



**A
SURVIVOR'S
SECRETS**

Once Trafficked, Now Free from Feelings
of Worthlessness, Fear, and Shame

GINA CAVALLO

with Cindy Lambert

If you or someone you love has been ravaged by abuse, addiction, shame, crippling fear, or toxic secrets, Gina Cavallo's captivating and courageous account of her journey is the resource you need. This story of forgiveness, healing, and hope will bring restoration and encouragement to every reader.

CAROL KENT

Founder and Executive Director | Speak Up Ministries

Author | *When I Lay My Isaac Down*

Human trafficking is the scourge of our time. Through Gina Cavallo's powerful *A Survivor's Secrets*, you will be captivated by how Gina became a victim, got out of the system, and journeyed from trauma to freedom. I couldn't put it down!

RUTH GRAHAM

Author

Daughter of Billy Graham

Gina Cavallo is a rising leader on the issue of human trafficking. In *A Survivor's Secrets*, Gina opens her heart and delivers a powerful account of resiliency and determination. Her story will leave readers inspired and empowered to stand against human trafficking and support individuals who have survived it.

DR. DANIEL PAPA

President of the Board of Trustees | New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking

As you discover what Gina has overcome to find her identity—her worth, voice, purpose, and her empowerment—you will understand how she has come to be the agent of change she is today. *A Survivor's Secrets* will inspire anyone who has the courage to read it to see their own story through new eyes and do what's necessary to become who they were meant to be.

PHILLIP BRACCO, LMFT

Pastor of Care | Emergence Church, New Jersey

After hearing Ms. Gina Cavallo speak at an anti-human trafficking forum in my congressional district, I immediately invited her to provide her compelling testimony at the hearing I chaired on human trafficking in the US Congress. Gina is a courageous trafficking survivor and an expert who speaks with strength, experience, and authority about the human costs of this heinous crime. In *A Survivor's Secrets*, Gina offers hope to other victims as she draws on her faith and speaks of the healing that only God can provide. This book educates, motivates, and powerfully inspires. It's a must-read for anyone who wants to help trafficking victims hiding in plain sight.

CHRIS SMITH

US Congressman for New Jersey's 4th District

A Survivor's Secrets is a beacon of hope, reminding us that even in the face of unimaginable adversity, the human spirit can prevail.

ALFRED F. ABRAMSON

Retired Brigadier General | United States Army

Gina helps readers understand children who are misunderstood, abused, neglected, and disconnected. Shining a light on how secrets and lies groom children and make them vulnerable to the advances of predators, Gina gives caring adults a road map to recognize children like her.

PASTOR JO LEMBO

Director of Faith Initiatives | Shared Hope International

A Survivor's Secrets is a raw and beautiful book that brings the reader through the cobwebs of trauma, abuse, shame, and the imbalance of power that tried to tether Gina Cavallo to powerlessness and shame. You will be moved at how God's love triumphs over all the enemy's perversions.

TONYA TURNER

CEO & President | UNITAS

I lived most of my life within five minutes of where Gina grew up and lived and would have *never* imagined that what happened to her could happen in “my world.” We can’t be unaware of what goes on around us any longer! *A Survivor’s Secrets* is a beautiful picture of how important it is to realize who we truly are.

A must-read!

ROBERT F. DAVIS II

CEO | Christian Solidarity International & Odyssey Marketing and Advertising

In *A Survivor’s Secrets*, Gina skillfully exposes the dark realities of human trafficking. She even found ways to sprinkle humor and show discretion when sharing the unimaginable truths of her lived experience. It’s painful to see how “normal” childhood experiences can actually prime children for trafficking. The thought-provoking, raw details in this book will serve as a manual for parents and caregivers who are committed to doing everything in their power to effectively safeguard our children.

WINCEY TERRY-BRYANT

Singer, Songwriter, Playwright

A Survivor’s Secrets has so much hope, truth, pain, life, and faith. Gina opens her heart and soul to the world by sharing her journey, and we all see that life is not solely about surviving our pain but choosing to thrive in spite of it—not only for ourselves but to benefit others who are still suffering.

TRICIA GRANT

Executive Director | Just Love Worldwide



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FOCUS
ON THE FAMILY,

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People's names and certain details of their stories have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. However, the facts of what happened and the underlying principles have been conveyed as accurately as possible. All stories in this book are true, and where real names are used, those stories are used by permission.

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Part 1

**PANDORA'S
BOX**

2016

THE AWAKENING

I'D DRIVEN ONLY ABOUT A MILE OR TWO from the church when I realized my hands were trembling. I cranked up the heat, hoping the warmth would help calm me, even though I knew my shaking had nothing to do with the chilly evening air. I had to get a grip on my emotions. Panic. Grief. Horror. They had crashed through the wall that had held them back for so long. I shook my head to break free of them, but I could still feel them pulsing through my veins.

Had I known that attending my church's Redemption & Recovery group was going to rip open such old wounds, would I have started attending several weeks before? I had squirmed through the first few meetings, listening as others in the group shared their painful past experiences with trauma, alcohol, addiction, abuse,

and the like. Yet in spite of my discomfort, I'd kept returning to the meetings, unable to resist the raw honesty of the people in my small group and the intensely personal way some of them were talking about Jesus. Maybe I felt a yearning to relate to Jesus the way they did. Or maybe it was a desire to connect with others on such a transparent level. Maybe the dark, hidden trauma of my past was aching to finally be exposed to the light. Or could it be that R&R might help free me from the pain of my past? Oh, how I longed for that freedom!

Well, whatever is drawing me back, I don't need it if it's going to make me feel like this. My heart was pounding so hard that I was finding it difficult to catch my breath. *I'm a mess!*

I'd come to Redemption & Recovery to serve coffee only as a way to support my son-in-law—the pastor—in the new ministry he'd launched at our church the fall of 2016. In fact, when he'd first mentioned the new program, he'd invited me to attend as a participant.

"Hey, Mom," he said, "why don't you join one of the women's recovery groups?"

I immediately got defensive. In fact, I felt irritated. I suspected he was trying to tell me that I needed to join because something was wrong with me. It seemed that people were always telling me what was wrong with me.

"No, thanks," I said, trying not to sound too insulted. "I don't need it." At the time I thought that R&R was only for people who struggled with alcohol and drugs—and those struggles were many years in my past.

"Well," he said, "I'm going to join one of the men's groups."

"Good for you. Maybe *you* need it." I regretted my sharp tongue the minute I heard my words. "But . . . maybe I could help by leading a group," I suggested, hoping to smooth any feathers I may have ruffled.

THE AWAKENING

Wisely, he didn't press me for my qualifications or ridicule my offer. Instead, he enthusiastically filled me in on why he was launching the program.

"I believe this program is really going to change lives," he said. "We all have areas of our lives that God is calling us to grow in—areas where we can reflect Jesus and His power to save and heal and overcome. Areas like anger, resentment, codependency, loss, anxiety, grief, or addiction and substance abuse. R&R is for anyone seeking a safe place to remove masks and work through life's struggles in a deep way. This experience can really set people free."

Listening to his passion eased my defensiveness, and his mention of a safe place intrigued me.

"I could come and serve coffee," I offered, thinking perhaps he was politely ignoring my offer to lead a small group.

So that's how I started. But during the coffee breaks, several of the women were so welcoming that they soon coaxed me into joining their small group of about twelve. Being a people pleaser, I didn't want to seem unfriendly, so I reluctantly joined them. As I nervously sat in the circle, I was careful to maintain certain boundaries. It may have appeared to others that group conversation was easy for me, but the opposite was true. I often struggled trying to fit in with others. I always felt like I was on the outside looking in.

After attending R&R for about a month, I was listening to the women share their struggles one night when I began to sense that their stories were triggering some unwanted feelings in me. It was as if an invisible crowbar was prying the lid off a long-forgotten crate. My shoulders tensed and my stomach tightened. I tried to ignore the building anxiety by focusing intently on the woman who was talking at the moment. But then she started describing a traumatic experience. My breathing grew shallow. I realized that I'd clenched my teeth. Then a very old memory came to mind.

Something I hadn't thought about in decades. The memory made me flinch.

No! I'm not going there. Nothing good will come of it.

I wanted to leave right then, but I didn't want to seem rude or hurt the feelings of the woman speaking. So I did everything I could to distract myself. I scanned the room and counted heads. I counted ceiling tiles. I tried to go numb. But the crowbar was still working on that box, the emotional pressure inside me threatening to escape. Long-forgotten memories were now springing to mind, and with them came feelings of panic. When the session was over, I bolted from my chair and tore out of the building to my car.

But the onslaught of old memories wouldn't stop. On the way home, I was trembling as I tried to focus my full attention on driving. I checked my speed. Took note of the distance between my car and the car in front of me. Eyed the rearview and side mirrors. Turned on my favorite music. Anything to distract myself from the images swirling in my mind.

I'll be home in a few minutes, I assured myself, in spite of the typical New Jersey traffic. This will pass.

Suddenly a face I hadn't seen in forty years flashed through my mind. The angry face of a man only inches from my own and wearing a look of disgust. I saw him pushing me backward and slapping me across the face so hard that I fell to the floor.

Oh, dear God, don't let me go there.

But it was too late. The past was screaming its way into the present, and I was coming undone.



I pulled into the driveway, turned off the ignition, and fought to take a few deep breaths. I knew my husband, Peter, would be

THE AWAKENING

occupied watching television in the living room. I could easily avoid getting involved in a conversation.

“How were things at the church?” Peter called to me as I hung up my jacket.

“Fine,” I called back as I moved toward the bedroom to change. “It was a good night.” Confidentiality was a priority at R&R, so Peter knew not to expect me to say more.

It was comforting to be home, to hear Peter’s voice, to be reminded that I had a good and happy life now. But it didn’t feel good to keep a secret from Peter about my experience that night. My silence felt like a lie. But what choice did I have? Peter knew nothing of my old life. We’d been married for four years, and these memories had remained buried where they belonged. It was as if they were secrets I’d been keeping even from myself. No reason to dig them up, right?

But somehow I knew it wasn’t right at all. And I wasn’t *trying* to dig them up. These forgotten memories were escaping all on their own, and they truly frightened me.

Just then an image of myself cowering from an oncoming punch flashed before me. *Where is all this coming from?* I wondered. I was terrified. *What is wrong with me?* I wanted to believe this was just a bad dream that would go away. But I knew in my gut that these memories were real. Actual events from the past were haunting me, and I couldn’t control or stop them. Attending Redemption & Recovery had triggered them. How was it possible I had suffered something so inhumane and then buried it so deeply?

I’ll just not go back to R&R, I thought. The memories will fade again.

I wanted to run into the living room and tell Peter what was happening. After all, isn’t that what you’re supposed to do in a

marriage—be honest and transparent and feel completely safe, especially with your best friend?

Wrong! cried a voice from deep inside. *The last time I told a husband of mine the truth about my past, the cost was too high.* And with that thought came a flashback of my first marriage, which had been to a man named Ray. With him I'd learned the hard way what happens when you reveal an ugly past to a husband. But that's a story for later.



I pulled myself away from the memory of Ray and climbed into bed, even though it was earlier than my normal bedtime. Later, when Peter came to bed and snuggled up next to me, I pretended to be asleep. But I was far from it. The old memories still haunted me. My pillow was damp with tears, my palms sweaty, my teeth clenched, and my stomach in knots.

Since leaving the church that evening, I'd been accosted by faces, names, scenes, sounds, smells, and images all locked away in my soul long ago. I'd thought those memories were dead, but now I knew they'd just been lying in wait. The memories poured from Pandora's box, and there would be no gathering them up and burying them again.

Something about the Redemption & Recovery group had pierced me. Shame had scorched me. Truth had nauseated me. Panic had overwhelmed me. Fear had moved into my heart and taken over.

What would Peter think if he knew about my past? How could he ever understand? I could barely wrap my head around that three-year nightmare, something so foul that it had robbed me of all my dignity, so inhumane that it had left me deeply shamed and traumatized. No wonder I'd blocked it out of my memory.

THE AWAKENING

Now that the memories had resurfaced, I wanted to find the cleansing and peace that the leaders of R&R had been speaking of. But how could I? Dare I even utter my experiences to them? How would they react? Would they tell others? What would my daughter say? My son-in-law? I'd lose everything. I'd lose them and my church and Peter—the dearest gifts in my life. I could even lose myself. What if I began drinking again? What if I sank back into the darkness of depression, the suicidal state that had once nearly claimed my life?

Dear God, I'm so afraid. I can't go back there.

But I was already on the threshold, and stepping forward seemed inevitable.

Finally I drifted into a fitful sleep.

I spent the next day pretending nothing had happened. And the following days as well. I skipped out on R&R for several weeks, calling the leader and saying that my schedule had too many conflicts and I couldn't help with coffee anymore or return to the small group.

I expected to feel relief. With no R&R sessions, surely the memories would die down. But far from it. They continued to haunt me. Horrendous scenes kept popping into my mind. Faces. Threats. Beatings. The feel of a knife being held to my back. Knowing my abuser slept with a gun under his pillow. And the burning shame at the unspeakable things I had been forced to do. It seemed like the more I tried to stuff the memories back into the past, the more they multiplied. It was terrifying to realize I had no control over the flashbacks.

Then one afternoon my phone rang. It was Marianne, my R&R small-group leader. She'd been trying to reach me for weeks, but I'd ignored her calls until now. I'm not sure what prompted me to answer this time, but I did. After some polite small talk, she got to the point.

A SURVIVOR'S SECRETS

“Look, Gina, I don’t know what you’re going through, and that’s okay. I don’t need to know. But we miss you and want you back in our group. And whatever you’re going through, I want you to know that you are safe with us. You are safe here. Please don’t be afraid. Please come back.”

Safe? I’m safe? And they miss me?

Her words were like cool, fresh water pouring into my thirsty soul. I drank them in and wanted more. My past, my memories, my shameful secrets—they all felt so dangerous and threatening to everything I held dear. *Safety* was precisely what I longed for. It was what I needed. I thanked Marianne for calling and told her I’d consider returning.

But I knew that if I was going to do this—if I was going to participate in this recovery program and revisit my dark past—I’d need more than just this small group. I’d likely need a professional counselor as well, someone who could help me work through the trauma. This was too dark and deep to face without a counselor’s guidance. I also understood that I’d have to tell Peter everything about my past. If I was going to tell my small group and my counselor, then my husband needed to know as well.

So I made my decision. My shame had had the upper hand for too long. I wouldn’t let it control me any longer. I believed that God wanted to free me from this dark fear. He’d brought me to Redemption & Recovery for a purpose, and it was finally time to face my fears, expose my brokenness, and find healing.

God, help me, I prayed as I parked my car and walked into the church.