

Inside My Heart

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Chapter 1

I never, ever dreamed that I would be writing a book, and yet here I am, doing just that. Sometimes I find myself asking, *Lord, why me? What have I got to say that other people would want to read about?* But I live my life never questioning God's plan for me, and since I've been given the opportunity to write this book, it must be what I'm meant to do. My greatest hope is that what I put down in these pages may inspire and help women by offering a portrait of who I am, how I've lived my life, the decisions I've made, and how I've made them.

A lot of people go through life without really thinking about who they are and why they do the things they do. It's as if they're living their lives on autopilot, staring straight ahead without seeing anything other than what's right in front of their faces. They accept what comes their way without considering whether or not it's right for them, and don't realize that by passively accepting whatever happens, they are giving up chances every day to create the lives they want.

But it doesn't have to be that way. I want you to know that you can make choices in your life; in fact, you *must* make choices in order to have the life you want. I know this is the truth because it's a truth I have lived.

For some reason, I've always known what I wanted, ever since I was a little girl. I live every day of my life as if it were an adventure, and I approach every aspect of my life as if it were an event. 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 began to wonder about how I got that way, and how it is that my life has turned out the way it has.

What it comes down to is that I simply cannot imagine wanting to be anything other than who I am: a wife to the man I love, a mother to two grown sons, and a woman who has declared her independence from the rigors of parenting and is poised on the brink of a new and exciting phase of life. And I didn't become who I am through dumb luck; I did it by knowing myself, and using that knowledge to create the life I wanted.

You see, I absolutely believe that in order for a woman to experience happiness, fulfillment, and peace, she needs to know 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 destiny. And I think it's getting harder and harder to tell the two apart. So much of the time, women are moving so fast, we lose ourselves just trying to keep up with the frantic pace of life. You drag yourself 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 you can lose track of your essential feminine self, that unique, life-giving entity that invigorates your being and warms the souls of the people you love.

But you don't have to lose that self, and the way to hold onto her is to accept nothing less than the best for her—that is, *for yourself*. I believe we were put on this earth to live lives of joy and abundance, and that is what I want for you. I want to get you excited about whatever phase of life you're in; about being a woman in this day and time,

about being the woman that God created in you. And it's all there for the choosing, because I believe in the marrow of my bones that how you live, how I live, how we all live as women, is largely a matter of choice. You have the right to choose to be happy. You have the right to choose to have a good attitude. It's all a choice. And I'll tell you right now that 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 are probably thinking, "That's easy for you to say: you live in a wonderful house with a successful man who loves you and gives you 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 having free will and being at liberty to embrace the joyful aspects of life and reject the hurtful ones, so you can choose to do what's working for you, and turn your back on what isn't. It's a privilege to choose to be happy. It's a privilege to choose to be positive. It's a privilege to take charge of your existence and be excited about your life.

And it is a privilege to touch the lives of other women through the pages of this book. So 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, a wildly enthusiastic homemaker, and embarking on a new career as an author at the age of fifty-two. 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.

First and foremost: 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. Because I've known ever since I was a little girl 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 I have created the life I longed for and never had when I was a child.

I grew up 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 kids, and still get along. We never had enough money to buy everything we wanted, and for some reason, we always thought of ourselves as loved rather than deprived.

But my father was an alcoholic and a gambler, and because of that I lived every day in uncertainty. I woke up every morning feeling loved but also 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, whom I love so much, is going to start drinking and gambling again and not come home? How long will this binge last? 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 deprived my sisters, my brother, and me of the father we yearned for, and that I would dedicate my life to undoing the legacy of doubt that accompanied his great love for us.

So when I grew up, my plan was to find a man, marry, 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 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.

And then there's my mother, who, to put it simply, 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 down the bathroom floor, or ironing my father's shirts, or sitting hunched over her ancient 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 troll the streets 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, and she'd 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 five years older than I am now. I was married and the mother of a five-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 that I died young and left my children to lead so much of their lives without me. 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 inhabiting lives they neither chose nor contemplated. So many of us have dutifully reproduced our mothers' or fathers' behaviors, duplicating our parents' patterns and manifesting 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 even bring it into the house. Your great aunt's furniture might not suit your dining room, just as 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 doomed to a destiny you had no part in creating. Each of us possesses the will to create her own legacy. And it's all a choice.

Writing this book has required me to think about the choices I've made, and made me aware of the exhilarating power of living a chosen life. 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've always pictured myself as the one person 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 knew I wanted a husband who didn't drink or gamble, and I made it happen. I knew I wanted to take care of myself to remain vibrant and healthy for my family, and I made it happen. And everything that has happened is the result of conscious choices that I made.

I believe with all my heart 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 in very humble circumstances, the youngest of five kids (along with my twin brother) who sometimes had to content themselves with oatmeal for dinner. I never had a store-bought dress until I was well into 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 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.

That is my goal for this book: to tell everyone who reads it about the power of choosing her life rather than taking it as it comes along—not so you can make the same choices I made, but so you can make the choices that are right for *you*. I’m not an expert at anything, and 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 also 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 behind 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 a source of constant rejuvenation for my spirit, and I am thankful for the gift of free will and being empowered to choose the life He means 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. 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, so I won't lose these precious reminders of love. 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.