

## CHAPTER ONE



# Fresh New Start

**W**HAT BETTER PLACE TO START telling you my story than at the beginning.

I want to take you back in time to when I began to ask myself some pretty scary, but important, questions. Don't worry, it's not going to be one of those, "*Well it all started in a small farm house in the coldest December since 1962. The seventh child of ...*" I would not do that to you. No, it was scarier.

I was thirty-seven years old and had been married for eleven years to a man who seemed to adore me; I had an established fifteen-year career and a beautiful house on the outskirts of the city. I had a life that most women would cut off their right arm for, except for one small thing—there was a stranger staring back at me from the mirror. I didn't know who that person was anymore and, what was worse, I didn't even know when the

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woman I knew had disappeared. I was completely lost to myself; the fun-loving, caring person I once was seemed to be missing in action, replaced with someone I did not like. This person was dishonest, unhappy, bitter, angry, tired, and, the most agonizing realization of all was that she was alone.

This person merely existed. She was not living life at all but just going through the motions of a so-called perfect life. This might sound a bit odd to you or maybe not. Maybe you have been in a relationship at one time in your life in which you felt empty. Maybe you felt yourself alone when you were supposed to be a couple. You found yourself doing things more often on your own as opposed to doing things together. Friends and family see the perfect couple and are envious of what they believe the two have shared and built over time. Meanwhile you are thinking to yourself, "*Oh God, if they only knew the truth!*" If you have ever been in a relationship like that, then you know exactly what I am talking about.

Why was I questioning the state of my marriage after eleven years? What was happening to me, and to the values of what marriage was all about that I had stuck to over these years? My view on marriage was that when two people married it was for life, no exceptions. There was no grey area, only black and white. How could I possibly be alone in a marriage? What was wrong with me anyway?

I remember I had tried to talk about my concerns with my husband, Mark, when these feelings kept nagging at me. We had been married for about eight or nine years at the time when I told him that I felt things were not right between us and had not been for a long time. I told him I had been feeling this way for many years and was hoping that things could change between us, but instead they only seemed to be getting worse. I was worried about this and suggested that perhaps I should see a professional about it, about me in particular. I was trying to take responsibility for the state of our marriage,

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because I knew the problem was with me and that I was terribly unhappy. I was the one always pulling back. I was the one who did not want to be intimate. I was the one who would rather stay at work than be at home. Sex to me had become just another chore that had to be done around the house and something that I no longer looked forward to.

Mark talked me out of seeing a therapist, saying that what we were going through was normal for a couple who had been together for years. He convinced me that because my job was so stressful things would get better eventually, when work slowed down. If things were still distant between us and not getting any better over time, then perhaps I should consider leaving my job to reduce the stress level to alleviate the pressure I was feeling. If I chose to do that, when and if that time came, he would stand behind that decision and we would get through it as a couple. It made sense to me at the time, but in my heart I knew I was no longer in love with my husband.

So why did I not say anything at the time that I had finally mustered up the courage to at least confront Mark about my unhappiness? It was because I hate confrontation. It scares me because of the memories of seeing how it played out when my parents attempted, ever so poorly, to try this act with one another. Let's just say it always ended badly with someone leaving the house, usually my father.

So because of this childhood fear, I was too scared to say it directly to his face, for fear of hurting someone who did not deserve to be hurt and because of the old memories that clouded my mind. But by doing that, I was not being true to myself and, in turn, was not being truthful with Mark. To make peace and not rock the boat, I remember convincing myself that I had done my bit by at least trying to talk about it. Yet secretly, I was hoping that by opening the floor to having the conversation, Mark would have said something along the line that he too was no longer happy with our partnership. But that was not the case

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and I should have known better. Mark never talked about feelings, wants or desires and maybe that was part of the problem. He just went with the flow of life and never expected anything more than what was presented to him or to us. He always did whatever I wanted to do and never told me what he wished or hoped for. This was when the “nice guy” routine grew a little too much for me to bear at times.

Life had become boring and lonely because it was me who made all the decisions about the direction of our lives. It was a one-sided relationship, if you could even call it a relationship at all, and I truly missed having a partner who needed me. It’s important to feel that you are needed and that was something desperately lacking in our marriage right from the start. We had, for so long, been living independently from one another and not doing much of anything as a couple, as a married couple should.

So what did we do after that conversation? We brought out the broom and swept the really big issues under the rug and hoped they would all go away. But they didn’t, and the rift between us only widened over time.

Mark and I were married in 1988 when we were both twenty-six years old. You would think we were old enough to know exactly what we wanted out of a life and in a partner to share in that life. But I would not figure that out until many years later.

Before Mark came into my life, I had been working at developing my career for approximately three years. I was dating off and on within that time frame, more off than on, and nothing terribly serious. I was so driven back then to prove to everyone, especially to myself, that I was smart, worthy, and good enough to have it all. I would succeed in life despite what my mother had said I would amount to, which was not much of anything. I put everything on the back burner, relationships included, to prove I mattered. I was more interested in moving up the corporate ladder in the company that I was working for at the time. My goal was to leave my mark on this company, to become very success-

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ful, to be one of the youngest female executives the printing industry had ever seen. I was so focused on that goal that I lost touch with what really makes someone whole.

One day I came home after work to find a rose sitting at my door with a mysterious note inviting me out for dinner later that same week. Who could this be from? My social life was non-existent at the time. With a little detective work on my part, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that my secret admirer was Mark who, at the time, was living out of town. We had dated when we were both eighteen years old for a short time and then went our separate ways. Seven years later, he was back. We were able to pick up right where we had left off all those years before.

Things were always easy for Mark and me, effortless you might say. We dated for ten months and got married in the fall of 1988. Mark was a great catch: he was very good looking, athletic, funny, smart, a hard worker, incredibly organized, an all-around nice guy. Everyone was thrilled for us, but little did I know when I married him that the “nice guy” would eventually be the thing that would drive us apart. Our relationship quickly became one comprised of being best friends rather than husband and wife, but at the time, I didn’t know any better.

Things for Mark and me could have been worse, right? We went through the years as status quo, friends, who both decided that careers were more important than bringing children into the mix. We shared a common goal and at least we were on the same page about that. Let’s work ourselves to the bone to make up for all the toys and “stuff” we both did not have growing up. This is the way our marriage was for many years. We didn’t realize it, but success came at a very high price. It was one of the big factors that cost us our marriage.

Today, when I hear people say they have married their best friend I want to warn them to be careful not to end up where Mark and I did. It is one thing to say that, but if you really end

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up treating each other like you would a best friend, perhaps that's the way the relationship should have stayed and you should not have jumped into a marriage so quickly. I would learn this important lesson about how to behave and treat a life partner, as a true equal, but not until later in my life's journey.

It was a couple of years after having that conversation with Mark about the problems with our marriage that I found myself feeling trapped in our "very quiet" arrangement. What do you do when you are the only one in a couple who feels the relationship is unhealthy? How do you go about telling someone who is a good person and would do anything for you that you are no longer "in love" with him? How do you tell him that because he is always so damn happy and that everything with him is just wonderful or that he doesn't need anything from you—that he is slowly driving you crazy? The questions and self-talk circling in my head did not seem to let up. If anything, they were becoming all consuming.

Then I asked myself the really big questions: How much longer will I be able to keep up this charade? Is it normal not to have passion in your marriage or in your life? Is it normal to never have an argument with your spouse because everything is just great and nothing is ever wrong? Is this all there is to life? It can't be. What? We are born, we are children, we go to school, we get a job, we get married (maybe have kids) and then we die? If that's it, then God has a great sense of humour and I can't wait to meet this comedian.

During this time, I can tell you that home did not feel like home. There was silence under that roof. No communication whatsoever. If Mark was not out in a sporting activity or staying late at work, I was out of the house, either at work putting in longer hours than necessary, or playing baseball in the summer evenings to avoid the dull existence of home life, and to avoid confrontation. So we filled our empty marriage with details instead of dealing with issues because that would have required

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energy and effort.

When you're depressed, like I was during those years, your energy level is very low, so it's easier to avoid issues than to address them head on. I simply did not want or have the energy to deal with what was becoming the inevitable fate of our marriage.

What was sadder was that it seemed to be only my problem. Mark seemed to be content with the status quo because if he was not, then why was he not saying anything to me about this strange arrangement? When we were home, Mark would be upstairs in the office working on the computer and watching some game on TV, and I would be in the basement watching a movie or losing myself in yet another novel. Just anything to escape from the loneliness that was hanging over me. I remember my genre of choice was legal/suspense/thrillers—no way would I even attempt to read romance novels. But every once in a while an author would throw in a steamy love scene and I would scoff at it, thinking, "*Yeah right, only in fiction or in the imagination of the writer, but not in real life—at least not in my life.*"

I was so bitter and depressed with almost everything else in my life. The only thing that held any interest for me was playing baseball in the summer months. Pretty sad, wouldn't you say?

But I felt alive and happy when I was on my own or hanging out with the "girls". You learn to grasp onto the little things in life that make you happy so you can get through another day, week, month, and year. For me, it was summers. I was also secretly hoping to see someone, a stranger, who seemed to have captured my interest many years earlier. This stranger, in all likelihood, never even knew I existed and that was fine with me. It was safe for me and my troubled marriage.

I started losing weight during that time because I was stressing out about so many things. My life was falling apart, yet I was the only one who knew it. I was too proud, ashamed, and scared to let my secret out to anyone, for fear they would say I was crazy. My marriage was failing. I hated who I had become. I

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despised my job. My friends at the time were few and far between. I was so depressed I couldn't even stand my own company, so why would I subject my family and friends to me and my negative views on life? It felt like I was slowly choking to death on life—my life.

What was I missing? What was keeping me from the life I wanted and knew I deserved? I wasn't a bad person for wanting more out of life, so why was I feeling so damn guilty about it? With the new millennium approaching, could I go through another decade like this? There was one thing in my life I knew was desperately lacking and I was so thirsty for it. But what was it? Then, it hit me like a ton of bricks!

The "it" I was searching for was faith, although not the religious kind of faith. I did not run off to join a convent or some religious cult. Faith was right there in front of me the entire time, but I was too busy being skeptical and playing the victim to even see it. All I had to do was open my eyes and look around me. If I wasn't happy with my life, then I had to do something about it. I could no longer point the finger elsewhere. The problems in my life were ones I had created all on my own and I had to have faith in myself to turn my life around, stop pointing the finger and take responsibility for my choices.

It was as if I was looking at life through my own eyes for the very first time when this realization came to me. I was seeing and understanding certain things I had not seen before. I was asking myself these new and harder questions about the path that I was on and that was okay. It was more than okay. These questions were life-giving. I was looking at myself as an outside observer. Did I like what I was seeing? Did I even know who I was? Did I like myself or, more importantly, did I love the person I had evolved into?

The answer to all those questions was an astounding "No"! So then I said to myself, "*What are you going to do about it? Are you going to continue to play the martyr, the victim, or are you*

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*going to start making different choices for yourself?”*

I was terrified, but also excited, with my discovery. I felt as though I had just uncovered a great treasure. The precious gems I discovered were that I was in control of my own future and that I had to stop feeling guilty for wanting to experience more from life. I am in complete control of creating the life I wish to have, but I knew, in order to find myself, I would have to make some pretty bold changes. Changes that I knew in my heart I should have made long ago. I knew that my new choices were not going to be popular.

Was I ready to stand and face the world alone at thirty-seven? Did I have faith in myself to do this? What in the world was I basing my choices on, and why now? Was I ready to completely turn my comfortable, safe, and empty life upside down to finally satisfy that thirst? I was so scared to leave to start a new life of uncertainties, but even more frightened of what would happen to me if I stayed to live a life of certainties. I felt if I did not make a change, I would lose myself, my courage, and my way, forever. I could no longer continue to live this façade and deceive myself and Mark. It was too hard to stay and even harder to seriously think about leaving, but it was something I knew I had to do for myself. I had to be able to look into that mirror again and like who was reflected back at me.

I based my choices on the faith that I was doing the right thing for me and only me. Sometimes we have to be selfish in order to grow and that is not such a terrible thing to discover. I had stayed far too long, because I didn't want to hurt Mark or upset our friends and families. But continuing to live a life based on lies was no longer the answer for either one of us, especially for me. I needed to be true to my feelings. I was getting ready to leave a marriage that had died a long time ago.

I learned over the years not to cast blame on Mark, or me, for how our marriage had dissolved right before our eyes. We do the best we can with what we know and have at our disposal at

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the time. But don't kid yourself, I did question my sanity for quite awhile and quickly got myself into therapy before considering divorce as the final option. I needed help from an outsider, a neutral person who was not close to the situation, one who could be objective, who was trained in helping people who found themselves in trouble. I felt that I owed it to our marriage to at least try to salvage what we had built over the previous eleven years. Yet deep down in my heart, I knew that it was over for me. In the end, no amount of counseling was going to repair the damage, but I had to at least make an attempt.

I don't have many regrets in life, but the one that I did carry around for quite some time was that I hadn't listened to my inner voice when I first mentioned counseling to Mark as an option for myself. Would it have helped? I don't know, but I don't beat myself up over that decision any longer. I learned a valuable lesson because of that mistake. Listen to your inner voice and don't have others, even those who say they love you, convince you to go the other way. Have faith in what that voice is saying to you. It rarely leads you down the wrong path. I believe that counselors and therapists can be impartial parties for those who need to talk when they are faced with a crisis. We don't always have the answers ourselves, so it's okay to seek advice from those who are trained to help those in need. I was raised to believe that "shrinks", as they were often referred to, were simply a waste of money, that you don't air your dirty laundry in public, and the number one reason for not seeing a therapist was that if people ever found out, they would think you were crazy.

It was during this difficult time that I started questioning my belief system about a lot of things. I didn't think I was crazy to see a therapist. If anything, I believed the opposite and I started thinking differently about other things too. Maybe my idea about being married to one person for the rest of my life might be wrong as well? Do we only have one soul mate in our

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lifetime? Are we meant to be with only one person for our entire lives? I didn't know because this was the first time I ever questioned myself about that, and thought maybe not. Maybe some people are not fortunate enough to find and marry their ideal mate the first time around. Perhaps people stay in unhappy marriages because they fear being alone, or they stay for the sake of their children. If what society was saying about therapy was wrong, then there was a good possibility that the theory of "until death do you part" might be wrong as well.

Another fear that I knew would be realized was that family and friends, on both sides, would not side with me. My final decision to leave everything behind that I called my life up to that point was not going to be viewed favourably. I was going to be the bad guy and have to learn to live with that reputation for the rest of my life. Yet, knowing all the negative fallout from my choices that I was about to make, the relationships that would be severed immediately, and the unknown that stretched ahead of me, this was still something I was not going to let pass me by. What did I care about what others thought of me and my decisions? They were not living my life and it was about time I started to live my life the way I wanted to—not how others and society say I should live it. That's how I had been living my life up to that point and look where it got me. No, I needed to start listening to myself, to my inner voice, to have faith that the choices would be the right ones for me.

I would have to re-think my views on the values that I had developed throughout my life on certain issues. Maybe things in life are not always so clear-cut, black and white, or right or wrong. Maybe life is what *you* decide it should be, based on your own experiences instead of on your old ideals or how others say you should live it.

The reason I was doing this was to survive. I was trying to find out who I was. I was doing what was right for me. I felt there was a greater purpose for me and that this was not what

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life was all about. I was willing to leave everything behind to start anew in hopes of finding out what that purpose might be. Was I going to be making more mistakes by choosing to leave my marriage to be on my own, shelve a career that was changing how I viewed people in general, and alienating some friends and family to search for my purpose in life? I didn't think so; all I knew was that I was definitely willing to take the risk.

If you are taking risks you are living a life. I was so ready to embark on this new path that I literally left running and dared not look back for fear I might choose the easy way out and just stay, settle for an empty life and continue to play the victim. Something inside me was telling me that this was the right choice and the right time. It was okay to be asking myself these questions. My choices were based on faith in myself and nothing else. My life was about to take a different route, a different path, and I was excited for the first time in a long time. I was so looking forward to my new adventure, to the new mysteries that life was going to present to me. I was no longer asleep in my life. I decided to no longer play the victim and to start taking charge of my life. I was not helpless and this situation was far from hopeless.

What was even more thrilling was that I was finally going to meet and be introduced to the person whom I had been searching for all this time—my real self. I trusted and believed that the choices I was about to make were going to lead me right to her. I prayed that when I found her, I would love and be proud of her, no matter what. We were in this thing called “life” together and, once my decision to leave came to fruition, there was no turning back for either of us.