



MISS BRENDA

and the

Loveladies

One woman's brush with prison...

A community of women fighting the odds for survival on the outside...

A Heartwarming True Story of Grace, God, and Gumption

BRENDA SPAHN
and
IRENE ZUTELL

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WATERBROOK
P R E S S

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MISS BRENDA AND THE LOVELADIES
PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS
12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200
Colorado Springs, CO 80291

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Some names in this book have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

Hardcover ISBN 978-0-307-73217-0
eBook ISBN 978-0-307-73218-7

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Jacket design by Mark D. Ford; jacket photography by Jeanne Carreker

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House LLC, New York, a Penguin Random House Company.

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The Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file with the Library of Congress.

Printed in the United States of America
2014—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*To my husband, Jeff Spahn, my children,
my twenty grandchildren, and my two great-grandchildren,
who have loved and supported me in who I am
rather than in who they wanted me to be.*

*To Jason, my wonderful stepson, my hero
behind the scenes, who is now with the Lord.*

*To all the women of the Lovelady Center—
those who are alive, and those who have died.*

*And to Don McGriff, who is now with the Lord,
and who was with us in the early days.*

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Introduction

Make sure you are doing what God
wants you to do—then do it
with all your strength.

GEORGE WASHINGTON

I was raised in a trailer. My parents struggled to feed and clothe me. Because I grew up without having much, I promised myself one day I'd be very rich.

Decades later, I had built a successful business. I finally had what I could only dream of as a child—a big house, fancy cars, expensive jewelry, and all the material things I could ever want.

At the height of success, I found myself under investigation for a crime I didn't commit. I faced the possibility of a lengthy prison sentence. All those possessions I had accumulated and cherished I was likely to lose. I had always felt I was in control of my life and my destiny. Once I was at the mercy of the legal system, I realized I was in control of nothing.

I lost my business, but I found another calling. I lost my riches, but I discovered riches of the spirit. I lost my faith in the system, but I discovered another faith—a faith in things that never depreciate or corrode or collapse. I found faith in God and the indomitable power of redemption—for myself and for a group of incarcerated women who'd been catastrophically abused by the system, by spouses, by parents, and by themselves.

Instead of chasing the American Dream, rehabilitating these women became

my career. I learned that within each of them—even the most terrifyingly brutal felons—dwelled an undeniable spark of the divine.

Junkies, grifters, armed robbers, prostitutes, drunks, dealers, and murderers became my new social circle. They were former inmates of the Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women in Wetumpka, Alabama—another monolithic bureaucracy that warehoused the forgotten until they disappeared, returned, or died. Its motto could have been “Abandon hope.”

They became the Loveladies. In the beginning, no name would have been more improbable. In time, no name could have been more fitting.

This is my story.

This is their story.

Meet the Loveladies.

Have I Lost My Mind?

Fear is faith that it won't work out.

ELBERT HUBBARD

O h my Lord, what have I done!" I gasped. I stared out the kitchen window as six violent criminals stomped up my driveway. Hunter, my four-year-old adopted son, stood on tiptoes trying to get a glimpse of what had me so terrified.

"Your mama has messed up big-time," I said.

For the last month, I had pictured this moment time and time again—but it had looked very different. In my imagination, the women would skip up the driveway, giggling and talking excitedly. I'd open the door with a loud "Welcome!" and women would race toward me, enveloping me in big, grateful bear hugs. After they'd thanked me profusely for being so wonderful, we'd sit around the kitchen table, have lunch, drink tea, share laughs, and get to know each other.

But these women stomping up my driveway didn't look like they wanted tea. They looked like they wanted blood.

Had I lost my mind?

Jeff, my husband, had predicted this. "You'll get yourself killed, Brenda," he said when I first told him my plan to rehabilitate female convicts. "You've had a lot of wild schemes in your life, but this is the craziest I've ever heard." Yes, but a lot of my schemes had worked out, and besides, this was different. This time it wasn't about me.

Now six very scary women, just released from the roughest women's prison in the country, were in my driveway.

I thought I had figured it all out. After spending months helping female convicts at a work release center, I thought I understood them. I had spoken with the inmates, we had prayed together, and they had seemed genuine in their desire to turn their lives around and start over.

But now I doubted everything. How could I have been so stubborn, so driven, so foolish? *How could I have put my little boy in danger?*

The night before, I'd combed through their "jackets"—prison files—and discovered with horror that the parole board wasn't sending me the nonviolent offenders I'd visited at the work release center. Instead, the women who had just shown up in front of my house had spent, collectively, one hundred years behind bars for crimes such as armed robbery, possession, drug dealing, prostitution, and manslaughter. I found out later that these were the hopeless cases—cases stamped CANNOT BE REHABILITATED—that all other programs had rejected.

At the work release center, I helped women who were struggling to get their lives together. But the women coming to my home were so hardened, so dangerous, that the system had given up on them. These were not the women I had bargained for.

I was supposed to rehabilitate them? For the next nine months to a year?

I wrapped my arms tight around Hunter. I should have dropped him off with the nanny, but I had been running late. My heart pounded so hard I was sure Hunter could hear it beating. I didn't want to scare him, so I took a breath and tried to find a portion of calm.

It wasn't that I hadn't prepared. I'd hired a housemother, a cook, and a driver. I owned a six-thousand-square-foot house with seven bedrooms and six bathrooms on ten acres of property that no one lived in. Hob Hill was perfect: it would become my "whole-way" house for parolees as they transitioned into the real world.

This is a good plan, I reassured myself.

These women would learn a skill and receive counseling, therapy, and, if need be, treatment for addiction. Since my program was faith-based, I'd teach

them about Jesus, His unconditional love, the power of faith, and the reality of redemption. Then I'd get in my Cadillac Escalade and hightail it back to my new home in a gated community a few miles away.

I reminded myself that I was just supervising this program. You see, I'd be able to supervise it without really getting my hands dirty. I wouldn't give up my whole life. This would be more a hobby than a vocation.

And this is how I'll be able to keep that promise I made.



Much of my family had been understandably furious with me for pressing forward with my plan, but Melinda, my twenty-eight-year-old, caught my passion and crazy vision. She and I had spent the last month preparing for the women's arrival. I bought couches, chairs, and tables for the common areas and beds, comforters, dressers, and night tables for the seven bedrooms. I painted the rooms in calming colors—blues, yellows, and every shade of purple. Each bedroom was named after a fruit of the Spirit—joy, peace, self-control, love, patience, kindness, goodness—which I'd carefully painted on the bedroom doors. Each room had color-matching comforters and thick bath towels. I'd decorated the rooms with paintings—many of my favorite getaway, the beach—and supplied them with empty frames so the women could fill them with photographs of their children and families.

I put the word out to churches that I was looking to hire a cook, a driver, and, most important, a housemother who would run the program in my absence.

I soon found the perfect housemother—Claudia. She was forty-eight, single, big, and strong with a gruff, no-nonsense attitude. She had spent time volunteering at the work release center. When I met with her, she told me that God had called her into prison ministry and she was ready to get started.

I asked if the thought of working with female ex-cons frightened her. She laughed as if I'd asked the most insane question. "I'll take tigers by the tail," she said. "This is the work I was meant to do. I'm not afraid. It's my calling. I know I am going to change lives. The Lord sent me to do this."

I hired Claudia on the spot. She was so excited that she hired a moving company to haul all her bedroom and living room furniture into the upstairs master suite and office area. After she surveyed her new home, she nodded. “This is where I’m meant to be.”

Likewise I’d hired a cook and a driver.

I could make this work. I *had* to make this work. For months I’d pleaded with the parole board to release women into my custody so I could help them get their lives back on track. I had told the board their system didn’t work and needed an overhaul. After all, 30 percent of the women released from Alabama prisons returned to prison within the first six months.

They laughed at me. “What do you know about rehabilitating these women?”

“I know that giving them ten dollars and a bus ticket is just about the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard. I know I can do better.”

In Alabama, there were only two options for newly released prisoners: They’d get their ten bucks and transportation back to where they committed their crimes. In a short time they’d go back to old ways with old friends. Or they’d spend a few weeks in a halfway house, where they’d receive food and shelter but little else, then be put back on the street.

No matter their destination—bus ticket home or halfway house—once they were released, these women had one thing in common: they had no hope. And they had no hope because they couldn’t envision a future outside of prison.

To me, the solution was obvious. My whole-way house would be a place where they could change their lives by learning skills and receiving counseling. We would give them a picture of a future they themselves could create, one in which they could succeed.

I have always considered myself visionary, but the parole board used a different term—delusional. Ultimately I wore them down and they finally agreed, probably just to make me go away.

Now I realized they were trying to teach me a lesson. I was sure they were having a big laugh about it: *“I wonder if that crazy redhead is scared senseless yet. How long until she calls us to take them all back?”*



I crouched lower and squinted through the window, hoping the awnings outside shielded me from the women's view. My eyes landed on the scariest-looking woman I'd ever seen in my life. Was she even a woman? With a shaved head, baggy khakis, and an extra large navy-blue prison-issued polo shirt that covered her tanklike physique, she resembled a gangbanger looking for trouble. Her fists were clenched, and her eyes blazed with fury.

Why is she so angry? Doesn't she see how great her life is about to become?

The other women were right behind her. She was the gang leader and they were her loyal followers, standing so close to each other they appeared connected—an impenetrable wall about to storm my house. A heavyset woman who seemed devoid of the fury the rest possessed stopped to gawk at my home. Shaved Head snapped her face toward her and the woman's expression immediately turned grim.

Ken, the driver of the van who had shuttled the women from prison to my place, opened the back of the truck. The women collected their belongings. One by one, each woman pulled out a brown paper sack with her name written large in black marker. A paper sack! These were all their possessions in the whole world!

My heart sank. *What about clothes? shoes? things?* I hadn't realized they'd show up with next to nothing. In my naivety, I thought they'd spend most of today unpacking their belongings.

They were almost at the door—and I was paralyzed. Melinda, who hadn't been watching them through the window and had no idea what awaited her, realized I wasn't moving, so she headed to the door.

Dear Melinda, what have I gotten you into, and why are you so calm?

Of all the people in our family, Melinda was the one who had the most personal interest in my crazy dream. To be fair, my husband Jeff *couldn't* be there at Hob Hill—he needed to provide income for our family, and our real estate business was located more than four hours away in Gulf Shores. But Jeff, who'd been

through plenty of “harebrained Brenda schemes” before, was admittedly not a fan of my “whole-way” idea, even as he tried to be supportive of me.

Melinda was the one who, ever since she’d been a little girl, had always been by my side. At eleven, she’d sit next to my desk and answer the phone as I filed clients’ tax returns. When she was old enough, she worked with me. When I started helping women at the work release center, she had accompanied me. She was just as passionate as I was to help women turn their lives around.

I hadn’t mentioned to Melinda that these women might be different from the work release darlings we’d worked with. Apprehensive as I had become from reading the files, I still held out hope that things would work out fine. But one glimpse of the crew of ex-cons who had just shown up shook me. Melinda had spent her life trusting me. Now she was an unwitting partner in my crazy scheme.

She opened the door wide.

I scooted toward her. “Welcome to my home,” I blurted out, forcing a big smile.

The women glared at me. I waited for someone to say something. Instead, they pushed into the house, squeezing through the door in one massive pile. They forced themselves past me as if I wasn’t even there.

I wanted to stop everything and yell out an order: *Get out of my house and get back in the van!* Maybe I could just give them some lunch and send them off, saying this was a big mistake.

Shaved Head came so close to me I could feel her breath on my face. I squeezed Hunter.

“I ain’t gonna be no maid in a little white apron for you,” she spat out, her voice growing louder with each word. “What the h***’s a g**d***** white woman gonna do with us? Lady, what kinda sh** do you think you’re playing?”

Sharon “Shay” Curry. Even though she looked different from the photo in the prison jacket (she had hair back then), I recognized her. She was a forty-five-year-old black woman who’d been in and out of prison her whole life. She’d done it all—armed robbery, dealing and using drugs, prostitution, attempted murder.

Dear God, attempted murder!

Shay's nostrils flared and her eyes bore into me. I watched the other women study her. I could tell they were taking their cues from Shay. In the short time they'd been together—probably since the van ride over—Shay had become the unofficial ringleader.

I knew if I didn't win Shay over there would be no way to right this ship.

Where was Claudia? She'd been watching as the van pulled into my driveway, but I had no idea where she'd gone. It was her job to get the women settled into their rooms—not mine or Melinda's. Claudia, I told myself, would get the situation under control. She'd know how to handle Shay.

I took a deep breath, finally answering Shay, speaking as calmly as possible: "Well, I'm gonna help you get your life in order."

As soon as the words slipped out, I knew I'd made a mistake.

"You don't know sh** about me, lady," Shay hissed. "You're just some crazy white lady. How the h*** do you think you're gonna do that? What do you think you're going to do for me?"

My chest tightened and I felt dizzy. I scanned the room, searching for Claudia. The truth was, I didn't have any plans beyond getting these women into the house and introducing myself. In prison, every second of the day is scheduled. I had wanted to give the women a little breathing room. But already Shay was in my face, angrily demanding answers.

"What do you think you're gonna do, lady?"

I panicked and said just about the stupidest thing I could ever say: "I'm going to help you get your driver's license."

The women burst into laughter.

Shay looked like she'd just bit into something so vile she might be sick. "I've been driving my whole life, lady. I don't need no driver's license."

And then I said the second dumbest thing I could possibly say: "Well, how do you get insurance without a license?"

There was another fit of laughter. These women had thought they'd seen it all, but they'd never met a flaming-red-haired fifty-five-year-old woman like me before. I knew they had determined right then that I was a complete idiot.

I had an uprising on my hands. *Where will we hide if they get violent?*

I had to regain some kind of control before Shay took over my house.

“Oh, I forgot,” I said, managing an edge of sarcasm. “You’re all about breaking the law.” I rolled my eyes. “You’re real tough guys.”

They stared at me, their mouths hanging open, shocked that I’d sassed Shay back. I was shocked too but couldn’t help it—throughout my life my big mouth has gotten me into a lot of trouble. But occasionally it saves the day. I was praying that was the case now. Melinda shot me a look that said, *What are you thinking?* Then she turned toward the women and broke the ice. “Okay, ladies,” she said, smiling sweetly, “how about I show y’all your rooms?”

The women followed Melinda down the hallway. Some gasped at the bedrooms I had decorated for them. After years of living in a cramped dorm with 160 other women, these rooms with one, two, or three beds or bunkbeds seemed to them like paradise. From the corner of my eye, I saw two of them claim one of the downstairs bedrooms. I watched them stifle giggles as they ran down the hall to fetch their paper bags of belongings.

Ken, the driver, was a director for alternative treatment programs at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). During the last few weeks he’d become an advocate, helping me prepare my house for the women. He must have thought I was doing fine because I had a big smile plastered on my face. Truth was, my smile was frozen. You’ve heard of people being scared silly? I was scared *smiling*.

He smiled back. “I’m taking off,” he called out. “Is there anyone who wants to leave with me?” I heard some of the women giggling from the bedrooms.

“No!” one called out from a bedroom. “We’re not going anywhere,” others said. Shay stood silently in the hallway, her arms folded.

“What about you?” Ken asked Shay.

Go, I silently begged. Tell him you want to leave. Now. I can handle these other women, but not you. Get your butt in that van. I never want to see you again.

Shay scowled at Ken but didn’t answer.

“Shay? You coming with me?”

Stop asking and just flippin' take her! I wanted to scream.

"Shay?"

There was a heavy silence. I could feel my future in that void. *If she leaves, I stand a chance. If she stays, I'm doomed to fail.*

"I'll stay," she said, as if she were doing us all a big favor.

And with that, Ken left me in a big house with five female ex-cons and one ringleader from hell.



Shay and the other women headed upstairs to check out the remaining bedrooms with Melinda. As soon as they disappeared, I heard the click of a door unlocking. Claudia ran out, stopping in her tracks when she saw me.

"Where have *you* been?" I asked. "I need you to help Melinda."

Claudia didn't move. Gone was the tough broad who was going to take the tigers by the tail. In her place was a timid woman whose eyes were filled with panic.

"I quit," she choked out.

I laughed. "You can't quit."

"I just did. And you should too. You're going to get yourself and your family killed."

Claudia couldn't do this to me. I had a plan—she would run the program, the cook would cook, the driver would drive, taking the women wherever they needed to go. And me? I'd check in once in a while and make sure they were all doing their jobs. "I'm not even going to be there," I told Jeff and my family when they expressed concern that I was putting myself in danger.

I tried to sound calm, but I was a wreck. My heart pounded, and I thought I might collapse. I steadied my voice: "You told me God called you to work with these women. He wouldn't just change His mind."

"The Lord might want me to work with prisoners, but not *these* prisoners! You're crazy. I want nothing to do with this insanity."

I opened my mouth to beg her to stay, but she swatted her hand in the air, turned, and ran off.

Just as she left, the cook and the driver came out from wherever they had been hiding. They too raced out the front door.

I stood in the living room, holding Hunter tight and paralyzed with all kinds of fear. I'd always had a plan, a next move. Now, for the first time I could remember, I had no idea what to do. I prayed for guidance. I prayed for answers. I prayed that these women wouldn't kill me.

Was God listening to any of my prayers? Or had He quit on me too?



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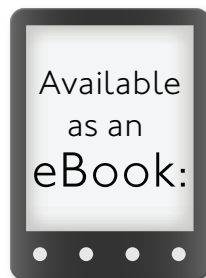
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