

OVERCOMING ABUSE, SHAME, AND  
UNNATURAL AFFECTION



# RESTORING

*Love*

**TINA ROYER**

foreword by **KIM HANEY**

# Contents

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Foreword	
<i>By Kim Haney</i> .....	<i>vii</i>
Chapter 1	
<i>Leaving Sin City</i> .....	<i>1</i>
Chapter 2	
<i>Resisting Temptation</i> .....	<i>13</i>
Chapter 3	
<i>Getting Back on Track</i> .....	<i>23</i>
Chapter 4	
<i>Shutting Doors to Darkness</i> .....	<i>29</i>
Chapter 5	
<i>Confronting Shame</i> .....	<i>37</i>
Chapter 6	
<i>Shifting the Focus</i> .....	<i>41</i>
Chapter 7	
<i>Acknowledging the Darkness</i> .....	<i>43</i>
Chapter 8	
<i>Battling the Darkness Inside Us</i> .....	<i>51</i>
Chapter 9	
<i>When the Darkness Beckons</i> .....	<i>65</i>
Interlude .....	<i>79</i>
Chapter 10	
<i>Dying Daily</i> .....	<i>81</i>
Chapter 11	
<i>Packing for the Wilderness</i> .....	<i>89</i>
Chapter 12	
<i>Fighting Battles We Aren't Ready For</i> .....	<i>101</i>
Chapter 13	
<i>Victory Ahead</i> .....	<i>111</i>

Chapter 14	
<i>Silencing the Voice of the Enemy</i> .....	121
Chapter 15	
<i>Goodbye, World, Goodbye</i> .....	135
Afterword.....	145
Appendix 1	
<i>Three Checklists for Overcoming Perversion</i> .....	147
Appendix 2	
<i>Reflections for Recovery</i> .....	153
Appendix 3	
<i>Notes for Ministers</i> .....	157
Appendix 4	
<i>Recommended Reading</i> .....	163

# Chapter 1

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## *Leaving Sin City*

In 2016, my husband, Nate, and I took a trip to Las Vegas. A couple we had known for years had joked when they were young marrieds that if they made it to their fortieth anniversary, they were going to have Elvis renew their vows. The year 2016 marked their fortieth anniversary, and they invited us to come celebrate their milestone in Vegas.

We agreed to go, even though we would be the only Christians in the group, and even though Vegas wasn't exactly known for an abundance of wholesome activities. Counting the couples' children, siblings, parents, and friends, there were almost thirty people in the entourage. As the departure date approached, Nate and I had second thoughts and almost backed out, blaming one another teasingly, "I don't know how you got us into this vacation," he'd say to me. And I'd laugh and remind him they were actually his friends.

Yet we never seriously considered canceling the trip. We both worked full-time; we pastored a small church; we had three children under the age of eight. This trip could have been to the dark side of the moon, and we probably would have gone. No kids and no work for three whole days. Eating at restaurants and having someone else make our bed each morning. It was too much to resist. Vegas or not, this trip was not going to slip out of our hands.

When we stepped off the plane in Sin City, it didn't seem much different than any other airport—except for the clanging of slot machines and the occasional clatter of coins when someone won a few dollars. Even the Uber driver seemed normal.

It wasn't until we got to the Strip—the street lined with the biggest casinos—that we started to feel out of place. I was in my skirt and ponytail, no jewelry and no makeup, surrounded by women in spiked heels and outlandish hair colors. Nate, at six feet, seven inches, stood out even more. He kept his hand clenched tightly around mine and kept his eyes on the ground ahead of us, trying to avoid making eye contact with the women who winked at him or the flyers advertising strip clubs and raves.

Three years before, we had planted a church near the heart of Sacramento, in a neighborhood plagued by drug abuse and all the struggles that go along with it: poverty, violence, prostitution, and neglect. It was common for cars to be broken into during a church service. We weren't surprised upon arrival to see piles of trash strewn about in front of the building. Even a homeless person camped out in one of the doorways with heroin needles nearby had ceased to shock us. It was the ghetto in every sense of the word.

It was also one of the neighborhoods I grew up in almost thirty years ago. And it was just as bad back then. So the prostitutes lining the Vegas strip didn't really bother me. Neither did the drunks stumbling on the sidewalks all around us. Even the cigarette smoke in the casino we stayed at didn't make me gag. In a way, it smelled like home.

But that doesn't mean it felt good. Vegas reminded me of the home I had spent almost twenty years trying to get out of. It smelled like shame and regret. And when I finally got free, I vowed in my heart I would never end up back where I used to be.

But on September 2, 2013, three years before we landed in Vegas, God stepped into our home and asked Nate and me something we couldn't refuse. He asked us to go back to where I came from and reach for hurting people. We had three small children at the time, and it wasn't exactly the time of life I would have chosen to start a church. But it was awfully hard to tell God no when He asked so plainly.

On the night God called Nate to plant a church, I was in my daughter's room lying on a twin bed, feeding her so I could slip her back in the crib and then go to sleep. I was exhausted. Day after day, it was a struggle to find enough time to even shower or comb my hair. If it wasn't a church day, there was a good chance neither one of those essentials would get done. I stroked Clara's hair as I lay next to her. It was close to midnight, and I considered taking her back to my room, but I knew it would be hard to find a spot in the bed. Our two boys, ages two and four, slept with us most nights. Adding a baby into the mix probably wasn't a good idea.

So I lay next to Clara on the twin bed, snuggling her close, hoping to catch at least a few minutes of rest. However, the moment I closed my eyes to drift off to sleep, I felt a strong impression to get up and go back into my own room. The cool September night made me shrink back from the strange impulse, thinking maybe I was being irrational. *Lack of sleep can do that to a person,*

I reasoned. I didn't *want* to go, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I *needed* to go.

Just as before, the moment my eyes shut, I felt an overwhelming urge to get up and go to my own room. *I wonder if something bad is going to happen*, I thought. The twin bed I lay on was directly under a large window. Maybe God was trying to warn me. Maybe a stray bullet was going to shatter the window. That was the sort of thing we worried about in the neighborhood where I grew up. But I had been married almost fifteen years now, and it had been a long while since I worried about danger in my own home. Still, the urge to get up wouldn't go away.

I thought about tucking Clara back into her crib, but if something happened in her bedroom that night and she was harmed, I would never be able to forgive myself. Finally, I gathered her in my arms, keeping her wrapped tightly in her blanket, and shuffled down the hallway to my bedroom.

Standing in the doorway, I shook my head, half-frustrated and half-smiling. Nate was lying on his side breathing deeply, and our two boys were sprawled all over the bed as if they owned it. The youngest lay cross-wise, his feet on my pillow and his head almost hanging off the side of the mattress. The oldest had shimmied to the bottom of the bed where he was snoring softly.

*Well, this is silly*, I thought. There was no way I could rearrange the boys with a baby in my arms. Getting them to sleep each night was a monumental task, and I would do almost anything to avoid waking them up. Besides, there was no way I could fit myself and my baby into the mix. My only options were to lie on the floor while holding Clara, or I could take her to the living room and

settle into the recliner. Or I could go back to her room and lie down again. I stood for a moment, gazing at the tumble of boys in the bed, and decided to try to ignore the feeling and go back to Clara's room. *Everything will be fine*, I told myself. I closed my eyes and mouthed a silent prayer: *God, please keep Your hand of protection on us right now. You know what I felt a few moments ago. Let angels encamp around our home. Protect our home, our bodies, and our minds, in Jesus' name.* As soon as I finished praying, I felt released to go back down the hall. It was as if somehow I had done what I needed to do.

And now I could rest.

Before I walked out of the room, Nate began to wake. I whispered softly, "Don't worry, hon, it's just me. I'm sorry I woke you. I'm heading back down to sleep in Clara's room." Once in her room, I snuggled her close and closed my eyes. Whatever I had felt minutes before was gone, and I felt peace. Smiling softly, I started drifting back to sleep.

Then, I heard footsteps coming down the hall and turned to see Nate standing in the doorway. It was too dark to see his expression, but I could tell something was bothering him.

"Sorry I woke—" I started to say, but he shook his head, interrupting me, "I think I just had a vision." Though he was currently the assistant pastor in a church, and though he came from a long line of preachers and pastors, my husband wasn't exactly a vision-having kind of guy. We tried to live right. We prayed. We read our Bibles. But we didn't have visions. At least not ordinarily.

But this wasn't an ordinary night.

As my husband of almost fifteen years began to speak, the strange feeling I'd had earlier snuck back up on me.



It was then that I realized *strange* wasn't the right word. No. It was a peculiar feeling. Unusual. Out of the ordinary.

It was the Holy Ghost.

"What did you see? In the vision, I mean. What was it?" I couldn't guess what was coming, but I knew whatever it was would change the course of our lives.

Nate said, "I saw the foundation of a church in Del Paso Heights. I mean, I saw minute details of the footings and foundation. Stuff I couldn't possibly know." Nate was a general and electrical contractor by trade. He worked with plans and foundations all the time. I couldn't understand why this was such a big deal.

He stopped, as if waiting for a response. But I honestly had no idea where to begin. All I could think was, *God, you woke me up and sent me out into the cold hallway to pray so that you could show my husband a set of construction plans?* Nate understood construction and buildings, but I didn't. So I asked the only question I could think of: "What do you think it means?"

A heartfelt grin spread across his face. "I think it means we're supposed to start a church in Del Paso Heights."

The moment he said it, images of streetwalkers, heroin addicts, and neglected children crowded into my mind.

And I knew.

I knew he was right.

But I grinned and spoke, "Nate, you know I spent my whole life trying to get out of there. And now you're going to take me back?"

He shook his head. "Nope. I'm not going to take you back. But I'm pretty sure God is going to."

And God did. For the past three years, we had worked at carving out a church in Del Paso Heights. We had been working in an area covered by spiritual darkness, trying to shine enough light to show people the way out.

So the darkness of Vegas was not surprising to either of us.

It wasn't the *type* of sin that bothered us, it was the sheer magnitude of it. There weren't just a couple scantily-clad women strutting around, making eyes at passersby; there were dozens of them, stripped of any sense of modesty they might once have had.

Del Paso Heights was bad, but Vegas was on a whole different level.

Here, in Vegas, the sin was prevalent. It was rampant in Del Paso Heights too. But here, in Vegas, it was celebrated. While it was celebrated back home, the difference was that in Del Paso Heights, the sin still reeked of disgrace. It was dirty and felt seedy. But here, in Las Vegas, the sin was decorated. It was made to look beautiful. It was stripped of its shame.

Back home, the prostitute looked tired and empty, embarrassed, but here, she was brazen and proud. Back home, the bars were dingy and dark, and they smelled musty, like the sweat of tired men. But here, the drunks sat in comfy chairs, at slot machines, with bright lights and cartoon-like sounds all around.

Back home, sin was bondage and darkness.

But in Vegas, sin was king.

Nate and I checked into a room at a casino on the Strip where the rest of our group was staying. We had a few hours until dinner time, and we were tired, so we decided to get some rest. We spent that first night and