

“Related by Chance, Family by Choice teaches how to evaluate in-law relationships with biblical perceptiveness. Deb DeArmond winsomely persuades that ‘in-law’ relationships can truly be ‘in-love’ relationships. You will profoundly benefit from her keen insight into the Scriptures and her down-to-earth illustrations and practical life applications.”

—**Laurie Dodds**, Speaker and author

“This book is a godsend of encouragement. . . . Every mother of a grown son, and every woman who marries a man with a mama, needs this book. I’m thankful someone had the wisdom and courage to write it!”

—**Becky Johnson**, Author of over 40 books, including *We Laugh, We Cry, We Cook*

“Related by Chance, Family by Choice is a must-read for anyone navigating the sometimes complex path of the relationship between a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law. Deb DeArmond provides not only expert advice from personal experience, but she also provides tools, checklists, and action steps that one can take to make sure that this relationship is the best possible. I applaud this important work!”

—**Susan Steinbrecher**, Founder of Heart Centered Leadership

“Deb’s book is original and fresh—full of excellent insights, tips, and probing exercises that encourage you to consider the perspective of your own ‘woman-in-law.’ I love the fact that it exposes the world’s view of the ‘in-law’ mentality and emphasizes how to build stronger, more loving relationships with your ‘in-loves.”

—**Carol Doyer**, Editor-in-chief for LivingBetter50.com

“Related by Chance, Family by Choice came along at the right time for me, because just a few days ago my son married a woman who has captured my heart. I want my new daughter-in-law and my son to have a great relationship, and I want to be a supportive, encouraging mom, but I’m sure there’ll be days when we won’t see eye-to-eye on things. . . . With godly wisdom, insight, and abundant ideas and tips, Deb DeArmond equips ‘women-in-law’ who love the same man with all they need to do life together well. The book is an excellent resource that I will refer to again and again.”

—**Twila Belk** (aka the Gotta Tell Somebody Gal), Writer, speaker, and author or coauthor of five books, including *I Believe in Healing* and *I Believe in Heaven*

“With candor and a touch of humor, Deb DeArmond shares hard-won wisdom about creating meaningful connection with daughters-in-law and shows how those relationships can be as loving and fulfilling as any family relationship. *Related by Chance, Family by Choice* is a valuable resource for mothers of grown sons—proving that daughters-in-law are God’s perfect addition to a family.”

—**Cheri Fuller**, Speaker and author of *Mother-Daughter Duet*,
A Busy Woman’s Guide to Prayer, and other books

“There wouldn’t be so many in-law jokes if more mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law read *Related by Chance, Family by Choice*. Deb DeArmond provides tips, strategies, and stories to assist women in navigating these sometimes murky waters, helping families find clear sailing for the years ahead. Don’t miss this book!”

—**Michelle Cox**, Coauthor of *Just 18 Summers*

“I never realized how little I knew or considered about my or my wife’s relationship with our daughter-in-law. Deb’s in-depth and concise communication gift reveals the necessary ingredients for the family God meant us to experience.”

—**Jack King**, Founder of Faithful Men Ministries

“In a world where, more often than not, relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are filled with stress and strife, Deb DeArmond shows us that it does not have to be this way. . . .

Whether you are a mother-in-law wanting to improve your relationship with a daughter-in-law or a daughter-in-law longing for a deeper bond with your mother-in-law, I encourage you to read this book and put these tools to work.”

—**Gerry Wakeland**, President of CLASSEMINARS, Inc.

“*Related by Chance, Family by Choice* is a terrific tool for *all* relationships, and especially for the sometimes touchy in-law variety. Deb has made what could have been a painful subject into a fascinating relational journey. . . . A challenging book that is also *fun!*”

—**Joann Cole Webster**, Vice president of the
Christian Men’s Network, and cochair of
Global Operations for the Billion Soul Network

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*Transforming Mother-in-Law &
Daughter-in-Law Relationships*

Deb DeArmond

 **Kregel**
Publications

*Related by Chance, Family by Choice: Transforming Mother-in-Law and
Daughter-in-Law Relationships*

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Dedicated with love to Ron—my husband, best friend, and brainstorm partner. You helped shape this work in ways I never expected. Thanks for being the champion in all I've ever attempted, for introducing me to Christ, and for being the first in my life to ask, "When are you going to write your book?"



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Preface: The Girls

Written on Mother's Day 2011 and posted on Facebook

*M*y sons married incredible women. Each of them followed our advice, and all three “married up.” Way up. If I could have selected wives for my boys from a catalog, it would have been these three: Sarah, Heather, and Penny—listed in the order they came into our lives. As we prepare to celebrate Mother’s Day tomorrow, I want to take a moment to recognize my girls.

Sarah was the first, and she was also the first one to refer to me as her “mother-in-love.” It blesses me each time she says it. I’ve known Sarah from the time she was thirteen. That’s more than half her life, and I can’t imagine my life without her. Sassy, smart, and amazing. She is a wonderful mom, and she loves my son Jordan fiercely. She is our redhead.

Our brunette is Heather. I met her when she was sixteen. She is married to my son Cameron. She told me once that when she was single, she couldn’t imagine calling anyone but her own mother “Mom.” But the bond between us is such that she said she could never call me anything else. What a sweet honor. Caring, smart, and genuine. Awesome wife. She will be an incredible mother—hopefully in the not too distant future.

So that leaves the blonde spot open. And son Bryce filled it when he married our wonderful Penny. “Mama Deb” is her sweet name for me—and I love it. Penny was twenty-eight when she joined the family and completed our set. There was an open place in my heart God created just for her, and my heart recognized her the moment I met her. Amazing wife and mother. Talented writer and runner.

These are the daughters of my heart.

I want to thank their moms for sharing them with me. Dru, Melody, Pam—you all did an amazing job. God bless each of

you for the years you invested in bringing them up. My life is richer because I am backup mother to your girls.

And girls—remember how much I love you!



So how did we get here? How have we sidestepped the typical mother-in-law/daughter-in-law agony? What did we do? How do we maintain it? Is it always without its challenges? That's what this book intends to explore. We are *not* smarter, luckier, or more spiritual than the average MIL/DIL. What we *are* is determined to be united as a family and just intelligent enough to know that we can't do it without Jesus!

Acknowledgments

First, and most importantly, thank you to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. You rescued and recreated me; You know me and love me anyway. You placed a love of words in me when You formed me and have created the plan, the path, and the push to write this book. I am humbled by Your willingness to entrust its message to me, and You alone deserve any praise that it achieves.

Thank you to my sons, Cameron, Jordan, and Bryce. Nothing prepared me sufficiently to be your mom, and nobody could have loved you more fiercely. I have always been grateful God entrusted each of you to me. I have appreciated your encouragement on this journey, and I thank you for bringing your wonderful wives and children into our family. They are a gift to us all.

Thank you to “my girls,” Sarah, Heather, and Penny. Your contributions made this book possible. You each helped me learn to be a mother-in-law by letting me into your world. There’s nothing I haven’t already said. I love you and am incredibly blessed to call each of you “daughter.”

Thank you to Penny Baker DeArmond, my writing DIL. You were a helpful brainstorming partner, generating ideas that found their way to the page. Your willingness to jump in, toddler in tow, to spearhead the conversations with Sarah and Heather, and then capture the voice of “the girls” in chapter 5 was a genuine gift. Can’t wait to read your novel!

To the first real writer I ever knew, my big brother, Jack. I admired you so much that writing was my first attempt to get your attention when I was nine years old and you were, well, older. I am grateful for the role you played in helping me find my way to the keyboard. I miss you every day.

To my own mother-in-law, Virginia Rolin. I’m unbelievably blessed by your presence in my life. God knew how much I would

need a backup mom. You are my prayer warrior, encourager, and cheerleader. Thank you for raising the man of my dreams.

Thanks to Kathy Carlton Willis—mentor, coach, editor, friend, and guru extraordinaire. I am thankful beyond words (well, almost beyond words) for your skill, your energy, and your belief in my work. Thanks for taking this journey with me. Your friendship is a treasured gift in my life.

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To my WordServe Literary family: Greg Johnson and Alice Crider and all those in the agency who support and serve authors as we work to serve Him through our writing. Thank you.

Thanks to Steve Barclift, my editor at Kregel, who has guided me through the publishing process. Thanks also to Dennis Hillman, Dave Hill, and the Kregel family for treating me like one of their own.

Thanks to the focus groups and interviewees whose insights, stories, and shared experiences helped us understand the joy, the challenge, and sometimes the pain that the woman-in-law relationship incites. Special thanks to Melynda Bonner, Jesi Steiber, Stacey Bengtsson, Jillian Thomas, Kim Carter, Katie, Vickie, and Sharon. Also to the hundreds of anonymous online survey respondents—we owe you a debt of gratitude.

Introduction

What's the Problem?

I want to know your secret,” said the woman across the table from me. We were attending a three-day retreat for women. I looked up at her and realized she was speaking to me. I didn't know her, and I certainly wasn't sharing any secrets at the dinner gathering. My silence and startled expression prompted her to say more. “I'm sharing a room with your daughters-in-law. They love you. I mean, not just like you. They really love you. I want to know your secret. How did you do that?”

The mother-in-law/daughter-in-law (MIL/DIL) relationship has historically been one of the most challenging many women will ever face. What's the problem? We are two women who love the same man. One as mother, the other as wife. You would expect we might bond over our mutual admiration over the man-in-the-middle. We know the other woman must be bright; she sees him as wonderful too. But that's not usually how it plays out. Each may feel the need to mark her territory as a warning to all trespassers: “Step back! He's mine.” MIL has seniority and tenure on her side. DIL . . . well, let's say she may have some other advantages that often trump the mama card.



The Burning Question

**Does it have to be bad?
Can we all just get along?**

I've been a mother-in-law for nearly ten years. I have three unique and wonderful women I call daughters-of-my-heart. We

know how blessed we are, because our friends, coworkers, and sometimes absolute strangers have reminded us of that fact.

Why is our story so unique? I'm not quite sure. I do know the girls and I have worked diligently to establish and maintain good relationships even when the circumstances and our various personalities have made that challenging at times. We have not always agreed on everything, and I do recall one of the girls asking my son, her hubby-to-be, "Will your parents always have an opinion about our lives?"

"Probably," was my son's reply. "But they won't be upset if we don't follow their advice. They just need to give it." Ouch! His cheekiness in sharing that conversation with us, along with her willingness to discuss it with me, are the hallmarks of our strong relationship. We deal with it—together.

The question from my retreat-mate is not that unusual. I get it often, as do the girls. Many ask us to share how we do life together so well. So as I decided to explore this complex relationship, I asked the girls to come along on the journey. You will hear their voices throughout this book. We often don't see eye-to-eye, but we do agree on some important things: we want to live united, not divided, as a family, and we believe it is possible only if we are willing to acknowledge that we cannot do it without a heavy dose of God's love to guide us.

We have conducted a great deal of research to help us understand the status of the woman-in-law (WIL) relationship. Focus groups, an online survey with more than 150 respondents, and interviews and conversations with more than a hundred women have assisted us in gaining some insight into these unique family relationships. Here is some of what we have learned.

"The first time I met my mother-in-law to be, I thought she was amazing . . . filled with lots of smiles, happiness. NOPE! She puts on a face, plays a game, and controls the show. Then my husband and I changed the game and she got angry. It's not pretty at all."—DIL, age 34

What's the Problem?

“She cried when we told her we were engaged. She is very controlling and has a very strong influence on my husband’s life.”—DIL, age 27

“My daughter-in-law is highly critical of my son and they didn’t seem to really be in love when I first met her. I didn’t think she was good enough for my son. And I still don’t.”—MIL, age 49

“I never met anyone so moody as my daughter-in-law. She is desperate and manipulative and tries to control my relationship with my son.”—MIL, age 57

These are just a few of the comments from our online survey conducted in November 2011. While many women reported their relationship with their MIL/DIL to be better than average, *less than half* reported it as *good* or *close*. Some facts about our respondents:

- Some 93 percent of those surveyed acknowledged a faith affiliation, and 96 percent of that group self-identified as Christian.
- We discovered that 79 percent said their faith was foundational in their lives and guided their daily actions and decisions.
- In fact, 87 percent reported they were of the same faith as their WIL, but only 38 percent believed the faith of that woman was foundational to her life or was reflected in her decisions and actions.
- Most interestingly, 30 percent reported the relationship was “bad,” which they described as not close, difficult, and filled with criticism, or simply off-balance with the woman-in-law.
- More than half (57 percent) said the difficulties in the relationship were either mostly their fault, or they at least equally shared the responsibility for the failure of the relationship.

Given that this audience was primarily made up of Christ-followers, these numbers surprised us. Many women did report a healthy and loving relationship and felt blessed with their MIL or DIL interactions. But the numbers who reported the relationship status as “bad” in our survey were nearly identical to those in a survey conducted on the popular website *iVillage* in October 2010 where there were no statistics on faith.

How can it be that our faith provides us no advantage in this area of our lives? Especially since 79 percent reported their faith was foundational to their daily lives and guided their decisions and actions?

I strongly believe that the routine portrayal of the stereotypical meddling, intrusive mother-in-law who believes “no girl will be good enough for my son” has a lot to do with how we view this relationship. Movies, sitcoms, and late-night comedians all yuck it up at the MIL’s expense. Think Marie Barone from the TV show *Everybody Loves Raymond*; Jane Fonda in the movie *Monster-in-Law*; and even comic strip Dagwood’s constant, embittered battle with the mother of his wife, Blondie. The MIL stereotype has guided our perspective and our expectations in a subtle but real way.

The Internet is full of resource material, most not intended to help but to let off steam. Consider the following if you will:

- [facebook.com/ihatemyotherinlaw](https://www.facebook.com/ihatemyotherinlaw)—A group of 2,239 women who are happy to share the details of their “hideous hag MILs.”
- [MotherinLawHell.com](https://www.motherinlawhell.com)—The tagline reads “Daughter-in-law, you are not alone. Stop suffering in silence.”
- [IHateMyInLaws.com](https://www.ihatemyinlaws.com)—Orients their readers to the site as a place where “it is fun to hate your in-laws.” Daughters-in-law are a primary target here, but no woman is safe; they are all under attack: MILs, DILs, SILs, and even the men, although they get off with a mere smattering of attention.

If the stories are only half true, they are bad. Really bad. One that stood out was the daughter-in-law who now boycotts holidays with her husband's family because the gift she received the prior year was "a hand-me-down, secondhand gift." It was a prized piece of family jewelry, an heirloom highly valued by her mother-in law. She gave the gift as a confirmation of her love for her son's wife.

As believers in Christ, we live in a world that endeavors daily to shape our thinking, our perspectives, and our opinions. It is difficult to avoid the powerful influences we are exposed to on a regular basis. Add to this the real experiences we have observed or the stories we've been told by friends or family who have found hurt, disappointment, or sadness in their MIL/DIL relationships. We may realize our own expectations are low in this regard. We expect little, so when little shows up, we are neither surprised nor alarmed. It is what it is. And we do little or nothing to address it. We've fallen in lockstep with a worldview that does not represent who God asks us to be. We must challenge this lie.

God's Word is intended to serve as our user manual in this life. There is wisdom and instruction on nearly every topic we will encounter in life, including our family relationships. The Bible will guide our path if we will allow it to do so. The stereotypical view of the MIL/DIL relationship is so bleak it creates a perfect opportunity for the Christ-follower to demonstrate the impact of the Lord in our lives by choosing to do it His way and not settle for the world's way.

There is good news. One of the most significant survey results revealed that 70 percent of the respondents said they would be willing to make the effort necessary to improve the relationship if they knew how. That's the focus of our book. Although you will hear our story and the stories of many other women, this is not primarily a book of memoirs. Relationship, like anything else we accomplish, requires not only effort, but also the tools and skills to get the job done. Knowing *what* to do comes from

God's Word. Ideas on *how* to do it are where I believe we can help you.

I have spent nearly thirty years working with adults to improve their communication skills, learn how to deal constructively with conflict, and build better relationships. When my clients are successful, it's not because of the inspiring stories or funny anecdotes I've shared. The successful ones acknowledge that they are struggling in their relationships and are willing to learn tools and skills to improve their lives by changing the way they think and behave in their relationships. They are successful because they choose to be.

Using This Book

To help you get the most from your reading, keep in mind this book's basic structure. Its chapters are arranged to provide a logical path to creating, sustaining, or improving a godly relationship with your in-law:

- The first few chapters offer biblical foundations and God's example for the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship. We will examine the issues that break God's heart and create hurt and division in the family.
- The middle chapters introduce tools, tactics, and tips to move beyond the stereotypical MIL/DIL relationship, equipping you to do it God's way according to the Scriptures.
- The final chapters discuss challenging situations that sometimes create additional hardship in reaching your relationship goals, and include helpful suggestions for resolving the sticking points.

Throughout the book, you may discover some sections that focus on the other woman more than you. I encourage you to read these as thoroughly as those that speak directly to you. Here's the rationale:

What's the Problem?

Many of us play both roles in our lives. We are both mother-in-law and daughter-in-law at the same time or will be in the future.

Gaining understanding of the issues, challenges, and heartache of the other woman will provide insight for you as you create a relationship that works for you and your family—and pleases God—all at the same time.

In chapter 2, we examine the two most famous biblical in-laws, Ruth and Naomi. Then, beginning in chapter 3 and continuing through the remaining chapters, you will find a brief section entitled “What Would Ruth and Naomi Do?” This section allows us to see how the concepts from each chapter tie back to the lives of these biblical in-laws, their choices, and ultimately, their successful relationship.

We want you to use this book, not just read it! Knowing *what* to do is good, but having some ideas for *how* to put into practice what you learn is even better. At the end of each chapter you will find a resource section to help you do just that.

The format for each of these resource sections is similar although not always identical. In *every* chapter you will find the following:

Self-Assessment. This is a quick assessment to see where you currently stand on the concepts taught in the chapter. Knowing your strengths helps build your confidence, while knowing where you can improve identifies areas for action.

Plan of Action. Here you will have a chance to reflect back on the chapter content, selecting three areas that were most important to you. We encourage you to also record anything you felt the Lord revealed to your heart. Use the self-assessment results, along with your answers to these questions, to create a Plan of Action. The worksheet asks you three questions:

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- What will you do?
- How will you do it? (Identify the specific steps.)
- When will you start? (A goal is a dream with a deadline!)

Prayer. The final step in each chapter is a prayer, based on the content of the chapter and incorporating God's Word, that declares your commitment to honoring God in your woman-in-law relationship.

In some of the chapters you will also find Quick Tip sheets. These are kick-off actions or ideas you can incorporate into your Plan of Action and add to your tool belt of resources. These tools will help you make or develop new skills and approaches in your WIL relationship. New skills result in new outcomes. Our goal is that those outcomes honor the God you have chosen to serve.

Life is a choice. God gives us the freedom to choose. But He also makes His will clear to us on this topic. He expects us to choose love. What will you choose?

Take a moment to reflect on your thoughts about your MIL/DIL relationship on the next page.

PLAN OF ACTION

What's the Problem?

Review the statistics and key points from this chapter. Use this information to help guide you as you respond to the questions below.

What were three ideas, concepts, or elements that spoke to your heart in this section?

Complete this sentence: Above all, I would like my relationship with my MIL/DIL to

What areas of your relationship need improvement? Which areas need to better reflect your commitment to the Lord?

Prayer

Father, I recognize that I am responsible for my actions and behaviors in every relationship You have placed in my life, including the one with my in-law. I accept that Your Word is the authority in the life of the believer, and I am committed to honoring Your instructions. I desire to see my relationship with my MIL or DIL reflect Your presence in my life and demonstrate Your glory in a world desperate for You. I am willing to make the effort necessary to accomplish these things. *(Inspired by Psalm 119)*