

PROLOGUE: PRETTY LITTLE LIARS

THE BOOK I DIDN'T SET OUT TO WRITE

Read by Kelly Cowan

We sat beside each other in the back of the church, with our knees touching and our deflated hearts mirroring the same overwhelming discouragement. Everyone else sat in front of us, their backs to us as they sang the last few worship songs, oblivious to the spiral of defeat we were swirling in a few feet behind them. My husband and I couldn't be much further from the typical pastor and pastor's wife, or so we're told. He loves to cook and is much better at laundry than I am. We argue over who is the bigger introvert. I don't play the piano or help with children's ministry, no one has ever in my whole life described me as sweet or quiet, and in the past year I've had pink hair a handful of times. Whether or not we fit the stereotypical description of a family in

* See A Note from Jess for more on this.

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church ministry, at that moment I imagine we felt what thousands of ministers of the gospel had felt before us, and I imagine we'll feel it again in the future.

It was Easter 2016, our third Easter together as a church, and we'd anticipated it. Holy anticipation, sacred expectation—we were both hoping for some revival. We'd made invitation cards for everyone in our church weeks before and asked them to pray over who they wanted to invite. We'd held prayer gatherings to ask for God's power to be displayed among our people that day. Nick, my husband, had prepped an amazing sermon and then preached his heart out.

But friends? It just didn't go down like we had pictured. Nick had seen a few people fall asleep during the sermon, and from where we sat in the back, we could see people looking bored, using their phones during worship. I am sure God moved in people's hearts and shifted things in the spiritual space, but outwardly it looked like any other Sunday, or even a little worse. It felt like the dreaded "off Sunday," which flew in the face of the Sunday we'd anticipated, planned, prayed over, and hoped for.

So we sat in the back like two young kids who'd lost their little league game. We tried to encourage each other a little bit, rallied enough to say good-bye to everyone, tore down our mobile church (we meet in an elementary school), and took our kids to lunch to celebrate Easter. We didn't talk much for the rest of the day about what had happened that morning but instead shifted gears and discussed what the upcoming spring break would look like for our family.

The tension was thick. We'd hoped God was going to show up and do something incredible. We'd hoped for life change at least and revival at best. We were doing all of this for God, so wasn't He going to show us His presence and His power?

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The next morning, in a quiet moment, I let myself pull the string a little bit. As I spent time with the Lord, I got honest and open with my Father and told Him how I felt about our Easter. I cried about my unmet expectations and what seemed like the lackluster spiritual state of our church. I told Him how hard it was to be a church planter's wife, and it was feeling particularly difficult with so little visible fruit and outward change. And then finally, when I was done telling Him how I felt about it, I decided to be quiet for a moment and let Him tell me how *He* felt. I asked if there was any correction or reproof for me, any part of this problem in which I'd been complicit without realizing it.

It's worth noting that I sure didn't anticipate a rebuke. I thought He might give me some piece of Scripture or sense that we were doing all we could do and confirm that this was simply everyone else's fault. True story.

I didn't sit long before something interesting happened in my brain. As I replayed the day, three particular conversations stood out. If my memory of the day was like a fluid stream of water before, now there were three ugly boulders disrupting the stream—three big boulders that didn't belong there. And these recollections didn't have anything to do with other people's sins or issues—they were about me. I had had three separate conversations with three separate women in our church that Easter morning, all of them eerily similar and kind of embarrassing to remember. And if they were embarrassing in my own mind, you can only imagine how humbling it is for me to share them with you now. But that's where we gotta start, sisters. Someone has to go first.

I'd gone to each of these women individually and told them about something that was on my mind, something I felt compelled to share and excited to talk about. I'd initiated these

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conversations—with my friends, these women of God, on this super-spiritual and holy day of Easter—with an agenda. I point this out in such an explicit way because you need to picture it fully: these conversations didn't happen accidentally, and no one was trying to fill the space or make light banter. I went there *with intention*.

What I had to share wasn't a new passage of Scripture that was impacting me or a truth God was revealing in my heart. It wasn't a burden I was praying through or an answer to prayer I was eager to communicate.

What did I go out of my way to talk about to those three daughters of God that fine Easter Sunday? The show *Pretty Little Liars*. (Don't shut the book. I promise this is going somewhere.)

Now let me back up, in case you're not familiar with *Pretty Little Liars*, or PLL for short. Wikipedia describes it as "an American teen drama, mystery-thriller television series based loosely on the popular book series of the same title." Wikipedia also tells us it was meant to be "*Desperate Housewives* for teens," a theory I can corroborate. One magazine called it a cross between *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and *Gossip Girl*. So, yeah—that's the gist.

I just felt this utter compulsion to talk to the women in my church about it on that fine Easter Sunday because I'd begun watching it and couldn't get enough. Did I talk about how expectant we were for worship that day? No. Did I share with them how Nick and I had been fasting and praying for our people to experience the Lord on Easter Sunday? No. Did I ask them how God was moving in their hearts and lives? Give them an opportunity to testify to His great love and mercy? No. I just told them about this semi-raunchy, teenage murder-mystery TV show I'd been watching. *And then I plopped myself down in the back of the church wondering why we weren't in the midst of revival.*

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And so I sat there the following morning, feeling all the love and grace and mercy from my Father, who knows I make mistakes over and over again. I didn't feel condemnation or shame, but a warm conviction spread through me. My heart began to beat faster, and my head throbbed with one very loud question: *Have I forgotten about holiness?*

What shift in my spirit had caused me to talk about something so profane when, in reality, I was so spiritually expectant? How often was I doing this—living on the outside like someone who isn't thinking about God all the time, when on the inside my heart is solely for Him? Was this how I was leading others? Ignoring the sacred to fit in and seem normal?

Had I grabbed grace and abandoned the call to be set apart? Had I missed the abundance available to me by walking the mysterious duality of relationship with God—grace *and* truth? I talk a lot and think a lot about freedom, about what I've been freed from. But suddenly I was wondering: Why don't I think about where I've been freed *to*? If I was taken out of darkness, condemnation, and the shackles of sin, then where does my soul currently reside?

I wondered: *Am I on holy ground? If so, how is that compelling me to live, and why, for the love, am I talking about Pretty Little Liars on Easter Sunday? Have I forgotten about holiness?*

I sat in my bed, having the most honest moment with the Lord, holding my coffee cup and looking out the window with clarity, confirming this one thing in my soul: *Yes, I think I forgot about holiness.*

Then I got out of bed and marched into my husband's home office, where I began talking and confessing and conjecturing in circles and loops. I went through the whole story and laid

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my questions bare for him, telling him I had this rooted sense in my soul that maybe I wasn't the only one, maybe a lot of us had forgotten about holiness. He nodded and affirmed my verbal ramblings with a slight smile as he continued to let me process.

Then I started asking friends in whispers at coffee shops, "Do you think we've forgotten about holiness? Do you think it's just me? Is this a thing?" Their blank stares were followed by slow nods, maybe an errant tear or two running down their cheeks. After I confessed, they confessed in return. Though none of us had talked about it, we'd all felt some version of an ache in the back of our hearts. We were all living with some awareness of the tension between what we believe about God and what our lives say we believe about God. None of us wanted to tumble into legalism or spiritual perfectionism, but we were all feeling something here, a conviction that maybe something was amiss.

I couldn't help but think back on times where a friend confessed some sin to me and I plastered "grace" all over her with my words, dismissing her conviction. Memories of times I asked for grace in the wake of hurting someone, skipping casually over the process of repentance and restoration, suddenly stood out to me vividly. There were so many times I'd invoked grace for myself and others, and in these instances it seemed we traded what could have been sharpening and growth for easy dismissal.

We give ourselves grace about nitpicking at our husbands, not spending time with the Lord, misusing our finances, telling little white lies, having bad attitudes, and losing it on those around us in the midst of stressful days. We give ourselves grace, but somewhere along the way we stopped letting that grace transform us as it is meant to. And I wondered: *Has this caused us to lose sight of our holy standing with God?*

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As I shared these ideas with my people, we realized that we talk about grace, mission, mothering, and our dreams. We talk about fashion, culture, the books we're reading, leaders we love, and things we're praying about. But we don't talk about holiness—ours or God's.

Oftentimes on Friday mornings, the women in our community meet for sunrise prayer at the beach. Sometimes there are twenty of us, sometimes there are three of us, and oftentimes it's just me. The Friday after Easter I met a few gals for our usual prayer time, and with shaky hands I told them, "I feel a tug to pull this string and linger on this question, asking it first for myself, and then for our generation: Have we forgotten about holiness, and have we traded our pursuit of the things above for a grace that is not compelling us to much at all?" They were honest and told me the question stung, but that they were glad I had asked it. Laughing, they shook their heads, gently joking with me about how I ought to write a book on the topic, about what a hard book that would be to write and maybe not an easy one to read, but I should think on it.

Here's where I should tell you that this is not the book I set out to write. But it has become the book I most need, and friend, I hope the same will be true for you.

My next step was to write a frightened email to my editor and agent, asking if I could change what was intended to be a lighthearted book into a pretty deep one. Jenni is my agent, and Stephanie is my editor, and they're busy women, and I respect them more than I could ever say. I didn't expect to hear back from them for weeks, but their emails appeared in my inbox much sooner than I anticipated, and they were saying the same thing everyone else was: *It won't be easy, but you should do it. Let's change the book: let's write about holiness.*

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Finally I made my older sister, who was in Africa at the time, drop what she was doing and read a few paragraphs I'd written. Did she think I was crazy? Did she think I was abandoning grace or falling off the liberty wagon? Did she, too, resonate with this—this righteous, rumbling fear that maybe we've forgotten about holiness? These are the kinds of things you need your big sister to sign off on, even when she's five thousand miles away. We talked on FaceTime as she walked around, pacing the dirt floor of the missions base. She blinked back some tears, blessed the idea, and sent me on my way to write.

One by one, the people I love looked at me with kind eyes and quiet affirmations. They felt it in their hearts too, and they saw it in their communities. They felt the pangs of conviction deep in their ribs during conversations with other believers, and they experienced the dull ache of confusion when a group of professed Jesus followers seem to slink away in apathy from spiritual things, moving instead toward the things of this world. My people confessed that they, too, had wondered if our doctrine of grace had somehow eclipsed our understanding of holiness, rather than the two working together to help us live in awe of the Lord. And each of them said, "Yes, if you can write this with humility and a large dose of hope, this is the book you should write."

THE WRONG GIRL

If I'm honest, friends, this is the part where I want to slam my laptop closed and pick a new book topic. Because this is perilous and dangerous ground we're about to wade through. The first few days I felt the tug to write *this* book (instead of the one I had

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planned to write), I told my Father in prayer, “*You’ve got the wrong girl!* I’m the wild and free girl. I’m the gospel girl! I love grace, and I am messy, and I have never stayed inside the lines. Ever. I cannot be the one to talk about holiness.” I told Him I’d rather be responsible for writing about things that make people feel good, excited, and ready to tackle the world.

But in His gentleness, the Lord bolstered my heart. I felt free to stand in the truth that it’s the wild and free women, the ones who love the gospel and soak up grace, who *need* to talk about holiness. I started to believe that strong words can carry the most hope, and with conviction, we can find the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

I’m not sure if you’re like me, if you’ve avoided talking about holiness because you’ve discounted yourself. Maybe there have been conversations you’ve wanted to steer toward a more righteous tone, but you’ve thought surely you’d be misunderstood or discouraged from taking it too far. I wonder if there are moments you’ve wanted to push, prod, or ask a hard question, but you’ve been certain the people you’re talking to will only see your past sin and your faults. In those moments, isn’t it easier to stick to the safe waters of grace, rather than stir things up with talk of holiness or higher callings? When our reputation is at stake, isn’t it often easier to take the more cautious path that doesn’t expose us to the accountability our own hearts are craving?

Maybe you’ve had these hunger pains for holiness but you haven’t wanted to make anyone else feel uncomfortable. You could be surrounded by believers who are seemingly older and wiser, and you’re waiting for them to start the conversation. I’m willing to bet that a large number of you have tried and have been shut down. I’ll never forget the story of my good friend, who felt a stirring in her spirit to read more of God’s Word with the women

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in her church. She shared this desire with her pastor, asking if she could start a Bible study, and was told that it might shame other women who don't like to read the Bible but instead prefer Christian books. Some of us only have to push through the perception and fear that our holy desires are too much; others of us have had those fears confirmed.

Or maybe, on the other side of the fence, you've fallen so in love with the grace message that's been leading the charge in recent church history that you've felt nothing but *relief*. It's certain that the American church is experiencing a surge of freedom, and it's a beautiful thing. I've heard it called various things: the Grace Movement, the New Grace Reformation, the Hyper-Grace Movement. Whatever it's called, the message is clear: For the past few decades, the American church has been receiving and believing the idea that we've been set free from our sin and made clean in a whole new light, with a whole new fervor.

We're listening to contemporary worship music, maybe even singing secular songs depending on where you attend church. People can now wear jeans to church in almost every city across the country, whereas that was an anomaly thirty years ago. We've got bumper stickers declaring that it's about relationship, not religion—it's grace, not rules—New Testament, not Old Testament!

I've sat with women in churches across America and heard them say things like, "It wasn't until five years ago that I started to *get grace*," or "You know, at the church I grew up in, we didn't talk much about grace. We talked a lot about what we needed to do, but a lot of what I'm hearing now is new and fresh." In some regions, they've been talking about grace longer or in different lights, but most people watching the church culture spectrum will agree—we weren't embracing grace, the way we are now, fifty or sixty years ago.

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It wasn't that I was *trying* to forget about holiness, it's just that I heard about grace so much more. And I needed it! I *needed* to hear the good news of grace. I needed the balm that settled me and spoke at-ease-ness over my soul. I needed the good news that Jesus is enough and His forgiveness is all-encompassing to assuage the intrinsic feeling that I'm not enough. So maybe you're like me, and it wasn't that you wanted to walk away from holiness, but that you let it slip past you in celebration of grace.

I also recognize there are a slew of women out there who are nothing like me, and maybe by this point in the chapter you're feeling frustrated and riled up, thinking, *I didn't forget about holiness! Don't speak for me!* Maybe you've thought a ton about righteousness, about being set apart, God's holiness, our standing with Him, and the truth that how we live and act and move is a reflection of what we believe about who He is. But I wonder if you're like those of my friends on the end of the spectrum who've said they remembered holiness all along but have felt the ache in their bones from a lack of ability to trust in true, abundant grace.

There are telltale signs and symptoms when we swing too far one way or the other. I find that when we swing toward holiness and away from grace, we spend much of our days measuring—measuring how far and how good we are against the world around us, measuring the sin and fallen-ness of everyone else and fearing it might seep into our tidy, protected worlds. In the seasons where I've chosen holiness over grace, I've found that choosing to pursue holiness alone is never enough. When I start to think about living upright and pleasing the Lord, and I forget about grace, I am never enough. I am never up to par. I can never quite live up to the picture of holiness in my head.

And when we swing toward grace and away from holiness,

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things get murky and dangerous in a whole new way. When we talk about grace without holiness, grace begins to lose its weight. If God isn't holy and hasn't made us holy, then sin isn't such a big deal, grace isn't so necessary, and it's a lot easier to dole out grace to one another. The only problem is, this easy come and easy go grace is empty—we can never seem to get enough of it, because it doesn't change us or spur us on to a better way. And when we've forgotten God's holiness and our own holy standing, which He so freely gives, we don't remember how much we need grace, so we certainly don't remember to give it to others. Grace without holiness fails us, leaves us wanting more, leaves us asking, *Is this all there is?*

The symptoms of forsaking holiness in my own life look like rhythms of constantly treating myself, excusing myself, and becoming desensitized to the things of this world that break God's heart. I forget that I was sent here to be here the light in the dark, not to learn to love the dark myself. When I swing too far into grace without embracing holiness, I give up easily and early, without pressing in and pushing forward into the abundant fruit God has for me. I find myself defending my own sin and judging everyone else's, and screaming at the world, "I need a break! Give me some grace! Don't you see I'm trying over here!?" Grace without holiness doesn't satiate. It doesn't solve my problems.

Here's the thing. As I began to wrestle with God in this tension, He brought a wild possibility to mind: What if grace and holiness were never meant to work at odds with each other? What if God has always intended for grace and holiness to work *together* in gorgeous harmony?

What if God has always intended for you to dance in grace, stand on holy ground, and run on mission?

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Can you imagine? If we put aside our struggles and stepped into a new way as a woman called to dance, stand, and run? Sure, it's messier and far more mysterious than an either/or, grace-or-holiness lifestyle. But I think that's what the abundant life looks like.

The absolute truth is that I'm not the wrong girl to write this book, and you're not the wrong girl to read it. No matter where your heart is in regard to grace and holiness, this book is for you. We *are* recipients of God's great grace, *and* we are set apart as holy daughters of God. I believe God has invited all of us to *move* in worshipful response to His glory.

It's time for the daughters of God to dance in celebration of grace, to truly grasp the freedom we have and the darkness we've been brought out of. For the sake of our own spiritual abundance and the glory of God, we get to stand firm on the holy ground that's been purchased for us by the blood of Jesus. We get to accept that when God calls us holy, that's exactly what we are, that our holiness was imparted to us through the righteousness of Christ. We get to live in a way that agrees with and affirms who He says we are. And in the name of Jesus and for the advancement of His kingdom, once we've gripped the grace He's given us by faith and planted our feet on His holy ground, we get to run on mission as ambassadors of life, hope, truth, and love.

We are the daughters of God. We get to dance in grace, stand in holiness, and run on mission. And we're ready to get started. Amen?