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*He loved her, of course,
but better than that,
he chose her, day after day.
Choice: that was the thing."*

—Sherman Alexie, *The Toughest Indian in the World*



Introduction

My fifth year of marriage to my husband, Tony, was a turning point for me. After living in the Midwest for three years, we'd returned to our home in the Pacific Northwest, eager to be near family and reconnect with old friends. Before we moved away, we'd been a part of a vibrant and growing church community, one filled with authentic, messy people who were full of love for each other and love for us. These people taught us what it was to have a true partner in life, nurtured us through the beginning of our relationship, blessed us on our wedding day, and encouraged us as newlyweds. That's what we thought we would return to, like a warm and loving childhood home. Instead, we came home to splintered relationships, infidelity, and divorce.

Couples who had been married for decades were now living in separate homes. Newlyweds whose gifts I hadn't gotten around to shipping were already broken up. I could no longer keep track of the number of phone calls, text messages, and e-mails I'd received from friends telling me that their husband or wife was leaving them. That they'd been cheated on or been unfaithful. I'd been told, as we all have, that the divorce rate in the United States hovers around 50 percent, but now that number had real people attached to them—people besides my own parents.

My mother and father separated when I was just three years old. Their divorce was final by the time I was five, and then I didn't lay eyes on my father again until I was an adult. My younger sister and I were raised by our incredibly determined and independent single mother. I spent my childhood as her confidant, wiping her tears when her boyfriends broke off their relationships, or when she found out they were married, or when the wife she knew about found out about her. Once in a while, a boyfriend would stick around long enough to move in and pretend to be my dad. Then it would end. It always ended. We'd move back in with my grandparents until my mom became too determined and independent to accept their help, and then we'd move out and start the cycle all over again.

I share this background to tell you that the odds that I would stay married were not in my favor. Children of divorce are more likely to get divorced as adults than those who don't come from a divorced home. Research also indicates that people are at greater risk for divorce if they experience depression, as well as if they were sexually abused as children, both of which are true of me.

My husband, my rock, comes into our marriage with none of these challenges. His parents are still married, and he has no history of depression or abuse of any kind. I, on the other hand, carry these black marks in my heart, marks I didn't ask for or bring upon myself. I know that a lot of you carry them as well.

So in our fifth year of marriage, as I consoled so many friends about their breakups, I became more and more restless. Their devastating stories were reminders that the stats were stacked against me, against all of us. The reality of how fragile marriage really is kept me awake at night. I'd roll over on my tear-soaked

pillow searching for my husband's face in the dark, pleading with him for reassurance. He did his best to remind me of his love, his commitment, but it didn't feel like enough. I had become keenly aware that I was not immune to the possibility of divorce.

The hashtag #staymarried was born out of my hopeful questions. Will Tony and I stay married? What does it take to stay married? I wasn't satisfied with clichéd answers such as "A great marriage puts God first." I knew too many couples, including many who put their trust in God, who'd watched their marriages crumble underneath their feet. I needed to know more. I needed to know the science and psychology as well as the spiritual reality of the forces that can either pull us together or drive us apart.

As I began to research for myself and share the findings with others, I began to sleep better. I started to understand ways to defy the odds, and I wanted everyone to be equipped with the same marriage-boosting knowledge, especially newlyweds. "Stay married" is not a command or a stance against divorce. I don't believe it's healthy to stay married to an abuser, an addict, or a narcissist. I recognize that, as painful as it may be, divorce is sometimes the best possible decision. Still, I see now that it doesn't have to be inevitable for any of us.

This book is my invitation to you, an invitation to discovery and to faithfulness. With each reading, I hope you discover more about yourself and more about your partner. By committing to weekly reading and discussion, I hope you build a habit of faithfulness. Faithfulness, after all, can only be measured over the course of time. It can't be rushed. If we want to have marriages that are strong enough to weather whatever life throws at us, we can't take any shortcuts.

INTRODUCTION

These devotions are our stories, our attempts to use the data that's out there and love each other in a way that brings hope and light and a chance for all of us to push against the stats that hover over us. I'm not a therapist, or a scientist, or a social worker. The only qualification I have is hope. My hope is that you'll find encouragement in these pages and that you'll use this book to build a foundation for your own efforts to #staymarried.

How to Use This Book

This book is made up of 52 weekly devotions. The best way to use it is to start with your calendar. Schedule 30 to 60 minutes each week to read and discuss it with your partner, and don't let anything or anyone else take that time away from you. Prioritize connecting with your partner via the Scripture, reading, and discussion questions.

Keep a Bible and a journal close by. Some weeks will include instructions for additional Bible reading, and journaling your answers to the questions, whether separately or together, can help you reflect on your thoughts each week and serve as a record of your takeaways at the end of the year.

Slower Is Better

These 52 devotions are meant to be read together with your spouse over the course of one year. You could binge read this book. Go ahead; devour it. If I were you, that's exactly what I would do—but that's because I'm impatient. One of the gifts I hope you'll receive in this devotional is the gift of pace. A marriage is more like a marathon than a sprint, and if we're going to make it to the finish line, we need to learn to pace ourselves.

So when you and your spouse use the book together, try to talk about only one devotion per week. In order to really grow, we need to give ourselves time to reflect and put into practice what we've learned. As James 1:22 says, "Put the word into action. If you think hearing is what matters most, you are going to find you have been deceived." If you and your spouse devour this book without giving yourself time to let the words sink in—both the words I've written for you and your words to each other—you'll walk away without really letting the ideas penetrate your consciousness. These devotions are meant to be relatively quick reads. The discussion questions and the natural flow of conversation and discovery that happen *after* the reading are what's meant to draw you closer together. If it takes more than the 30 to 60 minutes you've allowed yourself, keep going. Work through any tough discussions together as best you can and continue to keep communication open all week.

Grow in Faithfulness

Along with pace, I hope this book will help you receive the gift of developing a faithful habit. Faithfulness is only discovered over time. Anyone can do one nice thing or even a few nice things in a row, but a faithful person is one who consistently does the right thing, no matter the circumstances, over and over and over again. Since faithfulness is the cornerstone of a long-lasting marriage, I hope you'll practice being faithful to this work week after week. Make your marriage a priority now so that you can reap the rewards of building a marriage you love for years to come.

Reading Alone

Ideally, this book would bring you and your partner closer together. But I know what it's like to be in a season where only one of you wants to grow in your relationship. If that's you, I invite you to read this book and journal your thoughts on your own. As you develop a deeper sense of love and perhaps some new perspectives, your partner may become interested in joining you. But even if they don't, you'll still benefit from doing the work on your own.

Reading with a Group

Being a part of a community of people who are all heading in the same direction is great for your marriage. If you're reading this book with a group, or leading such a group, make sure you look ahead and choose the weeks that best fit your group dynamic. If you're longtime friends, you may be able to have discussions on intimacy and baggage without any trouble. But if the group members are fairly new to each other, you may want to choose weeks that are less emotionally draining while still being points of growth. Feel free to skip around and use the subjects that work best for you.

Pray for Each Other

Beginning and ending each week in prayer is a wonderful way to slow yourself down and prepare your heart to receive something new. Whether you hold hands and pray aloud, meditate silently, or use any other variation of prayer, don't neglect this essential unifying practice. I am praying for you.