



BETTER THAN OKAY

*Finding Hope and Healing
After Your Marriage Ends*



BRANDI WILSON

“If you are at the end of your marriage or the end of your rope, my friend, Brandi Wilson is a worthy guide on a journey you never thought you’d have to take.”

Holly Furtick, Elevation Church

“For the one ready to overcome, this book is for you. Brandi Wilson has written a wonderfully wise, witty, and grace-filled guidebook to healing, forgiving, and flourishing after life’s setbacks. With refreshing vulnerability, freeing truths, and practical tools, these pages reveal the beauty of the redemptive power of Jesus.”

Hosanna Wong, international speaker, spoken word artist,
and author of *You Are More Than You’ve Been Told*

“Brandi Wilson was one of the first people to welcome my family to Nashville when we moved here thirteen years ago. Now, she’s inviting you to the table, too. Come get encouraged. Come get inspired. Come discover in her authentic, beautiful story that a life that is better than okay is always available.”

Jon Acuff, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Soundtracks: The Surprising Solution to Overthinking*

“An amazing thing happens while you’re reading this book. At first you are walking with the author through the depths and darkness of her personal wilderness. And then somewhere along the way, you feel a shift—that the author is walking with you through your wilderness. Brandi Wilson has been there and made it through to the other side. And what she has courageously and generously done in this book is return to the wilderness—the very place where you now are—and with honesty, compassion, and wisdom, Brandi serves as your guide on the healing journey to the other side, where hope

and perseverance arrive to help you discover and recover peace and joy.”

Ramon Presson, PhD, licensed therapist and featured expert
in the DivorceCare series; author of *When Will My Life
Not Suck? Authentic Hope for the Disillusioned*

“It feels impossible to ever feel that you will be okay. Brandi’s friendship, prayer, and words were what helped me through my darkest times. This book is everything she said that helped me get to the other side, so I know you will also be better than okay because of this book.”

Jana Kramer, actress, singer, and *New York Times*
bestselling author

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For Jett, Gage, and Brewer—
you three have my heart.
We will forever be Us Four.

Contents

Introduction—Here We Are 11

1. **To Be Continued . . .** *How to Walk into the Unexpected Episodes of Life* 17
2. **Pretty Scars** *How to Find Beauty in the Wounds* 27
3. **I Cussed a Lot** *How Grief Can Taste Like Tears and Sound Like Swearing* 37
4. **From Bent to Bold** *How to Move from Brokenness to Bravery* 43
5. **Whose Voice Do You Hear?** *How to Shake Off the Shame* 55
6. **I've Never Missed My Ex** *How Loneliness Both Hurts and Heals* 63
7. **Humbly Grateful or Grumbly Hateful** *How Gratitude Is a Game Changer* 75
8. **Out of his Shadow** *How to Step into Your Sunlight* 81
9. **My "Ex-Husband Knots"** *How to Engage in Self-Care and Soul-Care* 91

10. **“I Googled Dad”** *How to Cling to Hope When Your Kids Are Heartbroken* 103
11. **Us Four, No More** *How to Redefine Your Family for the Future* 113
12. **I Have a Six Pack and I Don’t Mean My Abs** *How Friendship Forges Strength* 121
13. **Discarded** *How to Find Your Place When You Feel Like You Don’t Fit* 133
14. **Stop Trying to Resuscitate What’s Dead** *How to Breathe Life into Your New Life* 145
15. **Brandi Got Her Groove Back** *How to Navigate the Peaks and Pitfalls of Dating* 155
16. **2,400 Square Feet and a Prayer** *How to Start Dreaming Again* 171
17. **Better Than Okay Is Just the Beginning** *How to Live and Love Your New Life* 183

Books That Guided My Healing Process 197

Acknowledgments 199

Notes 203

Introduction

Here We Are

I think it's fair to assume this is a book you never expected to need. To put it bluntly, it's the book I never wanted to write. The first thing I want you to hear is *I'm sorry*. I'm sorry for your heartache. I'm sorry for your shattered dreams. I'm sorry you're putting the pieces of your life back together.

Next, I want you to know you're not alone. Walking through a divorce is annihilating, even when you're surrounded by a loving support system. Your heart is broken, your marriage has ended, your next steps are unknown, yet the lives of the people around you continue as yours is falling apart.

If we could, I'd sit across from you at a quaint little coffee shop in my hometown and listen to you share your disappointment, hurt, fear, and anger. The opportunity to sit across from you and say "me too" would be a gift. To hold space for you to share how you arrived at this undesirable title of "divorced." Since we probably won't get that opportunity (though if you're ever in Nashville, let me know), I'm going to do my best to pour my "me too" into

the words on the following pages. To create a book that doesn't give a cookie-cutter formula for moving forward, but the story you get to create by taking your best next step. While I might not know you, my heart aches for you and what you're walking through.

Feel all those emotions, friend. Tell me how you never walked down the aisle expecting to divide your household items a few years later. Admit how you never had children to parent them part-time based on a court-ordered parenting plan. Share your disappointment, frustration, and anger.

While I empathize deeply with what you're facing, I also want to pour a healthy dose of encouragement into your hurting heart. You will survive your divorce and come out stronger. Trust me. I want you to say that to yourself.

I will survive my divorce and come out stronger.

Again, this time like you mean it.

I will survive my divorce and come out stronger.

Better. One more time.

I will survive my divorce and come out stronger.

YEAH, YOU WILL.

You will, I know it in my bones. There will be days you don't want to get out of bed. Days you feel like nothing is going right in your life. Days the grief hangs heavy over your slumped shoulders. And also.

There will be days when you begin to see glimpses of yourself again. Days you recognize how far you've come. Days you celebrate the hope you begin to feel. Days when tears don't roll down your cheeks, and (believe it or not) you catch yourself laughing again.

I'm sorry these are the circumstances that introduced us, but it's an honor to be on this journey with you and to write a book that whispers hope into your heart once again.

The year 2016 was the year my husband walked away from our marriage. It was a doozy of a year, to say the least. A year I never expected to experience. Let me give you a quick glimpse into my life pre-divorce.

I married my college sweetheart. Very early into our marriage we planted two churches, the latter being Cross Point Church in Nashville, Tennessee. The church boomed in growth and so did my pastor-husband's career. In fact, the church spent numerous years listed as one of the fastest-growing churches in the nation. Nashville is a city of dreamers, young and old, and the church matched the environment and atmosphere of Nashville perfectly. As the church grew, it expanded to five campuses across Middle Tennessee.

In 2016, my then-husband announced that he was resigning from the church. His departure from the church and our family played out on the front pages of local, state, and national publications. The first paragraph of the news story in *The Tennessean* put it like this: "[The pastor], who founded Cross Point Church 14 years ago, said he resigned as senior pastor of the Nashville-area megachurch because he is tired, broken and in need of rest."¹

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, I was dealing with some painfully private things that the readers of *The Tennessean* weren't privy to.

The narrative being repeated was about an overworked pastor who was burned out. The reality was I'd been sleeping alone, not by my own choice, for more than six months. In my heart I was sure my suspicions were correct; the brokenness went much deeper, trust had once again been broken, and I was experiencing devastating heartbreak.

And the reality is I didn't just lose my marriage and family unit; I lost my church family. The people I'd spent the last fourteen years leading and loving. The staff I shared a meal with every week at staff meetings and regularly invited into my home. The ladies whom I'd had babies alongside and raised our children together. The church that wasn't just a job or role to me, but a spiritual extended family that I loved and was honored to serve.

One Sunday I was at one of our campuses hugging people, and the next Sunday I was hiding out in my home telling my kids their dad didn't work at the church anymore. It wasn't just my marriage that unraveled. Life as I knew it had ended. I'm aware that my divorce was more public than most divorces are, but I've talked to enough women to know divorce always plays out in some public way for everyone, even if it's just in the neighborhood, the family, on Facebook, or under the steeple of your church. The unraveling of your family unit is traumatic, and it can often feel like all eyes are on you.

Because my divorce played out in public more than I was comfortable with, deciding to write this book took some time. Write it too soon and I'd be writing out of wounds, which isn't healthy for anyone. I decided to take some time to heal. Writing from my scars allows a level of empathy anyone walking through a similar situation deserves.

This book isn't about why my marriage ended. It's about what God chose to do in me as I chose to begin again. It's about mending

broken hearts and stepping boldly into a new identity. This book isn't about what happened to my marriage—but about who I have grown into. This book isn't about what was lost—but what I've found. This book isn't about what was taken from me—but what remains. Better than okay is a life where you're not the victim but the victor.

As we walk this path toward hope and healing together, I'm going to occasionally include portions from my personal journal. Not only was writing a huge part of my healing, but the journal entries also give you a glimpse of what I was feeling and hopefully will allow you to feel a little validated in your own journey and emotions. You're not alone, and you're gonna be better than okay.

Dear 2016,

I AM NOT SAD to see you go; you were the roughest year of my life . . . full of heartache, disappointment, betrayal, and loss. There were days when I didn't want to wake up—didn't want to face life. But by the grace of GOD—I DID. I got up and moved forward every single day. My marriage was over, my friendships drastically changed, and I realized TRUE TRUST was something I would have to relearn.

My heart literally ached from the loss I experienced. But you, 2016, also brought lots of GOOD. I thank God for reminding me to FOCUS ON THE GOOD. He is my ultimate good and He surrounds me with glimpses of His goodness every single day.

2016—YOU SUCKED. But you also began to remind me WHO I AM, who God uniquely created me to be. You reminded me who I am in Him, not defined by my marriage or my connection to a thriving church, but by my identity in Christ. I remembered I am witty. I love to be silly. I love to feel physically strong. You taught me to love yoga and made it medicine for my heart

and mind. You started teaching me about true FREEDOM. I pray that I always show my boys how to live life FREE.

2016—You threw a lot at my kids. As much as my heart ached for me, it was broken for them. I hate any of the hurt I have caused them. My prayer is for them to grow through this and for us to draw closer together, this new little family.

Good-bye to you, 2016.

Good-bye to the pain, the heartache, the hurt, and the betrayal. Good-bye and good riddance. I never want to look behind me, but I always want to remember all you taught me.

—B

To Be Continued . . .

How to Walk into the Unexpected Episodes of Life

Sitting in an office decorated with stiff, dark leather chairs and walls painted a depressing shade of beige, I took a deep, shuddered breath. The pen in my right hand lightly grazed the paper and signed my full legal name: Brandi L. Wilson—the name I’d signed thousands of times since the moment I walked down the aisle of my parents’ church in tiny-town Kentucky toward the man I loved. A walk toward the person I planned on spending the rest of my life with—to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part. A walk that signified a beginning full of hopes and dreams for our future.

This time, the signing of my name signaled an end. An end to my marriage. An end to my current family unit. An end to being a wife. An end to my role at a church I loved and helped plant fourteen

years before. My signature would end life as I'd known it. Signing my name signified my status as a divorced woman and a newly single mom to three sons.

Yet here I was. Sitting in an attorney's office after ten hours of mediation. Feeling a mind-reeling mix of emotions. Intense relief and immense sadness. Pride that I had made it this far and terrified of all I needed to figure out. Hopeful that the best was still to come and mourning all that was broken and lost. Signing my name for the first time since I was twenty-two as a single woman.

No one foresees their marriage ending in divorce. No one expects to live through the division of a life you worked hard to create with the person you loved. Splitting Christmas decorations, kitchen appliances, furniture, savings accounts, and—the most difficult—time with your children. No one delivers a baby, looks into that infant's eyes at the hospital, and thinks, *I can't wait to spend every other weekend and even-numbered-year Christmases with you!*

I never expected this to happen to me. Me, who became a Christian at a young age. Me, who had been in church since birth. Me, who had chosen to follow God's call in my life. Me, who served a church with my whole heart. Me, who believed in love. Me, who was created to value the connectedness of relationships. Me, who was loyal to the core. Me, who loved and adored her husband and had since I was nineteen years old. What the heck was happening?! Signing those papers and recognizing I was now divorced felt like an out-of-body experience.

Putting into words all the emotions bubbling inside you when facing divorce is incredibly difficult. I come from a long line of couples who are happily married. Parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles all successfully married and enjoying decades together. Divorce wasn't an option for me. Hard work, counseling, figuring it out, sticking through tough times, communication, and dare I say

love were what I believed in. However, it takes two people committed to doing the work, individually and together. Unfortunately, from my perspective, I was the only one who wanted our marriage to work out. I felt (and still feel) I was the only one who was committed, who desired to do the hard work of healing, who was willing to forgive, who wanted to keep walking through life side by side, hand in hand, together.

Signing my divorce decree was like reaching a finish line marking the end of an eighteen-month battle. I was now facing a new beginning where everything was unknown. I'd already been through so much devastation, and I was too tired to even think about starting over. Physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion regularly overpowered me and brought me to my knees.

Maybe you're like me. I'm a glass-half-full, let's-find-the-positive-in-this-situation kind of girl. I'm not one who likes to focus on suffering. Yet we all go through seasons of suffering that feel like they are going to take us out, cause us to wonder if we'll survive the heartache, force us to question what we believe and who really loves us. Trust me, I wish I didn't have to write about divorce and suffering, but I choose to share the value a season of suffering brings to your life.



Back in the days before we could binge-watch entire series on Netflix or Hulu, television shows and movies would occasionally reach a cliffhanger—a place where you don't know how the story will end—and then the three looming words *To be continued . . .* would flash on the screen. Then we waited. Sometimes the waiting would be seven days for the next episode to air, and sometimes we waited four months (*gasp*) until the next season started the following fall.

The medical drama *Grey's Anatomy* did this so well in season 2 episode 16, which aired after the Super Bowl in 2006. I'd watched the game with a group of friends, and all the men had exited to the kitchen to finish off the remainder of the snacks while all the women eagerly gathered around the television, because McDreamy, duh. I remember exactly how I felt watching the beloved protagonist, Dr. Meredith Grey, go from assisting a paramedic in the operating room whose hands were on a bomb inside a patient's chest cavity (yep, it was a very realistic medical scene) to putting her own hands on the bomb in the patient's chest! Cut to a black screen. And you guessed it: *To be continued* . . .

Those three words left audiences full of anticipation and questions. Then we waited. *To be continued* . . . left us wondering what was next. What was next for Dr. Meredith Grey? How would Meredith move forward in what appeared to be a hopeless situation? Would she survive? Was the bomb going to explode in her hands?

My life felt *To be continued*. . . . My story would continue, but what my future looked like was up in the air. What was next for me? How would I move forward when I felt so empty? Would I ever feel happiness again? I wanted to curl up in a ball and sleep until it was all over. The dismantling of my family was an overwhelming and traumatic process to live through. Everything around me existed as painful reminders of my heartache and loss. *Suffering* was the only word to describe the trajectory of the path my life was taking.

To be continued . . . creates suspense and frustration. We just want to know what happens and if everything will be okay! But one other perspective on *To be continued* . . . is that it brings hope. It is not over. There is more for you. I understand that might be hard for you to believe, but I'm six years down the road and want you to know there is a future where you will smile again. What you thought was the end wasn't; the story continues. And that hope

may feel small—the future might seem daunting and overwhelming to you right now, but there is always a seed of hope in every *To be continued* . . . no matter how small.

One person who models hope in the midst of suffering is Anna the prophetess, mentioned in the New Testament. In three simple verses, she presents a model for walking through suffering.

Anna enters the story when infant Jesus, only forty days old, is being presented by His parents at the temple. Luke writes, “Anna the prophetess was also there, a daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher. She was by now a very old woman. She had been married seven years and a widow for eighty-four. She never left the Temple area, worshiping night and day with her fastings and prayers” (Luke 2:36–37 MSG). Anna then approached Mary, Joseph, and Jesus and began thanking and praising God. She “talked about the child to all who were waiting expectantly for the freeing of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38 MSG).

We don’t know a lot about Anna. Her story is recorded with only three brief verses, but we can gain great insight into how her suffering strengthened her and brought her closer to God.

1. Anna chose worship over bitterness

Anna lived in an era when being married meant security, identity, and provision. Her husband had passed away decades before, when she was a young woman. Scripture says she was a widow for eighty-four years, living at the temple. *Dear Lord, please help me to not be single for eighty-four years!* Sorry, I just like to shout that prayer up on a regular basis.

Anna was on her own. Yet somewhere during that difficult and heartbreaking journey, she made a decision. She wasn’t going to live a life of bitterness and disappointment. Instead, she was going to live

a life of worship. At a time in her life when she had every right to complain, to have a short temper, to speak hurtful words, to doubt, to choose bitterness, she decided instead to spend her time worshipping. I'm sure she had her moments. Anna probably grew tired at times, wondering how much longer she'd be on those temple steps. Regardless of what she felt on the inside, she chose praise.

2. Anna was committed to hope

She knew her story wasn't over; it was only to be continued. She held on to hope that a man would come to save her and the whole world, and she waited her whole life in anticipation of that promise. One thing that strikes me is Anna obviously didn't have a kinsman redeemer—a male family member who, as the nearest relative, was charged with the duty of taking care of her. There wasn't family who stepped up to help her out.

Luke 2 says she never left the temple. She was committed to seeing the story of salvation and redemption play out in her life.

3. Anna saw God in places where others didn't

The suffering changed her and changed her perspective. Anna's personal tragedy had driven her to God rather than away from Him. She had drawn close to Him in the difficult years and trusted that He was with her right in the middle of her personal tragedy.

So when the Savior of the world came to the place where she worshiped, she recognized him immediately, even though He was only a few days old. She had been focused on God with all her mind, heart, spirit, body, and time. Because she lived a life of worship, anticipation, and hope, when the promise over her life was fulfilled, her eyes were wide open to it.

We follow a suffering God who is with us in every experience of our lives, especially when we're suffering. Our challenge is to allow our dark times to draw us closer to Him so that we will see Him at work in a way others might not. When you're leaning on God, He begins to open your eyes to see beauty in your brokenness. Trusting Jesus in our pain sharpens our spiritual vision to recognize Him at work and share His faithfulness with everyone who crosses our path.

When I was so desperate that all I had was God, I poured out my hurt to Him regularly in the pages of my journal. In a lot of ways, God was the only person I felt I could be totally honest with. The pain felt like my heart was breaking, and having trivial conversation was exhausting, so I often hunkered down in my house, alone. Depression ruled my days, and anxiety stole sleep from my nights. It was a period of my life that I hoped would end quickly . . . but I also knew the battle that lay ahead. My intention became focusing on one day at a time. Anything else overwhelmed me and seemed insurmountable. Fear and anxiety were my constant companions; the questions swirled day and night:

Would my heart ever heal from the repeated betrayal and abandonment?

Were my children going to be forever damaged from the impending divorce?

Would I be alone forever?

Would I be able to make it financially?

How would I pay for college as a single mom?

Had I made the right decision to file for divorce?

I asked myself that last question repeatedly: *Did I make the right decision?* The right decision for myself and the right decision for my

boys. Divorce wasn't what I wanted; I desired to continue to fight toward reconciliation and restoration. But what I wanted wasn't to be. I realized I couldn't control what was happening to me, but I could control how I responded to what was happening to me. That began to help me feel a bit empowered. Life felt out of control, but I did have control of myself and the life I chose to live moving forward. I began to see glimpses of hope.

Because in my suffering I knew He was my lifeline.

In my suffering He was my constant companion.

In my suffering He was my HOPE.

I'm not going to pretend like leaning in to Jesus was easy. Doubt resided in my head, and I spent many hours begging God for the resolution my heart longed for. Why wouldn't He give me what I asked? Could God *really* be trusted? Did He *really* desire for me to live life to the fullest? Because it sure didn't feel like it. Could anyone *really* be trusted? Did He *really* want what was best for me? There was so much I didn't understand, and I questioned where God was and why He had allowed my life to fall apart. Why had God permitted my kids to endure the pain of their parents' divorce and the loss of the only church family they had ever known?

Rejoicing in heartbreak sounds like an oxymoron, but it's heartbreak that will prompt your soul-searching and be a catalyst for your closeness to God. God will help you stand in your pain, not because of your strength but because He is in you. You who have begged for the pain and heartache to end, who are so overwhelmed—look to Him, keep your head up, cling to hope, ask Him to help you learn from this suffering and to see what He wants you to see. Don't just look, but see Him and those around you.

If you were waiting to find out what happened to Meredith Grey, I'm here to tell you she's still alive and well in season 18 (the continuing never ends). In *my* current season, the suffering is a lot less intense. There are some seasons of suffering that force you to figure some things out but that don't completely deplete you.

I don't know what season you're in. Whether the suffering in your life feels too overwhelming to function, you feel depleted, or you are in the process of recovering from a season of intense suffering, know that this is not the end. The words *To be continued . . .* are for you and for your life, and there is immense hope in those words.

Suffering knocks us down, but it brings us to our knees in prayer. Suffering will take your breath away, but you're going to cling to Him like never before. Suffering will leave you emotionally depleted, but you're going to whisper the name of Jesus. Suffering will make you go to places you never wanted to go. But you can do it! Suffering gives us the opportunity to become investigators of our own lives and find beauty in our brokenness. To see God at work in ways we never would have dreamed. Sharing our suffering allows us to take our failures and faded desires and bring others on the journey to finding hope in Him.

In order to truly heal, I strove to embody this quote from Henri Nouwen: "You can tell your story from the place where it no longer dominates you. You can speak about it with a certain distance and see it as the way to your present freedom. . . . Your past does not loom over you. It has lost its weight and can be remembered as God's way of making you more compassionate and understanding toward others."¹

As I signed "Brandi L. Wilson" as a newly single mom, I knew I was damaged—but not destroyed. Moving forward wouldn't be easy, and life would never be the same. But deep down, I knew I could and would begin the process of healing and would rise again.

I've made a surprising discovery since that day: There's good news when your life falls apart. Really. The beauty of your life falling to pieces is that you get to put those pieces of your life back together the way you want with the help of God. Yep, you're in total control. You have control of your thought patterns, your self-care, how you spend your time, what you want for your future, and how you act on your feelings. It may not feel like control at the time, since it's thickly laced with fear and apprehension, but it is control. And when we take that control and choose healing, hope, and closeness to God, we will begin seeing a lot more of God and His promises in our stories.

You might be going through hell right now, but you're going to be okay. You really are. Just take one day at a time. Let me remind you of a few things you might need to hear.

You are worthy.

You are loved.

You are strong.

You are going to make it through this.

You are unique and special.

You will survive your season of suffering and come out stronger.

You're going to be better than okay.