

CHAPTER ONE

CHANGE

*Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.
To keep our faces toward change and behave like
free spirits in the presence of fate is strength undefeatable.*
—Helen Keller

It was Thanksgiving weekend, and I was on an airplane returning to my home in Grand Rapids, Michigan, from a seventieth birthday celebration for my mother in Prescott, Arizona. Although she had survived two heart attacks and triple bypass surgery in the past six months, Mother was now suffering from severe muscle damage. My own heart was heavy as I thought about what her future might hold.

Mother was always so full of life, whether she was whitewater rafting, hiking the Grand Canyon, bowling, or performing with the Dancing Grandmas. The Dancing Grandmas was a group of women who met once a week to rehearse tap dancing routines. They performed in nursing homes and special celebrations. This was her favorite activity, and she made the costumes for each woman. Mother had done it all with such zest for life, it just did not seem possible she could be so thin and frail. When we took trips together in the past, I could hardly keep up with her.

Now she moved slowly and cautiously, always short of breath at the slightest exertion. It just did not seem possible that my energetic, lively mother could now be so weak and fragile.

My mind traveled back in time to when I was a young girl. I used to love to watch my beautiful mother getting ready to go out for the evening with my father. Red was my favorite color, and she had a rich, ruby-red taffeta princess-style dress with tiny covered buttons all down the front. Black velvet trim accented the sleeves and collar. The dress made a swishing sound when she walked. How I loved that dress!

I would study her as she leaned forward toward her bureau and carefully apply matching bright red lipstick. She looked like a movie star, and I would fantasize about growing up to be just like her.

My husband had decided at the last minute not to go to Prescott with me, insisting that his overloaded work schedule did not allow him to take any time off. He was a busy physician and worked long hours, so even though I knew Mother would be disappointed, I tried to be understanding. My daughter, Alison, used his ticket and went along to visit her grandmother. My thoughts were interrupted as the flight attendant announced to prepare for landing.

We had a two-hour layover in Detroit, and since neither of us had eaten, we decided to find a nice restaurant and have a leisurely dinner. It was a pleasant experience, with much discussion about the upcoming holidays and our plans to spend Christmas week in Cancun, Mexico, as usual.

After dinner, the waiter brought the check, and I handed him my American Express card. I was surprised and slightly embarrassed when he came back to the table and informed me that my card had been declined. I handed him my Visa card, beginning to feel uneasy. He quickly returned, telling me that this card would not go through either.

By then I was horrified, insisting that both cards were good. I knew I had paid the bills, and the cards were not delinquent. He shrugged and gave me a look that said, "Sure, lady, but you had better find a way to pay this check."

The waiter would not be persuaded to take a personal check now that two credit cards had failed. Alison and I fumbled

through our purses and managed to come up with just enough cash to pay for our meals, minus his tip. He was not pleased, and we could hardly wait to get out of there.

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The rest of the flight home was uneventful, but I had an ominous feeling of dread. I went through various scenarios in my mind: Perhaps someone had stolen our identity and was using our credit cards. I was so thankful for this short half-hour flight. All I wanted to do was get off the plane. I was so anxious to get home.

I pulled into the driveway and wondered why there were papers and pieces of trash strewn about. As I pushed the button and the garage door lifted, I could not even imagine what my husband had been doing. Everything was a trashed mess. Then I walked through the front door into the house. My eyes riveted around the rooms. Nothing was in its right place—the dining room table was in the kitchen, the living room sofa was in the family room, and the sun porch was empty.

As my daughter ran through the house screaming, “We’ve been robbed,” I turned and saw a letter that had been placed on the dining room table. I read it with disbelief. It was from my husband, telling me he had left me. He had moved out while I was away, he wrote, and had taken most of the furniture with him.

Confusion and bewilderment flooded my mind. How could he have done this wicked deed on Thanksgiving weekend? Could our life together have been so terrible for such a drastic decision to move completely out of the house?

This could not have happened, I rationalized. Surely he must have had a mental breakdown. I remembered reading about men who had been sleep-deprived or grossly overworked and who one day just walked away from everything. This had to be what happened to him.

I was positive if I could just talk to him, he would change his mind and come home. I would not allow myself to accept the truth of what was happening to me. It was simply not true. I just had to be patient; and he would ultimately come to his senses. I refused to believe that our life together was over and that he

would never come back home. Besides, I had to remain calm right now for my daughter's sake.

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I felt numb as I wandered through the shambles that used to be my lovely home. I felt like I was suspended in time. I knew my body was there, but I could not feel anything. It was as if I was some stranger, watching a slow-motion picture of someone else's life through a window.

I was afraid to go into our bedroom. As I expected, it was nearly empty. He had replaced our bed with the guest room bed, probably out of guilt. All of my clothes from the dresser lay heaped in the corner of the room.

I never went to bed that night—I didn't even get undressed for two whole days. And I surely could not ever have prepared myself for what was yet to come.

MORE CHANGE

At 7 A.M., the doorbell rang. I flew to the door thinking it was my husband, but instead, a stranger stood there. He was very young and his lips were quivering. He quickly thrust papers into my hands, and as our eyes met, he saw my obvious pain and whispered, "I'm sorry, ma'am."

I replied. "It's okay; it's not your fault." Then as I closed the door and opened the divorce papers, I had to ask myself, well, then, whose fault is it? How did our lives come to this, and what had gone so terribly wrong?

I tried to lie down and rest. I wanted to think things through, but my mind was frozen. I had not shed one tear so far; I could only stare at the ceiling from a bed that felt foreign and seemed so small in my great big, empty room. I felt like I was floating on a raft in a vast unknown ocean with no idea what lay ahead except a long tunnel of darkness and aloneness.

Once again, my mind went back to my mother. I had not yet told her my husband had left me. Mother would be heartbroken, and in her fragile condition, I worried the news would be too much for her. She adored my husband and believed he had played a major role in saving her life after her first heart attack, when the doctors in Phoenix told her there was nothing they

could do and sent her home to die.

Within two weeks, she had a second attack, which caused extensive muscle damage. As I stood beside Mother's bed in a Phoenix hospital, she informed me that the doctors were refusing to do open-heart surgery on her because it would be too great a risk. I immediately called my husband, who contacted a cardiac surgeon in Grand Rapids. That surgeon consulted with the Phoenix doctors, who reluctantly faxed copies of the heart catheterization results to Grand Rapids. After extreme pressure from the Grand Rapids doctors, my sister Carol, and me, the Phoenix doctors finally agreed to do the surgery.

Nearly two years had gone by now, and even though we were devastated that the surgery had not been performed after the first heart attack, we were very grateful Mother was still with us.

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My mind returned to the present. I knew I had no choice; I would have to make the call. I dialed Mother's number and a weak voice on the other end answered.

"Momma, it's Barbara. There's something I have to tell you."

"What's wrong? You sound terrible."

"When I got home Sunday night, the house was almost empty."

"What do you mean, Barbara? Has your husband disappeared?"

"No, Mom, he has left me and taken more than half of our things. I don't know what to do." Finally, the tears began to fall.

"What do you mean, he's left you? How could he do such a thing on Thanksgiving weekend—especially when you were down here visiting me?"

"I don't know, Mom. His letter said I was not to try to contact him, as he would not talk to me. He has closed out all of our joint bank accounts, taken the money, and left me with nothing. I am convinced he has lost his mind and that when he realizes what he has done, he will come back home."

"Don't worry, Barbara, I will wire money to you immediately so you can hire an attorney."

“No, Mom, I am not going to do that. If I wait long enough, I just know he’ll regret his actions and change his mind.”

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My refusal to accept what had happened was so strong at this point that I listened and watched for his car to drive into the driveway that night, as it had every night for all those years. I just knew that at any moment, he would walk in and say, “Honey, I am back. I made a terrible mistake.”

But there was no sound other than that of my own breathing. I sat silently and waited for a car that never arrived.

The total denial I was in at that time seems so unreal now, but during an extreme crisis, our survival instincts kick in and in an amazing way seem to protect us from going over the edge. I think it is our own psyche trying to help us deal with the initial shock, while we learn to cope with the traumatic situation life has dealt us.

All through that second day after talking with Mother, my mind was filled with questions: When did my husband come to this decision to leave me? Was it one specific thing or many things? What pushed him over the edge? I guess I knew all along, for quite a while, that something was terribly wrong, but I chose to ignore it. How could I have been so stupid not to do something to improve my marriage when I had the chance?

He had asked me on two different occasions if I would consider counseling, but I said no. I thought if he was not willing to change his work habits and spend more time working on our marriage, I was not willing to go for counseling.

Our social life had changed so much over the years. He had a busy practice; I owned a small day spa. As a result, we had essentially begun leading separate lives. He complained constantly about being unable to reach me. He said, “When I want to talk to you, I do not want to be told that you are with a client.” I tried to explain that I could not stop in the middle of a skin care service to take a phone call. But he insisted I did not care enough to put him first, and that my business was more important to me than our marriage.

We rarely even had dinner together any more. We used to exercise together three evenings a week at a local health club.

First we would walk around the track together and talk about the day's events and our future plans. Then I would head for the weight room, and he would run the track. After our workout, we met in the adjoining restaurant to have dinner.

But as I worked longer hours in the salon and he became busier with medicine, we began to meet at the club less often. He was working out later and later at night, and I was simply too tired to exercise. I started working out at home in the morning, and we spent much less time together.

I had even dropped out of my church choir and stopped attending Sunday services, which we used to go to together. Then in the past two years, my husband had started begging off attending my family events, claiming his schedule was simply too tight to spare the time. He had begun traveling somewhere every month for his business, but I was the one saying, "I really cannot take the time away from the salon to go with you."

As I pondered all this, the most overwhelming sense of loss and emptiness swept over me. Why didn't I close my business and travel with him, as I used to do? In hindsight, my choices now seemed so ridiculous and shallow. I sat rocking back and forth on the bed, with my arms wrapped around myself, pleading with God to please give me another chance and let me have my life back.

Isn't it amazing how we desperately hang on to something we think is so important, and then in the process, actually lose so much more than we gain? If you know that something is ruining your marriage or ruling your life, ask yourself, which is more important—what I am holding onto or what is being destroyed? Sometimes the best choice is to hang on and other times to let go.

The salon gave me what I thought was some control over my life, when actually, my business controlled me. Ultimately, the salon changed my entire life, but at this particular moment, I neither welcomed nor wanted the change.

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The doorbell rang early the next morning and I literally ran to the door, again expecting my husband to be standing there. I had totally forgotten that my housekeeper was scheduled

to work that day. “Barbara, what on earth has had happened here?” Jane asked, surveying the house with a startled look on her face.

I was jolted back to reality, which was that my house was a complete disaster. Jane was unprepared for the shock. I slumped down in a kitchen chair, and said, “My husband left me, and this is the end result.” She began silently wandering through the rooms. Finally, she looked at me and said, “You look almost as rough as this house! Let’s get this place cleaned up and all the stuff put away, and you will feel much better.”

I tried to respond, but no words came out; instead, I started crying uncontrollably. When I stood up, everything went black. Jane caught me before I fainted. “Oh, you poor honey, we’ll get the job done so you won’t have to look at this mess.”

Jane fixed me a cup of coffee and listened while I shared with her what had happened, and explained that I could not pay her until the money from my mother arrived. She was very sympathetic and understanding and did not seem to mind. My husband had left some of his moving boxes in the garage, and I brought those in for Jane to fill.

My bedroom was the worst task as my clothes were still on the floor in a heap. Jane took all my off-season clothes and packed them in boxes to create some sense of order. I was very saddened at the end of the day to have to say goodbye to her. It was apparent I could no longer afford the luxury of a housekeeper—one more change I would have to handle.

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When the phone rang that evening, I was frozen with such fear; I could hardly pick it up. I was not sure I could face talking with my husband. I forced myself to lift the receiver and say hello.

“Hi, Barb,” said the voice on the other end of the line. “I knew I should call, but I could not do it right away. I am really sorry it has to be this way, but I thought it was the best thing for us under the circumstances.”

I hung onto every word, and I could not speak for several seconds. Finally, barely audible words came out. “My heart is broken; how could you do this wicked thing? Where are you,

and who are you with?”

“No one,” he replied, “I am alone in my apartment.”

“Apartment?” I repeated. “Why are you in an apartment? You could have discussed this with me so we could work things out. Could you not have said, ‘Barbara, if you refuse to go to a counselor, I am going to get a divorce’? Do you really want to give up just like that and destroy our lives? What about our families? Have you given any thought to the impact on our children?”

“Yes, I have considered everything that this means and I have made my decision. I am not going to change my mind. I love you; I just do not want to be married to you any more.”

I refused to believe him. “No, you must come back home, please, please come home.”

“I have made my decision. I’ll call you when more time has gone by.”

“Well, what about money? I have no money to run the house.”

“I am not going to give you any money. The house will just have to be sold. You will have to take care of yourself. If your business does not generate enough money for you to live on, you will have to close the salon and find something else to do.”

I could hardly comprehend what those words meant. He continued. “You will have to get an attorney, and our attorneys will have to work everything out. I have to go now. Goodbye.”

I hung up the phone. For the first time since I returned home, sheer panic hit, so overwhelming I could neither move nor take a deep breath. I knew I could not take care of my house with the income from my little day spa; the business had just started to break even.

Memories of arguments we had had over remodeling the house raced through my mind. He said we could take out a mortgage to pay for the work, but I did not want to put a mortgage on my house. He argued that I did not trust him, and said there was plenty of money to handle a large monthly payment. What was wrong with me that I could not say no? Now here I was, facing the real possibility of losing my home.

COURAGE IN THE FACE OF CHANGE

My life was going to change dramatically, and the reality of what that meant had begun to take hold. I should have prepared myself for the possibility of divorce. In the past, there had been opportunities to stash some money away, but somehow it seemed dishonest and unnecessary. What was I to do? Where was I to turn? I was so frightened. Thank God, I had one credit card in my name that he could not cancel. The money from my mother would arrive in the morning, and would carry me for a little while. Once my husband had more time to think things through, I was still sure he would change his mind.

Where reality was in all of this, I did not know. All I could focus on was how to turn back the clock and fix this horrible nightmare. I started by calling his best friend. After tearfully pouring out the details of the last twenty-four hours, his friend kept saying, "I cannot believe it; I just cannot believe it. I assure you, Barbara, I did not know anything about this. He never discussed your marriage problems with me at any time. I am almost as shocked as you are. I promise I will try to talk to him." During the next conversation I had with him several days later, I was told, "I am sorry, Barbara, but I just do not want to be involved."

Do not expect friends to fix your problems or intervene in your personal affairs. They can listen and advise, but ultimately, your own personal life's situation rests with you and you alone. My closest friends tried to intervene and persuade my husband to reconsider his decision. They expressed my deep sorrow at losing him, assuring him that I was willing to do whatever he wanted if he would only give our marriage another chance.

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He finally agreed to attend three counseling sessions to see if there was any hope of reconciliation. I was not sure as to why he chose the number three, but I was willing to agree to even one, if there was any chance at all to convince him to come back home. I did not believe he thought there was even a remote chance for reconciliation. He was simply placating me in an effort to get a speedy, more amiable divorce and to ease his conscience.

I don't remember much about the session, except that my

husband kept insisting he had done nothing wrong, and I was the one who needed to change. When the counselor began questioning him more in-depth about his motive for seeking a divorce, he became defensive and insisted that divorce was his only alternative. When she asked him why he had agreed to have counseling, he replied that he believed it was what most people did when they were getting a divorce.

She gave us a homework assignment and he agreed to follow through, on her direction. We were to meet for dinner, either out someplace at a quiet restaurant or at my home. He said he would come to the house for dinner.

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I was ecstatic as I prepared his favorite meal, complete with dessert. I cleaned the house until it was spotless and dimmed the lights. Candles were burning and soft music was playing in the background. I wore the sexiest clothes I could find, choosing a look that was casual but seductive.

After he arrived, and we were eating dinner, I asked him how I could change to be more like what he wanted. I could tell he was preoccupied and really did not want to be there at all. Finally, I asked, "Why did you come here tonight?"

"Well, I promised the counselor I would follow her instructions, so I wanted to keep my word," he explained. "I cannot stay long; I have to do my rounding yet. We have two more appointments, so I will see you again in two days." With that, he got up to leave.

I began to cry and begged him to stay, but it was no use. I sat down and looked at the half-eaten dinner, the beautiful candles glowing, and I felt like I was the loneliest person in the entire world.

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The second counseling session was similar to the first. Our next assignment was to take place over dinner in a quiet restaurant of his choosing. We were to discuss what actually led to his decision to leave. He was so subdued a conversation was difficult. He finally admitted he did not know how he had

let things go so far, but insisted he would not change his mind. When I asked him what he met meant by “let things go so far,” he said he could not say.

He then informed me that he would not attend the third session. I felt such pain in my heart; I thought I would surely die. He then got up, took out money to pay the check, and walked away. I sat there for the longest time, thinking maybe he would come back and finish dinner with me, but he did not return.

I pondered the comment he made about how he had let things go so far and wondered what exactly that meant. Did he mean going so far as to moving out of the house or filing for divorce? Then I had another thought: Surely he did not mean he had gotten involved with another woman. That just could not have happened. We had always talked about the dangers for doctors of women who would go to great lengths to strike up an affair and snag a doctor away from his wife. But he absolutely would not have allowed such a terrible thing to happen to us. Of that I was certain.

Suddenly I felt total panic; I could not allow myself to sit there another second. I had to get out of there and go home. Since he did mention “letting things go so far,” maybe he would really think hard about his decision and change his mind. At that point, I was still certain he would make the right decision and come home.