

## Chapter 2

### Stepping Over the Threshold and Into the Fire

Unless the LORD builds the house, the stepmom labors in vain.

Psalm 127:1 (paraphrased)

“Okay, Elizabeth, hurry up and finish your lunch. Your dad and Kali will be home from their honeymoon in about two hours!” Grandma Schnieders announced.

A few months before our wedding, Larry and Elizabeth had moved from their former home in Topeka to our new home in Lawrence and had already begun fine-tuning their new environment. We figured Elizabeth might need a jump-start on adjusting to her new third-grade class before I arrived on the scene. Larry’s parents were delighted to come to Lawrence and watch Elizabeth so she could continue her schoolwork without interruption while we honeymooned. “You’ve got to get your room spick-and-span because Sarge will be doing a thorough inspection!” Grandma often joked about herself being a strict sergeant who does white-glove inspections of little girl’s rooms and gives merit awards for a job well done. The old gag usually worked because Elizabeth loved working for any kind of a prize, but today she rolled her eyes and slowed her eating further. She moved the French fries around on her plate, drawing circles with them in the ketchup.

If Grandma thinks she can con me with that sergeant stuff, she can forget it! I like my room just the way it is. At least I used to like my room before I had to move here. I can’t believe Dad went off with Kali and left me for a whole week. It seems like months! I miss him so much. I miss our polka dancing in the living room and SpaghettiOs for supper,

and most of all, I miss him reading to me at bedtime. Grandma and Grandpa try, but they don't read it the same way as my dad.

"Come on, Pokey. You want Grandpa to help you with those fries?" Grandpa Schnieders asked, trying to do his part in speeding up the process.

"What's the big deal about a clean room?" Elizabeth whined. "Dad doesn't make me clean my room. Why should *you* care? I'm going outside."

Elizabeth ran from the table, leaving her dishes. She bolted out the back door and into the woods behind the golf course (her favorite cooling-off and "thinking things over" place) before Grandma could catch her. But before too long, Elizabeth was back, heading straight for her room without a word to anyone. About an hour later, she appeared at the top of the stairs and called out, "Okay, Sergeant, ready for inspection!"

Grandma was a little surprised at Elizabeth's sudden about-face, but she wasn't entirely unfamiliar with her granddaughter's unpredictable behavior that often flip-flopped without explanation. Grandma climbed the stairs and gushed over the marvelous cleaning job. "Grandpa, come see!" she called. "You won't even recognize this room. Why, it's clean enough to pass Sarge's white-glove test. I'd say this calls for ice cream!"

Elizabeth beamed and headed for the car with a renewed spring in her step.

As the ice cream eaters returned from their outing and pulled into the driveway, Larry and I were cruising toward home and listening to the song "I've Had the Time of My Life." *Could have been the theme song for our honeymoon*, I thought as we both sang along.

I had always imagined our arrival at home to be as romantic as a movie scene, with my dashing husband swooping me into his strong arms and carrying me over the threshold. *Then* we would greet the family. But

the sight of Elizabeth and the in-laws climbing out of their car ended my daydream.

“Daaaaaaaad!” Elizabeth squealed her excitement as Larry’s car door swung open. She flew into her daddy’s arms like a homing pigeon returning to the safety of her coop. “What’d you bring me?” she chirped.

“Oh, I think there’s something you might like in one of those suitcases,” Larry teased.

I greeted them congenially, masking my disappointment about the magical “threshold moment.” (I realize my fantasy was unrealistic, but I’m a sucker for romance, and I was clinging to the dreamy-eyed notion that courtship gallantry would extend into matrimony.) It was slowly beginning to sink in that I had married two people, not one.

I smiled and turned to Elizabeth. “Hi there. How ’bout a hug?” I asked, tickling her side gently as we all walked into the house.

Elizabeth swatted my hand away as though it were a pesky fly and ignored my question. She squirmed in Larry’s arms, making it difficult for him to hold on to her. “Dad, I want to go see Amanda.”

“Whoa, we just walked in, Elizabeth. Kali and I have to unpack and do a few things around here. We can’t be driving all the way to Topeka today. We’ve got to go to Kansas City and move the rest of Kali’s things and then pick up Pandy from the kennel.”

Elizabeth wriggled out of Larry’s arms and stomped her little foot. “No, Dad, I’ve been waiting *forever* for you to get home. I’m going to see Amanda today!” she said, changing it from a request to a demand. Her formerly cute voice escalated into a shrieking siren, and our homecoming moment turned into a good old-fashioned, megavolume, bawling, kicking temper tantrum. “I want to see Amanda right now!” she screamed, loud enough for Amanda to hear her in Topeka.

I stood stunned, my mouth gaping open, revealing my children-should-be-seen-but-not-heard upbringing. My in-laws shuffled their feet in

embarrassment while Larry tried his best to console and quiet Elizabeth. She screamed all the louder and began writhing on the floor.

Larry said tenderly, “Now, Elizabeth, this is no way to act. I’m so happy to be home and to be with you. Grandma and Grandpa are leaving soon. You don’t want to spoil their nice visit, do you? We’ll talk about seeing Amanda next weekend if you’re on your best behavior this week.”

Larry quickly rummaged through his suitcase to pull out the gifts we’d bought and handed boxes to Grandma and Grandpa. “Elizabeth,” he tantalized, “if you don’t stop crying I can’t give you your present from Hawaii.” He held up a pretty gold box. Shaking it, he pretended to listen for a rattle.

Elizabeth calmed momentarily as Grandma and Grandpa opened their boxes containing the gifts we’d selected. They looked adorable as they held the colorful Hawaiian shirts up to their chests and smiled broadly.

Our eight-year-old fashion plate loved clothes, so she excitedly grabbed the box from Larry’s hands and pulled out a hot-pink floral dress. She threw it on the floor in disgust. The wailing resumed, and Elizabeth ran to her room, shrieking as she went, “I don’t want that stupid dress. I don’t want to live in Lawrence in this creepy *Star Wars* house. I want to go see Amanda!”

I don’t know why Dad had to marry Kali, and why did we have to move to Lawrence? Things are never going to be the same now that she’s moving in and bringing all her furniture-from-another-planet with her. I mean, who ever heard of a chair you’re not allowed to sit in! Worst of all, I hardly ever get to see Amanda anymore, and boy do I have a *lot* to tell her! I hate going to school without her. I don’t have anybody to pass secret notes to in class or swing with on the tire swing at recess. I’m just the “new kid” for everyone to ignore. Kali and Dad say I should be able to make friends easily. Of course, I can’t make any friends here

because they all think I live in a weird outer-space house. All of our old things are gone—even my mother’s dishes! I hate it here. I hate my life!

Larry turned to his folks, smiled, and summed up the entire scene with one sentence: “She’s probably tired.”

Tired! I thought. She’s behaving like an ungrateful, demanding, spoiled little snot! This problem requires a bigger fix than a nap!

Grandma caught my eye and whispered, “We’re so glad you’re home. It’s been like this off and on ever since we arrived. I think she pines for her friend Amanda, and I know she missed Larry terribly while you were gone. We battled every night at bedtime. She simply wouldn’t mind me no matter what I did.”

Something is certainly tormenting Elizabeth to prompt such a dramatic scene, I thought. Missing Amanda, moving away from her old home—it was becoming clear how much Elizabeth had left behind when she and Larry moved to Lawrence. Now she was trying to cope with a new stepmother as well. It was obvious Elizabeth was struggling, but at the time I, had no clue how deep her pain really was.

Early on, Larry and I had agreed that the best way to get our marriage off on sound footing was to change surroundings rather than try to plug me into their former life. Larry understood why it wouldn’t seem right for me to move into a love nest fashioned by his first wife’s loving hands. This would also settle the design dilemma—I loved classic modern design, while Annette (Elizabeth’s mother) had traditional taste. So together, Larry and I designed a beautiful new home—my dream house but Elizabeth’s nightmare.

The location we chose was ideal for Larry and me but less so for Elizabeth. Lawrence was midway between Kansas City (where I worked) and Topeka (where Larry worked). The location allowed me to keep my sales position with a well-respected furniture manufacturer *and* furnish our home at a hefty discount. Elizabeth would have to change schools, but we

figured that because she was a socially outgoing child with a resilient spirit, she would be fine—after all, she’d already moved several times due to corporate transfers.

Once the location was selected, it seemed logical to pack away the china and heirlooms for Elizabeth and hold a “getting-married garage sale” to sell the traditional furnishings that would look out of place with our décor. I never imagined that an eight-year-old would object. I hoped she would see my sleek, classic design concepts as exciting, fresh, even hip! But my contemporary taste stuck out like a petunia in the rose garden of our traditional neighborhood, and our new-kid-on-the-block was not enamored with the distinction.

Not only was embarrassment an issue, Elizabeth’s overwhelming loss had totally escaped me: she had been the lady of the house for five years in a home full of cherished memories of her mother. Now here she was in a place that felt nothing like home. Neither Larry nor I guessed how distressing it would be for Elizabeth to be wrenched from Annette’s environment and thrown into mine. Somehow it never dawned on me that a child might be attached to a particular décor not solely because of taste but because it represented “home” and her lost mother.

As a new wife, I was simply focused on creating an environment where a loving family could flourish, and like all wives, I wanted our home to carry my own personal touch. But I was so inept in relating to children that I never even tried to open the door to Elizabeth’s emotions—partially because the chief emotion I saw her reveal was anger, and I didn’t want to invite any more of that!

My only experience with children came from my own childhood. When my parents divorced, my mom did not probe deeply into my emotions. My feelings were largely swept over, and I guess I was unwittingly repeating a pattern I didn’t even realize was flawed. My mother had managed to communicate that emotions were to be worked out on your own—or in today’s vernacular, “Get over it.”

If a birth mother could botch something so badly, I suppose I was entitled to a few mistakes. Yet I wish I had asked Elizabeth to tell me more about her feelings over the décor, the house, and the move. I thought her put-downs of my furniture and artwork were simply another way to reject me. Because she picked out the things for her own bedroom, I figured her personal needs had been addressed. I have often wondered how our relationship might have been different if I'd taken the time to probe a little further about not only the furniture but also how she felt about having to move. Even if our decisions had remained the same, at least she would have known I cared enough to listen.

I began to wonder if we'd done irreparable harm by adding relocation to the compromises we'd all have to make in living together as a family. To say our family's adjustment to marriage was stressful is like saying a hurricane is a bad hair day. We all enter relationships with expectations that are likely to go unmet. If the expectations aren't discussed in advance of the wedding vows, a power struggle can result. And when three people tie the knot, the tie that binds can quickly become a noose! If I had understood that fact, I might have eased some of our stress by sharing my own expectations openly and honestly before the marriage, particularly in the areas of parenting and domestic responsibility.

Larry was looking for me to lighten his load where Elizabeth's needs were concerned, but I had been expecting him to continue in the stellar hands-on parenting style I had come to admire—and depend upon. Elizabeth was not enamored with my increased involvement in her day-to-day routine. It seemed to me her expectations of having a stepmother in the house were for me to stay locked in a closet until summoned and then appear only to wash her clothes or buy her something.

I wanted a new mom, but Kali's not what I had in mind. I was better off when "Aunt" Ann looked after me while Dad was at work; at least she

made great home-cooked suppers and taught me how to play the piano. I wish Dad could have married someone like her! Kali doesn't seem to be good for much that I can tell. She's always working at that stupid furniture company, and she acts like taking me to run errands is a big chore. Now I'm stuck with her!

Every day became a flurry of activity that set us all on edge. Larry's commute was about thirty minutes each way, while mine was closer to an hour with heavy traffic, thus subtracting nearly two hours from my amazingly shortened twenty-four-hour day. At one point, Larry even suggested that I consider quitting my job. That certainly would have eased the stress of our time crunch, but it didn't seem financially realistic at the time. And even though my boss was starting to take note of my slumping sales figures, my job was an oasis compared with a stay-at-home assignment caring for a child who detested me.

So for the meantime, I would cope with the long workdays and the commute. But when I finally arrived at home, it was time to cook! *What do you mean, what's for dinner? I hoped we'd be going out to eat!* I grumbled to myself, remembering all of those courtship candlelight dinners in nice restaurants. Besides, I didn't know how to cook! I had been a single, career-minded woman eating micro-meals. At least I had cookbooks. I'd never cracked one open except to look at the pictures, but I had them. "This sounds perfect," I said to Pandy. "*After Work Cookbook: Quick Meals in a Jiffy.*"

Flipping through the pages I saw something that sounded tasty, and I even had most of the ingredients. *Yum. Three-cheese Mexican lasagna. Okay, I don't have pepperjack cheese, but I do have Swiss. I like Mexican and I love lasagna—tossing in a third culture can only improve the dish, right? Let's give it a whirl. How hard can this be?*

I set the table with the everyday dishes we'd received as wedding gifts and opened the window so a nice breeze would refresh us as we ate,



fondly remembering the many nights we dated and dined alfresco. *The fresh air will set a nice atmosphere*, I thought as the timer announced that the food was ready. I called to my family, “Come and get it!”

“Down in a minute. I’ve got to get this checkbook to balance.”

Larry called out.

“Elizabeth, let’s eat. Food is better when it’s hot,” I called out as cheerfully as I could muster. *With as much trouble as I’ve gone to for this dinner, they could at least come before it’s cold!*

Larry came down to the table while I drummed my fingers on the countertop waiting for Elizabeth.

Larry sat down, eyeballed my curious-looking creation, and simply asked, “And what exactly do you call this dish?”

I sat down and responded with pride, “Mexican lasagna.”

Elizabeth slammed the window closed. “I don’t like the wind blowing while I eat,” she announced.

“Yes, that probably is better. Thanks, Elizabeth,” Larry chimed in.

You could have heard my eyes roll a block away. *Larry loved the breeze before she started whining about it.*

Elizabeth wriggled into her chair and sniffed a forkful of lasagna. “I’m not eating *this*.”

Before the “Yes, you are, young lady” could escape from my mouth, Larry took his first bite. I could tell by his expression that this Mexican lasagna wasn’t going to win any Betty Crocker awards. I tasted it myself and quickly decided I’d be lucky if my dish didn’t get me arrested for attempted murder.

“This is disgusting!” Elizabeth snapped, running to the kitchen. She poured herself a bowl of Cocoa Puffs, headed for the loft, and plopped in front of the television.

Mexican lasagna—oh, brother. So much for coming home from school to a batch of hot chocolate-chip cookies fresh from the oven. Kali probably

can't even pour milk! She's still at work when I get home anyway. What a dork of a stepmother she's turning out to be. Yesterday I caught her "sewing" my girl scout badges to my sash with Velcro. No way am I asking her to be room mother now, she'd probably poison my friends—that is if I had any friends. I miss my mommy so much.

The following night, the dinner I prepared was not much better, and by the end of the week, Elizabeth announced in self-defense, "From now on, I'm cooking my own meals."

Each night, she would cruise the kitchen, make an insulting comment about the meal I was preparing and begin making her own meal. Her "cooking" mostly consisted of elbowing me out of her way and removing my things from the microwave to nuke a frozen pizza. I guess that makes us even in the cooking department, but I really was trying to learn the art of preparing healthy cuisine.

After about a week, I became concerned about Elizabeth's diet. "Larry, have you noticed what Elizabeth is calling "dinner"? She's concocted some sort of entrée using Uncle Ben's instant white rice with a squirt of hot water. Her dinners consist entirely of undercooked rice, pizza, Cocoa Puffs, potato chips, and apples. That is not a healthy diet," I worried. "Children need vegetables, protein, and milk—lots of milk!"

We defaulted into frequent trips for fast-food, and on those nights, Larry reminded me that Elizabeth's kid's meal included meat (if you call cardboard hamburgers meat). "There's calcium in that Frosty, you know!" he proclaimed.

"And I suppose a pickle counts as the five servings of fruits and vegetables she needs too?" I retorted. "Unless Doritos have recently been added as a Basic Food Group, that child is *not* properly nourished."

"Now Kali," Larry cautioned, "don't worry about her eating habits. I've been at this parenting thing for quite a while. When Annette died, I was concerned about my ability to give Elizabeth proper nutrition, so I

asked her pediatrician about it. He said, ‘If you leave kids alone, their bodies will tell them what is missing, and they’ll eat what they need.’”

“I suppose that might be true if a child didn’t come home from school and eat an entire bag of chips and drink four Cokes before dinner!” I ranted.

But Larry didn’t want to hear any more about her diet. My sensitivity meter was in double digits, and I wondered if Larry felt he had made a matrimonial mistake. I was starting to question the same thing.

“This is not what I signed up for, Pandy,” I confided to my furry friend. I had imagined chatty family dinners where we would all discuss our day, followed by an evening of playing a nice board game together. Weeks of nightly strain at mealtime were taking a toll on us. Elizabeth was growing increasingly aggressive with verbal jabs at me, and I was growing more irritated myself.

The issues for a stepparent are complicated under the best of circumstances, but I was handicapped due to a missing “mommy gene”—the one that instills a conviction that without children, life is meaningless. My mother had the gene, so I guess it skipped a generation. I hoped I would eventually get the hang of being a mother. But Elizabeth hated me, and that is the one thing she always communicated effectively.

“Elizabeth, that was uncalled for,” my husband would say. But, oh how I longed to hear him announce a zero-tolerance policy and punctuate it by saying, “Kali may not be your mother, but she *is* my wife, and I expect you to treat her with respect!”

After a second or third offense, Larry usually laid out consequences for Elizabeth’s inappropriate behavior. However, it seemed to me that Larry’s “pride and joy” had a way of winding Daddy around her pinky, and I rarely felt the consequence was harsh enough to produce the desired result.

Regardless of what was said or done, the behavior didn’t improve—it grew more offensive. From Larry’s perspective, my

comments concerning Elizabeth aroused a papa bear's instinct to protect his child from an intruder's overbearing parental style. While it is true that a parent's first job is to protect the child (even from stepparents), the balance between protection and put-down is extremely tricky.

In reality, I spent more time with Elizabeth than Larry did. Needing some leverage to deal with Elizabeth's behavior, I wanted to be considered an equal partner on the parenting issues. But to Larry, I was more of an assistant coach who was overstepping her boundaries. Like so many stepparents, I had plenty of responsibility and no authority. As my role in our new family blurred, my questions mounted. Shall I be a friend, a mom, or some combination of both? Shall I voice my disagreement over parenting decisions, or take a backseat? What do I do with all of these feelings that seem to well up?

Then there was the issue of unconditional love.

From the moment the umbilical cord is severed, most parents begin falling head over heels in love with their baby. Mom and Dad agree that the child's needs are paramount. As the infant moves from newborn to toddler, giant love deposits are made daily into the parental bank account. Every smile, coo, and gurgle is amazing! By the time they hear the words "Mama and Dada," they're hooked. When hard times hit, they have the emotional reserves to deal with them because of the years of building up love.

But a stepparent entering the scene begins with an empty love account and from the get-go senses there is a run on the bank. Years may pass without any attempt to replenish the coffers (particularly when the child has been wounded, is angry about that loss, and has matured to "teen behavior" well before the proper time). All this may leave a stepmom asking, "Why must I act as though I have no needs, and why must I constantly bow to this miniature tyrant who kicks me one minute and then asks if her laundry is done the next?"

Deep down, even an inexperienced adult knows that the child's needs must come first. Therefore, guilt creeps in. "Love more and complain less," logic murmurs in our ears. But when we give and give without getting anything in return, even our best intentions can be challenged. Often, I felt that the smallest hint of appreciation would have been enough to help me want to keep giving.

So the tension mounted, and we all retreated to separate corners of the house to lament our unmet expectations.

Mommy, I miss you so much. Why did you have to leave me? I need you to come back, to tuck me in like you used to. I cry myself to sleep almost every night. I'm just not happy anymore without you; I don't think I'll be *really* happy ever again.

One night in my own hurt and confusion, I sought comfort in a devotional book and the comfy chair in our guest bedroom. I'd hardly settled into the cushions with the blanket over my lap when the tears began to roll. My own mother had crocheted that blanket for me, and as I felt its cozy warmth, I wished she were alive to reassure me and give me some motherly advice. Wrapped up in my pain, at the time it escaped me that Elizabeth and I might have been going through such similar struggles—missing the love and comfort of our mothers and not knowing if we were going to survive this.

I found myself staring at the ceiling, as if by looking hard enough, I could see into heaven and obtain my mother's wisdom. "Mom, I don't know what to do. I thought a mother was what Elizabeth needed and a partner is what Larry wanted. Yet no matter what I suggest, it seems Larry doesn't want to hear it. I'm rarely taken seriously, and sometimes my motives are even questioned. Elizabeth definitely doesn't want my mothering. I don't know what she had in mind, but clearly I'm not a match. I may be living with people, but I'm lonelier than ever." I confided in my mother as though she were there in the room.

My soft tears turned to great sobs, and I took my complaint to a higher authority. “God, I need Your help. I’m in way over my head. I don’t have any idea what I’m doing. I can’t seem to make Jell-o, much less a casserole. I only know how to make my way in the corporate world, and those skills are woefully inadequate for this job. I made a promise on my wedding day, not only to them but also to You. I don’t want to go back on my promises, but I’ve gotten wrapped up in a ball of twine that I can’t untangle. Please help me.”

It’s hard to explain what happened next. A calm washed over me like a cool, refreshing rain. I felt a strong sense of reassurance, almost as though God were placing His hand upon my shaking shoulder. I dried my eyes and opened the devotional book on my lap to the reading for that day, March 6. I wept again when I saw the words printed on the page, but this time they were tears of joy.

“Why art thou cast down, O my soul?” (Psalm 42:5). “Why?” It is good to get to the bottom of our troubles and our griefs. Get to the very bottom. To understand their cause is well on the way to their cure . . .

When the psalmist put the question to his soul, he discovered the cause for his deep grief. He found the trouble not so much in the severity of the conditions around him, as in the darkness that pervaded his own soul. He had lost sight of God. . . .

His “uplook” was obscured by his “outlook.”<sup>1</sup>

It was true! In my well-meaning but misguided attempts to be Wonder Woman at work and Martha Stewart at home, I was so overwhelmed that any notion of turning to God for help hadn’t even bleeped across my radar screen.

While I didn’t know a thing about children, God did, and what’s more, He knew everything about this child He’d put in my path. He knew about knotted balls of twine. Better yet, He knew how they became

knotted and what was necessary to untangle them. He was willing to share His wisdom—all I had to do was ask.

From that day forward, I knew I was not in this marriage alone unless I chose to be. I had made my vows before God on our wedding day. When I said, “I do,” God said, “So do I.” But I had left Him at the church like a forgotten wedding gift. No wonder I was struggling in my marriage: I was doing some mighty heavy lifting alone and with puny muscles. Yet thankfully, in my desperation, my spirit had cried out to heaven, and heaven was answering back. God was extending His loving, strong arms and offering to help lift my burden.

### **If Only I Had Known . . .**

- People begin relationships with high expectations that will likely go unmet, and everyone must cope with some degree of disappointment.
- Talking about expectations and disappointments can diffuse some of the tension in a new stepfamily.

### **What I Would Have Done Differently**

Because no one gets everything they want in any relationship, knowing and understanding what everyone expects is a great starting point for family discussions. I wish I’d known enough to discuss nitty-gritty details before the wedding—things like who would cook dinner and how Larry envisioned our partnership when it came to raising Elizabeth.

Even after the wedding, it would have been helpful to discuss expectations as we went along. If I’d asked Elizabeth what she’d expected from a stepmother versus what she got, I might have learned some interesting things! Initiating that type of conversation would have let her know that I cared about her feelings and took them into account when making decisions.

Negotiating expectations is part of the blending process. We each had our own needs, hopes, and wish lists. Our family’s adjustment might

have been easier if we'd each spoken up a little more about how our expectations were meshing with reality.

### **Reflecting On Your Own Family**

- How have you dealt with the differences between your expectations for your new family and the reality?
- What expectations do you think your stepchildren had about your marriage to their father, and how might they have been disappointed?
- In what ways do your ideas of discipline differ from your husband's, and what have you done to increase cooperation and solidarity?
- What are some things you could do, starting now, to help your family cope with differing parenting styles and unmet expectations?

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<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Charles E. Cowman, *Streams in the Desert-2* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1966), p. 71.