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—BARBARA ROSBERG, cohost with Dr. Gary Rosberg
of the nationally syndicated radio show
America’s Family Coaches LIVE; coauthor of
Divorce-Proof Your Marriage

Kimberly Stuart

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To Edna Mae Roggen,
Wilma Marie Ruisch, and Patti Sue Ruisch,
on whose tall shoulders I stand.

Psalm 90:1

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prologue

Despite the fact that women had done it for centuries, the whole experience nearly killed me. In my weakest moments, I'd recall with shame the *National Geographic* images: a peasant in the African bush doing it alone, or a teenage bride squatting on the floor of the Amazon, still able to stir the tribe's evening meal with her free hand. I, of course, was pampered and Western. I'd been sanitized, sanctified, and stitched, all in a "birth suite" at St. John's Hospital. The nurses even brought me a steak dinner to celebrate.

Even so, I still came close to a nervous breakdown in the chaotic months following the steak and the stitches. Perhaps by writing it all down for you, I'll make a bit more sense of it for myself. Maybe I'll even dare renew my subscription to *National Geographic*.

chapter/one

“Now, I need you to focus,” I said, screwing up my face in concentration. “The black or the stripes?”

My conspirator fixed me with a blank stare, blue eyes unblinking.

“Need more information? Okay. Choice Number One: classic black suit, complete with a jacket that covers expanded girth and breasts suddenly, alarmingly voluptuous.”

No response.

“Right. Choice Number Two: a bit more daring with a pink angora sweater, the must-have this fall, but still comfortable with flared charcoal pants.”

“Argstf. Moolrsh?”

I paused to consider the counsel, then, “I agree. I’m going black.” I leaned over to kiss my six-month-old daughter, Nora, on her cheek. “Thanks for your help, fashionista.”

Perhaps I should have been concerned about seeking and following the advice of a girl wearing footie pajamas, a bib, and three quarts of saliva, but I had precious little time to dwell on that. I was on my way to meet grown-ups, people.

Nora watched me from her perch on our wrought-iron queen bed. Her red striped pajamas were distant cousins to our comforter, its narrow lines woven in three shades of green. The wall behind Nora was painted the most vibrant shade of the three and made my daughter's eyes sparkle a deep Dutch blue. Her chubby frame was propped to a sitting position with the help of two pillows. "Gyeoroish," she said, gnawing with gusto on the handle of a toothbrush.

"I know, sweet pea, I'll miss you, too. But you're going to have a great time with Lauren." I stuffed my lactating bosom into a black bra I'd bought in late pregnancy. The end result reminded me of a tourniquet. I pulled on my pants, taking care not to slice any stretch marks with the zipper, and donned my suit jacket. When I looked back at Nora, she was falling onto her side in slow motion like a timbered tree, grinning the whole way down.

"Need some help, lovey?" I picked her up under the armpits, burrowing kisses into the neck I knew had to be somewhere underneath those jowls. Nora smelled of lavender baby soap and puke, equal parts. I slung her and her soggy toothbrush onto my hip and made my way to the bathroom to check our reflection in the mirror.

Frazzled twenty-nine-year-old female flanked by wide-eyed, gurgling infant intent on oral hygiene.

Brilliant. Let the games begin.



"So, I think that's everything."

Lauren the Wonder Babysitter looked at me with huge, fifteen-year-old doe eyes. I knew her family from church and

had asked her a few times before to stay with Nora. Lauren was homeschooled and conscientious, like Aunt Bea inhabiting the body of Hillary Duff. “We’ll be *fine*, Mrs. Elliott. Not to worry.”

Adolescent babysitter or cruise ship hostess? “My cell number is on the fridge, in case you need anything. I won’t be more than a few hours.”

“Sounds good.”

Nora was already engrossed in the educational toys Lauren had brought along, each of them appropriately challenging but not overstimulating.

Seriously.

“All right, then. I love you, sweetheart.” I smooched Nora five times on cheeks, forehead, and various other fleshy places. She didn’t notice, fully content on Lauren’s lap. “Have a good time, um, learning. Thanks, Lauren.”

Aunt Bea flashed me a golden-girl smile. “Enjoy!”

Wow.



I started up the Beast, my term of endearment for my '87 Civic. No matter what you read in the papers, teachers do not roll in the wealth of your squandered tax dollars. The Beast, in all its chipped maroon glory, was coughing, sputtering proof.

I revved 'er up and pulled onto Winwood Lane, stewing over Lauren’s amazing confidence around children. Six months ago, of course, a Wonder Girl babysitter would not have evoked any reaction in me, much less the furrowed-brow one I felt now as I merged into morning traffic. Why did it

matter one whit that Lauren-for-President commandeered my household better than I did? Why did I feel like a bumbling fool who didn't know formula from engine oil?

Where was the Heidi Elliott of yesteryear? Summa cum laude graduate of a prestigious university. Master's degree in education. Career woman, community volunteer, devoted wife and friend. Now reduced to a complete pansy in the presence of an abnormally maternal fifteen-year-old pixie.

My black suit and I were on our way to rejoin the workforce. After having Nora, I had taken a semester's maternity leave from my position as a high school teacher. The fall term was swiftly drawing to a close, and I was on my way to meet with the principal and my long-term substitute to iron out the details of my return after Christmas.

I'm ready, I assured myself as I slapped on lipstick and powder found under a crusty burping cloth at the bottom of my purse. I puckered up, checking my reflection in the rear-view mirror as I drove.

"Whole stretches of hours without Elmo, for example," I said aloud. I couldn't help but grin at my own face, barely able to place a time when I could walk anywhere in a building without clutching a baby monitor.

I might even try urinating with the door closed. Maybe eat lunch, brush my teeth before noon. . . .

The shrill ring of my cell phone startled me out of reverie. Was Lauren crumbling under the pressure? "Hello?"

No such luck. It was Jake.

"Hi, honey. Are you on your way to school?" asked my husband of five years over the background hum of the paint store he owned and managed.

“Yep. I’m almost there. I’m a bit nervous but doing my best to conjure up feelings of *I am woman, hear me roar*. Do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Want to hear me roar?”

“Sure, but how about after we light some candles and put on a little Barry White?”

Astounding how deftly they can work that in, isn’t it?

“Okay, Barry, I’m at the school now, so I’ll have to coach you on the finer points of marital bliss later. Thanks for checking up on me.”

“Break a leg, babe. You’ll rock their bulletin-board world.” He lowered his voice. “Give my best to the Iron Maiden.”

“I’ll give her a peck on the cheek just from you.” I heard Jake snort. “See you tonight.”

I put my phone on vibrate, tossed it into my purse, and got out of the car. Before me loomed Springdale High School, the bastion of higher learning at which I had been professionally fulfilled and grossly underpaid for half a decade. Function had conquered beauty in the architectural battle for the high school: The building was long and rectangular, an extended blur of gray brick with black trim. Three tiers of flags in front offered the only point of visual interest, at least until you met the student body.

Crisp November air greeted me, catapulting me into the world of sharp pencils, blue-lined notebook paper, and Friday football games. I headed past the flagpole toward the double doors and thought, It’s good to be back.

“Well, look who’s here.” Dorothy McMinn looked at me over her glasses. She sat sentry with impeccable posture, manicured hands folded neatly in front of her cardigan. Springdale High School’s secretary for thirty-six years, Iron Maiden McMinn was an even mix of severe German nurse and a pit bull that fancied appliqué sweatshirts. Don’t mess.

“Good morning, Ms. McMinn. How are you?” I smiled warmly, hoping for a thaw on this nice autumn morning.

“As well as can be expected on a Monday, particularly considering the remarkable disrespect I have heard only this morning from America’s youth. I assume you are here to speak with Dr. Willard?”

“Yes. I’ll just wait until he’s ready.” I started toward a seat next to a sullen-looking boy in black. I couldn’t help noticing we matched, though I think he was going for a slightly different effect.

Ms. McMinn cleared her throat and spoke into her phone. “Heidi Elliott here for you, Dr. Willard.” She hung up and looked at her captors. “He’ll be right with you, Mrs. Elliott. Micah, you’re just going to have to wait. And it wouldn’t kill you to sit up straight.” I was fairly certain the Iron Maiden had actually starched her collar. I was also fairly certain I didn’t own starch.

Micah grunted.

I sat down and noted with pleasure the familiarity of my surroundings. I looked around me at the office I’d whisked in and out of hundreds of times a day, checking my mailbox, submitting intercom announcements, asking McMinn for extra chalk, which she kept under lock and key with the Wite-Out and rubber cement. Even the presence of Micah in Black was oddly comforting.

The neglected sections of my brain kicked into gear, the ones independent of “-ie” words like blankie, nightie, and poopy. I couldn’t wait to brush off the dust of my former self, the one in which I’d invested thousands of hours and dollars to educate. Not that I hadn’t enjoyed my time with Nora. I wouldn’t have done it any other way. But, just like pregnancy, there came a time when life had to return to normal.

“Aren’t you the Spanish teacher who had a baby?” Micah was busy drawing some sort of gnome on his beat-up sneaker and didn’t look up when he spoke.

“Yes, I am. My name is Mrs. Elliott.”

“I registered for your Spanish II, second hour. But some dork is subbing for you. You should get a babysitter or something.”

Nothing like the angst-shaded compliments of a sixteen-year-old.

“I’m up for next semester, actually,” I said, watching the gnome acquire hair and a goatee. “Are you going to stick with it?”

Grunt. “Maybe.”

Ms. McMinn’s beady, carefully shadowed eyes peered over her computer. “Mrs. Elliott, Dr. Willard is ready for you. Micah, perhaps you could find better uses for ink.”

I heard Dorothy muttering something about the Great Depression, which she was too young to have experienced but probably loved to reenact at home.

“Good to meet you, Micah,” I said as I rose to go. “Give me a chance next semester.”

“*Adiós*,” he muttered to his sneaker.

I could work with that.



Dr. Willard opened his door as I approached. “Heidi! How’s the new mommy?”

For a moment I panicked, thinking he was going to rub my belly.

During my pregnancy Dr. Willard had felt a strange and unwelcome freedom to touch my expanding midriff. I had split-second, heightened Jackie Chan awareness, readying myself to karate chop his pudgy little fingers. Fortunately Dr. W. was reaching for my hand, which is an acceptable custom in Western cultures and not nearly as intrusive as a belly rub.

“Hi, Dr. Willard. It’s good to see you,” I said, which was not entirely false. Dr. Willard was a very nice man, in his own school administrator sort of way. He had difficulty focusing on details like, say, curriculum, teaching philosophies, and critical thinking, but he was adept at other skills his job required. For example, he was very good at a select group of motivational speeches. I was certain Micah in *Black* was in for the “You can be *more*—just give it a try!” which included several “inspirational” stories involving Sam Walton, founder of Wal-Mart.

I wish I were making this up.

At any rate, I was not *unhappy* to see Dr. Willard, which I felt was quite good enough. I sat in the chair he indicated. “How is your family?” I asked.

“Wonderful, wonderful,” Dr. Willard nodded earnestly. “Bobby’s doing very well at the U, studying communications and playing football, playing football. And Lisa’s enjoying her last year of junior high. Keeping busy, keeping busy.”

“And how is Mrs. Willard?” I asked. “I’m sure this is a busy time of year for her.” Mary Jo Willard served as director of Springdale’s annual Holly Daze Parade, a veritable orgy of tinsel, candy canes, and other forms of holiday merriment that made its way across town the third weekend in December. Mrs. Willard, fond of wearing hot pink and turquoise nylon running suits year-round, was very well suited to her job and to her husband. I’d found it best to avoid the woman like the plague, both for her morning-news-anchor personality and her uncanny ability to persuade people to volunteer for the ring toss or dunk tank.

“Oh, yes, yes. That Mary. Just can’t keep her down. She’s a live wire, that one!” Dr. Willard barked out a percussive laugh that didn’t spread to his eyes. “So, Heidi, you’re ready to come back to the halls of academia?”

“Yes, I am.” My cell phone vibrated in my purse, and I had to bite my cheek to keep from answering it. Was it Lauren? Had she inadvertently given Nora peanuts before the recommended age of two and sent her unwittingly into a deep coma?

“. . . and I’m sure you’ll find everything in good order. Have you been in contact with her?” Dr. Willard was looking at me inquisitively.

Catch up, brain. What did he just ask?

“Um, in contact with . . . oh, Ms. Stillwell? My sub? Yes, of course. I mean, I plan on talking with her this morning when you and I are through.”

Anaphylactic shock? Perhaps Nora’s first bee sting and we didn’t have one of those pens to counteract the allergic reaction?

I cast a furtive glance at my phone.

Dr. Willard paused; my phone stopped vibrating. “Heidi,” he said, taking off his glasses and rubbing the red creases they’d left on the bridge of his nose. “Now, I want you to be sure you’re ready for this, see. We’ve had many new mommies come back after their maternity leave thinking they’re ready for the real world again, only to have them quit on us a few weeks into the semester.” He raised bushy eyebrows, smirking. “Makes for quite the dilemma on the administrative side.”

Feathers significantly ruffled, I forgot about my unanswered phone. I pulled myself up to my full height, which, while not imposing to many, easily equaled stocky Dr. Willard’s, former shot put champion that he was.

“Dr. Willard, I assure you I’m ready to be back. More than ready. You don’t need to worry about any divided attentions or lack of preparedness.” Jerk, I added to myself. What decade did he live in that he had the moxie to insinuate women couldn’t multitask? I did little to disguise the disdain on my face.

“Great,” said Dr. Willard, disdain completely lost on him. He rose from his faux leather office chair. “I’ll let you and Ms. Stillwell get caught up. Glad you’re back, Heidi, glad you’re back. I’ll be happy to tell parents that our Minnesota Teacher of the Year 2004 is back to work at Springdale.” He gave me a thumbs-up and flashed me his best I’m-still-your-boss grin as he showed me to his door. “Kiss that precious little bundle for me.”

Sick.

“I sure will,” I said, clutching my purse to my injured pride as I made my way past McMinn and Micah, who looked at me through his bangs.

“Boy or girl?” he asked.

“Sorry? Oh, girl. Nora. Her name is Nora.” I pushed open the office door.

“Nice.” Micah approved.

I smiled distractedly through the closing door and remembered the missed phone call that had caused me heart palpitations. Still muttering to myself about Willard’s little pep talk, I retrieved the phone and looked at my caller ID. Jake.

“Jake,” I said when he answered. “You called during my meeting.”

I could hear him giving muffled instructions to an employee, and then, “Hi, Heids. I was just calling to see if you’d pick up my dry cleaning on your way home.”

Dry cleaning? I made a mental note to add “maid” and “concierge” to my résumé. “Sure. And the meeting went fine, now that I know we have time to get an EpiPen for deadly allergic reactions and that ‘mommies’ are employment risks.”

“That’s great, hon. Thanks for the shirts.” For all intents and purposes, he’d already hung up. “See you tonight.”

“Right.”

I dropped my phone back into my purse and headed for the foreign language hallway, breathing deeply and banishing thoughts of self-absorbed males, the glass ceiling, and Spanish-speaking gnomes.

I am so ready for this.