

STEFANIE & CALEB ROUSE

*wholehearted*

LOVE

OVERCOME THE BARRIERS THAT HOLD YOU BACK  
IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AND OTHERS—  
AND DELIGHT IN FEELING SAFE, SEEN, AND LOVED

*Wholehearted Love* is a powerful and redemptive journey that will leave you with a full heart and a fresh perspective. Caleb and Stefanie have masterfully interwoven biblical truth and practical principles with the narrative of their own epic, real-life love story. Whether you are single, dating, engaged, or married, this book will remind you of God's perfect plan for your life and your relationships.

**DAVE AND ASHLEY WILLIS**

Bestselling authors and hosts of *The Naked Marriage* podcast

*Wholehearted Love* is a deeply moving exploration of love in all its complexities and nuances. Caleb and Stefanie capture the essence of human connection, delving into the depths of passion, heartbreak, and the transformative power of love. With its raw emotional depth, this extraordinary book will resonate with readers, reminding them of the profound beauty and challenges common to the universal experience of love.

**ANDREW F. CARTER**

Lead pastor of Royal City Church, author, and speaker

Just the idea of loving without abandon can be intimidating, but Stefanie and Caleb bring so much hope for each one of us on every page of *Wholehearted Love*. Not only are they incredible people, but they really love and care for others, and it shows in this book. I cannot recommend this enough for anyone who desires to love wholeheartedly.

**LEANNA CRAWFORD**

CCM songwriter/artist

Caleb and Stefanie's book is a profound and transformative guide for anyone yearning to cultivate healthy love relationships. With grace and vulnerability, they address the areas of the heart that can be unhealthy and toxic, and they offer practical steps toward finding healing and restoration. The "Making It Personal" sections at the end of each chapter allow readers to embark on a personal journey

of self-discovery, making this book an essential tool for those seeking healing and growth in their relationships.

**MIKE SIGNORELLI**

Lead pastor, V1 Church

I am so thankful Stefanie and Caleb wrote this book! It identifies real areas of struggle we deal with privately and quietly, and it helps us feel less alone and more equipped. Wholehearted love is the ultimate goal, but there are so many blocks that can prevent us from having what we were made for. After this read, you'll be able to take hold of the love God died to give you.

**KRISTEN DALTON WOLFE**

Author of *The Sparkle Effect*, success and fulfillment coach,  
Miss USA 2009

*Wholehearted Love* is a tribute to the transcendent love we have in our heavenly Father and an empowerment to mirror it in our earthly relationships. This book equips readers with the tools and insights needed to overcome the obstacles that can hinder relationships, and it allows them to transform their thinking and create lasting impact.

**ARDEN AND CHRISTIAN BEVERE**

Authors and podcast hosts

This book is a rare gift because it takes the dislocation of pain and disappointment seriously while offering us pathways to peace and wholeness. Authentic, practical, and accessible—there's something here for everyone who's seeking to know and be known. Well done, Caleb and Stefanie!

**ADDISON BEVERE**

Messenger International, author of *Words with God*

Stefanie and Caleb have chosen to lean into the pain associated with the tribulation promised to each person, and God has used them tremendously. Vulnerability is the gateway to connectivity, and this

power couple has taken what could have destroyed them and turned it into an incredible ministry.

**JOSHUA BROOME**

Speaker and author

*Wholehearted Love* is a wonderful book, full of engaging stories and wisdom. It gives practical steps to experience deeper freedom in your thoughts and your personal life!

**JENESSA WAIT**

Artist and author

God has raised Stefanie and Caleb Rouse to be a voice to their generation. . . . Nothing impacts our daily lives more than the health of our intimate relationships. This book provides a clear path to both identifying and overcoming the barriers to that health while providing a way forward so we can experience God's grace and peace in our relationships. Dig into this book and begin to live your best relational life!

**JOHN NUZZO**

Lead pastor, Victory Family Church

Caleb and Stefanie have been integral in my life and path—talk about “the real deal” kind of people. I genuinely don't know where I would be without their grace-filled guidance and family heart toward me—they are a sliver of heaven. I have no doubt *Wholehearted Love* will bless, encourage, and impact your life in ways that'll last a lifetime!

**COLLIN LABROSSE, @COLLINLABROSSE**

Social media influencer and MMA fighter

*Wholehearted Love* is packed with profound revelations that will reshape the way you view relationships and bring extraordinary healing to your heart. With grace as their compass, Caleb and Stefanie navigate the complexities of unhealthy love and toxic patterns with wisdom, unfiltered vulnerability, and gentle guidance.

Their words resonate deeply, offering practical steps toward restoration and renewal through the timeless truths of Scripture. This book is a powerful testament to the beauty that awaits when we surrender to God's perfect plan for love, illuminating a path toward a life lived authentically, wholeheartedly, and abundantly.

**CHAD AND TORI MASTERS**

Faith-based YouTubers and hosts of *Mornings with the Masters* daily devotional podcast

What a unique gift this book is to those who may have lost hope in love. Our friends Caleb and Stefanie share ashes-to-beauty stories that tug at your heart . . . and you will certainly find part of your story in theirs. This book helps the brokenhearted to heal and speaks truth and hope into broken places. *Wholehearted Love* is their authentic way of guiding you through the pain of your past and leading you to the healthy life God intends for you!

**MONTELL AND KRISTIN JORDAN**

Pastors, authors, and friends

*Wholehearted Love* is an absolute must-read if you want to feel inspired and awestruck by the goodness and faithfulness of God. The vulnerable storytelling in this book makes the reader feel as though they are walking with Stefanie and Caleb through their incredible story, which was written by God and is a true testimony of God's love to all who read.

**JACOB AND JULIA PETERSEN**

Social media content creators

I dearly love Caleb and Stefanie Rouse. They are helping people find true love and build their dream marriage. In their new book, *Wholehearted Love*, you will be captivated by their stories and learn how to grow deeper in love with your spouse or, if you are not married yet, how to find and pursue true love.

**MATT BROWN**

Evangelist; author of *Truth Plus Love*; founder of Think Eternity

*Wholehearted Love*



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*To our sweet twin boys, Asher and Shiloh,  
we wish you were here with us.*

*Thank you for showing us a whole new way to love.*

*You both are such a gift, and we can't wait to  
hug and kiss you one day in heaven.*

*This book is for you.*

*And to you, the one holding this book  
and reading these words,*

*God sees you.*

*We pray this book will ignite dreams  
once dead in your heart and bring hope  
and light to even the darkest places.*



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# Foreword

GROWING UP IN a small Midwestern town, I (Chelsea) didn't have many options for a vibrant, loving dating relationship. There were more cornfields than the eye could see, and farming families named their streets after their last name. I couldn't see a future with any of the guys around (I'd surveyed the land). I don't think I was extremely picky, but I like to believe I just knew what I wanted. After a couple of lonely years, I decided to date the guys I *didn't* see a future with because I thought they were all that was out there. *Surely, I just have to settle because these are my only option?* I thought.

This was the common theme I saw when I was growing up: date in middle school and high school, then somewhere in college or after college, get married. Most people married their high school sweethearts. But from afar, I saw a lot of settling. Like me, others thought that if they settled and got married, their relationship would naturally improve just because they took it to the next step of engagement or marriage.

Just for a second, imagine you broke a bone. Ouch. The healing process afterward is anything but fast. Healing requires you to slow down, possibly be on crutches, and live a little differently for a period. If you don't, you'll walk around with a wound that only gets worse and can lead other parts of the body to get damaged too.

Many couples walk into their love lives like they are on crutches, with open wounds that have never healed. They didn't take the time to heal from the past (rejection, pain, or cheating), and this leads to further fear in the future—and sometimes even leads to self-sabotaging a good relationship!

Maybe you've struggled with swirling thoughts about your own relationships because of what you've seen in relationships close to you: divorce, infidelity, or addiction.

Questions and thoughts like these may have surfaced for you:  
*Am I even capable of a loving, committed relationship?*

*I've seen far too many relationships fail—what if I'm just part of the divorce statistic?*

*My parents divorced—I could end up just like them.*

*I've been treated like trash in past relationships. What can turn that around?*

*Is there something wrong with me that I attract people who continually hurt me?*

The list goes on.

As we were reading *Wholehearted Love*, we felt ourselves being deeply counseled and given tools that we can implement in our marriage. And what a blessing this book would have been before marriage or when we were dating! With each chapter, Stefanie and Caleb pull back the layers of a beautiful onion (as Shrek would say) and get to the root of some challenges that could be holding you back from a flourishing relationship. If you are open to healing, you will receive it!

We are sure this book will leave you way better than before—and more empowered to live and love wholeheartedly. We pray you will live in the fullness of what your relationship could be!

*Chelsea and Nick Hurst  
Speakers, online communicators, and authors*

# Prologue

“HAPPY VALEN-TIME’S DAY, MOMMY!” I shouted as I ran down the steps to make the school bus. I threw my arms around her in a big hug.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, sweetie! I hope you have the best day.” She loved the way I pronounced Valen-times and thought it was sweet how intentional I was in thinking of others on all the special holidays.

She handed me my pink, yellow, and blue backpack, which matched my outfit, and I was giddy with excitement over the precious cargo inside: Little Mermaid and Beauty and the Beast cards addressed to my classmates, with lollipops attached to each one. I couldn’t wait to show my friends how much I cared about them, and I had written a special card to a boy I liked. I wondered how many cards and treats I would get in return. And would that boy give *me* a special card too?



Valentine's Day for me was filled with anticipation. It was a time to show others I cared. I loved getting candy, and I loved hearing nice words from others, and I loved telling others nice things. It seemed like the best kind of day.

My childlike joy for this holiday stayed over the years. Although I stopped giving out Little Mermaid cards, I still found cute ways to celebrate. Fast-forward to the year I was going to graduate from college. This next Valentine's Day was bound to be the best one yet . . .

Over Christmas break, my boyfriend Todd had popped the question with a gorgeous diamond ring and an elaborate *Pretty Woman* theme. I was happy but kept feeling like something wasn't right.

I hadn't spent much time at home the last several years, other than for Christmas and spring breaks. I had an apartment at Penn State, where I was attending school, and I was volunteering twenty hours a week in a high school ministry. In the summers, I worked near campus. My family was three hours away, and because I was so busy, I didn't find much time to go back home. But in those rare visits, sleeping in my childhood bed brought back many emotions.

The room was still decorated much like it was when I was a little girl. Pink flowers on the comforter, a pile of stuffed animals, some old band posters. Album after album filled with pictures of my friends and family. And a little white desk where I would sit for hours in my younger days, doing my makeup and writing letters to my friends and boyfriends. That Christmas, I opened the drawer and started reading through some old notes. I reminisced about the silly things my girlfriends and I would pen back and forth to each other—the boys we liked, what they said to us, how we were so glad to be friends.

And I pulled out my old journals. I gathered them in my arms and sat crisscross-applesauce on the bed. I had written almost daily since I learned to make full sentences, ending each entry

with the words “I love you God, I love you Jesus, I love you Holy Spirit, I love my family, I love everyone in the world. God bless them all!”

As I flipped through the pages, I found an entry entitled “My Dream Man.” It was a list of characteristics I longed to have in a future husband, penned in early high school.

Handsome  
Loves God  
Tall  
Funny  
Last name that starts with an S  
Family lives close to my family  
Good family  
Has lots of money . . .

The list went on, but I called my mom into the room.

“Mom, you gotta check this out!” I exclaimed. “I can’t believe I’m getting everything I’ve ever wished for. Todd has it all!”

“Wow, yes, that’s pretty incredible.” She appeared excited, but I noticed some hesitation in her voice. I felt in my gut like something was off with my relationship with my fiancé—that even though I was getting everything on my list, something big was missing. But I pushed the feelings down and picked up a bridal magazine to find my perfect dress.

Day after day the gut feeling kept creeping back. I brought up these concerns to Todd several times.

“I feel like something is not right,” I said. “I feel rushed, and I can’t shake this weird feeling. I think we should push back the wedding.”

Todd kept assuring me that everything was fine. I was overthinking things, and it was my family’s fault that I was feeling this way. We would stop having them in our life soon, and then I

would feel better. Although this made me sad—I loved my family very much and it killed me to think of not being close to them anymore—I decided he probably knew best because he was older than me and way closer to God.

I distracted myself with wedding planning through break and into the New Year, and January was full of ministry and friends. Since Todd led the ministry I volunteered with and the meetings were held at his house, I couldn't wait to show my ring to all my friends, invite some of them to be bridesmaids, and tell them the whole proposal story. We purchased the bridesmaids' dresses, and I found the wedding gown I had always dreamed of. Todd and I chose our venue, caterer, DJ, and flowers. I loved the attention and special fellowship we all were sharing. The two of us felt loved and cared for by our community, and almost everyone was full of joy over our upcoming union, which was planned for May. My family supported the wedding financially and helped with some of the planning, although I kept sensing their hesitation.

I couldn't wait for Valentine's Day. The holiday I had loved since childhood was bound to be better than I could imagine—my first one as a woman engaged to be married!

When the day finally came, Todd had made a reservation at a nice local restaurant near Penn State. When he picked me up, I got in the car myself. In the early stages of dating, he would open the door for me, but not today. He handed me a yellow orchid with "Happy ValENTIMES Day" written on the container. I still pronounced the word wrong, and he loved letting me know that. Some of his comments had made me feel small over the course of our one-year relationship, but I tried to see it as all in good fun. I handed him a card about being excited to marry him and happy he was my fiancé.

During the car ride, I sat awkwardly, asking him several questions in an attempt to get a conversation going. He gave me only

one-word answers. I thought he must have a lot on his mind, so I focused on my growling stomach—I was excited for some good food. I stared down at my hands, where my ring sparkled in the last glimmers of daylight. It was so beautiful, but my heart was heavy.

As we entered the restaurant, Todd gave the hostess his name and asked how she was with a kind smile. I hadn't gotten that smile so far that day. He talked to that stranger more than he had talked to me. She led us to the middle of the dimly lit restaurant, and we took our seats. I thanked Todd for the orchid and asked him how he was doing. "Fine," he said without even glancing up.

I stared at my menu. Being there was becoming painful. I ordered my meal but had a pit in my stomach when the food arrived. I tried to ask him several more questions, but he looked around the restaurant, as if he hadn't noticed. It was so uncomfortable sitting there in silence, and I couldn't wait to leave. *This isn't what I thought this day was going to be like*, I thought to myself.

We drove back to his condo in darkness and silence. I couldn't wait to get out of the car and just about sprinted to his living room after we pulled into the driveway.

I sat on his couch as I was accustomed to doing, and he sat opposite me.

"I need the engagement ring back," he finally said.

"WHAT!" I shouted. "What are you talking about?"

"The wedding is off. I need the ring back."

I kept asking, "Why? Why?" and he just kept saying the same thing: "Give me back the ring. The wedding is off."

The wind was knocked out of me, and my heart dropped to my knees. I blanked out and barely remember handing back the ring and running out of the house. I honestly can't recall whether I ran home or whether he drove me.

The next week was and is a complete blur. All I can remember is sobbing uncontrollably into my pillow and not sleeping all

night. I remember him stopping over one day to make it clear that it wasn't just the wedding that was off: our relationship was over for good. He gave me no explanation, no other information. He told me I was no longer welcome to attend the meetings at his house because it would be too difficult for him.

In a flash, I lost my dream of being a wife. I lost my dream wedding. I lost many of my friends (because he was their boss), and I lost hope.



# *What's Your Dream?*

ENVISIONING YOUR GOALS TO ENSURE  
FULFILLING RELATIONSHIPS

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## **CALEB'S STORY:** THE DARK FOREST OF DISAPPOINTMENT

I always dreamed of what true love might be like, and I knew it was something I wanted. My father enjoys a good love story, and many times as a family we would take in the sweet aroma of romance through our collection of the classics. I have seen my fair share of romantic comedies and epic love tales.

There is something captivating about extravagant and pursu-ant love, whether it's in the stories of Romeo and Juliet, Jasmine and Aladdin, Prince Charming and Snow White, or any number of others. Take your pick and you'll find suspense, true love's kiss, and a tale that takes your breath away.

In the summer, my family would take a two-week road trip, crossing the country from California to Missouri to visit my two sets of grandparents. My father's parents resided in a small German

town with original brick buildings, beautiful wineries, and a few general stores filled with townsfolk who had known each other for a lifetime.

My grandparents had a large old brick house outside of town. I could feel the memories from a hundred years ago as I walked through the halls, where pictures of family members I never knew were mixed in with photos of all my aunts and uncles. My grandparents were not ones for flashy living nor any type of modernity. Even using the bathroom, which had a window in the door, was an experience.

In the kitchen and living room area sat their vintage box TV. After a day of playing outside, my brothers and I would sit on the couch and watch one of three options for entertainment before bed: the movie *Free Willy*, recordings of World Cup soccer games from 1994 (I mean, how can you resist that?), or the cult classic *The Princess Bride*. Let's just say it was an easy choice: we watched *The Princess Bride* every night for a week straight.

If you haven't seen this movie, you need to; it's a classic love tale with unique humor. It's one of my favorites. Every summer, I would watch how true love conquers all, and I don't want to spoil it for you, but I learned that wholehearted love comes only to those brave enough to walk a scary and vulnerable road, where all hope seems lost until love makes a way.

Later, as an adult, I longed for a love like this. I had seen a glimpse of it—I had parents who loved each other, oftentimes acting like kids as they pulled pranks, laughed together, built a family, and went after their dreams.

And I wanted something like that: a partner, a best friend, and someone who would take on this epic adventure of life with me.

Unfortunately, life isn't easy, and love is even worse at times. Broken dreams and a wounded heart sent me down a path where all hope seemed lost. I had lost a relationship I had been in for

five years, while simultaneously losing out on my dream of being a professional athlete. Those two losses, along with the death of an important person in my life, led me to distrust God and His purpose for me. I went searching for love and hope in all the wrong places, and it left me feeling empty, alone, and scared for the future.

I felt many times like I was living in a deep forest, where I couldn't see above the trees. My future was dark and cloudy, and the path in front of me was bleak and barely visible.

I realized that something had to change, but what? And would it be worth fighting through the branches that had grown out of my pain, obstructing the path to change and leaving me resistant to even trying? Was it worth putting my heart out there again, with the possibility of more loss and disappointment just around the bend?

You might find yourself at a similar crossroads. Life hasn't been the easiest, and maybe you have been patiently waiting for your person for years, losing hope day by day, hour by hour, and minute by minute. You see the dream you have always wanted, but there are many unknowns.

Two paths lie in front of you. One is safe and shorter, and the likely outcome is similar to the situation you've been in. The other ends in the dreams you've always wanted, but the road is long and filled with unknowns, fears, and vulnerability.

Maybe you've found yourself right here in this book because you want that Prince Charming and Snow White kind of love. You always have. You just don't know if it is possible for you. And maybe it's made you distance yourself from God. Maybe you feel like you can't be fully yourself in a relationship.

I want you to know that I see you, friend.

Your pain isn't wasted. It is real. And at this crossroads I encourage you to take a long look at what you want. What your dream is.



What you have always wanted your life to look like and feel like.  
And decide, is it worth taking this new road?

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**STEFANIE'S STORY:** FINDING HOME

But God.

I've found these to be two of my favorite words. I'm sure you have guessed that the story in the prologue is my story. After the heartbreak of that broken engagement, I didn't know if I would ever have another relationship or get married. But God came through in a way I had never experienced before.

I remember sitting on a park bench and telling Jesus, "I'd rather it just be You and me forever than to be back with all the things of this world without You." And I meant it. God's love without striving, trying to prove myself, or worrying about performance was better than anything I'd ever experienced. There was no going back.

And Jesus sent me on a quest. He showed me my true purpose and flipped everything I thought I knew about love and relationships upside right.

It put a fire in my soul that made me want to help so many others who have experienced the pain of heartbreak. Becoming exactly who Jesus created me to be and loving Him and the ones He's called me to love with my whole heart is a journey I've been on ever since.

I felt called to leave my home in Pennsylvania and make a cross-country move to Pasadena, California, where I would earn my master's degree in marriage and family therapy at Fuller Theological Seminary. Leaving was frightening, yet hopeful. I felt the still, small voice of the Lord in my heart, leading me away, wooing me to find my purpose and future.

After two years of completing hard coursework and fulfilling

hours of counseling clients, I finally had done enough to receive my degree and begin work in therapy. Then one Sunday, a very tall, handsome man entered my life. As Caleb tells it, he saw me from across the room as we were worshipping in church, and it was love at first sight. How we began to date is a long story (one that we will share later in this book), but we eventually crossed paths again a year later. Caleb asked for my phone number, and we went on our first date. Our hearts had never connected with another person in such a powerful way before. We felt like we were home to each other. We knew we were safe, seen, and loved for who we were, and for the first time ever, we both felt like we could love wholeheartedly in a romantic relationship.

We got married just over a year after our first date and started working together at a Christian school in our area. Caleb's master's degree is in education, and he had been working in the school system for a few years prior. We embarked on a new career together, trying to make a positive impact on youth for Christ. I was given the opportunity to develop my own curriculum within the Bible department, creating lessons on relationships and family dynamics, which led to remarkable breakthroughs in my students' lives. After three years at the school, I felt a calling from the Lord to take this work online and start sharing about relationships and God's love through social media.

By the grace of God, this has brought opportunities that we never thought we would have—traveling the world, seeing new places, meeting people from all over, sharing about God's beautiful love. In all of these situations, we've assured others that wholehearted love is possible, as we have experienced it in our own marriage.

Eventually, Caleb was able to leave his job as a teacher to pursue this work full-time with me. Through this new venture we developed a program called Cultivate Relationship where single

women and men can come to us and find freedom from their past and gain the tools needed to have successful and thriving relationships in the future. It is also a powerful course for newly engaged and married couples to set up their relationship for long-term success.<sup>1</sup>

Through our courses and programs we have been able to touch the lives of hundreds of people from around the world, helping them move past heartbreak and move toward wholehearted love. Now God has put it on our hearts to share this message with you. I'm so honored to join you for part of this journey throughout these pages.

## **WHOLEHEARTED LOVE CAN BE YOUR STORY TOO**

Dear friend, you've read the beginnings of our story, and we'll share more about our own heartaches and triumphs in later chapters. You may find that your story is similar to ours. Perhaps the pain you've faced and the circumstances you've experienced have been too much to handle. There's no way to face that much anguish and not do something about it. Sometimes we put on a mask and armor to protect ourselves from further injury. The burden of the mask is so heavy, but it's more desirable than feeling vulnerable and unsafe.

God knows that this life can be hard. He knows the troubles we will face. And He wants us to exchange the masks and armor we've created for the most powerful armor of all.

We wish we could talk to you in person right now. We'd ask you all about the battles you've faced. We'd get to hear about the pain you've encountered, if you'd share it with us.

We would say that we know your challenges haven't been easy, but we believe God has hope on the other side. We'd tell you that

God is with you and will never leave you. You won't have to do this alone.

We also want you to know that it's not going to feel discouraging forever. All your big dreams, all your heart's desires for a relationship—maybe God gave them to you for a reason.

The mask you've put on may have helped you get where you are right now, but perhaps it's no longer serving you. It's time to let your heart encounter the Prince in a whole new way. A beautiful love story could be right in front of you, one that's even better than you dreamed.

*The mask you've put on may no longer be serving you. It's time to let your heart encounter the Prince.*

Will you come on this journey with us to find out if wholehearted love is possible and worth what it takes to get there?

When we find healing from past pain or trauma, we can experience wholehearted love as God intended. We can grow to love God, others, and ourselves more completely. We can have our hearts be fully known, fully seen, and fully loved.

## **WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?**

We're so glad you're here. You're courageous to be diving into the subject of loving others, yourself, and God more wholeheartedly. If you are still unsure about whether this is the right book for you, consider whether any of the following scenarios describe you:

You have a great desire to be married, but your love life hasn't yet worked out the way you hoped it would.

You are single and don't know if you want to be married, but you want to love with your whole heart.

You are dating, and you want to know how to tell who is a safe person to give your heart to and who isn't.

You are almost engaged, engaged, or newly married and want to keep your relationship healthy and thriving over time.

You don't desire to get married, or get married again, but you want to have a loving, open heart toward your friends, family, and community.

You are happily married but desire even more connection with your spouse.

Your marriage seems very difficult, and you want to feel more seen and loved by your spouse.

You are divorced, your heart is shattered, and you want reassurance that there is still hope for a better relationship in the future.

If you fit into any of those circumstances, you're in the right place! Your heart is so very precious to Jesus. He cares about you more than you could know. He wants to heal all the hurting, disappointed, or walled off places so you can be more fully seen and loved and be loved in a safe way.

The emotions that accompany the situations suggested above are complex. Any or all of these thoughts may be going through your mind:

I feel alone and I long for a relationship.

I'm just out of a bad relationship and I'm still not over it.

My expectations are not being met.

My relationship is not going the way I want it to.

I keep thinking about my ex.

I keep going back to someone who's wrong for me or ending up with people who are noncommittal.

I must be crazy—I don't understand why I keep doing what I'm doing even though I'm unhappy.

I wish I could be authentically myself in a relationship and feel happy with who I am.

I feel like I'll never find the one for me.

If you are married, you may wrestle with these questions:

Does he still love me? Am I still desirable to him? Is this just the way it will be forever now?

How do I win back her heart?

I've experienced broken trust in my marriage. How can I regain trust in my spouse?

The details of your situation and the emotions you are experiencing may vary from these possibilities, but it all comes down to a few basic questions:

Why do I keep making bad decisions?

Is there something wrong with me?

Am I worthy of love?

Will I ever feel safe?

Will anyone ever see and love the real me?

Will I lose my identity in a relationship?

Will I just get hurt?

What's the point?

## **PAST BAGGAGE**

When I (Stefanie) first met one of my clients, Zara, her protective mask was as firmly in place as if it were forged to her. I fully understood from the stories she told of her past that this was her way of coping with the pain. I had an immense amount of compassion for her.

Zara's dating profile was filled with pictures of her that didn't leave much to the imagination. She wondered why she kept attracting immature men who weren't really interested in a serious relationship. She had seen beautiful women dressed in a certain way get the "hottest guys," and she thought that was

what would make her happy. But time after time, she was left feeling used.

She acted like sleeping around didn't faze her, but as she shared more of her story, her distress flowed from her eyes like a waterfall.

"Why doesn't anyone commit to me?" she wondered aloud. "I always thought if I gave them sex, they would keep me around. But now I'm finding that it's not the case."

My heart ached for her. This woman, who I could tell had the biggest heart and beautiful dreams, wanted a man who was loyal and kind. Someone she could trust enough to have a family with. Someone who would be there for her.

Zara initially told me she had never been in a serious relationship. But then she described a four-year "friendship" with a guy she met at college. She referred to him as her best friend. And she gave him everything. She did his laundry and took care of things he needed help with. She was always there for him, and she even paid for different things. They sometimes spent the night together, but he also had several girlfriends during those four years.

But then—just days after the two of them spent a romantic weekend away together—he told her that he was going to be a dad with another woman. It wasn't until that moment that she was finally ready to be done with him.

And maybe done with love for good.

She told herself, *I'm so strong, it doesn't bother me. I don't need anyone. Men are all terrible. Who needs a relationship after all?*

But I could see through her bravado. I understood all too well why she was feeling this way. She believed that closing herself off would enable her to push beyond the torture her shattered and bruised heart had been through.

Her dreams were withering, but I saw a glimpse of hope.

"What if something could be different?" I asked softly. "What

if you can heal from this and be set up for an amazing relationship in the future?”

## **BEAUTY FROM ASHES**

Dear friend, it might feel easier to give up hoping for something beautiful. But God is in the business of making beauty appear from ashes. He hasn't forgotten about your heart's desire. He has made you a masterpiece. The future He has for you is filled with hope and good things. But will you allow yourself to dream a little? Will you allow yourself to anticipate brighter days on the other side of pain? Hope can be daunting, but it can change everything.

Your life can be different and we're going to show you how. First, in the remainder of this chapter, we'll help you define the type of life you want for yourself. You'll think through the kinds of relationships you're looking for, both with others and with God. Sometimes, though, toxic thoughts can keep you from achieving the life you desire. We'll help you uncover some of those in the next chapter. A little later, we'll look at the coping mechanisms that are often used to cover pain, and we'll consider how they might be at work in your own relationships. We'll also talk about how toxic thoughts lead to behaviors and cycles that prevent you from living wholeheartedly.

Too often, when we are in pain, we forget how much God loves us, so we will spend some time unpacking the idea of God's goodness, and how He displays His love in the good and the bad. Sometimes, even when we know God cares so much for us, and even when we have come to understand the toxic thoughts that have held us back, we may come up against a problem that

*It might feel easier to give up hoping for something beautiful. But God is in the business of making beauty from ashes.*



overwhelms us. We will talk about what happens when you are at the end of your rope, and how you have a choice to do something different.

In later chapters, we will give you the truth, not only about who God says you are but about the future He has in store for you. We will show you how to believe the truth and take action surrounded by the truth. You'll also discover the secret weapon for combating the toxic thoughts you will come across. Lastly, we will show you how to move forward, feeling known, seen, and loved. All of this will help you to find healing from past pain or trauma so you can experience wholehearted love as God intended.

Throughout this book, we will illustrate these points to you by sharing vulnerably the emotional suffering that we have experienced and observed in different romantic relationships in our own lives as well as those of our clients. We will also cover topics such as the pain of family relationships, broken dreams, cheating, sexual abuse, and pregnancy loss. Most important, we'll anticipate the triumphs, healing, and amazing things God can do despite any pain that you may have gone through.

Fast-forward a year later after working with Zara. She incorporated the concepts we share in this book into her life, and Stefanie worked with her one-on-one and then in group coaching (via Zoom). God started revealing all the reasons she had done the things that she did. He healed her shame. He relieved her pain. She is now engaged to the most amazing man, someone who treats her with love and respect. She changed her approach to relationships and got much better results this time.

What started her on the right foot was hope. Hope that her heart could heal. Hope that the men who used her weren't the only ones out there. Remember, there are over eight billion people in the world. There are bound to be some good men among them.

She knew *why* she was showing up to our group every week.

She had a vision of a life that she didn't yet see but still hoped for. As the author of the book of Hebrews says, "Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" (11:1).

Zara believed those words, and she started to let herself be loved deeply by the God of the universe.

## **ENVISIONING YOUR DREAM**

"Welcome to Hollywood! What's your dream?"

This is one of the iconic lines from the movie *Pretty Woman*. A man walking through the streets yells it out among the people walking along, and the line rings like a familiar song to those who watch the film.

We used to live in Los Angeles, and you can feel the dreams in the air there. There's such a sense of hope, aspiration, and purpose. We've never been anywhere like it. As you walk around, you can see those who have achieved it all—money, fame—living in the mansions that line the streets of the Hollywood Hills. But you can also see people who once had dreams but are now homeless, hurt, and crushed by the weight of this world.

The line "What's your dream?" resonates with many who see the film, causing them to reflect and remember what they set out for and what their dreams are made of.

In the same way, we have to ask you: What's *your* dream? What have you always longed for? Is it to have a partner to share life with? Or perhaps a fairy-tale romance fit for a top-ten spot on Netflix? It might even be finding your true purpose—why God created you—but you haven't been able to sort through the mess in your life to find just what that is.

No matter what your dream is, we have found that identifying exactly what you want and setting a plan and goals allows you to take action and actually achieve it.

It's like a battle plan for war. Arranging the armies in the right places gives one side a tactical advantage and a way to win the fight. Those who do the best planning can beat even the strongest army.

So what is your dream? We want to help you figure out what you are looking for and why it's important. Essentially, it's your "why" for pursuing wholehearted love.

Loving others can be so messy. Pain from bad experiences in the past, insecurities about how we were made, the kinds of people (or lack thereof) in our lives, uncertainty about whether we are "qualified" for a loving relationship—all of these may put up barriers in your heart. They feel like good reasons for hesitating to get too deeply involved, which will ultimately keep you from wholehearted love.

At some time in your life, you've had a dream or desire for what a fulfilling relationship would look like, but perhaps unmet expectations have become a huge area of pain for you. Maybe you've lowered your standards significantly because you're not finding the type of person you always envisioned. Without firm goals and boundaries in place, you may be tempted to accept people who cheat on you or treat you poorly in other ways.

Or maybe you've been closing yourself off to your spouse. You feel as if part of you is dying. It seems easier to put up walls than to be vulnerable to further hurt.

And maybe you feel this spreading into your relationship with God. If you're honest, perhaps your relationship with Him feels only surface level. You've hidden parts of yourself from Him, and you aren't encountering His love like you have in the past. You want to feel His love again.

Often, there is a huge difference between what we think we want and what will truly bring us joy, fulfillment, and peace. Every successful business has a mission statement and business plan. The

purpose of these is to ensure that all personnel will continue conducting business in accordance with the company's purpose and vision, whether in times of success or setback. Having this mission statement keeps them on brand, focused, motivated, and able to communicate the mission to others.

We have found that many people haven't had the mission and tools they need for their relationships to succeed long-term. It is so important to plan in a positive way, to plan for success, to plan for purpose, and, in essence, to put a stake in the ground and say, "This is what I want, and I am going to do what I need to in order to get there!"

You're here, reading this book, for a reason. If you truly want to change the course of your current or future relationships, the best place to start is by creating your personal plan or "mission statement." We like to call it a "My Why" statement. It is a statement of what you want out of life and why you are willing to do what it takes to achieve it. To put it plainly, it answers the question, Why do you want to live wholeheartedly?

In order to come up with a "My Why" statement, we believe it's important to carefully think through the following four questions. They will help you to accurately and thoroughly state your "Why."

*1. Do you know how God sees you?*

Our relationships affect every single aspect of our lives. And our hearts come with us everywhere, whether we like it or not, whether we try to shut them down or not. We can't remove who we are and how we love from anything else we do. But if we truly understand how God sees us, there's no reason for us to close off our hearts from our relationships and our lives.

Can you imagine for a second how God sees you? He sees you as someone He cares enough about that He sent His one and only Son to die for you. He sees only the very best, purest version of

you, with all your sins wiped away as far as the east is from the west (see Psalm 103:12).

God wants us to walk with Him so we can be the fullest version of the person He created us to be. When you understand this, you can carry yourself with humility as His beloved. When you know you're loved beyond imagination by the one who created heaven and earth, you can walk authentically from a deep place in your soul that can't be shaken. How would that feel?

## *2. Why is it important to you to love with your whole heart?*

Wholehearted love is exactly that, loving with every part of your heart—nothing hidden, allowing yourself and someone else to have access to all of you. No walls, no masks, no filters. Just the raw and real you.

Think about what it would feel like to be loved fully and unconditionally for who you are at your core. Why is that important to you?

If you could fast-forward to your absolute dream relationship, can you describe what it would look like? How would your future boyfriend/girlfriend/spouse treat you? What would you do together? How would being in that relationship affect the rest of your life?

These are all great questions and important to think about. Knowing what you want allows you to make important decisions. It helps you to see ways that you can set up your relationship to be more like your dream. It enables you to know what you would allow or be willing to put up with, or what you would put a stop to.

## *3. What kind of values will you hold on to in your dream relationship?*

Like us, you have very likely compromised about something in your life. Perhaps you, too, have allowed certain values into

relationships that you now regret. Thinking about this question gives you the opportunity to identify and set boundaries based on the values you are going to stick to and give priority in your current or future relationship.

Values can play a huge part in our compatibility with another person, so understanding what is attractive to us, what would need to be worked on, or what would be a deal-breaker is key in understanding your relationships and loving wholeheartedly.

#### *4. How would loving and living wholeheartedly impact the rest of your life?*

Imagine just for a short moment what it would be like to get to heaven and meet Jesus. You feel His glory and goodness. All the baggage is gone. And you realize that so much of the burden you carried didn't have to be with you on earth. You could have experienced a little taste of heaven more often.

Picture that heavenly version of yourself, free from all the chains, standing in the most beautiful light. Think of what that version of yourself, free from insecurity, has to bless the world with—your love and tenderness.

Think of how that bright version of yourself would be able to have relationships with others. How would it feel to connect on an even deeper level of beautiful intimacy with the right person? And then, how would it impact the rest of your life to love in this way?

No matter what stage of life you are in, you find yourself in this book for such a time as this. So today we encourage you to think about why you want to love wholeheartedly. What is calling you to this deeper sense of love and fulfillment? Allow God to shape you as you walk through this journey with us.

At the end of each chapter, we will include a section designed to help take you a little deeper into the ideas we have explored together. To receive the most benefit from this experience, we encourage you to read through the Scripture verses and answer the questions, prayerfully considering areas where God may be prompting you toward growth and change. We are so glad you are here, and we pray you will gain life-changing insights as you continue.

*Scripture to Apply*

Read the following verses and note what they say about how God views you and the kind of life He wants you to have. Summarize what you see in these verses in the space provided below.

LORD, the God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven or on earth—you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way. (2 Chronicles 6:14)

Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people. (Ephesians 6:7)

God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27, ESV)

We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10, ESV)

## WHAT'S YOUR DREAM?

I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

Because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it. (Numbers 14:24)

### *Questions to Consider*

1. Has your past or current relationship had negative patterns that you don't want to continue? Describe them below.
2. How would it feel to love with your entire heart and to be completely safe and comfortable?
3. If you could be fully yourself and know how cherished and accepted you are, why would this change other aspects of your life?



4. How will loving the right people with your whole heart have a positive impact on the following:

- Your happiness

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- Your future or current spouse

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- Your future or current children

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- Your community

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- Your legacy

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- The decisions you make for your future

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### *Call to Action*

Create a short “My Why” statement for yourself. Review the four questions on pages 15 to 17 and think about why you want to go on this journey of becoming wholehearted. What areas of your life will get better because you do? What will keep you motivated so you don’t pause this journey?

Here is a sample statement that might help you with creating your own:

“I do this because I want to be wholly myself, the way God intended me to be. I want to be healed from past pain and walk in freedom so I can more fully give and receive love. I don’t want to be stuck when I could be free. This will have a positive effect on my joy, my health, my knowledge of God’s goodness, and my ability to reflect God’s light and love to others.”

## WHAT'S YOUR DREAM?

My Why statement:

Now, read your “My Why” statement every morning and/or night. Remind yourself of what is important to you. Use it as motivation to keep you on this journey that could change the trajectory of your life.

