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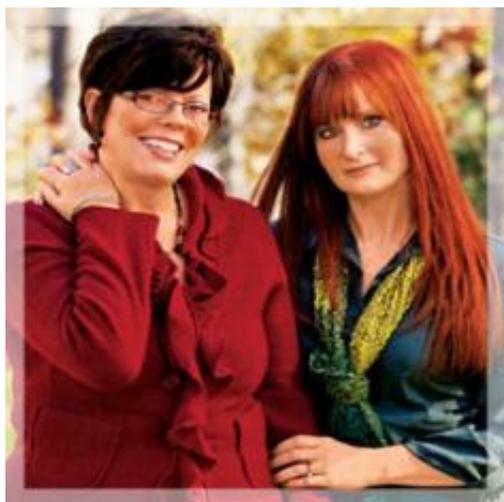
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## With Secrets Revealed, the Healing Begins

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## With Secrets Revealed, the Healing Begins

A battered wife, inspired by a co-worker's concern and prayers, begins to put her life in order.

By Jo Ann Fore, Knoxville, Tennessee

As appeared in

Karen, my new coworker, popped her head into my office. "Wanna grab a cup of coffee after work?" she asked. "It would be nice to get to know each other better."

"Karen, I just don't have time," I said.

Karen had joined our faith-based, nonprofit organization a few months earlier and already she'd befriended almost everyone and was organizing employee outings.

She had it all: a strong marriage, a loving family. I could see why people liked her. Positive attitude. Hard worker. Responsible. Compassionate. Our joint projects ran smoothly. I couldn't have asked for a better colleague.

But I wouldn't, couldn't, go deeper than that. Not with Karen. Not with anyone. How could I? What if my secret got out? What would people think of me then? What would perfect Karen think?

The secret I was desperate to keep was this: I was married to a real-life Jekyll and Hyde, a man who was sweet and charming to me one day, and emotionally and physically abusive the next. He would beg for forgiveness and I'd give in, wanting to believe he would change. And he would...but not for long.

I stayed because I was convinced the abuse would end, that we'd heal and eventually have a good marriage.

But lately I questioned if anything I believed could be trusted anymore. My marriage was more like a prison than a sacred bond, and certainly not an emotionally healthy environment for my 12-year-old daughter, Tabitha.

My secret had isolated me from everyone, even God. I was almost too ashamed to pray for help. No one—especially not bubbly, I-have-a-perfect-life Karen—could understand.

Besides, I was a professional, a woman who held her own with board members, CEOs and affluent donors. I could never admit I was one of “those women,” battered wives whom others judged and whispered about, saying things like, “What's wrong with her? Why doesn't she just leave the jerk?”

I'd been dancing around Karen's invitations ever since she'd started. I made up reasons why my family didn't join the after-work get-togethers, and why I had so many hushed phone conversations with my husband during the day.

“Maybe there's something I can help you with?” she said. “Something that would free up your schedule?”

“Thank you,” I said. “But this is all stuff that I have to do myself.”

“Okay,” she said. “If you change your mind, I'm just down the hall.”

Karen persisted. A gentle nod. That sweet smile. An encouraging word. She was so genuine I almost, almost, wanted to confide in her. But what if she thought I was to blame for my situation? I couldn't take the shame, the condemnation.

*Lord, I prayed one morning driving to work, I feel so cut off from everyone right now. Especially from you. Don't you see what I'm going through? Can't you help me find a way out of this pain?*

Yet my prayer only caused me more shame. How could I impose on God to help me with a situation I had let get so out of control?

The night before a critical planning session at work, my husband and I got into an intense argument and he punched me in the face. It was the hardest he'd ever hit me. My eye swelled almost shut. Tabitha heard the noise from upstairs and came running down.

“Get in the car,” I said. I drove us to a friend's and called in sick. I never did that. I prided myself on my professionalism—that was the one thing my husband couldn't take from me.

My boss accepted my lame explanation. But not Karen. She called my cell. “Are you okay, Jo Ann?”

“I’m fine, thanks,” I said, my voice cracking slightly. *Keep it in check.* “I’m really sorry I can’t make our meeting.”

“That’s all right, we’ll manage,” Karen said. “But I’m more concerned about you. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Of course...just a little under the weather...”

“All right,” she said. “Although, I really get the feeling—and forgive me if I’m crossing the line here—that you’re not okay. At all. Can we talk?”

Oh, how how I longed to talk! But I couldn’t dare take the chance. I managed to appease Karen and ended the conversation.

What else could I do? One thing I knew—I couldn’t afford to lose my job. I had to go to the office to pick up some files. One day I slathered my face with cover-up and threw on my biggest pair of sunglasses.

Late that evening, when I was certain everyone had left, I drove into the parking lot at work. Just then, I spotted Karen’s car leaving. She saw me too. *Oh, no.* She pulled her car up to mine and rolled down the window.

“There you are,” she said. “I’ve been wondering where you’ve been.” There it was again—that genuine concern.

“Oh, you know, I’m still not feeling well and Tabitha...she is just swamped with school activities, and I’ve been trying to do some of this work from home without having the files I need. All in all, it’s been a little crazy.” The words tumbled out much faster than I intended.

“I’m going to ask you again, Jo Ann. Are you *really* okay?”

Silence. No, I wasn’t okay. And that primal need to tell the truth, to confess my secret, welled up again. Only this time I couldn’t push it down.

Without a word, I lifted my sunglasses. The bruises told the story better than I could. Cringing inside, I waited for the shock, the judgment. The condemnation.

“I’m so sorry, Jo Ann,” Karen said, her eyes filling with tears. “I’m here if you need me.” She paused. “Whenever you’re ready.”

“We’ll talk, just not now,” I said, and rolled up my window. *Now what does she think of me?* Still, I felt an undeniable relief from sharing my secret. Somehow the grip around my heart lessened.

After a month apart, my husband committed to therapy and swore he’d change—whatever it took. Tabitha and I went back home but I felt sick about it.

My first day back at work Karen walked into my office and set a fabric-covered wire-bound book

in my lap. "Here," she said, "you might want to read this."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Just open it. Please."

I flipped the cover and turned the pages. They were filled with Karen's handwriting. This was her journal.

"It might help you to know I've gone through some rough patches too," she said. "I've been in the pit. And I got out. Writing through my pain helped me grow closer to God and see the comfort he gave me. Anyway, I think there might be some stuff in there that will interest you."

I could hardly believe she'd offered to share something so personal, so raw. "Karen, are you sure?" She nodded. There was no judgment or pity in her eyes, only caring.

I started reading. Her honesty drew me in like a moth to light.

"God, how could you see this and not intervene?" she wrote. "I am so weary, so numb. I feel as though you are not here; I need to feel your presence. Am I not able to feel you because of my anger? Show me what to do with the anger, keep me safe...guide me, heal me."

I felt the shock of recognition, those words echoed my feelings so strongly. Karen understood. I wasn't alone. The journal showed me something I was desperate to know: We are never beyond God's reach no matter how isolated our circumstances make us feel.

I held onto the hope in one of Karen's prayers: *Lord, help me to place you deep within my heart so that I may pull strength, courage and peace from you as needed.*

Little by little, I shared my feelings with Karen. The hurt. The unbearable shame. My deepest fears. The more I shared, the lighter my burden felt.

One day my husband went too far. Tabitha and I left. For good. Where did I turn? Right down the hall to my friend Karen. She helped me start over.

She taught me that I *am* deserving of the love God puts in our lives and the people he sends to help. People we can trust to understand us, to share our pain and our joy. People like Karen.

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