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CHAPTER 1



My Story: How I Became Halfway Enlightened

My body is coiled in the fetal position on the hall carpet. One cheek is slapped against the beige wool and my nose is sucking dirt. Yellow cat hair clings to the knotted ridges of design. Fine dust, like silken sand, is making me cough. This rug is filthy.

Tears drool from my eyes and wet the carpet. In the process, the dust turns to small lumps of damp grit. *When, I wonder, was the last time this carpet was cleaned, and why isn't my vacuum doing a better job?*

I'm flat on the floor because I've collapsed in despair. It's almost Christmas, the Big Happy Season, and I want to die. I want out of my life. I want to kill myself, but . . . *darn*, I'm thinking, *why is this carpet in such stinky shape?*

I kick my legs a few times. I moan and cry and wheeze. I roll over onto my stomach, squeeze my eyelids together, and howl. I can't live this life anymore—

it's unbearable. Turning my head to one side, I open my eyes. My dog-sized long-haired orange cat sits close to my head, peering intently at my face. "My entire life," I holler at him, "has been nothing but emotional pain! I've been a loser in love forever!" The cat's ears flatten like he's sitting in a hard wind.

"Nothing has ever worked out for me. Nothing *will* ever work out for me. And now," I yell, "I'm too old to have any hope that I'll ever have a good and happy relationship with a man! I can't stand it anymore—I'm finished! It's over. I'm going to kill myself."

I sob and toss my body from one side of the narrow hallway to the other and back again. The cat jumps quickly out of the way. "This is it," I tell him. "I'm ending it."

I sit up, gobs of orange cat hair plastered all over my black sweatshirt and black jeans. I look like a hairbrush. Cat hair is up my nose, and clumps of it are sticking to the oil on my face. I start sneezing. I kick my feet and scream, "*I can't die covered in cat hair!*"

I call one of my married sisters. "I'm going to kill myself," I moan. "I'm 53 years old, and I've never had a good relationship with a man. This last man has done me in and finished me off. I don't know what's wrong with me, but I can't get it figured out. I've been therapied for years, and I've tried everything. Nothing works. I'm outta here."

"Oh," my sister says. She pauses. "I was going to ask you to bring a salad to my Christmas brunch."

"What kind do you want?" I ask. If I wait a week or two to kill myself, what will be the difference? There's no sense ruining a family party—someone else in the family generally does that. I feel too bad to kill myself tonight anyway. I decide I'll just wait a bit . . . you know, I'll wait to kill myself until I feel better.

YOU DON'T KNOW ME, but you may be wondering what has brought on this peculiar screaming crisis in my life. Well, it's the regular things:

- The way society has brought up many of us women to think that we're second best, and that we should be grateful for what we have in a family, a relationship, or a marriage.
- The influence of my charming and talented father, who is addicted to prescription drugs and alcohol and to the abuse in his own past. It's my father who unconsciously "loves" me and "hates" me, who tutored me in the negative patterns to look for in the men in my life.
- My mother, who, like so many women in her age group, has been taught to accept her marriage as it is—for better or for worse—and who thinks that the way her husband treats her and her children is just "how it is."

In short, I grew up knowing nothing about how to attract or have a healthy love relationship. I grew up thinking there was something very wrong with me that prevented my emotional happiness, something I simply couldn't fathom or figure out.

Along the way men have loved and hated me, and they've loved and left me. I've been abused, molested, and taken advantage of. I've given my money to men, as well as had them steal it from me. I've experienced almost every disaster that you can imagine happening to a

woman. Eventually I got therapy, which explained things and made perfect sense, only it changed nothing. I kept trying and hoping, and somehow I always found the energy to go one more round, longing to finally find and snatch the bright ring of happiness that represented a loving, permanent man—that ring that some women seem to find so easily.

Then one day, when I'm 53, smack in the middle of the festive holiday season and right before a Merry Christmas, another “perfect” and “wonderful” relationship gets snatched right off my love truck. The romance ends for no logical reason that I can see, so I shatter and snap: I throw myself on the floor and decide to die.

I realize that the life I've been living has to absolutely, totally, and completely come to an end.

IN THE WEEKS THAT FOLLOW, while waiting for a better and more convenient time to end my life, a vivid picture begins to form itself in my mind:

*I'm standing on the edge of a high cliff.
Behind me is the vast emotional land of terror
and abuse I've always lived in. It's filled with
the crowded shadows and outlines of one disas-
trous love affair after another. Turbulent emo-
tions from all the years have piled up like packs
of wild dogs, shrieking and slobbering and tear-
ing at my back.*

*As my toes touch the rim of the cliff, I look
down and see the edge of my life, which seems
to go on forever into the immense, dark, deep
Unknown. In front of me there is simply space . . .
and a future that goes into infinity with*

nothing showing itself. It's clear that I can't go back to my old life, which was so full of pain and agony. It's also clear that I can't continue to stand still on the brink of the cliff—not with all that familiar but brutal angst pressing up against me. My past is shoving me hard, and I'm in emotional disarray and despair. I realize that my life experiences with men have finally broken me.

Gradually, as I stand immobilized, I begin to realize that I've thought my only option is to die. Then boong, like a bell clanging, I hear, "My body doesn't need to die. I only need to kill the self that suffers." The inner voice then whispers to me, "Go 'cold turkey' and leap away from your old, familiar emotional life. Jump into that great Unknown, that invisible, endless carpet of unadorned space in front of you."

I'm terrified. If I don't have my old life full of men, what will I have? Maybe I'll fall hard, down into the deep darkness and be pulverized. Maybe I'll fly. Maybe when I let go of my past and my habitual ways of thinking, I'll hang and drift in space forever like an astronaut who loses his tether. Or maybe jumping over the edge will bring me more pain and loneliness than I've already endured. Worse than that, maybe I'll find that I have no life at all.

The voice gives no more direction, so again I'm lost in the silence. Wavering and waffling for days, I finally realize that I have no choice. No emotional life, I decide, is better than the old life. So as I get ready to jump off that cliff

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and into my new life, I tell myself, "I will never suffer over a man again. I will never have certain kinds of men in my life again. If I never have another love relationship with a man, so be it."

And I know it to be utterly true. Then I spread out my arms, and I fly away.