

# BLENDDED WITH GRIT

## AND *Grace*

Just Keep Livin'  
When Life Is Unexpected



JESSICA RONNE

“Jess’s authentic yet stark honesty is encouraging for not only blended families but for all families who need a compass for walking out of hardship and into a life of imperfect beauty. This is a book you’ll pass on to others who need a lifeline in family life.”

—**Brenda L. Yoder**, LMHC, counselor, author of *Fledge*

“An inspirational story infused with faith, family values, and true appreciation for the simple things in life—like quality time. This is a beautiful testament to how powerful the right perspective can be in the midst of devastation, loss, and the daily challenges of being a parent and devoted spouse.”

—**Laurie Hellmann**, author of *Welcome to My Life*, host of *Living the Sky Life* podcast

“From the trials of stepparenting to the challenges of raising a teenager with special needs to figuring out what foods everyone will eat, Jess and her husband, Ryan, don’t mince words, but they do give one another and God credit for making it all work. The Ronnes’ story will leave you with hope that you, too, can find reasons to celebrate the extraordinary in your own ordinary life.”

—**Ingrid Lochamire**, blogger, speaker, author of *One Man’s Work*

“If you’re walking through a dark time or are just afraid of what’s next, this is the book for you. It will resonate with your own experiences and needs, and you will feel like Jess is a friend walking beside you.”

—**Jessie Clemence**, author

“Reading this memoir is like being hugged by a warm blanket. A tattered and torn blanket, for sure—it has been through a lot—but that’s what gives it the kind of life wisdom and comfort you’re looking for. Sit down by the fire with your friend Jessica and wrap yourself in this book.”

—**Ron Deal**, blended-family speaker, therapist, best-selling author of *Building Love Together in Blended Families* (with Gary Chapman) and *The Smart Stepfamily*

“Jessica Ronne shares her story of real grief blended with real grace, hardship, and hope. The words she writes of overcoming trauma and tension are an invitation to every family—blended or not—to just keep living for and through love, even in the midst of loss.”

—**Rachel Kang**, author, Founder of Indelible Ink Writers

“Jess shares so generously the three things that have restored and nourished her soul in hopes they will restore others’: faith, family, and food. With a deep and honest look into a real-life blended family, this ultimately is a beautiful story of surrender—surrender to God’s will, God’s plan, and God’s timing, especially in the midst of incredible pain.”

—**Dr. Lisa Peña**, cofounder of Labeled & Loved, author of *Waiting for the Light Bulb* and *The M.o.C.h.A. Diaries*

“Filled with honesty and heart, Jessica invites us into the deep joys and sorrows of being a parent. Sometimes heart-wrenching and other times hilarious, her accessible storytelling about finding healing in unexpected places is all at once fierce and tender—just like the mother she clearly is.”

—**Kayla Craig**, author of *To Light Their Way*, cofounder and host of *Upside Down* podcast

“Jess and Ryan share their heartbreaking stories and how God allowed them to find joy again amid the struggle. Jess pulls out true nuggets of gold at the end of every chapter that you can immediately apply to your life and/or marriage.”

—**Stephen “Doc” Hunsley**, MD, Executive Director and Founder of SOAR Special Needs

“Every chapter is more than the telling of a story; we’re invited to step into the days and make ourselves at home, to not simply observe but to be present in the midst of the push–pull of simplicity and complexity of faith, love, and family. Jessica weaves memoir, caregiving wisdom, and a little kitchen therapy into a book that is not simply read—it is experienced.”

—**Ronne Rock**, mentor, speaker, author of *One Woman Can Change the World*

“Even if you have differing experiences, the feelings discussed within this book are universal. Jessica details her experiences so vividly and honestly—making for a read anyone who has dealt with loss or new life can relate to.”

—**Stephanie Hanrahan**, Founder of Tinkles Her Pants

“What a breath of inspiration! Blended families will learn so many tips and tricks, from meal negotiations to holiday traditions and the emotions involved.”

—**Brenda Stuart**, coauthor of *Restored and Remarried*, counselor/coach, Marriage Illustrators, [GilandBrenda.com](http://GilandBrenda.com)

“This book resonated in deep places and pulled me through with threads of faith, hope, and love.”

—**Gina Kell Spehn**, cofounder and President of New Day Foundation for Families, author of *The Color of Rain*

“An honest, vulnerable reflection about the realities of family life, this book is filled with practical tips for finding joy and balance amid the complexities of marriage and parenting.”

—**Kate Motaung**, author of *A Place to Land*

“There aren’t enough people being honest about the difficulties of blending, and there don’t seem to be enough resources to help those of us who are in the thick of it. Jessica Ronne has emerged in this space with a refreshingly honest and real look at the challenges of blending families, all the while giving us a peek into the beautiful, redemptive stories God writes when he grafts broken lives together.”

—**Davey Blackburn**, Founder of Nothing Is Wasted Ministries, host of *Nothing Is Wasted* podcast

“Jess and Ryan Ronne have passed through great adversity without having been defeated or defined by it and continue to grow together in love. Readers of this book who share in their sufferings will also share in the hope and comfort that God has given them.”

—**Stephen Grcevich**, MD, President and Founder of Key Ministry, author of *Mental Health and the Church*

“*Blended with Grit and Grace* invites you into a beautiful story of mingling grief and giggles in the hard and unexpected places of blended families. With the heartfelt compassion of someone who’s been there, Jess offers a place to know and be known, as well as a friend to walk with on the road before you.”

—**Amy Elaine Martinez**, *Past to Power* radio/podcast host, author of *Becoming a Victory Girl*

“I found this book encouraging, authentic, hope filled, and easy to read. Get this book and be ready to learn how to make your family work.”

—**Connie Albers**, podcaster, speaker, author of *Parenting beyond the Rules*

“I loved reading the raw honesty of Jess’s story and watching how God continues to move through it to bring resolution, hope, and purpose.”

—**Shannon Guerra**, author of *Upside Down*



“Jessica feels like a trusted friend who wants to share her story through the hard-fought wisdom she has learned along the way. My heart was warmed and stirred to think about how I intentionally want to love my family—as well as the blended spiritual family God created and has asked us to love—with grit and grace.”

—**Rachael Adams**, host of *The Love Offering* podcast

“Whether your family is blended or not, you will find that Jess’s insight and counsel will minister deeply to your body, belly, and, most importantly, soul.”

—**Callie Daruk**, author of *What Does God Want You to Do before You Die?*

“Jessica Ronne shares her strenuous and harrowing story of finding love after loss by blending personal examples, intimate details, inspirational anecdotes, practical marriage and parenting tips, and mouth-watering recipes. This hope-filled gem delivers a heaping of grit and grace that will leave you echoing Jess’s signature mantra: *just keep livin’!*”

—**Chuck E. Tate**, author of *41 Will Come*

“You will sink into Jess’s engrossing stories as you learn about the messy yet redeemable reality of blended families. Jess and Ryan figured out through grit and grace how to navigate a large crew of grieving children, their own grief at losing their spouses, and how to move forward in strength and love and boundaries.”

—**Lorilee Craker**, *New York Times* best-selling author of 15 books, including *Anne of Green Gables*, *My Daughter and Me*

“Jessica shares with wit and joy what our aching souls want to discover: the grit of life does not have to wear us down; it can make us into a beautiful pearl instead. Failed expectations are not the end of our story. There is a joy-filled life after death, pain, and hardship after all.”

—**Denise Pass**, speaker, worship leader, podcaster, author of *Shame Off You*

“*Blended with Grit and Grace* is a recipe book for blending two families after the trauma of suffering the loss of one or both parents. The curtain is drawn back, allowing us to see what’s real and true in addition to the incredible challenges and struggles they experienced, and continue to face, together.”

—**Anna LeBaron**, author of *The Polygamist’s Daughter: A Memoir*

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When Life Is Unexpected

JESSICA RONNE



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## BLENDING WITH GRIT AND GRACE

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LEAFWOOD

P U B L I S H E R S

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## FOREWORD

by Kate Battistelli,

author of *The God Dare: Will You Choose to Believe the Impossible?*

Years ago, I read something Edward Albee wrote in his play *The Zoo Story*. He said, “Sometimes it’s necessary to go a long distance out of the way in order to come back a short distance correctly.”

I could never fully understand it because I heard it before I’d lived it. Now? I understand *perfectly*. I learned the hard way that God’s not a genie in a bottle; and he’s not a Magic 8-Ball. He is not required to give me everything I want like some kind of cosmic vending machine; and sometimes, he’ll take us a long distance out of the way in order to bring us back a short distance correctly. In fact . . . he will dare us to trust just as he did with Jess and Ryan when they acted in faithful obedience through the blending of their families in 2011.

I don’t come from a blended family and don’t have one now, so I’m not familiar with all the ups and downs that Jessica Ronne has dealt with in her lovingly crafted book, *Blended with Grit*

*and Grace*; but one thing I *do* understand is the pain of loss. For me, it happened through miscarriage and numerous failed adoption attempts.

I'm the crazy woman who longed for five children—with all the crayons, crumbs, and craziness—but God's plan for me was *one child*. It took me *years* to get it through my thick head, and during those years, I found myself consumed by bitterness, depression, and anger toward God.

I'd been taught God was a good Father who gave you the desires of your heart, and my desires were good, for Pete's sake. I wanted a big family, so I relentlessly reminded him that I'd raise my children to know and love him, to follow him all the days of their lives, to honor and serve him. What on earth was I doing wrong? Why wouldn't he give me what I wanted?

Eventually, I figured out he had a different dream for me and my husband—not one we would have chosen. Just like he had a different dream for Ryan and Jess—a dream that would fulfill his perfect plan in their lives like he fulfilled his perfect plan in mine.

Our daughter began revealing gifts and talents that astounded us, and God began to show us how to dig deep and bring out those gifts, polish them up, and offer them to the world.

We were always eager to hear Francesca's newest songs; and as she grew, her songwriting and performing ability grew too, and God began to show this mama's heart he had big plans for our little girl—big plans that would include a future Grammy Award! We didn't know at the time how deeply her songs would affect so many people, one of whom being Jess as she went through intense trials with her son's special needs and her late husband's cancer battle.

As parents, we hope and pray our children's lives will have an impact on other lives; we hope they'll make a difference in the world, but what an incredible blessing it's been to see our child's life and music, her love of Jesus Christ and public worship make

such an indelible impact on others' lives! It truly is like "sunlight burning at midnight!" as Jess describes in her memoir.

In my pain, I forgot one little detail in my walk with the One who counts the hairs on my head, the fearful and wonderful maker of the stars above. I forgot this inescapable truth: *It's not about me.*

In my time of deep trial, he taught me three main truths I've treasured and tried to remember as other trials have come:

- He has a bigger plan than my happiness.
- He is thinking about the next generation.
- He wants me to want him for who he is, not what he gives.

God's ways of maturing us into his sons and daughters will always come as a surprise. He chastens to bring change. He will make me face *myself* in the midst of my greatest challenge and see who I really am and how desperately I need him! Isn't that how it always goes when we walk by faith and not by sight?

Be reassured as you read these inspiring words about love, family, marriage, children, and yes, grief and loss: you are on the right path. Life is filled with twists and turns, and we don't know where it's going to take us, but let me encourage you with this, especially if you're young: the years give perspective you may not have now.

You will find lots of wisdom in these pages. Jessica and Ryan have walked the walk—they've faced discouragement and hardships, devastating difficulties with a special-needs son, blending two families with love and laughter—and they've made it work beautifully. They reveal a deep love and respect for one another that's refreshing to discover, and you can almost smell the wonderful dishes Jess is cooking up in her kitchen! Like Jess, I too find solace in the chopping and sautéing and stirring. So, give yourself some grace. Hang in there. Hold tight to the One who's holding you.

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By the way, I never had five children, but God did give me five grandchildren, and I couldn't be more thrilled! I get to enjoy plenty of crayons, crumbs, and chaos. My five little peppers who have a Mimi and Poppy devoted to them to the moon and back.

And today I'm grateful, so very grateful, that he *took me a long distance out of the way in order to bring me back a short distance correctly.*

—Kate Battistelli

## INTRODUCTION

Growing up I never thought, *When I get older, it would be great to be part of a blended family.* No, this thought never crossed my mind, and why isn't this an aspiring dream for most? Because, first, a blended family is created from a broken family, and this isn't a life goal many pursue; second, most people don't wish difficulties upon themselves! No one anticipates the implosion of the traditional family unit by death or divorce, and when this traumatic occurrence erupts, a plethora of emotions are experienced, including anger, sadness, relief, and depression. However—hallelujah, there is a *however!*—as the dust settles on these experiences of pain, suffering, and misery, something interesting often occurs. We find a new normal. A new dream that seems to work. Perhaps we meet a special someone, which may eventually lead us to the altar, where we will vow to love, honor, and cherish this perfect individual forever and ever.

Suddenly the shattered road doesn't feel so overwhelming, and we turn a sharp, unexpected corner where we discover a

freshly paved road. The sun is shining, and the birds are chirping. This new, redemptive existence is joy filled, but it is also a road marked with a unique set of difficulties and challenges—for this is a journey not for the faint of heart.

Hi! I'm Jess. I grew up in a large family in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I attended college, married my husband Jason at twenty-two, had a child in 2002, and began building a grown-up life. We invested in a fitness center, built a house, raised our son, and I discovered I was pregnant again in 2004. Our baby was given a terminal prognosis during a routine ultrasound appointment, but God had a different plan for his fragile life—a story I tell in my memoir *Sunlight Burning at Midnight*.

My plan—oh, don't you love the plans we make—included working part-time, having two more children (a boy and a girl), and being a supportive wife as Jason built his career. What a great idea, right? But . . . there's always a but . . . God had a different plan. Three years later, Jason was diagnosed with a brain tumor. That tumor was not malignant, but the next one, a year and a half later, would be. He lost his battle to cancer on August 24, 2010, and I became a thirty-three-year-old widow with four young children (yes, another boy and one girl). My plan was totally blown to smithereens.

A few months later, on a lonely Halloween night, a blog follower unexpectedly left a comment suggesting I check out a young widower's website. Ryan Ronne lived in Oklahoma with three young children and had recently lost his wife to brain cancer four days after Jason had passed away. I left him a short message, and the rest is history.

We were married in April 2011, adopted each other's children, and went on to have a final child together in 2015—to make it eight—Caleb, Tate, Lucas, Mya, Mabel, Joshua, Jada, and Annabelle. And just like that, I was part of a blended family.



I've now been a mom and wife in this family for ten years, and as with any family, there are joys and trials. Ryan and I didn't initially realize how many complexities there were to consider when blending our family: adoption, special needs, faith, food, traditions, cultures, in-laws, extra-laws, and bylaws, to name a few! The list was exhaustive, and only compounding the difficulties was our daily reality of nine grieving people. To say we were floundering in those first few years is an understatement.

I often sought counsel from women who were many years ahead of me in a successful blended family, and they would suggest making self-care a top priority. Self-care is different for each individual but should be a priority nonetheless. Some might enjoy reading, others working out, shopping, or starting a Bible study, but for me, the concept usually involves food.

One way I unwind after a long stressful day is in the kitchen—cooking, sipping a glass of chardonnay, and listening to soothing music as I chop and dice and sizzle my way through making a meal. Not only is the art of cooking comforting, but it also provides me with tangible activities (slicing, dicing, and sipping) as I mentally wrestle with feelings of insecurity, jealousy, anger, or sadness. Cooking is a healing balm, a therapy for my heart and mind, and has brought me to a place of peace numerous times. Cooking is also a way I can serve and love my family well—by providing nutritious meals that are enjoyed around the table.

My love of cooking has arisen out of a love for food—appreciating new tastes, textures, and cultures—but I wasn't a passionate cook, or honestly a very good one, until we moved to rural Tennessee. I love pizza, pasta, sushi, turkey burgers overflowing with pickled ginger, brisket sandwiches, chicken salad on homemade bread, and warm apple pie straight from the oven, topped with freshly churned vanilla bean ice cream. I love it all, and unfortunately, where we lived, most of my favorites were not readily

available. If I was going to enjoy the foods I loved so dearly, I had to learn to make them, one way or another.

As I navigated the art of cooking, I taught myself through trial and error. I added or subtracted certain ingredients, often opting for healthier alternatives such as honey for sugar or applesauce in place of oil—tweaking and adjusting until the finished product was delicious and offered nutritional value to my family.

Ryan and I approach life in a similar way—tweaking and adjusting to accommodate different needs, cultures, traditions, and personalities in an effort to create a cohesive, well-oiled machine—a family thriving in a healthy environment. We’ve had difficult conversations and celebrated the differences we each bring through our varied backgrounds and experiences.

Cooking through the stressful phases of life provides me with an escape from the daily grind of motherhood, which came in especially handy when I instantaneously added three children to my brood. Raising seven—and later eight—little people is not easy. Admittedly, I entered our blended family with ignorance. I naïvely reasoned that as the eldest of twelve kids, how difficult could it really be? I’m here to tell you, it is hard. I blundered and triumphed and lost my cool time and time again through those first years, but the kitchen remained steady. It beckoned me. It promised a safe, soothing haven—a refuge, as I shooed the kids out (yes, I’m that mom), turned on the music, and poured myself a glass of wine. Cooking brings me peace, which leads to joy, as I slowly stir a big pot of beef stew or add more stock to the chicken curry simmering away on the back burner. The repetitive motions remind me that life takes time, as does anything worth having.

As long as we continuously stir the pot, have the conversations, check in with one another (and ourselves) about how pressure is affecting our emotional well-being, say I’m sorry and I love you, and of course, forgive often, it will come together—with

time—forming something deeply redeeming and beautiful. Many of my favorite slow-cooking dishes represent my family and the stories of our life together. Each ingredient, raw in its original form—chicken, veggies, broth, spices, herbs, maybe a little fruit—may be unique, yet each lends to the flavor of the dish, to the art of the finished product. However, the delicious result is only obtained through the steady, low flickering flame of the burner or the warm oven, as the individual ingredients meld together into a meal.

Within each chapter, there's a theme related to our blended life, with stories detailing how we've dealt with obstacles, issues, and the triumphs we've encountered thus far in our ten years of marriage. Although this book is primarily written from my perspective, Ryan—the father and husband of this whole kit and kaboodle—also chimes in throughout as he offers a uniquely male take on our unexpected life experience (see the sections titled “Ryan’s Take” for his insights). This book also includes a series of key takeaways in the form of quick, easy-to-read, bulleted lists to summarize the discussion and provide you with some helpful tips. Finally, there is a handful of our family’s favorite recipes, most of which take time for the true blending of the flavors to develop—just as our family has taken time to blend and mature. What you won’t find within these pages are all the answers, and we don’t claim to have it figured out. These are our stories, solutions that worked for us, and they may or may not work for others. Let this book serve as a good friend who listens during a difficult time. It won’t offer an onslaught of advice but instead seeks to be supportive—nodding in agreement—*Yes, it’s a difficult road, but you will get through it and there is abundant joy if you stay the course.*

My hope is that you, dear reader, feel less alone on your unexpected journey, that you can laugh and learn from many of our mistakes (and triumphs!), and perhaps bring your family closer

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together as you attempt to create one or two of the dishes presented throughout.

I pray you open your heart, mind, and of course, your mouth not only to engage in healthy honest communication with the people you love but also to take a few minutes to slow down, share a meal, and enjoy some good ole cooking simmering away on the back burner of your stove. Just keep livin'!

# OUR NEW, BLENDED FAMILY

Releasing *Expectations* and Embracing *Reality*

Savannah, Georgia, is where it all began. Ryan and I met in this beautiful historic city in December 2010—four months after the deaths of our spouses. After weeks of emails, texts, and calls, we decided that the time had come to meet face to face. Neither of us wanted the initial meeting to occur in our home states, and we excluded the children until we knew that the relationship was moving forward. We settled on Georgia, a state on our bucket lists—a slow, southern land of warmth and sweet tea.

I booked various trusted friends, sitters, and family members to care for my kids as I prepared to meet Ryan, a man I had admittedly fallen in love with over the course of a few weeks—a man I had only talked to via emails, texts, and phone calls. Sounds like a creepy episode of *Dr. Phil*, huh? The night before I was scheduled to leave, I couldn't sleep. I tossed and turned as constant doubts bombarded my thoughts: *Will he be handsome? Will he be*

*attracted to me? Will we connect? Will my kids be okay while I'm gone? Will I be taller than him?*

That last question worried me.

Ryan had assured me that he was 5'11" to my 5'10", but I had some concerns. I did not want to tower over a potential future husband.

The morning finally arrived, bright and early. I greeted my mom—the first of the caregivers—and she gave me a tight squeeze and told me to have fun.

At the airport, I settled in with a magazine and my phone vibrated. I glanced down: *I can't wait to meet you in a few hours.*

My heart leapt—a message from Ryan.

I responded: *I can't wait to meet you too.* And then I smiled at the thought of how close I was to meeting a man I was quite certain I was already in love with.

When boarding began, I joined the line, eager yet with nerves getting the best of me as I struggled to calm my beating heart. In less than two hours I would meet who I hoped would be the man of my dreams, and before I knew it, the plane was descending into Savannah. I stood up, had a good stretch, collected my belongings, said a little prayer, and headed in the direction of the baggage claim where he and I had agreed to meet.

Ryan's plane landed twenty minutes after mine, so I quickly called my girlfriend Tara, who was rooting for me from Michigan: "Tara! I'm freaking out!" I whispered. "I can't stop shaking—I'm so nervous!"

"Jess, calm down. Take it one step at a time. First things first. Meet him and then call me!"

As I hung up the phone, I turned, and there he was. My dream guy, Ryan, walking toward me with a huge smile. He looked incredibly handsome in jeans and a rustic baseball cap, and he immediately engulfed me in a huge embrace. I held on for dear life



to this stranger I had adored from the first words in our emails and now face to face—his face slightly (by an inch) taller than mine. Praise Jesus for small victories and expectations fulfilled.

Our weekend was romantic as we talked and kissed and wine-d and dined to our heart's content. We pored over memories—discussing “them,” our late spouses, Jason and Kaci—as we shared pictures and histories and lives spent with other people. These individuals we had loved and had created families with. People who were now in heaven. We were completely engrossed with one another—so much so that the whole world could have blown away and I’m not sure we would have noticed, at least until our last night together.

We dined somewhere that final evening. I’m sure it was beautiful, and I’m also sure we hardly ate because the endorphins of new love sustained us in those early days. We roamed the cobblestone streets and then returned to the hotel, where we cozied up in Ryan’s room to watch a movie on his laptop. As we cuddled together, all snuggled up nice and close, *she* appeared on the screen. A video of Kaci, Ryan’s late wife, flashed before our eyes in the middle of the movie. Not as a ghost but instead as an old recording that for some unexplainable reason started playing during our romantic time together. Talk about killing the mood. I immediately backed away from my new boyfriend—hurt and confused and now very aware of this other woman who had been a part of his life. She was no longer a vague idea, a stranger in a photo, but was now a reality with mannerisms and a personality and a southern drawl. A reality who Ryan had been married to. Had he planned this? Were we not supposed to be together? Was God sending us a message?

Ryan repeatedly apologized, and I assured him that it wasn’t a big deal, but it did feel like a big deal. We had entered Savannah with a fantasy idea that we would be enough for each other and

that somehow our love would erase the grief we had, but when I saw her, I realized that I couldn't be enough and that Ryan couldn't erase my pain either. There was grief we had to face in order to move to the other side of our respective losses. In time. It was a strange and confusing place to be—falling in love with one person while simultaneously grieving another—but it was where we were, and we had to own our unique paths.

We were heartbroken saying our goodbyes the next morning. Our love was real but so was our grief, and in saying goodbye, it felt like another loss. We knew that God had placed our families on a path of redemption, and on that path, there would be numerous opportunities to release our preconceived expectations and embrace our blended reality, which would have a few hiccups—one that involved the bright red pots that adorned my kitchen shelves when we were married that following spring.

### Red Pots: Embracing Our New Life through Difficult Conversations

In the beginning, there was a couple. This pair of lovebirds named Jessica and Ryan flitted about in bliss and romance, and then something hit them one day—like a nosedive straight into a freshly Windexed window. *Bam!* The couple was stunned silly as they shook off rose-colored blinders, unruffled their feathers, and saw what everyone else had been seeing all along—reality. Reality came close to shattering our romantic naïveté in little ways those first few months of marriage; minor missteps we quickly forgave because our love was blissful and new. However, approximately five months postwedding, I ventured into the kitchen and opened a cupboard to retrieve a cooking pot. I reached for one of my new pots, which I inherited from Ryan's former household—a bright-red Teflon pot. Now, personally, I don't believe Teflon is a safe product. But here was this Teflon pot in my cupboard, at my

husband's insistence. Next to other colorful Teflon pots, which he had packed into our cupboards. I cringed as I always had since those pots had been placed there months earlier. Then it happened. I decided: *No more red pots!*

Before our wedding, I flew to Oklahoma to help Ryan pack for his move to Michigan. I honestly had no idea what a disaster I was about to behold. I occasionally joke about how my husband has a tiny bit of a pack-rat mentality, and this is what I faced upon arrival. We began in the basement, where we rummaged through hundreds of boxes. I finally threw my hands up and suggested we pack it all and organize the contents later. This was not the best idea, because once in Michigan, our home would be large enough to accommodate his numerous belongings. And when I say *his* belongings, I am referring to *their* belongings—his late wife and himself. Pictures, knickknacks, casserole dishes, silverware, pots and pans, and anything else you can possibly imagine. Fortunately, they were well cared for. Most were fairly new and in great condition; however, I didn't like many of them. This can be a touchy subject. Typically, a woman who remarries doesn't want belongings from her husband's previous marriage to have a prominent place throughout her new home. There is something about making a home personal, and incorporating another woman's possessions isn't at the top of that agenda. This tendency, I'm certain, is in part tied to insecurity—especially in a new marriage, as the years and shared experiences haven't had the opportunity to solidify trust in the relationship.

Back to the red pots—I also don't like bright colors. My decorating style veers toward neutrals, and I was resentful that *my* house was full of décor that made me cringe. In my previous marriage, I decorated according to what I liked. My late husband Jason didn't have an opinion about how I accomplished this, what I purchased (as long as it was within the budget), or what

color dishes we had. But Ryan seemed to have an opinion about everything, and this irritated me. I began thinking and praying about it—but mostly thinking about it—and decided my mental well-being was more important than holding on to anything that brought me angst. I packed a big cardboard box with belongings I no longer wanted—yes, including the Teflon pots—and marked it for Goodwill. When Ryan saw the box, he began to ask questions, and soon the conversation spiraled into a full-blown argument.

“Why would you give these pots away?” he asked.

I had been stewing for months and convincing myself that my husband was attached to these dumb red pots. My head was filled with lies: *He just wants his old life back. He isn't ready to marry me. He doesn't even love me!* Needless to say, my husband was in for a treat. I explained, not so calmly: “These pots make me feel like you regret marrying me and want your old life back. I have these belongings all over *my* house that I don't want! I don't like bright colors or Teflon, yet I have colorful Teflon pots in my cupboards! And all of it belonged to another woman whom you were in a relationship with. Your wife! Which is unsettling because I'm your wife. It isn't right.”

I continued to explain how I was slightly territorial and wanted to be the only woman in his present life, and as long as I had a household full of another woman's belongings—belongings that I didn't care for—I was going to struggle emotionally, especially in a new relationship where I was dealing with feelings of insecurity. I explained how I needed the red pots to be gone for my peace of mind. Home is my refuge, but with someone else's décor splattered throughout, it didn't feel homey or safe. It felt like I was living in another woman's reality.

Ryan was genuinely surprised as my true feelings emerged and couldn't fully understand my reasons for attempting to dispose of his belongings simply because I didn't like them. In his defense,

this is completely out of character for me, as I am generally grossly opposed to wastefulness. As we communicated, it became clear the red-pot issue had to do with his upbringing more than anything else.

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### **Ryan's Take**

Jess is correct. I grew up with limited possessions, so anything I purchased was earned and was therefore valuable. To earn extra money, I even started dumpster diving around five years old! I quickly became a pro and was diving solo by eight years old. The neighborhood kids and I would walk miles of alleys as I learned which trash bins to hit and when. We collected aluminum cans, and when I heard loud music a couple of houses down from ours late into the night, I wasn't concerned by the lack of sleep. I was estimating how much money I would have the next day.

I did have a slight emotional attachment to the red pots that I wasn't willing to admit because I generally try to avoid conflict. They were one of the few thoughtful, expensive gifts I had purchased my late wife. That was one of the reasons for my disdain when I saw them packed, not so neatly by the way, in a random Goodwill box. I saw the red pots as a huge upgrade for Jess, since most of her cookware had been purchased at secondhand stores and garage sales. I love a good bargain, but I truly thought she would eventually grow to like them if she used them long enough. As a man, I couldn't understand why it mattered where they came from, and at that point in our marriage, I still considered them mine. I had no idea the inner turmoil she was going through over what I considered a minor irritant; however, I learned to understand it wasn't really about the red pots and more about her feeling like I was bringing pieces of my previous marriage into our marriage.

When it comes down to it, time really does heal—even when it came to the red pots and many other misunderstandings in those first years.

It's important to have the difficult conversations. It can be incredibly awkward to be the person who brings an issue to the surface, but these feelings must be aired out before bitterness begins to fester. We make these conversations less painful by choosing a time when neither of us is distracted or enjoying a rare moment of peace. If Ryan brings up an issue while I'm making dinner, I'm going to be frustrated. If I bring up an issue as he's packing for a relaxing day of fishing, that's going to defeat the purpose of his relaxing day because all he'll be thinking about is the issue. We've also learned to tackle one problem at a time. I have more difficulty in this area. That time he tracked mud into the house leads to the time he didn't help with dishes, which leads to that one time, five years ago, when he didn't want to get rid of the red pots. I'm learning to train my thoughts and stay on point for the sake of harmony and respect within our marriage.

These conversations have helped our family, as we bridge the transition between expectations and the reality that calls for grace in certain circumstances—even in the face of colorful Teflon pots.

### Mom and Momma: Releasing Expectations

"It makes me so angry that I call your dad 'Dad' and you won't call my mom 'Mom!'" screamed seven-year-old Caleb to his brother Tate a few weeks into our new life together.

Although Caleb and Tate were only six months apart and shared the experience of losing a parent at a young age, their lives had been vastly different up until that point. Caleb had been my right-hand man for three years as his father fought cancer. He



cared for his younger siblings, brought his dad meals in bed, and processed the hair loss, nausea, and goofy words that escaped Jason's lips while brain cancer ravaged away his sensibilities. He witnessed and ultimately came to an acceptance of his father's death before Jason officially gained his citizenship in heaven, and he was the one who found his father lifeless only minutes after he had breathed his last. He worked through the stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance simply by being in the turmoil. He often voiced what Jason and I had feared—"Is Dad going to die?"—and, in turn, he forced us to look at the truth, stripping away the pretenses or fallacies we were clinging to. He drew pictures of himself and Jason in heaven and placed them beside his pale, motionless father while he slept. Caleb was given the gift of time—time to face the possibility that his father would not always be with him—and he used that time to grieve. Now he was eager to welcome a new father figure into his life. The first time he met Ryan, he asked if he could call him Dad because he desperately yearned for a father again.

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### **Ryan's Take**

Kaci was unexpectedly diagnosed with a brain tumor in March 2010. The family knew she would be doing radiation treatments for the next six weeks, so we each took a turn staying with her since the treatments were hours from home. I went first and then returned home to be with the kids.

However, only days into her treatments, the tumor hemorrhaged and everything changed. I spent the next six weeks in and out of the hospital, and the rest of the time, we stayed in a long-term hotel so she could be close to the neurologist. Tate, Mya, and baby Jada were primarily cared for by Kaci's mom and didn't witness their mother's quick decline. They

occasionally visited but didn't realize she had the dreaded C-word—cancer—until a few weeks before she died. They enjoyed grandma's house, as grandmas typically offer a looser set of rules, and they basked in their newfound freedom. They viewed the experience as a prolonged, fun vacation, and when Mom regained her health, they would return to their life with rules, chores, and responsibilities. They weren't processing their feelings or working through any stages of grief.

Kaci and I ended up in Houston's Johns Hopkins Cancer Treatment Center in July 2010, where they did an MRI and discovered that the tumor had grown roots, encapsulating her entire spinal cord. As the doctors shared this news with me, I finally accepted that her time was up. I made a few phone calls, and she and I went home.

I sat down with my kids during the last week of Kaci's life and prepared them for the reality of her death. I'm sure they were confused and knew something was wrong as they sat nervously on the floor beside me. I told them that their mom was declining and that the cancer had gotten worse. As the C-word escaped my lips, Tate immediately went rigid and proclaimed, "Dad, Momma doesn't have cancer. She only has a tumor." I explained that her tumor was cancer. I realized then that Tate knew people recovered from tumors but they died from cancer, and he cried for the first time since her diagnosis. We all cried as I informed them that mom didn't have much time left, but she wanted to spend what time she had at home. She died less than a week later—only four months after she had been a healthy, normal momma to her three children.

While Caleb had reached acceptance after three years, Tate had just begun his journey with grief. I was also in denial, which delayed the grieving process, so I was shocked when

a few weeks after Kaci's death, Tate asked, "Dad, will we get another mom soon?"

That question made me face reality. I was a thirty-three-year-old widower with a seven-year-old, a five-year-old, and an eight-month-old baby. I knew I didn't want to raise them alone, but I had no idea what God had in store or how quickly our lives would change.

So, what's in a name? We never pressured or asked the kids to call us anything, and we allowed them to pave their individual paths. Each one chose to call us Mom or Dad, except for Tate. We figured he would call me Mom in his own time, if ever, but I was hopeful that we would eventually get to that place in our relationship.

He and I got along great and even bonded in our first few months together. He affectionally called me Jessica, while the other kids immediately took to calling me Mom and Ryan Dad. It seemed to work until we heard Caleb yelling at Tate over the situation.

Caleb felt like I was being rejected by his new brother, whereas he had accepted his new dad, Tate's dad—and this wasn't fair. Caleb was fighting for me, which was sweet, but it was a misguided battle.

I pulled Caleb aside for a chat.

"Why does it bother you so much that Tate won't call me 'Mom'?" I asked

"Because your kids call Dad 'Dad,' and Mya and Jada call you 'Mom,' so Tate should too," he explained.

"Honey, Tate can call me 'Jessica' if he wants to. He's not at the same point in the grief process as you are, and it might take time for him to work through his feelings—and that's okay."

Caleb's personality dictates that he needs an explanation to process experiences, and once he receives this valuable information, he's able to lend more grace to almost any situation. He was

still frustrated but understood the reason Tate was hesitant to call me Mom.

### **Ryan's Take**

While Jess was trying to explain things to Caleb, Tate and I also had a heart-to-heart. He wasn't ready to call Jess Mom because he felt like that meant he had to say goodbye to his birth mom. I helped him understand that he never had to let go of her memory, and she would always be his momma. He needed permission to love and accept a new mom, and to feel like he wasn't replacing his momma by accepting Jess. Kaci would always be Momma and Jess could be Mom—two separate women. There could be room for both in his heart.

It didn't take more than a few days for Tate to ask, "Mom, can I go see if the neighbors can play?" or "Mom, what's for dinner?" It was a little awkward initially, but as we gained confidence and momentum in accepting our lives together, "Mom" slipped off his tongue just as easily as "Momma."

The name game can be tricky to navigate when you're first starting out as a newly blended family. Ryan and I have messed up numerous times in how we've addressed issues, but I think we got it right here. We let the kids lead and had vulnerable conversations as we explained that acceptance doesn't mean you're letting go of what came before. Acceptance simply means you've reached a place of allowing more love to grow in your heart. Tate had to hear that he could keep "Momma" for Kaci, and if you find yourself in the same situation, maybe your child needs to keep a name sacred for someone as well. It may be Momma, or Gigi, or Daddy. Allow this. Allow for time and healing. Give your child space to process. Some

kids will be on board immediately with a new mom or dad figure, and others may take years to get to that place. It's not a reflection of you as a person, and miraculously, I didn't take it that way here as I so often do in other situations. It's also not a rejection of you as a parent. It's simply a reflection of the child's need for time, healing, and acceptance—an invaluable lesson my sister taught me early on in life.

### **Sisters: The Importance of Choosing Acceptance**

I grew up with adopted siblings, and during childhood, I had no idea how this experience would one day shape my life when I adopted Tate, Mya, and Jada.

I was closest in age to my adopted sister Karen, although we were not emotionally close growing up because she entered my life the year I left for college. She had a rough childhood. As a young girl, her mother brought her to a children's home in India when she was unable to care for her. She was later adopted by an American family at age thirteen who didn't understand how to meet her need for love and affirmation, and eventually, her father placed her back in the system after her adopted mother died. Enter my family, who adopted her when she was fifteen years old, but the scars of rejection had already found their place in her young life. Those scars begged for strong doses of affirmation and praise as she continuously sought to answer the questions that beat in her heart: *Do you love me? Do you want me? Or will you abandon me as so many already have?*

As children, we don't understand the complexities of the human soul, and I saw Karen's neediness as taking away from the already limited amount of personal attention we received from our parents. I prided myself on not being needy like her and resented that she was always seeking affirmation as she struggled to trust that those who were supposed to care for her wouldn't leave her again.

I never thought twice about the decision to adopt Tate, Mya, and Jada. Maybe I should have given it more thought, as it was a life-changing decision, but it came down to falling in love with Ryan and seeing a need. He was a father to three motherless children. I loved him and loved his kids by proxy. It made sense to remedy their void by becoming their adopted mom. I have never regretted my decision; however, I will admit that I entered it very naïvely and have struggled through significant emotions as I dealt with the aftermath of this life-changing role.

Shortly after the ink on the adoption papers had dried—about a year into my marriage—I began to suffer from depression. I missed my biological children. I had devoted three years to caring for Jason, and then months cultivating a marriage and forming bonds with three new children. I realized I had put my biological kids on the back burner, convinced they would be okay because they innately knew my love for them. I was their mom!

I had a deep ache for Caleb, Lucas, Mabel, and Joshua, but I wasn't sure how to remedy this desire without the other kids feeling slighted. My expectation was that bonds would simply fall into place—the connections with Tate, Mya, and Jada would magically appear—but they didn't. It was natural to reach for Joshua, who I had carried in my belly for nine months and who lovingly gazed into my eyes as I held him. It wasn't natural with Jada, who often eyed me with suspicious contempt when I reached for her. I knew that depth in relationships took time, but I didn't want to cause my children any more pain than they had already experienced. I often pulled attention from my biological kids and gave it to my adopted ones, and then one day I simply broke. Ryan found me hunched over our desk as tears streamed down my face.

"I miss my kids!" I blubbered as the emotions of the past year rose to the surface.

"Honey, you can miss your kids," he gently replied.

“But I don’t want your kids to think that I love my biological kids more than I love them,” I replied.

He continued: “Your relationship with Caleb, Lucas, Mabel, and Joshua is deeper, and my relationship with Tate, Mya, and Jada is deeper. That’s the reality. All you can do is bond with each child in small ways to build connections with him or her.”

His words opened a door for me that day. He gave me permission to say, “It is different. It’s different for me, and it’s different for them, and that’s okay.”

Ten years later, my relationship with all the kids has solidified and deepened, as relationships do with time. My sister Karen has become an invaluable resource and friend as I navigate the tricky world of adopted feelings and concerns. She has served as a sounding board for the abandonment and attachment issues that often present in adopted children, and she’s offered advice on tactics and skills to try. She continues to teach me valuable lessons in grace through how she navigates her own experience, and I now see our blended family as a beautiful illustration of how our heavenly Father chooses us in our insecurities, unmet expectations, and imperfect histories, and simply loves us as his children.

A few years ago, Karen and her kids made the long journey to Tennessee from Michigan. We spent time laughing, watching the cousins play together, and of course, cooking. The beauty of having a sister from India is that she is gifted at cooking curry! During our visit, we spent a good portion of our time in the kitchen, where she taught me the authentic way to make chicken curry. This dish involves a lot of slicing and dicing and throwing the ingredients into a big pot, then simmering them on low heat for hours on end. Kind of like our family—the individuals slowly blend through intentional time together and meaningful connections. However, there is another important component to a blended family, a difficult aspect that we’ll discuss in the next chapter: You might need

an extra-sharp knife for the type of slicing and dicing that might occur. I'm talking about creating healthy boundaries—boundaries that often involve removing aspects, traditions, or possibly even relationships that aren't beneficial or uplifting to the new marriage or family. Sometimes, difficult decisions must be made for growth and life to occur.

### *Chicken Curry*

This dish is comfort food at its finest, especially during the cooler autumn and winter months, and it's full of healthy nutrients that will start your family off right during the cold and flu season. You'll feel like the parent of the year as you dole this out on your family's plates.

- 1 large onion, diced
- 4–5 garlic cloves, diced
- Olive oil
- 1–2 large jalapeños, diced (remove seeds for less spice)
- 2 28-ounce cans of chopped tomatoes
- 4–5 chicken thighs, cut into pieces
- 7–8 cups of chicken or bone broth
- 2 cans of chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- 1–2 tbsp curry powder
- 1 tbsp cumin
- 1 tsp chili powder
- Salt and pepper to taste

Sauté the onion and garlic with the olive oil on medium heat until translucent. Add the jalapeños and cook for a minute—stirring constantly. Add the tomatoes and broth. Stir. Add the remaining ingredients. Stir and simmer on low all day long, stirring occasionally. Serve over rice or a baked potato.



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