

FOREWORD BY CHRISTINE CAINE

BIANCA JUÁREZ  
OLTHOFF

HOW TO HAVE  
YOUR LIFE

NOT  
SUCK

BECOMING  
TODAY WHO  
YOU WANT TO BE  
TOMORROW

HOW TO HAVE  
YOUR LIFE  
NOT  
SUCK

BIANCA JUÁREZ  
OLTHOFF

ZONDERVAN

*How to Have Your Life Not Suck*

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## FOREWORD

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“Do you want to change the world?”

I will never forget the day I asked Bianca Olthoff this question. We were eating hummus and pita bread, while talking a million miles an hour—loudly. I guess that’s what happens when you put a Greek woman and a Puerto Rican woman at the same table. It was her passion and humor that caught my attention, and her audacity and compassion that kept it. I could tell this was a young woman who wanted to love the world like Jesus and live an extraordinary life for his glory. She wasn’t normal. I loved that about her. I still do.

“Of course I want to change the world,” she said.

There was a long pause, and then I challenged her to commit to a season of coaching and training that would help her to become who she needed to be, to do what she had been called to do. It would not be easy, and it was not for the fainthearted. At that point in her life, she did not need a cheerleader to encourage her, but a coach to really push her. She was obviously an extraordinarily gifted young woman, full of potential, but in order to realize that potential, she would need to commit to the process of growth and transformation.

Few are willing to embark upon that painful path.

The way is narrow.

To live a life of service to others, you must learn to die to self.

Crucifying the flesh is never easy.

Always messy.

She looked at me, and I saw her think long and hard about what her future would look like. She took a deep breath and said yes. Thus began our adventure working alongside one another, fighting to abolish slavery everywhere forever through The A21 Campaign.

Bianca has fought hard to ensure that her own life does not suck and shares her wisdom with us as only she can. Full of truth and humor, she takes God's Word and makes it applicable to our everyday lives. If the Bible is the guide, Bianca has translated the guide to reach the next generation.

Using the story of Ruth—an Old Testament heroine with a pockmarked past—Bianca makes some of life's difficult topics like suffering, growing up, heartbreak, and friendship not only survivable, but relatable.

I've been a firsthand witness to seeing Bianca walk roads that have made her stronger and wiser. I love her with all my heart. I know you will too.

Christine Caine,  
founder of A21 and Propel Women  
and author of *Unashamed*,  
*Undaunted*, and *Unexpected*

## THE BEGINNING

---

“I just wish someone would’ve told me this *years* ago,” Ashley groaned, covering her face with her hands.

We sat at a small table near the coffee shop window, sipping drinks and eating lunch. Like lightning, her words struck me, momentarily illuminating my thoughts. My wish was the same—that someone would’ve told me what I was telling her when I was her age.

I’ve never considered myself to be a guru, coach, or mentor because those roles seem reserved for Dr. Phil, therapists, and sage pastors. But one thing I did know: I was good at reading the Bible and talking about Jesus. And that was how Ashley and I connected.

One Sunday morning I stood behind a podium and taught about one of the greatest stories in history, one that has captured my heart. It’s a story of trial and triumph, pain and promise, a story of two women from two different generations, two different backgrounds, and two different countries who came together and witnessed the invisible hand of God moving in their lives. One of the women had weathered life’s greatest losses, suffered a crisis of faith, and felt old and washed up, without a future or hope. The other woman had her entire life before her but had nothing to rely on, build upon, or inherit. They supported each other in their journey to find home, family, community, and purpose.

This rags-to-riches story of redemption is the stuff that



makes film writers swoon. And it's all recounted in a small Old Testament book named after the heroine, Ruth.

My deep love for the story of Ruth permeated my words as I preached that Sunday morning. Ashley—who sat alone in the full sanctuary—hung on every word. After the church service, she found me in the courtyard and asked me one question, which morphed into a conversation and eventually led to us sipping drinks over lunch in Orange County, California.

My new friend was twenty-seven years old, a college graduate living with roommates in an apartment they could barely afford. She was attractive and smart and outgoing—and as single as a Pringle ready to mingle. Recovering from a string of bad relationships, and having watched her parents' marriage implode during her high school years, she found herself in church in search of ~~meaning purpose a relationship~~ . . . well, she really didn't know. But she knew her life sucked, and she needed *something*.

After months of roaming the church campus and connecting with no one her age, Ashley's attendance at church and interest in spiritual things was waning as her brunch-and-workout routine momentarily satiated her desire for community and meaning.

Ashley had so much potential, so many opportunities, so many roads before her, but she suffered from what I diagnosed as Analysis Paralysis. I know I'm not a psychologist, but I've coined my own "diagnosis" for women who struggle to find the right partner, fight loneliness, and/or can't move forward when they're feeling stuck.

You might recognize these symptoms:

- Inability to make decisions
- Confusion and fear of the future
- An inordinate feeling of being left behind and not knowing how to move forward
- Staring at people with a frozen smile and wide, darting

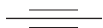
eyes when they ask what you are going to do with your life (because you know you couldn't even decide what jeans to wear that morning)

On a random Sunday morning at church, as Ashley sat in a sea of faces she didn't know, something struck her. It wasn't my awesome biblical knowledge or exegesis. It wasn't even the killer fake eyelashes I wore. Ashley was struck with the truth of God's Word. Sure, I did my best to make the biblical text fun and relevant, but there is NOTHING like the power of God's Word coming to life.

That morning, sitting in church alone, Ashley felt like God was speaking to *her*.

"I mean, I know there were thousands of people in church this morning, but God was speaking to me through Ruth's story," she explained awkwardly, as if I might laugh at her recollection of the morning.

But I knew exactly what she was feeling. I'd had the same experience.



Ten years before, as a twenty-five-year-old living at home with my parents, I was in graduate school, licking my wounds after a bad breakup, and dealing with my mom's second round of cancer. Life sucked. I wanted a therapist—or at least someone wise—to come alongside me and tell me what to do with my life, tell me which guys to stay away from, tell me which type of jeans would make my thighs look thinner. But even more than that, what I wanted was someone to look into my eyes and tell me, "No matter what happens, life is going to be okay."

I never had a mentor or "life coach" (whatever that means), but I always believed characters in the Bible were my actual friends.

As a child, I loved church and Sunday school and vacation Bible school and summer camp because they were chances to learn more about my Bible friends. If Deborah from Judges 4 were alive today, I would make it my mission to become her political staffer and learn how to lead like her. If Lazarus's sister Mary lived in California, I would invite her to lunch and ask her what inspired her to acts of love without fear of judgment. If Paul were still walking the earth, I would invite him to our church and ask him to teach us how to break down theology in an easy way like he did for the Colossians and Ephesians. Better yet, I'd ask him how he fought off loneliness and isolation while he was imprisoned for living out his calling.

(This list could go on and on because, in my mind, I have *lots* of friends from the Bible.)

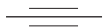
But if I could pick one woman to be my BFF, it would be Ruth. Ruth was in the middle of a spiritual desert, having lost everything—her love, her financial security, her family, her dreams—and decided then and there, with confidence, who she was going to be in the midst of her loss. Without a map, a mentor, or a social media following, Ruth decided **where** she was going, **who** she was going to follow, and **how** she was going to live.

Though these amazing characters aren't alive today, I believe their stories can serve as modern-day playbooks for how to live, lead, and love.

In my own desert season at twenty-five, as I questioned my faith—when I lost my security, my dreams, and the man I believed I was going to marry—I became friends with these women on their desert journey back home to Bethlehem. Naomi was a wise old woman who taught Ruth (and me) to express grief but trust God, to have hope but work hard, to be guarded but vulnerable.

Through time, lessons learned, and strengthened faith, I have become wiser and taken ownership of the title *mentor*. You might not be Ruth. I might not be Naomi. But I can safely wager we both

have gone through our fair share of desert seasons. We are two different women from two different backgrounds and possibly from two different generations, but I've learned some valuable lessons I want to share with you. Learn from my mistakes and glean from my experience.



That conversation with Ashley led to many more with other young women who echoed her sentiment: *How can we learn today what we need to know for tomorrow?* What I discovered through countless conversations and coffee dates is that when you are stuck and confused, you don't need finger wagging or nagging. You need a guide who can point you to your proverbial Bethlehem, who can remind you there is a God who provides, and who will look you in the eye and say, "No matter what happens, life is going to be okay."

I'm here to be your guide (minus the cargo shorts and tacky hat). I have made my share of mistakes, which have caused me heartache, but I've found my way back and want to help you avoid taking the same unnecessary detours. Adulting is hard and mistakes can cost you time and energy, resulting in loneliness and pain. In that vein, I want to share with *you* what I've learned about life from my friends Ruth and Naomi.

In Part 1 we will discuss relationships and how to date well. Part 2 explores some questions around faith and how to survive trials with our spirituality intact. Finally, in Part 3 we will have some hard chats about growing up and living toward our legacy.

And because I already love you so much, I've invited my dear friend Dr. Deborah Gorton, clinical psychologist and Dean

No matter what  
happens, life is  
going to be okay.

of Psychology at Moody Bible Institute, to help us through some tough topics by sharing her wisdom and perspective. Look for her input in the sections called *Thoughts from a Therapist*. (This is basically free therapy, so you're welcome! You've already started making your life not suck, and you're doing it at a bargain rate.) I have known Dr. Deb for the last five years and have learned so much from her lectures, not to mention from her life. She is a therapist with a teacher's heart. The wisdom she has imparted to me has changed the way I think and has given me the ability to believe I can be all that I'm called to be.

If generations of women have gone before us and survived loss, fear, trauma, and stretch marks, so will we.

And sometimes that's all we need to get back up and keep walking.

Join me as we figure out how to make your life not suck.

## STOP! READ THIS FIRST!

---

Before you read this book, you're going to need to know a little bit about the life and times of Ruth the Moabitess. If you've read the small book of Ruth in the pages of the Old Testament, you're already one leg up! But to make sure we are all on the same page, here is a Disney version of one of the greatest stories ever told.

Once upon a time, in a land far away, lived a woman who had lost everything. Ruth was born in a crazy city with a bad reputation, but in the midst of the chaos, she found a Jewish hunk by the name of Mahlon who married her and welcomed her into his holy Hebrew family. Sadly, tragedy struck, and before Ruth could have a baby, her father-in-law passed away. In another fatal family blow, her brother-in-law Kilion died before her sister-in-law, Orpah, could produce the next family heir. And if things seemed like they couldn't get any worse for this young woman with infertility issues, they did. In tragic form, she lost her husband to illness.

Three dead men left three living women with no home and no income in Moab, a land deemed unacceptable for good Jews because of its questionable history of incest and pagan worship. Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, therefore decided to return to her hometown of Bethlehem to try to find refuge among her people.

All three widows began the desert trek to Bethlehem. But on a hot, dusty road halfway between Moab and Bethlehem, the matriarch broke down. Having lost her husband and two sons—with

no heir produced by either of her sons' widows—Naomi urged her two daughters-in-law to go back to their homeland. Orpah turned back to Moab accordingly, but Ruth refused to leave her mother-in-law, vowing to love Naomi, her people, and her God from then on.

Upon the women's arrival in Bethlehem, life didn't get easier. On the brink of starvation, Ruth decided to look for work in the fields—a job that would entail hard manual labor. She found herself in a field belonging to a landowner by the name of Boaz. Ruth was treated kindly and protected by this man of honor and was given food not only for herself, but for Naomi as well.

When Naomi found out that Ruth was working in Boaz's field, she became a true Jewish *yenta* and tried playing matchmaker. Encouraging her daughter-in-law to spruce herself up, Naomi instructed her beloved Ruth to let Boaz know she was single. In an unheard-of move for a Jewish love story, Ruth initiated a DTR, and Boaz responded immediately. Then Boaz married Ruth and welcomed her mother-in-law into the family. He was a great guy.

But the love story doesn't end there. In true fairy tale fashion, Ruth became pregnant and bore a son, whom Naomi loved as her own. The story of Ruth and Naomi proves to us that even when life feels hopeless, we can hope for a beautiful beginning to a new chapter.

## PART 1

# Dating and Relationships



Dating is one of the hardest relational minefields to navigate in adulthood, am I right? Because the church has remained largely silent about relationships other than marriages, we've turned over the narrative and allowed magazines, movies, and media to tell us what love, dating, and sex should look like in our culture. Leery of listening to the wrong voices, I became passionate about the topic of dating and relationships (and secretly hope to make #bHarmony a thing so I can become a matchmaker for all my single friends). I felt it necessary for us, as wise followers of Jesus, to take back the narrative of healthy dating relationships and learn from someone who braved the minefield—and survived to tell us about it.

Enter Ruth. She isn't a dating guru or a model for successful single living, but she leans upon the wisdom of an older woman and takes calculated risks in the process of



getting to know someone. In this section, get ready to take tips from Dr. Deb, read about other women's dating experiences, and walk away with some wisdom from Ruth and Naomi, such as:

- The value of dating someone with a job (HELLO!)
- How to fearlessly communicate what you want
- The difference between being vain and being clean
- Accepting gifts doesn't mean you're a gold digger
- Why you should have high dating standards

Perhaps you are married and feel like this section no longer applies to you. Take heed, lest ye fall, my dear sister. The act of getting to know someone—*dating*—never ends, even after you say *I do*. But if you are beyond the conversation, you probably have single friends, coworkers, or family members who have questions about dating that perhaps you've lost the answers for. This section will refresh and remind you of ways you can support, love, and guide your single sisters.

## CHAPTER 1

# ACCEPTABLE STALKING



*Boaz asked the overseer of his harvesters, “Who does that young woman belong to?”*

RUTH 2:5

“Do you think what we are doing is wrong? Isn’t this intrusive?” Marlee asked, genuinely concerned. I waved my hand in the air as if swatting the annoying words away.

“Listen,” I insisted, “we are doing *research*.”

Marlee—a single and vivacious twenty-two-year-old—met a guy at church who had commented on a few of her social media posts and even direct messaged her. Unsure of his intentions, she asked me what I thought.

Without thinking twice, I pulled out my phone and googled his name. With the help of the World Wide Web, I found a host of information about him and tracked down his social media accounts. We huddled over my iPhone like FBI agents stalking a terrorist—we needed all the information we could find. Why? Because if there was going to be an advance into “foreign territory” (aka dating), she needed to be prepared.

Ten years ago, before the explosion of online dating and social

media, *stalking* was a word reserved for weird men with scraggly hair and maybe a murky cockeye (à la your awkward next-door neighbor to whom you've never spoken a word). But with social media boasting four billion daily users, we have made internet "stalking" of potential boyfriends socially acceptable. Not only is it acceptable, it is a valuable tool when it comes to getting to know someone you're attracted to from a safe distance.

To ensure we aren't being driven by the lusts of the flesh (aka "eye candy"), let's take a clue from our friend Boaz.

In Ruth 2, we see Boaz enter the story. Business owner and bad\$\$\$ boss, he visits his enterprise and scopes out the land. The employees are hard at work when the owner of the field surveys his holdings. As he is going over the daily routine, he catches sight of someone new working the fields.

What does he do?

Does he copy the swagger of his biblical ancestor Joshua, march down to the field, and whisper to Ruth, "Girl, are you Jericho? Because I will walk around you seven times if it will make you fall for me."

Negative. He doesn't. Instead of swooping in and making some smooth moves on the young Moabitess, Boaz observes her from afar.

We can learn a few things from the type of man Boaz was. For starters, he was intimately aware of who was in his field. A foreigner in his field caught his eye, and he did some research to find out who she was. Because Boaz didn't have the handy help of Facebook or Instagram, he relied on the tried-and-true form of acquiring the background of a new person: he asked a trusted colleague, his overseer.

"Who does that young woman belong to?"

In a culture where family was your identity, your land and lineage said everything anyone needed to know about you. (More on this in chapter 8.) Unfortunately, Ruth had two strikes against

her. Not only was she an immigrant, she was an immigrant from a despised land, Moab. As people who were birthed out of incest and worshipers of a false god, Ruth's family would have been ostracized and despised among the chosen children of Israel.

If the conversation had stopped there, Ruth's story might have ended as quickly as it began. But the overseer revealed to Boaz that Ruth was a hard worker who didn't take lots of breaks. In that small byline, that brief inclusion, Ruth's character spoke louder than her social status, marital status, or immigration status. Thank goodness there is always more to our stories; our history and heritage do not determine our outcomes.

This is why I believe there is something wildly important about getting to know someone from a distance. When we become intimate with a person (through conversation, close proximity, and emotional connection), our judgment and decision-making can become clouded.

For example, I attended a small liberal arts college in California. The entire student body consisted of fewer than three thousand students, and only a thousand lived on campus. The dating scene was always interesting because returning students vowed they would never date \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank). My friends and classmates would list a host of requirements and a litany of *nevers*. But after the first semester of late-night study sessions, college parties, and dorm life, everybody's nonnegotiable standards about what they were looking for in the opposite sex became a blur, a phenomenon commonly referred to as *wearing beer goggles*. As in, you drink until someone looks attractive.

The problem with dating or "going out" without investigating (especially when we're feeling limited, lonely, or, worse, inebriated) is that we make poor decisions, we lower our standards, and we think what's in front of us is all there will ever be.

Boaz waited and researched from afar. Thanks to social media and the internet, so can we.

If you are interested in someone, do your research! It's easy to become infatuated with someone up close, so do your investigating from a distance. Like the proverb warns us: *guard your heart and put down the beer goggles*. (Okay, fine. I added that last part, but Solomon would've agreed with me.)

Here are some tips on how to investigate someone online in the appropriate manner.

**GOOGLE.** Google is a search engine that can help you find the best place to eat in your area, trending news, and—lo and behold—it's also great for cyberstalking a potential date.

Just so we are clear, I'm a cyberstalker and proud of it. Not only have I stalked online every man I've ever dated, to this day I creep every conference and church I speak at. I visit their website, check out their social media, and even click on their hashtags. Why? Because the internet is the best way to find out not only what people say about themselves, but what *other people* say about them.

If I googled a guy and discovered he was voted Beer Kegger Champion of his college, was tagged in tons of photos half-dressed at parties, and every photo in Google Images was taken with a different girl, I'd probably think twice about going out with him.

And before anyone judges me and says, "But Bianca, we are NEW creations in Christ and God forgives us of all stupidity! Don't be so judgmental," let me say this: you're right. But if there's nothing online to balance out the half-dressed party animal pictures (deworming children in Somalia, serving his local homeless community, being—I don't know—*sober*), then that's a red flag.

On the other hand, if someone has no online presence at all, that's also a red flag. Like, have you been living in a hermit commune with no internet? Who are you, Ted Bundy?

Use this ~~gift from God~~ tool to learn more about the people you're thinking about doing life with.

**SOCIAL MEDIA.** I love social media. I consistently say social

media is the greatest social equalizer. Prior to social media, we would never have had access to the president of the United States (unless you were, like, super cool and could pull strings in politics). But now, all I have to do is tag @POTUS, and I have directly communicated to the leader of the free world.

What we put out on social media is a reflection of who we are, what we believe, and who we engage with. (Note: I did not say social media is who we are. Social media is a *curated reflection* of who we are and how we want to be perceived. More on this from Dr. Deb later.)

You can learn so much about someone by ~~stalking~~ researching his social media accounts. Does he share your values? Does he like the same things you do? Can he spell? All this can be learned simply by scrolling through someone's social media profile.

Don't believe everything on the internet . . . maybe just half of it. Because it's likely at least half of it is true.

**ASK FRIENDS.** What Boaz did by asking his overseer about Ruth was even better than googling her, because the best way to get to know someone is to ask their friends. Nothing will ever trump direct relationship.

No article can adequately communicate someone's heart.

No photo can show a full picture of someone's life.

No post can express the totality of someone's worldview.

But conversations with people who directly know a person give life and breath to that person, even if they're far away.

Take your time.

Do your research.

Ask questions.

You might just discover someone in your field who comes from a bad family and isn't from your area but works hard and has a good reputation.

You're welcome.

## THOUGHTS FROM A THERAPIST

## Dr. Deb on Internet “Stalking”



Like any good thing, we can take the benefits and overdo them, making the outcome more harmful than helpful. This can easily be applied to internet stalking. In a study conducted in early 2018, the Pew Research Center found that one quarter of Americans are online “almost constantly” and an additional 43 percent of Americans are online several times a day. Researchers have also found a significant relationship between social media use among young adults and rising rates of depression.<sup>1</sup>

Social media and the internet have provided us with significant access to information, and as a result, the world has become smaller and smaller. As Bianca states, this provides ample opportunity for research and acceptable “stalking,” but it’s only half the picture. Our online platforms can also provide ample opportunity for obsessive stalking and over-comparison. The problem with online information is that it’s always limited. We see a Facebook picture of the guy we like with his arms around a girl, and we immediately assume she’s his girlfriend (or maybe even that he’s a “player”). Rarely is the first thought that she is his sister or cousin.

When we only have access to one side of any information, it’s easy to fill in the blanks with our own interpretation of what we’re seeing. And once we get started down the rabbit hole of desperately trying to fill in the blanks, it’s hard to stop. It’s the Alice-in-Wonderland effect; you’ve found yourself stuck in a curated fantasyland.

So how do you set yourself up to engage in acceptable stalking without crossing over to obsessive stalking? Set your expectations and limitations before you start your research. Here are two tips:

1. **BE PURPOSEFUL IN ESTABLISHING YOUR GOALS.** If your objective is to investigate someone's interests, connections, and overall visual presence, stay committed to that pursuit and only that pursuit. Don't log on to aimlessly find out anything and everything you can about that guy you met at the coffee shop yesterday. The next thing you know, three hours have gone by and you've discovered that he is, in fact, not an unemployed hippie hitchhiker with three wives and a dozen mismatched kids but a missionary photographer who regularly travels overseas to document the work of agencies with which he partners. At least, that's the story you're telling yourself.
2. **LIMIT THE AMOUNT OF TIME YOU'RE GOING TO SPEND RESEARCHING UP FRONT.** Smart phones, smart watches, and smart tablets can also provide smart boundaries. Be intentional and set a timer. If you've given one hour to finding John Doe's online footprint and all it has revealed is his current job, favorite food, regular summer lake vacation with extended family, and his adorable obsession with his rescue pup, that's a great starting point. The last thing you want to do is show up for date number one already knowing everything there is to know about the guy. A little mystery is still a good thing.