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Chapter 1



ELIZABETH

I've always loved weddings. The smell of orchids, the rustle of a white satin gown, the first strains of the wedding march—it rarely fails to bring tears to my eyes. And I never arrive late. Who would want to miss one single minute of this blessed event?

But not today. I would rather be anywhere else on this particular day. Not that I don't love my niece and wish the very best for her and her handsome young man, but how do you smile your way through a wedding when it feels as if your own marriage is in serious peril? How do you celebrate the holiness of matrimony when you're questioning whether marriage really works or not? It feels slightly hypocritical to me. Phony. And I hate being false. That's why I plan to confront Phil tonight—after the wedding festivities are over. I have no idea how he'll react, or whether he'll even care. Perhaps he'll be relieved to get whatever it is that's driving us

apart out into the open. I think that's how I'll feel. And if this is really the end...well, I'll deal with that later.

Being a somewhat considerate wife, I have tried to give Phil some gentle hints that all is not well between us. For one thing, I came up to this lovely lake with the unrealistic hope that the combination of these beautiful surroundings, being away from the distractions of home, and the romance of what promises to be a sweet wedding would ignite something between us. And in a way, I guess it did. It ignited my anger when Phil decided to take a before-dinner hike that left me sitting alone in the restaurant until nearly eight. Of course, he had an excuse.

"I'm sorry, Elizabeth," he said. "I got totally turned around on the trail."

"What about your GPS?" I asked with irritation, trying to remember how much he'd paid for that ridiculous state-of-the-art compass device, which apparently doesn't even work. We were back in the room by then, and I'd hastily removed my sexy outfit of a slinky turquoise dress and an incredible pair of sandals with killer heels and replaced it with baggy boxer shorts and a T-shirt.

"I forgot it." He sat on the edge of the bed and began to untie his hiking boots, meticulously loosening the laces one by one, then carefully removed first his shoes and then his socks, as if he were doing the most important thing in the world.

I looked back down at my *O* magazine, quickly flipping past Dr. Phil's column, titled "Healing Your Marriage," and sighed loudly. Why don't men understand how a real apology works? I

mean, you can't just say, "I'm sorry," like that and expect those two simple words to erase everything. We want sincerity.

Of course, it didn't help matters when I became somewhat emotional at that point and subsequently got so rattled I'm sure I failed to make any sense. Why is it so easy to be sidetracked by silly little things like shoes and shoelaces when there are really big issues eating away beneath the surface?

"Elizabeth," he said in that patient tone he uses on me when he assumes I'm having a hormonal meltdown or being overly dramatic. "You're just tired. You've been too consumed with helping out with the wedding lately."

I tried to explain that it was *not* about the wedding or about me being tired or even a hormonal ambush, because I knew that was what he was thinking. "It's about you and me," I finally shouted at him, instantly regretting my lack of volume control, since we are staying in the room right next to my sister and her husband at the Lakeside Inn.

Not that Jeannette isn't somewhat aware of my marital concerns—although we haven't really spoken of them directly. But sisters just get these things, and under normal circumstances she's a helpful and sympathetic listener, that is, when she's not obsessed with "important" details like getting the bridesmaids' tussie-mussies arranged perfectly. Consequently, I'm not sure whether she completely grasps that my marriage may be in serious danger right now.

"I'm sure it can't be too serious," she commented, somewhat absently, just last week. We were assembling about a hundred little

net bundles filled with environmentally friendly birdseed. We securely tied these with burgundy and pink ribbons, which I suspect will be difficult to open in time to be thrown at the lucky couple when they climb into the horse-drawn getaway buggy that the groom's mother insists is necessary (although Jenny says she thinks Michael may have other plans). "I mean, Phil is about the sweetest guy on the planet," my optimistic sister continued. "Other than the regular stuff we all go through, I can't imagine that it's possible for you guys to have any *real* problems."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Okay, then what's going on, Elizabeth?"

"It's hard to explain," I began. "But it's about those little things, you know? Those things we all probably take for granted but notice when they're missing. That's what got my attention at first. Like the way he used to fix the coffee in the mornings just the way I like it. Or the way we used to read the Sunday paper in bed together. Now Phil gets up at the crack of dawn, laces up his running shoes, and takes off without even saying boo."

Jeannette just laughed. "That doesn't sound like grounds for divorce to me."

So I decided to keep these disturbing thoughts and suspicions to myself for a while. Maybe I was imagining things. But then, especially during these past few weeks, I had become more concerned than ever. Still, I told myself to simply bottle it up, pretend everything is okay until this big wedding is over and done with. No use in burdening others with my marital woes right now. Besides,

what kind of aunt does that to her favorite niece? Jenny deserves better from me. So like the proverbial kettle that's about to boil, I've been desperately trying to keep a lid on my pot. And that's probably the reason I lost it last night. And it wasn't just about the shoes and socks, either. Although the socks eventually did play the lead role in our little fight, it was simply a last-straw sort of thing, symptomatic of all the things that plague our relationship.

For starters, Phil has always been the worst sort of packer. I'm sure that's only because he knows I will eventually step in and save him, like I always do. But I'd decided to let him pack his own bags for this trip. Maybe it was because I was concerned for the future of our marriage and thought it was about time he got used to doing this little chore on his own. Naturally, it never occurred to him to pack a pair of *black* socks to go with his *black* suit. Of course, he did pack hiking socks to go with his hiking boots, as well as several pairs of short white cotton socks to go with his running shoes, because it's his goal to jog around the lake every morning while we're up here. He wouldn't want to get out of shape now, would he? But did he remember that we're here to attend a wedding and that he's expected to don a suit and tie for this event, complete with black socks? Of course not. And as usual, he expected I'd bail him out. That's what finally pushed me over the edge.

And that's also the reason I had to drive to town first thing this morning, or so I told myself when I stormed out of there: *I have to find a place to purchase a pair of black dress socks*. Trust me, that's not easily accomplished in a little tourist town that caters primarily

to outdoor enthusiasts and people looking for a trinket to take home to the kiddies. I found water socks and crew socks and hiking socks and even skiing socks, although it's late June and not exactly ski season, but it took three shops before I finally located a pair of black socks. And even then they were the cheap kind that show skin if you pull them too tightly and might even allow a toe to pop through before the evening is over. Naturally they cost as much or more than the good ones. But that's what I get for letting Phil pack his own suitcase. Maybe it's a bit like packing your own parachute.

Still, it was a good excuse to get away from him. So now I'm sitting in this cute little coffee shop that also sells books, both new and used, and I'm enjoying a calorie-laden snack of a raisin scone and a cup of café mocha—and not a skinny, either. Suddenly I'm thinking maybe this is exactly what I need. I don't mean this little coffee break, although that's welcome enough. But perhaps, after my marriage falls completely apart just like it seems to be doing, I'll sell my half of the decorating business to Carmen and invest my share of the money in a little book-and-coffee shop in a small tourist town, just like this. And I'll spend my days fixing specialty coffees and reading good books—like the ones Oprah features in her book club, those promising books I always bought with great hopes, started with real enthusiasm, but never seemed to find the time to finish.

I study the twenty-something woman behind the counter and imagine that it's me. Oh, except for the pierced nose and magenta-

tinged hair—although I might consider rinsing my dark hair in something more along the color of eggplant, if I really wanted to feel wild and free. But I do wonder how it would feel to live in a place that's totally unlike our suburban home in the hills next to the city. I imagine what it would feel like to be completely on my own—away from Phil. Maybe I would get a cat. Or maybe even several cats. Phil has allergies that make pets unrealistic—that and the fact we're not home very much during the daytime to take care of them. His allergies also cause him to snore at night if he forgets to take his little yellow decongestant pill. I try to imagine how it would feel to sleep alone in my own bed without any snoring to awaken me. This idea is surprisingly appealing. And I'm slightly shocked at myself. Am I actually planning an end to our marriage? Or perhaps it's already over, and I'm simply going to be the last one to know.

Although it cuts deeply to think that this could really happen to us—yet I know it happens to couples all the time—I decide to continue playing this little what-if game. What if our marriage did end? I wonder how we'd tell the kids our sad news. Of course, they're grown now, with lives of their own; maybe it wouldn't matter so much. And Conner's been talking about taking a job overseas, and Patrick is consumed with his new job. They'd probably get over it—in time. Okay, holidays might be tricky, but I assume these things can be worked out. Other people manage.

I tell myself to stop these foolish imaginings, that nothing good will come from it and that I should get back to the lake and

the ongoing wedding festivities, which will last late into the evening. But this padded window-seat bench is begging me to stay longer, and the girl with the magenta hair just put in a Norah Jones CD, one that I haven't heard before. So I lean back into the cushions and take a nice deep breath, followed by another. How often I forget to really breathe.

Seriously, will anyone out at the lake really miss me in the next thirty minutes or so? I'm sure Phil is relieved that I'm gone. Besides, the first actual activity on the wedding-day schedule isn't until 12:30. It was supposed to be an "intimate" luncheon (only "close family and friends") to be served lakeside. But according to Jeannette, "It's really just an excuse for a schmoozy affair that's being hosted by the in-laws-to-be." She knows they've invited some "important" people, wealthy people who are potential clients for their son, and my poor sister is terrified that she'll embarrass Jenny in front of them. So she made me promise to come and make a "good impression."

"I don't see what difference my presence will make to anyone," I told her last week.

"But you're so much more polished than I am," she said. "And you're good with people. And you can talk about your design studio and even drop names if you need to."

I laughed. "You must really be desperate, Jeannette."

Naturally, I promised to be there. I can't see how that will make her look any better, but these are the kinds of requests a good sister doesn't question at times like this. I glance at my watch. By my cal-

culations, Phil should've finished his jog around the lake an hour ago, and he's had enough time to cool down and take his shower as well. If I'm lucky, I might even get the room to myself for a bit. Just long enough to get my bearings and brace myself for the day ahead. I have a feeling it'll be a long one.

So I force myself to leave this sweet little bookish oasis, and I slowly drive back to the inn. I love this winding road that climbs up toward the mountainside lake. I've got all the windows down as I breathe in the fresh smell of pines warmed by sunshine. As I drive, I go back to my what-if game. If my marriage really does fall apart and if I quit the design business, perhaps I can get a different car, something small and sporty. Maybe a convertible or at least something with a sunroof. I won't need this bulky SUV when I start running my little coffee-and-book shop. Maybe I'll get an older European car. Maybe even a Jaguar, if it's never been smoked in. Most of the Jaguars I see are driven by older people who all seem to be smokers. I'm not sure why that is or why it bothers me that it is. Maybe I'll settle for a BMW, a classic that's in mint condition, the style with the boxy body design, and with leather that's nicely broken in. I can see myself driving something like that. Phil would give me his old line: "Cars like that are the owners' nightmares and the mechanics' dreams come true." But if my marriage was over and I was forced to live on my own, well, I'd learn not to worry about such things. I would learn to simply live and let live.

Now if only I can make it through this day.