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(Don't Skip This)

My marriage is over, right? I have to leave, right?” My friend Jamie held me in her arms in the hallway of the Conrad Hotel in Nashville as devastation set in.

The bad thing had happened. I was crushed—or so I thought.

At 6:00 a.m. I'd woken up to a phone call from my now ex-husband to hear the worst possible news about my marriage. It had happened again. Apologies again. Betrayal again. I just remember staring at the phone, completely numb with so many thoughts running through my head.

- **Disgust.** *How could anyone do this to someone they love, the family they love, the children they love, to God? What about everything we've built? What about our house? What about our future? Our grandkids that haven't been born yet?*
- **Disbelief.** *No. This isn't happening again. I don't*

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believe it. I'm asleep and this is a nightmare. Wake up, Toni, wake up!

- **Despair.** *I can't make it through another trauma. I've already been through too much. This will crush me. I won't be strong enough for my children. How will I raise them? I can't handle any more pain.*
- **Disappointment.** *I'm not mad, but I feel disappointed that this is actually the reality of my life, that God would allow this.*

My shoulders were slumped and my eyes glazed over when I'd gotten off the phone. No emotion. I'd ended the call by saying, "Thanks for telling me. I'm going to go process this in a safe space. I hope you get the help you need."

Thankfully two of my closest friends were staying in the Conrad Hotel on the same floor as me: Jamie and Jessica, who had both been walking deeply with me in a group called a confessional community (we'll talk about that in more detail later). The previous day we had filmed a show, together with my friend Lisa, on a Christian network. They were just a few rooms down the hall.

God knew I would need them.

My hands were shaking when I texted them.

Hey, are you guys up? I have a very private emergency. I'm sorry to bother you this early.

They both joined a FaceTime with me immediately, and I told them everything. I cried. I was so afraid. They were right there.

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After we got off the phone, both of them texted me reassuring words:

Jamie: *We love you dearly* and are in your corner and fighting for you. It's okay to be needy. *The Lord is your strength* right now. We can talk whenever you want.

Jessica: Love you. You aren't alone today or tomorrow or the next day. You aren't who you were, and you didn't have the resources (emotional, communal, financial) that you have now.

They came for me just like Jesus would. I needed safe people, and they met my need. I needed people who would just listen, and they listened. I needed my people when it felt like the pain was on the edge of crushing me.

And if I've discovered anything as I've walked through this season, it's that you probably need people too.

Why I Wrote This Book

This wasn't the book I was supposed to write. I'd just turned in a fifty-thousand-word manuscript for a book on sanctification (which is just a fancy word for living a life honoring and pleasing to God after you say yes to Jesus). I was honest and raw about my personal sin and how dark my past had been in hopes that readers would feel less alone in their own past sin and turn to the God who cleanses all things—who hasn't given up on us, ever. After turning the book in, I was so relieved. I

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even celebrated with my friends with a little sushi night. All that was left were edits and to actually release the book into the world.

Then I was headed toward my second divorce.

I started feeling like that book wasn't the book I was supposed to release. I'd been through so much pain at the hand of someone else's sin that I didn't want to market, release, tour, and talk about sin in that way. I wasn't ready, and my publisher agreed that after going through a public divorce, it wasn't wise. Even though I believe God's timing and promptings are right and good, this one really sucked.

I was devastated—and then something beautiful happened. I told my confessional community group about not releasing that book during one of our monthly calls. They had already witnessed tears flow from heartbreak, sadness, and anxiety—now they were holding disappointment with me.

“Aww, Toni,” Jessica said, “I'm so sorry. After all the work you put into it, that really does suck. I'm disappointed with you.”

Jennie agreed. “That book is for later. It will come out one day.”

“Toni, I wish I could just fly myself down to Atlanta and give you a big hug,” Ann whispered. “I'm deeply sorry.”

“Love you, T,” Lindsey added.

And then Jamie said something that changed the direction of the conversation. She took herself off mute and jokingly said, “I was serious when I messaged you on Instagram that what you posted should be your next book! I think it would be a really good one.”

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I had posted about and tagged almost every person who helped me and my kids while I was navigating and healing from divorce, figuring out finances, managing a public platform, caring for my au pair who moved from Brazil to live with me and help me with my children, finding a new place to live, and much more. I was so grateful, and I needed to share that because of God and His people, I more than survived—I thrived. The last slide in a series of Instagram posts held these three words: *Don't heal alone.*

Those were the words Jamie was talking about, and everyone on our confessional community call lit up. They all believed with me that this topic would indeed be my next book. And that, my friend, is the power of not doing life alone. That is why you are here reading this book today.

Community turns dark and weighty things into easier victories. So welcome to the victory that my beautiful group of baddies (that's what we call each other in the confessional community) helped me reach. Welcome to the book God knew I was supposed to write—for me, for many around the world, and for you. I'm so glad that it's not by coincidence that you're reading *Don't Try This Alone.*

You Aren't Alone

Reading this book isn't going to be easy. Surprise! The healing journey is never easy, and it'll never be a straight path. It's messy and heavy and can feel crushing. We need assistance. We need a coach. I'm offering to be your bestie don't-heal-alone coach:

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- I'll always be honest and vulnerable about my difficult journey with pain, betrayal, and disappointment.
- I'll openly share any resources that have helped me heal.
- I'll be honest about my weaknesses and how my friends and family helped to strengthen me—there was no way I could do this alone.
- I'll always bring God's truth to the table.
- I'll challenge you to do and say the hard things required to build a healthy community that is not only there to help but able to hold you accountable.
- I'll make sure we laugh a little and take breaks so that we can get through this together. After all, hope and hurt can coexist.

But before we get started, here are two things you need to know:

1. **What it will cost you.** (Ouch—I know.) You can't hide anymore. You've got to step into the light, okay? You have to get out of the darkness of your hidden pain and start sharing openly. You're going to have to trust again if you've been hurt. And I'm sorry for that. You'll have to trust God with your heart—all of it. You'll have hard conversations with people who may not be ready to stand with you in the trenches. You'll have new boundaries in relationships that may make you sad. You'll have to tell your people about the pain you're going through again and again—this may sting.

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2. **What you'll gain.** You'll beat the mess out of shame.

You'll find people who are trustworthy, and you'll start feeling safer in your body and in this broken world. God will meet you and blow your mind. He'll send people your way that just get it, He'll comfort you when it's scary, and He'll heal you.

You'll learn that boundaries are biblical and a way to honor your own heart. You'll experience feeling seen in really intentional ways when you call a friend and they let you cry for as long as you need with no words spoken. They'll listen to you tell "the story" a million times until you feel better. Your healing journey will be easier, and your people will be there to witness it.

I'm hopeful for you. I believe in your resilience to do hard things. I don't think you'd pick up a book on healing with others if you weren't serious about your healing journey. You are such an overcomer. Every tear that you've cried is stunning.

You're going to make it. And this book will help you do just that. Healing with people by your side won't be easy, but you were made for it, and you will do it. I know it.

I believe in these words that you're reading because I've seen it through my own pain and know with every fiber of my being that if you lean into this concept of not healing alone, you will look back on the dark moments and remember where the light pierced through.

You'll see the goodness of God in the land of the living (Psalm 27:13). The dry rocks in your life will be pierced open,

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and you won't be left thirsty—you have access to living water (John 4:13–14). When you're out of this valley, you and God and your people will rejoice because you made it to the other side. You'll rejoice because pain didn't crush you—because you didn't face it alone. As you go through this book, whether it's by yourself or with a close friend, book club, or small group, remember those truths as you dive in.

Here's what our journey together will look like: In the first part of the book, I address the reasons we try to heal alone. If we're going to fix anything, we've got to know where our brokenness comes from in the first place. The truth is we want to heal alone for so many reasons—we're ashamed, we've been taught to numb and hide, or we're afraid and have good reason to be. Once we address those things and willingly name them, we'll be able to start healing them so we can move on to the next section of this book—the practical stuff (my favorite!).

In part 2 we will talk about how to *actually* build your community. Because let's be honest: It can be weird finding new friends—especially as an adult. We'll get practical and dive into what to look for, red flags to be aware of, and how to navigate friendships in need of transition. All the things.

Last, in part 3, we'll fill your “community backpack” with ways to sustain the community you have built. We'll even take a moment to figure out how you can be community for others. After all, relationships aren't one-sided. And if we want healthy, God-fearing, reliable friends who help us heal, we will have to be healthy, God-fearing, reliable friends who help others heal too.

Let's dive right on in.

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Chapter 1

YOU WERE CREATED FOR WITNESS

Have you ever felt like your pain would crush you? Maybe it's a long-term pain that feels like it'll never let up. Maybe you're going through a season of singleness that feels like it'll never end. You've followed the rules, you've honored God with your body, and you've focused on your mental and emotional health. You've even attended all the singles' events, but it just doesn't seem that God is being intentional about sending your spouse.

Or perhaps it's a challenging kid. Been there, and I've got all the battle scars to prove it. You've tried gentle parenting, made mistakes with that, and slipped into aggressive parenting instead. *No judgment here.* You went and got the diagnosis, tried different dosages of medication, promised candy if the

behavioral chart had more green colors than red ones. You may have cried uncontrollably in front of your tiny human because all their behaviors triggered all your inadequacies. It seems they'll never learn to regulate, they'll never be on the honor roll, and you'll always feel mom guilt for taking your own sadness out on them.

Maybe it's not being a parent that has caused your pain, but being the child. The pain of abandonment by a father who selfishly chose not to be present for you. Or here's a taboo topic—motherhood wounds. Maybe it's pain from the mother who kept choosing her addiction over your tiny, fragile heart.

Or perhaps it's the longing in your heart to be a better parent than the ones you had, or just to be a parent at all. There's the pain of infertility or miscarriage, and the longing you have to hold your very own tiny human keeps you up at night. You're pleading and asking God to please return what was lost—or at least give you what you don't have at all.

These long-term, painful, broken parts of our stories get more excruciating with time. I know the pain of something not getting better. And I know what it feels like to have the same trauma and pain revisit over and over again, poking and prodding and peeling. I know that in-between space where you think, *This really sucks*, and *I'm not surprised*.

But maybe for you it wasn't a long-term familiar pain—it was sudden. You received that diagnosis, and in one moment your healthy turned into “How long do I have?” or “Is there a cure?” Maybe it was you, sweet friend, who were unfaithful, and the person you once trusted to keep your secret spilled the

beans. Now the look in your spouse's eyes is permanently seared into your brain.

And the grief of losing someone suddenly is like getting your pants pocket stuck on the handle of a door—there's a jolt that brings you into shock and disbelief. Your mother, no longer with you or able to remind you if it's a tablespoon or teaspoon of salt needed in her favorite recipe. Your father can no longer hop on a FaceTime to help you fix the flat tire that happened when you were on the way to something important.

That sudden pain knocks the wind out of you. Makes surprises feel cruel. Turns birthdays and holidays and anniversaries into memorials instead of celebrations. Sucks you into sadness like a garbage disposal.

And no matter how quick or slow or short or long the pain is, it rushes in and turns into unwelcome chills down your body, into nausea that turns into sleepless nights into despair. And every single one of your bones is aching, and they won't stop. It's like your organs are being twisted and turned. All you want is for the pain to stop. To stop hurting. To stop ruining and crushing and taking.

Pain is a violent thief, isn't it?



Okay, let's take a break. If I were sitting in a coffee shop with you as this conversation is flowing, I would give us a break right here. And I would say I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for whatever pain took from you. I'm so deeply sorry. And I feel seen because it

took so much from me too. I'm reminded of Jessica's words: "You aren't alone today or tomorrow or the next day." This is the healing balm that held my arms up, because we were designed to have our arms held up when life gets too heavy to do it ourselves. So take a deep breath right here. Really deep. Now hold it and then blow out for longer than you breathed in. Do that three times.

And then let's dive back in. When you're ready and not before, okay?



Sometimes anticipating pain can be more crushing than the pain itself.

For people like me, who have lived through really hard things—sexual manipulation and abuse, addiction, an eating disorder, two divorces—it's extremely difficult for me to believe that something bad isn't always around the corner.

I want to be more optimistic. I want to believe that there's good coming my way, but I'm also so scared that it's just *not*. I live in this constant tension, fighting to believe that a good God will come for me and protect me from evil, and knowing the reality that we live in a fallen, broken world and evil is on its way too.

Here's an uncomfortable truth: We can follow God and still experience hard and painful things. The Israelites are a perfect example of this.

In the Bible the Israelites were following Moses from Egypt

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to Canaan. They camped in a place called Rephidim, “but there was no water for the people to drink. So they quarreled with Moses” (Exodus 17:1–2). I want to point out that these people left behind bondage and all they had known to follow God’s plan for their lives. They were following the will of God, but that did not come with protection from imperfection or pain.

Moses knew that even when pain and longing come into our hearts, our God is able to fulfill those longings and provide a way forward. Moses did what we see him do best—he took his difficulties to the Lord. And look at what God’s first instruction was: “The LORD answered Moses, ‘Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb’” (Exodus 17:5–6).

God’s way forward through hard things will always be with Him and His people. God knew exactly what Moses needed to provide for the Israelites: He needed the God of divine presence, and he needed the physical, tangible presence of God’s people (the elders of Israel) if he was going to lead these people out of bondage, through the impossible, and onward to a peaceful place. Moses knew that the only way beyond the pain is through the pain. And he was reminded by God that he couldn’t—or maybe shouldn’t—do it alone.

The next part of the story gets a little weird. God told Moses to “strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink” (v. 6). Um, what? Strike a rock and water is just going to miraculously come out? Moses and the whole

group of people knew that this wasn't normal. This is not how you get water; water then was typically obtained from a well, spring, or bag made from sheepskin. Hitting a rock doesn't get you water. But in this miraculously generous act of God, it did. Moses wasn't the only one to witness it; the elders and almost two million Israelites did too. Moses believed in God in the midst of a real need, and because of his surrender to God's presence and His people, everyone around him got to experience the miracle.

The Miracle of Presence

Reminders of God's presence and the importance of living in witness are found outside the Bible too. I had a reminder of this recently during a hard day. It was a grief day for me. I cried after dropping my daughter off to school. I cried on the way home from the gym. I cried as I went to work, leaving my son with my au pair, Anna Julia. I cried on social media, allowing people to see the raw and honest reality of healing from divorce after betrayal. Seven months after having to leave my marriage, there was still grief. Staring me in the face was the very thing I didn't want to happen.

On my Instagram Stories I said, "It just sucks, you know? I have my moments when I don't want to have to endure so much. I don't want to be broken." That's a wild statement from the girl who founded an organization called Broken Crayons Still Color. And also, it's just the truth.

But guess what happened at 11:00 a.m. on this grief day? I

had counseling. And my counselor helped me with grounding exercises to bring me back into my window of tolerance—which is just a fancy phrase for bringing me back into an emotionally stable place.

And then guess what happened at 3:00 p.m.? I hopped on the phone with a close friend who had gone through betrayal in her marriage as well, just five months after I had, and we talked and cried together. By 4:00 p.m. I had hope pumping through my veins again. Because sometimes it isn't the painful thing that crushes us; it's going through it alone that does.

After being in counseling for the past nine years and attending multiple healing retreats, intensives, and courses on healing, I've realized two things.

1. We never stop healing.

We live in a dark and fallen world under a curse, which wasn't God's original design. When He created Adam and Eve, He created them to be "fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:28). He created them with the intention to be blessed and to have humble power over everything. We were designed for a beautiful coleadership position with the Creator of the universe. And then evil stepped into our connected union with God, and pain, sorrow, suffering, and deep grief entered our stories.

The painful stuff is coming. I don't say that to scare you. I actually hope it gives you peace, like it does me. Because it

means I'm not crazy for thinking the bad stuff is coming—it actually is. And you're not crazy for thinking about how dark our world is—it is. The pain you've gone through is real. Can we just sit in that for a moment? Can we grieve that there is an enemy of our souls—the serpent in the book of Genesis that tempted Eve in the garden to eat the fruit of a tree that God had said not to eat and ultimately stole our perfect, connected union with our Creator (Genesis 3:1–7)?

I mean, I don't know about you, but I really do wish we could have a do-over. I want to frolic in the grass in complete freedom, without a care in the world! I don't want to worry about my children. I know you don't either. Who wants to worry about finances and sickness and toxic relationships and church hurt? We're not crazy to think that this world is ghetto and jacked up, because—*surprise*—it actually is!

And we don't have to hold that grief alone.

2. Healing doesn't happen alone.

I have a strong belief that there is only one way for us to manage the pain that the darkness in the world causes—together. Lean in right here. The anxiety and depression and sleepless nights could be waiting on a trusted, licensed Christian counselor to teach you grounding exercises. And yes, maybe the way your marriage ended feels like it'll crush you. I know that pain. And the only thing that got me through the grief that felt like a tearing and ripping was a group of my closest people, who offered Band-Aids that held me together until I had the capacity for the emotional surgery I really needed.

Maybe you have friends and you've kept them at the surface for far too long. Maybe you've been deeply hurt by your community, which prevents you from wanting to trust anyone again. I know it's hard. I don't blame you. *When we love hard, we get hurt hard too.* And (not *but*) we don't have another choice. We were designed for community and witness. We won't survive this life without it.

Healing Happens in Community

I received a text from my friend Belinda today. She's walked with me through this past season of devastation and divorce.

You're inspiring me to work on my recovery time when I feel overwhelmed, frustrated, and out of control. Also, on how to alter my perspective so I can better view how God is working on my behalf, even when I get in my own way. Thank you for that. I know you're impacting and changing lives because you're doing it with me just by being yourself. What a blessing!

That's the impact of healing in community. Not only does it change you, but it heals the people who get to walk with you. They get a front-row seat to what God is doing in your life, and maybe it grows their hope that He'll do it for them too. Maybe it'll remind them that they don't have to heal alone either. What a gift.

That's what I deeply want this book to be for you. A reminder, a tool that will fight the belief that healing is best done alone. Healing alone actually makes it harder. I want you to read this book and allow it to create a reflex in you when you're in pain. A reflex that says, "I need God right now, and I need His people too."

- Tragedy hits your family. God and His people.
- A failed test. Beeline to God and His people.
- The decision to leave a marriage that is no longer God-honoring. God and His people.
- The devastating news that the doctors can't find the heartbeat. God and His people.
- The terrible diagnosis. Let God and His people cover you.
- The moment they found out your sin. Let God and His people lead you to conviction.
- That job let you go. Let God and His people provide for you.

This is the way forward. There's no other way. Our bodies are wired for togetherness. And when we fight our God-given wiring for connection, we not only end up attempting hard things alone but we risk not being able to succeed in them at all.

There are a few things that make us think that we can or should heal alone. And we have to address those lies before we can fully embrace healing in community. Let's dive in and shed the light of some truth on those lies.

Think on This

- Is there a time when you felt alone? Can you imagine Jesus sitting in that place with you and gently saying, “Daughter, there’s a difference between being alone and feeling lonely. I am with you so you’re never alone. And it’s okay to feel lonely.”
- Now close your eyes and imagine the God of the universe, the God who is with you, sitting next to you. He’s right there.