

PRAISE FOR *A LOVE LETTER LIFE*

What your heart longs for most—is a love letter life. Hold these pages and fall the way you’ve always wanted. Jeremy and Audrey have vulnerably written their own tender love story that will powerfully awaken you to write your own rare kind of love story—the kind of love letter life that just keeps falling more deeply into a sacred intimacy.

Ann Voskamp. *New York Times* bestselling author
of *One Thousand Gifts* and *The Broken Way*

We’re so grateful for Jeremy and Audrey’s story that they so graciously and honestly lay out in *A Love Letter Life*. It’s one of those rare books that makes you feel like you’re having dinner or coffee with them, while simultaneously gaining a wealth of knowledge and wisdom and things to think about! We’ll be passing out copies to friends, for sure.

Jefferson and Alyssa Bethke.
New York Times bestselling authors of
Jesus > Religion and *Love That Lasts*

Jeremy and Audrey’s beautiful love story is one founded on the true source of hope and life, Jesus Christ. Their timeless tale is one of adventure, creativity, and faith, available for not just them but all of us when we allow God to be the center and foundation of our relationships. Read and be inspired to know that with intentionality, you too can live a love letter life.

John and Lisa Bevere, bestselling authors

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A Love Letter Life will inspire you, challenge you, and guide you to an intentional marriage. What a gift this book is to hearts that are longing for what lasts!

Lara Casey, author of *Make It Happen* and *Cultivate*

It's no surprise that most of the Bible comes to us as history and biography. In reading other people's stories, we discover our own. More than that, we navigate our own path by the landmarks of those who have gone before us. Jeremy and Audrey Roloff have done a superb job of walking the road of dating to marriage, not just as lovers of each other, but as followers of Jesus. They take their relationship seriously; they take Jesus even more seriously. There is much to learn in these pages.

John Mark Comer, pastor of teaching and vision at Bridgetown Church in Portland, Oregon, and author of "The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry"

While reading *A Love Letter Life*, I felt as if I was reading a story that should be on the big screens! Audrey and Jeremy know that love is about action, and not passive feelings. I admire them for the way they live their lives, and I'm thankful they are in this world to showcase what true love is about.

Chelsea Crockett, Encounter Now podcast with Nick and Chels, author of *Your Own Beautiful*

A Love Letter Life is inspiring! Reading Jeremy and Audrey's story refueled our desire as a couple to continually pursue our marriage with intentional ways of creatively expressing our love for each other. We appreciated their candid way of sharing such

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intimate moments from their relationship, using their experience to encourage others who are on the journey of dating, engaged or already married! This is a modern-day classic romantic love story that will be the kindling in couples' hearts that sparks deep love for years to come.

Aaron and Jennifer Smith, authors
of *Marriage After God*

The Roloffs share their inspiring love story packed with humor, struggles, romance, and wisdom. Be sure to read with a highlighter or pen nearby! *A Love Letter Life* is full of wisdom and truth bombs about how to pursue a love that lasts.

Jason Kennedy, *E! News* host

Jeremy and Audrey Roloff are beautiful storytellers, and their genuine respect and love for each other leaps off the pages of *A Love Letter Life*. Wherever you're at in your love story, this book will inspire and equip you to pursue a love story you'd want to read about someday.

Scott Harrison, *New York Times*
bestselling author of *Thirst*

Inviting, authentic, and compassionate, the Roloffs speak to the longing heart. As they take us on a journey through their love story, we are challenged to live a story worth writing about. This book provides not only the inspiration but also the tools and ideas to make it a reality.

Jordan Lee Dooley, author,
founder of the SoulScripts movement,
and host of the SHE podcast

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A **LOVE**
LETTER
Life

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**PURSUE CREATIVELY. DATE INTENTIONALLY.
LOVE FAITHFULLY.**

**JEREMY AND AUDREY
ROLOFF**

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A Love Letter Life

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To Ember Jean

May you be a light in this world.

We love you,
Mom and Dad

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Mandatory
Reading

OUR FIRST *Letter*

AUDREY

It was a storybook summer. We spent our days walking train tracks, riding in truck beds, sneaking through train tunnels, jumping off bridges, picking berries, playing fugitive, climbing hay bales, exploring old barns, playing harmonicas, watching drive-in movies, and losing track of time. We capped off nearly every evening by the campfire pit, permanently saturating our clothes with the smell of smoked Pacific Northwest pine and sacrificing sleep to be together—even when togetherness meant simply sitting in silence and waiting for the sound of the train to echo through the rolling hills of Helvetia, Oregon. As the country song goes, this was the “summer I turned a corner in my soul.”¹ It was a summer unhindered by time and full of adventure. It was the summer I finally let myself fall for the farm boy who had patiently pursued me for two

years. It was a summer of “winning moments” that consistently affirmed we were falling in love.

As September drew near, our summer of timeless perfection was coming to a close, and we both had different finish lines. I was heading back to college at Oregon State in Corvallis for preseason cross-country training, and Jeremy was transferring from Portland Community College to Brooks Institute of film and photography in Santa Barbara, California. All summer, we had chosen to ignore the fact that our relationship would eventually be complicated by 900 miles of separation. It made the fifteen-minute commute from my parents’ house in the suburbs to Jeremy’s family farm in the country seem like nothing. We both anticipated a defining good-bye, but neither of us was sure if it would mark the end of a summer love or the beginning of a lifelong love story.

In the weeks leading up to Jeremy’s departure, we felt increasing pressure to have the DTR—the *define the relationship* talk. We both agreed we needed to talk about expectations for our relationship before we went back to school. Would we be just friends? Would we begin a long-distance dating relationship? Or would we just raise our glasses to an epic summer and move on?

After heading home from another evening by the campfire, I got a text from Jeremy. Auj, we need to talk about what we are going to do.

I knew what he meant. Yes, we do.

Tomorrow, I’ll pick you up around five, and we’ll go to the trestle to talk. We won’t leave without discussing the future of our relationship.

With butterflies in my stomach I typed, Sounds like a plan.

That night, I nervously scribbled my unfiltered thoughts in my journal. All summer, I had been praying for discernment in

OUR FIRST LETTER

anticipation of the day we would inevitably have the DTR. For me, there was a lot more riding on our conversation than whether or not Jeremy and I would officially start dating. Two years previously, I had made a commitment to myself that I wouldn't enter a serious dating relationship with someone I couldn't see myself marrying. That made saying yes to dating feel like saying yes to Jeremy for the rest of my life.

Looking back, despite all my efforts to be intentional, I realize that in some ways I had put too much pressure on dating. After all, how are you going to figure out if someone is worth marrying if you avoid or turn down every guy who looks your way? Maybe I needed to be more willing to experience a few awkward no's before I found my yes.

When I woke up the next morning, I analyzed every possible outcome of our conversation. Would he ask me to be his girlfriend despite the long distance? Or would we shy away from that level of commitment and agree to just "see what happens"? We were both aware of all that was riding on our conversation, which made the hours leading up to our DTR feel like days. Unlike our summer of timeless days, this day was completely pressured by hard-stop time—our five o'clock meeting and our impending back-to-school dates.

I heard the rumble of Blue Moon accelerating into my neighborhood long before it reached my street. Blue Moon was Jeremy's rusty, dented, pale blue Volkswagen van. Every time I heard Blue Moon—or any of Jeremy's old cars—pull up to my house, my heart beat faster and my hands grew shaky.

Even though I could hear him coming from a mile away, I waited upstairs for him to park and come to my door. Unlike most guys I had dated, Jeremy never sat in his car and texted, I'm here. He always came to the door and knocked. When I opened the door this

time, I could have sworn he'd gotten cuter overnight, which spiked my nerves and my heart rate even more. We greeted each other with blushed faces and flirtatious smiles. Jeremy walked me over to the van and opened the door for me. As he did, he said, "Hey, we should try to throw our shoes before we talk. I brought them!"

Jeremy and I had decided we wanted to timestamp our summer in a concrete way. True to unconventional form, we had this idea to tie together two of our old shoes—one of his and one of mine—and toss them over a wire under our beloved train trestle, one of the longest wooden train bridges in North America. The train trestle had become "our spot" that summer, and we wanted to leave our mark. Although we didn't say it out loud, I think we both hoped that the shoes would become a forever reminder of the summer we began a lifelong love story. "Oh yeah!" I blurted. "I'm glad you remembered!" This quirky task calmed my nerves. Now we had something else to do besides have "the talk."

Our nerves made for a pretty quiet twelve-minute drive to the bridge. Once we arrived, Jeremy parked Blue Moon on the gravel road just up the way from the trestle. He opened the side door of the van, and we sat on the floorboard prepping for our shoe mission. We firmly tied our shoelaces together, and on the bottom of one of Jer's shoes we wrote, "Jer and Auj summer 2011." Then we walked the quarter mile to the opening in the railroad beams where the bridge arches over the road. This is where we had scouted the perfect spot to throw our shoes in hopes that they wouldn't be easily discovered and would be nearly impossible to take down.

A thin wire ran underneath the railroad tracks about sixty feet up. As we stood beneath it, I felt only a grim hope that we would accomplish this mission successfully. In contrast, Jeremy looked up at the wire with confident assurance. He immediately kicked

OUR FIRST LETTER

off his Birkenstocks and began climbing up the wooden beams, staining his feet with creosote as he ascended. Once he reached a beam with a good tossing angle, he launched the shoes at the wire. One of the shoes struck a beam, sending them ricocheting back down onto the hot summer blacktop.

I quickly retrieved them and tried to fling them back up to Jeremy, but my aim proved horrible. Jeremy had to climb down and then go back up again. This time before throwing our shoes, he closed his eyes and playfully prayed, “Lord, help me make this!” On his second attempt, the laces caught the wire perfectly, and the shoes wrapped around it multiple times. *He did it!* I was stunned. I’ve always been wary of signs, but the shoes sure did feel like one. Jer climbed down, and we stared up at our shoes with pride, both of us secretly hoping this would be a permanent symbol of a beginning rather than an end.

We walked back through the unharvested grass fields that surrounded the trestle beams and up a sloping hill until we reached the top of the tracks. We sat on the sun-warmed rails, and Jeremy suggested we start our conversation with prayer. We bowed our heads. I don’t remember everything he said, but I do remember he prayed for the Lord’s will in our relationship.

As we said amen and lifted our heads, I felt simultaneously hot and cold—a rush of heat filled my face, and I was frozen with nervousness. I’m usually a pretty decisive person. I pride myself on being a fast outfit picker, and I’m always the first to order at a restaurant, but when it came to dating, I experienced a change in cabin pressure. I knew that dating Jeremy meant three years in a long-distance relationship, and I felt apprehensive about the burden that long distance might become. Doubts swirled in my mind. I was afraid that the distance might ruin our love story. Would we have a

better chance at forever if we just stayed friends until we could be in the same city again? I liked Jeremy. He was husband material, and I was beginning to envision a future with him, but what if it was just bad timing? I had spent the morning journaling and praying about how to express my concerns to him, but in the moment, I couldn't recall any of them. To my relief, Jeremy initiated the conversation.

He started out by recapping our glorious summer. We both beamed with joy as we relived all the memories we had made. Then there was a pause. With a more serious tone, Jeremy looked me in the eyes and said, "I know we both said we would never do long distance, but I think I'll always wonder what could have been if we don't at least try. I don't want to look back on this summer as just a blissful memory with that girl I once knew. Audrey, when I go off to school in Santa Barbara, I want to be able to call you mine. Will you be my girlfriend?"

"Yes!" I said with my whole heart. While he was talking, an overwhelming sense of peace had come over me. All the worries and uncertainties I'd had about being in a long-distance relationship suddenly vanished. We sat in silence for a moment, realizing that this marked the culmination of a two-year patient pursuit. Although we didn't know it at the time, it also marked the beginning of an ongoing pursuit for the rest of our lives.

Bursting with adrenaline, we held hands as we trekked back down the sloping hill into the now starlit fields. When we reached the road beneath the trestle, Jeremy stopped and suggested we take in the night sky for a moment. We lay down on the pavement and gazed up. There was a full moon that night, but it was a massive shooting star racing across the sky that forever sealed the moment in our memories.

Finally we were officially dating, but we only had ten days before

OUR FIRST LETTER

Jeremy had to leave for school. We savored every minute together during those ten days and ended each night by the campfire pit. We held hands, shared our first kiss, and gave voice to the thoughts we'd had about each other but had concealed for so long. As we talked by the campfire on Jer's last night, we committed to writing letters to each other. Yes, *letters*. Real pen and ink on paper, folded into stamped envelopes. We wanted *more* than text messages and nightly phone calls. We had a deep desire to add excitement and creativity to our communication and also to chronicle the growth of our love. Letters seemed perfect.

On August 25, 2011, Jeremy left for his new home in Santa Barbara. I drove to his house to watch Blue Moon kick up dust as it rumbled down the long gravel driveway at Roloff Farms, packed to the brim with his belongings. Before we said one of our first drawn-out good-byes, Jeremy handed me my first letter. It was wax-sealed in an old brown envelope. I felt like a starlet on the set of a 1950s romance movie. He asked me to wait to read it until after he had left and then to mail my response to his new apartment in Santa Barbara. He wanted something to look forward to. Holding his first letter made me feel like I was holding the immunity idol in *Survivor*. I wasn't naive to the fact that we would endure many Tribal Councils in our years of long distance, but something about holding that first letter gave me confidence that our torches would keep burning.

In our final moments before good-bye, we both felt a whole gamut of conflicting emotions. Unsure, yet confident. Nervous, yet at peace. Heartbroken, yet excited. One thing we wholeheartedly agreed on was that love wouldn't just happen to us. We had to pursue it. We were committed to writing our own God-inspired love story. Jeremy's first letter was the start of our love letter life.

Audrey,

Well, this is the beginning. Such an amazing feeling. I just want to say I am really excited. I am looking forward to our next chapter as God is on our side. I will be praying for you and for us.

I really want you to speak your mind with me. I want to know what you're thinking. It makes me feel better because I didn't know for so long.

As always there is so much I want to say to you, but I just get lost in my thoughts. It's okay though. We have plenty of writing to do. And Skype!

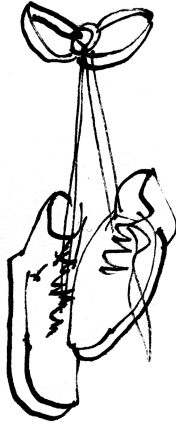
I feel the need to emphasize the concept of being open with each other through this process. We went two years with keeping things bottled up, which I believe worked out for the better, but it might have become a habit. However, we're dating now, so the rules have changed. If something bugs you, let me know.

We had so much fun this summer, Auj. I really enjoyed getting to know you more. One of these days, we will get our notes and thoughts together and write a screenplay, or a book!

Well, I'm gonna keep this one short because I don't have time (you're on your way over). If you ever cannot read or understand what I'm saying, text me, or we will Skype-date it.

You're beautiful.

THE BEGINNING



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JEREMY

Two years earlier, I almost missed my chance to meet Audrey. It was during winter break of my freshman year of college when I received a text from an old friend named Mitch: Jer, I have someone you need to meet. A girl. You free Saturday?

I was still recovering from a failed three-year relationship, and this wasn't the first time a friend had tried to set me up. I promptly shut him down. Hey, man, good to hear from you. No, I'm busy. Sorry!

This happened during the peak of *Little People, Big World*, a reality television show about my family that had been airing for five years at the time. I had gotten used to people asking me to meet friends and friends of friends. I always felt uncertain about the motives behind the meetings, so I rarely obliged. However, Mitch was a good friend, an old friend who had my trust, and he insisted.

Reluctantly, I agreed to a blind date with some girl named Audrey. What made me say yes? I still don't know. I spent the rest of the week looking for reasons to bail, even up to the last minute. Before I could cancel, Mitch texted me the address of Audrey's parents' house. It was just a couple hours before we were supposed to meet up, so I was too far in to back out now.

That evening, I tried on five different outfits before I climbed into OhSo, my little orange 1971 BMW 2002, and headed down the misty driveway. Although I was reluctant to go, there was something thrilling about going on a date with someone I knew nothing about,

THE BEGINNING

and I wanted to make a good impression. I arrived ten minutes early and parked across the street from Audrey's parents' house. The front lawn was perfectly manicured. A brick archway stretched thirty feet high and framed the front door, which was covered with perfectly arranged Christmas decorations. A fluffy white cat was perched in an upstairs window and looked down at me as though he knew what I was in for. Everything seemed too tidy. *Goodness, she's probably a straight-A student type*, I thought. *Awkward. Boring. High-maintenance.* Now I felt even more apprehensive.

I had never gone on a blind date before, and to be honest, it just felt embarrassing. I wasn't desperate. I was doing this for a friend because I trusted him and he had insisted. I was convinced there was no way sparks would fly and zero chance I'd hit it off with some random girl from the burbs.

I walked up to the front door, knocked, and waited. No answer, no sounds of stirring, nothing. I raised my hand to give it another knock when—*shebang!*—the door flew open while my hand was still in midair. Before me stood a girl with frizzy red hair wearing running buns and a sports bra. Her petite frame was dripping with sweat and speckled with mud. *What in the world kind of girl opens the door dressed like this when meeting a complete stranger?* She was slender and pretty and had a big smile on her face. I thought she was probably expecting me to be Kelcey, Mitch's girlfriend and one of Audrey's best friends, who was going to be joining us.

"Hi," I said, "are you Audrey?" Some part of me hoped this mess-of-a-girl was Audrey's sister or something.

"Yeah, hi!" she said. "You're Jeremy. Nice to meet you. Sorry, I'm running a little behind. Kelcey and Mitch aren't here yet, but come on in." The words flew out of her mouth almost as fast as the run she'd apparently just finished.

“No worries, I know I’m a bit early.”

The words were barely out of my mouth before she turned around and bolted up the stairs, calling back something like, “I’ll be ready in a few. Just wait in the kitchen and . . .”

Her voice trailed off as she rounded the corner. Still standing in the doorway, I let myself in the house, took off my shoes, and placed them neatly next to the others under the entryway bench. I found my way to the kitchen and sat down. *Well, this is awkward.* Looking around the house, I concluded that the family seemed normal enough. The house was clean and organized; sports trophies lined the shelves; Scripture cards were posted on the fridge; and a tray of homemade desserts filled the counter. *Okay, maybe this won’t be too bad.*

A few minutes later, to my relief, there was a knock at the door. Before I could get up, I heard the door open and shut and someone kick off their shoes. From around the corner walked Kelcey. I knew of Kelcey, but we hadn’t met. Mitch and Kelcey had been dating for a while, and both had gone to high school with Audrey. Kelcey was in Audrey’s tight group of best friends, whom I would later come to know as “the God Squad.”

Mitch showed up a few minutes later and joined us at the kitchen table. While we chatted about the plan for the evening, I got the feeling Mitch and Kelcey both had higher expectations than I did. The plan was to eat dinner at the local Macaroni Grill—where we were sure to engage in some thrilling conversation—before heading to the opening service of Solid Rock. Solid Rock was the church they all attended, and a new campus was launching that night in downtown Portland. I had been there occasionally, but I was in a season of spiritual complacency and wasn’t regularly reading my Bible or committed to a church.

THE BEGINNING

Audrey eventually walked down the stairs, and I looked over from across the room as she approached the kitchen table. Her beautiful red hair was pulled to the side and cascaded down the front of her floral ruffled blouse. She wore black leggings that formed to her athletic legs, and black lace-up boots. Her lips shimmered with a generous gloss of red lipstick. *Okay, fine, she's hot.*

We all piled into Audrey's red Mazda and headed off to dinner. When the server came to take our drink order, Audrey casually looked up from her menu and said, "I'll take a glass of milk."

Milk? Who is this girl? Who orders milk at a restaurant . . . and on a blind date!

Over dinner, we talked about a wide range of topics, and I found myself both perplexed and intrigued by Audrey. Her thoughts, interests, and mannerisms were peculiar, and I couldn't get a read on her. She was unlike any girl I had ever met. Our curiosity was mutual. She would later say she felt she had met the boy version of herself—that I was quirky like her and we were interested in many of the same things. Prompted by Mitch, we discovered that we even shared the same favorite movie—*Stand by Me*. There was no neat box I could fit this girl into. And there was zero mention of *Little People, Big World*. The show was usually one of the first things—and sometimes the only thing—that people I'd just met wanted to talk about. That alone threw me off guard and piqued my interest.

After dinner, we headed to church, where I met the rest of the God Squad. When I asked about the name, they explained that some boy in middle school had called them the God Squad as a way to poke fun, but the name had stuck.

The service was routine—pray, sing, sermon, pray again—but there was a lot of energy in the room. Everyone was excited to

A LOVE LETTER LIFE

celebrate the beginning of this new campus. I, however, was pre-occupied with this unusual girl and also a little self-conscious, knowing that her best friends and Mitch and Kelcey were constantly looking in our direction to see if anything was happening between Audrey and me.

After church, we drove back to Audrey's place and said our good-byes. It wasn't a sparks-flying kind of night, and yet something about it had felt so right.

I was curious about this girl. She clearly marched to the beat of her own drum. I liked that. Her confidence and strong sense of herself were refreshing. Something about our meeting felt "meant to be." Even though I couldn't get a good read on her, there were uncanny moments when I felt a deep sense of connection and a longing for more.

Who is this girl?

I decided to press on and find out. That blind date marked the beginning of my patient pursuit of Audrey Mirabella Botti.

A PATIENT *Pursuit*

AUDREY

I couldn't stop thinking about the skinny jean-wearing, Taylor Swift-loving, vintage car-driving farm boy. A few months had passed since our blind date at Macaroni Grill, and although I wasn't ready to be in a serious relationship, I was definitely curious about this boy. Over the next few months, whenever I was home from school for the weekend, Jeremy and I would rendezvous at church. Sometimes he met up with my friends and me ahead of time so we could drive together. Other times, he hung out with us after church for some late-night grub. While I was at school, Jeremy would send an occasional text with a movie, podcast, or song suggestion, but we hadn't gone on a second date or spent any time alone together. When I came home for summer break and it was warm enough to hang outside in the evenings, he invited me over to the farm for the first time.

THE BEGINNING

I approached the iconic Roloff Farms sign on Helvetia Road, turned down the gravel driveway, and proceeded to the dimly lit security gate. I glanced down at my phone to review Jeremy's text message instructions outlining which buttons to press on the keypad. After I pressed a few buttons, Jeremy's voice crackled back through the intercom.

"Auj?"

"It's me!"

"Access granted," announced a robotic voice as the gate opened, although it felt as if in that same moment I also granted access to my heart in some small way.

I followed the driveway through a tunnel of trees that led up to an enormous farmhouse. As I pulled up, a large group of guys and girls all hopped onto a giant passenger ATV thing and then sped off. I took a few deep breaths in the comfort zone of my car before emerging. Jeremy was standing outside and motioned for me to join him on a smaller ATV.

"Hop on the mule," he said. "Everyone is headed out to the campfire pit."

Mule? I knew he must be referring to the ATV, but I felt like an idiot for not being more fluent in farm lingo. I joined him on the mule, and we buzzed past barns, farm equipment, animals, and other structures I couldn't quite make out in the dark. We reached the campfire pit where Zach, Jeremy's twin brother, was debriefing the rest of the gang on the rules. Unless you're a *Little People, Big World* fan, you'd never know that Zach is Jeremy's twin brother. They look and act nothing alike.

We were about to play a game of Fugitive, but this was different from the suburban style Fugitive I was used to playing with my friends. For us public school kids, Fugitive was essentially a

A PATIENT PURSUIT

giant game of tag, but the people who are “it” are “cops” and drive around in cars. We usually designated four cop cars, with multiple people in each car. Everyone else was a “fugitive.” For the fugitives, the goal was to run from the starting location (usually a school parking lot), to the destination (usually another school parking lot), without getting tagged by the cops. Sometimes that required running through surrounding neighborhoods or parks to stay out of sight. To officially catch the fugitives, cops had to pull over, get out of the car, and tag them. Fugitives who got caught became cops and had to help catch other fugitives. The first person to make it to the destination without getting caught won the game.

I took pride in my fugitive skills. Even when I was spotted, I could always outrun the cops. But the rules for Farm Fugitive turned out to be much different. When you grow up on thirty-four acres, you don’t need to run through people’s backyards and apartment complexes in order to play the game. Instead of cop cars, Zach drove around on a mule while the rest of us fugitives ran from one end of the farm to the other, and back again. Instead of having to actually get out and tag us, Zach just had to call out our names. That meant stealth was even more important than speed.

As Zach pointed out the boundary lines, I felt my confidence begin to plummet. Apparently, we were all supposed to run from the campfire pit to the pumpkin barn, which was a safe zone, and then back to the campfire pit. Except I had no idea where the pumpkin barn was.

Before I could ask any questions, Zach was counting down, and everyone took off running. I followed Jeremy into the dark forest and immediately felt disoriented. Within a minute or so, we could hear the mule closing in on us. Jeremy and his friend Mueller

THE BEGINNING

quickly vaulted over a fence that took me much longer to scale. By the time my feet hit the ground, the boys were long gone, and I was left to navigate Roloff Farms on my own.

This was no ordinary farm. I felt like I was running through a farm version of Disneyland. I ran through the forest past a swamp fort; over a hill inhabited by sheep, goats, and cows accompanied by a replica of Noah's ark; through a miniature cowboy town; past a pirate ship, a *Swiss Family Robinson* tree house, a castle, and a sports arena; and through fields of hay, berries, and flowers. Even in the dark, I was enamored with it all.

For a while, I wondered if I would find the pumpkin barn before dawn, but I was eventually able to make out some pumpkin paraphernalia in the dark, a few signs for tours, and a maze of wooden fences that I guessed to be some kind of line management system for the pumpkin business. When I finally reached the safe zone—the barn—I was congratulated by Jeremy and Mueller.

“Auj, you made it! We’re gonna make a run for it up the High Road; come with us!”

As soon as Zach's mule crested over “Roloff Mountain” and dropped down behind “Barn Three,” we sprinted through the pumpkin arena and up a massive hill toward what I assumed to be the edge of the property. Even though I was breathing hard, I couldn't help but smile. The enchantment of this place and the wonder of this farm boy had already captured a piece of my heart.

We made it to the campfire pit unspotted and unscathed. We won! A few moments later, we were reunited with the rest of the fugitives, all of whom had been spotted and become cops. We laughed, shared our stories of escape or capture, and hung out by the fire. After everyone else eventually went home, I stayed. Lingering as the minutes turned to hours.

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Jeremy and I talked and stared into the embers, occasionally lifting our gazes to make eye contact through the flames. I questioned him about all the unorthodox structures I'd encountered as a fugitive, and he downloaded on me the genesis of the farm and the story behind all of its artifacts.

"Was any of this here when your parents bought the property?" I asked. "What made your parents want to build this crazy playground?"

The question put a twinkle in Jer's eye. He stood up to tell the story. "When my dad was a kid, he had several surgeries on his legs. While he was recovering in the hospital, he dreamed of having adventures with cowboys, Indians, knights, and pirates. When he and my mom bought the farm, he finally got the chance to bring all of those childhood dreams to life. Zach, Molly, Jacob, and I grew up playing cowboys and Indians in a mini cowboy town, playing knights in the castle, walking the plank on the pirate ship, and sleeping in our *Swiss Family Robinson* tree house." He smiled as he spoke. I could see how much he cherished this place.

"Wow, that's insane!" I said, eager to hear the rest of the story.

Jeremy described his childhood as every kid's dream. His parents, who are dwarfs, bought the farm when Jeremy and his twin brother Zach were still in the womb. It was just a rolling piece of land in the Oregon countryside, but Jer's dad had a vision for what it would one day become.

Throughout Jer's childhood, his parents not only built the playground and tourist attraction that is now Roloff Farms, but they also renovated the old farmhouse and started the family pumpkin business. The fact that they did all of this as little people managing a giant farm while simultaneously raising four children was what eventually caught the attention of a few television networks.

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I assumed the TV show helped to build everything that was on the farm, but it was just the opposite. It was everything on the farm that helped catch the attention of the television networks.

“It really was, and still is, a magical place,” Jeremy said with gratitude. “Honestly, the farm has been like a third parent to me. It’s taught me so much and made me who I am today.”

I was eager to know more—about the farm and about the boy who had been so impacted by it. This was the first of many nights we would spend together by the campfire pit that summer. Even so, I wasn’t looking for a serious relationship. My priorities were elsewhere, and falling in love felt far-fetched to me. I never got too caught up in longing for romance or seeking attention from guys. I was content on my own and took pride—perhaps too much of it—in my independence.

I liked that my relationship status was not an indicator of my happiness or well-being. But the more time I spent with Jeremy, the more I started to wonder if this could ever be more than friendship. I remember thinking, *If this ever does develop into something, what an amazing story we will be able to tell!*

JEREMY

I knew from the start that Audrey was a special girl, someone I wanted to pursue and hopefully build a love story with. She seemed to have the fruit of the Spirit in her life that the apostle Paul describes in Galatians 5: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. But I also knew that pursuing her meant I needed to get my act together. If I hoped to have even a shot at making this girl mine, I needed to become

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the kind of man who was deserving of her. At the time, I was in a season of laziness, losing sight of who I was becoming and what I was doing. Meeting Audrey was a firm reality check. So I got to work—on myself.

I dusted off my Bible and immersed myself in truths about the kind of person I wanted to become—a man of discipline, purity, and direction who pursued a deeper relationship with Jesus. Until Audrey, I had never met someone who held up a mirror to my life just by being herself. The light in her life showed me not only who I was, but also who I wanted to be. She inspired me to become a better person. The pursuit was on.

It was clear skies and warm weather. Spring had sprung, and our crew of friends decided it would be a good night to head to “the clearing” for a bonfire. The clearing, as we dubbed it, was a half-logged sloping hill, the remnant of a logging operation that had been abandoned for quite some time. It was just a few miles north of the farm. The east side of the hill that faces North Portland is logged, leaving a beautiful lookout over the Willamette River where it snakes around Sauvie Island.

Excited to make another memory, I called Audrey and asked if she wanted to come with me that evening. “There’s something I want to show you. Meet up with us at the farm tonight?” Her only question was, “What time?” I liked her go-with-the-flow personality and her willingness to embrace the element of surprise.

When she arrived at the farm, the rest of us were already loaded into the farm’s pickup truck. Zach was behind the wheel; Roth and Scott were in the front seat of the cab; Dan and Jake were in the back seat; and Mueller and I were in the truck bed. Country Rule #37 says, “Never pass up an opportunity to ride in a truck bed,” and we tried our best to abide by the Country Rules.

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Audrey jumped in the back of the cab, and I hollered up to Zach, “Good to go!”

The truck was packed with all the ingredients for a good time—firewood, blankets, and a full cooler. We also brought along a guitar in hopes that Roth, our designated musician, would indulge us with some songs. Once we arrived at the clearing, we started walking up the trail to the point where it would eventually fork. The typical hiker always chose to go straight at the fork, but we peeled off to the right—on the trail that led to a hidden spot we had discovered the previous summer. With the fire lit, blankets laid out, and the sun setting, we talked into the night. Mueller talked about his latest girlfriend; Roth told stories about his customers at the local Linens-’n-Things; Zach went on some soccer rant; and we all razzed him about his trunkful of Mountain Dew cans. The night was lighthearted, and we felt young.

At one point, I walked a hundred feet or so down the hill to take a tinkle (Audrey *still* laughs at me when I use this word). As I was walking back, I met Audrey on the trail. My heart skipped a beat, and I suddenly got all nervous. Finding myself alone with her sent a jolt of electricity through me.

“Hey, how you doing?” I asked. It was the best I could come up with on short notice.

“I’m good,” she said, “but I have to pee too!”

I started to explain that there were no Porta Potties, but she quickly cut me off. Evidently, there was no time to waste.

“I don’t need one,” she said. “Can I go where you went?”

Oddly enough, this impressed me. A girl who is down to pee in the woods—radical!

“Yes, of course!” I said, pointing to the general area. “I’ll wait for you around the corner.”

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When she emerged from the forest, we moseyed back up the hill. The Milky Way lit our path, and we paused to admire its brilliance. I glanced over at her and whispered, “This is what I wanted to show you.” We stood together in silence. There was peace in the cool night air.

I can’t remember how long we admired the sky, but we eventually made our way back up to the firepit, where we were greeted by a hoot and holler from Mueller. Apparently, our absence had been noted. Laughing off our embarrassment, we joined the group in putting out the fire and loading up the truck.

On the ride back, seemingly by accident—although such things rarely are—it was just Audrey and me who ended up sitting in the truck bed. We were quiet most of the way, but it was the farthest thing from awkward. In fact, it was a silent joy. Nothing needed to be said. Never had silence felt so comfortable. We sat next to each other and leaned against the cab of the truck. The trees zipped past as the road behind us disappeared around every turn.

I wanted to kiss her, but we hadn’t even confessed our feelings for each other. If I did, I would be admitting my feelings for her, and it felt too soon—or was it? I knew I was falling in love, but I also knew the principle that it’s wise to be patient when pursuing someone you don’t want to lose. I didn’t want a kiss to determine the status of our relationship or confuse my feelings for her. I didn’t need a kiss—I knew that. And if I was going to kiss her, I wanted to do it on the foundation of a friendship that could support it. I knew we weren’t there yet, so I refrained. Barely.

Our relationship grew quite a bit that night. We were two friends getting to know one another without the pressure of the “boyfriend/girlfriend” label. We were becoming friends while also beginning to fall madly in love—but patiently.

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As spring became summer, we spent more and more time together. What some would call “friend-zoned,” I called pursuit. I got to know Audrey, and she got to know me. We developed increasing levels of trust, joy, respect, and admiration for one another. I got to see how she treated her parents, what she was interested in, what her hopes and dreams were, and the strength of her faith. There was a growing excitement of discovery between us. I was in hot pursuit—crafting gifts for her, taking her places, and spending time with her.

Now, to be honest, not everything I experienced with Audrey at this point was a positive. I discovered that she had quite a few walls around her heart. I started to notice her walls more and more as our friendship grew. She seemed to be into me, but she wouldn’t—or maybe couldn’t—hint at something more than just friendship.

I took the fact that she kept hanging out with me to be a good sign, but Audrey was a hard nut to crack. Her strong will kept her distant and difficult to read. Part of my patient pursuit included attempting to carefully break through her walls. As we continued to spend time together, I pursued her creatively and patiently. I think a girl like Audrey was a hard catch because she wasn’t interested in men, but a man. I wanted to be that man, the one who fought for her heart.

At times it was very difficult, but I continued to pursue her because, deep down, I believed that what we were experiencing was mutual. There was an intensity between us, an *inloveness*, that invited both vulnerability and caution. We were careful with one another because we didn’t want to mess it up. This friendship we were nurturing allowed us to build the foundation for a love story without getting lost in a cloud of emotions from physical intimacy.

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I believed that if I kept pursuing her, Audrey was a treasure worth waiting for.

A word to the single guys out there. If you're pursuing a woman who is hard to catch, don't give up! It means she has standards, and she isn't about to fall for just any guy with a smartphone who sends her heart emojis. If you're serious about wanting a lifelong relationship with this woman, your patient pursuit is part of what qualifies you as husband material.

Pursuit takes work, and so does marriage. If you learn to pursue before you say "I do," it's a skill that will continue to serve you well beyond the *I do*. When the real thing hits you, pursuit itself becomes a pleasure. I wanted nothing more than to find a way to Audrey's heart. I was eager to press in, and doing so made me feel alive. I wanted more, and if you're reading this book, I'm guessing you do too. So take a risk and press in! Just don't get weird. You don't want to end up on the creeper list. Pursuit is politely persistent.

My patient pursuit was the scariest thing I had ever done, but it was also the most exhilarating. There were times I was tempted to cower in the corner with fear of rejection, but if I did, I'd lose her. Audrey was the type of girl I wanted to take a few arrows of rejection for to have a chance at love with. Rejection is temporary; the glory of true love is eternal! As the wise King Solomon said, "He who finds a wife finds a good thing" (Proverbs 18:22 ESV). However, he never said it would be easy! On rare occasions, this finding may fall into your lap with a note from God attached that reads, "You're welcome." Kind of like how I met Audrey—it sort of just happened. But our relationship coming to be was another story. It required traveling a long distance and navigating some tough terrain—valleys of uncertainty and mountains of doubt. That's the road of the patient pursuit.

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AUDREY

I changed my outfit three times that morning. But I wasn't deciding between dresses and jewelry; I was deciding between mud clothes and hiking boots. I had no idea what to wear for the occasion, but I wasn't about to be the rookie suburban girl who asked. The sun was barely beaming through the blinds in my bedroom window when Zach's Subaru Outback full of country boys pulled up to my parents' house. In addition to Zach, the crew included Jeremy, Mueller, Roth, and Jake.

Jeremy got out of the car and came to my door. Whether he was picking me up or dropping me off, he *always* came to the door. I wasn't used to that in a guy, but I respected him for it. After joining the rest of the boys in the car, I was told we had one more stop to make on our way. We were picking up Tori, Zach's new girlfriend. *Relief!* I wouldn't be the only girl on this adventure.

After a few hours of listening to country music, reminiscing about past summer excursions, and dreaming up future ones, we reached our destination—Ape Cave.¹ Ape Cave is the longest continuous lava tube in the continental United States, and the third longest (in total mapped length) in North America. The tunnel runs 2.5 miles underground just north of Mount St. Helens in Washington State.

Ape Cave is sometimes referred to as Ape Caves (plural) because the main entrance falls between the lava tube's two ends, the Lower Cave and the Upper Cave. The Upper Cave is a 2.8-mile hike round-trip. First, there is a 1.5-mile descent on slippery, dark, rocky terrain in an underground tunnel. The tunnel eventually leads to a ladder that ascends to an opening in the cave's ceiling, the exit. The return hike follows a 1.3-mile trail that winds through the forest

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back to the main entrance. The Lower Cave is just a 1.5-mile hike round-trip and is considerably easier. The terrain is flat, broad, and covered with sand and mud rather than loose rock. As we piled out of the car and walked toward the main entrance, it wasn't even a consideration. We headed straight for the Upper Cave.

We immediately encountered terrain that demanded both agility and caution—well, for me at least. The boys, on the other hand, took off like Super Mario Bros. I could hear the iconic theme song playing in my head as I watched them bounce over the rocks full steam ahead. For them, this was beginner-level stuff.

I was torn between wanting to impress Jeremy by bounding ahead and not wanting to get myself in trouble. I wasn't afraid or uncoordinated, but I was cautious. Unlike the rest of the gang, I had a little more at stake if I got injured. If I slid on a rock or twisted an ankle, my collegiate running career could be on the line. So I methodically wobbled my way into the darkness, hunched over, sometimes on all fours, much more apelike.

As we progressed deeper into the cave, it grew colder and darker until Jeremy finally struck a match and lit the lantern. Something about this scene ignited a spark in me, or maybe I just have a thing for lanterns. I'd never seen a real old-school lantern fired up before. Boys from my high school didn't own this kind of stuff. But I loved that Jeremy brought the lantern instead of a flashlight. He was prepared, but in a nonconventional kind of way. It made our whole adventure feel more enchanting. The light from the lantern bounced off the walls of the cave. It was an absolute necessity for our journey onward.

We hiked a little farther and then decided to turn off the lantern to see how dark it really was. I'd never experienced such utter darkness with my eyes open. Blind to everything around us, we walked

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around like mummies with outstretched arms until we bumped into each other. Jeremy and I connected for a moment. I knew it was him because I felt the lantern brush past my leg. It was one of the first times we'd touched each other. It lasted just a split second, but even in the dark I felt the chemistry between us building. *What if he kisses me? No one would know, and we wouldn't even be able to see each other's reaction!* Jeremy was unpredictable and charming—it seemed like something he would do, which made me incredibly nervous. I was interested in Jeremy, but I definitely wasn't ready for that.

This was one of many “kissable moments” we would have over the next year and a half of being *just friends*. They all would have made for epic first-kiss stories, but we refrained. The full extent of our physical connection in those years was limited to bumping into each other in Ape Cave, sitting shoulder to shoulder in the back of the truck, and high fiving after our Fugitive victory. Even when we side-hugged good-bye, we were sure to leave room for the Holy Spirit. You might be chuckling now, but we'll talk about how we messed up in later chapters. However, I think if we had jumped directly into a dating relationship, we would have been tempted to flirt with sexual intimacy much sooner. Instead, for the two years before we officially dated, we hardly touched each other.

Jeremy relit the lantern, and we eventually reached the end of the tunnel with no significant injuries. We ascended the ladder and greeted daylight like newborns, squinting and stretching to adjust to the newly bright environment. As we hiked back to the car, Jeremy and I fell into an easy and meaningful conversation.

This was how our adventures often unfolded. In the thick of it, we were focused on fully enjoying the moment. Afterward, the adrenaline rush fueled honest, refreshing, and meaningful conversations. We learned so much about each other through our adventures

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and the conversations that followed. Whether it was geocaching, going to drive-in movies, bike riding, or cruising around in Jer's vintage orange BMW until we got lost, every adventure was an opportunity to discover more of each other's character. We both knew that strong relationships come from strong friendships, so we continued to build the foundation of our friendship.

For me, it was also a chance to watch for any potential red flags. It prevented me from falling into the blind-love trap—hurrying into a relationship, dabbling with sexual intimacy, and becoming emotionally attached. You know, like when the person you're dating becomes “the most talented, most interesting, and most extraordinary person in the universe.” (And if that line doesn't sound familiar, please go watch *The Lego Movie* after you finish this chapter. It's sure to solve all of your dating problems.) As time passes, your friends and family might start to raise concerns about this most extraordinary person you're dating, but you won't listen because you literally can't see what they see. This is a titanic problem. One of the key ingredients to a healthy relationship is generous servings of input from the people who love and care about you.

Additionally, I didn't want to spend too much time with a guy I couldn't see a future with. Ultimately, what's the point of dating if not to find your spouse? In the words of novelist Nicholas Sparks, “I mean, if the relationship can't survive the long term, why on earth would it be worth my time and energy for the short term?”² Falling in love with someone you don't see a future with always ends with broken hearts. As I watched a close friend experience this heartbreak, I sensed the Lord warning me, *You can't help who you fall in love with, but you can help who you spend time with.*

* * *

THE BEGINNING

If you're single and searching for a lifelong soul mate, *search for a friend*. We have all had that friend—maybe it's you—who met someone they were attracted to and started dating five days later. A few months pass, and the relationship crumbles. Why? Because there was no foundation and no infrastructure to build on. Dating before becoming friends is like trying to make a sandwich by starting with condiments rather than bread. It's messy, and it just doesn't work. You have to lay down the bread first. Then the condiments have something to stick to, and there's a foundation for the meat and cheese. Okay, I realize that may not be the most profound analogy, but you get the idea.

A longing for friendship and relational connection is hardwired into our DNA. Friendship is not a means to an end, but a key ingredient for meeting our innate human needs for relational connection. I think that's why so many couples say they married their best friend. It's much easier to add physical intimacy to friendship than it is to cultivate a strong friendship after having been physically intimate. That's one of the reasons Jeremy and I are such advocates for being friends first.

In our experience, friendship allows the groundwork for healthy pursuit to take place. To all the single women reading this, volume up! You're not giving a man the chance to pursue you if you're skipping the friendship space and jumping straight into getting physically intimate or chasing down every nice guy who looks your way. Not to mention, if you're the one doing *all* the chasing, chances are the guy you're after does not want to be caught, or *he's just not that into you*.

Friendship allows us time to find out if the person we're pursuing—or being pursued by—is marriage material before the relationship gets muddled with sexual intimacy. You'll find out if

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he's willing to risk rejection and is determined to be a thoughtful, faithful, and loyal friend. Our period of friendship gave Jeremy the opportunity to pursue me and gave us a strong foundation for when it was time to get physically intimate.

I also want to address a lie that may be creeping into your mind right about now: *There are no guys out there who will pursue me like that.* If you believe this lie, you'll live this lie. Jeremy is *not* an exception. Don't you believe it for a second. Of course, in my biased opinion I think he is a one-of-a-kind guy, but he's not an anomaly. It's like that classic quote often attributed to Henry Ford: "Whether you think you can or you think you can't, you're right." Whether you think you'll never find a godly, romantic, handsome guy or you think you will, you're right.

The friends-first approach also gave Jeremy and me the freedom to get to know each other without being pressured by the dating label or the intoxicating fog of physical intimacy. Once you open the door to physical intimacy, you're increasingly compelled to move very fast in that direction. But what if you don't want to? What if you just want to get to know each other for a while? What if you want the next person you date—or the only person you date—to be your spouse?

Western culture puts too much sexual pressure on dating. And Christian culture often puts too much pressure on the idea of finding "the one." As a general rule, whenever pressure is present, there is a higher chance of an injury. I think that principle applies as equally to relationships as it does to hot water boiling on the stove or to an overinflated tire. Anything that's overpressurized is dangerous. When it comes to dating, patience deflates pressure.

There is a reason the best intimate relationships come from friendships. When the rush of those first electric feelings fade,

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as they inevitably do, you'll still be doing life with someone you enjoy. You'll have someone to laugh and adventure with. Someone who gets your inside jokes. You'll have a friend.

Starting as friends gave us the foundation we needed for a healthy dating relationship. It empowered Jer's pursuit, eliminated the pressure of the dating label, protected our purity, and kept us from being blinded by emotional euphoria. Our friendship gave way to the patient pursuit. Much like the lantern was a necessity to navigate our journey through Ape Cave, so our friendship was a necessity to navigate our journey to marriage. Much like the Milky Way lit our path to the clearing, our friendship glimmered bright with anticipation over what might be. Much like the camp-fire ignited meaningful conversations, friendship was the spark that ignited our love. The actor Bruce Lee wrote, "Love is like a friendship caught on fire, very pretty, often hot and fierce, but still only light and flickering. As love grows older our hearts mature, and our love becomes as coals deep-burning and unquenchable."³

NOT AN *Island*

JEREMY

I was the guy who started dating a girl once and then got told by people that we weren't the best match—how dare they! Maybe it was because I began dressing emo, listening to bad music, and only wore black. They also pointed out that I acted like a different person around her. I was “gloomier” than usual. The disapproving and unaffirming remarks from our friends only caused us to isolate even more, which led to mistakes and some friendships that were stretched and strained.

Hindsight is twenty-twenty, and looking back, I would have dodged some heartache had I acknowledged the concerns and red flags raised by my close friends. What I learned was that if you isolate yourself in a dating relationship, chances are that it's not because of something good. Isolation can be a way of hiding. And do we ever hide unless there is something we're hiding from? Whatever

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the reason, isolation allows for unchecked behavior. It's a way to escape issues in our life or our relationships, and that's exactly what I did in this relationship. Admittedly, isolation and escape were also coping mechanisms I was quite familiar with in my life outside of dating, but more on that in a later chapter.

I wasn't about to make the same mistake with Audrey when we started hanging out, so instead of isolating, I was intentional about integrating. This time, I was met with green flags.

* * *

Five months after I first met Audrey and her friends, fifteen of us circled around a cereal bowl in her parents' living room. We were playing a game called "Loaded Questions." The bowl was filled with slips of paper, each one containing a scribbled answer to a question. The questions included things like, "How would you describe the perfect summer day?" "If you could travel anywhere in the world where would you go?" "If you could have dinner with anyone in the world, dead or alive, who would it be?" Once everyone had dropped their answers into the bowl, one person read all the answers out loud. Then the rest of us tried to guess who had written each one.

Audrey and I ended up writing down the exact same answers that night—twice! Our answers to the *perfect summer day* question included camping by a lake, and we both said that we would travel to Switzerland! The fact that our answers were the same was a complete shock to everyone because it pretty much never happens in this game. Our friends laughed about it because it just affirmed what they already saw in Audrey and me—that we were kindred spirits. This was just a game, but it became one of the many affirmations we were beginning to notice.

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You'd think that after enough incidences such as this one, Audrey would have started expressing her feelings for me—but nope! It was obvious I wasn't going to break through Audrey's walls by beating at the door. The only way I was ever going to win her heart was if she opened the door from the inside. Looking back, this worked in our favor because it forced my patient pursuit, which in turn gave us plenty of time to vet one another through our friends.

Audrey and I included our families in our relationship as well. We wanted to give them the opportunity to raise red flags too. Not long after meeting Audrey, I walked into the kitchen where my mom was making homemade granola and proclaimed, "Mom, I'm going to marry this girl." At this point, we had only seen each other a few times and it was still several months before we would spend our first summer together.

My mom chuckled as she placed a sheet pan in the oven, but when she turned back around to face me, she saw the look on my face and realized I was serious. Removing her mittens, she told me she thought Audrey was "very nice" and that she seemed like "your kind of girl." Although Audrey didn't spend as much time with my family as I did with hers, my parents still liked her spunk and respected her, based on what I had told them about her.

In addition to our parents and friends, we spent time with each other's siblings. That Thanksgiving, I coaxed my brothers and sister into stopping by the Bottis after our annual Roloff indoor soccer game. I'm not sure why they agreed to come, but next thing you know, there we all were, hanging out in the Bottis' living room playing the infamous "Loaded Questions" game. Afterward, I asked Zach, Molly, and Jacob what they thought of Audrey. They loved her and her family. It was affirming that the most

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trusted people in my life respected and encouraged my relationship with Audrey.

I don't mean for this to be prescriptive at all, but we even had strangers who affirmed our relationship. Once when I was visiting Audrey at school in Corvallis, we hit up the Broken Yolk Cafe for what we thought would be a quick breakfast before I made the ninety-minute drive north back to Portland. We weren't officially dating yet, but we had a "no phone" rule we adhered to during meals that kept us present and attentive to each other—so much so that we hadn't noticed we'd talked an hour past closing time! We were the last ones seated in the restaurant, and most of the staff had already gone home. Shocked, we waved down our waitress who was still cleaning up, and she brought us our check. When we apologized, she assured us it was no problem. "I could feel the love between you guys," she said, "and I didn't want it to end." We smiled and took the compliment. Neither of us had the heart to tell her, *Oh, we're just friends.*

We continued to see each other on occasional weekends throughout the winter and spring, but once Audrey was home for summer break, we started hanging out all the time again. This would be our second summer together as just friends—learning more about each other and each other's friends.

The summer was a mix of routine meetups and spontaneous adventures. We spent most Sunday evenings at church with friends and usually went to Audrey's parents' house to slam some pancakes. There were trips to nearby lakes and rivers, where we boated, swam, and explored in hopes of finding a rope swing. And, of course, there were the late-night hangouts with everyone by the campfire at the farm where we were serenaded by the soothing crackle of the fire as we talked late into the night. Audrey and

NOT AN ISLAND

I typically sat across the firepit from each other, and I sometimes peered at her through the sparks, waiting for her to notice. She rarely obliged, but then again, neither did I—yet we both knew we did it, even if it was just for a second. Hasn't everyone had a time when they kept looking at their crush but wouldn't dare get caught doing it? We lingered by the fire after the last of our friends had jumped on the mule and headed back to the farmhouse. Sometimes we sat together in silence; sometimes we shared stories and aspirations.

I have especially vivid memories of the last night we were together before I left for Santa Barbara. Friends and family had all gathered to bid me farewell. Nine days before, Audrey and I had thrown our shoes over the train trestle to timestamp our summer and mark the decision that we were now officially dating. A night around the campfire was the one thing I wanted to do before I left. Amid the laughter, reminiscing and good-byes, I slipped away into the field for a minute to look back and take it all in. I wanted to remember the scene that grew our love story. As I looked back, excitement and fear were all wrapped up into one moment. I was about to embark on a new chapter.

I turned back around to look up at the night sky while I listened to the hum of conversation behind me. Moments later, my friend Dan, whom I've known since childhood, put his hand on my shoulder. "This is the best version of you that I've seen," he said. "Don't lose her." The words were spoken by Dan, but I knew all of my friends would have said the same thing—everyone recognized that I had something special with Audrey. Little did I know that it would be the affirmation of these same friends that would help Audrey and me endure the trials we would soon face.

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AUDREY

One of the first things Jeremy and I bonded over was our unashamed desire to be unique and to live creative lives. Our friends often teased us both for our quirky idiosyncrasies. Because we spent so much time with each other's friends, I witnessed the eye rolls and astonished looks Jeremy's friends made when he wore his skin-tight jeans (this was before skinny jeans were a thing) or when he stood a little too close to the edge of the train trestle or when he drove off-road and narrowly escaped crashing the mule. Likewise, he witnessed my friends poking fun at my tomboy wardrobe, my affinity for McDonald's, and my ignorance of pop culture and celebrity gossip. But all of this teasing only intensified our intrigue for each other.

The first winter break after we were dating, all of my best friends and their significant others planned a weekend snow trip to Black Butte Ranch, a resort community where one of my friend's parents had a vacation home. Among the gang were Kelcey and Mitch, the friends who had set us up on our initial blind date. It would be the first time my friends spent more than a few hours around Jeremy, so I was eager to hear what they thought after spending some concentrated time with him. These were trusted friends, so I valued their opinion. We all arrived and claimed our bunks—girls in the upstairs rooms and guys in the downstairs rooms. And yes, we actually slept separately. I was thankful to have friends who also valued purity.

It was the weekend before Christmas, and we had planned some festive activities, one of which was a gingerbread house competition. After settling in, we made a group trip into town for supplies. Each couple had ten minutes to wander the aisles at Safeway and gather

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materials for their gingerbread house. Jeremy and I instantly knew we didn't want to use all the cliché materials—candy canes, marshmallows, gumdrops. So we stocked up on pretzels, animal crackers, and birthday candles. Secretly making our way through the check-out line, we kept our supplies concealed from the other couples.

Back at the house, the competition began, each of us in a secluded corner to protect our building process from copycat infringement. Jeremy and I were lucky enough to claim prime construction-site real estate at the kitchen table. We agreed that everyone would have thirty minutes to construct and decorate. Then we would vote for the best house, but you couldn't vote for your own.

Jeremy and I began by laying down a thick base of frosting and then sinking in graham crackers for a wraparound porch. The house was a 1920s farmhouse with a huge deck featuring Oreo lawn chairs and a banana peel slide coming down off the roof. The yard featured a lush spread of green sprinkles with animal cracker sheep wandering about. On the edge of the property was a campfire pit constructed with pretzel logs and some birthday candles at the center. Slices of banana circled the pit for seating. A peanut butter path framed by lettuce shrubs paved the way to the front door. I'm not sure why we went for the red licorice swirl look on the roof.

Moments before the big reveal, Jeremy lit the birthday candles we had installed in the firepit and the chimney. Our house was sure to win—it was literally “lit”! While we admired our ingenuity with pride, the rest of our friends just laughed. It was attention-grabbing for sure, but not because of its beauty or symmetry. We didn't win “best overall,” but we killed it in the “most creative” category. And that's exactly how it was with our love story. It was far from perfect, but it was inviting, creative, and on fire.

Our Black Butte getaway gave our friends the opportunities to

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affirm, or advise against, our relationship. We were adamant about integrating rather than isolating. At the end of the trip, it was clear that my friends approved of Jeremy. They found it both comical and shocking that I found someone whose mannerisms complemented my quirks and whose personality matched my intensity.

JEREMY

Audrey had some stubborn walls, so in order to get her to look my direction, I had to get to know her friends and family. I think this was Audrey's way of luring me in for approval. Both Audrey and I were intentional about introducing each other to our friends and family and then later consulting their opinions. And honestly, I think we were both excited to introduce each other. It was like we were proud of each other and wanted to show each other off rather than keeping our relationship private in the fear that people would raise red flags. With Audrey, it was green flags all around.

I understand that this will not be the case for everyone. Finding trustworthy friends can be difficult. Dan happened to be a friend I grew up with. He helped steer me away from the wrong girls—even when I wouldn't listen—and put an affirming hand on my shoulder when the right girl came along. He had become someone I trusted and could go to for counsel.

One of my favorite Scripture verses speaks directly to the importance of having other people involved in our life. “Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety” (Proverbs 11:14 NKJV). Whatever stage you are at in your relationship, take a minute and think about your community. Are you giving them an opportunity to either laugh in affirmation or

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raise a red flag of concern? Are you allowing them to put a hand on your shoulder to signal approval or caution? Are you giving your friends and your family a chance to pipe in? This doesn't happen when we treat ourselves or our relationships like an island.

You may be thinking, *Okay, Jer, I'm not in a relationship, so . . .* Regardless, we all have the opportunity to *be* wise counsel. Sometimes it means playing the role of an affirmer; sometimes it means raising red flags. Is there a couple in your life you deeply respect and look up to but you've never told them how much you admire their love? Maybe you have the opportunity to be the affirming hand on the shoulder. May I challenge you to text or call them when you finish this chapter?

On the contrary, do you have any friends who are currently in toxic or unhealthy relationships? Maybe you have a friend who suddenly became really isolating when they started dating someone new? Maybe God is pressing you to be the courageous and compassionate truth-teller. Speaking truth in love is a delicate balance. It's hard to be the one raising a red flag, but it just may be the most gracious and loving thing you can do for your friend. It's much harder to watch your friends get hurt, knowing that your warning might have helped prevent their heartbreak.

If our trusted allies had expressed serious concerns, I doubt our relationship would have endured very long. As Audrey noted in the previous chapter, emotions are beautiful, but they can also blind us. We can get lost in the fog of feeling. When that intoxicating fog rolls in, friends are our lighthouse on the shore, shining a beaming light of clarity to help us navigate safe passage.