

Though everyone else has gotten down on the floor, as instructed, Jeff remains standing, hands out palms up, shoulders slightly hunched in the posture of an abbreviated shrug. It's his "I-can't-believe-this-shit" stance, one I've seen more times than I care to mention.

"What *year* is this?" he asks the room in general. "Is this really happening? How is that even possible?"

I'm on the floor but not facedown as I should be. Instead, I'm on my side, one hand clutching my husband's ankle. "Jeff," I say through clenched teeth, "get down."

But he continues his tirade. "I mean, what kind of bullshit security do you have in this place?" This last bit is directed at George Phelps, the bank manager and my soon-to-be former boss. Right now, George is doing his best to staunch the flow of blood from his nose, which I'm pretty sure is broken. He's about thirty feet away, and even I heard the crunch when one of the guys shoved George's head into the floor. He hadn't been moving fast enough for them. I'm guessing it would be difficult to stop a regular nosebleed while lying on your stomach, and this one is a gusher. My boss's gaze shoots my way as if he expects me to help him, but that's way above my pay grade. Besides, it's my day off.

I found out quite by accident that I was about to get canned. Jeff had gotten so sick of hearing me complain about my job as assistant to an asshole of a bank manager that he'd started researching jobs online for me. And lo and behold, there was a posting that sounded eerily like the job I was currently working and loathed more than life itself. "Hey Cath, come look at this." He had just gotten home from working overnight, repaving a stretch of highway not too far from our house. As was the norm, he'd gotten undressed as soon as possible and was sitting at the kitchen table in his boxers, surfing the web on our laptop while sipping his nightly (though it was nearly dawn) beer.

"What is it?" Rubbing sleep from my eyes, I stumbled over to him and peered at the screen. He wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me onto his lap.

"This job sounds a lot like what you do now."

"This isn't a lot like what I do," I corrected him once I'd gotten a better look at the job description, "it's *exactly* what I do. That's MY job posted there!"

"Holy shit," Jeff said. "Does this mean you're getting a promotion?"

"No, numbnuts, I'm not getting a promotion." I'd been dropping fairly non-subtle hints that I would be interested in working in the mortgage loan department. No, I didn't have any experience in that area, but I was willing to learn and caught on quickly and was desperate to do something that didn't involve Febreze-ing George's chair after a lunch of bean burritos. However, the one opening had just been filled by a girl with a finance degree so new that the ink was still wet and boobs that were still under warranty. So if I were to remain employed at the Evans Street Bank, it would be as Director of Ass Smell Elimination.

Jeff and I had decided to close our joint account there before I got fired to spare me the embarrassment of having to do it after the fact. This was the only reason I'd agree to go in on a Thursday, my usual day off. We had even cooked up a great story about clearing out our savings to buy a boat. George had broken out in a sweat when he saw I was there, and that was probably due to the three eager, bright-eyed, bushy-tailed young women who sat in visitors' chairs, holding resume portfolios and dressed in their best discount department store job interview attire.

*Caught you in the act, you jerk.*

But now, instead of holding a check for the eleven thousand dollars my husband and I have socked away, I am on the floor, struggling not to sneeze from the dust in the poorly vacuumed carpet. The only way to describe the scene is "chaotic." There are four masked

gunmen – who I've inwardly dubbed Numbers One, Two, Three, and Four – inside the bank, the biggest one barking orders at everyone. One of the interviewees is crying and another is throwing up. Paula, a teller, has wet her pants. And my husband, the idiot, is mouthing off.

"Come on, guys, we can take them," Jeff is saying. "There's only four of them and, like, twenty of us."

"They have guns," I hiss from near his work boot.

"Cathy," Paula Peepants says from her spot near the copier, "can you please quiet him down?" As if my husband is a boisterous toddler instead of a loudmouth forty-two-year-old moron.

"Hey lady, why don't you worry less about me and more about mopping up that puddle of piss you left over there? Place smells like a pool hall men's room."

I fight the insane urge to laugh.

Jeff looks down at me and, crazily, gives me his most charming smile. I know it's because he wants me to back him up on his mutiny idea. Lying on the floor, my fingers pressing into the scuffed leather of his boot in an effort to will him to not do something stupid, my neck craned at an extremely uncomfortable angle so that I can see his face, I am catapulted back to the moment that I first saw that smile.

I was a sophomore in high school and in the middle of my Spanish mid-term. The overly trusting teacher had just left the room when the adorable junior who sat next to me leaned over with a *Pssst*. "What's number six?" he asked.

"What?" He hadn't ever spoken to me before, and in all of my fantasies about how it would go down when he finally did, that certainly wasn't it.

"Number six. What's the answer?"

"I'm not telling you," I said indignantly.

"Come on, please? I know you know what it is. You're the smartest girl in the class."

But apparently not, because I caved and let him cheat. He gave me that winning smile then, and the sight of those perfect white teeth and sparkling blue eyes made me damn-near melt.

And now here I am, twenty-six years later, and that smile is shining down on me. Maybe the perfect teeth are slightly less dazzling and there are laugh lines around the sparkling blue eyes, but otherwise, the smile is identical to the one that first mesmerized me in Beginning Spanish. From my vantage point on the floor, I can appreciate the fact that I have a clear view of Jeff's face, as there is not even a hint of a middle-aged paunch to obstruct my line of sight. Always an athlete, he hasn't let himself go over the years.

The best thing about my husband is that he's barely changed since high school.

"I mean," he says to me now, *sotto voce*, "how do we even know those guns are real? Or loaded?"

In response, the gunman closest to us, Number One, fires a shot into the ceiling. There are a few frightened screams, and Jeff drops to the floor next to me like a Whac-A-Mole, all bravado effectively banished. Plaster rains from the ceiling.

"This is very real, people!" the gunman shouts. Two of his cronies are diligently emptying the teller drawers while the third guards the door. I rise up to peer over Jeff's shoulder and see George glaring at me in pure hatred, his balding head dusted with broken bits of ceiling. *Oh, I'm sorry, George. Are my husband's antics preventing you from panicking properly? By all means, let me shut him up so you can go back to being a worthless spaz.*

"Sorry, Cath. I tried," Jeff whispers. At least he has the decency to look sheepish.

"Well, just keep your pie hole shut from now on," I say out the corner of my mouth, like we're in a cheesy prison movie.

"Aye, aye." We're both on our stomachs, gazing at one another. He reaches out and grazes my cheek with his fingertips. I repress a shudder. "Do you remember that trip we took in the RV?" he asks.

I stare at him for a minute. "You mean our honeymoon? Yes, Jeff, I remember our honeymoon."

"That wasn't our honeymoon."

"We left the day after we got married. That's a honeymoon."

"I'm going to take you on a proper honeymoon," he says. "Somewhere that requires a passport."

"Sure you are." I've been hearing this for twenty-one years.

"I mean it. When we get out of here I'll take some time off and—"

"Look buddy, you wanna shut up?" a bank customer asks. He had been in front of us in line but is now lying perpendicular to us.

"Hey pal, I'm talking to my wife," Jeff says, his voice edged with hostility. "So why don't you mind your business?"

Number One actually snorts with repressed laughter as he steps past us, making his rounds to ensure that no one's trying anything funny. I can sympathize with him, though, because I'm baffled as to why the man I married would pick now, of all times, to start reminiscing about our joke of a honeymoon.

"Anyway," Jeff says pointedly, "there was a morning when we were camped in Colorado, that I got up to watch the sunrise."

"I remember." He'd tried the night before to talk me into getting up before dawn with him, but I had declined. To me, setting the alarm to get out of bed in the wee hours was the antithesis of vacation.

"I never told you this, but I didn't see that sunrise."

"*What?*" Why this matters to me at all, especially right now, is a mystery. But matters it does. Because it was my refusal to join him on that ridiculous excursion that precipitated our very first (but certainly not last) fight as a married couple. And to me, that marked the point, four days into our marriage, where things started to go downhill. "Why the hell not?"

"I woke up that morning and was all dressed and ready to go," Jeff says. "And I was going to kiss you goodbye before I left, but when I saw you lying there asleep, you were so beautiful, I couldn't leave. So I just watched you sleep and thanked God that somehow, out of all the guys you could've had, you picked me."

"Bullshit," I say to cover my unease. Every now and again, he throws something like that at me and I can't ever figure out his angle. I mean, he can't possibly be trying to get into my pants – that mission was accomplished the night of his senior prom.

"It's true," he insists. "I still feel that way."

"Just a few more minutes, people, and we'll be out of your hair," Number One announces. He's got his foot planted firmly on George's back, and squats down to confer with him, keeping his foot in place. George lets out a grunt of pain. After a few seconds, the robber, apparently disgusted, bumps George's broken nose with the side of his fist. George howls and the robber rises to his feet. "We seem to have encountered a little glitch here," he says. "Who here besides this asshole has access to the vault?"

Jeff's eyes immediately widen. It's a small enough bank that it doesn't even have ATMs. The vault is an ancient, old-fashioned room slightly larger than a broom closet. And only two people know the combination to the corroded dial-style lock on the door.

The bank manager and his assistant.

There's not even an assistant bank manager, just the man in charge and me, his long-suffering secretary. That's how rinky-dink this place is. And to think I once dreamed of moving to New York and becoming a stage actress. Then I fell in love with the world's least ambitious man and wound up stuck in Hicksville, USA.

"If somebody doesn't answer right now," Number One says, "I'm putting a bullet in this cocksucker's head."

Silence. Next to me, Jeff shakes his head ever so slightly.

The gunman sighs. "Fine." He aims at the back of George's gigantic, sweaty, garbanzo bean-shaped head.

"She knows!" Paula shrills. She has risen to her knees, darkened crotch on view for the world to see.

My husband briefly closes his eyes in dismay. When he opens them again, I'm stunned to see tears there. I want to dissolve into the floor.

"*Who* knows?" Number One demands.

"*She* does!" One of Paula's manicured nails is pointing at me. "Cathy Hill has the combination. She's the assistant bank manager!"

"Bank manager's assistant," George has the audacity to say from the spot where he has curled into a semi-fetal position, making me want to kick him in his broken nose.

"Oh, Catheter," Jeff whispers. He'd come up with that horrid nickname for me when we were in high school, and I've always hated it. But it's hard to be mad at him at the moment, because the tears have begun to leak from his eyes and onto the floor.

The masked gunman stomps over to me. "You know the combination?"

"Um..."

"No, she doesn't," Jeff answers.

"Yeah, right."

I'm being hauled to my feet by my elbow. My husband immediately leaps up and grabs my other arm. "Get your hands off my wife!"

"If you want to see your wife again, I'd suggest you get back on the floor," Number One says calmly.

"You let her go!" Jeff insists. "If you hurt her, I'll—*uff!*" He's cut off by a blow to the stomach, delivered by Number Three, who has, along with Number Two, finished emptying the teller drawers.

"No!" I try to go to his aid, but I'm pulled away from where my husband is doubled over.

"Come on," the robber snarls. As I'm dragged toward the vault, I glance up at the clock overhead, certain that I should be hearing sirens or cops or a bullhorn or something. Surely this has been going on for hours. It feels like we've been in the bank forever.

It's barely been three minutes.

My heart is pounding, the trembling of my hands so pronounced that I'm afraid I won't even be able to grab onto the dial, much less turn it. As we round the corner before I'm behind the wall that shields the vault from the view of the bank customers, I catch one last glimpse of Jeff, being restrained by one of the gunmen and now crying openly.



I'm not exactly sure when I fell out of love with my husband, but if I had to guess, I'd say it began at our wedding reception. He and the groomsmen were all drunk and loud and having a dance contest that resulted in our wedding cake getting knocked off the table. The little plastic bride and groom went spinning across the floor in opposite directions, an omen if I ever saw one. Wayne, my brother, watched the progress of the miniature bride and then looked at me as if to say, *Told you so*. And there I was, beaming, pretending that I was thrilled to be forever attached to that clumsy imbecile who was supposedly the love of my life.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Wayne had asked me, putting on his best big brother look of concern, at the rehearsal dinner.

"Absolutely," I answered. I had spent nearly one thousand of my hard-earned bucks on a gown, invited everyone I knew, and gushed all over town about my wonderful fiancé. I *was* getting married.

Wayne had never liked Jeff. And my husband's attempts to get closer to him only made my brother despise him more. Though Jeff can be annoying to the point of downright obnoxious, I'm pretty sure there's some jealousy on Wayne's part, as well. Wayne has always been somewhat plain (okay, well, horse-faced) and a bit of an outcast; Jeff is gorgeous and friendly and popular. On top of that, he has taken Wayne's best friend (me) away from him. So I guess I can understand why my brother might have been hoping that I would call off my wedding.

Over the years, Wayne's contempt for Jeff has only grown. "How's *Jeff*?" he invariably asks when I see him, the emphasis suggesting that he can't even stand to say my husband's name.

"Wonderful as ever," I always answer. An outsider would think it's sweet that after more than two decades of marriage, I'm still so smitten with my husband. But no one knows me better than my brother, and he can probably smell my sarcasm a mile away.

"Why don't you just leave him?" Wayne asked one day, after one of my especially vehement bitch-fests.

I sighed. "He's not *all* bad, I guess. And divorce would be such a pain in the ass." And, there are three things that, close as we are, I'm unwilling to tell my brother:

1. The sex with Jeff is phenomenal. I mean, really outstanding. As much of a nuisance as he can be, I've never cheated on him, simply because I know it would be a waste of time to even look for something better in that department.
2. After all this time, Jeff still adores me, and that's really good for my ego. I've gained twenty pounds and, let's face it, a pretty sour attitude since high school, but my husband behaves as if I'm still as optimistic and desirable as I was at fifteen.
3. I'm afraid to be alone. Pickings are definitely slim out there, so there is no guarantee that I'll even find myself another man, or if I do, that it will be an improvement. To hear my husband tell it, I look like a supermodel, but the mirror sings a different song. Most guys my age are looking for someone who's in their twenties or at least looks the part, and I fall under neither category.

And, in all honesty, I don't want to hurt Jeff's feelings. I know that sounds crazy from someone who has called her husband numbnuts (and dummy and stupid and brain-dead ape) to his face, but somehow over the years, it seems, he's come to accept that as just something we do, like a little comedy bit. I "pretend" that he irks me and I call him names and he just lets it roll off his back and lays a kiss on me that leaves me dizzy and unable to remember what had irritated me in the first place. And somehow, it was working for us.

Until it wasn't.

After my husband discovered my job posted online, I decided that maybe it was time to be proactive and actually look for a job myself. I'd been putting it off long enough and now had a pressing need to do it. Any day now, George would be telling me to have a nice life, and where would that leave me? Unemployed and stuck at home with Jeff during the day and even more miserable than I already was.

Job-searching, it turns out, can be a bit of a bore, so I found myself just goofing around on the computer when I stumbled across Jeff's online dating profile. It was on a website for married men looking to fool around. *I would never leave my wife*, he had written, *but I want to spend time with someone who doesn't make me feel inadequate. I'm not looking for sex, just companionship.*

I was stunned. I'd never known he was unhappy. A better woman would've seen this as a sign that she should maybe not call her husband a drooling halfwit because he burns a piece of toast. Instead, I got angry. Companionship, my ass. If I'd managed to remain faithful to him, he could at least reciprocate. When we'd first met, he had a gaggle of dreamy-eyed girls that would follow him around and I guess he misses it. Suddenly, one woman is no longer enough.

The worst thing about my husband is that he's barely changed since high school.

I'm reminding myself of this as I rip my gaze away from my sobbing spouse. I'm certain the tears are just from general fear and not from the possibility of me getting hurt. Because a man who cares enough about his wife to cry over her safety wouldn't sign up with a dating website, now would he?

Number One shoves me toward the vault. "Open it."

Ah yes, that's right. There's a gun in my back, so I should probably be focusing on keeping myself un-shot. I extend my hand toward the dial and for one heart-stopping moment, the combination escapes me. Pure panic floods my body, searing hot, and I can almost *feel* the path of the hypothetical bullet as it tears through my back muscle, then lung, then chest muscle and out of the sensible blouse I'd put on that day, maybe nicking a rib on its way. I can smell blood and gunpowder and singed fabric. I can hear the crunch, similar to the sound that came from George but much, much louder, as my nose strikes the reinforced steel door when I'm thrown forward from the impact of the slug.

What will it feel like to get shot? I wonder. Will it hurt or sting? Maybe, if the shot is instantly fatal, it won't feel like anything at all. Or maybe, for that split second before life is snuffed out, it will be pure, blazing agony, so profound that death is actually a welcome reprieve. The thought makes me feel sick.

"Open it," the robber repeats, and the combination appears as clear as if there is a neon sign in front of me. I get the vault open in mere seconds, and my captor and one of his buddies begin filling their duffel bags with bundles of bills. There are no safe deposit boxes – those are housed in our sister bank in the next town over – so no one's going to lose the deed to their house or their grandmother's brooch.

When they've cleared out the vault, I'm hustled back to the general population. Jeff is being held with a gun against his neck, but the look of relief in his shimmering eyes is unmistakable. My nausea returns.

"Thank you, everyone, for your cooperation," Number One says. He still has me by the elbow, his gloved fingers pressing painfully into my bones. "Enjoy the rest of your day." He shoves me to the floor then, suddenly and hard, and I land with a muffled "Oof!" but remain

silent otherwise. Through the eyeholes of his ski mask, I can detect bewilderment. Why didn't I cry out, make a big deal of my injury?

Number One hesitates, looking down at me for a moment. "We gotta go," Number Four cautions from the door. "Twenty seconds."

With an exasperated sigh, Number Two releases my husband and strides over to me. I look up at him in horror and dread-filled speculation as he draws back one steel-toed foot and kicks me square in the side. The pain is instantaneous and intense, the sound of my ribs breaking as loud to me as the gunshot had been earlier. My fellow hostages let out a collective shocked gasp, and even in my haze of my anguish, I can understand what they're thinking: The robbers are done, they got the money, what was the sense in hurting anyone else?

Jeff, predictably, goes berserk, lunging at Number Two, actually leaping over me like a quarterback to nab his prey. "No!" I try to scream, but the wind has been knocked (or more accurately, kicked) out of me and I can only manage a faint wheeze. I don't want this to happen, but it's too late to turn back, and the next few seconds seem to play in slow motion. My husband charges at the robber who has kicked me, his face pulled into an animalistic rictus of rage, his eyes wide and wild and rolling in the sockets like those of a spooked horse. I make an attempt to snag his pant leg and bring him to the floor, but with my slowed movements and skewed perception, I miss by a good yard. Numbers One, Three, and Four are already on their way out the door, but Number Two pauses just for a moment, pivoting almost casually to face Jeff and lift his gun and pull the trigger.

Someone is shrieking, and I have just enough time to realize it's me before everything goes black.

*He's gone.*

That's my first thought when I come to. People are screaming and crying. One of the regular bank customers, an elderly man, is kneeling next to me. I'm almost touched, knowing it must've taken quite the effort for him to get to his knees (especially after having been forced facedown onto the floor) until I remember that he's notorious for peering down the tellers' blouses. He's staring with avid interest at my own shirt, which ripped partway open either when I fell or was kicked. Pervert.

"My husband..."

"Your husband's fine, miss." But he's lying. I know this because he won't even look me in the eye. Not that this guy *ever* looks women in the eye. But there is blood on my sleeve and something that I am almost certain is brain matter and bits of skull.

I roll over in time to vomit, the pain in my ribs so excruciating that unconsciousness hovers just outside of my reach. I stubbornly will myself not to pass out. The old man stays by my side, making nonsensical murmuring sounds that I guess are supposed to be comforting but instead make me want to rip off my own ears just so I don't have to hear them anymore.

Soon the police and paramedics are there, and I'm being gingerly lifted onto a gurney and then being rolled past a man-sized sheet-covered lump on the floor, and as they're taking me to the ambulance, I see Paula watching me, her face shrouded with pity. "My husband's quiet now, isn't he, bitch?" I snarl at her as we go past, and she recoils as if she's just been slapped.

The police are at the hospital to take my statement and to officially notify me of Jeff's demise. I thought I'd be numb upon hearing the news, but I surprise myself by bursting into tears. Crying hurts my ribs, but I've been given pain medication and it's a distant kind of hurt, more

like I'm imagining it than the real thing. Wayne appears immediately after the cops leave, his homely face somber as he sits in the chair next to my bed.

"I came as soon as I heard," he says. "I'm sorry, sis."

"Thanks."

"When are they letting you out of here?"

"Tomorrow."

There's a nurse in my room, fiddling with various things, and Wayne waits until she is gone before whispering, "I really *am* sorry, Cath. You know, about the..."

"Yeah," I say dryly. "What was *that* about?"

He shrugs. "It was a spur-of-the-moment thing. Had you followed the plan, I wouldn't have improvised."

"So it's *my* fault that I'm in the hospital?"

Wayne looks uneasy. "You didn't scream. You were supposed to scream when Pete pushed you." He shrugs again. "I had to do *something* to make Jeff come at me or else it would've looked like I shot him for nothing."

*You did shoot him for nothing*, I want to say. *Because he didn't deserve to die*. But I can't say that because it had been my idea in the first place, and when we'd been devising our strategy, Wayne and Pete and Steve and Johnny (and Mike, Number Five, who drove the getaway van) had made it crystal clear that once the plan was in place, there would be absolutely no room for transgressions. Still, seeing how distressed my husband had been at the thought of me being harmed, and as enraged as he became when I actually *was* hurt, I'd had second thoughts. Jeff didn't have to be killed in order for my brother and his friends to pull off the job – they'd done it several times before without anyone so much as getting a paper cut. But the guys had been

itching to hit another bank, and I wanted to get back at my boss for preparing to fire me, and I was thinking that it would be a good opportunity to get rid of another pesky man in my life, and it had all snowballed from there.

"You're not sorry, are you?" Wayne asks.

"Of course not," I say. "Good riddance to bad rubbish."

My brother looks positively gleeful as he rises to his feet. "I'll pick you up when you're discharged tomorrow."

"Okay."

He stops grinning just long enough to plant a peck on my forehead then practically skips out of the room, whistling. Of course he's happy, I think. He's gotten a windfall and rid himself of his nemesis, all in the space of seven minutes. I, on the other hand, feel lousy, and before I am even aware that I'm going to do it, I'm reaching for the phone.

"I have information about a bank robbery."