

A full-length portrait of Rachel Joy Baribeau, a woman with long, wavy brown hair, smiling broadly. She is wearing a sleeveless, knee-length dress with a colorful geometric pattern in shades of blue, gold, and black. She is also wearing tall, brown suede over-the-knee boots. Her left wrist is adorned with several gold and silver bracelets, and she is wearing a ring on her left hand. The background is a solid light blue.

# RELENTLESS JOY

Finding Freedom, Passion, & Happiness  
*(Even When You Have to Fight for It)*

RACHEL JOY BARIBEAU

“Rachel’s joy in sharing her own experience for others’ benefit never ceases to amaze me. She is a selfless sharer with wisdom that cannot be ignored. Her message is eloquently outlined in *Relentless Joy* and reaches all readers to their core. It’s rare that a book actually makes you a better human, but that’s exactly what this one does. Soak up this guidance willingly to put into action throughout your life.”

**Laura Rutledge**, ESPN host and reporter

“*Relentless Joy* is a fantastic glance into Rachel Baribeau’s journey. Just like her annual talks with our football team, you can feel Rachel’s positive perspective, genuine passion, and abundant joy, even in the face of adversity, as you read her book. This book is another elite benchmark in Rachel’s mission of #ImChangingtheNarrative.”

**P.J. Fleck**, University of Minnesota head football coach

“The first time I heard Rachel speak I immediately wished that I had known her when I was coaching. I would certainly have had her come speak to our players and promoted her speaking to our entire student body. Her message is truly that prominent.

I’ve always encouraged the young men in our football program to ‘surround themselves with people who can and will make their lives better.’ At the top of that list, for me, is Rachel Baribeau. She makes a difference in a most positive way. Her words, as you will read, will strongly and positively impact your life. She has a passion for bringing a productive, joyful, meaningful, and helpful life to others.

*Relentless Joy* is a fantastic read for all ages. And all who read or hear Rachel speak regarding ‘changing the narrative’ will benefit tremendously and have access to a more productive and fruitful life. It is also a guide to the development of prominent, caring, and successful leadership. I find myself drawing daily from her thoughts written in this book, feeling as though it has made my life better.”

**Bill Snyder**, College Football Hall of Fame coach

“*Relentless Joy* is an open reservoir of passion. Rachel is a true ambassador of the ferocious authenticity necessary to connect with the heart of any audience. Rachel has survived, she has thrived, and now she has arrived to deliver the recipe of an overcomer. Do yourself a favor and jump on the joy train.”

**David Tyree**, Super Bowl champion, owner of DT3 Enterprises

Rachel Joy Baribeau, *Relentless Joy*  
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# RELENTLESS *JOY*

**Finding Freedom, Passion, and Happiness**  
*(Even When You Have to Fight for It)*

RACHEL JOY BARIBEAU



*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Rachel Joy Baribeau, *Relentless Joy*  
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To my Booty-Tooty and number one fan, my mommy. I did it, we did it! Can you believe it? I know you are throwing a party in heaven for this book. Can you and Jesus let some confetti fall down here on us?

And to my soulmate and best friend, Christopher William Rohe. Thank you for your endless support! None of this would be possible without you. You are my best friend and the answer to my prayers. I've been called a lot of beautiful names in my life, but "wife" means the most to me. I love you over the Grand Tetons and back.

To my (bonus) kids. Thank you for making my life more amazing than I could ever fathom.

And to my people: my family, my friends, and my fans that have become friends. You complete me, and I mean it, every bit as cheesy as it sounds. If you have ever wished me well or prayed for me, count yourself amongst my tribe.

Parts of this book are hard to read. There is mention of self-harm, suicide, and other sensitive topics. I want to be respectful and thoughtful to everyone that will dive into these pages by including an overall trigger warning. But hear me when I say this—feel it deeply, and maybe even close your eyes and say it to yourself—even in the midst of my triggers, there is joy waiting to be discovered. I love you.

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## *Introduction*

**W**hat follows are my innermost thoughts. I have spent the better part of a year putting them on paper, but they have been percolating my entire life. And before you dive in, let me just say that as excited as I am for you to read this and hopefully be changed, I am also completely terrified. I make a living from being vulnerable, but, holy cow, this is a new level, even for me. But if I didn't offer you my full self in these pages, I'd be missing the point of this book entirely.

So this is Rachel: completely raw and unabridged.

In this book, I humbly offer you my story. Not just for the sake of telling it but to share what I have been blessed with in hopes that you will discover it too.

And what's that, you might ask?

Joy.

Through the many ups and downs of my journey, I have discovered a joy that is like that sturdy old umbrella standing strong against the wind. The kind of joy that is battle-tested and maybe a little beat-up, but you know it's going to hold in the worst tempest. Yep, my friend, that is what you stand to procure from this book. An unwavering and relentless joy.

Maybe you feel like I once did: hopeless or in a perpetual funk. Maybe you've hit rock bottom financially, spiritually, or psychologically. Maybe you just know there is more. I've been there. I've been all these places and I'm telling you, you are exactly where you are meant to be, holding or listening to this book. There is a plan to move forward, and I believe with all my heart that the baby steps to help get you there are within these pages.

But before I get too far ahead, let me tell you a little about myself. I was adopted by my father at eighteen months old, told at six, and then retold at twelve, since I didn't remember. This revelation pulled the rug out from under my little soul's feet. I hid the sadness, telling no one. I was internally calling myself names like *bastard*, *unwanted*, and *unloved*. (Well, I think Satan was the author of those lies, but we will save that for a bit later.)

At twenty, I was pistol-whipped and almost raped in an attempted robbery/murder. I fought back and put all four perpetrators in jail, two for twenty years apiece. (They had very long, violent rap sheets.) I battled an addiction to hard drugs through most of my twenties, which eventually led to selling the drug to support my habit. Even as I was ascending in the sportscasting world, I was battling this addiction—literally living a double life. I got clean in 2008 only by the grace of God and have never looked back.

I was the first and only known female sportscaster to ever fully participate in a semi- or professional football training camp. I lasted for five days of two-a-days before being medically released. (The plan was never to play in a game, only to learn it from the inside out. I was beaten black and blue after seven days of being tackled. I was a walking ice pack.)

I've climbed the world's tallest freestanding mountain, Kilimanjaro. I organized the group climb on behalf of my dear friend and former NFL player Kevin Turner in support of his battle with ALS. We encountered a blizzard at the top. I slipped and fell while on the Western Breach and started to slide very quickly. The last person in line on the climb grabbed me midfall. I count myself as a miracle,



having survived that slip on the top of that mountain. (Sidenote: the person who caught me was added to the climb the night before. Coincidence? I don't believe in them. But more on that later.)

I was the first female host on SiriusXM collegiate sports stations, was on the jumbotron of the Cowboys stadium highlighting college football history and hosting the first College Football Playoff game, and am one of the few females in the world to vote on the prestigious Heisman award, which is awarded to the best player in college football. (Let's go, girls!)

I've faced pain that I wouldn't wish on anyone. (Sadly, I'm sure many of you can relate.) I've survived abuse in my childhood and in my adult relationships. I've since done major work through therapy and with Jesus to forgive. I left that toxicity in my past, deciding that the cycle ends with me. I have lost both my parents and so many others. Grief is a constant companion, but I've made peace with it. Sort of. I almost took my own life after losing my mommy to cancer. I call it my Dark Night of the Soul, which you will hear about later in this book.

Let's all take a breath after that paragraph! Sheesh! I don't know that I've ever written all these facts about my life in one place. I am well aware that my life has been dramatic, by the way. As much as I loathe drama, it tends to follow me. Not in a dramatic "let's argue, fuss, and fight" way but in a sensational "crazy and amazing things just keep happening" way. People have often told me it should be made into a movie. (Welcome to my life.)

But please know that I share these things not for sympathy but to say that through it all, I still have joy. Joy that rumbles up from my soul, to paraphrase Maya Angelou. That's why I am so determined to spread joy. It's my calling in life. With a zillion news outlets pumping doom and gloom into our faces all day, I have made the conscious decision to be a *JOYstarter* instead. And I want to teach others to do the same.

It's with this mindset that I founded a movement called #ImChangingtheNarrative. Our mission is to promote positive mental health and GOOD love for yourself and others by serving as

inspiration for students, professionals, and parents as they create individual legacies of purpose, passion, and platform. Since its inception in 2016, we have worked with more than sixty colleges multiple times, law enforcement in several states, US Customs and Border Protection, high schools, prison ministry, churches, and halfway houses. When I am discouraged, my business manager reminds me that I created this from nothing. From an idea in my mind and a calling in my soul.

In this book, you will learn many of the same principles I teach from stages across the country. Recently, one of our leaders and speakers in *#ImChangingtheNarrative*, Tre Hicks, compared us to the famous explorers Lewis and Clark, charting new territory. I felt that in the deepest part of my soul. Yep! That's what we are doing, charting new territory so that others can follow, so that *you* can follow!

Hence, the writing of this book. It is an extension of my calling.

I want to teach you, my dear reader, how to have joy no matter your circumstances. I want to help you chase and notice joy in our ever-darkening world. I hope you “think, feel, and then do something about it,” as my friend Tim Shaw says. If I encourage you to think and feel but you don't take action, then what is it all for? You will hear me talk about your spiritual shovel in this book. Often, we wish hard for change but are unwilling to do the digging and hard work needed to make it happen. You will need your shovel. Hard work is required for true transformation, my dear.

My mom used to tell me that a wound will get worse before it gets better. I think it's the same with transformation and healing. It is very likely to get harder and hurt worse before it gets better. But isn't the hope of healing better than sitting on the sidelines—or on the couch—always wondering what could have been?

We won't be doing things halfway in the pages of this book or in our lives. No more playing it safe or living in fear. I hope to inspire you to take action toward finding the freedom, passion, and happiness you were made for—even when you have to fight for it! As my warrior-queen and friend Thea Wood says, “Kick fear in the face!” HIYAHH!

I promise you this fight is worth it!

In this way we become the light makers in our world. The peace-keepers. The healers. The changers of the narrative.

So, are you in?

If you are still reading, I'm going to assume your answer to that question is "Heck YES!" Or maybe it's just "I'm interested. Keep talking." Either way, I am happy that you're joining me!

But before going on, there are a few things you'll need to know.

First and most importantly, I love you! I want you to know that. I'm not a "love ya" person, by the way. You know, that whole "I don't know you that well, so it's only a 'ya' and not a definite 'you.'" That feels halfway to me, and as I've mentioned before, I don't do half-ways. I may not know you, but I DO love you. I love you because you are my sister, you are my brother. I love you because you are a fellow miracle and warrior. I love you because we are all on this journey together, sweet pea.

(Oh, also, I might call you *all* the pet names throughout this book because I love pet names. I gush when called sweet pea, darling heart, lovebug, sugarplum, my love. If you don't prefer them, feel free to keep hearing "dear reader" as I speak to you in the coming pages.)

Next, know that I laughed and cried a ton while writing this book. Both acts are ways to express what is going on in our hearts and are incredibly important in the healing process. Interestingly, a woman named Rose-Lynn Fisher did a multiyear photography project of more than one hundred actual tears as seen under a microscope that she captured from herself and volunteers, even a newborn. Tears elicited from grief or joy, called psychic tears, have been found to contain protein-based hormones, including the neurotransmitter leucine enkephalin, a natural painkiller that is excreted when the body is under distress. I love this quote from Rose-Lynn Fisher:

Tears are the medium of our most primal language in moments as unrelenting as death, as basic as hunger and as complex as a rite of

passage. It's as though each one of our tears carries a microcosm of the collective human experience, like one drop of an ocean.<sup>1</sup>

So keep those tears coming! They are part of what it means to be human! I hereby give you permission to cry and laugh your heart out. Consider it a royal decree.

I also encourage you to journal and plan a book club with your neighbor, coworker, and bestie from high school. Because in truth I hope this book is received as part book, part journal. In fact, if this book were a meal, it would be a whole smorgasbord of self-help, wisdom, encouragement, and faith running together like gravy oozing out and covering all the foods on your plate. These are stories of my crazy, amazing, hard, beautiful, wonderful life. The same kind of life I want for you.

There is a JOYSTART section at the end of each chapter that offers you a practical way to apply what you are learning. It's like a jump start for your car but for your soul! Writing something down is more influential to creating lasting memories and change versus simply telling ourselves we will remember it. And sharing yourself and experiences with others creates community. There is joy, peace, understanding, support, and acceptance in community. I am no one without my people. I pray this book draws you closer to your people too.

Lastly, here is what I *know* about the journey you're about to go on: you will meet Jesus in this book. He is here among these pages, waiting to be discovered with fresh eyes. My hope is that whether you've known Him for years, been church-hurt or people-hurt, or don't believe in Him, you will get to know Him in a new way. And maybe—just maybe—after reading this book, you will want to know Him in the most intimate way! As your best friend, your provider, and your Papa. That would be the greatest joy for me! (It's also okay if you just want to learn more about Him or even if you just come to think, *Jesus seems like a pretty rad dude.*)

I mentioned my great friend Kevin who passed in 2016 from his battle with ALS. He was one of the primary inspirations for

#ImChangingtheNarrative. He once told me, “You could step off a curb tomorrow and get hit by a bus. I got a heads-up on my life. So I say I’m sorry. I hug my kids. I live life to the fullest.” My gracious, what a simple yet profound mantra. Kevin loved radically and lived fully. He taught me to do the same. Now I pass this same precious knowledge on to you.

I hope when I go to be with my Maker and my mama, you will say, “That girl loved radically!” Within the pages of this book, I will teach you to love radically too. Because your life and my life are far too precious for any halfway kind of love. None of us know when our time is up, and we are all just walking each other home. I want to love radically, extraordinarily, until that moment comes. This book is an invitation to do the same in your life.

I pray you find new ways to chase joy every day and in every way, big or small. Because this moment is all we have. I once heard someone say there is a reason our windshield is so big and our rearview mirror is so small. We can’t do anything about the past but learn from it, honor it, heal from it, and use it to be better. Your real gift is now. Your real gift is this book, the pencil or pen in your hand, and your desire to learn more, be more, and chase joy relentlessly!

I want you to hear and receive my words in the way that is most meaningful to you because this journey is about you! Thank you for purchasing this book, and thank you for being willing to go on the journey of a lifetime with me as your guide.

Oh, and one last gentle reminder before we set out: I love you. I see you. Your story matters greatly. I’m holding space for you!

Let’s begin our journey.

# 1

## CHAPTER 1

### *The Birth of a Movement*

**I** am the person who runs toward trouble, to the burning building instead of away from it. And oftentimes, people are burning buildings. I know this because I was once a burning building. Heck, I still am known to spark up from time to time. But there is a difference between a life burning to the ground and a soul on fire. I want to teach you that difference. I want to teach you to look in the mirror, discern deeply, grab the fire extinguisher for yourself and others, dust the soot off your life, and ignite your soul in a whole new way.

I know it can be done. I am living proof.

Let me set the scene: it was August of 2016, and college football was breaking my heart.

I literally broke down and cried while hosting on SiriusXM College Sports Nation. I was the first female host on the college sports stations of SiriusXM, an honor that I still hold very dear. But the state of affairs of college football was so emotionally distressing to me that I penned the following article, which went viral and spawned a national movement:

Everywhere I turn these days, there is news of horrid sexual allegations, rape, blame-shifting, cheating (level 1 and 2), gross misappropriation of funds, illegal gun-toting, plausible deniability, and general lawlessness, by players and coaches.

It is not a good time for college football, and that is an understatement.

It brought up a memory I had pushed far down deep, one I had not even shared with my own family, until today. But it came barreling back like a searing-hot poker in my gut.

You see, I was once a victim (now I am a victor). Late one night I was in a familiar house with a familiar somebody, and he was uncharacteristically angry. He dragged me from one end of the house to the other, by my hair. There were other people in the house, supposedly sleeping. I screamed for help, but no one came to my aid. Finally, he relented. I curled up into a ball and went to sleep. The next day I had chunks of hair missing from my head and carpet burns covered my body. But what hurt worse than my injuries was the fact that people heard my (bloody-murder) screams, yet they refused to help me.

“Why?” When I go back to that night, that is the resounding question I have. “How could you?”

That’s why I can identify with these victims at campuses across the country. I am one of them. And they are me, and a great deal of us were ignored in our most vulnerable hour.

So I will leave you with this: what are we going to do to take our game back? Where are our leaders? Our makers of men? Where are the responsible fans—you know, the ones that think for themselves rather than blindly follow their school’s every decision? Where are the teammates strong enough to tell another when they are doing wrong? Where are the coaches that are willing to say, “Sometimes doing the right thing might cost me something, but I’m willing to do it!”

It’s high time for these people to stand up and take the game back that we love.

Who’s with me?<sup>1</sup>

This was the impetus, the inciting incident, the spark.  
My sadness, my frustration, my pain.

You will hear me say it several times on this journey of a book: your greatest purpose is often born from your greatest pain. Such was the case for me. So much so that I blindly opened a Google doc after the above article was published and typed: *Who are you away from the field? What makes your heart beat faster?*

These questions would spring an idea. The idea to help others see that there is a king or queen, royalty, inside all of us. That idea became the spark that transformed the pain I was experiencing into a passion that burned bright. That simple idea grew into my life's purpose. And so a movement was born; I just didn't know it yet. It was cellular still, only palpable because of the pain in my gut. It had no name. I just knew I needed to speak my truth.

And speak I did.

I was invited to speak at Florida State University that same August. I spoke on passion and purpose and grabbing the headlines for good things. I spoke about changing the narrative and my own experience with domestic violence. I didn't know what was going to happen or what it would look like beyond that talk. I was just going where the Lord sent me.

Since those early years, the movement has definitely proven ever-evolving. We grew, word spread, people were helped, and we even embraced a name.

### #ImChangingtheNarrative

And like the little engine that could, we just kept going. We have now worked with more than sixty colleges and counting and with the Customs and Border Protection, partnered with the Northern Sun and Big 12 sports conferences, and consulted with the Big Ten. We've been featured in international newspapers and even on a giant promo in Times Square. A movement that started with athletes in mind now also inspires CEOs, stay-at-home moms, students, and everyday folks.

Today, our mission statement is "to promote positive mental health and GOOD love for yourself and others by inspiring students,



professionals, and parents to create an individual legacy of purpose, passion, and platform.” Every book I read, every person I meet, and every life changed along the way puts a log on the fire of my soul and allows me to teach from a place so authentic yet still so raw, but that rawness has an intrinsically powerful edge. It invites any soul that is even minimally conscious and curious to a life of more, a life of different, of better, of non–status quo.

And it all started with an idea.

I wonder what answers you might have if you asked yourself the same two questions. (Just substitute the word “field” for your personal title.) What sort of change could you accomplish in our world? What sorts of movements are lying dormant beneath heaps of pain, just waiting for a spark to ignite them?

*What sorts of  
movements are  
lying dormant  
beneath heaps of  
pain, just waiting  
for a spark to  
ignite them?*

What might you be able to accomplish if you not only *understood* your own royalty but also *believed* it? Like really believed it.

I find that because of what I like to call “funky junk,” so many of us never quite understand the majesty within. Funky junk can be anger, bitterness, unforgiveness, mental illness, trauma, abuse, self-loathing, and so much more. These things distract, stand in the way, and steal our joy. But if we put in the time and effort to work through our junk and ultimately let it go, we can start to see ourselves and others clearly. We can see that we were born not just to simply exist or make it through; we were born to leave a legacy! We were born for wholeness and greatness and relentless joy.

When we grab our shovel and do the hard work to get there—things like taking care of our mental health, learning self-care (what we commonly refer to as soul care around the movement), reconciling interpersonal relationships, and discovering our purpose, passion, and platform—we not only heal and grow ourselves but

also are able to throw the rope back for someone else so they, too, can be all they were meant to be.

As another anniversary of the movement fast approaches, I finally feel like I can look back and truly marvel at all we created without letting the foot off the proverbial gas. I've had some amazing people helping me on this journey. Some stayed awhile and others were there only for a season, but they know who they are, and #ImChangingtheNarrative would not be where we are without them.

Because here's the whole truth and nothing but the truth: I have fallen, failed, been broken more times than I can remember, lost everything, and probably turned some people off with my relentless nature; I have been facedown on the floor, and almost took my own life even, but I'm still here! I'm still standing! Thanks in large part to those who loved me even when I didn't love me. And those times I fell and failed, oh boy, did I get up with a vengeance that I'm sure reverberated through the halls of hell. "Oh shoot, that didn't kill her? That didn't steal her joy? Back to the drawing board, guys." I like to think that is the conversation going on in hell every time we crawl back from things that were certainly designed to take us out.

With the help of God and others, I've crawled back from losing everything and kept my joy in the process. And now I get to be that source of support for others (and hopefully you).

I am able to help others because I've been there. While I'm a glass-half-full girl (or as my mom used to call me, the eternal optimist), I can also tell you about life on both sides of the coin—joy and despair. When you are examining yourself, I hope you examine both sides of the coin too. There is great value in knowing yourself, my dear. There is also great value in knowing your pain, what ails you, haunts you, and keeps you pinned down. And there is even more value in deeply loving yourself, but we will get into that throughout this book.

When you are willing to embrace both your strengths and your pain, you are able to help those who are where you have been. I've gotten middle-of-the-night suicide phone calls from people I've

spoken to and gotten them professional help. They are all alive and thriving today. I can do that because I've been the one on the other side of the phone in need of a friend.

One of those people I got a call from in the middle of the night now coaches high school football as an assistant coach. We keep in touch from time to time, as is often the case with many of the people I have talked to. I offered to speak to his team via Zoom, and I recently visited with them virtually. When I hung up the Zoom call, I was in a puddle of tears. The enormity of what had just happened enveloped me.

Here was a player I initially spoke to FIVE YEARS AGO! When he called me late one evening, desperate, I had not spoken to him in TWO YEARS! But still, he reached out to me. Why me I'll never know, but I thank God profusely that he thought of me during such a low moment. We, alongside our resident psychologist, Dr. Josh Klapow, got him the immediate help he needed that night, but we also continued to encourage him and check in on him. Fast-forward, he is now thriving and living his best life, and because of him, I got to pour into his players, another generation, another group of souls. Each someone's child. Someone's grandchild. Someone's everything.

And so, the ripple on the pond gets larger.

I've been blessed to have inspired countless people with that same relentless nature that others have always been turned off by. Different strokes for different folks, my people. I've created a movement from zilch, nada, nothing. I created it because I saw a problem and knew I could do something about it.

I say this not to brag but to show you that you can make a difference too!

What issue touches a nerve for you? What problem makes you want to live your life to help others? Haven't some of the greatest things grown from a problem? Sara Blakely created Spanx because women desperately needed better shape and support wear. Lewis Lattimer and Thomas Edison brought us mainstream electricity because they were tired of relying on candlelight night after night.

Let me share an important truth with you: you will die (duh), but your ripple will live on. You may never know who (or how) you affected others in this life with your sheer life force, your smile, and your generosity. Don't ever let anyone talk you out of making an impact, of living with joy, of sharing random compliments with complete strangers. (I'll chase someone down just to tell them something great about themselves.)

That money you left the maid as you departed the hotel or the big honking tip you left at the restaurant when you sensed someone was clearly struggling might be the action that turns everything around for them; it might be *the sign* that restores their faith in humanity. What if that act of generosity was the one they needed to make rent or get a hotel for the night? What if that dollar was the reason they began to hope and believe again for a better future?

If you feel the ping in your soul to turn around and do something for someone, don't you dare let anyone else talk you out of it, even if that person is you. These small acts of kindness begin to train our hearts toward a lifestyle of caring for others.

And that sort of kindness is contagious!

One time, I started picking up trash after a Widespread Panic show in the early days of Bonnaroo. I was tickled pink to slowly see others around me start to grab garbage bags and pick up trash too. Before we knew it, the field was clean and our hearts were happy.

Don't let anyone steer you from the path you know you're supposed to walk (and skip. When is the last time you skipped like a child? I highly recommend it!). If you've lost your way, this book is the invitation to walk (or crawl) back.

I really love this thought that has been attributed to both Carl W. Buehner and Maya Angelou: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

Right now, in this moment, I want you to lean into their words and remember the people who made you feel worthy, mighty, royal, validated, and seen. Let's take a moment to celebrate them.

The late Cecil Hurt was a legendary reporter for the *Tuscaloosa News*. He interviewed Bear Bryant and Nick Saban and many others in between. He was a giant and genius in the sports reporting world. He was also my friend.

I took the #ImChangingtheNarrative message to University of Alabama football in 2017. I was over-the-moon happy. Alabama is the college football mecca. Working with them will put you on the map in terms of speaking. It was even sweeter because I used to call Tuscaloosa home. I survived a tornado there while huddling in my closet with my two dogs, saying what I thought could be my last words to God. I met my best friend there and became the godmama to her kids. I started a Zumba program there and a prayer circle afterward. I met a precious man named Mr. May there, whom I adopted as my grandfather. I became a better reporter for having covered Nick Saban and Alabama football in Tuscaloosa. And I met Cecil there and cohosted his show for the *Tuscaloosa News*.

He was not able to attend my talk with Alabama football that day in 2017 but called me right after. This normally curmudgeonesque, even stodgy, man said, “You don’t get it, do you?”

“Get what?” I asked.

“You think you’re solely affecting players in that room, Rachel, but if one player goes back and breaks the generational cycle of poverty, drugs, or substance abuse, if one player changes the narrative in his family, in any way, or changes the way he deals with and talks about his mental health, then it affects his grandkids, and so on and so forth. It’s not just the players you spoke to today, Rachel. It’s so much bigger than that.”

Wooo, boy, that’s the good stuff right there!

I can close my eyes and still reach out and touch the dashboard of the car I was sitting in when he said that. I can even see the foliage and the restaurant I was sitting in front of.

Sidenote: I am working on genuinely receiving compliments. In my past, for a myriad of reasons, they have made me uncomfortable. I would dig my nails into my hands and deflect with another

genuine compliment to the giver, never letting the words pierce the deepest veil of my soul. But on that day, I felt his words. They blew open a hole in my soul of knowing what I was truly created for, a chasm so wide I could never go back. I could never not do this work. Someone's grandchild could be changed because of it. And they were depending on me to use my pain for a purpose.

And there is this: for all the pain I've experienced, there's still more joy than I can count. And oh, the life change that has happened because I've chosen to use my pain for purpose and count my joy instead of my pain.

It really comes down to a simple question, my love: Are you a victim or a victor? That is a decision we all get to make and it is made in our minds, hearts, and souls.

What follows in the chapters to come is a collection of stories that pack a punch. After all, my movement is built on my stories and the art of storytelling. These are tales that will immediately put you at the center of the action, narratives that will bind up and break your heart at the same time.

One of the greatest compliments I have ever received was from the head coach of East Carolina University at the time, Scottie Montgomery, who said, "It works so well [your talks] because it's your life. It's your story. You're not coming in and trying to tell someone else's story. You don't talk down to them. You lift them up. You infuse hope into them. That's why you are so effective."

And that's my hope for this book. So buckle up. I'm going to share with you some of the most impactful moments of my life, the ones that shaped and molded me into who I am. I am also going to share my heartbreaking failures and the times I summited the mountaintop. My hope? That you can see shades of yourself in my missives. That you will travel to Israel and Africa with me on the wings of my memories. That my tales will push you, grow you, challenge you, and ultimately change you.

I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I had never answered the call of my soul, the call to create this movement. And

I wonder who I would be and where I would be. I'm fairly certain I would be successful, but I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I would be far emptier for never having fully put my finger on what it was that was missing. I'm sure I'd feel a real and palpable ache for what could've been. I don't stay in that imaginary place long because it's too painful for me.

I am walking in all my glory now, and I can't imagine any other life.

I want the same for you.

You may not know just yet what the question is that will spark *your* passion. That's okay. The only thing required of you as we take this journey together is an open heart and mind. I'm going to touch places in your heart that might sting a little. This is not because I hate you but because our pain and triggers are often surprising and beautiful invitations to healing. The ride will be bumpy and tumultuous, but boy, will it be worth it if you are willing to punch your ticket. I can't wait to see who you become and what you accomplish.

I am now a soul on fire, but because I was once a burning building myself, it is imprinted on my DNA to carry buckets of water for people who are still burning buildings themselves. My mission? To go back and show you how to find the embers of passion hidden in the ashes. I have a message of hope, truth, and purpose, and I'm giving it to you. In the end, I hope you'll carry the water with me—for yourself and others.

The journey has begun, and here is your first joystart! Go ahead and mark up the margins of this book or write in the journaling space included in the back of this book. (Truthfully, I hope you come back to these very notes many times over.) You might have a question or thought that has been ping-ponging around in your head and heart for many moons now. Listen to me, don't tamp it out or ignore it any longer. It is bouncing around your head for a reason.

Are you ready? Let's go!

## **JOYSTART**

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When considering your life, actions, and inner dialogue, what stories do you tell yourself and what stories do you tell the world around you? I want you to sit down and ponder on this one. Are they negative, depressing stories of brokenness, or are you telling stories of hope, joy, peace, and overcoming?

I want to tell stories of overcoming, stories of finding joy in the midst of immense pain, and stories that will inspire people for generations to come. I want to teach you to tell similar stories, my friend. Make them good ones. You and I are literally writing the book of our lives at this very moment. And one day, that will be all that's left of us—our stories, our legacy, and our (good) name. Jesus once said, “A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Luke 6:45).

What is your heart full of, beloved? That is what I hope you will investigate in the coming days as we walk through this journey together!

Once you have journaled some about the stories you are telling, write one sentence or question that is burning in your heart right now. What truth would you write in response to that sentence or question at this moment?

Here are a few questions you might consider:

What am I created for?

Who am I outside of being a mom or a dad? (I've gotten this one recently.)

Who am I away from my career?

What is my legacy?

What brings me joy?

How can I cultivate joy on a daily basis?

What would a healing version of me look like?