

A man and a woman are embracing in a library. The woman is wearing a white turtleneck, blue denim overalls, and a white hat. She is standing on a black step ladder. The man is wearing a grey t-shirt and blue jeans. They are both smiling and looking at each other. The background is a large black bookshelf filled with books. A disco ball is on a shelf above them. A chessboard is on a shelf to the right.

# designed to last

*Our Journey of Building an  
Intentional Home, Growing in Faith,  
and Finding Joy in the In-Between*

**ASHLEY & DINO PETRONE**

CREATORS OF ARROWS & BOW



 designed to last



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*Our Journey of Building an  
Intentional Home, Growing in Faith,  
and Finding Joy in the In-Between*



*A Tyndale nonfiction imprint*

ASHLEY & DINO PETRONE

*with* SEPTEMBER VAUDREY

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*Designed to Last: Our Journey of Building an Intentional Home, Growing in Faith, and Finding Joy in the In-Between*

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*To my Instagram community,  
the kindest, wisest, most talented home-design fanatics I know.*

*—Ashley*

*And to Gabe, Gavin, Quinn, and Foxi:  
It's an honor to be your parents. We love you so much.*

*—Ashley and Dino (Mom and Dad)*

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**a note from ashley**

About five years ago, I had an idea. I pulled Dino aside, looked him in the eye, and said, “Babe, maybe we should write a book.”

Dino stared at me in surprise. “Huh? Um, yeah, babe, let’s get on that,” he said, laughing.

But he saw the earnest look on my face. He knew the joy I got from sharing ideas and inspiration through my blog and Instagram accounts, @arrowsandbow. They provided an artistic outlet for me, a self-employed mom of three little ones. It gave me so much joy to read comments from people who said something I’d posted had empowered them to create a beautiful, welcoming space in their own home. I just love home design, not just because it’s creative and fun, but because it brings my people closer. I thought of all the life lessons it had taught me over the past ten years that I’d been married to the man standing before me.

“Okay, let’s hear it,” he said. And in pure Dino fashion, he dove into the conversation I clearly wanted to have.

“It’s like this: I know we don’t know everything about life or marriage or whatever.” Dino laughed again. “But I keep thinking about my younger self at eighteen

or nineteen years old, not married but wanting to be; dating but unhappy; trying to figure out God's place in my life. Then married at twenty after a whirlwind romance and engagement. I wish I'd had someone to shed a little insight into married life, family, and faith—how to build our most important relationships so they endure for the long haul. Someone a few years ahead of me, someone I could relate to.”

“Would have helped us both to have that,” Dino said.

“We still have so much to learn,” I continued, “but we're a few years ahead of some people, and I feel like maybe we have some helpful stuff to share.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he said. After a brief pause, he nodded. “I think you're right.”

Neither of us thought about the book idea again until a year or so ago, when a publisher who followed me on Instagram approached us.

Long story short, we wrote a book.

Although we've only been married for fifteen years, we've crammed some crazy experiences into those years—and plenty of mistakes, too. Man, have we learned a lot! I'm not quite the same stubborn woman who once lived day to day for the next new, shiny thing, hoping it would bring me fulfillment. Slowly, slowly, I'm becoming a more confident, content woman. Dino, too, has matured through these experiences, and we've grown together as a couple.

This book is part memoir, part DIY-design book—an odd combination, I know. The thing is, design is woven into my story so closely that I can't separate the two. I can't fully tell one part of our story without the other.

The first part of each chapter is pure memoir; then you'll find an “At Home with Ashley” section packed with some of my favorite DIY tips and tricks. They're mostly related to home design, but—full confession—I sneaked some relational tips in there too! You've been warned.

I used to think my love for home design was a curse because it so often led to discontentment with what I had—or didn't have. Today I can see how God used my passion for design to enable me not only to improve the homes we've lived in, but also to experience the relationship between intentional design and intentional living. Good design mirrors good living. Read on and see if you agree.

As I mentioned, home design gave me more than just a better-looking house; it

introduced me to my incredible community of Instagram friends. If this includes you, thank you! You've watched my design skills grow, given me great ideas, prayed for me, and encouraged my personal growth along the way. I'm forever grateful. You're my favorites! And if you haven't yet checked out our online community at @arrowsandbow, join us! You'll be welcomed aboard wholeheartedly.

This book is our story. Dino and I don't know everything. We fail and make mistakes and are far from perfect, as you're about to find out. But we hope that by being open about our lives, sharing the vulnerable parts (gulp!), and simply telling our adventures, you might discover similarities between our journey and yours.

We have a lot in common, you and I. Whether you're married or single, a parent or not, a Christian or an atheist, you're a human like me. You're someone trying to figure out life, make your world better, and become a better person. That's my journey too. Here's what has worked for Dino and me. I hope you find our story helpful as you live out your own.





a note from dino

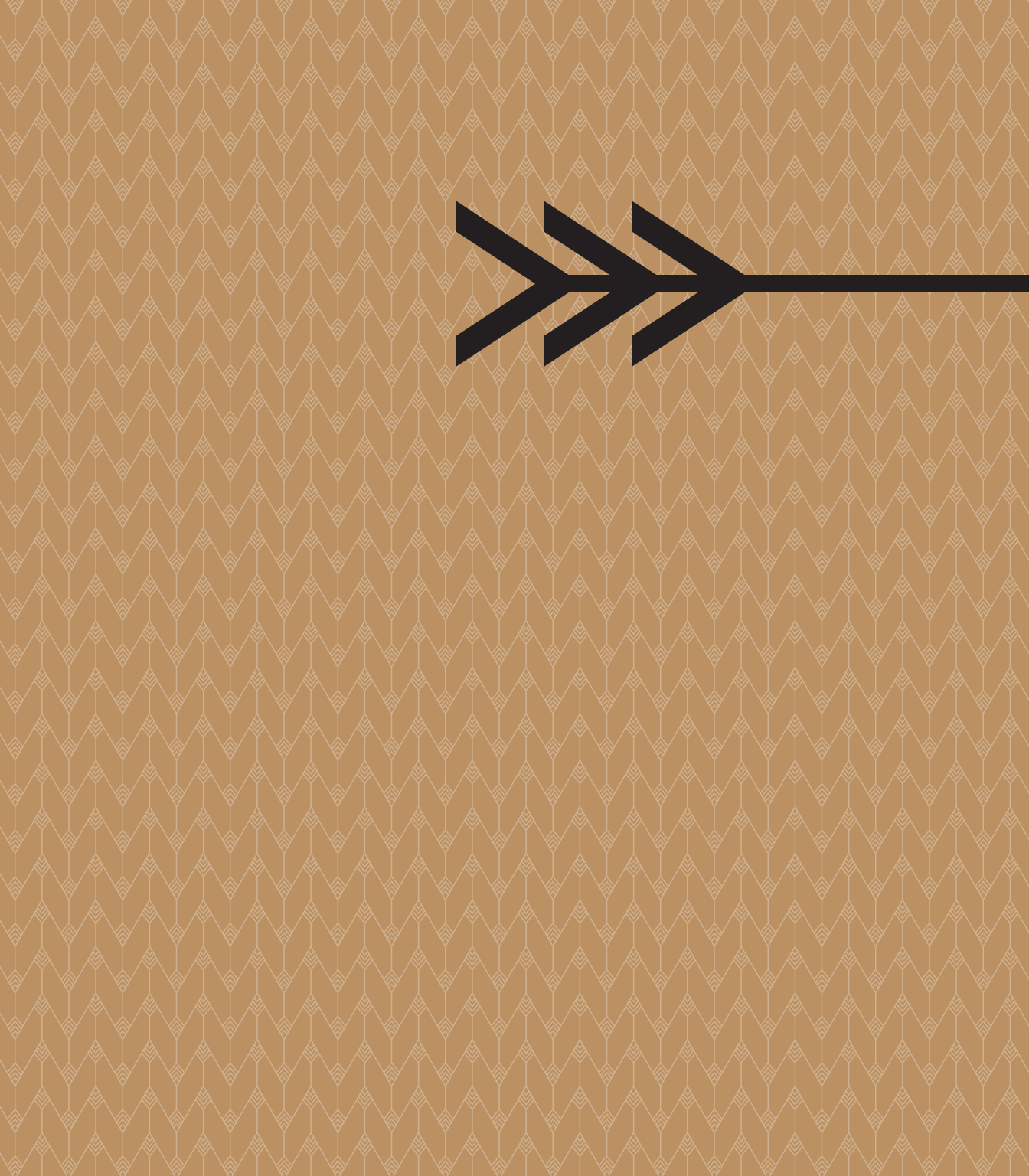
Ash and I wrote this book together, which is how we do life—as true partners. While the two of us hold many of the same values, our perspectives are almost always different (ahem—opposite!). So rather than trying to write as one voice, we each wrote our own sections in each chapter, with Ash telling the main story and DIY-design stuff while I provide parts of my own story and add some color commentary. You'll notice the Dino text has a different font and style (like what you're seeing right now) to make the transitions between our segments clear. (The other clue would be the letter *D* that begins each of my parts.)


The writing process turned out to be a smooth, awesome ride, and we hope you enjoy the read.



# PART I

spark





# 01

in it to win it

*When you realize you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody,  
you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible.*

—HARRY, in *When Harry Met Sally* by Nora Ephron

“So you wanna?” Dino asked, pulling a small velvet box from the pocket of his shorts. He opened it to face me. Inside was a stunning engagement ring.

I stood there in the beach parking lot, shocked—staring first at the ring and then at the man I’d been dating for all of three whole weeks.

*Three weeks! What?*

Let me back up.

Dino and I had known each other since we were kids. He’d played on a soccer team with my older brother, Ryan, in our small town of Lynden, Washington. Our parents had become friends and kept in touch even after my family moved to

California and his to Las Vegas. But until a few weeks before, I'd not seen Dino since I was in eighth grade and he was a senior in high school.

Then along came our moms, who just so happened to be close friends.



D When my mom told me that Lori Fabian and her daughter, Ashley, were coming to visit her and my dad in Las Vegas for the weekend and suggested I come home for a visit, too, I didn't give it much thought. I recalled Ashley only as Ryan's kid sister, a blonde wisp of a girl, cheering for her brother from the sidelines of our high school soccer games. Now I was twenty-four and single, having broken up with a longtime girlfriend six months prior. I'd just run a marathon and was focusing on my health, figuring out who I was without said girlfriend, and having fun with my roommates at Cal State Long Beach. I was in no hurry to start dating again. *But sure, Mom, I'll be glad to make the five-hour drive home to Vegas to visit you and Dad for the weekend—and say hi to your friend and her kid.* And so I did.

Then the doorbell rang, and I opened my parents' door.

There stood Ashley, blonde and beautiful with a dazzling smile. *Heyo! Total babe.* I couldn't believe this was the same little kid from my soccer team days. She had just turned twenty, and she took my breath away.

Our moms knew exactly what they were doing. This trip had been their idea, after all. For the past three years, I'd been stuck in a destructive relationship with my boyfriend back home. He didn't treat me well and had cheated on me more than once. I wasn't happy, but I wasn't sure how to break it off.

Too often, I'd been trying to find my value through unhealthy relationships. I'd grown up in a Christian home, but for me that had been more about a list of rules than a relationship with God. And at the fresh age of twenty, I was still trying to figure out who I was.

My mom had been worried about me, and Dino's mom wanted him to find a nice girl, so here I was in Vegas. I walked up to the house, and Mom nudged me forward to ring the doorbell. The door opened.

“Hey!” Dino said, smiling. “C’mon in!”

There stood a tall, dark, and handsome man—with no shirt on, mind you. Had he just gone for a run? I was speechless. *Boyfriend back home? What boyfriend?*

Dino invited us in and led us toward the back patio, and when we stepped outside, the wind off the desert was gusting like crazy. My hair went everywhere.

“The wind was angry that day, my friend,” he said, a slight tweak on a famous one-liner from *Seinfeld*’s George Costanza.

*This guy knows Seinfeld! I like him already.*

From the moment I walked into the house that day in Vegas, everything seemed effortless with Dino. We just clicked. He seemed genuinely interested in everything I had to say. As we got to know each other a bit during those first few hours, I felt so at ease, as if we’d never lost touch since those soccer-game days. He was kind, funny, and supportive as I talked, which gave me all the confidence in the world. Unlike past relationships where I felt I had to perform, I quickly realized that with Dino, I could simply be Ashley.

I’m pretty sure the parents noticed how well their matchmaking plan was working because a couple of hours later, they had to make an “emergency” trip to the grocery store, leaving Dino and me alone in the backyard. So subtle.

We got lost in silly conversations about our favorite TV shows and challenged each other to see who knew the most one-liners from *Seinfeld*. I should have taken our mutual love of that show as the first sign that Dino was the one for me.

Dino knew I had a boyfriend, and as the day progressed, I could tell he was doing his best to hold back with me. *Solid guy right there.*

As I looked across the table at Dino over dinner, I had a major light-bulb moment—one that had taken me reconnecting with a guy I hadn’t seen since I was thirteen to understand: *There’s more out there than the type of guy I’ve been dating—and maybe I deserve more.*

Growing up, my parents had insisted I go to youth group at our church. I figured I was expected to date squeaky-clean guys like them. But I never did. I chose jerks every time. I didn’t realize there were decent, down-to-earth guys who were actually cute (or hotties with a body like Dino’s) and who weren’t dorks but had a solid

faith. Sitting at that table, I realized I was stuck in a relationship back home that was very unhealthy. I was settling.

In just one afternoon with Dino, it hit me: *I don't want to live the rest of my life settling.* Even if nothing were to become of my natural chemistry with this guy, I knew I could do better than my current relationship. I must do better. I deserved better.

The two moms and I had headed downtown to do some shopping. As we drove, I knew I needed to end things with my boyfriend back home. So what did I do? What any normal girl would do: I broke up with him over the phone from the back seat of my mom's car in the parking lot of a T.J. Maxx.

As they parked the car and got out, I hesitated. "I'll be right in, guys!" I said. "Just give me a sec. No biggie—just gonna break up with my boyfriend of three years over the phone. Grab a basket for me!"

The moms exchanged a sly look and then smiled.

"No problem, honey!" my mom said. "Take *alllll* the time you need!"

Breaking up with someone over the phone sounds harsh, but it wasn't as bad as it sounds. That boyfriend and I were both unhappy in the relationship, and we'd been talking about breaking up for weeks. My call came as no surprise, and the entire conversation took less than three minutes. We both knew it was over. *Done.*

As I hung up the phone, a deep peace settled over me. I felt liberated. I headed into the T.J. Maxx, and after a good thirty-second cry in the purse department, I was ready to move on with my life. Also, snatching up a few great deal-finds definitely helped. I mean, it would have been a shame not to bond with the two hopeful moms over some shopping!



The moms and I paid for our treasures and headed to Starbucks to meet Dino and his dad, Dean, for coffee. The news that I was now unattached and available made its way back to Dino in record time. (Thanks, parents!) As soon as we sat

down, it was clear that the connection between Dino and me had ramped up a notch. Now that I was a free woman, Dino was a little flirtier and I was digging it.

The rest of that Saturday was a blast. Dino and I spent every moment together, and it gave us a good chance to get to know each other beyond the obvious mutual attraction.

As our little weekend getaway neared its end, our moms began scheming again. Dino had a test to take back at college on Monday morning and was planning to head home Sunday night.

“One more day, Dino!” my mom begged over dessert that night. “Can’t you just stay for one more day? You can do a makeup test!”

She was such a bad influence, but Dino played along.

“Lori,” he said, pointing to her dessert, “if you eat that entire brownie and ice cream in two minutes, I’ll stay.”

My mom was never one to turn down a challenge. She stared down at the brownie in front of her, then picked up her fork. “Deal!” she said and dove in.

“Okay, okay!” Dino said, stopping her after a few bites. “Don’t make yourself sick! I’ll stay.”

That extra night together really solidified the start of our relationship. We went on a date to the movies and let the sparks fly. Dino tried super hard to take it slow since I was coming out of a three-year relationship. We didn’t even hold hands. But it was clear to both of us that this relationship was going somewhere.

**D** The next day, Lori and Ashley headed back home to Camarillo, California, and I headed to Cal State Long Beach to take my makeup test. Before we left, Lori and I decided to caravan since we’d be driving along the same stretch of Interstate 15 for the first few hours. Ash hopped in my car for the first leg of the trip.

We stopped at our agreed-upon halfway point to get gas and swap passengers. While Ash was in the restroom, Lori began filling up her car. I walked over to her, a little nervous.



“Hey,” I said, shoving my hands deep in my pockets and giving her a sideways grin, “I *really* like your daughter.”

“Um, I know,” Lori said, smiling back. “It’s a little obvious. Seems your feelings are mutual.”

Yesss!

Over the next three weeks Dino and I relied on instant messaging to stay in constant contact. Remember IM? This was before texting, and neither of us were big phone talkers, so IM was our go-to thing.

I worked as a stylist’s assistant at a hair salon in Westlake Village, about sixty-five miles west of Dino’s apartment in Costa Mesa, with Los Angeles in between. A couple of days after I returned home from Vegas, my stylist went out of town so I had some time off. I headed to Costa Mesa to visit Dino.



He shared a two-bedroom apartment with three roommates. Let’s just say it was definitely a college guys’ apartment. The furniture was mismatched and sparse, clearly bought at garage sales or found on the curb. Strange smells lingered in the air, and the sofa and carpet boasted twin stains that looked like someone had spilled Froot Loops and forgotten to clean it up. That disgusting sofa was my bed during my stay, so I took it upon myself to grab one of Dino’s clean sweatshirts and cover the couch pillows with it while I slept!

D

Ash agreed to come down for a couple of days to visit. At first, I was thrilled she’d said yes. Then I began to panic. What was I going to do with her? I had no idea.

Let’s be honest: Ash was way out of my league—a fact my roommates had reminded me of far too often ever since I’d told them about her and shown them pictures.

I felt suddenly insecure. *What can I do to impress this woman?* Certainly, this apartment wouldn’t do it. Then it hit me: *I’ll take her for a ride on my motorcycle!* In my nervousness, I went for the most “show-off” activity I could think of. What woman can resist a guy on a motorcycle, right?

When Ash arrived, she took my breath away once again. Even though

we'd talked and had been instant messaging constantly since Vegas, this was only the second time we'd seen each other in person. I was reminded just how remarkable and beautiful she was.

I gave her a quick tour of the apartment before hitting her up: "Want to head to the beach on my motorcycle? No plans. We can just see where the day takes us."

"Sounds great!" she said.

We loaded the bike with towels and a picnic, and I fired it up. Ash hopped on back and put her hands around my waist. It felt electric. Her touch was so natural, so confident. She wasn't fearful of holding me tight or in any way uncomfortable with me. All my insecurities instantly melted away. There was something about her touch that instantly gave me confidence in myself. This woman made me feel like I could take on the world. Everything about being with her felt so natural, so normal, so right.

We took off, the breeze in our hair and sun on our faces.

And a mile later, my bike broke down.

If you're unfamiliar with motorcycles, here's what you need to know: They're surprisingly heavy and hard to move when they're not in drive. As my bike pattered to a stop, Ash jumped off and quickly got behind me, pushing and helping maneuver the bike out of traffic. *This woman is no mere princess*, I thought. *She's tough!*

Without speaking a word, we both instinctively clicked into partner mode, each doing what was needed in the moment to get the bike and ourselves to safety.

Ashley's reaction shocked me. Why was I so struck by her hopping off the bike and helping? Then I remembered: A few weeks earlier I had been on a date with a girl who was more of a friend than anything else, but while driving her home, my Jeep broke down. (Clearly, vehicle maintenance wasn't high on my priority list—or within my budget—in those college days!)

I got out of the Jeep and began pushing it to the side of the road. This girl didn't budge; she just sat there in the car. Not only was she apparently unwilling to help me, but she made things harder by adding her weight to the car for a Dino-powered ride.

Ashley's reaction was such a stark contrast. Without me asking, she did what was needed, adding her physical strength to help solve the problem. In

those few moments, I learned a ton about who she was—and what kind of partner she'd someday be.

It didn't stop there. During every minute I spent with her in the coming weeks, whether in person, IM'ing, or on the phone, I felt like we were talking soul to soul. We finished each other's sentences, shared so many of the same values, and had so much in common when it came to what we wanted in life. We could talk for hours.

We even laughed at the same odd things. Once when my roommate Greg dropped something on his toe and yelled in pain, we both burst out laughing. *Same weird sense of humor? Check.* Everything just clicked.

After the motorcycle breakdown and those first couple of days together, I was beyond sold on wanting a lifetime of days with this woman. Not to sound overly dramatic, but it

felt as if I had been living in a world of black-and-white my whole life, and now I was seeing in color for the first time. I couldn't stand the idea of going back to monochromatic living. I wanted to be around Ash all the time. She told me she felt the same.

From that weekend on, we spent every possible waking second together.

When I wasn't at Dino's apartment, we spent our time IM'ing. We even watched *Seinfeld* reruns and other favorite shows together while chatting via IM or the phone.

By this point in our lives, we both knew what we wanted in a life partner. Each of us had been in several serious long-term relationships, and although we were only twenty-four and twenty years old and had been dating for only three weeks, I knew Dino was someone I could build a life with, and that's exactly what I wanted to do.

We began talking about marriage early and often. After just a few weeks, we felt so connected, and it wasn't a mere physical connection. In fact, we'd shown great restraint physically. The chemistry was certainly there, but it was much more than that. It was a connection of our souls.

**D** In the few weeks since Vegas, we had been together every day but two. From the day we met, I had known this woman was a perfect fit for me. But wasn't it too soon to get engaged? I believe marriage is for a lifetime, and I knew if I

were to marry Ashley, it would be a forever commitment. I didn't want to make a mistake and marry her on impulse.

At twenty-four, I was young, but I was wise enough to know that when it came to making a huge decision like this, I needed the input of others who knew me and knew Ash. I needed confirmation from people I respected. Was I just infatuated with this amazing woman? Or could others see what I saw in us—this perfect fit, this effortless synergy?

First, I talked to my roommates. "What's your take on things with me and Ash?" I asked. "I'm serious about spending the rest of my life with this woman, and I want to ask her to marry me. I trust you guys and your judgment. Are you seeing things like I'm seeing them?"

The three of them had spent almost as much time with Ash at our apartment as I had. They'd also hung out with her on their own when I'd been in class or at work. They'd seen firsthand how we clicked. One by one, they looked me in the eye and basically said, "You'd be a fool not to marry this woman."

Their input gave me confidence that I wasn't crazy. Ash and I truly did have something special.

I then spoke to my parents, Ash's mom, and her closest friends. I wanted their input and their blessing in asking her to marry me. They all affirmed what I sensed in our relationship: This was right. They all told me to go for it. But the biggest conversation was yet to come: I called Ash's dad, Glen, and asked him to meet me at Starbucks the following day.

I'm a traditional guy, and it was important to me that I honor Glen's role in Ash's life. It's not like he made me feel I needed his permission to marry Ash. She was an adult who could decide her own future, after all. But I definitely wanted his blessing. If he didn't feel good about me marrying his daughter,



*After just a few weeks, we felt so connected.  
The chemistry was certainly there, but it was much  
more than that. It was a connection of our souls.*

I legit didn't want to go through with it until he did. I knew the parents were happy that we were together. Still, the short time we'd been dating was sure to raise Glen's eyebrows, and I was a little nervous.

Before meeting with her dad the next day, I drove to Ash's apartment as a surprise. We didn't have plans, but she had the afternoon off, so we just hung out. Once again, I was reminded just how effortless it was to be with this woman. We didn't need plans or entertainment. We clicked so well, just being together.

Ash had no idea I'd spent the last few days talking with friends and family about marrying her—or that I was meeting with her dad that evening. When it was time for my secret meeting with Glen, I made up an excuse about having to run a work errand nearby. "I love you, Ash," I said, hugging her as I left. It was the first time I'd said those words out loud.

"I love you too, babe," she said.

When Glen sat down at my Starbucks table, I realized I didn't really have a planned speech, so I just told him what was on my heart.

"Your daughter is amazing," I said. "More than that, it just feels so natural to be with her. I realize it's only been a few weeks since we've been dating—"

"Two weeks, to be exact," Glen interjected.

"Yes, only two weeks," I continued, "but here's the thing: I want to ask your daughter to marry me. We've spent almost every day together since Las Vegas, and we've spent hours and hours talking—about everything. We want the same things in life. Our families share the same values. And I want to spend the rest of my life with your daughter."

Glen wasn't surprised. I'm sure Lori or my mom had leaked to him why I wanted to have coffee. And he came prepared with questions: "How are you going to provide financially? Can you support yourself and a family? Where will you live? What's your plan for marrying Ashley?"

I had solid answers. I was about to graduate from college and had a good job. I was making a decent living. Ash was supporting herself, too, in an apartment where we could live after we got married. I wanted to be an honorable man by her, and we would wait till we got married to have sex.

"That's all good," Glen said, "but Dino, what I really want to know is this: Do you love my daughter? Have you told her you love her? Has she said she loves you?"

"Yes, sir," I said, grateful for my earlier conversation with Ash. "I absolutely love your daughter, and she tells me she loves me, too."

"All right, then," he said. "Yes. Yes, you have my blessing to marry my daughter."

And now to that beach parking lot and the velvet box . . .

Dino's "So you wanna?" was not perhaps the most romantic or conventional marriage proposal in the world. But let's face it: Nothing about our relationship had been conventional. Romantic, yep! Conventional? No.

Without hesitation, I said yes.

We set our wedding date for September 24. Yeah, a four-month engagement fits with our form of crazy.

## the two become one

We chose not to live together before our wedding because we wanted to save sex for our wedding night. But I'm not gonna lie—there were some hot make-out seshes in there!

I remember our first kiss so well. After the failed motorcycle picnic on the first day I visited Dino, we decided to walk to an outdoor mall in Newport Beach, not far from his apartment. He hadn't even held my hand yet! Inside I was like, *Come on, buddy, you're killin' me! Make a move!*

As we walked toward the Cheesecake Factory where we had dinner reservations, my patience hit a wall. I took the initiative and grabbed his hand.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! You can't make the first move!" he said.

Apparently, I'd bruised his Italian ego and stolen his thunder.

"Oh, yeah?" I replied, grinning. "What are you going to do about it?"

He turned me around and pulled me in close for our first kiss.

It was worth the wait.

The handholding/first kiss scenario is a good snapshot of our personalities. We're both pretty strong and domineering. My role model of how to be a woman was my mother. We are very close, and she's a strong, confident woman. She taught me, "If you want something done, you do it yourself." And there is no such thing as "No." You find a way.

Dino, on the other hand, had a stereotypical Italian father as his dominant role model. His dad is a hardworking, godly man with a commanding personality. We both carried a bit of unhealthy bossy-pants baggage into our relationship.



About two months before our wedding, we got into one of those wonderful tangles that people inevitably have when they're first getting to know each other. Neither of us can remember how the argument started, but it definitely had a whole bunch of this in the middle:

Dino: Well, you have to do what I say because I'm the boss!

Me: What? Um, heck no! *No way* are you the boss of me! I'm my own woman, and you can't tell me what to do!

Can you hear both of our parents in these words? The fight ended with us hanging up the phone on each other. I then cried for a few hours, basically assuming our wedding was off. There was no way I was going to marry a guy who acted like this. And I'm sure I wasn't looking so appealing to him anymore either.

**D** Hanging up the phone after that fight just about tore my heart out. I didn't even know what we were fighting over, and I couldn't stand the idea of not resolving this. I needed to make things right with Ash and knew I couldn't just carry on as normal while the most amazing person in my life was upset with me. I had no doubt we would figure it out.

I needed to see Ashley in person; to look her in the eye and apologize; to resolve our disagreement; to be with her and feel her touch; to make sure she understood that with all my heart, I just wanted what was best for her and, ultimately, what was best for us. I prayed she wasn't so upset with me that this was unsolvable.



*This was the beautiful beginning of us breaking away from our former selves and beginning a journey of “two becoming one.”*

It was six o'clock in the evening, and I was in Costa Mesa. She was ninety miles away in Camarillo, and I'd have to drive through the heart of Los Angeles traffic if I wanted to see her that night. I got in my car and floored it, pushing the speed limit for the next three hours as I drove to her apartment.

At around nine o'clock, I heard a knock on my door. I opened it, and there stood Dino—the man I'd fallen in love with just a few short months ago. He had driven through Friday night rush-hour traffic to come and make things right between us.

Dino didn't say a word. He just reached out to me and wrapped me in his arms. Holding tightly to each other, we started crying and apologizing.

I was such a stubborn mule back then. I truly believe that if Dino hadn't humbled himself and initiated reconciliation that night, I never would have. And perhaps we wouldn't be married today.

This was the beautiful beginning of us breaking away from our former selves and beginning a journey of “two becoming one.”

And a few months later we were married.



## designing on a budget

Our first home together was an overpriced apartment in Camarillo, the town where I'd grown up. As a new bride, I was super excited to decorate our place.

From an early age, I had always been fascinated with the quick transformation I could give my bedroom simply by moving the furniture around. Mom used to tease me about how often I rearranged my room, but the new look made all the difference to me, not just aesthetically, but for my mood. It was like a fresh start every time.

I even liked helping my friends rearrange their rooms. Once when I was in eighth grade, I spent the night at my best friend's house. Let's just say she wasn't the tidiest girl. So the next morning while she was in the shower, I raced around her room cleaning, organizing, and rearranging. It was a race against the clock!

When she stepped into her room half an hour later while towel drying her hair, she stopped in her tracks. I'll never forget the look of delight on her face. By simply getting rid of clutter, organizing what was left, and moving some furniture, I was



#### QUICK TIPS

- ▶ Buy quality furniture secondhand.
- ▶ Use mood lighting to create ambience.
- ▶ Create free space by avoiding the temptation to cram too much in a room.
- ▶ Paint one wall to give a room a whole new look.

able to show her the room's potential. With a little rearranging, her space felt more open and better reflected her personality.

Kind of a weird story, but as you can see, the desire to bring beauty, peace, and personality to physical spaces has always been in me.

Fast-forward to my first apartment as a newly married woman, and those habits stuck with me! The apartment was tiny and pretty standard as apartments go—white walls, beige carpets, cheap countertops, and window blinds. Our budget was tiny, too, but I still had big ideas for our first home together. So what's a girl to do? I got creative on how to make that small space pop.

I loved scavenging garage sales to find unique pieces, stuff I knew we could never afford at a furniture store but that would make a fun statement in our little home. We left Dino's Froot Loops–stained couch behind with his roommates and found a leather love seat, recliner, and cool lamp that made it look like actual grown-ups lived there—all for \$125. I kept stopping by T.J. Maxx till I found the perfect throw pillows, candles, and area rug that pulled it all together. I was so proud.

It doesn't take a huge budget to create a space you'll love. It's all about creating ambience and making tiny changes that reflect your personality.

## DESIGNING ON A BUDGET

Don't let the size of your wallet keep you from creating a beautiful environment. Here are four simple, affordable ways you can transform your home on a budget:



»» **Buy secondhand.** If your budget cannot support a room full of expensive new furniture, then garage sales, estate sales, flea markets, rummage sales, and apps like Craigslist, Facebook Marketplace, and OfferUp will be your new best friends. So many of my favorite pieces today—both furniture and decor items—are quality pieces I purchased secondhand. It feels great to discover and restore a piece that is old and one-of-a-kind, or even to purchase something brand-new at a majorly discounted price. It's like a treasure hunt!



»» **Use mood lighting.** Candles and a string of twinkle lights are inexpensive ways to create ambience in any space. I'm pretty sure this was one thing that drew Dino in while we were dating. I lit pillar candles on practically every tabletop in the apartment and thumb-tacked strings of twinkle lights across the living-room ceiling. He loved how cozy the mood lighting made my apartment feel. It wasn't all bright with fluorescent ceiling lights or floor lamps blazing at full blast. There's just something about mood lighting that draws people into a home and makes them want to stay.



»» **Don't overfill.** Packing your home with too much furniture, decor pieces, or wall hangings overstimulates the senses and creates stress. In my first apartment, I discovered that the more I filled it, the more I wanted to clean it out. Give yourself and your guests room to breathe, especially in a small apartment or house. With minimal furnishings, you create free space. You can see what you have, love what you own, and feel at peace in your clutter-free zone.



»» **Paint one wall.** As a young girl who constantly rearranged her room, I developed a love for the transforming power of paint. If you can paint your space—even just one contrast wall—go for it. It can truly change a room's whole vibe. Be bold and have fun! If you don't like the result, just paint over it!



