

Who will enable me to find rest in you? Who will grant me that you come to my heart and intoxicate it, so that I forget my evils and embrace my one and only good, yourself?

SAINT AUGUSTINE

CHAPTER ONE

Ellyn



I LOVE BUTTER.

If stranded on a deserted island, given the choice between a pound of butter and a man, Honey, you know I'd choose the butter. Any woman worth her weight can catch a fish and I'm worth every plentiful pound. I don't need a man to provide. But barbeque that fish over an open flame without a drizzle of liquid gold, and all you have is dandruff-dry flakes of flavorless flesh. With butter? That same flaky flesh becomes a gourmand's delight.

But do I love butter more than I love God?

That question nibbles at my peace, like I nibble at a cookie when others are watching.

I tap the rubber spatula I'm holding against the bowl on the mixer. It's a ridiculous question. I tap again. Butter and God can't be compared—that's like comparing baklava and broccoli.



But if it's so ridiculous then why does it leave dainty bites in my sense of serenity?

The Hobart HL600 mixer drones, but not loud enough to muffle the ongoing debate in my head. In my heart, I don't want to love anything or anyone more than I love God. But in my stomach . . .

Stop condemning yourself, Ellyn.

I set the spatula down, swipe my index finger across the pound of butter softening on a marble slab on the kitchen's stainless countertop, and then stick the finger into my mouth. My taste buds dance at the sweet cream and hint of salt. I lick my finger clean. "Mmm . . . heaven."

Paco, my sous chef, walks past and swats my upper arm with a towel. "Hey, Ellyn, you have a phone call. Time to stop flirting with the butter, Bella."

Doubt returns. See, even Paco knows where my loyalty lies—or at least my attraction. I grab a towel and use it to mop my forehead, then walk to the sink, wash my hands, and dry them on the apron tied around my waist. I remove the apron and toss it, along with the towel, in a basket for the laundry service. I run my hands over my black chef's coat, smoothing it over my hips.

I wouldn't be caught dead wearing beached-whale white.

Then I turn, sidestep through the entrance to the office, and pick up the receiver. "Hello, this is Ellyn."

"Ellyn, this is Dee at Dr. Becker's office calling to confirm your appointment. 9:00 a.m., Monday the 29th."

I lean back in the desk chair and look at the ceiling.

"Ellyn?"

"Um, yes, I'm here. What . . . what is the appointment for? I don't recall—"

"Your annual physical."

"Oh, right. You know, that date isn't great. I may need to resched—"

"You've rescheduled twice before." Dee's voice softens, but her admonishment is clear.



“Oh . . . well, okay, the 29th it is. I’ll make it work. See you then.” I hang up the phone and look at the calendar on the desk. I count the days until the appointment and mentally tally how many pounds I can lose before then. “Phooey.”

“What phooey?”

I swivel in the office chair. Rosa, my dining-room manager, leans into the office. “Phooey! Who makes a doctor’s appointment for a Monday morning? Women always weigh more on Mondays.”

“Dat so? What phooey anyway? You fine.”

“Yeah, right.”

“*Si*.” Rosa smiles, her dark curls bouncing as she nods. “Napkins? We talk napkins now?”

I glance at the clock on the wall. “Later, okay?”

“Later? It’s always later with you. *Camarón que se duerme, se lo lleva la corriente.*”

This is one of the times I’m grateful that I’m not fluent in Spanish. Though I keep trying to learn. It’s survival in this area, especially inland where Mexican workers maintain the vineyards. The California wine community owes its success to the laborers.

And so do I.

I grab a pad of sticky notes and scrawl a reminder to discuss napkins with Rosa this afternoon. Then I heft myself out of the chair. As I stand, my knees creak and the arthritis in my feet accuses.

I sigh.

Stupid phone call.

Fatigue tempts me to sit back down. Instead, I walk out of the office. “Paco, I’ll be in the garden.” I shout this over my shoulder and then walk out the back door of the restaurant, letting the screen door slam behind me. I trade my kitchen clogs for my garden clogs and then limp my way across the patch of grass between the renovated Victorian house and the garden.

A physical? I shake my head. As much as I try to deny it, not having one annually would be irresponsible. There are employees, families, who depend on me for their livelihood. Keeling over in the kitchen won’t do.



I stop at the edge of the garden—organic herbs and vegetables glisten in the morning sun, droplets of dew like prisms of crystals on the leaves. I sigh again.

I need to keep a grasp on my health.

Health? How about your weight? If you weren't so—

“Shut up, Earl.” I do *not* want to hear another accusation from my inner critic.

The sensation washing over me because of that appointment reminder is as well known to me as Earl's voice. However, the sensation and I are not on a first-name basis. I simply call it what it is.

Shame.

That's what causes me to question my love for God, too.

I push the thought aside. I'll deal with it tomorrow.

Just like you'll eat healthier tomorrow?

Earl knows as well as I that tomorrow never comes.

Fine, so I'll see Dr. Miles Becker on Monday morning, the 29th. I wish, as I have many times before, that I could make an appointment with a female internal-medicine specialist, but with the lagging economy in Fort Bragg not many new doctors are setting up practice. Oh well, I'll step on the scale and don a paper dress for Dr. Becker—again.

I smile to myself. “*That*, Ellyn, is called a safe relationship. The man is married *and* he knows how much you weigh.”

I turn my face to the sun and let it warm me, then reach for my hair and pull the clamp out of the back, letting the curls fall over my shoulders.

Those hair clamps induce more headaches than hormones.

But a day of sunshine on the Mendocino coastline will cure almost anything—maybe even my foul mood. I listen to the sounds of the village coming to life—bells ringing on shop doors, the grinding gears of delivery trucks, and the occasional conversation from the street outside the restaurant.

A lone gull squawks overhead.

“You single too?” I shrug. “Nothing wrong with that.”



The scents of rosemary and basil growing in the herb section of the café's organic garden calm me. My shoulders relax and I draw in a deep breath of moist air. I look back down at the garden, a patchwork of colors. I eye the blue curled Scotch kale I planted two weeks ago. I use it for garnish in the restaurant—the blue-green foliage adds a pop of color on our white square dinner plates.

I reach for a basket on the potting shelf at the garden's edge and head for the herbs. Then an idea hits me and I look back at the kale. "Of course, a juice cleanse!" A juice cleanse has to be good for at least a pound a day—maybe more.

Seven pounds in seven days.

Perfect.

The weight on my shoulders lifts like a coastal fog.

I PUSH OPEN THE door of the old Baptist-church-turned-health-food-store, Corners of the Mouth, on Ukiah Street and brace for the smell of vitamins. *Good Lord, You could not have created that odor. That has to be something man conjured up after the fall.* But, as always, I'm surprised by the scent of fresh produce and the loaves of Café Beaujolais' bread they sell. There's a nutty warmth about the place.

I nose around the aisles for a while and land in front of the essential oils. I open small bottles and sniff the aromas. Lavender. Eucalyptus. Thyme. Then, I wander toward the refrigerated cases in the back.

"May I help you?"

I turn around and face . . . her nametag says *Twila*. The tattoo of—what? A branch of thorns?—across her right cheek says *I'm desperate for attention*. "Hi, Twila. Yes, I'm going to do a juice cleanse. You know, get all those disgusting toxins out of my body. Any suggestions?"

"Sure." Twila gives me the once-over, likely making her own judgments. "So, like, do you also want to lose weight or is it just a detox?"



I give twiggy Twila my most charming smile. “Well, if I lose a few pounds in the process that wouldn’t be all bad, now would it?”

Twila shrugs. “It just means you’ll do a different cleanse. No nut milks—just organic fruits and vegetables. Do you want something prepared or will you do the juicing yourself?” She looks at my chef’s smock, pants, and clogs. “I bet you’ll do the juicing yourself.”

“Good call.” I like her, despite her thin frame and cry-for-attention tattoo.

“Okay, so maybe a book with recipes and information about nutrients and antioxidants?”

“Great.”

“The book section is in the choir loft with the herbs.” She points me to the stairs. “You’ll find several books on juicing. I recommend a three-day juice cleanse.”

“Thanks, Twila.” If three days is good—seven must be better.

“Sure. Come find me if, you know, you have questions or whatever.”

I don’t know that I’ve ever climbed the stairs to the choir loft—I’ve always thought of it as the area where they keep the voodoo stuff. Healing herbs? C’mon, herbs are meant to enhance the flavor of foods. Then I see all the loft has to offer, and my eyes widen. Jars filled with mixtures of dried herbs and teas line the shelves—each a delicious health aid—there are teas that energize, teas that calm, and teas and herbs that aid sleep. There’s also a selection of teacups, pots, and infusers.

And not one voodoo remedy in sight.

After I’ve found a book I like, I head back downstairs, grab some organic Tuscan kale—or as they call it at Corners, dinosaur kale—and a bunch of organic carrots, and then find Twila behind the register. I hand her the book and vegetables and watch as she rings up my purchases.

“So . . . Twila, what’s with the thorns? The tattoo?” Hey, if the girl has something tattooed on her face for the world to see, then it’s open for discussion, right?



“Oh . . .” She raises her hand to her face and her fingers linger on the thorns. “It’s a sign of solidarity with those who suffer, you know?”

My blank expression tells her I don’t.

“Like, the sick, the hungry, the hurting.”

The fat. “Wow.”

“The greatest evil is physical pain.” Sincerity shines in her wide, gray eyes.

“Really?”

“It’s a quote. Augustine.”

Lord, I’m such a dork for judging her. “Physical pain?” I look around the store at all the healing properties. “So is that why you work here?”

She shrugs one thin shoulder. “That’s part of the reason.”

“Are you new?”

“Sort of.” She smiles and shrugs again. “I mean, I haven’t worked here for that long, but my mom’s worked here for like thirty years or something. I sort of grew up in the store.”

“Oh, you’re Nerissa Boaz’s daughter?” I cock my head and look at Twila’s features. “I haven’t seen you in several years—I didn’t recognize you.”

She twirls a strand of her long, dark hair around one finger. “Yeah, I was gone for a long time. School and . . . you know, some other things.” She places the receipt for the book inside its pages and hands it to me, along with the vegetables she’s bagged.

“Welcome back.” I drop the book and vegetables into the canvas bag I carried into the store. “It doesn’t seem like many of the kids who’ve grown up here come back once they’ve left.”

“Yeah, the town’s kind of small. Not a lot of opportunities.”

I nod. “So are you following in your mother’s footsteps or is this”—I gesture to our surroundings—“just temporary?”

She shoves her hands into the pockets of the hooded sweatshirt she wears. “I guess I’m doing what she does, but we each do it in our own way. I plan to stay here, unless, like, I’m led somewhere else.”

“Led?”



The sweet smile that crosses her face makes the tattooed thorns seem out of place. “Yeah, God. You know?”

“I do know.”

“Nice.”

“Well, thanks for your help, Twila. I’ll see you around, I’m sure.”

“Yeah. Hey, where do you work? Which restaurant?”

“Ellyn’s on Main Street.”

She looks back at the store’s copy of my credit card receipt. “Like your name? You’re the owner?”

“Owner and chef.”

“Nice.”

“You’ll have to come by sometime.” I realize as I say it that I’d like to get to know Twila. “Really.”

“Yeah, maybe. Do you serve any vegan dishes?”

“Vegan?” *Seriously?* “No, I let Raven’s up at the Stanford Inn handle the vegan stuff. But I could probably come up with something for you.”

“Okay. Nice to meet you. Good luck with the cleanse.”

“Thanks.” I turn and wave as I go.

I can’t wait to get home! I’ll create recipes. Maybe even write my own juicing book. Add a juice bar to the café.

At the very least, I’m on the road to losing seven pounds in seven days and there’s nothing better than that.

THE MORNING OF MY appointment with Dr. Becker, I step on my scale and gulp.

Maybe it’s wrong.

I wander from the bathroom into my closet. The narrow space in the old water-tower-turned-home is flanked on either side by shelves cluttered with extra dishes, boxes, wrapping paper, whatever. I don’t have enough clothes to fill the space, so I use it for storage, filling just one section of hanger space with my work smocks, elastic-waist pants in varying cotton prints, and a few other items. Another section of shelves holds the three or four pairs of sweats, long-sleeved T-shirts, and sweaters I wear at home or around town.

I reach for my one pair of dress slacks—black linen—and slip them on. I pull the waistband together and struggle with the zipper and then stretch the waistband even more to get the button into the buttonhole. I grab the black cotton sweater that I wear with the slacks and give thanks that it's long and baggy.

I don bronze leather flats I can slip out of and emerge from the closet dressed. "It's as good as it gets." I accessorize in anticipation of The Event and leave my watch and favorite bronze bracelet sitting on my dressing table and put small studs in my lobes rather than the hammered bronze hoops I usually wear with this outfit.

I didn't weigh the outfit, but once I lose the shoes, it has to come in under a pound, pound and a half, tops.

I sit at the dressing table in my room and turn the makeup mirror on. The light highlights each freckle across my nose. I dust my face with matte powder, then apply a little blush, mascara, and lip-gloss. More makeup than I use most days.

My eyes, the color of green sea glass, stare back at me from the mirror. From the chin—or chins—up, I look okay. But from the chins down . . . Well, it evidences the occupational hazard that is my career. *Or my choices*, as Earl would say. Then I remember Twila. I rest my elbows on the dressing table and rest my chins on my hands.

"The greatest evil is physical pain."

Do I think that's true? I have my share of physical pain, but I assume it's just what God's allowed. So who am I to argue?

Get over it, Ellyn. You don't have real pain. You're just fat. There are people who really suffer.

For once, I agree with Earl.

I lean forward and eye my reflection in the mirror. "Suck it up, honey."

WHEN I REACH THE doctor's office, I walk in, register with the receptionist, and then take a seat. Magazines sporting cover models with long, narrow waists are scattered across a table between the chairs and there's an antiseptic smell to the air. The magazines repel me, but the woman sitting across from the chair I've chosen does



look interesting. She's tall, slender, and her skin is the color of cocoa.

There's something exotic about her that I find intriguing, even if she is scrawny.

Her dark hair is cropped close to her head, accentuating her dark eyes and full lips. I notice the earrings dangling against her long neck—small turquoise stones hanging from chandelier-type drops. Those babies must weigh at least four ounces all on their own. But then, she doesn't need to worry about that, does she?

She must sense my stare because she looks up from the book she's reading and flashes a tight smile in my direction. I smile back and reach for a magazine, *Highlights*, my skin turning the color of a Big-Boy tomato, I'm sure.

"Sabina Jackson."

We both look up at the nurse's call.

"Dr. Norman will see you now."

The woman closes her book, drops it in her purse, and gets up.

Sabina. Her name is as exotic as she is. And it appears to be Sabina's lucky day—it's the pudgy nurse who will weigh her. The pudgy nurse never comments on my weight.

But who is Dr. Norman?

Camie calls my name—tanned, toned Camie, who, with my chart open in her hand, leads me to the scale. "Date of birth?"

"April 12."

Camie looks from the chart to me. "Year? Just to confirm . . ."

"Nineteen"—I swallow—"sixty-six."

"Okay, please step on the scale."

The Event.

I set my purse on the chair next to the scale and slip out of my shoes. I take a deep breath, step up onto the scale, and close my eyes. I hear Camie moving the little weight thingy.

Then I peek.

Big mistake.

"What? Wait. Are you sure? I mean, I know. But . . . I was hoping my scale at home was . . . wrong."

"You're up six pounds from last year."

Oh good. Chastisement. As if I don't feel bad enough already.

The juice cleanse did me no favors. That first morning of juicing kale, carrots, and apples left me holding a glass filled with green sludge. It looked like something scraped from the bottom of a stagnant pond. It smelled like it too. I pinched my nose closed and slammed the juice down. Oh, but the aftertaste . . . I chased the juice with a small bite of a buttery croissant I'd brought home from the café.

And, well, one bite led to another.

Failed diet plan number 1,358. Or something like that.

"Ah well, I'm a chef, you know."

She gets me settled, runs me through the usual routine, and then hands me the paper gown. "Doctor Becker will be with you in a few minutes."

I undress, stuff myself into the gown, climb up on the examining table, and wait.

A few minutes later I hear Doctor Becker's familiar *rat-a-tat-tat* on the door.

"Come in." I pull the gown tighter as he opens the door.

"Hey, gal, how are you?" He holds out his hand.

I reach for his hand, which swallows up mine, and we shake.

"How long have I been seeing you now?" He looks at the file. "Six years? So, may I call you Ellyn rather than Ms. DeMoss?"

"Sure. I mean, after all, you've seen all of me every year for the last half dozen." I smile while clenching my teeth. Why does everything that goes through my brain come out my mouth?

Dr. Becker laughs and I notice, as I have before, the sparkle in his blue eyes. The doctor is a large man—tall, broad, and, if not for that sparkle, imposing in the small space of the examining room.

He takes a seat on the rolling stool in front of the table I'm sitting on and stretches his long legs out in front of him. His feet, clad in running shoes, land just beneath mine, which hang over the edge of the table. He smiles up at me—my file sits on his lap. "How's the restaurant business?"



I cross my bare legs, and consider suggesting the good doctor don a pair of shades to avoid the glare coming from the white sheen of my shins. “It’s good, considering the economy. The tourists keep us going.”

He nods. “I’ll have to come by for dinner soon. It’s been awhile since I’ve meandered around the village.”

“Well, it’s still there.” *Brilliant, Ellyn, like he thought it fell into the sea?* “So . . . um . . .” I look to the side and eye the blood-pressure cuff hanging on the wall. “. . . I guess blood pressure’s first?” *Let’s get this over with.*

Dr. Becker glances toward the wall and then looks down at my file, still unopened. He seems hesitant. He finally pats the file with his left hand and clears his throat. “Actually, Ellyn, I wanted to talk to you about something.”

He looks at me, eyebrows raised.

“Okay.” A knot begins to form in my stomach. Is he going to start with my weight? Did he look at my chart before he came in and see how much I’ve gained?

“I’ve taken on a partner. Dr. Courtney Norman? Maybe you’d heard?”

I shake my head. Thank heaven! No awkward discussion about my weight.

He looks from me to the floor, but before he does, I see a flash of emotion cross his face. Sadness? What’s up, Doc? But the expression is gone when he looks back at me.

“It’s time to live a little.” He smiles and runs one hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. “And Dr. Norman was ready for small-town life after doing her internship in Chicago. She’s excellent. Really.” He waves one of his large paws in my direction. “And she’s familiar with women’s issues.”

“So . . . you’re . . .”

He waits for me to finish my sentence but I don’t. Although I’d guess him to be in his early fifties, he still seems too young to retire and I don’t want to offend him. But where is he going with his glowing report of Dr. Norman?

Once he realizes nothing else is coming out of my mouth, he begins again. “I’m lightening my case load—taking a day or two off each week to pursue other interests.”

“Oh, great. I bet your wife is looking forward to that.” He’s always spoken of his wife and the time they spend together. I’ve met her at the café, they’re regulars. Or were. I haven’t seen them in some time.

He stares at me, and something clouds his expression again. I glance down at his left hand . . .

And see his bare ring finger.

Oh no. “Did I stick my foot in my mouth? It’s the only acrobatic move I do well.”

“No. No.” He looks at the floor and doesn’t even break a smile at my joke. “Anyway, I’d like to transfer you over to Dr. Norman. I think she’d be great for you and helpful with some of the issues you’ve struggled with. But I didn’t want to do that without discussing it with you.”

He’s fidgeting with the corner of my file.

“Oh, okay. Sure, that’s great. I’ve often thought a female would . . . I mean . . . you’re great . . .”

He holds up one hand and smiles. “I understand.”

He’s dumping you, honey. Too much butter on your thighs. He’s handing the fat girls off to the lady doctor.

He stands and reaches his hand toward me again, but this time when I shake his hand, he seems to hold mine for a moment or two longer than usual. “Ellyn, it’s always good seeing you. I’ll look forward, I hope, to seeing you at the café?”

“Sure. I’m always there.”

“Great. Dr. Norman will be right in.” He turns and leaves the examining room.

The warmth of his hand lingers on mine.

Well, at least it was a nice dumping. And you’ve wanted a female doctor, right?



“Right.” I pull the paper drape closer around my ample stomach and chest as I wait for Dr. Norman, who I’m certain is young, skinny, and beautiful.

Maybe *she’s* what happened to Dr. Becker’s wedding ring.

See him at the café? Yeah, I bet. Nice way to soften the dumping, Doc. Although, maybe I deserve the dumping. Six more pounds? *Oh, Lord, I’m sorry I’m such a disappointment to You.*

Even more of a disappointment than I am to myself.