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and it went like this . . .

 On a normal Tuesday in late November of my sophomore year of high school, my dad sat me down and delivered a very surreal piece of news that would forever change my life: he had stage-four liver cancer.

I'll never forget where we were sitting, the feeling of the breath being knocked right out of me, and every step up the stairs to my room. I felt alone, scared, and abandoned.

What started as a diagnosis of a maximum of six months to live (that seemed far too short) became even shorter. This man who raised me, saw me, loved me, and called me his, quickly passed away less than two months later.

My teen years, which I thought would be marked by “finding myself and living it up,” were now marred by total despair and loss. The months and years to come were consumed with questions I couldn't get answered, and I lived like a daughter abandoned by her earthly and heavenly Father.

But I hadn't always felt abandoned.

Years earlier, when I was a little girl, my dad loved to play a game with my sister and me that we liked to call the “bedtime game.” Clever, right? The game was simple. My dad would tuck us into bed, turn off

the lights, and walk out of the room, all the while keeping a grin on his face knowing what was about to happen.

Naturally, we would giggle the whole way through this portion of the game because we knew we were already plotting our plan of attack the second he walked out of the room. It was simple: sneak out of bed, turn on the lights, crawl on all fours (highly unnecessary, but it seemed important for the integrity of the game at the time) through our 1970s single-family ranch home into his office where he would pretend not to see or hear us creep our way toward him.

As we would get just inches away from him, as quick as the wind, he would spin around in his office swivel chair, scoop us up, and reverse attack us with tickles and giggles to no avail. This would continue for about five whole minutes (five minutes is a *lifetime* in tickle years), and then we would all three run it back.

Get tucked in. Plot our attack. Reverse tickle attack from Dad. Repeat. This would continue for a good ten rounds before my sister and I ran out of steam as we drifted off to sleep with heavy eyes and full hearts.

As I've gotten older, these memories have grown more and more dear to me. As much as I loved sneaking out of bed and finding my dad in his home office (oh, the thrill of the game), he must have loved it just as much, if not more. We, his daughters—whom he adored—wanted nothing more than to end our days getting wrapped up with him in games, tickles, and laughter. It must have brought him so much unceasing joy to know his children cared to move toward him with reckless and childlike abandon.

As a little girl, I sensed a similar draw toward God. I recall at a young age knowing and actually believing that God loved me. That He saw me. That He created me. And that nothing could separate me from that love. I don't know how, but back then, I didn't have a hard time simply believing it.

and it went like this . . .

At the same time, I also remember being praised at my small Christian school for being able to articulate (more like regurgitate) spiritual truths at that same young age. Although these actions were seen as “good,” they instilled in me a belief and permeated a lie that I could earn a little “extra” love from God. That He could “extra” approve of me. “Extra” see me. Be “extra” proud of how He created me because *look at me go*, quoting John 3:16 *and* Proverbs 3:5–6 in front of the whole school.

It was scary how good I got at giving people (and God) what I thought they wanted from me—all by the age of seven years old. The thing is, learning Scripture, being kind, and showing up for people are all good things, but when I believed the lie that they could earn me value, importance, or status, they became very, very harmful things.

This lie ushered in the one thing that separates us from God: sin.

Somewhere along the way in this game of performance, I stopped running to my heavenly Father and started running in the opposite direction. The truth and lies got too jumbled, and I fed the monster of approval, affirmation, and acceptance I found in other places. If you’ve been there, stick with me.

The games I once played as a little girl with my dad were now replaced with a game of “hide and no seek” toward God. What I didn’t realize is that everything I was looking for could be found in Him.

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THE ORIGIN OF OUR IDENTITY

I love a good story. Who doesn't? After all, stories serve many purposes. It's how we get to know and relate with others and how we express ourselves. They also help us identify parts of our own story.

As cliché as it sounds, my favorite story growing up as a little girl raised in a small town in north Georgia was the iconic movie *Cinderella*. I was a sucker for it.

The charming and incredibly creative mice.

The duplicitous stepsisters.

The race against time.

The humility and timeless persona of Cinderella.

Prince Charming (enough said).

But there's one part of the story that always intrigued me the most: the dynamic of the glass slipper. (To the .000001 percent of you who have never seen *Cinderella*, spoiler alert.)

After every attempt of her stepsisters and stepmother to hold her back from attending the prince's ball created for him to find his true love, Cinderella is given one last chance by her fairy godmother to make a fashionably late arrival.

And with a "bibbidi-bobbidi-boo," Cinderella is provided with everything from a pumpkin carriage, a tailor-made gown (a true rags-to-riches story), and, of course, the famous glass slippers.

As the story goes, the prince falls in love instantly with Cinderella, but she leaves abruptly right before midnight, and he's left only with one glass slipper to identify her with. Despite her stepfamily's best efforts to inhibit Cinderella from true love, she is finally reunited with the prince by none other than, you guessed it, the glass slipper. The perfect fit of the slipper reveals that she is the one he had been looking for all along.

Before you write me off as a sappy romantic, the reason I love this story goes far beyond the narrative of a boy and girl falling in love.

and it went like this . . .

And this definitely isn't a chapter or book about romantic relationships (even though you better believe we are going there in later chapters).

The reason it draws me in and whispers to a place deep in my heart is because it's the story of a young girl who once felt forgotten but now believed she belonged. It mirrors the reality that we have had belonging etched into the core of our existence since the beginning of time.

Just like Cinderella's perfect fit, we fit into the creation story. We are not forgotten. This means that in God's economy, there is a place for you and me.

A place where we flourish.

A place where we feel no shame.

A place where we're able to receive forgiveness from others and ourselves.

A place where our past doesn't define us.

A place where we can be redeemed and made new.

A place of true and unlimited freedom.

A place our hearts long for. A place like Eden. But if you can even imagine, friend, a place even better than the garden. More on that later.

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belonging etched
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since the
beginning of time.

WHY ORDER MATTERS

As any decent storyteller knows, we can't fully know where we're going until we know where we've been. That's why the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden is so essential for us to understand. Let's take a look.

(As you read, I encourage you not just to look to understand yourself in the narrative—there will be plenty of time for that. Look at what this text reveals about God first, then yourself.)

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:1–2).

Pause. Go back and read that one more time and really let it sink in. Then, let’s continue.

The beginning. The origin of space, time, and existence. Before it all came to be, God was. He was there, putting everything into motion. See, God exists outside the borders of the world we live in. He is in it all, above it all, and before it all. He is the Great I AM, who was, is, and is to come (Ex. 3:14; Rev. 1:8).

We often project onto God the image we want Him to fit into. Simply put: we make Him small in our minds. We get uncomfortable thinking of a God we cannot fully grasp or make tangible this side of heaven. I’ve heard it cleverly put that just as God created us in His image, we tend to return the favor throughout our lives.¹

If you’re anything like me, it can be such a challenge as a finite human being to comprehend His infinite vastness and wonder. But as we are finite, God is infinite. As we find ourselves limited, God is limitless. As we are the created, He is the Creator. This is good news because this is the God who didn’t stop at Genesis 1:2.

Then what did God do?

God created (in order): light (day), dark (night), waters, land, crops, moon, sun, and then living creatures (Gen. 1:3–25).

While He saw that all His creation was “good,” up until this point, nothing had been made in the *imago Dei* (the image of God). It was all pleasing to God but didn’t bear His image or imprint. But God still wasn’t done.

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27).

and it went like this . . .

One thing that Moses, the author of Genesis, is helping us see here is that God is intentional. He is deliberate with what He makes, but He's also highly detailed in the order in which He creates. Order matters.

I have a friend who loves to do puzzles. It calms her and helps her unwind after a long day. So naturally, when Christmas rolled around, I wanted to find her the perfect puzzle. After much searching, I found a beautiful vintage butterfly one that I couldn't wait to give her. Not only that, but I also was eager to see the final product.

You see, what I learned from my friend is that puzzling is an art. It takes intentionality and order. Any good puzzler knows that when starting a puzzle, you must put together the border first. It's simple: locate the pieces with straight edges and put them all together to create the framework, and only then can you make your way inward. And that's exactly what she did.

I know I'm biased, but let me tell you, the end result was such a beautiful formation of what was meant to be all along. A collage of some of the most beautiful and rare butterflies on earth. But without her intentional order or plan of action, beginning to end, the puzzle would have never been what it was supposed to be—finished.

Order matters. And if it matters that much with a puzzle, how much more did God put intention into His creation order?

Out of all creation, He created humankind last. Why do you think He did this? *Clearly, because He saved the best for last, Morgan.* Okay, while there's truth in that, there's a much better answer that reveals a depth about the heart of God toward us.

A PLACE OF BELONGING

I believe that one reason God created us last is because He wanted us to know from the very start that He, our *Abba*, goes before us in *all* things.

What an invitation. To see God this way—as *Abba*—means in the

Greek to see Him as “Daddy.” This is a God who longs for you and me to see Him in the most intimate form of a father and to cry out to Him, “Abba! Father!” (Rom. 8:15).

Like an Abba . . .

He didn’t make us wait on an earth that was void.

He didn’t make us stand in the darkness as
He created light.

He didn’t want to deprive us of the beauty of
the seas, moon, stars, and the rest of His wonder-
ful creation that points to His glory.

He didn’t make us wait for our home to
be prepared, but instead created us right in the
middle of it.

**It’s who He is
and who He
will always be:
our true place
of belonging.**

I think that God wants us to know that what He did in Eden, He will do again and again and again: make a way for us. He will always prepare a place for us. A place of safety and belonging. He will always give light to the darkness for us. He will always whisper to us in our moments of doubt that we are not a misfit to Him.

With God, we will always have a seat at the table. What He did in the beginning is what He will continue to do throughout our entire lives. It’s who He is and who He will always be: *our true place of belonging.*

We will never feel fully alive until we experience the depth of the warm embrace offered to us by our heavenly Father.

I’ll never forget the safety and assurance I felt in my dad’s arms when I was younger. My dad was a six-foot, lean-framed man with blue eyes that personified gentleness and purity of heart. He was lovely. His kindness shone on everyone, and he spent his adult life stewarding work well, loving his family, and investing in younger men who were seeking to follow God. I loved him so much and knew he undoubtedly loved me. No matter where he was, that’s where I wanted to be. I didn’t

and it went like this . . .

question how often, how deep, or for how long I could stay in his arms.

Each night, I would stay right there, because where else would I go? I'd stay cuddled up with him, having no doubt that it was me who belonged there and no one else (except my sister, who was probably annoyed with me growing up for monopolizing so much of dad's lap—sorry, sis). When I was with him, I knew that I was safe. I was seen. I was home.

Isn't that exactly the pursuit of our heavenly Father toward us, but so much better? Doesn't the creation story this far show that God has extended an invitation for us to eternally abide in Him? To cry out to Him as Abba?

God has gone before us to show us He is safe. He is trustworthy. He isn't going anywhere. He doesn't just provide a home. He is our home. The God of Eden is the same God that is pursuing us right now through these pages. May our restless souls find rest in Him.

FULLY SEEN, FULLY LOVED

The other remarkable detail about humankind's creation narrative comes later in Genesis:

The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

“This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man.”

Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. (Gen. 2:20–25)

“There was not found a helper fit for him” (Gen. 2:20). So God does what He does best—He creates the perfect fit. He creates a partner and she is called “Woman.” This is where you and I find our truest identity, friend. As one who fits. One who belongs. Just like a puzzle, the full picture wasn’t revealed until the last bit was complete. Creation was good, but it wasn’t in its fullness until God breathed life into the very last piece: woman. He created her last not out of forgetfulness, but that we might know that in Him, we “lack no good thing” (Ps. 34:10).

Many of us have lived years, maybe even decades, believing lies from the enemy that we are unwanted, unlovable, unvalued, and forgotten. Believing that we must live in shame over what we’ve done or what’s been done to us. As you’ll learn more throughout this book, this was my story for years. Because of brokenness from my past, I didn’t know where I started and shame began. I would wake up in the middle of the

night with flashbacks from the past and false narratives for my future. I found it impossible to live in the present because that meant coming to grips with the scars that marked my life, my relationships, and my view of myself (and my projection of how God must see me).

But our origin story from Scripture begs to differ. Before we could do a thing, good or evil, our identity was secured by the One who calls us His beloved. It wasn’t until I came face to face with my true belovedness that

God was able to do the work of redemption and reconciliation in my life. Only then did I get a glimpse of the truth laid out in Isaiah 61:7:

Before we
could do a thing,
good or evil,
our identity
was secured by
the one who calls
us His beloved.

and it went like this . . .

“Instead of your shame you will receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace you will rejoice in your inheritance. And so you will inherit a double portion in your land, and everlasting joy will be yours” (NIV).

Brennan Manning, on the topic of our belovedness, writes:

God created us for union with himself: This is the original purpose of our lives. And God is defined as love (1 John 4:16). Living in awareness of our belovedness is the axis around which the Christian life revolves. Being the beloved is our identity, the core of our existence. It is not merely a lofty thought, an inspiring idea, or one name among many. It is the name by which God knows us and the way He relates to us.²

Don't you find comfort in the truth that there's nothing you can do to earn *or* sabotage your primary God-given identity? You are more loved, seen, purposed, valued, and secure in Him than you can even imagine.

As we move forward in this book together, let this reality be at the forefront of your heart and mind.

In the presence of your Creator, you can be like Adam and Eve in Eden: fully seen, fully loved, and free of shame. From the garden, we see that God is giving you and me a framework for a life of freedom that can actually be lived out today.

After years of wallowing in shame and hiding, *now freedom is my story*. And in these pages, you will see that it can be yours too. Not because of our righteousness, but because of the abundance of His goodness to call you His beloved who belongs.

As we all know, Eden didn't last, but our God's pursuit of us has never wavered.

So why don't we believe it? Why don't we live free? What's holding us back from a life of belief in our belonging?

And the story continues . . .