

RE·BUILD /Rē'BILD/VERB

TO BUILD (SOMETHING) AGAIN AFTER IT HAS BEEN DAMAGED OR DESTROYED.



“BEHOLD, I WILL DO A NEW THING. NOW IT SHALL SPRING FORTH. SHALL YOU NOT KNOW IT? I WILL EVEN MAKE A ROAD IN THE WILDERNESS AND RIVERS IN THE DESERT.” ISAIAH 43:19

Lord, please help me to get through this interview without getting completely dragged.

Tenetra Miles was known for having a sharp tongue that would cut anyone--politicians, celebrities, church leaders and a ton of other public figures. However, in addition to being a co-host of a popular, syndicated radio show, she was also the host of a very popular digital talk show called *Tea with Tenetra*. So, needless to say, it made sense to use Tenetra’s platform to help salvage Amara’s career and reputation. Still, that didn’t make it any easier to put on a brave face when she faced the judgmental eyes of Tenetra, who seemed eager to scrutinize her every word and move.

“So, let’s get straight to it. You quickly went from being a college dropout to being a prominent pastor’s assistant to being a Christian influencer with a popular YouTube channel, best-selling books and acclaimed speaking engagements. Be honest. Did your sanctified sugar daddy, Pastor Monroe, help you build your career? Did you use your affair as leverage to get him to make a few calls and maybe open up some doors for you?”

“No. I never wanted anyone to find out about the affair, and I never blackmailed Pastor Monroe into giving me anything. I’ll admit that he gave me a laptop and recording equipment, which helped me to start my career, but *I* built my brand. I self-published my first few journals and devotionals and built my big following on YouTube from the ground up while I worked all sorts of temp jobs and odd jobs to pay my bills. Eventually God just let my content reach the right audiences, and *he* opened up the right doors for me.”

“Mmm hmm,” Tenetra muttered before sipping her tea. “So, what made you want to ‘touch and agree’ with Pastor Monroe? I mean if you were giving it up just to get some recording equipment you probably could’ve just slept with someone from an electronics store or something. Why risk getting involved with a public figure?”

“Pastor Monroe made me feel needed and valuable at a time when I was running from a lot of personal issues. He gave me the gifts and gratification that I needed to take my mind off of some things that I needed to address. He was a good distraction, but that doesn’t excuse my part in what happened. I’ve repented to God, and I’ve personally apologized to Lady Monroe. So, I’m just trying to move forward at this point.”

Tenetra sat up straighter in her chair.

“You spoke with Lady Monroe? What’d she say?”

“I’ve already caused enough hurt, so out of respect for her, I’m not going to go into detail about that conversation. I’ll just say that she made it clear that I shouldn’t contact her husband again, but I didn’t plan on doing that anyway.”

“Oh, now you want to show her some respect...Ok...” Tenetra muttered before taking another sip of her tea.

“You know, I grew up in the church, but I’m not what some people would consider a saint by a long shot,” Tenetra said. “I’ll be the first to admit that I spend more time in the streets than inside a sanctuary, and God and I have more of an understanding than a relationship. I don’t have time to be following all of those rules and expectations in the Bible, and I think God knows me well enough to understand that. The thing is, I’m honest about that, and I don’t make money off of acting like I’m someone that I’m not. People like you and Pastor Monroe act like you’ve got everything about God and Christianity figured out just because you *seem* to live your lives a certain way. Meanwhile, you’re doing just as much, if not more, dirt than the rest of us! Do you feel like you deserve to have the platform and the opportunities that you have to influence people?”

“No, I probably don’t deserve the opportunities and the platform that I have, but I’m just grateful that God is so good that he’ll give me better than what I deserve. I’m definitely not perfect, but the Bible is full of imperfect people who God used to transform people’s lives. So, even though I know that I have a lot of work to do to fix my reputation and work on my healing, I’m not going to run and hide from my calling just because I’m facing a few challenges.”

Amara took a sip of her tea and then took a deep breath. This was the first time during this interview that she’d felt completely confident, and she could tell that Tenetra was a little annoyed that she couldn’t get more of a reaction out of her.

“She’s going to try to push your buttons and make you get all emotional,” Shanice had warned her. “So, whatever you do, don’t lose your composure. She’s been known to hit her guests where it hurts.”

“So, in a recent video, you admitted that you lost your dad, who was a minister, when you were young. What do you think your father would think of you giving your cookies to a man of the cloth?”

Amara took a deep breath before she answered. She’d figured that this question might come up, and she’d found herself occasionally wondering the same thing. Still, hearing Tenetra ask the question out loud hurt more than she’d expected, and it took all of her strength not to start crying.

Don't lose your composure, she reminded herself.

"He'd be really disappointed, because he raised me better than that, and he had high expectations for me. But...I also know that he'd go out of his way to let me know that he still loved me and that he'd be there for me no matter what. And you know...that's what God does with us. Even though we disappoint him when we make destructive decisions, he still loves us and wants to give each of us a fresh start when we come to him. I went from being seen as sanctified to being seen as scandalous, but at the end of the day, I'm still loved by God. I'm still going to be used by God. Period."

Amara could tell that Tenetra was trying to think of a good way to throw some more shade at her, but she was apparently stumped for the moment

Amara took a satisfied sip of her tea. It looked like God had answered her prayer after all. Tenetra may have been pulling out all of the stops to drag her, but God had helped her keep it together, even when she felt like she might crumble for a moment.

Won't he do it? She thought to herself.

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As Amara pulled into her driveway, she felt like a huge weight had been lifted from her shoulders. She'd never felt so relieved to be back home. After spending all morning and most of the afternoon doing interviews, she was ready to just relax for the rest of the day.

Once she got inside, she kicked off her shoes and didn't even bother to change out of her outfit before plopping down on her couch. Just when Amara was getting ready to relax and binge watch *Girlfriends*, she heard her doorbell ring.

When she checked her surveillance camera and saw who it was, she was tempted to just ignore them, but her curiosity got the best of her, so she opened the door to greet the unexpected guest.

"Lena? What are you doing here?"

"*Lena*? What happened to 'mama'?"

"You know, I asked myself that same question after you took off with most of my daddy's little life insurance money and never came back."

"I guess I deserve that."

"No. What you deserve is for me to slam this door in your face for just popping up after all these years, but I'm feeling a little gracious right now. So, come on in."

Amara knew that she was being harsh and disrespectful, but she honestly didn't care. She'd been dealing with a lot lately, and having her mother show up out of the blue after all this time wasn't helping.

"You have a nice place. You always did have good taste, even when you were little. You always wanted everything to look posh and pretty. I remember that."

Amara rolled her eyes.

“You didn’t answer my question. What are you doing here? How’d you even find me?”

“I convinced Serena to give me your address. I heard about everything that was going on while I was travelling, and I wanted to check on you.”

“Well, I’m fine. So, you can go back to your glamorous life as a flight attendant. I wouldn’t want to keep you from all the carefree travelling that you love so much.”

“I have 12 days of vacation time, so we have plenty of time to spend together. We can have brunch or something...if you want.”

“I don’t.”

“Listen, Amara, I know that you’re upset with me for leaving when you were young, but it’s not like I forgot about you. I wrote to you, I called you and I even sent you some gifts from my travels.”

“Yeah. You were Mother of the Year. You wrote me *one* letter a year, called me during holidays and on my birthday and sent me some good guilt gifts. I’ll give you that.”

Lena sighed.

“I’m sorry that I left you, but you have to understand that I was only 21 when I had you, and your father was 25. Neither one of us really knew much about what life was like outside of Eden Springs. Your father was content to live a nice, quiet life in a small town. He was a simple, old soul. I mean, as young as he was when we had you, he cared enough to pay for a life insurance policy to make sure that his family was taken care of if something happened to him. Even though we never found out for sure if he was your biological father, he took responsibility for you and married me so that we could give you what he thought was a more stable family unit. That’s just the type of person he was--stable and reliable.”

Amara fought the urge to tear up. Even though Lena's speech was bringing back memories of her father, she refused to let Lena see her crying.

"I just wasn't like that! I wanted to be free to travel and have some adventures. I felt like I was missing out on everything that the world had to offer. So, even though it wasn't fair to you, after he died, I saw it as a chance to start a new life. I figured that you'd be in good hands with Serena, and she did a great job with you. Despite your mistakes, you're smart, creative and God-fearing. I've watched every video on your YouTube channel and used every journal and devotional that you put out. I'm so proud of you."

Forgive her like I've forgiven you, and give her grace like I've given you grace, she heard God say, but she couldn't do it. All of the emotions that she'd suppressed since her mother left were suddenly coming to the surface, and right now all she wanted was for Lena to leave so that she could go back to forgetting that she existed.

"I know that I'm several years late in saying this, but...I'm sorry. I know that I left you during a time when you needed me the most, and I didn't support you like I should have. Please forgive me, Amara. I love you, and I want to be in your life now."

Amara angrily wiped away a tear that managed to escape before replying.

"I accept your apology."

Amara could tell that her mother was a little hurt that she didn't say that she loved her too or that she was interested in having a relationship, but she just couldn't bring herself to say those things. Her mother couldn't just pop back up after all of these years and expect them to just instantly, tearfully make up like they were some mother-daughter duo from a TV movie.

"Well, it's obvious that you still need time to process everything, so I won't hold you up any longer. I'm staying at the Hilton Atlanta. I'll write down my room number and my cell number if you want to catch up."

“We’ll see...” Amara muttered and shrugged.

“I really do love you, Amara,” Lena said as she prepared to exit. “I always kept a piece of you with me, everywhere that I went.”

Lena placed her number and some sort of photo on the coffee table in front of Amara.

Amara turned up the volume on her TV to let her mother know that she didn’t want to talk anymore, and after a few seconds, Lena left.

After the door closed, she picked up the photo out of curiosity. It was a picture of her and her mother in Eden Springs Park when she was a baby. They were wearing matching yellow dresses, and Amara was smiling a big, gummy smile at the camera while her mother was beaming and gazing lovingly down at her.

It was just a stupid baby picture. She was a grown woman, and she wasn’t going to cry over this little piece of paper that shouldn’t mean anything and shouldn’t make her feel anything...but she did. She cried...and cried...and cried, until she finally drifted off to sleep.

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“Girl, open up!”

Amara groggily woke up to the sound of someone incessantly knocking on her door. The last thing that she wanted right now was another unexpected guest, but the voice on the other side of her door belonged to someone who wasn’t going to be easily ignored--Pastor Summer Thompson.

Summer was one of Amara's closest friends and the outspoken (and sometimes controversial) co-pastor of Revolution Church, which she ran with her husband. They'd met in college, and Summer was the one who'd actually hooked Amara up with a job at Pastor Monroe's church after she'd dropped out. Summer had been calling her repeatedly ever since the scandal from her past had been exposed, but Amara hadn't felt like talking to any of her friends. Apparently, Summer had gotten impatient and had just decided to pop up.

"I know you're in there, because your car is in the driveway, and I hear your TV on. Don't ignore me and make me have to get all loud and ratchet in this nice little suburb, because you know that I'll do it! Let me in, girl!"

Amara sighed and forced herself to answer the door.

"Summer, now's not really a good time for..."

"Ooh, It sounds like you're watching *Girlfriends*. That's my show!" Summer exclaimed, pushing past Amara and making her way to the living room.

"Come on in, I guess," Amara muttered.

"Since you've been ignoring my calls, I decided to pop up and check in," Summer said, kicking her shoes off and making herself comfortable on Amara's couch.

"Girl, when I hooked you up with that assistant job at my church home back then, I didn't expect you to hook up with the pastor! I know that you said in your little video that he treated you well and you were dealing with some personal stuff when y'all got together, but I don't understand how you were 'in lust' with him for a whole year. I mean, I'm not gonna call him *ugly*, but...in my opinion, he's got a face that only a mother and Jesus could love. He must've had a really comforting 'rod' and..."

“Summer! Don’t finish that sentence! Just...don’t. I was younger, I was careless and I just made some bad decisions that I regret. So, can we please not talk about it anymore? I know that what I did was wrong, but I’m just really tired of focusing on it.”

“Alright. I get it. So, is there anything else that I need to know about?”

“Nope.”

“You’re lying! Amara, you know that you’re a terrible liar, so I don’t even why you’re trying to play with me. Spill it! Spill the tea!”

“Fine. My...mother came by to visit me today.”

Summer sat up straight, and Amara could tell that she was switching from her unfiltered, fun-loving friend mode to her counseling/pastoral mode.

“So, how’d it go? How do you feel?”

“I feel like she shouldn’t have just popped up over here and expected us to just be cool again. I made peace with her not being in my life, and now she just wants to act like we can go to brunch and be best friends all of the sudden? I can’t do it.”

“Amara you need to forgive her, and I think you should at least try to give her a shot. With everything you’ve been through lately, you should understand better than anyone about what it’s like to not want your past thrown in your face.”

“That’s different...”

“Is it? She made a damaging choice because it felt good at the time, and you did too. She wants to move on and not have to constantly be punished for things she can’t change, and so do you. I know it’s not the exact same thing, but I’m just saying...God has forgiven you, and he doesn’t define you by the mistakes you’ve made. You need to forgive your mama and *try* not to define her by one mistake.”

“I just don’t think that she deserves...”

“Chile, if God gave us what we deserved, a lot of us would be ‘up the creek without a paddle,’ like my grandma used to say. And weren’t you just talking about how God was so good that he gave *you* better than what you *deserve*? I’m not saying that you have to be ‘best friends’ with your mama, but you do have to let go of your resentment and figure out how to move forward. Whether or not you want to have a close relationship with her is your choice, but you have to figure out how to heal. It won’t be easy, but it’s necessary.”

Amara wanted to respond, but she couldn’t find the words. As much as she hated to admit it, Summer was right.

“Whew! All of this soul-searching is making me kind of hungry. You got any snacks?”

“You came over to check on me! How come you didn’t *bring* me any snacks?”

“Because you like bougie snacks like pomegranate and vanilla cashews and fancy dark chocolate with sea salt caramel. I didn’t feel like spending my money on that stuff! You know that I only buy snacks if they’re off-brand. So, I’m gonna find something to eat in your kitchen, and then I’m going to pray with you. I’ll be right back.”

Amara rolled her eyes. Summer could be extra sometimes, but she was grateful to have a friend who knew how to keep it real with her and comfort her with prayer. She was going to need all of the prayer she could get to keep her next interaction with her mother from going left.

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“Amara, this looks amazing. I had no idea that you were like a younger version of B. Smith or Martha Stewart!”

Amara forced herself to smile and mutter “Thank you.”

She’d invited her mother over for lunch at her house so that they could talk about their relationship, and she’d put together a Mexican food-inspired charcuterie board since she remembered how much her mother loved Mexican food.

After they’d gotten comfortable at her kitchen table, Amara cut straight to the chase.

“So, you said that you carried a piece of me with you everywhere you went, but what stopped you from coming to see me until now?”

“I actually did come to see you a couple of times, but I never had the courage to face you. I went to one of your book signings, but I got nervous and got out of the line. I paid for a meet and greet at one of your speaking engagements, but I couldn’t go through with it. I didn’t think I deserved to be there while you enjoyed your success, and I figured that you’d reject me.”

Amara vaguely remembered thinking that she’d seen her mother at a few of her events, but she’d told herself that it was just her mind playing tricks on her.

“When I heard about the scandal with you and Pastor Monroe, I knew that I had to put my pride aside and come check on you. Being here for you mattered more than my fear of rejection, and I’m sorry that it took so long for me to get to this point.”

“Well, I can’t say that I was thrilled when you showed up on my doorstep, but...thank you for trying to fix things. I’m sorry that I was rude to you yesterday. You just brought up a lot of old feelings for me when you showed up. Even though I wasn’t on the best terms with God when you left, I used to pray that he’d bring you back so that I wouldn’t have to live without both of my parents. After a while, I just gave up, but I guess it’s true what they say: ‘delay is not denial.’”

Lena gave her a small smile.

“Look, I’m not saying that I’m comfortable with us having mother-daughter shopping sprees or spa days when you’re in town, but I’m willing to work on rebuilding our relationship. We can start small--a visit every now and then and a couple of calls a week--and we’ll go from there.”

“Thank you. Those things may seem small to you, but you have no idea how much they mean to me.”

“Thanks...mama.”

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When Amara got a call from a number that she didn’t recognize later that evening, she almost didn’t answer it, but once again this week, her curiosity got the best of her.

“Hey, Amara. This is Josiah. I got your number from your aunt. I hope you don’t mind. I just needed, I mean, I wanted to see how you were doing.”

Well, it seemed like Aunt Serena had gotten really comfortable with giving out her personal information, but she actually didn’t mind this time around.

“I see. Is this something that you typically do for all of the former guests of Heaven On Earth?”

“Just the ones that I can’t get off of my mind.”

“Ok. That was a little corny, but I’ll let it slide since I am glad to hear from you.”

“So, tell me, Ms. Amara, what’s been going on in your life lately besides you doing damage control?”

“Let me see...where do I even start...”

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Here goes nothing.

Even though Amara had gone live plenty of times, this would probably be one of the most transparent live videos that she’d ever done.

“Today on *Get Real & Get Right with Amara*, I’m going to talk about rebuilding. As you guys know, I’m in the process of rebuilding my brand, reputation and life after dealing with the infidelity scandal. It’s funny how we can spend so much time carefully constructing and perfecting all of these different aspects of our lives--our images, our careers, our relationships, etc., making sure that we either cover up or compensate for our shortcomings--only for one mistake, event or revelation to make everything come crashing down. Then, we have to figure out how to put our lives back together, piece by piece.”

“The Bible says in Proverbs 18:16 that our gifts will ‘make room for us and bring us before great men,’ and I think that a lot of us, myself included, only tend to focus on the positive connotations of that scripture. We like the idea that our gifts will make room for us to have more influence, resources, connections and gratification, but we might not consider that our gifts can also make room for other things like more scrutiny, challenges, doubts and more opportunities for us to use our gifts to cover up things that we don’t want to deal with.”

“I’m definitely guilty of that last part. I used to tell myself that the reason I was able to constantly create so much Christian content was because I was so passionate about serving God, but, honestly...I was also trying to distract myself from my brokenness. Trying to help other people fix their lives kept me from focusing on the cracks in my own life. Teaching other people about healing from their pasts helped me to numb myself to my own pain and regrets. Being someone who people contacted for advice helped me to convince myself that I didn’t need any help. I was constantly telling people to ‘keep it real’ with themselves, but I wasn’t doing that. I built a brand and a life that looked beautiful and strong from the outside, but up close, there were all sorts of foundational and structural issues.”

“So, what I want you guys to understand is this: when you find yourself in the process of rebuilding something, don’t be discouraged by all of the work that you have to do, but be encouraged by the opportunity to construct something better, stronger and more in alignment with God’s vision for your life. That’s what I’m trying to focus on in this season of my life, and I look forward to taking you all on this journey with me.”

“So, until next time, remember: keep it real with yourself, get right with God and figure out the rest as you go.”