

# *Hello, My Love*

*Between Two Worlds*  
*Book 1*

**EJOURNEY**

Sojourner Books  
Berkeley, California

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Hello, My Love!/EJournal — 2nd Ed.

ASIN B00FIDG12U

Cover Design/Ana Grigoriu/Books-design.com

Line editing and proofreading/Richard Journey, Ph.D.

Book Layout ©2013 BookDesignTemplates.com



## *1. 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.

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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.”

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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.

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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.”