

***Chris & Carmen Garner's Story:*** Written by Lisa Holloway and published in *Can My Marriage be Saved* (True Stories of Saved Marriages) by Mae & Erika Chambers

“You’re leaving me?”

The clock didn’t tick. No one breathed. At that moment Carmen couldn’t have said where the kids were or even the color of his shirt. Everything ceased to exist under the force of his calmly spoken words as they shattered her world. All of her energy was focused on holding the tears back.

Chris turned away to reach into the drawer where the checks were kept. “It’s already done. Where are the checks? I need one for a deposit on the apartment.”

Carmen closed her eyes, asking God for the strength *not* to beg him to stay. What a reversal that would be. How many times had her ex-husband hit her and called her names, and then beg her not to leave him. When she opened her eyes again, Chris still stood there, close enough to touch if touching could reach him. She crossed her arms. “Is there another woman?”

Silence.

Finally he spoke. “No, Carmen, there’s not.” There was a hint of sarcasm in the voice that finally answered. “I just can’t do this anymore.”

Her body was numb, rooted to that one spot in the bedroom. She remembered how he kissed her so gently, making her feel precious for the first time in her life. “Chris, I love you. I think we can work through this.”

But he just shook his head.

She sighed, beginning to grasp the ramifications of what was happening. “Well, if you’re going to leave, *you* are going to have to go out there and tell the children. I won’t do it for you.” Carmen kept her voice low out of habit: they never fought in front of the children. They went for walks or drives or kept it behind closed doors. It was one of the few things they were united on.

She turned to face the window, blind to the sun-filled day shining brightly outside. She heard him cross the bedroom and shut the door behind him. Woodenly, she walked to the bathroom and turned on the shower. There she collapsed, sobs wracked her under warm pulse of the water.

Finally, she turned off the shower and wrapped herself in the hug of a soft, clean towel. Fingers trembling, she dialed a friend from church. Her tension only increased as one ring followed another, but then Linda answered, and Carmen heard the words pouring out. “Linda, this is Carmen. Chris is leaving me.”

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Chris stood in the living room, unable to walk right in and tell the kids. Instead he paused, gazing at the lively eyes of Carmen’s daughter and son, Michelle and Steven, smiling back at him through the glass.

*These are our children,* he thought. He’d already been separated from one child due to divorce and hated to see it happen again, but what could he do? *This isn’t the life I wanted. She’s always blaming me, accusing me. I can’t even talk to a woman without her jumping all over me. She’s so insecure. All we do is fight.*

His eyes fell on another picture: a tiny snapshot of a young woman and a baby tucked in the larger frame of Michelle’s senior photo. The thought of Michelle’s unexpected pregnancy was like a blow to him all over again. He still didn’t want to deal with it. Things had never been

the same between them after that, and he had pushed her away—something Carmen had a hard time understanding. It had nearly torn the family apart.

Steven . . . well, he was only thirteen, but it seemed like the older he got, the more rebellious he became. For the past year, there'd been a lot of trouble, and raging hormones and girls chasing him didn't help matters. This wasn't the young man he knew Steven could be. This was not the son he used to build models with or cheer for when he earned new merit badges in Boy Scouts. He didn't have much in common with this boy searching so desperately for his identity. And the closeness they'd felt in years past was lost as they spent less and less time together.

And there was Carmen. A part of him wanted to go back, hold her, and tell her he didn't mean what he'd said. But he did mean it. It was just too difficult, one crisis after another. *Love won't fix this. I just want someone to listen to me and care about what I want for a change.*

He grabbed his bag with fresh resolve as he removed his car keys from his pocket. He strode to the front door, and gripped the knob.

The phone rang.

It rang a couple more times before Chris reluctantly reached for it. "Hello?"

It was Loren, the husband of Linda, one of Carmen's best friends.

"Hey Loren, this really isn't a good time."

Chris listened impatiently Loren doggedly insisted they meet for coffee immediately. He suddenly had this urgent need to meet with Chris.

"Can't we do this some other day Loren? What do you mean, no? Okay, maybe real quick, but this just isn't a good time for me. Okay, okay, I'll be there in twenty minutes."

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Carmen combed her fingers through wet hair and started the car, hoping a drive would help her clear her mind. She was on auto-pilot as she drove laps around the neighborhood, crying and replaying the scene with Chris in her mind. *What happened?*

She'd never expected to fall in love with Chris. When they first met, they were both married and had their own problems. All that time working at the phone company together, he'd seemed arrogant and wasn't very social.

Then one night Carmen's first husband had exploded in anger—again, and for the last time. Afterwards she'd watched him load up for a camping trip. A couple of days later when he walked through the door, chucking his sleeping bag on the couch, the air of emptiness struck him: After thirteen years of abuse and fear, she was gone for good.

A year and a half later, Carmen heard that Chris's wife had left him. Knowing what it was like to be alone, she'd felt sympathy. She almost laughed as she remembered thinking that since she wasn't attracted to him, they could really just be friends. But as she got to know him, she found out that he wasn't arrogant, but gentle. They started dating.

Even so, she'd balked a little when he asked her on a "date" with his parents. *What is he—some kind of mama's boy?* But it wasn't like anything she'd expected. She loved being there and found herself wanting to be a part of them. There for visitation, Chris's only son ran around the apartment, charming each of the grandparents and Carmen in turn as only two-year-olds can do. She remembered the long-ago smallness of her own two children as she gathered him into her lap.

Nothing about her dysfunctional upbringing had prepared her for this wholesome little sit-down. As they played cards, Carmen remembered her own childhood as one of many in an

alcoholic, abusive family. Yet she'd felt so alone, so small amidst their lack of interest. In a way, she'd never really gotten to be a child; she had fended for herself from a young age and forged signatures on report cards that parents never asked for.

Then, as they sat there talking and laughing together, his parents asked her to bring her kids by so they could teach them to swim. She remembered how the tears had come into her eyes as she finally felt a warmth that could include her *and* her children in a way that no one else had—not their father, not their own grandparents. These people she barely knew wanted her and the people she loved most to be a part of them.

She and Chris had gotten serious pretty quickly and maybe not everything about the relationship was perfect, but they were in love. In spite of the problems they were facing even then, they were certain this growing love would sustain them through anything that came their way. Chris started attending church with Carmen and her children despite his agnosticism. Five months into the relationship, they felt the pull of the Holy Spirit to come into a renewed relationship with God. A month after that, they were married. *We thought we'd live happily ever after . . .*

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As Chris drove to the coffee shop, he couldn't help but think about the early days with Carmen. She was pretty and full of life, but she'd been hurt in so many ways by the people she was closest to. It had been hard for her to open up and trust, but he'd wanted to protect her—to make her feel special and beautiful. He couldn't believe the way he'd felt the first time she smiled at him . . . or the first time they kissed. He had felt a tidal wave of emotion.

The simplest things had made her happy. *Not anymore. These days, nothing I do seems right. She's always nagging me. And she lets the kids get away with way too much.*

They had made a real effort to join together as a unit—thus the policy of arguing in private. They'd also arranged visitation to give themselves maximum time as a family and as a couple, with Chris's son visiting on the weekends when Carmen's were home—and all of the kids gone on alternate weekends. The children were always “our children,” but it was nice to have some time simply to be alone, to enjoy and get used to each other without all the responsibilities with a ready-made family.

And then there were the exes. *Why can't Carmen just tell him to leave us alone? There's no reason their conversations have to go on forever. I can't stand the way he talks to her and treats the kids. And she complains about me and my ex!*

Their methods of running a household were different, too. Chris remembered with dismay the day he'd opened the pantry and discovered all the jars of spaghetti sauce. Disgusted, he threw them in the trash: Clash One of the War of Different Expectations. *I wish she'd do things my way. I'm used to making homemade sauce—what's wrong with that? What's wrong with wanting things to be done right?* But when Carmen saw what he'd done, she confronted him. Hurt and angry, she felt criticized by his actions—rebuked for the way she, a working mother, managed the home.

The car in front of Chris was going way too slow. Irritation pulled him back to the present moment, and he pulled into a parking space beside the coffee shop. Once inside, he saw Loren sitting at a table not far away, focusing on his coffee with intensity. Sensing him, Loren looked up and waved, nudging the chair across from him with his foot.

“You can't just leave, Chris,” Loren said. “You have to step up and take responsibility for becoming the husband and father God intended you to be.”

Chris was amazed by the straightforward audacity of this man—only an acquaintance—confronting him. But something of the conviction and authority in Loren’s voice reached past Chris’s wall. He began to really listen as Loren unrelentingly held him accountable for his promise to Carmen and his responsibility to his family spiritually and practically, through all the landmines life put in their path. Laying it all on Carmen’s shoulders so he could move on was not an option. Hearing the Spirit-led words, he knew Loren was right. He just didn’t know what to do to face it.

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That evening, Carmen moved about in a daze. Kids came in and out of the rooms. They could see that something was wrong, but the expression on Carmen’s face told them not to press for answers.

Sinking into the couch, Carmen watched her son sitting at the other end. How could they tell him the stepfather he’d grown up with wouldn’t be around any more? She remembered the day they’d told him about the engagement. While his sister danced around, all smiles, he had looked up at his mother with a face full of anguish and fear, asking “Now that you’re getting married, does that mean I’ll never see my daddy?”

They’d done their best to reassure him. Every other weekend, he went to visit his father; every day in between, Chris worked to raise him and build a relationship with him. Chris got involved in his life, giving his time and enthusiasm to build something positive. Eventually, Steven learned to love and accept Chris, but it was so hard for him. *Was all his pain for nothing? Why can’t Chris understand what he’s putting us through? He just decides to leave and doesn’t even give us a chance. I don’t know why I should expect anything more; he always pulls away when things get hard.*

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When Chris entered the bedroom that night, Carmen was already there, huddled tight with her back to him. The slightest quiver of surprise ran through her—wasn’t he leaving?—but she didn’t speak. What was left to say?

“I’m not leaving you,” Chris whispered as he lay down beside her. “We have a lot of work to do, but I want to try.” He leaned toward her, caressing her soft, dark hair and taking in the scent of her perfume, faint and warm.

And she turned to him, throwing herself into his arms once again. She didn’t try to check the tears pouring down her face—tension released transforming into liquid joy; he tasted the saltiness of them as he kissed her over and over, rejoicing with her and holding her tight.

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Carmen finished telling her story, warmed by compassion as she looked across the table at the young couple they were counseling. Jeff and Susan stared back, hurt and animosity distorting their faces. “That night began the long journey of growing into the couple God meant us to be. It wasn’t easy for us, and it won’t be for you either. It took some serious marriage counseling, and several years of seminars and small group study after that before we really began to work through our issues and learn to find our identity in Christ instead of each other—learning not to look to the other to complete us or to make us happy. No person can do that.”

Chris joined her by saying, “We had to learn to see the strength our differences give us in communication, thinking, feeling, and handling problems . . . and in helping us understand the

struggles other couples are going through.” He squeezed Carmen’s hand, loving the helper God had given him for this marriage ministry.

*Twenty-six years of marriage . . . I never would have believed we’d get here.* Carmen ran her thumb over the firm ridges of his fingers, loving the feel of the wedding ring pressing against her skin. “Life together isn’t perfect. I’m still learning to let go of fears and insecurities that come from my past.”

“But one of Carmen’s biggest strengths is in confronting the tough issues and not letting them go until we solve them. Our family is better because she looks honestly at our problems. Don’t pull away when Susan holds you accountable.” Chris looked almost sheepish as he admitted, “I can be impatient with others’ weaknesses; I see a little of that in you, too, Jeff. But the flip side of that same quality can be perseverance to work through the obstacles and go the distance.”

“We really do balance—and challenge—each other,” Carmen mused. “There is satisfaction in supporting your husband, in meeting his needs and lending him strength. I never got that from waiting for him to make me happy and feel what I feel.”

Chris looked thoughtful. “Her strengths . . . and weaknesses . . . complement mine and enable us to live and minister more fully. Without her there is no ministry.” *Without her half of my heart is gone.* The smile in her eyes told him she’d heard what he didn’t say.

*This story was written in 2007 and the events took place in 1988. While we still do not have a perfect marriage, we have a great marriage and we continue to grow. At this point it has been 31 years and we look forward to continuing to grow through the challenges we will face.*