FOREWORD BY
ANNIE F. DOWNS

THE ASTRONAUT'S WIFE

HOW LAUNCHING MY HUSBAND INTO OUTER SPACE CHANGED THE WAY I LIVE ON EARTH

STACEY MORGAN

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A Tyndale nonfiction imprint

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The Astronaut's Wife: How Launching My Husband into Outer Space Changed the Way I Live on Earth

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To my fellow military and astronaut spouses—
the most courageous and resilient people I know.

You always find a way to thrive in the most challenging seasons.
Never forget that you are a critical part of every mission's success.

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FOREWORD

BY ANNIE F. DOWNS

I have the best seat in this story. I walked into Stacey's life by walking into the Johnson Space Center. I was in Houston for an event, and Stacey met some friends and me for a tour of NASA. I have always been very into space and space travel, so getting to meet an astronaut's wife and tour with her felt like such a huge deal. Within minutes, we were seeing the International Space Station and hearing Drew's voice from outer space.

Stacey and I became fast friends that day over burgers at lunch and laughs as we went from place to place at NASA while I kept asking if I could hop in her car for a ride between stops. We exchanged phone numbers, not knowing that our friendship was beginning literally days before the world would shut down due to COVID and we would all be secluded in our homes. I got to jump into this story right as Drew was headed home and right as Stacey's life was about to change again.

That's when she started to write it all down—all this season had been, all her life with Drew had been, and all that was to come. And the story changed for me—from living it with her,* to feeling it deep

* A lot of the times Stacey mentions watching Netflix, I was co-watching the same shows from across the country, across the pandemic—alone as well. It was a gift. We laughed a lot.

in my own life and seeing how her story reminded me of God and my story too.

I heard an interviewer say recently that the highest compliment you can pay someone who has put a book out into the world is to say you've been moved by their memoir—whether you know the author or not. I agree with that; Stacey is such a fine writer and storyteller that you will feel connected whether or not you are friends with her. It's rare that we get an inside look at such a public job, one we have watched movies about and read books about and, looking up into the sky, wondered about. When I finished reading this book, I felt more appreciation for family, for friendship, for sacrifice, and for God's caring hand.

Stories about outer space remind us that God is so much bigger than we can imagine. But stories of family, of connection, of figuring out the hard times and walking through them together remind us that God is, at the same time, personal and intimate and caring. He is all these things, and I'm thankful for the way Stacey masterfully weaves that truth into these stories of an astronaut's wife.

You are about to embark on one of the most unique journeys I've ever seen with one of the funniest, kindest, and best guides around. As you read, may God meet you in your own story in ways that are—forgive me—out of this world.

INTRODUCTION

EVERYTHING I NEEDED TO KNOW ABOUT SPACE I LEARNED FROM TOM HANKS

The first time I watched a rocket launch, I was sitting on the hard linoleum floor of my elementary school cafeteria. After herding all the fifth graders into the large empty room, our teachers told us to sit quietly and keep our hands to ourselves. The lunch ladies were noisily preparing our noontime meal behind the kitchen doors, and the smell of chicken patties and tater tots wafted into the room. Once all the students were seated, Miss Farrell walked solemnly to the front of the room and turned on a boxy television strapped to the top of a wheeled cart. A live shot of space shuttle *Discovery* flickered onto the screen, the white spaceship and its bright orange fuel tank a beautiful contrast to the sunny blue sky. As the countdown neared, my friend elbowed me, signaling me to look over at our teacher, who was sniffling loudly into a tissue. The other teachers stood by nervously wringing their hands, their eyes glued to the TV screen. As

ten-year-olds, we didn't understand the adults' emotional response, but we applauded loudly when *Discovery* successfully lifted off the launchpad and rocketed into the sky in an impressive plume of fire and smoke. Then we filed back to our classrooms, sat down at our desks, and counted the minutes until recess.

It wasn't until years later that I began to understand the historical and emotional significance of that day. I know now that the launch I watched at school in September 1988 was the first for NASA since the 1986 *Challenger* disaster, which, at the time, was the deadliest accident in the US space program's history. *Challenger*'s boosters exploded just after liftoff, claiming the lives of all seven astronauts on board, including teacher Christa McAuliffe. America watched the fiery blast in shock and then fell into a state of shared grief. Now over two years later, it wasn't surprising that my teachers cried that day in the cafeteria—*Discovery*'s safe launch marked America's triumphant "Return to Flight" and the end of our collective mourning period.

After that, I maintained a peripheral view of the US space program at best. In history class, I studied the Cold War and how the "space race" to the moon between America and the Soviet Union was just one of many battles between these two world superpowers. I vaguely recall seeing the televised coverage of subsequent shuttle launches from Florida's Kennedy Space Center on my rabbit-eared television. But if I'm honest, most of my limited understanding of space history came from watching Tom Hanks in the movie *Apollo 13*.

All that changed in 2012 when my husband came home from work one day in an uncharacteristically giddy mood. "NASA has opened up the application window for a new class of astronauts," Drew told me with a level of excitement usually reserved for Christmas morning. I was genuinely puzzled. Why was he telling me this? Drew was

an Army officer and medical doctor dedicated to his profession, so I didn't see the relevance of his announcement. Not only that, but while I didn't know much about NASA, I had heard that the shuttle program was scheduled to end within the year, so why were they still hiring astronauts? What vehicle would they even fly on?

"Well," I said in an attempt to share equally random news, "chicken was on sale at the commissary today."

"No, you don't get it," Drew said as he stepped forward and grasped my hand. "I want to apply to be in the next class of NASA astronauts."

"Um, what?" I asked with a look that must have been equal parts confusion and horror. We had a plan for our future, and Drew becoming an astronaut was certainly not in it. We loved the Army. We were dedicated to the Special Operations community. To thrive in that stressful world, you have to be all in, and we were in deep. Even our four kids, ages two to nine, accepted Drew's frequent absences as part of their normal life rhythm. As far as I knew, military life was our past, present, and future.

"Look, don't freak out," Drew said. "NASA has never selected an Army doctor before. The likelihood of my being chosen is very small, but I want to try. Okay?"

"Okaaay," I said, clinging to the 99 percent chance he wouldn't be chosen and we wouldn't have to throw our family's well-scripted plans out the window.

"No matter what, I'll always be able to say I was a NASA applicant," Drew joked. "I doubt I'll even make it through the first round."

Except he *did* make it through the first round, and the next, and the next. The application process eventually culminated in a life-changing phone call in June 2013. During that conversation, NASA invited Drew into the twenty-first class of NASA astronauts, upended our lives, and transformed me into an amateur space historian.

Initially, I was embarrassed by how little I knew about the American space program. Never one to go into something blind, I read a handful of books and watched movies like *The Right Stuff* to help fill the significant gaps in my knowledge.

Like many people, I had only a vague understanding of the US space program's dynamic beginnings. I learned that the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) was established in 1958, and only three years later, President John F. Kennedy made the audacious pledge to put Americans on the moon by the end of the decade. Three programs—Mercury, Gemini, and then Apollo—brought the US ever closer to that visionary goal in less than ten years. The speed with which the programs developed, combined with the unbelievable bravery of those early astronauts, is staggering. When *Apollo 11*'s lunar lander touched down on the moon's surface on July 20, 1969, the world held its breath. And when Neil Armstrong said those famous words "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," the world cheered.[1] It was a monumental accomplishment and a testament to humankind's ingenuity to push the boundaries of our own existence.

America's lunar initiative ended after *Apollo 17*'s final mission to the moon surface in 1972. However, one of the Apollo program's lesser-known legacies occurred in 1975, when an American crew docked their Apollo capsule with a Soviet Soyuz capsule while in orbit around the Earth. The literal joining of the two spaceships became a powerful symbol of the fact that Americans and Soviets could work together as allies in exploration, even though they remained geopolitical enemies.

Over the next decade, NASA's focus shifted, and they began imagining a future in which American astronauts could live and work in space. That led to the development of a brand-new type of spaceship, the space shuttle.

When the first shuttle launched in 1981, it sparked a massive flurry of American interest in space exploration and created a huge opportunity for international partnerships. The space shuttle fleet, consisting of *Columbia*, *Challenger*, *Discovery*, *Atlantis*, and *Endeavour*, flew 135 missions, carried astronauts from sixteen different countries, docked with the Soviet space station Mir, and deployed the Hubble Space Telescope. But its lasting legacy would be its commission to haul the components for the International Space Station (ISS) into orbit.[2]

Starting in 1998, a multinational team of astronauts and cosmonauts (the Russian term for *astronauts*) built the largest and most complex spaceship ever devised. From its outset, the ISS was as much a wonder of international relationships as it was a technological marvel. The station was purposely designed so that its full operation is possible only in full cooperation with our international partners, most notably our intermittent frenemies, the Russians.[3]

After the last space shuttle launch, many Americans assumed that NASA closed up shop and locked its doors. At least, that's what I thought. Gone were the days of smiling astronauts in bright orange space suits and televised launch countdowns from Florida. So when Drew told me that NASA was not only still hiring astronauts but somehow still launching them into outer space to live and work on the ISS, I was intrigued. How were they doing it? You may be as surprised as I was to learn that we were hitching rides on Russian rockets.

If thinking about US space history rekindles a small flame of hazy memories in your mind, learning about the Russian space program is like gazing into a fascinating parallel universe. Unlike America's program, the Soviet space program was cloaked in secrecy, and much of its early history was not known to Westerners until the Soviet Union fell in the early 1990s. In fact, the Soviets established their base of space operations 1,300 miles southeast of Moscow at the Baikonur

Cosmodrome complex in Kazakhstan, a former Soviet republic known for its nomadic culture, freezing winters, and blistering summers. The Soviets built their remote, secret spaceport and the surrounding support city for one sole purpose—to launch rockets. It's about as far a cry from bustling, colorful, coastal Florida as a person can get.

The opening move in the US-Soviet space race was the successful launch of the mysterious *Sputnik 1*, the first space satellite, from the Baikonur Cosmodrome. On subsequent missions, the Soviets launched the first dog, Laika; the first man, Yuri Gagarin; and the first woman, Valentina Tereshkova. This string of "firsts" fueled the space race rivalry with the United States and paved the way for Soyuz, Apollo's competitor in the sprint to the lunar surface. After the Americans landed on the moon first, the Soviet Soyuz mission was abruptly changed, but the vehicle was not. While there have been many technological upgrades over the years, the size, shape, and soul of the Soyuz spacecraft have remained much the same since the 1960s, as has the spirit of the entire Soyuz program. Every aspect of a Soyuz launch is steeped in history, tradition, and Russian vodka. Almost everything Yuri Gagarin did before his history-making launch from Baikonur in 1961 is still followed to the letter by today's cosmonauts at their own launches. For better or worse, while the Americans began and ended new space programs and processes, the Russians stuck with what worked—a robust and reliable system that has successfully launched cargo and crew into space for over fifty years.

Once the space shuttle program ended in 2011, Soyuz rockets became the only game in town. When we arrived at NASA in 2013, there was little doubt that when Drew was assigned to a mission, he would fly on a Soyuz rocket. And while every American astronaut dreams of launching from US soil, Drew knew that to be a part of Soyuz would mean something so much more than a rocket ride into

space. Soyuz is a rich cultural experience that, in many ways, reflects the essence of space exploration—cooperation that transcends historical rivalries in the spirit of discovery, lifelong friendships between astronauts and cosmonauts, and an example of hope for humanity.

That is why the first time I watched a rocket launch in person, I stood, a proud American, on what had once been a top-secret Soviet military base. My husband climbed into his Soyuz rocket on the same launchpad used by the Soviets for *Sputnik 1* in 1957 and Gagarin's launch in 1961. And in what can only be described as an ironic twist of fate, I watched Drew's Russian rocket lift off into the night sky on July 20, 2019, the fiftieth anniversary of the Apollo moon landing. The event was an astonishing confluence of historical events, stunningly intersecting with my own life. On that day, I was not just a witness to history but a part of it.

CHAPTER 1

EVERY ADVENTURE BEGINS AT A CROSSROADS

CHOOSE HOPE OVER FEAR

July 20, 2019

Baikonur Cosmodrome, Kazakhstan

At 9 p.m. on the desert steppe of Kazakhstan, it is still close to 100 degrees outside. My stomach has a knot in it that won't go away, and the bumpy ride across the old Soviet-era roads of the Baikonur Cosmodrome hasn't helped. The four kids and I tumble out of the van and look around, taking in the bizarre, celebratory scene in front of us.

Hundreds of people are milling about, most of them speaking languages I don't know. Many are dressed in full "outer space" gear: The vivid mission patches, NASA logos, and color photos of the crew printed on their T-shirts and hats are bright splashes of color against the dusky evening. A man saunters by in an astronaut costume, complete with a bubble helmet. These spectators have paid thousands of

dollars to travel from across the globe for this moment: a chance to see a Soyuz rocket launch, this one with my husband and his two crewmates strapped into the tiny capsule on top.

Despite my nervousness, I turn and smile at my oldest child, Daniel, who is quietly taking it all in. He's a Star Wars fanatic, and a few years before, he might have wanted to be in costume himself. But not now that he's fifteen. He's far too cool, and he knows full well that this is no Hollywood movie.

As the space tourists flow toward the public viewing area on the left, our NASA escort, an experienced astronaut who has flown on Soyuz, guides us to the right. I check for my girls—twelve-year-old Amelia is scanning the crowd for one of her besties, another astronaut's daughter whose dad is also strapped into the rocket we can see in the distance. I'm glad she can share this experience with a friend who gets it. Sophia, my athletic ten-year-old, is bouncing with excitement as she grabs my hand. "Can we swim in the hotel pool again tonight, Mom?"

Sure, honey. Just as soon as we launch your father into space. "We'll see," I say as I put my free arm around Gabriella—she's never one to pass up a cuddle, especially today. At only eight, she has the most questions and worries about her dad leaving.

All four kids accounted for, we keep moving, bypassing the relatively well-lit grandstand area filled with giddy space enthusiasts. Next we pass the gaggle of international press and science reporters who have set up their tripod cameras and portable lights, which sprout like artificial trees growing out of the flat scrub grass. Our group, along with a handful of NASA employees, move into an open spot on the far end of the field. It's darker here, and quiet.

I can hear the reporters speaking into their cameras in preparation for the launch that will begin in less than thirty minutes. One

voice in particular cuts through the night. It's a British reporter who is recounting everything that unfolded earlier in the day, with specific emphasis on one of the families she had observed: "And then the children—hoisted up on the shoulders of family and friends—reached out their hands for one last wave, one last touch through the bus windows, one last 'I love you' before the bus with their father and his fellow crewmates pulled away to the launchpad where their Soyuz rocket waits."[4]

She doesn't know that the very family she's telling the world about is standing within earshot. I remember her from earlier in the day. After watching Drew complete the final leak check of his Russian Sokol space suit, the kids and I sat behind a table with a thick glass wall separating us from Drew, who sat behind an identical table on the other side of the glass. The two men who would make the journey into space with him, Italian crewmate Luca Parmitano and Russian cosmonaut commander Aleksandr Skvortsov, sat next to him at the table. The room behind us was full of family and friends of the crew, program officials, and several dozen members of the press who were maneuvering their cameras to get the best angle. The glass was soundproof, so in between me whisper-hissing at the children to "Remember that the cameras are watching so *SIT UP* and *STOP* touching your sister," we used a microphone on the table to broadcast our public goodbyes to Drew through the overhead speakers in the ceiling. Then we stood up, put our hands on the glass, and locked eyes for the last time. Drew mouthed, "I love you," just before turning away and walking out.

The suit-up room emptied quickly as we rushed outside for a spot to watch the crew ceremoniously exit the building and board the bus that would take them to the rocket. After the bus pulled away, everyone—family, official guests, tourists, and press—attempted to

make their way back to their own vehicles. During the awkward, accidental mingling that resulted, the British reporter approached us and asked if we were willing to speak to her about the launch. Giving a coherent interview in the midst of this emotional buildup and the jostling crowd seemed impossible, so our escort politely declined on my behalf.

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My real goodbye to Drew had been the night before. My escort walked me to the quarantine facility, only a few hundred yards from our Baikonur hotel, where a silent guard hit the button, allowing the fortified gate to roll open. Once I slipped inside, another escort walked me down the gravel path to a low-slung building recently built by the Russians for just this purpose. It has three simple motel-like rooms, each with a bed, chair, and bathroom. No phone, no TV, no clock radio, no extra frills. But it gave me and Drew the one thing we needed most, a few minutes of privacy—no kids, no doctors, no TV crews. Just us. The last time for a long time.

"I'm sad to leave you," Drew said as we sat next to each other in the quiet room. "Part of me wishes I wasn't going."

"I know," I replied. "This will be the longest we've ever been apart in the twenty years we've been together. I'll miss you so much." My eyes filled with tears, and my chest was heavy.

"You've got this," Drew said, putting his arms around me. "It's another big adventure for us."

"I am proud of you," I said. I leaned in and pressed my face into Drew's chest so he couldn't see the tears running down my cheeks. "And as hard as it is to say goodbye, I'm excited for you. These aren't sad tears; they're happy, proud, excited, and anxious tears. I think the anticipation of tomorrow may be worse than the actual launch."

"I think so too," he said. "I just want to get on that rocket and get this waiting over with."

A couple of hours later, we gathered up the last few personal items of Drew's—uniforms, extra clothes, books, souvenirs—that he wanted me to take home. Then he walked me back to the gate. My escort was waiting on the other side of the fence.

"Good night," Drew said. "I love you."

"Goodbye," I said as we embraced one last time before Drew turned around and headed to his room for one last night on Earth.

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Now, four hours after the prelaunch press conference, the reporter who approached me earlier is the one I can see best, her face illuminated by her camera light, her hand holding a black foam microphone. Behind her, at least half a dozen other reporters are doing similar reporting in Spanish, Italian, and Russian voices. It's as if I've stepped onto a movie set, and we're almost at the climactic scene where the international press will report to the world whether or not the daring and dangerous Earth-saving mission has been successful.

With his medium build, dark hair, and friendly smile, my NASA escort looks and acts precisely how most people imagine an astronaut should. He exudes a quiet confidence acquired from years of training and spaceflight experience. He gently encourages me to move toward the middle of our small section of the field for the best view. He peers at his watch and tells me, "Less than ten minutes until launch." The knot in my stomach grows tighter.

My kids are wandering around, talking to the grandparents, uncles, and friends we brought with us on this epic pilgrimage. I call to them, and they head in my direction, kicking the dusty ground as they walk. My mom is already beside me, while my in-laws stand

with Drew's two brothers, nervously chatting and checking their watches and cameras. Our close friends are grouped together but spread out in a line, so they all have a clear view of the launchpad that appears directly in front of us, only about a mile away. By rocket launch standards, we are really close.

"We need to stay together now," I tell the kids. My voice sounds deep and solemn, even to my own ears. "We're going to move up to the front and hold hands while we wait for the launch."

Whether they understand the gravity of the situation or know I'm serious by my tone of voice, I hear none of the usual complaining that comes when told to hold hands with a sibling. My escort hovers behind me at a respectful distance, ready if I need him.

"Two minutes out," he tells me. There are no blaring announcements over a loudspeaker or giant digital countdown clocks like spectators had at the Florida shuttle launches. We just look at our own watches and phones in the dark, knowing that the Russian ground crew will ignite the rocket at exactly 9:28 p.m., not a minute earlier or later.

My fingers tingle as I grip a small, sweaty hand with each of mine; my breathing is shallow and rapid. I take a deep breath to help center myself. If I didn't have the children there with me, I might be tempted to sink to the ground and let the intense feelings of anxiety overwhelm me. But as I glance down to check my own watch, I catch a glimpse of the tattoo peeking out from behind my watchband. It is brand-new, inked only three weeks before. The fancy, slanted script reads "Esther 4:14," a reference to an Old Testament Bible verse that has always spoken to me, but never more than in this moment.

Esther's story has *everything*! A crazy king, a beauty pageant, a reluctant queen, secret identities, dangerous plots, and a particularly gruesome but gratifying ending for the villain. My tattoo references the point in the story when Queen Esther is at a crossroads. Her uncle

has told her of a plot to kill their people, the Jews, and he's asking her to *do something*. The verse inked on my wrist is her uncle's response when he senses her hesitation: "Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14, ESV).

God placed Esther into a moment of history for a specific purpose, but he gave her the choice of how to respond. Would she choose the path dictated by fear and do nothing? Or would Esther choose the path paved in hope, willing to act and face her fears, confident that God would use the situation, regardless of the outcome, for his greater purpose? Either way, she knew her life would change dramatically, and her decision could prove fatal. Spoiler: Esther decided to step up like a complete boss and declare, "If I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16, ESV). Man, I wish I had guts like Esther.

Though standing in a hot, dry field on the opposite side of the world waiting for the one-minute countdown to begin pales in comparison to the life-or-death decision this biblical queen faced, in this moment, in my soul, I am Esther. The emotional cocktail of pride, excitement, elation, nervousness, stress, and fear is so potent I feel completely overwhelmed. My mind is filled with unanswerable questions, as I imagine Esther's was. *What if something goes wrong? What if the rocket explodes? Have I just said goodbye forever to my husband of twenty years? What if something happens while he's gone and he can't come home? Will I be able to handle all the logistics and emotional burden of raising four children on my own?* Even with years of training and full confidence in the equipment and technology, things happen, mistakes are made. *On the flip side, even if everything goes perfectly, what comes next? What will life be like with Drew in space and us back here on Earth? Will our relationship suffer? Do I have the skills, support, and endurance I will need for this marathon mission?* I am standing on the edge of a psychological cliff, my toes dangling off the edge, not

knowing if in a few short moments I will be filled with the elation of a successful rocket launch or the shocking downward plunge of mourning the loss of my best friend and my children's father. My fear and uncertainty are palpable as I stand at this crossroads, and my heart is pounding like a drum. No matter which way this launch goes, I know that my life, and the lives of my children, will never be the same. Both outcomes are filled with uncertainty and unknowns, the fear of which far outweighs my fear of the rocket launch itself.

"Thirty seconds," a voice calls out from the darkness behind me. We can see the support structures beginning to move on the launchpad.

"Ten seconds."

Whatever happens next, we will choose the path of hope and together face whatever comes next. After all, the fear in my heart is heavy and tight, but it is not unfamiliar.

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June 2007
Southern Pines, North Carolina

It was the height of the War on Terror, and Drew was deployed to Afghanistan. I wasn't alone; the majority of my friends' and neighbors' husbands were deployed as well. Covert and extremely dangerous, their missions often made the news and required extended communication blackouts at home in order to maintain operational secrecy. By this point in the war, we had all been to memorial services for fallen friends and comrades.

If there is one thing the military does right, it's helping people face their own mortality. As part of the predeployment preparation, we had updated our wills, signed powers of attorney, and made a list of which sentimental items of Drew's would go to each child should he not make

it home. Of course, posing for the "official death photo," the portrait that could be enlarged to poster size should it be needed for placement next to a casket, was always the most sobering task on that checklist.

As a community of military wives, we lived with the shadow of death and the fear of the unknown every day. It followed us everywhere we went and screamed at us every time we turned on the news. There was an unspoken rule not to bring it up, as if talking about death somehow made it more likely. For me at least, thinking about Drew's possible demise made my fear feel more tangible, so I happily joined the silent movement to avoid the mention of anything morbid.

It was in this context that I had one of the most remarkable conversations of my life. I was enjoying coffee with my friend Lisa on her front porch one bright, sunny day when she turned to me and said, "I've been thinking a lot about what would happen if our husbands were killed."

Immediately, I sat up straighter, shocked that she had just stepped into taboo territory.

"It's not like we would ever want that to happen, or that life would be easy, or that we and our kids wouldn't need counseling or be depressed. But I have determined that if that were to happen, we would be okay. Life would go on, and eventually we'd be all right."

I sat there stunned at her bold revelation. It was as if instead of willfully ignoring the fear of her husband's death like the rest of us, she had turned and stared it straight in the eye. Our husbands' deaths were, at the time, by far the most concrete and gigantic fear in our lives. But as her words slowly sank in, I had to agree. And as we sat there and began to talk about how we would cope, who would come alongside us, and how God was our families' ultimate provider, I felt hope and light begin to dissipate the shadow of our fear. It was the most phenomenal conversation I had ever been a part of. From that moment on, I began

to understand this fundamental truth: While we are in the midst of our unique, difficult circumstances, whether combat deployments, illness, financial troubles, loneliness, addiction, relationship struggles, or even rocket launches, God gives each of us the ability to choose the path of either hope or fear. Whether we like it or not, we will live our lives dictated by one or the other, and if we don't make an active decision to choose hope, our default will always be fear.

Fear is reactionary and defensive, and it leads to an eventual downward spiral into despair. Fear tells our hearts that scary, outside forces have dominion over our lives, so we'd better grasp and grapple for whatever scraps of control we can reach. Fear tells us that if the worst thing happens, our lives will no longer be worth living or that everything good in our lives as we know it will be over.

The alternative—hope—isn't blind optimism or denial of reality. Like fear, hope says that our lives are not our own, but unlike fear, hope speaks the truth that a force much greater than current events or our own abilities is in control, and we can rest in that divine power to sustain us. Hope enables us to live confidently and with peace, no matter what happens, because we trust in a God who is with us in both the best and worst of times. In those dark deployment days, sitting through funeral after funeral, I felt God's hope speaking to me, telling me that even if the worst happened and Drew did not come home, life might be different, but it would still be worth living and full of good things. Even so, each day, I had to make a choice. Which path would I travel: fear or hope?

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3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . The engines ignite in a massive explosion and slowly lift the rocket off the ground. We feel it before we hear it. Sonic rumblings travel through the hard ground, and the vibrations course through

our feet. The wave of the massive engine roar reaches us, rolling up through our bodies, vibrating in our chests. The fiery blast blinds us as the rocket rises higher and higher into the night sky. The sound is so loud my daughter attempts to press her ear into her shoulder since both hands are tightly held. The light is so bright, it's like looking directly at the sun, and my brain tells me to look away. But I want to see every second of it. Drew is *in there*. So whether the rocket continues to rise off the ground in a glorious arc of fire or suddenly explodes in a massive plume of smoke, I'm watching. Spots appear in my peripheral vision as my eyes attempt to adjust. I allow myself a few gulping sobs, and that small emotional release helps me stay calm. Down at the other, far end of the field, I can hear the cheers and celebration from the space tourists. This is exactly what they've come to see. It's magnificent and awe-inspiring and worth every penny! It's a bucket-list event, and for them, the party has just begun. Back on our side of the field, a heavy silence engulfs us. There are no high fives or fist pumps. We know the crew intimately and understand that we're not out of the woods yet. It feels like a holy moment, standing silently in the dark, surrounded by people watching the rocket travel farther and farther away until it's just a dot of light in the sky, like a distant star.

NASA is tracking the rocket's progress and provides updates each time it successfully passes another risk point. "First stage is complete," my escort tells me at the two-minute mark, meaning that the four external boosters have been successfully jettisoned. We can breathe a little easier now, remembering that a malfunction with the booster separation triggered a ballistic launch abort of a Soyuz carrying NASA astronaut Nick Hague, our good friend, less than a year earlier.

About nine minutes after launch, the next round of messages comes rolling in. "Second stage is complete," my escort tells me with a smile. "Drew's in space."

Stage two is when the core stage separation occurs, and the main body of the rocket drops behind, leaving just the Soyuz capsule containing the crew, now in orbit around the Earth. They've crossed the Kármán line, the altitude—100 km above sea level—that defines where "space" begins. As a group, we collectively exhale. The worst is over! I turn and see my in-laws hugging each other and Drew's brothers. Our guests are smiling and breathlessly chatting with one another in a way that only people who have experienced something monumental together can.

"Can you believe how loud it was? My ears hurt!"

"I didn't realize we'd feel it so much! The ground was moving!"

"That was incredible! Look at this picture!"

"I can't believe how emotional it made me!"

As they banter, they look to me: Is it okay to approach and offer me a hug yet? My friend Lisa, the same Army deployment friend from years ago, steps forward, and we embrace with a wordless sense of relief and joy.

Now that all the flammable fuel rocket components have been jettisoned, Drew's small capsule flying through space at over 17,000 miles per hour feels safe by comparison. More family and friends offer hugs, congratulations, and their thoughts about the launch. Everyone is teary-eyed as they describe how they felt knowing Drew—their son, brother, or friend—was on the rocket they just witnessed break the bonds of gravity.

"Thank you so much for inviting us to be here."

"This was so much more than I could have imagined."

"Look at this video I took of you and the kids backlit by the rocket blast! What an experience!"

The reporters are excitedly describing the launch to their viewers in a cacophony of foreign languages. My brain is trying to process it

all, and I still feel as if I'm on a movie set; it just doesn't seem completely real. *How can this be true? Is Drew literally in space?*

We work our way back to the waiting vans and pile inside. It's been less than an hour since we first arrived at the launch viewing area, but it feels far longer. The forty-five-minute drive back to our hotel seems to take forever as the adrenaline starts to wear off and emotional exhaustion sets in. By the time we pull up in front of our hotel, I'm done. Just before the kids and I head up to our rooms, my escort asks if I want to watch the docking in four hours. Docking, when the Soyuz capsule rendezvouses with and physically attaches to the space station, though obviously important, can be boring to watch. You can see the spacecraft getting closer and closer to the station, but you don't see any camera views from inside the capsule, and all the dialogue is technical and in Russian. I choose to try to sleep instead. Hatch opening, when we see the newly arrived crew enter the space station for the first time, will be the more significant event of the day and only a couple of hours after docking. I know we will need at least a little sleep in order to be at our best for that important milestone.

The kids fall asleep quickly. I try to rest too, but my head is spinning. It's the first time all day I've been away from cameras and curious glances. Memories from the day flash across my mind, but they skitter off like fireflies before I can grab one and examine it more closely. I can hear some guests and tourists loudly celebrating in the hotel bar down the hall. Their jubilant songs and euphoric chants are a soundtrack to the tumbling jumble of thoughts and feelings within me. I lie in the dark, thinking about Drew orbiting the Earth, floating in his tiny capsule, a vehicle with about the same internal volume as my minivan. It seems impossible. It's like trying to ponder infinity, a concept just out of reach for my finite brain.

Drew is gone, literally off this planet for nine long months. In many ways, I am now alone on this Earth. I eventually drift off, thinking about Drew floating in zero gravity and wondering what unknown craziness is going to come next.

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My cell phone alarm jolts me awake. I have a hard time rousing the kids, and they're grumpy. I don't feel so cheerful myself. I take the time to do my hair and makeup because I know we will be on camera again. The knot in my stomach has been replaced with the low-level nausea that comes with sleep deprivation. We'll be watching the hatch opening from inside an old theater on the other side of Baikonur, so our group of family and guests meet in the lobby to board the vans once again. I'm quick to pawn my kids off on relatives who are far more tolerant of their complaining than I am at this time of the morning.

After a short drive, the vehicles pull up outside the theater. Again, it's like something out of a movie set. Soviet-built, the stark architecture in this remote location makes it seem as if we are reporting for secret training, not a televised event. The street outside is deserted, but the lobby is bustling with activity. Friendly local women are serving juice, champagne, fruit, and cookies to whoever can stomach them at this early hour. As much as I want to let loose with a swig of bubbly, my stomach warns that a celebratory drink would probably not be a good idea. I settle for some juice instead.

"Mom, I don't feel so good." My oldest daughter, Amelia, appears at my side looking pale and unsteady. "I think I might throw up."

She has the same lack-of-sleep stomachache I do. The high temperatures, even at this early morning hour, and the building's lack of air-conditioning aren't helping.

I scan the room for a quiet corner where I can park her for a few minutes before heading inside the auditorium.

"Sit here," I tell her. "Take deep breaths and drink some of this juice. And if you think you're going to be sick, use this." I pull over a trash can. Having watched the hatch openings of several of our astronaut friends, I know there is a NASA TV camera crew inside the auditorium, and we don't need live coverage of my daughter vomiting for the world to see.

A general murmur rolls through the crowded lobby, and my escort says it's time to go inside. The old theater has two levels: the main floor and a slightly elevated balcony toward the back. The crew families are directed to sit in the balcony's front row so we have an unobstructed view of the large movie screen set up on the stage. The stagnant air is sweltering, and mercifully someone pulls an old pedestal fan to the side of the balcony and turns it on. It slowly oscillates back and forth but doesn't do much to help cool the air in this big space. My kids sit oldest to youngest next to me, and we can see our family and friends sitting below us. As we wait, sweat running down the back of our necks and legs, a few confused bats swoop across the room, brushing their wings against the peeling paint on the ceiling. I'm struggling to keep a smile on my face as I watch my kids wiggle and poke each other, trying to get comfortable in the old seats. To our left, the NASA TV crew has set up their camera and are panning the room, occasionally swiveling toward us in the front row. The heat, the bats, the kids, the nausea, the waiting—it's too much.

With no warning, the screen flickers on and the live coverage begins. In front of us is a live video feed from one of the Russian modules inside the space station. In the middle of the screen, we see a short hallway, like a tube, receding back a few feet before deadending on the closed hatch, which reminds me of something I'd see

on a submarine. The astronauts already on the space station, our friends Nick Hague and Christina Koch, occasionally bob into the shot as they wait. The Russian commander hovers by the entrance to the hatch hallway. Nick and Christina move in closer, looking as anxious to see the new crew emerge as we are. There is no sound with the video feed, so we try to guess what they are saying. It's clear they're all waiting on the green light from Russian mission control to open the hatch. Suddenly, there is a flurry of activity and the hatch starts to move. It reminds me of watching an eclipse; it seems to start slowly and then picks up speed. As the hatch swings down into the capsule, the station's Russian commander and his counterpart in the Soyuz work together to wrestle the cumbersome metal door into place.

Aleksandr, the Soyuz commander, is first out. A grandfather and veteran of two spaceflights, his previous experience is obvious. He floats into the module confidently, hugging the crew and effortlessly moving to the side to make room.

We're not sure who will be next to emerge, and we hold our breath as we wait. It's Drew! I watch as my husband pulls himself into the module with his arms, his legs floating stiffly behind him. He happily, albeit clumsily, hugs his classmate Christina, her curly hair bouncing with each excited squeeze. Drew pivots off Christina to grab Nick, one of his best friends and the person I know he is most excited to see. They embrace in what feels like the world's longest recorded man-hug. (Watching the coverage again later, we timed the hug at a remarkable ten full seconds.) They both look elated. I'm stunned. Is this for real? How can the man I was reminding to take out the trash just last month be *in space*? He is *floating*! He is smiling! This is crazy.

We watch the group awkwardly fumble and bump into each other as they arrange themselves in the module. The newly doubled crew spreads out in two rows of three, new arrivals in the front, old crew

in the back. The three new arrivals—Drew, Luca Parmitano of Italy, and Aleksandr Skvortsov from Russia—put on headsets that allow them to communicate with the ground. They can't see us, but they can hear us. Now it's our turn to perform for the cameras.

Weeks earlier, we'd been prepped about this part of the hatch opening ceremony. One by one, each family will be handed a phone connected to mission control, allowing us to talk with the crew. Each person will be given an opportunity to speak with their astronaut, and the audio is connected to the live video feed that NASA TV is recording, so it will all be streamed for the world to see and hear.

You'd better believe I wasn't going to hand my eight-year-old a microphone to the world without a little preparation. Earlier in the week, I grabbed an envelope from my hotel room and told each kid to write down just one sentence to say to their father when the phone was handed to them. I practiced with the younger two until they could say their sentences clearly and without giggles or weird inflections. This exercise seemed silly and pointless to them at the time, and I had to bribe them with candy to repeat it over and over. Now, as the phone is brought to our section, I can see in their eyes that they wish they had practiced a little more.

Aleksandr's wife goes first, speaking Russian, but the sentiment is clear: "The launch was great; I love you." Next comes Luca's American wife and his two daughters, speaking English. They ask how he felt during the ride up and wish him good luck. Then it's our turn. The NASA TV camera swings in our direction as the phone is passed to my youngest. I hand her the envelope with her words written on the back, and she reads them out loud into the phone receiver: "Daddy, I love you forever and always."

There is a short delay as the audio signal routes through Moscow's mission control and shoots into outer space. Her eyes light up when

we hear her words echoing into the astronaut headsets, and Drew responds with a voice full of emotion. "I love you too. I love you very much. Keep thinking about us and praying for us."

As the phone moves down the row, the children each say their prepared lines, and Drew responds, saying how much he loves them and misses them already. Drew's eyes are misty, and his face is tight. His crewmate Christina pats him on the back, recognizing his strain. As the phone is handed to me, I look down, momentarily thrown by the fact that the receiver looks like an old cordless model we owned a decade ago. Somehow I had expected something more high-tech. I glance at my prepared sentence and wish I had thought of something more profound.

"Drew, the launch was surreal. We are so proud of you. This will be such an amazing adventure. We love you."

"I love you guys so much," Drew responds. "It was an incredible ride. It is surreal to be here." He wipes his eyes and pumps his fist toward the camera.

At that moment, I am thinking only of his outer space adventure—Drew floating through the station, performing spacewalks, and doing the seemingly impossible while orbiting the planet. As I think about what's next, I know this journey did not begin when the rocket launched, just as it will not end when it lands. This journey began years, if not decades ago, when Drew and I together chose this life, one full of excitement and fun and adventure, but also risk and heartbreak and danger.

And I can see now that the first big reason we've been able to thrive and not just survive is that no matter what comes up in life, we actively choose hope. Not a hope based on wishes and dreams, rainbows and unicorns, blissful happy endings, or even our own abilities. It's the kind of hope we are offered each day, with God's strength,

to look our fears and uncertainties straight in the eye and continue to move forward, no matter what happens, because he is with us and will enable us to do what must be done. It's the kind of hope we have to choose anew each morning, the type of gutsy hope we hear in Esther's voice when she says, "If I perish, I perish."

So as the video feed ends and I think of my husband orbiting far above the Earth in his new home for the next nine months, I know I have only one choice: I choose hope.