

CHAPTER ONE

The Keys to Happily Ever After....

Are you tired of hearing about the skyrocketing divorce rates in our country? Does it scare you to think that your future marriage has a less than 50 percent chance of survival? Do you feel helpless to improve your odds of having a successful marriage? What if we told you that we know the key to more than doubling your chances of staying married? And what if we told you that this key was something you can use right now, whether you're single without a prospect in sight, in a serious relationship, or engaged to the love of your life and knee-deep in *Brides* magazines? How much would it be worth to you? Would it be worth five easy payments of \$29.99 plus shipping and handling? How about the price of this book?

Here's the key: Don't Marry Young. In fact, don't get married until you're thirty. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, your chances of staying married more than double if you get married after the age of twenty-five. That's right, the old "50 percent of all marriages end in divorce" statistic is literally cut in half for those who marry for the first time after twenty-five. And after thirty combined years of working with women on the verge of divorce, we're taking it a step further and saying that you'll have even better odds the closer you are to thirty. But there's nothing magic about turning thirty. There's a lot more to it than sitting back, biding your time, and waiting for your thirtieth birthday to roll around. If you're serious about improving your chances of choosing a great husband and having a fabulous marriage, there's a lot you need to be doing *now*, before you walk down the rose-petaled aisle.

So what qualifies us to be the Keepers of the Key? For the past sixteen years, we have been working with women in crisis – Shannon, in her psychotherapy office, with women and couples who were trying to save their troubled marriages, and Celeste, in her divorce law office, with women whose marriages were already beyond saving. We've listened to women pour their

hearts out and share their stories of disappointment, regret, disillusionment, and guilt over their failed marriages and unrealized hopes for the future.

How It All Started

Just a few years into our professional practices, we'd often commiserate that entering the scene in our client's lives after the damage to their marriages had already been done was frustrating. There was not much we could do at that point to turn back time. Was there anything that could be done to better people's chances of having a successful marriage or were we all just destined to be random victims of the depressing divorce statistics? As big fans of marriage and out of desire to have great and lasting marriages ourselves, someday, we decided to investigate. We were determined to figure out what leads to the demise of marriages and if there was anything to be done to prevent divorce before saying I do.

After discovering consistent patterns in our clients' stories, we came to two important conclusions: First, the choices we make before we're married, even long before we ever lay eyes on our spouse, have the biggest impact on the success or failure of our future marriage. And second, happy marriages are born out of fulfilled single lives.

Armed with this knowledge, we were determined to find a way to encourage single women to live their lives to the fullest in their twenties so that they could make better choices, have some great experiences, and hopefully enter marriage with no regrets. A book was the obvious choice to reach the single women of the world with our message of hope. We didn't get very far on the whole book thingy back then because we were so busy traveling, pursuing our careers, and making the most of our own twenties. Sixteen years, two marriages (just one each!) and six children (three each!) later, we have an even better vantage point. Our personal experi-

ences of marrying at 29 and 30, have reinforced our message that having a fabulous single life leads to an even better marriage later. Throughout the next twelve chapters, we'll share many stories from our clients, mentor relationships, focus groups, and interviews with women of all ages and stages of life. We are so appreciative to these women (whose names have been changed) for their willingness to honestly share their experiences, even the painful ones, in the hope that others will benefit.

Vanessa

Vanessa is a former therapy client who, at twenty-three, was sure she had found her soul mate. She and Greg met their junior year of college and had been inseparable ever since. If this wasn't love, she didn't know what was. By all accounts, Greg was a great guy – athletic, handsome, funny and incredibly romantic – everything that Vanessa had always wanted in a husband. Vanessa had never experienced such intense passion with anyone, ever. “Our chemistry was intense, and I always felt safe when we were together. My parents loved Greg, too. They were always telling me how relieved they were that I had Greg to take care of me now that I was graduating and ‘going out into the real world.’”

I was pretty nervous about walking down that aisle on my wedding day. I knew I wasn't ready to be anyone's wife and couldn't shake the nagging feeling that there was more I should have done with my life before getting married. But I knew that I loved Greg and he loved me. Besides, my parents had spent a small fortune on the wedding and my friends and family were all there, expecting me to say I do.” So she did.

A little less than five years into her marriage, it became painfully obvious to Vanessa that she had made a wrong decision. She had changed so much during those five years and felt a million miles away from Greg. Fighting was a constant in their relationship. Many of the fights were about money, of which there never seemed to be enough, even though Vanessa had a

decent-paying job. The credit card debt was spiraling out of control and Greg had been through three jobs since the wedding and as many periods of unemployment. “I didn’t understand why he wasn’t more motivated to try to find work but seemed content to just sit around and wait for the phone to ring. When Greg found out that I had called my parents to help out with the rent, it caused a huge fight. What else was I supposed to do? He hadn’t worked in five months!” Despite her guilt, Vanessa quickly began losing respect for Greg.

Vanessa reconnected via Facebook with a girlfriend from college who had spent the past two years working with a nonprofit in Paraguay. Hearing about her friend's incredible experiences learning a new language and exploring a new culture made Vanessa long for the freedom to just pick up and go. She tried to talk to Greg about the possibility of working abroad, but he made it clear that had no interest in leaving the comforts of the good ol' US of A and couldn't understand why Vanessa would want to.

Religion also became a problem between them. “Greg and I always considered ourselves to be spiritual people, but decided back in college that organized religion wasn't for us. When a friend from work invited me to her church several months ago, though, I felt a very strong connection there. I started going to church every Sunday and invited Greg to go with me, but he had no interest. That was the last fight we had. We just can’t seem to agree about anything anymore.”

Why had Vanessa been so naïve to think that she could make a decision about who she would spend the rest of her life with at age twenty-three? That "intoxicating" love she had felt so strongly toward Greg had slowly worn off and was instead replaced by feelings of resentment and distance. She was miserable, ashamed, and full of regret. Why hadn't love conquered all?

Vanessa wasn't just a silly little girl in love, nor was she reckless in her decision to marry. She was a college graduate, had known Greg for a few years before they got engaged, and had the support of her family and friends. Most importantly, Vanessa truly believed she was in love.

And she probably was. But, that's just it. At 23, Vanessa lacked the ability to know herself or to really know her future husband. It was the life she had *yet* to live that would bring about the growth and maturity that she was just starting to experience now, at 28. From this new vantage point, Greg already looked a whole lot different than he had sitting across from her in their college cafeteria.

Marin

Marin got married a week after she turned twenty-four. She graduated from college and then spent a year getting her teaching credential. She and Erik had been dating for five years and knew they were meant to be together. Marin's family loved Erik like a son, but still encouraged Marin to wait a few years to get a job, settle in to adult life, and get to know herself a little more before getting married. Marin saw no reason to wait. Thirteen years and three children later, Marin is still happily married and had this to say: "I am glad that I married Erik—he is still the only one for me. But...I do wish I had listened to my family and married him later. We struggled financially for the first several years and despite truly being in love, it definitely put a strain on our relationship. In our late twenties, we began to develop different interests and goals for our lives. We had to go to counseling to get help to get through those difficult times. All this time, we were struggling with infertility. In retrospect, I don't think we were old enough to handle such big life issues. We got through everything and stayed together, but it would have been easier to handle if we had been older when we got married."

Rory

The first time Rory slipped on that white satin gown, she knew it was the one. She was only six at the time, trying on Halloween costumes in the aisle at Wal-Mart. Thus began Rory's love affair with all things bridal. She always expected that she would get married right out of high school, but because she wasn't dating anyone at the time, she went to college. By the time her senior year rolled around, Rory began to panic. Her boyfriend of a year, Bobby, wasn't on

board with her plans of having a “ring by spring” so she gave him an ultimatum. He caved, and they got married that fall.

“I always wanted to be a young mom and was convinced that my eggs would shrivel up if I didn’t have a baby by the time I turned twenty-four. I had Nathan just three days after our one-year anniversary. What should have been a happy time in our marriage ended up being awful. Bobby and I fought constantly.. He always wanted to go out with his friends, but expected me to just stay home and take care of Nathan. I never got to have any fun. Money was always a big problem, too, mostly because Bobby was happy working part-time at Best Buy and spent most of his free time playing video games. I finally realized one day how completely different we are and that we want completely different things out of life. I got so caught up in my goal to get married, I hadn’t thought past the finish line. Bobby and I ended up getting a divorce, and Nathan and I are now living with my parents. Not exactly how I had imagined my life would be. My biggest regret is that my son is going to grow up in a broken home.”

These are the regretful refrains we hear from the women who sit in our offices crying their way through boxes of tissue: “I don’t know what I was thinking.” “I didn’t even know myself when I got married.” “I changed so much in my twenties; I would have chosen someone very different if I had waited to marry.” “In my early twenties, I had no idea what I really wanted or needed in a husband.” These married or divorced women, who ranged in age from twenty-four to sixty, were full of regret about the way they had spent their twenties. We asked them to complete the sentence “I wish I had taken time in my twenties to _____.” Here are the most common responses:

finish my education

pursue my dream career

travel

figure out what I believed

deal with my family issues

get out of debt

live on my own

deepen my friendships

see a therapist

be more sexually responsible

feel better about myself

Through these conversations with our clients, a consistent theme emerged. Marrying young, before you know yourself and have a solid handle on your life, is a bad idea. We were both saddened and disturbed to hear these frequent expressions of regret, especially because there wasn't much we could do to change the path these women had already chosen for themselves. That's when we realized that even though it was too late for these women, it isn't too late for millions of other young women. And it's not too late for you.

But Everyone's Doing It

Hollywood celebrities are known for their whirlwind romances followed by intense proclamations of true love. In the last few years, there has been an epidemic of brief courtships between people in their young twenties, followed by extravagant weddings. These young celeb marriages have an average shelf life of around one to three years.

Jennifer Garner, movie star, married fellow actor Scott Foley when she was 26. Jennifer was utterly effusive after her engagement: "He is a completely amazing human being!" she gushed. "I never imagined I could ever be this in love with another person. I'm giddy!" They were married for all of three years. A few years later, she married co-star Ben Affleck. Recently, when asked about the differences between the two marriages, this was her response: "I don't have

this fantasy about marriage anymore. Everyone says it takes hard work. Well, it kind of does - and I'm much more pragmatic about romance than I used to be. (With Scott) I wanted to see him as a white knight and was crushed whenever anything normal happened. I wanted to be the princess. Now I'm much more willing to see myself as human and flawed, and accept someone -the whole picture. My life is definitely changing for the better. I couldn't be happier or feel more comfortable with the direction it's going in."

Jennifer's reflections perfectly illustrate the difference between a twenty-something woman's perspective on marriage versus her perspective after thirty. You'll notice that she mentioned nothing about either of her husbands. She didn't say a word about which *guy* she felt the strongest chemistry with, or which *guy* made her laugh the most. It was her *own* perspective, expectations, and overall maturity that made all the difference in the marriage relationships.

And then there's actress Kate Hudson, who married rocker Chris Robinson at the age of twenty-two. She was obviously over the moon in love with her future hubby when she was quoted as saying: "We just kind of met and that was it. Every rule went out the window. We were telling each other we loved each other by the fourth day. I moved in a week later." Flash-forward to her admission shortly after her divorce from Robinson. "Looking back, it's pretty obvious that I married way too young. I'm such a different person now."

We're happy to report that some celebrities are actually getting it right. Here's what a recently-married Beyonce told Seventeen magazine about the importance of waiting to get married: "I really don't believe that you will love the same thing when you're twenty as you do at thirty. So that was my rule: Before the age of 25, I would never get married... I feel like you have to get to know yourself, know what you want, spend some time by yourself and be proud of who you are before you can share that with someone else."

This is your brain. This is your brain in your twenties.

According to a recent national survey by researchers at Rutgers University, 94 percent of singles stated that they wanted to marry their soul mate. But many of them admitted that they had no idea what they were looking for. Well, of course! Doesn't it make sense that you can't possibly identify a soul mate until you know your own soul? And did you know that the human brain isn't even fully developed until the age of twenty-four? Is it any wonder that choosing a spouse before then basically doubles your chances of divorcing?

We frequently see evidence of this immature thinking in young women.

Claire is twenty and a sophomore in college, engaged to be married next summer. "Tyler and I are just meant to be together. We've been dating for almost three years and are ready to get married. The plan is for me to move in with him and his roommate for now until one of us gets a job. It sucks that our parents are going to stop paying for school once we get married but we'll just figure it out as we go along. Our parents keep telling us we're too young and we're going to change a lot in the next few years. But that's cool; we'll just grow up together. "

Or take Robyn, the twenty-three year old newly-married and pregnant woman who can't work because her doctor put her on bedrest. "Sure it's tough financially right now, but it will all work out. John is working hard and we will be able to pay off our credit card debt when I can work again—maybe in a few years when the baby is in school. We're not like those couples who have a baby and grow apart or fight when they don't have money—we just laugh about it."

One of the best qualities of youth is hope and a positive outlook on life and the world. Unfortunately, the flip side of that optimism is unrealistically high expectations and naiveté regarding the realities of married life and the challenges it brings.

Getting to the Source

Are you feeling inundated by the messages everywhere telling you that by your mid twenties, you should be married and well on your way to having children? Or, is the pressure

you feel coming from within? Maybe somewhere along the way, you created a timeline for yourself that requires you to be married by, say twenty-five and have kids by twenty-eight. This pressure can make you perpetually anxious about your future, and is also a big time drain. We both lament the endless hours we wasted in our twenties worrying about what our futures would look like. Where will I live? Who will I marry? Will I be able to have children? How many? Do I even want children? Part of that anxiety is simply human nature, but you can make a concerted effort to stop worrying about all that right now. In fact, we challenge you to completely put those concerns aside for the time being.

You'll have to stand strong. You'll be battling the message of most books, magazines, and popular internet blogs that tell you that your twenties should be spent finding a man, trapping a man, and marrying a man. It's true, most of the books you're likely to encounter in the relationship section of your local bookstore focus on *How to Hook a Guy in Ten Easy Steps*, *Land a Man in Thirty Days*, *Capture His Heart in Four Dates*, et cetera. The problem is, they're getting it all wrong. Your twenties shouldn't be spent finding a man; your twenties should be spent finding yourself.

If you're under the age of, say, twenty-seven, we want you to put those books down for a while. We're asking you to take a break from trying to figure out how to hook a great guy and instead spend some time becoming a great you. Yes, even if you are dating someone right now, this still applies. We're not suggesting that you pick up the phone and break it off; just promise that you won't make any rash decisions, such as getting married, before you've had a chance to reflect on the next twelve chapters.

Your Quarter-Life Crisis Challenge

If we've managed to convince you about what you *shouldn't* do in your twenties--get married or spend ridiculous amounts of time thinking and worrying about the future-- you're probably wondering what your twenties *should* entail. First of all, let's acknowledge that your twen-

ties is a time when your sense of self is seriously challenged. The hopes and dreams that you have been storing up are now rubbing up against reality as you face the real world. If you recently graduated from college, you're now dealing with the pressure of finding your perfect job and facing the disappointment of realizing that the perfect job doesn't exist. You may be questioning whether your chosen career path is even right for you at all. You want to be financially independent but may be finding it difficult to break away from the security and safety net of Mom and Dad. For the first time in your life, you're responsible for your own decisions and might be struggling to define your values and identity apart from your family. You know you're supposed to be thankful for all the choices your generation has, but having so many options can be overwhelming.

In her book *20 Something, 20 Everything*, Christine Hassler explores the concept of a quarter-life crisis, which includes feelings of confusion, disappointment, a sense of being displaced, and general unhappiness. Hassler refers to a woman's twenties as a "Neverland between childhood and adulthood." We couldn't agree more that your twenties can be a confusing time, but we reject defining this decade as a crisis. A challenge, yes. A crisis, no. The good news is that while this decade will surely have more than its share of challenges, it can also be one of invaluable growth, inspiration, and self-knowledge. A time where the very foundation for your future is created -- a foundation for a fulfilling marriage and family life.

If you spend your twenties learning how to be a fabulous, stable, independent, fulfilled single woman, it will naturally follow that you will choose a guy to marry who possesses these same wonderful qualities. You will lose your taste for the long-on-charisma and short-on-character guys whom you, in the flighty youth of your early twenties, found yourself drawn to like a moth to a flame. And you will have it takes to be a great wife and partner in a lasting and loving marriage.

This book is not a guide on how to simply endure your twenties, but rather on how to embrace them. Chapters 3 through 12 each examine one of ten crucial aspects of your life and

explore the importance of making good choices in these areas--choices that will eventually lead you to a place where you will be:

- * Able to decide if and when marriage is right for you.
- * Capable of choosing a great husband.
- * Empowered to make great choices for your life.
- * Resolved to aim high and not settle.
- * Enabled to have an exceptional and lasting marriage.
- * Equipped to raise children who will go on to achieve all of the above in their own lives.

Based on the insights we've gained through our experiences of talking with hundreds of women over the years, and hearing their stories of marriages that have succeeded and many that have failed, we developed the Ten Keys to getting a fabulous single life now and even better marriage later. Following these keys won't guarantee endless marital bliss, but they will go a long way in ensuring that you never end up in either of our offices.

Key #1: Invest in Friendships

Key #2: Resolve Family-of-Origin Issues

Key #3: Define Your Career and Education Goals

Key #4: Create Financial Stability

Key #5: Nurture Your Emotional Health

Key #6: Cultivate a Positive Body Image

Key #7: Become Independent from Your Parents

Key #8: Establish Your Spiritual Foundation

Key #9: Draw Healthy Sexual Boundaries

Key #10: Pursue Adventure

As you delve into these ten areas in your own life and complete the exercises and quizzes found in each chapter, you will gain new insight and understanding about your past and about your hopes for the future. Simply reading the next twelve chapters will not change your life. But if you allow yourself the time to reflect on these ten areas and to be honest through the process, you *will* change your future.