

daring to live

How the Power of Sisterhood
and Taking Risks Can
JUMP-START YOUR JOY

SHERI HUNTER



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For my children,
David and Danielle

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introduction

JULY 2009

I set out for a whitewater-rafting adventure on West Virginia's Gauley River with three of my closest girlfriends. Brenda, Angenette, Mia, and I had met two years earlier through the outreach ministry at our church. We quickly bonded over our shared life experiences, our Christian faith, and the fact that we—four middle-aged, African American women living in Detroit—wanted a little more adventure in our lives.

One Sunday afternoon, Mia—always the woman of action—walked into a ministry meeting with information on whitewater rafting. Fed up with all our talk of having an adventurous girls' weekend, she put a plan in motion.

"C'mon, Sheri! It'll be fun!" Mia said as I skeptically paged through the pamphlet she'd practically poked my eye out with minutes earlier.

"I don't know," I said slowly. "It seems kind of dangerous, seeing that none of us can, you know, *swim*."

“But that’s why it will be an adventure!” Mia winked. “What’s an adventure without a little danger?”

“Yessss, let’s go,” Ang said. “So great I found like-minded women who like adventure. I’ve whitewater rafted before. It’s so fun.”

Mia and Ang were so excited, but it was unusual for me to consider doing something like this. Still, I was at a point in my life where I wanted to live outside myself a bit.

“Okay, I guess so.” I gave a half smile. “I’m down!”

Brenda was the last to agree. Like me, she didn’t know what we were getting into, but she was willing to give it a go.

The morning we left, I hugged my kids real tight and kissed my husband, Mannard, goodbye as I headed out the door.

Mannard stopped me, not letting go of my hand as I tried to walk to the car. He gave me a pointed look. “Remember to have *fun*,” he said, arching his eyebrows. “Don’t hold yourself back on this trip because of the what-ifs.”

I gave him a thin-lipped smile. If there was anything I’d learned over seventeen years of marriage to this man, it was that he always knew what I was feeling, whether I expressed it or not. “Okay, I won’t,” I said, avoiding his eyes and darting out the door.

The next day, as I stood in front of the massive, churning Gauley River, Mannard’s words ran through my mind. I felt my heart slide into the pit of my stomach. I was *terrified*. I could not swim, so how was I supposed to deal with a hostile river that seemed primed to toss any one of us overboard? Had I embarked on the equivalent of a suicide mission?

Angenette was the only one who had whitewater rafted before, when she lived in California. She was a true diva,

bringing all her adventurous spirit, as she had skydived and traveled to South Africa—things that made my head spin. Mia and Ang were inspiring me.

We were assigned to a raft with a sturdy-looking forty-something and his teenage son. As Katy, our guide for the day, went over the safety precautions in detail, I fidgeted with my life jacket, trying to ascertain whether it was sufficiently buoyant to hold my weight in the very likely chance I got thrown into the drink.

Our adventure began smoothly enough. I was lulled into a stupor, looking at the beautiful wooded areas surrounding the river. The frightening rapids I'd seen in the pamphlet must have been for the experienced paddlers only, I reasoned. Boy, was I wrong.

Within minutes, so much water had crashed over my head and spilled down my throat, I thought I'd be sick. My water shoes clung to the floor of the blue urethane raft as I gripped the rope inside it. I dug deep, ready for the next wave to hit. I'd situated myself at the back of the raft, since Katy had designated the very front as the “wallop zone”—the area where you had better take one big gulp of air because you'll likely hover at the top of the swirling West Virginia river a good many seconds before plunging over the rapid.

As another rapid approached, I held on to the rope. I clenched my teeth and tasted a bit of blood as I accidentally bit my cheek. Brenda and Ang screamed as a giant wave washed over them, trying to slink away from the wave without going overboard. There was nowhere to go to get away from the onslaught of freezing water; we simply had to endure it.

The next rapid quickly approached. It seemed smaller than the previous one, but I was ready. Katy sat high on the

backside of the raft, working her paddle to navigate the craft headfirst into the circling undercurrent. We slammed hard into another raft and then bounced up against a giant rock. I flew out of my seat, nearly dropping my oar into the river. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the flash of an object dropping like a rock into the rapids.

“Katy is in the water!” someone shouted. We all paddled as hard as we could toward her, even though the strong currents were moving our raft away from her and down the river. Her eyes widened with either fear or mortification that the raft was floating away with her paying customers on board.

Luckily, another guided raft had seen what happened and steered over to assist us with our rescue. As the leader of the other raft shouted directions at us, I was surprised to see Katy swimming with all her might toward us—and making headway, no less! Our frantic paddling and Katy’s efforts got us within range of each other, and she was able to grab on to Angenette’s oar as Brenda and I helped to haul her back on board.

“You guys okay?” Katy said, looking up at us through wet eyelashes.

“Are *we* okay? No, are *you* okay?” Ang asked.

We all laughed, relieved our commander was back at the helm.

At the end of our day, Katy led us to a rocky cliff that people were climbing. Four rafts were floating along the shore, and at the top of the cliff a line of about fifteen people waited to jump into the river.

“Nope, not doing that,” Ang said matter-of-factly, and positioned herself to relax inside the raft, tucking her legs along the seat cushions.

We watched in awe as people jumped from the cliff and swam back to their rafts. Those who remained on board helped hoist them back into the raft. For someone who had never even jumped into a swimming pool, the idea of hurtling forty feet into the water gave me more than a moment of pause.

Mia looked at us with a mischievous smile and informed us she was jumping. “Y’all coming?” she asked.

I looked at the line. There wasn’t one African American face in the bunch, nothing black or brown except for the bark on the elms whispering, “Sheri, don’t do it. Stay in the raft with the wise Angenette.”

But something inside me told me to rebel. I remembered Mannard’s words: *Don’t hold yourself back on this trip because of the what-ifs.*

Soon I was following Mia up the side of the cliff, with Brenda reluctantly following behind. On the way up, I nearly fell face-first over a particularly small rock. I had no idea how I was going to make it to the top without fracturing my ankle, let alone jump when I got there!

I heard myself say, “I can’t, Mia. I want to go back.”

“Don’t turn back now,” said a tall, lean guy walking near us. “It’s more treacherous going down than continuing up.”

I looked over my shoulder. He was right. I would definitely crash-land trying to get back down. There was no option but to continue up the trail.

Standing at the top, I felt like I had conquered Mount Everest. I would have been fine putting that in my journal as the day’s accomplishment, but with the rickety rock pile behind me, there was only one way down—I had to jump. The line was getting shorter and shorter.

Mia shook all her limbs as if shaking the fear out of her body. She stepped back a few feet, then jogged toward the cliff and jumped.

Brenda and I looked at each other in surprise. “Man, she did it!” Brenda said.

“Yep.” I peeked over the edge in time to witness the voluminous splash. Katy and Angenette paddled toward Mia, using the oars to hoist her into the raft.

“Okay, Bren, it’s on you.” I gave her a thumbs-up.

Brenda responded with a killer side eye. “I thought *you* were next.”

The two of us hemmed and hawed while the line grew steadily longer behind us. I realized that she was as frightened as I was. I clasped her hand. “Let’s do it together.”

“One,” Brenda said. We looked eye to eye.

“Two,” I said as we scooted closer to the cliff’s edge.

“Three,” we said in unison, and leapt as if our lives depended on it.

I felt the pull of gravity as my stomach lurched to my throat. Our hands somehow dislodged, and Brenda accelerated to move ahead of me. I didn’t look down and kept my eyes closed. I held my breath and heard a splash. It wasn’t me.

When was I going to hit the water? I was moving alone in time, and though I knew that the inevitable submersion was coming, I was uncertain how the impact would feel.

I hit the water like a torpedo, water filling my nose and mouth. Somehow, with all that H₂O around me, I felt a big smile form on my face. I surfaced and heard Brenda’s laughter as she was hoisted into the raft. Then it was my turn. They pulled me in, and I crashed onto the floor of the vessel.

Breathless, I grinned at my friends. “I’d do it again!”

They just laughed. The truth was that we all wanted to be bounced here and there. A gentle, tranquil day on a lazy river would have been an epic fail. No one wanted that—not even me.

I have since learned that’s true of my life as well. While I say I desire serenity, after a while it becomes mundane and tiresome. There’s a deep dissatisfaction that festers inside me when things sit still, making me crave a more challenging world—a world that requires more of me and forces me to live up to my full potential.

What will challenge you?



That adventure was the first of many I would go on with my sister-friends. We would eventually call ourselves the Dare Divas, a name that reflected our sassy attitudes and penchant for extreme activities. Together we learned to ski, drive motorcycles, and parachute out of airplanes. The four of us had grown up in inner-city Detroit, so to say that these feats were things we’d never dreamed of doing is a vast understatement—and yet it seemed that together we could accomplish anything.

When I think back to that whitewater trip with my friends, I can see how the Lord helped me develop friendships and forge ahead through challenges, which prepared me for the devastating summer of 2012, when the unthinkable happened. On a rainy August morning in 2012, I awoke around four o’clock to what sounded like a broken water pump in the basement. I reached over to wake up Mannard so he could deal with the pump. Those bumps in the night were his job.

When he didn't respond, I looked over and realized *he* was the source of the offending sound. His hands were balled into fists; his eyes bulged. His once beautiful cocoa-brown face was ashen. He was arched eerily heavenward, struggling for air, unable to speak.

"Baby! Mannard!" I shouted.

He didn't respond.

I slid onto the hardwood floor, nearly tripping over my nightgown to dial 911.

I rushed to my son's room to wake him up. He was solidly snoring, and I grabbed him and dragged him across the floor.

"What's going on, Mom?"

"Help me! It's Dad!"

Back in my bedroom, I heard my seventeen-year-old man-child cry out like he was five years old when he saw his dad. We both did some version of CPR with my hands on Mannard's chest, my son's hand on his dad's forehead, but seconds later my husband stopped the awkward jerking as his spirit obeyed what was to be.

My son and I both let go as we watched my husband, his dad, breathe out—slowly, rhythmically, like he was expelling the last remnants of air from his lungs. As the doorbell rang downstairs, my son and I watched as one solitary tear slid from Mannard's face to the pillow. He was just fifty.



When I lost Mannard, I faced deep sorrow and shock, of course. But I distinctly remember that one feeling overshadowed all the others: supreme abandonment. This feeling was so permeating, it led me to question my long-held relationship with Jesus and my place in life itself.

During those first few weeks, the pain inside ate away at me. I turned to some destructive habits. Fortunately, the Dare Divas were there to pick me up, turn me toward God, and use our adventures together to help me heal. Our dares took on a therapeutic role. As I reflected on each challenge, I saw that God was using the dares to teach me a series of life lessons for my new life without Mannard.

My friendship with these women not only strengthened my resolve and joy for life, it renewed my personal relationship with God. I began seeking the Lord in ways I had never before dared to. Jesus was calling me to embrace his way of living, to walk in faith every moment of the day, and to develop greater discipline so I could have a more satisfying, fulfilling life.

Through the dares, I learned to step outside my comfort zone to follow where God led. Much like with jumping off that cliff, there was no going back. God was calling me to be a better mother to my children, a better friend to the Divas, a better custodian of the finances Mannard had lovingly stewarded during his life, and a beacon of hope to others who were dealing with profound loss.

We can all live a bold, daring life. This doesn't mean we have to face rushing rapids or jump off a cliff. A truly bold life is lived in the small moments, by choosing what God has called us to do. It's not letting the what-ifs hold us back. It's loving extravagantly, helping those in need, and being a good friend through the peaks and valleys of life. God calls us to journey outside of our comfort zones and propels us to live miraculous lives and try new things.

As I navigated my way through my sorrow and depression following Mannard's death, it wasn't a straight path to

healing. There were times I'd take two steps toward feeling confident and strong, then jump five steps back. My story does not flow in a neat timeline. At times when the dare commenced and was completed, the lesson was potent, and that very day I felt myself growing in strength. Other dares took months, years even, for me to absorb the lesson and see the power of God's love and how he carried me through.

These dares, though not chronological, demonstrate how healing has been for me: a slow, steady realization of my own resilience, God's grace, and the power of friendship. I was on a Dare Diva adventure. Do you dare to join me?

1

dare to care

when you need friends and God sends them

JULY 2007

The Dare Divas began at Christian Tabernacle Church (CTab), and the more we served together, the more my camaraderie with Brenda, Angenette, and Mia grew. The Contact Outreach and Development Ministry (CODM)—which included sharing the grace of salvation, discussing the significance of baptism, acquainting new members with the Christian walk, and having a decent amount of fun—was sometimes formidable, but it was a joy to see people grow in their walk with the Lord.

Each year, CTab held an all-church picnic. One of the events, the Armor Bearer Competition, was a stiff contest between ministries. The challenge contained a series of inflatable obstacles like on the TV show *American Ninja Warrior*.

None of us were highly trained athletes able to scale thirty-foot props designed to torpedo us into oblivion. But at the annual event you'd see Christians who were humble on Sundays go rogue in an effort to crush the competition.

"Listen, guys," Mia said, "we have to put on our superhero capes and run like we are Olympic gold medalists. I'm not playing with anybody. We have to win this." Mia was CODM's coach, and she took her job so seriously she came just short of brandishing a whip. "I don't want to hear anything about any knee or joint pain, because I've seen you all run for those donuts and hot coffee before church."

We laughed. Mia was not alone in her passion. The whole church got a bit frenzied over this yearly competition.

"Look," Ang said, "I'm not gonna break my neck hurling myself down that giant slide. Not gonna happen."

Lola, our friend who served in the pastoral care ministry, sauntered by and overheard Angenette. "Just give up, ladies and gents," she said. "We have police officers and professional security members in our ministry. You all are too soft."

"I got this," Angenette said, ready to confront Lola. We all knew that Ang, the attorney/counselor, was about to preach. Among the Dare Divas, she was the straight shooter and also the resident comic. She could make us fall on the floor in tears with laughter.

"Come on, now," Brenda said, smiling nervously. "Remember we are children of God. And while this is a competition, no need to act ungodly."

Ang looked at Brenda. "Sis, we know all that." Then she turned to Lola and said, "But they still about to get whipped. Because, Lola, my sis, we don't need police or security

strength. We are gonna win with the Holy Spirit power of God!”

“Amen,” I said, laughing.

“Down with them all and hallelujah,” Mia said, wrapping her arm around my shoulders in solidarity.

We had so much fun that day. Old and young alike tumbled over the expansive church lawn like teenagers. With the exception of a few mild abrasions and a bruise or two, there were no major injuries. The CODM team didn’t win; pastoral care did—easily. But that didn’t stop us from looking forward to a rematch the following year.

Soon the closeness of serving and playing side by side bled over into the personal lives of each of the Dare Divas. We confided in one another and reached out for counsel and prayer on the big and small things going on in our lives. We would talk in person or text when we needed immediate counsel and support.

If one of us was sick, the others would bring groceries or a meal. Sometimes we’d just sit with the recovering Diva, binge-watching a favorite TV show or talking about life, jobs, marriage, and children. God granted us a special camaraderie that brought joy and sweetness into all of our lives.

We all have been there for each other, and we’ve opened our hearts to love each other. We know it was the Lord who facilitated that blessed day when we met in 2005. Back then, Mannard and I were raising a young family, and even though we were truly content, I felt a restlessness. I wanted to develop friendships but didn’t know where to turn.

Maybe you have experienced a time where you longed for deep, abiding friendship but were not certain how to

go about attaining it. It can be difficult for all of us to find like-minded people.

This was the place I found myself when I suddenly had an awakening to my need for friendship beyond my husband. Mannard and I had been married six years, and the kids were two and three. Though I loved my life, I felt isolated. At the time, Mannard seemed A-OK with his three friends—Alpha Phi Alpha frat brothers from the University of Pennsylvania who were solidly planted miles away from Detroit in Philadelphia. The four were perfectly content with their quarterly twenty-minute telephone chats about career, football, and family. But I felt like something was missing.

One day I broached the subject with Mannard. Our son, David, had just been kicked out of preschool for biting a girl in his class. “Don’t you just want to talk to someone about what you’re dealing with?” I asked.

“Nah, that’s why I have you.” Mannard was keeping an eye on the kids while I packed snacks for their upcoming overnight stay with my in-laws.

“That’s sweet, babe,” I said. “Maybe I’m just different. I need more human connection. More girl talk.” I wiped the stove and stuffed baggies of Cheerios and bite-size grapes into a sack.

“We *are* different,” he said. “I can talk to my friends on occasion, and that’s enough for me. But you should get your girl talk. Find some friends.”

“I’m your friend, Mommy,” David said sweetly.

I stooped down and kissed my little biter on the forehead. “I know, pumpkin.”

Mannard picked up Danielle from her high chair and placed her on his hip. “Dang, little girl, you feel soggy.” He bumped his nose with hers and she giggled.

“Look, I’m good,” he said to me. He kissed me on the cheek as he headed for the stairs and Danielle’s changing table. “I don’t really need more friends. But I want you to be good too.”

Our daughter patted the back of her daddy’s neck with her chubby hand and leaned her face into his broad shoulder. The two of them ascended the stairs, completely satisfied.

So why wasn’t I?

Shortly after that conversation I met the three women who would have a profound impact on my life and become life-long friends and fellow adventurers. At the time, Brenda and her husband, Idowu (I.D.), led the Contact Outreach and Development Ministry at our church.

Mannard and I had been talking about how to spend more time together, since his job as an IT consultant had him crisscrossing the US. We thought volunteering together at church was the perfect opportunity. As it turns out, a few weeks later our pastor asked Mannard and me to serve in the CODM.

At the informational meeting, Brenda welcomed six newcomers to the outreach ministry. “Pastor and Sister Morman said they picked individuals for this team who have loving and patient hearts,” Brenda said, smiling warmly. “And as I look around, I feel it. I know we’re going to do a mighty thing through Christ.”

I smiled, catching her enthusiasm.

“Plus you’re the only ones willing to volunteer for forty hours per week,” I.D. chimed in with a chuckle.

“Don’t scare them off, I.D.,” Brenda said, swatting her husband. “It’s not *quite* forty hours.”

Mannard arched an eyebrow in my direction, giving me his classic “what have you gotten us into now?” look.

Brenda passed out some large binders with colored tabs, outlining ministry policies and procedures. She looked sharp in her pin-striped navy suit, having just come from her job as a state public health administrator.

“Put me to work,” said Mia, a woman with a tousled pixie cut. “Just so you know, I’m good at PowerPoint, Excel, pivot tables—any document, any data, I can put into a chart. I’m here to serve in any way.” Mia’s energy was contagious. I would learn that she was also a vice president and auditor for a bank.

“Wow, yes and yes!” Brenda said. “Thanks for sharing. We will try to put those skills to use.”

“This is some binder,” Angenette said, holding the massive thing in her arms like a bag of concrete. She may have been a lawyer for a major automobile manufacturer, but I could already tell she had a wicked sense of humor.

“I was thinking the same thing,” I said, shooting a smile her direction. “All the information we’d ever need to know and more, I guess.”

“Don’t be frightened by it,” Brenda said. “I know it seems like a lot, but it also has forms we will need to use regularly and frequently asked questions.”

“Don’t worry,” I.D. added. “We don’t expect you to do more than you can. Pastor Morman has a saying: ‘Christ, family, then the church.’ While there’s plenty to do in this ministry, we never want you or your family to suffer.”

“And this ministry is fun!” Brenda said, soothing our worries. “We’re going to have a ball together.”

“I love having fun,” Angenette said. “Sign me up for *allll* of that.”

“Yes, please,” Mia said. Her bright pink lipstick seemed to match her effervescent spirit.

I could tell that these new acquaintances were just what I needed—what my heart had been longing for.

When Brenda said that Christians could serve and have fun, she lit a light within my soul. I was just beginning to figure out what it meant to live an adventurous, joy-filled life with Christ, but I felt I would learn more as I worked alongside these women who already felt like sisters.

I had no idea Brenda, Mia, Angenette, and I would become the Dare Divas. It seems fitting that our relationship began with an adventure—serving the beautifully diverse group of people at our church. Serving brought so many different people into our lives. There were couples, singles, young people, and seniors, some with financial assets and others who had very little. Each provided insight or wisdom that enriched my life. I had one idea of what friendship could look like, but God wanted to broaden my perspective.

If you’re in a season where you’re looking for new friends, consider volunteering with your church or a local organization. You might find that it blesses you just as much as it blesses others.

For me, the awakening of meeting new friends came by serving others. Even Mannard found that serving together and forming friendships with other couples at church strengthened our relationship with each other and with God. Working alongside other couples in ministry, we learned we were not alone in the struggles of married life. Those who had been married longer than us gave us advice on putting each other

first and balancing the stress of raising kids with loving each other well as husband and wife. We received so many life lessons from individuals we admired and who had allowed the Word of Christ to affect their own lives.

We also had front-row seats to see how God was operating in the lives of his children within the larger church body. As we served, countless individuals and couples blessed our hearts, sometimes in ways we least expected.

When I served in the wedding ministry for a season, I was in my early forties and two other members were in their twenties. One of the women sang in the choir, and I had often admired her vocal abilities. I was surprised when she told me, “One of the reasons I joined the wedding ministry was to get to know you. I wasn’t certain just how to do that, but I thought serving alongside you would be a good way to start.”

“Same here,” said the other young woman, who had married two years earlier and recently welcomed her first child. “I’ve always admired you and your husband. You two are all about that serving God business.”

I was taken aback. I had never imagined people were watching me—so much so that they wanted a closer look. I felt humbled that others looked up to me and wanted to follow my example. I had never viewed myself as a spiritual leader, and yet here God seemed to be opening that door.



Several years after Mannard and I joined the Contact Outreach and Development Ministry, we were asked to take the reins. I enjoyed watching Mannard rise to the challenge in his new role. The kind, compassionate man I had married had a bigger heart than I had even imagined. I marveled at

his restraint when dealing with difficult people. He showed me that I should never use my tongue as a weapon. If someone chose to be unkind, I didn't have to reciprocate.

As I watched my husband counsel those who had a grievance with the church, I learned the power of listening and making people feel heard. During our time serving together, I watched Mannard's quiet strength defuse many tensions and bring greater unity to our church body.

I look back on those years serving with Mannard and the Divas as some of my sweetest. Proverbs 27:9 says, "Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel" (ESV). Through ministry at the church, Mannard and I found earnest counsel that strengthened our relationship. In addition, I found sweetness in the friendships God provided. That sweetness was only amplified as we served hurting people together and witnessed God's glory.

I had once longed for such kinship and soul connection with other women. But before God could grant me the deeper relationships I desired, he planted me in a ministry that would teach me to love people right where they were and show compassion and empathy even when I didn't know how. I prayed with people going through health crises and those at risk of losing their homes. I prayed for restoration in marriages and healing for terminal illnesses. I walked with folks through so many heartaches by offering a hug of understanding, a listening ear to those who felt lost, and words of Scripture to those who felt alone and unloved.

As I served with the Divas, I was amazed to see how each of my friends had their own unique way of showing love. Brenda displayed natural, loving leadership, guiding others

with authority that came from biblical knowledge. Mia gravitated toward ministry to children and was attuned to their innocence. She broke down Scripture to its simplest form—grace, love, faith—so that even the very young looked up to her in awe when she explained the mightiness of Christ. And Angenette was the sassy sister-friend who would have you giggling one moment and then coming passionately before the throne of Christ in prayer the next.

As God taught me to be a true friend, I often looked to Christ, who modeled perfect friendship. He set an unmatched example of how to love others well. While on earth, he possessed the characteristics of the truest friend—patient, wise, kind, loving, self-sacrificing. Jesus could certainly have accomplished his mission alone, but he chose to have friends. He reached out to the twelve disciples and gave them full access to his life. These men became his trusted confidants who spread the message of salvation to the world. They watched him do amazing feats such as turning water into wine and feeding thousands of people with five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus’s friends had a front-row seat to God’s glory manifesting through him.

In the final hours before he died, Jesus gave his disciples these instructions: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:12–13 ESV).

At times this command seems so impossible amid busy schedules and a desire for independence. I can be so wrapped up in my own life that I forget to put in the time and effort to get into the messiness of someone else’s life, to be there and love like Jesus loved.

Making new friends and letting them into your heart takes being vulnerable, and if you've been hurt by others in the past, it is not the easiest thing to do. Have you wondered why it has been hard to make friends?

For me, taking a deeper look into my intentions and expectations has eased the way. I've been on many adventures now, but the biggest dare in my life has been to open my heart to others and experience honest, vulnerable relationships. Learning to engage in authentic, imperfect friendships has been one of the most challenging and important lessons I have learned. God has used these friends to expand my heart through joyful and devastating times. I have learned that while God is my rock and foundation, I can lean on other people too.

AUGUST 2012

As it turns out, the one thing more terrifying than a dare is the horror of real life. I never felt that more strongly than when I drove through the early morning mist behind the ambulance that carried my fifty-year-old husband. There were no sirens echoing through the streets. No lights flashed to warn other drivers to get out of our way. After a catastrophic cardiac event in the early hours of the morning, Mannard had left me. Though I was right there, I had been helpless to save him. My husband was gone.

At the hospital, I watched a nurse pull a sheet over my husband's head. When a hospital attendant came and asked me if I wanted to donate Mannard's eyes and gave me paperwork to fill out, family and friends comforted me. I don't recall who pulled out a tissue to wipe my tears or who brought me a cup of tea. Thankfully, a fellow mom brought Danielle

home from cheer camp, as I was too afraid to drive after the shock.

All of a sudden I needed to get out and get some air. I had to leave the horrid room that held my husband's lifeless body. I needed to get out of the hospital and breathe as grief washed over me. Outside, I paced back and forth along the entrance sidewalk, hugging my arms tightly to my body.

Then I saw a figure running toward me from the parking lot. Mia raced my direction with her handbag flopping at her side.

"Sheri!" she screamed, nearly tripping over her own feet. She gathered me into an embrace, and I wept on her shoulder. "What? I . . . I'm trying to breathe, Sheri. Are you? How are you breathing?" Her tears wet my cheek.

Right then, I crumpled. Mia used strong arms to keep me from tumbling to the pavement.

I'm not sure how long we stood there before a car screeched up beside us. Ang stepped out of the passenger side. In her rush to hand the valet her keys, she dropped them. She didn't bother to be courteous as she stepped past the attendant and the keys to get to me and Mia. She didn't say a word or ask any questions. She simply placed her arms around both our necks, forming a circle.

Brenda was on the road at the time, heading to visit her family in New York City. I tried not to worry as she received this news while she was driving. Rapid text messages came from her. I handed my phone to someone—I believe Mia—as I could barely form a sentence, let alone type a text message.

I don't remember everything that happened that morning, but I do remember the prayers. Fervent words that broke into my dark reality like a glimmer of light and connected me to a God who seemed very far away. I'm sure I muted many of

those words in that ripe, raw moment. But I leaned into my friends. They stepped in and recited the Word to me. These friends, who *knew* me, forced me to recall all the times in my life when God had made a way out of no way. Even in the pain of my circumstances, I was reminded of all the times God had been faithful to me in the past.

I thought back to falling in love with and marrying my amazing man. I thought of the beautiful life we had built together, raising two healthy children.

Back in the hospital, the confusion and exhaustion washed over me as I collapsed to the ground, right there in the waiting room.

SEPTEMBER 1977

When I first met Mannard, I was a gangly ten-year-old with neat cornrows in my hair and teeth too large for my mouth. My mom worked in housekeeping at Henry Ford Hospital, and her coworker, Joyce, had a fifteen-year-old son who was on scholarship at an elite private boarding school forty-five minutes away from where we lived. Once, when Joyce was driving him back to school after a weekend in Detroit, she invited my mom and me to tag along.

I folded my skinny legs into the back seat of Joyce's pea-green '72 Ford Thunderbird and shut the door.

"Hey, I'm Mannard."

I turned to see one of the most handsome boys I'd ever laid eyes on sitting next to me. He smiled warmly.

"Hi," I mumbled, wanting to disappear into the leather seat. I didn't feel worthy to be talking to this handsome teenage brainiac.

As we drove on windy roads past groves of elm trees and Georgian mansions, Mannard entertained us with stories of his hijinks at boarding school.

I giggled at each story, and soon he had all of us rolling in laughter. I had a huge crush on him, but he wouldn't know that until we started dating eight years later.

JANUARY 1985

After that magical car ride, I eventually forgot about Mannard and my crush on him. During my senior year of high school, I suddenly began panicking about college. My mom and I had no idea how we would pay for it.

On a crisp, sunny day in January, Mannard appeared at my front door, and my crush came tumbling right back. His mission was to help me with college applications. The funny, daring boy with the Afro had turned into a handsome man. He was six feet tall with a buttery caramel complexion and slightly wavy hair.

"Hi," was all I could muster as Mannard and Joyce stepped through the door. I felt like that tongue-tied ten-year-old kid in the back seat of their car.

"Thanks for helping me," I said, directing Mannard toward the kitchen table where my college forms and financial aid papers were laid out.

"He didn't have a choice," Joyce bellowed from the living room, where she and my mom sat talking.

Mannard folded his jacket neatly across the back of the kitchen chair. He smirked at his mom's comment. "Happy to help, Sheri," he said, his voice just as warm as I remembered.

“All those hours working for free in the financial aid office at school should come in handy.”

“You worked for free?” I asked. This strikingly good-looking man was not only brilliant but also a humanitarian?

“Uh, no, wrong word!” He took a seat and removed a calculator and folder from his backpack. “It was work-study, part of my college financial aid package, so I wouldn’t need a loan.”

“Cool, I could use one of those . . . a work-study.” I fluttered my eyelashes, thankful the years had been kind to me. My once-crowded teeth were now neatly stacked without the help of braces, and my long tresses were pressed bone straight midway down my back.

Mannard’s eyes pierced mine, and I sensed a mixture of attraction and unease in his gaze as he quickly moved his eyes down to the paperwork. “Well, that’s the goal,” he said. “There are all kinds of ways to avoid debt—Pell grants, work-study, and . . . uh, the other free one . . .” He struggled for the word.

“Scholarships?” I offered.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s it,” he said, exhaling deeply.

Was he flustered? Because of *me*?

Two weeks later, I had a school dance and needed a date. “Should I ask him?” I was driving my mom nuts with my quandary about whether or not to ask Mannard to accompany me to the dance. “I mean, he’ll say no, right? He graduated from the University of Pennsylvania. That’s ivy, Mom. No way he’d want to go to some lame high school dance.”

“Oh, goodness, Sheri,” Mom said. “Just ask the boy!”

Mannard had been on my mind since the day he helped me. I dialed his number, breathed deeply, and nearly hung up before I heard the tenor of his voice. “Hello?”

I paused. “Hey, Mannard. It’s Sheri.”

“Sheri!” He said my name so brightly that my heart leapt. “I was just thinking about you.”

I giggled. “No you weren’t.”

“Seriously,” he said. “I wanted to ask you to the movies or something.”

I was thankful he couldn’t see me through the telephone wires, as I was beating my pillow to a pulp with excitement. *Yes, yes, yes!*

“That’s funny, ’cause I was thinking about you too,” I said. *Don’t lose it, Sheri. Keep your calm, girl.* “I kinda need a date for a dance at school.”

“Really?” I could hear the smile in his voice. I wasn’t imagining it; he liked me.

“I wasn’t sure whether to ask because I thought you might be bored,” I said, beginning to ramble. “So not sure if you can, or want to, or maybe you’re dating someone so she may not like it . . .”

Mannard interrupted my awkward monologue. “No, I’m not dating anyone. And yeah, I’d like to go to the dance with you. When is it? For sure, I’m going with you.”

When I hung up, I pranced around my room like I had just won the Miss Universe contest. The man of my dreams had agreed to go on a date with me. *Me.*

Mannard accompanied me to that dance, and after that we were inseparable.

It was easy for me to get hooked on Mannard. He always seemed to anticipate what I needed before I even knew to ask.

When I had poor transportation, he offered to loan me money to buy a used car. When I needed funds for the University of Michigan–Dearborn, he gave me information about scholarships that I applied for and won. He always thought ahead and was knowledgeable about so many things. I was twenty-four when we married in 1991, six years after we began dating.

As a newlywed, all I needed was Mannard. I poured all of my time and attention into my relationship with him. I had friends from high school and college, but I placed those relationships on the back burner.

“Girl, you are turning into a forty-year-old,” my college friend Leslie said. “You ain’t even twenty-five yet. Let’s hit the club!”

I sat at the counter of Leslie’s bachelorette pad, sipping a pinot grigio. “I can’t go to the club and dance with another man! Please.” I tried to ignore the disappointed look on my friend’s face. “Hey, if your man danced with another woman, you know you’d throw hot grits at him on the dance floor. And you’re not even married!”

“Girl, you’re right about that!” she said, laughing. We clinked glasses.

As hard as I tried to keep up the friendships with my single friends, I couldn’t connect the way I had before. I’d changed.

As I focused on my husband and eventually my two young children, many of my close female friendships faded away. I would hear about my former girlfriends getting together for girls’ nights or exciting weekends in the big city, but I was never invited. And although I may have occasionally been envious, I didn’t really mind. I knew in my heart that wasn’t me anymore. I was just where I needed to be.

Have you ever felt awkward navigating a new season in your life? When the things we did in our past are no longer attractive, it can be difficult to determine what in our lives has to remain and what has to change.



On the morning Mannard went to be with the Lord, the first thing that comforted me was these words from Jeremiah: “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’” (29:11). I so wanted to believe that. And my friends were there to assure me that the words were true, even if I couldn’t see that through my immediate pain.

When Mannard passed, I was so thankful that God had fulfilled my longing for kinship and close sisterhood through the Dare Divas and fellow ministers of Christ. These weren’t quick or uncomplicated relationships. I was still learning to love and be loved by imperfect people. But the richness I experienced, even on the worst day of my life, made every moment of investment worth it.

God had brought people into my life—souls of his making who loved me right where I was—who spoke truth to me and held me on my darkest day. In the months that followed, I would need them desperately. God was already providing for the rough path that lay ahead. That day I had no idea how hard that path would be, and I’m thankful for that. Though the ripple effect of losing Mannard had only just begun, with faithful friends in my life, I knew I was not alone.