

A DIFFERENT KIND OF LOVE STORY

HOW GOD'S LOVE FOR YOU HELPS YOU
LOVE YOURSELF

LANDRA YOUNG HUGHES
with HOLLY CRAWSHAW



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I dedicate this book to my precious daughter, Sterling.
May you always see and love yourself as God sees and loves you.
I will always love you with all my heart.

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PREFACE

I have a confession to make.

I love *The Bachelor*.

Not, like, the literal current contestant, but the show itself. And while we're kicking things off here with brutal honesty, you should know that I also love *The Bachelorette* and even *Bachelor in Paradise*.

I can practically feel your judgment now and I probably deserve it.

But I love watching people chase love. Is there a more relatable concept? Not that we're all crossing our fingers to get an invite to a group date, but it's in our wiring to want and need human connection. And that may look different from one person to the next, but ultimately, we all want to be loved.

I left something out of my confession. I am one of those people who seriously cannot wait until the end of a series to find out who gets the final rose. That's right, guys. I READ THE SPOILERS.

I'm not sure what that says about my character, but I'm not going to stop doing it. In fact, I am going to give you a spoiler right now.

In this book, you're going to read about a different kind of love story. It's a love story each and every one of us is currently playing a role in—whether we're aware of it or not. And truth be told, it's scary critical that we stay tuned-in to this love story. Because outside of a growing relationship with God, no other love (or lack of love) has the potential to improve or implode your life like the love that you have for *you*.

That's right. This book is about learning to love yourself. And I don't mean like, go have a pedicure and a solo Target run. Those things are amazing, but they're on the surface of what it means to genuinely know, accept, and love you.

Inside these pages, you'll read about things I've done and choices I've made that I *never* thought I would share with anyone in a million years—especially the general public. I am going to reveal secrets I buried for years and years that make my *Bachelor* confession look like story time at the local library.

And while there aren't any roses in my story, there are definitely a few thorns. Throw in some media-induced drama, my personal control issues, and my entire family being deceived, and the stage is set for some quality entertainment.

So even if you don't yet see the point in reading a book on loving yourself, you should at least turn the page to see who gets the final rose.

ONE

Plot Twist

Jesus replied, “Friend, do what you came to do.”

Matthew 26:50

I was sitting on a bus on the way to basketball camp, surrounded by my friends and teammates, when I got the phone call that would change everything. It was my mom.

“Whatever you do,” she said, “don’t watch TV. Turn off your cell phone, and don’t listen to anyone who tries to talk to you about your dad.”

Like a scene from *Gossip Girl*, my teammates’ phones vibrated with a chorus of texts. And, yup. Their whispers and sideways glances told me what I already knew: those messages were about my dad.

I was barely fifteen years old. A freshman at a new school on the way to basketball camp. Not a care in the world beyond whether or not I would get to dress out for varsity come fall. But then, in that one single moment, everything changed.

You know what we call this in #BachelorNation? We call this a *plot twist*.

Have you ever gotten into a TV or book series, only to be blindsided by a plot twist? Things are going totally fine until the main character gets into an awful accident, becomes friends with the villain, or is killed off (I'm looking at you, *Grey's Anatomy*). When that happens, you have to wonder . . .

Is this the end of the series?

Did they just ruin the whole thing?

Whose dumb idea was this anyway?

As fun as those moments are to watch on TV, it's just different when you experience a plot twist in real life, isn't it?

Now my parents aren't, like, Jay-Z and Beyoncé-level famous, but in the church world, they're well-known as the founding pastors of Fellowship Church, a nondenominational congregation with multiple campuses across the country. My dad, Ed Young, is a communicator and leader in the church space. He's also a *New York Times* and Amazon bestselling author (no pressure, Landra) with a handful of spots on broadcast TV.

I had no clue that in my absence our privacy had been completely violated. Journalists had been secretly interviewing staff members at our church. Helicopters had circled our home taking photos. News reporters had even dug through our trash in an attempt to question my dad's integrity as the pastor of a church. Essentially, their angle was that my dad's financial success meant he was a thief. (He's not. My dad's character and work ethic are unmatched.)

My teenage mind reeled with the shocking loss of privacy and the sudden realization that my life and my family's life were being scrutinized. I mean, they took pictures of my sisters and

me as if that proved something about my dad's character. They even stole flight records from the airport to see where he was flying and snuck photos of my parents' place in Miami (where the church has a campus, by the way).

Like I said, I was in ninth grade at a new school when this all went down, and to say it was a challenging time would be the understatement of the millennium. Finding out that your life is under the microscope of the mainstream media can certainly make a teenager feel overly self-conscious. In other words, it about drove me nuts.

Let's start with the betrayal. Have you ever had a friend straight up hurt you? Like, turn their back on you or reject you? (I really want to make a *Bachelor*-betrayal joke here, but I'll refrain since this part of my book should probably be treated with some seriousness and not be compared to a Molly-Jason-Melissa scenario.)

In all seriousness, it felt like those staff members who gave interviews against my dad's reputation personally shoved a knife between my shoulder blades.

And even more brutal was the backlash.

As our once-faithful church family and close friends chose to believe untrue accusations and even help spread the false rumors, the hurt continued to deepen. How could lifelong friends whom we had fought in the trenches with suddenly leave our side when we needed them most? We had visited them in the hospital, taken them meals when they were hurting, and held their hands when beloved family members passed away. But when we hoped they would stand by us, they chose to believe the lies and perpetuate the cycle of pain. The betrayal cut into my heart, and my faith in the power of friendship to help and heal took a severe blow.

Want to know who else knows something about betrayal? (Besides reality TV personalities, of course.)

You guessed it. At least, maybe you guessed it. It's Jesus.

When I think or talk about Jesus, sometimes it's hard for me to imagine him being like me. Like a human. Who, like, had bad breath and enjoyed the odd afternoon nap. But Jesus *was* like me—like us. I wrestle with his humanity more than I wrestle with his God-ness, which logically speaking doesn't make a ton of sense. There are historical records of Jesus living and walking this planet, but somehow it's more difficult for me to believe that Jesus was ticklish than it is for me to believe that Jesus beat hell, death, and the grave to rise from the dead.

The New Testament makes it clear that Jesus had a human body: "The Word became a human being" (John 1:14). Can't really argue with that, can we? We also read that Jesus was born (Luke 2:7), that he grew (Luke 2:40), and that he dealt with conditions like tiredness (John 4:6), thirst (John 19:28), and hunger (Matt. 4:2). Jesus had needs—vulnerabilities.

And if you think about it, it's Jesus's vulnerabilities that make him the *most* like us. But that's the same for all people, right? We relate best to each other when we realize we share a common experience—struggles, challenges, and setbacks.

But Jesus's vulnerabilities weren't limited to physical issues. He was emotionally vulnerable too. He was impressionable (Matt. 8:10), sorrowful (Matt. 26:38), movable (John 11:33–35), and troubled (John 13:21).

One of Jesus's most glaring vulnerabilities was a result of his very nature. Jesus was *relational*. When he came to earth, he could have chosen a number of ways to influence people. He was the Son of God—he had the ability to speak a word and

command the knee of any man or woman he wanted. But that's positional influence—the influence you have over people who have less power than you. It's easy to exert positional (vertical) influence. We do this as parents every time we tell our kids, “Do it because I said so.” In other words, “I am the boss, so do as I say.”

No, Jesus chose the *other* type of influence—relational influence. The kind of influence that requires time, effort, and work. Jesus's influence with his disciples had everything to do with the relationship that he shared with them. They were his friends. His “ride or dies.” They shared their lives together, and like with all close relationships, Jesus opened himself up to the potential for great hurt.

Enter Judas. Judas Iscariot was one of the twelve disciples Jesus chose to do life with.

You've heard this story before. But let's dig into the account together because I think there's something incredible we can learn about the character of Jesus here. You may have read that Judas disclosed Jesus's identity to the chief priests and elders for thirty pieces of silver, playing a crucial role in Jesus's apprehension and subsequent crucifixion. Here's the exact telling:

While Jesus was still speaking, Judas arrived. He was one of the 12 disciples. A large crowd was with him. They were carrying swords and clubs. The chief priests and the elders of the people had sent them. Judas, who was going to hand Jesus over, had arranged a signal with them. “The one I kiss is the man,” he said. “Arrest him.” So Judas went to Jesus at once. He said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” And he kissed him. (Matt. 26:47–49)

I mean, I can think of a thousand less intimate ways that Judas could have let the crowd know who Jesus was. But Judas betrayed Jesus with *a kiss on his cheek*.

Have you ever felt that cold whisper of betrayal against your skin? Can you imagine how Jesus must have felt as Judas walked toward him, knowing full well what his friend and follower was up to?

Surely Jesus watched each of Judas's steps in torment. *Turn around, Judas. You don't have to do this, friend. Please.*

But Judas traded his friend for a fistful of coins. And Jesus knew it was coming. "Jesus replied, 'Friend, do what you came to do'" (Matt. 26:50).

FRIEND? Jesus, come on. I can think of a few words I'd use for Judas in that moment, but none of them would have been *friend*.

Maybe Jesus put a little sarcastic emphasis on the word to remind Judas *just* whose death warrant he'd signed. Chances are, he didn't. Because if you've ever had the breath knocked out of you by someone you love hurting you, you know those initial moments of shock can be a slow ache. An ache of disbelief. An ache of sorrow. Of loss.

It's the same ache I felt in the backlash of my family being betrayed.

Friend, do what you came to do.

Jesus looked in the cold face of deception, the face of a man he loved—a man whom he'd done *life* with—and had a choice as to how he was going to react. He chose compassion.

Here's a freebie: when we have a choice between compassion and anything else, Jesus wants us to choose compassion.

In the following weeks, I would like to say I chose compassion. But I didn't. My problem on that bus in ninth grade was

less about my lack of compassion toward others and more about my lack of compassion toward myself. I withdrew. I shut down. And it was during this season of emotional pandemonium that I first developed the symptoms of a disease that would nearly destroy my body and my life.

You see, I am currently in recovery for a severe eating disorder that includes behaviors associated with anorexia, bulimia, and bingeing and purging. An eating disorder whose roots sprang to life when the news stories about my dad broke.

At that point, I officially lost *control*. I didn't have control over who took my photo. I didn't have control over what my friends said about me when I wasn't in the room. It felt like I didn't have control over *anything*.

Except what I ate. I controlled precious little—but I did control that.

Because when you're a teenager, there's no one making airplane noises with a bright red spoon, forcing you to take bites of food. And if there is someone watching you eat, you can always get rid of it (purge) later.

In the wake of what felt like universal rejection, a deep cavern had been carved into my newly wounded heart. A place I knew logically Jesus *wanted* to fill. Because he loves me no matter what, right? That's what I had been told my whole life.

The problem was, I felt ashamed. I felt angry. I felt alone and unlovable.

My eating disorder became my comfort. My safe place. My friend. And in a twisted sense, it became my way of feeling loved.

Can anyone else relate to that? To turning to sources you know will hurt you as a way of making yourself feel better?

Maybe for you it's alcohol, or overeating, or overspending, or even overthinking. We use these things like pacifiers when we feel out of control, disappointed, rejected, or hurt.

And that's because we're all looking for the same thing—to *be loved*. To be loved with a different kind of love than the imperfect variety that we experience in our earthly relationships.

One of my favorite movies is James Cameron's *Avatar*. If you've never seen it, it's about the alien world of Pandora and its inhabitants, the Na'Vi beings. If you have seen it, how are the blue Na'Vi people still so gorgeous? I don't know how the filmmakers did it—but the graphics are breathtaking.

Back to the point.

One of the Na'Vi greetings is *Oel ngati kameie*, or *I see you*.¹

I see you.

I comprehend you.

I understand you.

I see you—not just on the outside but on the inside too.

I think it's one of the most beautiful expressions I've ever heard. *That's* what we long for—to be *seen* by someone. To be seen and known but still be fully accepted.

That's the different kind of love our Creator made us to crave.

So let me pose this question: Why would God design us to want something that we can't find on this side of heaven?

Did he want to set us up for disappointment?

Did he want to test our ability to withstand hurt?

Did he want us all to get repeated concussions from banging our heads against walls out of frustration and despair?

Here's what *I* believe God was thinking when he wired us with the desire to be loved unconditionally: God created us to

want to be loved in a way only he can love because he's jealous for our hearts.

That may sound “churchy.” Or maybe it just sounds straight up weird. But it's true—God wants to be the only one who is able to meet that innate need because he wants to hold a piece of our hearts that no one else can touch.

And when we try to fit other things inside that God-shaped hole?

In my case, it spelled complete and utter disaster.