

A photograph of Danielle Walker, a woman with long, wavy, light brown hair, smiling warmly. She is wearing a cream-colored, ribbed, long-sleeved sweater. Her right hand is raised to her neck, with her fingers gently touching her hair. The background is a bright, out-of-focus window with a grid pattern, suggesting a bright, airy indoor setting.

danielle walker

New York Times bestselling author of *Against All Grain*

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Health & Hope through
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Food Saved Me: My Journey of Finding Health and Hope through the Power of Food

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For my grandma Marge.

*You instilled an appreciation for family and community
in me from an early age; and you taught me what it looks
like to show affection through the food we make and the
conversations around our tables with the ones we love.*

The information contained in this book is based on the author's experience and personal research. It is not intended to replace consultation with your physician or other health-care provider. Diagnosis and treatment of an illness should be done under the direction of a health-care professional.

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A Note from Me to You

This book is the story of how food saved my life. It's also a love story—about loving food, loving family, loving friends, and loving myself enough to take an active role in managing my own health. I have experienced a decade-long cycle of diagnosis, disease, remission, setbacks, recovery, and loss, but one thing has held true: Food continues to save me. And my mission is to help you understand all the different ways food can help save you, too.

If you have used my cookbooks or followed my blog or Instagram page for a while, you've probably read snippets of my story here and there, but until now, I've never done a deep dive. If you don't know me, let me introduce myself: I'm Danielle. I'm a wife, mom, and self-taught grain-free, gluten-free, and *mostly* dairy-free cook and baker from the San Francisco Bay Area.

When I was twenty-two, I was diagnosed with an extreme form of ulcerative colitis, an autoimmune disease that viciously attacks an otherwise healthy colon, resulting in severe—and in my case, life-threatening—malabsorption, malnutrition, and anemia.

In the first few years following my diagnosis, I was so sick I had to be hospitalized multiple times, and on more than one occasion, I required emergency blood transfusions and iron infusions just to

stay alive. With each flare-up, my weight would fluctuate drastically. It wasn't unusual for me to lose as many as twenty to twenty-five pounds within a matter of weeks. That rapid weight loss would often lead to arthritis-like pain in all my joints, a ridiculously rapid heart rate, hair loss, energy loss, and a host of other problems.

Much to my dismay, my husband, Ryan, and I spent the better part of our first year as husband and wife in and out of emergency rooms and doctors' offices. We were unable to travel, stray too far from home, or even enjoy an evening out with friends and family for fear of what might happen if I had another flare-up.

In an attempt to manage my symptoms, my doctors prescribed high doses of steroids and other medications, the side effects of which were often as bad as, if not *worse* than, the disease itself. When I asked them whether food might affect my condition, each physician told me the same thing: "Diet didn't cause it, diet can't help it, and diet can't cure it." But as I continued relying solely on the prescriptions, my symptoms only worsened. My sickness controlled my life until I decided to take matters into my own hands and drastically change my diet.

After doing some research, I decided to stick to unrefined whole foods—the way people ate before the agricultural revolution changed the way food is grown and processed. I like to say it's the way humans were designed to eat before mass production ruined food and before convenience and immediate gratification largely displaced fresh, healthy, and real foods. My diet centers on grass-fed or pasture-raised proteins, fish, vegetables, fruit, seeds, nuts, and healthy fats. It eliminates dairy, legumes, grain products, sugar, gluten, and all processed food.

Almost immediately after I changed my diet, my symptoms began to subside, which was the sign of hope I needed to press forward. But virtually every dish I loved, growing up, had at least one if not

multiple ingredients on my “can’t have” list. That triggered a whole new list of fears and concerns:

Does this mean I’ll never again be able to enjoy all the rich, creamy, sumptuous foods of my childhood?

Who’s going to want to come to our house for a meal or a holiday celebration, knowing I’ll only be serving grain-free, gluten-free, sugar-free, and dairy-free food?

Will people even feel comfortable inviting me to their homes and special events, knowing I probably can’t eat what they’re serving?

How will I eat when I’m traveling?

When I have children of my own, how will I pass down all of the food traditions and memories I grew up with?

My guess is that you have many of the same questions. And believe me, I get it. When you’re forced to alter your diet drastically for the sake of your health, it’s natural to worry that much of what makes life worth living will be lost along with your newly eliminated food groups. It’s understandable to worry that you will miss out on special occasions with family and friends or be unable to provide homemade cookies for a child’s party. And if you’re anything like me, you’re probably also worried that you’ll never again be able to experience the joy that comes from lovingly preparing and serving food to the people you care about.

Well . . . over ten years, thousands of recipes, and three *New York Times* bestselling cookbooks later, I promise you, you *can* effectively manage your symptoms while still enjoying truly amazing food! The process may not be perfectly smooth, and you may hit bumps and setbacks like I have, but your entire life can change for the better.

When I embarked on this new food journey, I assumed it could only help those like me with digestive diseases. But since that day, I have received hundreds of thousands of emails and listened to personal accounts during my book tours from people all over the world who have experienced relief from everything from Crohn’s disease,

ulcerative colitis, multiple sclerosis, Hashimoto's disease, type 1 diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, and psoriasis to autism, infertility, migraines, and food allergies. I've also received positive feedback from people without specific diagnoses whose brain fog, restless sleep, and everyday aches and pains cleared up after altering their diet. They're all managing their health while enjoying nutritious, great-tasting meals that even their friends and families love to eat.

Odds are, if you're reading this book, you or someone you know is struggling with some kind of autoimmune disease or other malady, and you're wondering if changing your diet can help. The short answer is yes! It most definitely can! The slightly longer answer lies in the pages that follow.

If you're new to grain-, gluten-, and dairy-free living, I want you to know that you're not alone. Hundreds of millions of people around the world suffer from various types of autoimmune diseases, and millions more from food allergies or chronic ailments. While diet may not provide a *complete* cure, changing how and what you eat *can* help you manage your health and significantly reduce both the frequency and the severity of flare-ups. I would bet my life on it. In fact, I have.

That's why I have written this book. I want to share my journey so that you will know that there is a path forward—there is healing and there *is* hope. In fact, if you take nothing else from my story, I pray it will be that—*there is hope*. Hope that you can live a full, happy, and healthy life without ever feeling hungry, excluded, or deprived. Hope that with each setback comes new learning and a renewed sense of determination. And hope that food *can* radically change your life for the better.

I know it can.

I've experienced it.

So have millions of others.

Now it's your turn.

Prologue

It was one in the afternoon, the Saturday before Thanksgiving 2009. In four hours, my husband, Ryan, and I were due at a friend's house for our annual "Friendsgiving," where we would celebrate the big day and feast with a few other newlyweds. After we were all sufficiently stuffed like turkeys, we would settle in for a competitive game of Dutch Blitz.

We always did it potluck style. The hostess would prepare the turkey and gravy, while everyone else was tasked with filling in the remaining Thanksgiving dishes—green bean casserole, cranberry sauce, stuffing, sweet potatoes with marshmallow topping, fluffy rolls with butter, crispy bacon-fried brussels sprouts, and of course, pumpkin and pecan pie.

This year, I had signed up for two items, but with trepidation. After spending two years suffering from a debilitating autoimmune disease that affected my digestion, I had vowed to completely overhaul the way I ate. It was an attempt to ditch at least some of the medications I was on, and with them, some of the symptoms I had been dealing with. I had just eliminated all breads, milk and butter, sugar, and some specific carbohydrates like white potatoes and other root vegetables that could be potential causes of inflammation.

Of course, when I made the decision, I hadn't thought about how difficult it would be trying to adhere to those new restrictions during an extremely food-focused holiday season. In retrospect, I probably should have put it off until the new year.

Most of my fondest memories were tied to holidays. And nearly all of them involved food. I so looked forward to gathering around the table with family and friends to enjoy one another's company over a wonderful meal. But now it all felt different. Lost. Abandoned. All those traditions felt like they were being discarded right alongside my newly rejected foods.

I sat in my kitchen looking at the dishes I had signed up to bring—mashed potatoes and a pumpkin pie—and realized I couldn't even eat them. I could make them “as is,” so everyone *else* could enjoy them, but then what would *I* eat? Just the turkey and possibly a salad—without dressing or croutons—provided someone happened to bring one. That didn't sound at all like the joyful holidays I remembered so fondly.

Because mashed potatoes with loads of cream and butter is one of Ryan's favorite side dishes, I resolved to make them “as is” so he could pile his plate high with three scoops as usual, and make a second version for myself. I had read claims in low-carb, healthy recipe blogs and books that pureeing steamed cauliflower with some chicken stock was an even stand-in for mashed potatoes. It sounded a little far-fetched, but what other choice did I have?

So I printed out a recipe and went to work. I boiled the cauliflower and transferred the cooked florets to the mini food processor I'd received two years before as a wedding gift. It could hold only about a cup at a time, so I worked in batches, pulverizing the cooked florets into a white, creamy substance—a white, creamy substance that looked *nothing* like mashed potatoes with all their stature and texture. It was runny and lacked the billowy volume mashed potatoes have. It more closely resembled cauliflower soup.

I had followed the instructions to a T, so either that blog was fibbing, or the author hadn't eaten real mashed potatoes in years and had phenomenally low expectations. I, on the other hand, had just made the real deal and *accidentally* tasted a few bites as I was making them to check for flavor. And there was no tricking my taste buds.

The pie was a different story. There wasn't a stand-in for that. How could there be? Flour (gluten), butter and cream (dairy), and sugar. All things I couldn't eat. I made the pie from the recipe written in my grandmother's cursive on an index card, just as I had for years, and pushed past the disappointment that while everyone else was enjoying a slice of my past, I wouldn't be able to eat it. The autumnal smells of nutmeg and cinnamon wafting from the oven as the pumpkin custard baked were torturous, so I fled the room to shield my senses and set a timer upstairs so I wouldn't burn it. Actually, part of me kind of hoped it would burn, giving me a convenient excuse for not bringing it while avoiding the devastation of only being able to *smell* my favorite dessert of the season.

Shortly before four, Ryan loaded up our car with the creamy mashed potatoes, my cauliflower "soup," and the perfectly golden and set pumpkin pie before we made the ten-minute drive to our friends' home. When we arrived, the others were unloading their goodies, offering each other Thanksgiving hugs, and peeking under the foil at what others had brought.

"Don't worry. I brought real mashed potatoes too," I said as I registered the look on a few of my girlfriends' faces after they peered into my dish of cauliflower mush and took in the putrid smell that accompanies cooked cruciferous vegetables. I hadn't yet told our friends that I was embarking on this new way of eating, and I didn't want anyone to feel nervous about hosting us or guilty for eating my "off-limits" foods in front of me.

As a few of the ladies finished their remaining prep in the kitchen and set out some appetizers, the rest of the crew headed to the

backyard for the annual game of touch football. As I sat watching the game, one of my friends set a basket of potato chips, a giant bowl of creamy onion dip, and a tray of cut vegetables surrounding a vat of ranch dressing on the bar next to me.

Potatoes are on my list of carbohydrates to cut out, I reminded myself, *so none for me*. The starches fed the bad bacteria in my gut, which I was trying to eliminate and replace with good, healthy bacteria that fight inflammation.

What is in that onion dip that I love so much? I thought as I eyed the carrots that I knew I *could* eat. I dreamt about smothering them in the creamy dip or drenching them in the ranch. *They probably have milk or sour cream in them—or both*, my brain reprimanded my growling stomach. *Dry carrots and celery it is*. I started munching on them like a bunny, eyeing with disdain the velvety dips that sat taunting me.

I heard the ding of the timer chime from the kitchen and walked inside to see our hostess pulling out the twenty-pound bird, roasted to golden perfection. She applied the final basting of juices and luscious fat that had dripped into the bottom of the pan, then tented the turkey and set it aside to rest while we guests displayed our reheated contributions on the countertop. Her husband did the honors and sliced the bird, presenting heaps of perfectly cooked dark and white meat on a platter adorned with citrus fruits and herbs.

Plates in hand, the gang ceremoniously lined up in the kitchen. I peered ahead of me, silently debating what I could and couldn't eat, and what *might* be okay just for tonight, even if it was technically off-limits. When I reached for a small spoonful of the golden, toasted stuffing wafting aromas of thyme and sage, Ryan gave me a gentle nudge. I'd told him on the car ride over not to let me slip up and eat the foods I had avoided over the last couple of months and vowed not to eat tonight, no matter how tempting.

While everybody else skipped my runny cauliflower soup, a poor stand-in for the buttery and creamy mashed potatoes that sat next

to them, I ladled a few spoonfuls onto my plate. Like water flowing downhill, they cascaded out and filled my entire plate. As a kid, I hated when my foods touched on the plate. I had lightened up a bit as an adult, but I still preferred my sides and main dishes to have their own places. Apparently, the cauliflower “mashed potatoes” had a mind of their own.

I bypassed the green bean casserole, knowing that if it was anything like the one my sister and I were tasked to make growing up, it contained a can of cream of mushroom soup, a tub of sour cream, and onions coated in flour and fried until crisp. The canned soup likely included wheat and MSG, and it definitely included dairy. I swept over the sweet potatoes because they had golden browned sugar in them and toasted marshmallows on top; skipped the salad because it had croutons and more of that creamy ranch dressing; and didn’t even look at the fluffy, warm dinner rolls and accompanying butter. It was just too cruel.

I finally got to the bird, picked out a few pieces of white meat—my favorite—and put them atop my cauliflower soup. The caramel-hewed pan gravy that sat in a boat next to the meat was calling my name, but I had seen the hostess whisking in cornstarch and wheat flour. I knew my body would not thank me later if I succumbed to its siren call. Having helped myself to all I could, I sat down at the table with my dry turkey and cauliflower soup and looked longingly at everybody else’s plates heaped high with my seasonal favorites.

“How’s it taste?” I asked Ryan.

“Horrible,” he said with a half smile, knowing that’s what I wanted to hear, even if it was the furthest thing from the truth.

While everyone else chattered away, raving about the food and complimenting each other on the different sides and dishes, I crawled into my own little hole. I felt different. Left out. Like everyone was looking at me. I felt sorry for myself. I didn’t even have the courage to explain why I was eating this way for fear that we wouldn’t be

invited back to our friends' homes—or worse, that they wouldn't ever want to come to *our* house again.

I looked down at my plate of watery cauliflower. *In the US alone, millions of people suffer from autoimmune diseases and millions more have food allergies, and this is the best we can do? This terrible food that sucks the joy out of us?* I couldn't stand the thought that this was what I would be reduced to eating if I wanted to be healthy.

Why not create your own recipes then? I mused.

I *did* like to cook, but I mostly made simple dishes, and I worked from recipes my mom and grandmas had been using for years. I had never created my own recipes before.

Still . . . I thought, lifting my fork and watching the diluted soup drip back down onto my plate, *whatever I come up with couldn't be any worse than this.*

PART 1

Love Well

1

I have *always* loved food.

Many of my favorite childhood memories center around meals or treats. Whose don't? For me, the best memories are of my parents, siblings, and me eating big family dinners and celebrating every holiday imaginable at my grandparents' house.

From as far back as I can remember, twenty to thirty of us would gather at my grandparents' house for a feast every month. My sweet Italian grandmother, Grandma Marge, made everybody feel loved and cared for through food. She always had an extensive buffet of homemade *everything*—at least three different meats, roasted salmon, freshly made tortellini with homemade marinara, a huge salad, steamed artichokes and asparagus, rolls, pies, fudge-swirled vanilla ice cream, and her famous fruit crisps.

I especially remember the big family crab feeds she hosted each winter. Dungeness crab, which is in season then, is big in the San

Francisco Bay Area where I am from. When my cousins, siblings, and I were really little, Grandma Marge would crack the crab for all eight of us and have it waiting on our plates while the adults labored over their dinners. She definitely knew how to spoil us!

When I got older and was able to crack open the shells myself, I followed the way my family did it. Everybody was quiet while we concentrated on releasing the succulent meat from the reddish-orange shells. All you could hear was *crack, crack, crack*. We cracked for what seemed like an eternity without so much as a taste so we could feast on that huge stack of crab meat all at once. And my family *loves* mayonnaise, so bowls of mayo would be scattered around everywhere for us to dip the meat in. It was heavenly!

It wasn't just the food that made everything so special; it was celebrating and connecting with family and friends. Enjoying good food with loving people made me feel like I belonged. And at the center of all of it was Grandma Marge, the delighted hostess making sure that everyone felt important, needed, and loved.

What impressed me most, though, wasn't how sweet Grandma Marge was or how delicious her food was, but how simple she made it all look. And believe me, it wasn't. She never allowed potlucks at her house. She made every single dish fresh and from scratch. Nothing from a box! And she accepted help from no one. It didn't matter if someone was a vegetarian, a pescatarian, or was allergic to dairy, she had something for each of us—her special ingredient . . . love—and I wanted to be just like her someday.

When I was five, my family moved away from the Bay Area to Colorado. We continued to go to Grandma Marge's whenever we were in town, but I missed those monthly feasts with our extended family so much. Because we didn't have family in Colorado, my parents focused on growing our circle of friends through church and my dad's work, and my mom took over the hosting duties, which she

loved. We called these new friends our extended family and spent most of our holidays and special occasions with them.

Mom worked outside of the home, so she didn't have time to cook everything from scratch. But her meals were still delicious, especially the velvety casseroles enriched with a couple of cans of cream of mushroom soup, a tub of sour cream, and a layer of cheese on top, as well as the French dip sandwiches with thinly sliced roast beef piled high on crusty rolls, blanketed in gooey cheese and mayo, with a bowl of brackish dipping juice on the side.

When my sister, Leisa, and I were old enough to help in the kitchen, those were the first treasured recipes she taught us to make. She also taught me some recipes from her mom, Grandma Bonnie. I still relish the taste of Grandma Bonnie's very Americanized version of a shepherd's pie, which we made frequently—ground beef layered with thin French green beans and a box of dried flaked mashed potatoes, all smothered in a creamy sauce of cream of mushroom soup and sour cream, and covered in cheese and fried onion strings.

Sundays were for tacos. As soon as the church service ended, my sister and I changed out of our Sunday dresses and headed into the kitchen to help Mom with the preparation. I mastered the art of browning the ground beef and stirring in a packet of seasoning by the time I was ten, and we all helped with chopping and prepping the fixings—lettuce, tomatoes, refried beans, grated cheese, sour cream, and black olives. We'd lay all of the bowls heaped with toppings out on a lazy Susan set in the middle of the table. Most Sundays we shared the meal with our "extended family."

Where Mom really outdid herself, though, was in celebrating holidays. She learned that from her mom, and she left no stone unturned. Every Valentine's Day, our breakfast table was blanketed with a big box of See's chocolate hearts, pink pancakes, and toad-in-the-hole (an egg fried in the heart-shaped hole cut from a piece of bread). My sister, brother, and I would squeal with delight when we entered

the kitchen for breakfast on St. Patrick's Day and spotted a box of Lucky Charms with green shamrocks adorning the table. And on Halloween, Count Chocula cereal and powdered-sugar doughnuts started our day on a festive note. That evening, before we would put on our costumes and head out to nab a ton of sugary treats, Mom would cook up pumpkin soup and hamburgers—a mash-up of traditions from Grandma Bonnie and Grandma Marge.

Christmastime was my favorite. The day after Thanksgiving, we decorated every inch of our house, and all month long we watched every sappy Christmas movie we could find on television while baking dozens upon dozens of cookies to give away as presents—cut-out sugar cookie reindeer, bells, Santas, and stars, all covered with red-and-green icing and sprinkles; spicy gingerbread men with little red cinnamon eyes and buttons; rich chocolate fudge squares made with a jar of marshmallow fluff; thumbprint shortbread cookies filled with different flavors of sweet jam; gingersnaps; biscotti; and creamy peanut butter balls dipped in dark velvety chocolate.

The cornerstone of Christmas breakfast was Grandma Marge's braided cinnamon swirl loaf. She would spend the entire week mixing, kneading, proofing, and baking enough loaves to give one to each of her kids and their families, always making a handful of extras to distribute to extended family and friends. In between the crusty pieces of braided dough hid a hot, sticky center laced with a hefty dose of cinnamon. And when she pulled it out of the oven, she drizzled it with a snow-white powdered sugar glaze. She had to have made at least two dozen individual loaves each year. Even after we moved, she continued to ship them to us.

Come Christmas Day, my dad would take over, using recipes he had learned from Grandma Marge and *his* grandmothers—Granny Sarella and Grandma Ruby. Though I don't remember seeing him cook much during my childhood, I do vividly remember the meal he made every Christmas—standing rib roast with caramelized onions,

roasted sweet carrots, and potato wedges; a pan gravy made with a roux and lots of pepper and garlic; salad with bay shrimp doused in his favorite blue cheese dressing; and butter-and-garlic-drenched mushrooms and zucchini. He cooked all day while my siblings, Leisa and Joel, and I played with our new toys.

As we grew older, we started to find our way around the kitchen a bit better ourselves and took full advantage of our small bit of knowledge to make some extra cash. We were always creating *something* to sell—from beaded necklaces, friendship bracelets, and homemade pillows to our very creative lemonade concoction called “Fizzy Coolers” (made with a proprietary mix of lemonade, Sprite, and Kool-Aid). Our entrepreneurial brains were constantly looking for ways to earn an extra dollar or two. Our favorite was when we played restaurant and offered a date night of sorts to our parents. For a hefty dollar, we sold them a simple dinner of food they had purchased and we had put together. We would don our parents’ oversized adult aprons, light a candle on the table, throw on some Frank Sinatra, and sketch out the menu on the meal-plan chalkboard Mom had hanging in the kitchen. I would usually play *maitre d’*, while Leisa played the server and Joel was the food runner.

When I was fifteen, Dad got a new job and we returned to the Bay Area. While I was thrilled at the prospect of being able to take part in Grandma Marge’s regular feasts once again, Colorado had become my home. I was about to enter my sophomore year of high school, had campaigned for and been elected to student council, and had made the varsity lacrosse team. I finally felt like I had a group of friends I could trust and with whom I looked forward to spending my final three years of high school. Now that was all being ripped away.

The angst I felt—and subjected my poor parents to—lingered throughout my sophomore year. Then one evening the summer before my junior year, a friend brought a group of us together with a

bunch of her guy friends from a rival high school the next town over. One in particular caught my eye.

“Who’s that?” I asked, eyeing the cute, brown-haired guy with bleached blond tips and bright blue eyes leaning up against a raised red Jeep Cherokee covered in snowboarding bumper stickers.

“That’s Ryan Walker,” my friend whispered back.

“Oh my gosh, he’s so hot!” I couldn’t remember the last time I blinked.

“You don’t know the half of it,” she continued. “He’s captain of the football team, and rumor has it, he’s a shoo-in for homecoming king.”

Ryan Walker. “Oh, that’s the guy Christa went on a date with,” I said. I felt a little deflated as I realized that he might already be taken.

I must have made some kind of impression on Ryan that first night because a few weeks later, when he went off to snowboarding camp, he called me every night. (Apparently things were over with the other girl.) We got to know each other over the phone, and with every call, I liked him more and more. While funny and outgoing, he seemed to have a good head on his shoulders and focused on football and school over partying.

And even though Ryan was an only child, his family sounded a lot like mine. His parents went to every one of his football games, just like mine went to all my lacrosse games, and they were as big into hospitality as my parents were, always welcoming his friends into their home.

When he got home from camp, he asked me out. I was thrilled to say the least. And as an added bonus, while he was gone, I’d gotten my braces removed! We went on a few dates that summer, but ultimately broke up so he could enjoy his senior year—and date the cheerleader at his school that everyone said he should. Oh, high school! But we stayed close, and our friendship blossomed.

I pursued him like a moth to a flame his entire senior year. I even

went to *two* different proms my junior year with two of his good friends, hoping it would make him jealous (earning me the affectionate nickname “Walker Stalker” from my friends)!

Then, just when I had all but given up hope that Ryan felt the same way I did, a group of us went to Yosemite right after his graduation. We loaded into that red raised Jeep and made the four-hour drive to the beautiful valley floor where we had reserved a camping spot. We all pitched in making dinner around the campfire. We cooked hot dogs on skewers, heated baked beans on a little propane burner, and because my mom always made tuna casserole when we camped, I treated everyone to the timeless delicacy that is egg noodles, a tin of Chicken of the Sea, and a can of cream of mushroom soup. After dinner, Ryan and I hiked to the top of a big boulder to look at the clear sky, which was studded with tiny golden stars. We started talking about his upcoming freshman year at the University of Colorado. Because I had grown up in the state, he loved asking me all about it.

That’s when it happened.

“I’m falling in love with you,” he said.

“You are?” I said in disbelief. No one had ever said those words to me before. “I feel the same. I’ve been falling in love with you for the past year.”

We spent the rest of the evening lying on that big boulder, talking about his imminent departure for another Boulder, and how we could possibly work things out with the distance. We drove home a couple of days later and spent the rest of that summer attached at the hip. I worked at a P.F. Chang’s that was right down the street from his parents’ house. I would head there after work and eat the leftover dinner his mom always saved for me. I loved Ryan’s parents, and God bless them, they treated me like the daughter they never had.

That fall, Ryan headed off to Colorado for college, and we both wept as we said goodbye and ended our relationship. It’s not that

we wanted to; we just assumed that's what you did when one of you was starting college and the other one was stuck in her final year of high school. Ryan wrote me love letters via e-mail daily during his first few weeks away. I, in turn, was miserable without him and didn't want to be part of anything fun or exciting at school. After about a month of silently pining for one another, we cracked, tearfully confessing to each other that we couldn't bear the thought of either of us being with anyone else, and embarked on a year of long-distance dating.

The following fall, I enrolled at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, executing the plan I'd had in my head since first moving back to California—to attend the same college where my sister was completing her final year. I was now about an hour north of Ryan.

One weekend early in my freshman year, I decided to do something a little special for Ryan and his roommates.

“I'm going to make chicken Parmesan for you guys this weekend,” I announced. Granted, I had never made it before, but I'd seen people make it on television, and it was one of my favorite things to order when I went out to eat at Buca di Beppo. To be honest, I don't even think I had a recipe. I just figured, *How hard can it be? It's just spaghetti and breaded chicken.*

The guys were thrilled. After all, it's not often you get a real home-cooked meal when you're away at school. They even chipped in to help buy the ingredients.

As soon as I arrived at their apartment, I shooed them all out of the kitchen and got to work. I coated the thick boneless chicken breasts in an egg wash and Italian bread crumbs mixed with grated Parmesan and fried them in a pan on the stove, just like I'd seen on TV. After turning each one a couple of times, I noticed the breading was starting to burn, so I pulled them off the heat and stuck the pan in the oven to keep everything warm while I made the pasta. Once the pasta was ready, I pulled the pan out, placed the chicken

breasts atop the pasta, and added a few slices of mozzarella and a sprinkle of Parmesan cheese. I placed the pan under the broiler just long enough for the chicken to become bubbly. Then I heated up a jar of marinara sauce to blanket the cheesy chicken and proudly served it to the boys.

It looked and smelled amazing.

The boys eagerly grabbed their knives and forks and immediately started digging into the chicken. Then, one by one . . . they stopped.

What's the matter? I asked.

After exchanging a few awkward glances, Ryan finally spoke up. "Um, this isn't cooked."

"What?" I grabbed his plate and inspected the beautifully golden chicken. Sure enough, the inside wasn't just pink; it was 100 percent raw. I had no idea that after you seared the chicken to get a good crust, you had to *cook* it the rest of the way in the oven—or that you were supposed to pound the chicken flat before you breaded it so it would cook evenly.

I was mortified. After apologizing profusely, I collected all of their plates and cooked the chicken the rest of the way through.

That first failure sparked a hunger within me to get it right. I began religiously reading cooking magazines, watching the Food Network, and imitating the likes of Rachael Ray, Ina Garten, and Giada De Laurentiis. I might not have had their pedigree, skill level, or equipment, but after nearly poisoning the love of my life, I was determined that at the very least, the next time I cooked for someone, the food would not be raw.

Despite the fact that I almost killed him, Ryan still saw a future for us, and we talked about marriage almost daily. He even burned me a CD and attached a little sticker of a bride and groom to the top where he wrote "you" and "me" with arrows pointing to the happy couple. Next to that was a handwritten note and the sequence of songs he'd included.

But while we were both desperate to move forward with our relationship, share a home, and never have to say goodbye at night, Ryan's parents felt otherwise. They were 100 percent *for* us. They just didn't want us to make the mistake of marrying too young, so they said that if we got married before we graduated, they would stop paying Ryan's tuition. Neither of us wanted to see that happen. We were young, but we were smart enough to know that going into a marriage with two college tuition loans to pay off could cause some newlywed turmoil. I knew Ryan had looked at rings and had been saving up what little money he had. And we *talked* about getting engaged constantly. Still . . . I hated waiting.

Because we knew that eventually we wanted to settle in California (not being fans of Colorado's harsh winters), we transferred to different colleges in Southern California to finish our degrees the semester after the raw chicken fiasco.

During my junior year of college, in December of 2005, Ryan and I planned to head to Maui with his parents right around Christmastime. He knew what a fanatic I was about Christmas, and given the romantic setting, I had an inkling he might propose.

Each day he gave me a note or memento from our relationship centered around the theme of "The Twelve Days of Christmas"—apartment listings from Southern California, a ticket from a USC football game, a gas receipt from our numerous drives up I-5 to visit our families in Northern California on holidays. Because we were only going to be in Maui for eight days, I assumed that if he was going to propose, it would be on day seven. So on day six, I painted my nails with a fresh coat of polish—you know, just in case I was about to get a new ring to show off. That day, Ryan sent me to the hotel spa for my first ever professional massage and facial. It was dreamy.

We had dinner plans that evening, but when I got back from the spa, Ryan told me his parents needed more time to get ready and suggested we go for a walk on the beach. It was beautiful. The sun

was about to set as we walked barefoot, hand in hand, down the Kaanapali beachfront. About twenty minutes in, we turned around to head back. Suddenly Ryan stopped and took both my hands in his. *What's happening?* My mind raced. *This isn't supposed to happen until day seven!*

The next thing I knew, Ryan got down on one knee and pulled out a little box with Ashley Morgan written on it. I knew that name. She was a friend of my sister's. She was also a jewelry designer and had made Leisa's custom engagement ring.

"Danielle," he said, his eyes misting over, "I love you more than life itself, and I cannot imagine spending my life without you. I know you have been waiting for this, maybe even *expecting* it tomorrow, so I had to throw you off and do it today." He laughed, then held my hand tighter. "Danielle Lynne Norsworthy, will you marry me?"

Tears flooded my eyes, and my already sunburned cheeks turned an even brighter shade of red.

"Yes!!! A million times, yes!" I screamed in excitement.

He rose from his knee and picked me up, twirling me around in the setting sun while the waves came crashing in behind us.

Then he carried me over to the grass, where his parents were waiting with a bouquet of flowers and a camera.

That night at dinner, I couldn't stop looking at the gorgeous ring he'd designed. A Royal Asscher cut—my favorite because it had a vintage appeal and beautiful square shape with rounded edges and layered facets. When you look deep into the diamond from the top, it's like looking into a kaleidoscope. It was set in a platinum band, and on the interior, he'd had our initials engraved. Everything about it was perfect.

By the way . . . day seven's gift? Getting to spend the rest of my life with my best friend.

