

CHAPTER ONE

May 14

Dear God,

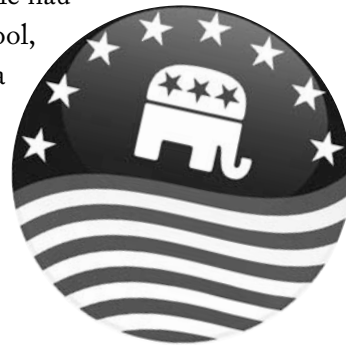
Thank you for this day and for the rain. Thank you for our blessed state and nation. Thank you for my husband.

Thank you that it is not a man's world. Thank you that you sent us to help them, and thank you for the joy that your Spirit fills us with and its strength to do so.

Thank you for my work and the busy day ahead. Deliver me from being uncaring toward my staff. Help my talks with Paul to go smoothly when he calls. Protect me from certain thoughts about my ten o'clock meeting. Forgive me of—

Lisa Jeffus cut her morning devotions short by tossing her prayer journal back onto her nightstand, leaping out of bed, and sprinting down the hall as fast as her queasy stomach would let her.

The shower could still be heard through the open door of the master bathroom, and Lisa did not want Bobby to see her. In their four-bedroom house, the regularly unused guest bath provided her with privacy and relief. She had felt a little nauseous the day before during Sunday school, but Lisa dismissed that wave to the extra glass of Chardonnay she had had the night before. But there was that possibility that maybe, finally, the day she and Bobby had been having so much fun working toward had finally arrived.



Lisa, nevertheless, tried to understand why morning sickness had to exist as she knelt before the guest toilet. Her sudden heaves jarred her out of the joyous thoughts of what the disorder signified. Still, she was grateful she hadn't put on her face yet and wouldn't need to retouch her lip liner.

She also thought it was right to protect Bobby from any false hope. A quick stop at the Walgreens on Highway 78 would provide her with a test kit she could use at the office. After another heave, she began to plan for a day that would start late.

Bobby knocked on the guest bath door, which Lisa had managed to get shut in between abdominal constrictions.

"Lisa?" spoke the rich but often reserved voice.

"Yeah! Yes!" Lisa reached up to make sure the door was locked. "I'll be out—"

"I've got to get out to the site early," said Bobby through the door, unhearing what his wife of more than eleven years may have been trying to say, let alone offer as cover. "Sorry. Roger woke me up with a text. It has to be a Starbucks morning for me."

The couple usually started their day together with coffee and bagels at the kitchen table. It was a somewhat strict routine that the busy pair had set up for themselves, as the pastors at Southfork Church had insisted upon "couple time" or "C2" as a relationship preservative.

Lisa quickly excused the change in schedule as she felt another surge of sickness come on. "That's okay! Be careful—"

"I'll call you later. Love you!"

"Love you—," said Lisa, just holding a heave long enough to guess Bobby was out of earshot. Back onto the porcelain altar she went. Relief followed that most horrid of sick motions. She hoped that the post-vomit serenity was a foreshadowing of what would follow the contractions—endorphins or whatever—a wash of ease that made the pain of childbirth bearable. She had a weird feeling that maybe this was the definition of grace. But it smelt so bad.

Within a few minutes, she got her legs back and was opening

the door. What to wear? Ten o'clock was the only face-to-face meeting she had for the day, and that wasn't too formal. She had to look good for that one, but of course, she couldn't look too good. It was still business. She was also a mother now, too, if only in theory. She thought about her black dress with the white-trimmed collar—a flatterer but formal and obscuring. And some new Blanhik pumps would be the perfect accent.

She suddenly reversed her path to the master bedroom—it was too far!—and banged the guest bath door back open as she collapsed with Olympic skill onto the toilet a final time.



The northeastern corner of Dallas County had become a kind of final frontier of suburban America. If one were to think of a suburb in the classic sense as an outlying bedroom community without industry or a major commercial center, the borderless communities of Rowlett, North Garland, and Sachse fit the description. Although a new mall now sprawled along the on and off ramps of the President George Bush Turnpike, even that outdoor retail district had been designed to resemble the small, storefront downtowns that once dotted North Texas.

Filling the prairie along the Turnpike were the old and new tract subdivisions which were a staple of Metroplex living. The Jeffus home was a member of just such a patch of the dream, though more upscale than others. Bobby and Lisa's 3,200 square feet of all-brick gables sat nestled off Highway 78 behind a barrier of assorted hardwoods. The style of the home was completely identical to its neighbors, but considering that the small neighborhood had been carved out of an abandoned, overgrown cow pasture, Lisa believed that their enclave epitomized a core view of hers that wealth and property are the ultimate agents of renewal. They had a Sachse address, and a map would only barely keep them out of Dallas County's hyper affluent neighbor to the north, Collin County.

Bobby Jeffus had crossed over from engineering into manage-

ment of a recently relocated construction firm. He was a self-made man, having done aluminum-frame construction while working his way through U.T. For Lisa, he was her working man. She had been attracted to him every bit as much for his rugged individualism as his class origins. While she had been given everything, Bobby presented to Lisa the chance to share her life with someone more modest. She quietly admitted to, then overcame, an early desire in their relationship to control her “manservant”—obviously, it was in her nature to be in control—but it only took one incisive complaint by Bobby within the first five months of dating to convict Lisa of her attitude. As unassuming and practical as he was, Bobby was always very prescient in his speech. He seemed to truly understand Lisa, and that was why she loved him.

And Lisa made herself a compliment to Bobby. Known professionally for her ebullience and energy, Lisa was the one who pushed him through the door when he was offered the job in management. For all of his hard rationality, Bobby found in his wife an intelligent risk-taker. Lisa successfully navigated a world that few Americans knew about—let alone understood—in terms of its impact on their daily lives. By starting her own political fundraising firm, Lisa staked a claim in an ever deepening mine that served as the mother lode for modern democracy. Lisa had become part CFO, part vivacious hostess to a growing list of the country’s VIPs.

And Bobby’s humble persona contributed to Lisa’s success by keeping his socialite grounded, when Lisa’s ambitions seemed to plan too heavily on a given connection rather than the hard work or required details. Lisa never sought political counsel from him explicitly, but Bobby always had a way of ferreting out from her whether she had actually done her homework before making a decision.

They also looked good standing next to each other. At age thirty-three and standing almost six foot two inches tall, Bobby was far from overweight, but he was beefy. Lisa had never really gained that much weight since college, yet she was full-bodied to begin with. Her height just under five foot nine gave those around her a

sense of deference when she walked into a room. She'd styled her thick, reddish-brunette hair shorter since she and Bobby were in school—a kind of natural career hairdo progression—but otherwise, she looked the same whether her last name was Jeffus or Dillon. She and Bobby were both a little too fair to tan, but Lisa's complexion was the envy of her girlfriends.

Lisa was strangely self-conscious about her penetrating, light blue eyes, thinking people might see them and not take her seriously. She got an idea somewhere that light eyes made a woman seem like an airhead, same as being a blonde. She was inseparable from her sunglasses as a result, at times not removing them until she was well inside. Sunglasses were also an indulgence for her. Even before she could afford them out of her own pocket, she never wore a pair that cost less than two hundred dollars.

She only grabbed her wallet and BlackBerry from her purse before entering the drug store. She decided to buy the most expensive pregnancy test kit Walgreens had. The Latina checkout lady smiled as Lisa handed her a twenty-dollar bill. Back outside, she climbed back into her black Tahoe and tossed her essentials back into her purse next to her ubiquitous prayer journal. She cut across the parking lot to a new Starbucks drive-thru, a place where Bobby had probably been less than an hour or so earlier. A funny feeling came over her again, but it wasn't nausea.

Dear God,

Please protect my husband today. In Jesus' name, amen.

She stuttered through traffic down Highway 78 and made a right onto Buckingham. The broad, six-lane street was still quite wet from the sustained spring rains—welcome relief from almost two years of an especially Texan drought. It was a little more direct to stay on 78, but she hated navigating downtown Garland, and the stretch of Highway 66 to Skillman was a kind of bleak industrial zone that dispirited her. Instead, she cut across and skirted the Richardson

border then made a final turn onto Audelia south, which fed into Skillman and put her less than ten minutes from the office without any more congestion.

“Is this Cara?” asked Lisa into her phone. Today was the first day for summer interns at the Mockingbird Group, Lisa’s firm.

“Yes ma’am,” replied the young voice.

“Hey, we are so, so happy you are on the team with us this summer. I really enjoyed talking with you and know we’re going to have some fun.”

The voice on the other end was excited but a little muffled with intimidation.

“I need you to do me a favor really quick, though.”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Can you simply go around to each person who’s there and tell them I’m running late, but that I’ll be there really soon? Thanks.”

“I’ll do it right now, Mrs. Jeffus.”

“Please, call me Lisa. I’ll be there in a few minutes.” Lisa hung up. By now, she was making her way onto Skillman. She couldn’t quite escape low-income untidiness along her commute, however, as her office was on the third floor of the Commerce Bank building in North Dallas’s Vickery Meadow, a neighborhood in transition. Once the retail nexus of middle-income Dallasites, who lived too far from the Park Cities, Vickery Meadow saw seedy elements overshadow it in the late 1980s in the form of bars, liquor stores, and strip clubs. A haven right before then for Boomer Yuppies with stylish apartments, the Meadow became an immigrant enclave for multiple nationalities once those young professionals got married and moved out to the suburbs.

Lisa rented a two thousand square foot office suite just down the hall from her old boss, a U.S. Congressman. It wasn’t all mace-at-the-ready, though. A handful of dumpy bars still lingered, but many liquor stores had either been closed or remodeled along with other retail units. And because of the population density and percentage of children, the city had driven off or was grandfathering out the strip clubs. Still, the owner and founder of the Mockingbird Group

hoped one day soon to have four thousand square feet downtown along tony McKinney Avenue, maybe in one of the hot new skyscrapers her husband was helping to build.

“Good morning,” greeted Cara Lawson, the attractive if overly thin SMU intern Lisa had called earlier.

After giving the obliging look at her grandfather’s portrait across from the reception desk, Lisa returned Cara’s greeting.

“Good morning, Cara.”

She knew she needed to be every bit the charismatic general to her junior staff. “Thanks for helping me out. Did you get in okay this morning?”

“Yes, ma’am. Mr . . .” Cara blurted out in laughter at not being able to remember names. “I’m sorry; the man with blond hair was here already.”

“You mean Nate? Oh yes, he’s our early bird.” Lisa then leaned onto Cara’s desk. “I think his hair’s more gray than blond, though,” she half-whispered, continuing her way in.

“I heard that!” shouted a voice from an office door before Lisa’s in the corner. Nate Knight stepped into the central area of the suite while closing a small, metal binder on some papers. It was true that his hair was now significantly grayer than blond, but that belied a very youngish face. He thrust the ream of warm sheets into Lisa’s hand as she passed by.

“Clips for the queen bee.”

“I told you that we are only to use aviary metaphors around here,” commanded Lisa as she switched on the fluorescent lighting of her office. “We are the Mockingbird Group for a reason.

“How do you like my shoes?” she asked rhetorically.

“Isn’t that the national bird?” asked Cara, who had gravitated over to the conversation, not sure if she had been dismissed.

Nate snorted, lingering in Lisa’s doorway.

“Of Texas, yes,” responded Lisa with a smile. Cara returned sheepishly to her desk.

Nate seated himself across from Lisa’s desk, Mountain Dew in

one hand. “You know,” he said, “I still think that Mockingbird has too much mock in it, especially for our business.”

“Submit your bill for name change to the committee,” quipped Lisa, in one motion setting her BlackBerry onto her desk, tossing her now empty Starbucks cup into the wastebasket, and immediately flipping through the news clips Nate just handed her. She sat down in her burgundy-leather desk chair.

“Looks like Brookshire has indeed drawn an opponent,” Nate stated. Lisa was already turning past the copy of the online article from the Tyler Democrat. She continued flipping without looking up.

“That is in fact what my ten o’clock meeting is about.”

“Again,” grumbled Nate, “your openness and inability to keep secrets overwhelms me. You mean you already knew?”

Lisa smugly smiled at her trusted media expert.

“How?” added Nate with growing frustration.

“Danny Geister,” she said.

“He’s handling that race?” Nate blurted.

“It is more accurate to say he’s been assigned,” responded Lisa. “He emailed me Saturday night, before this story ran.”

Nate held his tongue for a bit. “Are you sure it’s okay to do business with him?”

Lisa raised her eyebrows. “What do you mean? His candidate is doing business with us.”

“No,” said Nate, “I mean, you know, his reputation?”

“Go back to your office and get to work,” chided Lisa, half joking and half irritated.

As Nate was leaving, Lisa checked her desk clock to see that she did end up being almost twenty minutes late. It occurred to her that she hadn’t yet seen the rest of the staff this Monday, but her thoughts quickly turned to stepping down the hall and using the pregnancy test kit she had smuggled into her own place of business. She had one VIP to call. She figured she had just enough time before Danny got there. She looked up a number stored in her BlackBerry but picked up her office line to make her call.

“Hi George, this is Lisa. It was good to see you yesterday.” Lisa’s tone was brisk and every bit as business as her potential contributor.

“Thank you for getting back with me,” responded George Masters, a congenial man with a light North Texas accent. Implied in Masters’s gratitude was the middle-aged businessman’s discomfort with discussing political business in the hallway of Southfork Church, let alone right after Sunday school. “I wanted to make sure I had not maxed out with Paul, but I had something else I wanted to mention to him,” Masters explained, heading Lisa off from her mechanical “ask.”

“Sure thing,” said Lisa.

“We got wind that the House was going to cut the post-op reimbursement under Medicare. I wanted to make sure Paul knew that, so I’m telling you, as well as his DC people.”

“I’ll definitely make sure he knows,” said Lisa, though the most she would or could do was note the issue in her monthly report to Paul on donations. She already visualized herself writing “Medicare provider cuts” on her spreadsheet.

She added an indulgent, “The Speaker just hates those who do the actual health care, doesn’t she?”

“Well, I don’t know how she expects to—” began Masters on his tirade. This was when Lisa earned her money. She had a headset she normally used when a call went this direction, but her desire to get this one call done so that she could get to the restroom prevented her from setting up her elaborate multitasking technology. She never used the speakerphone, which signaled remote indifference to the other party.

“—and so I’m just alerting Paul to the problem. I know it’s tough when we’re not in the majority.”

“I will sure tell him. Every bit we can do to help moves us toward the day when we are again, though,” Lisa “asked” without missing a beat.

“Well I’m going to send another five hundred dollars, which is what I wanted to tell also. I’m still under \$2,300, right?”

“You’re still in good shape,” said Lisa. She had already checked Masters’s gifts-to-date on her spreadsheet at home after returning from church the previous afternoon. “You’re a true friend, George. I know Paul really, really appreciates it.”

“Okay. Thanks,” said Masters, abruptly hanging up.
Almost as quickly, Lisa was out the door.