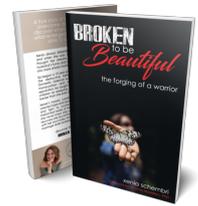




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Introduction

After hearing my story, many people suggested I write a book. Both fear and the feeling of inadequacy have always stopped me. Over the past few years, I have become more confident and feel ready to explore this idea further.

This book has been a journey for me. I started writing in 2012 and found that every time I thought I was getting somewhere, I had to deal with some emotional baggage that came up due to my experiences. I would take a break from writing and not take it up again for months or until I felt strong enough to write some more. Although I have a story to tell, writing it down has been a whole new ball game.

I know it may be confronting and difficult to read at times, but, the aim of this book is to be a beacon of light in the darkness of domestic violence and abuse.

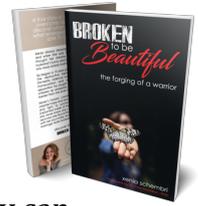
Domestic violence is a very personal battle for those who have been affected by it. Most people's understanding of DV will be determined by personal experiences or what is viewed in the media. From conversations that I have had with people, their understanding of DV includes bruises on the body, black eyes, and broken bones. My experience was - control, manipulation, misuse of power, emotional torment, financial abuse, sexual assault, spiritual abuse; and physical assault was thrown in, which also included my children. I believe that the underlying cause of DV is ultimately the selfishness that overwhelms a person until they cannot think of anyone but themselves. No one else matters in their world, just their needs and their wants; this takes precedence above anyone else or their feelings.

This was my life; for a long fifteen years, I was overwhelmed by someone else's selfishness that eventually broke me into thousands of pieces. So broken that even I did not have a clue who I was. Everything was controlled by another individual who believed he had the right to tell me how to feel, what to wear, how to look, when to do anything, where to go, and why I should do everything he said. I accepted that this was my life. I felt scared, helpless, dependent, and I felt there was nothing I could ever do to escape it. That is until one day. One day I found the strength and the courage to look beyond the now and see that there might be a future without control, manipulation, and all the pain. To be honest, the physical pain hurt, but it passed; it has been the emotional pain that has taken its time to heal. I cringe when I hear the children's rhyme, *Sticks and stones will break my bones but names will never hurt me*, because from my experience sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will break my heart.

I speak a lot about my faith in this book, as it has been a crucial part of my journey. What is evident throughout my story is that love wins; it conquers the shadows and the pain and turns it into something unrecognisable from what it once was. Love turned the ashes of my life into a thing of beauty. Where I mourned for a life I wanted and didn't have, I now wear joy like a fine garment. It underlines everything I do. I found love to be a constant companion whilst I was healing.



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I am hopeful this book will help to provide a new understanding of what love is ... and what love isn't. And despite what anyone may have been through, they can live a life of wholeness, full of forgiveness and, gain new knowledge of who they are, allowing them to realise that life can be lived to the fullest, no matter how tough life can get or has been in the past. I believe that someone's past does not have to define their future negatively.

I know that if it were not for my faith, I would not be here today. I do not say this lightly or flippantly, but it is a reality of where I was. I wanted to die. It was the only way out that I could see. I wasn't being

selfish; I just could not see past my pain, and I truly believed that everyone would be better off without me.

In The Bible, God uses all sorts of people to bring about His perfect will. People who you would not expect to be the 'perfect person'. He used a harlot, someone who laughed at His plans, someone who had a speech impediment. He used older and younger people, widows and married people, the childless, a woman who had nothing, an adulterer, a captive, someone who thought very little of himself, a dead woman, and a murderer. None of these people fit into my idea of the 'perfect person' for the task at hand, but they did fit into God's. That is because He sees the bigger picture and it is because of that I know He chooses to choose me with all my faults.

So now, there is nothing left for me to say other than to invite you to come and share this journey with me, a journey that turns something broken into something beautiful.

Xenia Schembri



Chapter One

I rolled over; tears stained my cheeks, mascara-stained my pillow, and my heart was pounding so loudly I could hear the vibrations in my ears; it felt like it was about to physically break in two Then I prayed:

'God, please, please do something, I can't do this anymore. Take him from me, make him leave me. I don't care how You do it, but make him leave. Make him die if that's the only way. Please God, make him die, please God, I can't do this anymore, I can't live like this anymore ...'

Oh, my goodness, did I really pray that?

What on earth would lead a woman, who fifteen years ago loved this man enough to say, 'I do' make her feel like that? What could have changed so dramatically? Could my life have really deteriorated that much?

I sat up in my bed and began to remember back to the day we first met. I could not believe how I had got myself into this position. Was he always like this? I thought to myself as I analysed the last fifteen long years. Yes, all the tell-tale signs were there, but as an eighteen-year-old girl, I was determined that things would change. Why was I so convinced that I could change him? I had no idea; aren't they the words that echo in every woman's mind during a relationship?

I met Richard in my hometown of Weston-Super-Mare in Somerset, South West England, just after I turned eighteen in 1988. In the early days of the relationship, I got so caught up in the romance that I ignored those little niggles that turned into big ... no, huge problems. Those funny, little quirks weren't funny after all. They were, in fact, to become massive issues that would destroy our marriage and almost me in the

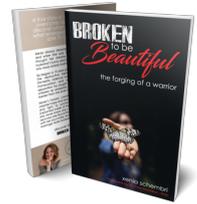
process. I had hoped that one day he would change; if he loved me, I was sure he would change. *Maybe he never really loved anyone but himself*, I sighed.

As I lay back down and rested my head upon the pillow, sleep was evading me.

I recollected a verse from The Bible that I had heard so many times before in church growing up: 'I have come that they may have life and that they may have it more abundantly.' (John 10:10b). I wondered when this so-called 'abundant life' would begin for me. Surely it would at some point, wouldn't it? Although, so far what I had experienced was nothing but abundant heartache. I felt like a frightened little girl hiding under the heavy blankets of life, scared of living, just feeling the heaviness of all that was going on; afraid of what life might throw at me next; terrified that I might not actually make it. Every now and then I took a peek out from beneath the blanket, very slowly, to see if it was okay to live a little. I soon realised that it was still way too scary and quickly covered my head with the blanket again.



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Now, to be honest, I had become quite an expert at looking like I had it all together. To everyone (or at least most people in the world) I had a happy marriage. Four beautiful kids, a lovely home, and some beautiful furniture. I always looked contented and happy with life. I'd throw a smile to anyone, and I'd always be looking for ways to support and help people. But, in reality, I had a broken marriage, one which was full of lies and deceptions to the world around me. One that zapped all my love, energy and happiness. Yes, they were right; I did have four beautiful children, each one with their own tale of how their father was abusing them, physically, emotionally and verbally. And, yes, I did have a lovely home and lovely furniture as well. But that wasn't enough to make me happy. I wanted someone to love me, cherish me and adore me. Someone to put me first for a change. I knew I could never leave; I wouldn't be allowed to. I was trapped in my fear, scared of what he might do. I knew if I was ever able to leave, I would have to leave everything. I wondered if he would even let me go? That really was a silly question; I

knew he wouldn't. He controlled everything: my money, my heart, my emotions, my body, the kids, the home ... everything!

Somewhere bubbling up inside of me, I knew that something needed to change. *Xenia, honestly girl, grow a backbone, come on, what can he really do to you? He has reduced you to nothing, the worst he can do, is kill you ... would that be so bad ... the kids? What about the kids? But, I can't change anything myself... yes, you can, only you have the power to change your world and make it different, however hard it is going to be ... come on girl, grow a backbone.* I argued with myself, confusing myself more. I knew what I needed to do, but doing it seemed impossible. There was another option, and it would take the power away from him completely ... but the kids? What would be worse?

This was the final straw though. I could no longer stay married to him, but he'd already told me he was never going to set me free. The words 'You will always be my wife, don't think you could ever not be' echoed in my mind.

At that moment, lying there, I could only think of one thing to do. But, even the thought of that shocked me. I could never actually imagine doing it. But then again, I wanted this pain to stop and if it was the only way ... okay, let me think about this some more... it is a big decision. It's a life and death decision, quite literally.