



THE
MAGNOLIA
STORY

CHIP AND JOANNA
GAINES

with Mark Dagostino

EXCLUSIVE SNEAK PEEK

THE MAGNOLIA STORY

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with Mark Dagostino



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*We would like to dedicate this book to our children—Drake,
Ella Rose, Emmie Kay, and Duke—and to the children of
Restoration Gateway. Our commitment to you will never fade.*

CONTENTS

<i>Blessings in (a Big, Ugly) Disguise.</i>	xiii
Chapter 1 First Dates and Second Chances	1
Chapter 2 New Directions.	13
Chapter 3 Something Old, Something New	27
Chapter 4 The Honeymoon's Over	37
Chapter 5 Opening Up.	49
Chapter 6 White Picket Fences	61
Chapter 7 One Door Closes	75
Chapter 8 Down To Our Roots	87
Chapter 9 Chipping In.	97
Chapter 10 Flipping Out	109
Chapter 11 Home-less.	123
Chapter 12 Getting to the Bottom	135
Chapter 13 Surviving or Thriving	145
Chapter 14 Heeding the Call	159
Chapter 15 The Bloom	173

BLESSINGS IN (A BIG, UGLY) DISGUISE

I have always been one to play it safe. If it were up to me, the less risk involved the better. But this isn't how the story goes—because I am married to the one, the only, Chip Carter Gaines.

One day back in early 2012, my husband decided to go window shopping online. That's always a risky thing to do, but when Chip's the man behind the mouse it can be downright dangerous. I never know what object—or animal—might show up at my front door on the back of some random delivery truck.

On this particular day, Chip happened to spot a used houseboat for sale.

We'd been living in a house that we were getting ready to flip and we'd just started renovating our farmhouse outside of Waco, Texas, which meant we were on the hunt for a temporary place to live. So Chip clicked through the pictures of that floating two-story shanty with its microscopic kitchen and had a full-blown Chip Gaines epiphany.

I really thought to myself, *How cool would it be to move our family onto a houseboat? We can put it on one of the lakes down here, and the kids and I can fish for breakfast from the balcony. Wow! Jo's gonna love this.*

So he bought it. Sight unseen. We just barely had our heads above water at that point, and he went and threw tens of thousands of dollars down on that thing. And then he didn't say a word. He had it shipped to Waco on a monster tractor-trailer and couldn't wait to show off his surprise when it finally arrived. After all our years of marriage, he was still clueless about how I might react.

I had no idea any of this was going on, of course. But right around that same time, on some random weeknight, I received a phone call from an out-of-state number I didn't recognize. I picked it up.

"Hi, I'm Katie Neff, and I work for a television production company," the woman on the line said. "I saw some of your designs online, and I was wondering . . ."

This Katie had apparently seen photos of our most recent flip house that I'd designed, the one we were living in at the time. A few weeks earlier a friend of mine, Molly, had submitted those photos to a popular blog called DesignMom.com, and I'd been excited that a blog with thousands of followers wanted to feature it. It was the first time my work had ever really been featured on a design blog other than my own. I had a loyal local following back then, but no national following to speak of.

"I loved what you did," Katie continued, "so I looked you up and read *your* blog too. I see that you and your husband work together, and I was just wondering: Would you ever want to be on a TV show?"

I sat there and thought, *Did I just hear that right?*

"What about us would you want to show on TV?" I asked.

"Well, we just love how organic it is—that you and your husband work together. Not only do you sell homes, but you also flip and renovate them. We think it's unique that you're a husband-and-wife team." She went on and on, and I finally said, "Well, let me talk to Chip and I'll get back with you."

I got with Chip, and he immediately said, "That's a scam. Don't call them back."

BLESSINGS IN (A BIG, UGLY) DISGUISE

I was just skeptical. Back in high school I had some buddies that were always trying to get into modeling. They would go to these “agents” and “casting calls” and then wind up paying some guy \$1,000 to take their headshots, and nothing would ever come of it. So, yeah, I thought it was something like that.

Jo really thought we should give them a shot, but I was just like, “Jo, I’m telling you, there’s no way this is legit. We’re gonna meet these people, and they’ll get us all excited thinking they’re gonna make us famous or something and then say, ‘Oh, by the way, you need to pay us twenty grand.’”

I somehow convinced Chip to let me call Katie back. We didn’t have a lot of money just lying around, so I knew there was no way anyone could trick us out of thousands of dollars. (Of course, I knew nothing about that houseboat yet!)

Sure enough, within a couple of weeks Katie sent an entire camera crew to Waco to spend five days filming us for what they called a “sizzle reel”—basically an extended commercial they would put together to try to sell a television series based on the two of us and our little business. They never asked us for any money at all. They were legit, which made us wonder: Why in the world would anyone care to watch us on TV? We don’t even *watch* TV. These people have to be nuts.”

After the crew spent a couple of days with us, they started thinking they might be nuts, too. Chip and I were *horrible*. We were scared of the cameras, which is hilarious because Chip is the most talkative guy I know. But like clockwork, the moment that red light turned on, he froze.

My mouth was all dry and I couldn’t think straight, and Jo was a little dull. They just followed Jo around and tried to make something out of nothing. It was pretty obvious this could not make good television. We were just awful. We really were.

The crew had me stand in my kitchen and try to make pancakes with the kids hanging off of my legs while Chip was basically sucking his thumb over in the corner, and the whole time I was trying to convince the kids not to look into the camera so it would look more “natural.” It certainly didn’t *feel* natural, and it definitely wasn’t any fun.

On the fourth day, just before the camera crew was scheduled to go home, their top guy pulled us aside and said, “Look, if something doesn’t happen here, there’s no way you guys are getting a show. This just isn’t working.”

We figured we were pretty much done at that point, and it didn’t really bother us at all. The two of us had never imagined we’d be on TV. We’d talked to friends about the kinds of things they watched on “reality TV,” and from what we could tell, none of it seemed like us anyway.

Then something happened. The very next morning, the houseboat arrived. With cameras rolling, Chip put a blindfold on me and drove me to an empty lot by the lake.

With all cameras on me, Chip released the blindfold and said, “Ta-da!”

I wasn’t sure what I was looking at. A shipwreck, maybe? On the back of a semi?

“What is that?” I said

“I got this for you, Jo!” Chip replied.

“That *better* not be for me,” I said. It was the ugliest, rundown-looking, two-story shack of a boat I’d ever seen. “What the heck are we going to do with a houseboat?”

“That’s our new home!” Chip said, beaming with pride at his purchase.

“What? You are crazy. We are not living on a houseboat.”

It quickly dawned on me that this wasn’t a joke and Chip wasn’t even close to kidding. I wasn’t mishearing him. He was dead serious about making that boat our home for the next six months.

I just about lost it. “How can we live on the water, Chip? Three of our kids don’t even know how to swim! Did you think this through?!”

Then he ‘fessed up and told me how much money he’d spent on it. As it all sank in, I realized I’d never been so mad at him, ever—and that’s saying something.

“Come on. At least come look at it. I know this can work,” he pleaded.

As soon as we walked a little closer, we could see the holes. *Holes*. In the *boat*.

We pulled ourselves up onto the flatbed and went inside to find the interior covered in mold. Someone had taken the AC unit out on top and left a gaping hole in the roof, so for years it had rained straight into the boat. We tried turning the engine over, and of course it didn’t start. That’s when Chip got angry. “I think I got scammed,” he said.

“Chip, did you even look at this thing before you bought it?”

“Well, no,” he said. “It was a great deal, and there were all kinds of pictures. It looked like it was in great shape. Oh, wait a minute. I bet the guy just put up pictures of this thing from when he bought it, like in 1980 or something. That sorry sucker.”

“Sorry sucker? Chip . . .”

By this point I’m trying to decide if we could scrap it for parts. My husband had made plenty of impulsive purchases. That’s just what he does. He’d gone and purchased the house we were currently in without showing that to me, either. But at least it was a house, with a roof, on a foundation. I’d gone along with it, as I always do, and over time I’d come to love that quirky shoebox of a house.

We had worked hard to make it our home. In fact, that house is where I’d had my epiphany about truly owning the space you’re in (a moment I’ll share with you later in this book) and where I’d designed the kids’ rooms that landed on the blog and caused the producer to call. I was already pretty upset that we were going to have to leave that house behind in a few months. But to think that we might have to move into this . . . *thing* was just too much.

“You need to return it,” I said.

“It’s paid for,” Chip said. “It’s done. I bought it as is.”

“Excuse me, semi driver!” I yelled to the man in the front seat. “I need you to hook that thing back up and take it back where it came from!”

Chip made it clear to me that once he made a deal—fair or not—that thing was ours now.

By that point the cameras had totally disappeared to both of us. We just completely forgot they were there. Chip’s arms were flailing around as he circled the boat, tallying up the problems he could find. My arms were flailing as I yelled at him for buying that dumb thing without talking to me first.

When I finally calmed down, I saw how disappointed he was and how bad he felt. I decided to take a deep breath and try to think this thing through.

“Maybe it’s not that bad,” I said. (I think I was trying to cheer myself up as much as I was trying to console Chip.) “If we fix up the interior and just get it to the point where we can get it onto the water, at least maybe then we can turn around, sell it, and get our money back.”

Over the course of the next hour or so, I really started to come around. I took another walk through the boat and started to picture how we could make it livable—maybe even kind of cool. After all, we’d conquered worse. We tore a few things apart right then and there, and I grabbed some paper and sketched out a new layout for the tiny kitchen. I talked to him about potentially finishing an accent wall with shiplap—a kind of rough-textured pine paneling that fans of our show now know all too well.

“*Shiplap?*” Chip laughed. “That seems a little ironic to use on a *ship*, doesn’t it?”

“Ha-ha,” I replied. I was still not in the mood for his jokes, but this is how Chip backs me off the ledge—with his humor.

Then I asked him to help me lift something on the deck, and he said,

“Aye, aye, matey!” in his best pirate voice, and slowly but surely I came around.

I can’t believe I’m saying this, but by the end of that afternoon I was actually a little bit excited about taking on such a big challenge. Chip was still deflated that he’d allowed himself to get duped, but he put his arm around me as we started walking back to the truck. I put my head on his shoulder. And the cameras captured the whole thing—just an average, roller-coaster afternoon in the lives of Chip and Joanna Gaines.

The head cameraman came jogging over to us before we drove away. Chip rolled down his window and said sarcastically, “How’s *that* for reality TV?” We were both feeling embarrassed that this is how we had spent our last day of trying to get this stinkin’ television show.

“Well,” the guy said, breaking into a great big smile, “if I do my job, you two just landed yourself a reality TV show.”

What? We were floored. We couldn’t believe it. How was *that* a show? But lo and behold, he was right. That rotten houseboat turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Over the course of the next few months, the production company’s head of development, Patrick Jager, championed our show tirelessly—until HGTV decided we were just what they wanted. Apparently one of the big selling points was the “authenticity” we’d shown during that humbling afternoon. We couldn’t have scripted it even if we’d tried. There was something about Chip’s impulsiveness, his riskiness, combined with my reaction to his riskiness and the way we worked it out as a couple, that landed us the show.

A few months later, the cameras were back—and *Fixer Upper* was born. Our quiet little lives turned completely upside down as our life’s work became a hit TV show. After years of toiling away semi-anonymously here in Waco, trying to make ends meet while designing our clients’ dream homes and doing our best to raise our four kids right, our world changed in a way that was much different than either of us ever could have imagined.

Now that we’ve had some time to reflect on it, it’s as if our whole lives

had been preparing us for this experience. We didn't know it at the time, but it's as if the seeds had been planted long ago.

Have you ever looked at the bud of a magnolia flower? It's a tight little pod that stays closed up for a long time on the end of its branch until one day, out of nowhere, it finally bursts open into this gigantic, gorgeous, fragrant flower that's ten times bigger than the bud itself. It's impossible to imagine that such a big beautiful thing could pop out of that tiny little bud. But it does. And that's sort of what getting "discovered" and sharing our lives on *Fixer Upper* feels like to us.

We never could have imagined being on TV together, touching the lives of so many people, especially back when we were two broke newlyweds sleeping on the floor of our eight-hundred-square-foot house while we renovated it, or when I first opened and then had to *close* my little Magnolia shop on Bosque Boulevard. I have to wonder, though, if it was just a happy coincidence that we decided to name that shop Magnolia. Or was it something more? Because it's staggering to think just how much it has blossomed.

As we finished up writing this book, HGTV was airing the third season of *Fixer Upper*, and we'd started filming seasons four and five. And that's only part of the excitement. Thanks to the show's popularity, we outgrew our beloved "Little Shop on Bosque." In 2015, to make room for all our new customers, we moved the shop into a converted, early twentieth-century cotton-oil mill. Our new property is marked by two giant, rusty, abandoned silos in the heart of downtown Waco—easy to spot from miles away. It's a place where we're proud to welcome our out-of-town visitors.

To get how exciting this is for us, you have to understand where it all started: a little shop, one employee, and a shopgirl that was happy to see eight customers a day. The reality that thousands of visitors are coming to our town to experience Magnolia Market at the Silos is not only an honor, it's one of the single greatest accomplishments of our careers.

We've also had the great thrill of seeing our friends' businesses

boom, since we've gotten to incorporate their work and artistry into the shop and the show. That was our goal from the beginning—to bless our community, our friends, and our viewers through this unbelievable platform we've been given.

Chip and I have received generous opportunities to speak all over the country, to give DIY tips on talk shows, to design our own furniture, rug, and paint lines, and now to write a book. A book! Can you believe it?

For the two of us, writing these pages has offered a welcome chance to stop and look back on the story of our lives, and it certainly has been an eye-opening process. How many of us take the time to relive half a lifetime's worth of happy memories, cringe-worthy failures, and unforgettable adventures together? How many of us get a chance to sit down and talk about the rough times we overcame in the past or to laugh about the stupid mistakes we made when we were young?

Working on this book has allowed us to look back on all the things that brought us here to the farm, to this place we love so much, and to this busy, exciting season in our lives. And let me tell you, it's been one heck of a journey. We're still trying to figure out how to make this new life work for us and our kids, smack dab in the middle of these exciting new adventures we've been on. Writing it all down has also allowed us to reflect on the inspiration we've picked up and the lessons we've learned along the way—and there have been many!

We feel so blessed to be able to share all of this with you with the hopes that you'll find new ways to love the space and season you're in too.

Even after all of this thinking and talking and writing, Chip and I still look at each other at the end of the day and go, "Us? Really?" Honestly, we're still pretty baffled as to why people seem to like watching the two of us be "us" on national TV, because these are the same old things we've been doing since the very day we met. But that's a story for another chapter.



FIRST DATES AND SECOND CHANCES

To this day, I am still not sure what it was about Chip Gaines that made me give him a second chance—because, basically, our first date was over before it even started.

I was working at my father's Firestone automotive shop the day we first met. I'd worked as my dad's office manager through my years at Baylor University and was perfectly happy working there afterward while I tried to figure out what I really wanted to do with my life. The smell of tires, metal, and grease—that place was like a second home to me, and the guys in the shop were all like my big brothers.

On this particular afternoon, they all started teasing me. "You should go out to the lobby, Jo. There's a hot guy out there. Go talk to him!" they said.

"No," I said. "Stop it! I'm not doing that."

I was all of twenty-three, and I wasn't exactly outgoing.

She was a bit awkward—no doubt about that.

I hadn't dated all that much, and I'd never had a serious relationship—nothing that lasted longer than a month or two. I'd always been an introvert and still am (believe it or not). I was also very picky, and I just wasn't the type of girl who struck up conversations with guys I didn't

know. I was honestly comfortable being single; I didn't think that much of it.

"Who is this guy, anyway?" I asked, since they all seemed to know him for some reason.

"Oh, they call him Hot John," someone said, laughing.

Hot John? There was no *way* I was going out in that lobby to strike up a conversation with some guy called Hot John. But the guys wouldn't let up, so I finally said, "Fine."

I gathered up a few things from my desk (in case I needed a backup plan) and rounded the corner into the lobby. I quickly realized that Hot John *was* pretty good-looking. He'd obviously just finished a workout—he was dressed head-to-toe in cycling gear and was just standing there, innocently waiting on someone from the back. I tried to think about what I might say to strike up a conversation when I got close enough and quickly settled on the obvious topic, cycling. But just as that thought raced through my head, he looked up from his magazine and smiled right at me.

"Crap," I thought. I completely lost my nerve. I kept on walking right past him and out the lobby's front door.

When I reached the safety of my dad's outdoor waiting area, I realized just how badly I'd needed the fresh air. I sat on a chair a few down from another customer and immediately started laughing at myself. "Did I really just do that?"

"Hey, what's so funny?" the customer sitting near me asked.

I looked up at him, and before I could even answer he asked, "Wait, aren't you the girl from the commercials?"

"Yeah, that's me," I said, still embarrassed from my awkward encounter with Hot John. I was, in fact, the girl from the commercials. I had some interest in television news. I had even done an internship with CBS in New York City, working under Dan Rather in the news division, and because of that my dad had insisted I go on camera for the local TV ads he ran for his shop.

I was so caught up in my own thoughts that I didn't even get a good look at this guy who had started talking to me. He was wearing a baseball cap and seemed like an average customer. He seemed around my age, maybe a bit older—that was all I really noticed. What did strike me was that he was real chatty, so we wound up sitting there for like twenty minutes just shooting the breeze.

Over the course of our conversation, he told me he was a Baylor grad. That struck me as odd. The guys I'd known at Baylor were more the clean-cut type. This guy seemed a little rough and tumble, the kind who'd rather work with his hands than keep a corporate calendar. But right off the bat I could tell he was smart—and definitely hardworking. He was just at the shop getting the brakes fixed on his truck. I also found it interesting that he'd stuck around Waco after graduation. "I love this town," he said. "I'm planning to stay in Waco until God makes it clear I'm supposed to move on."

That surprised me, too. I loved the way he mentioned God in a way that was so unguarded, and I liked that he wanted to stay in Waco. That was rare for Baylor grads. Normally people shipped themselves straight off to the big cities after graduation.

Speaking of, that whole week I had been debating whether or not to move back to New York City to pursue my dream of broadcast journalism. Most of my friends and family were encouraging me to go, and I was really wrestling with it. It occurred to me this could be my one big chance, but I also really liked it right where I was.

All of a sudden Hot John walked out and said, "Hey, Chip, let's go." I was confused. The man I'd been chatting with—who apparently was named Chip—explained that John was his roommate and that they were business partners. Oh, *of course* these two had come together. I was still completely embarrassed about my initial encounter with Hot John, but I said, "Hi." And then, thankfully, this Chip went right back to our conversation as Hot John took a seat and joined in.

Chip asked me about New York and what I wanted to do, and how

long my dad had owned the shop, and what it was I loved about Waco. He asked about my sisters and my family in general, and what I'd done at Baylor, and if I'd known a few communications majors he'd ran around with at school. (I told y'all he was chatty!) Somehow none of these questions seemed intrusive or strange to me at the time, which is funny, because thinking back I find them particularly telling.

At the time, it was just like talking with an old friend.

John finally stood up, and this baseball-cap-wearing customer that John had introduced as Chip followed. "Well, nice talking to you," he said.

"Nice talking to you too," I replied, and that was it. I went back inside. The guys in the shop wanted to know what I thought about Hot John, and I just laughed. "Sorry, guys, I don't think it's gonna work out."

The next day I came back from my lunch break to find a note on my desk: "Chip Gaines called. Call him back." I thought, *Oh, that must be the guy I met yesterday*. So I called him. I honestly thought he was going to ask me about getting a better price on his brakes or something, but instead he said, "Hey, I really enjoyed our conversation yesterday. I was wondering . . . you want to go out sometime?"

And for some reason I said okay—just like that, without any hesitation. It wasn't like me at all. When I hung up the phone, I went, "What in the world just happened!"

So you said okay immediately? I don't even remember that. That's fun! No reservations? Man, I must've been good-lookin'.

What Chip didn't know was I didn't even give myself time to have reservations, Something told me to just go for it.

Cute, Joey. This story makes me love you all over again.

My parents were out of town that week, but I remember calling to tell them, "I'm going on a date with a customer that was in getting his

brakes done. I met him yesterday.” I guess it’s unusual for a twenty-three-year-old to call her parents and tell them she’s going on a date, but it was normal for me. I was extremely close to my parents and I was just excited to tell them.

My parents and my little sister, Mary Kay, whom I call Mikey, asked me what this Chip guy looked like, and I said, “I honestly can’t tell you. He had a baseball cap on, and the way we were sitting, I didn’t really get a good look at him.”

When the night of our big date came, I was giddy and a bit anxious. I got ready at my sister’s apartment. She and her roommates, Sarah and Katiegh, were all there for moral support, and Chip was supposed to pick me up at six. Six rolls around. No Chip. Then six thirty—still no Chip. I thought, *Well, maybe he thought the date was at seven*, so I gave him the benefit of the doubt. But when seven came and went, I was officially done.

Finally at seven thirty, a full ninety minutes late, he knocked at the door.

“Don’t even answer it,” I whispered to my friends, “I don’t want to go anywhere with this idiot.”

“But we want to see what he looks like!” they said, and so one of them finally opened the door while I hung back out of sight.

“Well, hello, ladies,” Chip said as he pushed his way into the apartment. I could tell that he charmed every one of them in about two seconds flat. I finally decided to step out and at least take a look at him. He was not like I remembered at all. This guy had no hair. I’d imagined he had hair under the baseball cap, but nope. Just stubble. And his face was weathered and flushed red, like he’d been working outside in the hot sun all day long. He was wearing a reddish-toned leather jacket, too, and I thought, *Is this red guy even the same guy I was talking to at the shop?*

It turned out that Chip had shaved his head to support a friend of his who was battling cancer.

THE MAGNOLIA STORY

A bunch of us shaved our heads for a good friend of mine. It was growing back, but it was just about a buzz cut at that point.

I still don't remember what he said that convinced me to walk out the door with him. He didn't even have a plan for our date. He said, "So, Joanna, where do you want to go eat?" He didn't apologize for being late, either. He had so much confidence. I don't know. I can't explain it. Only Chip could be an hour and a half late and have no one mad about it.

I wasn't an hour and a half late. She's making that up. I was like twenty minutes late.

Chip was an hour and a half late to *everything*. If I'd known that then, maybe I wouldn't have taken it personally.

Well, I think you're wrong. You're cute, though, and you do have me on the no-plans thing. That was bad. I don't know why I'm like that. I just never have any plans. I like the way things just work themselves out. It's more fun that way. I wasn't nervous about the date or where to eat, and I wasn't nervous about being late.

Out in his truck, Chip asked me again where I'd like to eat, so I suggested a place out in Valley Mills, a small town about thirty minutes from Waco—which, looking back, was a gutsy move for a first date. Thirty minutes was a long time to be in a car if you ran out of things to talk about. But there was a restaurant there in a historic mansion where my parents liked to go. It was really charming, and it was the first place that popped into my head.

The whole drive over there was kind of like a dream. Jo wasn't anything like the girls I typically went out with. But she was so cute, you know? We wound up driving out of town through these back

FIRST DATES AND SECOND CHANCES

roads—I didn't know where in the heck we were going—and we came up to this mansion with pillars on the front that looked like something you'd see in *Gone with the Wind*.

Everything was going about like I'd expected until we sat down at the table and the owner of the restaurant came over. Everywhere I went in Waco and Dallas, someone was always coming up and talking to me, so I thought maybe this guy was coming over to say hello. Turns out he wasn't coming to talk to me at all. He was coming over to talk to Joanna.

"Hey, sweetheart, how are you? I saw your latest commercial. Tell your mom and dad I said hello, okay?" They talked for quite a while, and my mind started turning, like, "Wow. This girl is a local superstar."

Dinner was perfect. We were both comfortable with each other for some reason, and the conversation came easy. When the bill came, Chip quickly popped up and took a big roll of cash out of his pocket. I don't think I'd ever seen anyone carry that much cash. My dad was successful, but he kept his money in a bank. Seeing that, I thought, *Oh, that's why he stayed in Waco. He's doing really well for himself!*

You thought I was rich. Ha! What you didn't know is that was probably all the money I had in the world. I always carried cash. I'd carry like \$1000 on me in those days. I just loved the way it felt. Plus, I worked with a lot of rough dudes, and some of them expected to be paid in cash.

It's funny because I went to Baylor, where I was surrounded by all these rich kids from rich families, and for whatever reason I was never drawn to that. I was much more comfortable hanging out with the guys who dug ditches. I lived like them, too, whether it was carrying all my money around in my pocket or sitting under some shady tree at lunchtime while they laughed at me trying to eat jalapeños.

After dinner the two of us went and sat on that grand front porch for a while. It was a beautiful night, and I could have just sat there and listened to the silence. But Chip, of course—he had other ideas. I just looked at him until I couldn't even hear him anymore. I remember thinking, *Nope. This guy isn't even close to done.*

In my head, I started to go down the checklist we women put together in our heads and our hearts. I'd always been attracted to people with dark hair. He was blonde or redheaded or something in between—it was too short to tell. I would have preferred hair, period.

I'd always been attracted to quiet guys, too, which I knew was a problem because the quiet guys never had the nerve to ask me out, and they certainly never drew me out the way this guy did. Still, he was all over the place. He was talking about the businesses he'd started, and these ideas he had, and how he was buying up little houses and flipping them and renting some out to Baylor students, and I was wondering if he was just a bit crazy.

I liked stability. I liked safety. I liked *traditional* and I liked being on time. And this Chip with the beet-red face wasn't any of those things. I did think he was kind of fascinating, though.

I know this is going to sound strange to some people, but right in the middle of that—right in the middle of me trying to figure this guy out—a little voice in my head said, *That's the man you're going to marry.* I swear to you it was clear as day. It seemed like the voice of God, or maybe it was some deep intuition, but I heard it. In fact, I heard it so loudly that I completely tuned out of our conversation and lost focus.

My roommates asked me a million questions after he dropped me off that night: “What was he like? Did he try to kiss you? How was the date?” And my response was that it was good. We had fun. He was a good talker. And no, he didn't try to kiss me. I didn't tell them about that voice in my head. It seemed far too ridiculous. But honestly, if it wasn't for that voice, I'm not sure I would have stuck it out though all the ups and downs

of dating a guy like Chip. I was spinning a bit, but I certainly didn't fall instantly head-over-heels for him or anything like that.

It wasn't exactly a love at first sight for me, either. It was a fun date, but I'd been on lots of fun dates. Something was different, though. Joanna impressed me. I couldn't stop thinking about that owner coming up to talk to her. I was honestly the one who normally got the attention. She was totally different from the typical blonde-haired, blue-eyed cheerleader type I tended to date. But the more I thought about her, the more I knew I wanted to see her again.

We made plans to go get coffee the following week, but I had to cancel. I hurt my back. In fact, I needed to go into the hospital for surgery, and I let Chip know that. He seemed real concerned and wished me luck—and then he never called me again. He didn't send flowers to the hospital. Nothing.

Flowers to the hospital? After one date?

Yes! That would've been the chivalrous thing to do. Everyone thought it was rude that you didn't call after that.

Huh. Well, I apologize, Jo. I didn't even think about that.

It's okay. I forgive you. I think it turned out okay in the end.

Even though he wasn't what I'd pictured as the type of man I might be interested in, there was just something about Chip Gaines that I couldn't get off my mind. I kept thinking about him—and thinking about just how weird it all was.

Our first date happened at the end of October, and it wasn't until after the turn of the new year—early January something—that I finally got another phone call from him.

“Hey, Jo, I just wanted to say that I really enjoyed our date, and I think we ought to stop playing all these games,” he said.

I was sitting there thinking, *What games is this guy talking about?*

I'd made a bet with Hot John to see who could hold out the longest before calling our dates back. I really wanted that fifty dollars from John! That's the only reason I didn't call.

I think Chip was still dating a few girls off and on then.

Yeah, I think she's right. But I did want to win that fifty dollars, and it was killing me because I kept thinking about you and I really did think you were going to call any day now!

“There's a basketball game tonight. Would you like to go?” Chip asked me. Once again, without hesitation, I said yes, and from that night on, Chip and I started seeing each other almost every day. He would come by the tire shop to visit. He met my parents. I met his parents. I went out and drove around with him to see some of the properties he worked on and to meet some of the guys he worked with in his landscaping business. One guy, Melesio, was like a brother to Chip. I had never seen someone bond so closely to the people he worked with.

After awhile, I even offered to help him do some of the books for the little businesses he was running, and he took me up on it. I'd never been around that kind of work before, but I thought it was fun. I thought *he* was fun.

About four months into it, we were shooting hoops in my dad's driveway when Chip stopped in his tracks, held me in his arms, looked into my eyes under the starry sky, and said, “I love you.”

And I looked at him and said, “Thank you.”

“Thank you?” Chip said.

I know I should have said, “I love you too,” but this whole thing had

been such a whirlwind, and I was just trying to process it all. No guy had ever told me he loved me before, and here Chip was saying it after what seemed like such a short period of time.

Chip got angry. He grabbed his basketball from under my arm and went storming off with it like a four-year-old.

I really thought, *What in the world is with this girl? I just told her I loved her, and that's all she can say?* I didn't throw those words around lightly. I'd never said those words to anyone. Ever. So saying it was a big deal for me too. But now I was stomping down the driveway going, *Okay, that's it. Am I dating an emotionless Cyborg or something? I'm going home.*

Chip took off in his big white Chevy truck with the Z71 stickers on the side, even squealing his tires a bit as he drove off, and it really sank in what a big deal that must have been for him. I felt bad—so bad that I actually got up the courage to call him later that night. I explained myself, and he said he understood, and by the end of the phone call we were right back to being ourselves.

Two weeks later, when Chip said “I love you” again, I responded, “I love you too.” There was no hesitation. I knew I loved him, and I knew it was okay to say so.

I'm not sure why I ever gave him a second chance when he showed up ninety minutes late for our first date or why I gave him another second chance when he didn't call me for two months after that. And I'm not sure why he gave me a second chance after I blew that romantic moment in the driveway. But I'm very glad I did, and I'm very glad he did too—because sometimes second chances lead to great things.

All of my doubts, all of the things I thought I wanted out of a relationship, and many of the things I thought I wanted out of life itself turned out to be just plain wrong. Instead? That voice from our first date turned out to be the thing that was absolutely right.