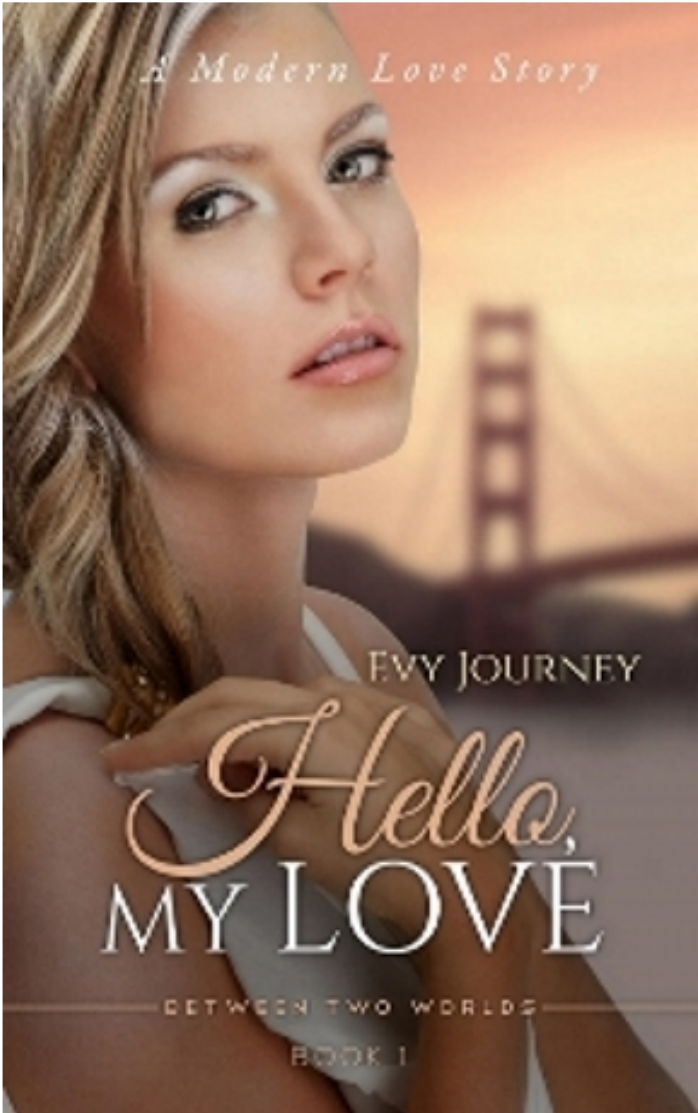




A Modern Love Story

EVY JOURNEY

Hello,
MY LOVE

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

BOOK 1

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En art comme en amour, l'instinct suffit.

In art as in love, instinct is enough.

—ANATOLE FRANCE, 1921 Nobel Prize in Literature *Le Jardin d'Épicure* (*The Garden of Epicurus*, 1894)

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CHAPTER ONE

Elise



Going to your parents' dinner tonight?" Elise could not help smiling at the text message.

She texted back: "Yes. See you."

Greg had been sending her text messages for some time. Often, they were greetings, in the morning, at night, on school holidays; or good luck wishes on exams, debates, and mock trials. Sometimes, he asked her opinion or a question about a legal matter or some fact of interest to either of them. She answered most of those messages although he told her she did not need to, if they were the usual greetings.

Before they met, Elise had known Greg—from numerous news reports—as the young, progressive owner of a growing internet-based business, and one of the country's twenty-five most eligible bachelors. The consensus in the media, especially among women reporters: tall, dark, and handsome. But Greg also had a reputation as a playboy, whose many romances were fodder for gossip columns. While Elise hesitated judging looks and personality, sight unseen, she was certain of one thing. She distrusted the likes of men such as Greg.

But that was a year ago.

Since he began consulting with her father, Dr. Halverson, an economics professor, Greg had been to many dinners at her parents' home. There, Elise got to know him better.

Now, when curious acquaintances learned she knew Greg, they invariably asked, and Elise hardly ever varied her answer: "Yes, to news reports. Greg Thorpe is tall—taller than my father who's more than six feet. Dark—tanned from jogging, bushy hair the color of French Roast woven with golden strands. And beautiful—clean-cut, cleft chin, smiling greyish blue eyes, and yeah, lean. But, I think, muscular. I'm not sure. I haven't seen him without his clothes on."

It always amused her that her incantation never failed to elicit sighs from young women.

Elise was about to slip her iPhone into her shirt pocket when it rang. Greg—she expected that. He often answered her text messages within minutes of her sending them, usually by texting. Once in a while, he called instead.

"Hello, Elise. How's the light of my life this afternoon?" Greg said in his teasing voice.

"Greg, hi. That's quick. Aren't you busy?"

"Not for you. And I'm glad you picked up. I was afraid you'd turn off your phone again."

"I can't turn it on in class, when I'm studying, or when I'm at work, and that's almost my whole day."

"Are you staying over at your parents after dinner?"

"I don't plan such things. Depends. How late it is when dinner ends, whether I have some easy way to get back to my apartment, how guilty I feel about not having seen my parents for a while, etc., etc."

"I see. It's Friday so I thought you're staying the night with them. Can I give you a ride home?"

Elise protested. "But I live across the bay. That's sixty more miles of driving for you, both ways."

"Less than an hour in my fast powerful car."

She smiled. Only when she opened up to him a few months after they first met did she realize that Greg had a wry, often self-mocking, sense of humor.

She teased him back. "But don't you need your beauty sleep? Aren't you getting married in two days? I'm surprised you're even coming to my parents' dinner party. I always thought weddings were exhausting. Don't you need to rest up for yours?"

"Think of this as my last fling."

"Isn't that when your buddies get you all soused and cavorting with some pretty young things? You definitely need stamina for that."

He groaned. "I'm afraid you have this unflattering image of me. But, believe it or not, that prospect doesn't excite me. I feel too old for all that."

"Thirty-two's not old. To me, old is decrepit. You're not quite there yet."

"I'm glad you think so. Twenty-year olds think thirty is old."

"I turned twenty-three a few weeks ago," she said, her smile replaced with pursed lips.

"That still makes you a young thing in my book. What if I cavort with you?"

Elise scowled. She couldn't think of a quick retort, which she knew Greg had come to expect from her. It was not that what he said irritated her. And she didn't actually dislike it. But she felt a vague sense of unease in her chest.

"I'm kidding. I know you're not the cavorting type. But we're buddies, right? Well, more like sparring partners, maybe. Don't buddies kid around?"

That's it, Elise thought. *I'm not the pretty, young cavorting type. At least, I didn't think he thought so.* It didn't annoy her, but it did bother her in some way. She did not answer.

He added in a softer voice, "Am I wrong?"

She picked up an edge to his voice and she hesitated through the ensuing silence; for her, an uneasy silence relieved only by his audible breathing. He was going to wait until she said something.

"I guess we are...friends, or whatever you wanna call it. That makes everything all right, then; kidding included. So, yes, you can take me home tonight. What's sixty miles between buddies? No guilt, on my part, that you're going out of your way. I gotta run." She hung up and did not wait for his reply.



That evening, Elise arrived at her parents' home when guests were taking their last bites of the appetizer. She had entered the house with her own keys and had gone straight to the dining room. She was trembling. Tired and tense from running between school and work, and then dressing hurriedly for dinner.

In the entryway to the room, she stopped to catch her breath. For a moment, she teetered on unaccustomed three-inch high black espadrilles, and had to lean on the wall with one hand to steady herself. Then, she straightened and

stood in place for another moment, as she brushed a lock of blonde hair away from her face and down her shoulders, its golden glints accentuated by her short-sleeved, dark purple turtleneck sweater. With it, she had worn a long black pencil skirt slit on one side to below mid-thigh that her roommate Leah had lent her. It hugged her lithe figure, and she felt self-conscious about it.

She uttered a general greeting, but out of habit, her gaze sought that of Greg's. He lifted an eyebrow as he smiled at her, his eyes glowing. She held her breath at the knot that formed at the pit of her stomach. She let her breath out slowly, and stretched her lips to mimic a smile.

In addition to Greg, two other couples—mutual friends of her parents from her father's college days—completed the eight places around the dinner table. She approached her mother from behind her chair.

"Elise, finally. We were wondering if you'd make it here tonight." Mrs. Halverson offered a cheek for her daughter's kiss.

"We had a small crisis at the Legal Aid office," she replied, kissing one cheek and then the other, the usual greeting among the Halversons ever since the children were young.

Her mother whispered, "Greg has asked me about you at least twice already."

Elise stole a glance at Greg as she sat down at her usual place across from him. Her gaze swept around her parents' friends as she greeted them with a slight nod.

They were regular visitors and could talk nonstop all night. Elise relaxed. The evening should be relatively calm and cozy. She was tired and she intended to sit among the group, as quiet as she could be.

But Greg's gaze seemed glued on her throughout dinner, and she couldn't help glancing back at him—rather too often, she thought uneasily. Still, neither of them needed to say much, and for that, she was grateful.

More than an hour later when the party went to the living room for after-dinner coffee, Greg approached her from behind and came so close that she could feel his chest against her back.

"Good evening, beautiful. I was afraid you'd skip this dinner. Glad you lost the hair clip. Love the sexy hairstyle. Did you know you looked like a lost nymph leaning on that wall for protection?" His voice barely rose above a whisper.

Elise turned her head towards him and coaxed a smile from her lips. She did not answer, but she was pleased that he noticed the difference in her appearance. She had taken extra care dressing up for this evening's dinner.

In the living room, she settled into an armchair. Greg pulled a chair closer to hers and sat on it.

"You look tired," he said, peering into her face.

"Yes. I am. It's been a very hectic week. I'm glad it's Friday. But I wish Mom stuck to her usual Saturday schedule. I'm not very good company this evening."

"Your dad said they're going to a birthday party for the dean of his college tomorrow night."

"Ahh."

"Let's be quiet together. I don't think this group needs our help."

Elise nodded and smiled faintly. How sweet he could be sometimes.

The lively conversation of the Halversons' friends swirled around her and Greg without much help from either of them. It centered on the best places to retire and wild ways to make

retirement exciting. The older folks were having their usual fun, their laughter punctuating outrageous suggestions.

After a quarter of an hour, Elise glanced at her watch, fidgeted in her chair, and suppressed a yawn. Listless from both food and wine, she had lost interest in the lively exchange and wished herself back in her apartment, warm and snug in bed.

The most garrulous of the group, Dr. Gronski, craned his neck, distracted by her fidgeting. He regarded her for what seemed, to Elise, too uncomfortably long. He must have sensed her discomfort. She could swear that he winked at her and smiled sympathetically before he shifted his attention to Greg.

He said, "Here's one lucky man. He doesn't have to worry about retirement homes, can retire right now, and do whatever he wants."

Elise watched from the corner of her eyes as everyone, except for her, turned towards Greg and stared. He returned the stare for some moments, and with a thoughtful frown, answered, "True, I could go anywhere I want, but I don't know if I'll ever want to retire."

"I should have guessed—a workaholic. But you're a bachelor, so no commitment and no one to nag you." Dr. Gronski chuckled, winking at his wife.

"Not for very long. He's getting married on Sunday," Dr. Halverson chimed in.

The two couples perked up.

"Oh! Who to? Why didn't you bring her here tonight?" said Dr. Gronski's wife, stealing a glance at Elise.

"She had prior engagement." Greg scowled as he answered.

Elise saw the muscles on his cheek twitch. He was clenching his jaw, clearly ill at ease.

She clicked her leather espadrilles once, a simple move she had borrowed a few times from Dorothy—a gesture that always brought the young character to a magical place in the movie *Wizard of Oz*. She rose from her chair.

As she had intended, the conversation stopped as everyone looked up at her. She walked towards the piano, in a far corner of the room.

“How about some entertainment?” She raised the front lid on the piano and smiled at her mother. “Mom, can you play us that piece you've been practicing?”

Her mother got up and approached Elise with alacrity. “Yes, I would love to. And I hope you like this Mozart fantasy as much as I do. I know my daughter does.”

She smiled at Elise, sat down, paused for a few seconds, and opened with the slow, dramatic notes of a piece that lasted more than twelve minutes. She followed it with a few more pieces until someone said, at the break between pieces, that it was getting late.

When the two couples had gone, Dr. Halverson said, “I'm sorry about my friends, Greg. For the most part, they're nice people.”

His wife added, “With an annoying love of gossip.”

“Yes, except for that. I shouldn't have mentioned your wedding.”

Elise said, casting Greg a surreptitious glance, “But it's true. He's getting married. They'll find out about it, anyway. Papers will splash the news all over their society pages, for sure. Dad, I'm surprised your friends haven't seen anything about it already.”

She arched an eyebrow at Greg, her eyes glittering with amusement. "Come to think of it, I haven't, either."

Greg scowled at her. "Well, maybe they don't read the social columns, or the tabloids where it's mentioned, ad nauseum. We didn't issue any formal announcements. She wanted to, but I refused. I want a quiet ceremony."

Elise scowled back, and with a lopsided smile, said, "But, I agree, they had no business asking why she—what's her name? I don't remember ever hearing you mention it. Anyway, it's none of their business why she isn't here tonight."

"We know her name," her mother said. "We met her at Greg's house when we were last there for a party. Perfect hostess."

"Stunning woman," her father added. "She reminded me of Ava Gardner."

"Yes." Her mother smirked and Elise knew her parents did not agree on Greg's fiancée.

"Will someone tell me what her name is?"

"Lori. Lori Williams," Greg said. "She's a public relations consultant at a company I do business with."

"Lovely name. Less formidable than Ava. She's now taken form in my head." Elise glanced at her watch. "I must go, too."

Greg rose. "I'll give you a ride home."

"But that's out of your way," her father said. "You can drop her off at the train station. She does it all the time."

Mrs. Halverson placed a hand on her husband's arm. "Let them decide what to do."



Neither Greg nor Elise had spoken since they left her parents' home. He seemed, to her, reluctant to disturb the silence between them. She, in contrast, felt impatient about it.

"I hope you don't mind my asking—you know, one buddy to another—why you've never brought Lori to dinner at my parents' house. Doesn't she resent you, spending so many of your Fridays or Saturdays with them?"

"Remember, your dad and I have business consultations before dinner. I know Lori. She'd be bored to death. I don't want your mother to feel she has to entertain her while I'm holed up with your dad."

"So, she's never curious or suspicious?"

"Actually, no, except to say that it must have been boring. Can we stop talking about Lori? This is my last fling, remember? I'd like it to be nice and cozy, in the company of someone familiar."

Elise frowned and compressed her lips. "Sorry, can't be your sister. You know my two brothers. You'll have to agree that's enough aggravation right there."

"Huh? Who said anything about a sister?"

"Familiar, 'family,' same root, right?"

"Sounds like it. Yes; and maybe that's what I had in mind. Anyway, I meant someone I feel at ease with. Someone I can spar with, but who doesn't take it personally. At the end of the day, we're still friends."

"I guess so. Something like that. By Monday, though, things have to change. When you're married, we can't be on the same footing anymore."

Greg did not answer and kept his attention on his driving. Elise stared into the darkness outside her window and recognized a few buildings on the way to her apartment.

They were only ten minutes away from it. She bit her lips and blinked a few times. Was this really it between them? Would he ever come to her parents' dinners again?

"I'd like to show you where I live. May I—on my last night as a free man? You've never been to my house, and I'm betting it'll change what you think of me." His voice intruded into her thoughts.

"Why should that matter?" Her voice was hardly audible. She was feeling suddenly depressed.

"Well, if we're going to be strangers again like a year ago, I'd like you to remember me. As I am, in my true element."

"And that's your house?"

"Why not? Don't we all create our surroundings to suit who we are? I'm sure Lori will want another house. Or, she'll renovate what I have now. So, if you ever visit us there, it won't show you the real me anymore." Greg turned briefly towards her, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

Elise forced a smile, but it faded before she turned her face away. She said, "Are you playing with me?"

"No, I am perfectly serious. And if you're still not sure, can I tempt you with champagne? I've got some good stuff at home. I'll offer you the best I have."

She did not answer. She was irritated, and she did not know why.

"Okay, that's not working. Can I ask, as your buddy? I'm honestly nervous about getting married, and I'd like to have a comfortable, relaxing evening. I can only do that around a true and familiar friend. Like you. I have other friends, but someone like you, whose chatter I can stand, and I actually think means something—rare."

She laughed softly, and regarded him a couple of minutes. "You mean that?"

"Yes, to me, you're a true friend I can really talk to."

She turned the idea over in her head. A true friend? For his last free evening. He was losing his freedom, and she was losing a friend.

Leah had asked her once if she had ever "thrown caution to the wind." She had frowned and shaken her head. Tonight seemed a good time to do just that.

She said, "Why not?"

He grinned, slowed down, and turned the car around.



Greg's house was on top of a hill, overlooking the bay and a cluster of cities below, their lights like strings of fluttering jewels in the late spring night. San Francisco lay in the distance towards the ocean. The neighborhood, as Elise expected, had large security-controlled homes, many of them Mediterranean-style mansion wannabes of stucco and red tile roofs. As Greg drove through a long driveway to his house, she gritted her teeth. Why did she let him persuade her to come to this place? She had no desire to go into one of those homes, much less spend an evening in one of them.

But she did want to spend some time with him, the way it had been between them lately.

Elise surveyed the house in the dark when Greg stopped to wait for the garage door to open. She relaxed a little. The house was different from those around it, its size modest, in comparison; its lines uncomplicated. She stuck her head out the car window and looked closer. Not stucco, but wood panels and something grey and smooth. Metal, she guessed.

"I hope you don't mind that I'm taking you into the house through the garage. We'll have to go through the kitchen," he said, as they got out of the car.

"Like at my parents' house."

But the interior was not like her parents' house. There, the hub was a large country kitchen of sunny yellow, accented with green, red, and blue, that spilled into a sitting area dominated by a much-used butcher block, often used as a breakfast table. Her parents' house was all about nurturing and casual comfort.

In Greg's house, the spare exterior lines continued inside. Its kitchen—small, compared to her mother's—was equipped with sleek stainless steel appliances and glass cabinets with steel framing. As they passed through the kitchen, Elise rubbed the surface of a countertop with her fingers.

"This is concrete."

"Yes, and so is the floor except it's been stained black."

"Really? Looked like slate to me." Her gaze swept across the kitchen. "Glass, steel, and concrete. Hard and solid."

The kitchen opened into one enormous room divided into two areas by a wide space between them. A long heavy wooden dining table for twelve defined one area, supported by a mix of wooden dining chairs and a massive wooden cupboard that stood against a wall. All had the patina of at least a century of use.

Elise walked to the opposite side of the room and sat on a long light taupe-colored boxy sofa. She had expected it to be firm because its curves were limited to a gentle hump, but its extra thick seat and back cushions softly cradled her body. She would be comfortable sleeping on it.

She leaned back, crossed her legs, and scanned the room from where she sat. Several ample armchairs faced the sofa and they all surrounded one low massive coffee-colored coffee table. The beige-toned seating appeared to float a little above the dark floor. Except for two wall-size abstract paintings, walls were bare.

Everything seemed, to Elise, fashionable but understated; tasteful and clean. A little too clean.

Greg sat on a chair across from her.

"Where's the main entry to your house?"

"On the other side of that wall, just behind you."

She turned her head to look. The inside wall behind the sofa was made of large, smooth white panels that stopped a couple of feet below the high ceiling.

"Slick. Very modern," she said, but she frowned and thought everything in the living area had to be merely some kind of façade for Greg. Underneath his cool, smooth demeanor, she had sensed someone more complicated and not always so sure of himself.

He smiled at her remark, his eyes enigmatic and vague. "May I show you the rest of the house before we have that champagne?"

"Might as well." They rose at the same time.

He led her up a wide staircase, through a hallway and into a study that seemed to her had more room than the apartment she shared with her friend and roommate, Leah. Classical music greeted them as Greg opened the door. Elise recognized it as the slow movement from a Brahms piano sonata that she had heard her mother play many times. She wondered whether he turned the music on by remote or it was on all the time.

The study had book cases—more stainless steel and wood—along two parallel walls, a big desk and office chair in front of another, and a well-worn cozy sofa and a coffee table in the middle. Surfaces in the room were cluttered with books, folders, magazines, and folded newspapers. At one corner, a guitar leaned on the wall, next to its case. Elise knew, without asking, that this was where Greg spent most of his time. She relaxed a little.

“I could show you my bedroom, if you like. But there's not much in it. The bed and a couple of tables, an armchair. It's less than half the size of this room. The other two rooms up here are the bathroom and a kind of dresser, walk-in closet.”

“It's your house. Your call,” Elise said, as she walked to the corner against which the guitar rested. She passed her fingers lightly along its strings. “This looks like an expensive classical guitar. Do you play?”

“I do. Not as much as I used to. But I have strummed those strings when I'm all stressed out or I can't sleep at night. It helps me unwind. I took lessons in my teens.”

She regarded him curiously, her brow knitted over her eyes. “You didn't seem to me the type who would play a musical instrument.”

“Why not?”

“I don't know. I think that implies someone sensitive, artistic; feminine, maybe? I could definitely imagine you whacking racquetballs, but”—she paused and regarded him with a doubtful smile—“playing a musical instrument, listening to classical music? I'd have said, no way.”

“Does it change your opinion of me?” Greg's eyes gleamed with amusement. “Do you like me any less?”

Elise grinned. “I like you more, actually.”

“Do you play? A musical instrument, I mean.”

"I studied piano until I was fifteen. I play okay. Not like my mother, though. She could have been a concert pianist."

"So, why didn't she become one?"

"Love, marriage, children. I guess that sometimes she wishes she had followed her dreams. I wish she did, too. I would have been so proud of her."

"Maybe, she believed career and family don't mix."

"Maybe. In her time, many women could have believed that."

Elise looked away, her face flushed. Greg had been staring at her in that intent way of his since she walked around his living room. She spun halfway around and gave the bookshelves her full attention, her back to him. She started inspecting books, many of them on technology and programming, and a couple she knew her mother also owned—books by Peter Mayle on living in Provence.

She went around the room once more. "Your house is awesome but I didn't expect you to choose a modern, almost minimalist house. Downstairs, anyway." She chuckled, as her gaze flew across the mess in the study.

"Oh? And what did you expect?"

"I'm not sure; at first, maybe I expected ostentatious. Like most mansions around here, with pricey period furniture, one of which could have paid for my entire college education. But where are all the other rooms?"

"That's it, I'm afraid. A bachelor's one bedroom pad."

"It's hardly just a pad. Mine is."

"Shall we go back down and have that glass of champagne?" Greg pointed towards the door with his hand.

"Can we have it here? It's impressive down there but kinda too hard and too cold for me. I'm more comfortable here, with these books and the lived-in clutter."

“We can do that.” He grinned, his first warm, heartfelt smile since that uncomfortable conversation with her parents’ friends.

He went to his desk, pushed a button and talked into an intercom.

“Wow, all the modern conveniences!” Elise said as she settled on the sofa.

She peeked into a couple of folders on the coffee table. Greg joined her, holding what looked, to her, like a photo album. He piled magazines and newspapers on top of each other and cleared a space on the coffee table, where he put the album down.

“I don’t see any computers or televisions anywhere in this room.”

“I have a laptop. It’s stashed away in my desk. Downstairs, there’s a projector and a screen hidden in wall cabinets. Oh, I do have a television. It’s inside another compartment in my desk.”

“Which you can pull up with the push of a button. I should have guessed.”

Greg laughed. “And I guessed right. You would rather have your champagne up here.”

“I like the clean look in your living area. The large solid pieces—both old and new—seem so like you. But, I don’t think I’d want to spend too much time there. I can’t walk around in my bare feet.”

“Believe it or not, you’ll want to do that in the summer. The concrete floor stays cool. But I, myself, don’t use that room much, as you can see. That’s my public face. It’s for guests. Very few friends have been invited in here.”

“Like Lori,” Elise could not help saying.

“Well...” Greg paused. “She was in here once but she’s uncomfortable in this room. Too many things in it. My living room doesn’t suit her, either. Too little in it.” He laughed again, this time, with his self-conscious, self-mocking tone.

Elise suppressed her impulse to say, “The bedroom, then.” But all she did was bite her lower lip. The fact went without saying: Lori had access to the bedroom, which he politely denied her.

A soft knock on the half-opened door made them both turn their heads toward it. A middle-aged swarthy man walked in, carrying a tray with champagne in a bucket of ice and one glass, which Greg took from him. He seemed surprised to find someone else there.

“I’m sorry, Greg. I thought you were alone.”

“It’s okay, Bob. I forgot to mention I had company. Bring one more glass up, will you, please?” Greg placed the bucket and the glass on the coffee table.

“You must have an extra room somewhere for Bob,” Elise said, after he left the room.

“There’s a house in the back. That’s where he lives with his wife and two kids. Bob has been with me since I took over my father’s business. He married Alicia just before I had this house built. They take very good care of me. I’d trust Bob with my life.”

When Bob returned with the second glass, Greg introduced him to Elise. She rose from the couch, extended her hand to Bob and flashed him a warm smile.

“A loyal friend from what I’ve heard.”

Bob hesitated, then shook her hand and gave her a sheepish grin. “I’m sorry, Miss Halverson, I’m not used to Greg’s women friends shaking my hand.”

“Well, those are his girlfriends. I'm just a friend. Like you are, so call me Elise.”

Bob chuckled and glanced at Greg with amused eyes.

“Greg says you're like family to him.”

“Ah, yes. Mr. Thorpe, Greg's father, hired me as a chauffeur, months before he died. Greg kept me on, at first, to drive him around. But he likes to drive himself, so I took on other duties.”

“So, you've been with Greg ten years. That sounds to me like real loyalty. It's unusual nowadays.”

“Yes, I married and had a family in those years.”

“Do you have children?”

“Two very healthy boys, five and eight years old.”

“They must keep you on your toes.”

Before Bob could answer, Greg said, with a smile, “Now he treats me like I'm his oldest son.” He turned to Bob. “*Padre, mi Madre esta esperando.*”

Bob chuckled again. “Elise, I'd like to talk some more, but my wife's waiting.”

He regarded Greg thoughtfully for a moment or two, smiled at Elise, and bade them goodnight.

Elise said, grinning, “I do understand some Spanish, you know. I figured I'd better learn it at school if I want to be a lawyer in this state.”

“You should get along well with Bob and Alicia, then. I'll have to tell him.”

“I wanted to learn Polish, too, but the university doesn't offer it.”

CHAPTER TWO

Greg



One Year Before

Greg first met Elise one year ago, but he saw her on television first, before they were introduced.

He had come home around nine o'clock, as usual, tired and in need of food. He set his briefcase down on the kitchen counter, went straight to the refrigerator, and surveyed its contents without much enthusiasm. A carton of milk, bottles of mayonnaise, mustard, and white wine looked forlorn on the shelves. He poked into the top bin where he remembered there were four packages of cheese. One looked quite moldy. He took all four out, tossed the bad cheese in the trash, and reached for the mayo and the mustard.

It would have to be another cheese sandwich night, which was not too bad with a glass of good wine. He chose a bottle of viognier from among the four different white wines he kept chilled in the refrigerator.

He would take his dinner up to his study, put his feet up on the coffee table, eat and relax to soothing music, and catch up

on some recreational reading. After a day of meetings, phone conferences, and all the minutiae of managing his business, he treasured those hours he had to himself.

He placed the makings of his sandwich on a tray, but before he could assemble it, his eye caught sight of shiny foil-covered plates on the dining table. He peeked into each one: pulled pork, a crusty bun, and cherry tomatoes. He smiled. *Thank you, Alicia.* She was determined to keep him properly fed. She came every morning to make his bed and tidy up. Usually, he had already left by the time she arrived. But that morning, she came earlier and asked if he was eating out tonight.

Greg brought the fork, knife, and jar of mayonnaise to the dining table. He never ate pulled pork with mayonnaise when Alicia was around. But alone, he slathered away. He liked the complexity—the layering of flavors, as he heard someone say once—it added to the spicy well-sauced strips of meat.

Since he was dining on Alicia's justifiably famous pulled pork, he decided to eat with some company, even if it was only a newscaster. He opened the television cabinet, and turned on the late night news before he sat down. The headliner, at the TV station he tuned in to, was no longer news to him. He had heard it on the radio as he drove to work that morning. He changed channels several times before he found a report that caught his eyes.

A large group of mostly Mexican workers was picketing in front of the State Capitol in Sacramento, some eighty miles away. He, himself, had to deal with the possibility of a strike not too long ago, but just this past week, he had reached a compromise with his employees.

Out of the crowd of dark hair and brown faces, a young woman stood out—blonde, luminous, and out of place, even

in the same loose shirt everyone else wore. She was obviously not one of the workers but was there as sympathizer or advocate for their cause.

Her hair was twisted into a bun, spilling wisps down her cheeks and her shoulders. The camera had focused on her face and zoomed in on it to fill the screen. In those few seconds, he stared at a pair of the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen—not so much because they were big, blue, and shaped like cat's eyes, under thick long lashes. They were so clear that he imagined he could see through their depths into a mind alive with intelligence and passion.

His heart skipped some beats; and he caught his breath. He had not been prepared for that reaction. Pretty faces littered his social landscape and he was used to them. Usually, he stared at one, for no more than a few seconds, and moved on to look at the next. This time, he grumbled in irritation when the camera panned away.

At work the following day, he asked one of his assistants to find out who she was. He told his assistant she could be a potential irritation to him, because of her obvious zeal in championing the working class.

The assistant called someone Greg knew at the television station and learned that she was a law student at the best university in the state, located in the Bay Area.

Two weeks later, Greg went for his first consultation with Dr. Charles Halverson at the university where the latter taught. Greg had won some concessions from his workers during negotiations on salary raises. They agreed on a smaller increase than they had asked for, on condition that he set up free or low-cost healthcare for his employees. He decided to seek the input of an expert on employee benefits. His management staff suggested Dr. Halverson.

Greg liked Dr. Halverson right away—engaging, witty, and with a droll sense of humor. Their meeting went beyond the one hour they had agreed on and, at the close of it, Dr. Halverson followed him to the door after giving him a vigorous handshake.

Dr. Halverson said, “I’ll walk you through the reception room. I need to stretch my legs a little.” He chuckled and added, “The older I get the more I need these little breaks. My daughter tells me I should try jogging but that’s really not—as you young people say—‘my thing’.”

“You look quite fit. You must have ‘a thing’ you like to do.”

“I garden. That’s ‘my thing’. My wife and I like to do it together and we spend hours at it. She takes care of the flowers and I do the rest. I have a thriving vegetable garden and some fruit trees.”

The reception room had been empty and quiet when Greg arrived half an hour before noon. This time, a few students were engaged in hushed conversations. The other half-dozen or so students, all apparently waiting for appointments, read books or tablets.

Greg’s attention was drawn to a young woman, with hair the color of gold, sitting in one corner, her ponytail cascading down one side of her head and hiding much of her face. Bent over a thick book, she seemed heedless of the talking couple one chair away from her. Unlike everyone else, she had neither earphones nor string cables sticking out of her ears.

She had caught Dr. Halverson’s attention as well. He paused in the middle of the room and strode towards her.

Greg hesitated. Should he wait where he stood? But he was too curious to know who this young woman was and why Dr.

Halverson had interrupted their progress towards the door to approach her. He followed.

“Elise,” Dr. Halverson said.

The blonde head jerked up and broke into a wide, bright smile at Dr. Halverson. “Dad.”

Greg was surprised to see the face he had seen on television less than two weeks before. Smiling up at her father, she looked so innocent and sweet, her fresh young face so unlike what anyone would have expected from the head bowed so low and only inches from the book that she gave the image of one who believed her life depended on that book. Did he imagine a pair of thick glasses on a plain face?

“I didn’t expect to see you here today,” Dr. Halverson said. He frowned and looked uncertain. “Is this the day I promised to take you out to lunch?”

“No. That’s next week but I need to pick your brain a little for one of my assignments.” She stole a glance at Greg who, by then, stood just behind her father. There was, in her large eyes, a flash of curiosity, veiled with disinterest within the next instant.

Dr. Halverson turned towards him.

“Oh, Mr. Thorpe, I’d like you to meet my daughter, Elise.”

“Call me Greg, please. How do you do Miss Halverson?” He extended his hand to her. He tried not to seem too eager to meet her, but he was aware that he failed.

She did not take his hand. She stared at him, her eyes darker blue and guarded.

He regarded her with amused eyes, but she had already ignited fire in them that he was hardly able to mask. He stood feeling somewhat foolish, but in a delicious tingle—certain that Elise was as aware as he was that they were both caught

in a mutual burn, in those few moments of arrested time. Then, he heard her speak.

“How do you do, Mr. Thorpe?” Her tone was formal, her manner, distant. As if she was addressing a professor or a judge. She turned towards her father, her greeting nothing but a momentary distraction in her reason for being there—to see and talk to her father.

Greg withdrew his hand and shoved it into his pants pocket. He was taken aback, consternated, uncomprehending. How could she be dismissing him now, like someone she would casually greet as he was passing through? She made it quite clear that she had no wish to get to know him further.

Her father said, “Mr. Thorpe—Greg—is my most recent client. You may have heard me mention him at dinner last week.”

“Did you? I'm sorry I don't recall.” She glanced at Greg. “How about it, Dad? Lunch today?”

Before Dr. Halverson could reply, Greg said, “I saw you on television two weeks ago with a group of picketing workers.”

He held her gaze again. He was not going to be that easy to ignore.

“Oh, that. Those were our clients at the Legal Aid Society. I counsel them on workers' rights.”

“Elise is in second year at law school,” her father said, beaming at his daughter. “She's at the top of her class.”

“No, Dad. Second, behind Brandon Lee.” A frown flitted through her brow. She seemed embarrassed.

“Good enough, for me. And for that, I'll take you to as many lunches as I can afford.”

“Have you chosen what kind of law to practice?” Greg asked.

“Possibly criminal law. I considered labor but that’s my dad’s expertise.” Elise smiled at her father—a warm, sweet, private smile exclusive of everyone else around the two of them.

She closed her book and bent over to pick up the book bag lying at her feet. Only then, did Greg notice that her feet were bare. She slipped her sandals on. Low-heeled, sensible sandals. They had been covered by her bag.

“You, two, done with your meeting? It’s past one and I’m starved. I have a class at four.” She stood up. She was quite petite, at least, compared to Lori, his fiancée. The top of Elise’s head hardly reached his mouth.

Dr. Halverson said, “Greg, why don’t you join us for lunch? Our school cafeteria won’t have anything fancy but we do have all those fresh, organic stuff that’s supposed to be good for you.”

“Oh, no, thank you. I do have to get back to my office. Miss Halverson, it was a pleasure to meet you. I sincerely hope we meet again.”

“Oh, for sure,” Dr. Halverson said. “If I know my wife, she’s probably already planning to invite you to dinner. Elise is always there for those dinners. She loves her mom’s cooking.”

“That’d be very nice. I don’t get too many invitations to home-cooked dinners. We, bachelors, are condemned to take-outs or dinners at restaurants.”

“We’d all be so lucky to have money to dine at restaurants,” Elise said.

“Elise!” Her father said.

“I’m sorry. It’s just that I’ve been working with people who struggle to put food on the table towards the end of the month. They can’t afford dinner at restaurants and, for

them, that's a feast that happens only in their dreams or on TV."

She cast a quick glance at Greg, then at her father, and looked away.

Whether Elise's apology was sincere or not, Greg could not say, but if she was indeed sorry, it was not because she offended him, but because she displeased her father. If so, he need not acknowledge it.

He looked at his watch and said to Dr. Halverson, "I'd better be going. I shall see you again in two weeks. Same time, same place?" He shook the older man's hand.

"Goodbye, Miss Halverson."

"Goodbye, Mr. Thorpe," Elise said. She barely looked up at him.

Greg was tempted to accept the invitation. He wanted to stay longer, get to know Elise better. He would have been easily persuaded, if she had smiled at him just a little. But, clearly, she would have thought he was intruding into her time with her father. She did not hide her impatience for him to leave her and her father alone.

She appeared to him so young, so inaccessible. And so nonchalant about her youth and her beauty. She made him feel old, dull and tiresome—that bugged him so much that he thought he wanted nothing more to do with her. And yet, he knew he was captivated.

Her irritated retort about workers and dinner at restaurants did not offend him. As an advocate for workers and their rights, she empathized with them. He could understand that. Still, Elise's manner towards him had been indifferent—he would even say, cold—and he smarted from it.

He saw her again, a month later, at the first dinner party to which Mrs. Halverson invited him. Elise arrived when everyone was already seated at the dining table. She took an empty chair at the opposite end from him. In the living room, she looked around and chose a chair at a corner, far from where he sat. They hardly said a word to each other that evening.

Greg convinced himself he did not care. Why waste time on someone whose blonde looks gave her an ethereal air—an apparition, a reluctant goddess who cultivated a look of wide-eyed innocence to hold men away at arm's length. Anyway, she did not belong in his world. He felt more at home in one inhabited by dark-haired seductive women conscious of their beauty and its effect on men.

Some of those women were more attractive, by the usual standards of bewitching voluptuous beauty, which they used in bold, open attempts to seduce him. Before he got engaged, he had not often resisted when they lured him to their beds. But he never succumbed to any of them. And not one, among them, ever engaged his fascination the way Elise did; not one caused him sleepless hours dreaming up a future life with them.

Greg could not help watching Elise, and he had been eager to listen to the random bits of insight about her that her father sometimes shared with him. He realized later, from what her father said, that she behaved with some indifference towards men, in general. He doubted that Elise cared or even knew how to turn her feminine wiles on to attract men. Was she just guileless or so confident in herself that she did not bother to flaunt her charms?

Elise, without much effort, struck at his male pride. Her indifference provoked him, prodded him to prove to himself

that he could break through her cool, imperturbable exterior and make her fall, at least a little in love with him.

On his fourth Saturday dinner at the Halversons, Greg sat with his hosts, their son Justin, a couple of university professors and their wives as they chatted in the living room, sipping after-dinner drinks. The front door opened and Elise walked in with a young man. She had not dined with them.

She introduced her companion as Daniel who her parents were obviously acquainted with. They knew he recently graduated from the same law school Elise was attending.

Greg could not help sizing him up. He had curly black hair, skin darker than his, brown deep-set eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses, a sharp nose, thin wide lips, and a square jaw. He reminded Greg of Superman's Clark Kent persona in comic strips he collected as a child and still kept somewhere in his closet. But unlike shy Clark Kent, Daniel looked self-assured and purposeful. He impressed Greg as handsome and heroic. Was he Elise's boyfriend?

Greg turned away irritably.

Mrs. Halverson was speaking to Daniel. "I'm really glad you came by. How was your party?"

"Very nice. A lot of fun," Daniel said.

Elise regarded Daniel with an amused smile. "Fun, yes, but we only had booze, chips, and chicken wings. Our honoree here hasn't eaten since breakfast so I suggested we come here and raid your refrigerator for leftovers."

"Of course. I did make enough, just in case you came. Go help yourselves to anything in the fridge."

Justin rose from his chair. "I'll show you where things are. I helped Mom put them away."

A few minutes later, Greg heard the three talking in the kitchen. He listened to them grow louder and livelier. After another half hour, they returned to the living room. Daniel thanked Mrs. Halverson profusely, and the three settled at one corner of the living room, where they resumed their animated conversation.

Greg's mind wandered a few times to their lively corner. He fought an urge to abandon his learned but sedate companions who were discussing the economy, while their wives noisily compared gardens to see which produced lovelier flowers or more vegetables.

He could barely hear the conversation among the young people, but his gaze kept darting towards Elise. Fascinated, he watched her listen in rapt attention to whoever was talking. But when all three talked on top of each other, she did not shrink from raising her voice to get herself heard. Several times, she broke out into laughter or feigned a pout while the young men laughed at her. She was clearly at ease with both of them.

Greg scowled. What could they be talking about? How could he get Elise to talk to him that way?

He smiled, despite his irritation. Elise looked as equally attentive to Justin as she did to Daniel. No, she wasn't indifferent to Daniel, but neither did she show signs of being in love with him.

Greg began to hope. He would have to find out how he could spark that earnestness, that passion he detected in her eyes, when he saw her on television.



Greg had been consulting with Dr. Halverson for four months when Mrs. Halverson invited him, for the first time and, on a moment's impulse, to stay for dinner after a Friday afternoon meeting. The more formal dinners he had been to were always on a Saturday, and with a larger party that usually included Elise, a few of the Halversons' old friends, and sometimes, her brothers.

He hesitated, at first, since he looked forward to quiet Friday evenings at home, after the end of an exhausting week. But how could he resist such pleasant company and the savory aroma of whatever Mrs. Halverson was cooking? He accepted.

As they were starting dinner, they heard the unlocking of the entry door as Mrs. Halverson passed the bowl of salad around. She looked surprised, but she beamed a smile at her husband.

"That has to be Elise. I thought she might come this Sunday. She rarely comes on a Friday."

"No, so she must miss your cooking, to brave the crazy Friday evening rush home." Dr. Halverson chuckled.

He said to Greg, "That's the only hold my wife now has on my fiercely independent daughter—her home-cooked meals."

Greg watched Elise walk through the vestibule. Her head was bowed like some philosopher absorbed by a burning question. She stopped at the doorway to the dining room, obviously surprised.

Her gaze flitted from him—a quick, heedless glance—to her parents. She approached her mother first; then, her father and kissed each one on their cheeks. Only after those rituals did she show a tiny glimmer of interest at seeing him there. But she blinked her eyes and the glimmer was gone.

She did smile as she greeted him. “Good evening, Mr. Thorpe.”

“Good evening, Miss Halverson.” He could not echo the cold formality in her tone even if he wanted to. His evening had become more promising the minute he learned it was Elise turning the key to the door.

“Your timing is good, as always,” her father said with a grin.

“And your habits are as boringly regular as ever.” Elise grinned back at her father.

“Touché, my dear. Your mother and I are always happy to see you, kids, at home. I wish your brothers came as often.”

“They have busy jobs and I’m a girl so I feel more obligated.”

Greg doubted Elise came from a sense of obligation. He believed she liked talking to her father and really did miss her mother’s cooking.

Elise dropped her backpack and a pocketbook—*Crime and Punishment*—on a dining chair before she took a seat across from Greg. She flashed him a glance and a reluctant smile. He was sure that she had been avoiding him, always choosing to sit the farthest away from him as possible. But, this evening, she had no choice, he thought amusedly, if she did not want to seem rude.

She did not say much during dinner, concentrated on the dishes before her, and ate with obvious relish. He wondered if she attacked everything she did with equal gusto.

After dessert, the four of them sat around the dinner table. Greg and Dr. Halverson talked about politics and the economy. Elise and her mother carried on another, low-toned conversation about a piano piece her mother had been practicing.

A face-to-face conversation with Elise had been nearly impossible before, but tonight, Greg resolved to wait for a moment to compel her to talk to him. His moment came at a longer pause in his discussion with Dr. Halverson. He turned to Elise and pointed to the book next to her backpack.

“Guilt, crime, justice—they seem to fascinate you, even in fiction. Have those issues changed from what they were in mid-nineteenth century Russia?”

“You have read *Crime and Punishment*?” She stared at him, a skeptic look in her eyes.

“Yes, why does it surprise you?”

“Was it required reading for an elective you were taking?”

“No. I chose to read it on my own after a college friend told me what it was all about. He was a lit major.”

“And you read it all the way to the end?”

She regarded him from the sides of her eyes, her head inclined a little.

“Of course, I read it all the way to the end. I always finish everything I start.”

“Hah.” She averted her eyes and was silent for a minute as she played with the teaspoon on her dessert plate.

He stared at her, diverted. She knitted her brow, squinted her eyes at the spoon, bit her upper lip, and compressed her mouth. What was going on in her head?

“What do you think of Raskolnikov’s reason for killing the old woman?” she asked, without looking up at him.

Startled out of his absorption with her, Greg thought for a moment. “On the surface, it seems cold and calculating but I think he talks himself into believing that he has a good enough reason.”

Elise raised her head. Her eyes flashed, and then narrowed as she stared at him.

She said, “He assumes the woman is inferior to him and, therefore, her life isn’t worth as much.”

Greg could sense her irritation. “But what about the times, his dire poverty and the humiliation he feels in it? I can imagine myself making the same tough choices if I have to deal with the same things.”

“But would you have gone ahead and killed her?”

“I might have.”

She glared at him, shook her head, and compressed her lips again. “How could you?”

“Desperate circumstances, desperate measures. I think there’s a point when we’re faced with a dilemma and making a choice could be a matter of survival.”

“Yes, but it isn’t really a matter of survival, is it? He buries what he took from the woman and never uses it. Besides, he kills her sister, too, an act that gains him nothing.”

“The sister killing is also an act of survival. He’s scared to get caught and, later, he buries the spoils out of guilt, which is overwhelming and makes him sick and nearly crazy.”

Elise regarded him thoughtfully for a few moments. Then, she looked away, her brow knitted over her eyes.

She said, “Yes. In the end, it’s how justice gets him. To me, that’s really what the story is all about—the weight of guilt becomes too much and he breaks down.” She sounded almost conciliatory.

“Sometimes, you have no choice but to give in.”

Elise nodded and turned toward her parents. She and Greg were so absorbed hashing through their disagreements that they had not noticed her mother suppressing a yawn a few times. Dr. Halverson, slumped in his chair, merely listened with a benign smile. He got up and began stacking dishes.

“Continue. I’ll just put these in the dishwasher and clean up a bit,” he said. He carried the dishes to the kitchen.

His wife followed. “I’ll help you with the dishes.”

When he and Elise were alone, Greg said. “I remember, you told me when we first met, that you’re thinking of practicing criminal law. Would you take Raskolnikov on as a client? You seem to disapprove of his motivation for the killing.”

She looked at him again and was thoughtful for a couple of minutes. “I believe there’s never a good reason to kill or seriously injure another except, maybe, when your life is threatened and you’re acting in self-defense. But, yes, I would defend him. Everyone needs to be heard in court. That’s a given in our system of justice. What I feel has nothing to do with it. I would do all I can to give him the best defense possible.”

“He confesses to the murders. That should make things simpler.”

“Maybe, but confessions can be retracted.” With a hint of a smile, she added, “Raskolnikov would be a very interesting case, actually. He’s intelligent and thinks himself superior. But he’s downtrodden, in the gutter. His crime is not one of passion, but something he mulls over for a while and rationalizes to himself. But he confesses, out of guilt, to a prostitute—a prostitute!—who persuades him to admit to the murders. Intriguing, no? What else can we mine from the depths of a criminal’s psyche, especially someone as complicated as this one?”

To Greg’s delight and his own surprise, Elise shed that annoying indifference she had assumed with him before then. She listened without interrupting him, after which she inquired, challenged, or nodded in agreement. Towards the

end, she flashed him an engaging smile, and like that night he saw her on television, he caught his breath. That smile, while not one of surrender, had ended any further arguments that evening.

At the next Saturday party, Greg came up to her on their way to the living room for coffee and after-dinner drinks.

“How was your day, Elise?”

She did not—as she had done in the past—turn or walk away as if she did not hear him. She smiled and said, referring to the conversation in the dining room, “Mr. Thorpe, this is the first time I ever heard you talk about your company. Interesting. I didn’t know that even lights are going digital.”

“We have the technology and we’re getting better at using it to save energy.” He took a chair next to hers.

“So, you’re helping fund some related research. I’m impressed.”

“My research budget isn’t that big. My operation is relatively small. But any scientific advances will ultimately be good for business.”

Elise nodded, smiled, and said nothing more.

“Call me Greg. I’m not so old—or am I, to you?”

“No, of course not. We’ve sat at the same dinner table nearly every week for the last few months. About time I called you by your first name.”

“Then, I can call you Elise?”

“You’ve been calling me that.”

“Have I? We’ve talked so little, I don’t remember.”

“Until we argued about crime and guilt, we’ve never had much to talk about.”

“Can we do something to change that?”

“What if we find nothing more we can talk about?”

Greg smiled and shook his head. "I doubt that. You seem to me to have some opinion on many things. Besides, if you put your mind to it, you can probably think of something to say about almost anything."

Justin, who was at the dinner that evening, pulled a chair next to theirs and said, "You betcha. I've never seen her at a loss for words."

Greg noticed he always sat next to Elise, and suspected he was protective of his sister, who was a few years younger than him.

"I had nothing I could really say about light technology. I know nothing about it," Elise said, glaring at Justin.

"I can tell you more, if you're interested," Greg said.

"Don't, Greg. You've got to keep some things from her. Or, pretty soon, she'll know more about it than you do." Justin chuckled.

"Shut up. I don't do that." Elise scowled at Justin with blazing, narrowed eyes. She turned away, to the conversation among the rest of the party.

Greg was dismayed. He wanted to talk to her more; he did not care about what. But he had lost that chance, for now.

Elise sat back on her chair, and for the rest of the evening, quietly listened to her parents as they kept the conversation going among the guests. The Halversons sat close together on the couch across from her, her father's arm alighting on and off like a protective wing over her mother's shoulders, as he talked.

Greg inserted a few remarks into the general conversation, but he contented himself with watching Elise and continued to do so when she appeared not to notice.

To him, she looked most serene when she focused on her parents or listened to the frequent banter between them

and her brother. Her eyes turned soft and a little smile, that seemed to say “all is right with the world,” played on her lips. That image was in contrast to the defiant face she regarded him with, during the first few months of their acquaintance. He later saw that same serene expression when she recollected certain incidents from childhood.

Before he left that evening, Greg said to Elise, “I meant it. I can tell you more about lights, the new technology, if you’re interested.”

“I really don’t get into everything. As it is, I’ve too much on my plate.”

“Your brother was teasing. I could see that. Anyway, in case you get curious enough about that, or anything else you think I may know something about, just ask.”

At a subsequent dinner, Elise did ask him for a very short account. His reply led to a long conversation about many things that night, from Greg’s college years to their political beliefs which, as he had expected, were quite similar.

Greg began to look past his desire for a conquest, for conquest's sake. But he also worried whether his fascination with Elise was growing into a kind of obsession. Why the need to know everything about her? Not only her beliefs and values, but also her passions, her longings. What turned her off and was there something she hated enough to want to destroy it?

He wanted to know her little quirks—the everyday things one hardly thought about—what she liked to eat, what she did for fun, her preferences for music, books, colors. He had never before sought to learn as much about any other woman he knew, not even Lori.

Those nights, in the convivial atmosphere of the Halverson home, Greg cultivated as comfortable a friendship

as Elise was open to. They talked and argued; they sparred and laughed together. Her mother noticed all that and took to sitting them across each other during larger parties, next to Dr. Halverson's end of the table.

Eventually, what he had hoped for came about—a friendship, not only of ease but also of trust, the kind that permitted them to share confidences and their innermost thoughts.

It began with a fortuitous conversation about a war movie, an unlikely topic not only for the two of them but also for the group that usually gathered around the Halverson dinner table.

That night, Dr. Gronski said, "I have to tell you all about this war movie I just saw. It's more drama than guns and firepower and, of course, it's Shakespearean."

He proceeded to talk about the film, triggering a lively exchange about films that contained violence.

Greg said to Elise, "Have you seen a war film you liked?"

She frowned and looked thoughtful. "I can't think of one. Not off the top of my head." She grinned as her gaze swept across the guests, among whom, a couple of conversations had grown heated. "Maybe, I just don't want to start a battle between us by talking about war films."

He nodded and chuckled. "No, we have to shout to be heard. Everyone here would think we're arguing again."

But later, in the living room, he said as they sat down on adjacent chairs, "I remember a war film that made quite an impression on me."

"Oh, which?"

"It's an old film, probably done before I was born; before you were, no doubt."

"So what? Some of the greatest films are really old."

“Have you seen films by Francis Ford Coppola?”

“I have. The university has film groups that show movies nearly every night, especially on weekends. Coppola films are a main staple in those, along with others well known to film buffs. I’ve actually seen his *Godfather* series more than once.”

“Yes, I remember campus movies. In fact, that’s how I first saw *Apocalypse Now*. They reissued an uncut version a few years ago and I bought a DVD. I wanted to be able to watch it anytime I felt like it. It’s now stored in my network drive.”

“Interesting. I’ve seen both versions, too. And come to think of it, if there’s one war film I really liked, that would be it,” she said, her eyes bright with wonder. “So what did you think of it?”

“The acting was superb, for one. Both Brando and Martin Sheen could do blank, but haunted, stares better than any actor these days. But many images were just wonderfully haunting. From the beginning—when the helicopter drones on and you see this haze of yellow napalm—until the end when Brando does a monologue and Martin Sheen sails away on a tugboat.”

“Amazing. I remember those images, too. Disturbing, but lyrical. And like you, I can keep watching them.”

Elise stared at him and her eyes seemed, to Greg, to have grown even brighter. He was riveted, and he felt as if they were all alone in the room.

“You have a rich inner life,” she said, smiling and breaking the spell he had momentarily fallen into.

“And so do you. You understood what I was getting at.” He grinned, regarding her with an amused eye. “But are you saying that because we agreed on something, completely, for the very first time?”

“Well, a little, yes.” She paused, thoughtfully. “You could have said this film is enigmatic.”

“It is enigmatic. What’s wrong with that?”

“Well, when you say enigmatic, you assume something deep is going on, but it can’t be understood, so it’s useless to explain after that. To me, that’s an excuse not to look closer.”

“I see. You have a point there.” Greg frowned, inviting her to say more.

“But you looked closer. And beneath the surface, you found the mood and theme haunting, ominous, but lyrical.”

“Those are your words, not mine. But I do agree.”

“Well, you could talk about the scenes where the mood is that way. I think that takes a vital inner life to see, especially in a film about war.”

“What if we didn’t agree?”

“That doesn’t matter. I would still say you have a rich inner life,” Elise said, the ghost of a lopsided smile on her lips.

“Is that important to you—having a rich inner life?”

She knitted her brow and looked directly into his eyes. “Isn’t it to you? Our inner life is what makes us human and, to me, it’s even more important for the way we live now. We’re constantly assaulted by all kinds of things—cell phones, televisions, ads, cars, news of war, the bad economy, shootings. It’s endless. Can you imagine just continuously reacting to these things? You lose your soul.”

“Do people talk about soul anymore?”

“I don’t mean it in the religious sense. You can call it spirit, humanity. But I mean that which makes us not only thinking, but feeling, compassionate beings. We’ve been given all these gifts to see beyond what’s obvious. To think, to feel, to react in our own individual ways. Why not use them to the fullest?”

“I do know what you mean. And I agree with you about the constant assault of technology and modern life on us. Technology is crucial to my work, but I just have to get away from it, from time to time. Do something else. Realize there is this certain person within me that craves for something more. I watch a lot of movies. I know that’s a form of escape, like romance novels or science fiction. But a lot of good films can draw you in, show you how people of other cultures, other places, live. They only take a couple of hours to sit through but I think they help you get in touch with what’s inside of you.”

Greg was almost breathless when he finished what he was saying. He had never talked to anyone that way—“getting in touch with what’s inside of you”—where did that come from?

“I like those kinds of movies,” Elise said.

“Maybe, we can watch something together sometime.”

She smiled that warm, engaging smile and Greg began to imagine that she, finally, had a smile meant only for him; just as she had an exclusive one for her father.

She said, “What if we don’t agree about how we interpret something we see?”

“Then, we can spend the whole night talking about it. But, in the end”—he paused, with a teasing smile—“I would still say you have a rich inner life.”

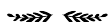
She uttered a low chuckle.

They gazed at each other for a long moment before she turned her face away, licking and chewing on her lower lip.

Greg did not turn away. He stared intently at Elise, amazed that she could draw something from deep within him—feelings he rarely shared with anyone but his mother and Bob, thoughts he had buried in nearly inaccessible parts of his brain. That was new to him and he liked it.

He knew, then, that he and Elise would never hesitate to share intimate thoughts with each other. He glowed with pleasure to realize that they had finally connected at a very personal level, one he now admitted to himself he had always wanted since they first met.

A strong, unspoken bond grew between them. But neither was aware of how entangled they were getting in it.



Months later, Greg again accepted Mrs. Halverson's spontaneous invitation to dinner. He had been to many of those by that time, and half the time, Elise came unannounced. He found himself always wishing she would come. To his delight that particular evening, she did.

She gave each parent a peck on the cheek, greeted him with a momentary raising of her eyebrows, and slumped down on a chair.

"I'm exhausted. This afternoon, I had my last finals for this semester. Am I glad it's over. Can I stay the weekend, Mom?"

"You don't need to ask, you know that."

"Great! Thanks." Elise sniffed at the dishes in front of her. "I haven't had this before, have I? What is it?"

"A Moroccan dish, a tagine. And, yes, you have," her mother said.

"It smells so yummy. What's in it?" Elise helped herself to a good portion.

"Garlic, of course, and cumin, cinnamon which I know you like, a bit of ginger."

Elise was silent throughout most of the dinner and only glanced at Greg occasionally, between mouthfuls. He did not mind her saying little. He found enough diversion just watching her whenever he could do so discreetly.

After dessert, Elise said, "Can we do coffee and talk in the living room? I'm really tired and it's more comfortable in there."

That was the last time he heard her voice that evening. She sat on the couch next to her mother, declined coffee, and fell asleep within ten minutes of sitting down and listening to the conversation between him and her parents.

An hour later, Greg rose to leave. He glanced at Elise once more.

Mrs. Halverson said, "I guess she'll be sleeping on the couch tonight. It's not too comfortable, but she's so tired she won't even notice."

"I can carry her to her bed, if you like," Greg said.

Dr. Halverson shook his head, "No, that isn't necessary. She'll be okay there. We'll put a blanket on her."

"I don't mind. She doesn't look heavy at all."

Mrs. Halverson said, "Are you sure you don't mind? She'll feel better in the morning."

"No, not at all." Before anyone could utter another word, Greg scooped Elise up in his arms.



Greg unbuttoned the top part of his shirt down to his chest. He was uncomfortable and a little sweaty, despite the air conditioning in his car. He had to be careful. His mind was

full of those past minutes with Elise in his arms, and they distracted him from his driving.

She seemed so peaceful, in deep dreamless sleep. His gaze had roamed from her closed eyelids to her mouth, where it lingered. That mouth, with its sensuous lower lip.

In the early days, he found himself wanting to kiss it to silence her arguments. Lately, almost every night after he switched his lights off, he imagined taking it in his mouth and savoring it as he would luscious fruit. Moments before sleep, she would float away, her effervescent image whirling back into the deep recesses of his imagination, to be reborn the next night.

Those lips, slack, parted just a little, looked more generous in sleep. How he wished he could have taken them in his. He might have, too—at least, a light, tender kiss—if her mother was not there, going down the hallway in front of him.

The thought of stealing a kiss from Elise thrilled him. He had never done it to anyone before. He never had to.

Without much warning, a flash of insight hit him. His eyes widened and he eased his foot on the accelerator.

“Oh, Elise, I love you. I’m in love with you.”

Was that why he was eager to accept all her mother’s invitations to dinner, why he was riveted by her gestures and the way emotions played on her features, why he provoked her sometimes into arguing with him, why she invaded his dreams?

Greg smiled, amused at himself for feeling like a schoolboy, in love for the first time. A frown replaced the smile. He was not the type to get caught in something so nebulous. The feeling should pass.

“No, it won’t,” he said aloud, in the next breath.

He imagined a year from that time, having dinner with Lori at home, but he could not go past the image of them sitting, indifferent and silent, sipping wine and eating. He vanished Lori from the scene and placed Elise where Lori sat. A full scenario unfolded in his mind of how they would talk through dinner, continue their conversation in the bedroom with Elise in his arms while he nibbled on her ear and her cheek, and end with them making love and waking up in each other's arms in the morning.

By then, he had been engaged to Lori for almost a year. Their wedding date had been set, invitations sent out, and Lori had built her trousseau.

That night, he paced his room, restless and sleepless. The following nights were not much better. He never counted on falling in love. Nor on anyone like Elise. He had not believed in love. Nobody expected it of him. Nor awakened it in him until Elise. But now, his nights were flooded with dreams of her. She filled him with an ache he never had before.

He recalled the nights he and Lori spent together. He thought that such recollections should dampen his longing for Elise. But they did the opposite and only left him wondering even more what it would be like making love to Elise.

CHAPTER THREE

Greg and Elise



Back to the Present:

Greg sat down at one end of the couch and poured some champagne into each glass.

He looked up at Elise and said, “Sit, please.”

Elise hesitated a little before she sat at the other end. She took the glass Greg offered her, smiled, and said, “Thank you.”

Greg took a couple of sips of champagne and put his glass down. He opened the album on the coffee table and pushed it towards Elise.

“Here—I took this out from deep inside my desk so I could show it to you. Indulge me a little and look at it. Isn’t that what nice friends are for?”

“Nice friends? Oh, yes. We keep them for that. We expect them to go, ‘Oh, wow, you’re so cute. That’s nice! Nice, nice, nice!’” She giggled, then pressed her palm to her mouth.

“You’re making fun of me already and you haven’t even looked at it. C’mom, be nice”—he laughed—“I mean be charming, be kind, whatever. Spend a little time to get to

know me better. I listen to your dad talk about you—which he does a lot.”

“Oh no! You can't trust parents. Surely not my dad, about me.”

“Really? But what he tells me fits with how I see you.”

“Ugh! Anyway, I'm ready to be nice. Okay, show me your little boy pics. That's what these are, right? You want to leave me with memories of you as cute, charming, and cuddly?”

“My mother thought so.”

Elise took the album, cradled it on her lap and studied the pictures on the first page.

“Nice!” She threw him a glance.

“Be serious.”

“I am serious. Is this your mother as a young woman?”

Greg inched as close as he could, but he was careful not to let their legs and arms touch. He glanced at the picture she was pointing to. “Yes. She was, maybe twenty-seven. I was three.”

“Beautiful and very dignified. I can see where you got your resolute jaw.”

After that, Elise did not say much about the pictures except for an occasional approving “Hmm” or a grunt-like sound through her nose.

Greg remained silent, content to sit next to Elise and breathe in the subtle and changing blend of sweat, citrus, and complex floral scents that she exuded, so near to him. Usually, she sat across the table from him or stood about an arm's length away. Now, he could put his arms around her and gather her close to him, had things been different between them.

He watched her for a while, fascinated by the side of her ivory neck and the hair that grew low down her nape. How he

wanted to pass his hand over its silky smoothness, to caress it, and then, to put his lips against that skin. He curled his fingers into his hands, lying heavy on his thighs.

Elise turned her head towards him and, for an instant, he thought he saw a spark in her eyes. Was it yearning, quelled at the very moment it began? Whatever it was, it tugged at his insides. She smiled, with some hesitation. A slight frown crossed her brow as she returned her attention to the album.

He was breathing faster. He inched closer to her, stared at the nape of her neck and leaned over. He pressed his lips on it before she could open another page. The kiss was light and tentative. She continued going through the pages of the album as if nothing happened.

“Elise—.” She showed no signs that she heard him. He wanted to turn her around, shake her, and tell her what she was doing to him.

“Elise—.” He was imploring now.



Elise shuddered. No one had ever called her in that way. Greg’s voice was low and resonant, coming from deep within him. A dull heavy mass churned in her stomach and she forgot which picture she had been looking at. She stared at the page and tried, without much success, to regain her focus.

She felt his lips on her neck again. This time, they wandered from her neck to her ear, to her cheeks. She could feel the heaving of his chest. For a few moments, she could not move. She could have turned around and kissed him back.

But something in her—conscience, perhaps; apprehension; even fear—would not let her.

She raised her head slowly. “Greg, what are you doing?”

His face was inches from hers and he peered deep into her eyes. “I love you, Elise.”

She held his gaze although it took some resolve for her to do so. “You can't. You're getting married in two days.”

“But I do love you. I can't help it.”

“Like a sister. You said so in the car. Or has all this been a ploy to get yourself a cavorting young thing in bed?”

“No! I confess I did look for any excuse to be alone with you tonight. And when you said things were bound to change between us, I wanted to be with you even more. You'll never ever be just any young thing to me.”

She closed the album and gripped it with both hands. She was trembling and she could not speak for a while. When she did, her voice was more subdued and she kept her gaze on the album.

“Come on, Greg, I've begun to believe you're not like most guys. And, you're right. Tonight, seeing you in this house, with Bob—I'm also ready to admit I was wrong about you being just another flashy playboy.”

She faced him again. “So, please don't play with me.” Her voice almost broke into a plaintive cry.

“How can I convince you I mean what I say? I want things to change between us but not in the way you imply. I want them to get better. Much better.”

“Oh, Greg!” She shook her head slowly, repeatedly. “How can you say these things to me? You're getting married this weekend.”

“I haven't forgotten. You've been reminding me that all evening. But I can't keep this to myself any longer. I had to

tell you. I've been in love with you from the first moment I met you."

"No. No! You can't be." She slammed the album on the coffee table, where it landed with a loud bang and toppled her glass of champagne, the pale gold liquid flowing into a puddle around it.

She glanced at the puddle, fought an urge to mop it with a napkin, and choked down a sob. She bounded from the couch and, in a few rapid strides, she was standing in front of the door. She stopped. All she had to do was reach for the knob. But she could not. She stared at it. And dropped her face on her hands.

She sensed Greg's presence next to her. The next instant, his arms were around her. She stiffened, but she couldn't extricate herself from his embrace.

"I'm sorry to make you feel this way. Maybe I shouldn't have told you. But sitting there, so close to you, I couldn't hold it in any longer. I've wanted so much to hold you, kiss you, tell you I love you since you walked in to dinner tonight."

She could run out of the room, away from him and end it all between them. Right now. But again, she could not. Her legs were leaden and her feet felt rooted into the floor. Her will was not equal to the force that her body and her heart seemed to have succumbed to. The same force that kept that door closed on them and stirred a distant voice within her:

"You love him, too. You can't deny it, not anymore."

At that very moment, that distant voice also told her that her life was about to change. How, she did not know, but she felt strangely eager for whatever was to follow.

She had been so much in control of herself in the past. But why not let go? *Throw caution to the wind, like Leah said. Just for one night.*

Greg drew one hand, and then the other, gently, away from her face. He pressed his lips softly all over her hair, her forehead, her eyes and her cheeks.

Elise did not push him away; she stood rigid and still for some time, her head down. Once more, he kissed her all over her face. He was so tender and so.....'careful' was the only word she could think of, as if he was kissing a hurt child to comfort her. She never expected that of him. How full of surprises this night had been. And it was not over yet.

She raised her face slowly up to his, her eyes half-closed. She parted her lips.

Greg regarded her upturned face for a few moments. He cupped her face in his hands and touched her lips with his. He paused, for a very short instant, before he kissed her again. And again—each kiss deeper than the one before. He clasped her close and she wound her arms around his neck. She clung to him, returning his kisses.

Elise whispered, her lips against his mouth. “Do you want to make love to me?”

Greg did not utter a sound. His eyes, dark and deep, gazed into hers, searching for the truth of how she felt about him.

*



When Greg followed Elise to the door and held her in his arms, he only meant to comfort her, reconcile her to the fact of his deep feelings for her. He could see he had distressed her in admitting them and that saddened him. His love for her—kept under wraps until now—gave him quiet, unexpected pleasure. It made him tingle just thinking of it and deliciously giddy imagining her in his arms.

When she said that they would have to be like strangers again and he realized that, after that night, he might never see her again, his mind revolted: No, not that. How could he bear it?

He was incredulous when she raised her face up to his and kissed him back. And, now, that question. How could she even ask it? He was speechless, afraid to shatter the wonderful electrifying promise of those few words—hoped for but never anticipated.

A distinct air of excitement, simmering beneath the surface, had been there between them since she walked into her parents' dining room. It agitated him, made him impatient for the dinner to end, so they could be alone together. He wanted to confront her with it, to challenge her to deny that it was there. He never imagined it would come so soon to this—as if fate had willed it. For her to love him back was what he had desired most.

Greg took Elise's hand and led her to the bedroom.

Once inside, he pushed the door behind them with a sharp definitive thud. They stood gazing at each other, bound by palpable anticipation of something neither of them had experienced before. Greg thought, *This might be the beginning of something to treasure, or the end of an unusual friendship*. Either way, they were both caught in something inexorable.

He whisked her up off the floor and carried her to the bed. He laid her, with tender care, on folds of silky sheets where he had imagined her many times before. She stretched her full form on the bed, her arms spread above her in a gesture of surrender, her eyes closed.

Before Elise, women could not seem to tear his clothes off fast enough and provoke him into ravishing them. Before

Elise, everything that happened between him and his partner was frantic and quick. They both focused on satisfying their own individual desire.

Now, as eager as his lips were, they trembled as he kissed her—much as his hands did when he touched her. His lips did not draw hers in hungrily. They tasted and lingered, savoring every bit of her his probing mouth discovered, taking in the delicate scents her skin gave off, at once sweet, musky, and briny.

Greg stopped for a moment, frustrated by the fuzzy constraining fabric that wrapped her neck. He raised himself on his knees and his eager but still trembling hands took off everything extraneous to him. Then he bent over her and, gently, slowly, he peeled every bit of fabric off of her. Little by little, he revealed the creamy, soft skin that, before that night, he saw only in his dreams or in his mind's eye.

Elise lay passive beneath him, but she had opened her eyes a little. And she did not turn her face away from him. She yielded to his fervent, tentative caresses. He parted her legs.

Elise was awkward, at first. But it did not matter. All Greg cared about was she was there, that he was making love to her. With her, he felt different. Every touch, every caress, every kiss was an intimation of love, a silent avowal of how deeply he cared for her. What he had not anticipated was how much that deliberate tenderness could push him to the height of uncharted passion.

In the beginning, Elise lay, inert but pliant under his tremulous caresses. But when his bare skin rubbed against her bare skin, she began to strain her body against his, to draw into hers the lips he offered her, to taste them as he had tasted hers and to devour as he had devoured.

She was heaving underneath him, panting, waiting, opening herself to him. He eased himself into her and she let out a long low gasp as she received him. He slowed his pace and she enfolded and clasped, rose and fell with him.

How excruciatingly delicious that moment was for Greg; the moment in which Elise first accepted him and gave herself to him, with apparent joy and without reservation. She moved in rhythm with him, undulating, receiving, reciprocating his gestures in exhilarating synchrony. He paused once, twice, three times, relishing, struggling to reign himself in, prolonging sensations almost too exquisite to bear.

To gaze into her eyes in those moments and see in them the same wondrous passion that consumed him—he was ecstatic, incredulous.

Not long after, the desire to take the other demanded complete fulfillment. He let his passion take over his will and all his senses. At about the same time, their passion erupted into paroxysms of shared ecstasy. She moaned with pleasure and he told her, repeatedly, how much he loved her.

Greg lay on top of Elise for a while and when he moved to lie beside her, he wanted to keep her locked within his arms. He gathered her closer. When it seemed to him that she was quite content to remain entwined in his embrace, he nudged his face against hers and pressed tender lips against her cheeks, drinking in her scent once more, now tinged with essences released from their lovemaking. With a smile on his lips, he descended into slumber.

An hour later, Greg was jolted from a dream. Elise had forced his arms open and taken flight. She drifted away until she vanished into thick white clouds. The dream was a recurrent one and it seemed so real that he was startled

when he opened his eyes and was met with the tranquil darkness of his bedroom. Gentle breathing—blowing moist and warm against his neck, its regular rhythm soothing to his ears—reassured him Elise was there. She had not moved from where she was as he fell asleep.

He kissed the top of her head. She stirred and, with eyes closed, lifted her face to his. He planted a soft light kiss on her lips, careful not to awaken her. But she responded, with repeated kisses that brought back the enchantment they shared, as if sleep had not interrupted it. It was still there and the desire to luxuriate again in those delirious moments was too strong to resist. Once more, he made love to her and she loved him back, with as much passion as she did earlier that night.



After Daniel, the first man she made love with, Elise was plagued by doubts that she was capable of taking pleasure in lovemaking. She was also suspicious of Greg's declarations of love. So, she waited and did nothing, at first, except react to his tender advances. But she could not deny what he aroused in her.

He gazed at her face from on top of her, his eyes glowing with an aching desire that quickened her pulse and made her gasp for air. He was so close that she could hear and feel the palpitation in his chest, rising and falling against her breasts.

Warm ardent lips grazed her eyes, her ears, her cheeks and her mouth. She received his caresses, her arms still lying above her head, her body draped like a soft rag doll on the silken sheets. But before long, her body and all her senses began to awaken to his touch, to the searing heat of his bare skin against hers, to the quiet insistence of the mouth that claimed hers as if they belonged to him. And, when she thought her excitement could not rise anymore, he plumbed depths of pleasure that she suspected but, before tonight, was not sure she had.

Elise played in her mind what just passed between her and Greg, relishing once again the pleasure of his arms around her, his warm moist skin against hers.

She watched him sleep, studying every detail of his handsome face, trying to commit it to memory. She would never see him that close to her again.

Her heart fluttered and she could not shake off the image of a dark, heavy cloud looming over what was yet to come. Tomorrow, the day after, and all the days after that, would never again be like what she and Greg just had. What had already passed between them was all they would ever have together. Magnificent, magical moments gone forever. She suppressed the ache that rose from her gut, bit her upper lip, and raised a hand to his cheek. But she resisted the urge to touch his face and trace its features until they were etched in her memory.

Elise stayed awake until she could no longer ward off sleep. She wriggled closer to Greg and nudged her face against his neck. When he made love to her again, it became, for her, the continuation of a dream, a dream she wanted so much to keep on going. But, it was about to end.



Sometime later, Greg awoke from the whirr of the garage door opening and the hum of a car engine backing out to the driveway. Elise had fallen asleep in his arms but, now, his arms were empty.

He jerked himself up and glanced at the clock on his night table. A note lay in front of it. He seized the note, and ran to the window. Almost five in the morning. He had been asleep three hours, a deep dreamless sleep that had eluded him the past few weeks.

By the time he reached the window, the car had turned around and was driving away from the house.

"Elise, please don't go. I love you. I've never loved anyone before, not like you."

He watched the car until it stopped for a short moment, turned onto the street and disappeared from his sight. He stood by the window for a few minutes, staring at the space where the car had turned.

He read the note in his hand:

I borrowed your car. Tell Bob he'll find it in your company parking lot this weekend. I'll leave the keys underneath the driver's seat.

I wish you well on your new life with your new wife.

That was all. Impersonal and to the point. She wrote neither his name nor hers on it.

He walked back, with heavy steps, towards the bed and sat on the edge of it, staring at the rumpled sheets and pillow where she had slept. He had never felt so alone and so abandoned as he did that moment. He never noticed, until then, how still and eerily quiet that hour of the morning was.

His night with Elise had been a different experience for him. With the others, after they made love, he lay on his back or on his side, facing the other way. He fell asleep soon after. The following day, he and his partner of the night before each went their way; their encounter just another thing that happened in the course of a day. Nothing to it, he used to think, but hormones and juices.

With Elise, he wished the night would not end. He wanted to prolong the sensuous joy he derived from, feeling her body against his. He imagined that he would awaken, in eager anticipation, to gaze at her face, hear the music of her voice, feel the gentle caress of her hand on his cheeks, and kiss her soft yielding lips. But she was gone.

“Oh, Elise, Elise. I’m sure you love me, too. You showed me that last night.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Elise



Dawn was tinting everything rosy as Elise drove back to her apartment. The rare occasions she had been awake at this hour, she delighted in the blush of early morning. But more than that, she marveled at the stillness of dark breaking into day, when the world awakened and sprang back into its usual chaos. So much anticipation and promise resided in that stillness. But, not this gloomy morning.

She would probably never see Greg again, never again experience the night they had together. She gripped the steering wheel and fought yet another urge to stop and turn around.

“No, you can’t go back,” she said aloud. When she talked to herself, it was as if her own voice was that of someone wiser, and it reassured her.

She squinted at the light, and swiped the tip of her nose with the back of her left hand. Her eyes and her nose were smarting, and her mouth burned red and fat. She peeked at her face on the rear view mirror. She had a light flush on her cheeks, a pinkish rim on her eyes, and a moist shine on her mouth. Nothing unusual that she could not attribute to a late night out, should her roommate Leah ask. But Leah should still be in bed.

“You’re almost home.” She reassured herself as she moved to the right lane and exited the freeway.

Accept it. It’s done. Finis. Kaput. True, you and Greg had a kind of special understanding. You both knew that. But he had already promised himself to someone else. You acknowledged that. With that piece of paper you left on his night table.

She let that reality sink in for a while.

Look at it as a kind of farewell, a rite of passage, or an unexpected milestone. Now, it’s time to let go.

She pressed her left hand on her chest, as if doing so could slow the rapid beating of her heart. She said to herself, “Is that what it’s like to love so passionately that you get totally consumed in it and you almost lose yourself?”

Scary, she thought, shuddering. Somehow, she could not say that aloud.

“It doesn’t matter now, anyway. Move on. Grow. Chalk it up to those once-in-a-lifetime experiences. Anyway, it hardly even began. There really was nothing more to it. Just a one-night stand. Everyone has one- night stands. It’s expected nowadays.”

But she could not convince herself, then, that all she and Greg would ever have was wrapped up in the just-concluded night they had together. Something had been building between them, something so strong that she could not imagine it ending, so compelling that she could not let go of it.

“Move on. There’s so much out there waiting for you to do. But first, learn to be a Zen master.”

She did not know exactly what a Zen master was. Only that he was someone at peace with, and sufficient unto, himself. She was feeling better already.

But the feeling did not last. The desire to damn conventions became almost too much to overcome.

“Just a few blocks more,” she said, mimicking her mother’s gentle, reassuring tone.

At the apartment, Elise tiptoed through the living area to her room. Leah was still asleep, as she had expected. She closed the door, and went to bed. She could use a couple more hours of sleep. It was Saturday and she had a little break from her often hectic schedule. Time enough on Sunday to ease herself back into her weekend routine, preparing for the coming week.



Elise stayed in her room until a couple of hours past noon. She lay in bed, awake but with eyes closed, struggling to suppress recollections of the past night. But her efforts were in vain. The memories were still too fresh; the sensations Greg elicited still so vivid that, many times, she could feel his lips pressing hard on hers, and more than once, she found herself writhing and squeezing her legs together.

Saturday dragged on and she did not see Leah until late afternoon. Leah came out of her room in her robe, kissed Elise on the cheeks, and said, “Got a hot date tonight.”

“Have fun.” Elise attempted a note of cheerfulness.

“I hope I don’t see you until tomorrow.” Leah sang those words, practically prancing into the bathroom.

Alone that sleep-deprived evening, Elise lay with a sheet over her head, brooding over what her feelings for Greg meant to her. They were deep, strong, she admitted to herself. So strong that they frightened her.

She had been well on her way into a meaningful career—all she believed she needed for a full life. Was not every woman supposed to be self-sufficient, with a life of her own? She, like any modern woman, refused to be defined by her association with a man and believed that getting married and having a family was an option, not a necessity. So, when she first set a goal for herself, she had focused on a career.

She started to set down what she wanted from life in the sixth grade, when her favorite teacher asked the class to imagine where they would like to be ten, twenty, thirty years hence and write it all out on a piece of paper. Their “milestones,” she said. They could go back decades later and compare how they did, based on those youthful desires.

Elise rewrote her milestones when she went to law school. That meant three more years before her first big accomplishment. Other, than that, nothing else changed. A career remained her focus.

So, why was she faltering now? Why was falling in love with Greg making her doubt herself and the choices that she had always believed were right for her?

Elise flung the sheet off her head and sat up in bed. She folded her legs close to her chest, clasped them, and laid her cheek on her knees. What did it matter now, anyway? All she could do was forget Greg and regret that she would never know what it might have been like for the two of them to be free to love each other.

A year, more or less. That was all it had taken since the very first instant she saw Greg in person, as she waited for her father outside his office.

He appeared like a genie from nowhere. When she looked up from her books, he was standing in front of her, next to her father. Greg’s face compelled her to look closer. Was it

his eyes? They had such directness and intensity in them and, yet, they seemed ready to light up with mirth. Was it his smile? A smile she couldn't help thinking about for days after that first meeting.

But, at that first encounter, some vague memory jogged her out of the pleasing diversion of an intriguing face. She recognized him—the rich playboy known for his many conquests—and she crushed her initial impression.

She had no wish to get to know him, but how could she avoid him? Her father had introduced them to each other and he was likely to be invited to her parents' home. It was obvious her father liked him.

She had been more than indifferent to Greg, at first. She had been rude during that introduction. But he ignored her bad manners.

His smiling eyes glittered with bold admiration, from which he seemed to be daring her to turn away. In spite of herself, she felt her heart thumping and had to struggle not to avert her eyes. He was burning and so was she. No other way to describe the heated, disconcertingly delicious itch that gripped her and settled into a tight mass in her stomach. It was the first time she felt that way with any man.

Then, reality intruded. "Wrong way," she told herself, "you don't want to go there."

Initially, she was unconcerned about meeting Greg again. She knew her parents would ask him over for dinner, a gesture of hospitality her mother felt compelled to extend to individuals who contracted with her father for professional consultations. Usually, they came for a couple of dinners and that was enough to satisfy her mother's sense of obligation.

But Greg had an easy, friendly manner about him that Elise thought was only to be expected. After all, he did have

a reputation for charm, which he obviously unleashed on her father in their meetings at the university.

One weekend night, her father announced at dinner that he and Greg had agreed to change their consultation schedule to late Friday afternoons. They were to meet at the Halverson home.

“Scheduling issues,” her father said. “Friday, after work, suits us both.”

Her father had never met clients at home and, yet, her mother actually appeared pleased at the change. “It’s better, anyway, to meet here than at your office. It’s more relaxed, I can serve you drinks, and you don’t have to fight traffic.”

The relaxed atmosphere of her parents’ house did help and before long, the easy rapport between Greg and her father grew into a tight friendship. Her mother began to ask him to stay for dinner after weekday consultations.

Greg became one of the “regulars” at her parents’ Saturday parties, the rare person who broke into the circle of “regulars” of a dozen or so old friends, most of them from her parents’ college days.

So, whenever Elise visited—about every couple of weeks—Greg was there.

Her mother had another reason for asking him to dinner often. “I take pity on him. He always goes home so late and eats alone. It seems so sad.”

Elise said, “Did he tell you all that and you believed him? He’s probably just playing on your maternal instinct.”

“No, he didn’t have to tell me. Since they could talk for hours after they discuss business, Greg often leaves from here around eight and he told your father he didn’t mind the late schedule of their meetings. He was used to it.”

“Maybe, that’s his subtle way of finagling an invitation.”

Her father laughed. "Maybe. But, it's quite all right, Elise. Really. We both like Greg's company and, at least, your mother doesn't feel left out. Besides, like you, I think Greg loves Mom's cooking."

"Then he should have found a girl a long time ago who could cook like Mom."

"I think he does have a girl and they're engaged," her father said. He grinned and winked at her mother. "But, I'm pretty sure she can't cook like your mom."

Elise thought it wise to say nothing more. Okay, so they liked Greg. But, she didn't. Still, she had to admit to herself that, indeed, he had a presence, a kind of charisma; a fine specimen of a man, as Leah would say.

During the early months of their acquaintance, she made no attempt to be nice to him or get to know him better. From his reputation, she had expected him to be shallow and full of himself. She had no interest in what he had to say. Unless it could not be helped, she sat as far away as she could from him. She vaguely recalled that, once or twice, he asked her a question on their way to have coffee at the living room, after dinner. But she pretended she did not hear him.

And, yet, Elise did wonder. Her father, who suffered no fools, liked him a lot.

Then, one day, Greg asked her about a book she was reading. That started it all. She admitted to herself that he surprised her. He had depth, after all, and could talk at length about something other than business. After that, she stopped avoiding him and even took some extra effort to talk to him.

She discovered an active mind eager to go deep into the heart of matters, with a breadth in interests, and a reflectiveness her father must have discerned early in his

acquaintance with Greg. But the talk she had with Greg about the “inner self” was what finally cracked whatever defense she had put up between them.

Elise sighed. *Ah, how very aggravating!* Initially intrigued by a look, seduced by what may very well be a playboy’s charms, and finally lured into the lair by the sharp intellect behind greyish blue eyes. At least, she wasn’t taken in by his bod alone, as Leah would say. Like those other women.



Elise began Sunday as she usually did, reading assigned chapters of her textbooks, but she reached the last pages without having absorbed a thing of what she just read. She did not fare any better with reviewing her cases for her work at Legal Aid.

In the afternoon, she and Leah sat in their small living room and worked on assignments at the computers on their laps. Elise stared at the empty page of her Word program. She had been staring at it for, maybe, fifteen minutes, unable to key in even a title.

Leah said, “Hey girl, where’s your mind at? You’ve been staring into space, blank-like.”

Elise was startled to hear Leah’s voice and understood little of what she said. Elise lied. “I’m sorry. I have a case study I’m having trouble understanding.”

“Would you like to tell me what it’s about? It might be one we’ve discussed in one of my classes.”

“It’s all right, Leah. I can read it again. Many times, I get it the second time. If not, I’ll read it a third time.

“Well, okay. But I’ve caught you a few times today, staring at nothing, like you were spaced-out and about to cry. So, I got a little worried.”

Elise frowned. Spaced-out? About to cry? Had she been that obvious? She chewed at her upper lip as she regarded Leah.

Leah stared back at her. “Something is going on with you. Something is different about you since yesterday. I can feel it. You must have come in very late on Friday, from dinner at your parents. Did anything unusual happen there?”

Elise smiled and shook her head.

What was keeping her from telling Leah? Was she ashamed to admit to her friend—with her past loves and past heartbreaks—that she had finally fallen in love? For the first time. But her love had to end before it even began; because the object of it was about to marry another woman.

Elise started to open her mouth but no words came out.

Leah raised questioning eyebrows at her, waited, and when after a minute or two, Elise had not spoken, she turned her attention back to her work.

Elise lost her moment.



Elise met Leah when they both started law school. Leah had chosen her among several people who came on the same day to check out the apartment Leah offered to share.

“I knew, from the start, you and I would click.” She told Elise months later. And, indeed, they did.

“We’re complimentary opposites, you and I. You’re cool and I’m hot. I mean that in a good way. You’re calm

and clear-minded. I wear my heart on my sleeves. You're blonde and I'm dark brown. So, no clashes there." Leah was half-Italian, half-Black. She grinned, with a self-satisfied twinkle in her eye.

Elise forced herself to smile. Leah meant well, but her comparisons made Elise uneasy. She said, "Well, you're quite beautiful; and you have all these guys, swarming around you."

"Woman, have you looked at yourself in the mirror? The difference is—I invite them with my eyes." Leah fluttered her eyes and thrust her hip to one side. "You, on the other hand, you want to engage their minds. I guess you'll fall in love when you meet a young Judge Brenner."

"Yes. Too bad he's decrepit. But, more to the point, they say he's happily married."

They both giggled.

"But what a brilliant legal mind. That would get you."

"Yes. We could have argued the merits of a case in between steamy breaks at court."

"Girl, I like that imagery very much. How about steamy briefings in court right on the judge's bench?"

They giggled even more.

Leah had already had two "relationships" during their friendship and had her heart broken both times. And true to her declared self, she regaled Elise with much detail about those love affairs and bared her inconsolable misery that followed the break-ups. Elise was sympathetic and solicitous during those two times. She brought Leah breakfast in her room, gave her flowers and chocolates, and commiserated with her during nights Leah was too disconsolate to be alone. To her relief, the worst of Leah's misery played itself out in about a month.

Elise admired Leah's resilience but she thought she would not want to go through the break-ups Leah did. There were too many more important things she could spend her time and passion on than nursing a broken heart. So, at twenty-three, she had never had anything that Leah would call a "relationship."

"Nothing much to tell—pathetically close to zero," she said, without any regret, when Leah asked her in their second year at law school, around the time she and Greg first met.

"What about Martin? That guy who's a year ahead of us? He seemed crazy about you."

"There was nothing to that. It died after we got into an argument about politics."

"Did he lose the argument?"

"Actually, he didn't. But I think he couldn't stand women who can reason as well as he can. Plus, he's smarting because I've resisted going to bed with him."

"Ah, yes, they stay around for sex, at least for a while. I don't blame you, though. He's kinda cute but low on the sexy meter. Is Daniel still around? He doesn't look like the type who gets scared by brainy women. And, he's so hairy." Leah was tingling.

Elise smiled. "Daniel's a great guy who actually likes my mind. But he has graduated and we're hardly in touch anymore."

"Too bad. I thought you two were well-matched and had a thing going."

Men, in fact, ogled Elise a lot and she was used to that reaction, but she was both suspicious and somewhat contemptuous of it. She believed many men continued to be

suckers for young blondes—more so if they were also dumb. She despised the stereotype of a dumb blonde.

After pursuing her for a while, most young men who had shown some interest or curiosity, decided soon enough she was not worth the effort. “Why waste time on a cold fish?” someone was rumored to have said.

Martin and Daniel had persisted but, later, as she told Leah, Martin retreated and ended his courtship. Only Daniel remained.

Elise liked Daniel—serious, nerdy, athletic, and handsome in a dark, hairy sort of way. Behind his glasses and loose shirts, Daniel was lean and well-built from years of playing soccer. He was two years ahead of her in law school when he recruited her to volunteer her services for the Legal Aid Society and later supervised her during her weeks of training.

They worked together on many cases and, several months later, exhausted after completing an involving one, they went to his apartment with some take-out dinner. He made a pass at her. She responded and they ended in bed.

The experience had not been satisfying for her and, afterwards, she had insisted on his calling her a cab so she could go home.

As they were both getting dressed, Daniel peered into her face. “I didn’t expect you to be a virgin.”

She shrugged. “The opportunity never came up to get myself deflowered.”

“I’m sure many drooling adolescents would have jumped at the chance.”

“A few tried but none of the droolers appealed to me. Come on, Daniel, aren’t you supposed to be flattered you’re my first?”

"I would be." He paused, then added, "Except, you did not seem to have enjoyed the experience." He could not hide the disappointment in his voice.

Elise was silent for a few moments. "I suppose this is the point when I say, 'It's not about you. It's about me.' Well, that's kind of true. But it isn't unusual, is it, that the first time is not so great?"

"No, maybe not. I'm four years older but I don't have much more experience than you. I did have my first, in my teens, with an older woman. I've had, what would pass for three girlfriends, but"—he grinned—"you're my first virgin. And I wasn't in love with any of them the way I am with you."

"Well, maybe, you'll fall out of love, now that you've found out that what they say about me is true; that I'm a cold fish." She smiled, with an impish twist to her mouth.

She left in a cab not long after. They did make love again but the second time was not any better than the first. Later, she made excuses to prevent a third time from happening. Their relationship cooled off.

Elise began to wonder, after that, if she was, indeed, frigid. Why could she not have fallen in love with Daniel? He was intelligent, articulate, understanding, and had been much in love with her. They could spend hours being together, talking about almost anything.

But something else was missing—something Greg aroused in her and proved to her she was far from cold. To the contrary.

Her first intimation of that something came from that brief burn at their first meeting, and later, the way she squirmed a little, the tingle she felt—instantaneous, yet exciting—whenever Greg looked at her. She never felt that

way with Daniel, never melted in his arms the way she did with Greg.

Daniel was like a beloved pair of well-worn slippers. She relied on it, was used to it. She would keep it in the back of her closet after it had outlived its use. There, it might be forgotten or, years later, thrown away when it had lost its nostalgic value.

Greg was more like being bitten; as if he injected some substance into her blood that she could not get out of her system. A little at first, with that fiery gaze of his, and a full dose the night they were together.

How long will it take her to forget? What would she have to do to look back with detachment at their friendship and their night together?

CHAPTER FIVE

Greg



Hiya, old man!" The ringing of his landline had awakened Greg. He glanced at his clock. Nine o'clock. Nothing stirred and nothing made any noise. The day was sunny and the weather prediction promised a comfortable 72⁰F. But to him, the air was heavy and stifling; the sunshine, oppressive. Four hours ago, Elise left. Would he ever see her again?

The voice at the other end irritated Greg—Larry, Lori's longtime friend and a businessman. He and Lori were in the business administration program at the same university, from which they both graduated seven years earlier. Greg met Larry at a conference and, later, Larry introduced him to Lori.

Greg agreed, on Lori's suggestion, to take him as best man. When that decision needed to be made, he could not name any close male friends about his age. Dr. Halverson was the only man he considered a true friend.

"Ready for this evening? We've got some real surprises for you."

"Call it off. There isn't going to be a wedding."

"What did you say?"

"I can't go through with this marriage."

“Ah, pre-wedding jitters. You'll get over it. We'll get you in the mood tonight.”

“No, I mean it. I don't feel right about all this.”

Greg's declaration met with a long, heavy silence.

“I was afraid of this. I warned Lori I didn't think you were the marrying kind. Why would you be, with your money, your looks, and all those women eager for your company? Why settle for one?”

Greg was not about to reveal more than he had already done to Larry. He replied in a flat noncommittal tone.

“Maybe. I would appreciate it very much if you can keep this to yourself until this afternoon. I would have talked to Lori first and called you next. But you got to me first.”

“Better think twice about this, old man. You've heard what they say about a woman scorned. I know Lori better than you do. Besides, this is the cruelest thing you could do to a woman—to dump her the day before your wedding. Don't do it, man. You might be sorry.” Larry's voice took on a tone of anger that grew as he spoke.

“I have to go. I'm sorry about this evening.” He hung up before Larry could say any more.



Greg dialed Lori's number. He knew his call would be unexpected. They had both understood that they were not going to meet again until the wedding.

“Hello, Lori, it's me. I need to talk to you. I'll be there in fifteen minutes.”

“Oh, hello, Greg.” Her voice was faint and still a little throaty from sleep.

"I'm sorry to wake you. But this is important."

"Did you say fifteen minutes? You're not giving me enough time to make myself presentable. I won't even have time to shower."

"You always look good, so don't worry about it."

A quarter of an hour later, Lori opened her door to let Greg in. She had wrapped a robe around her nightgown, put on some make-up, and dabbed on some perfume.

"Good Morning, Lori." Greg greeted her with a buss on the cheek.

"C'mon, Greg! I know you can have me anytime you want after this Sunday, but you don't have to be so polite before then." She teased with a coquettish smile.

He gave her a faint smile but ignored her remark. "Shall we go in?"

"So unlike you to be suddenly shy."

Inside, she offered to make some coffee. He declined.

"Thank you but please don't bother, for my sake. I've had a few cups."

"I don't need any right now, myself. Would you like to come to bed instead? That dinner last night must have been boring."

"No, Lori, I'm here to talk."

She regarded him under knitted brows. "In that case, we'd better sit down. Some champagne perhaps?"

"Thank you but I don't touch the stuff in the morning."

"Then, help me open one. I haven't had anything this morning and I think I might need a drink to fortify me. You look so serious."

With champagne in hand, Lori sat on a chair opposite Greg, leaned back against it, and crossed her legs in a graceful move that exposed one thigh. "Well?"

"This is a painful thing to do. One of the hardest I'll ever have to go through. But if I don't do this, we'll both regret it." He paused. He was dreading what he had to say next. "The cruelest thing you could do," he could still hear Larry say.

Lori raised her chin, and compressed her lips. She seemed wary, her hazel eyes hidden behind half-closed lids. She remained quiet. She was not going to make it easy for him.

Greg cleared his throat and decided: Why not get straight to the point?

"We should call off the wedding. I like you, Lori but I don't love you and I know you don't love me, either." His voice still came out a little hoarse but his words were clear.

Lori glared at him, stunned and speechless for a minute. Then, she cried, "How can you be sure of that? I do love you, in my own way."

"We don't have much in common. We don't talk. We make small talk, that's all."

"I never knew you to be that interested in what I have to say." Her voice was steadier. She regarded him closely, a questioning look in her eyes.

"We have nothing we could claim we shared. We don't even spend much time together."

"Why should that matter? We like different things. I can be as eloquent about my interests as you are about yours. All you need to do is ask me."

She replaced her serious look with a beaming one as she enticed him with a smile and changed tactics as she got up. She sat on his lap and wound her arms around his neck.

"You seem to be interested enough in my body."

"Please, Lori. I don't mean to hurt you, and I am extremely sorry that I can't go through with this marriage. We'll be starting off on the wrong foot."

"There is someone else, isn't there? I can smell her on you. Were you with her last night?"

He did not answer but he met her accusing stare.

She persisted. "Is there someone else?"

She rose from his lap, and glared at him again.

"No." True enough, he thought, considering the impersonal note from Elise which implied her intent not to see him again.

"Well, then, given time, don't you think you'll learn to love me in your own way?" Her voice was low and sultry and she thrust red pouting lips at him.

"We've been engaged a year and it hasn't happened."

"You bastard! You jerk. You used me." She screamed, sat down on her chair and burst out crying. "You think because you say you like me, you can get away so easily?"

He was not surprised at the swift shifts in her tone. He had witnessed it several times in previous encounters. In this instance, she had every reason to strike out at him.

"I don't know how else to say I'm sorry. I'm sure this marriage would be a mistake."

Lori got up and paced in long frantic strides across the room. "Why did you ask me to marry you?"

"My mother convinced me it was time I settled down. I have never been in love with any of the women I've been with but I do like you. You are stunning, beautiful, and you and I are alike in some ways. We know what we want and we go after it. We're not daunted by obstacles. I thought it was enough."

She stopped and stood in front of him. He did not look up. After a long minute, she cajoled once more. "Maybe, it's enough. With our ambition, we could go far together. We could talk about that, if talk is what you want."

"I want more than that in a relationship."

She laughed. "Do you really believe you're capable of more than whatever it is you've given me?"

She paused and glared at him. "Hah! Think again. You and I are alike in another way. We're incapable of real love. It doesn't work for us. We were both aware of that from the beginning. We marry for mutual gain."

He did not answer. She watched him for a minute or two. Then, in a sweet, velvety voice, she said, close to his face, "Listen, why don't we go through with the wedding? If after a year or even a few months, you still feel the same way, we can file for a divorce."

"I can't."

"Why did you wait until the last minute? If you knew all this time, why string me along?"

Lori walked more rapidly back and forth, in front of where he sat. He could hear her breathing hard.

"I shouldn't have. I can see that clearly now. I've made a big mistake. I should have ended this engagement, when I began to have my doubts that this marriage was really what I wanted. Up until a couple of months ago, I had every intention of going through with the marriage. I have no excuses to give for why I didn't say anything at that time. I can only ask you to forgive me."

"There is someone else. I'm sure of it. Was it then that you met her? Don't tell me you've fallen in love! Or, think you have." She let out a shrill brittle laugh.

"I'm so, so sorry, Lori. I wish it did not end this way. I thought that since no real love was lost between us, this wouldn't be as hard."

"Well, you're wrong!"

She halted her frantic pacing and placed her hands on her hips. She watched him for a long painful minute as if she was weighing her alternatives. Then, she stepped back, seething.

“She can't have you that easily. You can be sure of that. You don't know me—that's quite obvious. So, I'm giving you fair warning: I will make you bleed. You have made the biggest mistake of your life. Now, get out. Get out! You make me sick.” Her voice was icy cold and controlled.

Greg leapt to his feet and snuck a glance at Lori. Something in her narrowed eyes and thinned quivering lips troubled him. In a few brisk steps, he was out of her apartment. He shut the door firmly behind him. Only then did he realize that he had been gnashing his teeth so hard that his jaw hurt.



Lori's fury and her last chilling words of threat hounded Greg as he descended in the elevator down to the lobby. Breaking the engagement was a lot thornier than he had anticipated and he could blame only himself for waiting until the last minute. And yet, he really had no other choice. How could he sustain a commitment—made rashly, a year ago—that he was convinced was a mistake?

From the beginning, neither he nor Lori had any illusions that their relationship was founded on anything but calculated mutual benefits. She was going to be rich from the marriage and move in elite social circles while he would have the heirs stipulated in his father's will. In Lori, he would have a beautiful wife whose social savoir-faire would be an asset to his business. And, they were good in bed together. When he

asked Lori to marry him, he believed those reasons as good a basis as any for marriage. But now, it seemed, to him, that what he had done was propose a business partnership.

In the parking garage, Greg could not remember where he had parked his car. He had been too distracted when he drove in earlier. He pressed his electronic key to locate it. It was at the farthest end from the elevator. He hurried towards the car, got in, and inserted the key into the ignition. But he froze, and could not get himself to start it.

At mid-morning on a Saturday, the garage was quiet and nearly deserted. Not really a bad place to be in the state he was in. He could sit there for a while. He closed his eyes as exquisite memories of the past night came back to him.

“Oh, Elise, what have you done to me?” The taste of Elise, as he made love to her, lay thick on his tongue, flowed down his gut, and spread through his whole being. He leaned against the headrest and allowed himself to wallow in his recollections.

He had been sure of his feelings since that evening he first admitted to himself that he loved her. So, why did he wait so long? If he had not, he would not be in this parking lot, alone, confused, perturbed and angry at himself, unable to decide what to do next. And Elise would still be with him.

He turned the radio on as loud as he could endure. He rocked his head from side to side, slowly at first, and then, a little faster; as if doing so would expel the heaviness inside of him. From deep within his chest, rose a low-pitched groan. It got caught in his throat. But it grew louder. And louder still. Until it broke out of him into a scream.

“What were you thinking, stupid? Why did you not do something about all this two months, six months ago?”

He growled, hit his forehead on the steering wheel, and growled again. His heart was pounding and he stayed slumped on the wheel.

After some time, his breathing deepened and his pulse slowed. He sat up, turned the radio off, and sat still for a few more minutes.

He started his car, backed out with a screech and hurtled out of the parking garage. A few miles later, he eased his foot on the accelerator.

The next day, Sunday, Bob smacked the morning paper on the desk in front of Greg while he was having breakfast in his study. Bob had folded the paper to expose the bottom of the front page. He pointed to a picture of Lori, in color.

Lori's figure—clad in bridal white, veil trailing down her back—jumped out at Greg. She stood alone, in front of the altar. The headline read: "Jilted by playboy millionaire Greg Thorpe."

"Your mother called. You'd better call her back as soon as you can."

"Why didn't she call me directly?"

Bob shrugged as he sat on the couch. "You knew there would be trouble after that night Elise was here. Friend. Yeah, right! You're smitten. I saw it that night when you looked at her. You've been in love with her for a while, haven't you? You should have done something about it as soon as you knew. This is so unlike you. You've always handled your women affairs with a sure hand."

"You're right. I can't explain how badly I've managed this."

"You've never been in love before. You've no experience with the real thing. About time you do, though. A little late in life but, hey, it's great. Too bad for Lori, she isn't the one."

“Which is something I may have to pay for.”

“Lori can get vicious. She’s capable, and she’s probably feeling humiliated about being jilted the day before her wedding.”

“I know. Waiting until the last minute—not good, selfish, cruel. And I don’t have a good excuse. Maybe, I got scared to find myself in love. Or loving a woman is so new to me that I continued to doubt it, even hoped it wouldn’t last. But I had that night with Elise, and I knew that losing her is worse than anything Lori could do to make me pay for what I did to her.”

Greg paused, frowning and thoughtful. After a couple of minutes, he looked straight into Bob’s eyes. “What, would you do, if you were in my shoes?”

“A break up is a mess, no matter how you cut it. But I’d probably do the same thing you did. A loveless marriage would suck the life out of me.”

“I wish I had known I felt that way, too.”

“Well, when you’re focused on the bottom line, it may not occur to you that emotions count.”

“No and I’m paying for my ignorance. There’s no painless way through this. It takes its toll even in the person who ends the relationship.”

“Brace yourself. This morning’s news is just the beginning.”

“I know it,” Greg said, staring into his cup of tea, retreating into his thoughts.

Bob watched him for several minutes. He rose from the couch. “Well, I’d better leave you to your guilt and misery. Duty calls, anyway.”

At the door, he turned and said, “I do see why you did what you did. Elise is different. She charmed me, too, that one. I

hope you don't let her get away. I salute you on your first good judgment, when it comes to women." He raised his fingers to his forehead.

Greg nodded. "Thank you. But I'm afraid I might lose her."

Bob gave him a sympathetic shrug and left.

Greg poured himself another cup of coffee. His mother could wait a little longer. He needed to think.

The break-up was going to cost him. Lori negotiated a prenuptial agreement that she was certain to take advantage of. The amount of the contract would make an appreciable dent on his personal fortune. But the millions he could lose did not bother him.

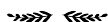
For the first time in his life, he was making decisions that subordinated his business to personal matters. His mother, if she knew, would protest. To her, nothing—not even love and the promise of happiness with a woman—was worth sacrificing his business for. The company he inherited from his father was not mere work. It was his life, as it had been for his father.

"No, mother; not anymore," he said aloud. Not for him, anyway.

He was going to woo Elise back. He was not sure how, but it was bound to be more complicated than what he went through to get his father's business into the internet age. He knew what he was doing then.

For now, his worries lay in Lori's threat against the woman she would blame for their break-up. He knew her enough to take her threat seriously. She had her resources—people she knew, like Larry, who were willing or could be bribed to help her. Sooner or later, she would find out about Elise.

As strong as Elise was, there was something trusting and naïve about her that could leave her vulnerable. Greg did not want her hurt. Not by Lori. And, surely, not by him.



“Gregory, what is the meaning of all this?”

Greg yanked the phone away from his ear at his mother’s sharp, excited voice.

“I was getting ready for this afternoon’s ceremony, and my hairdresser calls, and asks if our appointment was still on. I had to hear the news from her.”

“I’m sorry, Mama. I meant to call you this morning. I had so much to do yesterday. By the time I finished, it was too late to ring you up. I didn’t expect this story in the morning paper.”

“Obviously. So, what happened? What went wrong? I thought Lori was a good match. Beautiful, poised, educated, and she seemed much in love with you.”

“How do I explain this? I was never in love with her. And I disagree with you, about her being in love with me.”

“No matter. You’re talking like a schoolboy. Love is an overrated thing, anyway. It doesn’t survive marriage.”

“Maybe. But I’d like to give it a try.”

His remark met with a moment of silence. “You are in love, aren’t you? Is it the daughter of that economics professor?” She sounded skeptical.

“Yes. But how could you tell? I’ve talked about her with you, maybe, two or three times. That’s all.”

“I’m your mother. I notice things about you others don’t. I’ve never seen your eyes light up, the way they did when you

told me about this young woman. But be careful. She may seem like a goddess to you, but she's a lawyer, isn't she?"

"She's in her last year at law school."

"Whatever. She must be brainy, probably articulate, and with strong convictions. For you, an irresistible combination. But doesn't that describe Lori, too? Beware. Your new young woman may turn out to be as cold and calculating."

Her remark irritated Greg. His mother had always been perceptive, particularly about him, and she was outspoken and sharp-tongued when it suited her. In many ways, she was like Lori.

"No, Mama. Elise is not like that at all. Besides, Lori's convictions can change with how the wind blows."

"Elise, such a sweet name; almost exotic. How can you be so sure she's different?"

"I do think I know her. She's the most intelligent, most articulate woman I've met, but beneath all that, she has this childlike sincerity. She's too trusting, even naïve sometimes."

"And you want to protect her? From what I've learned of lawyers, she should make a bad one, if she's all you say she is."

"She does have an analytic mind; and believes justice should serve everyone equally. She cares deeply about defending the rights of the less fortunate."

"Oh, passion for her chosen vocation! The irresistible combination just turned lethal. I understand why you were hooked. But, are you likely to be on opposite sides of a bargaining table? Is she zealous about this mission of hers?"

"I'll cross that bridge when I get there. I'm not even sure she'll have me."

His mother let out a grunt. "She's stupid if she doesn't. Specially, if you tell her you love her. Women like that. They

go gaga when you say you've never loved anybody else, the way you love them."

"I've never loved anyone but Elise."

"Yes, I believe you do. This is a first for you. But don't ever lose your focus."

"There may never be a chance of that. I'm afraid Elise is put off by my reputation as a ladies' man."

Mrs. Thorpe let out another grunt. "Every young man should play the field. You happen to be better at it than most. Anyway, I hope you've got matters under control. Lori won't be a gracious loser. And your timing was very bad."

"I'm painfully aware of that. But I'll do everything to protect Elise. None of this is her fault."

"Do you intend to marry this young woman?"

"I do, if she'll have me."

"She must be quite extraordinary, this young woman of yours. I can't wait to meet her."

Greg knew his mother meant what she just said. Above all, his happiness—at least happiness, as she defined it—was his mother's main concern.

CHAPTER SIX

Elise



On Sunday night, Leah walked into Elise's room, waving the evening paper. "Here's something I bet you didn't expect."

Elise looked up, her eyes glazed from reading the book lying on her lap. She scowled, barely able to suppress her irritation. Her concentration was back and she was catching up on assignments she had planned to finish earlier that afternoon. But her current calm state was fragile and she did not want it disturbed.

Leah thrust the paper in front of her. "Isn't this about your father's rich friend? The one you told me often came to dinner at your parents? Who you had arguments with?"

Elise had anticipated news of Greg and Lori's wedding in the Sunday papers and had no desire to read about it. She glanced, reluctantly, at the news item, certain that she was about to see a photo of Greg and Lori smiling at each other after the ceremony. But when she read the headline, she had to restrain herself from snatching the paper out of Leah's hand.

Leah flicked a finger at the picture and sneered. "It seems the playboy got cold feet. Typical."

Her heart thumping in her chest, Elise perused the item within a few seconds. She said, in as calm a voice as she could muster, "I'm surprised, a bit shocked, actually."

In fact, the story agitated her and not in a bad way. Still, she stared at Lori's picture with a pang of jealousy she could not deny.

"She sure is stunning."

"Have you met her?"

"No, but my parents did at a party at Greg's house. Stunning was how my father described her. In fact, I've never seen her before this picture."

Leah studied the picture with Elise. "Look at that gown. This woman has expensive tastes. I bet it's a designer dress."

"But it makes you wonder, doesn't it? It's not enough to be beautiful; or to put out, to keep your man. Doesn't she strike you as forlorn and pathetic, especially in that expensive designer dress?" Elise could not mask the perverse pleasure she felt seeing Lori standing alone at the altar.

"Oh, girl, you're wicked. Don't you have sympathy for the poor woman? That's a nasty thing for any woman to have to go through."

"But what if he was not in love with her?"

"God, that's a tough one. Except, the guy is a playboy, so you could say, what he did isn't surprising. He's being true to his nature. If so, he's a jerk. Why wait until the wedding day to break up?"

"I don't know. There must be a good reason."

"You haven't had your heart broken so you don't know what it's like," Leah said softly.

"Oh, Leah, I'm so sorry. You're right. It's cruel of me to mock anyone's suffering. I do know how awful it is to go through a break-up."

“That’s because you’ve seen me through mine.”

Elise was speechless. After her callous remark, how could she disclose to Leah that she and Greg spent the night together, a couple of days before his wedding? Would Leah think her responsible for Lori's loss? And yet, she, herself, had been learning about the misery of loss the last few days.

Leah said, “Anyway, you raised a good question. What would you have the man do, if he didn’t love you?”

“I don’t think I’d marry or stay with anyone who didn’t love me. It’s out the door for him, even if it’s the day of the wedding, and even if I love him and I’d be miserable if he left me.”

“I’m with you on that. But, having gone through break-ups, sometimes I wonder.” Leah sighed. “Relationships are so darned complicated. They make you the happiest you’ve ever known but they can also make you so, so wretched.”



A week later, Elise sat in bed at night, unread book on her lap. She had been jumpy since Greg’s cancelled wedding. She kept her cell phone in her shirt pocket, expecting it to ring, and every half hour or so, she checked her text messages. She had been sure Greg would contact her.

But so far, he hadn’t. Had she been wrong about him and what the two of them had together?

She closed her book, folded her legs and clasped them to her chest. She laid her head on her knees and rocked herself back and forth. She had been doing a lot of going back and forth lately. One moment, she would tell herself she had

accepted that all was over between her and Greg. The next moment, her hopes revived. Did he break his engagement with Lori for her, or was Leah right that, as a playboy, he just was not able to commit?

She choked down a sob and turned off her lamp. She hugged her knees closer as tears started to stream down her cheeks. They flowed freely, soaking the lower half of her pajama pants.

Elise had not cried in a long time. The last time she remembered crying hard was when she was ten, after a fight with a boy in school. Prior to that incident, she had lived up to her parents' ideal of a little princess who had the grace and good looks of her mother as well as her gentle, charming, and gracious demeanor.

That fight changed her. She had flailed, with a strength and fierceness she did not know she had; scratched, kicked, shouted and was prepared to bite, if she needed to do so. Her shouting attracted attention. The boy's friends, who had been egging him on, ran away, leaving him crying and hurt. He had to be treated at the school infirmary.

The school counselor had taken her to the principal's office where the principal called her mother to come, pick her up.

When her mother arrived, the three adults asked her what happened.

Her eyes still narrowed from residual anger, all she said repeatedly was, "He touched me. He shouldn't do that."

"Where did he touch you? How did he touch you?" her mother asked.

She pressed her lips tight, on the verge of angry tears and too ashamed to tell them.

The adults tried again, a few times, and got the same response. In the end, they looked at each other and said no more. She and her mother went home not too long after.

Later, Elise learned from her girlfriends that the boy was too scared to say anything.

Her anger and her shame lasted a while and after that incident, she distrusted all the “girlish” things her mother told her she should do. She began following her brothers around, insisting on taking part in all their boisterous, boyish pursuits. She was determined to learn what they knew.

Most of the time, they tolerated her and often allowed her to insert herself into both their little pranks and big undertakings. She believed it helped that her brother, Justin, was six years older and Peter, ten. As they grew older, the boys learned to set limits. They locked their bedroom door when they did things they wanted to keep to themselves. She smarted at first but learned to respect their wishes.

Since that fight in school, Elise had been anxious to convince herself and her parents that she was equal to anything hard or hurtful thrown at her. She learned to smile and shrug off her frustrations. She did occasionally react in anger and gave vent to it. But she waited until she was alone in her room. In her private shower, with the water at full blast streaming down on her, she would shout out angry or hurt words until she felt better.

That determination to be strong and to show people she was strong confounded her parents, unaware that, at age ten, Elise had resolved never again to be seen as a fragile, vulnerable girl.

That was at least a decade ago. She had again become as vulnerable as she had been at ten years old except, this time,

she felt powerless about it. The unlikeliest provocation could make her cry and she found it unnerving that she could not control her tears.

On top of that, she was sore all over. Her muscles ached and her breasts were particularly sensitive. She was tired all the time. So she slept. A lot. That was the one thing that saved her sanity. Sleep. She learned to dose off in one boring class, sitting upright in the back, with her sunglasses on.



Some weeks later, Elise missed her period. She went to the drugstore and bought a pregnancy test kit. But she waited two weeks before using it. She wanted to be sure.

The result did not surprise her. She had anticipated it—she had been regular since she started college.

She did not tell anyone. At first, she thought she had no need to. She had already decided that abortion was her only choice. A child—let alone a child without a father—had never been in her plans.

But she was apprehensive. The last two months or so had unsettled her in a way she had not anticipated. Mostly, it was her own reactions that surprised her.

The night before she went to the abortion clinic, Elise lay in bed, brooding.

“You hoped Greg would contact you, a hope so great, it made you certain. Why were you surprised he didn’t call? He’s a playboy. What did you expect? He must know exactly what kind of line to use to get someone naïve like you, into his bed.” She choked down a sob.

“And yet, the way he made love to me, the things he said—how could there be anything false or put-on about those?”

Still, was she not better off without a reminder of Greg or the evening she had with him? She must let him sink into her past. A past that would fade, a figment of her memory that she hoped to regard, years later, with nothing but fond detachment.

Elise went to the abortion clinic, for the first time, mid-afternoon on a Friday. After the doctor finished examining her, she said, “Can I ask for a local, instead of a general anesthesia?”

“That’s not the usual practice. You’ll only be out a short time under general anesthesia. Not even an hour.”

“I’m coming alone and going home on my own. My parents don’t know I’m doing this. I can take care of myself while I recover. A social worker had assured me that a volunteer could call a cab and assist me into it after the procedure.”

The nurse assisting the doctor frowned in disapproval of her request. After the doctor left the examination room, the nurse said, “It’s much more advisable if you had a friend come and help you. This experience can be traumatic. The girls I’ve seen here want to sleep and wake up, as if nothing happened. But most can’t deny that the abortion did happen. It’s nice to have a friend, then.”

“The doctor said I could have a local. I’m healthy and less than ten weeks pregnant, so I expect nothing unusual to happen.”

“Well, yes. Things will be back to normal. But based on my experience, I still think it’s not a good idea. Anyway, talk to the social worker.”

“I already have.”

On the day of the procedure, a different nurse showed Elise to a room, handed her a gown to change into and a plastic bag into which to stuff her clothes, shoes, and bag. She was efficient, cold, and smiling.

“Make yourself comfortable. Did you have anything to eat or drink the last eight hours?”

Elise shook her head and the nurse left the room, closing the door behind her.

Elise changed into the gown and sat on the bed. After one quick survey of the clean, spare, and brightly lit room, she closed her eyes. The light bothered her. When after a few minutes the nurse had not returned, she lay on the bed and tried to relax. The room was quiet and everything appeared to be at a standstill.

In the tranquility of that room, sterile and cold, Elise began to wonder how many girls might have left traces of their sadness and confusion in the room if it had not been disinfected and scrubbed clean. Did any of those girls ever regret what they did? How different was she from them?

Elise began to breathe a little faster. She thought about the procedure she would be going through. What if complications developed? What if the doctor made a mistake and she could no longer have children? But she was not sure she wanted children, was she? So, that would be no big deal.

But the thought did not reassure her. She had been too busy with school and her work at the Legal Aid Society. Except for a few minutes of skimming through the instructions on how to prepare for the procedure, she did not spend time thinking about what was going to happen that afternoon. She took it on faith that an abortion was every woman's right if she decided pregnancy and a child were not right for her at any given time. When she made

the appointment with the clinic, she assumed pregnancy conflicted with her plans for the future, but she never mulled over how she might feel about, or whether she would ever regret, the consequences of her decision.

Elise felt herself gasping for air and her head floating above her. The pounding of her heart reverberated in her ears. A chill went through her spine and spread throughout her body. She pulled the blanket on her lap to cover herself. She tried concentrating on her breathing, a technique she learned from Leah to help herself relax and control anxiety before exams.

But images of the white sterile room kept intruding into her thoughts—images disturbing enough without being exacerbated by the pungent vapors of alcohol that hung in the hallways and which remained on her nose. The vapors had assaulted her senses as soon as she entered the clinic and they made her nauseous. She rubbed the bottom of her nose but she could not get rid of the smell.

She felt mounting panic. She was all alone. Nobody even knew where she was. If some complication developed and she bled to death, it could take some time before anyone found out. She would be cold and stiff by then. A mere shell. She shuddered.

She remembered noticing that the bed had wheels. Was it the gurney on which they were going to wheel her to the operating room? A blindingly lit white room where the smell of alcohol would be stronger and impossible to run away from. People would be there and she would not be alone. But those people would be hiding behind surgical masks and latex gloves. They only had one objective in mind. The thought jolted her up from the gurney.

“What in the world am I doing in this place?” she cried, her panic replaced by anger. “What a dirty unfair trick that women have to carry the burden of one night of abandon”—she corrected herself—“careless abandon?”

But even in her anger at how unfair things were, she knew that, for her at least, the night with Greg had been more than one of “careless abandon.”

Once again, she surprised herself. She bounded from her perch on the gurney. Grabbed the bag containing her belongings that she had tossed on the chair. Poured all its contents out.

She hastened to change back into her street clothes. She buttoned her blouse and zipped up her pants. Her hands were shaking and she was panting. What if the nurse returned before she was finished dressing?

Panic seized her once more, engulfed her until she was struggling for breath. Her heart was palpitating rapidly, and her hands were icy. She was suffocating in that room and she had to get out. She slipped one shoe on and then the other.

“Run, before the doctor and any of his nurses come back!” As well meaning as they were, she did not want them to take that life out of her. She grabbed her bag and raced out of the room.

Out in the blowing fresh breezes and the natural sunlight, she took a few deep breaths and ran in the direction of the apartment. A few blocks from the clinic, she slowed down and searched for a bus stop.

In the nearly empty bus, she sat by the window and stared at the passing landscape. She counted the buildings the bus was speeding by ... 1, 2, 3, 4 By the time she reached 200, her breathing and the beating of her heart had grown more regular. She smiled to herself.

She kissed the tips of her fingers and placed them on her tummy. No one who looked at her would know she was pregnant. But a new life was in there, beating within her. A very precious life. All she had that belonged only to her and Greg. All she might ever have that could keep her from the desolation and emptiness of being alone.

In the apartment, she locked herself in her bedroom. She lay down in bed and rested her hands on her belly.

She said, "I can't believe I did that. But you're mine and mine alone and I won't give you up. We're in this together, buddy, no matter what. You've upset my plans but that's not your fault. I'll cope. I'll have to. Because of you. I love you already and we haven't even met."

Elise kept talking to her baby until she fell asleep.

After her flight from the abortion clinic, she resigned herself to having a constant reminder of Greg. Between sleep, her studies, and her volunteer work at the Legal Aid Society, she allowed herself the luxury of remembering and relishing the memory of the night she spent with him. In a few months, she would have more than memories of that night. She would have a living, beloved being to focus all her love on.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lori



On Monday morning, after Lori's public statement of having been jilted, Greg was served with papers for a breach of promise lawsuit, asking for the amount specified in the prenuptial agreement he and Lori signed a couple of months before the wedding day.

The following weeks bore out Mrs. Thorpe's warning. They became nastier than that weekend. Every morning, Bob brought Greg, not only the morning paper, but also the tabloids he picked up from the grocery store. They carried some variation on the "jilted woman story." Women came forth with their own accounts of their love affairs with Greg, some of which had more detail than most men would care to reveal. One consistent thread ran through the stories—Greg's inability to commit to a lasting relationship.

After one week of such revelations, Greg said, "Why do you keep bringing me these tabloids, Bob? Will you quit doing that, please?"

"Don't you want to know what you're up against? You'll have to deal with this soon enough, you know."

"But I'm appalled at the sensationalism behind them. If my memory serves me right, apart from Lori, there were only three or four women with whom I had a relationship

that lasted for a few months. The rest of them are a blur. And I'm sure I never had any personal contact with many of them although I might have met them at one gathering or another."

"Don't you think it's time to call your lawyer? You should at least tell him about that lawsuit."

"He does know, already."

His lawyer, Artie Arnold, emitted a low incredulous whistle after reading one of the articles.

"If those numbers are true, you certainly earned your reputation with women."

"I admit I had many one-night stands. Women have been going after me since I was seventeen. That's about half my life. Many of them, I swear, I never touched beyond a handshake." He glared at Artie. He had been irritable for days.

"Relax. I'm on your side. Anyway, I bet this has all been orchestrated, for the purpose of building up the case against you."

"Are you saying Lori is behind these tabloid stories?"

"I'm almost sure of it. But proving that she is would not be easy to do. Her lawyer knows he cannot win by arguing the prenup was violated. The law does not enforce a prenuptial agreement, until the marriage actually takes place. If Lori wins damages, it will be for emotional anguish or if she turned down or left a job to marry you. But her lawyer would still have to prove such claims."

"I find this whole affair disgusting. And very upsetting. I've been criticized on business-related matters but I could handle those. There are always numbers, facts, even theories to respond to those. But how do you deal with personal attacks? It will be my word against theirs."

“I’m afraid, many times, that’s the name of this kind of game. Leave it to me. That’s what you’re paying me for.”

What Greg did not disclose was what worried him most. Lori’s hand in the stories was obvious to him from the beginning. But he saw the reason for them differently.

Lori meant for the amorous exposés to discourage any woman who might now be interested in him. He dared not imagine how Elise would take all those stories. Although she had a healthy skepticism of tabloids and never paid them any attention, she might be curious enough to read the stories about him if she saw them in the tabloids that supermarkets displayed at checkout counters. She was unlikely to miss the article in the paper about the break-up, with its catchy headline and Lori’s picture in her wedding gown.

He wanted so much to call Elise. But what would he say? He could not claim all those women lied. He did have relationships, from casual to a little more serious, with many of them. How could he make her believe him? Would she trust him after those stories?

Greg was also certain Lori was watching his next steps and that if he contacted Elise, Lori would find out. He had no doubt she would make good on her threat and whatever she did would be nasty. So, he kept away from Elise while Artie did further investigation, took steps to defuse the tabloid stories, and built a defense against the breach of promise lawsuit.

As Artie Arnold anticipated, Lori claimed both mental anguish and a high-paying job offer in New York that she had to turn down to marry Greg. But Artie was thorough. He unearthed the fact that the job offer was bogus and the mental anguish she alleged could not be sustained by evidence.

The night Greg broke their engagement, Lori was seen drinking and partying with Larry. Three days later, she flew with him to some Caribbean island. Although her excuse was she was nursing her grief, personnel at the resort they stayed in reported that she shared a room and bed with Larry and seemed to be having a good time.

The lawsuit did not go far and Lori decided to settle. Artie said, "They don't have a case, but I can't believe how sloppy they were, as if they didn't care if they lost. They must have more up their sleeves."

"Lori called. She wants to meet with me."

"Don't! You've already won. There's nothing to settle."

"You're right but we did have that year of engagement. If Lori had been free, she might have received some other proposal and accepted it."

"Guilt will lose you lawsuits, you know that. Besides, she could have broken up your engagement any time, as easily as you did."

Greg glared at him.

"Greg, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that it was an easy thing for you to do. I meant"

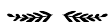
"I know what you meant. Don't worry about it. But I've already decided to meet with Lori. I owe her that much for that year we had together."

Artie shrugged. "Well, it's useless arguing with you, when you've made up your mind. But be careful what you agree to and choose a neutral public place to meet."

He shook his head and added, "I wonder if people realize what a softie you can be. Anyway, I want it on record that I advised against this meeting."

What Greg did not tell his lawyer was he hoped this meeting would lessen Lori's anger and prevent her from

hurting Elise or creating obstacles between him and Elise. He was prepared to help Lori advance in her profession or even offer her some financial remuneration for the year they were engaged.



Lori asked to meet Greg for dinner at the restaurant they used to frequent but, heeding Artie's advice, Greg suggested lunch at another restaurant where he often took business clients. There, he reassured her he could get them a private booth where they could talk undisturbed. She balked at his suggestion at first but he could not be budged—either there or at his office. In the end, she relented.

Lori arrived at the restaurant a few minutes after Greg did. She was dressed in red, a color he had told her flattered her dark hair and ivory skin. She had taken much care with her appearance and seemed prepared to be very charming. As she used to do in the past, she strutted around for his inspection.

"You like?"

"You've always been stunning Lori."

"No hard feelings from these last few weeks? You hurt me deeply, you know." She pouted seductively as she took a seat. "So, you can't blame me for how I've reacted."

"I'd like to say again that I'm sorry. Please forgive me if I have been cruel to you."

"But you won't change your mind?"

"No, I'm sorry. I'd rather stay single than marry for convenience."

“Ouch, that hurts. To be considered a mere convenience. But who’s to say it’s not a better basis for marriage than love and romance? I’m sure your mother will agree with me. You can’t stay single, you know. Your father made that very clear in his will. You need an heir, if you want to keep your business in the family.”

Greg was silent.

A waiter came to take their order, but Greg asked him to come back in ten minutes. “We haven’t had a chance to look at the menu.”

Lori sighed. “Oh, Greg, you are hard. How do you know you’ll do better with someone else? I am prepared to forgive and forget. We’re good in bed together. Doesn’t that count? We’ll have beautiful smart children, you and I. That’s something, isn’t it?”

“Lori, please. Let’s get to the point. Why did you ask to meet? Artie advised against this.”

“I expected he would, that jerk, but I know you better than he does. I was sure you could not refuse me.”

“What more do you want from me, Lori?”

She regarded him with knitted brows and narrowed eyes and said, “You owe me.”

“What exactly do you think I owe you?”

“I wasted a year of my life on you.”

“I could say I did the same thing for you.”

“Ouch again. You can be cruel. How did you ever get a reputation for being charming? You can cut a woman down when you have to.”

“I didn’t mean to be cruel but, maybe, I’m too blunt to be gallant.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. Tell me what you think that year is worth to you.”

“Frank and to the point. Very well. \$20M. That's a fraction of the total prenup. You won't hear a pip from me after that.”

“You're kidding, right?”

“No.”

“I can let this lawsuit go to court and you will lose.”

Lori regarded him with narrowed eyes. “I wouldn't be so sure. I have the goods on you.”

“What goods? You already had them all broadcast on tabloids, including many that were not true. I can swear to that in court.”

“It will be your word against theirs and there are several who will claim rape.”

“What? You wouldn't stoop that low!”

“I lost more than a year of my life in this. I lost my future.”

“I can't believe this.”

“Believe it. I swore to make you bleed.”

Greg shook his head in disbelief. He pushed his chair back and started to get up.

Lori laid a hand on his arm. “There's a way out of this. Let's go through with the wedding, stay a year together and let me get a divorce at the end of it. This arrangement will let me save face. That's more important to me than you might expect. I will drop the lawsuit and say everything that was written was a lie. I will say we had an argument the night before the wedding but we've made up. All I want is a year of marriage and that prenup to be honored. After that year, the award shouldn't be that big. Then you can get on with your life with that new woman of yours. Right now, you may have

trouble convincing her you're serious if she's been reading the tabloids."

"No way, Lori. I won't be blackmailed." He stood up. "This meeting is finished."

"Think about it. Marriage or twenty million. That prenup sum won't make much of a dent in your fortune. And a year should go by very quickly."

Greg walked away. He did not look back.

"Well?" Artie prompted, upon Greg's return to his office. He had been waiting there with a wiretapping expert.

"Am I glad I listened to your advice." Greg scowled in disgust. He pulled a small device from inside his jacket and handed it to Artie. He plunked down on his chair.

"Your ex-fiancée is up to something else. She wants you trapped in a marriage for some other reason than just money."

"I'm sure you're right. But I can't deal with any more of this today, so do you mind leaving now? I need to be alone for a while."

When they left, he told his secretary he was not to be disturbed.

The next day, Artie contacted Lori's lawyer to inform him Greg was prepared to pay all his fees and expenses and compensate Lori half-a-million dollars for the year she "lost" with him. It was a generous offer, considering they did not have a case, to begin with. To hammer in that they had no choice, he played the taped conversation over the phone.



The breach of promise lawsuit and all the incidents that surrounded it shook Greg to the core. The half million was

an insignificant fraction of what he could have lost and he was grateful for it. But his last encounter with Lori angered and bewildered him. What had he gotten himself into?

He was aware that lust was what brought Lori and him together for a while. Lust and their shared ambitions and the occasional times he saw something of his mother in Lori. But without being sustained by deeper feelings, lust waned after a few months.

His mother liked Lori a lot and when she reminded him he needed to marry soon, he decided to ask Lori. She seemed the most suitable of the women he'd ever had relationships with.

He castigated himself for his careless decisions and having vacillated too long before he broke his engagement. He did hurt Lori and it was natural that she would retaliate. But did she have to hit back with malicious fabrications? What else could he have done?

Greg went from remorse to outrage. All he needed was to call up the image of Lori and the smirk on her face as she blurted out the threat, a lie, that would brand him a rapist.

The recollection was nauseating. He had always had a warm spot for women. Although he did not love any of them until he met Elise, he sincerely liked them and most of them returned his fond affection. Calling him a rapist was the most vicious personal attack any woman could throw at him. That, and all the tabloid revelations Lori incited, pushed him close to hating women and swearing off all of them.

And yet, what of Elise, his memories of her and the promise in that night they had together? The answer to that was clear to him: He could not let her go, not while that promise lived. Elise loved him, too. He was sure of it.

He looked back at his years of playing around, years he had never given much thought to. He had assumed they represented the natural order of things. His father took pride in his conquests as a young adolescent and, at seventeen, set him up with a woman about ten years older. From her, he learned a lot about pleasing a woman. Love was never talked about and he never saw, between his parents, the quiet sincere affection and understanding Dr. Halverson and his wife showed for each other.

When the breach of promise case was closed, Greg expressed his profuse gratitude to Artie with a handsome check, over and above his usual fees. Artie's skillful handling of the case went beyond silencing Lori. He succeeded in keeping most of its details beyond the grasp of the press.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Elise



Hello? Mom?”

“Oh, it's you. I thought it was Dad calling before his class started.”

“Are you home now?”

“Yes, where else would I be?”

“I've been dialing your number for about an hour. Where were you?”

“I was in the garden. I can't hear the phone from there. Is anything wrong?”

“Can I come? I need to talk to you.”

“I'll be here.” Her mother paused for a few moments. “Would you like me to pick you up at the train station?”

Her mother had not offered to do that in years. She stopped after hearing Elise say jauntily several times, “No. Save gas, take the bus.”

Her mother was clearly uneasy. She had detected the anxiety in her daughter's voice.

Elise sighed. She was certain her mother was going to work herself up into a worry by the time she arrived at her train stop. She dreaded facing her mother when she was that way, but she was too tired to take the bus.

“Yes, please. I'm leaving right now.”

She was aware that she had always been a bit of a puzzle to her mother. They lost touch—probably rather too early, in her mother’s opinion—when she was ten.

Elise sat by the window in the train, staring glassy-eyed at the greenery and buildings against which cars were zipping by. She was so used to those passing images. They no longer distracted her from her thoughts. Good thing, too, because she needed time to think and be calm before talking to her parents.

She placed her hands gently on her belly. It still had not grown and except for her morning sickness, there was no outward sign, as yet, that she was pregnant. But she was very much aware of the baby growing within her and she had been carrying on many conversations in her head with it. She found them comforting; and this afternoon, Elise admitted to herself and to her unborn baby that she did not want to forget Greg.

“You know, it might seem impulsive of me to race out of that abortion clinic. I made a life-changing decision in a flash. But I think I already made a choice that night with Greg—your father. Why else did I risk making love with him, without any form of protection? Granted we were so caught up in passion that we couldn’t think. But now that you’re here, I must have done it for you, too, my little love.”

“How will Mom and Dad take what I’m about to tell them? Mom will be distressed, for sure. As for Dad” Elise paused and bit her lower lip. “I’m sure he’ll be upset. He’s got such expectations of me. And he’ll probably probe and ask me the harder questions.” Elise sighed. “I can’t deal with him right now. I’ll have to, but I should be ready for it, after Mom.”

When Elise’s parents bailed her out of jail years ago, her mother was upset, but her father had taken it in stride. She

had been one of many high school students hauled there for participating in a demonstration that turned violent. Back at the house, her parents insisted on the usual talk that often followed actions her parents considered major transgressions.

In the car, her mother had been in tears. At home, her father continued to mollify her as they sat on the ample, cushiony sofa across from Elise in the family room. He rubbed her back tenderly and whispered in her ear. Her father did a lot of whispering in her mother's ears.

At length, her mother calmed down. She glared at her. "I've raised two boys and neither—not Peter, not Justin—had been in any trouble like this. They've both been focused on school. So, why can't you?"

Elise did not answer.

"Why?"

She remained silent.

"Answer me, damn it!"

"I've got better grades than Justin and Peter. I'm graduating earlier."

Her mother's mouth gaped open and her father suppressed a smile.

She was emboldened by her parents' reaction. "Don't worry, Mom, please. I'll get my diploma and do all those things expected of me. But, I can't sit back and not get involved when I feel strongly about issues."

Her father scowled at her.

"No, we realize you can't. But neither can you stop Mom and me from worrying about you when we find you in trouble." He sounded irritated.

Her mother said, "People were hurt in that demonstration. I saw it on television before I got that call from the police.

How do you suppose that made me feel? You're a girl and you're only fifteen. Can you blame me if I worry about you more than I do your brothers?"

"But I can handle myself as well as they can."

"Are you sure? Either one of them can overpower you. Most boys who're at least your size can, I'm sure."

Her father scowled at Elise again and said, "Verbally, intellectually, I believe you can handle yourself better than your brothers. But Mom is right. I'm sorry but that's the way things are. The sooner you accept your limitations—which are not your fault, understand? It's nature—but the sooner you do, the better you can cope with them."

That talk ended with her father's admonition and a gesture of his head to tell her to apologize to her mother. Elise was grateful to her father for cutting their talk short, but what impressed her more was how fair and reasonable he was. After Elise told her mother she was sorry, he convinced her mother that they need not insist that Elise stop joining any future demonstrations. They only made her promise to inform them when she planned to join one and to stay out of trouble as much as she could, when she did.

What she was going to tell them now was different and was sure to disappoint him. He was proud of his "brainy" daughter and happy about her decision to go to law school. But her pregnancy and her choice to keep her baby could change his opinion of her and crush the hopes he had for her future.

The train, as usual, arrived at her station on time. For once, Elise wished it was not so prompt. She was among the last to descend. She walked slowly out of the station to where she knew her mother would be waiting in her car.



The phone vibrated in his pocket and Dr. Halverson smiled. "Right on time."

Students were talking and rushing out of the classroom, except for a couple who stood behind the desk. They were waiting to talk to him. He took the phone out of his pocket and raised his other hand to stop a third student, who had just approached, from talking.

"Hello! Everything all right?" He always responded with the same greeting, delivered with a slight inflection at the end and with the nonchalance of habit. He expected and always got the same answer. The call lasted less than a couple of minutes. Many of his students knew the routine and when they wanted to ask him questions after the lecture, they stood back until he had answered the call.

"You have to come home right away!" His wife's voice was shrill and frantic.

"What's the matter? Are you ill?"

"No, no! I'm quite all right. It's your daughter."

"Elise?" He had raised his voice and his students stared at him. He turned his back towards them and lowered his voice. "What could possibly be the matter with Elise?"

"I can't explain. I need you home, now!"

Elise had always resolved many problems on her own. He could remember only a couple of times, while she was growing up, when Elise had done something that required her parents' intervention. The first had been so long ago, in grade school, that Dr. Halverson could not remember the incident. The last was in her third-year at senior high, when they had to fetch her from jail, after a student

demonstration. She had been a lot more circumspect since she went to law school.

“Has she been in an accident? Taken suddenly ill?” His voice rose again. The three students retreated towards the door.

“No, no. But it’s almost as serious and I’m at my wit’s end about what to do. I can’t explain anymore over the phone.” She hung up before he could reply.



The mellow afternoon sun of late autumn, streaming through the large west window, muted the yellow tones in the Halversons’ combination family/living room. Elise was thankful for it, for she could see her parents’ reactions more clearly without the glare of the western sunshine.

Dr. Halverson and his wife sat across the coffee table from Elise. His wife had made a pot of herbal infusion, which she placed on a tray on the table, along with a plate of an assortment of cookies that she baked at least twice a week. Two cups steaming with the greenish brew of peppermint and chamomile lay, untouched, on saucers directly set on the table. Elise leaned on her chair and sipped her herbal tea.

He said, “You look good to me—very good, in fact. So what’s your mother so upset about?”

Before Elise could answer, her mother said, “You’ll probably be more upset than me once you hear what she has to say.”

He scowled at his wife, but said nothing. He leaned forward towards his daughter, “Well?”

Elise had been staring into her cup as she drank slowly. She raised her head and faced her father.

"I'm pregnant." She did not bat an eyelash.

"What? Come again?"

"I am pregnant."

"What do you mean you're pregnant? How could you be? I would have thought that you, of all people, would be careful not to let this sort of thing happen to you."

"Well, it just happened. I never meant it to."

"I'm having trouble understanding this. How could you let this happen?"

Elise shrugged.

"How many months?"

"Three months. And, no, Dad, I won't have an abortion."

"What?"

"I told you. I have argued with her about this and she wouldn't listen. This is a disaster." Mrs. Halverson sprang up from the couch.

Her husband clenched his jaw as he watched her, for a moment, pace around the room. He turned to Elise. "What about law school? You only have one more semester to go."

Her mother interjected before Elise could answer. "Yes. Make her understand how very bad her timing is. This is the last thing any of us needs. One semester left and she throws away her future. Nobody considers abortion that bad anymore. I never thought your daughter would."

"This semester's practically over. I'll take a leave of absence after this. I'll graduate one semester later, that's all."

Her mother jerked a hand up in her daughter's direction. "That is what I mean. She doesn't see the problem and thinks it will resolve itself magically." She stopped in front of Elise.

"You have no idea what it's like. It's impossible! Impossible to study when you have a baby. Especially when it's screaming for attention. Never mind having a career. I'll tell you this right now. Raising a child on your own is a full-time job."

"It's harder, but it can be done." Elise looked directly into her mother's eyes; her voice was clear and strong. She glanced at her father for an instant. "With your help, at first."

"What? Well, I won't. I've already raised three children and that's enough."

"I will take care of my baby. But I will need your help. To look after him when I have to go to school. That's a few hours a week, not a few hours a day. Most of my last semester will be independent study. I won't have much class time."

"Hah! Independent study! Guess what happens when your baby is crying to be fed. Or, when it refuses to stop crying all night. Or, it gets sick. That's where all your independent study goes."

Dr. Halverson watched his usually mild-mannered wife screaming at their daughter. He reached out, grabbed her hand, and pulled her back down on the couch next to him. He placed an arm around her shoulders and drew her close. She pushed him away, but he merely drew her closer and whispered into her ear.



Elise hung her head and bit her upper lip hard to restrain an urge to cry. She hated upsetting her mother whose help she needed most. But what was she to do? She had made a fateful

decision. That was obvious enough. As for the events that led to it, she knew in her heart that she did not and would never regret them. She was past the soul-searching called for by her actions and decision. Now, she must deal with its consequences as well as she could.

After a while, she raised her head and, with pleading eyes, said to her mother, "I do mean to impose on you. I'd need to move in with you for at least a year or until I pass the bar. I can pay for child care once I start working."

"So, is that your solution? For us to take the burden?" Her mother's tone was more subdued but Elise still heard reproach in it.

"You did tell me once I could come back, if I needed to, for as long as it takes to get back on my feet. Well, this is that time." She could not suppress the quivering in her voice.

Her father said, "I don't doubt you will be responsible, as you always have been. But I still can't grasp something. What puzzles me most is how this could happen to you. And why are you so adamant about keeping this baby?"

Elise was startled to hear her father's voice. He had been silent all through her mother's rant. She avoided his gaze. She could not say what was worse—her mother's emotional outburst or her father's quiet reproachful probing.

Her father waited, but she could not think of how to answer. She had imagined this conversation more than once. Even rehearsed how she would respond, but she had, clearly, anticipated the wrong questions.

He waited a couple more minutes. "This wasn't a chance encounter or a one-night stand, was it?" His voice was low, his tone, gentle.

Elise remained silent. She never expected her father to probe into her feelings. Or the reason for her decision. She

had prepared herself to convince him she could handle its consequences.

“I know you didn’t have a boyfriend. Do you love the father, whoever he is?”

Elise turned towards her father and looked into his eyes. “Yes.”

She hung her head and sat, silent and rigid for a long while. Neither parent said a word. Her answer had somehow made an impact on them. But what? She could not tell. At that point, she did not care. She was only aware that she was near some breaking point.

Her breathing deepened and quickened into staccato gasps for breath she tried to control. But she could not. Instead, they overpowered her. The gasps burst out into anguished tears that she had held back too long.

The tears flabbergasted her. But now that they had come out, she let her misery take hold of her. She really had no choice, anymore. Why not bare it all out to her parents?

Dr. Halverson and his wife stared at each other. He raised his eyebrows and she shook her head. They were bewildered, uncertain what to do. So, they watched. And waited for her tears to stop.

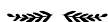
Elise soon quieted down a little. She bent over and covered her face with her hands.

She talked through her tears, between heaving for breath. “I’m so sorry to spring this on you. It was the last thing I wanted to do. I suppose an abortion is the most reasonable and practical thing to do. I thought of it, even went to a clinic. But I couldn’t go through with it.”

“This guy must be pretty special, the way you feel about going through with this pregnancy. Does he know?”

“No, Dad. I can’t tell him. But even so, I mean to keep this baby, whatever it takes.” Once more, the tears came; profuse, miserable tears.

Her parents sat, their hands clasped tight on their laps, eyes dark with concern. Still watching, waiting.



For a long time, no one uttered a word and Elise's crying pierced through the silence of her parents' perplexity and feelings of helplessness. Her father stared at her, scowling, his lips compressed and his hands clasped tight on his lap. Her mother, who had never been able to endure seeing her children cry, seemed quite affected by her anguish. The couple of times she raised her head to speak, Elise saw her mother gazing at her with mournful eyes, her mouth drawn downward, as if to keep herself from crying.

After a while, her mother got up, sat on the arm of her chair, and gathered her in her arms. “Oh my baby! I’m sure we’ll all manage. You know we’re here for you.”

Elise was grateful. She clung to her mother who could find no more words with which to comfort her. She held Elise—stroking her hair, pressing her cheeks and her lips to the top of her head.

Dr. Halverson watched mother and daughter. He rose from the sofa, but sat down again. He had been sitting with arms and legs rigid the whole time. Propping himself with both hands on the couch, he rose once again. He stuffed his fists into his pockets and walked towards Elise and his wife. He stopped for an instant, and walked away again, scowling, gritting his teeth, and muttering, “If only I knew who it was.”

Anger was an emotion that rarely bothered Dr. Halverson. When he was a student in college, he declared himself a pacifist. To him, violence aggravated problems rather than resolving them. As far as anyone knew, he never shouted at or punched anyone.

He was tall and lanky, with limbs that appear to flap from the joints, giving the impression that he lacked physical coordination and that if he threw a punch, it would land somewhere other than where he had intended. His large, intelligent deep-set blue eyes—the one characteristic his daughter inherited from him—had tiny lines on the sides from a habit of smiling. They made him look too kind to ever consider harming anyone. But, he had been athletic as a young man, who learned to use his whole body for both offense and defense. He had also honed his wit to use as a weapon.

After some time, Elise stopped crying and Dr. Halverson approached mother and daughter again. He started to open his mouth but his wife shook her head.

She said to Elise, “Stay here tonight. We’ll figure it all out. In the past, grandparents always helped care for children. I’m sure we can do the same. Even now, I read that among Hawaiians, everyone—the whole family, the community—is expected to take care of children. Much like that idea in *It Takes a Village*.”

Dr. Halverson raised his eyebrows and glared at his wife. He uttered a soundless “What?”

His wife glared back at him, compressed her lips for him to say no more, and turned towards her daughter.

Dr. Halverson sat down again and watched them.

“You can have your old room back. I have my sewing in there now but it should be easy to take those out. The bed is made.”

Elise forced a tremulous smile at her mother. “You don’t mind?”

“No.” Mrs. Halverson reassured her with a gentle smile. “Who else would you turn to?” She wove her fingers through her daughter’s hair and away from her face.

Elise laid her head on her mother’s lap. She was more subdued now. She closed her eyes and submitted herself to her mother’s soothing hands.

Silence reigned in the room for some time. Elise was exhausted. Her parents looked exhausted. They all needed to be silent for a while. To Elise, the silence meant a lot. There was calmness in it, the sort that followed a major storm. For her and her mother, a kind of trust, a bond once there and repressed, was beginning to reawaken.

At length, Elise raised her head. “I’ll go and rest in my room for a while, if you don’t mind.”

“Yes, do that. I’ll make us some light dinner. None of us will have much of an appetite.”

As Elise was about to disappear into the hallway leading to the bedrooms, her mother added, “You can move back in with us whenever you’re ready. I can help you get your things from your apartment anytime you want.”

Before dinner was over, they all agreed, without words being said, that Elise was back to stay that very evening and for as long as she needed.

The following days, Elise moved around the house without paying much attention to what was going on around her. Her uncharacteristic outburst had drained her and she did not talk much. Sometimes, she stopped in the midst of a sentence

and stared, unseeing, into space or at some object in front of her. Often, she withdrew into her room after meals, instead of talking to her parents or sitting with them—as she used to do—absorbed in a book or pounding on her laptop. Many times, she cried herself to sleep at night.

Her father was spared from seeing much of her unhappiness during the day, when he went to teach at the university. But, at dinner, he regarded her, with worry in his eyes, particularly during those long moments when she stared at a dish in front of her without eating. But Elise could not help it. The dishes she used to love were now often unpalatable or difficult to swallow.

She always felt relieved when dinner was over. After helping her mother in the kitchen, she gave each of her parents a perfunctory kiss, muttered a good night, and disappeared until morning. Sometimes, she did not come to breakfast. Her parents let her alone.



A week later, before he went to work, Dr. Halverson talked to his wife about Elise's behavior.

"How is she doing? She's not losing weight, is she? Is she eating enough? Is she this morose all the time?"

"Well, she's pregnant. I was nauseous at the sight of food, the first three or four months. She's probably like me. The good thing is, studying seems to take her mind off of whatever's depressing her. She leaves her door ajar during the day. I see her bent over her books. As focused as she's always been."

She frowned. "She closes her door again, minutes before you come home."

“What do you mean? Is she angry with me? But why would she be?”

“No, no. That’s not it. She’s not angry with us, I’m sure of that. Anyway, I could be wrong about the door. I may be imagining that. Maybe, she believes she’s let us down? You, especially?”

“Well, she has. But we’ve been supportive, haven’t we? Given her space.”

He walked away, scowling. He shoved his fists into his pockets, muttering again, “I wish I knew who the man was.”

On the weekend, Elise’s best friend Leah came to stay, lifting Elise’s mood for a few days after. The Halversons relaxed a little.

CHAPTER NINE

Elise



Hello, Leah!”

“Elise! Where are you? I was beginning to worry about you. Isn’t it later than usual for you to be out?”

“I’m at my parents. I won’t be coming home tonight.” It was the evening of the day Elise told her parents she was pregnant.

“You homesick for your parents?”

She could hear Leah laugh but, after the events of that day, she found it hard even to feign amusement.

“Actually, I won’t be going back to the apartment. I’ll be by to pick up my things, sometime in the next few days.”

“Isn’t this quite sudden? What’s the matter, Elise? I’ve been suspecting something has been going on with you. Your mom or dad sick? Are you sick?”

Elise could not answer; her tears were still too close to the surface.

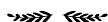
“Elise, are you still there? Talk to me. Did I do anything wrong?”

“No, no. Not you at all, Leah. And no one is sick. It’s me. I’ve been so high-strung lately and I’m not used to it.”

"Now, you're spooking me out. I've always admired how straight thinking you are. How cool you remain under pressure. I've never heard you talk like this."

"Please, Leah. I can't say much more right now. Can you come? Visit me? I need a friend to talk to. Stay the weekend."

"This sounds serious. Yes, I'll be there."



Leah appeared at the Halversons' door on Saturday afternoon carrying a bulging bag and a suitcase. Mrs. Halverson greeted her at the door.

"I took the liberty of bringing some of Elise's clothes. How is she? She sounded upset when we talked last Friday evening. I've never seen her like this."

"I'm sure she'll tell you about it herself. Right now, she's asleep in her room."

"She's been doing that lately. Her classes seem to tire her out. She isn't sick, is she?"

"No, I can't say that she is. Come to the kitchen and I'll get you a drink. Then I'll show you the guest room. Elise says you're staying the weekend."

Elise emerged from her room about an hour later. She joined her parents and Leah in the living room where they had been watching the afternoon news.

Leah got up and gave her a hug. "There you are. You look rested."

Elise held on to her tight. "I'm so happy you came. Let's go to my room."



Two hours later, the two sat huddled together on Elise's bed, still talking in hushed tones.

Leah said, "So, that's why you said all those things. Remember when I showed you that newspaper article? About the wedding that never took place."

"I couldn't tell you at that time. I don't know why. I wasn't ashamed of what I did. Not even guilty. No regrets, either. I fully expected him to go through with his marriage. I was prepared never to see him again."

"Do your parents know who your baby's father is?"

"No. But they don't ask, which is good, because I'm not ready to tell them yet. My dad's angry, of course. He and Greg are very good friends and I don't wanna mess with that right now."

"You'll have to tell them, though, sometime."

"When things cool off. I can't, right now. Not yet."

"Girl, you're in love in a bad way. I've seen the guy. He makes news. Tall, dark, piercing blue eyes, bushy eyebrows. Definitely not bad looking. With his money, I'd say he's a handsome dude. Too many women seem to think so. But I didn't figure him as your type. I actually thought Daniel was."

"So did I. But I couldn't get past treating Daniel as a very good friend and nothing more."

"So, what does this guy have that Daniel does not?"

"I don't know, outside of what I feel. We didn't get along well when we first met. I hated the image I had of him."

"It's not his money, is it?"

"Oh, Leah!"

"Just checking. Gotta look at every angle, you know."

“But what if I tell you I fell for him because I liked the way he said my name? ‘Elise’—long on the “i,” a pronounced “z” almost ending in “e.” Does that count? As a good shallow reason.”

Leah chuckled. “Now, you’re getting into the right groove. How about this? Underneath his suit, I bet he has a great bod. And with all that hair on his head, he must have a hairy chest. I love hairy men. Was he good in bed?”

“You would ask that. He made me feel loved, desired. He began so tenderly, so sweetly, but I felt myself burning at his touch. That was new to me.”

“Oh my!” Leah fanned herself with her hands and the two of them giggled.

Leah studied Elise's face intently. “It's nice to hear you laugh. But there's sadness in your eyes. I'm not used to it. It's obvious you love this guy and you're grieving his loss.” She slapped her palm on her forehead. “Oh Gawd! I sound like my dad. But it makes sense.”

“Does it? I hope so. Right now, I can't get my mind around what's going on with me. I've never been this miserable.”

“That's not unusual.”

“You never fell apart after your two break-ups.”

“I've been through it a few times since high school. I've got practice. Even so, I was miserable every time. One thing that helps me—from the very beginning, I tell everyone who cares for me what I'm going through. I get an awful lot of sympathy that way. I never had to be miserable on my own.”

“Yes, I should learn to do that.”

“Well, you're one tough cookie with a glass jaw.”

“What?”

“Don't mind me too much. I'm just mouthing what I heard from my dad. As far as young people go, he likes you. That's

a compliment, coming from him. To him, most of us, young people, are still wishy-washy, unformed. But he says you know exactly where you want to go and you're a problem solver. Not readily fazed by obstacles. Those were his exact words, by the way—'a tough cookie with a glass jaw.'"

"Huh?"

"Well, the way I understand it, it's like having a chink in your armor, a fragile breaking point that you're probably not conscious of. Like what you're going through now."

"Maybe I should go for therapy with your dad."

"It helps. He's not cheap. I'm lucky. I get my therapy for free. Although with me, he insists all he's doing is being an understanding parent."

"My dad doesn't understand much of these things. He's very sweet; and he and my Mom both love me very much. To them, I can do no wrong. Maybe that's why I can't allow myself to make mistakes."

Leah studied her face for a minute. "Are you sure you want to move back here, with your parents? Isn't it better for you to stay with me at the apartment? I'll help you."

"I have to take time off next semester to have my baby. You'll be quite busy, working on last-minute requirements for graduation. After that, you'll be studying for the bar. Anyway, I'll need my mom, and she needs to be of help to me. It makes her feel good, taking care of me. We've never been as close as we've been, the last few days."

She stared blankly into space and was silent for a few minutes. Leah did not intrude into her reverie. Elise was grateful. They both needed to be silent.

Sometime later, Elise said, "My dad—I think I've disappointed him." Her voice quivered. She bit her lip and

blinked. She thought she was calm enough, but tears had started to gather in her eyes again.

Leah reached over, took Elise's hand in hers, and stroked it gently. "Fathers do not do well at this sort of thing."

Elise nodded and lapsed, once again, into a long silence.

Leah said, "Anyway, I have decided not to sublet. I have saved enough money to pay my rent to the end of the school year. So, anytime you feel like coming and staying for a while, don't hesitate."

Elise bit her lips, already a little swollen from previous days. Her eyes were red and puffy and her face flushed. Her breath was coming in quick, jagged succession until the tears came again. Copious tears. She was getting used to them. But something was different this time.

These were quiet tears. Less from misery than from gratitude. Yes, she was grateful, relieved. People close to her understood and accepted what she was going through. She no longer felt alone. She had Leah; she had her parents who, she was sure, would come to be at peace with her decision to keep her baby. Coping with what she was going through did not seem so daunting anymore.

Leah leaned forward again and placed her arms around her. Elise clung to Leah and cried on her shoulders. A long while passed before she calmed down.



Elise and Leah spent that weekend in intimate conversations. Dr. and Mrs. Halverson left the two alone.

On Sunday night, the friends lay on Elise's bed after dinner. Leah said, "Maybe, you should recall those days when

you didn't like the guy. You know, focus on his irritating qualities.”

“I’m not sure anymore what they are. Some of our clients at Legal Aid wanted to sue him. But he settled, reached an agreement with his workers. I counseled them not to give in. The offer seemed the minimum he could get away with. They could have pushed for more and been awarded more than they settled for. At the time, I thought Greg took advantage of them.”

“Well, there you go, a ruthless, grasping employer.”

“Except, he took steps in favor of workers. He’s consulted with my dad. As a result, he’s phasing in an affordable health care plan. Now, he has an assistant who’s setting up childcare within the company premises, paid for by the company. There’re other plans they’ve talked about.”

“This guy sounds too good to be true. But, okay, I’ll go with it. Let’s try this—he doesn’t love you, but he wanted to get into your pants. He wanted your body, not the beautiful person inside you.”

Elise could not help laughing. “Oh, Leah. You’re funny. And you do me good.”

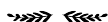
“Help me out here; I’m trying to cure you. Think of all that’s bad about the guy.”

“Maybe he did want just my body?” Elise sighed. “Well, that’s how it is, though, isn’t it? For almost everyone in our generation. Love needn’t enter into it.”

“Oh, Elise! I’m so sorry. Maybe this wasn’t a good idea.”

“No, it’s all right. I’ve actually wondered if I was the problem. I still believe that if you spend a night with a guy, it has to mean something more than just minutes of panting and titillation. It did, to me at least. Anyway, this affair has brought us closer, you and I. My mom and me, too.”

“Not that I’m glad you’re miserable right now. But, you’re right. I think we’ve evened things out a bit. Until now, you’ve been the selfless one, listening and giving. But I’m happy to reverse roles, for once, so call on me anytime you need support or just someone to talk to.”



Elise felt better the weekend Leah visited. The mood lasted a few more days. The following weekend, her brothers came to visit. They had to be told but she dreaded the prospect of it.

They were both angry, as she expected. Not at her ostensibly, but at the irresponsibility of the unknown man. She thought it unfair—their anger towards Greg—but she could not defend him. Later, she heard Peter, her eldest brother, talking to their mother in the kitchen.

“How stupid of her not to use contraceptives! How could she make that mistake? I don’t get it.”

“Neither does your father and neither did I. But I suspect she knew what she was doing all along. At some point, it didn’t seem to matter anymore why this happened. She’s made her decision and we should respect it.”

“But isn’t she imposing on you? You told me, when she left for college, that you were so relieved. No children to take care of anymore.”

“Strange how things are sometimes. I’m quite okay about all this. Elise has always been so independent and I felt I wasn’t much of a mother to her. Now, suddenly, I am.” She laughed. “I’m baking fewer cookies and we’re spending time together. I’m actually enjoying babying her a little. Anyway, who else is there to help her?”

Mrs. Halverson paused for a long moment. She said in a quiet voice, "I do want her to succeed. I will help her, as much as she will allow me, to make her dreams come true."

"Ah well! These days, a baby out of wedlock is not so shameful anymore. Famous people admit to it publicly. A year from now, Elise will take this as nothing but a setback. Still, it would give me pleasure to punch that man who did this to her. Had he never heard of condoms?"

Back in her room, Elise cried, and fell asleep. She was not sorry to find her brothers gone when she awoke in the morning.

CHAPTER TEN

Intermezzo



By the second week of Elise's moving back in with her parents, she and her mother had developed a kind of ritual. Most mornings, Dr. Halverson left for the university while they continued to quietly linger over morning coffee. An hour later, after they had cleaned and put away the breakfast dishes, Elise went into the bathroom to draw water for a bath. Her mother came in, within a few minutes, to shampoo her hair, sponge her with soap, help her out of the tub into her bathrobe, and dry her hair.

Back in Elise's bedroom, her mother blow-dried her hair, brushed it, and wove it into a thick plait. She seemed to know exactly when to come in and when to leave her alone.

Her mother, her beautiful Polish mother who, apart from her love and solicitous care for her family, was devoted only to her piano for which, everyone admitted, she showed exceptional talent. Elise wished she had talked to her mother more while she was growing up. But she seemed not to have much to say. She filled their silences by entertaining her family on the piano. At that, Elise knew no one better.

On weekends, she and her mother left Dr. Halverson alone with his books and drove to the seaside. There, they took tranquil walks on paths along the shore, often exchanging

very few words. In fact, neither talked much. Elise felt too sad, and her mother believed she could best help her through her unhappiness by giving her the pampering she refused as a child, and that needed no words.

On the fourth month of pregnancy, Elise felt her baby moving and kicking for the first time. She went to the kitchen where she knew her mother would be.

"Mom, my baby kicked me," she said with wonder. "I think he's doing somersaults in there."

Mrs. Halverson wiped her hands with a towel and placed a hand on Elise's belly.

"Yes, I remember what that's like," She said, gazing at her daughter's shining eyes.

"It's incredible. I'm nurturing a new person."

"Yes, you are and, thank you, for reminding me again what an amazing experience that is." She hugged her daughter tight.

"And to think I never intended to have children. I would have missed out."

Her mother chuckled. "Yes. That's something we have that men can never know."

Elise's unhappiness began to exhaust itself. Calmness settled in the household and Elise became more active at helping her mother in the kitchen and in the garden. She asked her mother to teach her how to bake cookies and prune her roses. But, except for that time when her baby made his presence palpable to her, Elise maintained a reticence that, in time, grew into a kind of serene demeanor.

By the seventh month, and still in the quiet way her parents had now become used to, Elise delighted in all the little preparations her mother directed her to do for the baby. They shopped for baby clothes together, cleaned and

decorated her brothers' old room, and transformed it into a baby's room. They took an old wooden baby crib out of the attic and resurrected it, with her mother's limited carpentry skills, a lot of sandpaper, and some tung oil they rubbed on the wood.

On her ninth month of pregnancy, Elise told her parents who the baby's father was and they were once again perplexed—he, more so than she was.

“They always seemed to be arguing and contradicting each other. I didn't know that they even spent any time together outside of this house,” Dr. Halverson said.

“Remember, Greg took her home the last night he was here for dinner. It figures. Elise was about three months pregnant when she told us.”

“Yes, I do remember. But that was the weekend he was going to get married! The bastard. I trusted him; and he took advantage of my daughter!”

“I doubt anyone could do that to Elise. And for all his reputation as a playboy, Greg's a real decent guy. I actually thought he was in love with her, from the very beginning. He stared at her a good deal. With those intent eyes of his—you know, like when he's really earnest about something.”

“Really? I've missed all that.”

“Well! Nothing new there.”

“How did Elise take it?”

“I wasn't sure how she felt. At least, not until that night she burst out crying. Elise has been so guarded before all this. She's smart but she's dense when it comes to dealing with feelings—hers and those of others. But she's learning. This heartbreak has been teaching her.”

“Could Greg have broken off his engagement for her?”

Mrs. Halverson grinned, with a twinkle in her eyes. “I’d like to believe he did.”

“Why? Does that satisfy the romantic in you?”

“A little, yes. But, to me, that shows his good judgment. I admit I’m biased in my daughter’s favor, but between Elise and Lori? In my mind, no comparison.”

Dr. Halverson chuckled, planted a kiss on his wife’s cheek and placed an arm around her shoulder.

“You and I, my love. I might as well admit my own perverse delight. I’ve been upset by this whole affair. That’s true. But like you, I also thought—good! Elise, in the grip of her emotions. I always knew she had fire in her. Not just brains. As for Greg, I agree. He’s a great guy. Sharp as a tack. I should know, spending all those hours talking with him. But I wish he wasn’t a playboy. I wouldn’t have minded having him as a son-in-law.”



The whole affair concerning Lori was so bewildering and distasteful to Greg that he wanted to get away from everything. He decided he needed time to himself, to go someplace as different as possible from the chaotic world he was in. Somewhere where life was simple and idyllic and all he needed to worry about was where to go jogging and what wine to drink for dinner.

After ten years at the helm of his company, he was confident the rough times were over and only some catastrophe could collapse his business. People would always need lights and there was no going back on digital technology.

So, Greg put a staff of trusted assistants in charge in his company and told them he would monitor his business from afar for a month. They were to send him daily reports, make day-to-day decisions on their own, and consult him only when something came up that could threaten the company's financial health.

His management staff and board of advisers were not surprised at his decision. He had never been away longer than two days. No one who knew him missed the scandal his ex-fiancée had created and people close enough to him saw signs on his face and his behavior of the strain wrought by the scandal and the tabloid gossip.

Assured that operations would run smoothly, he left for an undisclosed destination. He meant to stay away for a month but the month stretched to two, then to three.

When he returned, he devoted his time to work. He avoided social gatherings except when they were related to business.

His mother began to worry when he spent his New Year's Eve with her—he had not done so since he was twenty.

“How long do you intend to be unsociable?”

“I prefer to focus on the business for a while.”

“I’ve never seen anything hurt you as much as this affair has.”

“No. Nothing has. I think I can handle most problematic affairs related to business. But I’ve never had to deal with broken relationships or vengeful women. The hardest part, for me, is knowing I made mistakes that hurt everyone involved.”

“What about your young woman? Elise.”

“I’m sure I hurt her, too.”

“Why don't you contact her?”

“I can't yet, Mama.”

No, he couldn't; not yet. Not while he felt he needed to purge himself of some vestiges of his past before he could deserve Elise. He had to test himself, see what he could endure. He had always been in some casual or serious relationship, and he wanted to experience what it was like to be alone and lonely, to draw upon the resources he had within himself, and to learn to be content with them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Rekindling



Elise stared, with lids drooping over glazed eyes, at the newscaster on television, while she nibbled on some take-out falafel from a neighborhood restaurant. But as bright as that pita tasted, with her favorite spicy filling of bean balls, she could not relish it although she was famished.

What she wanted was rest. She needed more of that than what she could stuff into her mouth and her stomach. She plopped the remaining falafel on the coffee table in front of her, and slid her body, weary and heavy, down on the supple seat cushions.

The last two weeks had been hectic. She was exhausted from running around during the day—interviewing witnesses for her first big case—and working late in her apartment. She had devoted her nights to reading and analyzing transcriptions of interviews and depositions. This evening was not going to be any better.

Sweet, glorious slumber soon took over. But not for long.

Insistent ringing jarred Elise for an instant out of the thick fog in her head. She stirred, but she could not move her limbs. She slid back into another fitful dream.

The ringing began again. How long after the first, she could not tell. She groped for the phone on the side table behind her head.

“Hello.” Elise slurred, still dazed from sleep, her eyes closed.

Her greeting was met with silence.

“Hello?” she said once more.

“Hello. Do you remember me?” The voice that answered was deep and resonant, one resurrected from her past.

Elise sprang upright and swung her legs off the couch. She switched on the lamp on the side table. Now wide-awake, she reached for the remote control and turned off the television, still blaring the same headlines about the uncertain economy and businesses continuing to fail.

Did she remember? How could she forget? Not a week passed when that voice did not speak, answering one question or another, on the radio, on television, or merely in her head.

No, she had not forgotten. How could she? But she never expected that voice to address her again. It had been two years, after all, since they were last together, and one year since she had given up on him.

“Yes, yes. Of course, I do.”

Elise could not say anymore. Her heart was thumping. She tucked the strands of hair that had fallen on her face into the barrette on the back of her head and waited for the voice to say more.

For a long moment, there was silence at the other end although she could hear him breathing. She imagined his chest rising and falling, deep, rhythmic, and regular. She remembered how it felt as it did that, its muscles lean and strong against her breasts.

"I've been thinking a lot about you lately," Greg said. She gripped the telephone tighter and licked her dry lips. "Oh?" She managed to squeak the word out of her parched throat.

"Off and on the last two years. Mostly on."

"Mmmm. Me, too." She bit her lip. Damn! Sleep had stolen her self-control. She didn't want him to know she still thought about him.

"Really? Listen, can we meet?" He was never one to beat around the bush. That, she remembered very well, too. She liked that about him. She also liked how his greyish blue eyes peered into hers and how his direct gaze burrowed into her soul, even as those eyes bared his own. She liked the sharp, introspective mind behind them, too. She liked.....

"Stop!" Elise said to herself

"Are you still there?" Greg's voice jolted her out of her imagined residues of their past together.

"Yes. I'm sorry. I've had a long day. I'm still trying to wake up from a nap." She feigned a yawn. "It kinda came over me this afternoon. This is so unlike me."

"I see, hectic days as usual." Another moment of silence at his end. "Would you fit me into your busy schedule? Please? I need to see you. I want to see you."

Her heart went thumping again. She bit her lips harder to suppress the breath that heaved at her chest. A few moments went by before she could trust her voice.

"Why not. When?"

"Tomorrow night?"

"That soon? Aren't you busier than me? How could you fit me into your schedule, just like that?" Early in their acquaintance, she risked falling into sarcasm whenever she spoke to him. Tonight, he provoked it in her again.

“Please, Elise.”

“Where?”

“There’s an Indian restaurant on the corner of Huston and Kramer. Maybe 8 pm?”

“Three blocks from my apartment? Yes, I’ve passed by the place.” She knitted her brow and wondered, for a moment, why he would know about a restaurant in the area. But all she could manage to add was, “At eight, then.”

She hung up and did not wait for him to respond. Her hands started to shake and she clenched them tight, close to her stomach, to keep them still.

She blinked away the moisture gathering in her eyes and turned off the lamp. How exasperating! Why could she not turn off the sensations that flooded her? The way she could turn off that lamp with a quick flick of her fingers.

Her head began to reel and she leaned back on the couch. She was breathing deep and hard, straining for air. Her limbs tingled from a million tiny delicious pricks on the surface of her skin. Stirrings of sensations, too exquisite to be buried, churned her insides. But she wanted them buried. She needed them lost in some unreachable recess in her brain. She did not dare hope again. She clasped her arms around her chest.

What was she thinking? Why see him again? What did he want now?

Elise sat in the dark a long time—at least an hour, according to the clock on her side table.

Work. Work was always a good antidote to the messiness of feelings. She turned on the lamp again and stared at the thick putrid green folder of depositions on the coffee table. Next to it, lay the falafel, its sauce liquefied by wilted lettuce and oozing too close to those precious depositions.

She rewrapped the uneaten mess in its brown bag and threw it into the trash basket by her foot—already half-full of rejected drafts and notes for her new case.

She picked up the folder and placed it on her lap. But she could not open it. It weighed her legs down and reminded her how exhausted she was. Drained. Not so much from her work at the Public Defender's office as from all that happened within the last hour or so.

She unloaded the folder back on to the coffee table, turned off the lamp and went to bed.

That night, she lay, tossing, two hours past her usual bedtime. A couple of times, she skimmed through the book on eastern thought that she kept on her bedside table. Her trusty first defense against insomnia. She read it when fatigue could not put her to sleep. But that night, it failed at its task.

She took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, over and over. She tried to lie still, but her muscles twitched and trembled. The sensations Greg stirred in her again had stopped. And, yet, sleep continued to elude her.

She reached for the bottle of Benadryl under her pillow and popped a pill into her mouth.

Thoughts and dreams floated through her head that night. She fell asleep at some point, she was sure of that, because the following morning, she bounded without much effort from bed, alert and ready for the frenzy of the day.



Elise went straight home from work. She paced her apartment for about half an hour, faltering: Should she go

or shouldn't she? She dreaded seeing Greg again and, yet, she wanted to.

In the end, she told herself she should, if only out of obligation. She did say she would come. And seeing him again could help. Maybe the meeting could put a definite closure to a phase in her life—long passed—that still bothered her at night, alone on her bed. That was the best she could hope for, but it might be enough to give her the ease and peace she craved.

Elise arrived at the restaurant a quarter after eight. Inside the restaurant, the light was low, flickering from candles on dinner tables covered with stiffly starched tablecloths. Background music floated through the dense air, reeking of roasting meat and a mixture of Indian spices. She could recognize a few of them from her mother's cooking—cumin, cinnamon, and garlic.

She knew the song well, a popular Argentinean ballad sometimes chanted to the beat of tango. Now, it gushed from a tremulous, pleading voice "*bésame bésame mucho ...*" She frowned and smiled a little. Latin America in bed with India. Getting global could produce unexpected alliances.

A waiter led her to the table where Greg sat, his right hand on the table, cradling a half-empty glass of beer that he was tapping with a finger.

He rose as soon as he saw her, the shadow of a smile on his lips.

She came dressed in a midnight blue short-sleeved turtleneck and jeans. She wondered what he would think of her now. She was older and she had lost a few pounds since the last time they were together. He used to tease her about the baby fat on her face but she had lost that, too, setting off her cheekbones and the slight upward lift in her

eyes. She had swept her blonde hair, including the wisps that usually fell on her face, into a tight ponytail that she gathered towards one side of her head.

She was trembling a little by the time they stood in front of each other, the square dining table between them. With a forced smile, she clenched and opened her hand to steady it before extending it out to him.

“Good evening, Greg. I’m sorry I’m late. I was taking a deposition. It lasted a little longer than usual.” She lowered her lids as she apologized. She could not stand how he was looking at her.

“How are you, Elise? You made it. Better late than never. I was worried you wouldn’t come.”

He enclosed her hand in both of his.

“Is it cold outside?” he asked. He rubbed her hand gently with his thumbs and held on to it a little longer than she thought necessary.

“No, it’s warm enough. I get cold hands sometimes.”

She looked up again at those eyes, gleaming under his dark, lush eyebrows, even in the low light. She pulled her hand out of his. He seemed reluctant to let go of it.

She sat down and slung the strap of her shoulder bag on the back of her chair. She was doing all she could to avoid that gaze. She fidgeted on the hard wooden chair.

Greg said, “They’re not too comfortable, I’m afraid.”

Elise nodded at his sympathetic smile, her lips twitching into a semblance of one. She picked up the menu. “I am starved. I munched on an apple and gulped down a glass of milk for lunch. Maybe, that’s why my hands are cold.”

“Did you come straight from work?”

“No. I gotta read through some stuff tonight so I popped into my apartment to leave them there.”

“... que tengo miedo perderte, perderte otra vez.”

The plaintive voice and the orchestra trailed to a close. On its heels, a sitar trilled the exotic twangy strains of Indian instrumental music. Elise took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She read through the menu with greater concentration than she knew it needed, but it distracted her from his oppressive gaze.

“The tandoori lamb is their specialty.”

“Oh! You have been here.” She peeked at Greg from behind her menu.

“Yes. A few times.”

A rosy flush tinged her cheeks. He lived in the poshest neighborhood in the San Francisco Bay Area and had no occasion to wander into hers, twenty miles away, a gentrifying city with dog parks, Wi-Fi-enabled coffee shops, and new condominiums equipped with workout facilities that attracted many young professionals like her.

The waiter returned to take their order.

“The tandoori lamb, please, with salad. And a glass of mango lassi,” she said.

“Make that two, with naan, no lassi. But I’ll have a cup of tsai.”

The waiter took their menus away.

They turned towards each other at about the same time. Face-to-face, across the small table, they gazed into each other's eyes for a wordless minute or so. His eyes glowed with an expression she knew only too well. That gaze used to make her tingle. She endured it for as long as she could.

Elise pursed her lips and picked up the glass of water on her side of the table. Drops spilled out of the glass as she raised it to her mouth.

She held her glass tighter as she took small sips of water from it. She kept her eyes directed on the table, aware that Greg was still staring at her. She resisted a sudden urge to throw the water on his face—that should make him blink or turn his face away. Instead, she willed herself to look up again.

She raised her head. A wave of warmth infused her skin and she hoped the light was low enough to hide the blush that she was sure came with it.

Greg smiled at her—the kind of smile that brightened his eyes but barely broke his lips. A knot roiled at the pit of her stomach and spread to her chest. She frowned in irritation. After two years, how could that smile still bring on that sensation? A sensation, among many, that she had tried to bury.

Elise kept her gaze on him. But it was a struggle not to look down or turn away. She bit her lower lip.



Greg stared at Elise. He made her uncomfortable, he could see that. But he could not help it. He could not take his eyes off of her. Too long a time had passed since he last saw her.

When she offered her hand for him to shake, he was struck by some expression in her eyes that took his breath away. Was it sadness lurking within them that made her large eyes darker and deeper blue in the ambient candle light? Sadness or something else—it gave her a haunting look. The suggestion of a smile could not mask it. And yet, it made her more beautiful than he could remember.

In the past, he used to imagine Elise as a young lioness, when she wore her hair loose down her shoulders. Not fierce—not quite yet, anyway—but with potential for power in her assured, sometimes defiant manner. Now, she seemed like one ready to retreat.

With some effort, he looked away at the room around them, trying to calm the gnawing, longing feeling that seized him. Those silent but intense couple of minutes, right after the waiter took away the menus, brought back too many memories. Memories he wanted to turn again into reality.

Greg broke the silence between them. “You’re more beautiful than ever.”

“So are you.” Her tone was light and teasing but he heard a slight quiver in her voice that betrayed her uneasiness. Still, she held his gaze, this time, and seemed to relax a little.

“So you’re now a full-fledged lawyer.”

“I passed the bar nearly a year ago but I’m still lowest in the totem pole at the Public Defender’s office. So, they dump all the dirty work on me—boring, routine stuff. But...” She paused and smiled broadly. “I recently got my first big criminal case. I’ve been on it now, for two weeks.”

At that moment, Greg saw Elise as he remembered her. He returned her smile, riveted once again by the liveliness in her eyes.

The suggestion of a scowl crossed her brow for an instant, but her smile lingered. She said, “How about you? Anything new with you that’s not on the news? Your company’s on business pages a lot lately.”

“Yes. But I wish we could do what we’re doing quietly, without all that publicity. If we fail, I’m sure we’ll get more than our fair share of bad press.”

“Well, you’re high-profile—a personality, as media people like to say. So, you are news.”

He let out a low-pitched grunt. “The press pokes into my personal life too much. Mercilessly, sometimes. That makes me mad. But I get mad at me, too. I’m sorry now I allowed myself to be drawn into exposing so much of my life when I was younger.”

Their order arrived and for half an hour, eating preoccupied them. They did not talk much.

Elise was indeed hungry and gave her dinner her full attention. Halfway into the meal, she put her knife and fork down, picked up a chop, and tore small mouthfuls of the two remaining chops off of the bone with her teeth.

“You’re right. This is yummy! I haven’t had much time to sit down to a real dinner lately.” She sucked at a lamb bone one more time, put it on top of the small pile she had accumulated and wiped her hands with her napkin.

She raised her chin ever so slightly and looked straight into his eyes. For a fraction of an instant, she lifted her right eyebrow and her eyes glinted in the candlelight.

Greg remembered that look, had seen it often in their past contentious encounters. It made him uneasy.

“Now I can be civilized,” she said. “Nothing like good garlicky tandoori lamb to fire you up.”

“Do you want some dessert? Some gulab jamun? They make a mean one here.”

“No, oh no. Thank you. This is quite enough. The right mix of spice and acid to cut the sweetness.” She raised the empty glass of lassi.

“I would like some coffee. Do you want some?”

“Yes, if it’s decaf. I’ve already had too much caffeine at work”

They both waited, again in silence, for their coffee. Elise played with the small carafe of cream the waiter placed on the table. She traced its form slowly with her middle and fore fingers, going over every inch of it. He watched her, fascinated, in danger of lapsing into a trance. Her fingers on the porcelain were so like a caress.

After she had gone all over the carafe once, she began to retrace its form. Halfway around, she stopped and pushed it away. She jerked her head up and flashed unflinching eyes at him.

"What's this all about? Let's get to the point, shall we? Why did you call? It's been so long ago since we last met."

Greg was startled, but only for a moment. "Two years, that's all. Is that really so long ago?"

"I never thought we'd ever meet again. This distance between us, it seems so—big. You, way up there. Me, down here."

He held her gaze, without speaking, for nearly a minute. She did not blink.

"I can't get you out of my mind, Elise."

"The last time we were together, you were about to get married." A spark of anger narrowed her eyes for an instant.

"Yes, but I couldn't—didn't—go through with it." He kept his gaze on her but he began to breathe faster, disconcerted by that instantaneous spark in her eyes.

She regarded him for a long couple of minutes. He held his breath. She looked thoughtful, but other than that, he could not read her eyes. He could hardly wait for her response but, at the same time, he dreaded to hear it. Would he never see her again after tonight?

Elise blinked a few times and said, her tone and her voice milder, "I do know that. Your fiancée went to a firm a friend

from law school worked for. I know she filed a suit for breach of promise against you. My friend told me, later, that she was more anxious than you to settle. Keep the terms hushed up.”

Greg let out a long deep breath.

“Whatever happened to confidentiality?”

“It was a confidential discussion between colleagues.” She pursed her lips into a smile. That defiant look had crept back into her eyes.

Their coffee arrived and for a few minutes, they sipped it without saying a word. She cast quick glances at him. Was she wondering what she should do next? Once again, he had that sense that she had primed herself for battle.

Well, then, let’s get it over with, he thought. But the next instant, he hesitated. Battle was not really what he wanted to happen. He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss away the hurt she was trying so hard to hide from him.

He raised his arm and snapped his fingers at the waiter, “Check, please!”

“Please, let’s get out of here, Elise. I’d like to talk to you where no one can interrupt or hear us. We can drive around in my car for a while, if you want. I won’t have enough time for what I want to say to you if I just walk you home.”

“You can walk me home, slowly. And if you still have more to say by the time we get to my apartment, we could go around those blocks a couple more times.” With a twinkle in her eye, she added, “Or, I may ask you up to my apartment.”

At that, he smiled. For those few moments, they were back to what it used to be between them.



A moist breeze had been blowing outside and Elise shivered as they stepped out the door. Greg took off his jacket and placed it around her shoulders.

She smiled at him, grateful for his kindness. "This is not exactly the night for a leisurely walk, is it? How the weather can change so quickly! We'll have to walk a little faster." She hurried on ahead of him.

He walked faster to catch up with her. "Are you running away from me? I won't have time for everything I wanted to say if you go so fast."

"Just get to the point. Is that so hard to do?"

Greg did not answer and she bit her lip, regretting her tone. At her apartment before going to the restaurant, she had resolved to be cool and unconcerned and even practiced a couple of bland expressions on the mirror. But she was finding it harder to carry out her resolve than she had imagined. She kept her eyes on the pavement. She did not change her pace.

His silence lasted for a couple of long minutes and he continued to walk some paces behind her. She slowed down a little. Had she offended him? But what was she to do? What had she hoped would happen? She was only aware that she could not bear the uncertainty any longer. Maybe, it was a mistake to meet again.

"Elise." His voice, tremulous but clear, came from right behind her. He had reduced the distance between them. "I love you Elise. I've never stopped loving you—not since that last time we were together."

She felt her face burn and she was at a loss what to say. But she let out a gasp that she hoped he did not hear. Was this really what she desired, all along, for him to say that to her

again? She slowed her pace a little more. He caught up with her and walked alongside her.

“All the gossip they’ve written about me since that day I broke my engagement—much of it isn’t true.”

She remained silent. The walk had begun to warm her up but she shivered a little.

“I have this reputation, this past. It’s come between us. I’m aware I have to live it down, before you can accept me. The way I want you to.”

“It’s reputation well-earned.” A reflexive jab. But she believed it should not matter if he meant what he had said so far.

Greg winced and did not answer. Elise walked on in silence, her head down, absorbed in her own thoughts.

He spoke again and she raised her head. They had already gone around and were back in front of the restaurant.

“I’ve changed my views before—about many things I took for granted. Can you believe I can change my ways?”

“I would hope so. You’re older. I’d like to believe you have matured when it comes to—” she paused and added in a fainter voice, blushing and grateful again for the dark—“things like ... affairs of the heart.”

“My heart was never involved with any of those other women. They pursued me. I was young and I was flattered. What young man wouldn’t take what’s brazenly offered?”

“Indeed, what man wouldn’t?” She sighed, paused in her steps, and faced him. “Look. You don’t owe me any explanation. That one night we had together—I knew what I was doing. I knew you were getting married that weekend and I’d never see you again. I intended never to see you again.” She almost choked as she finished.

“You loved me. I’m sure of it. I think, I hope, you still love me. And I have loved you—totally, sincerely, constantly—since I saw you waiting in your father’s office. I’ve been as sure of it as anyone could ever be. These last two years, I understood myself as I never have before. And, yes, there were many things I regretted. But not loving you. And never that night we had together.”

Elise glared at him. Her eyes were beginning to well up with tears. “Why now? Why come back now, after years when you never bothered with even a little note?” She walked—almost ran—away from him.

Greg ran after her and held her arm to slow her down. “Because where you’re concerned, I’m a coward. I’ve wanted so much to call you since I broke my engagement. But there was that breach of promise lawsuit. I didn’t want you dragged into it.”

“That was settled a year ago.” Her voice was weaker. She did not have much fight left in her.

He reached out, as if to take her hand, but Elise stepped back. He seemed taken aback.

He said in a trembling voice, “I have never admitted this to anyone until now. That lawsuit, the malicious gossip, everything about that whole affair ... took the wind out of me, wrung me out. For the first time in my adult life, I lost confidence in myself. I made some bad judgments about people and worse decisions about my personal life. Decisions that hurt me, Lori, and now I see, you most of all.”

He sighed, a mournful look in his eyes. “Hurting you was the last thing I ever wanted to do. I did dial your number or started to text you so many times. But I’d hang up or not hit ‘send.’ I was afraid you wouldn’t accept me after those nasty tabloid stories. I just couldn’t take your

rejection. Those years of playing around ... all that baggageI guess I thought that to deserve you, I needed to get rid of them, become a better man—someone who could feel whole without needing anyone else, who could be content to live alone. I thought that when I came back to you, you would know it's because I truly love you, that I don't want to live my life without you. Do you understand?"

He took a neatly folded note out of his breast pocket. "Look, here's the note you left me after that night. So impersonal, so direct. It hurt. But I couldn't throw it out. It's all I have from you, of you."

Elise did not take the note, but she gazed at him with plaintive eyes. She did understand how Greg, immensely confident of his judgment, his fairness and his magnanimity, could be unsettled, unnerved to realize he was flawed and could make serious mistakes, after all. She also believed he did love her as much as he professed to.

For her, those two years of being apart had not been long enough to arrive at the point of not caring, or better yet, of forgetting. Certainly not when she had a child who always reminded her of Greg. Still, she was not quite ready to relent.

"You were getting married that weekend. And after that, I never heard from you." Her voice, soft and tremulous, could hide neither the hurt she felt, nor the reproach inherent in hurting.

Greg gazed into her eyes and pleaded. "That marriage never happened. You were the reason I couldn't go through with it. I love you, Elise. I've never loved anyone before. I've made many mistakes and maybe I should have come back a year ago. Someone more sure of himself might have. Now, I finally feel like myself again, ready to do whatever it takes,

for as long as it takes to earn your trust, and to make you love me again.”

Elise continued walking, her eyes cast down. She couldn’t look at him, afraid to give way to her own emotions.

Her silence gave Greg some hope. He said, his tone tentative, his voice still quivering, “I think you still love me.”

She did still love him; that, she could not deny. It was the source of her own vulnerability—those moments when her confidence in the choices she had made wavered, or when sleep was elusive and she sunk into profound loneliness in the dark solitude of her bedroom. She had hidden that vulnerability from others the past year.

They had reached her apartment building and she stopped in front of the locked entry. She shivered from the cold. Greg moved a step towards her and raised an arm to put it around her. She stepped back away from him. He dropped his arm to his side. His eyes pleaded with such tenderness that she could not help regretting her reaction. His gesture had been instinctive.

They stood still, gazing at each other, for some minutes.

She shivered once more and pulled his jacket closer around her. “Why don’t you come up? I’ll make us some hot tea. We both can use a cup.”



On a late Saturday morning, a couple of weeks later, Greg drove Elise in his car to visit her parents. She had told him that she would learn from this visit if she could marry him or not.

“But I love you and you love me. Isn’t that enough?” You’re old enough not to need your parents’ consent,” he said, with an amused smile.

She smiled back and shrugged her shoulders.

The front door to her parents’ house was wide open when they arrived. Her mother was standing on the entry porch, a broad smile on her face. She was carrying a baby—a little boy—in one arm, to whom she kept talking. She waved at them.

He glanced at Elise. “Who’s that little boy?” he wanted to ask. But she had already stuck her head and one arm out the window.

She was smiling, waving back vigorously at her mother and the child. She opened the car door, descended, and banged the door shut before he could turn off the engine.

Greg got out of the car as fast as he could. He wanted to walk with her, but she did not wait for him. She ran towards the house. He followed, frowning, wondering, puzzling over the little boy. His being there made him curious enough. But something about his features riveted him.

Elise took the child from her mother. “Oh, I’ve missed you so much, so much. I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

Elise seemed on the verge of tears. She was kissing the little boy all over his face, hugging him close.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Halverson.” Greg could hardly hide his embarrassment. Since that last dinner party two years ago, he had not seen the Halversons. With the last check he sent to Dr. Halverson for his services, he had enclosed a letter informing him that he was putting some projects on hold.

Mrs. Halverson smiled broadly. She seemed happy to see him. “Good afternoon, Greg. It has been a while, hasn’t it?

More than two years since the last time you were here for dinner. My husband will be thrilled to see you."

He caught the little reproach in her voice and he said, with some embarrassment, "I can't wait. I miss the long talks we used to have."

"Well, do go in, both of you."

She pressed her daughter's arm and said, "I'll go find your father. He should be somewhere in the back garden tending to his flowers." She hurried away and disappeared around the corner of the house.

Greg stood rooted in place, next to Elise, who seemed oblivious of everything but the little boy in her arms. She was still kissing him, talking to him, in a low, gentle voice. He seemed shy of Elise, at first, hanging his head and sucking on his fingers. But, soon, he placed his arms around her and laid his head on her shoulders.

Greg looked closely at the little boy. Probably about a year old, he had the color of his eyes and his skin and, although his golden brown hair was lighter, it was as bushy and wavy as his had been as a child.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he said.

"Do you honestly believe I could have or would have, if you didn't come back? Having my son was a choice I made, a responsibility I assumed as all mine. I wouldn't impose it on anyone else unless they choose to take it."

Fiercely independent, her father had said of Elise once. More than ever, Greg understood, and yet "But what if he asked about his father?"

"I could come up with a handful of explanations to give him."

"But none of it would be true. Have you any idea what this means to me?" His voice was trembling. "Even if you didn't

want to have anything more to do with me, I'd still want to be an important part of his life. I'm sure he'll want me to be a part of his."

Elise did not answer. She walked into the house.

Deep in thought, Greg followed her. What did it matter that she did not tell him? He was here now and he intended to be around. He did not doubt how he would choose. A smile slowly broke on his lips and broadened.

He clasped her in his arms, the child between them. "This is the most wonderful surprise anyone has ever given me. Marry me. I've never loved anyone but you. Our son needs his father. And I need him. I need you."

"His name is Gregory."

He was incredulous. The little boy raised his head and stared up at him with clear blue-grey eyes. Wide-eyed and curious like his mother.

"After me? Did your father know it was me? Your mother?"

She nodded, choked a sob, and buried her face on his shoulder. He held her closer and kissed his son.

Mrs. Halverson came into the room and called out in a quiet voice, "Greg ... Greg!"

Greg turned towards her, his eyes bright and moist. "Mrs. Halverson."

"My husband's in the middle of one of his 'little breeding experiments'. Would you mind going to see him by his potting shed? You do remember where it is?"

Elise said, "Let's all go and talk to him there."

"No! I mean, I need you to help me in the kitchen, Elise." Mrs. Halverson placed her hand on her daughter's arm. "Your father's been out in the garden all day and needs some

refreshments. You probably do, too, if you drove straight from your apartment.”

Dr. Halverson was bent over his pots as Greg approached. “Dr. Halverson!”

Dr. Halverson did not appear to have heard him. Greg reached over to touch his shoulder.

“Cha”

Greg found himself reeling back, his left jaw smarting so badly that, for a few moments, he thought it had been dislocated.

Dr. Halverson was glaring at him. “How could you? Why did you wait this long? Are you here to break my daughter's heart all over again?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Greg and Elise



Dr. Halverson peered into Greg's face, scrutinized one cheek and then the other. Without a word, he put his arm around the younger man's shoulder and led him back into the house.

Greg was still dazed, less from the blow he sustained to his jaw than from surprise at Dr. Halverson's reaction. He never thought this gentle man could be capable of a violent act or of expressing such anger. And that power in his wallop was quite unexpected.

Elise and her mother were sitting around the dining table, on which lay some toys and a baby bottle of milk. They were playing with little Gregory, seated on his mother's lap. They turned when the two men came in. Elise's eyes lighted up, but only for an instant.

Silently, Dr. Halverson led Greg to the sofa. Greg sat down, woozy and disoriented. The worst part of the pain was over but the left side of his face still smarted and his cheek felt hot where the punch had landed. His gaze sought Elise's.

She rose from her chair and handed her son to her mother. Before she could reach him, her father halted her movement with a hug and whispered something to her. She nodded and hurried towards Greg.

She sat down next to him and, with a gentle trembling hand, touched the cheek that was beginning to show a bruise.

“I should take you to the hospital. We should have your jaw looked at. Make sure nothing is broken or dislocated.” Her voice had a low quiver.

Greg moved his jaw sideways a few times, opened his mouth wide and rotated his jaw a few more times.

“My jaw’s all right. No harm done, but I’m sure I’ll be sporting a bruise on my left cheek for a few days.”

Mrs. Halverson handed him a bag of ice. “This should help some.”

Elise gazed up at him, her brow knitted over eyes soft and glowing with concern. The longing during all those past bleak months—at once unbearable and sweet—rose from within him. Elise, with her face up to his and that expression on her face, was the image that often came with that longing.

With shining eyes and a faint smile, he said in a low voice, “Can I ask for damages?”

Elise let out a short, barely audible laugh, wiped the moisture that had pooled in her eyes, and nodded.

Greg turned to Dr. Halverson. “My lawyer says I can ask for compensation for my suffering. May I ask for your daughter’s hand in marriage?”

Dr. Halverson grinned. “You may, but your fate is in Elise’s hands.”

Greg looked at Elise, his eyes bright with anticipation. She met his gaze, but did not say a word. He held his breath.

She sat still for a few moments. Then, she stood up and took little Gregory from her mother. She kissed the little boy’s face a few times, held him close, and whispered to him.

Greg and the Halversons watched.

Elise sat next to Greg again. She cuddled her child close to her bosom, stroking his back.

Greg waited. He was puzzled and beginning to worry a little.

Elise kissed little Gregory, and whispered in his ear again. She turned towards Greg and, without looking at him, placed their child on his lap.

Greg was taken by surprise. He gaped, smiling, at the little boy, who gawked back at him with big round eyes. He hesitated, uncertain what to do, and it seemed to him, his son was as bewildered as he was.

Gregory drew his little mouth down at the corners, as if he was about to cry. He looked around and when he saw his mother, he reached out to her. He tried to get up.

Greg was alarmed. He grasped his son by the waist and held him close. He said, "Daddy can't let you fall."

The boy pushed his father away and cried, "Mam-ma." He stretched his arms towards his mother again.

Elise smiled at the little boy, leaned forward, and kissed Greg on the lips. "Daddy."

Gregory turned in the direction of his grandfather.

"Grandpa." Elise pointed to her father. She kissed Greg again and put an arm around his neck. With her other arm, she drew her son closer and said, laying her head on Greg's shoulder, "This is Daddy."

Gregory's eyes darted between Greg and his mother. She kissed Gregory, then Greg, and said again, "Daddy. Mam-ma loves Daddy."

Gregory regarded his father for a long moment. He raised an arm and touched the bruise on his face. Mimicking his mother, he kissed him on the lips and smiled.

Elise sat back on the couch.

Greg held his son closer, incredulous at how ready the little boy was to trust him—a stranger who, until that day, the little boy had never seen in his very short life. He nudged Gregory's smooth baby cheeks with his rough one, murmured "I love you" in his ear, and kissed him softly on both cheeks. The little boy rubbed his ear, apparently tickled by his father's lips. He laid his head on his father's shoulders.

Greg smiled at Elise, his eyes brimming with gratitude.

"So, will you marry me?"

Elise did not answer but watched father and son. After a while, she smiled at Greg and said softly, "Yes."

Greg was speechless. Until two weeks ago, he doubted, even despaired, that this moment would ever arrive. But here it was. His eyes shone as he and Elise gazed at each other, bound by a sense of wonder they both wanted to prolong. He leaned over, placed his free hand on Elise's chin and gently raised her face up to his. He pressed his lips to hers tenderly.

Her parents stood in front of them, watching and waiting.

Dr. Halverson bent over to kiss his daughter's forehead. He grinned broadly and extended a hand to Greg. "Well, it seems we're in for a long and closer association. Take care of my little girl."

"You can be sure of that. I don't want my jaw broken. You can pack a punch."

Mrs. Halverson, teary eyed, embraced her daughter tight and long. "Be happy, my love. It's about time."

She turned to Greg and hugged him. "I'm so happy it's you. I always thought it would be. I can't tell you how I know. Maybe, I just hoped."

He kissed her on the cheek. "Thank you. I've loved Elise since I first met her. Please believe that I would have come sooner if I could have."

"I don't doubt it."



Greg and Elise stayed the night with the Halversons. Mrs. Halverson offered her sons' old bedroom to Greg.

"You would be sharing it with your son who sleeps in his crib. Elise has a single bed in her room. Too small for you two."

Elise arched an amused eyebrow at him and before he could answer, she said, "We'll be okay on my bed, Mom."

In Elise's room, they lay crowded on the bed, pressed against each other.

"I didn't want us to be apart tonight. Today has been too big a day for me."

"For me, too." She touched the bruise on his cheek and pressed warm, soft lips to it.

With the weight of two people, the bed creaked with every little movement either one of them made.

Elise giggled. "Don't you feel like a teenager doing something forbidden under your parents' nose?"

"Yes," he answered with a low chuckle. "This is a first for me. It's quite exciting, don't you think?"

He extricated himself from her and sat up. He surveyed the space around the bed. "Get up. There's a solution to this problem."

Greg yanked the mattress off the bed and placed it on the floor. He lay on it, pulling her on top of him.

"Well, at least, we won't fall too far down. Now, all you need to do is take care not to moan too loudly. Remember your parents are on one side and our baby on the other."

"I don't moan," Elise protested, smothering another giggle.

"Do, too." He nibbled on her ear and her cheek. "I like it. It's a turn-on."

Later, as they were drifting off to sleep, Greg said, "I haven't told my mother yet. She's been waiting these last two years to meet you."

"She's known about me all this time?" Elise perked up. She raised her head and stared at him.

"She guessed after I broke up with Lori. I did mention you a couple of times when I talked to her about my meetings with your dad."

"You didn't tell her we were together the night before your wedding, did you?"

"No! That belongs to you and me only. A night I treasured. My memories of it kept me going through my despair over those nasty months and not seeing you again."

"But how could she know about me?"

"I guess much like your mother did. She told me she thought all along it would be me. Mothers must have some instinct for these things."

"My mom has always liked you. I remember her saying to me when you and I first argued at their dinner table, 'You're too hard on Greg and he's such a nice guy.' I remember being irritated that she missed the fact that you were giving back as hard as you were getting."

He gave her a peck on the nose. "I'm sorry I wasn't gallant enough to lie or soft-pedal my opinions."

"No, don't ever do that. I'd never want us to lie to each other. Soft-pedaling—well, maybe, that would help sometimes."

“Anyway, those days seem so far away. All I want to do now is make you happy.”

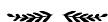
“Does that mean you'll let me win our arguments?”

“Maybe.” He yawned. “Ask me again when we're arguing.”

He gathered her closer and she snuggled her face at the crook of his neck.

“How about, let's surprise my mother next weekend? We'll bring our baby with us.”

“Mmmm.”



A couple of hours later, Greg woke up alone in bed. He bounded up from the floor, apprehensive for an instant, reliving that first night when Elise left his house.

The Halverson home was quiet, except for a light snoring coming from her parents' room. He put on his pants and tiptoed down the hallway outside the bedrooms. The light was on in the kitchen and he knew she was there.

Elise's head was bent over papers in a folder. He tiptoed towards her and called her name in a low voice. She jerked her head up and stared at him, glassy-eyed.

“I'm sorry,” he said, close to her ear. “I didn't mean to startle you.”

“I'm not used to anyone walking around the house in the middle of the night.”

“I woke up and you were not there.”

“I have to finish reviewing these documents for a Monday preliminary hearing.”

“Do you always work so late like this?”

“From time to time. But this case is particularly involved.”

"Is this the big case you were telling me about at the Indian restaurant? Are you allowed to tell me anything about it?"

"I can tell you a little. It's a murder case and the papers carried some blurbs about it, so some information is already public. You might have come across it—the killing of one of the leaders of a gang. I'm defending the young man accused of it."

"No, I never saw the article. But the case sounds exciting; or, at least, interesting."

"It's interesting. But a killing is never exciting to me. I still get nauseous at the thought of taking a life. Especially in a case like this, of a young man whose future lay ahead of him."

"I'm sorry. I'm ignorant about these things. Why did he kill the gang leader?"

"The motive is not new. A young man, who desires to be a member of a group, is tested with this heinous task."

"It does sound like medieval times when warriors killed for the glory of their tribe. Is there any danger for you, taking this case?"

"There can be, but I hope not. Gangs can get scary. I didn't know much about them, either. Their world is alien to people like us, so I'm getting as much information as I can. I'm learning fast."

Elise shuffled through the sheaf of papers in front of her. "It's a lot of work, that's for sure. That's why I left the baby here. I meant it to be for only two weeks but it's stretched to almost a month now. But my mom has become used to it, when she helped me out in my last semester of law school, and while I was studying for bar exams."

"Oh, my love. Now, I wish I came sooner."

“It wasn't easy and I felt guilty. You can see I still impose on her. But, at least, I don't bring laundry home, anymore. I can now afford to rent an apartment with its own dryer, washing machine, even a dishwasher. All extremely helpful with a baby. These last two years, my mom has been fantastic and we've become closer than we've ever been. And I learned I didn't have to be in control all the time.”

“Come home with me. You and little Gregory. That way, you'll be with him every day. I'm sure we can arrange for Alicia to take care of him while we're both at work. Her kids are in school for much of the day.”

“That's tempting. But for now, I do have to finish this work.” She kissed him and added, “Now off with you. You're too much of a distraction. All I can think of is snuggling back in bed with you.”

“Okay. But can I get you something before I go? Maybe a cup of tea or a glass of milk? I'll have one with you and I promise to be quiet.”

“All right. A glass of orange juice. And, oh, while you're here, you can help me staple some of these documents together. I've already got them in piles.”

Greg chuckled. “You dare ask the CEO of a company to do that?”

Elise pulled him closer and kissed him. “I'll pay you for it.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mrs. Thorpe



Greg suspected that what his mother was about to learn would be more than a surprise. Disruptions to her day-to-day routine annoyed her and having him visit unannounced on a weekend evening—accompanied by a child and a fiancée she had not been told about before—would be a shock to her well-ordered world. So, he rang her up from his office Monday morning.

“Can I wangle a dinner out of you sometime this weekend, Mama?”

“Saturday night is good unless you want to join your cousin and her husband on Sunday evening.”

“Not really. I’m bringing someone with me.”

“A new young woman? It’s about time. Two years abstinence is more than enough for any young man. Are you going to tell me anything about her?”

“No, you’ll have to form your own opinion when you meet her.”

“Whatever happened to Elise?”

Greg did not answer. He had already hung up.

Greg pulled into his mother’s driveway a quarter of an hour before they were expected, early Saturday evening. She would still be up in her bedroom, getting ready. She was a

stickler for proper dress as part of the gracious reception of guests at dinner. Stepping out of the car, he looked up at her bedroom window and caught a glimpse of her standing in front of it. She seemed to have retreated as soon as he saw her.

Elise descended and went to the back to get Gregory out of his car seat. She waited for Greg to take out a stroller and a bag that carried diapers, baby bottles, and all kinds of baby paraphernalia that she insisted they needed. After just a week of living with his son, he had learned a lot about a baby's needs and Elise had already taught him how to change diapers and feed Gregory. He put the bag in the stroller.

He placed a reassuring hand on Elise's back and led her towards the door. He knew she had been a little anxious about this first meeting, although she did not say much about it. He rang the doorbell.

The housekeeper opened the door to let them in. His mother was coming down the staircase.

Beaming happily, he approached his mother and gave her a hug. "I'm sorry I don't come often enough, Mama, but, maybe, I can make up for that."

His mother's gaze darted from him, to Elise, to Gregory. She forced a smile and winked at the baby.

"Begin by first introducing me, to this lovely young woman with you. And this little boy, too." She was smiling but her voice was flat, in a futile attempt to conceal her apprehension.

She advanced towards mother and son.



As Mrs. Thorpe walked towards them, Elise was aware that she was scrutinizing her and the baby in her arms. Mrs. Thorpe scowled and stared at them. Little Gregory hid his face on his mother's bosom.

Unflinching, amused, and guarded all at the same time, Elise stared back at her future mother-in-law. She had picked up a note of coldness and skepticism in Mrs. Thorpe's voice and she shuddered a little.

Mrs. Thorpe stood very straight, her head thrown back and chin thrust out enough that she regarded everyone, including her son, through half-closed eyes beneath a supercilious brow. Her voice was strong and gave the impression of someone used to getting her way. Elise found her appearance and manner intimidating.

Greg placed a possessive arm around Elise's shoulder and pulled her close.

"Mama, I'd like you to meet Elise and Gregory."

Mrs. Thorpe was dumbfounded. She held out a limp hand, which Elise gripped but did not shake. She could see that Mrs. Thorpe had lost her composure.

Mrs. Thorpe turned sharply to her son, "This is your Elise? And you said this is Gregory?"

"Uh-huh."

"I need to sit down and have this explained to me a little more slowly." She walked towards the living room, assuming control once again, calling out, "Bonitaaaa!"

Bonita, a short and plump Latin American woman, huffed in as fast as her heavy frame allowed her. Mrs. Thorpe's stern expression broke into a slight smile. "Bring us a bottle of wine, Bonita."

She turned to Elise. "Or, do you prefer soda? Or that trendy sparkling water, maybe?"

“White wine will do.”

“A bottle of Riesling, Bonita, with your tuna empanaditas. Bring three wine glasses, of course.”

“Can we get your baby some milk?”

“No need, I fed him before we left the house. He will nibble on a biscuit.”

In the living room, Elise placed Gregory in his stroller and gave him a teething biscuit. She pulled the stroller close to the sofa and sat down. Greg deposited the bag on one corner and sat next to Elise.

Mrs. Thorpe settled herself on a chair opposite the couple. She leaned back and watched, her lips compressed, scowling and squinting at the bustle going on in front of her. Her gaze wandered to the bottle, with a covered nipple, peeking out from the bag. She raised her eyebrows at Gregory who stared, round-eyed, at her.

Greg leaned over towards his mother. “Mama, forgive me for surprising you this way. Elise and I have only been back together a month.”

“And the baby?”

“He's ours. Gregory is my son.

“But I thought you said you were not sure Elise would have you.”

“True. The last time we were together a couple of years ago, she was determined never to see me again. At least, not as good friends, like we had been. Maybe, as distant acquaintances.”

Elise could not stay silent. “It was a couple of days before your wedding.”

“Yet, you spent the night together. About that time, I would say.”

Mrs. Thorpe flashed her a scornful glance before her gaze wandered toward Gregory. The child was still staring at her and she smiled her sweetest at him.

Elise blushed and did not answer.

Greg scowled at his mother. "Yes, we did. That night meant very much to me because I knew, then, that Elise loved me, too."

Bonita returned with a tray of wine, glasses, and a plate of empanaditas. She cleared the coffee table of magazines and ornaments and took her time unloading the tray. They waited for her to finish.

Mrs. Thorpe snapped at her after some minutes. "Leave it, Bonita."

Bonita straightened slowly, unfazed by the irritation in her employer's voice. "Anything else, Señora?"

Mrs. Thorpe shook her head and Bonita waddled out of the room, taking as much time as her steps could carry her.

Elise watched as Mrs. Thorpe's gaze followed Bonita's slow progress with apparent consternation. She could not help smiling in amusement and settled with a little more ease on the sofa.

Greg resumed as soon as Bonita disappeared into the kitchen. "Elise and our son have moved in with me. Not completely yet, since Elise still has a lease on her apartment. Mama, you don't need the details, do you? We're here to tell you we're getting married."

"I'm quite happy to be spared the little details. I've no need for them. Your baby threw me off, that's all. And, for me, this is all so sudden. Not too long ago, you were all alone. I was beginning to worry you would stay in some kind of a funk for a long time. Now, you have a family."

Elise glanced at her curiously, this time amused at this very proper woman's unexpected use of the word "funk." She relaxed a little more, diverted by the little quirks she was slowly discovering in Greg's mother. She was certain, then, that she was in for an interesting journey getting to know her.

"Yes. I wish I knew about it earlier—my son, I mean," Greg said.

"What would you have done after that nasty affair?"

He sighed. "It's true. I was quite shaken. But it was a year of being apart Elise and I could have done without."

"One year ago, you were not fit for pleasant company."

"I guess I was a bit antisocial. But it was then I became a father and, you, a grandmother."

Mrs. Thorpe groaned. "The idea will take getting used to."

She said to Elise. "I'm not good with babies. I wonder, sometimes, how Greg turned out so well. But I do love my children."

She beamed at Greg; the hard expression on her face had softened.

"You did spoil us. I got away with a lot; we both did, Brenda and I."

He said to Elise, "Brenda is my second cousin. My mother took her under her wings and raised her. She's like a younger sister to me."

Mrs. Thorpe smiled again, at no one in particular. She had a faraway look in her eyes.

"When Gregory took over management of the company, he wasn't prepared for it. His principal concerns, before that, had been school and girls. He wasn't expecting to manage the company for, at least, another ten years. He was in his last year in engineering at UCLA. But he did what he could.

I don't know how he did it, with both school, down south, and the company up here. But he persevered. He had to take fewer classes, while learning the business as fast as he could."

Elise, surprised, looked at Greg. "I thought you majored in Business Administration."

His mother answered for him. "Oh, no, he wanted to build bridges and buildings. For a while, at least, before he took over the company. He had a deal with his father. At the end of ten years, he was going to work for him to learn the business. But his father, my husband, passed away prematurely, a week before his fiftieth birthday."

"How sad! I'm so sorry. That's too young to die."

"Yes, too young," Mrs. Thorpe said. For an instant, she looked sad, but she turned to Elise again and said, "Well, that was more than ten years ago. The point is, I must have done something right. Or, maybe, I was lucky to be blessed with such a son as Greg."

Elise arched an eyebrow at Greg. He smiled and shrugged, as if to say "Mothers!"

"Have you set a date?"

Elise said, "Soon. But we agreed: no announcements in the paper. We want a quiet wedding."

"I think that's wise. You can never tell what Lori's anger can still bring."

Elise stared at her, puzzled.

"Of course. Greg would have spared you the details. The tabloids were full of them. But you don't read the tabloids, do you? Lori had some women lined up, who would claim they were raped. By my son! And that was after she had incited this parade of women, to spill out all their alleged sexual affairs with Greg. In print. Some quite graphically. These

women knew no shame.” Mrs. Thorpe snorted and clenched her jaw in anger.

A gasp escaped through Elise’s parted lips. She was flabbergasted and alarmed. Greg had never told her any of what Mrs. Thorpe was talking about.

“All lies, of course,” Mrs. Thorpe hastened to say. “But, I digress. When and where is the wedding?”

Elise, caught off guard by Mrs. Thorpe’s abrupt change in topic, took a moment to answer.

“In four months, but we haven’t set a specific date. I will be finishing my first year at the Public Defender’s office and will have two weeks paid vacation off. I’m taking one week off without pay. Greg wants to fly us all to the south of France, at the village he visited a year ago.”

“That soon? Don’t you need at least six months to plan a wedding? More, I would say, if it’s abroad.”

“It’ll be a small wedding—the family, of course, and maybe, a couple of friends. Greg phoned the owners of the place. They agreed to do the wedding. They don’t often do this kind of thing, but they have experience organizing celebrations and have done a handful of weddings for friends.”

“Are you happy with the arrangements?”

“Yes, very much so. I’m grateful to have someone else take care of them, since I haven’t got time. A big wedding was never one of my dreams and I’ve never been to the south of France, so that will be different and I can’t wait to see it.”

“You’ll continue working? But you don’t need to!”

“Yes, I do. There’s much work to be done. I plan to contribute to our household expenses.”

Mrs. Thorpe rolled her eyes and turned to her son, “Are you allowing all this?”

"My decision to work is mine. Not Greg's."

"I don't agree. When you get married, you have a husband whose word counts at least as much as yours, if not more. You also already have a son. You should take their needs into account over decisions that concern only you." Mrs. Thorpe was glowering at her, still shaking her head.

"Mrs. Thorpe, Greg and I have talked about these things."

Elise gritted her teeth. She felt her whole body tense up.

Mrs. Thorpe ignored her and scowled. She said to Greg, "Didn't Lori agree to stop working? She understood that there'd be some unusual demands on Greg's wife—social and business demands. So having her own career was out of the question."

"Mama! Please stop this comparison and talk about Lori."

But Mrs. Thorpe still had something on her mind and she was determined to say it. "You probably don't even have a prenuptial agreement, do you? As a lawyer, you know how important that is."

Greg vaulted from his chair. "Mother, enough please! Or, we're going to leave right now."

Elise grasped his hand and gave it a gentle tug. He sat down again on the sofa.

"Greg, please. Mrs. Thorpe, I'm sure you mean well. But what happens between Greg and me—that's our concern. You can give us your opinions, but we can choose to ignore them. Today, please, let's just be together. I didn't have a chance earlier to say that I'm glad we've finally met, so let me say it now."

Mrs. Thorpe pressed her lips tight and looked away. She was quiet for some moments before she spoke again, her tone more subdued. "I'll never understand this liberated woman thing."

“You may be more liberated than you realize.”

Elise bit her upper lip hard. She had blurted a quick and reflexive retort and she regretted it as soon as she said it.

Mrs. Thorpe glanced sharply at her.

“I couldn’t care a fig about that. My husband and children’s comfort and welfare were my main concerns. I never thought of a career for myself. I did not need one. There was a whole career right there.” She raised her chin and turned her face away.

Elise forced a smile and thought it best to say nothing more. A tense silence prevailed for a few minutes.

Elise broke the silence. “My parents are planning a dinner, for the week after next. I’m supposed to ask what date is convenient for you.”

“The second Saturday from today should work. I keep my weekends open for my children.”

“My two brothers will be there, too and I hope Brenda can come.”

“Brenda’s married. She’s about your age. She left college at nineteen, married a successful businessman, and is now a contented housewife. I’ll ask her and her husband.”

Shortly thereafter, Bonita poked her head again into the living room.

She said, “Señora, should I serve dinner now? The table is set.”

“Yes, Bonita. It’s getting late.”

Mrs. Thorpe smiled mildly at her housekeeper and rose from her chair. She looked relieved and Elise suspected that she was more ill at ease than she let on about meeting her.

The dinner proceeded more peacefully as they all took pains to limit the conversation to mundane topics about

the weather, Mrs. Thorpe's little anecdotes about Greg and Brenda, and stories about her women friends.



"You're an engineer. How come you never told me that?"

Greg and Elise were on their way home, and Gregory had been asleep in his car seat since they left Mrs. Thorpe's house.

"It was a dream laid to rest, before it even started. Blame all those Lego pieces I played with as a child. I wanted to build structures that would last, that couldn't be dismantled as easily as those pieces."

"Are you sorry you had to give it up?"

"Yes, when I have time to think about it. But I'm not complaining. I realize how lucky I've been."

He smiled tenderly, reached over to take her hand, and placed it against his lips.

"You do surprise me sometimes. You make me wonder why I ever disliked you."

"So, you do like me."

"I like you. I love you. I'm crazy about you. I adore you. How else do you want me to say it?"

He grinned. "Well, you can dream up other ways. I don't care so much what words you choose. But say something like that to me every day of my life."

Elise leaned over to plant a quick kiss on his cheek. "Consider it done, amore."

She sat back, gazing at his profile, clearly defined even in the dark. "Do you want a prenuptial agreement? We can set up one."

"I don't want. My feelings for you, my relationship with you is different. To me, this is all about love, trust, and commitment."

"Greg, I am a lawyer. I can separate a legal agreement, from all those wonderful reasons for getting married. They're not incompatible."

"Do you want a prenuptial agreement?"

"Frankly, it never occurred to me to have one. I haven't got much wealth to lose. But you do. I'll never be rich on my job, but it will always be there for me to fall back on."

"Then, can we drop it? We both see no need for this document."

She nodded and was silent for some time.

"I've never asked what happened, after you broke up with Lori. But, if there's something I need to worry about, I'd like you to tell me about it."

"There were many things I regretted—deeply—after the affair with Lori. Her limits seem beyond that of well-meaning people, but I'll never let her hurt you."

"I can take care of myself."

"You don't know what she's capable of. And neither do I. I worry about what she might do when she finds out about you. She'd get wind of it soon enough, but I'd like to delay that as much as possible."

"Is this why we're getting married in a small village in Southern France?"

"When I was in that village a year ago and even after I left it, I imagined you in it all the time. It seemed a place made for you and me, so romantic and private. I couldn't wait for the day when I could actually take you there. After the wedding, we'll have two weeks alone together—you and me, away from the rest of the world in this magnificent place."

Elise was silent for a while, fantasizing about the two of them among green and coral vineyards, under an infinite sky of blue smudged with floating cotton clouds. She would have to borrow her mother's books on Provence. She had been curious about them but never found the time to read them.

She shook off her imagined Provençal landscapes and said, "When did you go there—this place we're going to?"

"After Lori's lawsuit was settled. I intended to stay a month."

"What about your company?"

"That's the beauty of an internet-based business. I could manage it from almost anywhere I am in the world. But, in this case, I had a team running it onsite who sent me reports every day. I was lucky it was business as usual, in those three months I ended up staying in Provence. It was so refreshing to be where nobody knew me. Like being reborn. The time went by without my noticing it too much. If I didn't have a business to run, I could have stayed on."

"That's a long time to be away. You must know the place quite well, by now. Did you make friends among the French?"

"Of course. I became close friends with the owners of the house I stayed in. The same house we're renting for our honeymoon. On my first week, they invited me for dinner. Some of their friends were there, too. Benoit said they were eager to meet me. At first, I felt like a specimen being put on display. But everyone went out of their way to make me feel welcome. So, now I have all these French friends."

"How did you get along? Do you speak French?"

"Nothing to brag about. But, somehow, we understood each other, even though hardly anyone spoke English. Except for the owners—*les propriétaires*. The husband came for a year to California, to observe winemaking and the

production of olive oil in the Sonoma and Napa Valley areas. You'll like them. They're really friendly and they like you already."

"But, how? If we've never met."

"I emailed them your picture, of course, when I told them I was getting married and wanted to rent their house again. Benoit has also agreed to be my best man. He's great, no macho hang-ups, and his wife Cecile, though a little reserved, has this great spontaneous laugh. Very infectious."

"Can't wait to meet them both and to experience Provence. I've only seen it in movies and pictures."

"You'll love this place, I'm sure of it."

Elise fixed her gaze on Greg's profile for a long time as he drove on, a soft smile on her lips. How much her life had changed just within the last three weeks.

Hit and Run



The din of early morning cars and people hustling their way to downtown offices almost drowned out the ringing from Elise's cell phone. She was standing alone on a street corner, waiting for crossing lights to turn green. She fished for the phone in her briefcase and glanced at the number of the caller: the Public Defender.

"Elise, where are you?"

"Across the street. I should be there in a couple of minutes."

"Good. Were you able to get those reports from the police station?"

"Yes, I have all of them."

"Great. We'll be in better shape with them. I can always rely on you."

The traffic lights had changed and Elise glanced at her watch before crossing the street. She had fifteen minutes to spare before the hearing was scheduled to start. She rushed across, thinking about the trial, her first big one.

She would be defending a young man, who just turned seventeen, for the murder of one of the suspected leaders of a rival gang. She had already met with him a few times. He was a nice, clean-cut Hispanic youth who did not seem to fit the

profile of a gang member, much less a young criminal. She surmised that his appearance allowed him to go close enough to the victim to gun him down.

The crime had already made front-page news on account of the gang problem in the city. The case had the potential to be high profile, a complicated one that some elected official could turn into an election issue.

From what Elise had heard, the Public Defender would have taken on this sort of case, himself, or assigned it to a more experienced lawyer. But he chose to give it to her, telling her he was confident she was ready for it. She was dumbfounded, grateful for his confidence, and determined to prove him right.

She glanced at the light. It had changed from green and was now ticking down from ten. She walked faster.

Somewhere to her left, a loud roar pierced her ears, whizzed through her concentration like an arrow, and was cut off within the same instant by an ominous screeching. The suddenness of it startled her, but all she could think of was how strange it was that an engine was revving up, then braking too close to where she—who still had the right of way—was crossing the street.

An icy wave of foreboding coursed through her chest the next instant. Caught her breath in the middle of her throat; almost made her heart stop. She was about to be hit and she could not escape. She jerked her head towards the direction of the sounds. But she never saw where they came from.

A big man rushed past her on her left and the terrible bang of masses in unstoppable, violent collision suspended everything in an eerie microsecond. The man knocked her down. Fell on her as she was hitting the ground. The whole

incident flashed before her, as quick as lightning—too swift for her to make sense of what was happening.

With all the strength she could muster, she pushed the man away as hard as she could. But he was too heavy. Out of somewhere on his head, blood spurted, covering his head and flowing down his torso. She screamed but no sound came out of her. She tasted warm, dense, and salty fluid that gagged her. She spat it out in panic. But she was already drowning, flailing, struggling and gulping for breath.

“Don’t let go,” she said weakly to herself. But blackness, blankness, oblivion swallowed her.

Voices, commotion, and from far, far away, sirens intruded into that blackness. Light penetrated through, tinting that blackness with a cloudy dark red hue. She was nauseous, and an excruciating throbbing shot through her left leg, but she could not move it to ease the unbearable pain. Had a heavy rock crushed it? She remembered the man, the blood, lots of it. Was the man lying on her leg? But she felt too weak, too drained to care. She was floating on a groundswell—up, down, up, down.

She heard someone calling, “Miss, miss, can you hear me? Can you hear me? Can you open your eyes?”

She forced her eyes open. She saw a strange man’s face set against a vast blue sky and she thought, “Maybe I’m imagining the blood. Maybe, I’m in heaven. There’s no blood in heaven.”

“She’s conscious!” Someone cried from somewhere.

The face spoke, its excited voice soothing but unreal.

“Try not to move. The paramedics are here now. You’ll be okay.”

She wanted to protest. “I’m late. I can’t go with them.” But she could not recall what it was she was late for.



Greg's administrative assistant poked her head into the conference room where he was holding a meeting with his management staff. He motioned for her to come in.

She approached Greg briskly and in a voice a tad over a whisper, said, "There's an urgent call for you from Dr. Halverson. He asked me to make sure to tell you it's about his daughter."

The group seated around the table turned towards them with obvious curiosity. They were used to her coming in quietly to hand him or one of them papers or notes—she was a part of the well-oiled machinery that ran their operations. But this time, they could not fail to notice the urgency in her steps and the unusual agitation in her voice.

Greg bounded from his chair at the head of the table. "Continue, please. I have to take this call."

Dr. Halverson had never called him at his office in the morning and the cryptic message filled Greg with uneasy premonition. Elise could always get hold of him via the personal cell phone he always kept in his shirt pocket. He had given its number to her, his mother, Bob, and to no one else. Why would her father be calling about her?

He stared at the phone for a moment, reached for it, hesitated for another moment, and picked it up. He raised it to his ear where it magnified the rapid pulsing in his chest. His voice was low and hesitant when he spoke.

"Hello, Charles?"

“Greg!” Dr. Halverson snapped into his ears and paused. Greg could hear him panting. “Let me say first that Elise is all right.”

Greg tightened his hand on the phone.

“She was in an accident. She was unconscious when she arrived at the hospital, but she awoke before they wheeled her into the operating room.”

“Oh God, no!” he said under his breath. His voice quivered and he could hear his heart beating rapidly. An icy surge gripped his chest and spread throughout his whole body.

“What happened? Where is she?”

“She got hit by a car as she was crossing the street in front of the courthouse. The car took off and fled but there were several bystanders. A couple recorded the incident on their cell phones. One even got a shot of the license plate. Anyway, she's at Sutter and I'm here in the waiting room outside surgery. I need to call her mother now. She hasn't heard from me yet.” He hung up without waiting for a reply.

Greg leaned on his desk to steady himself. He could not control the trembling in his limbs and he was straining for air. For a few moments, he struggled to grasp what Dr. Halverson told him. Or, maybe, he just did not want to believe it. But the image of Elise lying badly injured on the road flashed before his eyes.

Bob had been dropping her off right in front of her office most mornings. How could a car hit her there? But it did. And she was in surgery. He growled, helpless and angry.

His head throbbed, and for a couple of minutes or so, his mind went blank. He could not move.

The image of Elise being wheeled on a gurney jolted him out of his stupor. He straightened and stood free of his

desk. His legs were steadier and his pulse had become more regular. He rushed out of his office, past his secretary's desk.

He heard his secretary call out after him, "Greg, Mr. Thorpe! Are you all right? What's the matter?"

He looked back at her but kept his pace. "Can't explain. Have the valet bring my car out front. Right now! Cancel my appointments. George is in charge. I'll call him as soon as I can."

At the hospital, Greg found Dr. Halverson in the waiting room, hunched forward on a chair, his hands clasped on his lap. "How is she?" Greg asked as he took the adjacent seat.

"I'm sorry. I wish I could tell you more than I already have." Dr. Halverson's voice quivered, his eyes dark with fear, his distress obvious on his haggard, colorless, and puffy face.

"They have been in there an hour and no one has come out yet. The emergency doctor told me it was a good sign she was alert. They have to do tests to make sure she has no internal injuries. She has a big deep gash on her leg. They have to treat it right away and stitch it up to stop the bleeding."

Greg plopped his body, heavy and depleted, on a chair next to Dr. Halverson's. The initial rush of adrenaline from the terror that took hold of him had consumed itself. But sitting with Elise's father, he felt a tightening in his chest that spread through his insides and curled into a tight knot in his gut, where it settled. He turned and stared at Dr. Halverson with wild eyes. The older man stared back at him, his brow knitted deeply over eyes swollen with fear, pain, and incomprehension.

He knew what Dr. Halverson was going through. They were the same emotions he was drowning under. But his were aggravated by guilt and anger at himself—a chaos of emotions that plunged him into a void where it seemed

preferable to be alone. He could not, there and then, summon any words, nor even any semblance of sympathy for anybody else. And he could not let his turmoil out. He was terrified it would overcome him.

“It’s unbearable waiting to find out how Elise is,” Dr. Halverson said. “The police were here when I arrived and they told me there was a second victim. He’s worse off. They say he ran ahead of her, to catch a bus on the other side. He was hit before she was.”

He paused and seemed deep in thought. “It’s tragic for him, and perverse of me, but I thank God he was there. He absorbed the impact of the car. Are you appalled that I’m thinking that?”

“No. It’s honest. Elise is alive and right now, that’s all that matters. We have to keep telling ourselves that.”

Greg lapsed into silence. He needed to say those words more for himself than for Dr. Halverson.

A few minutes later, he said, “I can’t forgive myself if” He could not finish, could not put into words his fear of what could have happened.

Dr. Halverson said, “This isn’t your fault. It’s the most awful thing we’ve all had to go through. But what could you have done to prevent it?” He stopped to swipe his eyes with the back of his hand.

“She’s my only daughter, my youngest. You can’t imagine how heartbreaking this is.” His voice broke and his body was rocked by cries of anguish he had been trying to suppress.

Greg raised his head. He hesitated, uncertain what to do. He placed his arm around the older man’s shoulders and waited for him to calm down.

Dr. Halverson said, “I don’t even want to imagine how devastated my wife will be. They’ve become especially close

these last two years. I'm very angry at the man who hit her. I hope the police find him soon. But it won't change what has already happened." His voice broke once again but, this time, he did not cry.

He continued, "That phone call from the police—it was the worst moment I've ever experienced."

They huddled together, an arm around each other. Greg felt there was nothing to say. Nothing either of them could do would make the other feel better. What they needed was reassurance from the doctor that Elise was going to be all right.

Greg dropped his head on his hands. His body started convulsing violently. Dr. Halverson placed his hand on Greg's back.

Mrs. Halverson arrived with her oldest son, Peter, not too long after. Neither one uttered a word but shock was obvious in their eyes. She buried her face on her husband's shoulders and cried quietly.

They all waited in agonizing silence.



Several hours later, the doctor emerged from the surgery room.

"She is under sedation from the operation, so you can't talk to her. That's the best thing for now, anyway. She came in with blood all over her face. We had to check for injuries to the head. She had no open wounds there, so that's good. There's no internal bleeding and no internal injuries, according to our tests. So those are all good news. She did have mild brain trauma. She also had a leg wound and her

kneecap was broken. We had to put a cast on her left leg so the kneecap can heal as it should. I will be monitoring the concussion closely, for the next twelve hours, at least.”

“How serious is it, doctor?” Peter asked.

“The concussion will take time to subside. Its course could be unpredictable. The sedatives we’ve given her will let her sleep a while, but I expect her to wake up in a few hours. We’ll find out more by tomorrow.”

“Wasn’t she alert when she went into the operating room?” Greg wondered if the doctor was keeping some vital information from them. He was dissatisfied with the doctor’s response and desperate for reassurance that Elise was all right.

“She was. In fact, she lost consciousness for a very short time. I would say less than two minutes, so that’s a good sign the brain injury is relatively mild. The other fortunate thing is, she wasn’t directly hit by the car. The male victim knocked her down and she hit the pavement. Most of her injuries, including the broken knee, were the result of the man falling on her. He’s at least twice as heavy as she is and that was probably aggravated by the impact of the car on him.

Her palms and elbows were scratched, her sleeves were torn. I think she had enough presence of mind to break her fall. I can't say much more than that right now. We’ll do more tests when she wakes up. I’m sure the police will also want to talk to her at some point.”

“Can I see her?” Greg asked.

“Yes, for a few minutes, but wait a little. They’re transferring her to ICU. You can see her there. After that, you should all go home. There’s nothing you can do here. She needs to rest and time is what she needs to heal.”

Later, Greg declared he would sit and stay with Elise for the night.

“The doctor said it’s best if we all went home. They’ll call us in the morning.” Peter reminded him.

“I have to stay here with her. I won’t disturb her. But I would like to be around, if she wakes up in the middle of the night. She might be frightened or confused if she finds herself in a strange room. I’m sure I can talk the staff into letting me stay.”

“What about your son?” Mrs. Halverson asked.

“Alicia will take care of him. Hopefully, it’s only for one night. She and Bob can reach me, if they need to.”

Greg looked as if he was not going to be dissuaded from his decision to stay. The Halversons left.



Alone in the hospital room, Greg gazed at Elise’s unresponsive form, covered with a white sheet up to her neck, her pale pasty face partly-hidden by an oxygen mask. One arm sprouted tubes attached to monitors. Her left leg, in a cast, was propped up on a small platform set on the bed.

He stood by her bed for a long time. The sequence of events since that morning’s phone call seemed unreal to him, a nightmare from which he would wake up and find himself back at home with Elise and their son. But he could not ignore the regular, consistent ticking of the monitors even when he closed his eyes or covered his ears.

He had watched her in the morning, called her his young lioness and her cub, as she hugged and kissed Gregory before going to work. And the night before. No, he should not think

about that. Not those wonderful, passionate nights since she came to live with him.

He stroked her hand tenderly, murmuring, "Oh Elise, Elise, my love. I can't imagine life without you anymore. How could you have conquered me so completely?"

An agonized cry, rare for him, rose from his chest. He sucked it in to cut it short. But it tore at him more than if he had let it burst out freely. He buried his face on the bed next to her hand, saying over and over. "My love, I'm so sorry, so terribly sorry."

Lori was the first person Greg thought of when Dr. Halverson told him of the accident. He had taken care to keep the press from getting wind of Elise and their engagement. But it was impossible to keep something like that a secret. Now, he had to face the likelihood that Lori had followed up on her threat. But before he could even think of that, he needed to contend with his guilt that he brought the accident on and that he had been helpless to prevent it. In the initial horror of seeing Elise looking lifeless, hooked up to electronic monitors, he was sure he could not forgive himself.

He murmured, hoping Elise would hear him, "We haven't even had a chance to fight yet. And think of our baby. We both need you."

Elise slept through the night. Exhausted, Greg dosed off on the chaise longue meant for visitors staying overnight.

He awoke when the morning nurse came in early to check on Elise.

She smiled at him after taking Elise's pulse. "The police were here this morning. They asked about her. The other victim died last night and they're still looking for the driver."

Although he did not know the other victim, Greg felt his stomach turn to hear he had died. He scowled and stared at the nurse.

She cupped a hand on her mouth. "I'm sorry, I talk too much."

He ignored her, his mournful eyes focused on Elise.

After some time, the nurse said, "Your wife will be all right. I'm confident she'll wake up soon."

"She's not my wife yet. Our wedding is set for a few months from now."

"Oh, my! She'll have to be married in crutches."

He conjured up an image of Elise in her wedding dress, hobbling on crutches and found it amusing, even comforting. He smiled at the nurse in gratitude.

About a half hour later, another nurse came in and after taking Elise's vital signs, began to call out to Elise. "Miss Halverson, Miss Halverson, time to wake up. Miss Halverson ... Miss Halverson ... Can you hear me?"



Elise opened her eyes, squinted and tried to turn away from the light that blinded her, but she could not. She raised her hand to her face to yank out whatever it was that prevented her from moving her head, but a gentle restraining hand held her hand down. She attempted to get up but that seemed even more impossible than moving her head.

She cried, "Where am I? Can someone turn off that light? Please let me go. I changed my mind."

"What have you changed your mind about, Miss Halverson?"

"I don't want an abortion. My baby is all I have of him."

"You're not here for an abortion, Miss Halverson. You've had an accident. Can't you remember? We've had to fix a fracture and close up a big leg wound. But you're all right now."

A man stood behind the nurse, gazing at her. She fluttered her eyelids several times, trying to focus on him. She saw tender anxiety in his eyes.

"Greg?"

"Elise, my love."

"I'm having your baby, did someone tell you? Is that why you're here?"

"We already have our baby, my love, and he's a boy."

"Is that why I'm here? But I don't remember giving birth."

"You gave birth a year ago. Our baby is at home, waiting for us."

The doctor walked in, smiling at Elise. "Good morning, Miss Halverson. I'm glad to see you awake and arguing with my nurse already. But, we still need to do some tests."

He glanced at Greg. "I'm sure you could use some coffee, Mr. Thorpe. You can come back in an hour."



Elise had been confused and disoriented—a common enough consequence of concussion, according to the doctor. By noon, much of her memory had returned and her agitation subsided. The police arrived after the lunch hour to ask her questions about the accident. She fell asleep, exhausted, after they left. Greg decided to go home, shower, and check on his son. In late afternoon, he went back to the hospital to find the Halversons already there.

“We couldn’t come earlier. The police were at the house. They’ve caught the driver. They had trouble finding him at first, since the car was not in his name.”

“How could they know it was not his name, if all they had to go by was the license plate?”

Dr. Halverson seemed reluctant to answer. “Let’s go outside for a minute.”

They went into an empty waiting room and sat down.

“The hit and run car was not registered to the driver. The last listed owner of the car was one Lori Williams.”

“No!”

“We didn’t assume it was your former fiancée. That name is common enough. But the police verified it’s her. When they left the house, they were on their way to question her.”

A grimace of pain crossed Greg’s countenance. “I was afraid of this. I’m so sorry, Charles. Hurting Elise is the last thing I would ever want to do.”

“I’m aware of that. It isn’t you who hurt her.”

“No. But it may be because of what I had done. I laid Elise open to danger. I failed to protect her.”

“We don’t know yet if Lori had anything to do with this. She couldn’t be that diabolical. Why, it’s been two years, hasn’t it, since you broke your engagement? And, anyway, my daughter is alive.”

“Lori is capable of this and she can bear a grudge a long time.” Greg’s voice was quiet, but he gritted his teeth and he was breathing fast.

“Greg, Elise is out of danger. For now, let’s be grateful for that.”

That night, before going home, Greg went unannounced to Lori’s apartment. He was not certain she would receive him but, to his surprise, she did.

"I know why you're here. The police were here this afternoon. I had nothing to do with your fiancée's accident. I have moved on with my life."

"So, what was that man doing with your car?"

"I told the police I reported the car stolen, five years ago. They checked and verified. I'm telling the truth. This is just an unfortunate coincidence."

He was skeptical. He regarded Lori intently, searching for indications that she might be lying.

"He must have stolen the car, put on a stolen license plate. How should I know?"

"The license plate was registered to you."

"Was it? That doesn't mean much. He stole the car, I tell you."

"If I find you had some connection with this accident"

His voice was low and trembling.

"What? You're gonna kill me? You're not capable." Lori taunted. "I could have refused you entry, if I was hiding something. But I want this settled. I don't want any trouble from you. I am, myself, getting married soon and I don't want to give my fiancé any reason to jilt me, like you did."

"Are you sure you didn't know this man?"

"Listen, the police believed me. I don't care if you do. I have told you the truth. I want you to leave now."

He left, but he couldn't shake off the suspicion that Lori was lying. She had evaded his last question.

Chapter Fifteen

Whodunit?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Whodunit?



Much of what Greg knew about the inquiry into Elise's accident came from news reports.

Unless there were fatalities, a hit and run was not of much interest and often warranted no more than a couple of paragraphs buried among the local news. But because Elise worked for the Public Defender's office, the first news item about the hit and run, on an inside page, carried a small photo of her and provided a little more detail about the accident.

When the first victim died, the accident gained more interest. So, the second news item was on the bottom of the front page of the paper and included the victim's photo. The accompanying write-up revealed the license plate of the car and contained a plea for help finding the driver.

At the last paragraph of that news item, Greg gritted his teeth in annoyance.

"Still recuperating at the hospital is the second victim in the accident, Elise Halverson, an attorney with the Public Defender's office and fiancée of playboy Greg Thorpe. The two are scheduled to marry in a few months."

He could not figure out who might have tipped off the press about their wedding plans. Then, he recalled that, at a

time of vulnerability, he did tell a nurse about them. He only had himself to blame.

The third news item—also at the bottom of the first page—came out when the police apprehended the driver. His picture occupied almost the same space as that of the dead victim.

Greg studied the photo of the driver. Something about the smirk on his mouth belonged to a face he had already seen before.

Subsequent news accounts reported that the driver was going to be charged with hit and run and reckless manslaughter for the death of the first victim. He also faced charges of auto theft. The evidence against him, recorded on cell phones by eyewitnesses, was more than sufficient to convict him. He decided to cooperate with the police. But every time he was interrogated, he denied the auto theft and stuck to his statement that Lori had given him the car in exchange for a favor he had done for her.

The police questioned Lori again. Like the driver, she could not be budged from her version of events. This time, she added her opinion that the driver was trying to save himself from more charges.

Greg was inclined to believe that the driver, not Lori, was telling the truth about the auto theft. One afternoon, on the day he returned to work after several days' absence, he decided once more to go through newspapers of the past few days. They had accumulated on the coffee table in the receiving area in his office, where he sometimes rested or entertained his clients.

He was not sure what he was looking for. At the very least, he should find the driver's photo again. The man's face had bothered him the first time he saw it in the paper.

The suspect's mug shot was easy enough to locate in the newspaper. Greg stared at it for some time, racking his memory. The longer he did, the more he was convinced he had seen it before—more than once and at a place he was familiar with. But the man he had seen before was better groomed than the man in the mug shot and he also had on a suit and the brazen air of youth.

Before long, a vision began forming in his head—nebulous at first but, even in that state, he could make out the familiar shape of a woman standing next to the man. He strained his memory to fill in the outlines of the face. Gradually, Lori, a very young Lori in her prom dress, emerged clearly.



“Don’t hang up on me. I know you lied to the police.” Greg hissed over the phone as soon as Lori picked it up at the other end.

“Whatever do you mean?” Lori tried to sound flippant.

“You were friends with the driver of the hit-and-run car. All I need to do is inform the police to look in your high school year book.”

There was silence at the other end of the line for a long minute.

“I could also tell them about your threat. I have not involved Artie in any of this yet, but a phone call to him is all it will take.”

“That obsessive anal bastard!” Lori snarled.

“You have some explaining to do.”

"I honestly had nothing to do with your girlfriend's accident. Come by at seven o'clock this evening. You'll find out why."

He arrived at Lori's apartment at the appointed time. She led him to the living room where a man between forty-five and fifty years old sat, slouched, on the sofa. His skin was parched and stretched from having been well scrubbed and he had thinning golden brown hair. But his features were fine enough to pass for a woman's, despite a thick well-groomed mustache. He stood up as Greg approached. Greg was surprised to find him just an inch or two shorter than he was.

"Greg, I want you to meet my future husband, David Belcher."

Greg was surprised, but he recovered within the same instant and extended his hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Belcher? Congratulations. Lori is both beautiful and talented."

Lori smiled at him; her eyes glittering with gratitude.

David Belcher shook the offered hand vigorously.

"David, please. Yes. I'm a lucky man. Lori tells me you're an old friend. I'm so sorry about your fiancée. How is she?" His voice was husky, with a timbre Greg guessed came from years of smoking.

"Much better now, thank you."

"Have you two set a date for your wedding?"

"Yes. A few months from now."

"Do you have to postpone it until she's in better shape?"

"No, we don't intend to. We'll get married in the hospital, if we have to, but I don't think it will come to that. She's getting better every day."

“So, you're a businessman, like me. I'm in import-export, myself, and have lived in Asia for much of my adult life. But I decided it was time to settle down, in good old America. Lori and I bought a house in Beverly Hills.”

Lori beamed and said, “Yes. It should be ready for us to move into, when we get back from our honeymoon.”

She hooked her arm around David's, and kissed him on the lips. David clasped her waist and reciprocated with a long kiss.

Greg averted his eyes, uncomfortable at the brazen display of passion that he suspected was meant for his benefit.

David let go of Lori and said, “I have to go. I have a conference call with some suppliers in Asia.”

He extended his hand to Greg. “I stayed because Lori asked me to. I hope we meet again when your fiancée is able to get around.”

Greg nodded with a slight smile, but said nothing. He waited while Lori bade David goodbye by the door, reenacting the same passionate scene he witnessed a few short moments ago.

When she returned, she sat opposite him, her smiling docile demeanor replaced by compressed lips and narrowed defiant eyes.

“You can see why I no longer have any interest in you and yours. David is a very rich man and he adores me. He knows nothing of my past with you and, anyway, he says he doesn't care. So, why should I risk what I have with him? I'm about to get everything I want. Even now, he's been very generous.”

She flashed the large diamond on her finger and jingled the matching bracelet on her wrist. “You never even thought of giving me these things. And, oh, I'm getting a new Mercedes sports car on my wedding day.”

"I'm happy for you, Lori, and congratulate you for getting what you've always wanted. But it doesn't alter the fact that you lied to the police. Why would you, if David doesn't care?"

"Because I have to be sure nothing stops this wedding from taking place. I don't want David to find anything to reproach me about."

"But you lied to the police."

"So what? That criminal is up for more serious charges anyway—manslaughter, assault. One lesser charge won't make much difference."

"But it can. He may have to stay in prison longer. Even an addition of a few months is too much, if it's based on false evidence. Doesn't that bother you?"

Lori pursed her lips in annoyance. "He deserves to be in jail, anyway. Aren't you angry with him, for what he's done to your woman?"

"I am. But he doesn't deserve to get a prison sentence for a crime he didn't commit."

"What do you want me to do? Tell the police I lied?"
Lori glared at him.

"It's the decent thing to do."

"What if I don't? After all, I really had nothing to do with your fiancée's accident."

"Then, I'll have to."

Lori did not answer. She stood up, walked toward the window, and stared out of it.

Greg waited a couple of minutes before he got up. He was certain, then, that there was not much he could do about someone like Lori.

He said, "Think about it Lori."

Before he could take a step, Lori spun around.

“Could you at least wait until after my wedding, a couple of months from now?”

“I won’t promise anything, Lori. I’m sure that’ll be too late. I’ll see myself out.”

He reached the door in a few quick steps. He could not get out of Lori’s apartment fast enough. Talking to her again left a bitter taste in his mouth. He resolved never to meet with her again. Next time, he would leave it to Artie Arnold to deal with her.

He rejected the elevator for the stairs and descended slowly. How, he thought, could he have allowed himself to have been entangled with Lori at all?

He was aghast to hear her dismiss the fate of the driver with such callous disregard for what was fair and just. He shuddered. A few years ago, he might have done the same thing—shrugged his shoulders and rationalized the driver’s fate as not his concern.

Now, he knew the anxiety, the agony of having someone he loved seriously hurt by another. It did not matter what the reason was. Nothing could justify knowingly causing someone harm.

He took in a long deep breath. He still had to remain vigilant. In his mind, Lori was not yet above suspicion.



Greg drove to the hospital on Saturday morning, intending to spend much of the weekend with Elise. He had just turned off the engine of his car in the parking lot when the phone vibrated in his shirt pocket.

“Hello, Greg?” Elise’s voice, still somewhat weak and quivering, was a balm to his trepidation.

“Yes, sweetheart. I’m in the parking lot right now so I should be there in five minutes.”

“Greg, I need to tell you something. I must also tell the police.”

“Can you wait until I get there?”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

He detected some agitation in her voice. He walked faster.

He saw Elise sitting at the edge of her hospital bed, a pair of crutches leaning next to her. Her hair had been combed and hung in a thick golden plait down her back. She turned towards him and smiled. She had applied a bit of make-up. Before today, she had seemed too sick and too worn-out to pay any attention to her appearance.

He ached watching her, still so fragile and so vulnerable. In the morning light, her skin had a certain translucence, as if it was amber glass that held her body together. Glass that could shatter into pieces.

He helped her up to her feet and enclosed her in his arms, as though doing so would keep her from breaking apart. She raised her face to his, her eyes closed and her lips parted a little. He regarded her for a second before he placed the lightest touch of a kiss on her lips. But she pressed hers to his harder and drew on his lower lip, her mouth soft but insistent.

He pulled her closer, feeling the warmth of her body, so close to his beneath her thin hospital gown. His hands crept inside the gown and caressed her smooth supple flesh. How he missed her. He sought her mouth with his, grazing, nibbling, probing and possessing its fullness.

She leaned against him and wound her arms around his chest. They held each other, wordless and content to be united in a close embrace, the first since the accident. With

her arms around him, the heaviness he had carried around since he received that horrifying phone call, seemed to lift. He was reassured. Elise was going to be all right and they were going to be all right together.

Elise disengaged herself from him after some time. "Help me back to my bed, please. I still get easily tired out."

Greg lifted her up and propped her gently against the pillow resting on the raised part of the bed.

When she was comfortably settled, he said, "You had something to tell me."

"Yes. I've been remembering more things. When the police asked me questions right after the accident, I couldn't recall anything at all. Now, things are coming back."

She took a sip of water. "In the middle drawer of my desk at the office, I shoved an envelope sent to me by snail mail. I glanced quickly at the letter on my way to a court hearing, the morning of the hit and run. It was a threat and, of course, it was unsigned. Our office gets its share of those; most of them end up amounting to nothing. This was the first one I've ever received."

"Could it be connected to your accident?"

"It could be. That's why we should give the letter to the police."

"Have you called your office about it?"

"No, I only remembered it today, while I was limping down the hallway. Since I started practicing to walk on my crutches, I've been getting these images, these memories, while I struggle along. Funny how that happens."

"Do you have any suspicions as to who might have sent it to you?"

“Well, my educated guess would be a gang. My big case involves a young gang member, not even eighteen. I think I told you a little about him.

Greg knitted his brow, trying to recall what Elise might have said. “Oh, yes, he’s charged with killing an older man.”

“Yes. His victim was from a rival gang.”

“I remember I asked you if this case could be dangerous. It sounds like it is.” Greg’s scowl deepened, in alarm. “Are these the kind of cases your office often gets?”

“Some. This is my first big one. As the newest attorney, I get more than my share of petty theft and welfare fraud cases.”

“Could the victim’s gang be threatening you, for defending this young gang member?”

“Possibly. That’s why we need to tell the police. But first I should call my office.”

“I’ll make those calls for you right now. We should do something about this at once.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A Tiff



A few days later, Greg sat at the bar in his kitchen, having his morning coffee before driving to his office. Alicia had come with Bob to tidy up and take Gregory with her. Elise was recovering rapidly and he had reduced his visits to the hospital to the hours after work.

Bob handed him the morning paper, pointing to an item on the front page. “Here it is again. You might be surprised but I wasn’t.”

“What’s it about?”

“Read on. It’s the continuing saga of Ms. Williams.”

“You never liked her, did you?”

“Nope. And I’m so glad you came to your senses.”

“Why do I let you treat me like you’re my father?”

“I tell it like it is, that’s why. You get the truth from me. Your father loved you, but he was too much into being the macho man.”

Bob poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down opposite Greg.

Greg scanned the story. The driver in the hit and run had been talking to the reporter of the article. He told the reporter that Lori Williams paid him to run over the female victim, Elise Halverson. He insisted he did not steal the

car; that it was, in fact, the payment he accepted from Ms. Williams, in whose name the car was last registered.

The first victim, the man who died, was not part of the plan. He just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. The accident was meant to scare Elise and put her out of commission for a few weeks. He did not mean to kill anyone.

The news item also mentioned that Ms. Halverson was engaged to be married to playboy Gregory Thorpe, who had broken his engagement to Ms. Williams more than two years ago, on the day before the wedding. Greg was furious.

"When are they going to stop poking into my personal life?"

"I'm afraid it comes with the territory. You made your choices so you have to live with them. You might as well develop a thick hide."

"I'm not concerned about me. I worry about Elise and exposing her to gossip." He paused before adding, "I'm also struggling with guilt. If this driver is telling the truth, I'm to blame for the hit and run."

Bob shook his head. "No, you're not. You had no control over what Lori was going to do. You've made mistakes, but who doesn't? In this case, your mistake goes way back, from the time when you thought with your crotch where women were involved. Then, you made an important decision about your personal life, based on questionable reasons. Now, you're suffering the result of that decision."

Greg groaned. "No, it's not me, but the person who means most to me who's suffered."

Bob looked at him with sympathy in his eyes.

“Yes, and that can make you very angry. But what’s done is done. No use banging your head on the wall for it. All you can do now is to try to fix it.”

Greg called his office to inform his secretary he would be late coming in. He drove straight to the hospital.

In Elise’s hospital room, the door to the bathroom was closed and he could hear the shower running. He assumed Elise was in there, showering with the help of a nurse.

He sat down on an armchair and decided to call the police detective he and Elise had talked to a few days ago. He took his cellphone out of his shirt pocket.

“Did you know anything about the story the driver gave the press? It’s on the front page.”

“Yes, he told us the same story but we dismissed it. We thought it was his way of trying to get out of the auto theft charge.”

“What if he was telling the truth?”

“We have no evidence to back it up with.”

Greg was silent for a moment, hesitating. “Can I call you back on this? There’s some information I’d like to check out that might be relevant to your investigation.”

He had not had time to assess what to do with his information on the past association between Lori and the driver. There was no doubt in his mind that the police should be informed. But he had hesitated to disclose what he knew. He thought that he should give Lori a chance with her new man; that there was no harm in waiting, at least until the driver's trial date was set. He would go to the police before that date, and if it occurred before the time Lori asked him to wait, that was unfortunate for her.

Elise came out of her bath, followed by a nurse. Greg rose from his chair and waited until the nurse had helped her sit on the edge of her bed.

The nurse said, "Do you want me to help you dry and comb your hair?"

"No, that won't be necessary thank you. But I would like some hot tea."

The nurse stopped for a moment in front of Greg, on her way out of the room. "Can I get you a drink, sir?"

He shook his head. He had decided a few days before that he would talk as little as he could to hospital staff. When the nurse left, he sat next to Elise, clasped her in his arms, and kissed her.

He whispered, "I miss you so much. And you smell so good."

He wanted to hold her longer and was reluctant to let her go. But the nurse had returned with the cup of tea, which she deposited on the table next to the bed. She glanced at them and left again without a word.

"Have you read the paper this morning?" Greg handed Elise the paper.

"Huh-uh. I don't get the paper until mid-morning."

She took a minute to skim through the news item. She glanced at him and scowled.

"I guess I've arrived. I've achieved notoriety. As one of your conquests. Not exactly how I wanted to become famous." She compressed her lips.

"I'm sorry. This was one of the things I wanted to protect you from. The gossip."

"It's not your fault. The last part is tabloid type stuff although I'm offended to have an identity imposed on me as one of your women."

She frowned and looked annoyed, despite her effort to sound unconcerned.

“But you’re not.”

“I know.” She smiled faintly. “Actually, it’s the gossip I worry about, the publicity someone could use maliciously to undermine what I do at the Public Defender’s office.”

“Yes. I understand. I’m so sorry. I know what you mean. But there may not be much we can do to prevent it. People will say anything, do anything they want.”

Elise sighed. “Is this what it’s like being your woman?”

“You’re not ‘my woman,’ you’re my love—the only one I’ve ever had—and you happen to be a woman. I’ll make it worth your while, I promise.” Greg held her close once more.

He said after some time, “What concerns me most is the driver’s claim that Lori instigated your accident. I’ve dreaded the possibility that she would do something to hurt you, in order to get back at me.”

“But she couldn’t have. She doesn’t know the driver. And could she really be that diabolical?”

He raised her chin and regarded her tenderly. “My trusting little darling. I do believe Lori is quite capable of it.”

“Is she? But why bother?”

“I found out something I haven’t told anybody yet. Not even the police.”

“What is it? Is it about Lori and the driver?”

“Yes. But how did you know?”

“Just a guess. The way you sounded, it had to be something important, or unexpected. So, what is it?”

“Lori did know the driver. They went to the same high school. He was her escort to the senior prom.”

“Are you sure?” Elise looked incredulous.

“His face looked familiar and I remembered—vaguely, at first—seeing it in Lori’s prom pictures.”

“How long ago did you recall this?”

“Not long. A couple of days or so, after looking through the news articles again.”

“So, what this driver says could be true.” Elise was pensive for a moment before she added, “But—the fact that they had been acquainted—that still doesn’t prove anything. He could’ve stolen the car and she didn’t know it.”

She regarded him with knitted brows. “Why haven’t you told the police?”

Greg saw suspicion creeping into her eyes and he began to doubt his decision not to talk to the police as soon as he learned about Lori and the driver.

“I confronted Lori about lying to the police, two days ago. I said I knew she knew this man. I guess I was giving her the chance to come clean and tell the police herself,” Greg said. He paused, frowning.

“And?” Elise prompted.

“She refused. To her, there was no point. She claimed she had nothing to do with your accident. She’s getting married to a very rich man and has no reason, anymore, to want to hurt me or you.”

“So, is that why you never told the police? You don’t think she had anything to do with the hit and run?”

Elise’s voice was soft and her tone, even. But she gazed at him from the side of her eyes and he could see that her lawyerly mind had started to wonder if something else was going on.

Greg said, “Not exactly. Regardless of what I think, the police should be informed, so I’ll tell them at some point. This man shouldn’t spend time in prison, for a crime he

didn't commit. But Lori did ask if I could wait until after her wedding. Until this morning's news, I was leaning towards giving her the benefit of the doubt and waiting. Now, after the driver's claim, I'm not so sure anymore. I can't dismiss the driver's story, as easily as the police seem to have done."

"You've talked to the police?"

"Yes. They told me they had no evidence to back it up. I came here first thing this morning, to tell you about that news item, before you saw it in the papers. I found it offensive and I was sure you would, too. But I also wanted your advice on when I should inform the police about Lori's acquaintance with the driver."

"I'd say 'now' and let the police sort it out. They'd have to take the driver's claims more seriously, if they knew those two were friends."

"What about Lori?"

"What about her? If her fiancé loves her enough, her friendship with the driver should make no difference to him. Would it to you, if I were in her place and lied to the police so I don't lose you?"

"Not if you lied about the friendship but, yes, if you paid the driver to kill or maim someone."

"Yes, I see. But I still can't believe she would do that."

Frowning and with some irritation, she added, "But if she did, she should go to prison. Conspiring to hurt or kill someone makes her a criminal."

"Poor Lori."

"What's going on Greg? First, you say Lori is diabolical. Then, you pity her and feel sorry for her. Why this sympathy for Lori all of a sudden? I don't understand what's with you. Does she seem more attractive again, now that you can no longer have her?"

“No! I do still feel guilty about having led her on, and breaking the engagement the day before the wedding. Maybe, in some strange way, I’m atoning for hurting her by making sure she marries this guy.”

“Why? Her happiness isn’t your responsibility. You must still care for her, more than you’ll admit.”

Elise turned away irritably.

“Is this jealousy rearing its ugly head?”

Greg gathered her in his arms again and kissed her. “No, silly goose. I never felt for Lori what I feel for you. I’ve never made love to anyone the way I make love to you.”

To his surprise, she pushed him away.

“Will you leave now, please? I want to be alone.”

“I don’t understand. Did I do anything wrong?”

“Well, maybe it’s not anything you did. Maybe, I need time to think.”

Greg was puzzled and hurt. Elise hung her head, her eyes cast down.

He gazed at her for a few minutes. He was reluctant to go but she seemed determined to keep her eyes averted.

“I’d better go.” His voice was hoarse and quiet.

He stood up and walked slowly towards the door. He wanted her to call him back. But she did not. He kept walking and did not look back.

That night, he waited for Elise to call. She had hurt him, and Greg was certain she was aware of it. He anticipated that she would call to say she was sorry. But by ten o’clock, his phone still had not rung and he became a little concerned. He dialed her room at the hospital. She should still be up.

The phone rang many times before an unfamiliar voice answered. “I’m sorry, Mr. Thorpe. Elise is asleep. She’s been in bed since eight.”

“Is she all right?”

“We had to give her a tranquilizer, to calm her and help her sleep. She was quite tired and agitated, maybe from all that’s been going on today.”

“Is anything going on I should know about?”

For an instant, he felt that same tightness in his chest that plagued him for hours after the accident.

“Nothing too serious. She’d been crying, but brain trauma patients can do that. They can become quite sensitive and emotional. Also, after a serious accident, people could be depressed and feel very vulnerable.”

“Was she crying a lot?”

The voice hesitated before answering. “She was. But she’s okay now. Come by tomorrow. I’m sure she’ll be happy to see you. I’ll tell her you called, first thing tomorrow morning.”



In the afternoon, Greg drove straight to the hospital from his office, carrying a bouquet of red roses and a small glossy dark brown and teal bag. Elise was sitting on a chair facing the doorway, her crutches on her lap. As soon as she saw him, she picked up her crutches and rose with some effort from her chair.

He stood by, waiting, resisting the impulse to help her.

He said, “I called the policeman—the one who took your statement about the threat. I told him I can prove Lori knew the hit-and-run driver.”

“Let’s hope they make a little more progress with their investigation.”

She tried to smile. Her face was flushed from the effort of pulling herself up.

“Yes. I should have told them, as soon as I found out.”

He offered her the roses. Her eyes brightened as she took them. She inhaled their fragrance with one long breath, her eyes closed. She turned and, after taking in their fragrance once again, she laid the roses gently on her bed.

Elise looked straight into his eyes. “Forgive me for sending you away yesterday? I don’t know what came over me.”

She laid her face on his shoulders.

“I think I know.”

Greg held her close, raised her face to his, and kissed her. He murmured, his lips brushing against her cheeks. “Forgive me?”

“Okay, but for what? You’ve been so patient, so caring.”

“For one, you might be here, because of your association with me. If so, I don’t know how I can forgive myself.”

“You mean Lori’s revenge? That’s her, not you. I don’t blame you one bit.”

“But I also opened you up to nasty gossip. I came to you with a past that gives you reason to doubt me. I”

She placed her arms around his neck, pulled his face down, and pressed her lips to his.

A quarter of an hour later, they sat facing each other, nibbling on chocolates he had brought along with the flowers. Greg watched, with a touch of amusement, as she devoured a few pieces within a few short minutes.

He said, “They say chocolates are good for putting you in a good mood.”

“Is that why you brought them for me? I do need them. Hospitals are depressing. I hope they release me soon.”

He smiled, happy to see her getting back her lively spirit.

“True or not, I love them; the truffles, especially, with or without liqueur.”

“I know—chocolates, tandoori lamb, and sushi.”

“Hmmm.” Elise spread her fingers, stained with a bit of melted chocolate.

Greg pulled some tissues out of a box on a small table next to the bed and handed them to her. She wiped her hands and licked her lips.

“Yes, maybe you can bring me some tandoori lamb from that restaurant, next time you come.”

He nodded with a little laugh. “As you wish, madam.”

She inspected the rest of the chocolates with twinkling eyes and a wide smile. She read their corresponding labels aloud to him. “Isn’t it classier not to give fancy names to chocolates? The flavor they’re infused with is enough, like these—Earl Grey, Grand Marnier, Hazelnut.”

He nodded again, but did not say a word. He contented himself with watching her. Her delight diverted him. He waited until she closed the box of chocolates and turned her attention back to him.

He said, “I got a call this morning from the police sergeant investigating the case. He told me about new evidence.”

“Is it important?”

“It could be. They’ve traced the threat you got in the mail to the rival gang of the young man you’re defending. The murder victim was, in fact, one of their top leaders.”

“That was really the likeliest source. All my other cases are routine stuff the office gets all the time. We don’t get that many threats, but those we do get are often meant to intimidate and are not followed through. The police and my office always take them seriously, though, until they’re proven harmless.”

“The police brought a gang leader in for questioning. He showed up at the police station with his lawyer. He did not deny the threat but claimed they only intended to scare you. But isn’t a threat a crime, too?”

“It is; but obviously, nowhere near as serious as carrying it out, whether it is to kill or maim.”

“But what if they planned your accident?”

“What if? There’s no evidence to connect the gang to the driver, is there?”

“No. You’re right. The police looked into that, too. They couldn’t find any connection between the two.”

“I’m sure the gang leader won’t spend even a day in jail. But the hit-and-run case has become a little more complicated for the police, and a little less of a problem for Lori. There’re two possible suspects now and, it seems, not enough evidence to rule out one or the other.”



A couple of days later, Elise was released from the hospital. Her parents came along with Greg to pick her up. Her mother had insisted on staying with her for at least a few days to help her readjust.

Greg was grateful. He had been uneasy leaving Elise by herself so soon after her hospitalization.

In the car, Greg informed them that the police were continuing an investigation into whether Elise’s so-called accident was planned.

“After I told police Lori and the driver were in the same class in high school, she was forced to admit that she lied.”

“What?” Dr. Halverson’s eyes widened in disbelief.

“Lori admitted she knew the driver, and gave him her old car, to help him out. He had lost his job. She was doing rather well and had bought a new car”

“She gave him her old car? What was it worth at the time?”

“I don't think the police were that concerned about what it was worth. But they found out she reported the car stolen, at his suggestion. She got some insurance money; and he didn't have to pay for registering the car. As far as the law knew, it was lost.”

“Why, of course. Profitable but fraudulent on both sides. I would not have believed Miss Williams capable of that.”

“Why? Because she's the spitting image of Ava Gardner?” His wife shook her head at him.

“Well, now that I know she lied, I think, maybe, she's unscrupulous.” Dr. Halverson conceded, with a sheepish grin at his wife.

Elise interrupted any further bantering between her parents.

“Did the police inquire further into the driver's claim that Lori instigated the hit and run?”

Greg said, “They did, but you already knew Lori's answer to that.”

“Yes, I do. The police should look elsewhere. Lori's a dead end.”

“Yes, the police are at an impasse. The driver is sticking to his story, even after they dropped charges of auto theft against him.”

“I wonder if the police inquired into any recent meetings, between Lori and the driver.”

“That, I can't tell you. Don't you think they did, but couldn't find evidence of them meeting?”

Elise nodded. "Maybe. If so, they have nothing, not even circumstantial evidence, to support the driver's claim."

Greg said, "And don't forget it's possible a gang's involved."

The Halversons had not heard this information before. They both asked, "What gang?"

Elise said, "I got a threat in the mail."

Greg added, "Police traced it to a gang." He stopped and looked at Elise.

She said, "I'm defending a young man whose victim is a member of the gang."

Mrs. Halverson was upset. "Can't you find another job when this is all over? I'm afraid for you. It sounds so dangerous, working for the Public Defender."

"Mom, don't worry, please. Most of the threats turn out to be nothing but threats."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Home



After about a week at home, Elise received a call from the Public Defender.

“How are you feeling?”

“Better. I still get tired easily and I’ve been sleeping a lot. Going around is slow and not too easy on my crutches. But I start physical therapy next week. That’s progress to me.”

“I can understand the fatigue, and sleeping helps you get your strength back. Take as much time as you need. We have a stressful job. And I want you to feel you’re up to its demands before you return to work.”

“Thank you. But you have me a little worried. You sound like you’re preparing me for a letdown. Are you firing me?”

“No, I’m not firing you. You’re a rare breed, not easy to come by. Ours is not a glamorous job with enormous salaries, which is what most bright young lawyers like you are after.” He paused.

“But ...?”

“I realize this is disappointing. But I’m sure you expected what I’m about to say next.”

“Maybe. But I want to hear it from you. That gives it weight. Besides I’m entitled to be told.”

"Of course. I have passed your murder case on to Ben. I've also reassigned your other cases. You understand; these cases have to move on, and we haven't been told when you're coming back."

She could not speak for a long moment. She knew such a decision had to be made, sooner or later.

"Elise, are you all right?"

"Yes. I expected this but it can still hit like a punch. Don't worry; I'll get over it. Ben is the best person you could give it to."

She wanted to scream.

"I'm sorry. I know you've been working hard on this case, but that should tell you what I think about you. I had to give the case to someone very good, after taking it away from you. Luckily, Ben concluded an old case a month ago and was ready for this."

"Thank you." She wished he would end the conversation.

"There'll be other cases, as challenging as this one."

"Yes, I'm sure there will be. Thanks for calling."

"I guess that's it. Be sure to keep in touch."

"I will."

Elise watched her son in his playpen but her mind was still on the call from the Public Defender. Tears started to gather in her eyes. She bit her upper lip firmly. Reassigning all her cases was inevitable. The world must go on without her. But she was eagerly anticipating arguing the murder case in court.

She was anxious about the prospect, but prepared. Now, all that work would benefit someone else and she would have to wait for another chance to prove what she was capable of. She gripped the cell phone tight in her hand and controlled an impulse to throw it out the window.

In their bedroom that afternoon, Elise laid Gregory down for a nap in his crib. She limped to the window to close the drapes and was about to pull the drawstrings on the curtains when the shrill unfamiliar voice of a woman, coming from the garden, made her pause.

She pushed the window open a quarter of the way to see what was going on. A very attractive dark-haired woman was arguing with Bob, who stood like a sentinel, his arms crossed in front of his chest.

Elise heard the woman saying, "Do I look like I have a gun or a knife on me?"

She opened her bag and showed its contents to Bob.

"There's nothing in it but make-up, perfume and my wallet."

"Miss Williams, I didn't say you had a gun or anything like that. Elise is resting and recovering. She can't see anyone right now. Maybe, you should come back when Greg is here."

"I don't want to talk to Greg. I want to see Miss Halverson."

"Not possible, Miss Williams."

Lori Williams. What could she want? Elise was about to close the window but she hesitated for an instant, reconsidered, and stuck her head out the window a little.

"It's all right, Bob. I will see Ms. Williams, but it'll take me a few minutes to come down. Show her to the living room, please."

Elise hobbled towards where Lori waited. She was more than uncomfortable. She was in pain and irritated, and conscious of Lori's intent, even insolent, stare as she approached on her crutches.

She sat on a chair opposite the couch Lori dominated, her curvaceous figure stretched diagonally across it, one arm

perched on the back. Face-to-face, the two women assessed each other.

At first glance, Lori seemed the more striking of the two—dressed in red jersey, with jet-black hair cascading down her shoulders, and narrow hazel eyes she gave an upward lift to with eyeliner, shadow, and mascara. She had on four-inch heels, making the legs she extended towards Elise seem longer.

Elise suspected Lori had dressed carefully that afternoon to present a dramatic picture of gorgeous womanhood against the beige couch. *Well, she succeeded*, Elise thought, admiring her. *She's all-woman, dripping with sex appeal.*

She felt juvenile, ordinary, and colorless next to Lori. She, herself, did not have any make-up on, not even the bit of lipstick and eyeliner she put on before Greg came home. And how could she be elegant with those crutches and the ugly gash on her leg?

“What can I do for you, Ms. Williams?”

Lori had not blinked in her frank scrutiny of Elise. She said, “You are as beautiful as an angel. But so young. Nothing like the women he had escorted and courted before. I would never have thought you were Greg’s type. He’s always gone for dark-haired, statuesque and sexy women.”

“You mean, like you, Ms. Williams? Anyway, I’m not a type and my relationship with Greg is none of your concern. You came all the way here to see me, so I thought I owed you the courtesy of hearing you out. I will admit I’m also curious.”

“Miss Halverson, I had nothing to do with your accident. That driver is lying.”

“It’s your word against his. And you already lied once about your acquaintance with him.”

"I'm sorry I did. That was a mistake. But Greg must have told you why I did that.

"He said you didn't want your fiancé to find out about it."

"He knows now, thanks to Greg. Now, David says he needs time to decide if he wants to go on with the marriage."

"That is none of my concern."

Lori uncrossed her legs and leaned forward. "You're right, it isn't. But I am pleading with you, as one woman to another. Greg fell in love with you and I'm sure that's why I lost him. I might lose David; too. He's beginning to wonder if I had something to do with your accident. But I don't. I honestly don't. I bear you no grudge. You're the only one who can help me convince David."

Elise was dumbfounded and could not believe what she just heard. *What nerve this woman has.*

"Let's say I believe you—I'm not saying I do—your trouble with your fiancé is between you and him. And I definitely wouldn't want to get involved in it."

"Yes, but I'm begging you. If you tell the press that you think I was not responsible, David will believe you and he'll trust me again."

"Ms. Williams, I can't tell, from where I sit, who's lying—you or the driver. And you did make threatening statements."

"The angry words of a jilted woman. Can you blame me? The day before my wedding, he dumps me! For you."

"You're guessing. How can you be sure Greg broke your engagement for another woman? And if he did, how would you know who she was? Anyway, that was more than two years ago."

"Well, the rumor is Greg has a son more than a year old. He would have been conceived about that time."

Elise did not answer. She stared at Lori, her defiant eyes daring her to say more.

“It’s your child, isn’t it? Yours and Greg. I smelled you on him the day he dumped me.”

“Ms. Williams, this conversation is over. I’d like you to please leave now. I will make this clear: I will not issue any such statements to the press.” Elise grabbed her crutches and started to rise from her chair.

“Miss Halverson—Elise—please hear me out a little longer. Please,” Lori cried.

Her eyes were pleading; one hand dug at the seat cushion, and the other gripped an arm of the couch, as if her hands would have to be pried open for her to let go of the couch.

Elise looked down at Lori from where she stood. She did not answer but she stayed.

Lori said, “All I want is to be happy, like you. I’ve already had my heart and my hopes broken once. Now, I have another chance at it. Couldn’t you find it in your heart to help me?”

“Don’t you see Ms. Williams? If I were to make the statement you’re asking me to, I will be biasing the police investigation. I can’t do that.”

“But I had nothing to do with it. Don’t you think the police would have arrested me by now, if they have evidence that I did it?”

“True. Concrete evidence is not there in a case based on one person’s word against another’s; and we may never get at the truth. But I’m sorry. I can’t help you. I have to remain neutral.”

Lori burst out crying. “Please, I beg you.”

“Ms. Williams, I am very tired and I do have to go now.”

Elise limped away on her crutches and up the stairs.

When she reached the second floor, she called Bob.

"Bob, Ms. Williams is still in the living room. Could you please make sure she's all right? She might need help to her car."

Bob replied jokingly, "You didn't hit her with your crutches, did you? She has that effect on people."

She laughed. "No, she's a formidable woman whether you like her or not. I'm sure she would have yanked the crutches out of my hand, before I could move a muscle."



Elise limped towards her son's crib and found him still asleep. She stroked his hands and his feet tenderly.

"Mommy and daddy are both back with you, my little one."

She went to the study and called Leah. She needed someone to talk to.

"You'd never guess who I got a visit from this afternoon."

"C'mon, who? I'm not good at guessing."

"Lori Williams. Actually, she could still be in the living room."

"Why'd you leave her there?"

"She tired me out and wouldn't leave. So I left."

"What if she snuck up on you with a knife?"

"Oh, Leah, don't be so dramatic. Anyway, with that dress, clinging on her like a second skin, where could she hide it? Besides, I asked Bob to look in on her. I thought of that possibility, going up the steps."

Elise laughed softly. "My imagination has gone wild since the accident."

"Well, you need more self-preservation techniques; and a wild imagination helps."

Amidst Leah's interjections of incredulity, Elise related what passed between her and Lori.

"Such effrontery!"

"Yes. She was shameless but, I confess, that woman did get to me a bit. I couldn't help admiring her. Sexy is a word invented for her. She also goes after what she wants. And, I can't help wondering—her tears seemed genuine. If she had nothing to do with my accident, it's unfair that she should lose her boyfriend because of it."

"Ay, Elise, always being logical and giving the benefit of the doubt. Don't go soft on this woman. What if she did instigate your accident?"

"You're right. Still, should I feel responsible, that Greg broke off his engagement with her?"

"No way. You didn't put a gun to his head. He fell in love with you. What could you have done? Sacrifice his feelings and yours for this woman?"

"No, of course not. That's not what I'm getting at. Lori is a bright, extremely attractive woman. Why would Greg give her up for me?"

"I don't know. How about what I already said—he fell in love with you?"

"He could fall out of love with me, as easily as he did with Lori."

"I'd like to say you have all these lovable qualities I'm sure Lori doesn't have. But I bet you'll see them as empty reassurances. So, I'll say what I think you want to hear: I haven't met Greg so I've no idea, and that's the truth."

Leah sounded impatient.

"I'm sorry, Leah. I'm being impossible, because I feel useless and unattractive."

“You need time to recover. You could have died. You do have your little one to take care of.” Leah’s tone was softer.

Elise bit her lips and blinked away the moisture in her eyes. “I can’t even do that very well. I’m sleeping a lot, so I’m not there for him, as much as I want to be. I can’t get too far with him on my crutches, even with a baby carrier I sling on me.”

After a momentary pause, she added, her voice breaking, “Oh, I also meant to tell you. They reassigned my murder case to another lawyer. In fact, they’ve reassigned all my cases.”

“Oh Elise! I’m so sorry.”



Elise hummed a soft lullaby, as she sat on a chair behind an eight-foot wide Chinese coromandel screen in the study, where Bob had cleared an area for the baby to sleep in at night. When the lullaby ended, she touched little Gregory’s hand and made sure he was asleep. She pulled herself up on her crutches.

Greg sat on the couch, reading a newspaper. They had fallen into a small routine before the accident, of putting Gregory to sleep and reading or working a couple of hours. Since the accident, she had been too exhausted to stay beyond a half hour.

Elise hobbled towards the couch. Greg looked up and smiled at her. She sat next to him and, after putting her crutches down, she placed her hand on the newspaper he was reading and gently pulled it away.

She said, “I got a surprise visit from Lori Williams this afternoon.”

“Oh?”

He seemed curious but, Elise thought, more than a little guarded.

“She gave me her version of ‘I had nothing to do with the hit and run.’”

“Somehow I expected her to do this. So, what did she say?”

Elise went on to relate what transpired between her and Lori.

Greg said, “I tend to believe she’s telling the truth.”

Anger flashed in Elise’s eyes for a fraction of an instant.

“What’re you saying? That I should agree to what she asked, to tell the press I think she’s innocent?”

“No. Of course not. But if she had nothing to do with your accident, it would be a shame if she loses David Belcher.”

“What if she’s culpable and gets away with it? She might try again.”

“But what if she isn’t?”

Elise gritted her teeth and grabbed her crutches. She regarded Greg with suspicious eyes and said, “We don’t know, do we? It’s neither my responsibility nor yours to find out the truth. If she’s telling the truth after lying to the police, she has no one to blame but herself, if they doubt her word now.”

She tightened her hold on her crutches.

“Why are you so eager to help her, anyway? She’s a stunner, that’s for sure, and probably great in bed. She seems made for it.”

Greg scowled and looked away. He was annoyed.

“I’m going to bed,” she said irritably.

She raised herself from the couch and limped away.

Minutes later, Elise lay in bed, her eyes closed and stinging with hot tears. Her body was tense and tight from her effort

to still the convulsions rising from deep within her. Yes, she was jealous, she admitted to herself. How could she not be? Greg seemed, to her, to have been defending Lori since that first time he had gone to her apartment. He went a second time and he did not tell her about that visit until days later. She began to wonder if anything more had happened that he was keeping from her.

Recovering from the brain trauma and the operation to make her leg whole again was taking too much time, sapping her energy, and keeping her from many things she used to enjoy doing. It seemed as though all she had been doing was sleep, so Greg and she had not spent any appreciable time alone together. Greg had also been coming home at least an hour later than before. He was catching up on his work, he told her. And, anyway, he reasoned, her mother was there for a few days to care for her and keep her company.

She winced at the image she must present to Greg—wan, worn-down, withdrawn, bags under her eyes, hair and clothes somewhat disheveled, and ugly stitches on a leg she had to prop up at night. And how could anyone be elegant and attractive limping around in crutches?

A vision of Lori as she saw her that afternoon, assaulted her—Lori's irresistible red lips and round breasts, her enticing eyes. Was she not temptation too great to pass up? She could easily imagine Lori seducing Greg again. He didn't do much resisting in the past, with her or with any of the other women Elise loathed to be compared with. Why would he now?

She began to wonder if moving in with Greg was a mistake. Have I been rash in agreeing to marry, so soon after we've been apart two years?

She let herself indulge in self-pity and tried to imagine the worse. Maybe, the accident happened for a reason and just at the right time. It's a test. Will our relationship endure, while we cope with its aftermath? She was sure she wouldn't spend even a single day with someone who did not love her enough to be faithful.



An hour later, Greg climbed into bed, careful not to disturb Elise. She lay on her side, her back to him. She never did that, not even lately. His gaze swept across her whole form, motionless and distant. Since returning from the hospital, she fell asleep before he joined her in bed. But she always slept, facing him, close enough that he could gather her in his arms.

He wanted to come closer, to put his arms around her. But after the small argument they had in the study, he hesitated. He stared at the nape of her neck and resisted an urge to kiss it, a part of her he knew so well by now.

He whispered, more to himself than to her, "Elise, I love you. Don't you know that, now, it's you I live for?"

Elise uttered a sound. It was low but he heard it and he knew it was a sob she tried to choke down.

"You're awake," he said, his voice soft and tender.

He slid closer and wrapped an arm around her.

"Whatever it was you imagined, I want you to know—I can't even think of making love to anyone else but you. Not since that first night we had together."



Elise held her breath, waiting, anticipating, oblivious now to everything but the sound of his voice. She inched closer to him.

“Do you remember the night we made love again, after you asked me up to your apartment? We were both shivering from the cold after a few turns around the block from that Indian restaurant.”

She did remember. They could not get enough of each other that night. The yearning built from a couple of years of separation—reminiscing, wondering, hoping, and imagining what it would be like to be together again—peaked into a frenzy of lovemaking more intense than their first.

She had been quite active, going on top of him, caressing every part of him, her mouth nibbling at his skin as he had done with her that first time. Reunited that night in her apartment, she enacted memories of that first encounter.

For her, their second night together had been another night of surprises. She thought that she had made love with abandon before but she realized, that second time, what it was to be so free in love that she allowed her mind to submit to whatever her body and her heart willed her to do.

Greg continued, “I was not trembling from the cold. I had not made love to anyone else since our first night together. I couldn’t. In your apartment, you made love to me like no other woman had before.”

She lay still for a couple of long minutes but she was trembling inside—an aching, delicious tingle she had not felt since before her accident. She turned around to face him.

“But how could you love me, when I’m so plain and haggard, and I’m tired all the time?”

“How could I not? You intrigue me, bewitch me with everything about you. All these contradictions. Here you are—confident, intelligent, forceful and articulate when you argue your viewpoint. Then, there you are—childlike, jealous, and strangely unsure of how much power you have over me and of how desirable you are. How beautiful you are. I can’t even begin to describe how you give yourself to me and what that does to me.”

She clasped his face and kissed him, a long, deep kiss that left them both breathless.

He was still panting a little when he said, “Can I make love to you? It's been so long, too many weeks. You seem so fragile that I've been afraid I would hurt you if I did. But, oh how I've wanted to make love to you. Why do you suppose I've been coming to bed later, when you're already asleep?”

She whispered into his ear, “Oh Greg, I do. I do want you to make love to me. I want to feel your bare skin against mine, you inside of me.”



Elise's sultry plea sent a thrill through Greg. His whole body throbbed in anticipation. He rolled over from his side and on top of her. He nudged her legs apart with his and she opened them wide for him. He stripped himself to his skin.

She pulled off her nightgown and arched her body against his bare torso, pressing her breasts against his chest. She moaned. “Love me.”

“Yes, oh yes, Elise, my love.”

He slithered against her, probing her mouth with his, entwining their bodies and their limbs. They writhed against each other, relishing the passionate heat of flesh against

flesh. He could hardly contain the thrill of her in his arms, after so many weeks of holding himself back. His hands and his mouth explored and drank in every inch of her skin, lingering on her lips, around her breasts, and the mound between her legs, delighting in how her whole body heaved with his caresses. He inhaled deeply the now-familiar scents she exuded from her skin.

He wanted to stay in those sensuous moments of touching, caressing, nibbling, and tasting. They excited, as much as they pleased both of them. But the ache in his loins had become excruciating. He slithered up once more, probed, and penetrated her as far as he could go.

She gasped. He stopped, and from deep within him, gushed a long exultant sigh.

She was moaning, almost in a swoon. "Oh Greg, my love, my love," she whispered, grasping him and pulling him closer.

Merged into one, they gazed at each other, their pent-up desire—neglected and restrained for too long—gleamed in their eyes and quivered in hungry lips drawn in and savored to their full lusciousness.

They undulated together, in slow but perfect harmony as they had done before, relishing the feel, even the idea, of their union. They stayed there as long as they could.

Soon, however, that delirious wave took them into that familiar feverish, violent crescendo. It culminated as always, into eruptions of passion, rapture, and declarations of love. He waited for her to get there first before he surrendered himself to that high from which descent was inevitable.

They held each other during those sensuous mellow moments that always followed their lovemaking. They lay awake, touching, caressing, rubbing their naked bodies

together, reluctant to let sleep rob them of the delicious sensations of being together.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A Quick Ceremony



Early the next morning, a whimper from the study woke Greg up. He rose, grabbed his robe, and threw it around himself. He tiptoed into the study to check on little Gregory. He touched his son's tiny hand and tiny feet under the warm flannel.

Gregory did not stir, so Greg planted a light kiss on his cheek and left the room, as quietly as when he came in. Back in their bedroom, he found Elise awake.

"How's he?" she asked.

"Asleep. He was dreaming, I think."

As he climbed back into bed, he said, "We'll have to renovate. Gregory needs his own room. Or would you rather we find us a new house?"

"Let's go back to sleep."

It was four o'clock in the morning and still dark.

"There's plenty of space to expand into," she said after a while.

"How many rooms should we add?"

"How many children do you want?" She chuckled and snuggled closer.

He gathered her in his arms. "Why don't we get married first before we make more?"

“Why don’t we sleep first?” Her words were garbled against his neck.

“Let’s go to the county clerk’s office this week. We’d have to go through a civil marriage here, anyway. French laws require forty days residence in that country.”

She raised her head from the crook of his neck and stared, at him.

“You mean our wedding ceremony would have no legal weight? No meaning to anyone but us and, maybe, to our parents?”

“That’s what Benoit told me. A civil marriage is easy to do here, anyway. We should still have that wedding ceremony later—you in a white veil and gown, bridal sponsors, flowers, reception—the works. Here or anywhere you want, any time you choose.”

“Legal is all I need. Those vows are important to me. I may be old-fashioned but, in my mind, they mean commitment; and as a lawyer, I want that certificate as a proof we made those vows. I don’t need to be married in a white bridal gown. Besides, isn’t a white gown for virgins? I ought to be married in scarlet.”

“You’ll look good in scarlet.”

He chuckled, nudging her neck and her face.

“But what about all those arrangements you’ve already made in that little village in France?”

“I want to take you there, for sure, so we’ll go some time. Soon, I hope, when you don’t need your crutches anymore. I’m sure Benoit and Cecile will understand. The place is great for walking and taking stock. I went on a lot of walks when I was there. I want to take you on my favorite trails. It’ll be a good excuse to have another honeymoon.”

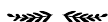
“Our formal honeymoon.”

“You can think of it that way. But it won’t be our last. I’d like to take you on many more.”

He smiled, a mischievous twinkle in his eye, and clasped her closer. They went back to sleep after some time.

They awoke later than usual in the morning. He planted a light kiss on her lips and jumped out of bed.

“I’ll have to skip breakfast. I’m late for a meeting.”



As she and Greg agreed to do, Elise called her parents and Mrs. Thorpe to inform them of their plans to get married before the week was over. They decided not to ask anyone from their immediate family to attend the ceremony at the county clerk’s office where all they needed was one witness. That way, no one’s feelings would be hurt from being excluded. Elise would ask Leah, who was to have been her bridesmaid.

Bob and Alicia would be there—Bob to drive and Alicia to take care of Gregory whose presence Greg and Elise both believed essential. They wanted to be able to tell him, years later, that he saw his parents pronounce their marriage vows.

Elise talked to her mother first.

Her mother could not hide her disappointment.

“I think it’s for the best. You’re practically married anyway. Although”

“Although what?”

“My daughter, marrying a rich man and she’s wearing an old dress. I always envisioned you as a radiant bride in a flowing white gown.”

"I don't have the energy or time to get a flowing white gown."

"Why don't I take you out shopping tomorrow? I know a couple of bridal shops with good ready-made gowns. I'm sure we'll find some dress suitable for you, with your crutches."

"Will that make you happier?"

"At least, I wouldn't feel so bad."

"Okay. Pick me up here at 10 am."

"Good. And why don't I make a nice family dinner after the ceremony?"

"We're driving to Carmel for a long weekend, right after the wedding. Besides, Greg's secretary has already made reservations for a wedding celebration, for family and close friends, same ones who were going to join us in France. It's for Tuesday evening next week."

"What about Gregory? Are you taking him to Carmel?"

"He's staying with Alicia. Her sons will be home. They like playing with Gregory."

Her mother sighed. "I guess that's all right. But ... getting married in a public office—how unromantic!"

"Oh, Mom!"

"Don't mind me. I'm being your mother, as usual. I'll call your brothers so you don't have to."

She was about to hang up but she was not quite contented yet. "Why don't you come for dinner when you return from Carmel? We'll have a family thing with your brothers. I have to do this for you."

"Oh, Mom." Elise protested, thought about it, and decided to give in.

"All right. But I'll have to ask Greg, and you promise not to make a fuss, if he prefers not to go. He has to go to work the next day."

With some uneasiness, Elise called Mrs. Thorpe. They had not talked since the night they first met, an evening that had been less than pleasant. Mrs. Thorpe sent her flowers at the hospital, with a nice little note. Other than that, she had said nothing about the accident nor inquired further about how Elise was doing.

“Hello, Mrs. Thorpe, it's Elise.”

“Oh, it's you!” Mrs. Thorpe sounded a little surprised. “You sound good. You must be feeling better.”

“Much. I'm still going around on crutches and I haven't got my full energy back.”

“It takes time. I'm sorry I didn't come to see you at the hospital. I don't like hospitals. I keep away from them as much as I possibly can. I spent too many days in one when my husband was sick—far too many. He hung on for a while. He wasn't ready to go. I was certainly not ready for him to go.”

“I'm so sorry. It must have been tough for you.”

“Yes, quite. I couldn't rely on Greg being around much, either, after he started getting involved in the company. He had to deal with the possibility he had to take over much sooner than we all expected.”

“You remember those days like they happened not too long ago.”

“Oh, yes. You never forget that kind of thing. And once in a while it hurts you almost as much. Anyway, you called me. So, what can I do for you?”

Elise was thrown off balance for an instant. Mrs. Thorpe seemed to have a knack for switching abruptly between topics and changing the mood of a conversation.

“I wanted to tell you—Greg and I decided to get married at the county clerk's office this week. We'll have a dinner

celebration with family and a few friends next week on Tuesday night.”

“Are you okay with that?” Mrs. Thorpe sounded skeptical.

“We might as well, since we’ve been living together and already have a son.”

Mrs. Thorpe sighed. “You are about as stubborn as Greg, so anything I say won’t make a difference.”

“I’m sorry if you’re disappointed in me, Mrs. Thorpe.”

“I’m not, really. I’m hardheaded myself. But I have all these traditional views and you’re upsetting them.”

“I’m so sorry, Mrs. Thorpe.”

“Now, I will insist on this—as soon as you become my son’s wife, you will call me Mama. Or Mom, if you prefer.”

“I can do that, Mama.”

She smiled and said to herself, “I’ll grow to like you, Mama. It may take time but we’ll get there.”

In the evening, she told Greg about their parents’ reaction to her announcement.

“They’re all disappointed that we’re not going through the traditional ceremony.”

Greg chuckled. “Then maybe we should go ahead with our original plans, but postpone it a couple of months or so. What do you think? Arrangements had already been made, anyway, and we only need to reschedule. I’m sure Cecile won’t mind helping out again.”

“That’ll make everybody happier.”

“We should still go on Friday—better to do that now rather than later. There’s no reason to wait until we leave for France. Besides, I can’t wait to make you my wife and my son legitimate. That’ll make me happier. Thank you for giving me an heir, Attorney Elise Halverson-Thorpe. How does that sound to you?”

“Awesome! And, you’re welcome. I like the hyphenated last name. Has a royal ring to it.”



On Friday morning, Alicia helped Elise dress and do her hair. They decided to leave Elise’s hair down with two thin braids on each side gathered together on the back of her head and adorned with a fresh white rose.

The dress she and her mother had chosen was a simple floor-length white flowing silk that draped around her neck and her waist where it was gathered in delicate, fluid folds that cascaded down to her feet. The cut and the softness of the fabric allowed her to move on her crutches and the folds hid the purplish red stitches on her leg and the bandage on her knee.

Greg was waiting for her in the living room. Alicia had insisted he was not to see Elise until she was all dressed. Elise hobbled down the stairs, clinging to the banister while Alicia followed, carrying her crutches.

Greg strode over to help her. But before he did, he said, “Stand there a minute. I’d like to look at you.”

Self-conscious at his scrutiny, Elise stood still. She glanced at Alicia, who watched her, a broad, amused grin on her face.

“I’ll always remember you like this. You’re the loveliest creature I’ve ever seen.” His voice was tremulous.

He stared a very long moment at her, his eyes glittering with both tenderness and ardor.

“That’s because you love me.”

She was blushing and she knew it, from the burning on her cheeks and the heat that flowed through her body. Several

months together and his look still made her feel that way. But, this time, she met his gaze.

Greg and Elise, accompanied by Bob, Alicia and Gregory, met Leah at the steps of the county administration building. She had rearranged her work schedule to come as witness to their marriage. It was, she told Elise, an event she did not want to miss. And she could not wait to meet Greg. Gregory, she already knew from the day he was born.

Greg and Leah each mumbled a polite “How do you do” after Elise introduced them to each other.

Leah was the first to speak. “Glad to meet the man who won my best friend’s heart. You must be pretty special.”

A frown crossed Greg’s brow before he grinned and said, “I feel pretty special. I can’t wait to get to know you better. Elise has told me a lot of great things about you.”

“As she has, about you.” Leah’s voice was cold, her tone, flat.

Elise glanced from Greg to Leah. She sensed some tension between the two and it puzzled her.

“Let’s go, you two. Let’s get this show on the road.”

She hooked one arm into Greg’s. She was about to hook the other into Leah’s arm but Greg took her crutches and shoved them to Leah.

“Do you mind carrying these?”

Elise started to protest but Leah, who seemed surprised for an instant, took the crutches. Greg scooped Elise up in his arms before she could utter a word. He carried her up the steps and into the county clerk’s office.

After the ceremony, Greg suggested they all have lunch at a restaurant.

Leah declined. “I need to get back to work. I’ll see you on Tuesday night.”

She kissed Elise on both cheeks and murmured, "You are so radiant and so beautiful."

She gave Greg a perfunctory buss on the cheek and left.

As soon as Leah was gone, Elise said, "What's with you two? I was hoping you'd hit it off. Apart from my parents, you're the two people closest to me."

"I guess we were jealous of each other on your account."

The reply was flippant although Greg hardly smiled.

"That doesn't make sense. You are each special to me, in different ways."

"That's human nature for you." He paused before he added, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, "I thought I was number one."

"Of course, you are. I'm totally crazy about you." She smiled and kissed him. "But you'll try to be friends with her, won't you?"

"Don't worry. I'll be nicer next time." Greg grinned, clasped her close and returned her kiss.

At the close of the celebration dinner the following Tuesday, Leah waited until everyone else left.

She spoke to Greg directly. "I'm sorry for my behavior on Friday."

"Me, too, I was not as nice as I could have been. I'm sorry about the crutches."

"We both love Elise so I want to clear the air between us."

"I didn't think you liked me much."

"That's not it, really. Like Elise, I distrust playboys. I've been hurt by a couple. I also saw what she went through after you two parted. I couldn't help feeling angry with you. I know that's unfair. Elise loves you and I trust her judgment. So, please forgive me."

Greg extended a hand to Leah, smiled, and replied,
“Granted, if you forgive me for the crutches.”

Leah shook his hand and kissed him on the cheek. “Shall we begin again?”

Resolution



On their return from Carmel, Greg and Elise, with their son, arrived on time for the family dinner at the Halversons. The customary greetings, hugs and kisses were lavished first on the little boy by both grandparents.

Mrs. Halverson held her daughter by the shoulders and gazed at her all over. Elise had a quiet smile on her lips, her eyes glowed, and her cheeks had an attractive rosy flush just beneath her creamy skin.

“You look so happy, you’re radiating all this warmth and light. You bring tears to my eyes.”

She hugged her daughter tight.

“Yes, we had a most romantic weekend.”

Elise’s smile widened and she kissed her mother on both cheeks.

Her mother whispered in her ear, “All those tricks Greg learned playing around must have helped.”

Elise cupped her mouth and giggled. She whispered back, “Yes. I think he used them all on me. First time I’m thankful for them, but don’t tell him that.”

Mother and daughter were still giggling when Greg and Dr. Halverson, with Gregory in his arms, approached.

Dr. Halverson said, "What mischief are my two girls up to now?"

He gave his daughter a peck on both cheeks.

"Why didn't you leave little Gregory with us? We miss him."

"Next time, Dad."

"Scout's honor?"

He winked at his daughter; then, he led everyone to the living room.

He said, "I have something to tell you that might be a break in the hit-and-run case involving Elise."

In the living room, he chose a chair and settled his grandson comfortably on his lap. Elise and Greg sat on the couch across from him. His wife joined the couple there.

Dr. Halverson waited for a minute until he was certain everyone's attention was on him.

He said, "The police seems to have unearthed some new evidence. Maybe, something crucial. I wanted to tell you about it before your brothers get here."

"Aww, Dad. Must we talk about that now? I'm not ready for reality yet."

"Yes, I see that."

Eyes alive with amusement, her father peered at her and arched an eyebrow at Greg.

"But this can't wait. You have to do something about it, and your mother insists on not bringing it up at dinner. She says it's not fit for dinner conversation."

Greg answered his father-in-law's arched eyebrow with a grin and said, "I thought the investigation was at an impasse."

"Apparently not, anymore. I got a call from the detective investigating the case. He decided to go back and inspect the

driver's bank account again. He said he could not quite get rid of an odd feeling that there were some clues he missed. The driver had some kind of police record that made him uneasy."

"He and his partner didn't find anything irregular the first time. But the second time, there was a bank employee who told him the driver asked for a safe deposit box the day after the accident. She helped him open it. She's a part-time employee and she wasn't working the first time the police were there."

Greg gave out a low whistle. "Wow! It's uncanny how coincidences have worked in this case. What if the detective returned, when that bank employee had her day off again? The police might never have found out about the safety deposit box."

"They may never have been able to solve the case. We never give chance—or luck—enough credit," Dr. Halverson said.

Elise said, "But what about bank records? That kind of information should have been in those records. I'm pretty sure a couple of employees can access those. Wouldn't they have told the police?"

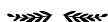
"It seems the police weren't informed of it the first time. Could be an oversight, that's all. Or, maybe, the police didn't ask the right questions. Anyway, I can't tell you much more than that. That's all I learned. The police want to talk to Elise, but had no way of contacting her. I gave them your phone numbers, but they couldn't reach you; and Bob couldn't help them, either."

"We turned off our cell phones," Greg said.

"Did they say what's in the safe deposit box?" Elise asked.

"No. I suggest you contact the police tomorrow. Maybe they'll tell you. The detective seemed reluctant to tell me. He

mumbled something about an ongoing investigation. From the way he sounded, it must be important. A large sum of money, maybe, or some other incriminating evidence.”



Elise called the detective the following day. They agreed to meet that afternoon.

Two detectives arrived at the appointed time. Bob led them to the living room where Elise sat on the sofa, playing with little Gregory on her lap. They introduced themselves as Detectives Chandler and Fuentes.

“I hope you understand if I don't get up. Please sit down.”

She picked up a soft toy from among the ones scattered around her and gave it to her son.

The two detectives nodded, distractedly. They scanned the room as they directed their frames into massive chairs adjacent to each other. They both tried to lean against the backs of their chairs but found them too far back, so they sat up and crossed their legs, in unison.

Bob had been watching the two with an amused smile. When they appeared settled, he asked, “Can we offer you some refreshments, gentlemen?”

“Yes, please. Thank you. Water or some soda will do.”

Bob left to get them their sodas.

Elise, just as diverted as Bob by her visitors, thought they reminded her of a married couple. Her eyes twinkled as she flashed them a bright smile.

“What can I do for you, Detectives Chandler and Fuentes?”

Detective Chandler began by telling Elise what she had already heard from her father. When Bob returned with a tray of glasses, cans of soda and a bucket of ice, the detective stopped and waited. Bob dawdled around the living area, as if he had no intention of leaving.

The detectives remained silent. Elise understood their hesitation. She caught Bob's attention and, with a slight motion of her head toward the door, she signaled for him to leave the room. He strode briskly out to the front porch.

The detective continued his recounting and stopped about where her father's explanation finished.

Elise waited with anticipation for him to say more, but when his silence stretched to a long minute, she prompted, "The safety deposit box must have contained incriminating evidence."

"Yes, it did. It had \$20,000 in it."

He paused again and seemed reluctant to reveal any more than he already did.

Detective Fuentes spoke, then. "We have evidence the money is payment for the hit and run. It's not possible the offender has that kind of money. He has debts all over the place. We found out that he's at the races a lot."

"That's an important break. But why do you need to talk to me about it? What, specifically, do you think I can help you with?"

"He's denying that it was payment for making the accident happen. He insists that the only payment he accepted for it was the car from Miss Williams."

Detective Chandler chuckled, in a derisive tone he failed to hide. "He says he inherited the money from an aunt who passed away a few months ago."

Elise frowned. "Clear this up for me, first—I thought he got that car five years ago when Ms. Williams reported it stolen."

"His story is Miss Williams came back to demand payment for the car and when he couldn't give it to her, she asked if he could plan and arrange an accident to frighten you. It wasn't meant to hurt you seriously, but for you to see it as a real threat."

"His story seems too elaborate to be believed, doesn't it? And yet, he's sticking to it."

"A little too much, we think." Detective Fuentes remarked. "Almost as if his life depended on it."

"I still have no idea how I can help you."

"We followed the money and our evidence is solid, at this point. The money came from another source. Somebody else paid him for the hit and run," Detective Fuentes said.

"Who?" Elise asked, her curiosity heightened by the new information.

"We know it's the rival gang of the young man you're defending, the gang the murder victim belonged to."

Elise was dumbfounded for an instant. A chill went through her spine.

"Are you saying the threat I got and the hit and run are related? How can you be sure?"

"We don't have to follow the clues too far to lead us to that conclusion."

"You must have some strong evidence that this money comes from the gang."

The two detectives seemed hesitant to say anything. They looked at each other for a couple of minutes.

Finally, Detective Fuentes nodded and Detective Chandler answered, "We want you to keep what we'll tell you in the

strictest confidence. There's a continuing operation we'd like to keep secret."

"You can count on me, Detective."

"The \$20,000 is all in \$100 bills and many of them had been marked. The offender and the gang weren't aware of this. That was evident to us. We traced the marks to our Narcotics division. Narcotics informed us they used the bills in a drug bust that failed. They had been paid to dealers, known to be members of the gang of the murder victim in the case you're defending."

Elise could not help exclaiming in amazement, "Wow! How often do you luck out with that kind of evidence?"

The detectives grinned in self-satisfaction.

Detective Chandler said, "Not very often, that's for sure. This gang had been very discreet and couldn't be nailed on any drug charges so Narcotics decided to run a sting operation."

"But you said it failed."

"That one time, it did. The operation isn't over yet. The fact that they paid out the money to someone who had been a petty criminal indicated to Narcotics that the gang was not aware of the sting. But, we prefer not to talk about it anymore. We've told you enough already."

"But you still haven't told me what you want from me. You have the evidence you need to file charges against the rival gang."

Detective Chandler turned to Detective Fuentes, as if he needed a decision from the latter. Detective Fuentes gave his partner a faint nod before he said to Elise, "First of all, we wanted to say we're sorry you've had to go through a very traumatic experience. It's sad that we can't prevent this kind of thing from happening. But we must warn you, ask you to

be careful. This gang, like all the others, is dangerous. If they followed up on the threat, they may try again and make sure they don't miss."

"Thank you so much for your concern, Detective. Do you know the case has been reassigned to someone else? It needs to go forward and I'm still recovering."

Detective Chandler said, "We haven't talked to the Public Defender about any of this."

Detective Fuentes hastened to say, "No, out of the question, for now. We have to maintain the secrecy of the sting so the fewer people who are informed of it, the better. You could be targeted again so we needed to tell you."

"But isn't the District Attorney filing charges against the gang leadership? That should deter them from following up with more threats, shouldn't it?"

"The thing is, Attorney Halverson, the DA refuses to jeopardize the sting operation so he won't file charges against that gang until the sting is completed.

"I see. All the more reason for you to inform my boss. You don't have to say anything about the sting, do you, to warn him to take the threat seriously? The rival gang will find out soon enough that someone else is now handling the case. Ben Seberg, that's who the case has been reassigned to. He could be in danger."

"We'll take that under advisement, ma'am. Meantime, please be careful. We're still learning this gang's MO. We're increasing police patrol around your area. Patrol doesn't usually drive around here. It's a safe neighborhood. All these houses have security installations. But a car will circle around here for a couple of weeks or so."

The detectives rose from their chairs. Detective Chandler handed Elise a card.

“Please call if you see anything suspicious. Also, we’re aware you’ve been asked at least twice what happened when you were hit. But if you remember anything more that you haven’t told us yet, please don’t hesitate to call us.”

Elise took the card and pointed towards the door. “You know the way out, gentlemen. As you can see, with my son and my crutches, you’ll be out the door before I can even get up.”

The two detectives surveyed the room again before they walked out the door. Outside, Bob sat, reading a magazine on a wooden bench at the entry porch. They gave him a mock salute before getting into their car. Bob nodded, closed the magazine, and walked back into the house.



That evening, Greg asked Elise about the detectives’ visit, as they sat on the couch in the study, after putting Gregory to bed.

Elise said, “They have some solid evidence, apparently. The safety deposit box had \$20,000 in it.”

“Payment for the hit and run?”

“It seems so. A criminal assault done for profit. But here’s the real kicker. The police traced the money to the rival gang of the young man I was defending.”

Greg turned pale. “Do you mean to say they made good on their threat? Oh Elise, that’s frightening.”

“Yes. That gave me the chills. I wasn’t surprised about the money or its source, but it is scary to hear the police confirm my suspicions.”

"I told you once that I think your job is dangerous. Can't you get into another line of practice?"

"Greg, this is what I've wanted to do. To make sure justice serves everyone."

"But your work with migrant workers did the same thing, didn't it? Maybe you can practice law for some organization like that."

"Yes, but this work extends my experience. I'm working with people who distrust our system of justice and can't afford lawyers."

She looked so earnest that he could not tell her that the agonizing night, when she lay unconscious in the hospital, was still too fresh in his mind.

"There must be a way you can do what you want to do, without putting yourself in so much danger. Think of our son."

"You and Gregory matter the most to me. But I do also have this need to work and be of some use."

"I'm aware of that but will you promise to think about it seriously? Look into a less dangerous line of practice?"

"I don't have to promise. I assure you now that I will always place you and Gregory above any cause or ambition. I love you both too much."

"And I love you so much, I can't imagine what I'd do if I lost you."

"Lori wasn't lying, after all," Greg said while they were preparing for bed. "So, why did the driver try to implicate her?"

"The police suspect he might have been threatened by the gang if he disclosed their involvement. Implicating Lori deflects suspicions away from them."

"What do you think of her, now?"

“She’s a rather unscrupulous, selfish woman but I can’t help liking her a little, although I may not say that to her face. So I’m glad, relieved to find she told the truth.”

“My generous little sweetheart.” He leaned over and kissed her.

“Maybe, like you, I feel somewhat guilty, for suspecting her and, earlier, for taking you away from her. I actually hope she gets her man.”

“You didn’t take me away from her. I didn’t love her. Nor any of the other women before her.”



Since that evening, Greg searched the papers for news that the gang leader had been charged with assault or murder for the hit and run. He could not feel at ease about his wife’s safety until then. But a week passed and nothing appeared in the papers about the gang murder case or the threat by the gang and its connection to the hit and run. So, he spoke to Elise about it again.

“I expected the gang leadership to be charged by now. I’m tempted to call the police and ask when they’re filing charges.”

“I suspect what the police have right now is circumstantial evidence and may not be enough for the District Attorney to file charges. The gang could claim the money was stolen from them, or they paid it to someone else, who paid it to the driver. Who knows what else they could come up with? I’m only speculating.”

“Wouldn’t they have to prove any claims they make?”

“They need evidence to back up any claims.”

"I keep wondering if the gang may try again. Did the police say whether this gang could do it again?"

"The police did warn me to be careful. The gang may try again."

"Why did you wait this long to tell me? Didn't you take it seriously?"

She did not answer right away. "I might as well tell you—the Public Defender has reassigned my case to someone else."

"How long ago was this?"

"Since that time Lori was here."

He let out an audible breath of relief and was about to say how glad he was she was no longer handling the case. The expression on her face stopped him. He reached out instead and clasped her hand.

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I guess I didn't want to admit to myself that I felt bad about it. I can understand why they did it, and I suspected it was going to happen, so there was no reason to take it personally."

"This was your first big case so I understand how disappointing it is. And it's okay to feel bad about it."

"I do feel bad about it and ashamed, somehow, that they took the case away from me. I feel like I failed. I thought I could take this in stride. But now, I see that understanding why things happen doesn't mean I won't feel bad or angry."

"But, my love, you didn't fail. The hit and run was planned to hurt you and you need time to recover from the effects of that. These are things beyond your control. To be frank, I'm quite relieved it has been reassigned to someone else."

"I'll get over my disappointment and believing I failed. I think I've already begun. It scared me, too, that the threat

was carried out. I tell myself some risk comes with the work I've chosen, and I must learn to accept that, but I was glad I was no longer handling the case."

"You could have died." He shuddered.

"I thought they only wanted to scare me. Now, they have no reason to go after me anymore."

"But your office has not announced that the case has been reassigned, has it? That gang still thinks you're defending the suspect. What's keeping the Public Defender from making the change public?"

"Generally, they make such announcements in high-profile cases; the gang murder isn't one. It happens a little too often."

"In my mind, it is high-profile, if a threat had been involved and it was carried out."

"Unfortunately, they have kept the threat under wraps. It's been kept out of the papers so as not to compromise the investigation of the hit and run."

"But reassigning the gang murder case has no bearing on the investigation of the hit and run, has it?"

"No, I don't believe so."

"Do you know who now has the case?"

"Ben Seberg. He's a hotshot lawyer. That defendant is in good hands."

The following morning, Greg called Artie Arnold from his office. The next day, a news item appeared in several papers: *Gang murder case reassigned*. It was accompanied by a photo of the murder victim.

It stated: Attorney Ben Seberg has taken over the case from Attorney Elise Halverson who is recovering from a hit-and-run accident.

It went on to relate a few already published facts about the case and gave a new trial date. Elise called Greg's attention to it that night, as she sat reading the paper in bed.

"Now, do you feel better?"

He grinned. "Much. I can sleep better at night. I was ready to go to the Public Defender and demand that he inform the press. It didn't seem like such a big deal."

"Usually, they're too busy to bother with press releases for routine stuff like this."

Elise regarded him with a frown, suspicion lurking in her eyes. He smiled, gave her a quick kiss and walked away to take a shower.

Later, when he joined her in bed, she said, "Did you have anything to do with that announcement?"

"Does it matter?"

"I suppose not. Just curious."

"Good. Right now, I've got other things on my mind." He pulled her down next to him.

"Like what?" She pressed her lips on his lips and all over his face.

"Like that." He gathered her closer in his arms.

Epilogue: Garden of Earthly Delights



Greg and Elise flew into Marseilles late afternoon in the middle of autumn. From there, they took a fast train to Aix en Provence. At their destination station, the owners of the property they were renting picked them up and drove them to the house in one of the small villages on the outskirts of Aix.

Benoit and Cecile were a genial couple in their early forties, well-tanned, lean, and sturdy, with sun-bleached strands weaving through their thick mass of dark hair—chestnut brown on Benoit and brownish black on Cecile. Elise thought Cecile bore some resemblance to Leah. She learned later that Cecile’s family originated from Algeria and now lived in Toulouse, southwest of Aix.

On the way to the village, Cecile invited them to dinner at their house in Aix that night. But Elise, still not fully recovered from the accident, was exhausted, and they had to decline.

“Maybe, tomorrow night?” Cecile asked. “We’re flexible. We have your wedding to do this week, that’s all. And you do

not have many guests. Some celebrations, we have as many as 500."

"Not tomorrow, I'm afraid. My son and my parents are arriving in the afternoon. How about the evening after?"

"Oh, yes, of course. I almost forgot. *Alors*, they must all come."

"That is generous of you. But wouldn't we be imposing on you?"

"No, no. I will put a bigger roast in my stone oven on the *terrasse* and more *aubergines*, *courgettes*, peppers, and tomatoes in a casserole next to it and you will have the best ratatouille you've ever tasted. You know ratatouille?"

"Yes, I certainly do. My mom is a good cook and tries all kinds of exotic dishes. She loves Provençal cooking."

"*Alors*, she will like to see my beautiful oven and how to do a proper ratatouille. The oven is almost as old as this farmhouse, you know, seventeenth century." Cecile smiled brightly. "You will also taste a *spécialité* of Aix, our *calisson*, small sweets made with layers of crunchy sugar on top, candied melon and orange and ground almonds and a little bit of very thin bread at the bottom."

"Sounds decadent!"

"What does it mean—decad...?"

"Decadent. In this case, it means sinfully good."

"I will remember that word. It is a good word. *Alors*, tomorrow night?"

Elise glanced at Greg. He nodded his agreement. "All right, tomorrow night."

"Benoit will come to take you to our house at about seven o'clock tomorrow evening. It will be okay if I invite a few friends? Greg has met them before."

“Yes, I would like to meet them and Greg did tell me about having French friends—your friends, too—who he met at your dinners.”

“Yes, these are also his friends.”

“*Et, voila. Chez vous,*” Cecile said when they reached the house. “For the next three weeks.”

Darkness had begun to descend, and Benoit and Cecile took Greg and Elise through a quick tour of the house and the property it stood on. The house was one of three stone buildings on a farm Benoit had inherited. It had two bedrooms and a well-equipped kitchen in the living area. The main building, at least three times as big, had five bedrooms. A tiny cottage, set among the trees away from the other two, slept two people.

Benoit also owned the land surrounding the farm—planted with olive trees and grapevines. The whole property belonged to several generations of Benoit’s family, and had once grown olives for oil as well as rosemary, thyme and lavender for sachets and *herbes de Provence*, a mélange of aromatics the area was famous for.

Greg rented the whole property for a week to accommodate the wedding party, who were expected in the next two days. The ceremony was scheduled a day after the arrival of Leah and her boyfriend, the last two guests.



Greg and Elise scanned the fields stretched across the little villages outside Aix en Provence. The light of early morning cast a warm glow everywhere. On the silvery triangular planes of a magnificent mountain range in the distance, shaped by centuries of lime-rich deposits. On luscious shades

of green on chestnut trees, olive groves, and other native plants at the foot of the rugged mountain. On rolling rows of dazzling lavender a little farther east, lying in harmony with everything green.

In the modest-sized vineyard west of the house, grapevines had begun to turn golden and bunches of dark purple grapes, hanging on thick gnarled branches, peeked out from under mottled leaves. The weather—still warm and muggy and not much different from summer—was tempered by steady, gentle breezes that perfumed the air with the smoky floral sweetness of lavender and the light, fresh, and grassy aroma of herbs.

“What a dreamy place. Thank you for bringing me here. Such colors! Such a majestic mountain!”

“Isn't it? Mont Sainte-Victoire. It's quite famous. Painted endlessly, from different angles, and in different lights by one of the world's greatest painters.”

“Which one?”

“Paul Cezanne. They say he's the most famous native of Aix en Provence.”

“He was from here? I've seen a few of his paintings in an art appreciation class; also, visits to museums Mom dragged us to.”

“His studio has been preserved. I can take you to it, if you want. I heard he trained as a lawyer, first.”

“Yes, I'd like to visit the studio sometime. I like his still lifes. They're so intriguing, with catawampus tables.”

Her gaze swept across the landscape again. She inhaled the fragrant breeze deeply. “Can you imagine living here forever?”

“Honestly, no. If olive oil or herbs and spices or wine had been my thing, maybe yes. I love this place. It's so lush

and beautiful and yields such wonderful things. And it's so serene. I would like us to come back, again and again, in the future. But only to visit."

"Long ones?"

"Every once in a while."

Greg and Elise were enjoying their first full day in the village. The night before—exhausted from the long trip—they went to bed as soon as Benoit and Cecile left them.

They awoke several hours later, past midnight. There was not much for anyone to do in the soundless, still darkness, sometimes disturbed by the occasional guttural hooting of owls. They were both certain they would fall back to sleep, if they stayed wallowing in bed for a while.

But Elise sat up an hour later. "I'm starved. How early can we go out for croissants?"

"If I know Cecile, you don't have to wait that long. Maybe, there aren't croissants. They like to serve those within a few hours of baking. But I bet we'll find munchies in the refrigerator."

They found apples in a basket on top of the kitchen counter. The refrigerator was stocked with bottles of water, a carton of milk, sliced country ham, a round of soft cheese labeled '*chaource*,' and a divided bowl of couscous and vegetables, with handwritten instructions on heating it in the microwave. Two bottles of wine, red and white, stood waiting on the dining table. Greg opened the red.

Elise munched on an apple between bites of cheese. "A veritable feast in the middle of the night."

"You should try the couscous and veggies. Really good! And with the ham and sips of wine, even better."

“These are great, too. The cheese is so creamy and rich, goes well with apple. I’ll have some wine with the ham, but after my apple.”

When they finished eating, he poured the last drops of red wine equally in their glasses. They lingered on their last glass, then returned to bed.

They fell asleep shortly thereafter. They woke up again, at four in the morning.

“I can’t sleep anymore, but there’s not much light out yet. What shall we do?” Elise stretched her limbs, sat up, and took a few sips of water from the glass she had earlier placed on the nightstand.

He grasped her waist with an arm and pulled her back down on the bed. “Only one thing in my mind at this hour.”

She lay with her back to him. He clasped her closer and began nudging the nape of her neck and the top of her bare shoulders. She giggled, and wriggled her head and shoulders, whenever his lips pressed on her skin.

“I didn’t know you had so many ticklish spots.”

She turned to face him. She rubbed his face gently with the tips of her fingers. “It’s the stubble on your face. It tickles.”

She closed her eyes and brushed her cheeks on his face a few times. “And, it feels good.”

He grinned and groaned. “Oh, you can drive me crazy.” He nuzzled his face on her neck and down her throat to her breasts, pulling the straps of her nightgown off her shoulders.

Later, they took a long shower together, brewed some coffee, and sipped it out of large cups, sitting side by side on a couch in the living room. Content to keep company with the stillness around them, they did not say much to each other

until red-orange streaks of light stained the sky outside. They walked out to the *terrasse*—as Cecile called it—to soak in their first morning together in the little village.



The dinner at Benoit's and Cecile's home was lively and casual. Dr. and Mrs. Halverson, in particular, enjoyed it very much. Mrs. Halverson spoke good enough French that everyone turned to her when translations were needed. She basked in the attention and thanked the hosts profusely for including them in the invitation. As Cecile predicted, she enthused over the stone oven and even wrote down the recipe for ratatouille, although Cecile could not give her the exact quantities of ingredients.

As evening wore on, and fortified with wine, everyone felt freer and more relaxed. Conversation grew livelier, less inhibited by language barriers.

"Why don't you all come to our wedding ceremony?" Greg said to the three other couples Cecile had invited to dinner.

Elise, surprised and suspecting Greg had had a bit too much wine, arched an eyebrow at him.

The French couples all glanced at Mrs. Halverson and she translated. They talked among each other, considering the invitation seriously. One of the men noted that it was the tradition in the countryside to invite everyone. "*Pourquoi pas? C'est la tradition dans la campagne d'inviter tout le monde.*"

One of the women remarked, grinning, "*Bon, ben. On peut. Mais, peut-être, il n'y aura pas assez à manger. Vous, trois, vous aimez bien bouffer.*"

“Cecile, is it too late to order more food to accommodate six new guests?” Greg had understood enough of what passed among the French couples.

“No, no, I can do it. I will ask for a bigger pig, maybe two more fish, more vegetables, a few more loaves of bread. The cake is big enough for fifty.”

“Are you cooking?” Elise was incredulous.

“*No, bien sur que no.* Men will come in the morning from the *boucherie/charcuterie* and roast a young pig outside. It takes hours and the skin will be very crispy. We will have fresh fish delivered, already cleaned and ready to roast in the oven. Everything else will be delivered already cooked or baked.”

Before the evening was over, Greg and Elise gained six new guests who promised to come earlier and help Cecile decorate and prepare the large kitchen-dining area in the main building.



At mid-afternoon, the following day, Greg and Elise sat together on a wooden bench, under a canopy of chestnut trees. Their son, in his childish waddle, was playing in the space between the rows of trees, sometimes running, sometimes squatting, or bending to inspect objects around him.

He said, “Let’s keep Gregory with us when everybody leaves. I want us, as a family, to be alone together. In this beautiful place.”

She beamed at him. “That sounds like a great idea. We’ve had so many things going on. Trying to become a family has

been a little struggle. Either, you've been absent, or I have, with the accident and all."

"I know and I'd like to do something about it. I want the three of us to spend time together. Gregory is already quite attached to you. I want the same thing. Even for him and me to do things alone together, starting now."

"I'm all for that." She hooked an arm around his and laid her head on his shoulder.

"My father wasn't there while I was growing up. Too busy with his business. He didn't show much interest in me until I became a young man, and he obsessed about—what he called—my conquests. I suspect he got a vicarious thrill out of them. I don't want that to happen between me and Gregory."

"Oh, Greg."

"I don't doubt he loved me. But it's hard for a child to feel close to someone who isn't there. I want Gregory to remember that he and I did things together when he was growing up."

She raised her head and tugged at his arm, "Well, you can start right now. Quick! He's picked up a twig that I think he'll put in his mouth. There....there!"

Greg reached his son, in a few long strides.

That evening, at dinner, Elise told her mother what she and Greg decided to do.

"Huh?" Mrs. Halverson knitted her eyebrows and stared at her, squinting quizzically. "I thought your father and I were taking him home with us, like we planned. What kind of honeymoon is that, with a child in tow?"

"Our kind of honeymoon. Greg and I have talked about this. We both want him with us. He and I were alone together at Carmel, and we've agreed to make time to be by ourselves,

as often as we can. But, now that I'm back to normal, we want these next two weeks to be family time."

Greg said, "You could say this is also my honeymoon period with my son. He spent his first year of life without me. The last few months have not been much better, with Elise recovering from an accident."

"Don't worry, Mom. Cecile says she'll help out, when we want to go off on our own."

"You'd leave your son with a stranger?"

"Mom, Cecile is not a stranger. You saw how warm and kind she is. Her children will play with Gregory. He likes that. He's becoming more sociable and loves it when Alicia and Bob's two sons play with him after school. Besides, it will only be for a few hours at a time."

"Well, it's your decision. It was unthinkable in my day."

"It was unthinkable in your day to have a child out of wedlock. But you didn't throw me out when I decided to do so. I realize how lucky I am. I don't think I could have done it on my own."

Mrs. Halverson sighed. "What else is a mother for?"

"Maybe, you should try doing something for you and you alone."

"It's too late to be a concert pianist."

"Yes, but you told me you enjoyed teaching piano. You could still give lessons, couldn't you? Or, maybe, play for the young patients at the children's hospital, entertain at parties. It's not a concert audience, but they could be more appreciative. And music could help the children get better."

Mrs. Halverson smiled but seemed hesitant. "Yes, I should look into it. I'll have to think about it; but it does sound tempting."



The day for the wedding ceremony was sunny, mild, and would remain so, according to weather predictions. Cecile moved the ceremony and the dinner outdoors.

By mid-afternoon, the long table covered with white tablecloths and adorned with lavender doilies and napkins, had been laid with silver, various glasses, and an assortment of plates. Vases of fragrant lavender roses, accented with yellow ones, were placed in the center. The vases also graced two smaller tables, one on which were wine bottles and more wine glasses, and another on which the wedding cake would later be placed.

The sumptuous smells of roasting meat redolent with rosemary and a hint of garlic wafted through the air to where guests waited.

The guests sat on chairs on the lawn outside the main house, waiting for the ceremony to begin. Greg, Benoit, and the officiating minister were already standing under a small gazebo that had been decorated for the occasion.

A chamber string quartet sat on stools on one side, playing a romantic classical piece. When it ended, the quartet stood and began the sweet, imploring strains of the Argentinean love song *Elise* last heard at the Indian restaurant, where she and Greg met again after two years of separation. The quartet strolled towards where *Elise* now stood with her father, behind Leah. For some moments, everything seemed at a standstill except for the music flowing out of the string instruments. As if on cue, the three started to move, in measured steps, towards the gazebo.

Greg waited, with glowing eyes, for *Elise* to make her way to him. She was wearing the same dress she had worn during

the civil ceremony. But this time, she had a silk chiffon veil secured on her hair with a tiara that belonged to her mother and she walked without her crutches.

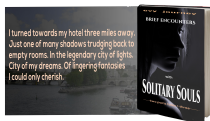
Through that veil, Greg and Elise gazed at each other, oblivious of the small crowd around them. As the quartet played the last mournful notes of “*Bésame Mucho*,” Elise took the hand Greg offered her. He pressed her hand to his lips for a moment, lingering on it before he hooked it around his arm.



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About the Author



Evy Journey writes. Stories. Blogs (three sites). Cross-genre novels. She's also a wannabe artist, and a flâneuse (an ambler).

Evy studied psychology (M.A., University of Hawaii; Ph.D. University of Illinois) initially to help her understand herself and Dostoevsky. Now, she spins tales about nuanced multicultural characters negotiating separate realities. She believes in love and its many faces.

Just as she has crossed genres in writing fiction, she has also crossed cultures, having lived and traveled in various cities in different countries. Find her thoughts on travel, art, and food at Artsy Rambler.

She has one ungranted wish: To live in Paris where art is everywhere and people have honed aimless roaming to an art form. She visits and stays a few months when she can.

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