

Foreword by MAX LUCADO

CHRISTINE CAINE

UNDAUNTED

Daring to do what God calls you to do



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 ZONDERVAN®

*To my husband, Nick,
and precious daughters, Catherine and Sophia.
You are God's greatest gifts to me.
I am forever grateful.*

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

EPHESIANS 2:

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Foreword

I've wondered what it would be like to visit with the apostle Paul — the globe-trotting gospel-proclaiming, chain-breaking trumpeter of grace.

I've imagined a good chat with Mary, the mother of Jesus — the simple village girl who, upon learning that she would be virgin *and* pregnant, told God: "Whatever you say, I'll do."

I've envisioned a conversation with Esther — the liberator from nowhere. Out of the shadows she stepped, and because she did, a nation was spared.

Paul. Mary. Esther. Turns out, I've met all three in the person of Christine Caine.

She has the spunk of a Paul. She's scarcely on the stage, or at the dinner table, before you hear her passions: Jesus, her family, and the forgotten girls of the slave trade. You know where she stands. And you know whom she loves. It's contagious, this heart of hers. Wonderfully infectious.

She has the obedience of a Mary. Who would have pegged a Greek-born, Australia-raised blonde pistol as a world-changer? Yet, just like the mother of Jesus, she brings Christ to the nations. Everywhere Christine goes, from South Africa to Eastern Europe, she radiates hope.

Especially to the girls to whom she is an Esther — the millions of teenage girls who find themselves in the throes of Satan's cruelest concoction, the sex trade. These young women should be becoming exactly that, young women. They should be listening to music, reading books, and flirting with guys. Instead, they are locked into brothels, beaten, raped, and treated like livestock.

Their only hope? Jesus Christ. And Jesus has chosen to work through people like Christine. Christ appears, not just in her name, but in her face, resolve, grit, and joy. She makes the rest of us want to love the Jesus she loves in the manner she loves him.

I pray you will read this book. If and when you do, you'll discover what I have: God has given our generation a Paul, Mary, and Esther. And her name is Christine Caine.

God has given our generation the opportunity to make a difference in the vilest atrocity of the century.

After reading this book, I resolve to do more.

I hope you will too.

Max Lucado

The Schindler's List Moment

The Greece I found that Wednesday afternoon in March 2010 was not the one I remembered from my honeymoon fourteen years earlier. There were no stunning, whitewashed buildings. No lapis-blue tile rooftops. No festive music. No outdoor market with vendors selling fresh pressed olive oil, mouth-watering feta cheese, fresh cantaloupe.

None of that. This afternoon the streets were empty, black, wet. The normally crystal-blue Mediterranean pounded dark and rough against the Thessaloniki shipping port. Strange horror fear, not just the season — this long, hard winter — changed everything.

Is this how they see it? I wondered.

“They” were fourteen young women, mostly Eastern European, recently rescued from sex trafficking. But they hadn’t begun their journey as women — they’d been mere schoolgirls when lured from homes in the Ukraine, Bulgaria, Georgia, Albania, Romania, Russia, Uzbekistan, and Nigeria. Sixteen year olds. Seventeen. Eighteen. Girls who should have been giggling about music and basketball games, worrying about what to wear to school — not how to survive the next minute.

Securely hidden in a safe house run by The A21 Campaign, the rescue ministry minister, my husband, Nick, and I had launched just six months before, we were to speak face-to-face that dreary afternoon about a part of Greece I’d never known. I kept reminding myself: *This is not a movie. This is not “reality TV.” This is real. This is real.*

The young women and I sat together in awkward silence. How does one speak of the unspeakable depths of shame and agony?

Nadia braved the waters. Haltingly, she told how she had been raised in a village in Georgia at a time of war and deprivation. Her family possessed an abundance of love but not food. Poverty consumed them. For years Nadia lived on dreams: dreams of escaping the hunger, dreams of a world away from the ravaged village, dreams of becoming a nurse. If she were a nurse, like the ones she saw dress the wounds of soldiers in her village, she could get away. She would travel. She would see a beautiful world, a world in which she had a helpful role to play.

But girls in poor Georgian villages did not go to school beyond the second grade. They needed to learn only how to cook and clean, not to read and write. What man, after all, would want to marry a woman more educated than he? Wasn’t that all that was expected — to marry, keep house, provide children, depend on one’s husband for everything else?

Nadia, an obedient daughter who desperately wanted to please her parents, tried to push aside her secret dream. Yet embers remained in her heart.

So just three weeks before her seventeenth birthday, when a man approached her group of friends at their bus stop and told of opportunities to work in Greece, those embers began to glow brighter. The man told the girls that Greece was beautiful and that people prospered

there. He said there were many good-paying jobs for waitresses, hairdressers, shop assistants. He said there were jobs just waiting for nurses.

The man gave her a brochure and said a meeting the following Friday evening would provide all the details.

For the next week, Nadia felt blinded by the light of opportunity. Her dream seemed so possible, so close. On Friday, she arrived early at the village community hall and found a seat in the front row. Several dozen other girls trickled in after her. The room was filled with excitement, chatter. Some men introduced themselves as agents and gave a compelling presentation of the opportunities in Greece. They promised a bright future. They passed out the necessary paperwork for obtaining passports and work visas and patiently helped the girls fill out the forms.

Nadia left the community hall full of hope. She ran home to tell her parents that she had the chance to start a new life. She could not only get education and training as a nurse and live a life of helping others, but she could soon send home money for her entire family.

Her parents were concerned. Greece was so far away. But the embers of hope burned in them too. Perhaps their daughter would be able to get ahead as they never had. Perhaps she could find a profession, earn a good income. She could be their key to new lives too. After much discussion, they reluctantly agreed to let her go. They drained all their accounts, selling what they could, even borrowing, to scrape together the fee Nadia would have to pay for hiring agents for her passage to Greece. Her dream — happiness, success, prosperity — became their own.

Nadia was met at the airport in Greece by a woman from the hiring agency who spoke no Russian. Nadia spoke no Greek. But despite that confusion, she went with the woman to an apartment building, where she was shown a room that she supposed would be hers. The woman left, and Nadia began to unpack.

Within minutes, her nightmare began. Several men rushed in and locked the door behind them. They beat and raped Nadia repeatedly. She tried to fight back. She screamed for help until she no longer had a voice. But for every protest, every scream, she received more abuse, more torture.

Confused, scared, ashamed, in pain, and broken, Nadia retreated to a dark place deep inside.

For two weeks, the beatings and rapes continued.

Finally, Nadia was told about her job. It wasn't in a hospital. It wasn't in a restaurant. It was in a brothel. Her new life was to be a sex slave. "If you do not do as we tell you, we will kill your family," she was told.

Surely, she concluded, people this evil would make good on those threats. Besides, they had taken all her papers, including her passport, and she did not speak Greek, nor did she have any idea where she was. Even if she escaped, she knew she wouldn't get far, let alone make it all the way back home to Georgia. Nadia felt utterly alone, though the men she had believed were hiring agents surrounded her twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. When they weren't in her room, they stood guard just outside her door and sent in a constant flow of customers with whom she was forced to perform unmentionable acts — up to forty

times a day.

No longer sure there was a God in heaven — why would he have allowed this to happen — Nadia pled with him anyway. *Let me die*, she prayed. *Oblivion would be better than this*. The silence, the horror, pulled her deeper into despair. No ember of her dream remained, not alone any hope of returning to a life with her family, to things familiar and free.

One day when the guard left her room, he forgot to lock the window. Though her room was on the third floor of the apartment building, Nadia scrambled onto the balcony. *Maybe, I am lucky, the impact will kill me. Oh God*, she prayed, *let the nightmare end*.

She jumped.

A woman passing by saw a girl throw herself from a third-story balcony and crash onto the pavement below. Horrified, she ran to Nadia, who, miraculously, was uninjured.

Nadia heard the woman speak — and was amazed that she understood that the woman was asking if she was all right. Had she died? Was she in heaven? No. Another miracle. The woman was real! And she spoke Russian! She wanted to help! Quickly, Nadia told her of her plight.

The woman gathered Nadia from the pavement and took her to the police station, where they filed a report. Then the police hid Nadia in a safe house to protect her from the traffickers.

One by one that March afternoon, the girls around me shared stories like Nadia's. Most had been raised in impoverished, ex-communist Eastern European nations. Each had come to Greece expecting legitimate employment. All had brought with them dreams, hopes, and aspirations to do something more with their lives than their own families had ever dreamed possible. All of those tender, youthful dreams had been shattered beyond anyone's worst fears.

What shook me most was the realization that, for each of these young women I spoke to that day, there were hundreds of thousands of others still trapped in the sex slave trade with no way out — hundreds of thousands of women whose unspeakable pain remained shrouded in secrecy. Silent.

Then Mary from Nigeria told her story. She and fifty-nine other young women had come to Greece in a shipping container.

“Wait,” I interrupted. “Do you mean you were contained in a ship?” I thought I was misunderstood, or that something had been lost in translation.

Mary repeated: She and fifty-nine other young women were brought to Greece in a shipping container.

A container loaded onto a ship? Like the one I'd just had an estimate on from a moving company for shipping my household goods to our new home? “A box?” I pressed. “A container used to carry personal and commercial goods, not people?”

That's right, Mary assured me — a box, a container put onto a ship. When she and the fifty-nine other girls arrived at the port the day of their departure, they thought they were traveling to good-paying jobs in a land of opportunity. Instead, they were greeted by hiring agents who said there were complications with the paperwork. Either travel by container, the

girls were told, or lose your deposits and any future opportunity to work abroad. Either make the voyage in a shipping container or turn around and go home.

“Our families had given everything they owned to pay for our passage,” Mary said.

So one by one, bewildered and frightened, the girls entered the container. When the last girl was inside, the door was slammed shut and they heard a lock snap into place. They stood frozen in darkness.

“Then the bubble broke! The bubble broke!” Mary exclaimed.

“What bubble?”

The filter, she explained, that allowed oxygen to circulate in the container. It stopped working, and the inside of the cramped box suddenly became not only lightless but airless as well.

I gasped, imagining the oxygen being rapidly depleted, the heat building, the women gulping for air in complete darkness.

The journey in the sealed container was gruesome. Half the girls died from lack of oxygen. The other half, the stronger ones, were near death themselves. They had nowhere to sit but in their own vomit and feces, since they were forced to relieve themselves on the container floor.

When the men at port opened the container, Mary said, they recoiled, appalled by the smell of death, decay, excrement.

One of the dead was Anna, Mary’s best friend. Anna had died an excruciating death, suffocating as if buried alive. But Anna was real, Mary insisted to me that day. Anna had existed. And Anna must be remembered.

The hiring agents preferred to forget. More interested in quickly getting what they referred to as their “shipped goods” from the dockyard, they hustled the living to small apartments nearby, where, like Nadia, the girls were repeatedly raped and beaten.

Before sunrise one morning (Mary had lost all sense of the passage of time), the girls were loaded into small rubber boats and taken across the Mediterranean Sea to a Greek island. That was the first time they realized that the original voyage had not even taken them to Greece. They had been brutalized in Turkey. None of the agents’ promises had been kept.

In the boat, Mary felt a surge of hope: The Greek Coast Guard was doing a routine check that morning — unusual for that hour, Mary later learned. She hoped that, unlike the crew at the docks, the Coast Guard could not be bribed to turn a blind eye. Mary’s captors showed signs of panic. Though she was freezing, sleep- and food-deprived, broken, and in shock, Mary’s hope grew. Rescue! Justice! Once caught, the traffickers would face a lengthy imprisonment.

And for that reason, these men would do anything to avoid being caught.

They began throwing the girls overboard.

Only five of the approximately thirty girls — those who had been strong enough to survive the deadly voyage in the shipping container — escaped drowning that day.

Those five were hidden among their captors when the Coast Guard came aboard. When

they finally arrived in Athens, the girls were taken to a brothel, where the nightmare of the Turkish apartment was repeated. Daily, Mary and the others were forced to participate in unspeakable encounters with dozens of men. Mary sank deeper into despair, wishing that she, too, had suffocated in the airlessness of the container or drowned in the Mediterranean Sea.

The horror continued for weeks. Or maybe it was months — Mary couldn't tell. But one day, anti-trafficking authorities, responding to a tip, raided the brothel. Mary and other girls were herded into the back of what appeared to be a police van. Were they being rescued? Hiring agents could be evil, couldn't police be as well? Uncertain and broken, Mary and a dozen other girls were raced to another apartment building. Police rushed them inside, where the girls waited in fear and resignation. But instead of beatings and rape, they were given rest, food and water, peace.

Though no longer in a physical prison, Mary remained silent, constantly tormented by recurring nightmares. The daily horror may have ceased, but the pain screamed nonstop.

Mary was safe but not yet free.

Stunned, I sat quietly for a moment after Mary finished her story. Around me, the young women at the table remained quiet too, almost reverent. Yet inside me, a storm of thoughts surfaced. Questions hammered at my broken heart: *How could this possibly happen in our world today? No matter how much money is involved, how can anyone be so depraved as to make slaves of others — let alone make it an international operation, enslaving not just one girl but hundreds of thousands, again and again and again?*

Sonia, a Russian girl who had arrived at the shelter the previous day, interrupted my flood of thought. "Why are you here?" she demanded, her eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Why do you come?"

Her tone was angry, and I felt the distrust behind her question: Was I who I said I was? Was I someone who could help? Or was I, like the hiring agents, untrue, unfeeling, evil?

How can I make her understand, I wondered, that I, too, know what it is to be trapped, enslaved, with seemingly no way out, no way forward, no way back? How can I make her see that as bleak as her enslavement has been, there are prisons just as black inside oneself, prisons in which Sonia and many of the girls sitting here may have retreated? How can I make each of the girls know that I care in the same way someone once cared enough to come to me in my pain?

Oh God, I prayed. *Help me help them!* I breathed deep and looked at Sonia for a long moment.

"There is only one rescuer I know," I told Sonia and the rest of the women, "with the power to free us from the darkest prison. That rescuer is the God I love, who loves us so much he left everything to come for us, to free us. He is the one who made us, each of us, for a unique purpose and a magnificent destiny. He makes right what the world makes wrong. His plans are for good, not for evil. His ways are straight and merciful. He came to give me hope and a future — and to give you one too. His promises are true. His love is full of forgiveness and peace, joy and kindness, grace. He is the true rescuer. He saves us from any prison, whether physical or emotional or spiritual, the ones we're forced into and the ones we fall into on our own. He chooses us. He can make all things new. He loves us without condition, unrelentingly, forever. He loves us broken, and he loves making us whole again."

And he asks those of us who love him to love others the same way. To choose them. To be agents of his hope, his forgiveness, his grace. He asks us to join him in rescuing others.

“That’s why I’m here,” I said. “That’s why I’ve come.”

Sonia’s eyes filled with tears. I could see her grappling with the concept of unconditional love, the meaning of grace, of all things being made new. All the *whys* and *hows* of what I said furrowed her brow. All the *what ifs* and possibilities had died in her long ago. Yet here was, resurrecting them. *What if there are good agents and true promises and a merciful God who loves me and chooses me and can lift me from the impoverishment, the betrayal and fear, the hurt and horror? What if ...*

No! Sonia could not believe all this. It was too good to be true. She knew all about promises too good to be true. The risk of allowing hope to reenter her life, only to see the hope dashed again, was too much. Her anguish turned back to anger, and she pushed back from the table. “If what you are telling me is true,” she yelled, “if what you say about your God is true — then where were you? Where have you been? Why didn’t you come sooner?”

Why didn’t you come sooner?

The girls around me didn’t move. No one spoke. But I could feel their eyes on me, the minds screaming that same question. I felt like Mary in that container, the weight of such a heartfelt cry pressing in on me like suffocating, airless darkness. I could barely breathe.

Why didn’t you come sooner?

The question seemed to echo. In the emotional power of the moment, the image of Sonia across the table, with her angry, anguished eyes, shimmered and morphed into that scared nineteen-year-old girl trapped in a room for one year, forced to service at least twenty-five men every day. That image morphed into another: a girl confused, hurt, and alone, engaging in self-mutilation or substance abuse or binge eating as a way of dulling her emotional pain. And then another, poor and starving, unable to feed or protect her family. And then another image: of children this time, suffering and dying from malnutrition. More images: depression, suicide, abuse ...¹

The faces became as grains of sand, so many. One hundred? Two thousand? A million? Too many. So many grains of sand that they melded together, indistinguishable, flowing like waters of the sea, an ocean of faces floating there for a minute, bobbing in and out of focus, hazy, distorted in the depth of suffering, loneliness, need, despondency, hopelessness. An ocean of faces going under, going down. I heard their sinking cry. I heard myself cry out as well, going under in a black despair.

Why hadn’t I come sooner?

On the surface, of course, there was a reasonable answer. So reasonable — an unassailable excuse: I hadn’t come because I didn’t know about their plight. How could I have come before I knew? How could anyone blame me for not fixing a problem I didn’t know existed?

But I didn’t offer that excuse. I didn’t offer it because the depth of their pain, the reality of their suffering at the hands of cruel and evil men, deserved more than excuses. And I didn’t offer it because I was suddenly thrown into a memory that put not only the suffering and plight of these women, but my reaction to it, in startling perspective.

A scene from the movie *Schindler's List* began to roll through my mind. The movie produced and directed by Steven Spielberg in 1993, is the story of Oskar Schindler, a Gentile businessman in Nazi Germany who saved the lives of more than a thousand Jews by breaking the law to keep them working in his factories. In a powerful scene at the end of that movie Schindler, played by Liam Neeson, is being thanked for what he has done by a crowd of those he has rescued — just before he flees for his own life. The grateful Jews present him with a ring on the inside of which is inscribed a saying from the Talmud: “Whoever saves one life saves the world entire.” But, distressed, Schindler says, “I could have got more out. I could have got more. I don’t know ... if I had just ... I threw away so much money. You have no idea ... I didn’t do enough.” He looks at his car. “Why did I keep the car? Ten people right there.” He pulls a pin from his lapel. “This pin. This is gold. Two more people ... and I didn’t. I didn’t.” And then he collapses into tears, overcome by the realization not of all that he did do, but that the pin in his lapel was apparently worth more to him than the lives of two people.

This moment, sitting at that table in Thessaloniki with those women so recently saved from slavery and yet still so devastated, was my *Schindler's List* moment. It was my moment of wondering what, in my life, had been my golden pin like Schindler’s, the thing so precious to me that it never occurred to me to use it to ransom the life of someone else.

Whoever saves one life saves the world entire.

I would not offer excuses.

“I don’t know,” I stammered at last. “I don’t know why I didn’t come sooner.” Such weak, small, light words for such a weighty question. “I am sorry. I am so sorry. Please forgive me.”

The silence became even more pronounced. Time seemed to have stopped. Nothing else mattered to me at that moment but these girls, their despair — and what healing God could bring to them. Though the silence seemed to last for an eternity, I felt so clearly present, so tuned into the now.

“I want you to know,” I said with new conviction, “that I have now heard your cries. I have seen you. I see you now.” I turned to Mary. “I see you, Mary. And when I see you, I see Anna.” I turned to Sonia. “I see you, Sonia.” I looked intently at each girl seated at the table. “I see each of you. I hear you. I know you by name. I have come for each of you.”

I wanted to see these girls as Jesus saw them — not as a sea of needs, but as individuals he had called by name and chosen one by one and loved. I heard his words before I spoke my own: *Tell them I have their names written in my book.² That I came to give the good news to the poor. To heal the brokenhearted. To set the captives free. Tell them these promises are for her. Now. As well as for eternity.³*

“You will no longer be hidden,” I told Sonia. “From now on, wherever I go, I will tell the people you exist.” I focused on each girl, one at a time. “I will ask them the very same question you’ve asked me. I will not sit back waiting, hoping, wishing, for someone else to do something. I promise you: I will *be* the someone. Now that I have found you, I will find other girls like you. I will do everything I can to stop this.”

Long after leaving that meeting, Sonia’s question rang in my ears, shook my mind, unsettled

my heart.

Why didn't you come sooner?

I offered them no excuses that day, but I did know that there were reasons. Reasons that when we hear God's call, when we feel that gentle (or not so gentle) urging of God's Spirit for us to make a bold step, take a risk, serve others, save a life, commit — we so often hold back.

It's because we don't feel empowered.

We don't feel qualified.

We think we lack the courage, the strength, the wisdom, the money, the experience, the education, the organization, the backing.

We feel like Moses when, from out of the burning bush, God called him to speak for him before Pharaoh. And Moses answered, "Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent.... I am slow of speech and tongue.... Please send someone else" (Exodus 4:10–13).

Not me, God. I'm afraid. Weak. Poor. Stupid.

Unqualified.

Daunted.

Not long ago, that is exactly how I would have responded.

But it has never been my desire to be *daunted*, to be afraid, to be unable to respond to God's call. Is it yours? I doubt it. I think that you, like me, want to be able to say instead "Here am I, Lord — send me." We don't want to sound like Moses, stammering around in search of excuses.

And we don't need to. Because, just as God gave Moses exactly what he needed to accomplish great things for God, he will equip us in just the same way. If he calls us to slay giants, he will make us into giant slayers.

God doesn't call the qualified. He qualifies the called.

And that is what this book is about. It is about what I call the "normal Christian life" — living boldly and courageously in the face of great difficulty, and amazing the world by beating the odds, for God's glory. It is what the apostle Paul meant when he told Timothy, "The Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7).

There is no shortage of ways life tries to daunt us, to render us incapable of following the bold and valiant plan God has for us. This book is about how to move past that — how to become *undaunted*.

And as I traveled away from that meeting that day, I thought of my own story. If anyone ever had a reason to feel unqualified, to feel *daunted*, it was me. And the reasons for that went back to things that happened before I was even born ...

GOD KNOWS MY NAME

I'm Not Who I Thought I Was

I had just closed my mouth around that first, long-awaited forkful of beef vindaloo — extra spicy — when my cell phone rang. I looked down, ignoring the midday chaos of the office dining area. Kathy. My sister-in-law. I savored the steaming vindaloo and considered letting her leave a message on voicemail. No. She rarely called in the middle of the day.

You'll just have to wait, I told my impatient stomach. I set down my fork and pressed the answer button on the phone.

The moment I heard Kathy's voice, I knew something was wrong: "Christine, George needs you. Can you talk to him? He's very upset. He just received a letter from the Social Services Department that claims that he's not your biological sibling. He was adopted at birth by your parents."

What! I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Let me talk with him," I said.

George came on the line, sounding distraught. He read the letter to me. "What do you make of this?" he asked.

"It's got to be a mistake. Social Services obviously sent this to the wrong person. Call the supervisors at Social Services immediately and tell them about this. Tell them it has to be a mistake. Then call me back to let me know how it went."

I hung up and pushed away my plate of food. The beef vindaloo that had seemed so delicious a few minutes before now didn't interest me at all.

How could someone have been so careless? Didn't they realize that a mistake like this could turn someone's world upside down? Why hadn't they taken more care in addressing the envelope, or in noticing which envelope they stuffed the letter into?

My phone rang again, interrupting the storm rattling inside me. "George!"

He was breathless. "Christine, it's true. They have an entire file on me. They told me that my birth mother has been trying to contact me, and they gave me the name of my biological mother and father. They told me where I was born. I have an appointment to go in and see the Social Services people tomorrow. They said they will tell me everything."

"It *can't* be true, George!" My racing heart beat over the sound of his mounting confusion. "This is just a big mistake, a mess. We'll get it straightened out." Though I tried to sound confident, I felt my own confusion rising with his.

An entire file ...

"I have to talk to Mum about this," George said. "I can't wait — I'm going over there now." I agreed, and told him I would meet him there.

I grabbed my purse and raced to the parking lot, my mind spinning in circles. *It's impossible — of course George is my brother. We grew up together. It's a ridiculous mistake. But ... what if it is true? After all, there's an entire file — no! It can't be true. What's George going to say to Mum?*

I was so shaken that for a full five minutes I couldn't remember where I'd left my vehicle. I eventually found it — right where I had parked it — jumped in, and drove to Mum's house in record time. For the second time that afternoon, I braced myself for what I was about to encounter.

WAS EVERYTHING ABOUT TO CHANGE?

As I walked up the path to the front door, I thought about all of the memories my family had created together in this home: The endless afternoon soccer games with friends in our front yard, the gathering place for all the kids in the neighborhood. The birthday cakes and homework dug into at the kitchen table. The Christmases around the tree. *How could all that not have been just what it seemed to us then – a normal family living life together? And yet what if this letter George received was true? Was everything about to change?*

Oh God, I prayed, give me wisdom, guidance, grace, and patience. I stepped through the doorway. What I saw stopped me in my tracks. George, his wife Kathy just behind him, was handing Mum the letter from Social Services.

Mum's hands shook as she scanned it.

There was fear, not confusion, in her eyes. And I knew. *It's true, I thought. It's true. My brother is adopted.* Time seemed to stop. I couldn't breathe. I felt pinned in place, only able to watch as tears streamed down Mum's face.

She looked at my brother. "I am so sorry you found out like this, George. We never meant to hurt you. We love you. I couldn't have loved you more if I had given birth to you myself. We loved you before we even laid eyes on you — and once we did, at the hospital, we never considered you anyone else's but ours. A closed adoption was the only option we were given at your birth mother's insistence, and we were advised to never tell you that you were anything else but our very own. I never imagined that your birth mother would try to contact you, or be allowed to. She signed a form giving you to us totally. I don't understand! The adoption laws must have changed." Mum looked down at the letter, slowly shaking her head in disbelief. She sobbed, repeating, "I couldn't have loved you more, I couldn't have loved you more." Then, "We didn't want you to even think you were unwanted or rejected. We never dreamed you could find out, especially after all of these years. One of the last things I promised your father before he died was that I would never tell you."

I felt paralyzed. The scene playing before me seemed surreal, more like a movie than my own life. *How could this secret have been kept from my brother for thirty-five years? How could Mum and Dad never have told us that George was adopted? Why had I never had the slightest suspicion that George and I were not biological siblings?*

And yet ...

This explained the mystery of why George is six-foot-four and I am five-foot-three. And why I have perfectly straight, light hair while he has curly dark hair. I almost laughed. *How could I have overlooked such glaring dissimilarities all these years? A sudden thought sobered me. What other family secrets did I not know?*

The question overwhelmed me. The tension, fears, and tears were rising, so I decided to do what any good Greek girl would do in the eye of a storm.

I headed straight to the kitchen to prepare something for everyone to eat.

Raised according to the philosophy that food is the answer to most things, I functioned on autopilot to make extra-strong Greek coffee and rummage in the pantry for some baklava. Our heritage had taught me that when in doubt about what to do or say, turn to cooking and

eating, and a solution will present itself. So I set everything on the table, hoping the combination of caffeine and sugar would recalibrate us. Then I took a deep breath and called to George, Kathy, and Mum.

We gathered around the same table where our family had shared meals and ordinary moments and milestones for more than twenty years. Only now the atmosphere around the table wasn't the same. Our trust had been breached. There was a schism where before there had been none. We sat on the edge of it, so shaken we didn't know where or how things were going to settle, or whether more things would crumble and fall. Uncertainty rumbled in the air and in the very pit of my stomach. With one letter, with a single seismic conversation, everything I'd thought I knew about our family had been turned upside down, inside out.

HINTS AND SECRETS

For an awkward moment we all sipped our coffee. Then Mum cried as she told us that after several years of trying unsuccessfully to conceive, she and Dad had been given an opportunity to adopt. They had decided to take it, while continuing to try to have children naturally. It had been a time of great anticipation, she said, repeating, “We loved you before you were born. We loved you before we laid eyes on you.”

I realized that, amazingly, neighbors and extended family members must have known - yet said nothing about it to us kids. *How can you keep such a thing secret? You can't exactly hide one day not being pregnant and the next coming home with a baby! How was it possible that so many people knew about this for decades, yet over the years never let a hint slip?*

And yet ...

And yet there *had* been hints, though they had been unclear to me at the time. I remembered an incident around this same kitchen table when I was eleven years old. Mum had been peeling onions, preparing our dinner, as George and I and our younger brother Andrew, played the board game Trouble. Somehow our conversation turned to adoption. I'm not sure how that happened, but I remember telling Mum that even if I were adopted she wouldn't care, because I loved her and Dad so.

“I can't even imagine anyone else being my parents,” I said.

My brothers each echoed my comments. *I can't even imagine anyone else being my parents.* Mum drew in a long breath. And for all these years, I had thought it was the onions that made Mum cry that day.

Dad called on the phone a few minutes later, as we siblings continued our board game, and Mum immediately told him that we had been talking about adoption. She left the room as she talked, and her voice dropped to a whisper. *What is it I'm not supposed to know?* I wondered at the time. *What is it they don't want me to hear?*

I strained, unsuccessfully, to eavesdrop, but heard nothing. Impatient, my brothers whined that it was my turn to play, and I turned back to our game as Mum returned to the kitchen. She busied herself with the pans as she prepared dinner. And that was that. From that moment until this, the word *adoption* was never again mentioned in our home.

Now, as George sat with his head in his hands, struggling to make sense of the new reality, I said to Mum, “That day ...” I wanted to know now what was kept from me back then. “Remember that day,” I repeated.

Mum nodded. “I remember every detail.” She told us how she'd come undone by the very mention of the word she and Dad had worked so hard to keep us from hearing, from understanding. When Dad called, she was ready to burst with anxiety.

“Shouldn't we tell them?” she'd pressed.

She and Dad had reasoned together. The truth might hurt us. Maybe it was best to keep things as they were, they agreed, and never speak of it again.

Now here it was, that secret truth, being talked about at the kitchen table. But, with the confession over, Mum's face relaxed. Her tension eased. She seemed relieved, freed by the

truth now in the open.

And yet for the other three of us, tension remained. Kathy was motionless. George was speechless.

He's in shock, I thought.

The silence, the stillness, took on an energy of its own. To break the strain, I reached for another piece of baklava.

“Christine?” Mum asked. “Since we’re telling the truth, would you like to know the whole truth?”

I dropped the baklava.

My heart skipped a beat, possibly five. The way she had asked that question could mean only one thing. I searched her eyes, hoping for some sign that I was wrong. Finally, I choked out, “I was adopted too.”

How much more bizarre could this day become?

What do you do when you have been living all your life, more than three decades, with facts that you *thought* were true, only to discover that so many of them weren't facts at all?

What else in my life was a lie? What other secrets were there about our family, about the life I'd thought I knew so well? Could I trust anyone or anything else? I felt like I was living in my own version of the movie *The Truman Show*.

Remember that film? How Truman discovered that his home, workplace, and world were not real at all, but rather constructed as part of a television studio that contained hidden cameras everywhere? Truman began to suspect, and then proved, that his friends and associates, from best friend to mailman to man on the street, were merely actors, each hired to play a fictional role in his pretend, if unscripted, life. Everyone around him knew that his life was merely *The Truman Show*, the most popular television series in the world. Everyone knew, that is, except Truman. I thought about how he discovered the lie, the hidden cameras, the actors who were simply doing a job, and how it rocked everything he believed about who he was and what his life consisted of. The revelation shook his sense of self to the core, as if his world had just tumbled into the sea, leaving him adrift in confusion. I thought of his sense of sadness, anger, fear, deception, betrayal.

I understood exactly.

For several long moments, Mum, George, Kathy, and I tried processing this rattling loop of emotion. The fact that I didn't say anything was in itself a miracle to anyone who knew me. I could feel my family's eyes fixed on me for some reaction.

Finally, I managed a single question, one that for me was of the utmost importance. “Am I still Greek?”

George, Kathy, and Mum burst out laughing. I couldn't help but join them. We so needed that laughter to de-intensify the moment. It had been such a hard, long afternoon, full of one shocking revelation after another. With its first burst, the laughter relieved the tension. And it did something more. It ushered back some of our familiar trust, our unquestioned love for one another ... and with that, one more revelation.

THE THINGS I KNEW FOR SURE

As it began to sink in that so much of what I'd thought to be true about my life was a lie, a surprising thing happened. Instead of being completely shattered, an assurance rose within me.

True, I had just discovered that I wasn't who I thought I was. I had no idea who my biological parents were; I knew nothing about them. I didn't know if I had been conceived out of love, a careless one-night stand, an affair, or a rape. When my birth mother gave me up for adoption, was she reluctant about it? Had she felt forced? Or was she eager to be rid of the inconvenience? I didn't know if she and my birth father had stayed together. Did he even know that I existed? Were they still alive? Why had she never contacted me? Did I have other brothers and sisters somewhere?

There was so much I didn't know. I was amazed that so many questions can flood your mind in a split second, from one moment to the next.

And yet ...

Despite all that, there was also so much I knew for sure. So much that nothing my mother had said, nothing she could possibly say, would turn into a lie.

Nothing Separates Us from God's Love

Without thinking about what I was doing, I stood, looked at George, then Kathy, then Mum and said with conviction, “Before I was formed in my mother’s womb” — and here I paused to add, unable to resist, “whose ever womb that was — God knew me. He knitted together my innermost parts and fashioned all of my days before there was even one of them. I am fearfully and wonderfully made.¹ Even though I only just found out that I was adopted, God has always known, and he has always loved me. And since *that* has never changed, therefore *nothing* has essentially changed. I may not be who I thought I was, but I still am who he says I am. And I am more. I am loved. I am his.”

Mum, George, and Kathy stared at me.

I stared back. They seemed as shocked by my words as by the news about the adoptions. I was a little shocked myself. Even as the underpinnings of my world had shifted radically, they were resettling in a more secure place. Even as things seemed to be falling apart, the truth of God’s love was holding me together. And that truth was: I knew he loved me unquestionably, unconditionally, whether I was adopted or not. The truth was: His love was relentless, unyielding, passionate, unending, perfect. A feeling of peace, supernatural peace engulfed me. I was okay. Everything was going to be okay. That may seem like an obvious conclusion, in light of the fact that my life, or at least everything I’d thought I knew about my life, was unraveling before my eyes. Nevertheless, I felt undaunted by it all, because of an unchanging, never-failing truth, a truth I clung to tenaciously: God was in control of my life.

Of course, I thought, nothing like a few quakes to test that belief. But did I really believe God who he says he is?

Yes. I did. God’s promises were real: I love you. Nothing can separate you from my love. Nothing can take you from me.²

Mum and George and Kathy must have wondered, *In the face of all that has been unleashed this afternoon, how can you possibly feel such peace and positivity and resolve?*

It may have seemed a miracle — but it wasn’t a mystery ...

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