

*Chapter 1*

# FROM MY HEART TO YOURS

I am on a mission to get you excited about your life. And let me tell you, I'm excited—not only excited to be a woman, but to be a wife, a mother, an enthusiastic homemaker, and embarking on a new career as an author at the age of fifty-two. My greatest hope is that what I put down in these pages may inspire and help you and other women by offering an honest look inside at who I am: how I've lived my life, the struggles I've faced, the decisions I've made, and how I've made them. The journey hasn't always been easy and it sure hasn't always been fun, and I've had my share of disappointments along the way.

I believe I'm smarter today than I was yesterday, and I know I'm a whole lot smarter than I was ten, twenty, or thirty years ago. I'm smart enough now to value the experiences I've had over the half-century I've been in this world, and I know that the ones that count are all

a result of the choices I've made. But I also know that many people aren't aware that there *are* choices to be made, that they *do* have control over a lot of what happens to them. The freedom to choose the way we live our lives is one of the great gifts we've been given, and that's what I'm going to talk about in this book.

You can make choices in your life; in fact, you *must* make choices in order to have the life you want. And whether or not you're aware of it, you *do* make choices all the time; even choosing not to choose is a choice. I know this is the truth because it's a truth I have lived.

A lot of people go through life without really thinking about who they are or why they do the things they do. It's as if we're living on autopilot, staring straight ahead without seeing anything other than what's right in front of our faces. I know what this feels like because it's happened to me. I'm usually able to snap out of my daze and get back in control pretty quickly, but I know how easy it is to go passive. We do things or agree to things or accept whatever comes

our way without considering whether or not it's right for us. And by passively accepting whatever happens, we give up chances every day to create the lives we want.

It doesn't have to be that way. You can make choices in your life; in fact, you *must* make choices in order to have the life you want. And whether or not you're aware of it, you *do* make choices all the time; even choosing not to choose is a choice. I know this is a truth because it's a truth I have lived.

In my heart, I've always known what I wanted, ever since I was a little girl. I live every day of my life as an adventure, and I approach every aspect of my life as an event. Life has tried to knock that spirit out of me, and you probably know what that feels like. But I always have faith that things will get better. And it doesn't matter how old I get; I still wake up every morning grateful to be alive and healthy, and passionate about making the most of the day. And while I've always known this about myself, it wasn't until I sat down to write this book that I thought about how I got that way, and how it is that my life turned out the way it has. I simply cannot imagine wanting to be anything or anyone other than who I am: a freethinking woman, wife of the man I love, and mother of two grown sons.

Notice I said "grown sons." When my younger son left for college a year ago, I declared my independence from the rigors of daily parenting and am now poised on the brink of a new and exciting phase of life. I don't know if fifty is the new thirty, but I do know that I'm in my fifties now and I love it. I also know that I didn't become who I am through dumb luck; I did it by listening to God's voice, knowing myself, and using all of that knowledge to create the life I wanted.

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two things: who she is, and who she is *meant* to be. They're not quite the same thing: the first one has to do with the reality of your life, and the second one has to do with your purpose for being in this world, which is something each of us has to discover for herself and cannot be dictated by any other person in our lives—not by our husbands, parents, children, employers, or friends.

I think it's getting harder and harder to tell the difference between who we are and who we're meant to be. So much of the time, we lose ourselves just trying to keep up with the frantic pace of life. We drag ourselves out of bed in the morning, already half an hour behind, and spend much of the day responding to the needs and demands of others. Somewhere along the line, we often lose track of the essential feminine self—that unique, life-giving entity that invigorates our beings and warms the souls of the people we love.

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But we don't have to lose that feminine self, and the way to hold on to her is to accept nothing less than being simply the best—the best we can be in the roles we choose for ourselves: wife, mother, daughter, sister, and friend. And when it comes to mothers, there's something I want to say: whether you stay at home with your children or work a job and then

come home to your children, the point is, you're still a full-time mother, and beyond that, a woman. We were women long before

we were mothers, and we'll be women long after our children leave the nest.

I believe we were put on this earth to enjoy lives of joy and abundance, and that is what I want for you and for me. I want to get you excited about whatever phase of life you're in, excited about being a woman in this day and time, excited about being the woman that God created you to be.

And it's all there for the choosing, because I believe in the core of my soul that how you live, how I live, how we all live as women is largely a matter of choice. We have the right to choose to be happy. We have the right to choose to have a good attitude. It's all a choice. And I'll tell you right now, I am going to use that word a lot in this book, because choice is very important to me.

A lot of women hear me say this, and I imagine a lot of them may think, *That's easy for you to say. You live in a wonderful house with a successful man who loves you, and you can probably have anything you want—you're a privileged person.* And all that is true. But do you know what the real privilege is? The real privilege is being free to embrace the joyful aspects of life and reject the hurtful ones, to choose to do what's working, and to turn your back on what isn't. It's a privilege to have the right to take charge of your existence and be excited about your life.

You don't need a lot of costly stuff to be happy: our first apartment was a whopping 420 square feet of linoleum and worn nylon pile, and I used to drive a 1962 Comet with bright turquoise paint that looked as if it had been brushed on. I lived the first forty-eight years of my life in the heartland of this country, and when I was a

kid, the only spoons I had in my mouth were stainless steel, not silver. Still, I always felt fortunate to be who I was, and excited by the prospect of what life held for me.

I chose to make my husband and my children the center of my life, and I've never regretted that for a moment—not one single second. Ever since I was a little girl, I knew that I was put on this earth to be a wife and a mother, and that's exactly what I chose to do. And it is through the integrity of that choice that I have created the life I longed for and never had when I was a child.

I grew up in Oklahoma with three older sisters, a twin brother, and parents who loved us with all their hearts. They were also crazy about each other, which went a long way toward teaching us kids how a man and woman could live together in a small house, raise five children, and still get along. We never had enough money to buy everything we wanted or needed, yet we always thought of ourselves as loved rather than deprived.

My father was a binge-drinking alcoholic and an addicted gambler. Because of that I lived every day in uncertainty. I woke up every morning thinking, *Did daddy come home last night?* And, if he hadn't, *Is this the day he'll come home?* Or if he had been around consistently for a while, I'd wonder, *Is this the day this man I love so much will start drinking and gambling again? How long will this binge last? Will there be enough money to buy food? Will the electric company cut off the lights again this month? How long will it be before he's back at work during the day and comes home at night and acts like my dad again?*

I knew he was a good and wonderful man and I loved him with

all my heart. I also knew he had an illness that cheated my sisters, my brother, and me out of the father we yearned for. When I was just a little girl, I wanted more than anything to make my father well. But because I couldn't do that, I decided that I would dedicate my life to undoing the legacy of doubt, pain, fear, and uncertainty that accompanied his great love for us. I forgave him even then, when I was little, but the fear never left.

So when I grew up, my plan was to fall in love, get married, and start my own family. And I decided then and there that I would not bring that part of my father's legacy into my adult life. I would never marry or even date a man who drank or gambled. I can remember making a conscious choice and telling myself: I adore my father and I am going to bring every good part of his legacy into my life and live it and embrace it in my husband and in my children. But I will not allow that part of his legacy into my adult life.

If my father had a powerful influence on me, so did the extraordinary woman who was my mother. To put it simply, my mother lived for her children. She always put herself last. If there wasn't quite enough food for dinner, she was the one who didn't get a full plate. She'd often be up well past midnight, scrubbing the bathroom floor or ironing my father's shirts or sitting hunched over her sewing machine, making me a skirt or a blouse out of remnants she'd gotten on sale.

And then there were the nights she'd drive around town with me or one of my siblings in the car, looking for my father, who hadn't been home in a couple of days. We'd drive slowly with the

windows rolled down, peering down side streets to see if my father was lying unconscious in a deserted parking lot or dead in an alleyway. We went out on a number of those gloomy excursions but we never would find him. She'd always drive home tired but grimly optimistic that he'd turn up alive and relatively well before too long.

That precious woman never put herself first. She also never took care of herself, which is why she died of a catastrophic heart attack at the age of fifty-eight—just six years older than I am now. I was married and the mother of a six-year-old son when she died, and I swore to myself that day that I would never allow myself to become so drained and depleted. I loved my mother and I have carried her legacy of love and devotion into my relationship with my children. But I have also chosen to reject the legacy of self-neglect that caused her to be taken from me when I still needed her so much. That is why I eat healthy food, exercise every day, and make sure I take care of myself so my body doesn't fall apart before it has to. That's exactly what my mother would have wanted for me, even if she didn't do it for herself. I truly believe that I can best honor my mother's memory not by perpetuating her legacy but by choosing the parts of it that are right for me, and losing the ones that aren't.

The concept of redefining your legacy is something I am passionate about, especially when it comes to women, many of whom are merely existing inside lives they neither chose nor contemplated. So many of us have dutifully reproduced our mother's or father's behaviors, duplicating our parents' patterns and mani-



festing a legacy that we, however unconsciously, feel obligated to fulfill.

I want you to know you have a choice: you do not have to haul your parents' legacy into your life like that old dining room set your great aunt left you in her will. If it makes you happy to eat at that table and sit in those chairs, by all means keep them. But if it doesn't, remember: you have options. You can hold on to the table and toss the chairs. Or lose the table and keep the chairs (perhaps reupholster the seats so they're more comfortable). And if you just plain hate the whole thing, get rid of it before you bring it into the house.

Just as your great aunt's furniture might not suit your dining room, your parents' ways of living might not suit your life. You're not insulting your dead aunt by rejecting her old furniture, and you're not betraying your parents by living your life differently than they lived theirs; in fact, what you're doing is being true to yourself. I believe in the core of my being that you don't have to bring into your life anything that isn't working for you, nor are you fated to live out a future you had no part in creating. Each of us possesses the will to create her own legacy. It's all a choice.

Writing this book has required me to think about the choices I've made, and it has made me aware of the exhilarating power of living a life of my own choosing. I don't know how it happened, but as far back as I can remember, I've always known my life had a purpose, and I've pursued that purpose with a passion. I have never thought of myself as a victim of circumstance; rather, I

examined the circumstances I was in, evaluated their usefulness in my life, and used them as a blueprint for how I would build the life I wanted. I always pictured myself as the one person and the only force besides God who I could count on to design the life I wanted to live, and make it a reality. I knew I was meant to be a wife and mother, and I made it happen. I wanted a husband who didn't drink or gamble, and I made it happen. I wanted to take care of myself to remain vibrant and healthy for my family; and I made it happen (although I confess that the day I get rid of the treadmill just might be the happiest day of my life). And everything that has happened is the result of conscious choices that I made—some of which, I must tell you, were difficult to make and scary to live

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with. The bottom line, though, was that the thought of living a life I didn't want was much, much scarier than taking responsibility for choosing to create the life I did want.

I believe that in this life, we are defined not by the station in life into which we are born, nor by our pedigree, race, or religion, but by the choices we make. By choosing to live with passion and purpose, I have fashioned a rich

and rewarding life—not because I'm special, or a genius, or born under a lucky star. Far from it: I grew up poor and was raised by

uneducated parents. We were blue-collar and sometimes no-collar, and it wasn't unusual for us to have cold cereal for dinner. I never had a store-bought dress until I was out of high school, and I was forced to adapt to life in a household where you were never really sure who was in charge.

But I always went to bed knowing that my parents loved me, and knowing that someday I would use that love to warm the hearts of my own children. It was then, when I was just a girl in Duncan, Oklahoma, that I made a choice to be the best that I could be, and I am living proof of the wisdom of that choice.

My goal for this book is to tell everyone who reads it about the power of choosing her life rather than taking it as it comes along—not so you'll make the same choices I made, but so you can make the choices that are right for *you*. I'm certainly not an expert on your life, but I *am* an expert on mine, and that is what I hope to share with you.

It's not my intention to give people advice on how to solve their problems (I leave that to my husband). But I've had my share of struggles over the years, and I know a thing or two about what has worked for me in this life. I have learned which battles to pick, when and how to push back, and how to bend without breaking. In short, I have figured out how not to lose “me” in the course of being so many things to so many people in so many areas of my life. I have

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chosen to be an active participant in my life rather than a spectator, and in so doing I have chosen how to be a woman, how to be a wife, and how to be a mother in ways that are uniquely my own. I offer the stories of these choices as evidence of the power of sheer determination, will, and faith in God.

To be sure, I'm not doing it alone. I wake up every morning and I thank God for everything that is good, right, and true in my life. I am thankful for a husband who has placed me in the forefront of his heart because I've chosen to stand beside him. I am thankful for two fine, strong sons who remind me every day of the rightness of my mission here on earth. I am thankful for all the people in my life whose love and care are sources of constant rejuvenation for my spirit. Finally, I am thankful for the gift of free will and for the chance to choose the life God means for me to lead.

Not least, I am thankful for the opportunity to reach out to women everywhere, and touch their lives by telling them about mine. I want to reach out to all women—older and younger, married and single, women who are mothers and those who are not, women who work outside the home and those who don't.

As I write this book, I find myself looking deeply into the reservoir of memory and seeing reflections of things I haven't thought about in years, sometimes decades. When I reach out to touch them, I do so gently. God has blessed me so that I can still feel the touch of my mother's hand and see my father's smile. This is what I offer, with equal parts humility, wonder, and truth. Should any of it touch anyone, anywhere, in any way, I shall consider myself abundantly blessed.