

the house

of

my



mother

A DAUGHTER'S QUEST FOR FREEDOM

SHARI FRANKE

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A Daughter's Quest for Freedom



SHARI FRANKE



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To anybody who has been silenced, gaslit, abused, or lonely.

You are stronger than you know.

May earthly and heavenly angels lift you up.

I would lead you and bring you into the house of my mother—
she who used to teach me.

SONG OF SOLOMON 8.2, NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE

INTRODUCTION

finally

August 30, 2023

It was a Wednesday, the start of a new college year, and I was slumped at my cramped desk, drowning in a sea of syllabi and first-week reading assignments. I skimmed the pages, but my mind refused to engage, thoughts always circling back to my five siblings.

A year had passed since I'd heard their voices, seen their faces, and the thought of them trapped in that house was eating me alive. Despite all my efforts—the countless phone calls, the desperate pleas to anyone who would listen—it seemed like there was nothing we could do to remove them from harm's way.

My phone rang, our neighbor's name flashing on the screen. My heart skipped a beat—each call from this neighbor represented a lifeline. It meant an update about the kids. It meant that they were still alive.

“Shari, the police are at your mother's house!” The words exploded through the speaker, no time for hello. “They've got guns out, they're about to bust down the door!”

My heart seized in my chest as vivid, horrifying images flooded my mind. Tiny body bags being carried out of my mother's home by faceless figures in uniforms.

It's happened, came the thought. They're dead.

In a daze, I grabbed my car keys and bolted. The drive from my student apartment to my mother's house in Springville usually took twenty minutes, but today it was an eternity compressed into moments of blind panic.

I hadn't been back to that house since Ruby had disowned me a year prior. Ruby, the self-anointed saint of motherhood. Ruby, who had turned my life into a surreal version of

The Truman Show for her social media disciples. Ruby, who had subjected me and my siblings to her twisted interpretation of crime and punishment all our lives—until Jodi came along, adding terrifying new flavors of sadism to the regime.

Jodi. Our family's very own cult leader, a false prophet who swept into our lives like a hurricane, turning my mother into a fawning, starstruck acolyte who lapped up her every demented word like it was holy water. My father, once our anchor, had been banished, leaving Ruby and Jodi to rule unchallenged over my four youngest siblings who were still there with them.

I drove through the familiar streets of Springville, a dull, all-too-familiar anger simmering within me as I navigated the quiet of suburbia. Why did no one have any information on the children? Why had they been pulled out of school? Why couldn't anyone shield them from harm?

Countless warnings had already been sent to the Division of Child and Family Services (DCFS), to law enforcement by me and by concerned neighbors. I'd been shouting from the rooftops for a year. Yet, despite the glaring signs of trouble, no action had been taken. The red flags we'd raised might as well have been invisible, and the system that was supposed to protect my siblings had left them at the mercy of two women drunk on delusion and unchecked power.

I turned onto our sleepy cul-de-sac and encountered a war zone. Police cruisers formed a barricade of flashing lights. SWAT teams prowled our front lawn. Neighbors huddled on the sidewalks, fear and fascination on their faces.

I got out of my car and an officer blocked my path, his face a tombstone. "I can't let you go past this point, miss."

"But that's my house!" I pleaded. "My siblings—are they safe? Where are they?"

Snippets of radio chatter teased me. Was that my brother's name I heard?

"Please," I begged. "Will someone tell me what's happening?"

An officer approached, his tone urgent.

"Miss, can you provide us with the layout of the house? Any safes? Guns?"

Through my tears, I gave him the information he needed: seven bedrooms, six bathrooms where we once jostled for mirror space, some guns locked away, a pantry that could outlast an apocalypse. Each room echoing with the ghosts of who we once were.

Then, chaos erupted. The front door splintered under the battering ram's assault. Officers swarmed in like angry hornets. I stood, rooted to the spot, watching.

God, please. Let them be alive, I prayed.

A surreal thought bubbled up. This moment, this climax of my family's descent into madness, needed to be documented, preserved, and shared on social media. Just like every forced smile, every staged perfection had been, too.

I pulled out my phone, my hands steady despite the madness around me.

Frame shot. Snap.

The caption crystallized in my mind, a single word that carried the weight of years:

FINALLY.

Upload to Instagram. Share.

This nightmare was born on social media—it should die there, too.

PART ONE



the garden of earthly
delights

CHAPTER 1

sealed

I have a recurring dream. It always starts so beautifully.

Ethereal light bathes rolling fields as far as the eye can see. A sense of profound peace washes over me as I realize this must be heaven. My earthly journey has ended.

The landscape shifts, familiar yet otherworldly. Loved ones I've lost appear in the distance, their faces radiant. I move toward them, weightless, unburdened, embracing them with tears of joy. *This is paradise*, I think. *This is peace*.

Then I see those eyes. Cold and unyielding, boring into me with a power as ancient as the stars. It's her. Ruby.

Suddenly, God's voice booms around me, shaking the very foundations of heaven:

"My child, you were wrong to defy your mother!"

I jolt awake, heart pounding, and for a moment the terror lingers—even in the afterlife, will I never be free from her?



My mother was born Ruby Griffiths on January 18, 1982, in Logan, Utah, the first child of five to Chad and Jennifer Griffiths, whose families had been devout members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) for generations.

When Ruby was young, her family relocated to Roy, Utah—a small city where the LDS church shaped nearly every aspect of life. In this tight-knit community, days revolved around scripture study, clean living, and, above all else, family. That is, after all, the cornerstone of our faith.

As the eldest in a strict, conservative home, Ruby's childhood was less about play and more about responsibility, and she was tasked with helping to raise her younger siblings. I can easily imagine a young Ruby, spine straight and eyes determined, navigating her family's expectations with a sense of righteous purpose, eagerly anticipating the day when she would have a family of her own, relishing the thought of finally being the one to make the rules and shape her home exactly as she saw fit. For Ruby, motherhood wasn't just a future role—it was the pinnacle of her aspirations, the one thing she had always wanted for herself above all else.

Her reverence for motherhood is not uncommon in the LDS theology I was raised with. Becoming a mother, in my faith, is a spiritual calling of the highest order, a chance to emulate the divine and participate in the grand tapestry of creation. Perhaps that's why the physical toll—the discomforts of pregnancy, the searing pain of childbirth—weren't seen as obstacles to be overcome or burdens to be endured, by Ruby. Rather they were sacred trials, opportunities to demonstrate her unwavering faith in God's plan and secure her place in the celestial afterlife alongside the hallowed ancestors who had walked this path before her.

As soon as she turned eighteen, the starting gun went off in Ruby's race toward eternal exaltation, and my mother embarked on her mission to populate not just her earthly home but her heavenly mansion as well.

First, though, she needed a husband.

In the year 2000, when eighteen-year-old Ruby first set foot on the Utah State University campus, she had one thing on her mind: manhunting. Yes, she had chosen accounting as her major but college was never about learning for Ruby. It was about finding a mate so she could get married, start a family, and begin fulfilling her divine purpose, A.S.A.P.

On a color-coded vision board Ruby outlined the key qualities she required in a man. "Five inches taller than me." "Handsome." "Car paid off." "Engineer." (Her own father was an engineer, so perhaps she liked the idea of history repeating itself.) It goes without saying, her ideal man had to be devoted to the church.

Enter my father, Kevin Franke: a senior living on campus, four years older at twenty-two, on the brink of completing his civil engineering degree, and very much a product of his LDS faith. He stood five inches taller than Ruby (check), had a chiseled jawline

(handsome—double check), and his keen intellect and ambition hinted at a promising future.

Plus, he seemed so... nice. Exuding genuine kindness, Kevin had a laid-back aura that was a balm to Ruby's intense spirit. Ruby had no interest in power struggles, after all; what she needed was someone relaxed enough to let her take the reins without too much resistance, a copilot content to let her navigate their shared journey, pay the bills, and give her the children she longed for.

Born on October 9, 1978, in Ogden, Utah, Kevin was the youngest of seven siblings, trailing his nearest brother by a full twelve years. Kevin's late arrival made him something of an anomaly—while his siblings were navigating high school and beyond, he was still learning to tie his shoes, and his days unfolded in a haze of neighborhood adventures and sports on TV, overseen by parents who'd done it all before.

Kevin's mom didn't like to cook or bake—life revolved around premade meals, TV, and talk of faith. The household was generally relaxed, without a lot of rules; an easygoing environment that sculpted Kevin into a gentle, even-keeled sort of guy.

Like Ruby, Kevin was devoted to finding his spiritual partner; a future mother to the children he hoped to raise in the gospel. But he had come to college to learn, secure his future, and had been in no hurry to meet his wife. Until he laid eyes on Ruby, that is.

He saw her first, working the room at a welcome week hot dog social on campus. The undisputed queen bee, Ruby flitted from man to man, her flirtatious confidence unlike anything he'd ever seen before. It helped that she was naturally beautiful, blond, with a huge dazzling smile and a svelte figure—Ruby was just his type.

As she methodically auditioned potential husbands, like a director casting her leading man, Kevin sensed the clock was ticking. Ruby was a prize catch, and if he didn't somehow distinguish himself in the crowd, he'd wind up just another also-ran in Ruby's race to the altar.

One evening, Kevin was sitting next to Ruby, holding her hand under a blanket as they watched a movie with some friends. Kevin couldn't care less about what was happening on the screen—all he could think about was the softness of her skin, the gentle pressure of her grip, the occasional brush of her thumb across his knuckles. Each sensation was electric, sending shivers up his arm and straight to his core.

Then Kevin glanced over and noticed another guy—one of Ruby’s admirers—sitting way too close on her other side. His stomach dropped as he realized Ruby was holding this guy’s hand under the blanket, too. Usually so levelheaded, Kevin jumped up, his face burning, heart racing. Without a word, he stormed out, leaving Ruby gaping after him.

The next day, Kevin talked to Ruby and laid down the law. No more hand-holding with other guys. Period. Ruby, attracted to his passion for her, fast-tracked Kevin to meet the Griffiths, her parents and toughest critics. They approved, and Kevin, in turn, introduced Ruby to his parents, the Frankes, who thought Ruby seemed like a lovely young lady, perfect for their son.

Two weeks after the day they met, Ruby cut to the chase. “So, are we getting married?” she asked.

Kevin, caught off-guard, uttered the most dangerous word in the dictionary: “Yes.”

In just fourteen days, they had gone from strangers to engaged.

As Ruby and Kevin threw themselves into wedding planning, they got to know each other a little more. Turned out they both loved playing the piano, though their approaches to the instrument could not have been more different. Kevin had a photographic memory and could play jazz numbers and popular songs without even practicing. Ruby, on the other hand, had once poured her entire being into the piano. Throughout her teens, she’d immersed herself in the world of classical music, her dreams filled with visions of concert halls and standing ovations. She approached each piece with meticulous precision, spending hours perfecting every note, every dynamic shift. For her, playing wasn’t about fun—it was about excelling, and when she fell short of perfection, it left a dent in her ego that no amount of practice seemed to fill.

Ruby’s entire self-worth was built on exceptionalism, so if she couldn’t be extraordinary, then what was the point? She needed a new dream, a fresh source of validation. If music wouldn’t define her greatness, then motherhood would. Cherubic faces to beam up at her with the love and adoration she craved. Blank slates, ready to be inscribed with her wisdom, her values, her Rubyness.

A couple of kids would’ve suited Kevin fine, but Ruby craved a clan, and Kevin was happy to agree to Ruby’s grand vision, vowing to move heaven and earth to support her in her dreams. Thus, the dynamic was set: Kevin, the perpetual supporting actor to Ruby’s lead role in her epic production of “Ultimate Mother.”

On December 28, 2000, barely three months after their first meeting, Ruby and Kevin strode toward the temple, ready to be eternally sealed in the eyes of God. Ruby was a vision in ivory, her hair a cascade of curls, a Southwestern blanket draped over her shoulders against the winter chill. Even Kevin's mismatched shoes—one black, one brown, thanks to rushed dressing in the dark—couldn't dim her smile.

This was it—Ruby's fairy-tale moment come to life. As the vows left her lips, she felt her happily-ever-after unfurling before her like a red carpet—finally, her life was about to begin.

CHAPTER 2

teardrops

She's getting tired in there," the obstetrician said. "We'll need to do an assisted delivery."

Then, with a contraption that looked better suited to cleaning carpets than guiding new life, the doctor suctioned my head and forcibly pulled me out into the world.

It was March 3, 2003, and after nine difficult months of pregnancy filled with a slew of medical complications, twenty-one-year-old Ruby had finally evicted me, her first baby, from her womb. Somehow, through her fog of pain and exhaustion, Ruby managed a victorious smile. In her arms lay not just a baby but a woman's ultimate power. Her divine right to mold a new soul in her own image.

Cradling me in the exhausted aftermath of delivery, she looked past the squalling, writhing bundle in her arms to the exalted future I represented. In my tiny frame, Ruby saw the first brushstrokes of her magnum opus, Chapter One in the epic narrative that would be her legacy of unparalleled parenting prowess.

When I was around three months, Ruby took me to the pediatrician to find out why I was so grouchy—my constant wailing was testing her vision of motherly bliss—but the doctor said it was just colic. When I began refusing my bottles and growing lethargic, Kevin freaked out, rushing me to the emergency room, where they discovered that I had a life-threatening intestinal blockage. Without the immediate surgery I received, I most likely would have died. From the very start, it seemed, my childhood was destined to be a fight for survival.

Ruby didn't believe in comforting me when I was a baby, not in the way most parents do. Why would she? Her family's philosophy had always been that it doesn't hurt a baby to cry things out. Babies shouldn't be coddled. Tantrums should not be tolerated. It's for

their own good, so they know who's boss, and when they grow up, they can learn to handle whatever life throws at them without being weak losers or crybabies.

Yet, ironically, my earliest memories are of Ruby crying. She had tears for every occasion. Joy, sorrow, boredom—it didn't matter, Ruby wept through it all, a woman perpetually at odds with her own equilibrium. Perhaps that's why she wanted so many children. A set of Russian nesting dolls, each one a slightly smaller version of the last, to absorb the tsunami of her raging emotions. For what better way to fill the gaping void within than to surround yourself with adoring little mini-mes? Interesting, though, how someone who cried so much herself seemed entirely immune to the tears of others, including mine.

I often wonder how much of my adult self was forged in those early formative years. My tendency to bottle up emotions, to present a stoic face to the world—are these echoes of an infant learning that her distress will always go unheeded? Even before I could form words or thoughts, was I learning that my pain didn't matter, that my needs were inconvenient? If my tears had been met with comfort instead of calculated indifference, would I have grown into someone more open, less guarded? Or was I always destined to retreat inward, becoming emotionally distant at a moment's notice, my feelings trapped behind a fortress that I still struggle to breach?

There's no way to know for sure—nature and nurture dance a complex tango, after all. But as I reflect on the many incongruities of my childhood, I can't help but feel sadness for the baby girl who cried for her mother. Who wanted a different kind of love than the kind she received. A love that allows for vulnerability, for tears, for the full range of human emotion. A love that allows a child the freedom to feel.

CHAPTER 3

mommy isn't very nice to me

In 2005, when I was two, the Ruby Show expanded its cast with my brother Chad's debut. Alongside him, another addition—our first dog, Nolly, a bouncing yellow Labrador puppy full of energy and love. She'd bound up to me, tail wagging furiously, showering me with sloppy kisses. Nolly, much like my little brother, would never fail to make me laugh.

In 2007, Ruby's third child, a girl, arrived on the scene. I will not be naming her in this book. Throughout this narrative, except for Chad, all my younger siblings will remain nameless. This isn't an oversight—it's my last line of defense for them.

In a kinder world, their stories would not be fodder for a book. Their private moments would be their own, known only to friends and family, not dissected by strangers on the internet. But peace and anonymity were never in the cards for us. We have Ruby to thank for that. Ruby and her insatiable hunger for attention and success.

My mother's journey into the spotlight started innocently enough—a mommy blog, titled *Good Lookin Home Cookin*. Mommy blogging was still a wild frontier then, ripe for the taking, and Ruby, like her sisters and friends, was excited to explore the possibilities of online media.

"My main goal for this blog is to journal our family's growth and experiences," Ruby proclaimed on her shiny new Blogger profile. "I want my children to have a place on the internet to go and enjoy reading about themselves and to see how they've progressed."

In my church, we're encouraged to document our lives meticulously, creating a road map for future generations to understand their roots, and it seemed as though the internet was just an extension of that, another way in which to do the Lord's work. Her

little recipe-filled blog gave Ruby her first taste of online existence and the possibilities it held—as a tool for self-expression, a way to project an identity and forge a connection with people by sharing her recipes for raspberry butter, honey-lime chicken, and trail mix cookies—painting a picture of a home filled with the constant aroma of freshly baked bread and lovingly prepared meals.

The truth is, I'm not sure she ever made those dishes. Sure, Ruby was always baking something (she enjoyed trying out recipes from her Ann Romney cookbook) but most of the recipes on *Good Lookin Home Cookin* were aspirational rather than realistic, part of an image, that of the smiling, flour-smudged mama, the gaggle of cherubs gathered around the table. Even at this early stage of her online career, Ruby was showing her willingness to sacrifice authenticity on the altar of appearances.

There are some exceptions—I can confirm that her bread was legendary, a staple of every family gathering and potluck. She'd slice it thick, each piece a small loaf in itself, with uneven air pockets that spoke of hand-kneading and patience. The crust always had a slight crackle, giving way to a soft, warm interior. It was the kind of bread that demanded to be noticed, that turned a simple sandwich into a meal. One slice was often enough to fill me up, though I'd usually end up eating more.

She went on to start other blogs: *Full Suburban* and a mommy blogging group with her friends called *Yummy Mummy's*. Exercising her natural flair for marketing, she started branding our family photos, putting a logo in the corner, saying "It's A Franke Life." My three aunts, Ellie, Bonnie, and Julie, who had all settled within an hour and a half's drive of one another with their husbands and own growing broods, showed similar interests in blogging. It seemed embedded in the Griffiths' DNA, this feminine urge to take family life and turn it into something bigger.

"All my kids are going to learn how to play the piano," Ruby proclaimed, and as the firstborn, I got to be the guinea pig. From the age of five, Ruby would wake me up at 6:00 a.m. and plonk me in front of our Kawai upright to practice under her exacting gaze.

"Curve your fingers, Shari! Count it out!" she'd bark, slamming the piano with her hand, making me jump. "And for heaven's sake, don't give me that face."

I quickly learned that anything less than unbridled enthusiasm would trigger Ruby into a rage. One hint of displeasure on my face, and *whack!* A smack on my arm, a flick to my lips, or a sharp tug on my ear. I rarely cried when Ruby punished me—only one

person in this house was allowed to shed tears, and it wasn't me. So I kept quiet, maintained a neutral expression. But beneath that calm exterior, a realization was taking root.

Mommy isn't very nice to me.

I was grateful for Nolly, who'd grown from an adorable puppy into a full-grown Labrador.

During those grueling piano practice sessions, when Mom's critical voice seemed to fill every corner of the room, Nolly would position herself under the piano, her warm body pressed against my feet. When Mom's tirade became too much, I'd glance down to see Nolly's gentle brown eyes gazing up at me, full of love and reassurance, as if to say, "It's okay, we're in this together."

"Mommy," I'd whimper, padding into my parents' room late at night, my stuffed horse, Bubbles, clutched to my chest. "My tummy hurts again."

Ruby would sigh heavily, her face pinched with annoyance. "Shari, we've been through this. There's nothing wrong with you. Go back to bed."

Even then, at five years old, my body was beginning to rebel, as if my very cells were crying out in protest against the environment in which they found themselves. I know now, of course, that the pain in my stomach was more than just a childish complaint—it was a physical response to my anxiety.

At night, that constant sense of unease would transform into something frightening. I would lie in bed, feeling the darkness press on me, utterly convinced that at any moment, a real-life demon would materialize beside me in my bed, ready to steal my soul. The fear was so real, I would plead with Ruby to leave the light on when I went to bed. But she had no time for my antics.

"No, Shari, you need to learn to sleep in the dark. There are no demons in my house." She was wrong, of course. There was certainly one.

And as soon as the lights went out, others would appear, grotesque figures straight out of a medieval hellscape, demonic entities leering with twisted grins. Their contorted faces haunted my sleepless nights, their agonized stories playing out in my dreams.

Why might a little girl harbor such tangible fears of demonic possession? I'm sure the deeply religious paradigm I was steeped in played a role. We firmly believe in Satan's power and the ability of his legion of fallen spirits to possess individuals. We believe that

evil can inhabit physical forms, sometimes fleetingly, sometimes for extended periods. Having been raised to believe the very air I breathed was thick with unseen forces battling for dominion over my soul, it was a small step for my young mind to imagine that battle raging in my own bedroom.

Perhaps, too, my constant sense of dread around my emotionally volatile mother had primed me for such fears—as if my subconscious, unable to make sense of the chaos at home, had conjured supernatural terrors to give shape to the formless anxiety that seemed to permeate our home.



One week, I practiced a new song my piano teacher had assigned, drilling each note and chord until I could practically play it in my sleep. Ruby seemed pleased with my progress and decided it was time to move on to another piece of music. But then came my piano lesson.

“Not quite there yet, sweetie,” said the teacher, after hearing me play. “Let’s work on it for one more week.”

One more week before she’d give me a sticker, passing it off as complete. Which doubtless seemed like a small thing to her. What she didn’t realize was that little gold star represented life or death to me—how was I supposed to tell Ruby that her judgment had been overruled? Did my teacher not understand the precarious position in which she had placed me, the delicate balance of power she had just upset?

Hot tears pricked the corners of my eyes, and I squirmed in my seat as my teacher looked at me quizzically, unused to seeing such intense reactions from a five-year-old.

“What’s the matter, Shari?” she asked.

“It’s just, my mom thinks it’s ready,” I said, voice quavering.

How could I possibly explain to my teacher the minefield I was navigating daily, the eggshells upon eggshells that I was forced to tread?

My teacher, sensing that Pandora’s box had just opened, chose wisely to shut it.

“Okay, never mind, here’s a sticker, well done! You’re doing great. New piece next week?”

Phew. I was out of the quicksand... for now.