

**MADISON
PREWETT
TROUTT**

Bestselling author of
Made for This Moment

**THE
LOVE
EVERYBODY
WANTS**

What You're Looking
For Is Already Yours

Foreword by Audrey Roloff



PRAISE FOR
THE LOVE EVERYBODY WANTS

“In her new book, *The Love Everybody Wants*, Madison Prewett Troutt shares her heart for God-honoring relationships with passion and compassion. Packed with incredibly wise, practical insights and biblical truths, this book will help you find the love that lasts and transforms lives. Anyone seeking to deepen their understanding of love and build stronger relationships with those around them will appreciate this message.”

—CRAIG AND AMY GROESCHEL, founding pastors of Life.
Church and authors of *From This Day Forward*

“Waiting to be loved can be one of the loneliest places in the world, which often leads us to compromise. I love that Madi shares the truths on why the right person is worth the wait and how God wants to use this season to lavish you with *his* love! Madison does not shy away from the hard topics and always brings it back to what God says about you.”

—BRITTANY LAKE AND BRANDON LAKE, Grammy
Award-winning singer-songwriter

“*The Love Everybody Wants* is a much-needed breath of fresh air in our dating-crazed culture. Every page feels like you’re sitting down having coffee with your best friend or favorite big sister, getting to hear how she navigated love, heartbreak, and everything in between. This book reminds us that true love is still possible and that God can turn the pain of our past into something more beautiful than we can imagine.”

—ONEKA McCLELLAN, co-pastor of Shoreline City Church

“This book will not only help you navigate singleness and relationships, but it will also help you love God more. Madi’s journey to marriage is so relatable, entertaining, and inspiring! She will minister to you and your friends while giving you great relationship advice and helping you realize the love you already have.”

—JONATHAN POKLUDA, lead pastor of Harris Creek Baptist Church, bestselling author of *Outdated*, and host of the podcast *Becoming Something*

“Reading this book was like having a sister eloquently express everything I’ve felt while looking for love in all the wrong places. It is a kind yet firm reminder that we are more valuable than we can possibly imagine.”

—JESS CLARKE HIGGINS, social media personality

“Madi is fiercely in love with Jesus. Ultimately, there is no other love that will satisfy. But *The Love Everybody Wants* will be a helpful guide for all of it—loving God and wrestling with our desires for love on earth too. This book will give you hope!”

—JENNIE ALLEN, *New York Times* bestselling author

“As a dating coach who gets to work with hundreds of single Christian women, I find this book to be profound. Madi addresses so many lies believed by singles, as well as ways to conquer those lies and fight for truth and freedom. There are so many tools for healing and wisdom in these pages that every single Christian woman (at any age) needs to hear and be reminded of.”

—KAIT TOMLIN, bestselling author, dating coach, and founder of Heart of Dating

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Prewett Troutt, Madison, author.

Title: The love everybody wants: what you’re looking for is already yours / Madison Prewett Troutt.

Description: First edition. | Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, [2023] |

Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023002287 | ISBN 9780593445242 (hardcover; acid-free paper) | ISBN 9780593445266 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Love—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Interpersonal relations—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4639 .P66 2023 | DDC 231/.6—dc23/eng/20230522

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023002287>

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

waterbrookmultnomah.com

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

Book design by Jo Anne Metsch

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This book is dedicated to my husband, Grant Michael Troutt. I am so proud to be yours, but I am even more proud of the man of God you are. Thank you for always pointing me back to the greatest love of all: Jesus. I love you forever!

FOREWORD

If you've picked up this book, my guess is that your heart desires a love that's characterized by all the "un's": *unquenchable, undivided, unconditional, unlimited, unending*. It's in our human nature to long for a love like this, but it's not in our human nature to live like we already have it. And the truth is, we do. You do. You are already loved by God more than you could ever possibly imagine, and there is nothing you can do to make him love you any more or less than he does right now. Even if you never love him back, he will keep loving and pursuing you. There really is no greater love than this.

Imagine you are in a dating relationship where you are so in love with your boyfriend and you are pursuing, encouraging, and desiring to love, serve, and respect him, but he never

shows you any love in return. You'd probably dump him. And I'd hope that you would. Love runs weary when unreciprocated. But not God's love. He loves you better than any human ever could, with all the "un's," even if it's never reciprocated. There is a verse in the Bible (1 John 3:1) that says, "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" That is what you are. A child of a God who lavishes his love on you so deeply and fully. So, you want that kind of deep, real, lasting, intimate, faithful, trustworthy, forever kind of love? As Madi so beautifully portrays in these pages, *what you are looking for is already yours.*

Back in 2020 I happened to watch an episode of Madi's season of *The Bachelor* with some friends and was immediately intrigued by Madi. There was a joy, peace, and confidence that she carried in a chaotic and, dare I say, unhealthy environment that set her apart. While all the girls seemed to be searching for love, it was evident that Madi *lived* loved. I could sense her love for God before she verbally expressed it because I share that same love. And when you know that love—God's love—you can't help but see it in other people.

As Madi's *Bachelor* relationship was publicly displayed on TV, I felt a nudge to reach out to her because I had also dated a boy in front of millions of viewers. For context, my husband grew up on reality television, so our dating relationship, our wedding day, and even the early years of our marriage were on public display to be both praised and ridiculed. The unconventional position I found myself in came with its own set of struggles that were unrelatable to my friends, which left me

feeling isolated. My heart felt for Madi as I remembered that season of my life, so I reached out to her on social media and asked for her address, hoping to mail her a little encouragement. Thankfully she responded, so I sent her a little package of goodies.

A week or so later, I got a message from Madi saying that she was truly blessed to receive the goodies. Since then, it's been a joy to grow in friendship with Madi and to cheer her on as she boldly and gracefully shares truth to a generation so consumed by lies—something she does beautifully in the pages that follow.

If you've picked up this book in hopes of figuring out how to find the perfect spouse, this is not it. And, might I boldly add, there is no such book. But what I am so excited for you to discover in these pages is the practical wisdom for pursuing healthy relationships, the comfort of hearing difficult truths from someone who's been there, the deeper understanding that will come from asking the hard questions, and ultimately a deeper understanding of how infinitely loved you are by God.

In the words of Martina McBride, “This one's for the girls.” And not just the girls who have ever had a broken heart or wished upon a shooting star or loved without holding back or dreamed with everything they have. This book is also for the girls who have felt the pressure to prove or perform to earn love. For the girls who have allowed shame, fear, guilt, doubt, or comparison to hold them back from experiencing true love. For the girls who are single and confused by the dating world and not sure what to even be looking for in a man of integrity. For the girls who are dating someone but aren't sure if it's the

“forever” kind of someone. For the girls who want to start their marriage on a healthy foundation but don’t have a healthy example of a loving relationship to learn from. And for the girls who desire a love story marked by the “un’s.”

As Madi says, there is a better way to approach our desire for love that is hardwired in our hearts. And it’s this—that we must look to God first, learn to see ourselves as he sees us, and only then will we be ready to love whoever God brings into our lives. When you pursue a real relationship with God and allow him to fill you with the joy, peace, freedom, and love that only he can, *that* is living loved. And that love is infinite, and it’s available to you now. As you read this book, I hope you see just how real, healing, transforming, and beautiful that love is—and that you not only see it but also experience it. *I hope you realize that what you are looking for is already yours.*

—AUDREY ROLOFF, *New York Times* bestselling co-author of
A Love Letter Life and founder of *The Marriage Journal*

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**THE
LOVE
EVERYBODY
WANTS**

1

LOOKING FOR LOVE

Searching in All the Right Places

We love *love*. We love the rush that bubbles up inside when we think about it. We can easily be swept up. Obsessed. Infatuated. We are hardwired for connection. We want to be seen, known, and, yes, loved. We want to be chosen, to be valued. Maybe you could even say we are made to love. But it doesn't take a PhD in the psychology of modern romance to know that finding deep love and connection is, well, not easy.

I know this has been true for me. Want a sneak peek of the real conversation going on in my head when I started to write this book as a single woman?

How many more wrong ones until the right one?

Is there something wrong with me?

Do I settle for good enough?

What if no one else will love me?

What if I end up alone?

What if I get hurt again?

Why is it so hard to let go?

Am I hard to love?

Am I enough?

Ugh, why can't relationships be easy?

How many more breakups until I finally get the whole “till death do us part”?

How many more tears and fears until peace and joy?

Will I ever be happy?

My guess is I'm not alone in constantly asking these questions. We're glued to our phones, social media, and TV dating shows. We're bombarded with images of love and relationships and sex and happiness and weddings and influencers who seem to have picture-perfect lives. But so many of us feel alone and confused. We're asking, *Why hasn't love panned out for me? I'm tired of not being chosen.*

It might come as a surprise to some that I struggle with this—but I do. You may know me from season 24 of ABC's *The Bachelor*, which aired in 2020. You may have read my first book, *Made for This Moment*. Or maybe you have no idea who I am, but you're desperately hoping to hear something refreshing and helpful on the topic of love. Something that goes beyond “Don't have sex until you're married” and “Wait on God's timing.” Though I've tried to put both of those pieces of advice into practice myself, I know that something *more* is

needed during the in-between. We need something greater than a list of rules so that if we do meet our someone, we're ready for them.

Trust me—I did plenty of dating “Madi’s way” and ended up with regret. I wound up hurt and feeling either like I was being rejected or like I was wasting valuable time and emotions. I’m not perfect and will never claim to be—just ask my friends and family! But I *have* suffered to the point that I was willing to do something different in order to find peace and joy. I stopped searching for love and instead started at the foundation of love itself—by learning to bring my longings to God and to accept and love myself first.

By the way, I think it’s worth mentioning that loving yourself doesn’t always look how culture and social media make it look. It’s not just about posting workout selfies or getting massages with girlfriends. More on that later, but another goal of this book is to encourage you to look beyond what you see online and on TV. Not just about love, but about people’s lives. Those are such one-dimensional portrayals of reality. I should know—people are always shocked when they get to know me and see that I’m just as insecure, just as tired of dating, and just as worn out as they are. I *was* anyway. What happened in between the worn-out and where I am now?

That’s exactly what I’m going to tell you.

But first let me say, there are no simple answers to questions on dating and marriage, mostly because our hearts are funny things, and people aren’t always simple. A quick internet search reveals plenty of people eager to dish out oversimplified relationship advice. But here’s what I want to tell you: I

think there is a better way. A deeper way. A way forward that sets our hearts in order and helps us see our longings and experiences in a new light.

And before you think I'm setting out to write a "how to get a boyfriend" book, you should know that's not the goal. I want to show you how to look to God, see yourself, and find deep love amid our culture's shallow ideas about romance.

Because the truth is, finding the love everybody wants isn't nearly as complicated as we've made it. In fact, the Bible tells us pretty clearly how love works in Matthew 22:35–39—my inspiration for writing this book:

One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

First and foremost, we must set our hearts right with God, know the depths of his love for us, and believe that his words about us are true. Then comes the often-difficult work of learning to love ourselves. When we get those two relationships where

they should be, only then can we start to talk about loving other people, whether that's cultivating a deep community of friends, better relationships with family, or a romantic relationship—all three of which combine to create a healthy support system.

If you want to use a tried-and-true metaphor, imagine your life as a house. Your relationship with God is the foundation. Your relationship with yourself is the framework and walls. You can't start adding furniture and decorations before the foundation and walls are in place. I mean, you can try. But you won't be successful.

The message of this book isn't that the ultimate finish line in life is to find a spouse and live happily ever after or that in order to be happy or have purpose, you have to find your person. It's not my intention to help you get married off. My goal is for you to understand that while we aren't made to go through life alone, we can't expect to have thriving friendships or romantic relationships until we've established our relationships with God and with ourselves.

What if we *never* find the person we're searching for? Does that mean we can't be fulfilled? I remember being young and praying, "God, I trust you in everything, but I'm kind of hoping that singleness is not your will for my life." Why is that? Why do so many of us connect marriage with wholeness? The truth is that as I've grown older, I've experienced the ways building meaningful relationships with God and with ourselves leaves little room for loneliness or unfulfillment.

On the search for a deeper understanding of love, we all

must work through the clichés and shallow ideas we’ve come to accept as truth—ideas like, *If I just had a significant other, I would feel whole* and *I have to follow my heart above all else*. While there are obviously wonderful aspects of being with another person, these ideas aren’t the fullest expression of God’s love and calling for us. That’s not to say we should ignore our emotions. That would be unrealistic—impossible, even. But we can’t be controlled by our emotions either.

These clichés can make their way into our hearts and influence how we think things should be. We often think we’re owed love the way the world defines it. In light of that, each of the following chapter titles is a common phrase related to dating and relationships that has become ingrained in our vocabulary through social media and culture. I want to help you examine these ideas and evaluate the truth of them. And in doing so, I believe we can arrive at a deeper understanding of what God says about love, because it’s only by embracing this understanding that we can experience peace, joy, and wholeness without fear for our future.

In this book, I’ll lay out some of the issues we’re facing emotionally and spiritually, addressing everything from social media relationship trends to biblical insights into God’s ideas for marriage and identity. Together, we’ll tackle love, faith, dating culture, and personal worth in a refreshing manner. Beginning in chapter 2, you’ll find QR codes embedded at the end of each chapter. These links will direct you to short videos and other digital resources covering a range of topics—things like the essentials I look for in a relationship, prayers for when

your heart is hurting, and words for seasons of waiting. My prayer is that as I share my experience, you'll be encouraged no matter where you are in life.

We're made for love, but it takes work to get these loves in order.

When we can learn to see relationships with God, ourselves, and others in whole, holy, and healthy ways, our hearts will stop looking for love in the wrong places. We're made for love, but it takes work to get these loves in order. But believe me when I say, it's possible to know the love of God. It's possible to love—and maybe even like—yourself. It's possible to navigate the matrix of relationships with confidence and hope. It's possible to look out to your future with joy—because you were made for love.

PROOF OF PROMISE

When I started writing this book, I was single. Again.

But at some point during this publishing journey, I met someone. *My* someone. Grant. He came at the perfect time—God's time. You'll hear more about Grant as we walk through these chapters together.

I don't claim to have mastered my relationship with God or with myself, but I have learned a few invaluable lessons on the way. I've learned that those connections must be my priority. Not just while I'm single, but throughout my entire life. Not just because it's those connections that best prepare me to take

on the title *wife*, but because that's how we're wired to live our most meaningful and joy-filled lives.

Wife! What?!

I know. I'm just as shocked as you are. But then again, I'm not.

We're all looking for the same kind of love. But my goal is to show you that the love everybody wants is already ours.

2

HE LOVES ME, HE LOVES ME NOT

Redefining True Love

*Is there something wrong with me?
Am I even worthy of true love?
Will I ever find the love everybody wants?*

These are questions I asked constantly growing up. By the time I was in my twenties, I'd had enough of love. I felt exhausted, hopeless, and angry. Why couldn't I get love right? Why were relationships so hard? Was I not worthy of the love everybody wants? I knew I was too young to feel so cynical toward relationships. It felt like I was drowning in a sea of self-doubt, with waves of self-imposed pressure. I would do anything for a breath of belonging or to feel enough, even if just for a moment.

What started as just thoughts then became my identity. I couldn't see anyone else's needs, because I was so consumed with meeting my own. I couldn't love others well, because I was so desperate to be loved. I couldn't serve others, because

I was constantly striving to prove I was worthy of being picked.

I knew that there had to be a better way. I started asking questions. I went to the Bible, I confided in mentors, and I did some soul-searching. Why did looking for love—something that seems to make other people feel so good—make me feel so *bad*?

In tracking down my sense of unworthiness, I looked back and saw sixteen-year-old Madi in a bathroom stall with her head buried in her hands, crying. She was overwhelmed with hurt. How could her first love reject her? In her mind, his cheating meant rejection and his rejection meant that she wasn't enough. She wasn't enough, because there was someone better and he picked *that other girl*. I then realized that young Madi's reaction was to develop an overachieving, performance-based mindset, doing everything she could to prove she should always be the first pick. From a place of fear and hurt, she built walls all around her broken and hurting heart.

After that moment in the bathroom stall, young Madi began to seek worth in getting attention from guys. Winning them over brought a rush of emotion, and as soon as she won them over, she would dump them because they no longer served a purpose. They proved she was worthy of their attention. They proved she was their first choice. This performance-based mindset trickled into everything. School, faith, family, friendships, and identity. Despite the momentary breaths of air that achievement gave her, the sea just continued to deepen.

Like any other unhealthy coping mechanism, getting at-

tention from guys was a *very* temporary fix. Over time, I became restless. Though I wasn't sure then what the root issue was, I see now how I was longing for the type of love I couldn't get from a guy. I was longing for something *deep* and *fulfilling* that would last forever. In the meantime, I was hurting myself. But more than that, I was hurting other people. While this is certainly nothing to be proud of, it was reality.

Freshman year of college, I realized I needed to deal with the monster I had allowed to rob me of the confident, content, and purposeful life God had called me to live. After years of chasing the high of male attention, I was tired of being tired. I was tired of hurting, tired of hurting others, and tired of the way looking for love made me feel. Change happened not in an instant but over time, after a lot of trial and error. But in that moment of realization, I finally confronted the lies that were born in that tear-filled moment in the bathroom stall years earlier. I decided to deal with the fear and shame that followed. I looked in the eyes of my sixteen-year-old self, lifted my head, and simply said, "I am sorry for what he did to you. But don't let his inability to see your worth make you question it. You have nothing to prove. You are picked and you are loved."

It was a powerful moment—going back to where the lie was born. Going back to where the pains of rejection began. If you can do that—if you can remember the first time you felt unworthy, unvaluable, and rejected, I'd encourage you to name that experience for yourself.

Maybe it was a teacher, coach, or parent. Maybe it was a guy you liked or a boyfriend. Maybe it was a friend or group

of people who wouldn't accept you. Whatever that first moment of rejection was for you, evaluating the validity of your feelings is a step toward healing. I think that's a great place for us to start together in this book.

Do you also feel like you're drowning? Maybe you've covered it up with makeup and tight clothes. With filters and Photoshop. You've put up walls of protection, promising yourself you will never feel that pain again. And somewhere along the way, you began to believe the lie that you're unworthy of love. But maybe the truth is that you're not bad at love; you've just been chasing the wrong definition of love. Maybe by redefining what true love is, we can finally embrace what's already ours and find the love we're meant for.

Ready to get started? To experience life change? To find the great love you were meant for? Then just like Shania Twain says, "Let's go, girls."¹

Maybe the truth is that you're not bad at love; you've just been chasing the wrong definition of love.

HE LOVES ME . . .

"He loves me, he loves me not . . ."

Did you ever play that game where you run outside, grab a flower, and rip the petals off one by one to figure out how your crush really feels about you? No? Just me? Cool.

Either way, you've probably been there, if not literally with a flower, then with life. Riding on the highs of "He loves me!" and suffering during the lows of "He loves me not."

My thoughts have bounced back and forth between these

lines of thinking more times than I can count. I picture that silly game and those flower petals falling and have come to realize that most of us still somehow believe the lie that *this* is what love is. That it's inconsistent. Unstable. Performance based. Uncertain. Immature. Emotional. A roller coaster. Sometimes causing us to lose ourselves or change ourselves, thinking, *If I look like _____, then I will be worthy of love. Or, If I give him what he wants, then maybe he will choose me.*

But then what happens when we change and compromise and settle . . . and we still don't feel like we're enough and we still don't feel loved?

Each petal that falls off leaves us feeling more unsure, unsafe, and pressured. We stay on edge. Depressed and suffering inside, battling the feelings of rejection and not being enough. We don't know what it's like to feel safe, peaceful, stable, and secure. Security is a foreign concept when we base our self-worth on the highs of other people's acceptance and the lows of our own underperformance.

I now wonder why we were so willing to look to chance and risk to determine our future—having our hope cling to the last flower petal or winning a bet over a silly game of rock, paper, scissors. Is it because these seem to be types of “hope” that we can bet on and “see”—in other words, because it's tangible? But that kind of fate isn't reliable or sustainable, or even real. It's a game.

So, what is love? Is it just a feeling? Is it attraction? Chemistry and passion? Is it rewards based—in other words, will a guy love you as long as you're who and what he wants you to be?

What if love wasn't built on other people's approval or acceptance? What if it wasn't based on something as flimsy and fleeting as a feeling? What if love wasn't defined by desperation or even passion but rather by giving and choosing?

What if I were to tell you that you could have a real love that isn't just based on chance, fate, feelings, fantasies, or luck? What if I told you that you could have a love that is unconditional, deeper than feelings or attraction? A love that doesn't depend on a flower petal hanging on for dear life. A love that never fails. That's the love everybody wants—and it is achievable.

Many of us have lost sight of what real love is. We have believed the lies of the media and accepted the tainted picture that Hollywood paints. If we base our definition of love on an ever-changing culture, we're going to stay confused. If we use our own emotions as a standard for love, they will continue to fail us. We will never feel the security we crave if we try to build it on the quicksand of today's version of love. But what about a love that is never changing, never failing, and never leaving? Isn't that what we all want?

Before we can truly recognize this real love, sometimes it helps to view the wrong love.

We will never feel the security we crave if we try to build it on the quicksand of today's version of love.

WRONG LOVE

When I was in high school, I was in a relationship with a guy that I was over the moon about. He was a few years older than me, and I thought he was *the* guy. You know the kind: The guy the

other girls wanted. The guy with relationship experience. The guy the other guys were jealous of.

I was just happy to be his girlfriend. But something about our relationship didn't sit right with my mom. She prayed daily about it.

One night she came into my room after I had fallen asleep and happened to see my phone on my bed. When she picked it up, it was unlocked, and a message popped up from my boyfriend. She clicked on it and read, "I can't wait for you to start driving. Now we can be together all the time and have more privacy." When she read that message, she felt alarmed. She knew this relationship needed to end . . . and soon. But he and I spent every waking second talking, either in person or on the phone. So, her prayers picked up tenfold. She prayed one specific prayer over and over, knowing it would take a miracle for the relationship to end: "Lord, remove all desire for him from her heart. I pray she would become disgusted by the sight of him!"

Bold, huh? Yeah, that was my mom's actual prayer.

One day not long after, I came home from school sick. Have you ever had your throat swell up so much that you can't swallow? That's how this started, and it was horrible. I couldn't eat, and I was in so much pain. I was tired and weak all over and had no energy to talk to or see anyone. My doctor diagnosed me with mono. I stayed in my room and slept. A week later, my boyfriend came over to bring me a smoothie. I don't know what happened—and I wish I could describe to you exactly what I felt in that moment—but all I can explain is that every bit of attraction to and desire for him had vanished.

Feeling nothing but repulsion, I broke up with him as soon as I got better. When I got home from school after my first day back, my mom asked about him. I just said, “Ew. We broke up. I couldn’t do it anymore.” I think it’s safe to say it was all due to the prayers of Mama Prew. My mom and I joke about it now, but that day I learned the power of prayer! Prayer changes things.

Although my mom’s prayer helped end that particular relationship, I was still obsessed with boys. I realize now that this obsession started when I was a little girl. I wanted love so badly. I watched *Cinderella* and dreamed of my prince. I listened to Britney Spears and longed for a man I could sing about. I lay in bed at night and practiced my reactions when I would get my first kiss.

It goes without saying: For most of my life, I’ve had to fight the temptation to put my worth and value in having a boyfriend. I believe I did this because it was a tangible hope—one I could see. But even when I did get the guy, it still left me empty and unsatisfied.

The love you hope for and long for won't require you to settle for a person or rush a season.

I now know the love you hope for and long for won’t require you to settle for a person or rush a season.

I now know I was looking for the right kind of love in the wrong places, which made it the wrong kind of love. Because . . .

The right kind of love with the wrong person = the wrong love.

The right kind of love at the wrong time = the wrong love.

FAKE LOVE

I've always been one of those people who actually *listens* to the lyrics of the music they're playing. Back in my high school days, I'd blare the artist Drake in my car. Even though I don't do this now or agree with everything Drake has ever said in his songs (even the clean versions), he seems to understand what it's like to experience fake love:

I've been down so long it look like up to me. . . .
I got fake people showin' fake love to me
Straight up to my face²

It's crazy to think that we sometimes intentionally seek out fake. I shopped for my first knockoff purse in Chinatown in NYC. I remember so many details: the smell of the streets, the crowded sidewalks I clumsily navigated, and me rocking some blue eye shadow and thinking I was the star of my own movie. Being fifteen without a job, I knew there was no way I would be able to convince my dad to buy me a two-thousand-dollar bag, but I had a good chance of convincing him to buy me a knockoff one for forty-five dollars! Playing the daddy's-girl role perfectly, I charmed my way into a "Yes, you can buy the bag."

One shady exchange with a stranger in the back of a bodega later, I got the bag. I felt so cool! I took pictures with it. I started taking it to school every day. I felt like *the* hot stuff. Until one day when I was walking with a bunch of my friends in the hallway and the handle broke in half. They all started laughing and I was so embarrassed. When I got home and

told my sisters, they replied, “What did you expect? It was fake. Fake doesn’t last long!”

Looking back, I wish I’d spent more time considering the implications of their words. If I’d saved up for a real designer bag, I would have had to save for years. *Why wait for the real thing when I can settle for a fake one that looks similar?* This is also how many of our minds work when it comes to love and relationships, even unknowingly. Why do we so often settle for a knockoff version of real love? Is it because it’s easier? Because it doesn’t cost as much? Because we can obtain it faster? We settle for a less-than version of what we could have because maybe we are tired of being alone, we are tired of waiting, or we fear we might not find anything better. But you don’t need more of what you’ve been settling for; you need something that will last.

Sometimes it’s hard to discern between what’s real and what’s not. Social media makes it easy to fake: Fake your looks, fake your mood, and fake your relationships. I know people who will post photos of themselves smiling with their boyfriends—making it seem like a perfect relationship—who at the same time are crying themselves to sleep at night because things really aren’t going as they seem. And then they break up a month later.

I’ve seen countless influencers, bloggers, and celebrities post photoshopped pictures of themselves with heavy filters, creating a beauty and lifestyle standard that is impossible to achieve in real life, even for them. With the help of technology and heavy makeup, we can make anything look real, even if it isn’t. I know, because I used to do it too—all of it. Photoshop,

filters, planned photo ops. I'm not proud of it, but I, too, have joined in the fake social media ploys.

Take, for example, when I was filming a reality TV show and had a massive pimple pop up on my face—one I couldn't hide. No, it was there to make its presence known. Well, once the show finished filming and it began to air, there was this photo of me with that massive pimple on my face. I loved the photo minus the pimple, so I thought, *Well, I can easily take care of that—Photoshop!* I went in, erased that pimple off my face like it had never been there, and posted the photo on my social media.

Only to discover that, an hour later, the TV show posted the same photo *without* erasing the pimple. I started getting countless DMs and tweets calling me out for photoshopping my pimple. So genuine and real of me. Safe to say, I learned my lesson. It's better to be pimple-faced and real than to showcase fake perfect skin.

Many times over the years, I talked about how fake social media can be . . . but then the same day proceeded to post filtered photos. Maybe this doesn't seem like a big deal, but it bothers me when everyone wants to talk about a problem yet no one wants to be the one to do anything about it. In this case, everyone likes to talk about the false reality social media paints and the negative effects it has on consumers, but then everyone continues participating in the very thing they condemn. That hypocrisy left me feeling convicted, so I texted my friends and committed to posting only non-filtered photos from that day forward.

Social media isn't the only way we can become disillu-

sioned. Through music, movies, and shows, we've become desensitized to what's real. The lyrics of songs and the scenes on TV are just as capable of convincing us that lies are truth. I'm not here to scare you or to tell you to get rid of technology—I use it too—but I am here to bring truth and hopefully awareness. It's through ignorance that we fall for and settle for fake love. And honestly, a lot of people will be fooled. But they will continue to see that fake love won't last.

So, what are we to do? How do we avoid fake love? I think we should start by acknowledging the phoniness. When we feel ourselves longing for something we've seen or heard, we're capable of saying, "That isn't real life," and coaching our minds and hearts with the truth. For me, truth is God's words and standards.

It's time for us to be the exception, to stop complaining and start changing. Maybe you need a break from social media. Maybe you need a no-filter commitment. Maybe you need to change the type of music you're listening to or what you're watching—even if it's just for a period of time. If you don't like what you've been getting, do something about it. If others are okay with settling for a knockoff version of love, let them! It doesn't mean you have to. As for you and me, we are destined for God's best.

One of my favorite books about love, *Love Changes Everything*, says,

Falling in love with fake will always leave you frustrated, especially when it comes to fake love. There are numerous kinds of fake love that will catch your eye and that

you can pursue. But there is only one love that can radically and unapologetically tear down the filters of your heart and carry you until your last breath. There is only one love that can take away the urge to settle for anything less than all that you are called to be. There is only one love that can step into the darkest of nights and light up your whole life. There is only one love that violently repels fake. This love—real love—changes everything.³

We weren't made to settle for fake. We were made for real love, a lasting love.

REAL LOVE

My mom used to write notes to put in my lunch box—even through high school. She didn't want me to forget her love for me, even for a second. Every day, there would be some form of encouragement ending with "P.S. I LOVE YOU—Mom." The notes meant the most to me when I didn't deserve them or expect them—times when I was maybe rude to her or didn't show her much affection or appreciation, yet she still went out of her way to let me know that she loved me. It made me wonder, *What have I done to deserve love like this?*

Receiving her unconditional love brought me to a place of overwhelming gratitude. My mom was always there for me and always believed in me, even when I couldn't see anything in myself. She would tell me she loved me and why she loved

me, and she would remind me of who I am and what I am called to do. She showed me what real love is: A love that never withholds. A love not based on my response or performance. A love not based on feelings.

I remember the first time a guy ever told me, “I love you.” It scared me and I ran away. Granted, I was only five, but that didn’t change even when I was nineteen. But when I finally found the right love, I didn’t run. I didn’t hide. I accepted it and welcomed it. I remember when my now-husband, Grant, told me he loved me for the first time. We had been dating for only a couple of weeks. He was driving me home from a rehearsal dinner, and he pulled over on the side of the road. After he parked the car, he sat there staring straight ahead for a few minutes. Then finally he turned to me and said, “I can’t take it anymore, Madi. I know it feels soon, but I can’t hide it. . . . *I love you.*” With any other guy, this was when I would look off in the distance and then pat him on the shoulder and say, “Thank you!” But this felt different. This felt *real*. This felt *forever*. With a racing heart and sweaty palms, I grabbed his arm, looked him in the eye, and shared, “I love you too.” It was the first time I had ever said it back in the moment.

Our relationship is far from perfect. We have ups and downs. Good days and bad days. Moments of questioning the other person. We had our moments of praying, “God, is this your will?” and following up with “Are you sure?” But amid the hard moments and changing seasons, one thing we can say with confidence is this: “God brought it, God was in it, and God was for it.” It isn’t easy, but it is real. It isn’t perfect, but it is real. It isn’t a Hollywood movie, but it is real. It is real love.

The kind of love you may have heard about before. The kind of love that makes me want to be more like Jesus. The kind of love that pushes me closer to who I want to be. The kind of love that empowers me to make a difference in the lives of others. The kind of love described in 1 Corinthians 13:4–8:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails.

Love is patient and kind? Love is selfless and others focused? Love isn't reactive or resentful? Love trusts, protects, and hopes? That kind of love is bigger than you and me! And that kind of love is greater than what we can give on our own. That's why real love doesn't come from another imperfect human. The love you've been looking for doesn't come from a compliment, a like, a follow, a boyfriend. Real love is found only in relationship with God. He is the love you want.

I know what you're thinking: *Madi, you just finished telling us how Grant's love is real love . . . and now you're telling us that only God can offer us real love?* Okay, so you're right. Sort of. The love between Grant and me is so powerful and fulfill-

The love you've been looking for doesn't come from a compliment, a like, a follow, a boyfriend. Real love is found only in relationship with God.

ing and real *because* Christ is at its center. He's the foundation we've built our entire relationship on. I know that sounds kind of ambiguous—and *very* churchy. Let me try to explain it with another metaphor.

If you've ever been under the authority of a coach or director, you know how important it is that the person in charge knows what they're doing. You rely on them to help you—to teach you. They're your leader. I had a softball coach once who was about to retire. To say she was checked out of the experience would be putting it mildly. She never had our lineup ready, and half the time, she called us by the wrong names. Even the officials calling the game would sometimes look at her in bewilderment, like, *What are you even doing?* Although we were a talented team, we had a losing season.

To try to make a relationship work without God as its leader is like playing for a bad coach. You have no direction other than your fallible, culturally influenced human minds. And even though we are well intentioned, we don't know how to love each other well. We don't know how to love like 1 Corinthians 13 tells us to love. We need a leader—a coach. We need someone to look to in times of doubt, times of conflict, and times of temptation to make us better than we would be on our own.

That's why figuring out where you stand with God matters so much when it comes to loving others. Cultivating a connection with him is what sets you up to be successful in healthy relationships. Getting to know his character by reading his words and spending time with people who know him well helps you become more Christlike and, as a result, more loving.

Let me reiterate—what Grant and I have isn't perfect. But the leader of our relationship *is*. When we do get selfish or impatient or angry, we have a standard of love to look to that helps us make better choices in how we speak to and treat each other. This is true in dating *and* in friendships.

One of the wonderful ironies of learning to give and receive love in a relationship with God is that once you've established a firm foundation of who you are in God's esteem, finding a romantic relationship doesn't feel quite as pressing. You aren't as needy or desperate, because you've been completed by the realest love of all—the love of the One who created you.

Do you want to experience that love? It's the greatest decision I've ever made, and it's based on what Jesus did for you and me on the cross. If you haven't ever made that decision, take a moment, put this book down, and talk to him. Tell him your disappointments, your pain, even your anger toward who you think he is. He's not scared of your doubts or questions. I want you to experience the same love that I do with God, because only in that relationship will you find all the answers you've been looking for and fulfill all the longings you've been living with.

He wants to have a relationship with you. Yes, *you*. Maybe the reason you picked up this book is that he's calling out to you to stop striving and to surrender to his love. With him, you don't have to ask, "Does he love

I want you to experience the same love that I do with God, because only in that relationship will you find all the answers you've been looking for and fulfill all the longings you've been living with.

me? Even after all I've done?" The answer will always be "He loves you. He loves you always."

We know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God,
and God in them.

—1 John 4:16

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3

PICK ME

Know Your Worth

What do they have that I don't?

Will I ever get picked?

What do I have to do to be chosen?

Sororities are a big deal in Alabama, where I went to college. There's a week before school starts called rush, when sororities are introduced to students. Over the course of the week, sororities decide which girls they want to join them, and students decide which sorority they want to join.

I had all my outfits ready for rush. I wasn't worried—I was confident in my accomplishments. I had worked hard throughout high school, graduated with honors, and performed more than seventy-two hours of community service. I was also proud of my achievements in sports: four-time state champion in basketball, two-time MVP, and Player of the Year nominee.

There were two sororities at the forefront of my mind. My

friends and I had discussed it beforehand, and those were the ones we had decided on so we could be together. I thought, *They have to pick me!*

The week was long and tiring, as I had the same conversations over and over again, but I was excited and hopeful. The day finally arrived when I would get the card back from the Panhellenic rush committee. This card would list the five sororities that wanted me. From there, I would write out the top three sororities I wanted, in order of preference. But when I received my card, I thought there must have been a glitch in the system.

Neither of the sororities I had planned to be in with my friends was listed. *Ouch.*

I replayed the week in my mind. I thought everything had gone great. I was shocked and hurt. I texted my friends, “Did you get the two sororities we talked about?”

“Yes!” they replied. “Did you?”

I felt a deep pit in my stomach. *They got picked and I didn’t.*

Bid day came (the day you find out what sorority you’re in), and I was in an arena full of girls screaming with joy as they found out which sorority they got. As I stood, staring at my envelope, I couldn’t help but still feel rejected. All the other girls began to sprint toward their sorority home, and I was left standing there confused and embarrassed.

The thing is, I loved the sorority that chose me. I adored the girls. Under any other circumstances, I would have been one of the girls jumping up and down and running. My disappointment had everything to do with not being picked by the same sororities that chose my friends. What did the girls who

got picked have that I didn't? Why had they succeeded where I failed? Why did it feel like I was never the one getting chosen?

My mom texted to ask how I was feeling. She was on her way to meet me at my new sorority home. The truth was that I was beginning to believe the lie that because I'd been rejected and my friends had been accepted, I was somehow less valuable and had less to offer. While everyone else was out celebrating, I was crying in my mom's lap.

"Madi," she said, brushing the hair off my snot-smearred face, "I know you know this, but it might help if I remind you. Everything happens for a reason. God has a plan for you."

I nodded. "Mm-hmm."

"And you *did* get chosen," she said.

As usual, my mom was right. I nodded.

As the months passed, I grew to love the girls in my sorority and began to develop a heart for them and a close bond with them. Throughout that year there were many opportunities for me to encourage and love the girls around me, which opened my eyes to ministry. I started serving at my church, which ultimately led to my decision to join their Bible college. As I look back now, it's obvious that what felt like a deep rejection in the moment was really a blessing—one that played a major role in leading me to my purpose.

Through not getting picked by the group I thought I wanted, I was led to put my confidence and hope in God, not in a sorority or in the opinions of other people. But that realization didn't come overnight. It didn't even come over weeks. It would take years for me to understand just how valuable *not*

being picked would turn out to be. At the time, it felt like another one of the many rejections I'd experienced.

Have you ever had a moment like this when you felt like you weren't picked? What my mom reminded me is true for you, too, right now, whatever you're going through. You are picked. Because the God who created the heavens and the earth and everything in it has chosen you by name and has made you in his image. And only by knowing and believing that truth can we begin to understand our worth in him.

THE PICK-ME CYCLE

I wish I could tell you that I no longer struggle with wanting to be picked or wanting to be the first choice, but I would be lying to you. I still sometimes feel like I'm drowning in a never-ending sea of unworthiness, desperate for a breath of air, and to be honest, I don't always turn to the right things for that breath.

This cycle has played a role in just about every area of my life: my relationships, my job, my friendships, and more. In the pages ahead, I will tell you about how I continue to wrestle with this—but more importantly, I will tell you how God continues to rescue me from my insecurities.

DON'T BE A PICK-ME GIRL!

Maybe you've seen a girl trying to gain attention on social media, and someone will comment, "Stop being a pick-me

girl!” Or maybe you’ve seen it in real life. Maybe a friend has totally changed her look, her likes and dislikes, and even how she talks and acts to get attention or affirmation. Maybe, like me, you’ve been a pick-me girl yourself.

When I hear the phrase “pick me,” I don’t immediately think about social media and people suggesting that a girl is just thirsty for attention. Honestly, I think about middle school PE class. You know the moment I’m talking about—when the PE teacher picks two team captains, and the rest of the students must sit there, waiting and hoping to be picked. The captains alternately call out names of the people they want on their teams . . . and there you sit, thinking, *Ooookay. Is anybody ever going to pick me? There are only ten of us left. What if I’m chosen last? What if no one wants me? Oh no. Now four people left. Oh gosh. Please, somebody, choose me!*

Tell me I’m not the only one to have gone through this.

Have you found yourself in a place where you so desperately wanted that guy to notice you? You did everything you thought you needed to do to get his attention. You wore tighter clothes, you posted the hot pics, you even physically gave yourself to him . . . but he still didn’t choose you.

Or maybe you haven’t ever felt like you’re enough in your family’s eyes, so you did everything to get that “Way to go” or “I’m proud of you” or “I love you.” Maybe you’ve just never felt good enough at anything, so you keep performing and striving for that acceptance and belonging.

I’m pretty sure none of us want to be a pick-me girl. But how often are we waiting for someone to choose us and affirm us? Maybe you’re waiting for that job you always wanted to

land in your lap. Maybe you're waiting for an invitation to a party or for someone to swipe on your profile or for your crush to finally notice you.

I get it. I've always had to wrestle with this. *Will I make the team? Will he choose me? Will I get hired? Will they include me in their hangouts?* Being a pick-me girl is exhausting. And it robs us of so much. It robs us of peace. It robs us of contentment. But it also robs us of *time*—our most precious commodity. If you're always standing around, waiting to be picked, you may miss out on the meaningfulness of life or even the purpose you've already been chosen for.

Sometimes when people attempt to break free from the pick-me cycle, they go to the opposite extreme and think, *I don't need anybody. I will never give my heart away, because no one deserves it. I am all I need.* I want to be clear: That is not the message I believe, live out, or am here to encourage you with. That mindset will only leave you alone yet still feeling the same emptiness as before. You may think having those walls up keeps out all the bad, but it also keeps out all the good. It will cause you to miss out on the abundant life God has for you.

When we long for superficial acceptance, we're leaving our fate, happiness, and security in the hands of other people. We're allowing those who don't even know who they are to define who we are. Sometimes we will even shift who we are and what we're about for people whose lives we wouldn't necessarily model our own after. We don't always do this consciously either. We'll see someone else get attention for something—how they dress or what they spend their money

on—so we'll do the same things, even if that's not really us. And we do this because we aren't confident in our own identity. Some of us have no idea who we really are, because we've been so busy being what we think will get us the most affirmation and attention. In other words, we've lost our sense of self.

Do you value yourself? Or do you only hope others will? Why should someone else give you what you don't even give yourself? The more you value something, the higher your expectations are of how it's to be treated. It's time to start placing a high value on ourselves. Not desperate, but confident. Not striving, but secure. And don't worry—we're going to be talking a lot more about this as we go on!

But here's where it starts: It's time to discover how valuable we truly are, because only then can we walk in the fullness of all God has to offer and who he has called us to be! We must learn to love ourselves so we can truly love the one life we have to live on earth and so we can give love to the world around us.

GET YOUR OWN JACKET!

Have you ever gone shopping with a mission? By that I mean, you head to the mall with an hour to shop and a picture on your phone of *the* item you're looking for. Yet as you shop around, you find everything except the one thing you need. Why does it feel like this happens to me all the time?

You may remember this story from my last book. I went shopping at Forever 21, where I was looking for this specific jacket that I really wanted.¹ After looking around for a long

time, I couldn't find it, but I did find a bunch of sweaters and sweatshirts I liked. When I walked into the dressing room to try them on, hanging on the hook inside was the coolest jacket I had ever seen. *Destiny. It was meant for me.*

I could have picked any dressing room, but I had chosen this one. And the jacket I wanted was right there waiting. Now all I needed to do was make sure it fit. I tried it on. It fit like a glove. *Could this be more perfect?* I forgot all about the other clothes and decided I would make only one purchase that day. I chose to keep the jacket on to show it off. When I walked out of the dressing room, I noticed a girl staring at me strangely. At first, I thought, *Oh, she's jealous of my jacket—I would be too!* But she kept looking, so I became a little nervous. I asked her if everything was okay, and she said, "Well, you walked into my dressing room, and now you're wearing my jacket."

I don't think I spoke for a solid three minutes. I felt so awkward. I took off the jacket and slowly handed it to her. We ended up laughing and joking about the situation, and I eventually found a similar one.

I tell this story a lot when I speak, because it's the perfect picture for a common human tendency: *How often do we try on other people's lives because they look better than our own?* We like what they have—the Insta-worthy house, the cool job, the Prince Charming, the big following, the perfect family. We want those things for ourselves, and we think, *Her life is so much better than mine, so I'll just try to be her.* Maybe we feel the pressure from society to compromise who we are, and we think that if we wear *her* "jacket," we will finally be accepted or feel like we're enough.

Or maybe it's a situation where we aren't trying to wear other people's jackets but people keep placing jackets on us. And these jackets look like other people's labels and expectations. At this point, we look in the mirror and we don't even recognize ourselves. We don't even know who we are anymore.

When I came off reality TV, I felt intense pressure. I was bombarded by so many opinions and judgments. Words were thrown at me that I wouldn't dare repeat—some of the meanest things you've ever heard. It would have been easy for me to succumb to those words or feel the pressure to change myself and my convictions to be more accepted or liked. It would have been easy for me to fall back into that moment of young Madi in the bathroom stall. But during it all, I had people around me who reminded me of who I was and encouraged me in my purpose. It wasn't always easy, but I chose to walk confidently in that, even with opposition around me.

This pressure to conform, to compromise, to compete and compare threatens who we are at our very core, and if we aren't quick to catch ourselves, we can easily be shaped into people we didn't plan on becoming. I don't want to see a generation of girls and young women who have been pressured to perform or prove their worth, who are living unaware, just following the next trend, and who don't even have their own voice anymore.

What about you? Do you feel it too? Have you ever been overwhelmed with the pressure to be someone else? So much so that you've lost your sense of identity? Maybe you feel you've lost the special thing that makes you *you*, or you feel you're the same as the next girl?

In the same way my mom and my friends have my back when I feel under attack, I want to encourage you to keep on being you. I want to remind you how special and unique *you* are.

You see, there will be a lot of obstacles to overcome as we learn to fight for our identity and love ourselves. Pressures, questions of purpose, and misplaced sources of identity can get in our way. Just as I stumbled into someone else's dressing room, we can get stuck staring in the mirror, wearing clothes and lives that don't belong to us. But it's time to see the beauty within ourselves. It's time to "wear our own jacket" proudly! It's time to know who we are and what we have to offer.

Until we learn to love who we are, we won't be able to experience true contentment, freedom, and confidence. We won't be able to receive other people's love to the degree we were designed to. We won't be able to love other people to the degree we desire to. Until we love ourselves well, we can't expect to be loved or to love others well. The only way to be truly confident and secure the way you crave is to realize who you belong to. In knowing who you belong to, you realize who you are. In realizing who you are, you know you have nothing to prove, so you don't need the validation or acceptance of other people, because you already belong.

Until we love ourselves well, we can't expect to be loved or to love others well.

Do you know who you belong to?

I can't separate my confidence and security from knowing who I belong to—and that's God. The more I grow in my relationship with him, the more confident and secure I become. As I

study the Bible, listen to his people, and spend time talking to him, my thought processes become healthier, my heart becomes less dependent on external affirmation, and I feel more at ease with who I am.

Look, I don't know where you stand on the topic of God, but for me, belonging begins and ends with him. I believe I am created by God on purpose *for* a purpose. I believe that about you too. Maybe you're not there yet—maybe you aren't sure about the whole God thing. If that's you, I'm glad you're here. There's a ton in this book that applies to you the same as it would apply to anyone else. But if you aren't sure who you belong to or why you're here, that's where you need to start.

THE LOADED QUESTIONS

When we struggle with our sense of belonging and identity, we may torture ourselves with some loaded questions. See if any of these feel familiar.

1. Am I Hard to Love?

I can't tell you how many times throughout my life I've asked myself if I'm hard to love. In other words, *Is there something wrong with me?* It seemed like everyone around me paired off with long-term boyfriends so easily. Then, in my early twenties, all my friends started getting engaged. Weddings and baby showers followed, and I felt like there was a secret to finding love that was eluding me. Because I felt different from

those around me, I immediately began to doubt what was inside me. I thought, *Maybe they have something I don't.*

I thought maybe there was some reason everyone else was getting picked to become girlfriends, fiancées, and wives. Maybe there was something undesirable about me. Something that screamed “Don’t pick her!” or a label across my forehead that told everyone to keep looking. I carried this perspective for a long time, questioning my own worth because other people didn’t seem to be able to see it. I based my value on other people’s acceptance of me. If I had to guess, you’ve done that, too, at some point in your life. Maybe you’re even doing it right now.

Instead of asking, *Am I hard to love?* we should ask, *Do I have a hard time loving myself?* For so many of us, the rejection we’ve experienced feeds the lie that we are no longer worthy of love from others. But what’s really happening is that somewhere along the way we’ve stopped loving ourselves and started believing we are unworthy. I’ve learned over the years that the questions *Am I hard to love?* and *What’s wrong with me?* have less to do with how others view and accept me and more to do with how I view and accept myself.

Learning to love yourself means that you don’t change yourself to be like someone else. You don’t compromise your values, convictions, standards, and likings to make someone else feel comfortable or to fit in with those around you. You don’t cave to other people’s expectations of you.

Loving yourself isn’t born from fear and people-pleasing, nor is it born from pride and self-centeredness. It’s born from a place of belonging, assurance, rest, and contentment. And if we learn to view ourselves the way that God views us, we don’t

long for acceptance and belonging; we love from acceptance and belonging. Read that again. We are not longing for belonging; we are loving from belonging. Loving yourself well means being confident no matter the circumstances, giving yourself grace when you mess up, cheering on others when they succeed, speaking words of life over yourself even when you don't feel it, and loving those around you.

In working through this and learning to love myself, even with my unique quirks and talents, failures and weaknesses, and loud and strong personality, *I've learned how to be confident in who I am by being comfortable with who I am not.*

If we learn to view ourselves the way that God views us, we don't long for acceptance and belonging; we love from acceptance and belonging.

We must learn to accept that even though we may look different, think differently, and dress differently from those around us, being different isn't a bad thing. Being different is what sets you apart and makes you special. Who wants to be normal? Normal is too common and too easy.

2. Am I Enough?

I've come to discover that in striving to be who we *think* we want to be, we lose the power we could have in embracing who we already are. When we bend ourselves to fit into someone else's mold, we become ineffective. Another truth is that we aren't ever going to feel like we're enough based on external standards. If we try to be, we will constantly be living off the highs and lows of other people's acceptance or our own performance, predicating our worth and value on external, uncontrollable, inconsistent factors.

I longed for something steadier, more constant. I longed for my confidence and view of myself to be unwavering, no matter what was going on around me. After I got my heart shattered in high school, I knew I had to do something different. I knew I couldn't escape hurt forever—that would be an unrealistic goal. But I also knew I had to change the way I perceived myself—Madi. Madi at face value. Madi with no makeup, no awards, and no boyfriend. *That* Madi needed a new measuring stick, because the one I had been using left me feeling worthless and unlovable.

One new habit I started was to pay attention to my thoughts about myself. Anytime I began thinking negatively about who I was or telling myself how dumb I had acted, I stopped those thoughts before they could take root in my mind and heart. I began to reject the constant condescension I treated myself with. After all, I would never talk to another person the way I was talking to myself, so it had to stop.

Instead, I started reminding myself of what I was good at. (Be forewarned if you try this practice, because it can feel a little uncomfortable at first.)

Madi, you are a good friend. Madi, you are loyal. Madi, you make your family proud.

But more important than what *I* thought about myself was what God thinks about me, so I also began reminding myself of what God says about Madi.

God says I am loved (Romans 8:38–39). God says I am wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14). God says I am worthy (Luke 12:6–7). God says I am chosen (John 15:16). God says I am enough (Ephesians 2:8–10).

It may not come naturally at first—it takes practice. But

replacing lies with truth over time rebuilds our brains and rewires our hearts to not rely on the world (or on guys) to find the love everybody wants. Because we already have that within ourselves—if we're willing to do the work to build those relationships within.

Left to my own thinking and my own will, I am not enough. But God within me is. He is more than enough. This means those mistakes you've made, the things that have happened to you, the experiences of being rejected, the times someone walked out on you, the moments of watching everyone else be happy, and the seasons of heartbreak that left you questioning "Am I enough?" don't define you and can't hold you back from who you're becoming and where you're going. With God, we are loved, chosen, and full of purpose. And we can say with confidence, "Because of God, I am enough."

3. Will I Ever Be Picked?

Before I started college, I thought it would be a good idea to compete in a pageant. I'm not exactly sure why. I guess it was another pick-me moment where I wanted to excel and be affirmed. Looking back, I can say pageants are not my thing, but hey, at least I tried!

I got all my dresses and necessities for the pageant. I worked with a pageant coach to learn everything I didn't know—which was *a lot*. Quite frankly, I had no idea what I was doing. I was going in hopeful but ignorant. A lot of girls dressed to the nines, hoping their beauty and status would win them the title. I found a girl who seemed to also be confused about everything going on, and I walked up to her, grabbed her hand,

and said, “We’re going to be friends.” Thankfully, we got paired up to room together!

The next few days were nothing short of uncomfortable, but I stayed confident and hopeful. Competition day arrived, and my friends and family all came out to support me. The part I was the most nervous about was walking in heels. I was a basketball player. I didn’t wear heels. Yet I mustered up the courage, did the initial walk on the runway in front of the judges and crowd, and thought, *Wow, that wasn’t too bad.*

After my walk, I made my way downstairs to the dressing room to change into my evening gown. I looked at myself in the mirror and hyped myself up. I said a few prayers. I rehearsed the walk, making sure I wouldn’t get my heels caught in my dress. Next thing I knew, my one pageant friend came down yelling, “Madi! Where have you been? You just missed your swimsuit walk!” *Well, great. There goes my chance at placing.* I knew my mom and dad were thinking, *Where is she? We spent a small fortune on a swimsuit just for her to miss her walk?* I’m sure the judges were confused when they called my name and no one walked out.

I laughed and said, “Well, I guess I still gotta finish this thing.” So, I went out in my evening gown when it was time and just had fun with it. But still, I couldn’t get over the fact that my friends and family came to this pageant to watch me, and my parents spent all this money on me, only for me to miss my swimsuit walk because I was in the dressing room hyping myself up. Iconic.

I wonder how many times I’ve done that—how many times

I've been so focused on the act of performing that I've missed out on moments of experience. How often have I been so preoccupied by the wrong things that I've been distracted from my goals and purpose? We live in a world that gives us ample opportunity to look any direction besides straight ahead. But that's where our focus is the most helpful—the most needed. Being present in the *right now* of our lives is critical to experiencing life fully.

My friend and I stood beside each other when they began calling out the girls who placed. I wasn't surprised I wasn't called. When the pageant ended, my friend and I hugged each other and laughed. I said, "I don't think pageants are our thing." She nodded in agreement.

I looked at my parents and said, "Can we please go eat some doughnuts?" I was so happy it was over and I could finally eat whatever I wanted again!

It's safe to say I understood why I wasn't picked, and even though it was still a little embarrassing, I realized the role I played in it. I have several friends who are in the pageant circuit, and they are incredible at it. It wasn't the pageant; it wasn't the judges—it was me! Sometimes we are quick to blame other people for our insecurities or feelings of unworthiness when we should look at ourselves a little more closely and pay attention to the role we might have played.

Thankfully, though, God isn't sitting up on a chair made of clouds, looking down, watching our every move, and picking us based on our performance. He doesn't pick us based on our looks or efforts. So many of us are striving and straining, just

hoping and praying someone will acknowledge and affirm us, when, in reality, we have already been picked. We were already chosen when we were created and placed on this earth.

Again, I don't know where you stand on the topic of God and if you believe you are his unique creation, but I would encourage you to take those doubts or curiosities to the Bible—or to a believer you know and trust who can answer your questions or point you in the right direction.

Yes, you were chosen. You were chosen before you were even created (Jeremiah 1:5). And, yes, you were made for love—the love of the One who created you.

Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.

—BRENÉ BROWN, *The Gifts of Imperfection*

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