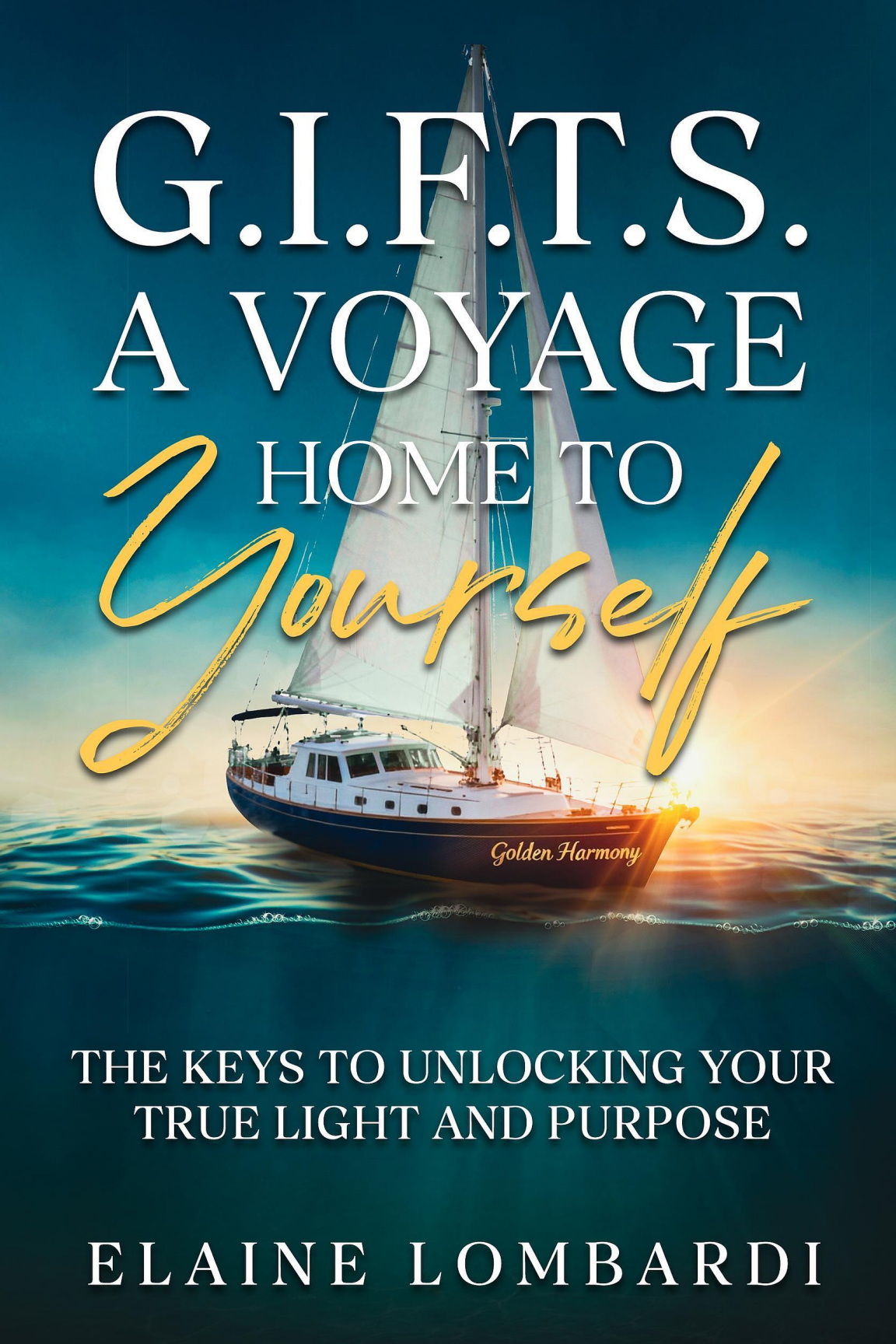


A sailboat with a white cabin and a dark blue hull is sailing on a calm ocean. The sun is setting behind the boat, creating a warm, golden glow on the water and the sky. The boat's name, 'Golden Harmony', is written in gold script on the side of the hull. The background is a deep blue sky with soft, wispy clouds.

G.I.F.T.S. A VOYAGE HOME TO *Youself*

THE KEYS TO UNLOCKING YOUR
TRUE LIGHT AND PURPOSE

ELAINE LOMBARDI

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PART ONE | G.I.F.T.S. A Voyage Home to
Yourself

The Keys to Unlocking Your True Light and Purpose



MEL BOOKS

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Elaine Lombardi asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

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A Note Before You Begin...

What you're about to read is Part One: Season's Call, the first three complete chapters exactly as they appear in the full book. G.I.F.T.S. A Voyage Home to Yourself. This story followed me for a long time before I finally wrote it down. It's for the woman standing at the edge of a new season of life, and the voyage that helps you find your way back to yourself.

~ Elaine

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Dedication

*For my incredible daughter Kristina,
mother of five, teacher, nurturer, warrior.
In the midst of homeschooling, activities, laundry,
and loving so many, may you never forget to
save space for yourself.*

*I am so proud of the mother you are
and in awe of the woman you've always been.
Graceful, resilient, fiercely loving, and absolutely remarkable.
You've always been gutsy, and with age you've grown wise,
courageous, tender-hearted, and extraordinary in every way.
Watching you live and love with such faith and devotion
fills my heart beyond measure. I love you so much.
You are a true gift to this world.*

A G.I.F.T.S. Companion Book



G.I.F.T.S. A Voyage Home to Yourself: The Keys to Unlocking Your True Light and Purpose is a companion book within the G.I.F.T.S. family. It brings the G.I.F.T.S. Method to life through personal stories, reflections, and nautical themes that illuminate what the five key areas can look like in everyday experience.

For the full step-by-step framework and practical system, read my signature core manual titled **The G.I.F.T.S. Method: The Five Keys System to Lasting Change.**

*To my reader,
Always remember, your gifts
are within you. Let them shine!*
Elaine Lombardi 

I

SEASON'S CALL

*“Challenges are gifts that force us to search for
a new center of gravity.”*

— Oprah Winfrey

The Parking Lot

The phone call came on a quiet Tuesday afternoon.

You sit in your car with the engine off, the grocery list soft in your hand. The same list as every week: milk, bread, chicken breasts, salad ingredients. Food for two now instead of four. You still catch yourself reaching for the sugary cereal your son loves before remembering he left for college three months ago.

You thought you were prepared. After twenty-five years of mothering, you should've seen this day coming. You'd even felt ready for it. *I can't wait to have more time*, you thought. And you'd meant it. Except now you have more time, and you don't know what to do with it.

The house that was too small for years suddenly feels enormous. The kitchen where you packed thousands of lunches sits clean and quiet. The calendar on your fridge used to be crowded with practices, games, and appointments. Now it holds your husband's work schedule and a note that his truck needs an oil change. That's it. Nothing that's yours.

He's the same person he's always been. Kind, steady, and a good man. But somewhere in the years spent focused on parenting, you stopped being partners and became project managers running a household. Now the project is complete, and you're not sure what role you're supposed to play.

Your phone sits on the passenger seat. You should call your mother back. She left a voicemail yesterday. You should text your daughter. She's busy

with the baby and her own family. You should do something. But you can't seem to find the energy for any of it.

You look around the parking lot. Other women move through their routines, loading groceries, scrolling through their phones, caught up in the rhythm of their lives. Some wear professional clothes, probably on lunch breaks from important jobs. Others have toddlers in car seats, still in the thick of what's behind you now. All of them seem to know who they are and what they're doing.

You're fifty-two years old. You have no idea who you are. You've been Mom with a capital M. Your entire identity was wrapped in that role. And you were good at it. Room mom. Team mom. The one who hosted the birthday parties, drove the carpool, and stayed up late helping with science projects that were always 'due tomorrow'.

You started little businesses over the years, trying to bring in extra money, trying to create something that was yours. But they never got off the ground the way you imagined. You only seemed to take pride in being a good mom, being present, being the mother you'd wanted your own mother to be.

But now they don't need you. Your daughter has her own life, three states away. Your son is at college, his phone calls brief and distracted. They're doing exactly what you raised them to do: becoming independent, leaving.

And you're left with the same questions you've had for years, only now they're louder: How do I build something that's mine? How do I become visible in a world that only sees me as someone's mother? How do I show up to a game where everyone knows the rules except me?

The few friends you have don't really understand. They're busy with their own things. You've never been good at the friendship part anyway. You've always felt a little out of place in groups, even when standing among familiar people.

You glance at your reflection in the rear view mirror. When did you get so old? The gray you keep meaning to cover. The lines around your eyes that appeared while you weren't looking. You're not young anymore. You're not starting fresh. You're a middle-aged woman who spent twenty-five years being the best mother she could be. You have no career, no professional

identity, and no idea what you're qualified to do besides mother. And nobody's hiring for that position.

The comparison spiral starts before you can stop it. That woman at the grocery store last week. The one who looked so confident, so certain of her purpose. You remember how she laughed into her phone, her tone light but focused, talking about a project, a meeting, a deadline. She looked like someone who mattered.

You had stood there with your cart of food for two and felt small.

I'm just a mom, you had thought, the words slipping in like an old habit. The shame of that thought still burns. It lingers quietly, the way certain memories stay lodged in your chest. Your children are incredible humans. You are proud of them. Grateful for them. The years you spent raising them weren't nothing. They were everything. Yet somehow, you still feel invisible. As though all that devotion left you without a reflection of your own.

You look down at the grocery list again. The same items you've been buying for twenty-five years. The same routine. The same life. But now it feels like you're going through motions without purpose. Cooking dinner for two. Cleaning a house that stays clean. Managing a household that barely needs managing. It's what you know how to do.

But underneath the routine, there's always been this other thing. This wanting. This sense that you were meant to create something, build something, be something beyond the roles you play.

Last week, you found yourself crying in the frozen food aisle. Standing there with a cart containing one bag of vegetables, tears slipping down your face, overwhelmed by the weight of wanting something you can't name. A boy stocking shelves asked if you were okay, and you said allergies. But the truth is, you have no idea if you're okay. You don't even know what okay would feel like anymore.

You tried talking to your husband about it. This frustration. This feeling of being stuck. But he didn't get it. "You can do whatever you want now," he said. "Start that business. Take a class." As if the problem were simply boredom and not something deeper, like an unraveling of identity you can't name.

He still has his work. His routine. His place in the world. He's still the same person he was before kids. But you became someone else entirely when you became Mom. You folded every other part of yourself away to make room for nurturing everyone else. And it was important. Your children are proof of that. But now they don't need nurturing, and you can't remember what you folded away. You can't remember who you were before. You don't know if she even exists anymore.

Your phone rings. An unknown number. You almost don't answer, thinking it's another spam call or another reminder about your car's extended warranty. But something, maybe boredom, loneliness, and the need to hear another voice, makes you swipe to accept.

"Hello?"

"Hi there!" The woman's voice is warm and bright. "You entered our drawing at the Wellness and Life Purpose Expo last month. The Life-Changing Adventure specifically for women in transition?"

You pause, trying to remember. The expo had been a desperate Saturday when your husband was golfing, and the silence of the house felt unbearable. You wandered through aisles of vendors selling crystals, essential oils, and coaching programs promising transformation. You entered drawings just to have someone look you in the eye.

"Yes," you say slowly. "I think I remember."

"Wonderful. You won our five-island transformational journey. Congratulations!"

You almost laugh. Another promise. Another program. You've tried things like this before. Signed up for online courses. Started them. Never finished. The excitement always lasted about two weeks before the fear crept in. *Who do you think you are? You have nothing valuable to offer. Nobody cares what you think. You're not qualified.* The old voice always found its way back.

"What exactly is this?" you ask, cautious but curious.

"It's a journey," she says, her tone softening. "For women who spent years being wonderful mothers but never learned how to be visible beyond that."

You fall silent. Her words find their way to that private place inside you, the one you never talk about.

“Women who compare themselves to others and feel small,” she continues. “Who start things but stop because they don’t believe they have anything worth sharing. Women who are more than ‘just a mom,’ but have forgotten how to be anything else.”

Your throat tightens. “How did you know?”

“Because I was once you,” she says. “Fifty-two, empty nest, no idea who I was without my kids. I thought my life was over. I was wrong. It was just beginning.”

Your heart beats faster. “What if I’m not brave enough?”

“Then you’re exactly who this journey is for,” she answers gently. “Bravery isn’t the requirement. Honesty is. Being tired enough to stop pretending you’re fine. And the willingness to admit you can’t keep living like this. Are you there yet?”

You stare at the grocery list on your lap, the words blurring as you think about the past few months. The same aisles. The same routines. The same ache. You glance at your hands on the steering wheel, remembering all the years they held little hands, clapped at recitals, wiped tears. Now they’re just... still.

You look out across the parking lot. The same one you’ve parked in for years, week after week, between the life you had and the life you don’t know how to start.

You think of last night’s dinner, the scrape of forks in silence, with the house seeming to hold its breath. This morning’s coffee, alone. Tonight’s plan, no different.

The woman’s voice is still soft in your ear. “You can’t see it yet, but there’s more waiting for you on the other side of surviving all this. Sometimes, all it takes is saying yes.”

You hesitate. “When does it start?”

“Saturday morning, nine o’clock,” she replies. “Harbor Point Marina, Dock 7. Look for the *Golden Harmony*.”

The name sounds like something out of a dream. “That soon?” you ask.

“That soon,” she says, and you can hear the smile in her voice.

You sit in the quiet after she hangs up. The silence feels heavier than before,

filled with something you can't quite name.

What did you just agree to? *You've always been the dreamer, the one who feels everything too much, but it's all trapped inside you. You don't do things like this.*

You replay her words in your mind, the way her voice slipped past your defenses. "One more thing," she'd said. "Bring your willingness to believe you are more than you've let yourself be."

You hadn't even realized you'd said yes until it was too late.

"Yes, I'll be there," you'd whispered, barely audible. And then she hung up before you could change your mind.

You stare at the phone in your hand, half-expecting it to ring again, for someone to tell you it was all a mistake. But it doesn't. The world outside carries on. Shopping carts rattle across the pavement. Car doors slam. The wind pushes a napkin past the windshield. Everything looks the same, but somehow it isn't.

You sit there for a long, suspended moment. Standing on the edge of something, holding your breath, waiting for what comes next. You don't know what this trip is or what you're stepping into. You only know you said yes, and it feels like the first real thing you've done for yourself in years.

Finally, you start the car. The engine hums beneath your hands. You pull out of the parking lot and drive toward home, but something inside you is still back there, in that space between endings and beginnings. You drive past the same streets, the same shops and corners, noticing things you've never really seen before. The golden light on a row of mailboxes. The shape of the clouds drifting by like thoughts caught in the windshield. The sound of your own breathing in the quiet.

You stop at the light, glance at the grocery list you placed on the passenger seat, and realize you never actually went inside. You turn around and head back, almost laughing at yourself.

You shop without thinking, reaching for the usual items, the old rhythm returning: milk, bread, chicken, salad. Ordinary things, but they feel different now. They belong to an old life that you're about to outgrow. Two versions of yourself, the one who came here and the one who's leaving.

At home, everything looks the same. The kitchen counters are clean. The

clock ticks in its steady rhythm. The mail sits in a neat pile at the edge of the counter. Your husband's shoes are where he always leaves them. You set the groceries on the counter and stand there for a moment, just listening to the silence.

He comes into the kitchen, glances at the bags. "You get everything?"

"I did," you say.

Glancing at his watch, he asks, "Everything okay? You were gone a while."

"I got sidetracked," you tell him. It's true, though not the way he thinks.

He nods, distracted, flipping through the mail. "You all right?"

You pause, a small smile tugging at your mouth. "I think so," you say. "Actually... I think I'm going on a trip this weekend."

He looks up, one eyebrow lifting. "A trip?"

"Something I won," you answer, unsure how to explain it. "A retreat. Just for a few days."

He nods again, already looking back at the stack of envelopes. "That sounds nice."

You wait for him to ask for details. He doesn't. He picks up the mail instead. The sound of it opening fills the quiet space between you.

You start putting the groceries away, one by one. The same motions you've done a thousand times before. And you stand there for a long moment with your hands resting on the counter, the cool surface steady beneath your palms. You can feel your heart still fluttering from the call. You can't tell if it's hope or fear that's settled in your chest. Maybe both.

That night, you lie awake beside him. He sleeps soundly, the way he always does. You stare at the ceiling, wide awake, replaying the sound of the woman's voice, the calm certainty in her tone. You think about the way she reached into the stillness and touched something inside you, you'd almost forgotten was there.

You picture the marina, the dock, the boat waiting there. You can almost hear the water lapping against it. You can't explain why, but the thought of it makes you breathe a little deeper. Feel a little calmer. You have no idea what waits for you on those islands, but you know you're going. You said yes... to something, to yourself. And for now, that's enough

2

The Dock

Saturday comes in with a soft gray drizzle, the kind that blurs the edges of things and makes the world feel suspended.

You almost don't go. Instead, you make coffee, scroll through emails, looking for reasons to stay put. Each small excuse whispers, *Stay comfortable.*

You count the usual worries swirling just beneath the surface: *what if it's a scam, what if it's foolish, what if nothing changes and you end up disappointed again.*

A free adventure retreat still feels unreal, something you barely remember signing up for. It makes you question your judgment.

But something tugs deeper than doubt. The quiet ache that's been following you for months, urging you to move before life becomes one long drift through the same routines.

You don't have language for it, but you know it's time.

You pack a small bag. You're not sure what belongs on a trip like this. A few changes of clothes. The unfinished book you keep meaning to finish. A water bottle. It feels like packing for something unknown and preparing for a life you haven't met yet.

The drive to the marina carries you through parts of town you hardly ever see. Strip malls and coffee shops blur past as Saturday slowly wakes. Lawns hum with mowers. Dogs tug at leashes. People move with quiet certainty through the same patterns that used to feel like enough.

With every mile closer to the water, your stomach tightens. The closer you get, the louder the voice of doubt becomes.

This could be nothing. You could turn around.

But your hands stay on the wheel.

Harbor Point Marina comes into view at the end of a narrow road lined with weathered buildings and peeling paint. The smell hits first. Salt air, diesel, and something faintly metallic. Possibility, maybe.

You park and sit for a moment, watching the water shift under the gray sky.

The marina is quieter than you expected. A few people move around their boats. A small world of competence and purpose. Some wear faded t-shirts and old sun hats, others look like they stepped straight out of a sailing magazine. Everyone seems to belong here, to know what they're doing. You, on the other hand, feel like an observer at someone else's story.

Dock 7 stretches ahead, slick from the morning mist, lined with boats of every kind.

Some bear the marks of years with peeling paint, frayed ropes, and tired hulls. Others gleam, fresh and confident, like new beginnings.

You walk slowly, reading their names painted in faded or polished script: *Sea Dreams. Wanderlust. Second Chance. Liberation.* Each one feels like a promise, a hope, or perhaps an escape from whatever was holding someone's story back on land, waiting to be claimed.

And there, at the end of the pier, waits the *Golden Harmony*. She isn't the largest sailboat, but something about her makes you stop. Her deep blue hull with gold trim seems to hold the light differently, like she's quietly aware of her worth. Her name curves across the stern in graceful gold script. Hand-painted, deliberate.

She doesn't look like a tourist vessel. She looks like someone's trusted companion. There's dignity in her silence, a kind of earned wisdom from storms weathered and journeys finished.

You stand there taking her in when footsteps sound behind you.

"You came."

You turn to see a woman approaching with the steady grace of someone who belongs near water. She looks to be in her early sixties, with long brown

hair caught by the wind, a wide-brimmed hat held in place by a colorful scarf. Her clothes are practical. A checkered shirt, white shorts, worn deck shoes that speak of work, not leisure.

But it's her brown eyes that hold you. Bright, warm, lined with the kind of joy that only comes from surviving yourself and liking who you became. There's no pity in them. Only recognition.

"You must be Elaine," you say, shifting your bag on your shoulder.

"Guilty." She extends a hand, strong, calloused, steady. "And you look like someone ready for something new."

Her words land with uncomfortable precision. "I guess that's one way to put it."

"There are many ways," she says, her gaze holding yours. "Sometimes it looks like being stuck. Sometimes it feels like moving but going nowhere. Sometimes it's realizing you've built a good life but lost yourself inside it."

Each sentence touches something you thought you'd buried. You nod, unable to find words.

"Well," she says, turning toward the *Golden Harmony*, "then you've found the right place. I've been sailing this beauty for twenty years, helping women remember who they are when life stops defining them."

You look at the vessel. "Why the *Golden Harmony*?" you ask.

Elaine's expression softens. "Because that's what I seek in every journey. The golden harmony between who we are and who we're meant to be. Between the roles we play and the truth underneath. Between giving to others and honoring ourselves. This sailboat helps women find that balance. She's carried hundreds of women from fragmentation to wholeness. And now she's here for you."

The words settle over you like a promise. "Back to themselves?"

"Exactly. To who they were before they started shrinking to fit everyone else's needs."

She rests a hand on the rail, fingers tracing the grain like she's greeting an old friend. "The moment you answered that call, I knew. You're ready for something different. The only question is whether you'll let yourself have it."

You glance toward the boat. "Before I do, can you tell me what I'm

getting myself into? Five days is a long time to commit to something I don't understand."

Elaine nods approvingly. "Fair question." She gestures to a nearby bench. "It takes a little longer than you might expect, but every island is worth it."

"I'm not sure yet," you admit. "How much longer? I only packed a few things."

"Come, let's sit over there."

You sit. The air hums with quiet expectancy.

"I'm sorry if that wasn't clear earlier. This journey has five islands. The whole voyage usually takes ten to fourteen days, not just five. Each island has a lesson. Some you might remember, some you'll discover for the first time. You'll discover things about yourself pertaining to..." She ticks them off on her fingers, "Gratitude. Intuition. Connection. Purpose. Self-care. The things that make life feel full instead of empty. The things often times your culture never taught you were essential."

"And you've been doing this for twenty years?"

"Yes," she says, grinning, "I'm Seventy-three now," watching for your reaction.

Your eyebrows shoot up.

She smiles at your obvious surprise. "I know," she says, laughing softly. "I'm more myself than I've ever been." She gestures at the boat, at the water, at herself. "This is what's possible when you stop fighting yourself and start living from truth, your body thanks you for the care you give it."

Her tone shifts, warm but grounded. "The islands will challenge you. Not the kind that breaks you. The kind that wakes you."

You listen, unsure whether to feel skeptical or intrigued.

"And at the end?"

"At the end," she says, "you won't find gold or jewels. You'll find what you misplaced. Your own gifts."

"Gifts?"

"The parts of you that got buried under doing and giving and worrying."

You take that in quietly. "What if I fail?"

Elaine looks at you with patience born of experience. "Then you'll learn

something valuable about courage. But here's what I know after doing this for twenty years. Women like us don't fail. Raising humans. Managing households. Keeping everyone else functioning. You just forgot to notice how strong that made you."

Her words reach a tender place within.

"So yes," she says, standing. "Five islands. A ten to fourteen-day voyage for the time you need to remember who you are beneath the noise. Are you up for the challenge?"

You draw a slow, deep breath. "I'm ready."

"Then let's get you aboard."

You follow her up a short ramp. Your heart quickens with every step. The instant your foot touches the deck, you feel a loosening in your chest, like a string pulled too tight finally easing.

The *Golden Harmony* is more spacious than it looked from the dock. Everything gleams with quiet order. Thick ropes coil neatly near the mast. Through an open door, you catch a glimpse of the main cabin. Warm teak wood. Blue-cushioned benches that promise comfort after long days at sea. Brass lanterns. Everything speaks of care and intention from someone who takes pride in maintaining something both beautiful and functional.

"How does she feel?" Elaine asks, watching you take it all in.

"Solid," you say, surprised. "Like she's earned it."

Elaine smiles. "She has. She's a teacher as much as a vessel. Out here, away from everything that tells you who to be, you start hearing your own voice again."

You trail your hand along the railing, the grain smooth and sun-warmed. "So I'll learn to sail?"

"Among other things." She opens a built-in storage bench and lifts out an old scroll bound with braided twine, beside it a polished brass compass on a leather cord.

"This," she says, "is why you're here."

You step closer. "What is it?"

"Your treasure map and compass," she replies.

She unrolls the parchment, revealing a map, intricately inked and softly

colored, edges curling from age. Five islands shimmer faintly in the gray light: *Gratitude Shores*, *Intuition Isle*, *Connection Cove*, *Treasure Island*, and *Self-Care Springs*. Tiny golden chests are drawn on each one.

"Treasure chests?"

"Each island holds a golden key," she says, "to unlock a gift you already carry."

You touch the compass. Its needle doesn't point north. The practical part of you wants to question it. But deeper down, something stirs. Curiosity, maybe belief.

"I don't understand," you admit. "If these treasures are mine, why do I have to find them?"

Elaine's voice softens. "Because life made you forget where to look. These islands and the gifts they hold are reminders. They're not lessons you learn but truths you uncover."

A soft wind rocks the *Golden Harmony*, the ropes humming their quiet song.

"Why me?" you whisper.

"Because you were still listening," she says simply. "You were brave enough to ask for more."

You look at her, searching for pretense, and find none.

"What would I have to do?"

"Visit each island. Find each key. Open each chest. Be honest with yourself. Let go of what no longer fits."

She places the compass in your hand. The metal is cool, the weight sure.

"Keep this close," she says. "It'll remind you where you're headed, even when you forget."

You slip the leather cord over your neck. The compass settles against your chest, pulsing faintly with warmth.

"How long do we spend at each island?"

"That depends on you," Elaine answers. "Every woman's rhythm is different."

The horizon brightens slightly, gray clouds parting just enough to reveal a hint of blue. For the first time in a long while, you feel the pull of possibility.

"What happens first?" you ask quietly.

Elaine nods toward the ropes. "First, we cast off. Then, when you're ready, you take the helm."

"I don't know anything about sailing."

"You'll learn. But this isn't about sailing. It's about remembering you can steer."

You look down at the compass. Its needle steadies.

Elaine's voice is gentle now. "Are you ready to leave the dock?"

You turn once more toward your car and the quiet ache of what was. And then back toward the open sea.

"Yes," you nod. "I'm ready."

3

Ahoy, Captain!

Elaine's smile radiates, lighting up the marina with warm confidence. "Then let's get this beautiful lady moving. First rule of captaining your own life. Nothing moves until you let it."

She moves with practiced efficiency toward the thick white ropes securing the *Golden Harmony*.

"See these dock lines? They keep us safe, but they also keep us from going anywhere new."

You watch her untie the lines, her movements sure and graceful. Each rope that slips free feels like a quiet permission. Another tether to your old life, releasing into the water.

"Can you get that one at the back?" she calls, pointing to the stern line.

You move carefully along the deck, surprised by how natural it feels to move with the boat's gentle sway. The rope is thicker than you expected, heavy with salt. As you work to untie the cleat hitch, following Elaine's quick demonstration, a flutter of anxiety stirs alongside a pulse of excitement.

"What if I mess this up?"

"Then you learn," Elaine replies easily. "That's what journeys are for. The worst that happens is we bump the dock. The *Golden Harmony* can handle it, and so can you."

The line comes free, and you feel the ship respond. She drifts slightly away, no longer tethered. Her movement seems subtle, but thrilling, as though the

air itself shifted.

“How does that feel?” Elaine asks, coiling the last line.

“Scary,” you admit. “But also... free.”

“Exactly. Fear and freedom start the same way. Your body doesn’t know the difference. Only your mind decides which story to tell.”

She turns toward the mast. “Ready to catch some wind?”

The next few minutes unfold like a memory you didn’t know you were missing. Elaine raises the mainsail with effortless strength. It snaps open with a sound like thunder, and the *Golden Harmony* surges forward, slicing through the gray water.

The transformation is instant. One moment, you’re drifting; the next, you’re moving with purpose. The sound of water rushing past the hull, the hum of wind through the rigging, the tilt of the deck beneath your feet. Each sensation blends into something electric and alive.

“Come here,” Elaine calls from the helm, her hands steady on the worn wooden wheel. “Time to learn what it feels like to steer your own course.”

You steady yourself with the rigging as you approach, the compass swinging softly from its leather cord against your chest. Up close, the wheel is beautiful. Smooth, aged wood polished by years of journeys.

“Put your hands here,” Elaine says, guiding yours to the grips. “Feel that?”

The moment your palms touch the wheel, something hums through you. The *Golden Harmony* speaks in subtle language — each shift of current, each gust of wind, transmitted through the wood. It feels like holding the heartbeat of something strong and willing.

“This is incredible,” you whisper.

“It gets better. Look at your compass. What does it tell you?”

You lift it from your chest. The needle points straight toward the horizon — a small dot of land barely visible through the mist.

“That’s *Gratitude Shores*,” Elaine says. “Your first destination.”

She steps aside, her confidence calm and contagious. “Now, steer us there.”

“Me?”

“You. Feel the wheel. Let the boat talk. Your job is to listen and guide.”

She places her hands briefly over yours, showing a tiny movement. The

ship responds immediately, graceful as breath.

"That small?"

"That small," she says, smiling. "Big corrections cause trouble. Small ones keep you on course."

You follow her lead, making minute adjustments as the wind nudges the sail. Each time you correct, the boat answers, smoother than before.

"There," Elaine says, pride in her tone. "You're doing it. That's all sailing is. Paying attention and adjusting."

"I did it," you say, hardly believing it.

"You're doing it," she corrects gently. "How does it feel?"

You breathe, really noticing: the rhythm of the waves, the pull of the wheel, the faint salt sting in the air. "It feels like... something I haven't done in twenty-five years."

"Like what?"

"Something new. Something that's just for me."

"What does it feel like?" she asks again, her voice stronger this time, encouraging you to let your excitement breathe.

"Alive." The word lands expressively between you.

Elaine lets you hold it for a moment before saying, "Remember that feeling. That's what you're here to reclaim. Not just for now, but for good."

You hold your course, loosening your grip as your confidence grows. The wheel steadies under your hands.

Noticing how you're handling the wheel, Elaine comments. "Control isn't about holding tighter. It's about trusting your touch."

You nod. Understanding.

The harbor opens into wide water. The wind strengthens; the *Golden Harmony* begins to rise and dip with the swells.

"This is different," you say, trying to keep your balance.

"Open water always is," Elaine replies. "No walls, no comfort. This is where you meet yourself."

A stronger wave hits. The ship lurches, and instinctively you tighten your grip.

"Breathe," she says calmly. "The boat knows what to do. You just stay

present.”

You force a breath and feel your body start to match the rhythm of the water. Not resisting, but moving with it.

Minutes pass. The island draws closer, its outline faint behind a curtain of gray fog.

Elaine points. “That’s your passage. Everyone faces one before reaching *Gratitude Shores*.”

Your stomach drops. The fog looks dense and endless.

“What if I get lost?”

“That’s why you have the compass,” she says quietly. “It stays true even when sight fails. Trust that more than what you see.”

The *Golden Harmony* glides forward until the fog envelops you completely. The air chills; sound dulls. Elaine becomes a blur at the edge of your vision.

You can barely see the bow. Panic tightens your chest.

“I can’t see!”

“I know,” Elaine’s voice answers, calm and near. “But not seeing isn’t being lost. Check your compass.”

You look down. The needle still points ahead, unwavering.

“It still points forward.”

“Then that’s your way. One breath at a time.”

But the silence presses in. Every sound feels dangerous, every shadow a threat. Your own thoughts turn against you. *You’ll fail. You’ll mess it up. You always give up.*

Your jaw sets. “I don’t have to listen to this.”

“What was that?” Elaine calls back.

“I said I don’t have to listen to this.” Louder now. “These are old stories. They’re not true anymore.”

The words feel like a flare cutting through the gray. Something in you steadies. You grip the wheel, not from fear but resolve. The compass glows faintly in the dim light.

You breathe and keep steering.

The fog begins to thin. A faint warmth touches your face. Then sunlight. Hesitant at first, then brilliant as it breaks through.

Suddenly, you're through it.

Behind you, the fog drifts apart like smoke. Ahead lies *Gratitude Shores*. Vivid, luminous, impossibly beautiful. Turquoise water. Sand shows specks of glitter. The air smells of salt and blooming jasmine.

You laugh softly, realizing you're crying. Relief, not sorrow.

Elaine stands beside you, her pride quiet but unmistakable. "You did it. You steered through the heavy and found your way to light. That's gratitude. Not pretending the fog wasn't there, but choosing to keep moving until you see clearly again."

You nod, voice catching. "I did it."

"You did. Well done, Captain."

The word *Captain* lands warm and right. For the first time in years, it feels like a title you've earned.

The *Golden Harmony* glides toward the island, sunlight sparkling across the water.

"How does it feel?" Elaine asks.

You look toward the bright shore, then down at the compass against your heart. "Like I'm stronger than I thought I was."

Elaine smiles. "Like you're exactly where you're supposed to be."

"Yes," you whisper. "Exactly like that."

II

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You've just said yes. The Golden Harmony is about to leave the dock. If you're ready to find out what's waiting at the first island: G.I.F.T.S. A Voyage Home to Yourself is available now wherever books are sold.



About the Author

Elaine Lombardi is the voice behind Living Forward, stories and tools for women ready to build a meaningful next chapter, no matter what season they're starting from. She is the author of several books in the GIFTS family, including *G.I.F.T.S. Empower Your Journey with the Five Keys of Transformation* and *The GIFTS Method: The Five Keys System to Lasting Change*.

With decades of experience as a teacher, director of education, and mother of four, Elaine brings a lifelong understanding of growth, resilience, and reinvention. She is a Certified Holistic Health Coach and Belief Coding® facilitator, trained at the Institute for Integrative Nutrition and board certified by the American Academy of Drugless Practitioners.

Married for over fifty years, she is a grandmother of ten and a great-grandmother of two. When she isn't writing, she's traveling, painting, or dreaming up the next chapter.

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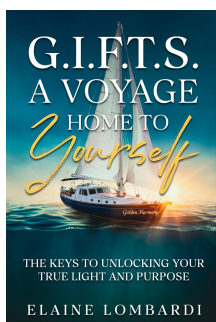
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Also by Elaine Lombardi

Elaine Lombardi writes for women rebuilding a life they didn't expect to be rebuilding: after loss, after injury, after the kids are grown and the house goes quiet. Her books move between memoir and practical guidance, but they all return to the same question: how do you keep living forward when the life you planned didn't happen the way you thought it would?

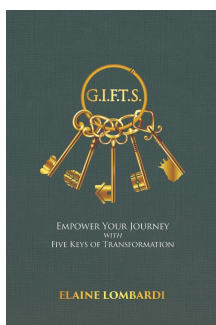
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