

Letter to Readers

Dear Readers,

Writing this book has been one of the hardest things I've ever done. It was tough enough to live through it once; the last thing I wanted to do was relive it—in print, no less.

I want to thank you for taking the time to read my story and to tell you how deeply and genuinely I hope it helps you in whatever battle you're facing—whether it's one you're fighting right now or one you've already fought.

I wrote this book for two reasons.

The first reason: you. When I was speaking at a luncheon recently and mentioned I was writing a book about verbal abuse, I was astounded by how many intelligent, capable, kind young women came up to me and said, "Thank you for talking about this." One woman was in the process of attempting to leave an abusive relationship. Another was coping with the loss of a relationship she'd escaped months ago. Yet another

nearly brought me to tears when she said, "My dad did this to me. His words nearly broke me." Our backgrounds might be different, our lives might tell different stories, and our pain might come from a different source, but don't we all, in some way, know how piercing it is to feel rejected?

I sit at my news desk time and time again relating accounts of domestic murders, kidnappings, and abuse. After a particularly hideous story about Baby Grace, a little girl who was beaten to death in Texas as her mother stood by, watching her boyfriend kill her daughter, I found myself praying, "God, how do we save these children?" Then it occurred to me—we save their moms. Here's what I mean by that: we make people strong enough, confident enough, aware enough of their value to say no and walk away when they're being mistreated or threatened. We encourage, motivate, and lift up people who feel buried under the weight of loneliness.

I'll bet you know what it's like, on some level, to question your worth. I'm convinced that's why we allow people into our lives who don't belong there. I certainly did. When we feel incapable, overwhelmed, or rejected, attention from anyone can start looking good, and our discernment about who to let in and who to keep out can get muddied. But it doesn't have to be that way. If we can see our own worth, we won't have to look to someone else to give it to us.

The second reason I wrote this: my three daughters. At ages eight, six, and almost three, they light up my world. As I look at their sweet, innocent faces, I'm not foolish enough to think that something like this—being abused in some way in a relationship—will never happen to them. I certainly hope

it doesn't, but if it does, I want them to know I've been there, I understand, and they can always count on me.

I will fight with every fierce bone in my body for my girls. And I think you should fight with every fierce bone in your body too—for you. Or for your friend, your daughter, or whoever you know who's living with the pain of abuse. Fight to find healing, understanding, and peace. And, if need be, safety.

Each of us has a different story. Not everyone needs to leave her partner. We don't want to abandon people who need help. Your answer might not be to get out—only you know what's right in your situation. And my purpose isn't to demonize people who are abusive. They're wounded and hurting in their own way. But please hear this: until someone is healthy enough to treat you with civility, dignity, and respect, that person isn't healthy enough to be in your life.

Abusive people need to be willing to do what it takes to own their mistakes and break that cycle. That doesn't mean they have to be perfect. No one is. But they have to be emotionally stable enough to deal with conflict without resorting to abuse. And they have to be willing to get help if they aren't.

If the abusive person in your life can't recognize that he or she needs help or isn't willing to get it, you have every right to leave. When you're in danger, you have every right to get out. Yes, it's excruciating. No one wants to feel as though he or she has abandoned someone. But you deserve happiness and peace. No matter what you've done or where you've been.

This book isn't a fairy tale. It's about a real-life struggle to find my own sense of worth. I can't fight this battle for you. I can't make it sound like this is easy to conquer, because it isn't.

LOVE ISN'T SUPPOSED TO HURT

What I can do is commit to being in your corner—rooting for your victory over your own self-doubt. That's what this is really about: discovering your own value in this world.

We can't change what has happened. We can't ignore abuse or deny it or act like it won't happen again. What we can do is see it differently so it doesn't haunt us anymore. Only then will we be able to let go of fear and regret.

Abuse is wrong. Period. Just because you can live beyond it doesn't mean it was all right that it happened. It just means you've discovered the strength you always had but never knew existed.

No one is immune from experiencing a miracle. I'm living proof of that. I spent half of my life subconsciously thinking I wasn't worthy of real love or success. Once I finally fell to my knees in transparent prayer and handed my pain over to God, the light came back on. Finding my faith in its full strength helped me to grasp the courage I'd given up on, even though it was always present. I was the one who gave up on God—He never gave up on me.

There's a miracle just waiting for you to see it on the other side of all of this. I'm not special. It happens to anyone who can learn to live with an open heart again. That's how we're born—open and loving and strong. Even if you don't feel it right now, you are still that way.

My hope is that this journey has helped you find the beautiful person inside you again. My hope for you is big. Hang on to hope, my friends. Hang on to hope.

*With love and hugs,
Christi*

Appendix 2

Help for Those Experiencing Abuse

IF YOU ARE being abused and need guidance, here are organizations that can help.

National Domestic Violence Hotline

Advocates are available to you live, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. They can offer you a direct link to a domestic violence program in your area.

Phone: 1-800-799-SAFE

Website: www.thehotline.org

National Dating Abuse Helpline

This service aims to help youth and young adults. Advocates are available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, via phone, online chat, and text messaging.

Phone: 1-866-331-9474

Texting: Text “loveis” to 77054

Online chat: www.loveisrespect.org

Legal Guidance

WomensLaw.org is a crucial resource if you're in a dangerous relationship and know you have to leave. It lists pivotal information to help you prepare to leave in advance or in a hurry, what to take with you (such as spare car keys, driver's license, money, copies of birth certificates, Social Security cards, medication, and, if possible, evidence of physical abuse), what evidence to keep to prove you've been hurt (such as photographs of bruises or other injuries, torn or bloody clothing, or documentation from police officers or doctors), and how to leave safely with children.

Website: www.womenslaw.org

Appendix 3

Red Flags That May Indicate Abusive or Potentially Abusive Behavior

THE FOLLOWING BEHAVIORS are warning signs of abuse, according to the National Domestic Violence Hotline.

1. Jealousy
2. Controlling behavior
3. Quick involvement
4. Unrealistic expectations
5. Isolation
6. Blaming others for problems
7. Blaming others for his or her own feelings
8. Hypersensitivity
9. Cruelty to animals or children
10. "Playful" use of force in sex
11. Verbal abuse
12. Rigid sex roles
13. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde personality
14. Past battering
15. Threats of violence
16. Breaking or striking objects
17. Any use of force during an argument

Appendix 4

Help for Friends and Family of the Abused

WHAT CAN YOU DO if you suspect or know a friend or family member is in an abusive relationship? The National Domestic Violence Hotline offers these tips.

- Don't be afraid to reach out to a friend who you think needs help. Tell her you're concerned for her safety and want to help.
- Be supportive and listen patiently. Acknowledge her feelings and be respectful of her decisions.
- Help your friend recognize that the abuse is not normal and is *not* her fault. Everyone deserves a healthy, nonviolent relationship.
- Focus on your friend or family member, not the abusive partner. Even if your loved one stays with her partner, it's important she still feels comfortable talking to you about it.
- Connect your friend to resources in the community that can give her information and guidance. (See the list of resources in Appendix 2.)

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- Help your friend develop a safety plan.
- If your friend breaks up with the abusive partner, continue to be supportive after the relationship is over.
- Even when you feel like there's nothing you can do, don't forget that by being supportive and caring, you're already doing a lot.
- Don't contact the abuser or publicly post negative things about him online. It will only worsen the situation for your friend.