

CALVIN ROBERSON

*Television's  
#1  
Relationship  
Expert*

MARRIAGE  
AIN'T  
FOR PUNKS

A No-Nonsense Guide to  
Building a Lasting Relationship

“Calvin Roberson has written a powerful and practical book that is deceptively easy to read. Just about every sentence has a jewel in it—easily understood and applicable to the daily needs of a committed relationship. Pastor Cal’s insights translate immediately into ways we can protect and improve even a troubled marriage—if we practice his version of ‘CPR’ I can’t imagine anyone, single or married, who would not be inspired, or would not profit, from the wisdom in this book.”

—Pepper Schwartz, PhD, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Normal Bar: The Surprising Secrets of Happy Marriages*

“As a prominent urban radio host, we talk about relationships a lot on our shows and when it’s time to call on an expert, there aren’t too many ‘experts’ I trust who talk the talk, walk the walk, and lead by example—but Pastor Cal is it. As we say, he’s the GOAT (greatest of all time) when it comes to marriage and relationship insight. *Marriage Ain’t for Punks* is consistent to what we love and trust about Pastor Cal. It’s realistic, honest (brutally, when needed), and practical. I honestly wish I had the type of guidance shared in this book a few years back . . . but I’m glad I have it now.”

—Nina Brown, radio and TV host

“I’m not a huge fan of counseling, but Pastor Cal makes me look at it differently. He’s such a down-to-earth guy and breaks things down in a way that empowers you and makes you want to better yourself. He’s revolutionizing the game and is a brother I can get down with on the counseling tip.”

—Ty Law, Pro Football Hall of Fame class of 2019

“Pastor Cal has created a clear and concise guide that can help you navigate the crazy ups and downs of marriage. We all have them, it’s just how we choose to respond. This isn’t a one-time read, this is a manual that should be referenced over and over again as you meet the many different challenges of wedded bliss. Almost everything in our lives comes with a manual, or at least instructions on upkeep and how to make it work. The most important relationship in your life should be no different.”

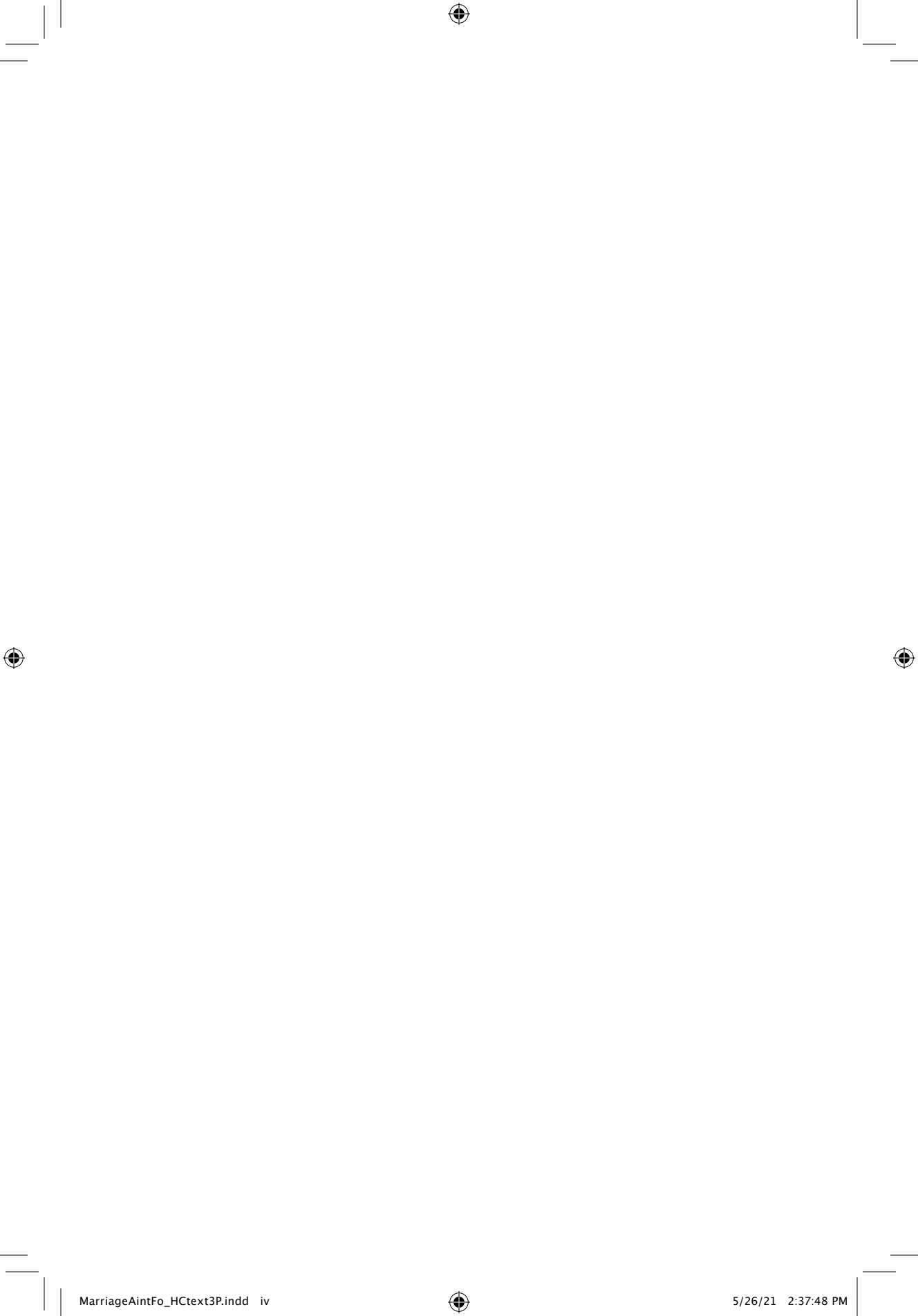
—Kevin Frazier, TV host

“*Marriage Ain’t for Punks* is a must read for couples who are struggling to make their relationship work. Pastor Cal, in his typical fashion, pulls no punches with his straightforward and direct approach. Rather than getting bogged down in clinical terminology, he cuts straight to the heart of the issues that many couples struggle with years into their marriages, offering concrete solutions and strategies to help overcome any obstacle. Pastor Cal is adored by fans for his honest and direct approach on television—now, they finally have the opportunity to get his advice and strategies to apply to their own marriages and learn how not to “punk out” so that they can have the love and marriage they want and deserve. I can’t wait to share this book with the couples I work with!”

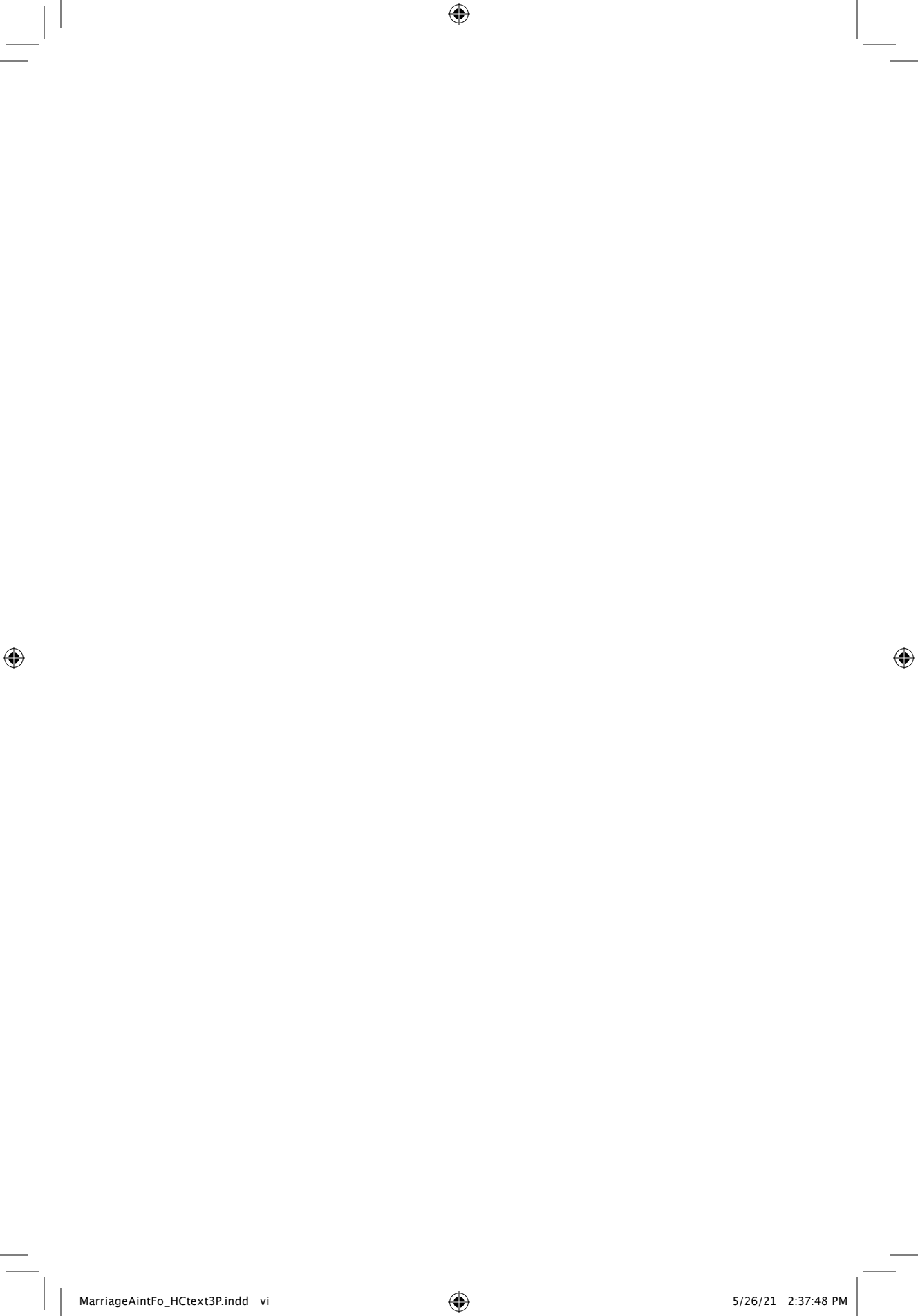
—Jessica L. Griffin, PsyD associate professor of psychiatry and pediatrics, UMASS Medical School, department of psychiatry; relationship expert and TV personality; CEO of Love Builder, Inc.

“I adore Pastor Cal! His spirit is incredibly warm and the way he helps couples work through their issues is done with nothing but pure love. So glad he’s part of the *Married At First Sight* franchise so the world can experience him on a weekly basis and learn useful tools that could possibly help save their marriages.”

—Nicole Haynes, EBONY media executive



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PUNKS



# MARRIAGE AIN'T FOR PUNKS

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*A No-Nonsense Guide  
to Building a Lasting  
Relationship*

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CALVIN  
ROBERSON



New York Nashville

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FaithWords

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104

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First Edition: September 2021

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

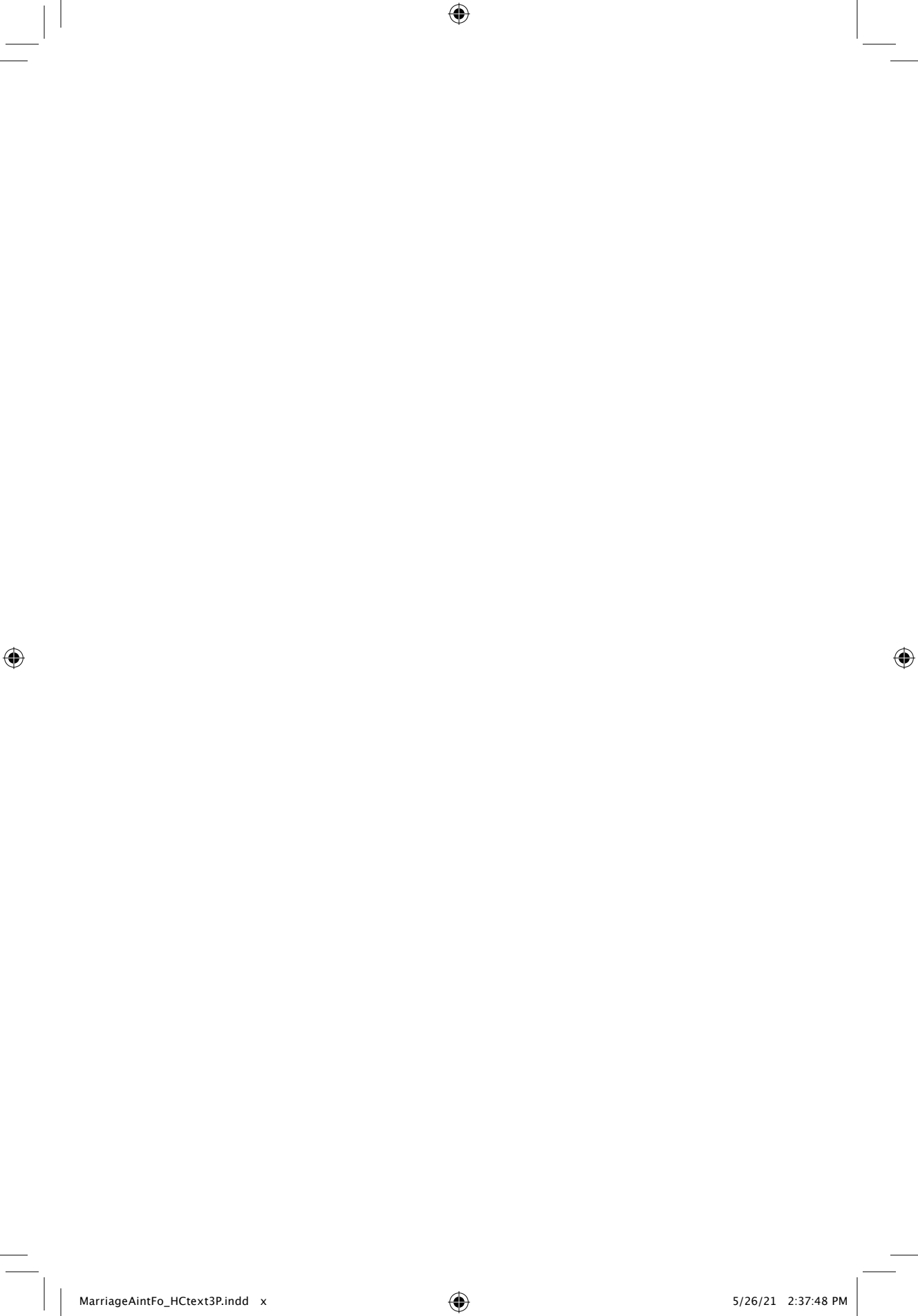
ISBNs: 978-1-5460-1569-7 (hardcover); 978-1-5460-1570-3 (ebook)

Printed in the United States of America

LSC-C

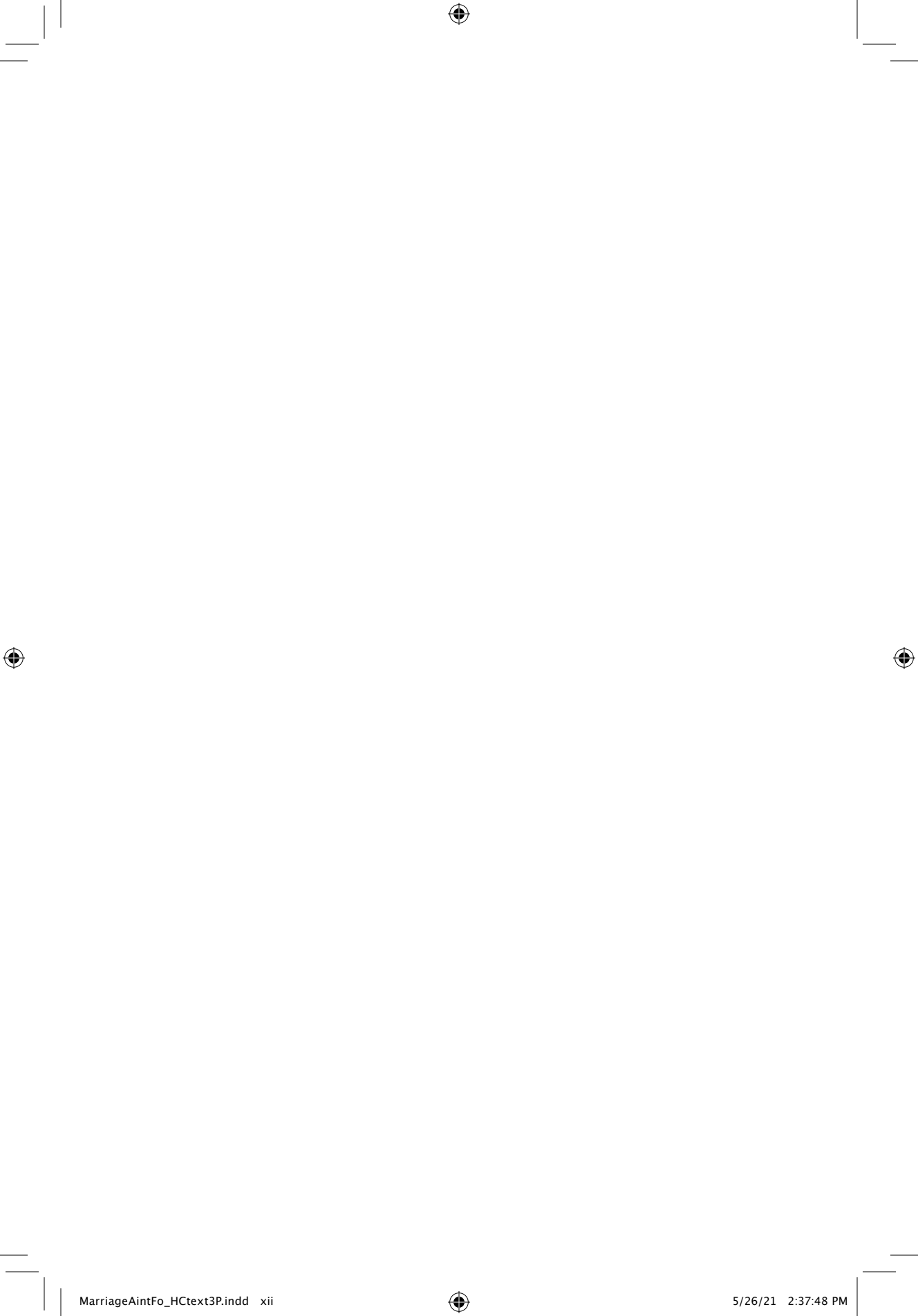
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*To all the couples who thought marriage would have been easier and  
happier and didn't punk out until it was.*



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# Introduction

They literally bumped into each other at a conference, and the rest was history. Two go-getters seeking marital momentum.

Rae was a rising star in her career as an IT technician. She was intelligent, powerful, and well respected for her knowledge and leadership. Her five-foot three, super-toned, alluringly beautiful exterior often threw people off guard. Coworkers sometimes made the mistake of assuming she was docile or petite. Nothing could be further from the truth! She had literally beaten all the odds in emerging from her Chattanooga, Tennessee, trailer-park upbringing to become an elegant and educated powerhouse in her field. Her goal was to break every glass ceiling she encountered, and she was well on her way to doing just that.

Jesse had been a nerd his whole life. As a loner in high school, he opted out of sports to focus on his hobby, the financial markets. He wasn't the handsomest or even the most intelligent, but nobody could match his intensity and focus. He was a plain-looking guy at five feet, ten inches tall with a slight frame. But he did have an understated rugged look. And because of his dogged persistence and intense attention to detail, he had done exceptionally well as a tech company analyst. He often noticed attractive women, but never had the confidence or the time to approach them.

That's when Jesse bumped into Rae. He was turning a corner

as she was rushing into the same meeting to get a good seat—boom! He accidentally knocked her phone out of her hand.

“Whoa, I am so sorry!” Jesse exclaimed, bending down and inspecting the phone to make sure it wasn’t broken. He handed it back with his best smile.

Rae’s frustration quickly subsided because of his respectful and repentant behavior. She even smiled back to calm his fears. It was only a brief moment, but it was enough to pique both their interests in the possibility of having a less awkward chance to be properly introduced. That chance happened after the meeting when Rae intentionally walked past him and playfully jerked her phone away, as if avoiding another crash. He laughed, they talked, and as I said—the rest was history.

Two years later, they were married. Jesse’s nerdy looks had been markedly transformed by Rae into a Wall Street hunk. She was steadily moving up in her career. They had settled into married life, complete with a new home and shared friends. Their chance meeting had given them both what neither had been looking for.

You might expect these two powerhouses to make an awesome power team as husband and wife. But as time went on, they began to drift into a common marriage routine. At the end of the day, when they both turned down the volume on their busy lives, they found they didn’t have much energy left for each other. After nearly six years of marriage, they frustrated easily and chose to spend time on their computers researching rather than relating to one another.

Occasionally they would get a call from their respective work colleagues to discuss the next day’s plans. Whoever took the call would perk up, showing more interest in achieving greatness in their career than in their relationship. The juices would flow, and

the energy would ignite. But as soon as the interaction was over, they'd settle back into the tension of their marriage once again.

If you were to look at Rae and Jesse as they sat in their living room—physically together but emotionally light-years apart—what would you see? A failed relationship? Spouses in name only? A marriage on the rocks?

Not me. I see an opportunity for something great.

## THE TRUTH ABOUT MARRIAGE

In my almost twenty-five years as a marriage counselor, I've learned that great marriages don't begin until you're ready to walk out the door. When you look at your husband and literally feel sick at what you see. When she leaves for work and you wish she'd never come home. You get nauseous at arguing about the same crap over and over again. You don't want to be touched. You would rather spend the night in the backyard than sleep in the bed with him. You feel as though this was the biggest mistake of your life.

Have you ever felt like that? If you've been married or you're married now, I'll bet the honest answer is yes. As a marriage second-timer, I understand the pain of a failed relationship. In my youth, I did not have the skills or knowledge to know how to navigate the difficulties of marriage. I found out quickly and painfully that matrimony without preparation or sufficient education will end in failure and regret.

These experiences are painful and real. Relationship counselors, marriage gurus, and self-help books will instruct you to speak your spouse's love language or learn the seven principles of a successful marriage. They may tell you that men are from Mars and women are from Venus. These approaches might work for some

marriages, but usually they only put a Band-Aid on the gushing wound of a challenged relationship. In truth, sometimes the hemorrhaging is necessary.

Here is the reality: There are no secrets to making marriage work. There are as many love languages as there are human emotions. You may never enjoy the image you concocted of what a happy or beautiful marriage looks like or what great kids look like. Rather, your journey toward a successful marriage may include much of the following:

- You are so dog-tired of each other that your sex life becomes inactive or uninspiring.
- You may, in some cases, be tempted to hurt each other physically.
- You forget about communication boundaries and say whatever is on your mind because you are fed up.
- The kids hear you argue and feel their world is falling apart.
- You enjoy it when another person flirts with you; you may even initiate it!
- There are tears, there may be cursing, and there could even be screaming.
- Prayers may help, but don't take away the pain.

Conventional wisdom says that's a marriage on its last leg. About to crash and burn. Absolutely not! On the contrary, this is a marriage laying the foundation for a beautiful reset. These are relationships that have just entered the flaming crucible of marriage reality and have begun the arduous task of streamlining and fitting two completely different personalities together.

The trick is for couples to effectively crack the surface of their

emotions and see past the romanticism and fantasy of their unrealistic expectations. When they do that, they will understand how their union, if managed carefully, can create positive legacies and change lives for generations. They will realize that they have started something beautiful, even though it may not appear so at the time. And they will learn that nothing great comes as a result of mediocrity and calm.

Successful marriages are made of victorious people who understand the goal is not euphoria. The goal is not to emulate the perfect sitcom relationship where everything is wonderful again after each thirty-minute episode. They don't romanticize the relationship. They don't mask their problems. Instead, they run toward them, ferociously attacking each challenge head on with a never-lose attitude. They realize the remarkable power they have together, and no issue, challenge, or terror has the power to dismantle what they are constructing.

## THE TRUTH ABOUT THIS BOOK

Over the years, I have emerged as a stand-out voice on relationship success. One reason for that is because I understand marriage is not a time or a space to be politically correct—it's too important. I believe tough love really works in today's relationships. While I've weathered some criticism for instructing couples to push past their fanciful ideas of *feeling* in love and fight to *grow* in love, I believe the success speaks for itself.

*Marriage Ain't for Punks* brings that same energy and no-nonsense audacity onto the page. It is not a book on “tips for a great marriage.” It is not a manifesto on nuptial happiness that, if followed, will turn your relationship into a little slice of heaven on

earth. I intentionally shy away from gimmicks, tricks, or pabulum commonly used to make marriage work.

In fact, the idea of this book is not to make marriage work.

That's right: Marriage is not the thing that is supposed to work. People are supposed to work! Marriage is simply the vehicle they have chosen to be in, but every marriage must have willing participants who understand that this institution may sometimes feel like an actual institution.

**Marriage is not the thing that is supposed to work. People are supposed to work!**

It is not the remedy for loneliness. It is not the gold-paved avenue leading to a rainbow, complete with balloons and a pot of gold. Marriage can be

tough, and the only thing that stands between you and divorce is your sheer will to fight like hell and manage your own feelings.

Truly, of all the things in life people have attempted, failed at, attempted again, and still experienced the most miserable of results, marriage stands at the top of the list. For as many people who fail at it, the question looms: Why in the world would you even want to do it? Why spend countless hours arguing about the same dumb issues again and again just to make up, have great makeup sex, and then a few days later argue again about—you guessed it—the same problem?

I believe there is something that intrinsically exists in this mysterious thing called marriage that draws us like moths to an oncoming headlight. We have positive and fanciful expectations in spite of the numerous examples of train wreck marriages we've either witnessed or experienced.

Now suffice it to say, not all marriages are or will be this dire or desperate. In fact, a great number of marriages may never

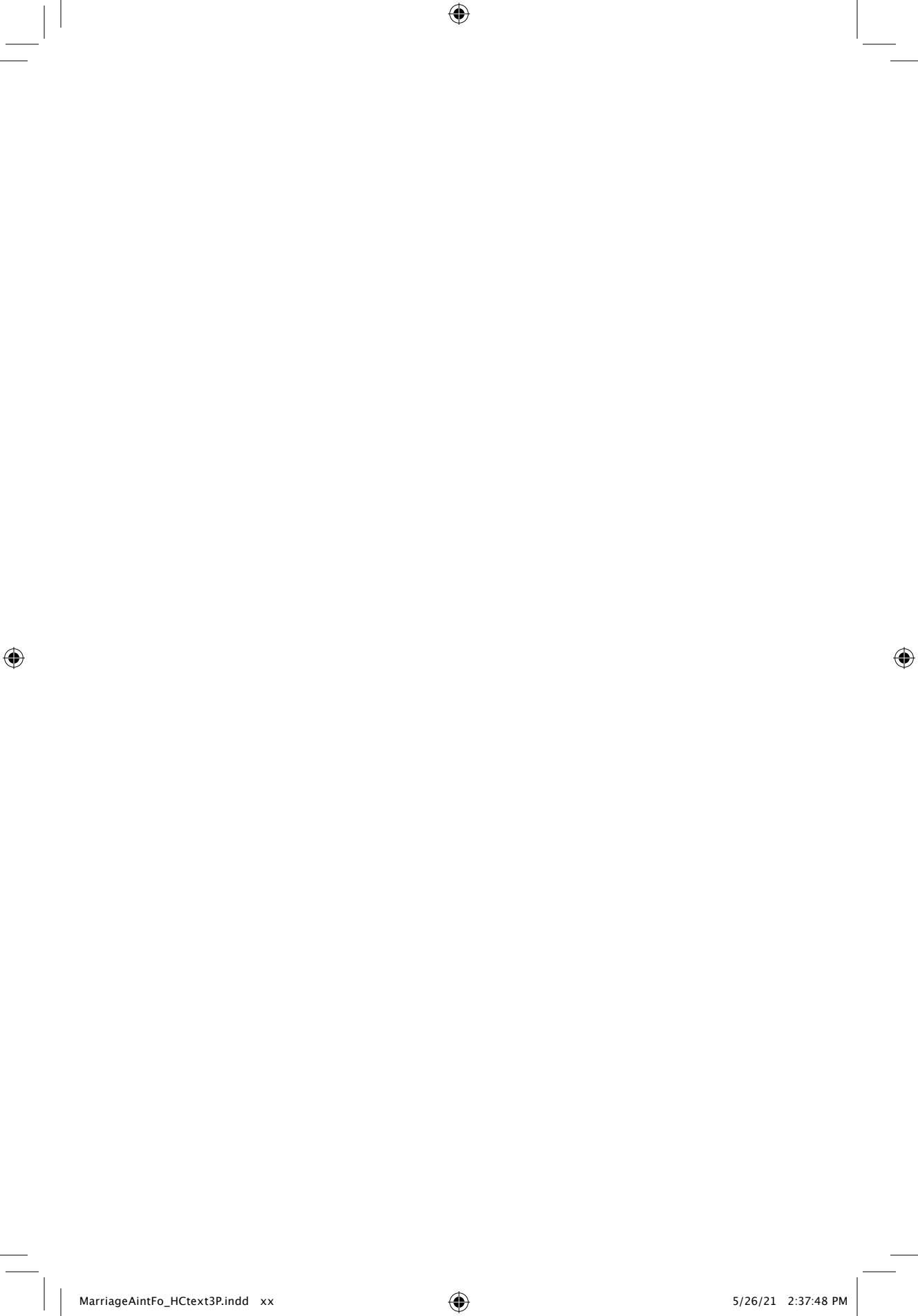
experience the impact of the moth flying to its doom. Many couples have done serious work on themselves and have learned how to communicate openly and honestly and can successfully navigate the challenges they face.

These positive relationships are what we admire. These are the stories of grandparents who have been married for fifty-plus years and are enjoying their golden years, hand in hand. These are the role models who give us hope and inspire us to pursue this blessed institution with great anticipation.

We still want the fairy tale—the happily ever after—and we rightfully believe we can have it! Even for those who are still licking their nuptial wounds after serious *marital arts* battles and have declared they're completely done with marriage, there is a small seed still planted somewhere in their psyche that, if given the slightest nourishment, will start to grow into the possibility that maybe next time it can work.

Okay, I must admit it: I'm one of those who believe. I believe in the fantasy, the unreal expectations, and the fairy-tale endings. But believing in them does not mean they will happen all at once. In fact, most of the time they come in segments. The key to a healthy marriage is to choose wisely, move thoughtfully, and commit permanently.

Easy? Absolutely not. But then again, marriage ain't for punks!



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## CHAPTER 1

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# Profiling a Punk

As a kid, I weighed barely a hundred pounds, dripping wet. Chucky was easily twice my size and five years older with a mean streak as big as his protruding forehead. So knocking me literally on my butt in our pickup basketball game on the dusty home-made court was an easy feat. But then, it was a part of what we did as country kids.

And as quickly as I hit the ground, I bounced back up in his face, trying to block his shot. It was laughable to watch. It was like watching an advancing great white shark going after its prey, unaware that an annoying little suckerfish was attached to its fin, flailing about, trying to stop it.

It was all a part of the game. That is, until Chucky decided to further exert his dominance by using my feeble attempts to block to make a public spectacle out of me. After successfully making his shot, he brashly turned around, pushed me to the ground, and uttered the word that changed the game entirely.

“Get outta here, punk!”

As the incendiary words dripped from his arrogant, curled lips, they seemed to ignite something in me. Instantaneously, my hundred-pound frame grew to three times its size. My strength was that of a hundred men. My anger was unchecked, and it felt as if I could actually fly.

Actually, my anger was real, but the flying I imagined was me being tossed by Chucky over a barbed wire fence. But in my defense, I bounced up and returned to the fight. After all, it was required to prove I wasn't a punk!

While growing up in our small but tough Southern town, there were three things you couldn't tell me or any of my friends without getting a quick and sometimes vicious reaction. You could not disdainfully spout the words "Yo' mama!" You could not *double-dare* anyone. And you could never call any guy a "punk." Not unless you were ready to seriously scrap.

The word "punk" meant you were not a real man, even at twelve years old. It meant you were not up for the challenge; that you were an inferior or unimpressive person who simply did not have the nerve to face whatever imminent danger presented itself. And to accept this emasculating insult without some kind of bravado and male posturing would only further prove you deserved the insult in the first place. This was serious, because who wants to feel they don't measure up? Who wants to face the truth that they can't accomplish a certain thing or that they aren't up to the task?

We all want to believe we have this indomitable force within us like latent nitroglycerin just waiting to be shaken by someone who challenges us to perform. It would be great to have super-powers bestowed upon us by some otherworldly force in the outer reaches of the universe, to be activated when we've reached the

absolute end of our rope. Then, at last, it bursts forth in unrelenting splendor and accomplishes the impossible.

The truth is, the great majority of us do have power that lies beneath the surface. Power that has been created within us, yet we have never accessed. It's dormant and waiting to be exercised. We have heard stories or maybe even witnessed some of the astonishing feats of people trapped in horrible situations who choose to suffer personal injury to save themselves or the lives of others. We've seen it in the recorded incidents of mothers who lift heavy objects to rescue their trapped and suffering children. The list goes on with the incredible deeds that people perform under extreme cases of duress.

But that list tends to shorten drastically when it comes to the superhuman strength or willpower needed to salvage or save our personal relationships.

As of the most recent census, the divorce rate has continued to decline, reaching a forty-year low, according to the National Center for Family and Marriage at Bowling Green University. This means couples are staying in marriages longer. More and more people are attempting to find resolution and actually want to stay married.

However, another reason for the declining divorce rate is that the number of young people who have never married is at an all-time high, according to a recent survey by the Pew Research Center. Nearly one in five adults ages twenty-five and older has never been married. This may indicate that many are losing faith in the possibility of a successful marriage.

To me, this is a clear indicator that most don't choose to access their inner power and work at marriage, but rather simply resolve to *punk out* on what is arguably the most important venture any

person can undertake in a lifetime. Often, the same type of verve and vigor we invest in reaching life goals is unavailable or even unconsidered when it comes to our relationships. We seem to think if we just believe in love, then all things will work out. If we simply care enough, our relationship will somehow find its sweet spot and will evolve into this beautiful and satisfying fairy tale.

This can't be further from the truth. Of all the endeavors two people can embark upon, the idea of blending two distinct personalities so they can move together in the same successful direction has to be the most difficult ever imagined—and the one that needs the most attention.

In over two decades of counseling people on various levels of relationship conflict, I have found there is a ripple effect that begins with one's ability to manage and resolve difficulties in their relationships, and then spreads to other areas of their lives. I believe a person's ability to find happiness and effectiveness in their job, in their school, and even in their health can all be linked to whether their relationships contribute to or detract from their lives. And when you consider that marriage is the most intense and closest relationship possible, the effect on other areas of life can be enormous.

More often than not, people stroll into adult marriage situations while maintaining the mentality and lack of commitment of adolescents. They don't count (or don't know how to count) all the costs associated with plunging into that colossal decision. In our modern, quick-fix society, it is easier to give up than to persevere—easier to throw in the towel than to push beyond our boundaries. Nowhere is this seen more obviously than in marriage. Mole hills that could be resolved with guidance or counseling are often inflated into what couples feel are impenetrable mountains.

Most marriages I have encountered have not taken advantage of premarital counseling. For some strange reason, people feel as though they will just know what to do when they get married. There they are, standing hand in hand and listening to the officiant or reciting their own vows and believing this will be a heaven on earth. This is the hope. But after the wedding night sex (and trust me, there is *no* greater anticipated sex than wedding night sex), it's not long before the dust settles and the first real issues raise their ugly heads.

Even with couples who have lived together for years prior to a wedding, there is still a change that happens when they get married. Somehow, hearing those words "I now pronounce you husband and wife" sets off a mystical chemical reaction in the brain, and a new reality begins. The person you thought you knew actually left you at the altar. It's all different now. This is when the earliest signs of marriage punkery begin to appear.

Punks are neither male nor female; they have no race or ethnicity. Punkery bypasses all those social classifications. This is where I have seen many couples plant the first seeds of doubt in their relationships, and where those seeds take root and begin to grow. They soon begin to view each other as enemies instead of partners.

In my decades of rescuing couples from the brink of divorce, I've found that a great number of hopefuls are quick to choose the path of least resistance. They will walk away from fixable difficult situations, as opposed to rolling up their nuptial sleeves and battling the challenges. I've heard reasons that are as varied as the personalities involved, but whatever they are, they still amount to punking out.

One excuse I often hear is this: *He'll never change, because*

*people don't change.* The idea that people can't evolve into something better is completely contradictory to who we are as humans. Throughout the vast millennia of life on earth, people have always learned from their mistakes and failures and course-corrected. The ability to change is deeply tied to who we are as intelligent beings on this planet.

Another reason I've heard people use to punk out is that a certain offense is unforgivable. While there may be things done that cause severe damage, I've counseled numerous couples who have made the decision to stay together and mutually fight through rather than give up. This has only made their relationships stronger.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not so naïve as to believe that every problem can be fixed. However, the common issues that most couples deal with on a daily basis can be resolved. Issues like anger, ineffective communication, or the common excuse that you *love her, but you're just not in love with her* are all the result of not having the necessary tools and the right perspective to confront, analyze, and solve these fixable challenges.

## THE TWO SIDES OF MARRIAGE

Marriage is supposed to make you better. When done right, marriage is supposed to be that thing that propels you and your spouse into your mutual destiny. It is not an antiquated social construct as some have claimed. Rather, successful marriages are at the root of a stable society. They are necessary to show that commitment is more than words; marriage is legally obligating yourself, your time, and your resources to another person—with the same thing being given back to you.

Marriage can be the most difficult and the easiest thing in the world, sometimes at the same time. There are two sides to marriage. Let's look at them individually.

The first side of marriage is the ugly or difficult side. With all the books and seminars available on sharing the "secrets" to a successful marriage, one would think this marriage thing would be a breeze. However, divorce rates and miserable marriages tell a different story. They tell the story of well-meaning people who are attempting a noble and time-honored thing, yet ultimately find themselves sleeping at opposite sides of the bed, deliberately trying not to touch each other. Sometimes they resort to living as roommates instead of love mates, having sexual fantasies about other relationships, or finding solace in scrolling through their smart devices peering at nameless faces or naked bodies.

When you find yourself in this phase of marriage, understand that it is just that: a phase. Often, I will see husbands and wives encounter difficult times in their relationship and will immediately magnify those trials as though they are the totality of the relationship. They will make decisions about the entire marriage based on segments of time where they are having problems.

No one does this in any other areas of their lives. My wife and I have a few favorite restaurants we frequent. Sometimes, we have a less than great experience at one of them. We simply chalk it up to maybe the chef is having an off day. But because we know the totality of his expertise, we would never write the restaurant off our list. That's *throwing the baby out with the bath water*.

The same can be said of going through the negative phase of marriage. It is vital that every couple understands the inevitable reality that there will be bad days, weeks, or months. There may be arguments that rival world wars. You will sleep on opposite

sides of the bed. You may wonder why you married in the first place. And you will make stupid mistakes that seemingly take forever to recover from. But these are not the marriage. They are only one side of it—a phase that is intended to teach you both the value of hunkering down, fighting the problem together, digging deeper, and discovering the beauty in the ashes.

But there is also the second side of marriage. It is the positive, much more exciting phase of the relationship. It is the story of couples who have been married for decades and still find themselves involuntarily drawn to touch each other, just to feel close. This side of marriage tells the story of those who can't wait to get home from business trips. They feel as though making love with their spouse gets better each time. They don't need other friends or companions around to have fun. They are satisfied with just the two of them. They have financial challenges, unruly children, and job pressures, but they join together to attack the problem instead of letting the problem attack their marriage.

I have been privileged to see so many couples experience the beauty and joy of nuptial bliss. In most of those cases, the couples have made the decision to be okay with not being perfect. They understand that the person they are married to is a blessing to them. They realize the value of having someone in their life who knows their deepest secrets and will take those cherished secrets with them to the grave.

They have their own unspoken language and can sense private humor without saying a word and then spontaneously laugh in sync. They understand that there are valuable stories behind each other's blemishes and imperfections. Stories that they each honor and respect, which increase their value to one another.

This is the side or phase of marriage that hopeful singles dream

of when they think of spending their lives with their beloved. This is the fairy-tale phase. This is what love stories and romantic comedies emphasize, and it's what we all aspire to have.

How is the latter phase different from the former? The latter has discovered the hard-learned fact that anything worth having is worth sacrificing to achieve! They have learned that with transparency and effective communication, every challenge can be met head on, fully examined, and solved. Every success can be completely celebrated, and true love can be completely realized.

Furthermore, every couple who has experienced the blissfully beautiful side of marriage understands that it has evolved out of the ugly and difficult phases. The splendor of these relationships stands like a lotus flower, which can achieve its astounding beauty only from the mud and mire it uses as its foundation. It must have the difficult and the undesirable times in order to produce the positive and successful results.

Relationships must go through conflict without fearing that it will destroy them. Dissention doesn't mean it's the end of the marriage, or that something is seriously wrong because you argue. On the contrary, conflict has a goal. It is a vehicle that, when used properly, can lead to understanding and mutual respect.

In order to move from the negative phases of marriage to the more beautiful and satisfying plateaus, there are steps to getting there. There are intentional decisions and

**Anyone can have a wedding and be legally bound, but it doesn't truly become a marriage until you've cried, argued, regretted, despised, then rethought, forgiven, changed, loved deeper, and committed over and over again.**

actions that must be carried out. Here is the unapologetic truth: Anyone can have a wedding and be legally bound, but it doesn't truly become a marriage until you've cried, argued, regretted, despised, then rethought, forgiven, changed, loved deeper, and committed over and over again.