

PROLOGUE

The letters come to me by the box load, carried upstairs to my office by Carl the Mailroom Guy, who drops them off and says cheerfully each time, “Well, here’s some more trouble for you to solve.”

He says this every single day as though it was a new thought, and every single day I laugh, and then as soon as Carl leaves the room, I sit down on the floor with the box and start pulling the letters out, one by one, unfolding them and breathing in their scent: the smell of paper and trucks and mailrooms and, yes, trouble. It’s like meditation for me—almost religion—that moment of unfolding a letter to get at its secret core.

That’s it, really: this job is like being the head priestess in the Church of the Advice Column. Services held every morning at the newspaper offices of The Edge, circulation 25,000, in New Haven, Connecticut.

My best friend, Maggie, says, “Don’t you ever get overwhelmed that people think ‘Dear Lily’ can solve their problems for them? Don’t you just look at that pile and want to go screaming down the hall?”

I tried to explain it to her once. “You want to know what it’s like when those letters come in? It’s like being given a big platter of warm chocolate chip cookies—no, make that a big platter of assorted cookies—some plain old oatmeal raisin, some with nuts and coconut, some way too dry and floury, and others sticky with molasses or so tart you wish they’d added more sugar. But they’re all warm and filled with different tastes and textures that I can sink my teeth into.”

Maggie gave that comment the look it deserved. She could see I was hungry at the time. She said she didn’t think Ann Landers had ever thought of the letters as something good to eat—and I said, “Well, maybe she did at first. Maybe the first letter she ever got was like a big fluffy sugar cookie, and she was hooked.”

I have my favorites, of course. Letters, not cookies. I’m partial to the handwritten ones that come on lined notebook paper or pink scented stationery, that spell out “Dear Lily” with a little bubble or a heart over the i. Women who write these letters tend to pour out their hearts onto the page, giving all the juicy details, like how jittery a man’s voice sounds when he’s giving his third lame excuse about working late or how they noticed a certain look pass between him and his secretary, a look that told them everything they needed to know.

I’m also fond of the energy that drives a person to type a single-spaced, four-page complaint, clinically documenting examples of a lover’s insensitivity as though this were a legal matter—and then the way the letter’s tone will suddenly shift and the writer will ask, sadly, wistfully, “So do you think I should stay or must I go?”

I’m even happy to decipher coffee-stained, hastily scrawled notes on scratch pads, complete with arrows and words crawling up the sides of the page. One of the best letters I ever got was written

on a cocktail napkin and consisted of one plaintive question: “Do you have to marry someone if you said yes but now you’ve changed your mind?” I could just see a woman sitting in a bar somewhere with her fiancé, and maybe he’s pinching the waitress’s ass or making racist jokes with the bartender, and suddenly she just knows he’s all wrong for her. I wrote back one word: No.

People are in such agony most of the time: that’s what my year as an advice columnist has taught me. You see human beings outside in the park, or in line at the grocery store, or having their hair done, and, unless they are right then weeping or climbing out the window onto the ledge of a skyscraper, you don’t immediately know this about them, how much they are suffering. People know how to put a good face on things most of the time. We’re good at that, as a species.

I’m guilty of that, too. Maybe that’s why I love this job so much. Here I am, thirty-four, divorced and the mother of a little boy I adore, and yet, as Maggie once said to me, it is quite possible that I am clinically unable to move forward in my life. She points out that my life as a mom has taken over my life as a woman. But sitting there in the Church of the Advice Column, seeing people’s stories written out before me like a little movie I’m watching, I feel clear and generous and braver than I actually am. I get goose bumps thinking how I can help them fix things up to be just right, just tweak the plot a little this way or that, and set life on its proper course. Maybe I’ll be able to fix myself if I can fix other people. That’s what I’m hoping for, deep down.

You know what people really need? Somebody who will listen hard and then find a way to tell them, “It’s not all your fault. It’s going to work out fine. Don’t give up.”

Oh, yes, and hot baths, cinnamon toast, and kisses. I strongly believe in the restorative power of kisses.