Chosen, Not Forsaken:

The Life and Perception of an Adoptee

By: Jessica Helvie

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my mom, dad, my brother Zach, my boyfriend Antonio, and my friends Abby, Nazareth, and Ilianna. All of you are instrumental in getting this book started, keeping this book going, and finally finishing it. You’ve all given me different perspectives on what to write, what to say, how to stay focused, and the goal(s) of this book. This book would not be possible without you.

Mom and Dad, I wouldn’t be here without you guys, and neither would Zach. You two gave us the best lives you could; you attended every competition, every game, wrestling match, parent teacher conference, birthday, Christmas, the list goes on. Not a day goes by where Zach and I don’t think about how much you two have helped us in more ways than one. From the very beginning, you guys have loved and cared for us more than we could have ever imagined, and you raised us in a way that makes Christ proud. You two show up when we need you and you never fail to be there for us. You guys aren’t perfect, but that’s okay. We aren’t trust fund babies and that’s okay. Instead, we are well-rounded individuals who have good heads on our shoulders, who know how to survive when push comes to shove. I love you guys so much!

Zach, where do I begin? You have been my baby brother for literally your entire life and while you love to annoy the crap out of me, it reminds me that I have a brother who loves me unconditionally. You have always shown up in ways that I don’t expect, whether it’s protecting me from creepy guys, helping me through anxiety, or just listening to me rant. You’ve driven home from appointments and you’ve been one of my closest confidants. Thank you for being that brother that I needed and wanted, and for being the brother who never gave up on me. I love you to the moon and back! And I know Tasha does too.

Antonio…oh boy, now I might cry. My best friend, the love of my life, my biggest supporter, my everything. You never fail to surprise me with the love, patience, grace, and support that you continuously give me. You challenge me in so many ways to just do better, to be better and I can never thank you enough for that. From the beginning of our relationship to now, you’ve always been that one person who is my person. You are the person who sees me at my worst and pushes me to keep going. You call me out when I’m being dumb, but you also help me think things through. I love you more than words can say and I love who you are as a man, as a partner, and as a friend. You always remind me that God is with us in the highs and in the lows, and I know that I can count on you to be upfront and honest with me. This book would not be possible without the words you spoke to me in front of Juice It Up! before the trip to Texas happened. Thank you for your encouragement, your honesty, and your support. I love you forever and always, to whatever end, no matter what!

Abby, Ilianna, and Nazareth: you three have been so supportive of this journey and have given me so many things to consider with this book. Each of you have offered your own unique ideas, unwavering support, and pure honesty in what I could talk about. I owe you guys so much!

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~Foreword~

“Who am I?”, “Where did I come from?”, “Why am I darker than mommy and daddy?”. These were some of the questions that I had asked myself from the time I was three years old to the time I was 25. At three years old, I remember asking my mom and dad why I was darker than them and had I known then what I know now, I'm not so sure I would have asked. At three years old, most kids are only concerned with playing with their toys or going to take a nap, but me? No, I was concerned with my toys and why I was darker than my parents. When they sat me down and told me I was adopted, I know for sure that I didn't understand and I probably wouldn't understand for quite some time. After all, what three-year-old understands that her mommy and daddy aren't her biological parents? I was sharp enough to ask the question, but I wasn't sharp enough to understand the answer(s) that would quite literally change the way I responded to comments throughout my life. I don't remember much after that, but I remember at four when my brother came home from the adoption agency. I remember he was definitely huge and if you ask my mom her side of the story, she'll say that she asked the social worker, "Is this the right baby?" While I was born at 5 pounds and 6 ounces, my brother was born at nearly 9 pounds, so he was nearly the same size as me at four years old. The older we got, the more my parents shared with us and honestly, that is something that while a lot of people disagree with, I couldn't be more grateful that my mom and dad had been open and honest with my brother and I from the very beginning. What my parents told me was that my mother had given me up because she was unable to financially care for me. She had no job and was unmarried, which was why she had given me up; in short, she wanted me to have a better life. If she hadn’t made that unbelievably difficult decision, I wouldn’t be writing this book and I wouldn’t have lived with the best parents ever.

As I got older, I learned there is almost always more to the story, but that side of the story is not going to be shared because it’s not my story to tell. One of the very first things my brother and I understood and accepted was that we weren’t biologically related (which, if you’ve ever met us, is extremely hard to believe). When we were kids, people asked us if we were twins because we look so much alike. But while we look a lot alike, we have two very different personalities. My brother, who is 6’3, has the heart of someone from the 70’s; basically, he’s an old soul. He’s very outgoing, but is also extremely introverted. He prefers staying home, playing with his dog, and probably watching anime. Me on the other hand? Yeah, no. I am way too outgoing for my own good, I absolutely love being outdoors, but I’m also someone who loves to sleep literally ALL THE TIME. I stay home with my boyfriend when we’re both off and we watch YouTube because we’re too tired to do anything. I have my mom’s confrontational attitude when it’s necessary, but I also cry when I’m frustrated and I get that from my dad. My mom will stop and help someone who’s been in a car accident (also me), but my dad cries while watching military homecoming videos (again, me). My boyfriend likes to tell me that I’m literally my parents’ child because I embody their personalities so well. But like all parents, they fought with my brother and I and vice versa. However, if there’s one thing my brother and I will always agree on, it’s how much we absolutely LOVE and ADORE our parents. Their story brought us here. I won't touch too much on their story and why they decided to adopt, but I will say that my mom has endometriosis, which therefore prompted her and my dad to adopt my brother and I. Them choosing to adopt us, to give us both a chance at a life surrounded by a family that loved us is something we will never be able to repay. However, I will also say that I struggled for YEARS with what I like to call Adopted Imposter Syndrome. Please note that I’m not a medical professional, so this is not a clinical diagnosis; it’s just my way of explaining how I felt for a vast majority of my life. Yes, I was surrounded by a family who absolutely loved my brother and I. Yes, my brother and I were given a darn good life. But that doesn't change how I felt growing up being the youngest and only colored girl in the family. Now, before I write another word, I'm going to say this: my story isn't about race, or ethnicity. It's about being adopted and accepting myself for who I am, regardless of my skin tone. If you've made it this far, then you're ready for the actual story. If I list any names, you won’t know if that is that person’s actual name or not; just know that the real names I have been given permission to use. I'm not going to tell my birth mother's story because it's her story to tell, and I'm not going to tell my birth father's story for the same reason. This is my story...and it starts here.

Chapter 1: The Beginning

“In the beginning it was all black and white.”

-Maureen O’Hara

I remember all of it. I remember which side of the table I was sitting on when I asked my parents why I was darker than them. I remember they looked at each other and told me that if I was old enough to ask, then I was old enough to kind of understand and that I could ask them anything I wanted. When they told me they had adopted me, I remember asking what that meant. I was told that it meant I wasn't theirs, that they had waited for me to be born at the hospital before bringing me home. As a three-year-old, I definitely didn't understand what they were saying, but by the time I was 4, I had a better understanding...especially because that's when we brought my brother Zach home. I knew my mom hadn't given birth to him, but I also knew that I instantly loved him more than anything. As we got older, we fought the way siblings fought, but we were, and still are, extremely loyal to each other. What I didn't know was what my parents had struggled through adoption wise. The stories they've told my brother, myself, and other people of how they almost lost both of us never fail to make me tear up. The adoption process is not an easy one; there is a lot of emotional turmoil for all parties involved and because of that, my heart goes out to everyone going through those emotions. Adoptions carry a huge risk of assumption as people do not always understand the processes involved, or even the genetics. Genetics can be an assumption that carries a great risk, and for my parents and I, genetics played a huge part in my adoption. For those of you who don't know, people who have darker skin are often born with Mongolian birth spots. If you know what these are and what they can look like, then you might have a vague idea about what can happen.

Before I go into the story, allow me to provide some context. My dad’s family is full of bowlers; bowling was a huge part of my life growing up, so I spent quite a bit of time in bowling alleys. Being that my dad was, and still is, an avid bowler, I had to stay in the nurseries at times because the alleys were no place for a toddler or even a baby. However, sometimes it’s the nurseries that can cause some drama simply because of one person’s assumption. My dad can tell this story to anyone because it was one that freaked him out and caused my mom to have a bit of a temper tantrum. As that night of bowling wrapped up, my dad was preparing to grab everything: bowling ball, shoes, bowling bag, and last but not least, baby Jessica. As my dad was leaving, I remember him telling me that the cops had come up to him and asked him if he was who they were looking for. When he said yes, they asked him to follow them to the nursery and so he did. He said his first thought was, "Oh my god, is something wrong with my baby?" When he got into the nursery room, the caretaker was there lifting up the back of my dress or onesie or whatever I was wearing, showing the police and the bowling alley manager my birth marks that also looked like bruises. The officers immediately assumed my dad was abusing me, but my dad told he wasn’t, called my mom at the hospital where she works and called the social worker. After hearing that my Mongolian spots were simply birthmarks, the officers apologized for the confusion and the nursery worker was chastised and told to go to the manager first since he knew the situation (or lack thereof). That was one of a few scares that my parents had to endure in the first couple years of my adoption.

Another scare that honestly spurred me into action for essentially my entire life was the fact that we didn’t know who my father was. That’s not an uncommon thing, but for my case, it was something that really affected me as a child, teenager, and now into my late twenties. My adoption papers listed one man as my father and his name was Sean. According to the papers, he was a blonde haired, blue eyed man, which obviously didn’t make sense to someone who was already a few shades darker than her biological mother. When I saw what the papers said, I asked my parents and that was when I really knew that the journey wasn’t going to be rainbows and butterflies.

Even though Sean wasn’t my biological father, he had signed off on the paternal parental rights, granting my parents the permission(s) to raise me. What I didn’t know until I was older was that if my parents had pursued the search for my biological father and found him, he could have said he didn’t want to sign off on his right to raise me, and my parents would have lost me instantly. Having that knowledge made the decision a no-brainer for my mom and dad: they decided to not continue searching for my father. Quite frankly, that was the best decision ever. Many of you might say that you would have wanted your parent(s) to look for your father/mother, but that wasn’t my case. I knew who my parents were, who my mom and dad were, and that was all that mattered to me. To this day, I have never regretted not finding out right away. Having a closed adoption made my life, and my family’s life, so much easier. One letter a year was all that was allowed from either side, and I was perfectly okay with that. I didn’t need any more confusion in my life, my parents didn’t need any more drama, and it just didn’t need to be complicated. My adoption being closed meant that no one could come after me in any sense of the word without my parents knowing; it being closed meant that my mom and dad were in every way possible, my mom and dad. But, like every adoptee, I wanted answers, and unfortunately, they were answers that my mom and dad couldn’t give me. Being a nosey teenager with access to the internet came in handy as I got older, and that was when I really started to dig around.

Chapter 2: The Dig Begins

“Your mind is like a gold mine, if you dig deep you will find something golden.”

― Gift Gugu Mona

Before I go into everything, let me just say that I have a very odd (and sometimes annoying) tendency to dig and go down rabbit holes. It actually gets me into a lot of trouble because I don’t always know when to stop, and sometimes I (or other people) get hurt in the process. As I was such a nosey teenager, I would go into my adoption files all the time and read them, trying to paint a picture as to who my mother and father were. There were times when I would catch glimpses of something and try to find it again, but never would be able to, which was extremely frustrating. Around the age of 9 or so, I received a letter from my birth mother that had a picture of her, and saw that she was wearing glasses; at that point, I had a strong feeling I was going to need glasses and it wasn’t long before that ended up being the case. At the age of 13, I was walking through Walmart with my mom and dad, trying to read the signs. I recall asking my parents why I couldn’t read the signs and they said they would take me to the optometrist to see if I needed glasses. I was so scared that I was going to be made fun of for them that I almost didn’t go to the appointment, but because I was a minor, I didn’t exactly have a choice. One thing led to another, and I was told I needed glasses and that I would have to get tested for glaucoma (cue the teenage eye roll and protesting). As I was getting tested, I remember becoming nervous and scared. What if I had glaucoma? Was I going to have to go on medication for it? Would I need special glasses? Thousands of questions were going through my head, but it was all short-lived when the specialist informed me that I didn’t have glaucoma, but that I simply had what looked like it and that it would probably be something that would continue to be there. That wasn’t the only thing that would continue to pop up genetically and the older I got, the more I started to research and dig in ways that would potentially benefit me.

When I was growing up, I was always getting sick. I knew I had a bad immune system because the minute the flu went around the school or some other kind of virus, I got it. Ear infections, the flu, tonsillitis, strep throat, these were all things that I remember having. Surprisingly, I didn’t catch the swine flu, but by that point in time, I had stopped drinking water from water fountains. I knew that having a bad immune system made it to where I was always getting sick and I wanted to know why I had an immune system that sucked (and still does). So, what did I do? I went snooping through adoption papers. One thing I will say is that my papers had a lot of information on them. I knew my mother had smoked and drank while pregnant with me, so I knew that those contributed to me having a bad immune system. I also knew that I while my parents made sure my brother and I ate healthy foods, I had a very unhealthy junk food diet (chips, cake, etc.). But while all of this contributed to my immune system, there were other factors that also contributed to it.

Around the age of 16, while I was in marching band (yes, I was a band nerd), my sugar levels would keep dropping. I would start getting shaky, dizzy, and severely nauseous. Not only would it happen at school, but it would happen at home, in the store, everywhere. My is my personal nurse (she’s literally a nurse), so I was always asking her for help or for ideas. We decided to do the trial-and-error method and I started carrying meal replacement shakes with me to school, or I would carry Gatorade, granola, whatever would potentially help. At points, it would take days for me to eat again and when we finally went to the doctor, we were told that I had hypoglycemia, or that I had low blood sugar. We didn’t know if it was genetic or not, but it wasn’t something that we could really find out at the time, so we just took the diagnosis and changed some things around. I was also told that I was anemic, which meant that I didn’t have enough iron in my blood. More red meat was introduced into my diet, and I was placed on iron supplements to help combat the symptoms. I started to introduce healthier foods to my diet and I cut out all the junk food I was eating. Did it suck? Oh absolutely; after all, who doesn’t love junk food? However, not only was I feeling much better, but my appetite had also changed. Genetically, there wasn’t much else we could learn because not everything was on the adoption papers (remember, we didn’t know who my father was, which meant that we didn’t have all the family medical history). So, as I got older, we adapted to how things would happen, and we would just work with it. For a little while, the digging stopped, but my junior/senior year of high school, everything changed.

I had grown up with the potential knowledge that I might never know my birth mother, but that didn’t always stop me from wanting to find her. I remember sitting in one of my classes my junior year of high school. I had been looking at a picture of my birth mother when this guy behind me asked who she was. I knew him, so I turned around and told him that she was my birth mother. I told him her name and he looked right at me and told me that he knew her. I remember my world stopping completely and my heart rate starting to kick up. I asked him how he knew her, and he told me she had been his babysitter when he was a kid. He said he knew her, her husband, my brother, and my sister. Until that moment in time, I hadn’t even known I had a little sister, so the tears were genuine, just as the desire to find them was genuine. I remember being at my grandparent’s house and typing in every name I could think of that had to do with my mother’s name and her previous location(s), and it wasn’t long before I did find her. Not only did I find her married name, but I also found her address. Again, I was a very nosey teenager who liked to go down rabbit holes. Did I do anything with that information? Honestly? Not really. I had her name and that’s what I used to find her on Facebook. When I did find her, I made it a plan to cross-check every person she knew to see if they were also someone I knew, and doing that brought me to the page of the guy from my class. Once I knew for sure that I had found her, I knew what I was going to do.

On the morning of my 18th birthday, my adoption became void. That same morning, I sent my mother a message on messenger explaining who I was. I sent the letter, not knowing what to expect. My phone was already blowing up with the “Happy Birthday” messages, but the one I really wanted never came. It wasn’t until I reached out again the following spring, right before I graduated, that I got an answer. From then on, the conversation(s) started. My family and I were about to go to Hawaii on vacation, but I didn’t want to ruin it so I kept my discovery a secret from everyone and that had some consequences that I will forever regret to this day.

Keeping secrets can be a good thing, but most of the time, it’s not a good thing. This was one of those times where it most definitely was NOT a good thing. After my family and I got back from Hawaii, I snuck out of the house to go meet my mother, brother, sister, and their father (who I now call my step-dad). Was it a good decision? Probably not, but I was scared and at 18 years old, didn’t want to hurt my mom and dad. Meeting my biological mother was definitely emotional. So many things were going through my head and if I’m being totally honest, I don’t even remember what I was thinking in those moments. Seeing my younger siblings was something that I had never expected, but I also knew that I loved them more than anything (and I still do). I had no idea my little sister Jordyn would become someone that I could lean on in the hardest moments, and I had no idea that my youngest brother (we’ll call him Joshua) would become someone who would consistently challenge my way of thinking. However, it wasn’t long before the secret began to eat at me and the truth spilled out to my parents. It was just another day at home when I pulled them aside and had them sit down. I remember telling them that I had found my birth mother and that I had snuck out of the house to meet her because I hadn’t wanted to hurt their feelings, but in that moment, the secrets and the lies that came spilling out hurt them even more than the initial action. It took some time for them to regain their trust in me and I can’t blame them for it. I had hurt them in ways that I couldn’t take back, and no matter how many times I told them I was sorry, the damage was already done.

When I graduated from high school, my dad’s family, mom’s family, and my biological family were all there to celebrate with me. Granted, it was a little challenging because I had to keep my adoptive family from meeting my birth mother and her family simply because I didn’t want any drama. It ended up working out though and I was able to say that the people who had raised me had been to my high school graduation, and so had my biological mother. Any time I went out to see my mother, step-dad, brother, and sister, I always told my parents. I told them who I was meeting, what time I expected to be home, and then I would tell them everything that had happened. Communication is vital in any relationship and I was determined to stay as close as possible to my mom and dad. Because I am as close to my parents as I am, they always know when something is bugging me and I always know when something isn’t right. It didn’t take long for me to realize that there were some holes in the story of how I’d been born, but how was I supposed to dig for those answers? Did I even want them? Could I accept them? I didn’t know. All I knew was that I had more and more questions each day and I was eventually going to have to accept the truth, no matter how difficult it could potentially be.

Chapter 3: The Start of Acceptance

“You are imperfect, permanently and inevitably flawed. And you are beautiful.”

― Amy Bloom

Acceptance is a journey that we all start, but some of us never complete it. My journey only recently ended and it’s a bittersweet feeling. My entire life had, in a way, centered around my adoption. I’d always wanted to be accepted by my family (even though I was), be accepted by my friends (which I was), but I also wanted to accept myself. In my eyes, I was treated differently because I wasn’t related to everyone and because I was over-dramatic and overly-sensitive. These days people don’t ask why someone’s child is darker or lighter than them; it’s just assumed that the child is fostered, adopted, or they have a parent with similar coloring. I was asked several times why I was darker than my mom and dad and it was a question that used to irritate me. Did it irritate me because people were being nosey and paying attention to outward appearances, or did it irritate me because it shouldn’t have mattered? I suppose both mean the same thing, but regardless, it irritated me. I remember around Halloween several years back when I was in my early 20’s, I went to the hospital to visit my mom after work. I wanted to take her some donuts and I also just wanted to see my mom. When I got there, I asked the assistant where my mom was, and when she asked who my mom was, I told her that my mom was Donna. She gave me the look that said, “You don’t look anything like her,” and I looked right in her eyes and said, “I’m adopted.”, and left. I called my dad immediately afterwards and he said that mom had been flexed and asked me what was wrong. I remember telling him to just put mom on the phone and when she got on, I told her everything. I remember asking her why people kept asking that, why it mattered so much. I’d also had a class on racism earlier that day, so there was no doubt in my mind that it was hitting a little close to home. Having to explain to people that I’m adopted has always had one of two answers follow me, one being, “Ohhhh okay that makes sense”, and the other being, “Oh that’s cool. When did you find out? How old were you when you were adopted?” I have never disliked being asked questions about my adoption because I’m vocal about it. Being adopted is one of the greatest things that’s ever happened to me, but having someone all of a sudden connect the dots has always grated on me. In my mind, it shouldn’t matter that I’m a different skin tone than my parents, but that’s just me.

Self-acceptance has always been a sore spot for me, for multiple reasons. I always questioned why my mother had kept my brother and sister, but not me. Now, I knew her reason(s), but it didn’t make me feel any less abandoned. In fact, that sense of abandonment followed me for years. The questions that went with it were always hard to ask because I remember that I had grown up being told I was over-dramatic and overly-sensitive, so in my mind I was too much to handle, even though that was the FURTHEST thing from the truth. To this day, I always ask people if they think I’m over-reacting or being over-dramatic, and it’s no longer because of abandonment issues, but it’s simply anxiety, which we’ll get into later. I have always questioned things, and sometimes, questioning things leads to a lot of over-thinking which causes me to spiral in ways that can be a bit rough. My adoption used to cause me a lot of frustration because I would always see things happen and wonder if it was happening because I was different. I used to think that some of my family members hated me because they treated me one way, my brother another, and my cousins another, but that was all the furthest from the truth; you treat people the way you do based on who they are and based on who you are.

I was always doing the comparison game, and if I’m being honest, there are times I still do. I would always compare myself to my brother Zach because he was treated differently than me (and to an extent, he would also compare himself to me, but for other reasons). He was always getting complimented by older ladies because he has hazel eyes (which I still find to be completely unfair) and I always wondered why I was never getting complimented. I have brown eyes, brown skin, and brown hair, so nothing about me really stood out. Growing up, I always looked a little older than I was, which led to my mom being super over-protective and particular about the clothes I would wear; looking back now, I’m grateful she did that. As humans, we get lost in the world of looks and that world is dangerous for so many reasons. How many young women/men compare themselves to the people on the magazine covers? Too many. I’m guilty of doing that to this day, but one thing I’ve learned about self-comparison? It leaves little to no room for self-acceptance. Self-acceptance means that you accept everything about yourself, including the flaws, but it also means that you accept that there are things beyond your control.

I couldn’t control any aspect of my adoption; I couldn’t control how people treated me, how many questions were asked, the looks my parents were given, the number of times the story was told, any of it. But what I could accept was that my adoption led me to realize that I was given so much more than other kids were. I could accept the love that my mom and dad had for my Zach and I. I could accept that while I was not their biological daughter, that they still loved me regardless of any law on the planet; that the chances and opportunities they gave me were opportunities that other people never got. What I was forced to accept was that I would potentially never find my father, that the man who had quite literally made it possible for me to be born, would never know I existed. That was a hard pill to swallow. I wanted my father to know me, to know his daughter. I didn’t know if I was his only child or the first, second, third, whatever the number may be, but I had to accept that. But in order for me to accept it, I also had to pray on it, and I prayed on it for YEARS. The answer was never a “yes”, nor a “no”, but simply a “just wait” and for the young girl who was praying those prayers, that was enough to give her a chance to continue on with her life until the answer was “yes”. That also means that I had to pray for patience. I was, and am, still growing, but as a young adult, I was growing differently than I do now. Now, I have to decide if a smart-aleck comment is worth saying, but back then? I had to decide if I really wanted my biological family in my life. I had to really think on how a relationship with them could potentially affect the relationship I had with my parents and that wasn’t an easy thing. Many of you might wonder, “How would that be a hard decision?” Well, if you haven’t already figured it out, I grew up in a blended household. I had gone from having one set of parents and my brother, to having my parents, my brother, and then my biological mother and her family. And to add on to that, I was considering adding even more people to my family and I didn’t even know if they were alive. I didn’t know if Gary was alive, if he was married, or if he’d even want a relationship with me. There were so many unknowns that I had to consider, which was also something that I’m sure was a reason why God was consistently telling me to wait. One of the hardest aspects that I had to face was that I had absolutely no control over a huge amount of the situation, and that was an exceedingly hard pill to swallow. It meant I had to put my trust wholeheartedly in God, and allow Him to guide me through the next steps of my life.

Chapter 4: Partial Acceptance

If you’ve ever had to accept a hard truth, you know that it’s not easy. It is a very long, and often painful process that can and does leave a lot of questions unanswered. Even partial acceptance isn’t easy. If I’m being totally honest, the partial acceptance was the part that took me the longest to get through. A huge part of me didn’t want to give up on my search for more answers or for the truth about where I came from. I remember watching the Disney movie Hercules with Zach a lot when we were kids because it’s a classic. I remember relating so much to Hercules because he always felt…different. He was the son of the god Zeus, adopted by mortal parents all because he had a ridiculously dramatic family member that wanted him dead. Granted I don’t have enormous strength, but I vividly recall hearing him sing “I Can Go the Distance” and breaking down into tears because all he wanted was answers, like me. He always asked the questions of “who am I” and “where did I come from”, all of which, if you remember, were questions that I had also asked. Every single person on this planet wants to know what their purpose in life is, and while I knew that mine wasn’t centered around my adoption, I also knew that my adoption was a huge part of it.

Accepting that you’re different, that you are not like everyone else is hard to accept. Remember the Comparison Game? Yeah, it still plays with my brain. I know I’m not going to be like Zendaya, Michelle Obama, Carrie Underwood, or even Ariana Grande, but that’s okay. I am who God created me to be and that is something that I also had to accept. I had to accept that my mother couldn’t care for me at the time, but was in a much better place to care for my sister Jordyn and my brother Joshua, and that she had done what she felt was right by me all those years ago. I had to accept that I would potentially never meet my father, and in all candor, if Sean was my father, I didn’t want to meet him (different story for a different time). Most of us want to know our parents, to have a good relationship with them. Most of us want to be able to ask the family medical questions, and a good chunk of us can ask those questions. For me, I couldn’t. I knew that I didn’t have endometriosis like my mom, or that I would become diabetic like my dad. Knowing those things helped, but they didn’t answer the burning questions that terrified me. Questions like “Does cancer run in the family?”, “Am I at risk for heart disease?”, “Am I the only one who is anemic and hypoglycemic?” were constantly running through my mind and unfortunately, it ended up being that cancer does run in the family, that I am at risk for heart problems, and that I am the only one with anemia and hypoglycemia. Sadly, these were not the only things that I was diagnosed with as I got older.

Remember that partial acceptance that I told you about? Well, it grew in my teen years and intensified well into my 20’s. In high school, I was not a tiny person. At 5’3, I was weighing in at about 140-150, wearing medium sized shirts and double-digit pants. Now, I wasn’t obese; I was extremely active so most of it was pure muscle, but I didn’t like the way I looked. I exercised all the time and tried to eat as healthy as possible, but I couldn’t get the weight off. Senior year of high school, I lost a ton of weight. I was doing 100 pushups a night, dozens of crunches, and because I was in marching band, a huge amount of cardio. I went from 140-135, and then down to 130. I was slimmer and felt so much better about myself, but the weight I had lost would end up coming back later that year, right before Hawaii. I was devastated. I couldn’t keep a boyfriend to save my life because they all had cheated on me, and I thought it was because I wasn’t pretty enough. After I graduated high school and started college, I knew things would change. I tried to focus on my classes and my studies, but I was becoming so stressed out with working and going to school that I wasn’t eating nearly as much as I should. One thing my body does that I have a love/hate relationship with is that when I get stressed, I stop eating. I literally only eat potatoes because it’s the only thing I can keep down, which is better than nothing. For 8-12 weeks, I ate nothing but potatoes. I started losing a huge amount of weight and it wasn’t long before people started to notice. My ribs were sticking out, I was wearing a size small in shirts, my hip bones were popping out, everything. To me, it wasn’t that bad because I was feeling good. I was getting attention from guys and it felt good to get that kind of validation, but it wasn’t healthy. I was bouncing between 115 and 130, but I eventually settled into 125. To me, that was still too big, but I had dropped so much weight from stress and exercise that it was consistent. I would get asked when I was going to start putting on weight again because I was too thin, even though I was healthy. I was eating again, doing yoga, getting better grades, but it wasn’t good enough and soon after that, I began developing another health issue.

Being allergic to bugs is one thing, but being allergic to food is something completely different. At one point during my college career, I was working two jobs. I was working at Applebee’s and at the college I attended, so I was literally always working. While I was at Applebee’s, I would always get this pasta plate that I loved, but it was always making me sick. At first, we thought it was dairy, so we began to cut that out, but it wasn’t easing the stomach pains or the nausea, or even the rashes that would randomly pop up and not heal for weeks at a time. At one point in time, I ate a donut and for weeks my back was covered in a rash. My mom suggested that I go to the doctor after I had done some research and started to eliminate gluten from my diet. That doctor’s appointment changed my life. While in my early 20’s, I was told that I had developed an allergy to gluten. For those of you who don’t know, gluten is a protein found in essentially everything; some people are allergic to barley, some to rye, and others wheat, but me? I’m allergic to all three. After scheduling a biopsy and a blood test, it was determined that while I don’t have Celiacs, I do have NCGS or Non-Celiac Gluten Sensitivity, which means that I test negative for Celiacs, but I have the symptoms. This meant that I was due for a total lifestyle change. If you’re curious about a list of food that I can’t eat, I would recommend looking it up because it’s essentially everything you can think of. I am allergic to sandwiches, donuts, pizza, pasta, cookies, candy, ice cream, cereal, the list is endless. The only way I can eat it is if it’s listed as Gluten Free. I still struggle with that diet because I live in a state (New Mexico) where it’s literally everywhere. Having to completely change my diet made it to where my parents had to research everything with me. Every label was read, every surface was wiped down, and every kitchen tool was sanitized. Yes, there are benefits to being gluten-free (no processed food(s)), but it is also extremely hard to enjoy food, so learning to bake and cook gluten free was also essential. Sadly, because of this change, I also started to notice that I was having more anxiety and that truly manifested in 2015. Before I go into this part of my life, please know that it is extremely hard to talk about because of how much had happened. From 2015 to now, I have had to completely re-assess everything. If you, or someone you know has anxiety or an eating disorder, please know that you are not alone, that there are people who understand what you’re going through. I can say that, because I have and had both.

2015 was a hard year. I was going through a massive diet change, I was working, and I was also in school. I was trying to better myself and do better in my classes, but unfortunately, that was put on pause for quite some time. September 15, 2015 is a day that I will never forget and I don’t know if I’ll ever be grateful for it. I was studying for a class test one night at a friend’s house and my dad called to tell me to come home for dinner. I grabbed my bags, said bye to my friend, and went home. After dinner, I was feeling so stressed out that I just wanted to watch a movie, so I begged my dad to go with me to the Redbox to rent a movie. On our way there, we were stopped at a red light, and as it turned green, I waited for a second and then went through. What happened next is still a blur. I don’t remember the car driving in front of us, but I remember hearing the impact, the sound of the airbags deploying, and the piercing silence of the aftermath of the accident. I think I blacked out at one point because I don’t remember hitting my head on the steering wheel, but I recall lifting my head up, seeing the debris from the airbags, and coughing on the dust in the air. My first words were, “What the F\*\*\*\*?!” and to this day, no one gets mad at me for it because what are you supposed to say in that moment? I can still see myself trying to open the door to get out of the car. I can still hear the voices of the women who were trying to help me, and I can still see the guy standing a few feet away, his arms crossed across his chest, surveying the situation. I remember hyperventilating and crying, the women trying to get me to calm down because they knew if I didn’t, I would pass out. The guy in the distance barked at me to calm down and breathe, and in that moment, I knew he was either military or law enforcement. His tone was like a slap in the face, getting me to calm down enough to remember that my dad was in the seat next to me. Looking over, I saw his face covered in blood, his glasses slightly pushed into his face and I hear myself scream out loud, asking if he’s okay. He told me he was fine, but that his arm was hurting. At that moment, I didn’t even notice another lady wrapping his arm in a makeshift sling, telling me he was going to be okay. I turned back around to the women next to me, and asked if the other driver was okay; when I heard he was, I left it at that. The ladies were asking me who I should call; I told them to call my mom and gave them the number, but she wasn’t answering. The EMT’s were asking me if we were okay, and that I needed to turn and talk to them, to help them understand what had happened. I told them and then I felt like I was going to be sick, so they gave me a vomit bag just in case. After they got my dad and I out of the car, they put us both into an ambulance and asked us where we should go hospital wise. At that moment, I was answering all the questions.

The ambulance ride was scary. The EMT in the back with us was asking all the basic, yet essential questions about our social security numbers, dates of birth, address, everything. I answered everything that I could, and the EMT was patient enough with me that she didn’t get mad. When we got to the hospital, they asked me if I wanted to call my mom and I said okay. When my mom picked up, the full reality of what had happened hit me and I couldn’t even speak; I handed the EMT the phone and she spoke to my mom for me, telling her what had happened. I can still see them taking my dad back to get checked in and me waiting in the other room for my mom. When she all but ran through the door, I burst into tears and she asked what had happened. I told her and she immediately went to the receptionist’s desk, asking for the details about my dad. Thank God we weren’t there for long, but by the time we left, it was morning and my legs were killing me because of the trauma from the accident. I hadn’t gotten myself admitted because I didn’t feel any pain and thought I was okay. By the time we got back home, I knew I needed to go back to the doctor, so I forced myself to get in my car and go to the doctor’s office. I don’t know how I got back into a vehicle after the accident so quickly, but I did. The doctor gave me ibuprofen and a muscle relaxer, and sent me on my way home, where I got ready to go to work.

Arriving at work was hard. My boss asked me why I was limping and when I told him what had happened, he immediately sent me home. Leaving my boss’s office, I decided to go to my professor’s office and tell him that I couldn’t take the test that day; when he asked why, I told him and he said to take the time that I needed and to just get better. I left my college campus and went to a different friend’s house. When she opened the door and saw me, she gave me a huge hug, pulled me inside, and called another friend, telling her to meet us at Chili’s. I hadn’t eaten in at least a day, and I didn’t realize how hungry I was. Needless to say, everything went up in flames after that accident. My grades plummeted, I was losing sleep, having nightmares, and next thing I knew, I was in therapy, being diagnosed with PTSD and anxiety. I literally felt like everything was falling apart. We were trying to get the car insurance companies to work together, to get us the money we needed, but it wasn’t working. The one thing that resulted in the insurance companies fighting with one another was a lawyer getting involved. Within a few weeks or months, we were in the beginning stages of a lawsuit that would last us for three years and two months. At that time, I wasn’t allowed to tell anyone about what was going on, my dad was trying to handle everything, but knew I needed to be involved, my anxiety was getting worse, and I was put on academic probation. I knew I had to figure something out and so I decided I was going to try my best to finish school. I left therapy when I realized it was potentially hurting the lawsuit, put in for a transfer to our main college’s main campus and got a job at one of the school’s sporting arenas. Slowly, my grades started to go up. My anxiety was still really high, but we were getting a handle on it. My primary had decided to put me on medication to help and each one I tried made me violently sick until we tried Prozac; that one worked, so we stuck with it. As the years went by, the lawsuit was at a standstill. The lawyers were frustrated because they knew, as we did, that it shouldn’t have taken that long, but it was. We were doing our best to stay calm, but it was getting harder and harder. My faith was on very shaky ground because I was so frustrated with God over everything that had happened. I had been getting violently sick again because I was self-inducing it, and I knew that things were getting worse. It wasn’t until I heard Sadie Robertson say that she had once said a prayer that went along the lines of “God, if you can’t change the situation, change my heart.” I said that prayer when I was at my lowest. I was also at my lowest when, after months and months of waiting for news, my dad asked me how I was managing to stay strong. I looked at him and then went back to what I was doing and said, “You never know how strong you have to be until it’s the only choice you have.” I remember he got really quiet, looked at me, and then apologized. I told him there was nothing to apologize for, that the lawsuit was emotionally and mentally draining. I was tired of fighting and wanted to throw in the towel, but I knew that if we did that, then there would be no lessons learned. No matter what happens to us in life, there is always a storm that we have to weather, that we have to get through. Gandalf once said, “All we have to do is decide what to do with the time that is given us.” Lord of the Rings fan or not, that quote is amazing and when I was at my lowest, all I had was time, I just had to decide how I was going to use it. Was I going to wallow in self-pity, or was I going to pick myself up, dust my hands off, and keep fighting? I decided to keep fighting.

Sadly, my lowest was going to be my lowest for a while. In September of 2018, I was diagnosed with bulimia nervosa. Let me first state that I am in full recovery and have been for over two years now, but it wasn’t easy. I was in therapy at least once a week, and I was doing my best to get back on my feet with God. I knew He was there with me, but I was still tired and angry with Him. Fast forward two months later, and we got the call that the lawsuit was over. I cried for hours because so much had happened in those three years and two months. September 15, 2015 to November 15, 2018 was the longest three years of my life, but it wasn’t over. The storm had calmed, but the next one was on the horizon. I had partially accepted that I couldn’t control everything, but that didn’t stop me from trying to.

Chapter 5: Total Acceptance

Total acceptance is something that most people catch a glimpse of, but may never fully get to hold onto it. While 2018 finished off in a calm manner, 2019 was a year that really was about recovery, but what I didn’t know was that it was also going to not just change me, but the world around me. I was still struggling a lot in 2019; work and school were both destroying me mentally and it was becoming harder for me to continue on. I wasn’t suicidal or anything, I was just mentally drained from everything that had happened from 2015 to 2018. In 2019, I had decided I wanted to take a break from school, but I knew that I couldn’t do it until the end of the year, so I made the decision to change churches. I talked to my therapist and she suggested that it was a good idea so that I could start to mentally heal. I finished out my spring, summer, and fall semesters, knowing that I would be taking a break for my mental health. That December, I got the paperwork done and signed up to basically take a leave of absence from school. Once I got through my finals, a group of my friends and I went to Georgia for Passion, which was a massive Christian conference that lasted for three days. While we were there, Covid had just started. China was on the news every single day and we knew that it was moving and spreading, but we didn’t know how bad it was. When we got back home in January, right after New Years, we went back to our lives, not knowing that it would be less than three months until our lives literally changed essentially overnight.

When Covid hit the United States and we all went into a full-fledged lockdown, my anxiety skyrocketed, as did everyone else’s. At the same time, I was also working on recovering from my eating disorder, so being able to stay home was more of a blessing in disguise for me than it was anything else. In that time, I kept going to the new church I had found in 2019, knowing that it was where I needed to be. But I also knew that 2020 was going to be a big year for me in some way, shape, or form. As I began to embrace parts of me that only I could, I also began to pray once more about finding my biological father. Regardless of what God would tell me, there was medical history that I knew I would eventually need to know and that it would cost more to go to the doctor for a full workup than it would be just to go through an online database like Ancestry.com. I started to do my research and found that I could get more out of 23andMe for my money. I bought the kit and submitted the saliva sample. I had to really remind myself that no matter what the results said, no matter what they revealed, my parents and family loved me unconditionally. I had good friends and I was doing my best at everything every single day. The results did not determine who I was, who I used to be, and who I would become; I was already uniquely me. My DNA didn’t determine who I was. My health history didn’t determine who I was. I was created to be a Daughter of Christ. Yes, I had (and still have anxiety), an eating disorder, and so many other things, but none of those changed the fact that God created me to do something special. I didn’t know and possibly still don’t know, what that could be, but I know that nothing and no one will stop me from doing it.

Chapter 6: Perspective Through the Eyes of an Adoptee

It’s important to note that there is nothing glamorous about the adoption process. It can get messy in so many ways, but I think it’s also important to note that it can yield some of the most beautiful relationships in the world. I’m not going to touch on the politics surrounding adoptions because every state can be different, and internationally there is a lot more red-tape to consider. What I can say is that while my parents didn’t have international or even domestic red-tape to cross, there were still a lot of things they had to do just to be told, “yes” by the adoption agency.

In 1994, in the state of New Mexico, adoption was definitely a thing. It wasn’t easy then, and it’s not easy now, but as I said, it’s worth it. Many couples want to have children but can’t for a variety of reasons, my mom’s reason being medical. For those couples that, for whatever reason, can’t conceive or carry a child to term, adoption offers them another chance at becoming parents. It’s an option that gives them hope and it’s an option that motivates them to keep trying to have that family that they are pursuing.

Adopting a child is not a process that happens overnight; it’s long, lengthy, and rough. Like I said, every state is different, but for my parents to adopt me, they had to allow the agency to do home visits in order to ensure that the home was safe for a child. They had to write about each other and themselves, as well as give accounts about their family members. Any pets they had, they were listed. Background checks were done and legal paperwork had to be drawn up, but eventually, my mom and dad were told they could move forward with the adoption process.

Fast forward to my perspective and I’ll be honest with you, it’s going to be hard to talk about because it’s something I rarely mention. There are only a handful of people who know, and even then, there is only one person who has ever seen me cry and scream about it, and that’s Antonio. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve just cried because I don’t feel accepted by anyone. One thing about being adopted is that sometimes it’s hard to feel accepted because of something simple. My family isn’t racist or prejudiced at all, but in my mind, I always felt like I wasn’t fully accepted because of my skin tone. Again, to the family members that might read this, I know that isn’t true. But that’s how it felt and it also was hard to accept myself when I was always being told that I was overdramatic, overreacting, or too sensitive. Those three words had a huge impact on me growing up, and now…now I always ask if I’m being too dramatic, if I’m being too sensitive, or if I’m simply overreacting. Granted, there are times that I am doing or being one of those things, but that doesn’t mean that I’m doing it or being it all the time.

That isn’t the only thing that was hard for me to accept. I had to accept that I wasn’t a favorite, and that was also why I was treated differently. I would have a cousin that would get to do something, or my brother would get to do something that I would want to do and I wouldn’t be able to do it. I kept asking why my cousins or brother would be treated differently than me, and of course, everyone denied that we were treated differently. But here is the truth: everyone is treated differently because we all react differently. Yes, I’m a sensitive person who sometimes reacts based on her emotions, but I’m also someone who has a really big heart. It took me years to accept that I have a big heart, to really embrace that side of myself. I may still justify my feelings or try to justify them, but even as I’m writing this book, this very chapter, I’m realizing just how different I am.

As a teenager, I was surrounded by people telling me that my father could be a billionaire who would pay off all my college debt, or that he could be a serial killer on death row. Yes, these could all be true, but there were other scenarios. He could just be your average Joe who walks around, watches tv or reads a book, eats burgers with his wife or partner, and just chills all day; or…or he could have been a rapist and I would have been the consequence of that atrocious action. To me, I stuck with that scenario because it was the worst one for me to imagine. I imagined that my father was a rapist, that I was a result of an action that was done without consent. Had I been smarter, I wouldn’t have even entertained that possibility, but I did it because as Michelle Jones says in Spider-Man, “If you expect disappointment, then you’ll never really be disappointed.” I wanted to mentally prepare myself for the possibility that I was here on this planet by accident, that I wasn’t planned or even desired. But here’s a simple truth: that isn’t true. I was planned, I was desired.

To those parents of adopted children, please do me a huge favor: always make sure your child is aware that they were and are desired, that they were and are wanted, that they were fought for. There are so many people out there who feel like no one wants them, desires them, or that no one will even fight for them. Don’t let them grow up believing that. It will mess them up in so many ways, and I don’t want you to have to live with the question of, “Did I tell my child(ren) just how much they mean to me?” It’s a hard question to ask yourself, and it’s an even harder question to ask your children. My dad has asked me on more than one occasion if I knew just how much he and my mom loved Zach and I, and to be honest, I’m not a parent, so while I can’t understand that sentiment, I always told them that we knew.

Always let your child(ren) know that they were CHOSEN. My parents CHOSE my brother and I. There are hundreds of kids who are born into families that they shouldn’t have been born into, families that they didn’t get to choose. As I got older, and as I still get older, I have truly come to realize what people mean when they say that you can choose your family. Blood does not make you family. Your family are those closest to you, those who you choose to let into your life. If you choose to adopt, make sure that it’s something that you greatly desire to do. Make sure that the child you’re going to adopt, to raise, knows that you are their mom and/or dad. My parents were always honest with Zach and I; they never kept things from us, and I absolutely adore them for that. No one likes being lied to, right? Don’t lie to your kid(s). I’m not going to tell you how to raise your kid(s), but please just keep this in mind: if they are mature enough to ask, you can answer them in the best way you deem. There are things I learned in the last year or so that went against everything I knew about my adoption, but they weren’t things from my parents. I’m not going to reveal who lied to me, why they lied to me, or what they lied to me about, but I will tell you this: it changed the relationship. What I learned…it broke me in so many ways. It truly made me question everything I knew, and I had to come to terms with the truth. The truth can be ugly, but it can also be freeing.

We’ve all heard the proverb that honesty is always the best policy, right? Honesty can be hurtful, but it’s better than a lie. Would you rather be hurt by being lied to, or be hurt by the truth? There are so many people who have lied to me and because of those lies, there is a lot of healing that has to be done. One thing I always tell people is that because my parents were honest with Zach and I from the beginning, our relationships with each other are stronger. If you want a strong and healthy relationship with your child, regardless of if they are adopted or not, be honest with them. Timing is a huge thing, so be honest when the time is right. That’s what my parents did with us; I also realize that not everyone parents the same way, so please just take my “parenting advice” with a grain of salt and please remember that I am not a parent; I’m just saying what my parents did was beneficial for me.

Chapter 7: Finding My Father

DNA is a funny thing. It literally holds all of the secrets to who we are, allowing us to learn so much about our past. Without DNA, people wouldn’t know if they were related to famous kings, queens, actors, actresses, or even politicians. Our DNA is so complex and is quite literally known as the building blocks of life. Growing up with a mother as a nurse, you can imagine that I learned quite a bit about DNA and the human body. I grew up learning that we get 24 chromosomes from our mother and 24 from our father, taking roughly fifty percent of DNA from each of them. That DNA comes from their parents, their grandparents, their great-grandparents, the list goes on. I didn’t know any of my ancestry for most of my life. I learned quite some time ago that my mother’s family is descended from Marie Antoinette, and that they come from all over Europe. None of this should really surprise anyone because we all know that there is a good chance we’re all descended from Europeans. What I really wanted was answers and for some reason, I couldn’t let go of it this time. I did my research and found that 23andMe was one of the most comprehensive genealogy sites out there. I took a leap of faith and purchased the subscription that would show me as much health history as possible without spending an arm and a leg. July 18 of 2020 was when my reports were released and I had no real lead on who my father was, but I did have more health history that I was able to go off of. However, on November 8 of that same year, less than 6 months after my DNA sample had been received, a cousin on my father’s side reached out to me and started asking me some questions. I quickly responded as she had said we were 2nd cousins, so I knew she was probably my best chance at finding my father. I told her my story and that I had been conceived in San Antonio in 1994 around January/February. She of course, did the math and said that she knew of someone who could possibly be my father. When she told me that, my heart skipped a beat? Was I going to meet my father? Would I finally be able to get some answers? My head was spinning, my heart was pounding, and I knew that if she couldn’t find my father, that I was for sure done looking.

After I had that conversation with my cousin, I knew I had to tell my parents. I knew I had to do this the right way this time. My parents and I had been through too much for me to do the one thing that would erase all the growth we’d gone through. While my parents weren’t entirely excited, they also knew that I respected them enough to be honest with them. I had made a vow that I would tell my parents everything that they needed to know, and this they definitely needed to know. I told them that they were my parents and that no one could ever replace them, that they were the people I trusted more than anything on this planet. Once I told them that, relief flooded their faces and they gave me their support. I told the guy, who we’ll call Gary, that he could go ahead and do the test and we would see what the results would show. Again, it wasn’t long before we got the results back and well…I had found my biological father.

The number one question I’ve always been asked when I tell people how I found my father is, “Are you okay?” If I’m being totally honest, at the time, I didn’t even know how to feel. Before we had done the test, he had told me that I potentially had two older brothers as well as an older sister, and since the test came back positive, I literally had three older siblings, as well as a step-mother. I was happy, scared, relieved, confused, a myriad of emotions. All my life, I had been the eldest child, but now overnight, I was the youngest, middle, and oldest. For those of you trying to keep count, I have six siblings all together: two older brothers, one older sister, two younger brothers, and one younger sister, and their ages are 38, 32, 29, 28 (me), 24, 23, and 20. When I realized that I was quite literally the middle child, I’ll admit, my brain kind of spiraled a bit. I had always been older than my siblings, but all of a sudden, I was also younger than my siblings. As a child, I had craved an older sibling, but knew that it could never happen unless my parents adopted an older child and well…they kept telling me no on that request. Once I started to process that I had another group of siblings, I wanted to reach out to them, but I didn’t know how they would react, much less feel. After talking to Gary about it, he told me he was going to tell them, but to give them some time given the circumstances (I will not go into that story either). It wasn’t long until my oldest brother Travis reached out to me and we began our relationship. At that moment, I knew which older brother I would be closest to and I was perfectly okay with it because in my eyes, I had an older brother! For those of you with the over-protective older brother(s), I had always wanted one. Zach has always been protective of me, but like all my brothers and sisters, he's taller than me, so he’s more intimidating. Having an older brother was probably one of the coolest things to me because now I had an older sibling who I knew wanted to be in my life and wanted to get to know me. I knew that it would take time for my sister Ashley and my brother Chris to reach out and to this day, I have never blamed them for it. Sometimes change takes time to adapt to and that’s perfectly okay. No one has ever been fully okay with change; everyone has to adapt to it in their own way, and every single person deserves grace during change. Ashley and I began talking a little while later, and while we don’t always talk, I’m just happy that I have a big sister. I absolutely love my little sister Jordyn, but having a big sister is just…different (Jordyn, you know what I’m talking about). In my own way, I look up to Travis, Chris, and Ashley. They have all been successful in different areas of life and it’s really interesting to see how three people you didn’t even know existed until recently, live their lives the best they can. My brother Chris and I are still developing our relationship, but again, that’s okay. I don’t talk to my brother Zach all the time, and my youngest brother Joshua I talk to maybe once or twice a year. After all, being siblings doesn’t mean that you have to communicate 24/7/365.

Communicating is something that comes with time, right? And can most of us be honest here and admit that sometimes we simply don’t want to communicate? It’s hard, it’s scary, and it’s definitely something that can cause more harm than good, or vice versa. But the thing with communication is that it’s necessary for relationships to flourish, for them to grow in every aspect. With my father, there is quite a bit of communication, but there is also quite a bit of miscommunication, which is only natural. We text quite frequently, so we do have a relationship, but we are also both aware of the boundaries we have put in place. Gary knows that he is not my dad, that I have a dad who I absolutely adore and he respects that beyond all measure. That being said, he doesn’t hesitate to help out when he can. He has told me that since he has helped my siblings, he will help me. Sometimes that help comes in the form of a prayer, which is way more effective than a lot of other things.

Prayer is the one thing that has gotten me to where I am in life. My faith is paramount to who I am and while I consistently fall short, that doesn’t mean God loves me any less. Finding my father was not an easy journey; I had to learn a lot, accept a lot, sacrifice a lot, and even just go with the flow. To this day, there are things I will always struggle with regarding my adoption, but here is the truth: that is okay. If you’re adopted, just know that you are not alone, that it’s okay to feel lost, abandoned, and utterly alone. I felt that way for years and while it was not a good feeling, it was a way for me to better myself. I grew to be extremely independent and capable of doing things on my own. I didn’t know either of my biological parents growing up and I don’t regret that because in all honesty, it probably would have confused me.

As an adoptee, figuring out the ins and outs of being adopted isn’t easy. There is no such thing as a bad question when you’re adopted because how can you know something if you don’t ask? When my father and I first started talking, he told me that had he known about me when I was a child, he probably would have sought out some sort of custody agreement and quite frankly, I’m happy that didn’t happen. When we’re teenagers, the world is already confusing, right? We’re trying to figure out who to date, what sport(s) we like, who our closest friends are, which class(es) we like and dislike, the whole enchilada. But what a teenager doesn’t need is two sets of parents fighting for time with them. My parents aren’t divorced, which for me, is a blessing. I didn’t have to worry about my mothers or fathers fighting over custody or weekends, what to get me for birthdays or holidays; I just had to worry about getting to school on time. But now as an adult, I have three mothers (my mom, my mother, and my step-mom), three fathers (my dad, my father, and my step-dad), four brothers (one adopted, one from my mother, and two from my father), and two sisters (one from my mother and one from my father). If you really want it to get more complicated, I could include a family tree, but I’m not going to do that. Neither of my biological parents are perfect humans, just like my mom and dad aren’t perfect. Then again, who is perfect? Other than Jesus, of course.

But I’ll answer that burning question that you’re probably wanting me to address and that is, “Did you ever actually meet your biological father in person?” And the answer is yes. In August of 2022, I made the 10.5 hour drive to Texas to meet my biological father, my step-mom, one of my older brothers, my sister, sister-in-law, and my niece and nephew. Now, as someone who routinely goes on long drives for personal therapy, I knew that this drive was going to be a bit different. I had only ever driven around the state of New Mexico, so this drive to another state was actually really intimidating. I had to make the decision to go to Texas very fast because I was being so flaky about my decision. In fact, I was so flaky with my decision that it took my boyfriend sitting me down and bluntly telling me that if he’d been given the opportunity to meet his father, he would have taken it, regardless of where he had to go. Hearing that really made me sit back and think about why I was being so indecisive. After having a conversation with someone who knows my story in depth, I realized it was because I was scared. See, I had grown up not knowing how my search for answers was going to end. I had always had something to research, to consider, and with the drive coming up, I knew that the lifelong journey was going to potentially come to an end. In other words, yes, I was terrified to have something so important to me end. It was bittersweet, but my boyfriend also knew that it was something that I needed to do.

The day of the trip arrived and I hit the road as my boyfriend went to work. I had opted to take the freeway and some of the backroads because it would save me gas in the long run, and while I drive a hybrid, I still wanted to see how many times I had to fill up before reaching my destination. The drive was long, I’ll tell you that much. I had opted to take the Interstate and then back roads because it was shorter and I wouldn’t be using so much gas, so I had to find ways to pass the time. I had a music list already created, my favorite podcast Crime Junkie downloaded, two new audiobooks by J.D. Robb, and my own thoughts.Within the first hour, I was already done with my music because they were songs that I just wasn’t feeling at 7am, but J.D. Robb was my lifesaver for the next few hours. I made my next gas stop in Plains, Texas, which isn’t far from the New Mexico border and by that point, I had been on the road for four hours. I was doing good on gas, but I was also paranoid that I would pass through Plains and not see another gas station for hours, so I decided to stop a fill up even though I was only at a little over half a tank.

Walking into the gas station, I decided to use the bathroom and get a snack since I hadn’t eaten. As I was leaving, this older gentleman did what Texas people do and said, “Hello.” I was quite literally shocked. I come from a state where we don’t talk to people at gas stations because we don’t know if they’re going to shoot us or something. Now, don’t get me wrong, New Mexico is a beautiful state and the food is amazing, but the drivers and the people in general are not the nicest; we make national headlines for bad things more than good things. But anyways, once I got back into my car, I called my dad and told him and he was surprised. I then told him, “You were born in Texas; now it makes sense why you talk to people at gas stations.” Of course he laughed at that and said I probably wasn’t wrong. Once I got back on the road, J.D. Robb was back on and Dallas and Peabody were solving homicides in New York. The drive seemed like it was taking FOREVER and I wish I was exaggerating when I say that I called my dad probably about ten times because I would get so bored. Thankfully, he didn’t mind and thought it was funny. Antonio was checking my location throughout the day, but I knew he was busy with work so I wasn’t upset about not hearing from him. Like, I said, the drive was long and boring.

I went through one town that had a ton of brick homes and I remember saying, “They do like their brick houses”, which of course cracked me up for some reason. If you know anything about me, it’s that I laugh at myself all the time; you have to be able to laugh at yourself in life, in my personal opinion. What I will say is that the drive to Texas taught me a lot about myself. I had to do some intense introspection during the drive and force myself to come to terms with some harsh realities. One reality I had to accept was that Antonio alone is not responsible for my happiness and that I can not be putting that kind of pressure on him. You see, we have to be able to get through life doing things that make us happy. For example, buying books is something that brings me a great deal of joy, just like buying things for Antonio brings me a lot of joy. We live in a very ugly world and we cannot depend on other people to make us happy because people are people; they are going to fail at things and if we base our happiness on them, they will almost always disappoint us. My parents make me happy, but they are not responsible for my happiness; that has to come from me. I have to rely on Jesus to make me happy because He will never fail me. I also had to come to terms with the fact that I cannot do everything with Antonio. As someone who absolutely adores spending time with her partner, I have a really hard time not being around him when we’re both off. Our schedules make it hard to get time together and when we do have that time, it’s only a few hours, so quality time is a must. That being the case, I’ve had to recently accept that people need their own time to themselves; I have severe anxiety and sometimes I just need to be left alone to process what’s going through my brain. There is nothing wrong with being alone; it’s healthy and it’s necessary.

As I said, this drive gave me a lot of time to think. I don’t know when I actually arrived in San Antonio, all I remember is that one minute I was out in the country, and the next I was on an interstate stuck in rush hour traffic that was still moving faster than New Mexico rush hour traffic on a good day. I had checked my maps to see how far I was from my destination and I was shocked to see it was only like 45 minutes. I was definitely getting tired and hungry, and my gas was below half a tank, but I was determined to get to my Biological Father’s house without having to fill up again. I will say this much about San Antonio drivers: ya’ll are pretty chill. I saw so many turn signals it was weird since people in New Mexico don’t use them and ya’ll let me switch lanes, which also doesn’t happen in New Mexico. New Mexico drivers learn defensive driving ridiculously fast because of how crazy it is to drive on the road, so when I say that I was freaking out because people were being NICE, I mean it. I didn’t see any accidents, which was also weird, but it wasn’t the most shocking thing. I think one of the weirdest things I’ve ever seen was the turn-arounds and I’m not going to lie, at first I didn’t see the point of them, but by the next day, not only did I appreciate them, I was having fun with them. Being in Texas was a culture shock for me. I’ve been to various states before (Hawaii, Utah, Idaho, Colorado, Oregon, Washington, California, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Georgia, Arkansas, Alabama, Arizona, and now Texas) and each has had their own culture, but Texas was the one that really taught me a lot.

When I arrived at my father’s house, I was trying to figure out a way to approach the door and ring the bell while standing there awkwardly. Thank God I work for Amazon because lo and behold, there was an Amazon package that was sitting there. I picked it up, looked at the shipping label, rang the bell, and when he opened the door, my first words were, “This was not shipped from the site I work at.” Probably the best entry I’ve ever done. He obviously gave me a hug and I got my stuff from the car. I knew I had to call Antonio and update him because he knew I was anxious and nervous, so I called him and spoke to him. I wasn’t on the phone for long, but just talking to him eased my anxiety greatly. After we hung up, I went back to talk to my father and this part is going to seem a bit harsh (sorry, Gary). I went in and we talked for a bit, but then he went back to watching tv and I just stood there, unsure what to do or say. In my head, I was expecting him to give me his undivided attention, but in reality, he was probably nervous. Here I was, his youngest daughter, someone he had been talking to for a little over 2 years and someone he hadn’t known even existed up until that point. What was he supposed to do or say? While I was over there trying to sort out my emotions, I had no idea what was happening on his end. Moral of this part of the story: give grace and be patient.

It wasn’t long before he jumped on the phone and called my step-mom Jean and told her I had arrived. She was already on her way home from work, so we didn’t have to wait long. When she arrived, she sat down and basically gave me her undivided attention. We sat there and talked for a little bit before we decided to go get some food because we were all hungry. Jumping in the car with them, I sat in the back seat and just watched the scenery while they talked. They had asked me at one point during the ride if it would be okay if we did the San Antonio Riverwalk that night since it would be cooler and I was okay with it. We had settled on eating at Margaritaville for dinner and like a true New Mexican, I judged the restaurant by their chips and salsa. I was pleasantly surprised by how good they were. Granted, I still prefer my New Mexican food, but the TexMex version wasn’t too bad.

Driving through Downtown San Antonio was incredible. It was hot and humid, but people were out and about, doing their own thing. There were so many stores that I wanted to go into, but since my bank account said, “Nah girl, you’re not going in there,” I forgot about them. As we pulled into a parking structure, we found a parking space and went to the elevator. After waiting for maybe 5 minutes, we went back to the car and went up (I think), to the next level, where we found another space and pulled in there. We walked to a new set of elevators and since these worked, we went to the right floor and proceeded to walk through the mall. In my head, I was taking note of the tourist-y stores that I wanted to see the next day when I went exploring (all of the stores were closed at this point). We kept walking and finally found the Riverwalk where I was absolutely stunned. Not only was it incredible to see in person, but it was absolutely breathtaking. The only time I had ever seen the Riverwalk was in Miss Congeniality when Cheryl, Gracie, and the other contestants were there for the swimsuit competition and Cheryl was asked to describe her perfect date. Her classic response of, “I would have to say April 25, because it’s not too hot and not too cold; all you need is a light jacket!” Needless to say, I was stoked! We opted to do one of the boat rides and even though I’m scared of getting on or in anything that is touching more than four feet of water, I did it anyway.

Sitting in that boat, while being shown bits and pieces of San Antonio’s history, was absolutely incredible. I had never imagined that the Riverwalk was as massive as they claimed and that ride yielded one of the most eye-opening experiences of a lifetime. Buildings that were optical illusions, pieces of art that had beautiful stories attached, bridges that were featured in movies, everything about it was as incredible as it sounds. I promised myself that I would go back the next day to see it when it was more full of life and to get some pictures in for my photography hobby. After the ride was over, we went back to the house where I quite honestly passed out. I’d been up since 6am and had been on the road for more than half of the day, so I was utterly exhausted. I don’t remember if I dreamed or not, but I remember waking up feeling better. I knew what the day ahead was going to look like: I would be going back to the Riverwalk and then I would be seeing my brother, his family, and my sister for the first time.

Driving to the Riverwalk was an adventure. I had several stops to do, including looking at some tactical stores to see if I could find something for Antonio and I had to go to Walmart for some basic necessities that I had forgotten (I always forget something either going to a destination or coming home). I called my dad to update him and when I told him I had found a Walmart, he asked, “What else did you find?” I told him, “Starbucks.” On his end, he laughed so hard and replied with, “Leave it to you to find a Starbucks. Where was it?” I told him, “Dad, it was across the street from Walmart…”. At that, he laughed even harder and once I told him that I felt like I had never left civilization, he started wheezing. What you have to understand is that I am constantly cracking my dad up because I say the weirdest things; when I told Antonio the same thing, he literally said, “Of course you found those two places.” What can I say? They come in handy. After I found my destinations and had an idea of where I was, I made my way to stop number one: the Riverwalk.

This first stop proved to be the most challenging for me as it was ridiculously humid. Within minutes I was sweating and my phone was overheating. But, I was having a blast. I went in and out of stores that I had wanted to visit and bought the gifts that I wanted to buy; I had forgotten how expensive tourism gets, but I didn’t care. As I continued walking, I realized I didn’t even recognize where I was in the city and while I wanted to keep going, I knew better. I turned around and tried to retrace my steps, but I wasn’t entirely successful, so I pulled out my phone and used my map system to get me back to my car. During my walk back, I felt my sugar levels drop and gave myself ten minutes to find something to eat and drink otherwise I would pass out. Thankfully, I found my way back to an area I was familiar with, went into a tiny store and bought a snack and a gatorade. I had kept an eye on the time and knew that I had to make my way back to the house, so I found my car and hit the road.

The drive back was an adventure as always, but I was more excited to meet Travis, Ashley, Michelle, and the kids. I made it back to the house before they did and didn’t have to wait long to meet my Travis, Michelle, Olivia, and Kye. Meeting my oldest brother really did feel like a dream come true. Remember earlier on I mentioned I had always wanted a big brother? Well, I had finally been able to meet one of them and to say that my heart was emotional is an understatement. Michelle was crazy beautiful and I knew in that instant that I would grow to have a good relationship with her (and she has definitely been an awesome sister-in-law). Being an aunt is one of life’s greatest gifts, I will say that much. My niece and nephew absolutely stole my heart and while getting my niece to hug me was a mission, it was a mission I was able to finish by the end of the night (thank you, Olivia!). My nephew Kye quite literally became glued to my hip. Not only can he talk as much as I can, the kid is absolutely hilarious. By the end of the night, I was 100% sure that we were all blood-related.

My sister Ashley and I have a relationship that is based purely on grace and patience for very personal reasons and none of which I am going to repeat, but I will always respect. There will always be one sibling that you have to work with more and that’s okay. My brother Joshua is like that. We only talk once or twice a year, but that’s just the relationship. Not all siblings get along and that’s also okay. What I did learn from meeting my sister was that she was still working on accepting that she had a little sister; I’m not going to psycho-analyze her because that’s not fair, but I will say that I don’t blame her. If I’m being totally honest, I would have probably handled the news of having a younger sister way worse and just not really acknowledged her, so thank you Ashley for acknowledging me and welcoming me into the family. I can’t imagine how challenging and hard this has been for you, but just know that I respect you more than I can say and I am so happy you’re my big sister.

While Friday was a big day, it wasn’t as big as Saturday was. Saturday was filled with more adventures, running into an old family friend who had seen me struggle in my teen years and my early college years, and spending time with my brother and his family. My brother had texted me while I was out running around and asked if I wanted to go to the splash pad with him, Michelle, and the kids and of course I said yes. Ashley wouldn’t be joining us and neither would anyone else, but that was okay. I met up with them at the house and we took off from there. One of the first stops we made was to some sort of donut shop that they had wanted to visit. Michelle had also planned on meeting one of her friends there and since her friend’s kids were also friends with Kye and Olivia, it turned into a big reunion that I was happy to witness. My brother and I started to bond at that point and that bond continued to grow as we made our way to the splash pad.

We sat there for a couple of hours and while the kids all played, and Michelle and her friend talked, Travis and I grew our relationship. I had never had an older brother that I could go to for advice, nor one I looked up to so much, but Travis quickly became that. We had already established a connection by texting, but talking in person made it so much stronger. While he is blunt and says it like it is, he’s also really open-minded and super easy to talk to. In the time that we talked, I learned more about him and knew that he and I would have a really good relationship. At some point in time, I started talking to Michelle and her friend and in those few moments, we bonded over so many things. I knew Michelle was going to be that sister-in-law that I could go to and it wasn’t long before that proved to be true. Those couple of hours flew by and next thing we knew, we were making our way back to the house to have a family barbecue with everyone and my step-mom’s family as well.

Meeting my step-mom’s family wasn’t intimidating, but it was a lot. I don’t even remember how many people I met, but I got the feeling that they were all very loving people, so I went with the flow. We all ate together and my nephew of course sat by me, and talked my ear off, much to my delight and the delight of everyone else at the table. After I finished eating, I started to clean the kitchen up because some part of me just felt compelled to help in any capacity. At the same time, Michelle was there, and that was where she and I began to grow closer. Having that time with her was so comforting because she has this soft-spoken and loving heart that makes people want to be around her. She’s so sweet and easy to talk to, so of course, my heart welcomed her in. She is my first sister-in-law and I remember telling her that she had set a high standard for any other sister-in-law that I might potentially have (sorry, ladies!).

As the night grew to a close, we all sat in the living room just relaxing and I was trying to hold onto as much as possible since I was leaving the next morning. I had been trying to figure out the best time to leave and had come to the sad and disgusting conclusion that I would have to leave at 3am in order to be home before 4pm that afternoon. I wasn’t happy about it, but it was a necessary evil and as much fun as I was having, I also wanted to go home; I missed Antonio and the rest of my family. But I had to say good-bye first and my emotional self was not looking forward to that.

Saying good-bye sucks and it wasn’t any easier. I didn’t like saying good-bye at all, but saying good-bye to Travis was the hardest because he’d been the one I had bonded with the most. We had already planned on me visiting them in Montana at some point in the next year or so, so I had something to look forward to. I also planned on visiting Texas again at some point when it was cooler, so I knew I had something to look forward to in the upcoming year(s). We all said our good-byes and before long, I was going to bed to try and get at least four hours of sleep (yes, I can function on that).

The next morning came too quickly and within a few minutes, I was out the door after saying good-bye to Jean and Gary. I had to stop for gas before I hit the road, so I stopped and discovered that my card wasn't working. I looked at my account and saw that someone had tried to use my card in Arizona, so I jumped on the phone and immediately called my bank. I was able to transfer some funds to my venmo account and survive off of that, but by that point, I was really anxious to get home. Driving through Texas at 3am is not my idea of fun; by 6am, I had to stop and get an energy drink and snooze for a few minutes. If you’ve ever done a power nap in your car, then you know that they are some of the best naps ever (unless I’m just really weird). That power nap made all the difference and before I knew it, I was back in New Mexico, speeding home because not only did I have to pee, but I wanted to see Antonio. I made it back home and literally jumped on Antonio, just hugging him. He held me and hugged me back because well, we love each other and we’re best friends. I filled him in on everything, and like the rock that he is, he sat there and endured my ADHD moments and listened to the details of the story.

This was a trip we both knew had needed to happen for more than one reason: I had to get used to not being with him all the time and I had to make this journey alone. That was one of the biggest lessons I had learned and it was one that will stay with me forever. You may have to do some things in life by yourself and that’s healthy. Not everyone can hold your hand, but the right people will support you and stand by your side. That trip would not have happened without Antonio sitting me down and telling me that he couldn’t hold my hand this time, that I had to be a big girl and do it myself. Was it scary? Absolutely. But was it necessary and worth it? Most definitely. You are never going to get anywhere in life if you can’t figure out how to do things on your own. I’ve had some people tell me I’m insecure and to an extent, that’s true, but I’m not insecure because I’m scared; I’m insecure about some things because I’ve never experienced them. As a person, I grew more on the trip to Texas than I did in the last year, and that is a blessing that I will forever be grateful for.

Chapter 8: Inner Peace

What does inner peace mean to you? Is it finally accepting everything you’ve ever been told? Is it healing from wounds of the past? Or is it waking up each day and choosing to keep going? For me…it’s all of the above. Inner peace is something that we all crave, that we all desire. We don’t want to be hurting anymore, to feel like there is nothing for us in this life. My inner peace is constantly evolving, changing me into someone that I hope will be worthy of her own self-acceptance.

I had to accept that my body will always change, that I will always have anxiety. I had to accept that I was adopted at an early age. I had to accept that being cheated on in multiple relationships didn’t mean I wasn’t worthy of love, that being sexually assaulted didn’t mean I was a piece of meat. The older I get, the more I accept that I am uniquely myself; that the Jessica typing this might be very different from the Jessica in a year, and that the Jessica from high school and college has grown into someone who is fiercely independent, extremely loving, and very sensitive. This Jessica had to accept that her happiness didn’t depend on other people, but that it came from Christ and Christ alone.

My inner peace will be a lifelong journey that will undoubtedly have its bumps and bruises, trips and faceplants. But that’s what makes life beautiful, right? We are all on this crazy journey of self-discovery, trying to decide who we are in this world and what our purposes are. Some may say that it’s morbid and scary, which at times, it very well can be. But others will say that it’s been a beautiful journey, which is also accurate. Just as my journey has and always will be mine, your journeys will always be yours. You will have people come and go and some of those people will stay, but remember that they do not determine where your journey ends, nor do they determine the choices that you make to succeed in life. Yes, they can support you, but at the end of the day, you have to be at peace with the decisions that you make, not the decisions that others make for you.

A long time ago, I made myself a promise that I would always do what was best for me. Is that always an easy decision? Absolutely not. As someone who lives with two other people, one of them being the love of my life, it’s not always easy to put myself first; in fact, my boyfriend will tell you that I never do it and that I actually will do something for him or his grandma before I do something for myself. My inner peace comes from helping people, which isn’t always easy for me to do. One of my biggest problems is shopping, or as I like to call it, retail therapy”. Sadly, this form of self-care had to end when my bills became bigger and priorities became even more necessary. But from that, I get inner peace from making sure I have paid all my bills. Your inner peace has to come from something you do for yourself or for others; no one can give it to you. Just as no one can give you inner peace, no one can be your main source of happiness. I couldn’t put my inner peace on someone else because they don’t have to go through the same things that I do. I have to fight my own battles, and while it’s okay to ask for help, there is some leg work I have to do on my own. So my question for you is this: are you willing to find your inner peace and have people cheer you on, or are you going to give someone else the power to find that for you?

It’s not easy to search for your inner peace, or to even become comfortable with who you are. I struggle with seeking approval from everyone and I probably always will. Why do I do it? I seek approval because I grew up thinking that I was always doing something wrong, and that the words I needed to hear were, “Good job!” or “I’m proud of you!” or some other form of acknowledgement. Granted, I did hear it, but for some reason, it wasn’t said in the tone that I desired. I always believed that it wasn’t genuine, which honestly causes more harm than good. See, I wanted my mother to acknowledge me in so many ways, but she couldn’t and that’s not her fault. I wanted my father to acknowledge me, but he couldn’t because at the time, he didn’t even know that I existed. I wanted to hear it from my family, as they were constantly praising my brother or my cousins’ on their successes. I remember hearing sentences like, “Maybe school isn’t for you.”, “You changed your degree again?”, the list goes on. Hearing these sentences, while they were potentially true, made me doubt myself. I’m not the best at math and had to take one course seven times before I passed it. By the time I finished the course and got to my stats class, I was determined to prove that I could pass a math class the first time. However, I wasn’t determined to prove it to my family, I was determined to prove it to myself. I had let the words of other people influence the way I viewed myself and instead of ignoring the words that could cause pain, I allowed them to seep in and damage pieces of myself that are only now starting to heal. I’m not a genius like my brother Zach, but that’s okay. I don’t have a master’s degree, and that’s okay. I have a bachelor’s degree and Zach comes to me for help when he’s writing his papers. We all have our own gifts and things we struggle with, but that doesn’t define who we are in the eyes of Jesus Christ.

I remember watching the movie Overcomer in 2019, and there was a scene that has stayed with me since I first saw it. One of the main characters had struggled with her identity because she wanted to overcome her asthma, which caused her to struggle with running. At one point in time during the movie, the song Who You Say I Am was playing in the background and the lyrics, “I am chosen not forsaken, I am who You say I am, You are for me not against me, I am who You say I am, I am chosen not forsaken, I am who You say I am”, made me bawl my eyes out. Fun fact: the lyrics inspired the title of this book. It was in that moment that I realized Jesus loves me for who I am, that He chose me and He has a plan for me that no one else can finish. When I realized that, I felt a kind of peace settle around me. I won’t lie, there are times when that peace is interrupted, when I lose focus of that God-given peace. But then I remember that part of God-given peace is accepting His grace and for me, that is and always will be, a challenge. Whether you believe in God or not, please know that this book is not designed to convince you to be a Christian; it’s just my perspective and my life, and believing in God is a part of who I am. My faith is everything to me and I’m not going to hide that. My faith is probably the one thing that has really allowed me to fully embrace all aspects of my adoption.

Chapter 9: Who I Was and Who I Became

“The more you know who you are, and what you want, the less you let things upset you.”

― Stephanie Perkins, Anna and the French Kiss

I grew up broken. I was in abusive relationships, and I heard some things growing up that did some permanent damage. It’s never easy to talk about my struggles because what person likes to admit they aren’t perfect? There is not a single person who wants to admit that they aren’t perfect, but here is the truth: no one is perfect. We are human beings, which means that we are inherently born with flaws. If you ask anyone who knows me, they will all tell you that I am extremely independent, I have a lot of pride, and that I am extremely critical of myself. But they will also tell you that I will begrudgingly admit that I have a pride issue and that I will ask for help. They will also tell you that I have an immensely huge heart, that I hate when people are hurting, and that I have a tendency to be a “fixer”. While I pointed out my flaws, I also pointed out that I will ask for help when I need it. It is not easy for most of us to ask for help; we want to be able to do things on our own, but as someone I know and love once told me, there is nothing wrong with asking for help. I have asked for help more this year (2022) than I have in a very long time. I didn’t just ask for help physically, I asked for help spiritually, emotionally, financially, and mentally. We are always going to struggle in life, but we have to learn how to take those struggles and grow from them.

As I was growing up, I had a hard time accepting that someone’s decision for my life did not determine where I went in life. My mother gave me up because she wanted to give me a shot at a life that she couldn’t give me herself, but it’s been entirely up to me on how I live that life. I did grow up in a loving home; I absolutely adore my parents and the fact that Zach and I are close with my parents means that I was one of the lucky ones. I don’t always act like I had a good life, but I will not intentionally lie and say things that aren’t true. As I continue to grow as a person and in my faith, I learn something new every day. I’ve learned who I am and that person grows and changes each day. I am someone who has had to overcome a lot of challenges in life, and I will always have to overcome challenges in life. I am someone who doesn’t apologize for how much she loves people, for how much she cares; having a heart is not a bad thing in this world. I’m someone who cried when Carrie Fisher passed away. I cried when Queen Elizabeth died. I cried when Paul Walker died. I also cry during books, movies, and when I accidentally hit an animal on the road. I get mad when I feel like I’m not being heard and I also get mad when people judge me. I am someone who has been in therapy for several years now and I am someone who is on anxiety medication. You are who you are, no one else can define you and no one else can determine your worth. People can help you accept your worth and value, but no one can decide that for you.

As I’ve grown, especially in the last year or so, I’ve come to realize that I can also be an extremely indecisive person when I’m backed into a corner. I was backed into a corner this year when I moved, and it was simply a corner I put myself in. I had to downsize quite a bit and one of my biggest goals this year was to take what I had downsized and consolidate it into something easier to move, in case we had to move out in a short amount of time. The more I consolidate, the more I’m able to come out of a corner that I backed myself into and become the adult that I desire to be. As I write this book that has helped me in so many ways, I hope and pray that each person who reads this learns something from it, that they are able to see something from a different perspective. Please know that this book…this journey, has not ended; it is on pause. I don’t know when it will pick back up, but I do know this: I am not alone, and neither are you.

You are loved, chosen, cherished, desired. You have a purpose; go find it, and when you do, don’t let go of it.

Epilogue

This autobiography has been edited, published, pulled from being published, edited again, and re-published for so many reasons, but ultimately, here it is. My story is far from done, and obviously God wanted me to tell it otherwise I wouldn’t be sitting here, editing this. This story is unique because it’s MY story. No one else has lived through what I have, gone through what I have, survived what I have. I have survived a sexual assault, physical abuse, mental abuse, emotional abuse, racism, a suicide attempt, mental health condemnation, so on and so forth. I constantly have to tell myself that I am enough, that I am worth it, that I am beautiful and loved. How I was brought into this world does not dictate who I am, nor who I will become. I dictate who I am and who I will become. There is a quote that I once heard that has stuck with me for a minute and it says, “Fate whispered to her, “You cannot withstand the storm.” She whispered back, “I am the storm.” To the person reading this, please know that you are not alone in this world, that someone out there loves and adores you for who you are. However you were brought into this world, that does not define you. Whoever mistreats you, that does not define them. Pink has a song called, “F\*\*\*ing Perfect”, and there is a line in there that says, “Mistreated, misplaced, misunderstood. Miss knowing it's all good, it didn't slow me down. Mistaken, always second guessing, underestimated. Look, I'm still around.” You will always be mistreated, misunderstood, underestimated, and mistaken, but you will always be someone worthy of love, respect, adoration. You will always be enough because you are you. We are always changing as humans, but that’s normal and natural. We will always change parts of who we are because we are constantly growing.

As humans, we will always have something to learn and I promise, if you go through life and you tell yourself that something wasn’t worth it, ask yourself this, “Did you learn something from it?” If you did, then it served whatever purpose it had to. My mental health has been challenged so much this year and yet, I wouldn’t change it because I’ve grown. I have had to accept things that I didn’t want to accept, learn things I didn’t want to learn, but I also refuse to let go of someone in the process: myself. The Jessica from 2015 would not have been able to handle what this Jessica handles now, but I wasn’t grown enough or mature enough to handle it. Trust yourself, and don’t let others define you. Don’t let your circumstances define how you treat others. If you are treated poorly for any reason, tell yourself that you will never treat people that way because you know how it feels. Don’t be the person who is the judge, the jury, and the executioner; be the person who extends love and grace, who shines bright in a dark world. Be that person who helps others no matter how hard it is. Be the person you needed years ago. Love the person you are. Love everyone, regardless of who they are. Here is where I will leave you until it’s time for me to write something else. In case you haven’t heard it lately, I love you and I’m glad you’re here.