Praise for Scary Close

“The digital tools allowing us to act as our own publicity agent are making it harder, not easier, to connect. I’m thankful for Don who offers his journey out of ‘public isolation’ and into a life of intimacy. The work is hard but the reward is worth it. What a beautiful thing to be known.”

Kirsten Powers, columnist, USA Today

“For those of us seeking a deeper happiness, Scary Close is a vulnerable, gripping, and impactful resource. Don provides a beautiful story and practical tools all in one transformational book. He stepped off the Grand Canyon of vulnerability in this one.”

Miles Adcox, host, The Daily Helpline

“Since Donald Miller wrote this book, I expected it to be good. What I didn't expect was that Scary Close would completely transform my approach to my marriage, parenting, work, and faith. Everyone needs to read this book, but no one can have my copy. This is the one book I will be loaning to no one. I need Scary Close near me at all times reminding me that being a real, live, messy human being is miracle enough.”

Glennon Melton, author, Carry On, Warrior and creator, Momastery
“Don invites us into his story of how he learned to impress people less and connect with them more. Finding connection is what everyone wants and yet we all struggle with it. Here’s a friend who will walk alongside you as you fight for it, find it, and grow it. The journey is worth it all. Thanks, Don.”

Henry Cloud, author, Boundaries

“Some authors I love because they’re real, others because they’re inspiring. Donald Miller is both. He has a way of drawing you into the narrative and then bam!, hits you with a truth you never saw coming. Scary Close will leave you feeling enlightened and refreshed and will change your relationships for the better.”

Korie Robertson, Duck Dynasty
Scary Close
Also by Donald Miller

A Million Miles in a Thousand Years

Blue Like Jazz

Searching for God Knows What
Scary Close

Dropping the Act and Finding True Intimacy

Donald Miller
To Elizabeth Miller
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Foreword

by Bob Goff

WE’RE ALL AMATEURS WHEN IT COMES TO LOVE and relationships. I’ve never seen anyone go professional, or wear a relationship jacket with stickers all over it from corporate sponsors like a NASCAR driver. They’ll never make an Olympic event out of relationships either, although I can’t lie, I’d like to see it in the winter games. We’ve let magazines on the end caps of our grocery stores, movies at our theaters, and old boyfriends and girlfriends who have failed us do most of the talking. Not surprisingly, we’ve ended up with a distorted idea not only of who we are, but also of what it means to love well.
Foreword

Don Miller is one of my closest friends. I know that he loves me because he’s told me. But even if he hadn’t said a word, I’d know Don loved me because I have experienced how Don has treated me during times of tremendous joy, paralyzing sadness, and lingering uncertainty. In a word, He’s been “with” me.

A number of years ago, Don and I went to Gulu, Uganda together. Uganda’s civil war with the Lord’s Resistance Army was still raging at the time and over a million people who had been displaced from their homes were living in displacement camps with no social services and very little security. When we arrived in Northern Uganda, we didn’t stay in a hotel; we stayed in a camp with 38,000 displaced people. It was certainly more than a little unsettling. Abductions were still happening in the region by the LRA fighters. Most of these kidnappings were taking place in the displacement camps.

It was late in the evening before Don and I left the warm fire and conversation with leaders from the camp. In the dark, we made our way to the hut we were staying in. There wouldn’t be any way to protect ourselves against any intruder who meant us harm. After ducking into a small opening in the hut, without saying a word, Don rolled out his mat in front of the door. They’d have to get by him to get to anyone else. Good friends do
that; they guard each other when things get scary by putting themselves in between their friends and what could harm them. Don wrote this book with much the same in mind.

I GET A LOT OF MAIL. I BET YOU DO TOO. MOST OF mine is from people I know, but I get a fair amount of junk mail too. Before I open any of it, I check the return addresses to see if the mail is from someone I know and trust. Some of my junk mail is obvious and easy to pull from the pile and get rid of without reading it, but a lot of it pretends to look like it’s not junk. Sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference. The same is true in our relationships. This book will help you sort the junk mail you’ve been bringing to your relationships.

But if you’re looking for a book with steps in it, this isn’t the one for you. Don writes with intellectual honesty and sometimes-painful transparency about his own life. He’s found honesty and transparency to be helpful guides. Don isn’t asking us to agree with him about what he’s experienced; however, he’s challenged more than a few of my assumptions about what makes for good relationships and I’m better for it.

Don and I have spoken at quite a few events together over the years. The most difficult part for me is never
who I'm talking to or what I'm talking about—it's introducing Don. If you can believe it, I've never made it a single time through introducing Don without getting choked up. I'm not really sure why. I think it's because I love Don and love makes us both strong and weak at the same time. I love who Don is, I love who he's becoming, and I am grateful for a guy who will put himself between me and what scares me the most, even if it costs him a lot.

Let me introduce you to my friend, Don Miller. And yes, I'm crying.
Author’s Note

SOMEBODY ONCE TOLD ME WE WILL NEVER FEEL loved until we drop the act, until we’re willing to show our true selves to the people around us.

When I heard that I knew it was true. I’d spent a good bit of my life as an actor, getting people to clap—but the applause only made me want more applause. I didn’t act in a theater or anything. I’m talking about real life.

The thought of not acting pressed on me like a terror. Can we really trust people to love us just as we are?
Author’s Note

Nobody steps onto a stage and gets a standing ovation for being human. You have to sing or dance or something.

I think that’s the difference between being loved and making people clap, though. Love can’t be earned, it can only be given. And it can only be exchanged by people who are completely true with each other.

I shouldn’t pretend to be an expert, though. I didn’t get married until I was forty-two, which is how long it took me to risk being myself with another human being.

Here are two things I found taking the long road, though:

Applause is a quick fix. And love is an acquired taste.

Sincerely,
Donald Miller
AFTER REALIZING WE BECOME LIKE THE PEOPLE WE spend time with, I decided to hang out with better people. I had a friend across town named David Price who was married to a great woman and ran his own business analyzing data for large companies. Before he analyzed data, though, he worked for an author in Colorado named John Eldredge. Eldredge writes books about the masculine journey and I'm a fan of his work. I don't know if it was because David had worked for John or whether he was just wired differently, but what I liked about David
is he had no interest in small talk. David understood life as a journey of the heart and wanted to know how my heart was doing on the journey. To be honest, sometimes I found conversations with him to be tiring. But I realized I only got tired because I was trying to hide. I’d rather talk about football or the weather than my heart. Eventually, I gave in and started opening up to the guy.

We didn’t become the best of friends, but he was my best friend. By best friend I mean he was the best person for me to talk to. Every time I walked away from a beer or a lunch with him I was, somehow, a more centered person. He never let me control the conversation with distractions. He’d just laugh them off and repeat the question I was running from.

David and his wife had just had twins, and he was looking for an office outside his home. I knew if I was going to get my life together, I had to do more David time. So I rented an office across the street from his condo, bought him a desk, and let him use it for free. I knew I needed more time with the people I wanted to become like if I was going to change. I decided to get a bit more aggressive about it.

THERE ARE PRUNING SEASONS IN LIFE AND THERE are growing seasons. When I look back on my life, I
can tell the greatest growth comes right after you get cut back. David had this sincere and kind way of cutting me back. I don’t think he meant to do it, but the guy was like a mirror, always reflecting back to me the truth of who I was. I doubt I would have been capable of a healthy relationship without him.

Before learning to get serious in a romantic relationship, I used women for validation. I’d move from girl to girl feeling too much too soon then finally feeling nothing at all. It didn’t take David long to notice the pattern.

In the mornings, before we started working, I’d listen to his stories about feeding the twins in the middle of the night and then he’d listen to mine about my most recent love interest. Pretty soon he confronted me.

We were having lunch at an Indian restaurant and I was telling him about a girl I’d met in Michigan. But rather than asking questions about her, which he normally did, he asked if I was getting my identity from manipulating these girls. He said it seemed strange to act so quickly on a crush.

I was taken aback and defensive. “I don’t think I’m being manipulative. I may really like this girl.”

He said, “Maybe, but most men don’t feel so strongly about this many girls a year, Don. Just last month you were talking like this about somebody else. I think you
might be using these girls to numb your wounds. You’re addicted to some romantic fantasy, but you can’t face the reality that love demands we make a choice and stick with it.”

Numb my own wounds? David wasn’t being unkind, he was being direct. But it hurt all the same. What hurt most is he didn’t see me as strong or masculine for reeling these girls in. He saw me as weak. He saw me as needy.

And he was right.

In every relationship I’d been in I’d fantasized about other women. One woman was never enough. I wanted them all. Some of that was sexual fantasy, of course, but plenty of it was romantic, the kind of daydreams where I’d sweep a girl off her feet and buy her a house and have some kids.

I’d meet a girl, get a little crush going, then start daydreaming about being her hero. This is terribly embarrassing to admit, but I swear there was a camera in my brain always shooting an imaginary television show and I’d cast myself as the fun-loving lead. My costars were interchangeable, sometimes a woman I ran into at a coffee shop, maybe a girl I met at a book signing, but, sadly, none of them mattered much to me in real life. I only used them as bit parts in a fantasy. I never knew what I was doing at the time, or I didn’t
fully have a conscience about it. I realize this is awful now. I’d be brokenhearted if one of my sons followed in my footsteps.

TALKING EVERY MORNING WITH DAVID HELPED ME realize the girls I’d crushed on were all the same: they were the girls who weren’t interested in me in high school. What I was doing was going back and rewriting the broken stories I’d lived in my formative years, trying to fix my broken past. I grew up poor, so most of the girls I fell for later in life were from prominent families. I was never athletic or cool, so the girls I fell for had usually been popular or cheerleaders. I’d never know that stuff until we started dating but something in me sensed it and pursued them as though they were medicine. It’s as though my broken identity was trying to validate myself with a certain class of people.

The healthier I get, the more surprised I am at the deceptive desires we so often mistake for love.

Of course, none of this ever worked. My broken identity turned me into a manipulator and my romantic life looked like one of those fishing shows on television, a game of catch and release in which I only held the girl long enough to snap a picture.
ONE MORNING DAVID MENTIONED I SHOULD STOP dating for a season. When he said it I had a quiet panic attack at my desk. I doubt he noticed. I sort of moved my mouse around and stared at the bulletin board behind my desk, imagining David, his hot wife, and their twin daughters waving at me through the window of a space station, all of them rooting wildly for crazy uncle Don, floating around in the cold wearing the puffy white suit of singleness.

“It might be good for you to go through withdrawal,” he said. “To detox from all the drama.”

Detox? I’m an addict now? I thought.

I fantasized about throwing my stapler at him.

IN THE END, THOUGH, I TOOK DAVID’S ADVICE. I decided to go six months without dating. I’d be lying if I said it was easy. I was at a book signing a few weeks later and met a cute socialite whose uncle was a senator. She stood there and tilted her head and told me how much we had in common through lips as shiny as a crack pipe. It was all I could do to stop shaking her hand. I stared at the back of her head as she walked out the door and hoped we’d mysteriously find each other again after I got out of David prison.
That night in my hotel room I daydreamed about the girl, whatever her name was. In the span of thirty minutes we got married and had some kids and one day when we were in our sixties her uncle and I sat in my posh library drinking scotch when he invited me to run for his seat in the senate. Brilliant.

I hated David so much. He was ruining everything. But at the same time I could feel the silliness of it all. Most of my romantic accomplishments had taken place in my head. And in those stories there was no risk and so no thrill, just the comfort of sugar.

There was also no character arc. Change only comes when we face the difficulty of reality head-on. Fantasy changes nothing, which is why, once we're done fantasizing, it feels like a bankrupt story.

I ended up taking more than six months off. It was nearly a year before I started dating again. In a way, the detox worked. After a few months I had the power to walk away from temptation. But it wasn’t until I started dating Betsy that I’d realize how much my fantasy life had negatively affected my relationships.

Here’s what happened. I moved to DC to pursue Betsy and, of course, had begun to direct a complete
love story in my mind. Betsy would play the beautiful, sophisticated girl who saw me as a hero and I’d play the lovable but hardworking power broker.

In the past, as soon as the girl didn’t seem to fit the part I’d imagined for her, I’d start focusing on how complicated the relationship was and move on to some other short-lived fantasy.

Betsy wasn’t who I thought she would be. She came from a great family and had worked around congressmen and senators on the Hill but had little desire to marry one. She saw them as too busy and in a constant struggle to provide emotional support for their families. And more than anything else, she wanted a healthy family. Her relationships were more about shared memories and common values than about strategic partnerships to help each other succeed. That one killed me. I’d ask why we were getting together with so-and-so and she’d say something about how they hadn’t seen each other in a long time and one time they’d stayed up all night smoking cigarettes on the lawn and talking about boys.

I had no mental category for that kind of friendship. I wasn’t sure how that kind of friendship profited anybody anything. What were they trying to build? Who were they trying to beat? What were the rules of the game, and how were they going to win? These are the questions in life that matter, right?
“Staying up all night smoking cigarettes and talking about boys seems to me a waste of time,” I said sweetly. Betsy rolled her eyes.

“Sometimes the real bonding happens in conversations about nothing, Don,” she said. “Sometimes being willing to talk about nothing shows how much we want to be with each other. And that’s a powerful thing.”

She might be right. I’m unwilling to say at this point. God knows I’m not staying up all night to sit on a lawn and talk about nothing. Betsy said if we have children I’ll do it and I suppose I will. It’s funny what happens to you when part of your heart gets born inside somebody else. I trust I’ll do the crazy things parents do and they won’t seem crazy.

I once took the DISC test, a test that assesses your work style and offers a report people can read if they want to know how to work with you. My report said, “Never talk to Don about anything that doesn’t advance his goals.” It might as well have said, “Don is a monster. Do not look him in the eye.”

BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING QUITE BEAUTIFUL about this new thing with Betsy. She was taking me somewhere. I’d known enough older guys who gave their lives to their careers and have nothing to show for
it save a lot of money and power and loneliness to realize Betsy was right. Relationships matter. They matter as much as exercise and nutrition. And not all relationships help us reach our goals. God doesn’t give us crying, pooping children because he wants to advance our careers. He gives them to us for the same reason he confused language at the Tower of Babel, to create chaos and deter us from investing too much energy in the gluttonous idols of self-absorption.

So this time I had to stay. I couldn’t run from Betsy like I had all the other girls. I had to face the reality I would never be the director of my own distorted love story. I had to realize Betsy would never be an actress reading from a script I’d written. She was herself with her own desires and wants and passions, and there was nothing I could do to control her.

I HAVE A PASTOR FRIEND WHO SAYS THE ROOT OF sin is the desire for control. I think there’s some truth to that. And I’d add the root of control is fear. The reason I had such a rich fantasy life was partially because it gave me a sense of control. There was no risk in my fantasy life, and risk is what I feared the most. After all, to love somebody is to give them the power to hurt you, and
nobody can hurt you if you’re the only one writing the script. But it doesn’t work. Controlling people are the loneliest people in the world.

Some people play out their controlling tendencies through intimidation or bullying. I’ve done that, for sure. But it’s the same tendency that drove my fantasy life: it’s the desire to be the writer of somebody else’s script and control all aspects of the story. It’s sad. Not even God controls people’s stories and he’s the only one who actually can.

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN MY CONTROLLING TENDENCIES nearly derailed my relationship with Betsy. It was our darkest season.

Here’s what happened: Betsy and I had gotten engaged in DC and were planning to move to Nashville after having the wedding in New Orleans, where her family lives. We started talking about buying a house, and because I knew Nashville better than she did, I narrowed the neighborhoods to the ones I wanted to live in. Without asking for Betsy’s input I met with a real-estate agent and had him put us on an automated list, careful to include only options I’d preapproved. Then I started building my railroad. By that I mean I laid long, steel,
unmovable tracks to our future that she would never be able to undo. I was going to get the house I wanted and she was going to live in it.

It all fell apart, of course, when Betsy and I traveled to Nashville to look at houses in person. There were whole sections of the map I wouldn’t drive into. I did everything but make up stories about nuclear waste dumps and EPA protected habitats for rare birds.

“A double murder happened in that house,” I’d say.

“It’s brand-new construction,” Betsy would protest. “Nobody’s had time to get murdered in it!”

The truth is, though, I’d found the house. It was a decently large house a few miles from my office. It had a good yard and a giant field behind it for the dog. There were two separate garages, and I intended to turn one of them into a home gym. It had a large office that would double as a home library and a living room prewired for a television large enough for a sports arena. The guest rooms were far enough from the master I wouldn’t have to interact with Betsy’s friends, and it was new construction, which means I’d not spend my life studying YouTube videos about leaky toilets. Perfect.

The real-estate agent took us to lesser homes first, saving the one I wanted for the finale. All the other houses were intentionally flawed, so this one would look the best. I was certain of my strategy.
As we toured the home I kept talking about the little things she might find attractive. Plenty of room for guests. A yard large enough for a garden. Old trees. A porch we could eat dinner on while holding hands. She walked through the house quietly, peeking in all the closets. She didn’t linger the way somebody does when they’re having a moment. I got concerned. I motioned to our agent to give us a little space. He stepped out into the backyard and Betsy and I stood in the kitchen.

“I don’t love it,” she said.
“You’re crazy,” I replied.
“I’m not crazy. I think we should go back through our list. This isn’t it.”
“This is it,” I said. “This is exactly it. It has everything you want, Betsy, a sink in the kitchen and everything.”
“You haven’t even asked what I want,” she said straightly.
“What in God’s name could you want that this house doesn’t have? Do you want a helipad? A waterslide? What’s wrong with you?”

There was a look in Betsy’s eyes I hadn’t seen before. She stood there quietly with her hand on the kitchen counter. The look wasn’t anger, exactly. It was more like sadness mixed with fear. It was the look of a trapped animal wondering what its captor was going to do and whether living in a cage might be worse than dying.
“I want you to tell me what’s wrong with this house,” I demanded. At that point I’d lost the ability to empathize. The thing that was supposed to happen wasn’t happening and I felt like my plan was being taken from me.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with the house, Don. I’m not sure.” Her hand was trembling on the counter. She hid it in the pocket of her fleece.

“You’re being a bully,” she said softly.

“A bully,” I said deliberately, as though to accuse her of drama.

There are times in a man’s life when he says things he will never be able take back. It’s true words can have a physical impact on somebody. A person can concuss with their words. Words can snap as fast as a trap in the woods and leave a victim to writhe for weeks.

“When you have the money for a down payment, or for that matter a mortgage, your opinion will matter a little more,” I said.

Betsy’s eyes filled with tears. She turned and walked out the door.

It was a long time before she could forgive me. I assure you I never spoke words like that again. They were unfair and unjust. I offer that story to you
as a confession. I was wrong. And besides, the reality for Betsy was she held an esteemed position in a large company in DC. Her career was just getting started, but she didn’t need me or my money. Her greatest fear was that choosing me over her career would come at the expense of her freedom and identity. She’d gladly give up her career for a family, but she didn’t want to lose her identity. She wanted to be Betsy and she wanted to have her clothes and her things and her home, and she wanted all of that both with and apart from me.

They never tell you when you get born a control freak it will cost you a healthy love life. But it’s true. You can’t control somebody and have intimacy with them at the same time. They may stay because they fear you, but true love casts out fear.

Betsy and I wouldn’t feel close again until we’d left DC and moved to New Orleans to prepare for the wedding. And it took many conversations to understand the damage I’d done. Finding her in the woods and prying the trap open was careful work. It took time. Incredibly, she didn’t make me pay for my mistake. She didn’t play the victim and that gave me the space for self-reflection.

For me, giving up control involved a period of grieving. It reminded me of the difference between writing a book and writing a movie. When you write a book you control every word, but with a movie you share agency
with the producer and cinematographer and even the actors. Everybody who touches the screenplay interprets it differently and by the time it makes it to theaters it looks nothing like you imagined. Yet in so many ways, it looks better. The director was able to smooth out your blind spots and the actors gave your characters new dimensions that made them real and beautiful.

The struggle in my relationship with Betsy was all about sharing agency. Was I willing to go into this thing having no idea what the finished product would look like? Could I give up my dream to merge it with hers and settle and perhaps be surprised by what could happen in a shared life?

Betsy and I found a house that worked for us. The garage wasn’t big enough to turn into a home gym and the office was smaller than I wanted, but the guest rooms were far enough from the master to ensure privacy from our guests. And we both wanted lots of guests. The place was wired for a giant television, too, a little bigger than Betsy is happy with but, you know, we all make sacrifices. Betsy loves the backyard, though. There’s enough room for a garden. She wants to learn to cook food we grow in our own yard. I found a place near town that sells railroad ties and I’ve been watching YouTube videos about how to make a raised vegetable bed. And you wouldn’t believe it, but
that same company she worked with in DC hired her to work on a project-by-project basis from home. So she’s started her own company consulting with her old associates.

We both have our independence and freedom, but we have those things with each other. It’s a paradox, but it works. It all reminded me of what my friend Henry Cloud told me, that when two people are entirely and completely separate they are finally compatible to be one. Nobody’s self-worth lives inside of another person. Intimacy means we are independently together.

I DON’T KNOW WHY LOVING A WOMAN IS SCARIER than climbing a mountain or sailing an ocean, but it is. A mountain can hurt your body and an ocean can drown you, but in the end you’re still a man for conquering them. Dead or alive, you’re still a man. A woman, though, can rob your manhood and reduce you to a boy at the drop of a word. It’s no wonder we all try to control each other. Sometimes relationships feel like we’re trying to emotionally cuddle with each other at the same time we’re tearing each other down.

But love doesn’t control, and I suppose that’s why it’s the ultimate risk. In the end, we have to hope the person we’re giving our heart to won’t break it, and be
willing to forgive them when they do, even as they will forgive us.

Real love stories don’t have dictators, they have participants. Love is an ever-changing, complicated, choose-your-own adventure narrative that offers the world but guarantees nothing. When you climb a mountain or sail an ocean, you’re rewarded for staying in control.

Perhaps that’s another reason true intimacy is so frightening. It’s the one thing we all want, and must give up control to get.