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Chapter One

“No Matter What”

Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain. —Psalm 127:1

As the years came and went, Mark fell deeper and deeper into addiction. He pulled further away, rarely even eating a meal with the family. His anger would flare up more often, and the amount of time we saw him sober dwindled. More responsibility fell on me as he became resentful and unable to follow through with responsibilities. Our three children were old enough to know what was going on. They saw it for what it was. There seemed to be no easy way for them to deal with seeing their father when he had been drinking.

How had this happened?



I was twenty-one when I spoke my vow of marriage. I couldn't imagine anything threatening our promise to each other. I wrote in my journal the night of our wedding that I would honor my commitment, no matter what. I had no idea what "no matter what" could mean in an unpredictable world. I was looking to start my married life with a husband who would protect, honor, and cherish me. The thought of my man not doing those three things was nowhere on my radar. Never in my wildest dreams would I believe that rather than look to him for protection, I would one day need protection *from* him . . . my own husband. The "no matter what" in our marriage would take us through much anguish.

It took years for us to understand God's plan for marriage and the character of His redemptive heart as we muddled through life.



I grew up believing that marriage must be relatively easy. My parents weren't screamers or prone to react with anger. If they had disagreements, they took care of them out of earshot of us kids. My mom didn't seem to struggle with allowing her husband to lead the family and Dad dearly loved his wife enough to always

consider her thoughts, feelings, and wishes.

I had the misconception that marriage really could be a fairytale romance. If my parents had any struggles, they convincingly kept them hidden. I did know that money was always tight on our Midwestern family farm. Other than that, I thought their life was rather problem-free. I figured I'd meet my Prince Charming someday and we'd live a life similar to the one my parents lived, or at least the life I perceived them to live.

When my eye did catch the flashing smile of a tall guy named Mark, it didn't take me long to imagine being lifted onto the back of a white stallion by this brave and handsome rider. It was obvious that I loved the romanticized version of a relationship. Our love began to flourish in the month of May just as the lily of the valley is in full bloom and warmth begins to drench the cool ground. Just three years later we were married as the lilies were making their yearly appearance. I couldn't wait to enter our little rented house as Mark's wife, bearing his last name like a badge of honor. I was certain complete contentment was waiting for me on the other side of the threshold.

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Lord.*

Two years into our marriage, we were over the moon with joy as we welcomed our first child. We were now a family of three. Rocking our precious little boy Jordan in my arms, watching his chest rise and fall with every breath, his tiny fingers wrapping around my hand, I was overwhelmed with love. Mark adored his little boy and was a good father to his infant son.

We soon had the added delight of two beautiful daughters. Kristen and Jena. Within three years and three months we brought home three precious babies. To say the least, life was busy.

But something else had taken up residence in our home and invaded our marriage, something I had certainly not invited. It stormed in and drove a wedge into our relationship and heartache into every corner of our lives. Mark had begun to drink heavily. He became distant as the pulls of financial responsibilities and daily life took a toll on him. The more I pressured him for attention and help, the more he pulled away. I was becoming more critical of him. I was realizing that the man I believed would bring me happiness was incapable of doing so. While I was looking to him to fulfill what no man is meant to fill, he would be fixated on the drink in his hand.

During the same time our babies were coming along, a tragedy in my family caused me to reexamine my life. My cousin's wife died just days before she was to deliver her twins: a boy and a girl. Complications and a critical hospital mistake took her and her babies' lives. She was such a tender, loving woman who loved the Lord. I couldn't understand why God would take her and spare someone like me. Her husband leaned hard upon the Lord as he managed to weed through the incredible grief that overtook him and their three-year-old son. After struggling with her death and my own need for a Savior, I dropped to my knees one day and re-dedicated my heart and my marriage to the Lord.

My husband did not find my new love for the Lord amusing. When I asked him to go to church, he tagged along, but only to satisfy me. I longed to share my faith with Mark. Watching other couples at church interact brought such sadness. Even with Mark by my side, I felt alone. Mark's discontent was most always evident on Sundays. (Later I would learn that he never felt more judged than in those days.) Countless times I tried to press him about his need for a Savior, not realizing I was vainly attempting to do the work of the Holy Spirit.

I began to pour all of my spare time into the study of God's Word. I was hungry for truth. Still, a cloud of doubt, worry, anger,

resentment, and denial constantly hung over my head. I would spend hours crying out to God in desperation, begging for Him to take away the addiction that was changing my beloved husband into someone I didn't recognize.

For a few years, the intensity of the situation tapered off somewhat, though the alcohol demon was still always there, always hovering. For a time, Mark became more engaged in our daily lives. He devoted time to being a football coach, and helped with the kids' Little Leagues and Jordan's scout troop. He loved playing with Kristen and Jena, and made it a point to spend some individual time with each of our children. We plugged into a wonderful church. We had friends who loved the Lord and loved us. We also made the decision to homeschool our girls. It was all a part of God's mercy, for He was putting into place sources of strength we would greatly need in the coming years. At that time there was laughter and love in our home, but we walked cautiously, for we never knew when the demon would raise its ugly head.

It was also during this time that the Lord opened doors so that I was able to use my passion for music and writing. Mark often encouraged me to pursue my songwriting career. Because I've always been happily creative, God gave me many wonderful opportunities to minister to people through music. It exposed my children to places of extreme poverty since I often brought them along when possible. As we traveled to places such as orphanages and shelters, the children were provided with ample opportunities for lessons in compassion. I was continually drawn to desperate places. Those who filled the orphanages, prisons, shelters—the people who were broken and oppressed—I could identify with, I understood.

But the drinking continued, and Mark was pulling away from the family. Although the changes caused by his drinking and my critical attitude were at first subtle, eventually it became a nasty

cycle in our lives—my demands and his drinking, his drinking and my demands. My insecurities made the situation even more difficult as I placed pressure on his shoulders to make me “happy.” When we had dated, he kept most of his alcohol use hidden from me. Drinking was something he mostly did with the guys. I tried to ignore it and pretend it wasn’t there. It was easier for me not to deal with it because I was ill equipped to know how. Now, however, it was affecting our relationship and our family life. I could ignore it no longer.

Unfortunately, I only reached out for help in those early years a few times. I truly didn’t want to say anything to anyone that was out of disrespect for my husband. I never wanted to hurt him. And I struggled with my own pride, wondering what people would think; would they not like Mark? Be shocked? Turn away? Could anyone understand? How would our children be treated? Lies from the enemy ran rampant in my mind and many times, I believed them. I thought that if I just prayed enough and loved enough, God would change Mark. God certainly could change him, but Mark had to be willing. However, first, God needed to change me.



I continued on my own downward spiral of depression. At the lowest point, I could barely get dressed in the morning let alone take care of my family. I was overwhelmed with grief. One morning it actually took me a half an hour just to put my socks on. My heart hurt so badly, I didn’t think it could continue to beat. I began to open up and tell a few of my close friends about the struggles going on in our household. I was desperate for help and desperate for someone to understand. I wanted answers. I wanted to hold my beloved man without the mistrust and wall that was between us. Had I known that the journey would last over twenty years I would not have had the strength, the courage, or the de-

sire to keep going. I lived with the mentality of doing just one day, one day at a time. I couldn't have imagined the nightmare that was coming.



Usually, when I traveled to minister through music, I would take one of the kids with me but this particular trip, I went alone. The kids were having fun taking a break from school for Christmas break. I had come to San Diego to do a worship event and a children's concert. It was New Year's Day and I was on the beach, soaking up as much sun as I possibly could before heading back to the Midwest

Despite the strained state of our marriage, I missed Mark terribly.

and into a brutal snowstorm. Many issues troubled my spirit, but most of all, Mark and our marriage were heavy on my heart. Though our children were more independent and able to reason and understand better, I constantly feared what effect our marital struggles were having on them.

The tide was low, so I was able to walk quite a long way through very shallow water, praying intently about our marriage as I went. I dreaded the thought of another twelve months with the same old issues. I was confused and tired and I desperately needed God to give me direction. It was the same old crying out, "Lord, what am I to do?" The response I received was not an audible one, but in my spirit, I heard the Lord say, "Joy, do you trust Me?"

"Yes, Lord, I trust You," I responded in my heart and again, I heard,

"Joy, do you trust Me?"

"Yes, Lord," once again I answered and once again He asked me,

"Joy, do you trust Me, do you trust Me with Mark?"

"Yes, Father, I do trust You."

Three times I heard in my spirit the Lord ask if I trusted Him. Three times, I had responded with a yes. I had no idea how, over and over again, I would need to think back on this time and this place and remember that the Lord wanted me to truly trust Him. And that I said yes.

Later that night, as I boarded the plane, my mind lingered over the words my spirit had heard earlier. I left the warm winds and the sandy beach behind, flying into a nasty snowstorm that had been raging in the Midwest. The plane made it as far as Chicago, skidding across the icy runway during landing. Although it was now morning, all that could be seen was blinding snow. Along with other weary travelers, I got in line to begin the tedious process of attempting to get out of Chicago. It was futile, due to the blizzard, and for the first time in twenty years Chicago O'Hare was closing. Everyone was advised to find a hotel. The airport was closing its doors and security demanded that everyone leave. I was one of the last persons to get a shuttle to a hotel. It was a haunting feeling to hear such silence in a place that is normally bustling with life.

Except for some abandoned cars along the road the city was deserted. By the time I reached the hotel, I was exhausted. I wanted so much to be with my family all cozy in our house, making snow ice cream with the kids, instead of alone in a hotel. And, despite the strained state of our marriage, I missed Mark terribly.

For the next two days, I was holed up in that hotel, alone with God. I opened my Bible and came to the last chapter of John verses 15–17. It was the account of Jesus reinstating Peter on the beach. I had plenty of uninterrupted time to chew on this portion of Scripture.

Peter denied Christ three times on the eve of Christ's death on the cross. I can't imagine the anguish his failure caused his soul. In that last chapter of John, the resurrected Christ is with His disciples, along a stretch of beach, and He begins to speak directly to

Peter. The scene is a moving one. Peter is painfully reminded of his denial of Christ and Christ is preparing Peter for his powerful role in the early church. Previously, Peter had acted in response to fear. I believe Jesus was instilling in his heart where his focus should now remain. "Peter, no matter what, feed and care for the sheep with *agape* love." Jesus desired that Peter would love Him and trust Him, even to the point of death (tradition tells us that Peter would also be crucified).

While I hadn't blatantly denied Christ in public, in the recesses of my heart there were pools of doubt and rivers of fear. I seemed to live in that fear every moment of every single day. Fear that life would never change, that my husband would never change, that we would be stuck in this pit for the rest of our lives. I so much wanted to possess the sold-out, *agape* love that Christ desired from Peter, but I was stuck in a place where I continually paddled about in my lonely, surging rapids of despair.

God used that time on the beach, however, to place a stake of faith in the ground. I eventually made it safely back home. The result of that blizzard was a lot of snow, snow that would melt in the spring. However, the storm brewing on the horizon of my life would soon be roaring more loudly and fiercely than I could imagine.