

Girl Meets Change

TRUTHS *to* CARRY YOU *through*
LIFE'S TRANSITIONS



Kristen Strong


Revell

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Strong, Kristen.

Girl meets change : truths to carry you through life's transitions /

Kristen Strong.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8007-2439-9 (pbk.)

1. Christian women—Religious life. 2. Change (Psychology)—
Religious aspects—Christianity. 3. Change—Religious aspects—
Christianity. I. Title.

BV4527.S747 2015

248.8'43—dc23

2015012128

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Published in association with William K. Jensen Literary Agency, 119 Bampton Court, Eugene, Oregon 97404.

15 16 17 18 19 20 21 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*To David, my abundantly good man
who first showed me all change
is a grace.*

*To James, Ethan, and Faith,
three effervescent joys who forever
changed my life for the better.*



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Foreword

Let's face it: high school and college are teaching us all wrong.

I've been an official adult for twenty years now, and there are three skills I use daily that I was never taught in school: budgeting, saying no with grace, and knowing how to approach change. I can't remember the last time I diagrammed a sentence or applied the Pythagorean theorem. Can you?

Luckily, there are plenty of books and courses on budgeting, and there are teachers on the topic of doing things with intention. But where are all the books and conferences and hashtags about one of the most inevitable things in life that we all face daily: change?

Change isn't something that happens to us that we have to face with tears, anxiety, and binge-watching HGTV. Change is something God uses to get our attention. Our reactions to change shape our life. And we are grown-ups—we can actually choose how we approach, live through, and respond to change.

When it comes to change, it's possible to thrive, even if that change looks like the exact opposite of the path you'd prefer. That's the message I needed to hear twenty years ago, that's what I need to remember today—and that's exactly what this book is about.

Kristen has been there, done that and is ready to shine the light on the murky future and imperfect, unknown tomorrow that change often brings with it.

If you need to be encouraged that change isn't synonymous with loss but that it brings along its own gifts, this book might be the best money you've ever spent.

If you need a change mentor, you've found her.

If you are wondering what the Pythagorean theorem is, I think it has to do with math.

Myquillyn Smith
moved fourteen times—most involved the ugly cry
author of *The Nesting Place*

Introduction

If you've ever found change to more resemble foe than friend, this book was written for you.

If you've ever resented change for all the craziness it brought into your life, this book was written just for you.

If you've ever believed change pushed your contentment just outside of reach and stole your joy, I want to hug you hard because *sister, I get it*. If you're like me, unwelcome change smacks right into you, demanding your full attention like a relentless preschooler who hasn't learned the word *no*.

When the change is something I've longed for and hoped to see, then I'm all for it. When change comes that's my own idea, then by all means, bring it. But the many forms of change that are not my idea? I don't think so.

I've lived life believing that if it would just stop changing—and asking me to change with it—I would be more content. I've tried to run away from change, or at least ignore it. But change doesn't go away. It sticks close by, begging us to turn our heads and give it our all-consuming attention. I've done

that too, although I've not given it favorable attention. I've hollered and waved my arms at it as I've pleaded with God to take it away.

Until one day, beat-up and bloodied from fighting it, I gave up. I gave up the fight and felt the Lord ask me to change my prayer from *God, remove this change from my life* to *God, remove my attitude toward change*.

That was my simple goal in the beginning. If change isn't going away, then I needed my attitude about change to go away. Not only did God faithfully remove my inability to acknowledge and accept change, but he began to show me how to adapt to it.

Not only adapt to it, but thrive because of it rather than in spite of it.

The answers that came weren't neat and tidy but hard fought. I wish I could say I'm a quick learner of new things, but some tests I retake because I don't pass the first time. I often have to relearn the same lesson more than once, and that takes time. But with a new goal tucked inside my heart—a goal to thrive amidst change—I knew the road that was best for me to travel. And that road was paved with brick after brick fashioned with God's faithful promise of "*You can trust me, girl, because I know what I'm doing.*"

I believed him, and with time, I believed the change he allowed in my life was for me, not against me.

Sister, maybe in the furthest corners of your heart you hope there is a way for you to thrive amidst change too. But that idea is a little too fairy tale because the reality you stand in today seems too far gone, too hope-gone. Or maybe you've done your best to avoid change, and in spite of making all the safe choices, change finds you anyway.

That's how it all began for me as an eighteen-year-old high school senior.

The gravel poked under my bare feet as I sprinted toward the mailbox at the end of our curved driveway. Reaching it, I opened the creaky brown metal lid as my eyes instantly grasped what I hoped to find: an envelope from the University of Arkansas's music department. I had already been accepted to the university, but this letter would tell me if I won the scholarship I needed to be able to attend there.

Grabbing the cream-colored envelope, I pulled it out of the mailbox and tore it open. Holding my breath, I unfolded the crisp letter with shaky hands and quickly scanned its contents. I exhaled, its refreshing good news washing over me: I had won the scholarship.

I also received favorable mail from Oklahoma State University, the college so ingrained in my soul I practically bled its school color of orange. But attending the University of Arkansas would not only be an opportunity to study at a music school with a stellar reputation, it would also be an opportunity to gently spread my wings a little farther, beyond my home state of Oklahoma. So I told myself that if I received the University of Arkansas scholarship, I would go.

But when I held the ticket to the school in my hands, I wasn't so sure. As time pressed forward, the Oklahoma State option tugged wearily on my sleeve, insisting I pay attention to all the fine things it offered too:

A good music school.

A family legacy of graduates.

And, given its close proximity to my hometown, many built-in friends.

In the end, Oklahoma State won. Saying yes to OSU felt as comfortable and natural as the school's black-and-orange sweatshirt, so I told people I chose OSU because it just felt right. Privately, however, I knew I chose OSU not because going anywhere else felt wrong but because going anywhere else felt new and scary.

And given a choice, this girl didn't do new and scary.

For as long as I can remember, embracing any kind of change that wasn't my own idea came about as naturally as chewing off my own arm. If you could peek through the curtains of my young adulthood, you'd see me wearing a selfish aversion to change like an invisibility cloak. But change is an unavoidable part of life, and handling it is a skill necessary to our well-being. Life and anything that represents life involves movement, and standing rigid against it will only break us. So being the loving parent he is, God gently but firmly urges us toward the uncomfortable places change brings.

It's a lesson I'm learning imperfectly but learning nonetheless.

With a couple decades from that Summer of Indecision in my rearview mirror, I laugh remembering how my "safe" college choice transformed into the open door where predictability and safe choices faded into oblivion. For during my freshman year at Oklahoma State, I fell in love. And not just with any fellow, but with a fellow in the United States Air Force. So with the date of my twenty-first birthday still ink wet on the calendar, I married my good man and in marriage alone received a crash course in flexibility, humility, and accepting a shared supportive role rather than the sole lead role in the story of my life. Throw in the head-spinning realities of the military lifestyle, and rest assured, I learned to adapt to change in a hundred baptism-by-fire kinds of ways.

Obviously, you don't have to be married to someone in the military to have change accompany your story. You may have moved cross-country—or across an ocean—for employment. You may have gone from being a part of a large corporation to being a small business owner. You may have recently married or divorced, lost your home or moved into a new one. Maybe you just knew homeschooling wasn't for you but now find that since the local schools aren't working for your children, homeschooling is indeed what you've been called to do. Perhaps you birthed a new baby and life feels drastically changed, or those babies you birthed have left home to begin their own new lives. Whatever the view of your circumstances, chances are you're dealing with changes on the inside as much as the outside, feeling the pull of the indecisive tide and just doing all you can to not drift to sea.

If this is you today, oh how I understand! Abram from long ago understood too. These words from Genesis 12 give us a picture of perspective:

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

“I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you.
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him. (vv. 1–4)

What was true for Abram then is true for you today: *if God is sending you to a new place, he's sending you with a promise.* Whether you experience transition under your feet, in your heart, or both, the Lord is bringing you to something new for the purpose of blessing you beyond anything you could ever dream for yourself. In the deepest parts of my soul, I know *change is an absolute provision of God's grace.*

Change isn't something to be feared or dreaded. It's just the next step, his next best thing for you.

The problem, however, is this: we know too little of what could be to feel discontent with what is. When change that isn't our own idea comes into our lives, it's easy to hold on white-knuckled to what we already have where we already are.



*If God is sending
you to a new place,
he's sending you
with a promise.*

After all, it may not be a terrible or unhealthy place. Where we are may be exactly what you imagined for yourself: beautiful, predictable, and reliable. Why rock the boat?

Or maybe the view from where you sit today isn't quite so ideal. Difficult situations still require courage to change. After all, an undesirable familiar place is still familiar, right? Sometimes we'd rather put our arms around unhealthy predictability than take a chance on a better brand-new.

Either way, what if God wants something more for you? If God knows all our *could be's*, perhaps he's divinely orchestrating your life to help you know them too. And in his infinite wisdom, he is moving you in a new direction toward all that could be.

But when we don't see any of this clearly, it's hard to hang on to belief.

It's my fervent prayer that from the first pages onward, this book shows you how to do just that.

I don't have magic formulas. All I know is that the Giver of all good things wouldn't allow you to be in your current environment today unless it brings you to a better tomorrow. If something is happening that you never fathomed—then God is working out something unfathomably good for you and in you. You may not be able to fill in all the puzzle pieces or connect all the dots, but together we can trust God with the parts we don't see. Together, we can trust God to turn our feelings of hope gone to hope *dawn*. Together, we can believe that if he's asking us to plant a stake in new ground, he wants us to pack the same promise he gave Abram:

“I will bless you.”

This is his promise for you.

This is his promise for me.

This is his promise for all women.

Together, may we gather hope as we listen, learn, and believe.

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PART 1

Acknowledge

The Change and the Loss

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1

Change: Up Close and Personal

There are far, far better things ahead than any
we leave behind.

C. S. Lewis

My daughter, Faith, stood gussied up in satin and tulle, and she not-so-patiently waited her turn to walk down the aisle as flower girl in our friend's wedding. While I held her hand at the back of the church, I saw the mother of the groom leave the women's restroom, and her expression said she had all the patience in the world for her almost-daughter-in-law to walk down the aisle. Her tears were hovering just below the surface, and her bottom lip quivered. As I made these observations and others, it was obvious this change—her

son becoming a husband—was not welcome at that moment. Oh, I'm certain she's found blessings within the change, such as her son marrying a good, Jesus-loving woman. But as she waited to take her turn in the processional, the pain of what felt like losing a son seemed to outweigh the blessings.

Now, did this mama want her son living in her basement for the rest of his life? I doubt it. I believe she knew this was a good change. However, she just wasn't ready for this change right now.

When change hurts, it doesn't feel like a blessing or a provision of God's grace. So we dig in our heels and decide to ignore it or just suffer begrudgingly through it. Yes, if God allows the pain change brings, then he knows the good purpose found in it will exceed the pain felt. But it's hard to see and know this when we are in the middle of the hurting. So what do we do when the pain change brings is here?

We hold the hand of trust, put one foot in front of the other, and walk through it one slow step after another.

Eventually, the time came for that sweet mother to walk down the aisle. She did it trembling, but she did it just the same. She did it believing that despite her feelings, the blessing was to follow.

Married to Change

It's a cold winter day and I'm trying to work on a project, but my mind is on a conversation I recently had with a new friend at a favorite local coffee shop. I keep freeze-framing the moment after she makes a crazy statement to me. As we sit bookending our china cups of tea and plates of lemon bars, she says, "I want to see change differently, but it doesn't come

naturally to me like it does you. You're just one of those people who can handle change, and I'm not." I nearly choke on my chai latte before swallowing. I fervently shake my head back and forth so hard my curly hair swings.

I say, "Well, maybe now I handle it better, but it wasn't always that way. Not by a long shot."

I share with her my story about how change was foreign to me until it barreled into my life with hurricane force.

I am a country girl who spent my childhood surrounded by endless blue skies and wide open Oklahoma prairies. I grew up in the same house on a street aptly named O'Neill Lane—my last name and the last name of everyone who claimed that lane as their address. In my little corner of Osage County, I tirelessly played with my sisters Sara and Megan and explored with our neighbor-cousins Jennifer and Emily, always with imagination to spare. When I needed a break from roaming, climbing, or swimming with the family posse, I kept company with books and diaries under one of many open-armed oaks. Friday nights meant sleepovers and watching *My Fair Lady* with Grandma Rea, and Sunday mornings meant church and pot roast with Grandma Mary. No matter which way I looked, comfort reached out its arms in deep roots and familiar ways.

Protection and stability were also warm companions—I had many needs met with little effort on my part. Community came preassembled. I never had to learn to make friends; they were simply always there. I never wondered who to invite to my birthday party or where we would spend Christmas Eve or even where to buy a Mother's Day gift for my mom. The choices didn't change, and I didn't mind the consistency one bit.

When I left for college a mere forty miles away, many friends left with me. I came home on weekends to enjoy loving family,

hot food, and easy laundry. While life on the Oklahoma State campus expanded my horizons, it didn't expand them enough for me to feel any deep-level changes inside. From the get-go, Oklahoma State felt like home away from home.

I assumed that if in college I met a boy I was serious about, I would meet one with solid Oklahoma blood who had designs on properly staying put in state. Oh, he might like to travel, but he would always end each journey on the road back home.

As it turns out, I *did* meet a good Oklahoma boy named David Strong, but David most definitely had no desire to stay put. After all, he had already lived in more states (and countries!) than I'd visited. He knew more people across the globe than I knew in my hometown. And while his passport had seen quite a bit of action, there were countless other places he wanted to visit and explore too.

David embraced change, no matter the flavor, as one of the most exciting things ever, as well as a great excuse to learn and experience new things. Meanwhile, I tended to err on the side of comfortable familiarity. When I was in high school, I did crazy things like drive from my home in the country to our nearby town for a late movie with friends. When David was in high school, he did crazy things like drive from Tulsa to Philadelphia to visit a friend. Interstate highways scared me to death, whereas David saw them as a fast pass to Adventureland. That is, unless he could be above the roads in the sky flying gliders, a type of plane *with no engine*. I didn't relish flying in a plane with two good working engines, let alone one that relied on wind currents to keep it airborne.

Other differences between David and me stood out from the beginning. His family was chock-full of military brass, and as

warm and welcoming as they were, their family lifestyle was quite the departure from that of my own artsy, free-spirited self. And our college majors could not have been more opposite: David studied electrical engineering in school, whereas I studied music.

When we both saw each other for the first time on a campus sidewalk, we couldn't help but look again. It took ten seconds flat for the analytical, change-loving boy and the artsy, change-averse girl to fall for each other. We were two very different people, but with a smattering of divine superglue, our differences worked together.

So on a humid June evening in Ponca City, Oklahoma, we united hands and hearts in front of the altar in the only church I'd ever known. We exchanged timeless vows, symbolic rings, and knowing smiles, feeling in our core that Jesus had joined two uncommon people for a common good.

True as this was, two people with such diverse backgrounds can't come together successfully unless some form of change is part of the equation. As David and I planned our honeymoon, I received a gentle introduction to this new experience, early proof of how this boy was already enlarging my vision of the world.

Over coffee and tea in a campus coffee shop, David asked me where I'd like to go for our first trip as a married couple. Since we were college students with little money, I assumed the list of possibilities was small. That was fine with me, however, as there were lots of scenic attractions close to home. I mentally shuffled through the options of never-before-seen places before my mind settled on the perfect location: the Arbuckle Wilderness. This popular tourist attraction in southern Oklahoma had drive-through safaris and countless animal

exhibits, and I'd always wanted to visit it. I turned to David and said, "How about the Arbuckle Wilderness? I've never been but always wanted to see it."

Blink. Blink.

"The Arbuckle Wilderness?" He grinned big. "Well, I like the Arbuckle Wilderness as much as the next person, but I was thinking maybe somewhere along the coast. After all, you do love the beach, right?"

Now it was my turn to blink at him.

"The beach? Well, yes, I love the beach. But beaches are too far away and too expensive, don't you think?"

He thought for a moment before adding, "Well, they're farther away and more expensive than the Arbuckle Wilderness, but I've been mulling this over, and if I pull some extra shifts at work, we can do it, I think. Are you up for it?"

I emphatically nodded my head up and down, realizing what I considered possible and what David considered possible were two vastly different things.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with honeymooning at the Arbuckle Wilderness or choosing less grand locations for vacations. After twenty-plus years of marriage, we've done more than our fair share of close-by trips or even happy-at-home staycations. My point is, in those early days of dating and marriage, my vision of the world and all the options in it didn't extend far beyond my driveway. I didn't know how to look further or entertain grandiose dreams. It simply never occurred to me to do so, and what I perceived to be possible reflected this. But David knew how, and with money he saved from his college job (as well as a steady diet of ramen noodles), we were able to afford a trip to the Georgia coast and Florida.

We had been home from our honeymoon for five minutes when the time came to pack our belongings for our first cross-country move. And as we loaded suitcases and boxes into our new old car—my grandmother’s orange and cream Chrysler Horizon—my experience with change went from gentle to giant. Marrying David didn’t just bring about the usual adjustments that come with sharing life with another person. Marrying *David the air force officer* put my exposure to change into overdrive, and I found myself experiencing things I never thought to include in my childhood scheming and dreaming. If my life before marriage had been a comfortable one-room schoolhouse, it now transformed into a classroom of the world.

If I were to search through the files of your life, I feel confident I could find a defining life change or two of your own. Maybe yours was a move and a new lifestyle like mine. Maybe it was something you expected but nonetheless struggled through—like the change my friend Allison encountered when her oldest child left for college. Or maybe it was out of the blue, like the ordinary Tuesday when my friend Sherri was served with “dissolution of marriage” papers. Or when the doctor called Aundrea and informed her she had a dangerous, life-threatening form of cancer.

Whether expected or not, ready or not, here it comes: difficult, unwanted, and trial-inducing change. And with it comes desperate questions, such as, *How am I supposed to make room in my heart for the new realities change brings when I want nothing to do with the change in the first place? How can I live my life well when life feels completely unfamiliar and foreign? Where do I find contentment in the middle of this messy change?*

Finding God with Us

Outside my window, snow falls in heavy flakes pregnant with beauty. Christmas sits on a calendar date not far from today, and I am reminded of how the first Christmas was when the world waited with pregnant anticipation for our Savior's birth. When I flip open the Gospels to read about this, I see proof that change isn't just something God allows but is something he authors.

“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means, “God with us”). (Matt. 1:22–23)

Talk about drastic change!

For the first time ever, God would dwell on this fallen earth with its faltering people. Everything changed so God could be with us like never before.

It's a personal message meant for my life and your life.

Wrapped in that swaddled bundle of a wee babe is this startling truth: sometimes God allows change in our lives so we can have his presence like never before. So perhaps the first step in making room for unwanted change is acknowledging that it's in our life because he wants to be in our life more. And if this is true, then there is indeed purpose in the difficulty and pain change brings.

But in those early days of marriage I was clueless about this and so many other ways change would affect my life. The girl who grew up neck deep in a tribe of family suddenly found herself alone for long stretches, and for the first time ever I had to figure out how to get used to my own company.

I felt this most acutely when it came to friendships. Gone were the days of easy, close-by friends to hang with and lean

on. And since we moved every three years, I had to actively seek out new friends on a continual basis. Not only that, but I had to actively seek out new *everything* on a continual basis. Every few years, our family had to start life over in many respects, from a new neighborhood to a new hairdresser to new doctors and schools. Our church home—and our denomination—also changed as our location and family needs changed. Different seasons brought changes in my identity too. After living much of life as Kristen the daughter and friend, I became Kristen the military wife and busy mom. And with no nearby family to rely on as well as a husband who frequently traveled, I felt the stab of doing many things solo—a lone cheerleader, one woman adding dad, aunt, and grandma to her list of roles.

In most cases, all the changes put me in a position to be the first one to initiate all connections. While this was sometimes easy and natural, at other times it made me feel vulnerable and out of place. Still, after I fought the awkwardness enough to do this (and put on my big girl pants in the process), God provided friendship and community. But once I found a decent-sized village of support, the next move would take it away, leaving me with one that was see-through thin. Over and over, I smacked into the same startling reality as I figured things out on my own:

Change is devastatingly lonely.

Lonely, scary, and overwhelming. And often I have kicked and screamed against it enough to make any toddler proud.

What I didn't know then but know now is this: the lonely, quieter space brought by change is a prime opportunity to open our hearts to see exactly what Jesus wants to teach us. Lonely is not an unfamiliar place for Jesus. He experienced


loneliness while hanging on the cross when he cried out to his Father, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). The loneliness, the loss, and everything else change brings has a purpose, and God knows how to best bring good from it all.

Many folks from small towns or who have lived in one place their whole lives listen to God’s whispers and push themselves out of their own comfort zones. They don’t live their lives hostile to change. They see beyond their drive-way into the horizon, just waiting for God to point them in the direction they need to go. I, however, was not one of those people. God had to push me out of my comfort zone

because otherwise I wouldn’t have pushed myself. If change hadn’t so unapologetically showed up on my doorstep, giving me no choice but to go with it, I would have dug in my heels and crossed my arms against it.

Handling change—beginning to see it as a grace rather than a grouse—takes time. But this I know: one of the key times God is closest is during and after change. And if God is close to us amidst change he brings *to us*, then he is working through it to bring out some positive change *in us* as well.

It takes time to maneuver the rough textures and shadowy shades of change that dips its fingers into all parts of our lives. It takes time for our hearts to accept it. But when we do



*If God is close to us
amidst change he
brings to us, then he
is working through
it to bring out some
positive change
in us as well*

learn to accept it, we see how God uses it to take us from the (Arbuckle) wilderness to our own (beach) paradise.

While I'm not about to get cocky and consider myself a pro at handling change, I have learned to move with it instead of fight it, to see what Jesus wants me to learn in the midst of it. *To see how he wants to draw me closer to him.* And oh, how I want to be closer to him.

No doubt about it: it's scary to leave the familiar, to leave what we know is comfortable. But you know what? While the old things we leave may be familiar, the new things he brings may be fantastic.



Prayer

Father in heaven, thank you for sending Jesus so my life might hold the boldest example of change meant for our good. Thank you for sending Jesus so I could hold on to your presence like never before. When change comes to the center of my life, help me to center myself in Jesus. Help me not to hide from change but to discover ways you desire to be closer to me during it. In the never-changing, always gracious name of Jesus, amen.