need to be.

It was selfish, but I begged God to allow me to work again someday. I begged God to give me my mind back and to take the taste of alcohol from me. I even asked God to make the alcohol taste like poison when I drank it, whatever it took to take the taste from me; I was in desperate need of peace.

I hoped that God answered my prayers in the way I wanted, where I could get well enough to work. While I was trying to heal to go back to work, a scandal broke out at my job, which caused many positions to be cut, mine included. They didn't let me go, but I was forced to leave the police department and reassigned to another department within the city. I was hoping to go to the parking authority if I had to transfer, but I didn't get an option of where I was sent; they sent me to the accounts payable department for utility services.

I was able to keep my salary, but I wouldn't say I liked the job. Because I was so adamant about returning to work, the psychiatrist eventually released me from FMLA under strict monitoring. The highlight of my days at work was walking to Oglethorpe Square for

quiet time. I still had therapy appointments, and the therapist continued to push me to leave the workforce, but I didn't want to at that time.

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THE AUTHOR

I worked for only a little while at the utility company. My health was improving, but everyone was still shaken by the suicide attempt that happened months earlier. The therapist felt that I needed to focus entirely on my health even though I was doing good. I'd begun making so many improvements that it seemed almost as surprising as the dips I'd made.

I had developed a daily habit of prayer and reading my Bible. Sometimes I would fast, whatever it took for things to get better. I was improving; it seemed like all the begging and asking God for my mind back was beginning to show. I still understood the therapist's point of view. I prayed and reminded God that I committed to following him and that if it were His will for me to leave, I would. I can't recall the entire situation, but I had to resign from work after the therapist deemed me not fit for duty, due to medical concerns. Medically, they honestly did not believe that I was mentally capable of ever working again.

Those next few weeks, I didn't do much or go anywhere; I spent a lot of time at home. During that time, I would pray and talk to God for hours because life wasn't looking like what I had envisioned. I wanted to know what did God want from me and where was I going?

One day while sitting in silence, I heard the words, "you can't stay in this relationship and fully serve me." I perceived the voice to be that of the Holy Spirit. I sat a while longer, attempting to come to grips with what I'd just heard. I reminded myself that I told God I would follow Him, no matter how it looked or felt. It didn't matter that Kiera and I had just celebrated our ninth anniversary.

I didn't give God an excuse or a reason for me not to be obedient. I told God that He would have to work a miracle for me because I didn't know where to start. I'd heard about those "pray the gay away" therapies and other campaigns that people had put together to deliver people, but I wasn't impressed with their methods because they were offensive.

I'd never known anyone who was delivered from same-sex attractions. The cases I saw on television seemed suspect to me. I told God that I didn't want to experience those weird therapies, but if He delivered me, I wouldn't fight it. In the meantime, I went online and googled books about people being delivered from homosexuality. I knew it was a long shot because the topic wasn't discussed much. Most things centered around helping you accept yourself as gay and trying to change yourself was wrong, but I knew that finding something about deliverance would be like finding a unicorn.

Fortunately, I stumbled across this one book written by a former lesbian who had been delivered from same-sex attractions. I'd ordered the book on kindle and began reading it immediately—the author's testimony was very touching. Afterward, I knew God had led me to the book, and I was grateful to have read her testimony.

I didn't know what God wanted me to do at that point. I told God that I didn't know where to start or what to do at that point. So, I asked Him to change my heart and send me someone to help me.

Days maybe weeks went by, and the author's story stayed on my mind. One day, I got the idea to get on Facebook to see if the author had an author's page. I searched for her name and was led to her public figures page. She had thousands of followers, and I knew it would probably be a waste of time for me to contact her. I decided to take a chance and send her a message. The next day, I received a message from the author's assistant, advising me that the author wanted to



speak to me, and for privacy purposes, could she have my contact information. I was so surprised because she'd taken the time to read my message and make contact so quickly.

As happy as I was, I was also overwhelmed with fear that there was a possibility my life was about to change. The anxiety caused me not to respond to the message immediately. I waited until I felt an inner push towards following up, and I finally followed through with my message.

*"I apologize that it took so long for me to post my number; please understand that I'm very nervous. I'm 28, and I'm trying to walk out of a homosexual relationship that I've been in since 18. I came out at 14, and I can't begin to imagine how to make the first step or even live outside of homosexuality. Where do I begin? I've been the 'masculine' one for so long that I don't even know how to be a lady. Through all of my emotions and feelings, I feel like God is trying to take me to another level. In order for me to reach that level in Him, there are some things I have to shed [like homosexuality]."*

— FB MESSENGER 5/21/14, 6:54 PM

The author called me immediately and said she could help me. She took my information and told me to expect a call soon from a woman named Pam.

Kiera could sense that things were different between us. Me changing didn't mean that I had stopped loving her. I battled with being with her or fully following God. I've met people that have been delivered from substances and other vices overnight. They invited God in their hearts, and it was an instantaneous deliverance.

I wished that my experience of being delivered from same-sex attractions was like that, but I was about to be in the fight of my life. Sometimes we have to fight for our deliverance, but just because we have to battle doesn't make it any less ordained by God.



## PAM

The first time speaking on the phone with Pam, she told me that I could give her a call while going through the transition if I needed to talk anytime, day or night. She shared her testimony with me, so I knew she truly understood what I was experiencing. She also understood the struggles that lay ahead for me, that I didn't even know myself.

Kiera was in the dark about the transitioning of my feelings, and I'm sure that she thought everything was okay between us. I didn't know how to have a conversation with her and tell her what I'd been feeling. I felt obligated to our relationship. I thought that we'd come so far and through too much that my leaving her would be more like abandonment than a break-up. She was there for me when I had no one, and it seemed wrong to hurt a person like that.

When I was forced to leave my job, I had to change my therapist again because I no longer had health insurance. I went to a free counseling agency and was assigned a counselor that I didn't think cared for me. I knew she was a Christian lady because she let it be known. When she found out that I was in a same-sex relationship, she became a very abrasive counselor. She exuded an attitude of not caring and had a real disposition towards me. Because of my counselor's

attitude, I gravitated more to Pam for counseling; Pam gave strictly by the Bible mentoring. I probably would not have given Pam much of a chance to help me if my counselor had been more open. Maybe, that was all in God's plan.

Kiera found out about me calling or "sneaking" (as she put it) behind her back to contact Pam for prayer and encouragement. I know it may seem bizarre that someone would keep something like prayer and encouragement a secret. Still, Kiera had become aggravated when I was going to church and Bible study in the past, so I didn't want any issues while I attempted to figure things out.

Since Kiera asked, I was honest and told her that I had desires to follow God, and I was questioning my sexuality and our relationship. Without missing a beat, she asked if it meant that I would date and have sex with men. I had not thought that far. I didn't consider that my not being with women meant that I had to be with a man. It was something about the thought of it that made me feel uneasy. It wasn't that I was scared of men or anything, but the idea of having a relationship dynamic that I'd never experienced as an adult with a man, not since Malcolm.

Kiera thought the idea of me being with a man or even dressing feminine was asinine. She wasn't the first to have made such an assertion during my life. I'd been told by many in the community that they couldn't picture me as a girl because I was so "hard". I took Kiera's opinion as her knowing me better than anyone, so I couldn't have been right about myself.

I know Pam had to think I was flip-flopping back and forth in an indecisive state, but I didn't know. Maybe I'd heard God wrong, and it was all a big mistake. I began to go back on the idea of leaving, but I didn't stop praying and asking God for direction.

I went to see my counselor, but a new counselor had replaced her. I was happy not to have to deal with her, but when I walked into the new counselor's office and saw all of the scriptures and crosses everywhere, I assumed I was about to have to deal with someone else just like her. I was so wrong about this lady. She was possibly the most kind and nicest counselor I'd had.

I felt comfortable enough to open up to hear about the things I'd

been dealing with, my relationship, desire to follow God, and how I felt pulled in both directions. I always stopped shy of telling her that I thought that I was on the right track because my symptoms had taken a turn for the better since I'd repented, and those crazy voices were gone once I started praying and reading my Bible every day. I knew she was a believer, but people prescribe to differing beliefs of what they believe God is capable of doing, and I didn't want her to get in a panic about the methods I'd chosen to get better.

During my last session with the counselor, I asked her about confidentiality and what we discussed in our sessions. I didn't want her to get in any trouble, but I asked her if I could ask her a question and get advice, but I understood if she couldn't answer. She told me that I could.

I asked the counselor what would she do in my situation. I shared that I wanted to hear from her as a believer and a spiritual perspective, not a standard counselor response. The counselor sighed and said, "Well, if you leave and God told you to, what did you lose?" She did not know just how effective those few words were; her answer confirmed for me what I'd heard, "what do you have to lose?"

I decided to leave Kiera, which still wasn't an easy one. The process was very long and drawn out. We argued at times, but other times we got along. She would ask me if I was sure, some days I was, and other days I wasn't. She was still set on trying to work things out. I felt that our separation would be easier on Kiera if I made her hate me. If she hated me, then she wouldn't fight so hard for us to stay together. It was probably the worst possible thing to do, but I intentionally hurt her to her core, resulting in her agreeing that we should part ways.

My mom told me that I could move back with her until I figured life out again. Kiera and I packed our things as much as could fit in my car and hers. The day we scheduled to leave, we both stood in the yard and said a brief goodbye. She got in her car, I got in my car, and we drove off in opposite directions. I had an hour and a half drive westbound, and she had an hour and a half driving southbound.

To Dublin, I rode in silence. I kept asking God, "did I make the right decision?", "Are you sure this is what you want?" I even tried to rationalize to myself that since I left Kiera by having her hate me, I

was not being Christ-like, so I should tell apologize so that we could work things out. The further I drove from Savannah, the more I began to feel like someone had ripped my heart out of my chest.

In the days that followed, I was too emotional. I was afraid and emotional:

*"I hate feelings and emotions because they always remind me that I'm human. No, being human isn't a bad thing, but being human while suffering feels bad. I mean, why am I here? What is the purpose of having to go through all of this hell? I get tired of people saying, 'leave it in God's hand'; God won't put more on us than we can bear.' 'pray about it.' And yadda yadda yadda, I'm praying, but God must be on vacation. #justventing #toofrustrated"*

— FB JULY 3, 2014

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DELIVERED

The months after Kiera and I split were some of the most horrible days of my life. Every single day, I wanted to call her and say that maybe we'd made a mistake and we could work it out. I didn't know what to do with my life without her. I'd never really had to live without her. Even more, I didn't have a job, no money, no place of my own, and I was back home with my mom sleeping in my old room that hadn't changed that much since I was in high school. I felt so out of my element and so lost. I wondered, did I follow God, or was I just being presumptuous about leaving? Maybe I'd heard wrong, and it really wasn't meant for me to go, or perhaps I was just terrified about what the future held for me.

Some nights I would cry because I was so uncomfortable and frustrated with my situation. I wanted my life to go back to being comfortable and familiar. Growing up, I saw many people go to the altar for prayer and come down the aisles screaming that they were delivered. So, I guess I subconsciously felt that the ways to deliverance were instant and straightforward. It wasn't until God began working on my heart and began the deliverance process on me that I realized there was more to having someone lay their hands on you, then boom,

an instant deliverance. Although it's helped many people, that method of deliverance isn't what God desired for me.

For me, starting on the road to deliverance was a process in which I needed someone to walk through it with me. I thank God for Pam because had she not been there praying with me and teaching me the ways of God, I may not have made it through the journey.

I remember staring in the mirror, just looking at myself. I didn't know who I was because the identity I had was no longer me. I asked God, who am I?

My mom was so excited about me being "delivered," but she didn't understand the inner battles that I was facing. For over ten years, I shopped in the men's section for clothes. I wore male boxers, sports bras, male street clothes, male dress clothes, kept my hair faded, and lived as a butch woman with a feminine fiancé. Sometimes, my mom would overwhelm me by pushing me towards more feminine clothes so that my outside appearance would be more "straight."

I asked Pam about trying to look more feminine. She told me not to worry about it at that moment and explained that man works on the outward appearance first. She told me to allow God to do everything in His time and His way because God first deals with the heart. Instead of trying to take on everything while being in a vulnerable place, I should allow God to finish what He had begun in me and when it was time, people would see it. I wouldn't have to make it believable or try to persuade people by manipulating things in my way because if I allowed Him to, God would clean me up in His way.

Some people would ask me, "why go through all of that?", "why not just be who you are?" They argued that if I had to work so hard to change, maybe I didn't need to change; perhaps I was who I was.

For me, it wasn't a matter of me living to please myself but to live a life that is pleasing to God. So many people have compromised their beliefs because they've taken on society's mindset that it's all about me, my truth, and my happiness. So, if being gay makes you happy and content, then it must be right. When in all actuality, something can look, feel, and seem right to us and still be wrong in the eyes of God.



(Proverbs 14:12: *There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death*).

What solidified that I had indeed followed God was a very intense dream I had one night. I had a dream that I was walking through hell. I was being escorted by what I perceived to be the Spirit of the Lord. We were surrounded by fire and burning embers, but the fire never touched us, nor did it come close enough to singe our garments.

While walking, I felt compelled to ask my escort the question to which I truly wanted an answer, "Why did I have to give up everything?" "What was the purpose of me having to leave my life and leave my fiancé? Why did it have to happen this way?" The escort didn't say anything but pointed to a wall. At first, the fire flames and embers impeded my view of the wall, but then they began to settle. The fire died down just enough for me to see a large, framed picture of myself hanging on the wall. What frightened me the most was that the picture was displayed like a trophy or a grand prize.

That dream was such an awakening experience for me; it was what I needed. It's one thing to spend your entire life being told you're going to hell by people, but it's quite another to have a God experience that says, "I love you enough that I won't allow the inevitable to happen." Had I had a dream like that a few years prior, it would've only added embers to the contentment I held inside. God waited until I was in the midst of walking out my deliverance to reveal to me the consequences of the road I was on.

Not even a full year after Kiera and I separated, the United States Supreme Court struck down a case that allowed gay marriage to be legalized in every state. I know for a fact, had I not left when I did, and Kiera and I were still together, that we would've been one of the first lesbian couples to legally marry in Savannah, GA. The sudden urgency for me to leave our relationship made so much sense. The breakup was hard enough, so I imagine that I would have fought to stay married and would have never left.

Pam continued to walk and pray with me during my journey. As time passed, my phone calls to Pam would become more limited. My life began falling in place on its new course. Also, I no longer needed

mental health medications; my mind completely regulated. I found a job and was permitted to work again; the words "disability" and "SSI" have never been uttered since.

Today, as a wife and mother, I live a very consecrated life. I will never forget the battles and trials I experienced, because those experiences helped to shape and mold me into the person that I am.

“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” Galatians 2:20 NKJV

## EPILOGUE

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It's not God's will that any of us should suffer or be bound at the hands of sin. I was guilty of getting my will confused with His purpose for me. I walked according to my own desires and comforts, never considering that there may be a better way. My circumstances drove my perception of life, and I felt like a victim to everything I had experienced from childhood into adulthood.

Fortunately for me, God desired for my eyes to be opened so that I could see and know the truth. During the time that I chose to read the Bible with no preconceived opinions, I was truly allowed to see God in the way that Raelynn had challenged me to. No longer was He this hateful, fear-mongering deity that I knew growing up, but He was a loving and compassionate God. He challenged everything that I thought I knew, and most of which I had to relearn. I can now admit that I was stubborn and rebellious. Despite the truth that I encountered, I still did not want to be accountable and acknowledge that there was a great chance I was wrong about God.

So, knowing the truth and choosing to reject it is what brought death to my front door on numerous occasions. Many things within me needed to be healed and dealt with if I was ever going to truly follow Christ. I know that God knew it wasn't something I was going

to be able to fight through by myself; looking back, I can see how He strategically used intercession for every transition in my life; whether it was by a dream to shake me up or through the prayers of someone else.

Despite the road I had chosen, I couldn't circumvent the God-given purpose for my life. During my process, I learned that same-sex attractions and the various addiction issues were manifestations of a deeper spiritual problem. It never dawned on me, as with most people, that my heart's issues were manifesting in my behaviors. At one point, I had even convinced myself that even if same-sex relationships were wrong, I could be in a relationship with a woman and just not have sex. A mindset on opposing God will cause you to look for loopholes instead of embracing what it means to fully surrender.

When God delivered me from same-sex attraction and my addictive ways, other things were dealt with as well. Going to counseling made me address the traumas and issues of rejection. I also had intercessors like Raelynn, who was not afraid to let me know that I was going in the wrong way and that she would pray for me to discover the truth. Raelynn even brought her mom to our job during her visit from the islands to pray with me. Upon meeting her mom, I knew where Raelynn's strong prayer life came from. Even the paramedic chose prayer over the medical protocol. He prayed and petitioned God for my life in the back of an ambulance.

Behind all the intercessors who were strategically placed in my life, undoubtedly, the person that prayed the most was my mom. My mom and I talk every day, and during one of our conversations, I asked her how she survived those years. Her answer was that she prayed. She said that she didn't confide in everyone but those she knew who had an honorable prayer life. She shared that she asked for them to pray in agreement with her. She never gave up and kept the faith that one day God would move for her.

My mom discovered my sexuality when I was 14, and I was 28 when I had a change of heart. So, for 14 years, she prayed and petitioned God. For 14 years, she didn't know what was going on on my end and how my life was transpiring. For 14 years, she didn't see any significant signs that I would leave or be delivered. She didn't know that God had

placed other intercessors in my path along the way. She didn't know that my dad was also praying for my deliverance, as he understood the power of redemption because he had experienced it long before I grew to know it.

Many people abandon prayer because they don't see what's happening on the other side. They assume their prayers aren't working, or even worse, they begin to believe that the situation must be the will of God since they see no natural manifestation of change. I can't imagine where I'd be if my mom had believed that. She told me that her prayer was for Kiera and me to geographically move in opposite areas, and we did (she went south, I went west); wow.

I likened being in bondage to being an inmate because that's what it's like. People believe it's simple to leave, but the gates, doors, and bars prevent you from leaving even if you can see the other side. The inmate can't exit the prison at will; it's a process to freedom. The same with spiritual strongholds; there's a spiritual process to free. Once you've obtained freedom, you must value the peace of freedom over all else.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Renikko Bivens was born in Dublin, GA (mother's hometown). Although, at the time, her family lived in Macon, GA, they moved to Dublin a year later as her father prepared for deployment to Saudi Arabia for the Persian Gulf War (Desert Storm). Her mother was also in the military, but ultimately made the sacrifice to accept an honorable discharge so that Renikko and her younger sister would not have two parents on deployment. Upon her father's return from Saudi Arabia, in 1991, the family moved to Oakland, California where they lived in military housing on the now decommissioned, Oakland Army Base.

Renikko's parents separated a few months prior to her 8th birthday, leading Renikko, her younger sister, and mother to move back to Georgia. To cope with the change in family dynamics, she developed a love for reading. Quite naturally, her love for reading ventured into a passion for writing. With her father having a natural talent for drawing, she learned that she also had the talent. So, a lot of her early years were spent reading, writing, and drawing.

After witnessing abuse, addiction, and mental illness rip her family apart, Renikko would also have to endure some of the same situations as an adult. The healing and deliverance she experienced on her journey to rediscovering Christ, also coupled with the loss of her first husband, helped to facilitate a passion for helping others battling with similar issues. This passion altered her career path and led her to the counseling profession.

Her background includes providing psychiatric services for young children and adolescents, servicing inmates in a prison residential

facility, and most recently leading an intensive outpatient treatment program for probationers and parolees within her county.

She has an Ecclesiastical Degree of Associate in Theology and a Bachelor of Arts in Social and Criminal Justice. She also holds several certifications both locally and internationally.

She enjoys spending every free moment with her husband (Travis) and son (AJ). They currently reside in the quaint, Southern town of Sandersville, Georgia (“The Kaolin Capital of the World”).