

Authentic *Me*



A Story of Strength,
Perseverance and Faith

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AUTHENTIC ME: A Story of Strength, Perseverance and Faith

INTRODUCTION

Life happens, and rarely goes according to plan. There are moments when you face problems that seem insurmountable. Your faith is tested. You find yourself broken and wonder if you can continue on. You begrudgingly begin each day and cover your pain with a mask. Underneath the mask lies the authentic truth of who you are.

Authentic Me details a story filled with turmoil as emotional experiences of domestic abuse and infidelity are revealed. A marriage to Kyle causes the main character to be thrust into a series of public roles. Their lives become a whirlwind of public events and publicity stunts, and she is the star of the performance. Failure to perform at her full potential results in abuse. Those who should protect her become enablers of further abusive situations. The message is clear: she should remain silent or suffer the consequences.

Her failure to acquiesce would force her to pay the ultimate price as she finds herself in a custody battle for her children. At her breaking point, she must decide whether to succumb to defeat or live victoriously. The choice is hers.

To save herself, she taps into her faith and reconnects to the core of who she is. She quickly realizes that her healing must be purposeful and will only begin once she uncovers the mask, peels away the hurt layer by layer and lives her truth.

CHAPTER ONE

Love, Marriage and a Baby Carriage

“Each new morning you get to write a new page in the present chapter of your life book. Make sure today that you are writing powerfully, purposefully and passionately. This is your life. You are the author of your story.”

~Sophia A. Nelson

I will never forget the moment I discovered I was pregnant with my first child. I was so excited! The excitement was displayed through tears of joy which immediately turned to worry. Would I have a normal pregnancy? Would the baby be healthy? How would the delivery go? How would I handle being a new mom? My worry

turned into fear. Yikes! Will I really have to push a baby out? How much will the baby weigh? As the questions plagued my mind, my level of anxiety heightened. Labor and delivery shows made me nervous. I had nightmares about horrific delivery procedures and baby abnormalities. I was totally elated about the pregnancy all while being completely terrified of childbirth. Well, it was too late for that fear now. The baby was inside of me growing and doing well. At some point, a precious newborn would make their debut into the world, whether this mommy-to-be was nervous or not.

I soon learned I was giving birth to a baby boy. The joy of it was indescribable. I wanted everything to be perfect for him. The nursery had to be color coordinated and fully equipped with the baby essentials: the crib, car seat, stroller and other newborn baby items all of which would be selected only after reading consumer safety reports and endless customer reviews. I was anxiously preparing for motherhood, my first child. It had to be *perfect* and according to plan.

I was having complications with the pregnancy. My heart literally stopped beating for a moment. Preeclampsia was the diagnosis. No surprise. It was indeed a stressful time. I was newly married. I had relocated from Nevada to Alabama to Ohio, started a new job and was getting settled into a new home. I was also studying for the Ohio bar examination.

As a result of the preeclampsia diagnosis, the doctor ordered bed rest. *Bed rest?! I thought, "What exactly does that entail?"* Maybe I hadn't fully explained to the doctor the extent of what I had going on and how busy I was. I couldn't possibly put aside all of my responsibilities and be confined to a bed! In hindsight, I now know it was something I should have welcomed as a break from the fast pace of my chaotic world.

My husband Kyle, whose career was in higher education, had recently secured a position as the student affairs administrator at a university in Ohio. We lived in a small college town and hadn't been there long enough for me to establish a strong support network. I was nervous about being there without family support, especially after experiencing sickness during the pregnancy.

When I gave birth, my mother traveled from Louisiana to stay with us for a few weeks. My son was born premature and remained in the neonatal intensive care unit of the hospital for two weeks after I was discharged. The drive from our home

to the hospital was one and a half hours. So, rather than make the long drive daily, my mom and I opted to lodge in a nearby hotel to be close to the hospital.

My baby was perfect in my eyes. I spent so much time at the hospital to the point that my mother began to encourage me to go to the hotel and rest for a few hours in between visits. I couldn't understand why Kyle wasn't as equally excited about the baby as I was and wondered if it would be unfair to him to raise it as an issue. He was certainly busy at work. Perhaps I was overreacting. He was a male which in my opinion somehow made him less compassionate. I was worried and concerned for the baby and decided not to let my apprehension spill over into our marriage.

When Kyle stopped by for a visit, he informed me that he would be traveling to attend a student affairs conference the next day. *So much for avoiding an argument!* The baby was three days old and was being fed through a feeding tube.

“You’ve got to be kidding me? You’re going to leave while our newborn baby is in the hospital to go to a conference that is conveniently in the city where your mistress lives? Is Dana that important?”

Dana and Kyle had a long history. They dated prior to our relationship and were once engaged to be married. They went a period of time with no communication, but Dana resurfaced when she discovered that Kyle and I were married. She professed her love for Kyle and the regret of not following through with their plans for marriage. Initially, Kyle was very open with me about Dana and set boundaries between them. Later, the phone calls increased in frequency and an intimate relationship developed.

Although I was agitated, I remained cognizant of the fact that the baby could sense tension. He needed us to be attentive to him, not arguing in his presence. I committed to blocking out the marital frustrations and becoming solely focused on the baby's needs.

I was basking in the joy of being a new mom. The day the baby was able to come home was one of the happiest days of my life. He was a healthy, happy bundle of joy and that was all that mattered to me. I couldn't be more amazed that I'd given birth to someone who now depended on me for everything.

Honestly, this wasn't my first pregnancy. A few months before I started law school, I became pregnant by my high school boyfriend. The timing of that news could not have been worse. I was at a point where I was ready to fulfill my dream of being an attorney, but how could I accomplish that task with a newborn baby? Did I even want to try? I decided that I did not. I had an abortion.

I never spoke with anyone about the abortion which consequently allowed me not to have to deal with the emotions that came along with my choice. It didn't occur to me that a single selfish act would shape my future decisions. When I was faced with difficult problems later in life, I resorted to that comfortable mechanism of handling issues: avoidance.

Years later those emotions surfaced, causing me to remain in an abusive marriage and aided in the process of my self-worth being devalued. I believed that domestic abuse was the punishment for my previous mistake. I'd killed an innocent being to pursue my professional dreams and aspirations. When I married, I had the lifestyle I longed for yet had the audacity to be unhappy when it came with additional baggage. Would years of physical, emotional and financial abuse be the price I paid for the fairytale lifestyle I desired or was it too much to endure? I often questioned myself, yet there was little time for a pity party. I'd dealt myself these cards and now it was time to play my hand. I learned to play my hand very well. I would even argue that I became too good at playing the game, at the expense of denying myself the authenticity and happiness I deserved.

"You're a stupid bitch!" He yelled, before he hit me so hard in my face that he knocked me down onto the living room floor. It took a second for the reality of the moment to set in. When it finally did, my mind immediately went into overdrive. I was angry! *This motherfucker actually hit me!* Truthfully, the fact that he hit me wasn't what I was most upset about. I was furious he called me a *bitch!*

"I know you didn't just call me a bitch! Have you lost your mind?" I stormed over to the closest telephone to dial 911. He wouldn't call me a bitch *and* hit me in the process! He was going to pay for this!

Kyle pleaded with me not to call the police. My head was pounding so his requests sounded like distorted rambling. "I'll leave. We don't need people in our business. Think about our jobs. How embarrassing would it be for everyone to know that we had a fight?"

In my mind I thought, *we* didn't have a fight. *You* hit me. You called me a bitch. You lost your temper. It's not my fault!

"911 what's your emergency?" the dispatcher asked.

"My husband and I were arguing and he hit me in the face," I replied. I burst into tears. The dispatcher requested that I remain on the telephone as she sent a police officer to our home.

As I held the telephone receiver, I became sick to my stomach. I was dizzy and felt an overwhelming urge to vomit. I was very afraid. Had I overreacted? I'd called the police on my son's father, my husband. I certainly didn't want him to go to jail. What kind of person would that make me? I hung up the telephone.

My mother-in-law was in town visiting which added tension in and of itself. After hearing all the commotion, she rushed into the room where we were. Kyle gave his mother a brief synopsis of what had taken place. She immediately began orchestrating our talking points for the police.

"Neither of you should put your jobs in jeopardy over a silly argument. When the officers arrive, you should tell them it was just a misunderstanding. Do not agree to press charges. The last thing you need is police involved in your private affairs."

I couldn't comprehend the words. In my mind, I was repeating to myself, HE HIT ME! He's my husband. I thought he would protect me. You would think at that very moment I would have realized I'd married into a family where true happiness was secondary to the opinions of others. Public image mattered in an unhealthy, abnormal way and this family would discredit anyone to keep that image intact.

The doorbell buzzed. All eyes looked to me. The police had arrived. I looked at my husband: his face was filled with terror. Guilt set in for me. I felt the need to protect him. He'd gotten upset, extremely upset. Did one act of rage make him a horrible person? Surely it would never happen again. I'd known Kyle for almost two years and he'd never been physically abusive. Perhaps it was a mistake and he really was sorry.

"No officer, he did not hit me. We had an argument and I called the police because I was upset. It was just a misunderstanding." I recited the rehearsed script robotically. The look on the police officer's face confirmed he did not believe me. He told me that without my statement there would be little that law enforcement

could do to prevent a similar incident from occurring again. I assured the officer that I was okay. After he secured witness statements and finished his investigation, I grabbed my baby, went upstairs and locked the door to prevent anyone from coming in. I was violated by my husband and unsure of whether he would hit me again as a consequence of calling the police. I needed some time alone to process the events that had just taken place. I finally fell asleep holding my baby in my arms.

We slept for a few hours that seemed like days of rest. I was hoping it would ease the pain of what I had endured. I couldn't understand why I was feeling guilty. I regretted calling the police. Rather than viewing the phone call to the police as necessary to protect myself, I instead felt I had done something terribly wrong.

The 'simple misunderstanding' script we rehearsed prior to the arrival of the police had been revised. In my mother-in-law's new version, the incident was solely my fault. In her witness statement, she said she was present during the altercation and that I had been suffering from post-partum depression.

I felt betrayed. Subconsciously, I began to doubt myself and wondered if I indeed triggered Kyle's anger and the domestic abuse. I eventually resolved in my mind that both my husband and my mother-in-law were right. I had to let it go. To do otherwise would only create more problems. I would forgive this first act and view it as an isolated incident.

I wondered if I'd made a mistake by getting married. We hadn't been married a full year and there were already signs of trouble. My marriage was all I had. My family was in Louisiana. It was time to be strong. I promised myself if Kyle ever hit me again I would absolutely leave.

A few days later, Kyle casually stated in a text message that he would never allow himself to get that angry again. I read the message but did not respond. I wasn't sure if this was his version of an apology. He never actually said the words *I'm sorry*. People can get help if they're physically abusive. I would have been willing to go to counseling with him. However, that wasn't the path we chose. Rather than admit there was a problem, we both operated as if the incident never happened. We did not discuss it again. In his efforts to regain my trust, he bought me expensive gifts and a brand new luxury car. We took lavish vacations. He befriended everyone in my friendship circle and constantly reminded them of the nice things he did for me. Kyle was charming and created a perfect persona for himself. He needed everyone around us to believe that he was a wonderful person,

without flaws. It was the process of convincing people that he was incapable of abusing me before they were even aware of domestic violence.

Three years passed and the joy of motherhood was still a natural high for me. I wanted that experience again. I wanted another baby. Kyle was doing well in his career and figured if a second child would satisfy me then so be it. We soon welcomed another baby boy into our home. I was blessed beyond measure. Motherhood truly is life's most precious gift.

The love that my children brought into my life made it easy to disregard the fact that Kyle and I were drifting apart. He spent the majority of his time at work. I spent all of my time with the children. When Kyle requested that we go to dinner or do things as a couple, I instantly declined. I was consumed with motherhood and showed little interest in doing any activity as a couple. Being a wife was secondary, which furthered the divide within our marriage.

The years that followed proved what I already knew to be true: if you don't get to the root of a problem and address it, the problem will continue to manifest itself. For a while Kyle was able to keep his promise. He was not physically abusive. I felt good about that fact and hopeful for our marriage. I couldn't stomach the thought of being in a relationship where every time there was a disagreement I feared being physically assaulted. However, in the place of physical abuse I found myself being subjected to emotional abuse and those scars ran deep.

As a result, there were numerous times I packed my bags and left, children in tow. I thought that if I left home enough times Kyle would stop disrespecting me. I hoped he would miss my presence and work harder to address our marital problems. My actions had the opposite effect. Kyle began to make jokes during arguments that suggested I should leave and go to a hotel. He told me how much better he slept when I wasn't at home and that he wished we could live separately forever. I didn't blame him at all for his behavior. Instead, I blamed myself and questioned what I had done to warrant this treatment.

It would be years later before Kyle physically harmed me again. Yet, emotionally, I was in for a roller coaster ride that no one could have prepared me for. If it's true that your hardest times reveal your character, mine was about to be tried, tested and revealed for the world to see.

“You’re insecure! That’s your problem,” he yelled as he stormed upstairs. We were arguing about Dana again. This particular evening, I’d heard the garage door open. His vehicle pulled into the garage, but he didn’t come inside the house until well over an hour had passed. He remained in the car conversing with Dana.

The fact that I felt his relationship with Dana was disrespectful was somehow my fault as well. He masked his wrongdoings in condescending remarks aimed at making me feel inferior.

“You never question a man who takes care of his household. Most women do as they’re told when a man is providing for them.” Didn’t I know that? No, I didn’t know that because I was stupid. If only I were older, maybe then I would understand. Marrying me was a big mistake. He would talk to anyone he chose to talk to, male or female, at any time. And, that was that.

Their relationship planted the seed of distrust that continued to grow in our marriage. It was a battle between female intuition and my desire to have faith in Kyle. I certainly didn’t want to appear immature or insecure. In an effort to prove that neither was the case, I vowed to never question him about his relationship with Dana. I knew that I had no control over his actions.

We never discussed Dana again and I never offered forgiveness. I also didn’t leave. I stayed with a hardened heart that would refuse to be mended.

CHAPTER TWO

Welcome to Campus Life!

“Nearly all men can stand adversity,
but if you want to test a man's character, give him power.”
- Abraham Lincoln

I remember the beautiful weather when we landed in Oklahoma. It was my first visit to the state. I didn’t know then how much of an impact this brief trip would have on my life.

My husband Kyle was a finalist in the position as president of a public university there. The three-day agenda was packed with interviews and meetings. We met university faculty, staff, students, constituents, community leaders, politicians,

church clergy and the list goes on. The introductions were endless and the questions many. What would be our platform for the university? How efficient would our fundraising initiatives be? How would we position the university for continued growth? Did we understand the challenges of historically black colleges and universities? Did we fully appreciate the nature and pressures of the role of a President and First Lady of the university? We answered in solidarity. We were committed. We understood the challenges. *We were a team.*

The opportunity to meet university stakeholders was the most gratifying part of the campus visit. We spent a substantial amount of time with the interim president of the university who reminded me of my paternal grandfather. He was very gracious and wise. His love for the university was contagious. He spoke of its history and culture in a way that instantly caused me to share his passion.

Our assigned campus guide was equally kind and informative. He provided encouragement between each interview session. As we were leaving the campus, a recent graduate expressed to me that the university operated like a family. I instantly concurred. In a short amount of time, it was apparent that the people we met possessed a deep love for the institution and had a vested interest in its success.

Two days later we received an announcement that Kyle was selected to be the next president of the university. It would be his first time serving in that capacity. I couldn't have been happier for him. His lifelong dream of being a college president was finally being fulfilled. It was a wonderful time for our family.

After the celebration, days of relocation planning followed. Since marriage, I had become what was popularly referenced among higher education professionals as the "trailing spouse," terminology used to describe a situation where one spouse is required to relocate as a result of their companion acquiring a new job assignment. Consequently, the trailing spouse faces a range of issues that impact them professionally and personally.

The move to Oklahoma represented the third move for me within our six years of marriage. Our family experienced growth and developed many friendship ties in Ohio. I had given birth to our two children and was practicing law. Another move meant that I would be required to put aside my employment, friends and established networks in pursuit of Kyle's career progression. I wanted to be a supportive wife, but it certainly wasn't easy. It would be a major adjustment for the entire family.

I hoped the move to Oklahoma would represent a fresh start for us. Things were going fairly well by this time. I'd blocked the fact that Kyle had been physically and emotionally abusive out of my mind. I didn't dwell on whether or not there were any acts of infidelity. I wanted us to be a normal, happy family.

Welcome to campus life! We were eager to get settled and get acclimated to our new life. It was an immediate lifestyle change. Our new home was directly in the center of the campus. I looked out the windows and saw the student union, student housing, classroom buildings and university offices. Though it was owned by the University, it was now our home as long as Kyle retained the position of president. It was spacious with plenty of room for the children to play. There was a large entertainment area in the basement where we hosted meetings, luncheons and other events.

The first few months were intense. There was a huge learning curve for Kyle as he adjusted to his new position. His workdays were extremely long. His travel increased so prolonged periods of time away from home became the norm. We quickly adjusted to busy and hectic as our new standard of living.

Before we moved to Oklahoma, I was working as an attorney in the Legal Affairs office on a university campus. This experience provided insight into the myriad of issues that college campuses face, the politics at play in decision making, risk management concerns and student life. When we relocated, we decided that rather than me seeking employment in a legal capacity, I would become actively engaged on the campus. There hadn't been a First Lady on this campus for years, so there was great latitude given in defining what the role should be.

To gain a deeper understanding of the parameters of my role, I connected with other university spouses through professional organizations such as the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. They had a program specifically designed for spouses of university presidents. I also spoke with university stakeholders and completed a campus survey to get the input of students to assess the needs of the campus.

I wanted to help make the campus experience engaging and fun. I served on various committees to understand the framework before I transitioned into being an event planner and hostess for campus functions. My attention to detail proved to be helpful when I organized events. I worked closely with the campus staff to ensure that the activities and programs went off without a hitch.

In alignment with my passion, I implemented a Pre-Law Society to afford aspiring young attorneys insight and exposure to the possibilities a law degree could offer. I hosted an annual dinner to connect female students with professionals in leadership positions which allowed for effective dialogue and discussion. I organized social activities: ice cream socials, clothing swaps, community service projects in partnership with the sororities and campus organizations. My children attended the university daycare which helped me to become actively engaged with that facet of the campus as well. I often advised females who struggled to find a comfortable balance between parenting responsibilities and the demands of being a college student.

I worked in conjunction with the university's development office to explore fundraising ideas that would sustain additional programming. This collaboration aided in identifying female alumnae who shared a passion for female empowerment. An annual leadership luncheon was instituted that led way to a renewed interest in the overall wellbeing of female students attending the university.

My position later evolved to include any and all programming that would garner support for female students and the challenges they faced. The objective was to provide mentors and position them to successfully achieve their goals. I was excited about this endeavor because I was afforded the same level of support throughout my matriculation in both undergraduate and graduate studies. I recognized the importance of positive role models and dedicated mentors. I knew that it absolutely mattered.

Through a partnership with a national service organization, The Links, Incorporated, we formalized a campus mentoring program. This was key in further solidifying efforts to support our female students. Workshops and seminars were offered that included topics in the areas of professional development, personal image, etiquette and self-esteem.

Student engagement was paramount in my new role and I embraced each opportunity to have interaction with the students. Helping them to become the best version of themselves forced me to examine the areas in my life where I lacked authenticity.

In addition to my work as First Lady, there were joint spousal duties that required my attention. University fundraising was at the top of the list. It was no secret that this was the least favorite of my activities. However, I quickly brainstormed ways to be instrumental in the success of those initiatives and later developed a plan that became the framework for Kyle's annual fundraising campaign.

As with most relocations, there were many changes that occurred immediately. Within the first few months, I gained a deeper understanding of the presidential role and its accompanying challenges. Yet, there was one challenge I had not prepared for: the presidential ego. The change in attitude that came from Kyle's newfound sense of perceived power and control brought destruction once again to our household.

CHAPTER THREE

Private Life vs. Public Lies

Narcissistic personality disorder is defined as a condition in which people have an excessive sense of self-importance, and extreme preoccupation with themselves, and lack of empathy for others.

"Your husband sounds like a narcissist," the counselor said. I had been seeing her for the past few months. I needed to talk to someone about my frustrations. Naively, I thought the move to Oklahoma would strengthen our family. The reality was the marriage was still in shambles.

I'd spent the past hour talking to my counselor about how things progressed. It felt good to say what I was feeling out loud to someone with the protection of confidentiality while doing so. I suffered emotionally as a result of keeping those feelings bottled inside of me for so many years. I was disappointed in myself for remaining in a relationship with someone who physically hurt me and left emotional scars. My self-esteem was at an all time low.

Publicly, we were the perfect couple. Kyle stood up at events and spewed out praises to me for being a supportive wife and loving mother. Behind closed doors the physical abuse escalated. I avoided confrontation because I knew any argument would lead to abuse. We resorted to communicating either through text message or by way of emails from his secretary. We didn't operate as though we were married. There wasn't even a friendship left. However, Kyle wanted the

marriage to stay in tact because it was good for his image. “The campus loves the idea of a family as the presidential unit, and that’s what we will give them,” he often stated.

It became fairly obvious to me that the pressures of being liked and conforming to the public image he created was consuming Kyle. He was self-absorbed, out of touch and regarded himself as among the social elite. His focus was solely on his career. Any other conversation, especially concerning our family or the marriage, was annoying to him.

His idea of transformative leadership was rapidly showing signs of dictatorship. We disagreed on almost everything, which ultimately led to us discussing nothing. Kyle’s communication with me was always condescending, spewed with disdain and violent patriarchy. He reminded me that I should feel fortunate to be married to him, and assured me that I could be replaced at any time. “You ungrateful, immature bitch! I work my ass off every day so that you and the kids can enjoy this lifestyle. Any other woman would love to be in your position!”

My mechanism for dealing with problems hadn’t changed. I avoided issues and potential conflict. Staying busy was easy to do. At home, I was going through the “Married-Single Parent Dilemma”. Kyle had become an absent parent consumed with the roles, responsibilities and challenges of his new job. Even when he wasn’t traveling, he spent extended periods of time at his office or attending work-related events. This left me responsible for all household duties and everything involving the children.

We had done very little in the way of rebuilding the trust between us. Questions of infidelity rose again. Rumors of a student on the campus being pregnant by Kyle surfaced. Later, there was speculation of an inappropriate relationship between Kyle and a university administrator. I was constantly bombarded with information that caused me to question his integrity. It became hard to decipher what was gossip with what was factual. I found myself in a constant state of unhappiness. It was a train wreck waiting to happen.

Discernment became paramount in our new leadership roles at the university. My email was flooded with people who wanted to meet for breakfast, lunch, dinner and all times in between. I was invited to more banquets, galas, fundraisers, and events than I could ever hope to attend. There was no shortage of human bodies present in our circle. Yet, I still felt as though there was no one to talk to.

During conversations with university constituents, Kyle engaged superficially about how the family enjoyed Oklahoma and more directly on university issues. He constantly reminded me that I would never understand the intricate relationships and everyone's indirect tie to the university. His controlling personality also dictated who my friends were. He was very paranoid about me creating friendships and often cautioned me against it. "We are considered outsiders because we are not from Oklahoma. Trust no one."

It was true that most of our colleagues were natives of the state and had a much deeper sense of the history and operations of the university. This was the basis for his rationale as to why I should neither feel supported by nor comfortable forming friendships with anyone.

As a result, I refrained from any discussion of personal matters. Could anyone fully comprehend the dynamics of what I was experiencing? Not likely. I concluded that I would either be viewed as complaining about living a luxurious lifestyle in a presidential home that the university funds or I would receive the standard "I understand" feedback. The reality was no one had a clue as to the magnitude of our situation and we worked harder to keep it that way.

Most days I was completely exhausted but I couldn't let my fatigue show. The public performance and façade was a requirement. Prior to any event, Kyle reviewed what his expectations of me were. The tone of the conversation was similar to that of a parent giving forewarning to a child: you will listen and obey, or you will pay a price for your disobedience. The price that I paid was almost always in the form of abuse. As long as I performed well in our public life, there was no concern for what was consuming me privately. I was to do as I was told, and with a smile.

The physical abuse had initially been sporadic. Now, the exchanges were bitter most times ending with a push, slap or punch. I still felt an obligation to protect him even when he physically abused me. I didn't want anything bad to happen to him. All I wanted was for the abuse and constant disrespect to cease.

The emotional strain was enormous. However, I didn't have the luxury to stop and deal with it. Life was busy. Moments after being emotionally abused or harmed physically, I was off to the next campus event as if nothing ever happened.

I often walked into campus activities just moments after crying. I kept makeup in my purse that helped to conceal my dark secrets. I would learn the hard way that

makeup, jewelry and expensive clothing should never be used to cover up your pain. In that moment, I was hurting.

I was a guest speaker on a leadership panel. The auditorium was filled with young students with blank slates. I wanted them to get life right the first time around. Learn from the mistakes of others. “Be authentic,” I proclaimed. “Never sacrifice your self-worth. Assume responsibility for your actions.” I was giving sound advice and pouring knowledge into others to deflect from the reality of my own pain. My physical appearance looked amazing though my spirit was slowly dying. I was pouring from an empty cup. I had not taken the time to nurture my emotional health. Private life versus public lies... it was slowly taking a toll on me.

I remember playing a game called MASH in middle school with my friends. It was a game used to predict our future. MASH was an acronym for Mansion, Apartment, Shack or Home. There were various categories in this game, including who you would marry, how many kids you would have, the kind of car you would drive, what your profession would be, where you would live, and so many other life determinations. The items that remained under each category at the completion of the game were considered to define your future.

It was a popular game for my friends and I. We were innocent little girls, dreaming of fairytale weddings with the perfect husband. Romanticizing the notion of marriage continued through our high school years. We fantasized about wedding dresses and honeymoon locations. In our minds, being married wasn’t optional. It was one of the items to check off your list if you considered yourself successful.

By the age of twenty-five, I’d found what most would consider a *good* man by modern day societal standards. Kyle was a well-educated black man, on the rise in his professional career. He was an eligible bachelor who happened to be ten years older than me. He was charismatic and charming. He hardly ever met a stranger. Kyle had been married before and had children from his previous marriage. He purported to be a single parent who was committed to family values.

Had Kyle been listed as a marriage option during my youthful days of playing MASH, he certainly would have been one of my top picks. He seemed to possess all of the characteristics I desired in a husband. On top of being everything I’d dreamed of, he was also able to provide the lifestyle I longed for. We dated and were engaged in less than a year. I was confident we would spend the rest of our lives together.

I later learned that the person Kyle portrayed himself to be publicly was in stark contrast to the person he was privately. Out in the open he was loving, kind and appeared genuinely concerned for the wellbeing of others. Behind closed doors he was a control freak and only cared about what made him look good publicly. He would go to any extreme for his career and he was willing to sacrifice his integrity in the process.

Any form of disagreement with Kyle led to name-calling and attempts to destroy my self-esteem. His way was the only way. He manipulated who our family friends were by his perception of their importance. If a relationship with them could benefit Kyle, then we could maintain a friendship. Otherwise, he considered the friendship useless.

I noticed these signs of controlling behavior early on in the marriage. I attributed our differences of opinion to the age span between us. Later, I excused his behavior under the assumption that he was dealing with the stress of his new job. It was hard for me to accept the fact that a marriage that was just getting started was already failing. That wasn't my idea of happily ever after.

Creating what we thought was the perfect marriage also meant that I couldn't let anyone know the truth of what was going on. I wondered if people could sense our problems when we were out in public. It was shameful and horrifying. Everyone was applauding us for being young, successful, doting new parents and the ideal married couple. How could I now admit that he was abusive and that our fairytale life was a lie?

I continued to pray that it would never happen again. I told myself that every incident was the last time. When we argued, I tried to ensure it didn't escalate to the point of physical contact. I thought I actually had control over that. The only real control that I had was removing myself from the situation, but I didn't and the abuse continued.

The emotional abuse was harder to deal with than the physical abuse. At times I didn't appreciate or understand the level of manipulation being used. Rather than finding value in my work, Kyle referred to it as a byproduct of him having his employment status. "If you leave me, I'll ensure you have nothing. You can't survive without me. I provide for this family. Do you know how stupid you would look if you left me? Everyone will think that you're crazy! *You are crazy!*" Kyle would make similar comments regarding everything we acquired together during the

marriage: “You never lived like this until you married me: you won’t be anything without me!”

Kyle’s attitude became increasingly worse. His ego seemed to control every situation. His constant reminder that I somehow lived a *good life* because of him was growing old. Nothing was really good about our life. It was not genuine. We were frauds. We portrayed a perfect lifestyle and lived in direct opposition to the public image we presented. I was conflicted by our public image. *I knew the real Kyle. The person who constantly disrespected and abused me. I was privy to our truth and burdened by the weight of our deepest, darkest secrets. Was that a good life? Not by my standards.*

I allowed myself to believe that I wasn’t affected by anything he said. Yet, my inaction indicated otherwise. I stayed. I devalued myself. There was no denying that truth.

Once Kyle was in a leadership position, I noticed the same behaviors surface in his career decisions. I became mindful of how he treated his subordinates and his lack of integrity in his professional relationships. He ranked his staff by level of importance and often shunned those he felt were beneath him.

“You’re so fake!” I was yelling again. We were in the middle of another one of many arguments. The argument began when Kyle scolded me about my friendship with the wife of an administrator. Angel lived closed to us on the campus. We would get together for walks in the evenings to debrief on campus activities and events. On this particular evening, I invited her to our home. After a few hours of chatting and letting our children play together, she went home. Within seconds of her departure, Kyle arrived and instantly began screaming at me. “You should be careful who you let come over to this house! You’re so naïve. You don’t understand the political landscape. Every decision is a political decision. I have told you before it is not good for employees of the university or their spouses to be at this house unless it’s for a university event. You have invited Angel into our house and you have no idea I’m about to fire her husband. Your stupid decisions constantly make my job hard! Don’t have anyone over here without asking me first!”

I wasn’t happy that I had to endure another one of Kyle’s paranoid selection processes of determining who our friends should be. According to him, everyone wanted to destroy him so I should only communicate with those people on his approved list. I was very confused because he knew that Angel and I were friends. However, he seemed to be very concerned that she was at our home. I was

disturbed because I had no reason to believe that he was unhappy with the job performance of Angel's husband. Kyle recruited Angel's family to the university. He sold them on his leadership and promised to be a source of support to them. Only a few months had passed and Kyle was ready to terminate him.

I snapped back at Kyle's attempt to scold me. "Why would you want to fire him when you're the reason why he's here? You hired him!" Because he's young was Kyle's response. "He's young and I'm tired of having to micromanage his department. I trusted the advice of a friend when hiring him. In actuality, I shouldn't have given him a chance. He was almost fired from his previous job. He doesn't handle responsibility well. He claims he works late hours but nothing gets done. He's simply not ready for this position. He was advanced too soon and does not fit well with my leadership style. I'm terminating him and moving in a different direction." I became more upset with every word that he said.

Hypocrite! Fraud! My resentment for him was turning to hatred. Had Kyle forgotten that when he applied for his position of this university, he was labeled as being too young? Why didn't he feel an obligation to be a mentor to this administrator rather than talk about him behind his back? I'd watched as Kyle smiled in his face at every possible opportunity. Yet, at the first moment of discord, Kyle was ready to cut him off. It was a disgusting and unprofessional way to handle the situation. Additionally, I wasn't pleased that my friendship with Angel was being dictated by who Kyle felt was important in the moment.

I shouldn't have been surprised because this had become Kyle's pattern of establishing relationships solely based on what the other person could offer him. Kyle created his success by strategically forming the right relationships, essentially being an opportunist. He was extremely judgmental of everyone but found no fault with himself. There was no such thing as constructive criticism when it came to Kyle. He would constantly surround himself with 'yes men,' those who supported his opinions and ideas with little or no criticism in order to obtain his approval. His employees knew that either you agreed with him or you would find yourself on the chopping block at risk of being terminated. It was not uncommon for Kyle to retaliate against his subordinates if they expressed dissent or opposing views.

I was shocked by Kyle's transformation. He made fiscal and managerial decisions that could have easily led to a legal nightmare for him and the university. I wanted to offer guidance to him, particularly with my background in defending lawsuits for another university. I knew that Kyle would need an understanding of all of the rules applicable to higher education law. However, I wouldn't dare caution him when I

felt he was making a mistake. Kyle was not interested in my opinion or advice. He operated the university in the manner in which he felt was best, without fear of any consequence for his actions.

Kyle made the decision to mix university business with personal pleasure. He relocated Olivia, an old girlfriend, to Oklahoma and hired her for an open position at the university. Their history spanned back to their times as undergraduates in college. They later began dating and lived together during their graduate studies.

Kyle did not mention to me that Olivia was a candidate for the position, on campus for an interview, or selected for the job. When I glanced through my university email, I saw the announcement of a new administrator. My jaw dropped. It took me a few minutes to process what I just read. I assured myself Kyle would not be that disrespectful. No one could possibly be that disrespectful. This must be a different person. Although I knew I was correct and the picture displayed in the email message certainly solidified her identity.

I picked up the telephone. I don't remember dialing the numbers to Kyle's office, but I now heard his assistant's voice on the other end of the line: "Office of the President." He was in a meeting. 'Should he be interrupted?' 'Yes, absolutely.' 'Can you state the nature of the call?' 'No. It's personal, very personal.'

"Don't call my office with this bullshit! Yes, Olivia got the job. I don't have to tell you every decision I make on this campus." I'm not interested in *every* decision you make, arrogant asshole! I'm interested in the fact that you hired Olivia on this campus and didn't even give me the courtesy of a heads up. That's a decision I want to know about! I was fuming and Kyle was still screaming into the phone. I abruptly interrupted his rant as I hung up the phone.

That hire was such a blatant form of disrespect that I no longer was excited about supporting Kyle's university efforts. I decided to resign from the campus committees I currently served on. I shifted my focus to my children and my career.

Linda was Kyle's secretary. She shared a very close relationship with Kyle and he often stated it was because she was loyal. For Kyle, that simply meant that Linda was his puppet and responded accordingly. She did exactly as she was told and would lie to cover up any of his wrongdoings.

Linda performed tasks of a personal nature for Kyle. When I made the decision to return to work, she was the person who coordinated his schedule and informed me if Kyle would be available to assist with picking the kids up from school. Both Linda and Kyle treated my communication with them as a privilege or honor they were bestowing upon me. If I needed help with the children, I was told to contact Linda and patiently await a response. If there was any time to squeeze in Kyle's busy, demanding, important life as university president, Linda would let me know. Even if I asked Kyle directly to help with the children while he was in my presence, I was directed to contact Linda for his availability. He was much too busy for such trivial things. Linda would filter my requests and make the final determination.

I was perplexed by the fact that I lived in the same house with a man who was my husband, yet we couldn't even discuss matters concerning our children. It was clear that taking care of the children was solely my job. Kyle's job was to be president and receive accolades. That's where he placed his importance. Receiving constant praise fueled his distorted sense of happiness.

The counselor asked what I felt was the underlying issue at play? I wished I had an answer to her question and an accompanying solution to the problem, but the reality was I did not. I did feel strongly that Kyle was dealing with some deep internal personal struggles. He had a strong desire to constantly make me and others feel inferior to him. He wanted to be needed and he thrived off of control. The more control you gave him, the happier he was. Hitting me and demeaning me was just one of many ways he exercised such control.

I'd tried several ways of dealing with Kyle's erratic and violent behavior- from total support of his professional endeavors to complete withdrawal from Kyle and our relationship. As Kyle began to act invincible, I felt more invisible. I was hoping the counselor could offer some professional guidance.

She listened intently and occasionally scribbled some notes on her notepad. "Narcissists are hard to deal with in a position of power," she whispered, "but I can give you some coping mechanisms."

At a subsequent counseling session, I arrived ready to once again discuss my discontent and frustration. Before I could start down that path, the counselor posed the following questions: "What are you holding onto that you need to release? Are you resentful and angry? Let's shift the focus to you and what you can control. If you feel you deserve better, what actions will you take? You can no longer remain

idle. Your situation will not change unless you change it.” She was advising me that a shift in mindset would be a necessary prerequisite to developing a plan to move forward.

CHAPTER FOUR

Showtime!

“It’s like you’re a character in this book that everyone around you is writing, and suddenly you have to say, ‘I’m sorry, but this role isn’t right for me’. And you have to start writing your own life and doing your own thing.”

~David Levithan

Neither Kyle nor myself were prepared for an unexpected life change. When I became pregnant with our third child, Kyle was furious. He felt it would hinder his ability to continue advancing in his career and that the added responsibility would decrease the level of support I would be able to offer to him.

Knowing that Kyle didn’t want our baby was the point where I lost all hope for our marriage. I was disgusted with the man I had married. I listened as he gave public speeches about being happy for our growing family only to return home to him screaming and yelling at me for being pregnant.

“Another pregnancy was the last thing we needed. You should abort the baby. How can you be any help with fundraising and other university activities if you’re pregnant? You knew this job required frequent travel and donors expect to see both of us. We should be making connections. Instead, you’ll be home sick and pregnant. Since you trapped me by getting pregnant, you’ll be forced to do everything on your own, without any support from me. You knew that I was busy before you decided to keep the baby!”

I was humiliated. Our marriage was broken, but I was still his wife. Who talked to their wife in that manner? What did he mean by saying he was being trapped by a pregnancy? How could he utter the word abortion? I was suffering from depression. In my mind, this was my karma. All of the emotions that I felt years prior when making the decision to have an abortion began to resurface. There was no way I would go through the horrific experience of terminating a pregnancy again.

During one argument, Kyle pushed me down several flights of stairs in our home. When he rushed down to where I'd fallen, I expected some form of care, concern, regret and hopefully even an apology. He responded by saying he hoped the fall would result in me losing the baby.

Kyle had not attended a single doctor's appointment. I drove myself to the hospital that afternoon, told the doctor that I'd slipped and fallen down the stairs and I wanted to make sure the baby had not been harmed. The ultrasound revealed that the baby was doing well. When I left the hospital I said a prayer. Once I made it through this pregnancy, I was leaving Oklahoma. I could not forgive Kyle again.

A few months later, I gave birth to our third child. Not much changed. Kyle began sleeping on the sofa downstairs and I slept in our bedroom upstairs. I don't recall how it happened. I never actually told him to sleep on the sofa, but I made it obvious I didn't want to be near him. There was no intimacy between us. In fact, it was a welcome reward. Whenever Kyle entered our bedroom, I cringed. He was a guest in our bedroom and my actions let him know it.

Occasionally, we still attended university events but they had certainly become limited and we would always arrive separately. It was very awkward. We would sit at a table and make small talk with guests even though we hadn't uttered a word to each other within the home in weeks. A few times, we even answered questions posed to us differently and would have to cover up the reality that we were literally strangers to each other. Kyle knew very little of what was going on in my world and vice versa.

It was homecoming month, one of the busiest and most exciting times on campus. For me, it also meant being obligated to attend homecoming festivities and pretend our marriage wasn't merely a charade. The annual homecoming gala that year was no different. I arrived to the gala an hour after Kyle. He greeted me when I entered and gave me a quick overview of the people who would be seated at our table. As I received my instructions for the night, we casually smiled and waved to guests. We were each doing what we needed to do in order to get through the moment with the least amount of scrutiny. It was standard practice in our business deal of a marriage: Thanks for showing up as my business partner in this venture. Here's a list of key donors. Entertain them well and you'll be compensated. Remember, any other person would love to have your position so you should be honored to be in attendance with me. You should do as I say. Your opinion is whatever I say it is. That's where we were in the relationship at that point. I would remain silent, smile and hope that the time spent together passed quickly.

Things were going smoothly the night of the homecoming gala. We each wore our fake smiles we'd grown accustomed to wearing. We sat together and entertained the university donors in hopes that the end result would be a huge check to the university. I applauded Kyle's efforts as president. He acknowledged my role as a supportive wife. We outlined the strategic plans for the university and our excitement for the future. The conversation was so standard and routine I could say the words in my sleep.

Finally, the gala was over. I was preparing to make a dash to the nearest exit when a photographer requested to take our photo. I kindly refused. I had done my part. I survived the night and played my role extremely well. I could now retreat back to the safety of my bedroom and the comfort of my children.

I had no idea that my refusal to take the photograph made Kyle angry. I had been home for almost two hours before he returned. He entered cursing and screaming. I begged him to calm down for fear that he would wake the children. Kyle refused to lower his voice.

“Crazy bitch! This is my job on the line. I've worked all of my life to be here and I'll be damned if I let you ruin it.”

When I walked away from him, he hit me. “I told you that I would never let you put your hands on me again! This is the last time!” Sadly, it had been the *last time* numerous times before. My threats at this point had little meaning to him. As he continued in his rage, I knew I had to stop him. I called the police department for the city and was informed that because we lived on campus the university police had jurisdiction. I felt hopeless. The university police department reported to Kyle. I didn't need university police to come to our residence for a domestic dispute involving the president! I needed someone from the local police department to respond immediately. The dispatcher apologized for not being able to help me and then transferred the call to the campus police.

Minutes later, the chief of police arrived at the home. It was no surprise that Tom and Kyle were friends. Kyle hired Tom and was his direct supervisor. I was not hopeful that my complaint would be taken serious and my concern was valid. No report was written. Tom parked discreetly on the side of the house in an unmarked vehicle and sat downstairs talking to Kyle for over an hour. They engaged in conversation, laughed and at one point I even heard Kyle offer Tom something to drink. You would have thought we invited Tom over for dinner rather than for a case of domestic violence.

When Tom finally came upstairs to talk to me he did not ask what happened. He clearly was not interested in investigating domestic abuse. He simply stated that Kyle was sorry this happened and it wouldn't happen again. Tom suggested that we both get some rest. He told me that he would make sure word of this incident did not get out in the community. In his opinion, that was the last thing we needed.

I'd certainly heard that line before. *We didn't need other people in our marital affairs.* I was terrified. Kyle showed no remorse after any incidents of abuse and each instance was getting progressively worse. I knew that he would be physically abusive again after being assured that the university police chief would ignore my plea for help. Kyle operated as if it validated what he'd told me all along: you are here because of me. You will either do what I say or be destroyed.

Our next encounter with the university police department was a result of my plan to separate from Kyle and leave the university residence. I was hopeful that a long overdue conversation with Kyle would be a positive step toward resolution of our problems. I calmly spoke with Kyle about the fact that I was unhappy and had been unhappy for quite some time. I explained that I could not continue to allow him to hit me and that his actions of abuse were destroying me. I was also concerned for the kids. Even though they were young I didn't want them to grow up thinking that abusive behavior was okay. I planned to take the children with me to stay with family in Louisiana and give our marriage a break. Maybe the time apart would be good for both of us.

Kyle interrupted me: "You will not take the children anywhere! Is this your way of getting back at me? No one will believe anything you say about me. I will not let you make a fool out of me." It was clear that I would not get through to him. Every issue revolved around how it would make him look publicly. My attempts at communication with him failed.

As I tried to get our youngest child from Kyle he shoved me onto the living room floor. I remained on the floor and began crying uncontrollably. I kept telling myself to get up and get the children. It's time to leave. I realized that as a result of my screaming, the baby was also crying. I gathered the strength to comfort the baby, but not before I heard Kyle on the phone with Tom. "Come over here. She's acting crazy and threatening to leave me."

Tom became personally invested in our marital problems. Kyle directed Tom to follow me around on campus and report back as to anyone I was meeting with or talking to. Tom and other campus police officers issued verbal threats to me. It

became a horrific nightmare. In Kyle's opinion his job was now in jeopardy, I was the enemy, and they should treat me as such.

I grew weary of defending myself and our marriage. Kyle's goal was to make me feel broken and helpless so that I had no choice but to allow the control to continue.

I was gaining strength at my weakest point. I didn't even know that was possible. It's true that your purpose can be manifested through your pain.

*You've covered your face with a heterosexual mask,
buried your homophobic truth in
infidelity, insecurity and lies;
masking who you are to conform
to who the world wants you to be;
You chose to surround me only with those
who held titles befitting enough to be in your presence.
To simply be silent and controlled
was your desire for me.
You failed to comprehend
that you can neither control that
which you do not own,
nor demand submission without
being deserving of it.
The lack of respect ran deep both ways.
I viewed you as an animal that would
devour anything in its path.
Your perspective of me was less than,
subordinate to and unworthy of...
You boasted often of the joy you stole from
your previous wife, viewing yourself as superior
while she remained inferior; yet you call yourself a man.
I could no longer view you as such.
A little boy you are, trapped inside a man's body.
An adult by way of age only,
searching for wholeness.
Your Catholic upbringing masks
family secrets and dark stories,
rooted so deep that you're
unsure of your own truth.*

*I couldn't be unapologetically me
because we were too busy
being un-authentically you.
I was crazy because I was a part of you,
Intertwined yet unaware that
your crazy was now me.
I laid with you, I stood beside you,
I cried for you when you were too
arrogant to cry for your damn self...
My heart let go of crazy.
What I once was I am no more.*

“Crazy?! No, I’m not crazy! I married crazy!” That was his new term of affection for me. Anytime I acted contrary to his wishes surely I must be crazy. If I didn’t engage in the right conversations, I was crazy. If I asked him to assist me in caring for the kids, I clearly didn’t understand the demands of his job as a university president and was therefore, crazy. Our world had evolved into a mass hysteria of positions, titles, money and image. It’s often said that not everyone can handle power. Kyle proved this to be true.

I’d been coping for the last year and a half but recognized that our life was a performance. When it was show time, I was on and did what I felt were my wifely duties to show extreme support. My part in Kyle’s show was now over. He didn’t respect me as his wife, so I would not behave as such. It was evident to those closest to us that a break up was on the horizon. I’m not sure if he noticed because he was very busy in his position, or at least enjoying the title of the position. ‘Mr. President.’ He was basking in its superficial glow.

There was talk of marital affairs and campus constituencies approached me constantly in that regard. At this point, infidelity was the least of my concerns: physical intimacy had not been a priority for several months. However, when the opportunity for retaliation presented itself, I quickly stepped up to the plate. The campus wanted to know if there was any truth to Kyle dating an administrator. Was Olivia really his new mistress? I responded factually and affirmatively. Hurt people hurt people. I was slowly becoming the person who had hurt me.

“I fucking hate you! I had a member of my governing board to ask me about this bullshit! Do you understand how serious that is? Do you not realize this job provides for you? You are here because of me!”

Blah, I had heard it all numerous times before. With each affirmation of his despicable of me, the words had less of an impact. It was late and I was tired. I had been asleep when Kyle burst into the bedroom. It startled me and I wondered why he was even there. I didn't have the energy for an argument. Please just go back to the sofa where you've been sleeping, I thought. As he cursed at me I sat up, looked him directly in his eyes and calmly said, "Stop screaming. I don't care about you. As a matter of fact, I hate you too! You have completely ruined my life. Now, please shut the door on your way out."

CHAPTER FIVE

Homophobia

Merriam Webster dictionary defines homophobia as an irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuality or homosexuals. The person who exhibits this behavior is referred to as a homophobe.

I grew up in the south: in a small town in the state of Louisiana. Being gay was not generally accepted. Prayer was the answer to everything in our Baptist church community. The notion was that if someone somehow mistakenly thought they were homosexual, the church could rally around the person and pray it out of them. To avoid the embarrassment, a person could choose to remain 'in the closet'. This culture of being ashamed to express your sexuality was pervasive within African American families. It pained me to see people pretend they were heterosexual when they were home with family, and live a different lifestyle when they were with their friends. The lack of authenticity was troubling to me.

"I don't want gay men around me! I don't have a problem with them being gay, but I can't be friends with someone who is gay. They can't be around me and be gay," Kyle stated proudly. This rant about gay men came out of nowhere. I had a friend visiting that weekend who openly identified as being homosexual. I took Kyle's words as an attack on my friend. However, Kyle's comment about gay men was deeper than this surface level conversation. Rather than condemning the gay community because their beliefs were different from his, it seemed he was instead defending himself. Kyle wanted me to be clear that he wasn't gay and never would be gay, which was odd because I never questioned his sexuality. Things later took

an interesting turn when homophobia surfaced in the place that I least expected... our marriage.

I was scheduled to be out of town for the entire day to attend meetings. I returned home earlier than expected. As I entered the home, I noticed Kyle's suit coat jacket draped over a chair in the entryway. That was strange. He was hardly ever home and certainly not during the middle of the day. I slowly took off my shoes and left them by the front door. I didn't want the sound of my high heels hitting the floor to alert anyone to the fact that I was there. Our bedroom area was upstairs. You could either take the stairway or the elevator. I knew that I couldn't take the elevator because the noise as it opened would also let him know I was home. I was convinced that an act of infidelity was taking place.

I rushed up the stairs as quickly and quietly as I could only to find that the door to the stairwell was locked. My heart was racing and I was becoming increasingly upset. Surely Kyle would not have a woman in my home and in my bedroom! It was definitely *my* bedroom because he hadn't slept there in almost a year. I was sure that Kyle was cheating on me.

Breathe, relax and calm down! That's what I had to do to think clearly. I realized I was still holding my keys in my hand, which included the key to unlock the door to the stairway. I turned it slowly and began walking down the hall to a closed bedroom door. I swung the door open so hard it hit the wall as I stormed into the bedroom. It was empty. I checked the bathroom. No one was there. I searched all of the bedrooms upstairs and even the closets. They were all empty. I sat down on the edge of the bed. I'd gotten myself upset over nothing. Kyle constantly told me I was insecure. Maybe he was right. I needed to pull it together.

I took the elevator down to get my purse, shoes and other items I had hurriedly dropped at the door. When the elevator chimed on the first level and I walked off, I saw Kyle. Apparently, he heard the noise of the elevator and walked out of the living room. He seemed disheveled and very surprised to see me. When I inquired as to why he was home midday, he quickly stated that he stopped by while walking to a campus meeting because he needed to get some papers from his home office. As he was explaining this, Bryan walked out of the living room as well. Now I was a bit confused. *Why was Bryan here?*

I glanced at them both with a puzzled look. Bryan worked on the campus. He was also a family friend that we'd known for years so it wasn't particularly shocking to

see him at our home. What was odd about the situation was the fact that I had walked past the office, by the living room, and through the entire downstairs area to rush upstairs just a few minutes earlier. I hadn't heard any conversation or noticed anything that would indicate they were working. There weren't any lights on downstairs. I didn't feel there was a reason to doubt what they said, yet their explanation didn't make sense to me.

I wished them well on the rest of their day and rushed back upstairs to change clothes. It would be almost a year later before I would reflect on this day again and understand exactly why something was not quite right about that brief encounter.

Kyle was raised Catholic. I on the other hand had never stepped foot inside a Catholic church until I met him. One of our conversations while dating was that I didn't want to attend a Catholic church; I desired to continue going to Baptist churches. Kyle wasn't attending any church regularly and was amenable to joining me at a local Baptist church. He later stated that although he was raised Catholic, he didn't like the Catholic Church and felt they covered up a lot of issues. It was a moment of vulnerability. I sensed that he didn't want to discuss what caused him to denounce his Catholic upbringing as he never told me what the issue was. However, when he visited family, Kyle eagerly participated in all of the Catholic rituals. On one occasion, I inquired as to whether his disdain for the Catholic religion had anything to do with the allegations regarding sex abuse scandals. Kyle neither answered nor mentioned the Catholic Church again.

Another source of vulnerability for Kyle relating to his childhood was his family. Kyle's father had been an alcoholic, which caused tension within his parents' marriage. His parents often slept in different bedrooms and he rarely saw them show affection towards each other.

I often wondered if that perception of marriage is why Kyle failed at marriages. Initially, I truly believed that Kyle wanted our marriage to work. But when conflict arose, he resorted back to what he had been shown by his own parents: division can run deep behind closed doors, as long as there's never a sign of it publicly.

Early in our marriage, I foolishly thought I could change him. As years passed, I hoped the children would change him. In hindsight, I now realize that family was never his priority however being seen as 'family-oriented' was important. He pulled the family out for special occasions to add a special touch when needed. Our job

had been solely to make Kyle shine. After that moment, we were put back on the shelf until needed again in some capacity.

Until you love who you are, you are incapable of loving someone else. It was a lesson we both had to learn. There was a struggle inside of him as to whether he wanted to be romantically involved with a woman. Internally, he was miserable because he was not being true to himself.

“Do you know your husband likes men?” I couldn’t believe I was being asked that question. I wasn’t sure how much credence to give to the words. It was quite bold for someone to approach me with these outlandish allegations. I carefully responded, “Kyle absolutely does not like men. Bryan is a family friend and we’ve known him for a few years.” I decided I would not tolerate or entertain any negative conversation regardless of how I felt about Kyle.

However, I soon noticed that the disturbing signs many were whispering about became more prevalent. Kyle increasingly spent more time with Bryan and awarded him a job promotion. When they weren’t physically together they were talking on the phone or texting. This was a very low blow. I couldn’t determine what was worse, being cheated on by your spouse with a woman or a man? The thought of either made me sick to my stomach.

A few months later, we traveled to Las Vegas for an alumni conference hosted by the university. I was eager to make the trip to visit friends and family who lived in the area. We hadn’t discussed what the sleeping arrangements would be once we arrived. The university booked a single hotel room for us. I was fine with us staying in the room together but Kyle wasn’t interested in my presence there. He assumed I would stay with family, however I did not. When I returned to the hotel room the first evening of our trip, Kyle immediately left. He didn’t take the key to the rental car we were using. He also didn’t take any personal belongings.

I showered and prepared for bed assuming he had possibly gone downstairs to the casino. When the alarm clock buzzed the following morning, I noticed Kyle was not in the room. It was unlikely he would still be at the casino. He’d slept somewhere else.

When Kyle returned to the hotel room later that morning, I approached him for the first time about whether he was seeing a man in general and particularly whether

he stayed with Bryan who was also there attending the conference. Kyle laughed and questioned why it mattered to me. He was right. I wasn't asking because I truly cared about anything Kyle was involved in. I only wanted to make myself feel better. The reality was nothing Kyle said would have done that for me. He was guilty of living a secret life. I was guilty of checking out of the marriage long before this particular issue arose. The trust between us had been severely eroded. Kyle certainly wasn't going to share information about his personal lifestyle now. I couldn't necessarily blame him. It was pointless to seek answers from him. One thing was clear: neither of us was happy yet we constantly pretended that we were. It was a sad situation for us both.

CHAPTER SIX

Breaking Point

You can put all of your effort in
 trying to make someone happy...
 But there comes a time when we become tired
 of trying to fill a bucket that is leaking from the inside.
 ~ Steve Maraboli

The alarm on my cell phone was buzzing furiously. I'd hit snooze at least three times already. I slowly opened my eyes hoping that the room would still be filled with darkness. It was not. The room was bright from the morning rays of sunshine. Great, I thought sarcastically. I knew being alive was a blessing, but I couldn't help thinking death would be an easier alternative. I was emotionally drained and operating from a very deep, dark place. Another morning meant another day to deal with the mess that was my life.

"I didn't know that by marrying Kyle I would be relinquishing part of who I was. I was consumed with anger. I began to regret the day I met him. I longed for true happiness, not merely a carefully orchestrated portrayal of a happy lifestyle. I stayed with a man who loved his public image more than he could ever love me or our children. I sacrificed parts of my life, my career, my friendships and my relationships with family members only to be humiliated, lied on and to, intimidated and abused. There were days I questioned whether I could continue to endure. It's easy to mask the pain, hurt, and abuse from others. It's nearly impossible to hide it from yourself. I know that Kyle won't continue to enjoy his fraudulent public

image, his empty soul. Eventually, the spotlight will shine bright on him. It is, after all, his favorite place to be - in the spotlight - at anyone else's expense."

Kyle and I were separated; I no longer lived on campus. Yet the control and manipulation continued post separation. It was quickly becoming a grueling and stressful ordeal.

The university's governing board was made aware of the domestic abuse by Kyle and the fact that campus police officers were being used as Kyle's private security detail. Despite my complaint, no investigation occurred. The inaction by the governing board to any of the complaints allowed the harassment to continue. It was as if there was an implicit stamp of approval of Kyle's actions, which served to silence my complaints and fueled the destructive behavior.

Kyle initiated a process intended to take our children from me. He began with allegations that I was an unfit mother and stated he was concerned for the children's safety when they were in my care. During the court process, Kyle testified that he had been the primary caregiver for the children for all of their lives. I wondered what he was thinking. Surely he had to be consumed with guilt for the lies he told. Did he have a conscience? I knew Kyle loved our children but he was not the primary caregiver for them. His work schedule as president didn't even allow for him to have the flexibility he was claiming to have. It was disheartening to watch him use our children in his campaign to bolster his image. Little concern was given to how his actions affected the children. The center of the story was all about Kyle as it had always been.

His secretary, Linda, testified in court that Kyle blocked his schedule every day to pick up the children and that this was a practice he had adhered to for many years. A university daycare worker collaborated the fabrication with her testimony that I was rarely present at the daycare to pick up the children neither was I actively involved in their lives. Kyle's oldest children offered testimony that during his previous divorce, Kyle maintained a wonderful relationship with his ex-wife and was a devoted father. The lies were bold and apparent and having to endure the attacks to my character was painful. It was a continued use of manipulation, except this time my children were at the center of the debate.

It became increasingly difficult during the proceedings to listen to complete strangers with opinions about what they felt was in the best interest of the children.

Children they had never met; children they did not know; children they did not care about; *children they did not carry in their womb.*

I wasn't at liberty to voice my opinion on the welfare of my own children. My thoughts were met with opposition. My intelligence was viewed as a threat. Who was I to think that I knew what a legal standard was or to be bold enough to assert legal protections and rights? I was a young, African American woman who should be happy to have a working husband living a comfortable lifestyle. I was livid at the mindset they were displaying, especially when it coincided with everything Kyle had said through our entire marriage.

Meanwhile, Kyle was using politics to his advantage. He befriended a local judge to aid in his quest for custody of the children. He did not want me to be a part of the children's lives. At that point, I did not care if Kyle even had a life. I told my family, the day Kyle died would be the happiest day of my life. I didn't even think I could be that lucky.

To maintain my sense of sanity, I focused on the children. I felt horrible for them. I tried hard not to let my frustrations show in their presence. They didn't deserve to experience what was happening around them.

My oldest son was forced to change schools to attend a location that was more convenient and accommodating to Kyle's schedule. The night before my son was to start his new school, I walked into his room to find him holding a picture his previous teacher had given him. I put the picture in a frame and placed it on his dresser. We talked about the change of schools and I assured him that he would meet new friends. I thought I had put his mind at ease when I left his bedroom, but when I checked on him a few minutes later he was holding his teacher's picture, crying. I tried hard to fight back the tears. I tried harder not to reveal my anger. I was extremely worried about him. *'What is on his mind? Is he anxious, nervous, afraid?'*

The children would go through many difficult changes from separation counseling to adjusting to various visitation schedules. I observed behavioral changes and feelings of sadness, guilt and resentment. I was constantly told that kids are resilient and they will be okay. None of that advice brought comfort as I watched the affect our problems were having on my children.

Time and time again, I went through varied emotions- from actively seeking forgiveness and peace to furiously wanting to hurt the person responsible for my pain and the pain of my children.

Anger! I had protective gear over my eyes and my ears were covered to muffle the sounds. I slowly lifted the gun and aimed at the target. The first shot startled me. I'd never shot a gun before. I stopped to catch my breath. At this point, I realized my eyes were closed. The instructor at the shooting range calmly asked me if I was okay. I took another deep breath, nodded my head yes and aimed again. I was there to increase my comfort level with shooting a gun. To aid me, I imagined Kyle as the moving target.

I was so mad I could kill him! I replayed that thought over and over in my mind. There were days that turned to weeks where I told myself killing Kyle would make me feel better and I even began the process of justifying it to myself.

One night, I had a nightmare that awoke me in a frenzy. I'd seen a vision of my children suffering. Up until this point, the only vision I had was me killing Kyle and the overwhelming feeling of satisfaction that followed. I envisioned it repeatedly. In most versions of the dream, Kyle begged me for mercy and I still pulled the trigger. But in this particular dream, I saw a different reality. I pulled the trigger and Kyle fell into a pool of blood. I didn't feel the sense of satisfaction and relief I'd imagined. As I turned around, I saw my children looking at me in disbelief. They began screaming, "Why did you hurt our dad?" Before I could sort through what happened, police were everywhere. Strangers grabbed my children and took them away from me. I had done all of this *for* my children. Now they were being taken from me. "Please don't take my children," I pleaded before I woke up.

The bathroom. That's where I was. I wasn't aware of how long I had been there. My heart was racing even though I was sitting still. I had extreme chest pains and shortness of breath. My head was pounding and I was dizzy. I could not stand. I didn't have my cell phone. I was home alone. I needed to talk to someone and let them know what was going on. Where is my cell phone? Am I dying? *Would it be better to die?*

I felt horrible. It was a recurring sequence of being unable to catch my breath, feeling dizzy, experiencing chest pains, profusely sweating and being afraid of

what was happening. I called one of my friends and explained the situation. Something isn't right. I don't feel right. What's going on here?

"You need to see a doctor," she said. I wasn't convinced that I needed to see a doctor. I felt fine most days and even that moment of panic lasted for only a few minutes. But it was still a scary feeling and I had no clue what triggered it. I reluctantly heeded her advice and scheduled an appointment. I learned I had experienced an anxiety attack.

My breaking point had come. Dealing with the emotions proved to be just as hard as enduring what happened. I could not simply move on and think that things would miraculously fall into place. I had to dig deep and examine the decisions I'd made as well as the consequences of those choices.

I wondered why I remained in the marriage for so many years. It was time that I could never regain. I had to deal with guilt and own my part in the failure of this relationship. When things went from good to bad, I hadn't demanded that we correct it. I ignored abusive behavior. I didn't do either of us a favor in my decision to remain silent about domestic abuse.

I decided to be completely honest with myself and examine whether I ever loved Kyle. Did I even know what love was? Most importantly, did I love myself? I had to look myself in the mirror and say that the answer was no. I neither loved myself nor was I ever in love with him. I didn't even know who Kyle really was. I rushed into marriage and ignored signs that could have saved me heartache later. I allowed things to happen to me that were disrespectful, yet I participated in covering up the problem. I didn't love Kyle. I loved our lifestyle. I loved my idea of a family for us. I'd lost myself.

I went into a deliberate retreat. I only spoke on the telephone to select friends that I trusted. It was a period where I realized who was really in my corner. This would be a tough road and I needed people around me who were true and genuine.

There were days where I couldn't do it alone, days when I didn't want to move forward. Fortunately, there remained a constant burning flame inside me that would never let me quit: my love for my children. I promised them I would never fail them. I would never give up on them. My love for them would be my strength.

My cell phone was ringing. I didn't want to answer the phone but I knew I should. It was one of my closest friends. To not answer meant that he would be worried about me. So, I slowly gathered the strength to say hello.

"Get up. Fight! Your children love you. Your friends and your family love you. I love you. God loves you. You have all the support you need. You can't give up. I need a favor from you..."

A favor? I'm going through one of the most horrific life experiences ever and you need a favor? "Okay sure, tell me what you need," I responded, contrary to what I was actually thinking. "I need you to walk to your front door, open it and look outside. The sun is shining. The birds are chirping. You are able to experience it because you are alive and you are well. You are extremely blessed. Now, go look in the mirror. You are beautiful. You are a Queen. You possess everything you need to get through this, and you will."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Full Circle

The most common way women give up their power
is by thinking they don't have any.
~ Alice Walker

This year would mark the first Christmas holiday the children would celebrate without both of their parents. I needed to make the holidays extremely special in hopes that the children wouldn't recognize that anything was different. It was a ridiculous thought for me to have because everything was indeed different.

I decided we would spend Christmas in Louisiana with my family. When we arrived, everyone was excited to see the children. The children were equally ecstatic about the opportunity to spend time with their grandparents. Their grandmother instantly went into overdrive making sure the holiday was memorable. They played games, baked holiday treats and enjoyed the time with their young cousins. Seeing my children running through my parent's home reminded me of my youth. The children were surrounded by love and they felt it, so they exuded love in return.

The icing on the cake was when the boys realized they each had their own Christmas tree for gifts. Three miniature trees almost proportionate to their height

surrounded the large family Christmas tree. They thought this was the absolute best idea ever. It was beautiful to experience those moments.

We were in a small town in north Louisiana approximately an hour from the Louisiana-Arkansas border. We joked during our childhood that if you drove through too fast you might actually miss it! There are no red lights and very few stop signs. It's full of countryside roads with familiar twists and turns. I couldn't keep a signal on my cell phone which limited telephone communication and wireless internet was nonexistent. None of that mattered to the residents there. You became aware of the strong sense of community from the moment you arrived. It was a safe place; one where genuine concern for others was evident in every encounter. Residents would give their last to help someone in need. The entire community was family to me.

This trip home presented the opportunity to retreat from the craziness that was going on in my world and come back full circle to my childhood home... a return to my roots of sorts.

Our joy was cut short the weekend following the Christmas holiday when illness struck our family. The next few days would be spent at a hospital with my uncle as he fought for his life. He was diagnosed with cancer and his condition was critical. The doctors had no plan for treatment other than to keep him as comfortable as possible.

We were blessed to see a new year. Yet, as I sat in the hospital room, I found it hard to focus on anything positive. I was reminded of how quickly things change. It seemed totally unfair. Everyone was together laughing just a few days ago at our traditional family game night. Now the smiles had vanished; in their place were signs of worry and concern. We avoided eye contact with each other in an effort to hold back tears. We were all praying for a miracle.

It was very hard to watch my uncle's health rapidly decline. Miraculously, he remained in good spirits, continuing to offer wisdom even through his pain. During his most difficult moments, he didn't give up. He quoted bible verses and engaged in fervent prayer. I was amazed at his strength and his faith. I listened intently as he told us to enjoy life and never take anything for granted. He shared with us the importance of leaving a legacy for our children. "Live prayerfully," he whispered, "for you never know which day will be your last."

Each day we gathered around his hospital bed to pray. To break the dismal mood, one evening we began to reminisce about my paternal grandfather. He was the ultimate patriarch of our family. We all admired and respected him. He was loving, but also brutally honest. As a result, we knew he said what he meant and meant what he said. He absolutely loved his family. He was the best and only grandfather that I'd ever known in my life.

When my grandfather died, our family was devastated. Not only did we miss him, but we also missed the family traditions that had become a part of our lives through him. An opportunity to reflect and share stories of my grandfather would instantly put a smile on our faces. My grandfather could neither read nor write, but often joked that he could definitely count his money. He raised a large family and was known to always have some sort of business venture going. He was an entrepreneur in every sense of the word, without any formal education or training. He possessed an unrivaled work ethic and passed that trait along to his children. As a result, they exemplified the core values that were now the foundation of our family. They showed respect and empathy for others. They were supportive. Their love was genuine. They were authentic.

It had been four years since my grandfather passed away. I could sense his calming presence among all of us. There was a message during those moments that resounded clearly to me. I absolutely could not give up. I could neither let my circumstances define me nor force me to hold on to bitterness. Focusing on the negative experiences would only rob me of my purpose and hinder me from discovering the true happiness I deserved.

My uncle's untimely death served as another opportunity to place things into perspective. I instantly missed his smile, his jokes and having his support. He never failed to express the utmost joy and excitement for every accomplishment I made throughout my life. He was there for each of my milestones. He'd also officiated my wedding ceremony. When he later learned I was experiencing marital discord, he prayed with me and for me. I found comfort in his words to me during the difficult season in his life: "God equips you with everything you need. You must remain faithful and true to his word. He never promised it would be easy but he will never leave you nor forsake you. God takes care of his children."

An inner examination of the core of who you are can be critical. It was time to shift gears. I was going through a storm. It was the hardest thing I'd ever had to endure to date. How I navigated the storm would determine my happiness. All of my experiences, whether just or unfair, were a part of who I was.

The return to my Louisiana roots was a necessary and timely experience. I owned the decision to be happy and operate in my unapologetic truth. Strength perseverance and faith were a byproduct of my bloodline. My family was not composed of quitters. They stood firm in their beliefs and stayed true to who they were. That was the legacy I desired to pass on to my children.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Moving Forward, Authentically

Authenticity is not something we have or don't have.
 It's a practice - a conscious choice of how we want to live.
 Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day.
 It's about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest.
 The choice to let our true selves be seen.
 - Brene Brown

“You should download the Countdown app on your cell phone! Let’s track how many days you have until this ugly divorce is final!” My friend was going through this ordeal with me. For months she’d been accepting telephone calls from me when I was angry, consoling me when I was sad and helping me to cope with the effects the separation was having on the children. “Ok, I’ll download the app,” I replied. That’s how the countdown began. When I first installed the app, the court date was over two hundred days away, which seemed like an eternity. Now, there were only fourteen days remaining until the divorce would be final. I was anxious to have this behind me.

I was home alone when I received notice that custody of the children was awarded to Kyle. That was the determination of the court. The room went black. It was surreal. It was a major setback that I had not anticipated. It felt like another death; it was indeed a loss that no mother should have to endure. After days of weeping and being in a state of despair, the anger resurfaced. It was apparent that Kyle used lies to gain custody of the children and I would never get past that.

“If he has the power to make you angry, he controls you.”

I didn’t want to accept those words. Of course Kyle doesn’t control me, I hate him! There was no way I would allow myself to believe that he controlled my emotions,

but it was true. I needed to change my course of action to avoid another vicious cycle of anger, frustration and sadness. I couldn't risk going down that path again.

I am a great mother. I never imagined I could lose custody of my children. I had reached another roadblock on my journey to happiness. The court's decision would serve as the ultimate test of my faith.

Calmness finally came from knowing my truth and not wavering in it. I'd been the person responsible for the children. It was my truth. My children knew that and so did everyone else around us. I had to find the strength to walk in my own truth undeterred by Kyle's attempts to discredit me.

I shifted the focus from how bad of a person I felt Kyle was and concentrated on the type of person I desired to be. I would never succeed focusing my attention on people and things that were beyond my control. My energy was much better served by being dedicated to myself and my children. How would I find the courage to continue the custody battle through to the end?

I immediately replaced worry with faith and began to regroup to determine what the next steps would be. The legal process would continue to play itself out. More documents would be filed and appeals would take place. It would be a long process. However, I could not afford to wait until the process was over to find peace.

Paramount was the desire to be authentically happy. It became a daily mantra. *You will be happy regardless of how people feel about you. You will be happy regardless of what anyone does to try to hurt you. You will be happy regardless of what the courts decide. It all starts with you.*

Moving forward is difficult within itself. Moving forward authentically is even harder. How do you begin to pick up the pieces and not be ashamed of your story? What does it mean to live authentically? Everyone has a story but not everyone will feel compelled to share their story with the world. We should neither be held hostage by our story nor let anyone silence our voice. I'd allowed both to happen and I was determined to reverse it.

I set aside time for self-care, reflection and meditation just as I had done during my visit to Louisiana. For years, I operated in dysfunction and thought it was completely normal. It wasn't until I got out of the toxic situation that I realized how damaging it had been.

I processed the additional agony that was a source of my bitterness. I had discounted the impact of infidelity, homosexuality and other disrespectful acts. The constant lies and deceit all played a part in me doubting my worth and thinking I wasn't good enough. I had to let go of embarrassment and understand that Kyle's actions were not a reflection on me.

I had not attended to the emotional trauma I felt during my pregnancy and the condescending rants I endured; the sacrifices I made that went unnoticed throughout the marriage; the admission that I felt betrayed beyond the divorce itself by friends and family members who took for granted the magnitude of their actions on the entire experience.

Every experience- whether good or bad- was relevant and deserved my attention. As the saying goes, "I had to face it to fix it." So, I sorted through all of the pieces of my life in an attempt to learn the lesson from each.

I started an intentional process of rebuilding my self-esteem and developed an attitude of gratitude. As a result of focusing on the positive things in my life, I began to realize that what I once thought were dire circumstances weren't that paramount at all. I had been oblivious to many blessings because I was focused on one subset of my life. Changing my mindset ultimately saved my life and helped me to move forward, authentically.

The Forgiveness Journey...

There was anger lingering in my spirit that I failed to acknowledge. To cultivate meaningful relationships and, most importantly, to love myself, I had to forgive. Forgiveness of others was also necessary to engage in intentional, purposeful healing. It would be a difficult process and there were days where I wasn't sure I was up to the task. However, I had to seek forgiveness or risk being destroyed by the anger in my heart. I began by taking the first step, for I realized that the forgiveness journey was where I would elevate into the beauty of who I was designed to be.

EPILOGUE

So You've Been Abused...

“You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, ‘I have lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.’ You must do the thing you think you cannot do.” ~ Eleanor Roosevelt

There is a reluctance to shed light on the issue of domestic violence against women by men in positions of power and influence. Those affected by this growing epidemic of domestic violence are desperately trying to comprehend how men are able to insulate themselves from any semblance of accountability. Women who date or marry men in positions of power who are physically, mentally and/or financially abusive often experience further humiliation during separation or divorce. More often than not, they end up voiceless, powerless and hopeless.

CEOs, doctors, lawyers, law enforcement officers and higher education administrators are just a few of the male-rich occupations that seem to be protected from any consequences for their abusive actions against their wives, fiancés, and girlfriends. These women find themselves as losing players in very public separations and divorces. They are often subjected to harassment and other forms of intimidation. Their voices are silenced with threats of retaliation, minimal spousal support is paid, and in some cases, custodial custody of their children is taken. Efforts to reach out to the proper authorities fail, and they are stonewalled and left to fend for themselves.

The lack of an investigation into substantiated abuse ends with an implicit stamp of approval from those who should be objective and fair, but who are more concerned with protecting the organization for which the abuser is employed or the image of the abuser. Because of his title, position and associations, the abuser is free to continue his destructive pattern of behavior without fear of retribution from his employer, law enforcement or the justice system.

As an attorney with over a decade of experience, I am committed to the legal system being fair and just. It must be the voice for the woman who is voiceless against a man deemed to have privilege and power. Unfortunately, the law does not always provide remedies and protection. When a legal system ceases to hear both sides of the domestic abuse story and fails to make fair and objective decisions irrespective of a man's power, position and associations, it ceases to be a legal system. Instead, it becomes a fraternity of powerful individuals – and in most cases, men – that upholds the wrongdoings of one of its revered members.

I'm passionate about this topic because I have witnessed firsthand the victimization associated with domestic abuse and the struggles women face. When I refused to leave a harmful situation, I became guilty of accommodating abuse. I erroneously believed that I was stronger by staying in an abusive relationship: *I was not a quitter; I was a 'strong black woman' dealing with a bad situation and persevering.* Admitting that I had been hit, verbally abused, and manipulated would require an admission that I had been less than transparent. It would mean facing my truth and examining why I failed to honor my worth.

As a result of my experiences, I truly understand that purpose can be manifested through pain. I realize how blessed I am to have gone through these emotionally trying situations without losing my sanity. I am thankful for life, healing and growth. I am no longer ashamed of an untold story. Similarly, you should never be deterred by the fact that your truth might make someone else uncomfortable.

Do not endure incidents of domestic abuse in silence. These situations could easily turn fatal. Seek the counsel of experienced professionals. Contact appropriate law enforcement agencies. Ensure your safety and exit immediately.

Finally, do not let what you have gone through define you. *Grow* through your experiences and always remain true to your authentic self.

“The empowered woman is powerful beyond measure and beautiful beyond description.” ~Steve Maraboli

AUTHENTIC
ME PART II
THE FORGIVENESS
JOURNEY



TIFFANY HILL

AUTHENTIC ME: The Forgiveness Journey

INTRODUCTION

There are many of us who have experienced the unimaginable. The unthinkable. The thing that we dare not discuss openly for fear of what others might say or feel. This reality undoubtedly leads to harboring unpleasant feelings that we should have released long ago. For me, it was the pain of domestic abuse. A subsequent divorce. Fighting a custody battle for my children. All coupled with not quite knowing how to pick up all of the pieces and move forward.

What remained a common question for me was after you've gone through one of life's storms and even come through on the other side, how do you handle the residual emotions? They don't just miraculously go away. Therefore, you must be intentional about processing what happened and why it happened.

Journaling has always proven to be an effective method for me to process my experiences. *The Forgiveness Journey* workbook demonstrates journaling as an opportunity to document your feelings along your unique journey, while keeping in mind that there is no perfect path. You should allow time for reflective thought as you complete each journal entry. Going through the process itself is where the growth occurs. The goal of this workbook is to gain a deeper understanding of who you are in an effort to move beyond the pain of your experiences into your authentic purpose.

*“The forgiveness journey was where I would elevate
 into the beauty of who I was designed to be.”*

I expected change to happen overnight notwithstanding the fact that the pain from which I was healing had occurred over several years. When I thought I'd reached the point of forgiveness, something would happen to propel me back onto the path of anger, guilt and frustration. How would I ever become emotionally free? What exactly does the forgiveness journey look like? Somewhere in the midst of all of those unanswered questions I was reminded to breathe and truly own the space I was in. *It was my journey. I could no longer be overwhelmed by it. I gave myself permission to live it.*

PART ONE

I Do Solemnly Swear

*I do solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing
but the truth so help me God.*

I'd started the process of rebuilding my life after divorce. Yet it seemed that every time I took one step forward there was yet another court filing by Kyle that would attempt to take me two steps backward. My friends often joked that in a time of heightened racial tensions, police brutality and senseless killings seemingly aimed at African Americans, Kyle was the only Black male willingly signing himself up for court. For me, there was little humor to be found in the acceptance that this was indeed my current reality.

The constant back and forth process left me with several unanswered questions: I do solemnly swear what? To maintain my sanity and not show my frustration? I do solemnly swear to maintain hope that the court system will eventually recognize and understand the controlling behavior of my abusive ex-spouse in particular and domestic abuse in general? What exactly did justice entail?

I certainly wasn't confident in the family law legal structure as the proceedings showed little resemblance of fairness or justice. I left each court hearing feeling completely drained and upset that once again my time had been wasted and the resources of countless others. The aura of the courtroom even seemed to linger on the clothes that I wore long after the court hearings were over. The small, damp, dark courtroom represented an effort to dim my light as it was fighting to shine bright.

There were several proceedings going on at once. Kyle filed a defamation action in an attempt to thwart my efforts to become a published author. He employed a law firm from New York city to send communications to various groups, ranging from civic organizations I was part of to professional connections, urging them not to support any launches of my book, *Authentic Me*, or related products.

I'd been involved with Kyle long enough to know he felt he was larger than life yet it wasn't until I received the defamation lawsuit that I realized he incorrectly assumed he was also beyond the reach of freedom of speech. I likened his protest against my book project to a toddler screaming, "She's talking about me and I don't like it! Make her stop!" Fortunately, freedom of speech doesn't work that way.

The irony of it all was interesting and reminded me of my late grandfather's teaching on the issue of guilt: "When someone is wrong, they'll know it. And you don't have to do anything to reveal it; they'll do that all by themselves." Armed with this knowledge, I filed Kyle's related whining over my book project as an admission of guilt and declined to give it any further thought.

My failure to acknowledge Kyle and his bullying antics led him to seek other avenues to get my attention. As I was sitting at my laptop one evening working on a speech, I began to receive text message alerts inquiring as to whether I knew a person by the name of Jordan Phillips. I did not know the name and did not understand the relevance of the inquiry. Then I was informed that Jordan Phillips was actually a fake Facebook profile account created by Kyle to massively share information online related to his defamation lawsuit and proclaim his innocence. It was obvious that this was another form of Kyle's retaliation for my book project and my courage to speak out against domestic abuse. When asked if I wanted to continue publishing my book my response was simple: The truth does not have to hide behind a fake name or social media account. *Authentic Me* was a collection of my truthful experiences with domestic abuse. There was no reason for me not to stand firm in my decision to publish my truth.

I proceeded with the book project and Kyle became relentless. He persisted in his efforts to silence me by filing a motion for a protective order in which he alleged he was afraid for his life and had resorted to wearing a bullet proof vest in order to protect himself from me based upon the content published in my book, *Authentic Me*. At this point, I questioned Kyle's mental state and well-being. I now had someone who had been abusive to me claiming that they feared for their safety based upon words written in a book. It was smokescreen after smokescreen all in the attempt to misplace blame and avoid accountability. Narcissism at its best.

That moment triggered something within me and made me realize that there's a lesson in everything you experience. For years, I'd listened to Kyle tell me that I would be nothing without him. However, now that we were separated Kyle was still threatened by the truth of who I was. He tried to micromanage how I parented all while proclaiming he felt I wasn't a good mother to our children. He was bothered by who associated with me and tried to prevent any of our collective friends from having any contact with me. I'd been so frustrated by it all that I'd lost the message in it. Even Kyle saw greatness within me at a time when I wasn't aware of my fullest potential. Kyle was fearful that the truth of who I was would threaten his very

existence. Though the pain seemed unbearable, the process changed me for the better. What was meant for my demise did not break me. I was strengthened. I realized I am enough. More importantly, I'd always been enough.

Kyle, like many people, believed that it was easier to not share the dark secrets that happen behind closed doors. Rather than recognize domestic abuse as a problem, it was easier to shift the blame to the person who had been abused. Something must be wrong with the person who wants to share their story; the person whose silence can't be bought with a price. That mindset reaffirmed for me the importance of domestic violence advocacy.

Even in the midst of a bad experience, I recognized my purpose. There needed to be more education surrounding domestic abuse, particularly within the legal profession. During one of my recent court hearings, I was subjected to a Judge making comments from the bench during open court that presumed domestic violence advocacy has a negative impact on minor children. I was astonished by the implications of these statements not only for me personally but for society as a whole. Judges and other legal professionals are persons that we've entrusted to make informed, unbiased decisions yet I was faced with statements so prejudicial that I wasn't comfortable proceeding with a hearing. Although it was a difficult decision to make, I opted to have a jury hear the case as opposed to presenting arguments before the Judge.

That decision was huge for me, but I moved forward in it confidently because I knew my decision was connected to my purpose. Our court hearings were being held in a very rural part of the state of Oklahoma and the likelihood of a jury being reflective of me was slim to none. However, I trusted that in proceedings where signs of justice had not been readily apparent, the jurors would understand the effort to silence my voice and justice would ultimately prevail.

It would be this story that I would later have the opportunity to share with lawmakers, legal professionals, etc. as a platform to effectuate change and instill a commitment to having knowledgeable officials handling matters of domestic abuse. I wanted my advocacy to serve to prevent anyone from coming after me and having a similar experience. I became passionate about domestic abuse survivors not encountering attorneys similar to the ones I referenced as the Cathy's or the Jennifer's of the profession who, in my opinion, did not understand domestic abuse and in fact made a mockery of it. This experience would resonate with many as an opportunity for additional training opportunities and support for survivors of domestic abuse.

“You need to pray for him,” stated a close friend. That was the most ridiculous thing I’d heard. At this point I made it a point not to utter anything about Kyle because it probably wouldn’t be a nice sentiment. Kyle had tried everything in his power to destroy me. There was no prayer that I was interested in praying for him.

Plus, the request had come at such a random time. I was discussing my idea to start a project to help women who had survived domestic abuse navigate through the legal system. As I was sharing this plan, my friend interrupted me and stated her thoughts on Kyle. I was immediately taken aback. Why were we even talking about Kyle? He should be a non-issue in my future plans for my life, I thought.

“I’m telling you this now even though I know you are not ready to receive it. You will move forward and you will do incredible things. However, you will be limited until you release the weight of what Kyle has done to you.”

So many things were happening all during a time when I was really focused on moving forward with my life but yet constantly found myself stuck in the past. I didn’t think about Kyle. And, I honestly believed I had forgiven him because I ignored him. I didn’t talk bad about him. I simply acted as though he was nonexistent. For me, avoidance was the new forgiveness. Thus, the advice that was shared with me did not resonate with me at the time. However, admittedly forgiveness was not playing out consistently. I’d think I was over the past, the abuse, the lies, the infidelity only to become angry again.

I had not forgiven Kyle at all. The important lesson was this: I needed to allow myself the opportunity to be completely okay with that fact. I didn’t need to beat myself up over lack of forgiveness or fault myself because it wasn’t happening fast enough. Nor should I look to anyone else for guidance on how long my unique forgiveness journey would take.

I decided to focus less on the fact that forgiveness hadn’t happened and more on the decision to approach forgiveness with a plan that would work for me. Most importantly, I had to acknowledge the things that happened as bad things that I would not sweep under the rug. I wouldn’t hide my truth; I wouldn’t be embarrassed by the past--- those actions would only serve to diminish my power. Rather, I would face these negative issues head on, and use them as an opportunity to grow. I would start with the step that many of us skip far too often: I would first focus on the negative.

Authenticity Journal Entry #1

Focus on the Negative.

- Make a list of all of the weights that you need to release. Include any experience that you have not healed from, any person who you have not forgiven, etc. It is important that you are very thoughtful during this process as it is a necessary part of your healing. Often we are encouraged to move beyond past hurts before we truly understand and appreciate why those things hurt us to begin with. We must process that pain so that we don't repeat those same mistakes moving forward.
- Allow yourself the freedom to be angry, upset or whatever accompanying emotion you feel. Who hurt you? How did they hurt you? Be very comprehensive in detailing when this occurred and how you felt as a result. Next, begin to think about ways that you can release that hurt so that it is no longer a hindrance to you fulfilling your purpose.
- Taking time to focus on the negative allows you to use your pain as a reference point. In *Authentic Me: A Story of Strength, Perseverance and Faith*, I shared my experiences through a troubled marriage and the pain of losing custody of my three children. That was a breaking point for me. As I healed from those experiences, it was important to me to not forget those emotions. This is the process of turning your negative experiences into positive affirmations. That pain is a reference point for me. It propels me to do better. It reminds me that I've withstood the unthinkable, and is a testament of my strength. It's okay to focus on the negative in order to be intentional about changing your situation. Deal with the bad stuff!

Dear Authentic Me,

Today I am making the choice to be transparent about the people and experiences that have hurt me. It might force me to focus on the negative, and that's okay. It is an important part of my growth.

Four days out of the month- that was essentially the time that he wanted the children to spend with me. I didn't imagine there was a human on earth that could be as spiteful as Kyle. As much as Kyle proclaimed to love his own mother, he was determined to pull our children out of my life. His only method of controlling me was to use the children. And, it had worked. This was the last straw!

The court filing had come at a time when everything else was going exceptionally well. I was frustrated that I allowed it to serve as a distraction. But I also did not understand how to not be disturbed by this. These were my children. And, I'd seen this game played so many times before.

I thought of every degrading name I could throw at Kyle. After anger passed, I sought understanding. Kyle's mother had recently died. Was this some twisted form of grieving? Next, I began to blame myself. How stupid must I have been to not recognize Kyle's character flaws. Why hadn't I realized that Kyle would eventually resort to this.

I reflected on the many warning signs I'd noticed along the way. The controlling, manipulative behavior had been present and even apparent within Kyle's dealings with his own family. Kyle treated everyone in his inner circle as if they could be controlled through financial manipulation. I recalled an incident with Kyle's daughter from a previous marriage wherein she requested that Kyle assist her with a down payment for a new car. Most dads would proudly assist if they could and Kyle was certainly in a position to help. Instead, Kyle treated it as an opportunity to flaunt his deemed superiority and boasted about the fact that his daughter needed to ask him for financial assistance because her mother couldn't adequately provide for her on a school teacher salary.

These rants always stood out to me in particular. My own father would gladly help me with anything I needed. Yet Kyle immediately seized upon his daughter asking for assistance as an opportunity to degrade her and his ex-wife. He shared story after story about how he overpaid his ex-wife for years with child support and she still had nothing to show for it. He was upset when his daughter didn't acknowledge his perceived gift fast enough and vowed to "cut her off" if he didn't receive a thank you prior to her cashing the check he'd mailed to her. I remember thinking how awful it must be to go through a divorce proceeding like that and have such a spiteful relationship as parents. Kyle's thought process seemed irrational yet he always justified it by saying their relationship was complicated. Why hadn't I recognized this behavior as a cycle that would be repeated?

There were numerous other incidents that presented red flag after red flag. And then I realized, all of these hindsight revelations were very helpful for me to assess the warning signs that I failed to recognize. However, no matter how much I focused on them I could not change the past. Therefore, there was no time for the blame game at this point in my life. I gained an incredible awareness by going through each of those experiences. It presented another opportunity to learn and grow.

It was time to shift. Get Quiet. Be Still. Seek Peace. There was only one person I could change, and that was the person in the mirror. I looked at my reflection and repeatedly said “I love you. Even when you make mistakes, I love you. I love you more days than I am disappointed in you. I love you through and despite it all.” As I uttered the words I was nervously trembling. I’d taken a bold step forward. I’d owned where I was, how I was feeling and resolved to move forward in spite of that. I’d forgiven myself first.

Authenticity Journal Entry #2

Forgive yourself!

- Focus first on the process of forgiving yourself before moving into the forgiveness of others. Jot down some things you need to release yourself from. What self-limiting thoughts have you been harboring that are holding you back?
- What are some of the mistakes you have made? How did you correct them? What did you learn from them?
- Mirror Exercise: Look at yourself in the mirror and write down the first things that come to mind about how you feel about yourself. Who are you? Not the person who others view you as. You are not your degrees, your title, your position. At the core of who you are, when no one is watching, *who are you?* What do you value? What are your best qualities? What things need improvement? These issues should be personal to you. The focus is on YOU. Make sure what you see and how you label yourself aligns with who you really are and your purpose in life!

Dear Authentic Me,

Today I will commit to loving the reflection in the mirror. I will tell myself that even though there are times when I've been disappointed with myself, I am proud of who I am. I will be honest about my mistakes and forgive myself so that I can be free to forgive others.

Authenticity Journal Entry #3

The Forgiveness Journey

- Consider the fact that the only thing holding you back from reaching your greatest potential is yourself. Your unwillingness to forgive is an additional weight that keeps you from fulfilling your purpose. This leads you to the the simplest way to look at forgiveness: it is necessary for you! The person who hurt you might still be exhibiting the behaviors for which you are trying to offer forgiveness for. The key thing to keep in mind is that is no longer your burden. Once you embrace forgiveness you release yourself from the ability to be held hostage by their actions.
- Recognize that forgiveness is a process! Don't dwell on whether it is happening fast enough or you're not doing it the right way. I realized that my thoughts that I'd failed at forgiveness of others was primarily due to the fact that I was judging my process by the standard of others. It is easy for someone else to tell you how to deal with a situation they haven't experienced. You always have a right to move forward in a way that's best for you.
- Outline what your forgiveness journey will look like. What does it mean for you to forgive others? Does it consist of rebuilding relationships or allowing yourself the freedom to let go of toxic relationships? How will your forgiveness of others bring a renewed sense of peace to your life?

Dear Authentic Me,

Forgiveness of others is hard! I admit that I haven't gotten this right. Today I will define my forgiveness journey and focus on the best way to move forward from my pain. A dynamic destiny awaits me. By forgiving myself and others for past mistakes, I am allowing myself the opportunity to live!

Authenticity Journal Entry #4

Positive Self-Affirmations

- Pull out your sticky notes! Jot down your favorite quotes, sayings, song lyrics, verses for meditation, etc. Next, post them everywhere! Remind yourself just how amazing you are by affirming your self-worth.
- Accept that anything that anyone does to try to hurt you is about them, not you. You can't change it. You can't control it. You can only control how you will respond and whether or not you will react. Negativity should no longer have a place in your life. However, it is important to note that this doesn't mean that negative things won't continue to happen in your midst. How you respond will be key!
- Gratitude List. Reflect on the many things you are grateful for. Write the list in your personal notes section. Reflecting on this list allows for you to cultivate a grateful heart.
- Evaluate your inner circle. You will need to be surrounded by people who are motivating and encouraging you. Those who elevate you. Protect your spirit! People may try to tear you down with their judgments, labels, opinions, or misunderstandings of you. You can't let that deter you from the path you are on. No matter what you have endured to date, you are destined for greatness. Take time away from everyone and remind yourself of this fact.

Dear Authentic Me,

Self worth means loving who you are- all of who you are- all the time. I am a unique creation. It is important that I affirm my self worth daily. I do not merely want to exist. I will focus on living and enjoying my life!

Being an overcomer requires intentional self-reflection regarding where you are currently and where you desire to be. Personal development planning by definition is the process of creating an action plan based on awareness, values, reflection, goal-setting and planning for personal development within the context of a career, education, relationship or for self-improvement. The definition itself recognizes that it is a PROCESS. It's time for you to begin the process of developing an action plan for sustainable growth!

<i>Authenticity Journal Entry #5</i>
<i>Develop a Personal Assessment Plan!</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start with where you are NOW! Remember, what others think of you is none of your business. This is the time to focus on you and your goals. Be transparent and honest. • Begin by stating what is your purpose. • Identify your strengths and your weaknesses. • Become committed to goal-setting. List three goals you want to achieve today? What are your weekly and monthly goals? These are your short-term goals. Next, focus on long-term goals. What goals do plan to achieve this year? Within the next 3-5 years? • Think about how you spend your time: are you busy or productive? Create a prioritized list of tasks each day. Set realistic deadlines that allow for flexibility. Value how you spend your time. Set a time limit on meetings and carve out adequate time for preparation to keep you on track daily. Be organized, purposeful and learn to say no to board memberships, organizations, etc. that you are not a part of your current plan. Decrease distractions and don't procrastinate. • Establish a support network and explore what resources are available to you. • Enlist an accountability partner and provide them with a copy of your personal assessment plan. Your accountability partner will help you to stay on track and aligned with your commitments. • Review your Personal Assessment Plan periodically and adjust your goals and stated timelines as needed. • Celebrate amazing you! Reward yourself for your accomplishments. And, don't forget to schedule time for yourself: your overall health, including rest and relaxation, should be an integral part of your plan.

PART FOUR

Authentic Freedom

Author Tiffany Hill on being authentic: "It was the realization that my sense of self-worth was dangerously intertwined with deception, and the decision to move forward from that understanding of who I was portraying in the the full beauty of who I am."

There are times when you will be tested and even more so when your enemy feels that they know what makes you tick. Kyle had attempted to create a sense of fear within me. For years, we'd lived under the illusion of a perfect married lifestyle. After the truth of the failed relationship had been revealed, I'd been at the lowest point of my life and experienced what I thought would have destroyed me. Indeed the loss of custody of my children had been devastating. But in that loss I found strength. As I woke up every day and continued to put one foot in front of the other and as I continued on through tears and on days when I didn't know if I would make it through the full twenty-four hours; I would simultaneously develop into a much stronger and better version of myself.

There were many days where I felt giving up was the easier option. It is on those days that you should appreciate your struggle to remain grounded. The days where you give it your all when you feel you have nothing left to give are the days where you too develop your strength!

Now when I am faced with challenges, I reflect back to those moments of intense pain. I revert my thoughts back to the negative and use it as motivation. My pep talk to myself is filled with confidence and bears no resemblance of doubt of my self worth: *You can move mountains! Your will was tested and you survived. So who or what will you allow to stop you now? Get out of your own way and make things happen!*

No matter what anyone does to you, they can never change who you are. You have the option of allowing the "thing" you have encountered to make you bitter or allow it to make you better. Your strength, your faith and your forward progress will be tied to your ability to turn any negative situation into a positive experience.

Your journey is yours to embrace, to live and to enjoy. After being in an abusive marriage for eight years, I recognized that I couldn't process that pain overnight. That doesn't mean you remain stagnant as you heal. You continue to move

forward. Continue to walk boldly along your path to forgiveness and allow yourself the flexibility to make mistakes along the way.

Above all, remember that someone's victory is tied to your testimony. I completed a book project about my process with hopes that my transparency would provide inspiration to others. Owning your story takes courage. No one should be ashamed of their story, their experiences, their past.

For domestic abuse survivors, no one can make you feel bad or embarrassed about being a victim of domestic abuse when you've already proclaimed yourself to be a survivor. Never be afraid to operate within your truth. You are the author of your story! Process your experiences and turn your test into a movement!

I was recording a public service announcement for a film project I was producing. My message included the following affirmations for domestic abuse survivors: "I want it to be the last time that you feel unsupported. The last time you doubt who you are or lose yourself because of what you have experienced. You are not what you have gone through. You do not have to suffer in silence. This is the last time."

Filming The Last Time movie had been a wonderful opportunity for me. I was surrounded by an incredible production team. The talented actors gave their all and the project received overwhelming support. We were now in post-production and I was able to view the producer's cut of the film. It was chilling to watch. The lead character represented a woman that I was all too familiar with. A woman I wasn't that far removed from. I remembered the days of crying in the mirror and thinking I have to pull it all together. I can't let the world in on my secret that I'm not *perfect*. The film was a testament that your authenticity always shows up- who you really are will always be revealed. You can't wear the mask forever.

The film featured survivors of domestic abuse. Most of the women I'd never met until the day we filmed their particular scenes. The moment was surreal. There I was standing in the middle of a room full of women with various experiences and one thing in common- we'd all survived domestic abuse. No doubt many of them had been at a place before where they didn't know how they would go on, but at that moment we were all assembled in unity reenacting a scene that had become a reality in our lives- the ability to push forward in spite of the circumstances. I'd wanted the film project to motivate, encourage and uplift others. In turn, it blessed me. *That's pain turned into purpose.*



Tiffany Hill is an experienced employment/labor law attorney. Her legal background includes employment as Deputy District Attorney in Nevada, Assistant General Counsel at Ohio University, in-house legal practice with Hammons Law Firm in Oklahoma as well as corporate legal experience as HR Legal Advisor for Paycom in Oklahoma. Tiffany holds a Patient and Protection Affordable Care Act certification and specializes in compliance issues, human resources training and policy development. As a legal consultant, she maintains knowledge of industry trends and employment legislation and uses those skills to minimize legal liability within organizations.

Tiffany also utilizes her legal expertise as an advocate for increased awareness surrounding the issue of domestic violence. Tiffany is author of *Authentic Me: A Story of Strength, Perseverance and Faith*, wherein she shares her personal story as a survivor of an emotionally and physically abusive relationship. Her second book *Authentic Me Part II: The Forgiveness Journey* is a workbook designed to use journaling as a tool to process life experiences and move towards healing. Tiffany is Executive Producer of “The Last Time,” a film project aimed at educating and empowering domestic abuse survivors. She hosts a motivational podcast, “Authentic Conversations,” which delivers content on such topics as leadership, professional development and self-esteem. Tiffany also collaborates with national organizations to cultivate emerging young leaders through mentorship programs.

Tiffany earned her Juris Doctorate and Bachelor of Civil Law degrees from the Louisiana State University Paul M. Hebert Law Center and is licensed to practice law in Louisiana, Ohio and Oklahoma. Tiffany obtained her Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Her professional and civic memberships include the Louisiana, Ohio and Oklahoma bar associations, the Society for Human Resource Management, the National Association of Professional Women, Women in Film and Television, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated and The Links, Incorporated. Her board affiliations include the Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs, the American Psychological Association, Board of Educational Affairs and the YWCA Human Resources Committee.

Of all of her accomplishments, she counts her role as mother to be the greatest. Her happiest times are spent with her three sons- Tyler, Trent and Tanner. Among the mantras by which she lives is: “To live authentically is the ultimate form of happiness.”

For additional information about Tiffany and her projects, visit www.thauthentic.com or email thauthentic@gmail.com. Also, join her online community @th_authentic.

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