

Introduction

I am not ready to write this book. I am not ready to venture into these emotions. I am not ready to relive all of the intensity and hard places that have been my life over the last eight years. However, I believe that God has said it is time to share my story, our story, His story. I hope that you, my reader, will find God on every single page, through every single moment. I never could have survived without His consistent guidance and faithfulness. Alas, here I am a widow, a warrior, and a survivor of the widowhood journey. I want you to feel equipped and empowered to believe (or understand) that you will also make it through the darkest days and most difficult moments of life with God. He will never leave you, nor forsake you, no matter what road you find yourself traveling.

Why do I call death a tsunami? Because Death wrecked everything in my life as far as my eye could see mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. No one else can see it, no one else knows how bad the damage is, and sometimes, it seems, no one else cares. A tsunami annihilates everything in its path. It constitutes far and wide destruction and shocks even seasoned local people by how far out the water recedes into the ocean before abruptly turning around to pour much farther inland than could be expected. Death is the same way: it swoops in and creates a shockingly deep void and then it wrecks your entire existence far and wide, yet to an outsider, everything still looks completely normal on the outside. After a physical tsunami, the destruction is easily noticeable to everyone. Even though the death was personal for me, the effects were far reaching into all areas and relationships of my life. In a Death Tsunami, because it happens in the spiritual realm, much of the destruction goes unseen.

I felt like no one could see how wrecked I was. I couldn't explain it. I couldn't tell anyone how to help me because I didn't even know myself. When every single part of you is destroyed, where do you even start? Not only will death plunge you straight into the Valley of the Shadow of Death, but it will blind you with how dark it is. In Psalms 23, it is written, "Though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death." The Bible refers to facing the aftermath of death as the shadow of death. The shadow. The tsunami of death is all the destruction that happens in the aftermath of Death coming. The shadow is the darkness that prevents you from being able to see, and the vulnerability that comes after death. Think of Death like a huge tsunami wave that can move across the Earth. The height, depth, and width are unimaginable in size because it is a spiritual principle. When it comes and takes a human life, the wave passes and that is the tsunami wreckage. The shadow of darkness comes, similar to a storm in the middle of the night, and covers like a dense fog that is impossible to see through. Daylight never comes, maybe even for years. There is no light in a shadow. That is why it is a shadow. There is no light in that valley, and it is so dark that you can't see your hand in front of your face. There was a small pin prick of light, the tiniest spot. I locked my eyes on it, for I knew that is where God was. I knew that if I focused on that light, it would shine a light unto my path, and my feet and I would make it out alive. Not only would I make it, but I could lead my kids out too, if they willingly follow. God is there, much like a spotlight, illuminating each step to get you back into the light.

Have you ever seen *The Never Ending Story*? I love that movie so much. There is a character in the movie called The Great Nothing. That is a great representation of death. The Great Nothing left nothing in its wake and it had no care for what it destroyed. The difference between this movie character and real life is that the character was seen coming. Death is never

seen coming. Even if it is known that someone is dying, there is not any way to know exactly when their last moment is. One minute there is life, then the next, the Great Nothing has come, and there is utter destruction behind it with a shadow so dark that one can't see.

Chapter 1: Our Story

In August 2003, I was at a music show with my son. We were out front standing on the sidewalk talking to a friend. Here comes this beat up truck, rickety and speeding around the corner, and my friend says, "Hey! There's Pineapple Butt." I turned to look, but it didn't really mean anything to me. Pineapple Butt had never really liked me since we were teens. I was the only Christian in the Birmingham punk rock scene, and he had always hated me because of it. I never tried to get to know him, and he avoided me, so it was kind of a mutually respected distance. I was always sober as a teen. I never was interested in drugs, alcohol, and debauchery. I was a Christian, though I was broken. Pineapple Butt's goal was to die at twenty-one in New Orleans on a drug overdose. He hated me because of my faith. He hated God, hated Jesus, hated anything Christians represented. He was so against the idea of Christianity that if he could do anything against it, he would. Anything. Everything. His anthem was to destroy.

However, in his early twenties, he met God on God's terms. He was introduced to the love of Jesus through a family that meant the world to him. Instead of overdosing on his twenty-first birthday, Jay Jordan was baptized in New Orleans. Instead of dying to life, he was born again. An opportunity to live life to the full. He said becoming a Christian was the worst thing and best thing that ever happened to him. He had to recognize that all the awful things he had done, prior to knowing Christ, were sins. There was a plethora of sin to sort through. He also appreciated that Jesus took it all to the cross and didn't make him pay for it. He indeed embraced life, especially the one that God had in store for him. We met a few years after this pivotal event. Although we knew of each other, and had been in the same places at the same time, we hadn't actually ever spoken, until the God ordained day.

He walked up wearing a huge T-shirt, baggie jeans cut off at the ankles, and Birkenstocks. Ew! What a mess he was! He sauntered over to where we were and just chimed in like he had been included the entire time. "Hi. I'm Jay. Or Pineapple Butt, you can call me either." It is common in the punk rock and biker scene to have nicknames. Pineapple Butt was originally given to Jay at about thirteen years old to hurt his feelings. But in these scenes, you either have tough skin and embrace what people try to break you with, or you will never make it. Jay embraced Pineapple Butt and was endearingly known as that for most of his life and by pretty much everyone he knew.

Pineapple Butt, it turned out, was friendly, even funny. I didn't think much about it because I knew he didn't like me. But, surprisingly, he told me that he had become a Christian. I rolled my eyes. Oooooof course he had! (Really, I thought he was just hitting on me at this point.) We talked about how cool it would be to have a ministry geared towards punk rock kids and those who were struggling, like drug addicts and prostitutes. He asked me for my phone number and stretched out his shirt. Um. In my mind, I was thinking, "No big deal, Stephanie. You can throw it off by a number, and it'll be fine. He won't find me." So, I grabbed the pen and

started writing my phone number directly on his T-shirt. But when I got to the last number, I paused. I hesitated, ready to throw in a big fat ol' lie that would keep him from calling me. Then I wrote it. I wrote the 9. What? Wait! Did I just do that? Did I actually write down my legit phone number?! Well. Crap. He now had my phone number.

It was almost like God wouldn't allow me to give him the wrong number. Had this human disaster known as Pineapple Butt just stepped into my life as a God-ordained, God-appointed person?

The next day, about 7:00 p.m., he called me on my cell phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi, this is Jay. We met yesterday."

"Yes, Jay. I know exactly who you are."

And four hours later, we said goodnight. Of course I reminded him that my phone plan wasn't free until after 9:00 p.m., so he would need to wait to call me until then.

Every night at nine, Jay called me like clockwork. Because of my experience with domestic violence in my previous marriage, I wouldn't let Jay come to my house. I was living alone with my son, and I wasn't about to take the chance that this huge man would be alone with us. Jay was patient, though he begged me to give him a chance to prove that he was safe. It took nearly a month before I let him come over. We geared up our conversation about starting a ministry together. R.I.O.T. (Reaching Into Our Territory) was about to be born in Birmingham, Alabama. Our focus was to reach punk rockers, hardcore kids, skateboarders, drug addicts, prostitutes, and really anyone who was used to walking off the beaten path and to the beat of their own drum and needed to be accepted.

This ministry sparked a friendship between Jay and me. We started spending a lot of time together. One night, he was at my house sitting in my recliner. I was on my couch. Now, maybe I should share a little bit about myself. I am extremely blunt. I am not shy. I am not afraid of confrontation or making things a little uncomfortable. Jay could've used that information up front, and it might have helped him through this conversation. So, we are in my den. My son had gone to bed, and we were just hanging out.

I said, "Jay, can we get over this little awkward thing and just be friends? It's never going to happen. I am not going to date you, so can we just move on so it isn't weird?"

He said, "I've never been so uncomfortable in my life. I mean, I guess so."

There it was. Called out into the wide open. I had just dropped the bomb and shattered his hopes of us dating. I figured it would help us to not have a big elephant in the room every time we were together. It didn't really sway Jay at all. He just continued right on dating me, without my consent, for months. Our ministry caused us to spend a lot of time together. We were living life out with our group and each other. We were very involved in many churches around our area.

One extremely cold night, Jay rode a Ninja 250 from his home to mine. It was an hour one way, and when he showed up, his eyelids were basically frozen to his eyeballs, and he had icicles on his lashes. He was nearly frost bitten, and was a gigantic ice cube. I could not believe that he rode a motorcycle in that weather, but wherever I was, is where he intended to be. I guess his big huge heart full of the fire of love kept him warm enough to endure the ride.

In November 2003, we took a trip to Texas for a conference. Our R.I.O.T. crew piled in a friend's Ford Expedition, and we spent the weekend at this conference. We all hated the

conference, so we left it early and just enjoyed the trip. We ate at fun restaurants and went to the mall. He let me shop while he watched my young son. He always acted like my son was already his own. It was a pivotal weekend for us. We became best friends on this trip. We created so many inside jokes, I probably laughed more than I had ever had in my life. There it was, the key to my heart, laughter. Laughter was never in short supply with Jay. He was hilarious. However, I still had no intention of dating him!

December came and for my birthday, he gave me an incredibly cool piece of art that he had made for my gift. I was flattered that he had spent so many hours working on this piece of art. It was a huge canvas with a graphite on black paint image of Jesus' eyes and crown of thorns. It fit so beautifully over my fireplace. He tortured himself with some chick flick and mediocre Mexican food. It was still an amazing night to him, because he was with me.

Jay helped me move from one house to another in January 2004. That night, after everyone left, Jay was sitting in a chair across the room, and he said, "I love you."

I said, "I know."

He exclaimed, "YOU KNOW?!"

I said, "Of course I do. You have shown me that you love me for months."

He was a bit speechless. But I did know. Jay was always there for me. He was an encourager and my biggest fan. If there was ever a way to say "I love you" without words, Jay Jordan had mastered it.

In February 2004, Jay and I had our first date. Fort Payne, Alabama, used to be called the "Sock Capital of the World" because it had so many sock factories. We did a lot of homeless ministry with R.I.O.T., and we were gathering socks for our next outing. We ended up at a nice restaurant in the mountains of northern Alabama on Valentine's Day. It was romantic. Over the months of our friendship, Jay had really proven himself. He was a constant, and he made things happen that needed to happen. He loved my son like he was his own. He told me that my mothering was one of the reasons he fell in love with me. According to Jay, he had had a terrible upbringing and a childhood saturated with neglect and abuse. He loved that I was an engaged mother. I was flattered by how much he noticed and complimented it.

One day, Jay was asleep on the couch. My son had woken up earlier than us, and he walked up to Jay—mind you he was two years old—and said, "Eggonme."

Jay said, "Comere, little buddy," and proceeded to attempt to pick him up. Then the light bulb went off. OH! Egg. On. Me. So Jay came upstairs and woke me up in my room and said, "Uuuuhhh, I think you might want to wake up. There's something downstairs that you need to see."

I got up and walked downstairs and wowza!! What a mess! There was baby powder and baby shampoo all over the living room and then the eggs... The "egg on me" eggs were everywhere. Seventeen out of eighteen eggs were broken all over the kitchen and living room. We called the one survivor, Nemo. Now, what you need to know about Jay for this story to be relevant is that he hated, loathed, and despised snot or viscous texture of any kind. It absolutely grossed him out and made him ill. So the fact that he was on his hands and knees, practically gagging, close to vomiting, to clean up the nearly dozen broken raw eggs off the covered kitchen floor, was further proof that he indeed loved me very much.

One weekend in May 2004, we were at a conference at the church I grew up in, and I heard God tell me that my new name would be Jordan. I was like, nope! God, I'll take any man

on the planet but Jay Jordan! I had prayed against him no less than a thousand times at this point. I mean, that man was a hot mess! No steady income. No home of his own. No driver's license! He didn't have anything pulled together. There was no way, absolutely no way under the sun that I was going to marry this man! Dating him was one thing, but marrying him was something else entirely. How did God expect me to marry a man with no driver's license?

I set an appointment with the pastor at the church. He told me that the Jordan River is a prominent place in the Bible, so I needed to study a bit about the Jordan. I did. The Jordan River is God's dwelling place. Ugh. "*Does that mean I have to marry this guy??*" was my thought process.

So, I prayed for three signs in hopes that I wouldn't have to go through with it. I asked for one sign to be from someone I trusted; a second sign from a really random but obvious place; and a third sign from God's word, the Bible. I got all three signs answered. The first sign was from my mom over lunch one day. She shared her story about how she knew God called her into her marriage with my stepdad. She just knew that she was supposed to marry him.

The second sign was given when Pepa, from Salt-N-Pepa (look them up if you don't know who they are because you should! They were fundamental in my early years of life. Maybe not the greatest influence for a young girl, but I still love their beats!), shared her story on a Christian TV show that I never watched until I was flipping through and saw her on it. And there was sign two. I stopped and watched her share that no matter what you have gone through, God can redeem it. No matter what you have done, God can redeem it. If you come from a broken marriage, God can redeem it. Sign two was that God was going to redeem my brokenness from being divorced by calling me into a marriage He ordained.

After the pastor mentioned that the Jordan River is a prominent place in the Bible, I sat down and wrote out all the scripture references that mentioned the river. I began to write the scriptures out so that I would be able to focus on what was being said about the river. The final sign came from the story in 2 Kings 5:1-14 in which Elisha told the king, who was a leper, to go bathe in the Jordan seven times and he would be renewed like a young boy. There it was, the third sign from God's Word, just as I had asked. Although this passage completed the third sign, the full significance of this scripture wouldn't be revealed until much later in my life's journey.

OK, God. I hear you. I will marry this Jordan man. But first he had to get his driver's license. Jay's license was suspended for failure to appear in court from a DWI charge he had had many years before I met him. We drove to the municipality, and he turned himself in. He gave me the money to bail him out. After I bailed him out, I went home, and he went to court the next day. The judge gave him time served and a fine, which he paid. Then he was able to get his driver's license, moving him one step closer to being marriage material.

Our Wedding and Building a Family

I told Jay on a Sunday that I would marry him. He called Sloss Furnaces National Historic Museum to see if we could get married there. They were stunned, no one had ever asked to be married there before. They agreed and asked us to donate \$50 to the museum. We chose a black and white theme, which was really cool in contrast with the rusty, deep iron red background. Three days later, on a Wednesday, June 30, 2004, I became a Jordan, with my

little son as our ring bearer. I began my descent into the “Jordan River” to be eventually renewed, after I first became destroyed by the death tsunami. I know that sounds backwards, maybe. In retrospect, I had no idea how backwards it would feel to experience it. I expected my promised renewal to come in the form of a happy marriage. Instead it came after one of the hardest, darkest places I have ever been. However, I learned that this journey would be probably one of the most important journeys of my life. Sometimes I lament the struggle, but I am forever grateful for the love and compassion and faithfulness that God has shown me through every single step.

We got pregnant three weeks after we got married with our first daughter. God knew we were going to need more than a sheet of paper to keep this family together. Jay was ecstatic. Me, not so much. I was excited about the baby but terrified about being pregnant because of the nightmare situation that I had with my first pregnancy and domestic violence. I didn't realize how that situation would cause me to withdraw from Jay. That challenge led Jay to entertain the idea of using drugs again. He had been sober for quite a while, but a guy he was working with had started bringing drugs around. Jay wasn't strong enough to resist, and eventually he gave in, which threw our marriage into a full tailspin. We were in total chaos with a baby on the way.

The finale of his drug use came just before he went into rehab in November 2006, but there was a lot of damage that was done in our marriage. A year-long battle with his addictions and having two young kids, while I was also building my business, was a very difficult season in our lives. There were many days that I hated him because I felt like I was carrying the weight of our marriage alone. We were unhappy many times in our marriage because I struggled to forgive him, and he struggled to know how to repair the hurts. There was chaos, and there were some really beautiful moments. I am sure that most relationships experience some of that same pendulum swing, ours just seemed to have a lot of force behind each swing that carried us to extremes.

I got pregnant with our third child while he was in rehab. Bad timing, I know. But it was God's timing. God had told me that Jay wouldn't finish the full program, but had He told me it was because I was going to get pregnant, I most likely would've tried to prevent that, which is exactly why He didn't tell me. My control issues would have intervened on God's plan. The day I took my pregnancy test, Jay called me and told me that he thought God told him it was time to come home. Jay and I weren't able to talk during the week, so I was surprised by the phone call. I asked him what his counselor said, and Jay replied, “He thinks I have heard from God.”

I answered, “Well, that's good because I took a pregnancy test today, and I am pregnant.”

He said, “Well, that is just confirmation for me.”

I went and picked him up from rehab. I got about five minutes down the road and slammed on the breaks in the middle of the road. I turned and looked at Jay and asked, “Am I taking home a husband or a problem?”

He answered, “A husband.”

My son was prophesied. I had told Jay and my mentor a few weeks prior that I felt like God was telling me that we would have a son and to name him Hammuel. They asked me if I was pregnant, and I told them no. I mean, certainly God wouldn't have given me another child while my husband was in rehab! I was surprised at the timing, but not that he was coming. In November 2007, a full year after Jay's surrender to get sober and stay sober, we had our son.

He was a bright light in a dark time. I was still very unsure that we would make it through the repairing of our marriage. I believe that we fought so hard because we had these small people that needed us. They gave us motivation to keep going and keep pulling together, even in the times we felt so far apart on our inside.

Over the next few years, we were busy growing family life. I was diligently working on building my business. He was a stay-at-home dad. Originally that was our plan when the economy tanked in 2008, but after we bought our house in 2010, he was supposed to go back to work at our metal company, Exodus Iron and Forge. We ended up dissolving the company, and Jay never went back to a formal job. A year after we moved into our home, Jay caught the kitchen on fire, so we were without a kitchen for nearly a year as we rebuilt it. This nightmare made me realize that we could never build a house together. It wasn't a difference in taste that was the issue, but a difference in understanding how critical a kitchen is for a family of five people. He didn't seem to have the same need to have a working one. We had plenty of dramatic fights that led to more space between our hearts.

Jay lost his mom, who was sick for many years. Then his sister-in-law passed away with cancer. These were both devastating losses for him. In my ignorance, I didn't have very much compassion for his grieving. Every day was so full and so busy, there was no time for grief. A foolishness on my part for sure. We had moved across town from my work, so I was gone a bit more and for longer hours. It was harder to fit in all the daily tasks, and frustrations ran high regularly. Jay struggled with depression and would have high highs and low lows. Though he was never fully diagnosed, he and I both thought that he suffered from bipolar disorder, which explained much of his self-medicating tendencies. He struggled with erratic behaviors, and sometimes he would sleep for three days at a time. These shutdowns were usually after a manic episode of hyper focus for two to three days. The roller coaster was an exhausting ride.

In July 2011, Jay had me arrested for domestic violence. The irony is that it was exactly ten years after I had been abused by my ex-husband. Did I hit him? Yes. Why? This is a complicated story, but it really boils down to the fact that I did not handle a situation well. However, I went to jail for what he did to himself, not what I had done. He hit himself over and over again in the face because he was full of drama and anger—and then called the police on me. It was a trump move and I paid for it. He tried to bail me out, but they wouldn't let him. I sat in jail for twelve hours and read Frances Chan's *Crazy Love*. God told me to forgive him that night. I said, "Absolutely no way in heck am I forgiving him for this!! Do you know what all I have put up with from him!?" The next morning at 7:00 a.m., my mother picked me up from the city jail. I went to file for legal separation that day. I was ready for this nightmare marriage to be over and done with for good. But God.

Forgiveness was the consistent theme that we were called to over and over again. God consistently drew us back together after every single dip we managed to hit, and there were a lot of them. We had many reasons to fight for each other, but often we fought with each other.

Jay had a way of being very demonstrative. Every movement and everything he did was big. Larger than life. He loved big. His anger was big. His heart was the biggest. It was hard to stay mad at him sometimes because of his beautiful heart and regal spirit. I couldn't have grown with anyone else the way I did with Jay. God had ordained it, and it was a breathtaking journey. We were sealed together as one flesh, and we had so much fruit to show for it.

Life was full. Each year of our marriage had huge events. I always say that this is when the Rockies were built in the panoramic view of my life. If I look at my life like a panoramic picture, there are valleys, hills, mountains, rivers, and oceans. It is a full-spectrum view of a fully lived life. There were really low moments for us as we battled through Jay's addiction issues and super high moments as we had beautiful babies.