

THE ONE

An Amazing Love Story Starts With You

RYAN & AMANDA LEAK

WITH JODI LIPPER

Praise for
The One

“Ryan Leak’s story is both inspiring and insightful. It is spontaneous romance coupled with historic wisdom from Scripture that has made their story enticing for over one million people on YouTube! You will see ingredients in their story that will help make your story a success also!”

—RON LUCE, president/CEO of Teen Mania International

“Upon meeting the Leaks, you can’t help but see how they both reflect Jesus. From how they met to how they live now, it’s amazing to see the way they use their gifts and talents as communicators to reinforce what love is: it’s a surprise and a commitment. Both Amanda and Ryan are continuously sharing this message in all that they do.”

—BIANCA JUAREZ OLTHOFF, speaker and chief storyteller
at The A21 Campaign

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P R E S S

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*To the little boy who keeps us grounded and makes us
better people every day, we dedicate this book to you,
Jaxson Carter Leak.*

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Foreword

When I was a twenty-six-year-old graduate student, I became very close friends with a wonderful man named Jeff. He was a few years older, the leader of a student Christian fellowship group, and we shared some similar activities. (Truth be told, I just *might* have joined one of the activities because of him . . .) We were just friends, but we spent lots of time together, and I wondered, *Might it become something more?*

Shortly before he graduated, Jeff asked me out for lunch and told me that he'd been praying about the same thing. He said he wanted to stay away from anything romantic for a while and really dive into a much more purposeful friendship to see if we might be “the one” for each other. We began talking about everything: our histories, goals, dreams, worries, and weaknesses. We counseled with friends and mentors. I was advised to not just pray, “Lord, is he the one?” but, “Lord, if this is of You, make *me* the one: make me into the woman Jeff needs as a wife. And make him into the man I need as a husband.”

Twenty years later, I look back with awe at how God has answered those prayers. How He honored that effort to not only find the right person, but to *be* the right person. How he guided two normal, semiselfish, excited-but-clueless people into a true love story. And how He ensured that we found each other in the first place.

As I watch the amazing story of Ryan and Amanda Leak on their

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famous YouTube video and read about their transition from friendship to marriage, I see an echo of my own history. But as I absorb the vibrant wisdom God has given them to share, I see so many of the lessons I wish I had known during our excited-but-clueless phase!

In this engaging book, Ryan and Amanda as a newlywed millennial couple bring to bear insight far beyond their years. They share solid counsel and encouragement for everyone who has wondered if the right person is around the corner—and real, practical advice for not only finding “the one” but *being* that one who someone else is looking for . . . both now and for years to come.

I’m thrilled that a few years ago, a simple little engaged-and-married-in-the-same-day video went viral and has given this remarkable couple a chance to share a big message today. A message that all of us need to hear.

Shaunti Feldhahn

Best-selling author of *For Women Only*

Introduction

What makes an amazing love story? Is it witty conversation over dinner, common interests, shared values, and strength in the face of obstacles, or is it something else—some secret, elusive element that we can only pray for? We've all seen those couples, the ones holding hands in the park or whispering to each other as they stare into one another's eyes, as if they share an awesome secret. We watch them and wonder, *What's the big secret?* And more importantly, what's their story? Do they ever argue? What makes them tick? How did their relationship start, and how did they end up with such an amazing love story?

We never anticipated becoming one of those couples. When we met, we simply tried to listen to God and find out what kind of journey He wanted to take us on. And while we faced a lot of obstacles along the way, it turns out that the story He had planned for us was one that many other people were interested in, and one that we couldn't wait to share with the rest of the world.

Three months into our new marriage, we posted a video about our surprise wedding on YouTube. The previous three months had been the happiest we'd ever known and not nearly as hard as people told us they would be. After a weeklong honeymoon, we'd moved in together, picked out a bunch of shows on Netflix, and hardly left the apartment for a couple of weeks. We're so grateful that our jobs as motivational

speakers and young-adult directors at our church allowed us this time to get to know each other as husband and wife.

The night we posted our video, we were sitting on the couch watching a show when we saw that one of our friends had tweeted that our video had gotten ten thousand views. We couldn't believe it. Did we even know ten thousand people? We ignored the show as we tried to name every person we knew, but we fell asleep before we even got through the first thousand.

In the months that followed, the number of views of our video skyrocketed past a hundred thousand, then five hundred thousand, and finally over one million. As those numbers climbed, our lives and our marriage took a brand-new path, one that we never imagined for ourselves. We appeared on national television, were interviewed for global newspapers, and even had a chance to meet some of our favorite celebrities. We slowly realized along the way that things were going to look different for us. We were in no way excused from the challenging realities of marriage, but we were following a unique and unknown path. God had written our love story, and He wanted to share it with the world.

We quickly started receiving thousands of e-mails, messages, and tweets from young adults telling us how our story inspired them, made them rethink everything they believed about love, and even led them closer to Christ. Along with these heartfelt responses, questions about dating and relationships inevitably poured in. As we embraced this season of our lives, we had the opportunity to meet and speak with thousands of young adults all over the country. We met girls who'd grown up without fathers or any male role models and now struggled to trust

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any male in their lives. We met guys who believed they were supposed to lead their relationships spiritually and financially but actually had no idea what this even meant. We heard from girls who'd been hurt in the past and were struggling to keep their faith that love even existed in this world and from guys who thought they didn't deserve love because they were broke. Hearing all their stories reinforced something that we already knew—relationships are complicated and hard—and now we saw it from a whole new perspective.

More than anything, we saw that so many of these young adults were in love with the idea of love. They were so busy waiting for someone amazing to show up, instead of spending this time becoming an amazing person themselves. One girl we met, Erica, had followed a guy across the country, hoping to marry him in the near future. Ten years later, after he had fathered two children with other women while still living with Erica, she finally had the courage to move on with her life and ask him to move out. When we heard this story, we desperately wished we could have gone back ten years, taken her aside, heard her heart, and encouraged her to make better decisions.

What we can do instead is encourage you to make good choices starting now. No matter what sort of relationships you've had in the past, we want you to know that God has a destiny, a plan, and a strategy for your life and relationships, and the great news is that with His help you can start writing a new story for your life today. Erica can't go back ten years and change anything, but she can decide to do something different with her *next* ten years. And so can you.

People who watched our wedding documentary believed our love story was all about getting engaged, getting married, and saying "I love

you” for the first time, all on the same day. That was part of it. But before that day, we went through a five-year journey together, through ups and downs, challenges, obstacles, joy, and persistence. During those five years, we took steps to create a great relationship, but we also made plenty of mistakes. When we saw those same mistakes being repeated by the young adults we spoke to every day as the young-adult directors of our church, we knew that we had to find a way to share with them the advice we wished someone had given us five years before.

The path to marriage includes those complicated dating years when the rules aren’t always clear and certainly aren’t fair. So much of your success when it comes to relationships is based on the way you were raised. If your parents modeled a healthy relationship for you, then you’ve got a head start toward creating a healthy marriage for yourself. If your parents showed you something less healthy or weren’t around to model any sort of relationship, you may feel like just imagining your future is an uphill battle. You have a few options to pull guidance from, but there’s no earthly model for a perfect marriage.

The church is a good place to start, but it can feel that the majority of sermons are geared toward married couples with kids. During the few times a year when churches touch on dating and relationships, often around Valentine’s Day, most of their advice is a list of things you *shouldn’t* be doing instead of the things you could and should be doing to become the best you. While we agree with most of this advice in theory, we know it doesn’t always answer all your questions.

Another option is to take your clues from the media. While there are some great resources out there that are really helping people, most people don’t know where to find them and subconsciously believe that

falling in love should be their goal because that's what our society celebrates most. Instead of showing you how to create a healthy relationship, our culture simply gives you an image to aspire to, one that will make you appear to be more dateable. Most of what the media presents about love is completely false, and taking too many of your clues from "reality" shows that have nothing to do with the reality of marriage can actually cause a lot of damage to your relationships.

If you fall for this trap, you'll start to believe that if you drive the right car, wear the right clothes, say the right things, and have a sweet house or loft, then you're a keeper. Well, we don't even know you, but we can say without a doubt that you're better than that. If you're looking for an average relationship, that's fine. You can put down this book. No hard feelings. But if you're looking for something better than average—an amazing love story and a godly relationship—then you've come to the right place.

Today, we are so grateful for the challenges we faced when we were dating because they're exactly what forced us to seek wisdom from married couples, pastors, and trusted mentors and friends. We went to counseling separately and together to heal from past hurts and become fully whole before joining together to become one. As a result, we set up healthy habits in our dating life that allowed us to transition easily into marriage. We aren't perfect—far from it. We've stumbled a bit along the way, and we're happy to share our failures along with our successes.

We're inviting you to read about our triumphs and our mistakes, and along the way we'll offer practical guidance, encouragement, reminders, questions to ask yourself, and helpful practices you can begin today. No matter what your relationship status may be, these will set

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the foundation for a healthy, thriving marriage in the future. We absolutely believe in “the one,” and we believe that you’re it. You’re the one who can make the decision either to follow the path to an average future or to use this time to prepare yourself for something more—your destiny. God has something awesome in mind for you, but He can’t get you there without your help. Make up your mind to reject average and to start living up to your potential in love and in life. An amazing love story starts with you.

Engaged and Married in One Day

Father, we thank you today that in your Word, you set it up so that people actually do come together where two do become one. And then when You're there, the third strand in that wound-up thing that You're putting together holds it tightly. We sense Your presence in this place. We sense You here, but we also know that as these two have chosen to follow You, they cannot do it without You.

—Nate Ruch, pastor at our wedding

SHE'S THE ONE

Ryan

Before I met Amanda, I never would have said that I was looking for a girl I could bring home to meet my mother. I'm not a mama's boy, but at the same time I knew my mother could be a little picky, especially when it came to me, the youngest of her three sons. In the past I'd flirted with some girls and dated a little, but I never considered bringing any of those girls home to meet my mother. I never even talked to my mom about the girls I dated, but when I first saw Amanda Roman walk into my brother's church, one of the first thoughts that popped into my head was, *I bet Mom would love her.*

Until that moment, I thought I had years to travel the world, do my business, and go to Lakers games before settling down. I was content and busy in my life as a "pastor-preneur," running two businesses: a motion-graphics company and a staffing company. I also traveled the country as an itinerant speaker and consultant. Life was busy and good. I was in no rush to get married.

But God had other plans. My brother was a worship pastor in Atlanta, and Amanda was in a discipleship program at his church. He called me and said, "I found your wife." I laughed him off. "Yeah, I'll bet you did," I said, but when I went to visit him a few weeks later and Amanda walked into the room, everything changed.

Amanda changed what I was looking for and defined my "type." She had an aura about her that commanded a room, just the right amount of spice, and the world's most captivating smile. I had no way of knowing then if she was the one, but I definitely hoped she was. And

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I knew that if she didn't turn out to be the one for me, whoever did would now have a lot to live up to. Amanda set a new standard for me.

Nearly four years later, after our relationship was tested in a million different ways and we'd each grown fully ready for marriage, Amanda and her friend were hanging out at my apartment while I was making dinner. I was going in and out of the room as they moved from one topic to another, finally landing on girl talk about weddings. It was a casual conversation; I'm not sure Amanda even knew I could hear her when she remarked offhandedly to her friend that she wanted to get engaged and married on the same day.

I didn't say a word, but I was thinking, *What? What does that even mean? How could it possibly work?* As I stood in the kitchen, it slowly dawned on me that in order to get engaged and married on the same day and still have the type of wedding Amanda dreamed of (not just a town-hall wedding), I would have to plan the entire wedding in secret. We've all heard of surprise birthday parties and even surprise engagement parties, but who's ever heard of a surprise wedding?

At that point, Amanda and I had been through a lot together, and I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was the woman I wanted to marry. It was just a question of when, and I knew that if I was going to be planning the entire wedding by myself, I'd better get started right away. First I needed to learn more about weddings in general. I immediately thought of Paula, a classy woman from my church who's like a second mother to me.

A few days later, I went to the church and grabbed Candis, a young woman who I knew could give me the perspective of a female from my own generation and pulled her into Paula's office. I closed the door and

said, “I want you to remain calm, but I have to tell you something.” A huge smile immediately broke out on each of their faces. “You’re going to propose!” Paula exclaimed. Candis jumped up to hug me. “I wish it was that simple,” I told them. As she sat back down, I explained. “Amanda said it was her dream to get engaged and married on the same day.”

Candis looked at me, pure confusion on her face. “What?” she asked, as if she hadn’t heard me. Paula’s reaction was a little different. She’d understood what I’d said, but she was frowning. “Ryan,” she said gently, with a mother’s worry, “I don’t know if that’s such a good idea.” Their reactions told me exactly how crazy this idea sounded.

“I need to know what goes into planning a wedding,” I told them, “and what it’s going to cost.” I grabbed a napkin and started taking notes as they gave me a crash course in wedding planning, from the dress and the tux to the flowers, catering, music, photographer, and even the cake.

Once I knew the basics of wedding planning, I needed to find out exactly what Amanda wanted her wedding to be like. Luckily, a lot of our friends were getting married, so we had plenty of opportunities to talk about weddings in general. After every wedding and even in the middle of dates, I asked Amanda what she thought about certain details and what she’d do differently. After dropping her off at home, I furiously made notes in my phone so I wouldn’t forget what she’d said.

Whenever the topic of weddings came up, I tried to keep it super casual so I wouldn’t give anything away. I wanted it to seem like I was thinking about it every now and then instead of during every waking moment of my life. Finally I called her at work one day and said, “Let’s be honest about our families’ situations. If and when we get married,

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the cost of the wedding is going to be on us, so I want to start saving for it now.” Amanda paused, and I wondered if she thought it was odd that I was bringing this up when we weren’t even engaged yet. But we both knew that marriage was in our future. “That’s a good idea,” Amanda said finally. “Great, I’ll handle the numbers,” I told her, “and you write down everything you’d want at your dream wedding. I’ll price everything out and set a budget.”

I figured it would take Amanda a few days or weeks to write down all the details of her dream wedding, but the girl e-mailed me an extremely thorough document within an hour. Now I knew who she wanted to sing at her wedding, who she wanted in the wedding party, what sort of venue she wanted, and all sorts of other minute details. I had my work cut out for me.

Once I priced everything out, I set a budget for the entire event and took a hard look at my own finances. I needed to know how much I could set aside each month and how much extra work I needed to take on in the next six months in order to pay for all of it. I quickly realized that even if I really hustled, it was going to be extremely tight. Luckily, I had Amanda as my partner, and she’s a great saver. I crunched a few more numbers and then e-mailed her back and asked her to start setting aside a certain amount each month. Amanda may not have known what I was planning, but we were already in it together.

Getting married in Miami wasn’t on Amanda’s wish list, but a friend of mine who lived down there convinced me that it would be the perfect location for our wedding. When I told Amanda a few days later that I was flying to Miami for “work,” she immediately said, “Ugh, I hate Miami.” Uh-oh. But when I saw how beautiful the beach was

down there and found a hotel that was exactly what we were looking for and fit our budget, I knew my friend was right. I told myself it was an added bonus that Amanda hated Miami because she would never expect it to be the place we got married or even engaged. It would be a real surprise.

The next several months seemed like a giant test of my will. Keeping this enormous secret from the person I loved most while making sure no one else spilled the beans had me constantly on edge. Until a couple of months before the wedding, nobody except my brothers and a very small handful of friends knew what I was planning. I didn't want to risk Amanda finding out. Most people didn't find out until they were invited, and even then I kept the details from specific people I didn't trust with the secret.

I woke up every morning asking myself, *Is today the day that I'm going to fail?* While I was at the gym, shooting hoops, or even speaking to large crowds, in the back of my mind I was running through the guest list, wondering who might slip and what I could do to stop them. But as each day passed and the secret remained intact, I got closer to making the surprise wedding a reality.

It was hard not to focus solely on the wedding, but I knew it was even more important for us to prepare for marriage since our engagement period would be hours instead of months or years. A few months before the wedding, I told Amanda that I wanted to attend a premarital class that was for couples who were engaged, seriously dating, or simply thinking about marriage. It was a great class that helped us get to know each other on an even deeper level. The talking points we received served as jumping-off points for imagining and discussing our future relationship, home, and even children. I already knew that I wanted to

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marry Amanda, but after completing that class, I felt more confident than ever that we could work together to build a healthy, thriving, godly marriage.

A DREAM DAY

Amanda

When Ryan and I were dating, it seemed like every other day another one of our friends was getting engaged. One by one, I watched them start planning the day they'd spent their entire lives dreaming about and get incredibly stressed out—and rightfully so! I was in school full time and working a full-time job, and I couldn't imagine planning a wedding on top of everything else that was already on my plate. I like to say I'm a simple girl who knows what she likes and wants what she wants, and I knew that my laser-focused personality plus work, school, and planning a dream wedding would add up to self-destruction.

My friend, who's also named Amanda, is an event coordinator who plans a lot of weddings. She was hanging out with Ryan and me one night sharing stories about some of the stressed-out brides she'd worked with. "Everyone thinks it's glamorous," she told me, "but they don't know that half the time you're starving, hiding in the back trying to eat a pretzel for strength while a bride's yelling at you because she's so stressed out!" I'm usually a relaxed person, but suddenly I could picture myself on my wedding day running around in a white dress on a caffeine high, panicking because the florist sent roses instead of peonies. "And now everyone wants a theme wedding," Amanda continued. "Every wedding has to be completely unique. It's so much pressure."

I thought about this for a moment and then said, "You know what

would be really different? I'd love to get engaged in the morning and married that same night." I'd never thought of this before. It just popped into my head as we were talking. Amanda looked at me as if I was crazy and asked, "But how would you plan a wedding the day of?" I just shrugged this off. I was already caught up in the fantasy of one day filled with two celebrations: the engagement and the wedding.

With no time to stress about anything, we'd be forced to go with the flow and remember what's really important. I could imagine my loud Puerto Rican family getting really excited about the whole thing and spending the day laughing and having fun. After the engagement, I'd run to the store with my closest friends and the godsisters who I grew up with and are like my best friends and sisters combined. Together, we'd pick out a cute dress for each of them right off the rack. We'd play whatever music happened to be on our iPods.

It would all be spontaneous and fun with no rules, stress, or pressure to be perfect, almost like eloping but better because our families would be there. Amanda and I joked and fantasized about this for a while, but I didn't give it much more thought after that because I figured that logistically it would be impossible. And without Ryan, it would have been.

With all the work I had to get through my senior year, I enjoyed taking a break from the grind by fantasizing about our wedding—what it would look like, who would be there, and what Ryan and I would each be thinking and feeling the whole time. Meanwhile, I had no idea that Ryan was secretly planning the whole thing without me! For months, my friends had been egging me on every time I talked about a potential wedding. At first I thought *I* was weird for thinking about a

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wedding before an engagement, but they made me feel like it was the most normal thing ever. Since everyone I knew was in on the surprise, they encouraged the dreaming.

Eventually they urged me to start looking for a dress. I brushed this off until one day my friend Des and I wandered past a wedding-dress boutique. Before we went in I told her, "I am NOT buying anything. Just looking around." I tried on two or three dresses just for fun. Then on my way back to the fitting room, I saw a gorgeous mermaid-style dress with lace details and a tulle bottom. Des saw the way I was looking at that dress and said, "Try it on!"

As soon as I put the dress on, I knew it was the one. After spending twenty minutes in the dressing room with Des telling her that I couldn't be the girl who had a dress before a ring, the sales lady came back and told me that she could get me the dress for \$300 under my budget. I was still torn, so I called Ryan and explained the situation, worried that he was going to think I was crazy. To my surprise, he said it was a great idea and that I should go for it. This should have probably been a huge giveaway, but I had no idea. I never stopped and thought, *Hmm . . . I wonder if my boyfriend is planning a surprise wedding for me.* My one and only suspicion was that my friends knew a proposal was in the works.

A PERFECT STORM

Ryan

The day before the wedding, we had one hundred guests flying in on about seventy-five different flights, and out of those, only one flight was

cancelled—Amanda’s. At about 4 p.m. the day before the wedding, she called me from the airport and said, “Hey, my flight’s cancelled.” She had zero urgency because she had no idea that she was getting married the next day. She thought she was flying to Miami to help some friends of ours move and probably thought she’d lucked out! But I just about lost my mind. Amanda was walking around the Dallas airport drinking Starbucks like it was nothing, while I was pacing the hotel lobby, zeroing in on how I was going to get Amanda to Miami. Deep down, I knew that God would make it happen if it was meant to work out, but it was still pretty stressful.

I spent hours researching alternate flights, and Amanda finally got on a flight that landed in Miami around midnight. I was so relieved to have her there that I was just about shaking when I picked her up from the airport. But the next morning, the sun was shining, all was well, and I was excited about getting married. The first thing I thought about when I woke up in my hotel room was the fact that I am extremely blessed. I think you can tell how blessed a person is by the relationships he has, and the fact that one hundred people had flown to Miami and would be in the hotel lobby to support me and Amanda was humbling and inspiring. I knew that with them on our side, we couldn’t fail.

I picked Amanda up at her hotel room with Jeff, the videographer I’d hired to film the entire thing. I’d told Amanda that we were making a video for the youth group that our friend who was moving to Miami was running, but that didn’t really explain why he was filming us just hanging out. She looked beautiful and happy, but she was being quiet in front of the camera. Amanda knew me well enough by then to know what a dreamer I am and to be prepared to go with the flow when we’re

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together. I'd planned plenty of crazy dates and adventures over the past five years, and some of them worked out great while others were total flops.

Of course, there were plenty that fell in between, too. For one Valentine's Day I bought Amanda a nice dress and some new jewelry and made reservations at a fancy restaurant. We were all set to go when my car broke down. We had to take Amanda's car, which we called Jagger because it was so old and broken down, with the front bumper hanging off. And it had moves like Jagger. That car had the shakes. We pulled up to the four-star restaurant and asked the valet guys to take a picture of us all dressed up next to our piece-of-junk car. One of the things I most love about Amanda is her willingness to go along with my schemes.

I think Amanda knew I was up to something the morning of the engagement/wedding, but thankfully she went along with it then, too. We were walking down the hallway with the camera guy following us when two ladies who worked at the hotel stopped us and asked, "Are you famous?" I told them I wasn't famous, so they asked, "Then why is there a camera following you?" I calmly said, "I'm actually in the middle of proposing." That's literally how Amanda found out what was going on, just moments before I proposed.

As much as I like having a grand plan, I never wanted things to feel so scripted that they didn't seem real. Over the past several months, I'd been so busy and stressed planning everything to the letter, and now I just wanted to be done planning and let the moment unfold naturally. I was ready to be as raw and real as possible, focused on how good it felt to be with Amanda and to not have anything to hide.

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One thing that's kind of unique about our relationship is that until the moment I proposed, I never told Amanda that I loved her. I'd found plenty of other ways to show my affection, but those words meant so much to me that I didn't want to say them until I knew I could back them up with every fiber of my being. By that day, Amanda and I had been through so much, and I knew I'd proven how I felt so I could believe myself when I said the words. I'd been practicing this moment in the shower for months, but I still wasn't prepared. There was no script here. I got down on one knee in the beautiful outdoor area in front of the hotel and said, "Amanda Roman, I love you so much, and it would honor me if you would marry me."

As soon as those words were out of my mouth, all of the stress and worry about planning the wedding fell away. Amanda nodded a yes with tears in her eyes and a shocked smile all over her face, and I slid the ring onto her finger. As we kissed, I could not believe that this was really happening. There was a part of me that still thought something would go wrong.

A MOMENT OF REFLECTION

Amanda

I was at the airport with my friend Shirley, who was moving to Miami, when we found out that our flight was cancelled. A few hours later, Ryan got me on another flight alone. I felt so bad leaving Shirley behind, and it didn't seem to make any sense for me to get there before the person who was actually moving. I told her I'd just wait with her, but she insisted that I go. In the back of my mind, I thought, *Wow, she re-*

ally wants me to get to Miami. What is she up to? I wondered if it was because Ryan was going to propose in Miami, so I jumped on the plane without asking any more questions. “See you in Miami, Shirley!”

It ended up being perfect for me to fly there alone because it gave me much-needed time for reflection. Writing in my journal, I told God that as I was growing up I’d seen Him provide for me through my mom. As a single mom, money was tight, but something always came through when we needed it. My grandparents would help us out, or my mom would find out about an organization that was giving out food or helping with rent. Other times we’d have just enough gas to get to my godparents’ house where there was plenty of food and love to go around. But over the past few years, I’d really seen God provide for me personally. Thinking about this made me feel overwhelmed with love and gratitude. On that flight to Miami, I told God that I knew it wasn’t His plan for me to grow up without a dad, but considering that’s what had happened, He’d provided more than enough for me and even given me some sweet surprises along the way. I finished by thanking him for the blessing of Ryan and wrote, “I’m ready for this next chapter, whatever it is. So surprise me.”

I barely slept that night; I was just too excited, wondering if tomorrow would be the day Ryan was going to propose. When he showed up in the morning with a camera guy, my suspicions were roused, but not about anything more than a proposal. It was almost comic relief when Ryan told the ladies at the hotel that he was proposing. This completely threw me off. Ryan is normally so romantic, and I couldn’t believe that he would just tell those random women that he was proposing before actually going through with it. I was confused and eager to find out

what was going on, but I trusted Ryan, and I went along with his plan without any hesitation.

It was only minutes later that Ryan told me for the first time that he loved me. Half of me was so happy that I wanted to burst out of my skin, but the funny thing is that the other half of me thought it sounded completely normal. I knew what those words meant to him, and I thought, *He just said it. This is it.* Before I could fully process that, he was proposing. The moment I'd been waiting for and thinking about for so long was finally here, and it didn't feel real. The ring he slid on my finger was more beautiful than any ring I'd ever imagined wearing, and I was completely overwhelmed.

Ryan grabbed my hand and started walking me closer to the hotel. I didn't understand why he was rushing me; I just wanted to savor the moment! But then he introduced me to the hotel's catering manager, and I knew something else was going on. He asked me, "Remember when you said you wanted to get engaged and married on the same day? What would we need to have here to do that?" I mumbled, "My family," feeling like I was in a trance. Ryan nodded. "Yeah, we'd need a few people here to do that. Well, the question isn't, 'Will you marry me,'" he continued. "The question is, 'Will you marry me today?'" Ryan opened the door to the hotel and I saw one hundred of our closest friends and family members standing there, shouting, "TODAY!"

This moment has taken me almost a year to fully process. It was the single most exhilarating thing I'd ever experienced, and I felt so overwhelmed with love that I wanted to burst. For the first thirty seconds or so, I assumed that all these people had flown to Miami just to see us get engaged. But as I looked around the room and my eyes slowly

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focused on not only our parents and siblings and closest friends, but also cousins, mentors, and friends who lived far away and we hadn't seen in months, I realized that all these people hadn't flown here for any proposal. This was going down *today*.

Later in the book you'll read all about the five years between the first date Ryan and I went on and our engagement/wedding day. The main obstacle we faced during that time was my mother's disapproval of our relationship. This caused us to break up and take breaks, and even after we were back together and talking about getting married, I didn't know if my mother would ever approve. This had weighed on me for five years, and I felt happy when I saw my mother standing there in the hotel, but when I saw the *approval* on her face, I was amazed. It was an answer to prayer in the flesh, a complete full-circle moment indicating that whatever happened that day and on the days that followed, God had already answered two of my greatest prayers—marrying Ryan and having my mother approve. I felt as though I was standing in the middle of a miracle. God hadn't only brought my mother there that day, but he'd changed her heart toward my relationship with Ryan, and that was huge.

After I hugged my mom and cried more than a few tears, Ryan and I were separated as we circulated among the guests. When we reconnected a little later, it felt amazing and surreal. Ryan thanked everyone for coming and asked a friend of ours to lead us in two worship songs since none of this would have been possible without God. As she sang and played her guitar, my mind clicked back to the moment on the plane when I wrote about how grateful I was for God's blessings. This was the first time I'd seen a man go so completely out of his way and so

far out of his comfort zone to make something happen for the woman he loved, and that woman was me.

There wasn't a lot of time to sit around and soak up all that love. Ryan and I immediately went to the city hall so we could get legally hitched without much fanfare, and then we went back to the hotel. Ryan had flown in my favorite makeup artist and hairstylist, and we went upstairs with my mom, godsisters, and besties for some fun, much-needed girl time while we got ready. A big storm that had been brewing outside had gotten worse throughout the day, and we had to decide whether to chance it and plan to have the wedding outside or do it inside. Ryan left it up to me, and I made the decision to just do it inside. At that point, I didn't care if it was inside, outside, or in the hotel room—I just wanted to marry Ryan Leak.

WHY WE WORK

Ryan

When I proposed to Amanda that morning, the sun was shining, but a storm had picked up speed throughout the day and eventually got so bad that they had to block off the street to the hotel. Cars were literally under water. It wasn't just a storm; it was a monsoon! My best friend's wife didn't make it to the wedding since the road was completely flooded, and we had to push the wedding back an hour because it was taking everyone so long to get there. The reception was supposed to be across the street, but the bridge to the other side was flooded and we had to move the whole party just a few hours before the wedding. Despite all this, when I saw Amanda walking down the aisle, it felt too good to be true.

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Amanda and I know why we work. It's not just because we share the same moral values, because we're attracted to each other, or because we have fun on dates. Jesus Christ is what makes us tick, what makes us go. Whenever we thought about a hypothetical wedding, we said that the thing that was most important to us was that the guests at our wedding would sense something special, and that something special would be the presence of God.

In the middle of the wedding, my eleven-year-old niece came up to my brother, tapped him on the shoulder, and said, "Daddy, I want this." When I heard this, her words became one of the highlights of the entire day because I don't think she meant simply that she wanted a surprise wedding. My niece saw a guy who was willing to put all the chips on the table for a girl. She got a front-row seat to godly love, and I'm so glad she recognized it when she saw it. Not only my niece, but every girl out there deserves to be cherished and loved at the highest level. I hope our story serves as one small example of what all women truly deserve.

WE'LL SPEND OUR LIVES TRYING

Amanda

On the day of our engagement and wedding, I had no idea exactly how much work had gone into planning everything. Over the course of the day, Ryan told me a little bit about some of the challenges he'd faced, and I had a million more questions for him, but my focus that day wasn't on the planning. It was on being present in the moment and adjusting my mind-set, not only to getting used to being engaged, but also preparing to be all about our marriage.

On our honeymoon, my mind was finally clear, and I asked Ryan

The One

to tell me everything. As we sat on the beach and Ryan shared the details of everything he'd done—the planning, the saving, the stress, and the ups and downs—I couldn't believe it. I can't say it made me love Ryan any more than I already did because our love isn't contingent on that sort of thing, but it certainly brought my appreciation for him to a whole new level.

More than anything, knowing what Ryan was willing to do for me makes me want to spend our entire marriage making him feel as loved and valued as he made me feel that day. I don't know if that's even possible, but I am determined to spend my life trying.

This is our story. It's unique to Ryan and me, and we know it's not your story. That's okay. This book is full of stories from our dating relationship and some from our marriage, but this book isn't really about us. It's about you, the relationship you want, and the choices you can make to help you create one beautiful, unique, and inspiring love story of your very own.

One Question to Ask Yourself: When your grandkids sit on your lap decades from now and ask about how you and your spouse met, what story do you want to tell them?

One Thing to Remember: Nothing is impossible with God (see Matthew 19:26).

One Thing to Work On: Pray and ask God to help you read this book with an open heart.



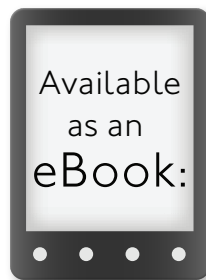
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