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A woman in a blue polka-dot dress is riding a teal bicycle. A basket of pink roses is attached to the front of the bike. The background is a solid pink color.

# DELIVERY HAPPINESS

A New Beginnings Novel

elise sax

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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elise sax

Delivery Happiness (A New Beginnings Novel) is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# CHAPTER 1

## “A Not-So-Happy Ending”

I smoothed out the front of my Stanford-red dress, which I wore for my son Jamie’s law school graduation. It was a magical day, not a cloud in the sky and the air filled with proud parents and graduates with job offers from the country’s biggest law firms.

My son was no different. Immediately after the ceremony, he would be on his way to New York City, a Midtown apartment, and a hefty mid-six-figure starting salary. I had a pack of Kleenex in my purse, and by the time he was handed his diploma, I had gone through it.

There’s something noble about raising a child. In my case, the nobility didn’t lie in sacrificing my body to pregnancy, staying up with him through the night when he had the croup, or being team mother for eight consecutive years of Little League. No, the nobility lay in the love I felt for him. Unconditional, overwhelming love. It poured out of me from the moment I saw Jamie’s cute little newborn face and continued through the end of his law school graduation ceremony.

I slipped my hand under my husband’s arm and took his hand. Our love burned just as bright as it always had. We had been speaking about this moment for years. The second our son was grown and the college bills no longer had to be paid, Steve and I were going to start the next phase in our lives and relationship. Romantic cruises around the world, gourmet cooking classes, and an RV trip across the country were all on the menu. In fact, I had a surprise picnic planned for our trip home from Stanford. There was a picnic basket hidden in the trunk of Steve’s Cadillac, and I was going to have him stop on a nice stretch of beach just south of here so that we could get a

head start on the best time of our lives.

Nothing could be more perfect.

And that's how my life was: Perfect.

The graduates threw their caps up in the air, and then it was done. Our child was grown. We took family pictures while I cried some more and then watched my baby walk away toward his perfect future. I swallowed down my tears and squeezed Steve's hand, getting the emotional support I needed.

But as Jamie left and disappeared into the crowd, my husband dropped my hand and took a step away from me. "There. That's done," he said.

"It's a big day," I agreed. "We have a lot to be proud of."

"I'm leaving you, Eliza."

"You have to go to the bathroom? I told you not to drink so much coffee."

He put his hands in his pockets and stared me down. "No. I'm leaving you. You know, forever."

"What are you talking about?" I asked. "You had a physical two weeks ago. You're the picture of health. You have the heart of a thirty-year-old and an age-appropriate prostate."

"No. I'm not dying, Eliza. Not dying that way. I'm leaving you. I've filed for divorce."

I looked around to see if anybody had heard our conversation. Luckily, everyone was focused on their own family, joyous in the events of the day. My husband's face was set in stone and dead serious. I wondered if he was having a psychotic break or an aneurysm.

Or maybe it was grief for losing his son to adulthood.

"Steve, I think you're just emotional, and that's understandable. It was a big day. Lots of sun, and you didn't wear a hat, even though I brought one for you and told you to put it on."

Steve rolled his eyes and walked away toward the parking structure. I followed him, trying to keep up in the uncomfortable shoes I had worn for the occasion. “Hold on, hold on,” I called. “Let’s talk about this.”

He didn’t stop, and I didn’t catch up to him until we were at the car. He took his car fob out of his pocket and beeped the car unlocked...but just the driver’s side.

“Steve, what’s this about? We need to talk.”

He opened his door. “There’s nothing to talk about, Eliza. I don’t love you. I’ve never loved you.”

I gasped and took a step back as if I had been punched. “But you took me to the prom. We got married during homecoming because you said you couldn’t wait to spend the rest of your life with me.”

He wasn’t moved. He was stone-faced, without emotion. “Ancient history.”

“I gave birth while you graduated,” I squeaked. My voice was a couple of octaves higher than normal, and even though I cleared my throat, I still sounded like I was welcoming Dorothy to Oz. “You said I was the most beautiful mother you had ever seen.”

“That’s *definitely* ancient history.”

I hiccupped back sobs. “I waitressed overnights to pay your way through business school with Jamie in a crib in the restaurant’s kitchen. You called me your hero. You said we would have a life of love and togetherness.”

“You sucked me dry, Eliza. You’re a joy sucker.” He made a sucking noise as if he was trying to suck ping pong balls through a hose. “Joy sucker. Twenty-five years of joy sucking. No wonder your lips look like that.”

My hands flew to my mouth. What was wrong with my lips? I was wearing Riding Red lipstick. The saleslady said I looked like Julianne Moore in it. Steve started to get into the car, but I planted my feet on the floor and yanked his arm. I was starting to believe he really was leaving me.

“Maybe we could go to a marriage counselor.”

He jerked his arm out of my grasp and pointed at me, wagging his finger with every syllable. “I don’t love you. I love someone else. Someone who isn’t a joy sucker. Someone young. Tight. When was the last time you were tight, Eliza? When the dinosaurs roamed the earth?”

I touched my belly, which had never snapped back after my pregnancy. Steve was in perfect shape. A year before, he had hired a personal trainer.

His personal trainer, Tammy.

Tammy with the rock-hard abs and plastic boobs.

Tight Tammy.

They worked out together every morning and some nights.

Nights.

The realization hit me hard. Nights. Tight Tammy. “No,” I said. “No, no, no.” And then I believed myself. No, it couldn’t be. There was no Tight Tammy. Steve loved me, and we were going on a cruise around the world.

“But the midnight chocolate buffets,” I said, nonsensically.

“Joy sucker.” He pulled away from me and sat in the car.

“But I put a picnic basket in the trunk,” I wailed.

He popped the trunk. “Good. Take it out.”

I skipped to the back of the car and took the basket out of the trunk. “I’ve got it!” I called. “Let’s sit and talk this out. There’s fried chicken.”

But Steve wasn’t listening. He started the car, slammed his door shut, and peeled away, like he was running from the police.

I stood in the parking structure holding the picnic basket, while I watched my husband leave me. Leave the joy

sucker with the flabby belly. I would have run after him, but I had blisters from my new shoes.

And I was in shock.

The sun was setting, and the parking structure was getting darker. It occurred to me I was four-hundred miles from home without a car.

But the mind is a strange thing. It's a survivalist organ. A dream-maker. It can make its own reality when the real reality sucks balls. So, I didn't believe Steve for a second. How could he not love me? How could he leave me? We were soulmates. We were forever.

When a bubble of doubt knocked against my wall of denial, my brain popped it. Then, I called a cab and went directly to the rental car agency.



I hopped out of the Honda Fit rental and ran into my house without closing the car door. "Hello? Hello?" I called once I got inside, but there was no response.

Steve and I bought the house fifteen years ago when he was made partner. He had always handled the money, and I didn't know exactly how much he was making, but he said he was making more than enough for us to buy the two-story house in the most expensive neighborhood in town. The house had a *Gone with the Wind* staircase and was decorated by someone who Steve said was the best. Sometimes I felt like I lived in a museum. So, I took refuge in a recliner that I had snuck in behind his decorator's back and watched *I Love Lucy* reruns while sitting in it.

Now, I entered the house, praying that my husband was there, that he had drunk a double Scotch and was feeling better. That had to be it. Maybe he was drinking and that's why he didn't answer. I ran through the entranceway to the Great Room and froze in front of the fireplace. Something was terribly wrong. First of all, there was no television above the fireplace, and the four remote controls on the coffee table were

gone.

So was the coffee table.

The house had been cleaned out.

“Hello?” I said, sounding like a five-year-old. “Steve?”

But my wall of denial finally crumbled. My house had been ransacked, and everything that Steve had liked in our home had been removed. Only my recliner was still there and so was my Mickey Mouse vase on the kitchen counter, which he had disdained. I realized that Steve probably had given movers a list and ordered them in while we were celebrating Jamie’s graduation.

Where was my husband? Where had he gone? Was he watching TV somewhere in another house, using the four remote controls he took, sitting on our absconded couch with Tight Tammy? I hugged my traitorous, soft middle that had lost me the love of my life and a cruise around the world. My perfect life had crashed around me.

But then a ray of hope flashed through my brain. Maybe I could work out, get a tummy tuck, or learn French. Maybe I could win my soulmate back. Maybe Steve could love me again and bring back the television. What did Tight Tammy have that I didn’t? I took a deep breath and felt better. Of course I could win him back! I wasn’t dead. I still had some spice left in me. We had a lifetime of experience together. We had had a child together. And years of memories and experience together. Nobody threw that all away just to run away with his personal trainer, even if she could crack walnuts between her thighs.

No, my husband was just having a slight hiccough in his love for me. But hiccoughs end and our marriage would continue. I was determined. I put my purse on the kitchen counter and dug out my phone to call my husband. As I started to dial, I noticed some papers next to my purse. I turned them around and read the first few lines in bold. Smith and Goldstein Attorneys at Law, it read. My stomach clenched, and I lost my ability to swallow.

A dark, heavy, overwhelming feeling of dread took over my body. *Fight or flight response*. I had heard about it, but I had never experienced it before like this. I had a terrible desire to run around the room, screaming.

In my moment of blinding panic, the words from my best friend Destiny's women's group came back to me. I had never gone to a meeting at the Second Chances Club, but I had heard enough about it from Destiny. "I am a beautiful, intelligent, capable woman," I told myself and repeated it three times until I could breathe again.

There. Better. Maybe there was something to women's groups, after all. I had made fun of Destiny and her sayings, but it turned out that they helped in a pinch. With as much serenity as I could muster, I looked down at the papers again. They were divorce papers with little colored tabs attached, showing me where to sign. Divorce papers. Steve had even left a pen next to the papers for me. A disposable Bic. Disposable like our marriage. How thoughtful.

"I'm a beautiful, intelligent... Oh, crap, this isn't happening!" I screamed. I stumbled backward, away from the papers, and dropped my phone on the floor. My head was filled with a loud buzzing noise, and I was having trouble breathing. There were so many thoughts running through my head that I couldn't catch them. But I knew they were all bad.

I walked backward like a dyslexic zombie until I practically fell into my recliner. Leaning back, I shivered, and that's when I realized that the man I had loved for twenty-five years had taken my grandmother's handmade afghan, along with most of my belongings, and now I would be cold.

And alone.

## CHAPTER 2

### “A Rocky Road”

I stepped over an empty bag of Chips Ahoy! cookies and a half-eaten family-size frozen lasagna and plopped back down on my recliner. The floor was a minefield of empty packages of carbs and preservatives. I didn't care. I was self-medicating. And just because it wasn't working didn't mean I would stop. After all, it was becoming habit.

Three days ago, my life blew up, and now I was reclining amongst the ashes...in my recliner. I had dragged the television from the guest room upstairs to the downstairs living room and managed to heave it on top of the mantel. Now, I was catching up on *Real Housewives From Everywhere* and a binge of *Breaking Bad*. Both shows gave me ideas on what to do next with the remnants of my life, but I discarded the ideas in favor of Pop-Tarts.

I covered my body with the blanket I brought down from the guest room and opened the Pop-Tarts foil wrapper. Steve had taken our bedroom set, which was almost okay with me because I hated the massive oak furniture. I chewed while I visualized what Steve and Tight Tammy were doing on my massive oak bed right now. A tear rolled down my cheek, which surprised me. I mean, how much can one person cry? How did I still have liquid in my body? I must have had superhero tear ducts. What a crappy power...crying. Why couldn't I fly instead? Or have a high metabolism?

I changed the channel to home shopping and dropped the empty Pop-Tart package on the floor. Drying my eyes with a blanket I'd brought down from upstairs, I soothed myself by imagining that Tight Tammy made Steve do squats and push-ups before she allowed him to do the nasty.

The nasty.



I hadn't done the nasty in nearly a year. Steve had said that he was tired and overworked and just not in the mood. Obviously, he was a big fat liar. Could he have been having an affair for nearly a year and that's why he didn't want to do the nasty with me? My tear ducts went into high gear again.

An ice cream commercial came on TV. A woman spooned creamy Rocky Road into her mouth and smiled. It was magic Rocky Road, able to make a woman smile. Maybe ice cream could make me smile, again, too. Maybe that's all it took to go from catatonic depression to happiness.

I rolled off the recliner and shuffled to the freezer. No ice cream.

"Isn't that just typical!" I shouted in my filthy kitchen.

Now, what was I going to do? I scanned the refrigerator and cabinets for something to replace magic, happiness ice cream, but after three days of binging, I was down to canned beets and stale All-Bran cereal.

It was time to leave the house. I took a deep breath and grabbed my purse off the counter, avoiding looking at the divorce papers, which were still on the counter where I had left them. I dug my keys out of the purse and walked to the garage door. But when I put my hand on the doorknob, I remembered about the rental car. It was still in the driveway, blocking the garage. I turned around and went to the front door. As I opened it, I was gripped with a terrible fear.

The outside world was scary. There were judgmental people out there, along with my husband and people who had bathed in the past three days, unlike me. I hated the outside world. I never wanted to see the outside world again.

But I needed the happiness ice cream.

I opened the door and stepped outside. I gasped. Somehow it had gotten dark out, and after three days and nights on my recliner, I had lost track of time. I checked my phone to see what time it was. The screen announced I had missed another call from Destiny from her vacation in Hawaii. So far, I had kept the divorce secret, but I got the impression

that she was suspicious. How could I tell her that my husband had left me, that my perfect life had turned to doo-doo? The phone said Eleven-thirty. Normally I was asleep by now, and so was the neighborhood. It was very quiet out, and the night sky was lovely and peaceful. But that didn't help my anxiety.

Yep, I needed happiness ice cream.

I only had thirty minutes before the store closed. I hopped into the Honda Fit and drove away from my fortress of solitude. Driving down the street was like being in a ghost town, like my neighbors had all gathered together and decided to give me much-needed privacy.

The local grocery store was deserted, too, and the parking lot was empty. I locked the car and got a basket. Inside was a cornucopia of self-medication. I could practically hear a choir sing Hallelujah. I stopped at the cookies and crackers aisle on the way to the freezer section. With wild abandon, I tossed at least ten packages of trans fats and artificial colors into my cart.

Chips were on the end caps, and I tossed in a few bags of those, too, along with some salsa so that I would get my vegetables. Finally, I made it to the freezers where the ice cream was.

But something was wrong. Something was terribly wrong.

“Hey, where's the Rocky Road?” I called. The ice cream section was practically empty. There were only two, frost-covered gallons of mint chocolate chip, and a quart of soy banana ice cream. I didn't like mint, and I didn't like banana.

It was like the universe was against me, as if it was playing a sick and twisted game.

“Rocky Road?” I called again, holding the freezer door open.

A pimply-faced boy, no more than nineteen years old, walked toward me, slowly. He was wearing skinny jeans, a grocery store smock, and a badge that said, “I'm Trevor”. His

mouth was open, and he had a look on his face, like he was lost and had no idea how he wound up in the store.

I snapped my fingers in the air. “Where’s your Rocky Road?”

He stared at the freezer and then at me. “Uh,” he said.

“What happened to the ice cream? Where’s the ice cream?” I demanded, maybe too loudly.

“There was a problem with the freezers,” he explained, finally. “We had to throw out the ice cream. Come back tomorrow. We’ll have more tomorrow.”

It was my turn to open my mouth. “But I need the Rocky Road,” I said. My voice started out normal, but then it took on a screeching quality a little like I had the power to turn him into a toad. “Is it so much to ask for ice cream? I work hard, you know. Don’t you think I deserve some goddamned ice cream?”

Like a near-death experience, I seemed to float up above my body and watch myself have a violent psychotic break, taking out all my rage on a poor teenager with likely more than a passing relationship to weed. I wasn’t proud. And the little piece of sanity in me wanted me to shut up. But I was like a locomotive at full speed, and no way could I stop the momentum.

I ranted. I raved. I think I even stomped my feet and quite possibly threw a bag of Hot Cheetos at the kid. But I’ll deny it if the cops decide to press charges.

The boy looked terrified. After thirty seconds of my crazy lady behavior, the manager came over with his cell phone in his hand and a threat of calling 911 spilling from his lips. I didn’t care. I wanted them to arrest me. I wanted to battle it out. I was Fort Apache. I was Norma Rae.

I was nuts.

I needed help. Why wasn’t someone helping me? Someone needed to save me from myself.

Suddenly, a strong hand took my arm with a gentle but

firm touch. I was startled and looked up into the face of the best-looking man I had ever seen. Better than a movie star. He was blindingly handsome, uncomfortably so. It was like he was airbrushed. Photoshopped, like Beyonce's thighs. He was about thirty years old, six-foot-three with muscles in all the right places. He was wearing jeans, a t-shirt, and sneakers. His hair was dark and wavy, and his face was chiseled, like it was sculpted by Michelangelo, himself.

Oh my God, I was delusional. My psychotic break was giving me visions of impossibly good-looking men in my local supermarket. What was I going to see next? The Loch Ness Monster? Big Foot? I rubbed my eyes, but it didn't help. He was still there.

"Come on," he said. His voice was rich velvet, as attractive as his genetic mutant, sexy face. Uh-oh, the delusion had moved to my ears. But his eyes spoke to me, too. Compassion. I had created the person I most needed at the moment. No, he wasn't offering me ice cream, but he was the first person to care. The kindness tranquilized me. In an instant, I was calmed and almost didn't give a damn about the lack of happiness ice cream in my mouth.

My fury deflated, and I sniffed. "Okay," I squeaked. My eyes sprung a leak, and tears started to flow. The mysterious Adonis took my hand and walked me out of the store. I walked with him as if I had been hypnotized. "But my basket," I said, gazing backward. The basket was full of junk food and seemed to call out to me, asking me not to leave it abandoned in the freezer section.

"You don't want all of that poison, do you?" he asked.

I was pretty sure I did. "No?"

"Good girl."

We walked outside and around the corner. I wondered if he was abducting me, and I felt perfectly fine about it. "They didn't have Rocky Road," I explained.

"You're a hot mess."

"You think I'm hot?"

He didn't answer. We walked a half of a block more to Denny's and went inside. The seating hostess got one look at my escort, and she seemed to get something in her eyes because she was batting them so fast that I thought she was going to take off.

"Look at you," she squealed and pointed at him. She giggled and shifted on her feet.

"A booth for two," he said, his voice still velvet. I didn't blame the hostess for slobbering over him. "Booth?" he repeated when the woman seemed to forget what she was doing.

Finally, she took us to our table, and we sat down. "What are we doing here?" I asked, but I hoped he had brought me there for Rocky Road ice cream. He took the menu from me.

"You're calming down, and I'm ordering for you."

"You are?"

"She'll have the egg white omelet and a glass of water," he told the waitress.

Blech. "I will?" I asked. "I like the Grand Slam. Double hash browns."

He leaned forward. He had long black eyelashes that I would have killed to have, myself. Without mascara, my eyes looked like hollow holes in my head. "How long are you going to continue poisoning your body?"

"A year, tops," I lied. I actually planned on poisoning my body for at least twenty more years. He sighed and frowned at my answer. "Who are you?"

"Sorry. I'm Hudson. Hudson MacMillan."

"I'm Eliza Farris."

"Eliza, why are you doing this to yourself?"

"Excuse me?"

"This." He pointed to my chest. I looked down. I was still wearing the dress I wore to my son's graduation, and it

was covered in food stains.

“Are you a Jehovah’s Witness? Is this a conversion thing?” I asked. It was okay if he wanted to give me a sermon, but I wished I had gotten my groceries if I had to listen to his warnings about going to hell.

“I don’t know what’s happened to you—work, husband, whatever—but you have to pull yourself up and right your life. Are you going to give in? Are you going to let life get you down?”

“I’m pretty sure the answer’s yes.” And boy, was it yes. After all, only three days ago, my entire life went down the toilet. Three lousy days. So, I was going to let life get me down for a long time to come. I was going to give in and give in big time. I was even planning on changing my middle name to *wallow*.

He took my hand on the table and held it in his large hands. “No, you’re not, Eliza.”

His eyes bore through me, right to my battered soul. He was mesmerizing. I trusted him, which wasn’t saying much about his trustability, considering my batting average. I had trusted my husband and what did that get me? “Are you a model?”

“I’m a Marine.”

“Oh.” That made sense. There wasn’t any fat anywhere on him. His chest pushed against his t-shirt. I could have bounced quarters off his ass...not that I looked. Okay, maybe I looked once when his back was turned.

“You’re not going to give in,” he repeated.

“I’m not?” I was starting to believe him. For a hardened Marine, he oozed earnestness out of every pore. I believed he wanted to help me. But couldn’t he help me with ice cream instead of egg whites?

“You have to make the decision right now to turn yourself around.”

He was speaking Greek to me. I had no idea what he

was saying. How could I turn myself around when I didn't know what direction my life was, now? It had sunk into a dark abyss, and I had no control. Didn't he recognize a victim when he saw one?

"We were going to go on a cruise around the world, but now he's with Tight Tammy on our Ethan Allen bed," I said.

The waitress came back with my eggs. "Eat," Hudson urged me. I wanted to say no, but he was so earnest and compassionate, not to mention bossy, that I picked up my fork and took a bite.

"How is it?" Hudson asked.

"Great, except for the taste and the texture."

"That's the taste of empowerment, Eliza. That's the texture of rebirth."

"You sound like Deepak Chopra," I said.

"I sound like the truth, but you don't recognize it when you hear it."

"Egg whites are the truth?"

He nodded. "I'm going to help you. I'm going to be there for you."

He meant it. I might not have recognized the truth when I heard it, but I recognized his earnestness. He believed what he was saying. Even though I thought I was beyond help, I grabbed onto his offer to rescue me. I had my doubts that a muscle-bound hottie could save me, but I wasn't going to reject his efforts. He already knew I was pathetic. What else could I lose?

"You're going to help me?"

"Yes. You're going to do everything I tell you, and I'm going to help you. You're going to be happy again, Eliza Farris. You're going to be happy and content. No strings attached. You won't owe me a thing. It'll be good for my soul and give me a good dose of karma."

Yep, he did sound like Deepak Chopra. He also

sounded too good to be true, and he probably wasn't. But any port in a storm. My tears began to flow again, and my nose ran. "I might not mind being happy and content," I conceded. "As long as I don't have to eat egg whites again."

"I'm glad," he said, smiling. "And yes, you're going to eat a lot of egg whites and learn to like it."

"But no lunges, right?"

He smiled wide, which gave me all the answers I needed.

"The only reason I'm saying yes is that you're probably a serial killer, and you'll put me out of my misery," I said.

"See? You're already thinking positively. That's improvement."

We traded contact information, and he promised to wake me up the next morning bright and early. Oh, goody.

I let him pay for my egg whites without arguing, and he walked me back to my car. I unlocked the door, and he touched my chin.

"Tomorrow is a new day, right?" I asked.

"Wrong. Today is a new day. You're already in it."

Ah, youth. Crazy, stupid optimism. What did a young guy with perfect looks know about life? What on earth could he teach me? He probably never had to overcome anything in his life. I drove the short distance home, convinced that my psychotic break was complete. First, I made a scene in the freezer section and then I gave my contact information to a muscle-bound stranger. In any language, that spelled crazy.

But as I got closer to my house, a tiny glimmer of hope flickered in my midsection and grew into a ray of optimism. Maybe this chance meeting was a gift from the Universe. Maybe Hudson would help me get out of my desperate situation. Maybe he would forget about the egg whites.

By the time I put the signal on to turn into my driveway, I was feeling better than I had felt during the last



three days. I almost felt strong enough to take a shower and change my clothes. But just as I was going to turn in, the garage door opened and my Mercedes backed out.

Someone was stealing my car.

I put the Honda in park in the middle of the street and hopped out. “No! No!” I yelled, waving my arms around. I ran to the Mercedes and pounded on the driver’s window. There was a man in a black knit cap and a camouflage coat, driving. He was dressed like the stereotypical car thief.

“Don’t take my car!” I pleaded.

First my husband, then my furniture, then my pride, and now my car. I was being stripped bare to the bone.

I pounded on the window, again, and the thief opened it. “Don’t bother me, bitch. This is a repo.” He picked up a baseball bat from the passenger seat and waved it at me.

“What do you mean, repo? I pay the lease every month.”

“Tell your husband that.” He pulled the bat back into the car, closed the window, and continued backing out of the driveway.

“What do you mean, my husband?” I shouted, but I knew what he meant. The car and everything else in my life was under Steve’s name. The furniture and the car...would the house be next?

I stopped running and watched my Mercedes drive away into the night. The neighborhood was still dark. If anyone had heard me yell, they didn’t bother leaving their home to check it out. My bottom lip began to quiver, and I felt hysteria build inside me. But I couldn’t cope with being hysterical. I couldn’t cope with a total breakdown. In short, I couldn’t cope.

Why didn’t I get the ice cream?

Quickly, I parked the Honda and ran into my house, closing the door behind me. I tried to take a deep breath and calm myself down, but I was freaking out pretty badly.

“You’re going to be okay,” I told myself. “Someone is going to take care of you bright and early tomorrow.” My voice echoed off of the tile floor, and I didn’t believe what it was telling me. Some muscle-bound stranger was going to take care of me? Fat chance.

Taking a couple of steps inside, I tossed my purse on the kitchen counter, but I threw it too hard, and it slid across and fell onto the floor. I picked it up and put it back on the counter.

That’s when I saw it.

There was a stack of unopened bills next to my purse, and sticking out from under the pile was a flyer for a delivery service called Delivery Happiness.

Its slogan was written in a beautiful, calming font: *Anywhere. Anytime. Anything you want.* Underneath it was a picture of a hoagie, a bottle of wine, and a chocolate cake on a table.

It was a sign.

The twenty-four-hour, toll-free number was written in bold below the picture. I grabbed my phone and dialed.



It took Delivery Happiness fifteen minutes to get to me. I passed the time pacing my house with the TV on in the background. When the doorbell rang, I jumped a foot in the air.

I opened the door to a tall, slender man around my age. He smiled and held up two large paper bags. “I’m delivering your happiness. Where do you want it?”

“I’m so sorry for bothering you this late.”

“Are you kidding? I live for this. I’m a night owl.”

I let him in, and he put the bags on the counter. “Nice house,” he said.

Suddenly, I was self-conscious about the package

wrappers on the floor and the food stains on my dress. I surreptitiously sniffed my armpit. It wasn't good.

"I'm redecorating," I lied.

"You have a lot to work with," he said, kindly. He had an open, friendly face, and he seemed pleased as punch to deliver my junk food. There wasn't an ounce of judgment anywhere on him.

"I have a couch upstairs in the bonus room that I want to bring down at some point," I explained, trying to show him I wasn't as pathetic as I seemed.

"Well, I have time. You want me to help?"

I took a step backward in surprise. Another stranger. Another offer to help. But this one was more specific. He was offering something I could use. A couch was even better than a recliner, and it would be nice to fill up the living room, again.

I stared at him for a minute. "You want to help me lug a couch downstairs?"

"Sure. Why not?"

Why not. Why not? I couldn't think why not except that maybe he was a killer or a burglar. But if he was, wouldn't he have already killed me or burgled...if he could find something left to burgle?

"That's very nice of you." I looked down. "I should probably change."

He smiled. "Not necessary."

But it was.

Suddenly, I wanted to change.

"I'll just be a second." I turned on my heel and ran upstairs. I hadn't entered my bedroom since Steve left me and I had discovered that he had taken the bedroom set because it was too painful. But now I walked in and went right to my closet. I slipped on a pair of stretchy pants and a clean t-shirt and a pair of Crocs on my feet. Then I skipped downstairs.

The delivery man was putting away my groceries. "I

hope you don't mind," he said.

"I'm starting a diet tomorrow," I said. Who knew what he thought of my purchases? I wasn't exactly the poster child for the nutrition pyramid.

"Bummer," he said. "Rocky Road is my favorite."

"Oh."

"Shall we?" he asked, dusting his hands off on his jeans.

He did the majority of the heavy lifting, and I mostly guided him. Within ten minutes, the couch was downstairs, facing the television. He snapped his fingers and ran back upstairs. A minute later, he returned with a coffee table.

"Now you have something to put the Rocky Road on," he said, smiling. "I guess I have to go. I've got more happiness deliveries waiting."

He gave me the bill, and I paid him, adding a ten-dollar tip. He opened the front door, as if he lived there, and walked out. "It was nice meeting you. Have a great rest of the night."

"Thank you." I looked out into the night. The curb was empty, not a car to be seen. "How did you get here?"

"My bike. It keeps me in shape so I can eat as much Rocky Road as possible."

He walked into the darkness, and I heard him as he pedaled away. He had gotten me my magic, happiness ice cream and motivated me to get dressed. Not to mention, he moved furniture. And all with a smile. It occurred to me that I hadn't learned his name, but it didn't matter because I would probably never see him, again.

## CHAPTER 3

“Thanks for the Mammaries”

I was startled out of a deep sleep. Struggling up from the couch, I tried to get my bearings. There was a soft light peeking out from under the curtains. It must have been early in the morning, which meant that I had gotten about three or four hours of sleep. It wasn't enough. I felt like death. My stomach was full of undigested ice cream, I had a terrible case of dry mouth, and my eyes were swollen.

I was about to fall back to sleep when I realized why I had woken up in the first place. Someone had knocked on the door. As if to prove me right, there was another knock. It was loud and insistent. I waited for the pounding to stop, but it didn't.

“I'll be right there,” I croaked. Opening the door, I was shocked to see Hudson MacMillan, my savior and egg white-pusher from the night before. He was a man of his word. It was bright and early. Like some cosmic joke, he was even better looking in daylight. He was wearing shorts and a t-shirt, and he was carrying a workout bag. I didn't like the look of that.

“But...” I started. I wanted to give him a string of excuses why I didn't want a workout bag in my life, but he seemed to read my mind and cut me off.

“We made a deal. I'm ready for you. May I come in?”

“Well...”

He edged past me and put the bag on the coffee table. He took a cursory look at the floor, which was littered with my nutritional sins.

“I've sort of been in a slump,” I explained.

“You think?” he asked, pointing up and down at me.

“What? I changed.”

“Not changed enough, but don’t worry about it. We’ll get you changed soon. How about you take a short shower and then we’ll get started? Don’t forget to brush your hair. It’s...” He threw his hands up in the air, like he was directing traffic. I put my hands on my head and was embarrassed to discover that one half of my hair was standing on end, and the other end was smashed flat. First, he made me eat egg whites and now he was making me brush my hair. I wasn’t sure I wanted a Bossy Mcbossypants in my life.

“What kind of Marine are you? You’re not a drill sergeant by any chance, are you?”

Hudson signaled me to sit on the couch with him and gave me a hard look, furrowing his eyebrows. “I’m sensing some reluctance on your part, and I get it. Being happy is scary.”

“I’m not scared of being happy. I was happy for twenty-five years, and it didn’t scare me once.”

He arched an eyebrow. “You believe that? You were happy for twenty-five years?”

I got uncomfortable, like I had stepped on an anthill. My skin was creepy-crawly, and it stung a little, too. Reflecting on my life was painful for some reason, and I didn’t want to reflect on why.

“What’s happening here? What do you want?” I asked.

Hudson unzipped his bag and took out a small notebook. He handed it to me. “Ten Commandments. Ten steps to the new you, and by ‘new you,’ I mean the old you. The original you.”

“I don’t remember the original me.” The original me went back a lot of years. Before senior prom. I couldn’t recall that far back except that I had blond highlights, a tight perm, and fourteen sweaters with three-inch thick shoulder pads. Not a pretty picture. Why would I want that again?

Not to mention that I was lonely back then. I mean, wasn't I? Steve wasn't in my life yet, so I had to be lonely. Didn't I? After all, he was out of my life now, and I was desperately lonely. So, Hudson was wrong. The good times were when I was with Steve, when he loved me. My husband was the secret to happiness. I had to get Steve back, and here was where Hudson was right: since Steve wanted me when I was the original me—and wanted me bad—I had to become the original me again. The solution was so simple. At that moment, I understood what I had to do. Somehow, I had to win my husband back from Tight Tammy's clutches...and her other body parts. I couldn't be happy until I did.

“Okay,” I said. “I'll do what you tell me to do. Excuse me, I'm going to make a cup of coffee.”

I got up, but Hudson pulled me back down. “No coffee. Coffee is bad for you.”

“Studies show that coffee is good for your heart.”

“Bullshit. No coffee.”

“But antioxidants...”

He shook his head. “Nuh-uh.”

“But coffee has fibraxidentals, which has been proven to prevent cancer.”

“Fibraxidentals is not a word. You made that up. Nice try.”

I stared at him through my angry, angry eyes. “Don't take my coffee.” I spat each syllable, and I clenched my fists, ready to punch him in the stomach. If he had a stomach. His abdomen was flat as a board, so it was debatable.

As much as I stared him down, he stared me down, double. And he was much taller, so he had more stare-down ability. I understood that this was a test of our relationship. Would he let me win, or would I be doomed to follow his stupid, crappy rules? It was a test of strength, which sucked for me because I was weak as hell. So I did what a weak person does: I lied.

“Okay. No coffee.” I had been on every diet ever invented, and I knew how to cheat, hide, and sneak food. I gained ten pounds on the grapefruit diet. If I could do that, I could live through whatever Hudson threw at me. From now on, I would remember to drink my coffee before Hudson showed up in the mornings.

He squinted at me, suspicion oozing out of him. “All right, Eliza. We’ll work on it. But you have to listen to me. I know better than you.”

“Oh, yeah? How old are you?”

“Thirty.”

I grunted. “The bra I’m wearing is older than you.”

“That brings us to the first commandment,” he said, smiling. “New beginnings need new.”

“New what?”

“Everything, but let’s start with your bras. We’re going shopping this morning. Don’t you know your breasts are important?”

I put my hands up over my chest in a defensive posture, and I was reasonably sure that my face was bright red. “Can we talk about something else?”

“Okay, how much do you weigh?”



Under duress, I took a quick shower, but I refused to put on makeup out of principle. No, I didn’t tell him how much I weighed. Even under torture, I wouldn’t divulge that information. I pulled my wet hair back into a ponytail. I tried to wear my Crocs out of the house, but he forced me to wear a pair of Adidas that I had stuffed in the back of my closet.

“There, I look like a suburban grandmother,” I said, gazing into the mirror. “Your plan to change me is off to a rousing start.”

“Come on, smartass. Your breasts need me.”



Probably every woman's breasts needed him, but I was a married woman and old enough to be his mother. Or at least his aunt or older sister or maybe his second cousin once removed. It was okay to get involved with a second cousin, right?

I closed my eyes and tried to scrub the image of Hudson's hands on my breasts out of my mind. Nope. It didn't work. The image was wedged in there pretty good. I couldn't look Hudson in the eye because I was sure he could read my mind, and I didn't want him to laugh at me.

He opened the passenger door of his car. It was a black, vintage Camaro. I had never been in a muscle car before. Riding in a fast car with a hunky military man was a totally new experience for me. "Don't go too fast," I said.

"Don't worry about it."

"There's no seat belt in here."

"Don't worry about it."

"I don't know where we're going."

Hudson put his hand on my leg, making my heart race and my body tense up. Ridiculous. He was Channing Tatum, and I was Kathy Bates. My heart didn't have the right to race anywhere near him. "Don't worry about it," he repeated slowly, enunciating every syllable, shutting me up, nicely.

He didn't believe in listening to the radio while he drove. He didn't like distractions. Hudson may have been cool, but he was also intense. We drove for about twenty minutes until he parked in front of an ancient store with a front window full of broken mannequins wearing dusty lingerie.

"I thought you said, 'new.' This doesn't look new."

"New for you." He hopped out of the car and opened my door for me. We walked into the store. It was even dustier and dingier inside. There was a glass counter with a small cash register on it and boxes were piled on the floor. A tiny, old lady with enormous breasts, purple hair, and a cigarette dangling out of her mouth shuffled in from the back.

“Hello handsome,” she said when she saw Hudson. Her cigarette balanced on her lower lip, as if it was surgically attached.

“Hi, Auntie.” He kissed her on the cheek. I was surprised he didn’t lecture her about her purple hair or the cigarette, and I was jealous that he was nicer to her than he was to me.

“You brought an emergency,” she said, staring at my chest. I fought the urge to cover myself, again, but I should have. She stepped toward me and squeezed my boobs with her little hands like she was searching for ripe fruit. “You’re young, sweetie. Why do you want to look old?”

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“Everyone is doing Botox and filling their lips with God knows what. Meanwhile, their bosoms are crying for help and making them old. They want better bras. You understand me, sweetie?”

“Yes, ma’am.” No, I didn’t understand her at all, and I desperately wanted her to let go of my breasts, but she was holding on for dear life, as if she needed them for balance. There was an inch of ash on the tip of her cigarette, and I worried it was going to fall into my cleavage. We stood like that for a while without talking, and I wondered if she had fallen asleep on her feet or had had a little stroke.

Hudson found a chair and straddled it backward. He took his phone out of his pocket and began reading. I didn’t know what I was doing there, and I tried to work up the courage to extricate my boobs from her claw-like hands. But suddenly she let go and shouted.

“40DD!”

Startled, I jumped back. “What? No! No, no, no, no, NO!” I cried. This time I did cover my chest before she could get at them again. “I’m a 36C.”

“Ha!”

“I’ve been a 36C since I was fifteen years old,” I insisted.

The old lady turned around to look at Hudson. “Denial is a terrible disease when it comes to bosoms,” she told him. “I’m only one woman. I can only right the wrongs of two bosoms at a time.” He nodded, as if she was Eliot Ness and my boobs were Al Capone.

“I’m wearing a Maidenform from Nordstrom,” I said with as much pride as I could muster. She ignored me and rifled through a couple boxes, taking out handfuls of bras.

“Come on,” she ordered and pushed me toward the back. She was surprisingly strong for such a tiny, old woman. We walked behind a small curtain into a small dressing room with two floor-to-ceiling mirrors and a blinking fluorescent light overhead. “Off. Off,” she said, pulling at my shirt.

“Could you leave first?” I wasn’t a naked person. I was a cover up at the beach person. I was a sex in the dark person. I had never tried on bras with another person in the room.

“I’m the bosom lady. Your bosoms have been waiting for me.” I had never heard the word *bosom* spoken so many times in my life. She tugged my shirt up and unhooked my bra in one movement with only two fingers. My breasts sprang free with wild abandon and flopped downward. I turned red from my head to my toes and everything in between.

“I’m a 36C,” I insisted.

She laughed. “And I’m Angelina Jolie. Don’t I look like Angelina Jolie? Don’t I have Angelina Jolie hair? Don’t I have Angelina Jolie legs?”

She looked like she had starred in *Tales of the Crypt*. Her skeletal frame and giant boobs were wrapped in paper-thin, translucent skin, with a roadmap of veins that seemed to have been drawn on with Sharpies. There wasn’t much Angelina Jolie happening there.

The bosom lady pushed and prodded me until I had stripped off my shirt and bra, and she had put a new one on me, manipulating my breasts into the double-D cups.

“This isn’t going to work,” I said, as she adjusted the straps. “It’s the wrong size. Believe me, I know...”

Then, I shut up. The bra was in place, and the old lady stepped back. She tossed the cigarette on the floor and crushed it with her sensible square heel. I lifted my arms, put them down by my sides, shrugged my shoulders, and then released them. I felt free, comfortable, light as a feather. I was in heaven. Paradise. The bra was better than chocolate or happiness ice cream. My boobs had blossomed into bosoms. I had graduated to a higher level of mammaries.

“See?” she said. “40DD. I’ve never been wrong in fifty-seven years.”

I hated the number. I wish she would shut up about the number. But I loved how I looked in the mirror. Even though the bra was bigger than my old one, I looked thinner. Younger. Maybe even attractive. Maybe closer to the original me. Hudson was a genius, and the bosom lady was the guru of lingerie, the Einstein of spandex and lace. I loved her.

An hour later, she had sold me ten bras of different colors and uses and fifteen pairs of the most comfortable and flattering underpants I had ever owned. There was also a distinct possibility that I had contracted lung cancer being in the same room with her, but it was a trade-off and well worth it. Besides, she agreed to cut out all the tags, so I could be a 36C in my mind forever.

She tossed my old bra in the trash, and I wore a new one. The bosom lady rang up my purchases, and I handed her my American Express. “Declined,” she said, looking at the credit card machine.

“What do you mean?”

“Declined.”

“Try it, again,” I said.

Hudson walked over to the counter. “Declined, again,” the bosom lady said.

“That’s impossible. Try this one.”

She tried all seven of my credit cards, and none of them worked. A feeling of doom crawled up my body, like a fog settling in at the beach. Luckily, she accepted a check, but

the excitement of my new undergarments was clouded with the fear that Steve had canceled my cards.

“He couldn’t have,” I told Hudson when we left the shop. He looked at his shoes and shrugged. “He wouldn’t. He... Would you take me to the bank?”



Hudson sat on a chair in the waiting area, while I sat at the branch manager’s desk. Mr. Philips typed a bunch of stuff into his computer and shook his head. “Mrs. Farris, it looks like your husband canceled the credit cards two days ago, and...” He stopped and sucked air through his teeth.

“What? He did what?” I urged him to continue.

“All your accounts were closed at the same time.”

The world spun around, and I gripped the edge of his desk so that I wouldn’t pass out. “Two days ago?” He had cleaned me out and left me alone and vulnerable. “That’s not possible.”

But as the words left my mouth, I knew that it was possible. Of course, he had closed the accounts and canceled my cards. Of course, he called in the lease on my Mercedes. Tight Tammy must have brainwashed him against me. Tight Tammy had forced him to leave me destitute.

But I had something that Tight Tammy didn’t have. Make that two things. I had bosoms...real ones, and I sat up straight in the little chair at Mr. Philips’s desk with the confidence that came from a supportive undergarment, and I remembered I had a Christmas account in my own name.

“How much is in there?” I asked.

“Twenty-five thousand dollars.”

One thousand dollars for every year I was married. “Close out my account,” I told him. “Cash. I want it all in twenty-dollar bills.”

“Are you sure you want to close it? We hate to lose a devoted customer.”

I narrowed my eyes and stood, pointing at him in an accusatory manner. “Maybe you should have thought about that when you cut me off from what is legally mine without even a warning.”

I walked out of the bank with Hudson, carrying the money in a used plastic bag. “Hold on to me,” I told Hudson because I was feeling weak. He helped me back into the car, and he slipped into the driver’s seat.

“You’re getting a large dose of reality all at once,” he said. I noted a hint of compassion in his voice, but it made me upset instead of comforting me.

“Temporary reality.” I knew I would get beyond the hell I was living in. I knew Steve would come to his senses and come back to me, and even if he didn’t, I would win him back. Nothing would stop me from having the reality I wanted. Because this reality sucked sweaty, smelly balls.

“I was going to take you for your first run, but I think you’ve done enough for today,” Hudson said, starting the car.

Run? Who was he kidding? I had never run in my life. Hudson was delusional. Talk about reality? He really needed a firmer grip on reality. I took out a wad of cash from the plastic bag and handed it to him. “Give this to your aunt to replace the rubber check,” I said. “You were right about the first commandment. The new bras are perfect.”

“They’re just the beginning. Tomorrow we move on to the second commandment.”

Whatever. I couldn’t imagine what torture he had in store for me. He didn’t understand what I needed. Running? Commandments? I knew what I needed, and I counted the blocks until we got home and I could call for more Delivery Happiness.

## CHAPTER 4

### “Balancing on Two Wheels”

Hudson’s Camaro turned into my driveway and parked, but he didn’t turn off the engine. “Eat thirty-five grams of protein and two cups of cruciferous vegetables for lunch. Got it?” He arched an eyebrow and looked at me with his head tilted to the side, as if he was trying to read my mind. Either that or somehow I was slanted. He had gorgeous eyes—blue—with impossibly long eyelashes. It was like he had stolen someone’s hot genes so that he could have a double dose, and I worried that some poor slob was walking around hot gene-less because of Hudson.

I also wondered where his girlfriend or many girlfriends were. I figured he must have scads of girlfriends. There must have been parades of women following him, and I bet they didn’t even need good bras. I bet their bosoms stayed up as if they were in deep space.

I blinked the image of his girlfriends’ gravity-defying boobs out of my mind.

“Of course. Protein,” I said. Peanut M&Ms had a lot of protein in them, right?

I pulled at the door handle, and Hudson touched my shoulder. “Eliza, protein and vegetables. No processed garbage. We need to clean out your pipes. Promise me?”

I promised him, while I made a strong mental image of crossing my fingers behind my back. It would have to do. I didn’t want to lie to him, and I didn’t want to let him down, but I was holding my entire life’s savings in a Walmart plastic bag, I was sleeping at night on a couch in my living room, my husband was most likely having wild donkey sex with Tight Tammy, and no amount of broccoli was going to get me

through this period of my life.

I stepped out of his car and shut the door, walking around to the other side. He opened the driver's window. "I'll see you at six-thirty tomorrow morning," he called, as if he was telling me that I had won the Powerball and magically I was a size six. "I'll bring the protein shakes." He waved, and I waved back. His tone implied that he was doing me a great favor, but all I heard were vicious threats. Protein shakes? Six-thirty? He sure was devoted to changing me, and I wondered why. I didn't think his motives were anything less than altruistic and kind, but I did wonder if my overwhelming pathetic-ness had forced his hand into giving up his life in order to give me one.

The car backed up slowly and sprinted down the street. I watched him go. It wasn't bad having a young man drop me off at my driveway. It kind of made me feel younger, like Botox wrapped up in an environmentally irresponsible vehicle.

Vehicle.

Vehicle.

I stood in my driveway and tapped the toe of my sneaker on the concrete. Something wasn't right. I looked around, but there was nothing there.

Nothing...

Duh. The Honda Fit was gone. Either the rental company took it away or it was stolen. A part of me didn't care about the missing car. This uncaring part of me wanted Steve's credit rating to go down the toilet and take Tight Tammy with it. This uncaring part of me wanted revenge. Like Lorena Bobbitt kind of revenge. Like really sharp scissors kind of revenge.

But then there was the other part of me, which didn't want to hurt Steve in any way. That part still loved him and was desperate for him to remember that he loved me, too. That part didn't want to sabotage our future together because I was going to win him back, and I figured his return was only a matter of time. I mean, I already had better boobs and new



panties, and tomorrow I was going to get up at six-thirty to be tortured in some way that would make me look a little more like Tight Tammy. Obviously, I was a hop, skip, and a jump away from looking great and getting my life back. Soon Steve would return to me, and we would be happy again.

So, I needed to warn Steve about the rental car.

My heart pounded in my chest, as I thought about calling him. What would I say? I had been waiting for him to contact me, to tell me that he had made a terrible mistake and that I wasn't really a joy sucker. I had checked my phone a million times and waited for the garage door to open and his Cadillac to drive in and park in its place next to our second refrigerator and the Stairmaster. But he hadn't contacted me, and I was in too much shock to contact him.

That's a lie.

The truth was that I was a coward, and I didn't want him to hurt my feelings again. I didn't want to hear that I was a joy sucker, didn't want him to yell at me to sign the divorce papers. If I didn't talk to him, then there was still a chance that he could be regretting his decision and was miserable with Tight Tammy.

I walked into the house and put my purse and the bag of money on the counter next to the divorce papers. The stack of papers had seen better days. Now they were stained with melted chocolate and pomegranate juice, and a couple pages were ripped. I wanted to throw them away, but I couldn't bring myself to touch them. If I laid my hands on them, they would be real.

With shaking fingers, I fished my phone out of my purse and called him. I sucked in my stomach while it rang and mopped up the sweat that had appeared on my forehead. On the third ring, he picked up. Well not really. It turned out that Tight Tammy answered his phone.

"Why don't you sign the divorce papers?" she demanded instead of saying hello. I stumbled backward in surprise, knocking hard into the cabinets. Somehow, I managed to regain my balance, but I couldn't form any words.

I tried to remember any Joan Rivers routines I had watched, but nothing resembling a good comeback would come out of my mouth. “Why are you in denial?” Tight Tammy continued. “You’re delusional. You need to see a therapist. You need to get a job. Don’t you have any self-respect? Haven’t you been a freeloader for long enough in your life? You’re pathological, you know. Surely you know that.”

She wasn’t exactly yelling at me. Instead, she was scolding me, like I was the twenty-something, man-stealing girl making a living telling middle-aged men to squat, and she was the wise, angelic woman who had put a man through college and had raised a son almost single-handedly.

But what if she was right? Perhaps her tight little body gave her enormous powers of perception. Maybe letting myself go was actually letting myself go for real, and my self had gotten up and left, leaving me with no self, at all. Without my self, I could have very well been pathological. I could have even been a joy sucker.

“I’m not pathological,” I said, barely getting the words out. My voice cracked and strained, and I didn’t recognize it as mine.

Tight Tammy groaned in frustration. “Steve!” she called. “Steve, it’s your ex-wife!”

At the words “ex-wife,” my knees buckled, and I slid down the cabinets until I was sitting on the floor with my worthless legs stretched out in front of me. Faintly, I heard Steve’s Nordstrom loafers clack as he walked toward the phone. Then, I heard his heavy breathing in my ear. He was back.

“Why haven’t you signed the papers?” he demanded. I tried to answer him, but no words would come out. “We can make this easy or hard, you know.” My heart leapt at the offer to make this easy. So far, it was hard as hell, and I needed a break. I would have loved to have a little easy in my life.

“Easy?” I asked, hopefully.

It turned out that our ideas of easy and hard were vastly

different. “I’ve been very easy on you, Eliza. All you have to do is sign. Do you really want me to drag your ass into court?”

I could understand the individual words, but I couldn’t figure out what he was saying. He was being easy on me? Drag my ass into court? I wanted to be *I Dream of Jeannie* and blink my way out of his version of easy. I wanted a whole different easy where my husband was helping me pack to go on a cruise together. I needed him to see that I was better than Tight Tammy. I needed him to see that he wanted to come back to me.

“The rental car is missing,” I managed, showing him my responsible side.

His heavy breathing stopped, and there was a moment of silence. “What?”

“The rental car is gone.”

“Why the hell do I care?”

“Maybe it was stolen, or maybe the rental car company got angry because my credit cards aren’t good anymore,” I explained. “And your credit rating will go down the toilet.” There. I helped him. I protected him from a low credit rating.

“I don’t give a shit about your rental car, Eliza. Sign the papers.”

“But...”

“If you don’t sign the papers in ten days, no more Mr. Nice Guy.”

There was silence, again. At first, I thought he was waiting for me to respond, but the “Mr. Nice Guy” comment had me flummoxed, and after a few seconds, I realized he had hung up on me. I looked at the phone for a second before I put it down next to me.

It was cold on the kitchen floor, and the only sound was the refrigerator humming. I was totally alone, and I only had ten days to win back my husband. “Get up, Eliza,” I said out loud, but I didn’t move. I had lost all will to move my limbs, and I needed something to get me going. I needed a

shot of happiness.



The doorbell rang twenty minutes later, and I finally got up off the floor. For a second, I thought Steve had changed his mind and had returned home, but if he had, he would have come through the garage and certainly would never ring the doorbell. I opened the door to see the Delivery Happiness man standing on my porch, holding a large grocery bag in one hand and balancing a pizza box on his other hand.

“I’m delivering your happiness,” he announced with a big smile. It was the first time I had seen him in daylight. He had bright green eyes and lines at the corners. Laugh lines. He was slender, and he looked like he was a few years older than I was. Attractive but not Hudson kind of attractive. Comfortable. Not like an old shoe comfortable but comfortable like a leather recliner with power massage, dual drink holders, and a place for the remote. He was wearing shorts, a paint-splattered t-shirt, and Converse sneakers.

“Hello,” I said.

“Hey, it looks like you’re a regular customer. That’s just great.”

I moved aside and let him walk in. He put the pizza box down on the counter, gently moving aside the divorce papers and pretending not to notice what they were.

“I didn’t know if you delivered pizza, but I’m glad you do,” I said.

He put the bag down next to the pizza and turned toward me. His face was open and friendly. “Well, if pizza makes you happy, then we deliver it.” I nodded. I hoped to hell that pizza made me happy. At least I was reasonably sure it wouldn’t make me *unhappy*. “I don’t think we had a chance to introduce ourselves,” he said, putting his hand out. “I’m Joe Grant.”

I put my hand in his, and he shook it. Firm, dry, warm. Calm serenity passed through me like a lightning bolt. I hadn’t

felt anything like it in years. Not since senior prom. I could have kept my hand in his forever, but his eyes flicked toward it, and I realized I had held the handshake too long and dropped my hand.

“I’m Eliza Farris,” I said, avoiding his eyes. I gnawed at the inside of my cheek, which was my go-to nervous tick since I was a child.

“Nice to meet you, Eliza Farris. Would you like me to help you put away the groceries?”

“No, thank you. It’s not much.” Just a two-liter of chocolate cream soda, a five-pound bag of peanut M&Ms, and a bag of pre-washed kale because I didn’t want Delivery Happiness to think that I was a gross pig.

“Okay, then,” he said.

“Oh! I forgot to pay you.” I walked toward my Walmart bag and counted out the money.

“Some people leave us their credit card number, and we use it automatically for the deliveries. It’s less of a hassle for a lot of folks that way.”

I handed him the cash. “I’m sort of having a problem with my credit cards. Those new chips break so easily.”

He nodded. “Sometimes technology is like a pact with the devil. Thank you,” he said, holding up the wad of cash. I opened the door for him, and he stepped out. His bicycle was parked just outside the door. It had a wicker basket on the front and a plastic box attached to the back. The bike looked like it had been put together with old parts, and it was splattered with paint, a lot like Joe’s shirt.

“Wasn’t it hard biking while carrying a pizza?” I asked.

“No, it was a blast. I’ve been able to ride no hands since third grade. What’s life without a little danger?” I guessed life would be fabulous without a little danger, but I decided to be diplomatic. I shrugged and smiled. “Do you like to ride?” he asked.

“Me? I haven’t been on a bike since I was twelve years

old. I like my car.” I gnawed at my cheek. “I mean I did. It’s... in the shop.” Another lie, and I clutched my stomach with the pain of it. I didn’t know why it was so hard to lie to him, but it was like my insides were being scrubbed out with a wire brush. I wanted to tell him the truth, but at the same time, I would have rather shouted my weight at my high school reunion.

We said goodbye, and I watched Joe pedal down my walkway and into the street. I closed the door. In the kitchen, I decided to eat the pizza on my best China, which my grandmother had given to me on my wedding day. “If you’re going to act ignorant, at least you can have pretty plates,” she had explained. At the time, I figured she had early-onset Alzheimer’s. She was right about them being pretty, though. The dishes had a vintage design from the 1920s, and I only use them for Thanksgiving and Christmas every year. But here I was, using a plate for my junk food. It made me feel slightly better, just like my new bras and the hope of getting my husband back. I put three slices of my ham and pineapple pizza on the plate and poured myself a glass of cream soda with crushed ice from the freezer. In a small bowl, I poured some M&Ms and then changed my mind and got a bigger bowl. Bringing everything to the couch, I sat with my feet up on the coffee table and the plate perched on my lap, and I clicked the remote until I landed on a marathon of *I Dream of Jeannie*.

Jeannie seemed happy to take care of her master, and she looked great in her pink outfit. Pink was never my color. I looked better in blue, which incidentally was Jeannie’s alter-ego color. The worst that Jeannie had to suffer was some timeout time in her luxury bottle with the circular couch. I could relate to that. I watched three episodes, and just as Jeannie was once again hiding from Dr. Bellows, the carbs and sugar began to work their magic and tranquilize me to a nice, calm couch potato state.

I was relaxed enough to push back at the memories of Steve’s hurtful words, which were hovering at the edge of my brain, like an army on a ridge, poised to attack at any moment. I was aware that they were there, but they weren’t hurting me

for the moment. I kept them at bay with M&Ms, cheese-filled crust, and sixties sitcoms that promised magic and sex appeal, even in the suburbs.

Introspection is highly overrated.

My eyes began to droop as my sugar coma took hold. I was just about to lie down and drape a blanket over me when I was startled by a sound outside. I bolted upright, knocking the wedding plate to the ground. Freezing in place, I heard it again. Metal scraping something, like Charles Manson's family was trying to break in, in order to steal my M&Ms and hack me into pieces with rusty knives they found in a medical waste dump. On television, Jeannie hopped on Major Nelson's lap and blinked him a good meal. Why couldn't I be Jeannie instead of a victim of a grisly cult slaying?

Why wasn't Steve there to save me?

I held my breath, hoping they would go away, but there was another noise. Hoping that it wasn't a drug-crazed, homicidal mob, but merely a rabid coyote that wandered off, I tiptoed to the front door and looked through the peephole.

What the hell?

I opened the door. Joe Grant, the Happiness Delivery man, was on my porch, leaning a blue bicycle with a large wicker basket against the stone wall that separated my property from my neighbor's.

"Joe?" I asked. "Did you forget something?"

He turned a light pink as a blush swept over his face. "I had an extra bike, and I figured while your car is in the shop..."

"Oh." The bike was a pretty sky blue, and the basket looked brand new. The seat was a wide, cushioned one. It looked like something out of a French film from the seventies where the pretty virgin in a flowy summer dress and no bra rode her bike down a country lane to meet her older, pipe-smoking lover. It was perfect.

Almost romantic.

“It has a bell,” he said and rang it.

“It has a bell.”

“The basket will hold two full paper grocery bags. I have an eye for those kinds of things. Professional hazard.”

“The basket.”

His smile faltered, and his face dropped. Joe touched his forehead and then crossed his arms in front of him. “This was a mistake. I see that now. I just figured... well, it was too forward. I presumed too much.”

He looked downtrodden, defeated, and I missed his normal smiling, happy expression. I put my hand on his arm. “No, it wasn’t a mistake. It’s the most thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for me. I love it. I love the basket and the bell.”

He dropped his hands and smiled. “Oh, good. I’m glad. I put new tires on it, too. Didn’t want you to suffer a blowout.”

I grabbed the handlebars and walked the bicycle to the driveway. I hadn’t been on a bike for years, and I was nervous that I was going to fall and humiliate myself, but Joe seemed so pleased that I wanted to show him that I appreciated his gift. Carefully, I straddled the bicycle and sat on the extra wide seat. It wasn’t horrible. I put my foot on the pedal and pushed.

They didn’t lie. Riding a bike was just like riding a bike. I was a natural, like I had been riding for all these years. I rode in a wide circle around my driveway, and it was just like I was twelve years old, again. Joe watched me, smiling, and I realized I was smiling, too. After two laps, I stopped in front of him and rang the bell.

“It’s perfect,” I said. I opened the garage, and Joe helped me park the bicycle where I normally kept my Mercedes. “Does Delivery Happiness usually offer this service? How much do I owe you?”

“This is the first time for me, and you don’t owe me a thing. Think of it as a karma boost. Totally selfish on my part.”

I shook his hand. “Thank you. You’re the best delivery man I’ve ever come across.”



“Thank you. That’s a mighty good compliment, especially since this is my side career. I’m an artist in my normal life. I’ve been doing this to cover for a friend who’s spending the summer hiking through South America.”

He was an artist. He seemed like an artist. I had never met a real one before. My son Jamie’s fifth grade art teacher sold pictures of her Shih Tzu at the swap meet, but I wasn’t totally sure she would be considered an artist. Joe was exactly what I imagined an artist to be like. His t-shirt was covered in paint splotches, and he had the air of someone who looked at the world differently. I didn’t know why I hadn’t put two and two together before. Of course, he was an artist.

“Well, I guess I should be going,” he said. “I’ve got an emergency Doritos delivery.”

“I love Doritos.”

“I’ll bring you a bag next time I come.”

It was almost a date, and it was my turn to blush. He shook my hand, and I got the zing of calm serenity again, but this time it was accompanied by something else, which I wasn’t prepared to look at too closely.

## CHAPTER 5

“They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?”

I vacuumed.

I woke up at three in the morning with a terrible desire to go for a bike ride, and I couldn’t go back to sleep. Since I was wide awake and there was no way I was actually going to go for a bike ride in the middle of the night, I had to find something else to do. These days, I would have normally watched TV or ate crap, but something must have shifted inside me, and instead of doing either of those things, I decided to vacuum the living room. Afterward, the eggshell-colored carpet looked beautiful without crumbs, and it invigorated me enough to dust the downstairs and throw out the pizza box and other trash.

When I was done, I went upstairs to take a shower. I was on a roll of positive productivity, and I was incredibly proud of myself. I almost called Hudson to boast about my clean carpet and my soon-to-be clean armpits, but I held myself back and decided to just surprise him when he came to the house.

In the shower, Steve’s beauty products were missing. During the past year, he had accumulated a large collection of expensive skin creams and hair treatments, but now they were all gone, leaving only lonely soapy rings on my tiled shelf. I organized my shampoo and conditioner to cover the rings so I wouldn’t have the reminder of his absence and the fact that he was now hydrating the bags under his eyes for a younger, thinner woman.

Even though I had never felt entirely at home in our decorated house, I had to admit that the shower was beautiful with its rain shower head and a long panel of massage heads. I stepped in, turned on everything, and let the hot water beat me

into submission. It was heaven. I even deep-conditioned my hair and buffed my heels. My legs were growing a coat for winter, but my burst of personal grooming wasn't strong enough to push me into using a razor.

By the time I got dressed in stretched-out yoga pants, one of my son Jamie's old t-shirts, and my new sports bra, I only had fifteen minutes to get a cup of coffee into me before Hudson was due to show up. I made a cup of hazelnut coffee with French vanilla creamer and three sugars. I got two sips down when the doorbell rang.

Damn him.

I took a last gulp of my coffee, hid the cup and the coffeepot under the stove with the frying pans, and answered the door. Hudson was standing on the porch in shorts and a t-shirt. A large duffle bag was draped over his shoulder, and he was carrying a travel drink holder. He was just as good-looking as usual. His face was an oddity, like a puzzle whose pieces fit together too perfectly. I had never seen bones do that before, connect and knit to make a work of art. Michelangelo's David maybe, but that was marble, not flesh and bone.

"I thought you said no coffee," I said, pointing at his drink holder. He stepped around me and walked into the kitchen.

"Protein drink," he said. "I consume protein six times a day." He pushed aside the divorce papers and slapped the duffle bag onto the counter.

"You must really like protein," I said, taking a seat on a barstool. Hudson unzipped the duffle and took out two plastic grocery bags.

"My body likes protein," he corrected. "Your body likes protein, too, but it doesn't know it, yet."

"I don't know about protein, but I'm pretty sure my body would like an Egg McMuffin."

He took out a package of eggs and pointed them at me. "Don't ever talk about that fast food place in front of me. You understand?"

He stared me down, and I blinked. “What’re you doing?”

“I’m making us breakfast. Where’s your frying pan?”

“Under the stove,” I said and jumped up, realizing my mistake. Too late. He found my cup and coffee pot, with steam still rising from them. He held them up for a second but didn’t look my way. I could feel the disapproval coming off him in waves, though. Without saying a word, he poured both down the sink and then retrieved a frying pan from the drawer. I thought I heard him sigh, but I wasn’t sure.

He separated a dozen eggs and scrambled the whites, pouring the yolks down the sink. He took a bottle of olive oil from his bag and poured some into the pan, followed by the eggs. “No bagels in your bag?” I asked.

“Steel cut oats,” he said, pulling out a package of oatmeal. Blech. It was like a scene from *Oliver Twist*. More? No way.

“I’m not really hungry.”

He pointed the spatula at me. “You have to eat six times a day. You’re in training now.”

Oh, yes. I had forgotten about the training. I was in training to get my husband back. I wasn’t certain how eating egg whites and oatmeal would help me do that, however. “Does Jennifer Lawrence eat six times a day?”

“We don’t care about Jennifer Lawrence.”

I was pretty sure I couldn’t do any better than looking like Jennifer Lawrence. Steve would go apeshit over Jennifer Lawrence. “But if she doesn’t eat egg whites...” I started.

Hudson put my breakfast in front of me on a plate and handed me a fork. “Focus on you, not celebrities. You have one body; honor it. So, eat up. Your body is an engine, and it needs the proper fuel to run correctly.”

I looked at the gross breakfast, and I fantasized about IHOP’s all you can eat pancakes. “I’m not sure I need to run. Couldn’t I just walk instead? Isn’t that good enough?”

“No more walking, Eliza. You’ve wasted too many years walking. Now it’s all about the running.” He shoveled egg whites into his mouth and pointed at my plate for me to do the same. I pinched my nose and took a bite. It slimed its way down my throat.

“Not even salt?” I asked, but he ignored me.

He finished his eggs and did the dishes. It was the first time a male had ever washed a dish in my house, and I was transfixed by the sight. After he finished, he pointed at my plate, again. “I can’t,” I said. “I’m too full, and I feel my engine running already.”

Hudson rolled his eyes. “Fine. Let’s get going.”

“Where are we going?”

“To train.”

“Can we pick up bagels first?”

Hudson lectured me for fifteen minutes about my attitude and my impermeable, bloated fat cells. There was a long section in his diatribe about bad carbs, and he rounded it out with accusations of visceral fat. Despite all of that, I was hungry. I wasn’t joking about the Egg McMuffin and the bagel. I wondered how long I was going to *train* with Hudson before I could sneak off to stuff my face. Sure, I knew I wasn’t being reasonable if I wanted to win back my husband with newfound tightness, but becoming a gym rat skinny bitch was a steep learning curve, and I had just begun.

I hid the bag of cash in the salad spinner in the cabinet above the refrigerator and followed Hudson out of the house. He drove us up into the mountains for our early morning training session at a popular running path. Even though it was pretty quiet outside, the path was filled with running, duck-lipped women. Hudson opened my car door and handed me a bottle of water. He put his hand on my lower back, and we walked to the path, getting on the conveyer belt of Southern Californians communing with landscaped nature, which was decorated with dog poop bag dispensers every hundred yards.

For all of my complaining, I was grateful for the

company and the walk. The morning was cool and quiet with a pleasant breeze, and it relaxed me. The path slanted downward, making the walk a breeze. Maybe getting into shape would be easier than I had expected.

“I like this,” I told Hudson.

“See? Your body is already thanking you.”

“You’re welcome, body,” I said, happily. We were being passed left and right by little tushies in tight yoga pants. I tried to ignore them and avoided looking down at my thighs, which were twice the diameter of any other thigh on the mountain. Occasionally, women would look from me to Hudson and back again, as if they were trying to figure out why he was with me. It hurt my feelings and made me feel great at the same time. Eat your heart out, little tushies!

“Ready for sprints?” Hudson asked.

“What’s that?”

“Five minutes of fast running.”

“Excuse me?”

“Come on. Five-minute sprint. Here we go.”

His hand reappeared on my lower back, pushing me, as he started to run. I had no choice but to run with him. I was fine for the first thirty seconds.

After that, everything went to hell.

My legs yelled at me, my lungs screamed at me, and my brain told me that if I continued, I would either drop dead from exertion or stumble over a rock and plummet to my death off the side of the mountain. It turned out that my brain was right about the second option. I was hyper-ventilating through minute three of our sprint when the tip of my shoe caught on a rock, and I went flying forward.

I was sure that I was going to fall on my face and skid down the path. Instead of winning Steve back, I would need skin grafts. I would be a monster with a skinless face. I wasn’t a genius, but I knew Steve wouldn’t come back to me if I didn’t have skin.

But miracles do happen. I didn't fall. While I flew through the air, Hudson grabbed the back of me, as if I weighed nothing at all, and steadied me on my feet without pausing in his run.

"Two more minutes!" he shouted, continuing to push me.

"Are you kidding? I'll be dead in two minutes!" I shouted back, but I didn't say another word because all of my powers to take in oxygen had left me. I was Jacques Cousteau without an oxygen tank. I was an astronaut without a suit. I was being murdered—suffocated to death—in broad daylight by a gorgeous man bent on my destruction by sprinting.

I hated protein. Hudson could go straight to hell with his egg whites.

My chest felt like it was going to explode, and my legs felt like they were going to collapse. I was sure I was never going to make it to five minutes. Then suddenly, Hudson grabbed me by the back of my shirt and slowed to a walk.

"Excellent job," he said, happy as a clam. "I knew you could do it."

I gasped and sputtered. Hudson took my water bottle, opened it, and gave it back to me. I tried to take a sip, but I gagged and spit it out.

"What do you mean?" I demanded when I finally regained the ability to speak. "I almost died."

"Ready? Here we go again."

"Ha. Ha. Very funny."

He grabbed the bottle, put the cap back on, and started pushing me again. This time, I tried to slap his hand off my back, but he was crazy strong and kept his hand splayed flat on my lower back, pushing me along as he ran. "Son of a bitch!" I yelled, as my legs propelled me forward, breaking all laws of physics. I was sure my heart was going to explode out of my chest. There was no way I was going to make it for another five minutes. I struggled against Hudson, but it was no use. We ran past other runners, as if they were standing still.

It went on forever, while I focused on trying to get him to stop. Just as I thought I was doomed to run forever, Hudson slowed to a walk, again, pulling me to his side. He gave me the bottle of water, and I gulped down half of it. “What’re you doing?” I demanded after I swallowed and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. I was drenched in sweat, and my legs were wobbly. So, this was the way I was going to die. I thought it was going to be cancer from secondhand smoke in college, but nope, I was going to die from exercise.

“Please, no. Please, no,” I gasped. “No more. I can’t. Don’t do it to me, anymore. Please.”

“Are you sure? You’re doing great.”

I grabbed a fistful of his shirt and stepped in front of him. I stumbled, and he held me up against him. I put my hands on his chest. It was wide and hard, like an exercise model or a cautionary tale against steroids. It distracted me. “What was I going to say?” I asked, running my hands up and down his chest.

“Something about running, I’m assuming.”

I dropped my hands to my hips. “Oh, that’s right. Listen, I can’t run anymore. Or exercise. And I probably need physical therapy. And a defibrillator.”

Hudson put his arm around my shoulders and turned me around. “All right, Eliza. I’m proud of you. You did good. Let’s walk back to the car and do ab work.”

I didn’t know what *ab work* meant, but I nodded. I figured at least we were walking in the right direction, now. “If you’re good, I’ll give you a massage after,” he promised.

He had to be teasing... right?

Hudson found a flat, open area near his car while I stood doubled over and gasped for air. He pulled a yoga mat from the backseat and laid it down on the ground. “All right, Eliza. Lay down over here.”

“I can get down, but there’s no guarantee I can get up, again.” My legs were Jell-O, and my muscles were barking.



He took my arm. “I’ll help you. Come on. There’s no excuses in living right.”

I plopped down on the yoga mat. “Do you have a collection of these sayings? You’re like a walking infomercial for pain and bad food.”

I lay down, and he lifted my knees up. He put his hands down hard on my feet and leaned over me so that his face was inches from mine. It was overwhelming having him so close. Against my will, my uterus whirred into action, boosting my system with a megadose of hormones. My body flushed, and not just from the physical exertion. I wasn’t used to having a young, good-looking man in close proximity.

“Okay, Eliza, we’re going to start with normal, old school, run-of-the-mill crunches,” he said. “Nothing fancy.”

“We? *We’re* going to start?”

“You know what I mean.”

I thought about arguing with him or feigning a heart attack, but I knew I couldn’t win an argument with him, and a trip to the hospital would just postpone my return to my couch and leftover pizza. Resigned to the torture, I put my hands behind my head and lifted my body upward in a crunch, moving my face even closer to his.

He shook his head, like I was his daughter and I failed the SATs. “Your breath smells like coffee,” he said.

I gnawed at the inside of my cheek and avoided his eyes, which was difficult since we were so close to each other. “Maybe the smell is coming from someone else.”

He sighed, and his breath smelled like eggs and testosterone. I didn’t know what he was doing with me. We were opposite sides of the coolness spectrum. No matter what I did, I could never live up to his expectations. I was doomed to fail.

By the time I was halfway through the third crunch, I started to cry. Hudson arched an eyebrow. “Keep going,” he urged. My tears began to flow, and my nose was running into my mouth. “All right,” Hudson said, resigned. He took my

hand and gently helped me up to a sitting position. He sat down next to me and put his arm around me. “Tell me when you’re ready.”

It took me a good five minutes to be ready. I blubbered and wiped my nose on my shirt. “This is never going to work,” I blurted out, finally. “I’m going to stay a dumpy, old woman with rolls under my bra strap. I’m never going to win him back.”

Once the words started flowing, I couldn’t hold them back. While I cried and worried about the impossibility of becoming a new me, Hudson held me tight and didn’t say a word. Finally, I wore myself out, and we sat in silence for a moment.

“It’s going to work,” he said, finally. “You’ve only been doing this for one day. It will work.”

“So, I have to work out forever? You’re going to torture me every day for the rest of my life?”

“I wish I could, Eliza, but I ship out in ten days.”

I turned to face him. He was staring at me with a slight grin on his face. “What’re you talking about?”

“I’m a Marine, remember?”

“But a Marine in San Diego. There are a lot of Marines here.”

“Yes, but they come and go. It’s part of the job.”

“Where are you going?” I asked, my voice hitching. All of a sudden, I was desperately worried about him. Were we still at war? Probably. I didn’t want him to go to war.

“I could tell you, but then I would have to kill you. And I don’t want to kill you.”

I searched his eyes for the humor that usually accompanied the familiar joke, but he was dead serious. He was a man of few words, but he had action written all over him. “Are you some kind of commando beret-wearing guy?” I asked.

“Something like that.”

I barely knew him, but I had already grown attached to him. He had become my support system, and he promised to improve me and give me the happily ever after that I was desperate for. What would I do without him?

“Ten days isn’t enough. I can’t get fixed by then.”

“This isn’t a get-fixed sort of thing,” he explained. “This is about getting you on the right track so that you can live your life.”

“Live my life? Is that your goal in all of this? I was already living my life.”

“No, you weren’t.”

Hudson stood, took my hands, and yanked me up. He rolled up the yoga mat and walked me to his car with his hand on my lower back. Opening the passenger door, he waited for me to get in and closed the door behind me. He tossed the mat in back and settled himself in the driver’s seat. Leaning over me, he opened the glove compartment, taking out the little notebook I had seen the day before. Inside, it was filled with scribbles, scraps of paper, and a few photos. He pulled it close to his chest and flipped through it until he found the page he wanted.

“Today’s commandment is fitting, considering our conversation,” he said.

“We had a conversation?”

“Discounting the tears and the talk about failing, you broached the subject of goals. That brings us to the second commandment: Know thyself.”

Know thyself? I already knew myself. That wasn’t the problem at all. I just needed to look more like Tight Tammy and win back my husband. Didn’t he understand that?

“Are you getting all frou-frou with me?”

Hudson leaned over me, again and took out another notebook, which was identical to his except that it was only filled with blank pages. “This is for you and you only. But I’m

giving you an assignment. Write down your goals.”

“I know my goals. I need to be better. I need to win my husband back.”

Hudson put his hand on my arm and gave it a gentle squeeze. “In my experience, when you write them down, goals have a way of surprising you. They change, get deeper. When you have a moment, write them down and then write them down again. Do it tonight and again tomorrow morning.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because you deserve it.”

## CHAPTER 6

### “Skulls and Fairies”

Hudson forced me to eat, again. This time it was a chicken breast, broccoli, and yam. It tasted nothing like pizza. Afterward, I never wanted to eat, again, so I guessed the diet was working. He washed the dishes and scrubbed the sink, and I sat watching, transfixed for a second time at the sight of a man cleaning my home. It was like watching a unicorn and Dumbledore dance with tree faeries, and it almost made the meal worth it.

“I’m going to be a little later, tomorrow,” Hudson told me, as he packed up his duffle. “Around eight. Is that okay?”

“Sounds like paradise.”

“Don’t forget to write down your goals.”

“Easiest assignment I’ve ever had.”

We walked to the door. He turned the doorknob and looked at me. “You’ll see. It gets harder as you go, but it’s worth it.”



My thighs were barking at me, and my calves felt like they were going to snap, like they were rubber bands that were pulled too tight. I took three Advils and sat in my recliner for six episodes of *Law and Order SVU* and one infomercial for a face cream that after only two weeks turned a middle-aged, saggy-necked woman into a twenty-something model, who was a dead ringer for a young Cindy Crawford. I held the blank notebook in my lap and ate about a half pound of candied pecans, while I watched her transformation on television. Hers was a lot faster and easier than mine. She

didn't have to eat a single egg white or run down a mountain.

I jotted down the number for the cream in my notebook. There. It wasn't blank anymore. I felt better. Now, I could tell Hudson that I did my homework. See, Hudson? Easy as pie. Oh...pie. I shook the image of pie out of my head, not wanting to erase the good I had done by eating a skinless chicken breast. It's hard to shake the image of pie out of one's head once it gets in there. Pie is so much better than skinless chicken breasts. Any kind of pie. Even *The Help* kind of pie is better.

I closed the notebook and looked around. The house was cleaner, but without the chaos and trash, it felt empty. Barren and sterile. Even with the television on, the house was too quiet. For the first time since Jamie's graduation, the shock had worn off enough for me to realize that I was entirely alone. I couldn't figure out how I went from having a full life to being completely isolated within a week. Was my husband the linchpin that turned my house into a home? Was he the magnet that pulled life toward me? Whatever it was, I was not just alone, but I had a huge case of the lonelies.

I was two steps away from listening to country music.

I clicked on my pen and wrote: *Goal #1: I don't want to be alone.*

Without thinking, I picked up my phone and dialed my son, Jamie. It wasn't until he answered on the second ring that I realized I didn't know what to say to him. I couldn't tell him that his father had left. Jamie had just started a high-pressure job in New York, and I didn't want the bad news to derail his success. No way would I be that selfish. I was determined to hide the truth. Besides, the truth was only temporary. His dad would be back soon, and I needed to save Jamie from this blip of unpleasantness.

At the sound of my only child's voice, I cracked. "I love you," I gushed, instead of saying hello. Damn. I was no good at lying. He was going to see right through me.

"Love you, too," he said. "Can we talk later? I'm behind on billables."

“Oh, billables. That sounds important. Very professional.” He sounded so grown up, but to me, it was only yesterday that I was treating his diaper rash and singing him to sleep. My baby. I loved him so much, and I was so proud of him.

“Yes, it’s very important. I haven’t slept in two days, Mom. I’m with one of the top law offices on the planet, now. They require blood from their junior associates.”

Jamie didn’t say a word about being the child of a broken home or about the injustices of his mother left for a woman with no cellulite. Obviously, Steve hadn’t contacted Jamie to tell him that he was sleeping with a young personal trainer and had taken my car. I was desperate to complain to someone, but I didn’t want to complain to my child.

“I’ll let you go, then,” I said. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks, Mom. Love you.”

“I love you, too. You know, you were the cutest baby. Do you remember the time I took you to Disneyland, and you told Cinderella that you were going to marry her?” He didn’t answer. “Hello? Hello?” Nothing. It was quiet on the line, and it took a moment for me to realize that he had hung up. I couldn’t blame him since he was busy with his life, being productive, while I was sitting in my recliner, watching face cream commercials. I needed someone who could relate more to face cream and my pathetic state.

I dialed my best friend.

“Hello? There you are!” Destiny shouted, answering the phone. “Where have you been? What’s wrong?” she asked. At least, that’s what I thought she said. She was blotto and slurring her speech. “Did that asshat do something?”

I didn’t have to ask her which asshat she was talking about. Destiny was obsessed with only one asshat, and I was wearing the ring that asshat had given me in high school.

Destiny was six-feet-tall, straight up and down, like a supermodel. No lumps or bumps. No Spanx. Not even a bra. We were the same age, but she looked ten years younger. She

was independent and fabulous, and she was always trying to “empower” me, whatever that meant. In short, Destiny was bossy. In the past, she had made me buy two leather miniskirts, even though she knew I had a personal rule to never show my knees in public. Then there was the time she made me get a full bikini wax because she said I was too Old School.

But the worst was when she dragged me to her women’s group: The Second Chances Club. Located in the local rec center, the club met in a bland room with a circle of plastic chairs, but not much else. The walls were covered with notices for macramé classes and the junior basketball league. But we weren’t there for macramé or basketball. We were there for something much worse. She had asked me to come with her, and I was all for supporting my friend, but it was my worst nightmare. I didn’t need to complain about men, talk about orgasms, or whatever they did in a women’s group.

Destiny’s bossy excuse was that she was saving me from my life. Totally ridiculous, I thought. At that point—a month ago—I thought I had a perfect life. I was comfortable in my comfort zone of life. But Destiny didn’t believe in comfort zones. She said they were mini deaths. I said comfort zones were comfortable. What’s wrong with comfort?

So, she finally got me through the door with donuts. The Second Chances Club always had donuts, she had explained to me, and she didn’t lie. There were glazed raised, sugar twist, and my favorite: chocolate cake donuts with sprinkles. There was nothing more comfortable than chocolate cake donuts with sprinkles.

“I’m not a wimp, but I know what these kinds of women’s groups do,” I told Destiny, as I took a tentative step into the room.

“Talk? Knit? Eat doughnuts? What?”

“I’m not an idiot, you know. I’ve read Erica Jong.”

“Erica Jong. From the seventies?” she asked. “Can’t you read something a little more recent? At least move up to the eighties?”



“But they—” I started but bit my lip.

“Doughnuts with sprinkles, Eliza,” she repeated. “Come on. You’ll love these women.”

“Okay, but if they tell me I’m responsible for my own orgasm and make me look at my vagina, I’m leaving,” I insisted.

“Deal.”

There were about ten women in the room, and they were all standing at the coffee and donuts table. Destiny was mixing and mingling, but I kept my head down and looked at my cup of coffee. I wasn’t exactly a social butterfly. Parties terrified me, and I would do just about anything not to talk to a stranger. Steve even had to call to make reservations at restaurants for me. It was a relief when it was time to start the meeting, and everyone took their seats.

They went around the circle of chairs, each woman introducing herself. There was Dottie, who was trying to make a living creating knitted tea cozies after her son stole her identity and bankrupted her. Then, there was Frances who was on food stamps after she was fired a year before she was supposed to get her pension, and Jane, whose boyfriend...well, they were losers, all of them, and I couldn’t wait to get out of there, back to my nice life.

“I’m going to kill you,” I hissed at Destiny, who was sitting to my left.

“This is an empowering group of women,” she hissed back. “Relax and get empowered.”

I didn’t know exactly what she meant by empowered. I was plenty empowered. Why did I need to get more empowered? And besides, how would these tea-cozy-making women teach me about empowerment?

After they shared about their miseries, they passed around little mirrors. My heart raced. “I told you,” I whispered to Destiny. “I’m *not* looking at my vagina.” Panicked, I hopped up and went back to the donut table. They were out of sprinkles—I might have had something to do with that—and

took a bear claw, instead.

But I was wrong about the mirrors. They were merely used by the women to look at their faces, in order to see their so-called beauty, intelligence, worth, and potential. I didn't look in my mirror. I thought that I already knew everything I was.

But that was a month ago when I was happy. Now, I was a miserable slob with no car and no husband.

"No. No. Everything's fine," I heard myself say into the phone.

"You're hiding something from me," she said and hiccupped. "I'm coming home in nine days. I'm having shex," she slurred. "Lots of shex."

Shex in Hawaii sounded great. I wanted shex. I mean, if I didn't have to get naked for it. Tight Tammy probably had no problem getting naked for shex. She was probably naked all the time, showing off her tightness. She probably got naked to take out the trash and to eat chips.

Who was I kidding? Tight Tammy didn't eat chips.

I got up and walked to the kitchen to get chips. "I've started working out," I told Destiny. "And I ate egg whites."

I ripped open the potato chips bag and popped a chip into my mouth. "That's great. I'm so happy for you," Destiny said. "I'm bringing you back macadamia nuts and a shell necklace." She giggled, and I heard a man's voice in the background.

"Well, I'll let you get back to your fun," I said.

She giggled, again. "Are you sure you're okay?" she said, sounding a little more sober. It was my moment to tell her about Steve, Tight Tammy, my car, and my bank accounts. It was my moment to get a wave of sympathy from my best friend.

But she was giggling and happy. She was on vacation and having shex. And she would be back in a little over a week, and then it would be all day and all night sympathy and

talking about my asshat husband. So, I decided to let her have a last, happy week on her vacation.

Besides, she wouldn't like that I was trying to win him back. She would quote Gloria Steinem, buy me a diaphragm, a box of condoms, and force me back to the women's club. Blech. That would be worse than egg whites and running.

"Yes, I'm fine. Just a little sore."

"Me, too," she said and giggled again.

When I got off the phone, I was thrust back into the quiet of my house. I had muted the television, and now the only sound was my chip-crunching and the soft tick-tick of the kitchen clock. "I'm not going to cry," I said, trying to break through the quiet. The silence of the empty house seemed to close in, suffocating me. I began to gasp for air. "I'm not going to freak out," I said. "I'm definitely not going to freak out."

I forced thoughts of relaxing and happy things into my brain. Sandy beaches, turquoise water, Mozart, and puppies... I crammed them all into my cerebral cortex or whatever part of the brain held images. The image of puppies calmed me the most. I had always wanted a dog, but Steve said they were disease carriers.

I wondered what kind of disease dogs carried. I didn't want anything major, like malaria or typhus, but I might have put up with a small disease like pink eye to have a dog to fill up the quiet, empty house. Putting the chip bag down on the corner of the counter, a few chips spilled out onto the divorce papers. I dusted the chips off and caught the words *relinquish the property* and *no spousal support* on the divorce papers. "Don't freak out," I said to myself, turning them over, so I couldn't see the words.

But it was too late. I was halfway to freaked out, and there was no turning back. I turned on the TV and blasted the volume, but it didn't help.

"I need help," I told myself. "And I probably shouldn't talk to myself."



Joe rang my doorbell twenty minutes later. “I’m delivering your happiness,” he said with a smile when I opened the door. I stepped aside, and he walked in and headed to the kitchen with a large paper bag. “Sorry it took so long. I had a big delivery to a frat party. How are you?”

Was that a trick question? I had called him every night for the past three nights, ordering all kinds of junk food. It didn’t take Sherlock Holmes to deduce how I was. Tonight, I had ordered donut holes and a pound of broccoli, even though I was sure Joe was catching on to my decoy vegetable orders.

“Just fine. Just fine,” I said, forcing a smile. I wasn’t happy, but I was happy to see him. He filled the quiet of my house, and I didn’t feel as lonely anymore with him there.

Joe took the broccoli out of the bag and put it in the refrigerator. Then, he put the donut holes in the cabinet and stuffed the paper bag with the others under the sink. He knew my house better than I did.

“Would you like a cup of coffee?” I asked, surprising myself. It was a blatant attempt at preventing him from leaving. My panic level was rising, knowing that he was about to walk out the door and leave me alone, again. Joe was surprised by my offer, too. He stared at me with his eyes open wide and his smile drooping a little. “I have donut holes, too. They go great with coffee,” I added, sweetening the pot. If he didn’t want the donuts, I was afraid I would block his exit with my body and disgrace myself big time.

The seconds ticked away. Well, maybe one second ticked away. But it seemed like forever. I guess time slows down when a person thinks they’re going to be rejected. I held my breath. I thought about telling him I was joking, that I didn’t really want to have coffee with him because I had a very hectic social calendar and didn’t have time to waste. I opened my mouth, but Joe beat me to it.

“Coffee sounds spectacular,” he said, his smile back in full form. “Donut holes, too. I have to admit that your holes

gave me a hankering for my own.”

He took a seat on a barstool and laid his forearms on the counter. I two-stepped to the coffeemaker and brewed a pot of decaf hazelnut. “Cream?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t refuse it.” I took the cream out of the fridge and poured some into a crystal cream dispenser. “This is very nice of you to invite me for coffee. Nice to take time out of your evening for me.”

I bit my lip, in order not to divulge that he was only interrupting the next infomercial. I poured two cups and handed him one. I remained standing on the other side of the counter and took a sip. “The donut holes,” I exclaimed, remembering them. I took them out of the cabinet and laid them out on one of my small wedding plates, remembering every ounce of Emily Post I could... although Emily Post was pretty quiet about donut holes. Joe took one and dunked it in his coffee. It looked good, and I did the same.

“I’m sorry to take you away from your deliveries,” I said, after my second donut hole. Joe ate a donut in one bite and gulped his coffee. He ate with a lot of gusto, like there was nothing he would rather be doing.

“Actually, I’m not on call today. Someone else is on delivery duty.”

“But...” I started, looking at the donut holes.

Joe’s face turned a light shade of red. “I heard your call come in, and since I’ve been your regular Delivery Happiness man, I thought I would do the delivery, anyway. Is that weird?” he asked after thinking about it for a moment.

Was that weird? A few days ago, I would have said that was just good service, but now standing a foot away from him, our eyes locked, and some kind of communication passing between us, I wasn’t sure. Lately, either men were shitting all over me, or they were bending over backwards to help me out. Who was I to say what was weird and what was normal? I seemed to have fallen into a parallel universe where nothing made sense, and everything was weird.

“No, not weird at all,” I said.

Joe nodded and smiled. “Good. I live about ten miles away, up in the mountains, and it’s a nice bike ride to your house. I enjoy it. How’s your bike treating you?”

“I haven’t had a chance to use it yet. To tell you the truth, I’m sort of afraid to ride it out on the street.”

“Navigating around the cars can be tricky. A little nerve-wracking at first. How about I pick you up tomorrow, and we can go for a trial ride together? I could protect you from all the big bad cars.”

I wanted to be protected from all of the big bad cars. I wanted to have an appointment to do something fun with a kind, attractive man. But with his invitation, the air in the room changed. The atoms rearranged themselves, and on some deep level, I realized that my life had just made an unalterable detour. Or maybe it had been going in that direction all along and I didn’t want to accept it. In any case, if I said yes to going on a bike ride with Joe, I was reasonably sure that that would mean that there was no turning back and that my life was changed forever.

“My life is... complicated,” I said, focusing on the plate of donut holes so that I wouldn’t have to look him in the eye.

“That’s the crazy thing about life, right? We keep trying to keep it simple, but it’s a little like turning back the tide.”

Right there and then, I almost told Joe about my plan to win back my husband. It was on the tip of my tongue to give him the whole, sordid story about Tight Tammy and my bank accounts, about the lost cruise around the world, and the truth about my car and my bedroom set. I was dying to tell him about my strategy to make my high school sweetheart love me again, about how I was eating egg whites and running, in order to be happy again.

My lips quivered from the pressure of the words struggling to get out. But like ordering kale and broccoli to

compensate for my junk food bonanza, I kept the hideous details to myself. Joe didn't press me about why my life was complicated, and he didn't say another word about the bike ride. The television got louder, as a commercial ended and an old movie started.

"*Bringing Up Baby* with Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant," I said, thankful for the change of subject. "This is one of my favorites."

"Mine, too," he said, standing. He dusted himself off, obviously getting ready to leave, and I didn't want that to happen. I wasn't sure about braving a ten-mile bike ride with him, but I was quite certain I was happier when he was around.

"Well, if you have time, maybe you'd like to sit and watch it with me. I could make popcorn." It came out like a question, like I had doubts about my ability to microwave a bag of popcorn. I almost slapped my hands on my mouth to shove the words back in, but it was too late.

Had I just asked Joe out on a date? I had blown him off about bike riding and then invited him to sit with me to watch a movie? What was I doing? I was a married woman, and as far as I knew, Joe was a married man. I scanned his left hand for a ring, but his fingers were bare. That didn't prove anything. As far as I knew, artists didn't wear wedding rings. They wore skull rings or fairy rings. I looked down again at Joe's hand. Nope. No skulls or fairies. I squeezed my eyes shut, willing myself to disappear. I had become an adulterer. I had become Tight Tammy without the Tight. Self-hatred ate me up and shame washed over me. I was about to take the offer back when Joe surprised me and agreed to stay.

"Sounds just about perfect. Butter on the popcorn?" he asked, making my shame and self-hatred disappear just as quickly as they had appeared.

I popped the popcorn and added extra butter. I scooted my blanket and pillow aside, and we sat close together on the couch with our feet up on the coffee table. The movie was even better than I had remembered, and it felt great to laugh out loud with Joe. I had been nervous about spending so much

time alone with him, but he was so easy and open that he took the awkwardness out of the room.

Afterward, I walked Joe to the door. “How about I pick you up at one tomorrow?” he asked.

“Pick me up?”

“The bike ride. I’ll take you up to my place. Half of the ride is on a protected path, away from traffic. Real pretty.”

“Uh,” I said because I couldn’t figure out what else to say.



## CHAPTER 7

### “Peer Pressure and Blow Jobs”

I woke up, disoriented. A glimmer of light peeked through the curtains, and my face was smooshed into my pillow with dried drool on my chin and the corners of my eyes encrusted with goo. Grabbing my phone off the coffee table, I checked the time. Six-thirty. I had slept a full six hours without moving. It was a record since my life had turned upside down. I almost felt refreshed, almost happy.

I shouldn't have slept so well. In fact, I should have been paralyzed with anxiety. Somehow, I had agreed to go on a bike ride with a man who wasn't my husband, and that should have sent my blood pressure through the roof. Not only that, but we were going to his place.

His place.

What did *his place* mean? It could be his home or it could be his penis. It could mean both.

I was pretty sure *his place* was a euphemism for monkey sex. Or at least some kind of animal sex. Or just plain old ordinary sex, which I hadn't experienced in over a year. Even when I was having plain old ordinary sex, it was married-for-twenty-five-years kind of sex, which was pretty much not sex.

In other words, I wasn't prepared for *his place*.

I couldn't have sex with Joe. He would probably want to do something kinky, like keep the lights on while we were naked. I couldn't let that happen. The designer mirror that Steve had insisted on installing in our walk-in closet was witness to the horror that was happening to my butt. Terrible things were happening to my ass. It didn't even look like an ass, anymore. It looked more and more like Nixon, to be frank.

That's why I walked backward for a week during our beach vacation last year. There was no way I was going to let anybody see back there. I definitely couldn't let Joe see back there.

What was I thinking? Joe wasn't going to see my butt. Joe wasn't going to have sex with me. I was a middle-aged married woman who slept on her couch. He was a nice guy who delivered junk food to my house and wanted to teach me to ride a bike. There's nothing sexual about a bike. It was a G-rated date. In fact, it was not a date at all. Perfectly platonic.

That's what I kept telling myself while I folded my blanket and went upstairs to take a shower. As I let the hot water rain down on me, I got inspired to shave my legs. Afterward, they looked shiny and new and inspired me to blow dry my hair and put on mascara.

"Hello, there," I told my reflection in the bathroom mirror. "You have mascara on." I didn't look half bad, not as young and thin as Tight Tammy, but passable. I only had eight days to win back my husband, but for the first time since he drove away from my life, I was truly optimistic that I could make it happen. Steve would come back to me. With twenty minutes before Hudson was due to show up, I skipped downstairs and made myself a cup of coffee with extra cream, and finished off the donut holes from the night before. Remembering my assignment, I opened the notebook. Without thinking too much, I wrote, "I want to go bike riding with Joe," which was cheating since that was a done deal. As an afterthought, I wrote, "I want my husband back" and circled it. Hudson said writing down my goals would be difficult, but it was a piece of cake. What I wanted hadn't changed, and now I was so motivated that I wasn't even worried about what Hudson had in store for me today. Bring it on, handsome torturer.

He arrived right on time. I opened the door to him standing and texting on his phone. He was wearing his usual shorts and a tight t-shirt, but he was distracted by whatever was happening on his phone. I waved him in, and it took him a second to notice me.

“Do you mind if we go on an errand before our workout?” he asked, slipping his phone into his pocket. I loved how he said, “our workout,” as if he was actually working out with me instead of just standing by in case I needed CPR.

“Sure. We don’t have to run today if you’re busy.”

“The errand won’t take too long.” He leaned forward and sniffed my face. “Really? Donuts?”

I slapped my hand over my mouth. “How do you know what donuts smell like? I thought you only ate egg whites and chicken breasts.”

“And broccoli,” he said. The corners of his mouth curved upward, making the dimple in his cheek appear. I was struck again by how handsome he was.

“I shaved my legs,” I told him.

His eyebrows knitted together, as if he was trying to figure out what I was saying, but he was distracted by his phone, which buzzed. He pushed some buttons, and his jaw worked as he ground his teeth. It was the first time that I had seen him less than cool and collected, and I wondered what was happening with his phone to make him so upset.

“Do you mind if we go right now?” he asked, but he was already digging in his pocket for his car keys and looking away. Quickly, I got my purse, closed up the house, and followed him out to his Camaro.

The errand was located in a seedy area of San Diego, full of squat, falling-down buildings, most of them housing filthy garages. Cars were parked everywhere in every stage of disrepair. Hudson parked in between two of the garages, in front of a small stucco building covered in graffiti except for its black door.

“Are you getting your car fixed?” I asked as he turned off the motor.

Hudson took a deep breath, as if he needed to calm himself. “No. I have a friend in need. Hopefully, it won’t take long.”

He got out of the car and walked around to open my door for me. Hudson put his hand on my back as we walked toward the building's front door, and I could feel the tension in his body radiate through his hand. I wanted to lighten the mood, but the only joke I knew was a knock-knock about an orange and a banana that I learned in second grade, and I didn't think Hudson would appreciate it.

His hand reached for the door handle, and he took another deep breath. He opened the door for me to enter. Inside, it was pretty dark, but it was clear that it was a bar. There were a few tables with mismatched chairs in the confined space. Behind the bar was a long mirror and rows of bottles. A quick scan of the bar told me I was the only woman and the oldest person in the place, except for the bartender, who looked like he played for ZZ Top. Four men stood when we entered. They were all built like Hudson, with lots of muscles and perfect bone structure. It was like a pecs and abs model convention.

"Surprise!" they shouted in unison and shot us with a barrage of Silly String.

"No fucking way," Hudson breathed.

I slapped away the Silly String so I could see and try to figure out what was happening. At first, I thought this was the way I was going to die, but it became quickly apparent that they were Hudson's friends. The four men ran at him, grabbing him and slapping his arms, shoulders, and back. "Happy birthday!" they shouted.

Hudson turned around, looked at me, and shrugged, like he was powerless to stop the force of his four friends. I wished I had known it was his birthday. I could have made him a birthday omelet or whatever hyper-fit hunks eat for their birthday. Two of Hudson's friends forced a glass of beer down his throat, and he coughed and choked the whole thing down. "It's not my birthday," he said when he came up for air. "It's not my birthday," he repeated in my direction. "My birthday isn't until August."

His blond friend, who looked like he was the oldest in

the group, put his arm around my shoulders. “No way could we give him a surprise party on his birthday. What kind of surprise would that be?”

“No surprise at all,” I agreed, mostly because the blond was about seven-feet-tall and a dead ringer for Conan the Barbarian. His arm must have weighed thirty pounds, and it was making my shoulders slump, as we walked to the center table where they laid out at least twenty glasses of beer.

“I’m Lance,” Conan told me. “I’m the mature one of the group.”

“Not true,” Hudson said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “He’s the geezer of the group. I’m the mature one.”

“Two years older than the rest of these hee-haws,” Lance said, holding up two fingers. “Two.”

Another friend, who was about half Lance’s size with jet-black hair, pushed Lance away from me and put his arm around my shoulder. “Who’s the chick, Hud? Is this a morning date or a leftover from last night?”

I felt myself turn red from my head to my toes. I must have looked like I had been dipped in red paint. I should have been insulted, but the idea that anyone would think that Hudson and I could be romantically involved or that he could be interested in me in any way was totally ridiculous.

Thinking about being romantically involved with Hudson, even though it was ridiculous, made me tingly all over. I flipped my hair and giggled. Being around so much young testosterone was giving me delusions that I was at the Winter Formal, surrounded by suitors. Hudson came to my rescue and lifted his friend’s arm off of my shoulder.

“Have some respect, Tony. This is Eliza Farris. Just friends, and she’s a real lady.”

Tony slapped the back of his own hand, as if he was scolding himself, and bowed to me. “Hello, Eliza. I’m Tony. Nice to meet you.”

“And I’m Peter, and this is Jeremy,” another blond

friend told me. Peter was bouncing off the walls with energy, and it looked like he had gotten a head start drinking. He shoved another beer into Hudson's hand, but he waved it off.

"I can't," Hudson said. "I'm driving."

"For the love of Pete," Peter said. "Be a man, Hud. Lady, you may not know that Hud is a man, or maybe you did and just figured that he tied down his junk." He eyed Hudson's crouch. "Nope. Nothing there!"

Hudson wrapped his arm around Peter's throat, and then it was a free for all as Hudson, Peter, and Tony rolled around on the floor trying to kill each other. Jeremy and Lance didn't seem to be concerned for their friend's safety.

"Let's get this lovely lady a drink," Lance said.

"That okay. I don't normally drink before... well, nine in the morning," I said, waving my hands.

"Give her that breakfast drink we had in Manilla," Jeremy suggested.

"Breakfast drink?" I asked, thinking about Hudson's disgusting protein drinks. "I don't like kale."

"Kale!" Peter blurted and doubled over with laughter. "No kale, beautiful. We're talking about a Blow Job!"

My face got hot again, and I was sure that I was fire engine red. Damn it. I so wanted to be cool, but my cool was coming out as a middle-aged housewife. New bras or not, I was all June Cleaver and not a drop of Beyoncé.

"Blow Job is the name of a drink," Hudson told me, extricating himself from his friends, and he shrugged again, as if he was embarrassed, too. It was hard to imagine him embarrassed by anything, and his discomfort was endearing.

"Give this woman a Blow Job!" Peter yelled at the ZZ Top bartender. A minute later, I was handed a thick and creamy drink in a short tumbler.

"Yum," I said, honestly. It was like the best smoothie ever. Like a smoothie with no fruit and vegetables. I downed the drink, like it was Ovaltine, and another one was handed to

me. “Creamy. I don’t normally like blow jobs, but this one is delicious,” I commented and belched.

“This was great, but we need to get going,” Hudson told his friends.

“Hud wants to leave, men,” Lance announced. “You know what that means!”

It turned out that it meant that Hudson needed his hands and feet zip-tied, his pants pulled down, and thrown onto the bar where Jeremy sat on him. By then, I was feeling the Blow Jobs like I was trying to wake up after surgery.

“Hudson wears briefs?” I said out loud, studying his half-nakedness, as he struggled on the bar.

“Did you say you wanted another drink?” Peter asked me.

“I don’t know,” I said, swaying on my feet. I was dimly aware that Peter was holding me up. “Maybe I did?”

“Keg stand!” Peter yelled.

“Keg stand!” the others yelled back.

“Keg stand!” I yelled, too. “What’s a keg stand?” Peter picked me up in his arms, like I was his baby. “Are you crazy? You’ll hurt your back,” I said.

“Keg stand!” he yelled again, ignoring me.

“Drop her and give me my pants back,” Hudson grumbled from the bar counter.

“I kind of like being carried,” I said, gazing into Peter’s eyes, and belched again.

Even though I wasn’t cool, even though I was a middle-aged housewife wearing sweatpants and Skechers walking shoes, the coolest, hottest men in America had made me one of theirs. For the first time in my life, I was part of the *in* crowd. I was Marsha Brady. So, it didn’t matter to me what a keg stand was. If it included being in the *in* crowd and being carried by a handsome young man with no body fat, I was all for it.

“Keg stand!” I yelled, which drew another round of hoots and hollers.

The bartender dragged a beer keg out from behind the bar, and Lance tapped it. “Oh...a keg,” I said, understanding slowly invading the alcohol-doused corners of my mind. “A keg...stand? Is that like a nightstand?”

“Tony, take a leg,” Peter said.

“I’ll get the valve,” Lance announced.

“No fair,” Jeremy said, still sitting on Hudson. “You guys get the fun part. I’m stuck with old man Hud.”

In a blur, I was turned upside down, held up by my legs. Lance told me to open my mouth, and he stuck the hose in it.

At this point, I should have begged off the keg stand. I should have left well enough alone. But I was a sucker for peer pressure, especially when the peers weren’t my own peers, and I was giddy with excitement that they thought they were. Peer pressure aside, if two Blow Jobs weren’t making me especially stupid, I would have freed Hudson with the nail clippers in my purse and left while I still had a couple brain cells left.

But the Blow Jobs were making me stupid.

So, I opened my mouth and sucked on the hose, as I was held upside down. *Gulp. Gulp. Gulp.* Up went the beer down my throat.

I was a whiz at keg standing, making my new group proud of me. Actually, it wasn’t that hard to do. I kept gulping, like I had been keg standing my whole life. And probably, my over-consumption of just about everything had prepared me for this moment. There wasn’t much difference between this and sucking down a pint of chocolate milk in no time flat, and I had years of experience doing that.

After a couple minutes, they put me down on my two feet and cheered my accomplishment. “Thank you,” I said, bowing. Then, I fell on my face.

“Uh-oh. Hudson’s mad,” I heard one of them say as I



lay there with a face full of linoleum. There were a few loud noises, like wood was being chopped for a fire, followed by a couple screams. I flew off the floor, and it took me a moment to realize that Hudson had picked me up and not that I had suddenly acquired the magical power of flight.

“Thanks for the party, dudes,” he said.

“It was nice to meet you,” I told Hudson’s friends, but it came out like two moans and a hiccup. “I would be very happy to host you at my house next time.”

“What’d she say?” Lance asked.

“Something about her breasts?” Jeremy said, taking a shot at deciphering my blotto speaking skills.

“No, not about her breasts,” Hudson growled and pulled me out of the bar, my body clamped to the side of his with his mega-muscley arm. The guys followed him out, and when Hudson opened his car door, they threw a bunch of birthday presents inside.

“Call Neil deGrasse Tyson because the earth is spinning way too fast,” I moaned.

“Fall back, Marines,” one of them shouted. “She’s about to blow.”

“Okay, let me get you over to the curb,” Hudson urged. “I’ll hold your hair.”

What a hero. He was going to hold my hair. Normally, only best girlfriends did that. Hudson was such a nice guy. Thoughtful. “Are you gay?” I asked and then my body convulsed as if I was turning into The Incredible Hulk, and I projectile-vomited a keg stand’s-worth of beer.

Luckily, only some of the vomit hit Hudson. The rest landed on his Camaro, spraying the interior through the open door.

## CHAPTER 8

### “A Perfect Innie”

“Your car smells bad,” I complained.

“There you are,” Hudson said. “Conscious again.”

“Can’t you drive without moving the car?” I asked. He was driving away from the bar and getting closer to my neighborhood. I felt like death, like a POW in an old Chuck Norris movie who was begging for death after being locked in a bamboo cage in the jungle for twenty years. I was slumped against the passenger door with my face halfway out the open window.

“We’re almost there,” he said.

“Liar! Oh, God.” Oh God was right. I needed a miracle. I needed God to come down from heaven and suck the alcohol out of my veins and replace my stomach with a new one. Preferably a stomach from someone who never did a keg stand or a Blow Job.

Damned peer pressure. Nothing good came from peer pressure. That’s why hermits and recluses and Unabombers were such stable characters. They didn’t have peers to pressure them.

“I’ll get you back in your house in three minutes. Can you make it that long?”

“What do you mean?” I moaned.

“Are you going to throw up in my car again in the next three minutes? I put a plastic bag next to you.”

“I’m not an animal,” I insisted. “I’m a grown woman, and I know how to handle my liquor and control my bod...”

My body convulsed, and the rest of the keg stand flew

out of my body and sprayed the entire dashboard and windshield.

“That’s what I figured,” Hudson mumbled, and I passed out.



“You can’t carry me. I’m too heavy,” I moaned. Hudson had found my house keys in my purse, and he was unlocking the front door while he held me in his arms.

“You’re not too heavy. I’ve carried grown men. You’re not as heavy as a grown man.”

I choked up and started to cry. “That’s the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me.” I hiccupped and another wave of nausea hit me. “Bathroom. Toilet. Help.”

He carried me to the guest bathroom and let me down gently to the floor. I lifted the toilet seat and hovered over it. But I didn’t throw up again. I had finally reached the bottom of the Keg Stands and Blow Jobs. I had emptied out the toxic alcohol from my body and was left with dehydration and overwhelming nausea.

And a headache.

I slumped back against the wall and sat with my legs outstretched, like I was hugging the toilet with them. It was a nice guest bathroom, designed by the expensive designer that Steve had hired. The wallpaper had raised, fuzzy green and blue flowers, and the faucet had gold handles shaped like birds. I would never have thought to design a bathroom like it. I would have painted the walls white and bought regular chrome faucet handles.

“I have no design skills,” I cried. My body’s last few drops of fluid leaked from my eyes and rolled down my face. “I like white walls. I like chrome. I don’t understand bird handles.”

“You’re a wreck.”

I wiped my nose with the back of my hand. “This is the

first time you're noticing that? Boy, nothing gets past you, Marine Boy. Oh my God. I'm going to throw up, again. Why did you make me drink?"

"Hold on. I'll be right back."

He left the bathroom, and I continued to study the wallpaper so I wouldn't have to study my life. Also, the multicolored flowers helped with my nausea for some reason. I figured it was because they made me dizzy in the opposite direction that the drunk was making me dizzy, counteracting the dizziness. Kind of like a double negative of dizziness. A couple minutes later, Hudson came back in with a glass filled with a maroon-colored mystery liquid.

"My failsafe hangover cure," he announced proudly. "First time I've ever made it at eleven o'clock in the morning."

"I don't have a hangover yet. I'm still drunk."

"It's all the same thing. Don't you know that?"

"No. How do you know that? How do you know... everything? You're a muscle-bound kid, but you talk like you're Yoda or that blind Kung Fu guy or Oprah. How did you turn into Oprah?"

"I'm not a kid, Eliza. Drink up." He handed me the hangover cure, curling my fingers around the glass.

"I don't want it. It'll make me sick."

He crouched down. His eyes were steely blue, an impossibly beautiful color on an impossibly beautiful man. It wasn't fair that he got more than his share of beauty when so many of us needed more. "Drink. It'll make you better. I can't leave until I know that you're better. Do you want that on your head?"

"No. My head hurts enough already."

"Drink."

"But it's gross."

"It's not gross. It's going to make you feel better."

I didn't believe him. Gross was gross. But I couldn't

fight him on it. I couldn't fight him on anything. He had muscles, and he was a Marine. He was trained to fight. He was born to fight. I was born for...well; I didn't know what I was born for. I had never gotten that far in my life. Hudson was pushing the glass closer to my mouth, and he had a determined look on his face, like he was charging up San Juan Hill or was forcing down his millionth egg white omelet. He wasn't going to take no for an answer. My only way out was to drop dead. The way I felt, I only had a seventy percent chance of doing that, so I decided to give in. Scarf down the liquid and resign myself to throwing it up right after.

"Fine," I said.

"That's my girl," he said, and I caught him blush. It wasn't my kind of head-to-toe blush. Just a faint tint, but for some reason, it made me happy and gave me just enough motivation to take the plunge and drink the nasty hangover cure.

And boy, was it nasty. It was thick, but not like the creamy Blow Job. This was thick in a gross vegetable way.

Dammit. The bastard had found all the vegetables I had bought from Delivery Happiness to distract from my junk food orders.

"Keep going," Hudson ordered. "Don't stop drinking until it's all done."

I gave him a dose of the evil eye, but he didn't seem concerned that I was upset at being forced to drink a disgusting mashup of everything gross and healthy in my kitchen.

Finally, I drained the contents of the glass. Surprisingly, I didn't retch.

"What did you do? Put Brussel sprouts in there?"

Hudson took the glass from me. "Yep. Feel that? It's your body in shock that it consumed something without preservatives in it."

There was a suspicious-looking glint in his eye. "Wait a second. Was that really a hangover cure, or did you just trick

me into drinking broccoli?”

Hudson shrugged and smiled wide. “All’s fair in love and getting into shape. I had to get cruciferous veggies into you somehow.”

“I don’t know what shocks me more, how devious you are or the fact that you said *veggies*.”

“Come on, girl,” he said, giving me his hand. “Time to tuck you in so you can sleep this off.”

He tucked me in on the couch and put a large glass of water on the coffee table next to me. He sat on the couch sideways, facing me. “Don’t forget to hydrate. A gallon of water. That will right you. That and a few hours of sleep.”

My traitorous eyes filled with tears again. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

“Because you’re not nice to you.”

“Look at me. I’m such a loser.”

“You’re not a loser.”

“I threw up in your car. You must hate me.”

“The car thing wounded me, I have to admit.”

“I’m so sorry I did that.”

He took my hand in his and gave it a gentle squeeze. “This isn’t your fault. It’s my fault.”

“No, it isn’t. I’m the one who drank half of a keg of beer.”

“You wouldn’t have drunk anything if it wasn’t for me. It’s my fault. I gave you shit for eating ice cream, and now you have alcohol poisoning. I tried to help you, but I only succeeded in hurting you. I’m the loser, Eliza. Not you. Me.”

I squeezed his hand back. “If you’re a loser, then there isn’t a person alive or dead who’s a winner. You’re Mr. Perfect. You’re flawless. It’s like God forgot to give you a flaw. You probably don’t even have a belly button.”

Hudson laughed and lifted his shirt. His belly button

was there, just where it was supposed to be. A perfect innie, surrounded by washboard abs.

I closed my eyes because he was difficult to look at. Too perfect. Too unreal. A belly button, but no belly. I didn't like how affected I was by looking at a man's non-belly.

"Before you go to sleep, I'm going to give you the third commandment," he told me.

"Are we still doing the commandment thing? Even if you're Moses, I'm not sure that I'm one of the Chosen People where fitness is concerned."

"Now that you *know thyself*, it's time to try something new," he said, ignoring my comment. "That's the third commandment."

"That's easy. I did a Keg Stand. That's new."

Hudson ignored that comment, too. He was very good at ignoring my comments. "Try something new that won't make you sick. And keep knowing yourself. You still have a ways to go in that department, but I'm leaving in a few days, so we have to move this along fast."

"Okay, boss," I mumbled. The ill effects of the alcohol were dimming and were being replaced by a wave of fatigue that was impossible to fight. I drifted off to sleep with Hudson still sitting on the couch, his thighs touching my hip.



A few hours later, I woke up with a start, sure I had forgotten something important, but totally unable to remember what I had forgotten.

I rolled off the couch and knocked into the coffee table and made the glass of water spill. There was no sign of Hudson. My tongue was glued to the roof of my mouth, a swollen, dry lump of flesh that made me want to retch again.

"I'm going to die," I moaned. "Please let me die."

I hadn't had more than one drink at a time in ten years. I had never gone to college, so I never got used to being

sloshed. Damn me for not going to college. I should have at least taken one class, gone to one frat party, prepared for this eventuality. I could feel the dregs of alcohol in every cell in my body. “Get out of my cells, you dregs,” I moaned. They ignored me. They were still there. I could feel them. They were rooted in, stuck in place, determined to stay forever, sucking out my good health, even though Hudson thought I wasn’t in any kind of good health. Well, the joke was on Hudson. I was in great health until the booze got me. Now I had proof.

“I can never feel worse than I do right this second,” I moaned. “Never. Torture me, and I wouldn’t feel worse. Take pictures of my stretch marks and put them on Tik Tok, I wouldn’t feel worse. I am as bad as it gets.”

The doorbell rang.

Lifting my head off the pillow, I looked around. “Oh my God, now I’m hearing things. The alcohol has wormed its way into my eardrums. Ice cream doesn’t do this kind of damage. Cookies are friendly. Snacks are kind and comforting. They don’t make me hear things. They don’t... Ow.”

I needed to stop talking. Talking hurt.

The doorbell rang again. This time, I sat up. I wasn’t really hearing things. The doorbell had actually rung. Who would ring my doorbell at this hour? I didn’t have any friends or family in town. Nobody loved me. Nobody cared.

Oh, wait.

Hobbling my way to the door, I peeked through the peephole. “Joe, is that you?” I croaked.

“Beautiful day,” he sang out from the other side of the door. “Beautiful day to ride a bike.”

Holy crap. Not only had I agreed to a bike ride, I had agreed to do it while I had terminal hangoveritis.

Joe lifted a drink holder in view of the peephole. “But first, I brought mochas and bear claws. Cycling is much better with mocha and a bear claw on a stomach.”



All of a sudden, my hangover nausea lifted. Mocha and a bear claw? Joe was my hero.

“I’m going to open the door,” I announced. “Close your eyes.”

I opened the door, and true to his word, Joe kept his eyes closed. “You caught me,” he said. “I lied about the bear claws. I got you two, not one.”

Grabbing his arm, I pulled him into the house and closed the door. “I’m going to let you open your eyes now. But remember this is not my fault. I’m not used to drinking, and I fell into peer pressure. I’m sure I look worse than I feel, so there’s at least a sixty percent chance that you will turn to stone when you see me.”

“I’m very brave,” he told me with his eyes closed.

“Okay. Open ‘em.”

He opened his eyes, and I slouched down, trying to hide, and bracing myself for his comments about devil alcohol or that my hair looked like I had put my finger in a light socket, or that I had residual vomit or drool on my shirt.

But Joe didn’t flinch or scan me for damage or do the smallest grimace. He held up the bag of donuts. “As I promised,” he announced. “Should I put them on the counter?”

I pointed at the kitchen. He put the bag and the mochas down. I hopped to it and took out a couple of plates. “Should we eat in here or on the couch?” he asked.

Since the couch had the remains of my night on it, I thought we should eat in the dining room like grownups. Then, I remembered that Steve and Tight Tammy had cleared the furniture out of the dining room. I still had stools at the kitchen counter, so I chose the kitchen. I sat down, and Joe dragged one of the other stools to the other side of the counter so we could face each other.

“Bear claws are my favorite,” he said, taking a large bite of one of them. Donuts with sprinkles were my favorite, but I decided to keep that to myself. After all, Joe might think I was ungrateful, or that I didn’t like bear claws, and I was

planning on inhaling both of my bear claws. I had a theory they would cure my hangover. Broccoli and Brussel sprouts drinks were bull-hockey, but donuts could cure any ill.

I took a sip of the mocha. It was heaven. Heavy on the mocha and sugar, light on the coffee. But just enough of the coffee to whirr my brain out of the fog. I closed my eyes and made a primal, guttural noise.

“I know the owner of the coffee place,” Joe said. “Debra. She’s a Delivery Happiness regular, too. Wonderful woman. She lost her husband after fifty years of marriage. A month after his memorial, she opened the shop. Debra had never worked outside of the home before, but it was her dream. Coffee and baked goods. She’s a whiz with scones, too.”

“She lost her husband? What did he die from?”

“Oh, he didn’t die. At least, they didn’t find a body. She literally lost him on a whale-watching trip.”

I gasped. “He went overboard?”

“Nope,” Joe said, shaking his head. “He disappeared before he got on board. She turned around, and he wasn’t there. Lost.”

Biting into my first bear claw, I thought about Debra and lost husbands. There were so many ways to lose a husband. Death, murder, abduction, and personal trainers. Once I got into shape, I was going to find my husband again and not lose him again. Hmmm...a tiny, worrisome doubt knocked on my brain, wondering how I wouldn’t lose him, again, but I shoved the doubt away with another bite of the bear claw.

“It’s really delicious,” I said. “I’m glad Debra got into business.”

I wasn’t lying. It was delicious and working miracles. Hudson could have his smoothie, egg white habits, but they didn’t do a thing against a hangover. For that, only deep-fried, sugary dough would do.

After the donuts and coffee, Joe waited for me while I

took a quick shower and changed for our bike ride. I found a baseball cap in the closet. It helped to cover up a portion of my face, which was a good thing today.

“You look the part for a bike ride, Eliza,” Joe said, approving when I returned downstairs. “Sporty. Wait until you see the day. Sweeter than bear claws.”

I opened the garage, and I took my new bike out onto the driveway. “Don’t go too fast,” I told Joe. “I haven’t done this in a lot of years. A lot of years. I had a perm the last time I rode a bike.”

“Wow, that’s a long time ago,” Joe said, and smiled at me. He had a nice smile, and he was free with it. Nothing seemed to bother him. Nothing. Not my hangover hair or global warming or cellulite or traffic. “Don’t worry. I’m not in a hurry. I’m more of a stop-and-smell-the-roses kind of guy.”

It had been a long time since I had smelled roses. My husband, Steve, wasn’t a big flowers guy. One time he went to the Super Bowl with his office colleagues, and he brought me back peanut packets from the airplane. They were good peanuts, toffee covered, but it was a typical Steve gift. For my birthdays, he would hand me his American Express card and tell me to get myself something nice. I always appreciated that because Steve wasn’t a good shopper, so he knew I would get myself something nicer than he could.

Still, a bouquet of flowers now and then would have been nice. When I won him back, I would have to let him know how much I liked flowers, so he would give them to me.

“Ready?” Joe asked, waking me up from my thoughts.

I got on my bike. “What if we get hit by a car?”

“We’re going to take a trail, so no traffic. It’s up here a few blocks.”

“I guess I’m ready,” I said, but I didn’t quite know what I was ready for.

## CHAPTER 9

### “Selling Protein Drinks on Instagram”

I followed Joe up the street. He was true to his word about taking it easy. The trail started out flat and straight, and it followed the river. It was a lovely day, warm and sunny with a nice breeze. It almost made me want to be alive, despite the jackhammer against my head. It wasn't as loud of a jackhammer as it was when I first woke up, but it still pounded every minute or so just to remind me that I shouldn't drink.

Joe was careful to stay by my side, even though I was moving at little more than a crawl. “Nice trail, right?” he asked. I nodded in reply. I still wasn't comfortable talking while I rode the bicycle. I needed to concentrate fully on my fear of falling. My hands were wrapped around the handlebars in a death grip. My knuckles were white, and I was feeling a burn begin in my upper arms from the exertion. So far, my legs were doing fine. I guess that was because we were going so slowly that I only needed to pedal once every few feet.

“Nice that the city made the trail next to the river so we could enjoy the view,” Joe continued. “There's a picnic spot a couple miles up, too. Right on the banks of the river. There's a fire pit and a picnic table.”

“Are we having a picnic?” I asked and was ashamed of the sound of hope in my voice, even though I had just consumed a mocha and two bear claws on top of a hangover.

“What're your thoughts on baked ziti?” he asked.

“Pretty much all of my thoughts on baked ziti are good, all except for my thoughts about not having any baked ziti.”

“I make a mean baked ziti,” Joe commented.

I took in his words and rearranged them in my mind

until I thought I understood what he meant when he talked about making a mean baked ziti. “Are you going to bake ziti for me? Is that what’s happening?” I asked, swerving my bicycle as I spoke. “Are we bicycling to your house?”

“It’s on the trail. I thought you would like to see it. There’s a view and some other things I wanted to show you.”

“And baked ziti?”

“And baked ziti,” he agreed. I dared to turn my head and saw him smile at me. He had a very nice smile. Still, I wondered if baked ziti was a euphemism for something I wasn’t prepared to give or consume. And then I wondered if baked ziti was a pretext for something I wasn’t prepared to give or consume. But I kept on pedaling, following Joe to his house.

The trail started an uphill climb, which I was surprised to find was manageable. I should have been concerned about going to Joe’s home. After all, he was more or less a stranger, and I didn’t know where he lived. Maybe he lived in an area with no cell service, not that I had brought my cell phone. Maybe he was a serial killer. Maybe he had a bone farm, and he wanted to add my bones to it. Maybe he wanted me to join his MLM and sell protein drinks on Instagram. The joke was on him. I didn’t have Instagram. So, I should have been concerned about following him to his home. But he was such a comforting presence. He made me feel calm when I was around him, so I trusted him. Besides, I couldn’t turn down pasta. It might come with garlic bread and a dessert. Joe had never let me down before. He was always delivering delicious snacks. He knew my tastes.

He would definitely serve dessert.

It took forty-five minutes to get there. At one point, we turned off the paved trail to a dirt trail that wove between trees and rocks and finally opened up to a large meadow above the town. There was a large farmhouse on the meadow, two bungalows, a couple of barns, and two shacks, all built in a large circle around about two acres of sublime meadow. In the very center was a large fire pit and a ring of wooden lawn

chairs.

Joe got off his bike and helped me off mine. “You live here?” I asked.

He gestured to the meadow and the group of structures. “Welcome to my home.”

“Which one?” I asked.

He smiled, sheepishly. “All of them. The whole property. Although, I live in the farmhouse.”

“You own a compound?”

“I own a compound. It came on the market, and I knew it was my kind of place.”

Wow, deliverymen made a lot more money than I had assumed. Then, I remembered Joe wasn't normally a deliveryman. Normally, he was an artist. He was only a temporary deliveryman, helping out a friend.

Wow, artists made a lot more money than I had assumed.

“It's amazing,” I said. “A compound. Wow. You're not a cult leader, are you?”

“A cult leader? Who would follow me? I do have two friends who live in one of the two bungalows. Jenny and Paul. You'll probably meet them eventually. They have a tendency to show up during dessert time.”

Oh, thank goodness. There was going to be dessert. I was so glad I came.

“You want a tour?” he asked.

I wanted a tour. We started with his house, which had all the original furniture from whoever had lived there before. Comfortable armchairs and overstuffed sofas and maple tables and chairs, all in immaculate condition, filled the house except for a large sunlit room in back, which was Joe's studio.

“You're a real artist,” I said, honestly surprised. A lot of people I knew had claimed they were artists, but they usually just made dangly earrings or sage bundles or moon

water. Joe was a real artist. A painter. His studio was bright and airy, with rows of paintings on canvas on the floor, leaning against the walls. In the center of the studio were two easels with paintings at various stages of completion.

One of the paintings was red. The other was blue.

“You know what?” I said. “Those look a lot like...”

“The Pillars of Creation in space.” Joe rubbed the back of his neck and rolled his eyes. “Would you believe that I’ve had those images in my head since before the Hubble Telescope existed? When the photos came out, I was blown away. I’m not saying that I think the universe was speaking to me, but art is an odd alchemy of magic and skill. A lot of mystery behind it. Where do the ideas come from? The visions that make us need to create? It’s one of the things I like about being an artist. The mystery. The unknowns. It’s like leaping before one knows what one is leaping into. Do you paint?”

“Oh, no,” I said, still lost in thought provoked by his words. I had never thought of art the way he described, but I could see now that he was right. Art must be exactly like that. The mystery of creation. The unknowns. My biggest fear was the unknown, the things that I had no control over, the maybes of what might be around the corner, of what my future would look like. But there was no fear in art. Instead, the unknowns were awe-inspiring. Like a word from above that had to be followed. Normally, I only got that kind of calling telling me to eat sugary, processed foods. I wondered what it would be like to have a calling to create beautiful works of art.

“I’m not a painter,” I said. “I painted the bedroom once, and my husband Steve showed me where I had screwed up, and we had to hire a painter to fix it. Otherwise, I did finger painting with my son Jamie when he was little.”

“That’s lovely, to finger paint with your child,” Joe commented. “What about in school?”

I shook my head. “Not much that I remember.” Then, I did remember something. “But I used to love Playdough. I played with it for hours. Much better than playing with Barbies.”

Joe smiled at me. “How about we finish the tour with some of the other buildings?”

We walked outside and made a circular tour of the compound. The first building was the bungalow where his friends lived. There were flower boxes on the windowsills and a charming flower-lined rock path leading to the front door, which was rounded and painted lavender.

“It’s like Snow White’s house,” I commented.

“Jenny has a thing for Snow White,” Joe said. “I would take you in, but they’re away for a few days, and I don’t feel comfortable going inside without their permission. Not that they wouldn’t give me permission. They love to have people over. Paul is an award-winning bread maker, and he always has new breads to taste. Jenny is an artist and has a very successful Etsy shop. She’s more than happy to show you her wares. Maybe when you come next time, they’ll be here.”

The next building was one of the shacks, which, inside, turned out to be a state-of-the-art kitchen, complete for a professional bread baker. It was immaculate and state-of-the-art.

“I love fresh sourdough with butter,” I blurted out, staring at the row of ovens.

“Paul makes great sourdough, but I would suggest trying his baguettes. A little ham, pickles, and butter on one, and you’ve got a sandwich that’ll make you swoon.”

My stomach growled, and my hand flew to my abdomen. “Excuse me,” I said, embarrassed.

“Don’t be. That’s on me. Of course, you must be starving. I’ll start on the ziti just as soon as we’re done with the tour. It shouldn’t take too long.”

It was just like Joe to be generous in that way, to pretend that not an hour before, I was stuffing my face with bear claws, and there was no earthly reason I should be hungry.

“You know what?” he said. “I have some of Paul’s sourdough in my kitchen. I can make some appetizers with it.



Goat cheese and fig sauce on a slice of sourdough is unreal.”

My stomach growled again at the thought of it and wondered about Joe. He was unreal, too. Everything he said, every word out of his mouth, made me feel better about myself and the world. He made me think that there were no problems, no issues that couldn't be overcome, that everything I felt or thought was perfectly reasonable, that I should never feel guilty or self-loathing, and that I should only be imbued with rock solid self-confidence and the knowledge that everything was going to be just fine.

Joe might have become my favorite person in the world at that moment. Maybe I loved him. I stood in place and took stock of my physical state. Was I turned on? Was my uterus whirring into action? Was my inner womanhood throbbing with unspoken desire, like I read in romance novels?

Not so much.

But I was feeling happy. Content. I was feeling comfortable. Safe.

We moved on to the other bungalow.

“I can let you into this one. It's empty,” Joe explained, opening the door.

There were no flowers on the stone path leading to the door or flower boxes under the windows. But there were two pretty windows in front, cut into squares with wrought iron crisscrosses. The door was round like the door of the other bungalow, but this one was painted a pretty green, worn and muted, which made it look like it was from Santa Fe. The bungalow had a good roof, and as soon as I realized that, I wondered why I was looking at the roof and wondered even more why I was trying to ascertain if it was a good roof or not. It was probably the first roof I had ever looked at. In the scheme of things, I wasn't a roof person. Or a plumbing person. Ditto cars and anything with a motor. But for some reason, I was not only interested in the bungalow's roof, but once we went inside, I also found myself looking at the floors to see if they were buckling (they weren't) and the walls to see if the paint was chipping (it wasn't).

I was very interested in every aspect of the soundness of the bungalow's structure. Finally, as we walked through the small living room with the homey, country furniture, and diminutive fireplace and into the kitchen with original post-war appliances, all bathed in sunlight, and upstanding hutches with blue and white china plates stored in green, wooden slots and a large farmhouse sink, an old one with two faucets and cracked enamel, I understood why I cared about the soundness of the bungalow.

I cared because I had fallen instantly in love with the tiny house. I was in love with it, in much the same way a man falls in love with a woman. Like Romeo when he saw Juliet. It was that kind of love. A lightning bolt. A rapturous event. A moment of fate, of kismet. I loved the bungalow, and I never wanted to leave. There wasn't much to it. There was the living room, the kitchen with a nook for eating, a bathroom with a claw-footed bathtub, and a bedroom just big enough for a queen-sized bed and two nightstands. Not even a closet. There were two armoires in the hallway, and I opened each. I could definitely fit my clothes in them, I thought, and then I wondered why I was eyeing the armoires for clothes space.

I woke out of my reverie and realized that I had been in the bungalow for quite some time. Joe was standing patiently in front of the fireplace without saying a word.

"Nice place," I said, finally.

"One more place to look at," he said, ending the sentence with a questioning lilt at the end. I felt mortified that I had held up the tour so I could check the toilet to make sure it flushed and ran the bath faucet to see how long it took to get hot water.

"Sure!" I gushed, loudly, as if I didn't care about the bungalow at all, and I was desperate to see the next building because it was undoubtedly more interesting.

I followed Joe out of the bungalow with one last look back at the green door.

The next structure was another art studio. This one wasn't devoted solely to painting. There were all kinds of art

made there. From pottery to painting to mosaics to weaving and other things that I didn't recognize.

"Wow, you do a lot of art," I said, impressed.

Joe touched the loom. "I'm just a painter. I set up this studio for people who would like to come and express themselves."

"Like Madonna," I breathed, finding a box of mosaic pieces. Digging my hand into it, I let the colorful shards slip through my fingers.

"I'm going to start the ziti," Joe said. "You want to stick around here while I cook? You could play a little, if you wish. I'll get you when the food's ready. We could eat outside at the fire pit."

"Sounds good," I said and sat down at one of the tables.

When he was gone, I slid a small, thin rectangular piece of wood toward me and placed my hand on it. The wood felt good. Organic. Alive. Ready to be transformed. My other hand dipped into the box of mosaics and pulled out a blue shard. I placed the shard onto the center of the wood and then shifted it to a spot on the left.

There.

An electric calm—I didn't know how else to describe it—washed over me. Calm in the deep conviction that I was doing exactly what I should do at that very moment. Electric in that it made me come alive.

After that, I became lost in the doing. I lost track of time, settled into a flow state until half of the wood was covered in a selection of blue and green shards and I was woken from the flow state when Joe gently touched my shoulder.

"You're talented, Eliza," he said, looking at my mosaic.

I pulled back and stood. "Oh, no. I was just playing around." My face was hot, and I imagined that it was bright

red. How embarrassing. Grown women aren't supposed to blush, I thought, chastising myself.

“Playing around,” he repeated. “No greater art than playing around. Children do it the best, and then we forget how to do it as we get older. It's an art to remember how to play.”

Who was this guy? He was like the Dalai Lama mixed with the Pope, with a smattering of Picasso and a touch of Steinbeck. Maybe he really was a cult leader. He just hadn't found his cult yet.

Joe had prepared the ziti and set out the meal by the fire pit. True to his word, he had also prepared the toasted sourdough with goat cheese and fig sauce. There wasn't a vegetable to be seen. The entire meal was delicious, and for the most part, we ate in companionable silence, just enjoying a pretty perfect day.

“Thank you so much for this,” I said as I took seconds of the ziti. “This has been a great day.”

“You're welcome back here any time,” he said. He caught my eye, and we stared at each other for at least seven seconds. All right, it was exactly seven seconds. I counted. When I got to seven, I broke away because I was sure that eight seconds meant we were engaged, and I was a married woman.

“I'm a married woman,” I blurted out. “My husband's name is Steve.”

“I know. You told me. Steve Farris.”

“He left me for Tight Tammy. She's his personal trainer. She has a genetic disease, which doesn't allow her to grow fat cells or make convincing facial expressions. I think if she ate baked ziti, her whole system would shut down, like throwing water onto an IBM computer. Not that I know if they make IBM computers anymore. I'm not a computer person. I bet Tight Tammy is a computer person. I bet she uses a computer to track every morsel she puts into her mouth. She probably doesn't put morsels in her mouth. She only puts body

parts in her mouth. Sorry... that was crude. It's not my fault, though. Tight Tammy makes me crude. And angry. Anyway, I won't have to worry about Tight Tammy for much longer. I'm going to win Steve back. It's going to happen soon. I'm riding a bike and eating egg whites these days. I even drank Brussel sprouts yesterday, so it's just a matter of a few days before Steve comes running back to me. He must also be tired of hanging around a woman who can't make facial expressions. Right?"

Joe didn't miss a beat. He was ready the second I finished my nonsensical tirade. "I think that if you really want to win Steve back, you'll do it."

"Thank you," I said, but I didn't sound convinced. I guessed hearing my goal spoken back to me didn't sound as good as I thought. It was like ordering flan. It always looked good on the menu, but it made me doubt my choice as soon as it was served at the table. Joe's certainty that I would get Steve back filled me with a certain apprehension that I hadn't felt before. Perhaps it was the nice day I was having or the beautiful surroundings or the kind of company that was confusing me from my goals.

"I can't eat another bite," I said.

"Me, either. I'll clean up, and then I'll take you home. I'll send you off with your dessert in a box."

"Thank you. I'll help with the dishes."

It didn't take long to clean up, and soon we were back on our bikes, heading to my house. He carried my boxed cheesecake in his basket that he usually used for deliveries. I wanted to tell Joe that he didn't need to escort me back, but I was still a little nervous about the bike, so I let him accompany me. I was happy to discover that the ride back was easier than the ride there had been. I must have been getting the hang out of cycling.

When we got back to my place, I thanked Joe again, and he repeated his invitation for me to visit anytime. Then he was gone. He didn't ask to come in. He didn't try to kiss me. He didn't try to get me to join his cult. Either he was playing

the long game, or he really just wanted to be friends. I didn't know what to think about either of those options.

Opening the garage, I parked the bike. Just as I was kicking the kickstand, there was a roar of an engine, and a black vintage Camaro drove up and parked in the driveway. Hudson stepped out. He was wearing grey jeans and a tight black t-shirt.

And muscles.

He was wearing a lot of muscles.

## CHAPTER 10

### “The Voice and the Essence”

I put my hand above my eyes, like I was trying to shield them from the sun even though there was no sun blinding me. Just Hudson. “Hudson, is that you? I don’t recognize you in real clothes.”

“All clothes are real clothes,” he said, marching his way into the garage. “If it covers your body, it’s clothes. Don’t put titles on clothes. Don’t give into society’s stupid rules.”

“Says the man with actual commandments.”

“I don’t have commandments about clothes.”

“I’ve literally got my boobs in new bras because of you.”

He cracked a smile. “Let’s not talk about clothes.”

I put my hand up. “Okay. Truce. Peace on the Western Front. We’ll only talk about disgusting food. At least, that’s what you call it: Food. I just call it disgusting.”

He cracked a smile again, and his eyes searched my face for something, but I didn’t know for what.

“What is that?” he asked, pointing at my bike.

“It’s my bike. I was biking. I was doing something new. I was following a commandment.”

“You bicycled? You pushed the pedals with *your* feet?”

I rubbed my legs. “I used my whole body. I’m sore from head to toe.”

He lightly touched my forehead, let his finger glide down the side of my cheek. “You even got sun, like you’ve been outside.”

“I was outside. There’s not a lot of room to bicycle in the house.”

“I’m so proud of you,” he gushed and embraced me in a side hug. He held the hug for a long time. “I didn’t tell you to bicycle, but you did it anyway. I’m so proud of you, Eliza. You’ve come a long way.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him I had just eaten six-hundred grams of carbohydrates and that there was a box of cheesecake in my basket, which Joe had given me before he left. The news would have crushed Hudson, and I didn’t want to ruin his happy moment.

“Why are you here?” I asked him. “Are you going to stuff cruciferous vegetables down my throat? Are you going to take me to a girdle salesman? Are you going to make me climb a mountain? Oh, wait. You already did those things.”

He pulled out of the embrace and looked down at me, his face awash with pride and joy. He smiled, and he almost knocked me back with the power of it. He was too good-looking. Too good-looking to be hanging around me. He should have been hanging around supermodels or Tik Tok influencers or reality TV stars. He should have been on magazine covers, showing off his stomach or on a pedestal somewhere, encased in bronze.

“I came to see how you were doing. You were pretty rough this morning. I was checking to make sure you didn’t choke on your own vomit.”

“You turned me on my side so I wouldn’t.”

He blushed slightly. “You noticed. I didn’t think you noticed anything earlier.”

“I’m fine,” I said after a moment to fill the silence. “I didn’t choke on my vomit. I didn’t even vomit. I got up early, ate a nutritious breakfast, and went on a bracing fifty-mile bike ride. I’m thinking of becoming a professional cyclist. I hear they have the best drugs.”

Hudson wrapped an arm around my shoulder and walked me back to his car. “I gotta get my food,” he said.



Opening his car door with one hand, he pulled out an insulated bag and shut the door again. With his arm still around my shoulder, he walked me back to the garage.

“I have to eat,” he said and gestured to the door to the house. I opened it, and he waited for me to enter, and then he followed me after he closed the garage. I watched him put his bag down on the kitchen counter.

Hudson began to laugh. He laughed so hard he threw his head back. “Nutritious breakfast,” he exclaimed between laughs. “Nutritious breakfast!”

“What?” I said, affronted. “Don’t laugh. I did have a nutritious breakfast. Full of nutrients and phytochemicals and antioxidants and whatever other crap we’re supposed to eat these days.”

He picked up something from the counter. “Piece of donut,” he said, holding it up and started laughing again.

“I’ll have you know that’s not a donut.”

Hudson arched an eyebrow at me. “Oh, no? It looks like donut. It smells like donut.”

“It’s not a donut,” I lied. “It’s a bear claw.”

He started laughing again. He opened his bag and took out two glass containers and a drink shaker. “Fifty-mile bike ride. I almost laughed when you said it, but I held back.”

I sat at the counter and looked down at my hands. “Well, maybe not fifty miles. But there were miles involved. And I went on a trail by the river. Some of it was uphill. I had to pump my legs. My thighs are sore.”

Hudson smiled and shook his head in appreciation. He sat on the stool that Joe had sat on before and opened his food containers. The smell of cold chicken and broccoli hit me. “I’m so proud of you, Eliza. You’ve come a long way. Maybe not fifty-miles, but a long way. And look at you. You’re like a new woman. Your face isn’t doing that thing.”

My hand flew to my face, and I felt around for anomalies. It felt normal to me. “What thing? My face does a

thing?”

Hudson scrunched up his face to illustrate. “You do something like that. Frozen in a wave of anxiety. Like your car is about to crash into a wall. Something like that.”

“Maybe I need Botox,” I suggested. “Or fillers. My best friend told me I need fillers. She went to a fillers party where all the women had it done. But I chickened out and didn’t go with her.”

“Fillers make women look like chipmunks,” Hudson said and stabbed a piece of chicken breast. “Like aliens. I want a woman to look like a woman. I don’t need her breasts to float in the water like volleyballs. I don’t need her skin to be a flat plane covered in three inches of makeup.”

“You don’t?”

“No. Disgusting.”

“You’re so full of shit. Every man wants those things from a woman.”

Hudson stopped eating and locked eyes with me. He had beautiful eyes. Amazing blue. Mediterranean blue. Caribbean blue. Not that I had seen either of those seas in person to know for sure. “I’m not every man, Eliza,” he said. His voice was deep and raspy, a testosterone-filled booming baritone. “I’m unique. I’m me.”

“Oh,” I breathed and tried to keep it together. I hated when I was attracted to him. He was so much younger than I was. I had no business being attracted to him. I kept trying to turn off the attraction, but then he would say things and look at me, and the attraction would whirr into action again.

“You don’t need Botox or fillers,” he continued. “No plastic surgery. No plastic anything. You just need to take care of yourself a little.”

“Self-care.”

He popped a piece of broccoli into his mouth. “Ugh. Don’t use that expression. Just don’t hurt yourself. Be kind. Don’t treat yourself like dirt, just because your husband treated

you like dirt.”

The words hit me like I had been slapped in the face with a wet towel filled with oranges. They hurt.

“Steve didn’t treat me like dirt. We had a good marriage.”

I sounded like I was about to cry. Then, I started to cry. Not big, blubbing crying. Just a couple teardrops falling from my eyes onto the kitchen counter. I hated that I was crying. I hated that I was crying because I was grieving over a marriage that I thought had been just fine and turned out to be a nightmare.

“Steve didn’t have a choice,” I said, wiping my eyes. “It was Tight Tammy’s fault. She hypnotized him with her toned upper arms and thigh gap. Men are stupid. They get seduced by women with fake eyelashes and no discernible body fat.”

Hudson snorted. “I forbid you to cry over that man, Eliza. Do you hear me? I forbid you.”

“Who are you to forbid me? You don’t own me.”

“I don’t own you. I’m not even saving you. I’m supporting you. I accept who you are. You are not allowed to get fooled by a loser who prefers a woman with fake everything to you. Do you understand me?”

I pushed back from the counter and stood. “You don’t accept me. You want to change me. You want me to drink broccoli and eat egg whites and wear appropriate undergarments.”

“Yes,” he said, calmly. “I want you to be you. I want you to shed off all of these years of you not being you, of pushing down, ignoring, rejecting, sublimating everything that’s really you. I want you to embrace the Eliza that I know is in there.”

He pointed at me, jabbing the air with punctuation. “You need to wake up. You need to thank the Universe that Steve left you after he turned you into...”

“Into what?”

“Into the person you thought he wanted.”

“Take that back.”

Hudson stopped eating and packed up his food. “Eliza, I don’t take back the truth. The truth is the truth and nothing should get in its way. You were with a man who didn’t accept you. You warped yourself so much that you had disappeared. Vanished. You lost your voice, Eliza. You lost your essence. And you did all that for nothing, because he left you anyway. He moved on with a woman who has no voice and no essence. Because that’s the kind of man you were with. A chickenshit. A dufus. Any man who tosses you away is a moron.”

He zipped up the insulated bag. “I know you’re upset at me right now. I know you want me gone. So, I’m going to leave. But I’ll be back.”

Hudson walked from behind the counter, gave my upper arm a little squeeze, and I watched him leave the house through the front door. Once he was gone, I made a beeline for the kitchen pantry, grabbed a bag of Oreos and a bag of vinegar chips, and took them back to the couch. Flipping on the television, I found another *I Dream of Jeannie* marathon. Sitting back on the couch, I ripped open the Oreos and took a bite of one of them.

“Oh, that’s better,” I said. Oreos had certain healing properties that one couldn’t find anywhere else. I watched Jeannie blink Major Nelson a steak dinner, and I started to cry, again. Not big crying. Just a couple more teardrops and one choked-up hiccup that I washed down with some potato chips.

“I’m not angry at you, Hudson,” I said to the empty room, as Major Nelson ordered Jeannie back into her bottle. “But you’re wrong. I didn’t warp myself. I didn’t lose my voice and my essence.”

My voice? My essence? I didn’t even know what that meant. I didn’t have a voice. I didn’t have an essence. Those were nonsense words. Made-up concepts. Hudson was totally

wrong. I had been perfectly happy in my marriage. Everything would have been just fine if Tight Tammy hadn't destroyed it all. I understood that Hudson's heart was in the right place, but his opinions were in the wrong place. I would let him stew on that for a while and then come crawling back to me to beg my forgiveness. In the meantime, I had the whole rest of the day on my own to do and eat whatever I wanted.

The phone rang, and I jumped with fright.

I found the phone stuck between the cushions and blinked twice at the name on the screen. Steve Farris. Oh my God. My husband was calling me. He wanted me back. I had done it. I had won. Wait until he saw me! He was going to be surprised by my new self. I had new bras! I had ridden a bike in the sun! Steve was coming back to me, and we were going to live happily ever after. He didn't even need to bring back the furniture. We could buy all new furniture or forget about furniture and go on a cruise. He would be apologetic about his breakdown, about his midlife crisis that threw him into the hands of Tight Tammy. And I would accept his apology with grace! I would show him what a wonderfully understanding woman I was. He would be grateful to me forever. Grateful and loving!

Tossing the Oreos and chips off the couch, I cleared my throat and answered the phone.

"Hello," I said, dragging out the word like I was a sex symbol in a sixties movie.

"Listen, and listen good, Eliza. I've had enough of your shit," he said without saying hello back.

"My...?"

"Shit! Your bullshit, to be exact. Sign the papers. We're over here, waiting for our lives to begin, but you haven't signed the papers."

"The papers?"

"The divorce papers, Eliza!" he yelled into the phone. I had it away from my ear, and now I turned it on speaker. His voice boomed against the bare walls and played a weird

backdrop to the muted *I Dream of Jeannie*. Suddenly, it was like Major Nelson was screaming at Jeannie and saying horrible things to her. But weirdly, she was smiling and fawning all over him. What was wrong with Jeannie? Was she crazy? Didn't she realize that Major Nelson was being mean to her? She should blink him to some place horrible, like a medieval dungeon or the Nordstrom's twice-yearly sale.

"About that..."

"I don't want to hear your excuses," he barked into the phone. "We don't have time for your games, Eliza. Stop playing games."

Was I playing games? I didn't think I was playing games. I didn't even like games. I didn't have one board game in the house, and I had never played a video game. Ditto sports. Sure, I had tried spin class once, but that was the extent of it.

"Do you know what you're doing to Tammy?" he demanded.

The question stopped me cold. What I was doing to Tammy? How about what Tammy was doing to me? How about her breaking up my marriage and family and house and happy ending? How about that?

"What am I doing to Tammy?" I asked. It was my turn to sound cold. It surprised me to hear the anger in my voice. Up until that moment, I had planned on being the good little wife, of acquiescing, of pleading, of meekness.

I picked up the package of Oreos and took a bite of one.

"Tammy has taken to her bed, Eliza!" he continued. "Her bed. This had been all too stressful for her. She's not used to dealing with people like you. Unreasonable, defiant, crazy people!"

"Wow, I'm a lot of adjectives," I said with my mouth full of cookie.

"What did you say to me?"

“Nothing. Go on, Steve. Tell me more about Tammy’s stress level.”

“I don’t think I like your tone. Your dowdy, old-before-your-time, flabby tone. Saggy tone. Pathetic, loser, unemployed, passionless tone.”

“I’ll say this for Tammy,” I said. “She’s improved your vocabulary.”

I picked up the chip bag and popped a chip into my mouth.

“I was being generous, giving you time to get your life in order, but you’re proving that that was a fool’s errand,” he spat. “You don’t deserve generosity. You deserve wrath. Wrath! You have been very cruel to Tammy. Very cruel. You should be ashamed of yourself. You’re going to be sorry now.”

“Oh, yeah?” I screeched. “Oh, yeah! Well, you tell Tammy she can kiss my saggy ass! Oh, wait, I don’t want her sexually transmitted diseased lips on my ass. So, just tell her to go straight to hell!”

I expected Steve to really let me have it then, but there was silence on the phone.

“Hello? Hello?” I said, but there was no one there. He had hung up, and I had no idea if he had heard any of my good comebacks. He probably hadn’t heard a thing. He probably had had the last word and was now rubbing Tight Tammy’s head and they were talking about his crazy, saggy wife.

I screamed.

It was a primal scream. Like a neanderthal scream. Like a loud scream, but in a deep voice that tore at my vocal cords.

Jumping up from the couch, I threw my phone across the room and screamed again. I looked at the cookies and the chips, but I knew they couldn’t help me now. Nothing could help me in my red-light rage, except violence. I needed to commit violence.

Violence without getting arrested or without hurting

anyone. Except for Tight Tammy. I could hurt her, and that would be worth prison time. Ditto Steve. I would have liked to stomp on his foot or pull his ear.

Did I? Did I want to hurt Steve? Had my grief turned to anger?

Yep, I think it did.

I spun around, looking for something that would soothe my rage. Something I could be violent with or against. Since the house was more or less empty, there was nothing much I could throw or destroy. Steve had taken everything that had meant anything to him.

“Hear that, Eliza?” I said to myself. “He took everything that meant anything to him. And he left you behind.”

It was like a light turned on in my brain. A light with an explosion after it.

Steve didn't love me. Steve didn't want me. He took everything he wanted with him and left me behind with the recliner. Steve wasn't going to come back to me. Steve was a two-timing, low-life sludge, cretin creep.

I screamed again.

There had to be something in the house he liked. Something I could rip apart with my bare hands. I stomped upstairs and looked through the closets. Nothing. I came back downstairs and stomped through the house and into the garage. Nothing. Then, I stomped to the back of the house, to the empty sunroom.

Oh.

The sunroom.

Steve loved the sunroom. It was his favorite place. He had the designer deck it out with a bunch of outside furniture, even though the sunroom was inside. He always took company to the sunroom when they came over because he wanted to show them that somehow he had conquered the outside. Conquered it and lugged it inside with one wall of glass and



three walls of oak paneling and furniture that had no earthly business being inside.

Now, there was nothing left of the sunroom. He had taken all of his outside furniture with him. The sunroom was now just an empty room filled with sun and nothing else. I flopped down on the floor and lay flat on my back with my knees up. The floor was cold. There had been an area rug there, but Steve had taken that, too. He wanted the area rug with him, but not me.

“Here lies Eliza,” I said out loud. “All alone in the sunroom. Just a big blob of ugly adjectives that that jerk husband called her. That jerk Steve. That horrible jerk Steve!”

I sat up, tired of feeling sorry for myself.

That’s when I saw it. That’s when I figured out what I could do to take out my rage. The wood paneling. Steve had loved the wood paneling. He had a thing for oak furniture, and he made the oak go all the way up the walls.

Well, now the wood paneling had to die.

Leaping up from the floor, I ran to the garage and found a crowbar, and returned to the sunroom. Starting where the wood met the wall of windows, I jammed the crowbar under the paneling.

It turned out that it was actually pretty easy to pry oak panels off a wall. They hadn’t been secured very well by the contractors Steve’s designer had hired.

Even though it wasn’t difficult to remove the panels, it took me an hour to complete the task. It made a satisfying sound as I tore the glued panels off. After I finished, I surveyed the damage. I had managed to strip the walls completely. They had been scraped and damaged with a few holes left in the plaster, too. I was standing on a pile of wood panels, and there was wood all over the floor around me.

But I wasn’t satisfied.

It wasn’t enough.

I returned to the garage with the crowbar and came

back to the sunroom with a sledgehammer. I didn't know why we had a sledgehammer, and obviously, Steve hadn't cared enough about it to take it with him when he abandoned me to live with a vapid Barbie doll. But we had a sledgehammer, and that was all that mattered. I could barely lift it, so I dragged it all the way from the garage to the sunroom.

“Kawabunga!” I shouted and let the sledge-hammer fly. Actually, fly was a generous term. I could barely lift it to my knees, and then I let it fall on top of the wood panels. It was a pitiful display of my strength, but it was effective, nonetheless. And satisfying.

After ten minutes, I was completely physically spent, nearly hyperventilating, but I had succeeded in splintering the wood sufficiently to take out my aggression. I felt almost healed. Almost satisfied.

“It's Oreos time,” I said and plodded back to the living room, leaving the sledgehammer amongst the piles of rubble. I lay down on the couch, covering myself with a blanket, and put the sound back on the television.

*I Dream of Jeannie* had been replaced with *Roseanne*. She was cackling and telling her child something about money.

“You tell her, Roseanne,” I said to the television, but I wasn't in the mood for *Roseanne*. Flipping through the channels, I landed on PBS. David Attenborough was speaking in a relaxing English accent about bears in Siberia.

Siberia looked like such a relaxing place for bears. There were a lot of trees and snow, and quiet. I continued to watch the nature show, so engrossed that I forgot about my cookies and chips. When it was over, PBS asked for donations, and I got up and found myself walking back to the sunroom.

It was a mess. There was wood everywhere, all in various shapes and sizes now that I had gone to town on it. My anger had subsided. At least it had subsided toward the wood paneling. Staring at the chaos didn't make me happier. I dragged the sledgehammer back to the garage, and I stopped there to look at the tools. Something in me decided to take some rope and a knife.

As in a dream, I returned to the sunroom and made a space for myself on the floor, surrounded by the wood pieces. Then, I slipped into the flow state I had been in earlier in the day with the mosaics. I picked up piece after piece of wood. I broke them by hand, weaved them together and bound them by rope. When I looked up from my work, I was surprised that I had made myself a chair. It was pretty. Bohemian and rustic, but not too rustic.

Gingerly, I sat on it, and I was thrilled to find that it could hold my weight. I had created an actually practical piece of art. Holy crap, I had crafted an actual chair! I was a craftswoman. I was an artist. All of a sudden, I felt a surge of pride in myself and my abilities. I thought of a whole new slew of adjectives for myself, and all of them were positive.

Artistic. Productive. Smart. Creative. Clever.

Yes, I was all those adjectives and more. *Take that, Steve. Jerk Steve.*

Finding my phone, I called Delivery Happiness. Thirty minutes later, I had started on a second chair, when Joe rang my doorbell with my delivery of a loaf of bread, a tub of cream cheese, four chocolate bars, and a bag of carrots. I left the chairs in the sunroom and opened the front door.

“Nice seeing you again,” he beamed at me.

I took the bag of groceries from him. “Would you like to help me seek revenge on Steve and Tight Tammy? Something naughty and illegal?”

## CHAPTER 11

### “A Poop Truck”

I put the groceries away and handed Joe a juice box that I found at the back of my refrigerator. I had decided to call him instead of Hudson to exact revenge on my husband because I didn't want to hear “I told you so” from Hudson, and I was pretty sure Hudson wouldn't do anything illegal that wasn't sanctioned by the government on foreign soil. Joe, on the other, had an easygoing attitude that I was hoping would extend to acts of barbarism. I didn't have any other friends at this point, since Destiny was in Hawaii, and my son was in New York. So, it was Joe or nobody.

“So, what's up?” Joe asked, sipping his juice through the tiny juice box straw.

I planted my hands on the counter and leaned forward. “Joe, my jerk husband called me a bunch of adjectives.”

“Uh-oh.”

“He also left me, cut off my bank account, stole my car and all of my belongings, and he's sleeping with a woman who believes that any woman over a size six should be sent to a prison camp to do squats every minute of every day until they die.”

“So... you need revenge,” Joe surmised.

I tapped my nose. “Exactly. Something really big. I want him to be very upset.”

Joe nodded and thought about it for a second. “I know a guy with a vacuum truck.”

“What's a vacuum truck?”

“It sucks sewage out of the ground. A poop truck”

“How is that revenge?” I asked.

“The hose pressure can go the reverse way. It can spit out the sewage it’s already collected.”

I slapped the counter. “Done! Deal! Let’s do that.”

“I’ve got black ski caps at home. We can wear those.”



Of course, I had no idea where Tight Tammy lived, but Joe did some research with her business name and found it. We dressed all in black, and we drove to her house at night. It turned out that Joe owned two pickup trucks in addition to his bike that he kept in a barn near his house. He drove us to Tight Tammy’s house, which was a large two-story home not far from my neighborhood. The lights were on inside, and as we waited for Joe’s friend’s poop truck to arrive, I decided we should snoop and see what they were up to.

Luckily, they were both on the first floor, and I got a good vantage point through a back window. I saw a lot of my furniture inside. It was disorienting to see it there, like maybe I had been living in the wrong house during the past few days, and actually, this was my house.

My house with Steve and Tight Tammy in it. Ugh. Steve and Tight Tammy. They were playing house. Playing house with my stuff. I couldn’t believe my eyes. Couldn’t believe what I was seeing.

“What are they doing?” I whispered to Joe.

“Your husband is cooking dinner at the stove. Tight Tammy is painting her toenails at the dinner table.”

I turned to Joe. “I’ve known Steve since I was a teenager. I’ve never seen him cook. Not even toast. Not boil an egg. Not microwave a Lean Cuisine. I didn’t even know he knew how to turn a stove on. How dare he cook for Tight Tammy? How dare he!”

“Now, she’s blowing on her toes to dry the polish,” Joe continued. “Now, he’s looking at her blow her toes. Now, he’s

waving his hand in the air. Now the pan is flying. It fell on the floor. I think he burned himself when he watched her blowing. Now, he's picking up the pan. Oh, he burned himself again."

Joe turned to me. "Are you sure you need revenge on these people? They seem to be doing it to themselves."

I looked through the window. Steve was running water over his burned finger. Then, he dried his finger and walked over to Tight Tammy, and stood behind her. He wrapped his arm around her and cupped her breast. Oh my God. He was touching her unnaturally perky breast. I turned back to Joe.

"Where's that poop truck? I need that poop truck. Now. I need it now."

"I think I hear it," he said and took my hand. We crept around the house to the front, just as the truck appeared and parked in front of the house.

A large man with a blue ball cap hopped out. "Hello, Frank," Joe greeted him and shook his hand. "This is my friend Eliza."

"Hey there, Eliza. You're the one with the jerk husband?" he asked and tipped his cap to me.

"The biggest jerk in the world," I asked.

"My sister is married to a jerk," he explained. "This thing that is about to happen happened to him. It was very satisfying. Not that this is happening now. I mean, it's happening, but it's not happening, if you know what I mean." He winked at me. "I'm going to turn the vacuum on and cross the street to smoke a cigarette."

"You don't smoke," Joe said.

"I'm starting tonight. And I'm going to smoke in the other direction, so I don't know what's happening with my truck."

"How do we use it?" I asked.

"Point the hose, and press the *out* button."

"Sounds simple," Joe said.

Frank crossed the street and stood facing us with his burly arms crossed in front of him. “Let’s find the out button,” Joe said to me.

It was easy to find. It was a large red button on the other side of the truck with a clear plastic cover on it. It was the kind of button I imagined was used to launch nuclear weapons.

“You sure you want to do this?” Joe asked. “You can back out if you want.”

“Do you want to back out?”

“I mean, we’re going to fill their house with potentially toxic refuse. I can’t imagine that’s totally healthy or legal. But he is a jerk. It’s well-deserved potentially toxic refuse.”

“Don’t forget her,” I said. “Tight Tammy is a jerk, too.”

“Exactly. Who paints their toenails at the dinner table?”

“Just for that alone, she deserves to live in ten feet of excrement. Will it be ten feet? Will it really fill up the house?”

Joe looked up at the truck. It was huge. “I think it will be enough that they’ll want to move. They might have to burn the house down after.”

“That sounds mean when you put it like that. This is revenge, not something mean. Justice, not revenge. Well-deserved justice.”

“It’s not mean,” Joe agreed. “It’s just...a strong statement.”

“A statement that they’re jerks.”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” I said, taking a deep breath. “Let’s do it. Let’s exact justice and make strong statements.”

The hose was heavy, but I wanted to be the one to carry it and fill the house with poop. That left Joe to press the button. I wanted to do the actual damage, and I didn’t want Joe to get in trouble.

Initially, I had envisioned ringing the doorbell and when Steve opened the door, I would spray him. But that would mean he would see me, and in his present frame of mind, he would send me to Alcatraz for the rest of my life. So, instead, I found an unlocked window at the side of the house and opened it wide. It was the living room, and it was filled with heavy oak furniture that had been stolen from my house. I waved my arm, and Joe must have caught the signal because the truck started to rumble, and the hose started to shake, and sure enough, the town sewage began to pour out of the hose into Tight Tammy's house.

There was a lot of pressure through the hose, and it shook with it. It was hard to hold on, but when an out-of-shape woman is faced with a daunting, physically exhausting task to avenge her own dignity and bank account, she can muster the strength of three Incredible Hulks. And I did. I was a Marvel superhero. I had the power to spray crap from an industrial hose into Tight Tammy's house. I bet her toenail polish was going to smear now.

I laughed hysterically at the thought.

It took a long time for Steve and Tight Tammy to notice that anything was wrong, not until the living room was filled with three inches of sewage, and started to spill out into their hallway. That's when I heard the screams and the sound of them running around, trying to figure out what was going on.

That's also when I realized they would see me when they came into the living room. They wouldn't see me at first, but when they saw the hose, they would try to wrestle with it, and that's when they would see me. Yes, that's exactly what would happen.

Uh-oh. There was a flaw in my plan.

Pulling the hose out of the window, I swung it over my shoulder and jogged to the front of the house, pouring sewage behind me. Joe saw me and pushed the button.

"Let's get out of here," I hissed.



Frank ran back from across the street before I finished the sentence. In a blur, he had the hose hooked up, jumped in the driver's seat, and quickly drove away.

While he did that, Joe and I ran to his pickup truck and hightailed it down the street in the dark because Joe wisely didn't turn on the headlights. In the side-view mirror, I saw Steve and Tight Tammy run outside to see how this horrible thing had happened to them. We had gotten away without them seeing, and as far as I knew, they had no idea I was behind the sewage.

Joe and I drove in silence for another couple of blocks when my phone rang.

"It's him. The jerk," I whispered in a panic.

Joe pulled over to the side of the road and turned off the engine. "Okay. Answer it now. Pretend you're asleep at home. It'll be fine."

"Hello?" I answered groggily.

"Eliza, where are you?" Steve sounded furious. He sounded like someone had just filled his house with excrement.

"Hello? Steve? I'm sleeping." I yawned for extra effect. "Can I call you back later?"

I hung up.

"What do you think?" I asked Joe. "Was that convincing?"

He started up the truck. "Yep. I think we got away with it. You sounded like you were dead asleep. Well? Was it worth it? Do you feel vindicated? Did you find closure?"

Did I find closure? No. I thought I had some more to do in my life before I enjoyed that sensation. But I did feel vindicated. I felt like I gave as much as I had been given the past few days.

"You know what? For the first time in a long time, I feel like I have some control over my life again," I said. "I don't feel like I'm a fish flopping around on the ground."

“You feel like you’re back where you belong. Like you’ve reclaimed some more of yourself.”

“Yes. My voice and my essence.”

“Voice and essence,” Joe repeated. “That’s a wonderful way to express that.”

“I must have heard it somewhere,” I said. My face turned hot, and I made sure to look out the window, so Joe wouldn’t see me blush.

“It’s lovely. Voice and essence. It says it all.”

“Do you smell something?” I asked. Something smelled horrible in his truck. Really horrible. Like something died and then someone ate the dead thing and threw it up. Blech. I opened my window all the way to get some fresh air, but it didn’t help the smell.

“That might be you,” Joe said.

“Me?”

“You spilled sewage all the way down your back. I didn’t have the heart to tell you before.”

I tried to look at my back. “Oh no. It must have happened when I slung the hose over my shoulder. I’ve messed up your truck.”

“Messes can be cleaned.”

And that seemed to say it all. Messes could be cleaned. Joe wasn’t upset, so I wasn’t either. For the first time, I believed that maybe my mess of a life could be cleaned up. Maybe I could start fresh with a clean slate. Maybe there was life after tragedy. Maybe struggles ended happily.

Messes could be cleaned.

“I’ll clean it for you,” I said.

“Nonsense. I’m going to drop you home so you can rest and celebrate your victory. I’ll handle the truck in the morning. Not a big deal.”

I put my hand on his arm. “No, Joe. I’ll clean it. It’s

time for me to start cleaning.”

## CHAPTER 12

“There’s a Knock at the Door”

I had been dreaming about something good, but suddenly the dream ended, and my memory of it evaporated from my mind. Even so, I kept sleeping. It was the deep, sweet sleep right before a person is forced to wake up.

I didn’t have a job. I didn’t have a place to go. So, there was no reason I would be forced to wake up. But somehow, in the recesses of my sleeping brain, I knew I was going to have to leave the ultimate comfort of a deep sleep.

Something was going to wake me up.

Or someone was going to wake me up.

Actually, someone was waking me up.

I opened my eyes. Hudson was standing over me with his arms crossed in front of him in an obvious display of disapproval.

“This can’t be a dream,” I said. My mouth was dry, and my tongue felt like it had swollen to twice its normal size. “I don’t have these kinds of dreams. Normally, I’m flying, or I’m naked during a final exam.”

“Your front door was unlocked. That’s not very safe. Someone could just walk in while you’re asleep.”

I squinted at him. He was wearing shorts and a tight t-shirt. “That would be horrible if someone just walked in while I was asleep,” I agreed. “Horrible. But who would do that? It would never happen. One in a million chance.”

Hudson ignored my snark. “There’s a mound of dirty clothes on your front porch, Eliza. Your clothes. I got worried. I inspected them. You know what I found?”

My guess was seven pounds of sewage, but I decided to feign ignorance.

I tried to shrug my shoulders, but my shoulders were wedged under the arm of the couch, so it was hard to do. “Maybe a possum? We had a possum in the backyard once.”

“It wasn’t a possum. No possum smells that bad. From my military experience, I figured out that it’s excrement. There was excrement in your clothes. I smelled them before I saw them, but I investigated anyway.”

“That doesn’t sound smart, Hudson. Why did you do that?”

“Because I was worried. I thought: Why are Eliza’s clothes in a pile on her front porch? Why does it smell like the most unspeakable foulness? Maybe she’s dead. Maybe she was vaporized by alien laser weapons. I didn’t know, but my mind went to the worst things I could imagine. Then I found your door was unlocked, and I really thought you were dead.”

“And then you found me asleep on the couch and thought I was lying here dead?”

He shook his head. “No, I found you lying on the couch, cradling a bag of chips in your arm with a circle of Oreo crumbs around your mouth. So, I knew you were totally fine.”

I wiped the Oreo crumbs off my face. “That’s not Oreo crumbs. It’s dried seaweed. I had a craving for dried seaweed. I kept the bag of chips with me as a test of my resolve to reject my odious past and move on to all things healthy. Seaweed is very healthy.”

Hudson picked up the empty Oreo package from the floor next to the couch. “I’ve never known anyone who lies worse than you. Nobody. Two-year-olds lie better than you.”

“I lie better when I’m not in a home invasion situation and when I don’t get woken with a start by a musclebound protein bully.”

He smiled at me. “That’s a good description of me. I like it. Come on. Get up. You’re burning daylight.”

“I’m not burning daylight, so daylight shouldn’t burn me. I’m going to sleep a little longer.”

“Come on. We’re going for a walk. Easy day. Active recuperation.”

“I’m recuperating on my couch,” I insisted. “I’m not going for a walk. I don’t need your services anymore. I decided not to win Steve back. I got revenge instead. So, it’s all over. I’m done and fine, and I don’t need egg whites and broccoli improvement. I don’t need to improve at all because I’m no longer trying to get my husband back from Tight Tammy.”

Hudson sat on the coffee table.

“I’m thrilled that you decided not to win your husband back,” he started. “I’m guessing the excrement had something to do with your revenge.”

“No comment,” I said. “But would you be my alibi if the cops call?”

He sighed. “Your husband and revenge aside, none of what we’ve been doing has been about Steve. None of it. It’s about you, Eliza. You. It’s about *your* life. *Your* future. *Your* present.”

“My voice and essence?”

“Huh? Yes. Your voice and essence.”

“And egg whites and broccoli will help my voice and essence?”

Hudson leaned forward until our faces were only inches apart. “It’s not about the egg whites. It’s not about the broccoli. It’s about self-respect. It’s about treating yourself at least as well as you’d treat any stranger on the street. How can you be happy if you don’t do that?”

There was something working behind his eyes when he spoke with me. Something not about me. Something about him. Something that tugged on my heart and wanted me to make him feel better. Was he not just a warrior, but a wounded warrior? Were his voice and essence damaged like mine?

I touched his hand. “Hudson, have you ever thought that Oreos made me feel better than egg whites?”

“In the moment, sure. For the first bite. Then, before you swallow that first bite, you know that you’ve done yourself wrong and you feel bad. Then, the sugar and preservatives and additives hit your body, and your body knows what you did to it, that you put stress on your cells, that your flesh is swelling with inflammation, and your system is trying to repair the damage, and all of that physical punishment sends a signal to your brain. It says, ‘I hate myself. I don’t deserve health or happiness or respect.’ It’s a perfect storm. So, I eat egg whites. And so should you.”

“That’s a lot you’re putting on an Oreo.”

“That’s a lot I’m putting on a package of Oreos. C’mon, Eliza. My mom didn’t raise a fool. I know you don’t eat just one cookie.”

“You have a mother? That’s the most shocking thing you ever told me,” I said. “I assumed you popped into the world a fully grown Marine from a sauna, sandwiched between two Nautilus machines.”

He smiled. “It’s hard to give up on you.”

“Oh, no? You would be the first to not give up on me.”

Hudson stood and put his hand out to me. “Let’s go. It’s a gorgeous day. An easy walk. I promise.”



It was a beautiful day outside. Hudson had waited for me to get dressed, and then we left the house to go on a walk around the neighborhood. I glanced toward the front door and noticed by some miracle that my pile of poopy clothes had disappeared. What a guy. He was unusually kind to me, walking at my pace instead of his, which meant we were walking at about the pace of an old lady shopping in the soup aisle at a grocery store.

“Are you going to tell me about your clothes?” he asked.

“About the excrement, you mean?”

“You could start there. That would be good. Excrement.”

“Technically, I think it’s called raw sewage.”

I thought I heard Hudson snicker, but I wasn’t sure because the wind was blowing. “Interesting. Why were your clothes soaked in raw sewage?”

“Why?” I said. “Because justice is dirty, Hudson. You don’t know anything about that because you’re in the army, and the army has nothing to do with justice. Not marital justice, in any case.”

“Eliza, I’m not in the army. I’m not a pussy. I’m a Marine.”

“Sorry. Excuse me,” I said. “I take it back. You’re not a pussy. You’re a Marine. But I repeat, Marine justice has nothing on marital justice. Marital justice is much dirtier than Marine justice. Where were you a Marine? Probably someplace clean and fancy like Beverly Hills.”

“Afghanistan,” he said.

I looked at him. “For real?”

“Special ops. Very dirty work.”

“Okay, I’ll give you that,” I said. “You might have done some dirty justice, but not like this. This was some high-level dirty justice, you know what I mean?”

“Enlighten me.”

I gave him every dirty detail about the night before. About the poop truck and the hose and Steve’s hand on Tight Tammy’s breast.

Hudson took in the story and was quiet for a moment. “Who’s Joe?” he asked, finally.

“Oh,” I said and stumbled over my feet. Hudson caught me and righted me before we continued walking.

“Who’s Joe?” he asked, again.



“Nobody. He’s a delivery guy. Not really a delivery guy. Well, he has delivered for me. But he’s an artist. And he has a bicycle. And...”

I clamped my lips together and shut up. I had said too much. I told him about the bicycle, and now he was going to put two and two together.

“I think I have the picture,” he said.

“I resent that,” I said. “You don’t have the picture at all. You have completely the wrong picture. I’m not that kind of woman. Not at all. Shame on you.”

“I think I hit a nerve.”

I stopped walking. “No, you didn’t hit a nerve. I have no nerves, and if I had a nerve, you couldn’t hit it with one of your Marine bazookas. I’m going home.”

I turned around, and Hudson followed me. “Bicycle, huh?”

“So, he rides a bicycle. Why is that a big deal? Why is that interesting? It isn’t interesting. Lots of people have bicycles. Have you heard of global warming? Climate change? It’s our duty to ride bicycles. You wouldn’t know because you drive a gas-guzzling Camaro. Is it hot in here?”

I tugged at my collar.

“We’re outside. Are you okay? You want me to get something delivered for you?” Hudson teased.

I tugged at my collar, again. “It’s definitely hot in here.”

We got back home, and I laid down on the couch. Hudson went to the bathroom, and then got a drink of water from the kitchen. For some reason, he started to walk around the house, checking out the emptiness or maybe making sure I wasn’t hiding Joe in a room. I turned the television on and found an episode of *Hart to Hart*. Hudson returned, picked up my legs, sat down on the couch, and laid my legs down on his lap.

“I love this show,” he said, leaning back and getting

comfortable. “Uber rich couple who love each other and fight crime. Perfect show. How can you not like this show?”

“I like this show,” I said. “They have a nice house, and he didn’t leave her for a skinnier woman. Of course, who’s skinnier than Stephanie Powers? Maybe he looked around and couldn’t find one and that’s why he stayed with her.”

“I love how romantic you are.”

Hudson was resting his forearms and hands on my legs, sitting transfixed by the show. I was more focused on his forearms and hands on my legs. He wasn’t touching my skin because I was wearing pants. Nevertheless, I felt the weight of him, the heat of him, and it all sent a zing through me that made me want to squirm and moan. It was all I could do to lie there quietly without moving.

I felt ridiculous. I had a grown son. I was a married woman... sort of. Hudson was much younger than I was. Much younger. He was gorgeous. He only ate from the perimeter of the supermarket, nothing from the much better, boxed, bagged, and jarred interior of the supermarket. He worked out every day. At least once. We were complete opposites. We were in completely different leagues. He was in the A-List league, and I wasn’t even in a league.

He probably didn’t even realize that his arms were resting on my legs. He probably thought they were large cushions instead. He was confused because normally, if he touched a woman’s legs, they were long and thin. He didn’t even know that legs could look like mine.

So, I was being totally ridiculous. I shouldn’t have had a physical reaction to him. It was humiliating. He could never ever know what he was doing to me by casually watching old television reruns. I willed my body to shut down and pretend that Hudson was my great-aunt Fran, who was a hideous woman with a skin ailment that made her arms break out in oozing pustules.

Closing my eyes, I pictured my great-aunt’s arms on my legs instead of Hudson’s.

Nope. It didn't work. I was still turned on.

A commercial started on television, and Hudson turned toward me, scooping my legs closer to his body so they wouldn't fall off. "Are you hungry? I'm hungry."

"Where are your Tupperwares? You always have your Tupperwares."

"I'm behind on my food prep. C'mon, I'm hungry. You know what we can do? We could order in. Have something *delivered*."

I gasped, and my legs shot up off him.

"What?"

"I'm sure we can find something healthy to be delivered. We could call Joe. He could deliver for us," Hudson said, straight-faced."

I sat up and put my feet on the floor. I was dimly aware that *Hart to Hart* had returned from the commercial break. I knew that Hudson was teasing me, but I also knew I could beat him at his own game.

"Okay," I said, brightly. "That sounds perfect. We'll get Joe to deliver. I'll do the ordering, though. Fried chicken, macaroni and cheese with Pop-Tarts for dessert. Pop-Tarts and Cool Whip."

"Great," Hudson said, shocking me. "Would you like to call Joe, or should I?"

He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket, held it with one hand, and poised the index finger of his other hand over it. I took his phone from him.

"Stop it," I said.

"What? Don't you want fried chicken?"

"No," I insisted, and my stomach growled, betraying me. "We're not going to call Joe."

"Why not?"

Why not? Why not? I didn't want Hudson to meet Joe

or Joe to meet Hudson. Why not? It was complicated. So complicated that I didn't totally understand my motivations. All I knew was that it would be awkward for me.

Hudson scooted closer to me on the couch. "Why not?" he asked, softly. He smelled good, not like a jock at all or like egg whites or even broccoli. He smelled like expensive cologne.

"I don't want to see Joe," I said, which was a half-truth. I wanted to see him, but not in front of Hudson.

"Why not? Did he do something to you? You want me to beat him up?"

"No and no. I can't see him, because I think he might want to have sex with me. There, I said it. Satisfied? I think he might be interested in me, so I can't see him."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't have sex with him!" I shouted.

"Why not?"

"Because..." I started to say I was a married woman, but after pouring sewage into my husband's love nest, I couldn't really use my official marital status as an excuse. "Because you have to get naked to have sex."

"He might like that," Hudson said, even softer than before. His voice was a soft rumble, coming from deep within his chest. It made me tingle, and I shivered.

"No. I can't be naked. He would laugh."

"Why? You're perfect. He would be a lucky man, Eliza. Any man would be lucky."

I turned to face him, and we locked eyes. His lips parted slightly, and he exhaled. He was studying me, or was he waiting for something from me? Waiting for my reaction? Waiting for me to do something or say something? He continued to look at me, and I swore his gaze went from my eyes to my mouth and back again.

"What did you say?" I asked.

Somewhere in the conversation, we had turned serious. Somewhere we had turned a corner, but I had no idea where it was going to lead. I didn't trust myself to read his expression or attempt to read his thoughts. I didn't want to jump to conclusions that would leave me humiliated and lose my remaining self-worth.

"Eliza..." he began. Hudson's voice was soft and serious, nothing like his usual boss Marine self.

There was a loud knock on the door, interrupting him. I moved to get up, but Hudson grabbed my arm.

"Eliza," he repeated urgently, never breaking eye contact.

There was another knock, even louder than the first. "Sheriff!" someone barked from the other side of the door.

"Oh, geez," I breathed. I clutched Hudson's shoulders in a blind panic. "It's the fuzz. It's the coppers. They found me, Hudson. Oh no, they know what I did. They've come to get me. They're going to cuff me and make me do a perp walk. They're going to lock me up. I can't go to jail, Hudson. I can't for so many reasons. One: I can't pee in front of other people. Two: The mattresses are too thin. Three: There are criminals there. Four..."

There was another knock. "Sheriff! Open up!"

"Four: I need to watch television to fall asleep," I continued. "Five..."

Hudson cupped my cheek. "Eliza, we don't have time to count. They're going to break down the door."

"Hide me," I pleaded. "Hide me, and I'll go on the lam. Hide me, and I'll move to Venezuela or the Cayman Islands. Please, hide me. I can't get arrested. My son is a lawyer. How would that look at his firm if his mother is a convict?"

"Go in the other room, and I'll see what this is about."

I ran to the sunroom, and I crouched low to the ground, hiding behind my two handcrafted chairs.

I heard Hudson open the front door and speak with two

men, but I couldn't hear what they were actually saying. A couple minutes later, I heard the door close again and footsteps approach the sunroom.

"It's just me," Hudson announced, and I stood up.

"Are they gone?" I whispered.

"They're outside."

"Are they going to arrest me?"

"It's not about last night," he explained.

I felt a sudden rush of relief and then another one of alarm. "Then, what is it? Is it Jamie? Is it about my son? Is he all right?"

"It's not about your son. No one's hurt. Come on back to the couch, Eliza. I'll update you."

He took my hand, and we walked to the living room. I sat down on the couch, and he sat on the coffee table facing me, so close that our knees touched.

"The sheriff came with the bailiff," Hudson explained. "They had legal papers. You're being evicted. The house is in your husband's name?"

A sense of foreboding and doom engulfed me like a thick fog. "Everything is in his name. He said it was easier that way. I'm not good with legal matters or taxes. He said if it was all in his name, I wouldn't have to worry about dealing with the bills and maintenance and the headaches. He said... Oh, no. What's happening?"

Hudson took my hands in his. "He's sold the house to Tammy, and you have to vacate. You have two hours."

"He did what? I have to what?"

"It's a trick, Eliza. He probably sold it for twenty dollars or something ridiculous, and he's going to pocket it and manage to get you out."

"Oh."

"Do you want me to call someone?" Hudson asked,

clearly upset for me. “I can call a lawyer.”

I looked past him to the rest of the living room and the kitchen, the curtains, and the carpets.

“Don’t call a lawyer,” I said.

He gave my hands a squeeze. “Eliza, I don’t think you understand what’s happening. You’re in shock. You have to leave your house in two hours and never come back. Do you understand?”

“May I have the television? I like the television.”

“You can bring your belongings. I think that includes the television.”

“I want the television, the photo albums of Jamie, and my clothes. I don’t want the house. I never liked the house. It was never my house. It was Steve’s house. He picked it out. He decorated it with an interior designer he chose. I had nothing to do with it except for cooking and cleaning.”

“You can have the television and photos and clothes,” Hudson assured me. “And whatever else you want from the house. I’ll make sure of it.”

“Thank you,” I said and gave him a hug. He hugged me back. My head rested on his chest, and his chin rested on the top of my head. He was a good hugger, firm, but not too firm. He was a Goldilocks hugger. I was comfortable and felt safe, despite what was happening in my life. I could have stayed in Hudson’s embrace for hours, but I only had two hours to clear out my belongings from the house.

“Wait!” I cried and pulled out of the hug. “Where will I go? I have nowhere to go.”

Hudson smiled. “You’ll come home with me. You can stay at my place for as long as you want.”

“I can’t do that. I can’t...”

He touched the side of my head and let his hand glide down my hair, effectively quieting me. “You’re coming home with me, Eliza. It’s the next commandment.”

“You made that up.”

“I made up all the commandments. So, I can make up this one, too. Eliza, you’re coming home with me.”



## CHAPTER 13

### “A Sleepover in Batman’s Lair”

It’s an amazing thing to pack all of one’s belongings into a Camaro. It took Hudson and me an hour and a half to gather everything that was important in my life. That included the television, four photo albums, my purse with the bag of cash in it, a large suitcase of clothes and toiletries, a quilt that my grandmother made me, and a salt and pepper shaker that I bought at a thrift store. Hudson wouldn’t let me take any of the Delivery Happiness junk food I had stashed in the pantry.

All of those belongings fit in the Camaro’s backseat and trunk. Then, Hudson draped the blanket I had been using on the couch onto the roof of his car, and the sheriff deputies helped him strap my two handcrafted chairs onto it, and then one of the deputies had a bike rack he let Hudson borrow, and they hooked that to the back of the car.

“There,” I said, looking at the Camaro in the driveway. “All of my life’s accomplishments. Except for my son. But I didn’t have anything to do with his success. He did that on his own.”

“Nobody gets here alone,” Hudson told me. “Nobody. Besides, you have one more accomplishment you’re bringing.”

“I do?”

He poked my chest. “You. You’re your greatest accomplishment.”

Tears sprung from my eyes. “I’m not an accomplishment. I’m a failure,” I wept.

Hudson brought me in for a hug, pressing me tightly against him. He was all hard planes and muscles, but it was comforting to rest against him, for him to hold my weight.

With his support, I almost felt that I was going to be okay.

When we got into the car, the bailiff got busy with the house. Hudson opened the car's windows and cranked the radio to classic rock, which I assumed was to distract me. "Fresh air and old music," he said. "They cure all ills."

Hudson backed out of the driveway and drove up the street. It dawned on me that I was going to see Batman's lair. Superman's Fortress of Solitude. Suddenly, a little kernel of excitement popped inside me. I had never thought I would see where Hudson lived. Actually, I never believed he lived anywhere. I couldn't imagine him owning dishes that weren't Tupperwares, let alone a nightstand or an ottoman.

Suddenly, I was wondering about all kinds of things. Did he live in an apartment or a house? Was the bathroom gross? Could I sit on the toilet seat without sticking to it? Did he have a bedroom set, or was his mattress on the floor? Did he even own a mattress? Did he have a modern aesthetic or southwestern or granny? Did his furniture come premade, or did he have to put it together himself?

"I can't wait to see what your place is like," I blurted out as he drove through town.

"Not far now," he said.

"What's it like, your place?"

"When we get there, no snooping in the drawers, Eliza," he ordered.

"You have drawers?"

"I'm not an animal. I'm not a kid. Don't mistake me for a kid."

It turned out that Hudson lived a little more than ten minutes away from my house. It was a brand-new development of townhomes. The entire development was very clean and manicured, with new sod and baby trees dotting every scrap of green. The townhomes alternated in color from light beige to dark beige and back again to light beige. I liked it. It wasn't homey and quirky like Joe's compound, but it was clean and fresh and fitting for new starts in life.

“Very nice,” I commented. “So, you live in a townhome.”

“I moved in recently, even before they completed construction of the development. A lot of my men moved in, too.”

“Did you follow them, or did they follow you?”

Hudson shrugged and turned left, deep into the maze of the development. “They moved in after me. I guess it was just habit. They followed me into battle, and now they followed me into a townhouse development in the suburbs.”

That was interesting. I didn’t know that Hudson was a leader in the Marines. For some reason, I just thought he was a regular grunt. But it all made sense. He was a leader. After all, he had been leading me for days and even got me to eat egg whites. If he could do that, getting men to risk their lives would be easy as pie.

Hudson made a few more turns, winding his way through the development, and finally drove into a driveway of one of the light beige townhouses. He pushed a button in the Camaro, and the garage door opened.

The inside of the garage was immaculate. On one wall were tools organized by type and shape, all hung up on hooks. Under them was a work table and two black tool chests. Black cabinets lined another wall. Besides that, the garage was totally empty. Even the floor was pristine. I realized that having to contend with all of my stuff would throw a wrench into his lifestyle. I wasn’t sure how he would deal with having a shot of chaos into his otherwise ordered life.

But then I remembered that I didn’t have a lot of belongings. Sure, I was a lot of chaos, but I wouldn’t take up a lot of space.

Hudson turned off the car and took a deep breath. “Here’s how we’re going to do this,” he started. “I’m going to take you in and do the tour, show you where everything is. Then, I’m going to bring all your stuff in while you stay in the house and get comfortable.”

“Oh, I can’t let you do that. I can carry my own stuff. I don’t want to be a burden. Look, I’m not going to put you out. This is a very temporary situation. I might be gone in an hour. Or thirty minutes. We can even leave my stuff in the car, so it’s easier to move when I go.”

Hudson shifted in his seat to look at me. “Eliza, trust me on this.” He karate-chopped his hand in the air for emphasis when he spoke. “You’re in shock, and you don’t know it yet. You need time to breathe and take this all in. You need a safe place to recuperate. We don’t know how long you’re going to need to stay with me until you get your feet back on firm ground. So, we’re unpacking and moving you in. You know, organized. You’re going to rest upstairs. It’ll be a lot easier for me to bring in the stuff than for you to help. Do you understand me?”

“You say that like I’m not capable of moving my belongings.”

Hudson smiled at me. “There are so many ways I can respond to that, but then we’ll never get out of this car. So how about you just listen to me, don’t argue, and we’ll get the show on the road.”

“Fish and guests start to stink after three days,” I pointed out.

“I love the smell of fish.”

I decided to give in, only because I was tired, in a semi-state of shock, and was dying to see his place. Besides, I didn’t want to lug my stuff up the stairs into his townhouse. I was just trying to be polite, considering that he was going to put me up in his home for however long I needed. That was awkward enough. I didn’t like to be a burden. I thought I had never been a burden before, but my husband had made it clear that I had been. If I was a burden while I cooked and cleaned for a man for more than two decades, how much more of a burden would I be by invading a man’s space and messing up his home?

“Here we are,” Hudson announced when he got to the top of the stairs.

The townhouse was three small stories. The kitchen, dining room, and small living room took up the first floor. The middle floor was an office, which doubled as a home gym, and the master bedroom and bathroom were on the top floor.

“It’s just like you to pick a place where you have to travel two floors from your bedroom to the refrigerator,” I noted, as I looked around his room.

“That’s just a happy accident. I like to move my body as much as possible, but don’t fool yourself. I never starve myself. Food is fuel. I demand a lot from my body, so I have to give it the proper amount of energy in the right forms so that it performs for me.”

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes. He was the most disciplined man I had ever met. I always found discipline to be uncomfortable, and I didn’t want to live an entire life in discomfort.

Turning around, my knees creaked. “Oh,” I said, and they creaked again. “That was uncomfortable,” I noted, and was hit by a wave of irony. I hoped that Hudson couldn’t read my mind because I was suddenly thinking hard about my life philosophy to delay discomfort now and get hit by it later when my body started to fall apart. Probably not the smartest life philosophy.

Perhaps I could be a disciplined egg white-eating Marine on a part-time basis. Maybe that would keep my joints intact while still enjoying a cookie now and then.

We left Hudson’s room and returned to the bottom floor. The entire townhouse was immaculate, just like his Camaro and garage. It was all put together perfectly, too. Fully furnished and matched to perfection.

“You know what this place looks like?” I asked him. “It looks like a model home. You know, the perfectly furnished places they have to get people to buy in housing developments. I’m very impressed, Hudson. You’ve done an amazing job here. Everything is in place. You remembered every little touch. You even have vases and lamps on the end tables. You must have gone shopping forever to get everything

just so. Or did you hire a designer to do it all?”

“Nope. No designer, Eliza.”

“Wow, I’m really impressed.” And a little weirded out. The home was nothing like I expected. Sure, I had a suspicion that it would be neat and tidy, but I thought he would own one spoon, one glass, and one towel. Not much else. Now, I had to alter my entire perception of who Hudson was. Now, I had to believe that knickknack placement was very important to him. Now, I had to believe he took pride in loveseats. I mean, he had an UGG throw slung over the back of his couch, for goodness’ sake.

Hudson started to laugh. He doubled over with the force of his laughter and even slapped his knee.

“What is it?” I asked. He continued to laugh and didn’t answer me. “What is it? Is it me? Do I have something in my nose?”

I wiped at my nose, and he laughed harder. Finally, he calmed down.

“It’s a model home,” he said, still chuckling.

“It’s what?”

“A model home. I came to sign the papers for a new townhouse and asked for this one, and they gave it to me with everything already inside. I didn’t do a thing to it except bring in two gun safes, my clothes, and fifteen meal prep containers.”

I slapped his chest. “You tricked me. You can’t imagine what I was thinking just now.”

“I could see your brain moving. You were picturing me wandering through Macy’s looking at end table lamps.”

“I was doubting my judgment about you. I thought I had completely read you wrong, which is impossible, but if you were a book, you would be one page long.”

Hudson sobered up, finally. “Look, I’m a Marine. I don’t have time to buy lamps or end tables. All I need is a sleeping bag and a hard piece of ground to sleep on.”

“And gun safes,” I added.

“And gun safes,” he agreed.

“Well, I’ll give you this: It was smart to purchase the model home. You’re all set. When you bring a girl here, they’ll be impressed.”

There was a deafening silence. My words landed with a thud, but I didn’t know why.

“I’ll get your things,” Hudson said, finally. “I’m going to leave the television in the garage, though. I have two in the house.”

When he came back, he put my two chairs around his dining room table and carried the rest of my belongings to his bedroom. I followed him upstairs and watched as he put my suitcase and photo albums in his walk-in closet.

“You don’t need to mess up your closet for me,” I told him. “I can put my stuff in the coat closet downstairs by the living room.”

“That doesn’t make sense. You’ll have to go down two flights to get dressed.”

I looked at him and then at his king-sized bed.

“I’m sleeping on the couch,” I said.

“No. I’m not going to allow that to happen. You’re going to take my room, and I’m going to sleep on the couch.” He gathered together some of his clothes and a few toiletries from his bathroom and walked downstairs. I followed him. I thought about arguing with him, but I knew it wouldn’t work. He seemed pretty adamant. So, as strange as it seemed, I was going to sleep in Hudson MacMillan’s bed tonight.

What a crazy world.

I watched Hudson put his clothes away in the downstairs closet with great care. Then, he organized his toiletries in the downstairs bathroom by the order of use after a shower.

He turned around and bumped into me. “Move back,

shadow.” He grabbed hold of my shoulders, turned me around, and walked me out of the bathroom and into the kitchen, all the while walking close behind me.

“This is good,” he said. “I can give you a meal prep lesson. Now that I’ve got you as my captive.”

“Are we putting stuff in Tupperware?”

“Yes. Excited?”

I was having a bad day. I had lost my home and was now homeless. It was definitely more of a pizza night than a chicken breast and broccoli night. But I didn’t want to dampen Hudson’s mood and seem ungrateful. He acted over the moon about teaching me how to do healthy meal prep.

“Everything in balance,” he started while he washed his hands in the kitchen sink. “I don’t want to preach about mindful eating, but the secret to success is having the food ready to go. That way, you won’t grab some crap. Are you getting this, Eliza?”

“Absolutely, sir.”

“Don’t call me sir,” he said, drying his hands on a kitchen towel. “Officers are called sir. I’m a First Sergeant in the Marines. I work for a living.”

“Absolutely, First Sergeant.” I did my best at saluting. I washed my hands, and we started cooking.

Hudson was in his element, teaching me how to meal prep. He was like a musclebound little boy explaining the virtues of protein to me, as we baked chicken breasts, roasted broccoli, and cooked other gross food. Hudson didn’t believe in sauces. Sauces weren’t *clean* he said. Clean food was the important thing, according to him. If I wanted to have a clean body and mind, I needed to only eat clean food.

“I’m guessing pizza isn’t clean,” I said, when we had packaged eight meals.

“Don’t joke about clean food.”

There was a knock on the front door, and Hudson went to open it. “Where is she?” I heard. The voice was familiar, but



I couldn't place it.

"Up there. Be nice," I heard Hudson say.

The two men came up the stairs. I instantly recognized the other man. It was Peter from the bar, one of Hudson's friends, who gave me a Blow Job and held my legs when I did a Keg Stand. He was the frat boy top with boundless energy. Today was no different. He smiled ear to ear when he saw me and wrapped me in a bear hug.

"Hello, Blow Job girl. I'm happy to see you again," he told me.

Hudson pried him off me. "Easy there, Marine," Hudson told him. "Don't break the guest."

Peter asked me to sit at the table, and I was thrilled when he sat in one of the chairs.

"So, what's happening here?" he asked, pointing from Hudson to me and back again. "Is this a thing?"

"It's a thing," I said. "I moved in."

Peter jumped up from the chair and jumped up again into the air, raising his fist high like he was about to fly through the ceiling. "Hudson has never lived with a woman. Never. He hides his chicks away from us."

"Not this chick," I said. "My suitcase is in his closet. Our closet."

"Peter jumped again with glee."

I rolled my eyes at Hudson. This was craziness. How could Peter believe that I had actually moved in with Hudson and that there was something between us?

Peter pounded the wall. "I live right on the other side of that wall in the other townhouse," he told me. "Anytime you want me to come over and party, I'm available. Maybe Hudson will be more sociable now. Hold on, I'm going to text the guys to come over."

"Oh, God," Hudson moaned.

"Tell them to bring pizza," I directed Peter.

Hudson tossed his kitchen towel up into the air and let it fall to the floor. The front door opened, and Lance came up the stairs. He looked even bigger than the last time I saw him.

“You moved in with him?” he asked when he saw me. “I thought you had better taste than that.”

Hudson put his prepared meals in the refrigerator with a definite air of defeat. I felt I should tell his friends the truth.

“I didn’t really move in,” I announced, just as Jeremy and Tony burst in.

“What?” Tony asked. “Dude, I had somewhere to go. I came to congratulate you on the little missus.”

“There’s no little missus,” I told Tony. “Hudson is letting me stay here because I just lost my house. It’s temporary. I’m couch surfing. That’s all.”

There was a moment of silence when they all stared at me like I had sprouted a second head. Then, Peter started to laugh, and Lance, Jeremy, and Tony joined in.

“Couch surfing with a Marine?” Lance asked me. “No. Sorry, honey. Just no.”

“That’s right,” Jeremy said. “It’s never just couch surfing.”

Luckily, the conversation took a sharp right turn to Tony’s motorcycle problems and let Hudson and me off the hook. Someone had indeed ordered pizza, and a few minutes later, five large pies showed up, along with a case of beer and a brownie pie.

I sat down to eat with them, and Hudson sat down, too, but he ate chicken, rice, and asparagus. I had a good time with Hudson and his friends. They had veered off the topic of whatever relationship Hudson and I did or didn’t have. Instead, they teased each other and talked about cars, motorcycles, girls, and television shows. I noticed that they didn’t speak about work, about the military, and I wondered if that was calculated or not. Hudson joined in with them, and it was nice to see him relaxed with his friends, even though it was obvious that, friendly as they were, he was still their

superior. They looked to him for advice and approval. Even Lance, who was the oldest and biggest of the group, deferred to Hudson.

Peter and Jeremy sat on my handmade chairs, and I was happy to see that they held up under the weight of the two men. As the afternoon turned into evening, I let them know that I made the chairs, and I offered them to them as gifts.

“Cool!” Peter said. “I’ve got like no furniture in my place next door. This’ll go great. It would be even better if I had a second chair.” He eyed Jeremy’s chair.

“No way, man,” Jeremy said, shaking his head. “Eliza gave this to me.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll make you another,” I told Peter. “If you really want another.”

“I do!” he said, slamming another slice of pizza into his mouth.

“It might not look exactly the same. It will be with a different kind of wood,” I said, since I was never going home again and couldn’t use Steve’s wood paneling anymore.

“Sounds killer,” Peter said.

My phone rang, and I left the table to get it. It was Joe, and I ran upstairs before I answered.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes. I’m... at a friend’s.”

“I was making a delivery nearby, and I saw the sheriff’s deputies, and then I saw you-know-who with you-know-who go inside.”

So, Steve and Tight Tammy had already moved into my house. It figured since her house was flooded with sewage. Still, it was quick. I had heard of power couples, but Steve and Tight Tammy were a ruthless couple.

“Steve kicked me out,” I told Joe. “He tricked me. The house was in his name.”

I didn’t want to admit that I had allowed him to put the

house in his name, that I allowed myself to be tricked. At that moment on the phone, I decided not to blame the victim, and I was indeed the victim in this whole thing.

“I’m so sorry,” Joe said. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, I didn’t like that house, anyway. It was never my house. I’ll be fine. I’m couch surfing.”

It was the second time I used the couch surfing line, and it made me uncomfortable to lie, but I didn’t want anyone to know that I would be using Hudson’s bed.

“Couch surfing is fun,” Joe said. “You could do that for a long time and have a lot of fun.”

“Lots of fun,” I agreed, but it made me think. Did I want to be a houseguest for a long time? No, I didn’t. I needed to find my own place. I needed to be a real person, a real adult, and stand on my own two feet. But I didn’t have a job or a credit rating. How would I find a place to live?

“I know you’re doing well and having fun,” Joe said. “But if ever you’re in the market for a place of your own, I’d love to rent out the second bungalow here. I hesitate to mention it to you because I’m sure you’ve got a plan. I haven’t rented the bungalow out yet because I wanted it to go to a special person. I think you’d be perfect. It’s not as big or fancy as you’re used to, and I’m sure you’d rather be with your friends, but if you ever are looking for a little place to call your own, I’m renting it out for twelve hundred a month. Utilities are included, and you’d have full use of the art studio next door and probably as much leftover homemade bread that you could eat.”

I didn’t answer for a full minute. I was letting his words soak in. It was like winning the lottery. I loved that little bungalow. I had loved it the first moment I stepped into it, and I never wanted to leave it. I pictured my grandmother’s quilt on the bed, and I couldn’t wait to go there. Twelve-hundred dollars was nothing, and I could easily pay six months in advance with my bag of cash. Six months might be enough time for me to get my life together, I thought.

“I love that bungalow,” I said into the phone.

“You seemed at home in it yesterday.”

“It was perfect for me. A dream home.”

It was all perfect. A happy ending. There was just one more thing to clear up, and I had no idea how to broach the subject. I wanted the bungalow more than I wanted anything, and I felt so lucky that he was offering it to me. But I had to know that he wasn't expecting something from me in exchange. Like maybe he expected me to move into his farmhouse someday. I really liked Joe. He was a wonderful person and friend, but I didn't have romantic intentions toward him.

How could I say that to him? What if I hurt him? What if he got angry and didn't let me rent the bungalow? What if he laughed at me because I'm a pathetic woman who slept on my couch surrounded by junk food, blubbering over the man who left me for his personal trainer?

I didn't have to worry. As usual, Joe was empathetic and knew my thoughts before I did. “It'll be nice to have another pal around the compound,” he said. “You know, some men say it's impossible to have a platonic relationship with a woman, but that's just what you and I have, and I hope we have it forever.”

“I'll take the bungalow,” I blurted out. “May I move in tomorrow?”

“The key will be under the mat.”

I hung up and practically danced down the stairs. Everything was falling into place. I could have kissed Steve for being a rotten jerk and stealing my house.

The dining room table was empty except for Hudson. The rest of the men were in the kitchen, huddling around the pantry.

“What's happening?” I asked.

“Don't ask,” Hudson groaned.

“Dang!” Peter cried from the kitchen. “Dude's got a

kickass supply of Twinkies.”

“And Ding Dongs!” Jeremy yelled, triumphantly.

“Dude’s got the Hostess with the mostess,” Tony said.

They returned to the dining room with armloads of Hostess boxes and dropped them onto the table.

“Did the model home people leave all that in Hudson’s pantry?” I asked, eyeing the stash of baked goods.

“Our man Hudson doesn’t go anywhere without Twinkies,” Peter told me, opening a box of Ding Dongs. “Even in the mountains of Afghanistan, he had at least a dozen packages in his pack at all times.”

I turned to look at Hudson. He smirked at me and shrugged.

“Perfection is the enemy of good,” he explained.

I smiled back at him and grabbed a Twinkie. “You know what? This clean eating is growing on me.”

Hudson’s friends left a couple of hours later. I helped Hudson clean up, and I swore to myself not to mention the Hostess cakes to him. It was enough to know that Hudson was truly human and not a robot. And it was nice to know for me that one could be a clean eater most of the time, and a Twinkie eater the rest of the time and be just fine inside and out.

By the time we were done cleaning, we were both yawning and ready for bed. I asked him once again if I could sleep on the couch, but he insisted on giving me his bed. I hadn’t told him about the bungalow yet, but since we had had such a long day and I had a feeling that the Joe conversation would be a long one, I decided to wait until morning to tell him about it. I said goodnight and went upstairs.

Hudson’s bathroom was modern and spotless. I took a long, hot shower, trying to wash the day off of me. After, I slipped between Hudson’s sheets. I could smell his cologne on his pillow, and that’s when I knew I wasn’t going to get a minute of sleep.

Boy, was I right about that.



## CHAPTER 14

“What Would Plato Say?”

Nine o'clock turned to ten o'clock turned to eleven o'clock. The clock on Hudson's nightstand taunted me with every passing minute.

But it was impossible to sleep. Hudson's mattress was comfortable. The sheets were luxurious. The temperature of the room was perfect.

None of that mattered.

My brain wouldn't turn off. My body wouldn't relax. Both were painfully aware that I was lying in Hudson's bed. That I was lying on his comfortable mattress. That I was lying between his luxurious sheets. That I was in his perfectly heated room at night, in my nightgown. Without a bra.

I flopped around like a fish out of water, trying to get to sleep. My back, my side, my belly. I couldn't find a position where I didn't smell Hudson's cologne. Finally, I gave up. Sitting up, I slapped the bed.

Damn it. I was going to have a long night. Luckily, I was moving into the bungalow tomorrow. Otherwise, I would have to fight Hudson for his couch. I couldn't do another night like this. It was torture trying to sleep in Hudson's bed.

I hadn't brought a book, and there was no television in the bedroom. I had no idea how to pass the time without going crazy. Whatever I chose to do, I would have to do it away from Hudson's room. It was making me crazy.

“Is milk ‘clean’?” I asked out loud. If Hudson had milk in the refrigerator, I could sneak a glass and some Hostess, and that would help to put me to sleep.

As quietly as I could, I stepped onto the floor and



tiptoed down the stairs. When I got to the second floor, I stopped at the top of the staircase and listened for signs of life from Hudson.

Mr. Perfect didn't even snore. He didn't even breathe loudly.

It was complete silence from below. I had had a lot of experience sneaking down to kitchens in my adult life. I had successfully done it numerous times in recent years with Steve, and he was a light sleeper. So, I knew I could successfully get some milk without waking Hudson.

I clutched the handrail, stuck in my memories of my life with Steve. I had forgotten about my nighttime kitchen adventures. Why hadn't I been able to sleep at night with Steve? What was keeping me up, making me too anxious to sleep? Had I been as unhappy as he was in our marriage? Not that I was aware. I had felt the same way about my marriage on the first day as I did in the twentieth year.

A bolt of self-realization hit me right there on the second floor of Hudson's model townhouse.

Holy crap. I was never happy in my marriage. I had gotten pregnant and trapped in a miserable marriage, and it had never gotten unmiserable in all that time I was married.

That was the thing about unhappiness. One learned to live with it and pretend that all was hunky dory. Day-to-day life was a struggle, and a person didn't want to add to it by dwelling on unhappinesses. Trapped in a marriage, I had been convinced that that was my lot in life until I died. So, I never questioned it. Instead, I had snuck downstairs to the kitchen at night. Miserable, but coping in the only way I knew how.

There, on the staircase, struck with an insight that would save me thousands of hours on a therapist's couch, I was almost glad that Steve had finally left me for Tight Tammy, that he had saved me the trouble of being miserable for the rest of my life.

But I was only *almost* not, not actually glad, and I didn't plan on forgiving Steve for a long time. I liked being

angry at him. It helped me deal with my fear of the future. What was going to happen to me without support? What was my son going to think of a mother who at this time of her life had nothing to show for it? No home, no work history, no accomplishments.

Yep, I was going to stay angry at Steve for a long time.

And I was going to find myself a glass of milk.

I tiptoed downstairs. It was pitch black except for the glow of the clock on the oven. I walked softly and carefully toward it, trying to remember where the furniture was so I wouldn't crash into it and wake Hudson.

I was doing well when Hudson tossed and turned on the couch. I stopped in my tracks. He turned, again, and punched his pillow.

"Damn it," he muttered and punched the pillow each time he spoke a word. "I can sleep anywhere, anytime. Why can't I sleep now? Why can't I stop thinking?"

He turned again, just like I had done in his bed, like a fish out of water. I felt like I was spying on him, so I cleared my throat to let him know I was there.

"Eliza?" he asked.

"Sorry. I came down for some milk. I was having trouble sleeping."

He turned on the end table lamp by his head. "You, too?"

He was sleeping without a shirt, and I continued toward the refrigerator so I wouldn't stare at his pectoral muscles.

"I hope you have milk, even though it might break one of your commandments."

He sat up and put a shirt on. "There's hot chocolate mix in the pantry."

I opened the pantry. It was a cornucopia of every comforting food item from the interior of a supermarket. No

wonder Hudson's friends had been ogling it. "You've been holding out on me."

I grabbed the hot chocolate mix and a few packages of Twinkies, now that I knew they were Hudson's favorite. I poured milk into a small saucepan and heated it on the stove.

"Do you need help?" he asked.

"No, thank you. This is my wheelhouse. I can make a late-night snack with my eyes closed."

After a few minutes, I brought him a cup of hot chocolate and a package of Twinkies. I sat next to him on the couch, and he draped his blanket over my lap.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" he asked.

"I'm waiting for you to take a sip of the hot chocolate. I want to see you do it. I want to witness it. I never thought I would live to see such a thing. It's like seeing Big Foot or the Loch Ness Monster."

He smiled at me and took a sip. "Delicious. My compliments to the chef."

"Wow, I can't believe you just did that."

I took a sip, too.

"I have news," I told him to break the silence. "Remember that call I got at dinner?"

"I was wondering about that, but I didn't want to pry."

"It was Joe."

"Ah, the famous Joe." Hudson took another sip and put the cup down on the coffee table. He opened a package of Twinkies.

"Remember when I went on that bike ride?" I asked.

"With the famous Joe," he said and took a huge bite of Twinkie.

"Not so famous. Just a deliveryman who became a friend. A *platonic* friend," I added softly and took another sip of my hot chocolate. "Anyway, he took me for a bike ride to

see where he lives.”

“As platonic friends do,” Hudson growled and crammed the rest of the Twinkie into his mouth.

“He owns a compound. He lives in a farmhouse. He’s an artist. There’s a couple who live in a bungalow at the compound, too. They live in a bungalow, and he bakes bread, and she’s an artist. And there’s another bungalow. You should see this bungalow, Hudson. It’s so cute. So homey. I love that bungalow. Anyway, Joe offered to rent it to me, and I move in tomorrow.”

“You move in tomorrow? It’s after midnight, so you mean today?” he asked.

“I guess I do mean today.”

“In the bungalow or the farmhouse with the platonic artist?”

“In the bungalow by myself. I’m going to have my own place. I have enough money to live there for a while, but I’m going to have to figure out how to make more.”

He turned toward me, and I pulled up the blanket, tucking it under my arms. “So, this is good news? You’re happy?”

“It’s the first good thing that’s happened to me since Steve left me. Well, the second good thing.”

I avoided his gaze and drank some more hot chocolate.

Hudson cleared his throat. “You should know something. I made up the commandments. I mean, I made them up on the spot.”

“They were good commandments. But you told me there are ten. You never gave me the rest of them.”

“I leave tomorrow night.”

“Actually, you mean tonight.”

“I guess I do,” he said, softly.

“But you’ll be back. You can give the commandments

to me when you return.”

“I can do that, but you’ll be at your bungalow. Won’t that crimp your style with your platonic friend?”

I touched Hudson’s hand, and he grabbed hold of mine, interlacing our fingers. “I want you to visit me at my bungalow. I want you to help me move in, and I want you to come see me. Come often. I’ll give you a key, so if I lock myself out, you can let me in again. You have to keep me on top of my game, make me eat disgusting food, and chastise me for failing every time I put something in my mouth.”

“That sounds good.”

“So, you approve of my bungalow?”

“I have to see it first, see you in it, and make sure you’re all right. Will platonic Joe have a key?” he asked and crammed another Twinkie into his mouth.

It was time to change the subject.

“Where are you going tomorrow?” I asked.

“I could tell you, but I’d have to kill you.”

“Sounds exotic.”

He laughed. “Well, I can tell you that it’s not a five-star hotel with room service and fresh towels every morning.”

“Do you like the Marines?”

He picked up his cup, again and took a long drink from it. “It’s everything I know. Everything I wanted to be. I wanted to make a difference.”

“That sounds wonderful. I’ve never made a difference.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes, it is,” I insisted.

“I know from personal experience that you’ve made a difference. You’re a special person.”

“Is *special* a nice word for crazy or stupid?”

“I’m not some kind of hero, Eliza. I joined the Marines because I was offered a choice,” Hudson said. “I could join the Marines, or I could go to prison. A judge offered me that choice.”

“So, you chose the Marines.”

Hudson shook his head. “No. I didn’t like authority, so the military was out, as far as I was concerned. So, I chose prison. I had just turned eighteen, and I was only sentenced to two years, so I thought it would be an easy way to spend two years. Three hots and a cot and all of that nonsense.”

“Holy crap, you were in prison for two years?”

“I was in prison for fifteen minutes,” he said, laughing. “I went there, freaked out, and changed my mind. I begged them to call the judge for me, and the next thing I knew, I was on a bus to Camp Pendleton.”

I put my cup down and picked up a package of Twinkies. “I don’t blame you. I would hate prison. The mattresses, the toilets, the criminals. I’m not sure I would like the Marines much more, though.”

“In prison, you acquire enemies who want you dead. In the Marines, you get a family who will die for you. In prison, you’re stuck inside and you don’t advance in life until you’re released. In the Marines, you travel the world, advance every day, accomplish more than you think you’re capable of. The only similarity is the food and the yelling. Rotten food and lots of yelling.”

“But you loved it. I can tell you loved it,” I said.

“I came up through the system since I was four years old. No one ever told me I was good at anything, so that’s what I believed. That I wasn’t good at anything.”

“But you were good at the Marines,” I guessed.

He nodded. “I was good at leading. Good until...”

Hudson drifted off. I knew there was something more to tell. Something that happened in his beloved Marines, and it left him with a darkness that refused to leave. I also believed

deeply that the reason he reached out to me that night at the grocery store and decided to save me had something to do with the darkness that haunted him.

“You’re a good man,” I told him because I didn’t know what else to say. Sometimes that’s all someone needs to hear, that they’re good, that they’re deserving.

“You don’t know that.”

“I know from personal experience that you’re a good man. Nothing is truer than that.”

I turned toward him, and we faced each other. The dim light from the lamp lit him from behind. I could make out his face, but not his expression. Not his eyes.

“Whatever happened, it didn’t happen because you’re not a good man,” I told him. “It didn’t happen because you were lazy or greedy or uncaring. Because that would be impossible. It would be impossible for you to be those things.”

Hudson snorted. “You’re too kind to me. I’m so happy you had that nervous breakdown in the ice cream aisle. It brought you into my life.”

“I bet. Now you have a nice maternal figure to say kind things to you.”

Hudson shook his head. “Eliza, I don’t think of you as a maternal figure. Nothing like a maternal figure.”

I realized that I had stopped breathing, and I took a deep breath. My heart was beating hard, rattling my chest. “Like an aunt?” I asked in a whisper.

He shook his head, again. “Not like an aunt or a cousin or an older sister.”

“Oh.”

“Not like a platonic friend, either,” he added. “Nothing resembling a platonic friend.”

“Oh.”

I made a point to breathe again, and when I did, I inhaled his scent. His cologne had worn off, but his

pheromones hadn't. They shot at me like bullets, each one hitting its target. I had never been close to a man like Hudson before. He was masculine from his head to his toes. Capable. He was in complete control of his body, and what an amazing body it was. I was happy that the room was so dimly lit. I didn't want him to read my face and understand my feelings.

I waited for something to happen because it felt like something was about to happen. Something big and important and impossible to turn back once it happened. The air was thick with it, whatever it was.

But Hudson stayed on his side of the couch, and I stayed on my side. I didn't dare move a muscle, and Hudson didn't move either. We stayed there until morning, talking. I told him about high school and getting pregnant, and he told me about foster care and about rifle practice.

And there was a lot of silence in between. A lot where we froze in place with only the sound of our breathing filling the space between us, paralyzed to move in a direction for fear that it was the wrong direction.



## CHAPTER 15

### “A First Encounter Kind of Thing”

At some point, I must have fallen asleep. It had to be after five in the morning but before sunrise. In any case, at around nine o'clock, I woke up slumped over the arm of the couch, my mouth open, and Hudson's blanket draped over me.

Sitting up, I saw Hudson tiptoeing past from the bathroom to the kitchen. Somehow, he had showered and dressed without waking me, and now he was fully groomed and wearing black jeans and a blue t-shirt that brought out the color of his eyes. I watched as he scrambled eggs and dropped bread into a toaster.

“Be careful,” I called to him. “Those are whole eggs. The yolks might kill you.”

He turned around in surprise, and his face turned red. It was an honest-to-goodness blush that started at his collarbones and went straight up to his thick hairline. It was an honest blush because we hadn't done anything the night before except talk, but he had probably said a little too much for his normally taciturn self, and that made him embarrassed.

Or he could have blushed because he remembered he told me he didn't think of me as a platonic friend.

It could have been that.

At the memory, I felt my face go hot, too, and I put my hands on my cheeks to cover them.

“It's my whole eggs day,” he said, gathering his composure. “I get one whole eggs day a week.”

“I love fried eggs,” I said. “Over easy with a good cup of coffee and sourdough toast with butter. Yum.”

“You think a lot about food.”

“So do you, but we think about different foods and for different reasons. You think about food because you’re using it as a tool to make yourself look like Henry Cavill. I’m thinking about food because...” I was about to say no one loves me, but I stopped myself just in time. “Is some of that for me?” I asked.

“I made it for both of us.”

“Okay, I’ll get dressed in a hurry and come back down.” I ran upstairs and dressed as fast as I could, washing my face with cold water and swiping my eyelashes with a light coat of mascara so I wouldn’t scare Hudson or make him regret what he had said to me in the dark.

After setting the table, I helped Hudson bring the food over, and we sat down to eat together.

“Are you sure you want to live with that guy?” Hudson asked me before we started eating. “You could stay here indefinitely. I won’t even be here for the next couple of weeks. I leave tonight. You don’t take up a lot of room, and you’re not a bother. You don’t know this other guy. He could be a serial killer.”

He could also be a cult leader, but I decided to keep that to myself. Hudson was already down on the whole Joe idea.

“Thank you for your kindness and hospitality, but it’s time for this little birdie to fly from the nest,” I said. “And I’m not living with that guy. I’m going to live in a sweet little bungalow by myself. You’ll see the bungalow today if you help me move in.”

Hudson put his hand on mine. “Eliza, there’s no “if” about it. I’m going to move you in. There’s no way I’m dropping you off there without inspecting the place and this platonic Joe. If I don’t like either, I’m not letting you stay there.”

My hand tingled under his touch, and I felt my face grow hot again. This was getting ridiculous. I was playing a

game that was impossible to win. Hudson was much younger than I was, and besides, he had the whole night to make a move, and he didn't. That meant that he was smarter than I was. He knew not to start something with me because it wouldn't work. He knew that he was better off with his own young Tight Tammy. Someone who could meal prep with him and look good in yoga pants. I was much more of a sweatpants woman than a yoga pants woman. That was definitely not Hudson's type.

A couple of hours later, Hudson had packed up the car, and we were on our way to Joe's compound. Joe had sent me the official address, and Hudson typed it into his GPS, and we left the townhouse development.

The compound wasn't far, but it was a world away. After twenty-five minutes, Hudson turned off the main road onto a gravel road, which wound its way through a forest.

"I didn't know any of this existed," Hudson said, looking around.

"I think Joe owns all of this. Did you see the sign back there? I think we're on a private road."

"A rich artist. You found the only rich artist. Figures."

"Money is overrated," I said. "Money can't buy happiness, you know? A modest military salary is good enough. Splashy money is just splashy, nothing more."

Yikes. It was the worst lie I had ever told just so I could make Hudson feel better about his bank account. I was such a liar. Money definitely bought happiness and everything else, including a forest and a compound. It bought security and safety and peace of mind.

"Money is a tool," Hudson said. "But it doesn't keep husbands faithful. It doesn't make housewives fulfilled."

"I know, so don't feel bad about Joe's money. You have a good job."

Hudson laughed. "Thank you for trying to make me feel better, but when I joined the Marines twenty-two years ago, I started putting all of my combat pay into Bitcoin and did

that until right before it crashed. I can buy a bunch of forests if I want to.”

“What the hell?” I said because no other words came to mind. I was too shocked. All of my life’s savings were stuffed into a plastic bag in my purse. Hudson’s life savings couldn’t fit in a semi-truck.

“This is cool,” Hudson said as we reached the compound. He parked his car on the outskirts of the meadow, close to the farmhouse. “That’s where *he* lives, huh?” he asked, pointing at the farmhouse and obviously not happy about it.

“The bungalow is on the *other* side of the meadow.”

I realized I was excited to be there and see my bungalow again. That’s how I already felt about it. It was mine. I couldn’t believe how lucky I was to be able to live in it.

Hudson grabbed my suitcase and an armload of photo albums. I carried the rest of the photo albums and my quilt. We crossed over the meadow. Just as we were about to pass the other bungalow, a man and a woman came out and waved to me. It was Jenny and Paul. Joe had mentioned them to me the day before. Paul was wearing a flour-coated apron, and Jenny was wearing an earth goddess flowy dress and a mane of long, thick, curly hair.

“You must be Eliza!” Paul called out. “Welcome.”

“Come on over after you’ve moved in,” Jenny urged. “The door’s always open. I hope you like bread.”

Hudson caught my eye and shook his head disapprovingly. “You moved in next to a baker?” he asked as we walked past Paul and Jenny.

“Isn’t it great? All the bread I can eat. Look, here’s my bungalow.”

It was still as cute and charming as I remembered it. Now, there was an old-fashioned skeleton key in the lock, and the door was slightly ajar. I pushed it open with my elbow and was greeted by the smell of freshly cut flowers and freshly

baked bread. Someone had left vases of flowers for me on the fireplace mantle and the coffee table, in my bedroom, and in the kitchen. There was a loaf of bread on a cutting board in the breakfast nook, along with two croissants and a small fruit tart.

I started to cry.

“Oh, geez,” Hudson said. He put my stuff down and clamped his arms around me in a tight embrace.

“It’s so perfect,” I blubbered. “It’s a dream come true. It’s everything I wanted.”

“It’s Snow White’s cottage.”

“Yes. It’s paradise. I’m going to be so happy here.”

“I’m glad you found your happy ending,” he said. “In the end, you saved yourself.”

His arms held me close, and I buried my face in his chest. “I just let people into my life, that’s all. Good people. The best.”

“You mean Joe.”

I dropped my arms and stepped out of the embrace. “I mean you, Hudson. Why are you so hard on yourself? You’re perfect. I’ve never known anyone more perfect than you. You never take a wrong step. Even with Bitcoin.”

He walked past me and sat on the little couch in the living room. “I’m going to tell you something, and after I do, you’re never going to want to see me again,” he said.

“You already told me to eat egg whites, and I still want to see you again. I can’t imagine you saying anything worse than that.”

“I killed a man,” he whispered.

“What?”

I sat next to him on the couch. “You’re a Marine. You were at war. I would be surprised if you didn’t kill a man.”

“No. I killed one of *my* men.”

“What? No. Impossible. I saw you with your men.

They idolize you. You're a born leader. You would never..."

He grabbed my upper arms tight. "Listen, I killed one of my men. I couldn't save him. We were under heavy fire and didn't get to him in time. I didn't try, and he died. Do you see?"

His face was distorted from pain. He was the picture of anguish, and I didn't know how to help him. I wanted to take all the pain from him, to take it for myself and suffer instead of him. Anything to alleviate his hurt. It was torture to see him like that, overcome with the guilt of not saving his comrade-in-arms, and what was worse was not being able to help him. My eyes filled with tears, and then they began to roll down my cheeks.

"No," I said. "You tried to help him. You did. But it was impossible. I know you, Hudson. I know that you would move heaven and earth to help one of your men. Look at what you've done for me. You put your own life on hold to make sure I was okay. You were under fire. If you had tried to help him, you would have died yourself. You tried. Sometimes, we're powerless to help. Sometimes we fail. But it doesn't make us bad people. It only makes us human."

Hudson cradled my face in his hands and used his thumbs to wipe the tears from under my eyes. "I've made you cry," he said. "I'm sorry I did that."

"You're a good man," I whispered. "You're the best man."

At that moment, Hudson conveyed all his emotions with a look. Gone was the playful banter. Gone was the age difference. In their place were two flawed, hurt people who had found each other despite all odds, and now they had crossed a point of no return. They couldn't deny what they felt any longer, no matter how much they feared they didn't deserve it.

Hudson cradled the back of my head with one hand, and after the barest moment of hesitation, touched my lips with his. His lips were warm and full, and my mouth opened for him. Our tongues touched, and Hudson groaned, sending

me through the roof with desire. I snaked my arms around his neck, and his fingers found my waist, letting his fingers trail gently up under my shirt. The feeling of his hands on my bare skin made me moan, and I pressed more deeply into the kiss.

The kiss was deep and slow, neither of us in a hurry, like we were getting to know each other or just enjoying the moment so much that we didn't want it to end. I felt dizzy. I felt like Alice spinning down the rabbit hole, not knowing which side was up or where I was going and not caring a bit.

I had never felt dizzy from a kiss. Never felt my body come alive like this. Was it possible for two people to fit so perfectly that a single kiss could make a person feel this way? It was almost too much for me to handle, the strength of the desire, the swarm of emotions. It was almost painful to experience such heightened pleasure. It was almost scary to allow my body to be in charge, to leave my mind, to not allow thoughts to come in except that this was where I wanted to be, here in this place with this man touching me, possessing me, loving me, wanting me, and that I wanted more of it. Much more.

Now that I discovered that this was even possible, I wanted it to continue.

Hudson didn't disappoint. He came closer to me on the couch and laid me down gently, without ever breaking the kiss. It felt so good to be held, to have some of his weight on me.

His voice brushed against my lips, as he said my name. "Eliza. Eliza," he said, as if he couldn't believe this was happening, either. Couldn't believe that this *could* happen.

I arched my back and tipped my head up with arousal. Hudson removed his lips from mine and trailed them along my neck, making me crazy with pleasure.

Suddenly, he was kissing my lips again and this time it was different. It became ferocious, his tongue thrusting in my mouth. My pulse raced, and my skin tingled, making me aware of every pore on my skin, along with every square inch of his body that touched mine.

It was all moving fast, and I didn't care how fast. I parted my legs, and he shifted his weight to nestle between them. This was going to happen, and it was going to happen now on the little couch in the little living room in the little bungalow. It was like I was christening my new house.

There was a sound outside. Paul and Jenny were talking, and they sounded close by. Were they coming to bring another housewarming gift? I was pretty sure we hadn't closed the front door, since we still had to go back to Hudson's car to bring in the television and the bicycle.

Hudson heard them, too. He probably remembered about the open door just like I had. In any case. He stopped kissing me, and he dug his face into the couch cushion next to my face.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Sorry about starting or sorry about stopping?" I asked, out of breath. My heart was still racing a mile a minute, and my body was burning up with desire.

"Sorry to you for the first and sorry to me for the second. Sex on the couch is not a first-encounter kind of thing. It's a third or fourth encounter kind of thing."

"There's going to be a fourth encounter?" That was the best news I had had in years.

"I'm supposed to wine and dine you before I jump your bones," he said into the cushion.

"But you don't wine and dine. I would be wined and dined while you ate a chicken breast out of a Tupperware."

Hudson lifted his head off the cushion. "When I get back, I'm going to wine and dine you. Then, I'm going to feast on you."

"Oh," I breathed and squirmed against him.

"Don't do that," he groaned. "A guy can only take so much."

He sat up and looked down at me for a moment and sighed. I sat up, too.



“I’ll be back in two weeks,” he told me.

“I’ll be here. I’ll get a facial before then. Maybe a chemical peel. I wonder if I can get liposuction before you return.”

He shook his head. “No. Don’t change. I want you to stay just as you are.”



Hudson had helped me move in, but since I had such few belongings, it didn’t take long. He, meanwhile, had to get organized for his top secret trip, so he said goodbye to me before noon with a small kiss and another promise to see me in two weeks.

When he left, the bungalow was quiet, but I didn’t feel lonely. It may have sounded crazy, but I felt so at home that it was like the bungalow was keeping me company. It was a beautiful day and I opened all the windows. Then, I took another tour of my new home. I had draped my quilt over my bed and put my clothes in the armoires in the hallway. In the kitchen, I poured a glass of water from the tap and sat down to a meal of delicious bread and butter.

Joe came to see me and brought me a Delivery Happiness gift bag of staples for my kitchen, and then he left to make his usual rounds. In the aftermath of the big kiss, Hudson had completely forgotten to meet Joe and give him the third degree.

“I’m happy you’re here,” Joe said. “It’ll be nice to see you every day. Later, Paul, Jenny, and I are going to sit by the fire outside and drink a glass of Jenny’s homemade beer. Are you in?”

It sounded wonderful, and I said I would love to join them.

“Good,” he said, obviously pleased. “There’s a friend of mine coming, too. I’d like you to meet her.”

I perked up. “Her? A special her?”

He laughed. “A very special her. I hope you’ll like her.”

When he left, I sat on my couch and made two phone calls. The first was to my son. I gave him an abbreviated story of what had happened. I told him that his father and I had grown apart, and I had moved out.

“You mean he was cheating on you,” Jamie said, surprising me.

“You knew?”

“I thought you knew, too. I thought you knew all these years, and you two had an agreement.”

“I had no idea,” I told him. “Never. I thought he was faithful.”

“This wasn’t the first woman, Mom. He’s had other women all my life. Once he brought one of them to my Little League game.”

His news hit me like a sledgehammer to the side of my head.

“I had no idea. I’m sorry that I was so blind,” I told him.

“I’m sorry that I blurted it out. I assumed you knew,” Jamie said.

“And you thought I was gross for staying with a man who treated me like that,” I guessed. No wonder my relationship with my son had been distant. He had lost respect for me, but I hadn’t known why. Now I did. I didn’t know if our relationship could be repaired, but I wanted to try.

“I’m so sorry, Mom. I hated living in a family full of lies. I didn’t know the lies were only coming from Dad. I guess I judged you wrong all these years.”

“That’s my fault. I shouldn’t have been so stupid, and I’m sorry I didn’t protect you, Jamie. A mother is supposed to protect her child. Can we start fresh? Is that possible?”

“I’d love that. How about I come visit for Fourth of

July weekend?”

“Wait until you see my bungalow. You’re going to love it! I’ll make you meatloaf and macaroni and cheese and ambrosia for dessert.”

Jamie laughed. It had been a long time since he had laughed with me, and it felt good. Maybe we really could heal our relationship and grow closer. “I’m actually on a diet. I only eat clean. Lots of chicken breasts and egg whites.”

Oh, geez.

“Well, I can make that, too, if you want.”

“Hey, Mom,” Jamie started, his voice turned serious. “Do you have a lawyer?”

“No. Your father drew up divorce papers, though. I’m supposed to sign them. I don’t have a choice because he put everything in his name during our marriage.”

“Oh, Mom. None of that matters. Don’t worry. You’re in luck. I happen to know a very good lawyer, and he only charges a meatloaf and macaroni and cheese dinner.”

“Does that mean you’re going to be my lawyer and you’re going to eat my cooking?”

“Nothing would make me happier.”

After I got off the phone with my son, I was on cloud nine. I danced around the house for twenty minutes. I was overjoyed that I had had a real heart-to-heart with him and that I was going to see him on the Fourth of July.

After I finally stopped dancing, I called my best friend Destiny.

“Aloha, girl!” she sang into the phone. “I’m back from paradise and need a girl session. I don’t want to go back to work! I want to live in a Hawaiian Resort! Being an adult is so unfair.”

“Steve left me, he took my house, I filled Tight Tammy’s house with poop, I made out with a Marine, I rented a bungalow, and I made two chairs,” I told her in one breath.

“Holy shit. Text me your address. I’ll be right there. Should I bring pajamas? I have a feeling we’re going to have to talk about this for at least twelve hours.”

“Yes. Bring your pajamas. You might even want to bring two pairs and a toothbrush. This is a pretty long story.”

“I’m so sorry, honey. That bastard Steve.”

“Spoiler alert,” I said. “The long story has a happy ending.”

## CHAPTER 16

### “A Very Happy Beginning”

Joe came into the studio with some papers in his hand. “Three more orders for chairs,” he announced.

I got up from my work making a chair. Since moving in, I had taken up a large portion of the art studio bungalow with my crafting. But ever since I sold a couple at the local outdoor market a week ago, I had gotten a lot of orders, and I was running out of room.

“How will I get it all done?” I worried.

“Jenny told me yesterday that she’d like to help you and get in on the business. She’s very good with the admin side of things. You know, like with social media and Excel spreadsheets,” Joe said.

“Really? That would be a lifesaver.” Having a business partner would make me feel much more confident, and I liked Jenny. In the two weeks that I lived there, we had become good friends.

“And I was thinking you could move into the barn on the far side of the property for chair production,” Joe added. “The barn needs some cleaning up, but the roof is solid. Let’s go over there, and you can check it out.”

I dusted myself off, and we went outside. A warm breeze blew the scent of wildflowers, and I inhaled it happily. Besides a cup of coffee, I had forgotten to eat this morning, and when we passed Paul’s kitchen, my stomach growled.

“I get lost in my work,” I explained to Joe as we walked across the meadow. “I keep forgetting to eat.”

“Me, too. That’s why I have the same stopping point every day so I can focus on a good dinner.”

“Smart. An organized schedule would help me. I thought this was just a hobby, but it’s turned into a career so fast.”

A wonderful career. I had never had a career before. I had worked menial jobs to get Steve through business school, but other than that, I had never had an actual career or business. It was all new to me and a little scary, but I loved every minute of it.

“Funny how things that are supposed to happen just happen,” Joe said. “When it’s right, it happens fast.”

That’s how it was for Joe and his girlfriend, Josephine. She was a professional sailor. They had met only a few weeks ago, but they were planning to sail to Tahiti together. They were going to leave next week, and they didn’t know when they would return.

“Here we go,” Joe said, and opened the barn door.

Joe had been right about it needing a good cleaning. Nobody had used it for at least fifty years, but it wasn’t as bad as I had expected. In fact, standing just inside the door, I could visualize where Jenny and I would have our workstation and where we could store the completed chairs. There was another space for an office, and I fantasized about having more workers coming and going, helping out.

I was filled with a sense of optimism. I felt that the business could actually work. I would have to figure out a name for the business. Something clever about chairs, maybe, although I was thinking of expanding to other kinds of furniture, too.

“This is too much,” I said to Joe. “I can’t accept this. I have to pay for it, and I don’t have the money right now. Maybe I’ll move into the barn in a year or so.”

“How about this?” Joe counteroffered. “You move your business into the barn now, and when you’re turning a big, healthy profit, you pay me out of that? Look, the barn is just standing empty. It could use some love. Besides, you’re going to look after the compound and my house while I’m away, so

let's just say it's even-steven for now.”

I shook his hand. “Deal.”

I stopped at Paul's kitchen on the way back to my bungalow, and he gave me a baguette straight out of the oven. When I returned home, I washed my hands in the kitchen and made a ham, butter, and pickle sandwich on the baguette and sat down in my breakfast nook. The sandwich was delicious, and I washed it down with a cup of apple tea that Jenny had brought over one evening.

My phone rang, and I was thrilled that it was my son, Jamie. He had been calling more often lately. Most of the time he wanted to talk about the divorce papers he was writing, but sometimes he called just to say hello and give me an update on his life.

“He signed the papers,” Jamie announced when I answered the phone.

“No way. I don't believe you.”

“I told you he would.”

Jamie had written up divorce papers that gave me half of the value of the house, returned me my car fully paid off, gave me fifty percent of Steve's 501K, and spousal support of five thousand dollars a month for five years. Considering that Steve's original offer to me in the divorce was a big fat zero, I couldn't believe he would sign off on Jamie's deal.

“Mom, it's a fair divorce. If he didn't sign it, he wouldn't be fair.”

“I repeat,” I said. “I can't believe he signed it.”

“I may have also threatened to sue him for emotional distress and kicking you out of your house and closing the bank accounts and taking the car.”

“Jamie Farris, did you purposely scare your father?” I asked.

“Mom, I'm a lawyer. I scare people for a living. Anyway, I have to get back to work, but I wanted to give you the news. You should be getting a check by the end of the

month for the assets, and your first spousal support check should get to you by next week. If you don't get it by then, call me, and I'll scare him again. I love you, Mom."

"I love you, too."

He hung up, and I stared at the phone.

How did everything in my life suddenly start going so well? One minute I was a mess, terrorizing poor pimply-faced Trevor at the grocery store because they were out of Rocky Road ice cream, and the next minute, I had money, a happy home, a passionate career, and I was waiting on a beautiful man to come and do *encounters* with me.

It's like I had won the Mega Millions and the Powerball all at the same time.

Hudson had emailed me three times in the past couple of weeks, but he didn't tell me where he was, what he was doing, or the exact date he was going to return. I worried about him, but not too much because I knew he was good at his job, and he had to do it in order to be happy. It was his calling.

I finished my sandwich and washed the plate in the sink. There was a knock at the door, and I opened it. I was surprised when a golden retriever puppy walked in.

"Hello?" I called, but there was no one there. Just the puppy. "You are the cutest thing in this world," I said, and picked her up. She was a ball of fur with a nose and a tongue. She licked me, and I hugged her to me. "I love you so much, and I've just met you. Who are you? Who do you belong to?"

"She belongs to you," I heard, and looked up to see Hudson walk through my front door. "Happy birthday."

"It's not my birthday."

"Then happy whatever day it is today."

He was better looking than I remembered. Wherever he had been, he had gotten sun. His face and arms were tanned, and his hair was longer.

"All those egg whites are working for you," I said.



“Right? I’m a stud. You don’t look so bad yourself.”

“You really know how to talk to a girl. I’m all aflutter.”

His eyes grew dark. “Are you? How about I make sure you’re telling the truth.”

He crossed the room in three long strides. Gently, he put the puppy down on the couch. Then, he wrapped his arms around me and walked me backward until I was standing with my back against the wall. The length and breadth of him was against me. I could feel his arousal, and that spurred my desire.

“I ached for you, Eliza. Every damned minute I was away, I ached for you. You’re dangerous that way. I can’t stop thinking about you.”

“That is dangerous. How can we remedy that?”

He was devouring me with his eyes. “I could try to work you out of my system, but I already know that’s impossible.”

“We could try, anyway. Maybe if we have lots and lots of sex, you would get tired of me and then you would stop thinking and aching.”

Hudson cracked a smile. “Eliza, you just used the word sex.”

I felt myself blush. “I know. Was that presumptuous?”

His hand slipped over my breast. I gasped and then moaned in response.

“I like presumptuous,” he growled. “Be presumptuous with me, again.”

Before I could figure out how to do that, he captured my mouth with his, and he thrust his tongue in my mouth. His hands traveled down my sides and cupped me from behind, lifting me up. Wrapping my legs around his waist, he carried me into the bedroom.

“This is going to be good, isn’t it?” I asked.

“This is going to be better than good.”

“What if it isn’t?”

“Then we’ll keep doing it until it’s off the charts wonderful. It’ll take a lot of discipline, but I have a talent for discipline, and we have all the time in the world to get it right.”

“So, you think it’s not going to be the first time around?” I asked as he laid me down on my bed. He stripped out of his shirt and pants. He was totally naked in front of me. I was so overcome by the look of him that I giggled.

“What am I talking about?” I said. “This is going to be the best thing since Rocky Road ice cream.”

He nodded. “Better than Twinkies.”

The End



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elise Sax writes hilarious happy endings. She worked as a journalist, mostly in Paris, France for many years but always wanted to write fiction. Finally, she decided to go for her dream and write a novel. She was thrilled when *An Affair to Dismember*, the first in the *Matchmaker Mysteries* series, was sold at auction.

Elise is an overwhelmed single mother of two boys in Southern California. She's an avid traveler, a swing dancer, an occasional piano player, and an online shopping junkie.

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