

Chapter One

When anyone asks my dignified, stiff-upper-lipped husband how a guy who's been an investment banker in exotic capitals of the world – London, Tokyo, Hong Kong, New York – ended up blissfully hitched to a broad from redneck-whitetrash-bluecollar Texas, he deadpans in his clipped British accent, “We were channeled together by the spirit of Elaine’s dead lover.”

Occasionally a silent, “this guy is nuts,” hangs in the air. More often there’s, “tell me more.” To which we leapfrog through our narrative, him laying out the dry who-what-when as I interject neon tidbits. Many a rugged stoic has responded, “Hairs on the back of my neck just stood up. You really have to write this story.”

So I began to contemplate doing just that. About five minutes into it I realized that simply scribbling down the dinner party version was to strip my story – the *real* story – of its potency. In book form, I would have to confess a lot of shit I’d just as soon not advertise. Insecurities. Deceptions. Grief. Humiliation. All the stuff that preceded happily ever after.

Jeezus. Why not ask my gynecologist to strap a webcam on her forehead and broadcast my next pelvic exam?

After months of mewling anxiety and twitchy dithering, I figured *well hell, it is what it is ...* and sat down to explore, for the first time, how I liberated myself from those red-white-and-blue Texas tentacles, and mustered the courage to give the kind of love I so yearned to receive.

In 1991, Mick and I slump on opposite ends of the sofa in the office of Maryanne, our couple’s counselor of two months. I inhale the moldy-damp smell of a century’s exposure to San Francisco fog, which, on this night, whips past the window, diaphanous and backlit by a streetlight. The sofa’s black leather cushion is cold when I wriggle outside the hollow I’ve warmed over the past forty minutes. Mick’s head is cocked and his hands clasped in his lap like an overbearing professor poised to slap down a stupid answer to a trick question. That phony, patronizing grin is frozen across his face.

Maryanne, a plus-size woman in thick-soled, old-lady Mary Jane’s and nerdy black-framed glasses, says, “I’m going to assign some homework, the objective of which is to put joy back into your marriage.” I am to do something for Mick that I know he will especially enjoy; and he is to do the same for me. No buying a gift – it has to be something that requires planning and execution and virtually no capital outlay. The goal

is to make the recipient feel special and loved and cared for. In two weeks we will report on how it feels to be the giver, as well as the receiver, of pleasure.

I leave Maryanne's office peeved. Lack of joy and pleasure is not on my bitch list. But if that's what it takes to get Mick to pitch in with the basics of everyday life ...

For the past two years Mick has been a stay-at-home-dad – to our six-year-old Weimaraner – not, to his mind, entirely by choice. Every day he checks the employment ads for a position where his fifteen years of teaching Transcendental Literature will translate into an impressive corporate title – VP at least – and a six-figure salary.

Riiiiight. As a headhunter I am familiar with this style of self-deception: self-aggrandizing goldbricks who claim they run with the big dogs, when their resumes suggest they've never gotten off the porch. But Mick is obstinately deaf to my kindly cautions. And snide nagging.

When I had to let the housekeeper go so we could afford marriage counseling he bellyached I made the wrong choice. By god, he's not going to vacuum carpets or squirt a little 409 on countertops or swirl a little Lysol in a toilet bowl. He doesn't cook and he doesn't grocery shop – would rather wipe his ass with yesterday's *Chronicle* than stop at QuikMart and pick up a roll of Charmin. Although I do have to give him credit for taking out the trash.

But for me, there's more at stake than a honey-do list of chores. Not yet forty-two, I've already Kervorkian-ed two marriages. Embarrassing. And depressing.

During my single years – which number more than the married ones – I searched for love as relentlessly as old-timey miners hunted gold, sifting men the way they sifted loose stones. I sloshed through a shitload of muddy streambeds, dodging the stiletto heel-prints of the prospectors who came before. No pun intended. I fell for guys with hearts as impregnable as boulders, was suckered by fool's gold. Then I met Mick. For most of our dozen years together, I believed he was my mother lode of love. Can he possibly be a flash in the pan? *Surely not. No.*

Because if he is, that's it for me. Never again can I shoulder disappointment, strap my rusted ole pickaxe and dented coffee pot onto my weary-ass metaphorical jackass and shuffle off to the next rise.

So here I am, staking my claim on Maryanne's ability to guide us back to contentment. Starting with this low-bar homework assignment that any halfwit could ace.

The next Saturday I splurge on a mediocre Merlot because, as my granny, Memaw, used to say, "Sometimes you have chicken, sometimes you have feathers." We were in a serious patch of feathers.

I roast a pork loin, whip up mashed potatoes and green beans and salad. After dinner I dim the overheads, light candles and put a meditation CD in the player. I settle Mick in his comfy lounge, cover him with a warm blanket and prepare him for a spa pedicure – something I introduced him to in a time of "chicken." I kneel at his feet –

oblivious to the irony – and spend the next half hour sanding calluses, filing toenails and clipping cuticles. I douse his feet and calves in warm lavender-and-bergamot oil and knead, to the accompaniment of his ooh’s and ahh’s, until my hands cramp. By the time I slather on peppermint lotion, he’s as mellow as a stoner with a 2-liter soda and a family-size bag of barbecued potato chips.

We talk about how much Mick enjoyed the pampering and how it made him feel special and cared for. Woohoo! Slap an A+ next to my name.

Predictably, Mick never even mentions his half of the assignment. Predictably, I begin to steam. Two nights before our appointment I confront him. He stiffens his spine, arches his eyebrows. “I don’t keep score the way you do. I don’t have to fill some arbitrary quota like a used car salesman. I’ll do something nice when I feel like it.”

“Like what? Visit my grave twenty years after I’m dead?”

At Maryanne’s office I report on the foot job and Mick confirms – albeit grudgingly – how much he enjoyed it. Maryanne congratulates us both and asks Mick what he did for me. Apparently he rethought “when I feel like it.” Tries to charm her with a wry shrug and, “She didn’t cook at all last week – I ate frozen dinners every night; but I never complained.”

Maryanne’s brow creases and her lips pucker as if she’s trying not to say what a stupid fucking asshole he is. Or maybe that’s just me projecting. She reiterates the instructions, tells us to try again, and sends us on our way.

Mick is pissy on the drive home. I consider cajoling him – agree that if he does something to make me feel special and loved and cared for (Maryanne’s words, not mine), it’s not like I’ll expect it to become a new routine. But can’t he do it just once? Remind me why I vowed to spend the rest of my life with him? Once would buy him six months of a whistling, smiling little ‘50’s-model wifey bringing home the bacon, frying it up in the pan.

Ah, screw it. Let him figure it out on his own.

On Tuesday I research whale watching because I know Mick is keen to see the whales on their migration path. We’re in season for Humpbacks and Blues off the coast at Monterrey. The tickets aren’t too expensive so I book the tour for Sunday. That morning I pack a picnic lunch of Mick’s favorites. Sourdough rolls, slices of sugar-cured ham, cheddar, apples, and dessert of choice for little chaps: Rice Krispies Treats.

Mick chatters enthusiastically as we make the trek down the coast. Facts about whale migration, the family dynamics of a pod and how whales played an important role in the history and lore of many ancient cultures. The depth and breadth of his scholarliness is one of the reasons I fell in love with him: he is well educated and a diverse reader – something I am not. His abundant and eclectic knowledge expands and brightens my world.

We board the boat and he takes his post like a kid awaiting the first pitch of the World Series. His jubilation softens the crusty edges of my heart. I reach for his hand and we bask in the easiness of joy, the memory of fun.

Whales arrive like a good omen. They breach, arc and crash through the surface of a smoothly undulating sea. At times they are so close, sea spray mists our skin and films our lips with brine.

Back on shore we spread our picnic on the faded backseat of the minivan, protected from horizontal needles of rain. On the ride home we touch fingers, speak softly of the happiness of the day.

And then the clock begins to tick. The closer we get to report day the more Mick itches with resentment. On the Saturday before our session he comes home brandishing a contemptuous grin, chest puffed in triumph. He tosses me a yellow plastic bag from the local movie store. I peek inside. Star Wars Trilogy. Mick's fave.

"I bought those for you," he says. "We can watch them together tonight."

Christ on a crutch. A dozen years into our relationship, a box of rocks would know I abhor science fiction. And most especially the spaceship, Jedi malarkey.

Maryanne isn't impressed either. "Buying a video specifically violates the instructions. Why do you think you're having such a difficult time with this assignment?"

Mick hitches his chin and directs his patrician nose at Maryanne. "I want to do things for her," he stabs his thumb toward where I crouch sulking and surly at the opposite end of Maryanne's leather sofa, "that *I* want to do. Why doesn't that make her happy? Why can't she simply love me without all her conditions? Why do you let her get away with being a gloating, condescending, ball-busting bitch?"

Ball-busting bitch? Ball? Busting? Bitch? Oh please, that's the best ya got? First you gotta have balls before I can bust 'em. And baby, I'm the half of this pair who's got a pair. Big old brass ones. More brass than the horn section of the UC marching band.

Of course, in the presence of our therapist I keep my trap shut.

Maryanne scrunches her lips. "Hmm." She reviews the instructions one more time, but her tone says she's throwing the third pitch to a batter determined to strike out.

But I'm not ready to give up. No, he isn't perfect, but his complaints about me – some undoubtedly valid – are as numerous as mine about him. And we've woven a twelve-year history together.

Hit it out of the park, Mick, please. Pick up the goddamn bat and hit it out of the park.

Alas, he does not. Still, I hold tight.

Two months after we stop seeing Maryanne, I take the Marin commuter coach across the Golden Gate Bridge, as I do most nights, schlepping home from my IT headhunting job in San Francisco. Before the bus grinds onto the gravel pullout at Blackie's Pasture in Tiburon I'm already craning to see if Mick is waiting to drive me up the steep hill to our rented house. Because even though I'm the one who does the nine-to-five that keeps him in fresh-pressed carrot juice and matinee movie money, he's the one who tools around in the old Dodge minivan that came with us from Michigan to California in 1987. Surprise, surprise, shithead isn't here.

I hike my pudgy ass up a half-mile of dark and twisty road, panting and wheezing in my overrun tennies, sucking Bay-laced salt air deep into my lungs. Wind flaps my raincoat. My short brown hair frizzes like a burgeoning pube transplant – on the wrong end. Briefcase of files slung over one shoulder. Carryall, fat with more files and dress pumps sags off the other.

But this night I mute my hostility because today Mick has gone for a job interview instead of wandering the mall or hanging about the house tickling his pickle or whatever he does while I sit wedged behind a desk, phoning potential clients and candidates – or, as it's known in the recruitment industry, “dialing for dollars.”

I huff across the shadowy porch of the low-slung, ranch-style house and turn the key in the lock. Graeble, the Weimaraner, whines and wriggles blissfully. I coo and stroke her shorthaired coat that gleams gunmetal gray, like a wet dolphin. She zips to her basket, snaps her leash between her teeth and flops it joyfully. I chortle at her antics. We head out to stroll the *cul de sac*, she the forensic examiner of every twig, every clod of dirt.

Back at the house I change into jeans and a sweatshirt. Pop out my contacts, slosh drops over my scratchy eyeballs and slide on a pair of safety-pinned glasses. In the kitchen I dump Mick's coffee mug and crumb-dotted plate atop yesterday's dirty dishes. Graeble begins to dance and whimper, ears alert, head cocked. The minivan chug-chugs into the garage. I take a deep breath. Try to visualize good news.

Mick pushes through the door, navy pinstriped suit coat folded over a forearm, briefcase in hand. In the other, plastic-covered clothes fresh from the dry cleaners. Glacial blue eyes avoid mine.

“Hi,” I say to a cloud of stale aftershave with an overlay of tar and nicotine.

“Hi.” He bends his top-heavy six-foot frame and pets a gleeful Graeble. Filaments of sandy hair foreshadow a comb-over.

Mick asks, “Did you walk her?”

Of course I did, dickwad! I clench my jaw.

Graeble pirouettes down the hall toward the master bedroom, Mick close behind. I lag at the rear of their parade, making childish faces at his back.

I lean against the arch of the bedroom door. “How was your meeting?”

He strides into the walk-in and hooks dry-cleaning hangers on the rod. “Great,” comes out in a muffle. “They said I have an impressive and unique resume and that I would be an invaluable asset to their team.”

In Mick's mind, “don't call us, we'll call you,” translates to, “Wait! Eagerly! By! The! Phone!” He hates when I cut through the crap. But after four years as a headhunter – albeit not in Mick's field of endeavor – I know all the blow-off patter. Have invented some myself. “They have work for you?”

“They're waiting for funding to come through.”

“When do they expect that to happen?”

He tugs his tie, slips it over his head. Belligerence etches his face. He's girded for the, "Maybe it's time for you to go back to teaching," monologue.

"Stupid question from a tech-savvy pro like you." He kicks off wingtips.

Screw you. I pad into the closet and paw through plastic-bagged hangers. "Where are my clothes?"

He empties his pockets onto the dresser top. Wallet. An unidentifiable electronic keychain gadget that looks like it might have come out of a box of kiddie cereal. Pack of smokes, tin of breath mints.

"Did you pick up my stuff?"

He slouches out of suit pants, aligns the cuffs, folds them over a cedar hanger. "No."

"I asked you just this morning to be sure to get my things." The two-octave rise of fishwife shrillery has become my default tone. "I need that navy suit for a client meeting."

"I guess you'll have to wear something else." He drapes his jacket over the pants and shuffles into the closet. Reappears in unbuttoned, baby blue dress shirt, cloud-white jockeys and knee-high black socks.

My pulse hammers into a headache. "Let me be sure I understand this. You stopped at the dry cleaners. You went in and stood at the counter. You asked for your clothes but you didn't ask for mine?"

In times past, confrontations like this followed a well-rehearsed choreography, like actors throwing punches but not hurting each other. He'd mumble some bullshit excuse like, "I forgot." I would pretend he was just absent-minded, not spiteful and infantile. But this time he says, "It's not my job to take care of you."

I freeze. Dumbstruck by that simple moment of honesty. *It isn't his job to take care of me.*

How true! How obvious! We aren't partners; we're an aberration of Mommy and Junior. Mommy, Mommy, grill me a steak and serve it on a warm plate. Mommy, Mommy, buy me a shiny, British Racing Green dragster. And by the way, pick up your own goddamned dry cleaning.

For the first time in our history, disgust sours my stomach and curls my lip. Til-death-do-us-part sidles out the door like a lunch-break gigolo.

Mick pulls on jeans and starts down the hall toward the kitchen. Graeble hangs back, loyalties torn by a gravity Mick does not recognize. Because this time I don't follow at his back, screechy and nagging. This time I just watch him go.

The next day I call Maryanne. "Is Mick ever going to *want* to give me what I need from him? Is that too much to expect from a life partner?"

This was not a sarcastic question. It was Maryanne who had opened the "okay for you to ask for what you need," thought process in the first place. I was still wobbly on the concept.

Ten seconds of silence. Then Maryanne's slow exhalation hisses through the phone. "Mick is never going to change," she says, resignation in her voice as final as the thunk of a satin-padded coffin lid. Grief shuffles into the empty sanctuary of my heart and takes a seat.

"But..." I want to argue, want to plead. "But ..." Doesn't he understand I would gladly continue supporting him – would hold his hand through this midlife crisis or whatever the hell he's going through – if only he would do some little thing that makes me feel loved?

"Mick is not going to change," she repeats.

My voice quivers. "Am I really worth so little to him?"

"It's not that you're worth so little, no. Mick loves you as best he can. But you have always found fulfillment in being the caretaker, the rock. The giver. Mick feels he is the rightful recipient of all that giving – that's why the relationship worked for as long as it has. Now you're asking him to change."

Shit. This is my fault? "I asked for only *one little thing*." A flush of guilt creeps my cheeks. "Am I too ... needy?"

She hesitates. "Perhaps the question you should ask is why do you feel you deserve only one thing? Why not more like half the giving ... half the receiving?"

At the time I thought the answer should have been as obvious to Maryanne as it was to me: Because I am strong. Capable.

I never considered she might be prodding me to look beneath the surface of my glib rationalization. To consider why I was desperate to be the hard-edged, don't-need-nothin'-from-nobody, unbreakable one.