

# Contents

Foreword by Stephen Arterburn .....	<i>xi</i>
Introduction .....	<i>I</i>
1 The Perfect Affirmation .....	8
<i>Guys and Sexuality</i>	
2 The Perfect Acceptance.....	29
<i>Girls, Jealousy, and the Comparison Game</i>	
3 The Perfect Image.....	47
<i>Getting Real</i>	
4 The Perfect Body .....	65
<i>Eating Disorders, Dissatisfaction, and the Battle     for Control</i>	
5 The Perfect Look.....	84
<i>Fashion, Pride, and Real Beauty</i>	
6 The Perfect Dream.....	102
<i>Money and Success</i>	
7 The Perfect Escape.....	128
<i>Loneliness, Drugs, and Suicide</i>	
8 The Perfect Path.....	147
<i>The Wide and Narrow Roads</i>	
9 The Perfect Fulfillment.....	166
<i>The Road to Healing</i>	
10 The Perfect Freedom .....	181
<i>A Beautiful Mosaic</i>	
Notes .....	192
Appendix: Timeline of Jennifer Strickland’s Modeling Career .....	193

## Introduction

**D**o any of you feel pressure to be perfect?" I ask the room full of girls with curious faces. Out of twenty-five girls, twenty-three raise their hands. I want to weep. I want to scream. I want to stomp my feet and pound my fists. Instead, I go into a rampage about how the expectation to be perfect is absolutely ridiculous, and everyone needs to let us off the hook, *now!*

I've known I should write a book about the pressure of perfection, to speak heart-to-heart on this issue with this generation. I've known it, yes. But I've never *felt* it at the core of my heart—until this moment as I see their faces. Their dear, creaseless faces with their wide, inquisitive, and sometimes narrowing eyes, and their hands, raised high and reaching.

"How so?" I ask.

Like schoolgirls who know all the right answers, they can't wait to be called on. The pressure comes from mom, dad, grades, sports, looks, success, achievements, their bodies, their faith; and that pressure is making some of them crazy. It seems they have two choices: internalize and struggle with it, or run away from it completely.

But caught in the trap of teenage bodies, they have to live in this world—they have school, families, and futures ahead of them. So the pressure *is* their reality. Like too much pressure on anything, it seems it could cause them to burst at the seams.

And if they burst, they will crack and leak.

There will be tears. There will be cries. There will be sobs. The masks will break open and the truth will gush out—the truth being, they are imperfect and longing to be loved like that.

This book, girls, is for you. It is my way of holding you while you let it all run out. It is my way of telling you that freedom is

possible—how I became free from perfect, free indeed—in hopes that you too will let God break the chains that bind you.



As a young girl lying under the covers at dawn, my eyes fluttered open and focused on the collage of masks that hung above the window opposite my bed. Everywhere I went as a kid, I wanted to buy a mask to bring home and add to my collection. I loved the perfection of their smooth, porcelain faces, teardrops painted on slightly blushed cheeks, lips pressed together and frozen in time. When my friends stayed overnight, all those hollow eyes staring back at them would freak them out. “Those things are scary,” they would say. But not me; I loved my masks. I found their flawless, unchanging appearances to be...beautiful.

Since I was a little girl running, leaping, and rolling on the emerald green grass that served as the giant blanket of our backyard, I have always been drawn to perfection. I loved to hide in the arching limbs of the massive oaks, play in the trickling stream behind the bank of our lawn, and watch the sun reflect off the water like diamonds dribbling over the rocks. I used to lie down on the warm, tickly grass and gaze at the silhouette of the oak leaves against the incandescent sky. And even though I knew I shouldn't, I always tried to look straight at the sun for just a moment so I could see the light in all its brilliance.

My mom says I always wanted everything just so—underwear folded neatly in the drawers and shoes lined in the closet just right. I wanted every hair in place and pouted if it wasn't. At school, I liked As, not A-minuses, and was prone to crying bouts when I didn't get what I expected.

Like most girls, I liked the idea of being liked. I wanted guys to like me, girls to be my friends, and teachers and parents to approve. At the core of my heart, I wanted what almost every girl in this world wants: peace, love, and happiness. My best friends and I used to write these symbols on our notes, lockers, and book covers: peace signs, hearts, and smiley faces. That's all we wanted out of life. Little did I know that I would travel the globe in search of these ideals in a world that couldn't deliver. It wouldn't be until that world had chewed me up, spat me out,

and I had landed at the bottom of myself that I would realize peace, love, and happiness were within my reach all along; they were right there in my own backyard.

Toward the end of elementary school, I became awkward from top to bottom. My long arms and legs got in the way as I ran and played. I wore big, thick, wraparound braces with headgear that indented into my frizzy hair, which grew more like a bird's nest every minute. To top it off, I broke both elbows when I fell off the top of our motor home while playing *Charlie's Angels*, so I had to go to school wearing double casts and slings. Let's just say no one thought I was very graceful!

Since I was so uncoordinated, my mother tried everything to help me gain some poise—dance, tap, ballet, all of which I loathed—and my dad tried softball, but I couldn't hit or catch a ball coming straight at me for anything, so that was no fun. Finally, Mom heard about a little modeling class at a local charm school, and she signed me up. To both of our surprise, I loved it.

Eventually the braces came off, my hair grew longer, and I grew taller. Modeling school became a world in which I fit—a place where I discovered something I was good at. I practiced standing up straight, walking the T-ramp with a telephone book on my head, applying makeup, and even standing like a mannequin in a store window. For the next several years, while my friends went to cheerleading practices, dance classes, and volleyball tournaments, I went to modeling classes, auditions, and photo shoots.

At seventeen, I found myself brokenhearted over a high school love that ended, feeling rejected and hated by many at school and wishing I could just fly away. It seemed my ticket to freedom came when I was offered a modeling contract from world-renowned agent Nina Blanchard and an academic scholarship to the University of Southern California. Sure that the future was bright and I would have no problem tackling school and modeling, I went off to Europe the week after high school graduation. I was seventeen and on my own in Hamburg, Germany. I didn't want to come back for college; I wanted to follow my dream and go with the other models to Paris, Milan, and New York.

But during some tearful phone calls to my brother and my agent, I decided to return home. The next four years were a whirlwind—working in Europe in the summer, living in Germany, Paris, Greece, Australia, and Milan; and then coming back to Los Angeles for school in the fall, juggling TV commercials, ad campaigns, catalogs, and classes. I grew up fast.

I lived in a world based on “perfect.” If I wasn’t chasing the perfect affirmation from people in the modeling industry, I was chasing the perfect acceptance from people at school. If I wasn’t chasing the perfect body for the business, I was after the perfect grade, the perfect essay, or the perfect score.

Without even realizing it, I spent the next ten years chasing that flawlessness that had so attracted me as a child, as if it would bring me the fulfillment I longed for. Believing the lies the world tells women about beauty, love, and happiness, I went after perfection until it nearly killed me: the perfect size, the perfect shape, the perfect image, the perfect look, the perfect student, the perfect daughter, the perfect path, the perfect escape. Later, even after I left the modeling business at age twenty-three, I attempted to be the perfect Christian. And that carried into wanting to be the perfect wife who ran a perfect house, until that nearly destroyed me too. It wasn’t until after ten years of living a life of faith that I finally got it. This is not Eden—there *ain’t no perfect* here.

Perfection comes in heaven alone. In surrendering to that truth, we can find freedom here on Earth, freedom from the lies that trick us into believing we are *less than*, because we are *all* less than perfect.

Never once in all my years of modeling did I ever feel that I could measure up to the standards of the world around me. Nor could I ever be the flawless person the business demanded of me—the kind that always looks “just so” on the outside no matter how she feels within. That has never been my strength. My face usually betrays how I’m feeling, so much so that the looks on my face have gotten me in trouble at times!

But in order to make it as a model, I had to learn to wear the masks. And I did. I wore many masks. I wore them so well that even my own parents could not always see through them. When I came back from having quit the modeling industry in search of a more authentic life,

I discovered my mother had a big collage of my pictures on a wall at home—pictures from photo shoots, pages from magazines, advertisements, cover shots.

Angrily, I demanded that she take them down. Naturally, she was confused; the collage represented my parents' pride in their daughter's career. But I knew what they didn't know—those pictures were only masks, and the stories behind some of them were too bitter to even relay at the time.

During the height of my career, while modeling on the runway for Giorgio Armani in Milan, I realized that, beneath the veneer, I had become an empty shell. I literally stepped off the light of the runway into the darkness of backstage life, and it was like a veil lifted from my eyes. I could see clearly for the first time. The beautiful, sculpted faces and bodies around me seemed to hold prisoners within. It is possible that the emptiness I saw in the models surrounding me was just a mirror reflection of the void in my own soul, but what matters is *I saw it*.

I did not want to face it, though; I had worked too hard to get there. Hence, the furious pace of the fashion elite became my own—running from country to country, job to job, from photo shoot to makeup chair to the gym and back all over again. My life took on a momentum of its own, as if I were caught in a tornado from which I could not escape. I wanted to be released from the pressure of it all—the pressure to be perfect—but I had no clue how or which way to turn or who to call for help. I was the prisoner, and the chains that gripped me were really chains I had placed on myself.

With no way to get free, my life spun out of control in such a rapid downward spiral that I didn't even see it happening. Eventually the whirlwind spat me out. When I landed, all the feelings of inadequacy had tunneled their way out of my heart and surfaced on my face and body. I simply could no longer cover the vacancy within.

It was at this time when I was down to mere skin and bones, using drugs, contemplating suicide, riddled with confusion, and haunted by loneliness that I discovered a perfect love that filled the caverns of my heart. It was *the* great discovery of my life: a love that washed over all the imperfections. This love returned me to that childlike state where I

didn't care what people thought, and I ran unshackled. The chains that had coiled around my soul were broken again and again, one by one. Love set me free.

This book gives you little glimpses into what my life as a professional model was really like. But more important than giving you a backstage pass to the world of fashion, I want to share with you the lessons I learned along the way. That's why you'll find that each chapter drives home a key principle, and within that chapter I share various experiences that led me to understand that principle and the part it played on my journey to freedom. That means my stories are not always arranged in the order that they happened to me, but rather they are grouped around the topic being discussed in each chapter. A timeline of my entire modeling career has been included as an appendix in the back of this book, and I hope you'll find it a helpful tool as you read on.

Although this book gives you snapshots of the story of my journey, it is not actually about *me*. It is about *you*—that girl inside of you who once ran so free, or at least longed to. It is about that innocent part of you who still wants little more than peace, love, and happiness. It is for you that I write—for that little girl within you on her own journey in search of perfect.

Whether you are looking for a perfect love, a perfect body, or a perfect escape, there is one thing that unites us: we all struggle to find that which will satisfy the longings of our hearts. And deep down we all desire a vast, wild river of love to flow in and through us, to carry us through this tumultuous place called Earth.

It wasn't until my perfect masks fell off the wall of my mind and shattered into a thousand pieces that God was able to put my little-girl heart back together in a mosaic more beautiful than ever before. It is all my shattered illusions that I bring to you in the pages of this book. And it is by looking at the mosaic God made out of the broken shards of my heart that I believe you will be able to see who he originally made you to be.

Are you a *girl perfect* like me? A girl who wants a perfect love in an imperfect world? I believe you are because, as Jack London puts it, we are all made up of the "same nonunderstandable fabric," the same "star-dust and wonder."<sup>1</sup> Yes, we are made of the same stuff,

my friend. And it is the same freedom we long for. I invite you to take this journey with me, hand in hand, like two Dorotheys on the road to Oz. That yellow brick road may contain some twists, turns, ups, downs, and certainly a tornado or two, but it will eventually lead us back home to our own backyards, where treasures await us...and where we truly belong.

## Chapter 1

# THE PERFECT AFFIRMATION

### *Guys and Sexuality*

*S*ometimes you are absolutely gorgeous and other times totally ugly—never in between,” the photographer says matter-of-factly, his face hidden behind a big black lens. He says it like I am an object, a specimen he is examining in his science lab.

*After the shoot he asks me to open my robe so he can see my breasts.*

*This is not uncommon in Europe. Many times I have been asked to try on a bra and underwear in front of a panel of people. And in Europe, topless girls appear in Vogue, Elle, and Marie Claire (just to name a few). They are topless on the beach, for goodness’ sake. So to them, this is normal.*

*But I am an American. To me this is not normal; it makes me highly uncomfortable. It is certainly not the way I was raised, nor does it reflect the way photographers and agents treat me back home. This is my third stint working in Europe though, so I am used to this.*

*Stupid girl that I am, I open my robe.*

*“It is a pity they are so small,” he quips as I cinch the robe shut again, regretting it already. “Italian men like women with big titties.”*

*I remind myself that the vast majority of the photographers I work with are simply doing their jobs. Out of ten photographers, nine are nice, professional guys. But as the smoke of his joint twirls in the air, I realize this guy is not so nice.*

*Launching an airtight defense in my mind, I think about how I had intentionally lost weight before coming to Milan. Having just graduated college, I was finally free to work in Europe for as long as I wanted, and I really wanted to do the runway. I had to be pencil thin, so what can I say?*

*I fasted from everything: food, alcohol, fat, calories. And I ran like mad, every day on the beach. I guess I left my femininity there on the shore, because there wasn't much of me left. Not that it mattered. I was never a swimsuit kind of model anyway—never had the body for it.*

*Instantly, I hate the photographer for speaking to me this way. What I should do is walk out, but I don't. I just swallow it, like I have been swallowing things for so many years, putting on the mask that says, “I am strong, and what you say means nothing to me. It has no impact on the way I see myself.”*

*The truth is I hate myself just as much as I hate him. I hate myself for wanting affirmation so badly that I would actually bare myself to this snake. I hate myself that the real reason I went to his studio was for a “test” shoot, to get “beauty” shots for a popular local magazine that wants to use me in their makeup segment—you know, those pictures where you see the girl washing her face, applying concealer, plucking her eyebrows, yada yada. Obviously, I did not expect him to ask me to open my robe and offer me pot after the shoot.*

*Later, as he drives me home in the pouring rain, his little European car skimming over the cobblestones, I open the window.*

*“Your makeup and hair will get wet,” he cautions.*

*“I don’t care,” I say bitterly, pressing my face toward the wind. I want to get wet. I feel dirty. I am stoned, angry, and too far from home.*

*When I get back to my apartment, I take a scalding hot shower, furiously scrubbing the makeup off. As the beads of water cascade over my tired neck and shoulders, I bow my head and let the tears flow. I want to wash away what I have done. I want to wash away this pounding fog in my head. But, most of all, I want to wash away his words: “Sometimes gorgeous . . . other times ugly . . . it is a pity they are so small.”*

*Little do I know those words would root themselves so deeply in my heart that I would feel like a jerk every time the clothes didn’t fit right. I would constantly fear looking ugly if I turned the wrong way, and I would end up going from person to person in Milan, looking for that stamp of approval that I thought would validate me.*

*For now, standing under the spray of the hot shower, I just try to wash it away. Then I can get up the next day, put on the mask again, and pretend the things they say about me don’t bother me in the least.*

---

## What We’re Really Longing For

**Affirmation:** *to validate, confirm; to state positively; to assert, to express dedication to*

The world tells us that our affirmation comes from men. If a man tells you that you are beautiful, it is so. If a guy tells you that you are intelligent, it is so. If he is attracted to you, then you are worthy. You are validated. On the other hand, if a man

says you are not dateable, not pursuable, or that you are ugly, stupid, or unlovable, then this is what you come to believe.

To take it even further, the world claims our value comes from our sex appeal. In other words, if we are sexy, we are *it*. We are the *bomb*. If we are not, then we really aren't worth much.

---

It's a fact that in our society, young girls feel pressure to look older and sexier. The first time I ever remember sensing this, I was about ten years old. I arrived at the hotel, holding my auntie's hand. As I scanned the pool, draped with long-legged models wearing high heels and swimsuits, photographers fawning over them, I felt instantly inadequate. The models' bikinis were filled with cleavage and rounded hips. As they emerged from the water, it clung in little beads to their oiled, suntanned skin. They were so made up, so womanly.

But the photographer seemed fine with the fact that I was a *kid*. First, he placed me in front of a waterfall, posing with a giant stuffed lion. But when he took that away and I stood there in my rainbow-striped swimsuit that stretched over my chest flat as a pancake, I felt suddenly embarrassed by the fine white hairs on my legs, my girlish body, and my inability to be sexy.

Later, he had me climb a tree and look down at the camera for a close-up. "Amazing!" he exclaimed. "You look eighteen years old here! Perfect, perfect." Then *snap, snap, snap* went the shutter.

There it was. They would applaud me when I looked like a woman, when I was sexy, when I looked older than I was, and when I was something that, at the moment, I really was not.

While you may not have been standing in front of a camera as I was, you've probably experienced similar feelings of embarrassment as you compared yourself to more physically mature girls or young women. It's a fact of life that girls get validated for looking older than we are—at least until we hit our thirties when society starts telling us we should look younger! But, that aside, when it comes to girls, the world tends to be in a rush to make them into women.

In turn, as girls responding to the world we live in, looking for validation and hungry for affirmation, we are in a hurry to get curves, get

our periods, become dateable and pursuable. Then we must get married, have children, have the best-looking house, and the list goes on and on. Why? Because we want to be stamped as being good enough, beautiful, or even better, perfect.



Deep inside I was really just a schoolgirl who wanted someone to applaud me, someone to tell me that I did a good job or that they loved me!

### A Quick Word About My Parents

Before I go any further into these stories, I must make a disclaimer about my parents that stands for the entire book: they knew very little about what really went on behind the scenes in the modeling industry. There were three reasons for that.

First, they were naïve and uneducated about the business. Second, they were in denial—they did not want to believe that anyone would try to take advantage of their little girl—and so they did not ask about details. They considered my modeling opportunities to be rare and exciting, and simply said, they wanted me to succeed. Third, I never told them about what went on behind the scenes. If I had, maybe I would have gotten a ticket out of the business early on.

It might help to understand that my mother was raised in a family that didn't allow her to pursue big dreams for her life, so the last thing she wanted to do was squelch my dreams. She wanted me to experience things she never had a chance to even consider for herself. Both she and my father were raised in homes where they just didn't communicate well. At least there was very little *honest* communication about the hard stuff. There was a type of code of

silence inherited in their generation, and they were taught *not* to talk about matters that were believed to be private.

Our home was very loving and very moral. My parents loved me deeply, and still do. I do believe, however, that they made some very poor choices in not protecting me more or keeping in closer communication with me about the situations I found myself in. But at the time, I wanted success as much as they wanted it for me, so I wore those masks that kept them from seeing the truth.

On top of it all, my agent Nina Blanchard had an incredible reputation for integrity, and rightly so. She was, and is, very well thought of and highly respected in the industry, and she always assured my parents that the agents in international countries would go to great lengths to take care of me. I lived in Nina's Hollywood mansion with her for a summer and the truth is, she watched over us models like a hawk. But when it came to the foreign agents, this was a total farce.

My agents throughout Europe let the models go anywhere and do anything we pleased. And they never said a word about our lifestyle choices as long as we showed up looking pretty for work.

When it came to my first photo shoot, Mom wanted to go with me, but that just wasn't *chic* in the business and so I refused her. I was seventeen years old and extremely strong-willed, and I just bowled over her with what I wanted to do.

Time and time again, Mom and Dad let me go alone to Europe. My folks used what they believed was conventional wisdom toward me: she has a good head on her shoulders; she gets straight As; she's smart; she'll be fine.

If you ask my mother today if she would do that again, her eyes would fill with tears, her face would crunch up, and she would say, "Absolutely not! No, never. Never, never, never! I should *never* have let her go alone!"

But that was then, and this is now.



Not only does the world tell us our validity stems from our sex appeal, but it also expects us to exercise that sexuality—regardless of whether we can handle the repercussions of becoming sexually active. The very day I signed a modeling contract with the Nina Blanchard Agency, Nina sent me to a Hollywood photographer to see how I moved on film.

The photographer told me to bring a short, tight black dress that showed my body, black sheer stockings, and black pumps, as well as anything else I wanted to wear. When I got to his apartment, he showed me a corkboard tacked with snapshots. Pointing to a picture of a woman wearing a little black dress, standing with her legs straddled, and fists clenched as if she were about to punch someone, he told me to, “Play with that mood.”

I looked at the woman in the picture—and she was a *WOMAN*; with big, firm breasts, muscular legs, and a look of hard-fought confidence in her eyes—and I thought to myself, “I don’t even have that ‘mood’ in me!” I was just a *GIRL* from a simple town with simple ways. I didn’t feel I could have this magnetic power on film, this gripping sexuality. But that is what he wanted. Of course, with my desire to please, I told him I would try my best.

We took a few shots on his rooftop and stairwell, and then he told me to put on the little black dress. As he led me down the sidewalk outside his apartment, some guys whistled from across the street. With my torso painted in the cold, black cotton, legs propped in stockings and high heels, and hand in hand with the photographer—who was twice my age—I felt like a prostitute. I kept telling myself that I was a model, not a whore, and there was a difference.

This was a battle that would continue to wage in my head for the next six years, as countless men dressed me up however they pleased and took my picture. No, I never even came near to selling sex as prostitutes do. In fact most of my work was very all-American: Eddie Bauer, Jordache, Oil of Olay, and so on.

When I look back, however, I realize that I allowed my face and body to be bought and sold for a price. It was used for whatever they

were trying to sell at the moment—clothes, cars, makeup—and then cast away when they were done with it, or when another, prettier girl came along. While this might not be the least bit disturbing for some models, for my little girl's heart, it was.

But on the sidewalk that day in Hollywood, I was still clueless as to what that photographer was trying to do when he placed my back against the wall, gently pulled my arms away from my body, and brushed my soft, blonde curls off my shoulders so they cascaded down my back. Backing into the street with his camera in hand, he told me to imitate the girl in the picture he had shown me—look angry, sexy, sassy.

Crouching in the middle of the street, shooting the camera up at me as I kept giggling and falling back against the wall, he continued telling me to get tougher, meaner, straddle my legs a little more, and a little more, and still a little more...and following his cues, I did. Wrapping my arms around my back, leaning forward on one pump, and glaring down the chute of the camera, past the one who took the pictures, I dove into the lightlessness that existed there. I dove right into that world.

It would be a long and twisted tunnel. While I was still young and innocent, they were trying to draw the sexuality out of me. It took a long time for me to realize that, in this world, sex is money...sex is power...sex is what they want.

As you might imagine, it got much darker and more dangerous in the coming years because I was constantly in situations where I was alone with men much older than I. The men were usually very careful to make everything look innocent on the outside, but inside many of them wanted something else.

After graduating college at twenty-one, I signed with Ford Models New York and Fashion Model Management in Milan and went off to Italy to do magazines and runway. I was only in the country a few days when I did a six-page spread for a popular magazine. In the pictures, I wore plaid skirts, white blouses and suspenders—a classic schoolgirl's uniform.

The clients wanted me to be young and energetic, so I spent the day smiling, leaping, and even dancing on stage in front of the camera. They decided to give me the cover of the magazine, and at the end of

the day, the crew actually applauded for me—I think it was the one and only time that ever happened!

After the shoot, I was walking down a dimly lit hallway toward the exit of the building. No one was around. Feeling great about the day's work, I had my bag slung over my shoulder and a little skip in my step. Then, out of the blue, I felt someone's strong hand grip my forearm. Stunned and terrified, I swung around and faced a man whom I had seen on the set of the day's shoot. He had snuck up on me. The deeply embedded lines of his face seared themselves in my memory. The hallway behind him was long, empty, soul-less.

I tried to ask him what he wanted, and although he spoke no English, he showed me in gestures that he wanted me to have sex with him. The man was at least ten years older than my father!

Revolted by the very thought of it, I attempted to pull away, but he squeezed my arm tighter. With the full force of my body, I yanked myself away from him and raced down the hallway, panicking to find an open door. I pushed on the first one I saw and it opened. Glancing back, I saw his silhouette as he stood immobile in the hallway. I ran down the stairs and into the street.

Once outside in the dark, I hurried all the way to the metro, my heart pounding. Then on the train, I kept my head down; I didn't want anyone to see how shaken I was. Scuffling along the dim street to my apartment, I finally came to my door, fiddled with the lock, pushed it open, slammed it shut, and locked it. The next thing I did was jump in the shower and try to wash it all off.



The world claims to appreciate innocence,  
to believe in its purity and beauty, and at  
the same time it can't wait to snatch it away.

Even now, every time I see those pictures, I see that man's face. In the pictures from that day's shoot, I look happy and free, young and innocent. Deep inside I was really just a schoolgirl who wanted someone to applaud me, someone to tell me that I did a good job or

that they loved me! But to that man, my affirmation would only come from pleasing *him*.

This is how our world views girls and sexuality. And there are so many more instances like this one that I could share with you. But this next story shows just how low it got—how wicked, convoluted, and deceitful some men’s desires can become.

The first week I got to Milan, I did a test shoot with a photographer that went really well. I got some pictures for my book and he reported good things about me back to the agency.

A few weeks later, he requested that I come back.

This time, without my knowledge, he arranged for my booker and the owner of the studio to come by and watch the shoot.

That morning when I woke up, I had a big pimple on my left cheek, and I knew the photographer was not going to be happy.

When I arrived on the set, I sat down in the makeup chair and closed my eyes—surrendering my skin to the makeup artist. After an hour of transforming my face, he began to hot-glue fake eyelashes on me, one by one, continually, “accidentally,” getting the glue in my eyes. I tried to be tough, but by the time he was done my eyes were beet red and the mascara was running. Then, he started crimping my hair.

“You’re crimping my hair?” I questioned.

He muttered something to the photographer in Italian, and the photographer tried to assure me that crimping was the new thing—hadn’t I seen Claudia Schiffer in her crimped hair on this month’s cover of *Vogue*?

“Uh, no.” I thought, “I don’t really care what Claudia Schiffer looks like on the cover of *Vogue*! I look like an idiot right now.” My skin was as pale as bone china; my eyes were bloodshot and highlighted in yellow eye shadow; my hair looked like a shingled roof; and I resembled a sick, deranged Barbie doll. I looked *nothing* like myself. But of course I could say nothing—I had to do my job.

I asked if I could get dressed, hoping that the clothes would help the situation. But to my surprise, there was no stylist on the shoot. I hated working on jobs where there were no stylists, where they just wanted to “throw something together.” It just was not professional.

“There are no clothes?” I asked. “What is this?”

“Relax, *bella*,” the photographer said, showing me some pink mesh material that they intended to wrap around my body.

Now many of you might be thinking, this is the point where I should have walked out. Good thought. But you must understand, I was a model. This was my job. And I had the eyes of my agent watching me.

So as they stapled the fabric around my bare body, I held myself with as much grace as possible, making sure I was fully covered. They had me climb a ladder, took a few shots, and then lit up the joints.

As they got higher and higher, they had me sit down and pose on a white bed.

I tried, but I felt really awkward.

The photographer huffed and puffed about having to change the lighting because of my pimple. Then, when the set was ready, he climbed to the top of the ladder and shot the camera down on me.

“Lie down,” he said, and then after a while, “Act like you are having sex with a man.”

With him hovering over me on the ladder and the other men poised around the room watching me with their arms crossed, I felt like a small animal circled by a pack of coyotes stalking their prey.

I writhed and squirmed under the glaring lights. I didn't feel sexy at all. I felt awkward and critiqued and under a microscope, like a stick figure doll that couldn't muster a feeling of sensuality no matter how hard she tried. I simply could not do it—and I told them so.

One by one, they lost interest and began to back away.

When the shoot was over I couldn't wait to get out of there. As I walked through the exit, the photographer was biting into a thick roast beef sandwich, the juice dripping down his chin. He hardly even looked up at me.

“Oh, *ciao, bella*,” he said, waving at me as if to say, “You can go now, we're through using you.”

I knew I didn't meet their expectations, and I didn't care. I just wanted to forget about it, wash off the makeup, wash off the words, wash it all away.

That weekend I needed desperately to get away from Milan. I had a job in Venice the coming week, so I decided to go early, as I had always

loved Venice and wanted to see it again—I had once been there with my family on a childhood trip. Damien, a French magazine publisher who had decided to become my manager in Europe, forbade me to go alone, so he set it up for his son to be my guide and ensure my safety.

While we waited for the train, Damien's son said, "I heard about your shoot yesterday."

"You did?"

"Do you remember that window on the right side of the room?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Do you know that they set those shoots up for girls, the ones with no clothes and no stylists, and there are men on the other side of the window watching you while they are smoking their cigars. They want to see how far they can get you to go on that white bed so they can get off on you. They do it to all the new girls. It's just how they do things here."

He took a big drag off his cigarette. He was a photographer. He knew what he was talking about.

I felt like I had been punched in the stomach. Even though I had spent four summers modeling in Europe by now, nothing like this had ever happened to me before.

"By the way," he continued wryly, "do you really think you are going to get a man like this?"

"Like what?" I asked.

"Like this! Look at you!" he said, mocking me. "You are so skinny. Do you think that will attract a man? You don't even look like a woman anymore."

At that moment, I was not a person; I was a thing. A thing they had used for their own entertainment, their own pleasure. A thing put under a microscope that they discarded when it no longer pleased them. I was no one's daughter, no one's sister, no one's friend. I was nothing but a thing in a world of things, and my only affirmation came from being "sexual."

At first, the men in the business were intrigued by my innocence; they loved the angelic hair, the porcelain skin, the awake and shining eyes, the pure smiles, and the easy laughs. Then they wanted to draw the sexuality out of me, they wanted to find the woman within the girl,

and finally, they wanted a piece of her. They wanted to *take*. Over the years, I began to feel like I had to constantly defend myself from them, until finally I was so exhausted I could hardly fight anymore.

So maybe that shoot when I was ten years old was the beginning of the loss of my innocence—that moment when I found out what they would ultimately want from me: sex. If my auntie had known then that this business would eventually swallow her little niece alive, she would have marched me straight home and told my mother, who happened to be ill in bed at the time, that there would be no more of this. Mom would have said, “OK. That’s it.” But how could they have known?



Shame continues to steal and steal again until the eyes no longer hold any light, the laughter is long gone, and freedom is only a thing in dreams.

That very weekend, Damien’s son—sent along to protect me—took advantage of me for *his* own pleasure.

I was falling asleep in a bed at the hostel when he climbed into the bed, uninvited.

“*No, no, no!*” I kept saying as he writhed on top of me. “*Stop, stop!*”

But he didn’t stop. I knew that he could hear me, but he did not listen. He wanted what he wanted. And I had become so weak that my voice was drowned out by his groans.

My soul left my body lifeless. I felt like I disappeared. That little girl who once ran free was dead now, vacant, absent completely.

The world claims to appreciate innocence, to believe in its purity and beauty, and at the same time it can’t wait to snatch it away. Once the fascination and intrigue wear off, the world moves on to rob someone else of her innocence.

We girls are left to carry the shame, whether we were responsible for what happened or not. And the shame continues to steal and steal again until the eyes no longer hold any light, the laughter is long gone, and freedom is only a thing in dreams.

Today I believe the loss of my innocence was the worst part. If not only a physical rape, it was certainly a slow, stripping, mental, emotional, and spiritual rape.

That was truly the end of my beginning, and the beginning of my end.

### FROM MY WORLD TO YOURS

Certainly, these things don't only happen in the modeling industry. My experiences are simply a mirror reflection of the values upheld by the world. In high school, college, and beyond, innocence is not considered "hip." Girls who are "hip" are girls who are sexual. They dress sexily, their bodies are sexually developed, and, more often than not, they are busy exercising that sexuality.

Of course there is a very fine line between being called "hip" and being called "slut." "Hip" means that you have sex, but not too much and not with too many. "Slut" means you have been found out—you sleep around and people talk.

In my high school and college, you were a very unusual girl if you were not having sex. Sex was just another way to show affection. Sex was a way to be validated by a guy. Sex was a way to show that you were no longer a little girl, you were a woman. If a guy said he loved a girl—and certainly if she loved him back—she was supposed to have sex with him. That was the expectation and the norm. At the other end of the spectrum, it was also not unusual for girls to have sex with more than one guy. After the first time, it was easier for them to go from guy to guy to guy. These girls either went through a lot of breakups, or they slept with whomever paid attention to them.

Here is the truth: girls who have sex with someone they love and girls who have sex with guys they hardly even know—the hip girls and the sluts—are actually looking for the same thing. Both sets of girls have the exact same longing in their hearts, and that longing is for love—affirmation, acceptance, approval, and affection. Every girl in the world is looking for a perfect affirmation—she is looking for someone to say, "I adore you. I love you to the moon and back. I approve of you,

just like you are right now. I accept you like this, and I want to shower you with my affection.”

Oddly enough, our world teaches that sex is a way to get that affirmation, but actually it's a lie. It backfires. If you go from guy to guy to guy, your longing is never satisfied. You end up feeling rejected, used, hated, and dirty; like a *thing* in a world of things. You become more starved for love than ever, and your level of shame feels bottomless.

On the other end, if you fall deeply in love and give him everything (not talking about marriage here), you end up losing more of yourself than you had to begin with. At fifteen, I fell in love with a hypnotically cute, sixteen-year-old boy at school. We became best friends, and I did what I thought you were supposed to do when someone loved you inside and out—I poured my heart, strength, soul, and, eventually, body into the relationship.

What a roller-coaster ride. If I wasn't in fear of getting pregnant or contracting a sexually transmitted disease from his former partner, then I was in fear of the relationship falling apart and him walking off with my heart. When he was “loving up” on me with his attention and affection, I was happy. When he was pouring that friendship and flirtation out on some other girl, I was miserable, insecure, depressed, and in fear of losing him. I expected him to fill the longings of my heart—the longing for unconditional acceptance and a love that never leaves you. But he was only a boy; he could not fill that place of longing inside me.

Sometimes I found myself laying my head on his chest and just letting the tears roll.

“Why are you crying?” he would ask.

“I don't know,” I whispered. “I don't know.”

But now I know. My innocence was lost and I could not get it back. I could not figure out why this boy, this relationship, did not fill the emptiness in my heart. I thought that by giving him everything, I would *gain*; but there was something I could not touch upon that was irreparably lost.

After four years of ups and downs, the relationship ended, and I just sank. In the mornings, I would lie in bed, buried beneath the sheets, my body heavy as if draped in chains. I no longer wanted to get up for

school; I didn't want to get up for anything. I just wanted to cry—and cry and cry and cry—until my hair was soaked wet with the tears.

Even while I was eighteen and working as a model in Paris, I would lie under the covers while the rain hammered against the window-panes, and I would let the tears run. I could hear the chatters of the models in the next room, but I did not want to join them. Instead, I lay in bed and read books about Buddhism, trying to find some kind of peace.

I didn't care about the modeling interview that day or the party going on that night. I cared about being loved, and my heart felt like it was tearing apart. I kept trying to let go, as the books told me to do; to experience the no-need, no-desire part of Buddhism that drew me to it. I felt that the books claimed that “not needing” anything would free me from suffering and would bring me peace.



Every girl in the world is looking for someone to say, “I adore you. I love you to the moon and back. I approve of you, just like you are right now.”

But it didn't work. The more I wanted to *not need* or *not want*, the more I needed and the more I wanted, and the more I longed for something to fill the hole in my soul.

I ended up in the same situation in college because the emotional need to be filled didn't go away—and I thought a man was supposed to fill it. I thought that meeting my prince charming was supposed to be the beginning of my happily ever after. But it was just the opposite; my college “love” was another roller-coaster ride that left me heart-broken, crying under the covers, miserable, angry, and wanting a love that didn't run out.

That breakup left me in far worse shape than the first. My happiness had once again been tied up in a guy, and the guy could not deliver. Then, one day, the guy—and my happiness—were gone.



I knew I was more than my body. I knew I was more than my sexuality. I believed that I had a lot more to offer the world than just my *flesh*! I had heard the “Say No!” campaign. In sex ed class, I had seen pictures of pregnancy, genital warts, condoms. Goodness, everyone in school knew we were supposed to say no. But what I didn’t know, what I didn’t understand, was, why not? I didn’t have a clue what my value was in a spiritual sense.

Many years later, coming to faith in God and studying the Bible for the very first time, I discovered the “why not.” First John 3:1 says when we put our faith in Christ, God *lavishes* us with his incredible love by calling us his children. We’re his daughters! (See also John 1:12.) God wants us to “know and rely” on the depth of love he has for us (1 John 4:16).

I realize that you may not believe in the Bible, but I ask you to give it a chance. Its wisdom transformed my life and gave me spiritual principles to stand on. Most of all, it continues to be my bottomless source of guidance in a world that has too many otherwise confusing messages to stand on.

Biblically speaking, your value has absolutely *nothing* to do with how men see you or your sexuality. It has to do with the fact that God knit you together in your mother’s womb—he created you (Ps. 139:13). Therefore you are the precious work of his hands and the beloved, cherished daughter of his heart. When the Bible says “the love of God has been poured out in our hearts,” God is telling you that *he* wants to be the source of your affirmation, the source that fills your longing, so you don’t look for that affirmation by sharing your sexuality before you are married. Simply put, God wants to protect your sexuality so it doesn’t lead you down roads of heartache.

Your sexuality is not a bad thing; it’s not shameful. Genesis says God called his creation good, so the sexuality he wove into your body—used in the way he says to use it—is also good (Gen. 1:27–31). When Adam and Eve first had sex, there was no shame in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:24–25). “Shame” didn’t enter the scene until Satan, in the form of a snake, convinced them not to listen to God’s one simple rule; then, the

Bible tells us, they were naked and ashamed (Gen. 3:7–8). The shame came from disobeying God. Instead of seeing his rule as a boundary to protect them, they saw it as too confining.

It wasn't the sexuality that was shameful; it was the disobedience.

But just because sexuality isn't a bad thing, that doesn't mean it is something to be used to receive affirmation. As you can see in my situation, it didn't fill my longing to be validated; instead, it left me longing even more for *real* love that wouldn't hurt me.

God's Word—which never changes no matter how cultural norms change—continues to define sex as something to unite married couples and bring forth children. Of course, our world today accepts having sex almost as freely as it does a good-night kiss. While it tries to tell us a woman's value is tied to her sex appeal, God does not say that. He values you because he loves you with an everlasting, perfect love. That perfect love only wants what's best for you. As your Father, he desires to build you up, not tear you down; to make your heart strong, not break it.

The Bible describes your body as a temple: a holy, special, sacred place. It is not supposed to be a place where anyone can come in and take what they want and then go on their merry way. It is supposed to be holy ground. Your body is *imago dei*, which means “made in God's image.” It is a creation and reflection of God, and should be treated as such, no matter what the world says.

By encouraging you to protect your body, God is trying to protect the daughter he loves. Most of all, he wants to protect your heart. In 1 Corinthians, Paul explains, “Just because something is technically legal doesn't mean that it's spiritually appropriate. If I went around doing whatever I thought I could get by with, I'd be a slave to my whims” (1 Cor. 6:12, THE MESSAGE). In other words, God gave you free will—he lets you choose. You can have sex, you can share your body with whomever you choose, you can even use your body as a source to try to get affirmation from men—those are all choices and options for you. But that doesn't mean it will be *beneficial*. The bottom line is: it may hurt you in the end.

Why does your heart tear so badly when these relationships end? Picture an image of a broken heart: a red, fleshy heart, torn down

the middle by a jagged seam. When you have sex with someone, you become “one flesh” with that person; the two of you are joined as one (Gen. 2:24; 1 Cor. 6:12–20). Then, when the relationship ends and you go one way while he goes the other—whether after one night or ten years—the flesh of your heart *rips*.

If that happens again and again, you may eventually carry the wounds of those relationships into the relationship with your husband—because sexual sin is one that you actually carry within your body (1 Cor. 6:18). So not only are you bringing your husband a body that has been explored by other men, but also you are bringing him a heart that has been torn again and again. Ultimately, you will regret the choices you made to share your body with others and wish you had saved it for the one with whom you spend your life.

When my husband, Shane, and I dated, we were in our late twenties and didn’t know many people who were saving themselves for marriage. To some we might have seemed crazy, but we both had suffered the consequences of our poor choices in the past; now we wanted to do things God’s way. We had already learned the hard way that his ways are best. But it was *not easy*!

We were wild about each other and crazy in love. When the lines of sexual purity got blurry and we began to struggle with how far was too far, Shane pulled the line back so far that we were *absolutely sure* we were being pure. After our dates, he would give me a quick kiss good night, then quote the one word from Scripture that saved our relationship: “Flee!” Then he would turn around and go home! It always made us giggle—it still does—but it worked.

“Flee” comes from 1 Corinthians 6:18, that says, “Flee from sexual immorality.” That is the best advice I can give you. Flee from exercising your sexuality outside of marriage.

Before you have sex, find someone who believes you are precious enough to first commit to you for life. Hopefully, he will protect you as Shane did with me. He made me feel *worth* waiting for. He made me feel like my value was based on so much more than just my flesh. Can you imagine what a relief that was after my life in the modeling industry?

You deserve that too. You are precious. You are loved by God. That is your affirmation. That is your validation.

Shane and I share a healthy relationship with each other, and we've been blessed with two beautiful children. I don't take these gifts for granted and believe they are a direct result of honoring God with our bodies during our engagement. So it's a choice you make. Ultimately, by choosing to do things God's way in a world that scoffs at his protective boundaries, you will find that his blessings will be *yours*. You will also find your affirmation will never hinge on something as fleeting as your sex appeal—it will come from God, a source that never changes and never stops loving you.

### IT'S IN THE WORD

Here's the good news: Through Eve came three children—Cain, Abel, and Seth. Cain and Abel perished because of jealousy and murder. But through Seth, God promised that a Redeemer would come, One who would remove our shame forever and bring us back to the garden, in communion with him.

That promise was for a Savior. When Jesus came, Hebrews 12:2 says, "For the joy set before him [he] endured the cross, scorning its shame," putting our sins to death once and for all. Even though for a long time I carried shame in my heart, I have realized that we do not need to carry the shame. Jesus *became* our shame so that we could be set free from it.

Jesus came to bind up the brokenhearted; he came to set the captives free. If you are held captive by sexual sin, if you are still carrying its shame or have a jagged, torn heart, give it to him. That's why he came, that's why he died, that's why he rose in new life—to give *us* new life!

My favorite verse says, "Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are *never* covered with shame" (Ps. 34:5, emphasis added). The day I walked down the aisle to marry Shane, I was pure, free, and radiant—not because of what I did, but because of what Jesus did for me. Faith in him removed my shame forever, replacing it with light, hope, and a future.

Do you need a perfect affirmation? Do you need someone to say, “You are special, you are precious, you are beautiful”? Isaiah 43:4 says that since you are precious and dearly loved by God, he will give men in exchange for your life. Namely, he gave his Son—who was beaten, spat upon, whipped, rejected, accused, and, finally, nailed to a cross. It wasn’t so that you would be condemned and left in chains, but so that you would be free!

If that is not the ultimate act of love, I don’t know what is. That is not a love that wants to *take*, but a love that *gives and gives and gives*. That, my friend, is a love that never runs dry, never walks out, and does not leave you longing. Instead, it fills the longing until it overflows.

Finally, that is a love *that washes and washes and washes* it away until we are completely clean again.



“Everything is *permissible* for me”—but not everything is *beneficial*.

—1 CORINTHIANS 6:12, EMPHASIS ADDED

So God created man *in his own image*, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

—GENESIS 1:27, EMPHASIS ADDED

Do you not know that *your body is a temple* of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore *honor God with your body*.

—1 CORINTHIANS 6:19–20, EMPHASIS ADDED

“Come now, let us reason together,” says the LORD. “Though your sins are like *scarlet*, they shall be as white as *snow*; though they are red as *crimson*, they shall be like *wool*.”

—ISAIAH 1:18, EMPHASIS ADDED