

PURSuing LOVE, FAITH, & MOUNT EVEREST
FOR A GREATER PURPOSE

A HIGHER CALLING

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CAPTAIN HAROLD & RACHEL EARLS
OF THE EARLS FAMILY VLOGS

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Contents

Prologue	00
1 The First Message	00
2 Love at First Phone Call	00
3 “We’re All a Little Weird. And Life Is a Little Weird”	00
4 A Million Times Yes	00
5 A Dangerous Dream	00
6 Short End of the Stick	00
7 When Nothing Is Certain, Everything Is Possible	00
8 The West Point Girlfriend	00
9 No Food, No Cake, No Condoms	00
10 An Extra Seventeen Swiss Francs for the Funeral	00
11 That Could Have Been Me	00
12 The Dirty Truth of Achieving Big Dreams	00

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13 Promises I Can't Keep	00
14 The What-Ifs, the How Comes, and the Why Me's	00
15 Beautiful Things Along the Way	00
16 Summit Fever	00
17 The Death Zone	00
18 Snow Blind	00
19 Dancing with Death	00
20 Homecoming	00
21 Ranger School	00
22 The Next Adventure	00
 Epilogue	 00
Acknowledgments	00

Prologue

My husband might die.

I'm wide awake, lying on my back, staring at the ceiling in an unfamiliar room, while these four words loop in my head. I am staying with a friend and fellow military wife in Colorado. Earlier in the day, I tried to keep my composure. But now, in the quiet darkness, I can't hold back my tears. The worry has set in strong, as this possibility feels very real. Much too real.

Harold might die.

My husband, my best friend and the love of my life, chose to leave me to climb a massive mountain halfway across the world . . . and he wasn't even a climber when I met him three years ago!

We haven't been married for a full year yet. I decided I couldn't sit at home waiting for Harold. I wanted my own story and my own adventure. I needed a change of pace if I was going to keep my sanity. I didn't want to stop living a full life and feel stuck in a period of waiting. My plan was to make the most of our time apart, so I embarked on my own trip, leaving Georgia and flying to Colorado, with plans to continue on to several other spots.

Harold had called me a few hours earlier from Mount Everest's Advanced Base Camp. He'd sounded exhausted as he told me about

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the significant snowstorm headed his way, forcing his team to climb back down to a lower elevation. I know with bad weather conditions, a tired body, and many hours of descending in low visibility, the chances of something going wrong are significantly higher.

I was feeling okay until I received an email from Tommy, Harold's best friend and their team's camp manager. I open it again, noting the parts that stand out.

I woke up this morning to a snowstorm at Base Camp. . . .

I do not know how extreme this snowstorm is up there but can imagine it has been significant. . . .

They are currently snowed in at ABC. . . .

The snow will delay any movement for several days. . . .

The trails are currently under snow and avalanches will be more prevalent with the fresh powder. . . .

Please pray that the weather clears up for our team and the others at higher camps and that everybody makes smart decisions, as I expect they will. . . .

Tommy's email says movement is delayed, yet I know they are pressing on. Is my husband making a bad decision—perhaps a fatal one?

I'm terrified. I don't know when I'll hear from him next, if at all.

I am trying to be strong. To enjoy my own adventures. But deep down, I'm afraid of being left alone. I fear if something does happen, I will blame Harold for making the choice to leave. Or maybe I'll blame myself for letting him go.

These aren't the typical worries of a twenty-four-year-old newlywed, but they are my reality until Harold is finally home and in my arms. Every day I'm realizing how precious and fragile life is

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and what truly matters. It's not the material things, the success, the money, or our physical appearances. It's the people we love.

The little moments count.

Living with that truth in the forefront of your mind changes you. It's changing me. I am starting to approach life with an attitude of thanksgiving, even in the midst of my trials. I realize my time with Harold is limited, and time is better spent being joyful and living in love than living in anger, frustration, or stress. I remind myself something I have told others: *You are capable of more than you can imagine. And with God by your side, you will always come out stronger!*

It would be easy to let fear take over, but I'm not going to allow fear to write my story. I won't be controlled by my current circumstances. Tonight, I choose faith over fear. Just like I did this morning. Just like I will do again tomorrow and the next day and the next. Until Harold is back with me and we are facing our next adventure together.

As I lie in bed, wiping the tears off my cheeks, I think about all those moments early in our relationship, and I realize something. Little moments can turn out to be big moments, the life-changing ones. Like being contacted out of the blue by a stranger who turns out to be the love of your life . . .

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The First Message

HAROLD

Spoiler alert! I didn't choose the princess. This love story is a bit more unconventional. In this tale, the guy meets the gal, falls in love, and instead of conquering the dragon, takes off to conquer the world's tallest mountain, leaving her to question if there will even be a happily ever after.

For my entire childhood, I was dead certain I would meet a girl and it would be love at first sight. No question about it. I was sure God had a grand, crazy plan for the way I was going to meet my wife.

I grew up knowing what I wanted out of life and never being scared to go after it. Wild adventures filled my bucket list, from visiting the Maasai tribe on the plains of Africa to exploring the Amazon Rainforest. However, climbing Mount Everest topped the list.

I don't hold back from dreaming big, and once I have a dream in mind, I can't stop thinking about it until I make it happen. If I say I'm going to do something, I will do it or literally die trying. I can't say that's the healthiest way to live, especially if the dream is deadly

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and means leaving behind the ones you love, but that's who I am.

I had just started my sophomore year at the United States Military Academy at West Point. I was playing baseball and was part of the Corps of Cadets.

One weekend I was able to get away and meet my best friend, Tommy, at Disney World. It wasn't long before I made eye contact with a very pretty girl. She had long hair and attracted quite a crowd. Kids flocked around her, staring as they waited in line to talk to her. She was none other than Princess Jasmine.

As Tommy and I passed, she looked straight at me in her turquoise two-piece and waved. Or maybe she was motioning for the little kids to walk around us. Either way, I immediately got butterflies.

Maybe she's the one, I thought.

After she was done signing all the kids' booklets and foreheads, she walked up to us and smiled. "Are you boys too nervous to talk to a princess?"

I fainted. No, not really, but I felt like I could have. Jasmine must cast spells in addition to granting wishes, because I was hooked! I finally got my nerve up, chased her down, and asked her on a date. *Take that, Aladdin!* Maybe it was a little cocky of me to think God had set aside a literal princess for me, but nothing is too big for God!

After my date with Princess Jasmine, though, I realized there wasn't much there besides an initial physical attraction. I knew the type of relationship I wanted would require a deeper emotional connection and a foundation rooted in God. I imagine God chuckles at us when we think we have it all figured out according to our own master plans, when what we really need to do is loosen our grip on being in control and see what He has in store for us.

Little did I know, God had someone for me who far exceeded any princess I could have dreamed of. Instead, she was an everyday, sweatpants-wearing, brownie-loving, strong, independent, God-

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fearing woman. She didn't wear makeup often, she rarely woke up before nine in the morning, and her car was usually missing a hubcap. But, man, did I fall head over heels for her . . . and fast.

RACHEL

Let's all take a moment to laugh at the fact that Harold thought Princess Jasmine is the one who grants wishes. The genie would be so offended! That's my husband for you: master of mixing up story lines and butchering song lyrics. I can't say those were qualities I was looking for in a spouse, but I've come to love his quirks.

When I began looking for a partner in life, it was important to me to find someone who was ambitious and passionate about working toward his goals, and, boy, did I find him. I met a man who believed big dreams were possible and chased them down with everything he had. This relentless drive, a quality that made me fall in love with him, would also lead him to pursue a dangerous dream that placed both of us on a precarious journey. A journey that easily might have killed Harold.

Like most girls, I have always loved love. Chick flicks are my jam, and I often dreamed about how my own love story would play out. I wanted a love better than what was in books and television shows, better than anything I could imagine. I'm not going to lie, though; I didn't know if that kind of great love actually existed in the real world.

By the time I was a sophomore in college, I was discouraged by the thought of love. Actually, *discouraged* doesn't do justice to the intensity of my feelings. I felt broken, confused, angry, and lost. I had all but stopped believing in love. I had just ended a relationship with someone I thought I saw my future with, and I had never felt that kind of heartache before. It was a deep ache in my soul that wouldn't go away. It lingered and festered. Truthfully, I listened to some of the lies it created in my head. I allowed questions to consume me until I was drowning in self-doubt.

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It's natural to hold on to things for too long, but healing can't happen until we finally let go. I was hurt, and I didn't want to be hurt again. I built walls, became closed off, and pushed away interested guys for a time. I still longed to be loved and to give love in return, but I didn't feel like it would ever happen for me. Quite frankly, I had a lot of healing to do.

I spent the next year working on my heart and grew to be content being single. I did, however, continue to pray for my future husband, even though I was pretty sure I wouldn't meet him until I was out of college. In my mind, I knew everyone I was going to know in college already, and there was no way any of them were the man God intended for me.

Turns out God had a different plan.

One night before bed, at the start of my junior year, I wrote this in my journal:

Hey, God,

Thank You for loving me unconditionally and pursuing me relentlessly. My heart is happy, and You know it's been a long road of healing. I trust in Your plan for my life and I know in Your timing, You'll bring the right man into my life. I don't need that right now, and it's okay if it's much further down the road than I thought. But can You just give me a sign that he is out there?

I love You so much, and I'm excited for what this year has to bring. I'm ready!

Love, Rach

The very next day I got a strange Facebook message from a guy I'd never heard of. His name was Harold.

HAROLD

For over a year, Tommy had been telling me about his redheaded cousin.

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“You have to meet her,” Tommy said. “Her name’s Rachel, and she’s awesome.”

“Sorry, man. I’m just not that into redheads.”

No offense to all the beautiful redheads out there. I was clearly delusional.

Eventually he showed me a picture of Rachel. Hot diggity dog! My jaw dropped. I didn’t expect her to be a knockout, given Tommy’s looks. (It’s fun taking jabs at your best friend when you’re writing a book!) To be honest, Tommy is a good-looking dude. I should have known that Rachel would probably share the family’s good looks.

“Why didn’t you show me her picture before?” I asked.

“I tried, but I got you now,” Tommy told me. “I’ll put in a good word for you. I’m sure she already knows who you are.”

The fact that Tommy spoke so highly of Rachel said a lot. He knew both of us and understood what I wanted most in life: a family. He told me Rachel would make an incredible mother and described her tender and nurturing spirit. When he vouched for her character and spoke of the way she loved the Lord, I was more blown away than when I first saw her gorgeous photograph. Yes, Rachel was a total knockout, but there was so much more that drew me to her. It seemed our characters, values, and goals we were chasing in life were aligned.

A couple of months later, Tommy made it sound like he had talked to Rachel and smoothed the way for me to message her. Certain he’d made her aware of me, I decided to send her a Facebook message. I worked hard to write a message that would have just the right tone: friendly, confident, funny, and not too desperate.

Harold Earls IV

Sep 13, 2012

Rachel, from what I hear you are a pretty awesome girl!
So, I figured I’d boldly and lamely introduce myself to
you over Facebook. I am currently in a relationship with
your cousin Tommy and he is always talking you up,

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so I figured I should definitely look to meet this girl he speaks so highly of.

In hindsight, it was a really lame message. But I was trying to be funny!

RACHEL

I had no idea who Harold Earls IV was. My cousin Tommy hadn't mentioned anything to me. In fact, I just assumed this Harold guy might be another distant cousin of mine I didn't know. Our only mutual friends on Facebook were my family members (I have a pretty big extended family).

I had always thought highly of my cousin Tommy—he's the kind of guy who makes you a better person just by being around him. I knew if Harold was his best friend, Harold had to be a solid guy.

I was a little intrigued by the odd yet endearing message. So, what did I do? I called my mom, the knower-of-all-things-family-and-drama. "Mom! What's going on here? Who is this Harold guy? And what kind of weird name is Harold?"

"I have no idea," she replied.

"I don't believe you." It was too bizarre for her not to know something. But I'll give it to her—she was pretty convincing.

"I really don't know!" she insisted.

I decided to text Tommy's mom, Meredith, to inquire further about this handsome man messaging me, and, boy, did she take that as an opportunity to sing Harold's praises. She told me that he came from a strong Christian family, had a good head on his shoulders, and had a zest for life like I did and that she genuinely felt we would make a good team. Coming from someone I looked up to, this affirmation carried a lot of weight.

I decided this Harold guy might be worth my time and shot him a quick message back.

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Rachel Wynn: Sep 13, 2012

Bet good ole Tommy makes a great boyfriend! I love Tommy!

HAROLD

My friend Tommy is a good and godly man. We've known each other since high school, and the two of us have encouraged each other, read the Bible together, and attended church together. We have repeated to each other the popular Andy Stanley quote "Start becoming the person the person you're looking for is looking for."*

We watched romantic comedies like we were studying game film: "Tommy, did you see that? He went 90 percent of the way for the kiss, and then she went the final 10 percent. Write that down."

When Rachel messaged me back, I was thankful Tommy had reached out to her ahead of time (or so I thought). I assumed my joke introduction had been a big success. We continued messaging each other. I spent tons of time, sometimes an hour or two, crafting my messages in Microsoft Word, then copying and pasting the note into Facebook. I wanted to come up with the most clever responses, and that took time. Frankly, she was way out of my league and a grade above me in college, and I was nervous I would screw it up!

I was afraid she wasn't into me, because her responses were quick, with little or no flirty emojis. I worked to become a man worthy of her while pursuing her intentionally. It makes me think of some wisdom from my pastor, Ben Stuart: "If you're pursuing someone, be clear about your intentions. If you're interested in getting to know her for the purpose of it leading to a relationship, let her know. If you aren't interested, let her know. Being clear about your intentions will take the stress out of trying to figure out where you stand with each other."

* Andy Stanley, *The New Rules for Love, Sex, and Dating* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 192.

I proceeded with this strategy for a couple of days, logging in to Facebook to copy and paste my message, then quickly signing off. Until one day everything changed. I logged in to send her a message, and before I could log off again, she messaged me back. *Oh shoot!* I thought. I had to come up with a response right then.

My cursor was blinking, and so, too, were the three dots letting her know I was on and responding. I panicked. Like sweaty hands, clammy face, and hives kind of panic. Okay, maybe not the hives part, but it was intense. The pressure was on, and I was forced to engage in an actual back-and-forth conversation.

To my surprise, it went well. But then Tommy logged on to my Facebook account from his computer without my knowing and started sending fake messages to Rachel right in the middle of our conversation! Once I realized what was going on (I could hear Tommy laughing in my head), I asked Rachel for her phone number so I could text her and hopefully salvage the rest of our conversation.

Lesson learned: don't give your best friend your Facebook login.

I spent the next several days texting her between my classes, baseball, and studying. I'd get this big goofy grin on my face every time I saw Rachel's name pop up on my phone, excited to see what new question she had or to read her heartfelt responses. There was so much depth to our conversations, which made the distance between us seem insignificant.

She was in college in Florida, while I was in college in New York. We learned that depth overcomes distance. The more I learned about Rachel, the more it became clear that we were equally yoked. For example, we both valued new experiences in the world more than worldly possessions. I had never met someone whose approach to life seemed to align so well with my own.



April 16, 2016

What have I gotten myself into?

I stand at an elevation of twelve thousand feet in Lhasa, China, during our ten-day excursion across the Tibetan Plateau, and I see the mountain for the first time. It's not the beautiful, graceful, white-frosted peak of my fairy-tale daydreams, with fluffy little dandelions in the valley. This Everest is darker, almost black, without much snow. It appears wild, intense, and wicked. The journey ahead of me is huge, super steep, and absolutely terrifying. Chills run through me.

This is no joke.

I see a cloud at the top, formed off the back side of the peak, but then quickly realize I am actually looking at the jet stream angrily ripping snow and ice off the summit. Where I stand, the day is perfectly sunny, but over there, the mountain exhibits deadly conditions. All the statistics I've read about the dangers, the widowed wives, and the extreme elements begin to cycle through my mind. I think of the frozen bodies on the mountain, all those brave souls who never made it back down. Then I think of Rachel at home alone.

Internally, I'm panicking, but outwardly, I'm celebrating our first glance of the mountain with the rest of the team. "Nice, there's Everest!" I say as high fives are shared. Deep inside, however, I can't help but think about the very real possibility of dying on that steep, dark mountain.

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Love at First Phone Call

Sunday, September 23, 2012

RACHEL

Ten days after his first Facebook message, Harold called me out of the blue. It was 8:07 p.m. on a Sunday, and I was walking to my car to meet some friends for dinner when my phone started vibrating. My initial thought? *It's probably my mom calling for the umpteenth time today.*

Boy, was I caught off guard when I saw Harold's name pop up. A big smile spread across my face as my excitement level shot sky high. At the same time, my body was riddled with nerves. This would be the first time we actually spoke; I realized I'd never heard his voice before.

I picked up the call as I climbed into my car. I drove to the restaurant while we talked, but I never went inside. I didn't want our conversation to end, so I sat in the parking lot with my feet propped on the dash and my seat reclined, talking to Harold as the night sky grew darker and darker. After an hour or two, I drove home and

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parked again, still talking. Finally, I went up to my room, and we talked until 2:07 a.m.

We talked for six hours straight about our families, our goals, God, our pasts, the present, and the future. He was really open about the way God had shaped him over the years. It was refreshing to hear a man speak with so much honesty and vulnerability about his past and what he wanted in the future. He wasn't holding back, and he wasn't sugarcoating anything. We were simply two people sharing our hearts and discovering that we were running in the same direction. I felt like my heart, which I had previously closed, was opening back up to this person I'd never even met. Whatever was going on between us was very different from anything I'd ever known before or expected.

It sounds insane to say, but I knew from that first call that he was my person. It happened fast, yet it was so clear to me. Though our relationship did develop quickly, I don't want to give the illusion that it randomly fell into place for us. We had worked on ourselves individually so we would both be in the right place with God and be the best versions of ourselves before we pursued a relationship together.

HAROLD

It was a cool September evening when I called Rachel from under the lights on the baseball field at West Point. As we talked, I walked barefoot around the field until my feet felt frozen, at which point I decided to head back to my barracks room. I crawled into my top bunk as I continued talking with Rachel, whispering so I wouldn't wake my roommate.

I can remember saying, "Rachel, you are it. I found you." I lay there and stared at the wall in a daze. Suddenly, everything was different. I had never felt the way I did during our phone call. It was the most intimate conversation I'd ever had with a person, let alone someone I technically had not even met.

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How was this even possible?

But it was. From that first conversation, I was done. The attraction I felt when I saw her beautiful picture was still there. Yet as I got to know her heart, how she was chasing God and what passions were ignited within her, it was obvious we were on the same page in life, and that was truly a more beautiful thing.

RACHEL

People talk about love at first sight, and not everyone believes it can happen. But for us, it was love at first phone call. I imagine if we'd spent six hours together in person, I would have been distracted thinking about if or when he would hold my hand or kiss me. Instead, that call allowed us to dig deeper and not be distracted by physical attraction. While physical intimacy is vital in marriage, most of marriage is actually living life together, so it's healthy to find someone who you can talk to forever and never get bored with.

After that first phone call, Harold and I talked on the phone or video chatted for hours each night. I'd get off the phone and my cheeks would be sore from smiling the entire time. There was this excitement stirring in my heart that radiated out of me. I wanted to tell everyone about him! In fact, I used to stand in my sorority dinner line waiting with my friends and pull up his Facebook pictures to show to them.

Although my heart had previously been broken and I questioned ever finding love, I had spent the year healing, and that little girl in me, dreaming of a fairy tale, was hopeful this crazy story beginning to unfold would be the answer to my prayers. The breakup I'd gone through helped me realize that if the person I thought was so great wasn't the right person for me, it meant God had someone even better for me. I made a promise with myself and God that settling in a relationship was not an option. I was determined to find someone who would always fight for me and never make me question my worth. God led me to Harold.

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Harold wasn't perfect, and I didn't expect him to be, but I never felt I would be settling if I ended up with him. It was quite the opposite, actually; I could see myself growing and becoming a better person because of him. We prayed together during our video chats, and whenever I was stressed about school or started feeling down, he would refocus my attention on God and help me see the bigger picture. He encouraged me not to hold back when it came to my dreams and pushed me to believe in myself and reach my full potential.

One of the qualities that stood out to me about Harold was how he continually worked on self-development and pushed himself to learn new things. I'm not just talking about studying what he learned in school. He would research how to be a better communicator, learn tricks for remembering people's names, expand his vocabulary, and so on. I loved how he was always working to improve himself and wasn't complacent; it showed me that with time, he would only become a better partner as he kept pushing himself to grow as a person.

Harold was an absolute superhero for staying up all night talking to me and then waking up a few short hours later for his morning military formation. Sometimes, though, he'd fall asleep during our calls (I mean hard-core sleeping, the kind where he'd start snoring and drooling!) and I'd get offended. It didn't feel good to pour out my heart and notice I was literally putting him to sleep. I mean, I know I'm not that boring! I had to learn not to take it personally and to understand that at West Point, the responsibilities and schoolwork are endless. This meant the time he was spending talking to me was time he didn't freely have. He was sacrificing sleep in order to make me a priority, and that more than made up for the few times I'd catch him with his eyes closed midconversation.

At this point, we still hadn't met in person, although it felt like we had known each other our entire lives. I invited him to be my date at a sorority function in November, and he happily accepted.

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I had butterflies even thinking about what it would be like when we met face to face. Little did I know, he had secretly been making plans to surprise me with a visit in October, a whole month earlier.

As a decoy, my friend Morgan invited me to a beach weekend with her family, so I packed my swimsuits and shorts and went to her apartment the night before we were planning to leave. Earlier, I had sent Harold pictures of my swimsuits and asked him to help me pick which ones to bring. He must have been grinning at how clueless I was.

Morgan and I were hanging out in the living room, watching *Friends* in our pajamas, which for me meant Nike running shorts, a super baggy camo T-shirt, and no makeup. Our friend Lauren was on her way over so she could introduce us to a guy she had met. They were both in on Harold's surprise too!

A little after midnight, Harold called. Just a few seconds into our phone call, Lauren and her guy (who is now her husband) walked in the door. I politely told Harold I would call him back. He started acting weird, like he didn't want me to hang up. I didn't want to be rude to my friend, so I told him again that I'd call back later. That's when he said, "Why would you call me back when I'm already here?" *And he walked through the door!*

I was in complete shock! He was wearing a blue collared button-up shirt with khaki pants and a belt, and there I was looking like I just got back from a duck hunt in my oversize camo shirt. It wasn't exactly how I pictured he'd see me for the first time. Had I even showered? How bad did my armpits stink? What on earth had my friends been thinking? A heads-up would have been nice, but to be honest, I was so overcome with excitement that I immediately jumped to my feet and hugged him.

In that moment, none of those things mattered to either of us. My entire body was shaking, and I couldn't seem to get any words out other than "What? What?" I couldn't connect the dots. I didn't understand what was going on because in my mind, my friends and

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I were supposed to be going to the beach. And, last I knew, Harold was in New York City having a night with his guys.

Harold is convinced I cried, but I didn't. I was way too confused to cry. But oh, buddy, was I full of joy! I'd never been that happy to see anyone before. It was like a movie scene you want to replay over and over. That was the defining moment that confirmed everything I was already feeling. I really had found my person, and I'd take that over a beach trip any day!

Harold and I headed over to Lauren's apartment and hung out in the living room all night, with no intention of sleeping. We basically talked each other's ears off until sunrise.

At one point, Harold looked at me and said, "You're my girlfriend."

"I am?" I responded, slightly confused about how I had missed the moment when that happened but also jumping up and down and throwing a party in my head.

"Wait, do you wanna be?" he said with the cutest mixture of uncertainty and excitement.

My answer was easy. "Yes!"

HAROLD

She was definitely crying when we first met. At least, I remember it that way. One thing I know for certain is my heart was racing about three hundred beats a minute. When I saw Rachel in person, I'm not kidding, she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever laid eyes on. That was the sexiest men's extra-large camo T-shirt I'd ever seen! I couldn't get any words out; all I could do was smile. We wrapped our arms around each other, and I wanted to never let go. I was doing my best to freeze that moment in time. It was the best first hug of my life.

I was so nervous leading up to that moment. Not because I didn't know if we would actually have a connection but in anticipation for what that moment meant. From our first phone call, I knew

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she was the one, so you can imagine the intense feelings building up as I made my way to meet my future wife for the first time. I felt such a deep emotional and physical attraction to her, a connection I had never experienced with anyone else. I felt she fully understood me. My past, my passions, what made me tick, what I cared about, where I was headed, and what I wanted to be—she accepted all of me.

Our excitement made us forget how tired we were. We must have fallen asleep at exactly the same time, and when we woke up, intertwined like a pretzel, our eyes were just inches apart. It was like one of those Hollywood rom-coms, where the guy and girl wake up and gaze into each other's eyes, smiling warmly as the sunlight hits their faces. That actually happened, except I'm not sure Rachel thought it was as romantic as I did.

"Oh my gosh," Rachel said. "I smell gross. The sun is blinding me, and I need to shower and brush my teeth."

I heard my stomach gurgling. "I'm starving."

We had forgotten to eat. We had only eighteen hours before I had to be back on campus at West Point, which meant we had just a few hours left together. We ended up grabbing some food before heading to the airport. When I picked up the tab and signed the receipt, I wrote, "Harold Earls likes Rachel Wynn." Even though the waiter must have been confused and probably made fun of how cheesy I was, I didn't care. I knew it would make Rachel smile.

At the airport, I got Rachel a gate pass so she could wait with me until the very last boarding call. We were kissing and hugging, the ultimate annoying lovebirds who literally can't keep their hands off each other. I heard someone ask, "Y'all just get engaged?"

"Pretty much," I said.

RACHEL

That's a pretty gutsy response after spending not even a full twenty-four hours with a girl, but earlier he'd made an even gutsier move. I

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have a little diamond ring my grandmother gave me that I wore on my right hand. A couple of hours earlier, Harold switched it over to my ring finger on my left hand.

“I like the way that looks,” he told me.

Perhaps it was because it looked like I was wearing an engagement ring, or maybe it was the way in which Harold was affectionately gazing at me that drew the comment from the stranger. Either way, the remark made us smile. It affirmed the strength of our connection in a very powerful way.

After Harold left, I took a screenshot of the time and date he’d called me just before he walked in to surprise me. I knew in my heart this was a pivotal moment in my life, so I wanted to document everything.

My life is about to change, I thought. *He’s military and he plays baseball*. Neither was overly appealing to me, but I did enjoy seeing Harold in both uniforms. I fully appreciated and had the utmost respect for our military, but it wasn’t necessarily the life I wanted for my own family. I knew I was in this relationship for the long haul, so I was facing the reality that it would require a lot of sacrifice on my end.

It’s impossible to have commitment without sacrifice; both are required in a strong relationship. Sometimes the sacrifices are small, and sometimes they are life altering. I knew this was going to be a life-altering sacrifice, but I also knew that what I was gaining was much greater. I wanted a life with Harold, which meant any sacrifice would be worth it.

Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined the kinds of sacrifices a life together would mean for us.

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April 16, 2016

Though I can't see the mountain in the dark of night on the Tibetan Plateau, I still feel it shadowing over me in the distance. I downplay my fears and nerves when I talk with Rachel. I tell her things like "It's not too scary" and "It's really pretty" and "I'm not too worried about it." These are half truths. In reality, this towering beast in the background is the meanest, blackest thing I've ever seen. I'm worried, and I'm humbled. I could share this with her, my best friend and biggest supporter. But I want to protect her from the knot in my stomach, the nerves constantly rumbling inside, and the nagging questions: What am I doing? and What have I left behind?

Have you ever come to a point in your life when the one thing you've been working toward suddenly seems insurmountable? A moment when your own personal Everest (be it creating a business, parenting, etc.) stares you down, looking bigger and scarier than you ever could have imagined? A time when you feel intimidated and alone? A time in which you suddenly begin to question everything? That's what I'm doing in China, asking over and over again, Have I bitten off more than I can chew? I know life sometimes presents moments that feel impossible. But I also know when you overcome these challenges, you come out stronger. I just hope I'm up to the task.

As we continue our trek to Everest's Base Camp, the mountain looms in the distance, growing larger with every step I take.

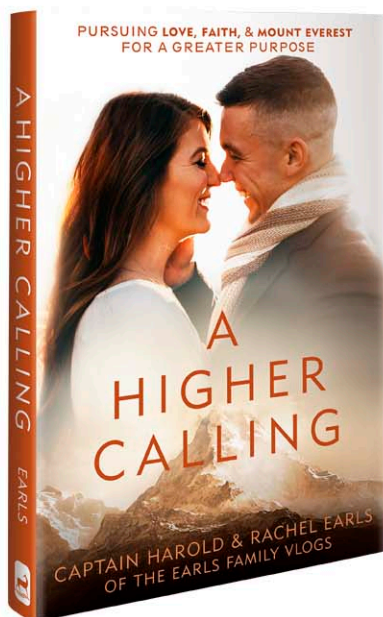
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