



a&b

*The First Day of the
Rest of My Life*

CATHY LAMB

CHAPTER ONE

The Gunshot Anniversary is coming up. Those six gunshots have echoed throughout my entire life. They grabbed everyone's attention in the courthouse pretty darn quick, too. *Bang, bang, bang!*

There was the expected cacophony of panic with people screaming and diving to the floor, attorneys scattering, the jury ducking, reporters squawking, photographers scrambling for a photo, and the sheriff barrelling toward the gunman.

Or, more properly should I say, the gunwoman.

The gunwoman was my momma.

Marie Elise O'Shea was a well-dressed shooter. She wore her light pink dress with embroidered white daisies circling the trim, matching cotton candy pink heels, red lipstick, liquid black liner that tilted up at the corners, and a yellow ribbon holding back her thick black hair. 'Yellow means there's still hope in this pickled, wrinkled, warped world, sugar,' she told me. 'Yellow means there's a new

tomorrow scootin' around the corner, you just wait.'

She looked a little weak, a little tired, but still beautiful, innocent even, the gun a strange, black aberration in her firm grip.

Annie and I were the only two people in the courtroom that sunny spring day who didn't move when she started shooting. We knew she would never shoot us.

She was shooting *for* us. Shooting for her daughters, and she had excellent aim. Momma had been raised on a farm in Oregon with fruit trees and rows of lavender and enjoyed target practise as an after-school activity. Some would argue her perfect aim was a good thing, others would argue it was not.

Right before my momma shot off her ladies gun she said to those three men, in a voice as hard as a chunk of iron, 'This is from Big Luke. He's going to escort you to hell. Goodbye.' She spread her legs in her cotton candy pink heels so she would have perfect balance, then whipped her gun out from her bra.

Bang, bang, bang. Dead on target. Three more shots to call it good.

Sheriff Ellery knew he did not need to tackle my momma as he would have with any other shooter. He sprinted up to her, sweating, and scolded, 'Now, sugar, you shouldn't have done that.'

Momma didn't argue with him. She handed over the gun to the puffing, distressed sheriff amidst the utter chaos and declared, 'Ellery, I had to. You know they've been threatening to come after my girls as soon as they're loosed from prison and I can't have that. I won't be around to protect them.' She held out her wrists for the handcuffs. 'Careful, honey. Don't

you break my nails. And make sure your wife knows that I will not be able to make her appointment tomorrow for her Cut 'n Blow.'

Sheriff Ellery, clearly upset, almost crying, but not because of the missed Cut 'n Blow appointment, snapped the cuffs on. He did not break Momma's nails. His wife was all aflutter about missing Marie Elise's Splendid, Superior Cut 'n Blow. Her niece's wedding was coming up, and the niece's mother, her older sister, who was so hoity-toity, would be there with her 'piggly comments,' and now who would get her all fixed up to do battle with 'that pig-dragon witch? Who? Why couldn't Marie Elise have done the shooting on Monday? She knew I had this wedding!'

Momma went to jail on that sunny spring day and worked her magic on the nails, hair, and make-up of many female convicts. One of them later became the owner of a beauty supply chain, inspired by 'the transformation Marie Elise made to my wretched hair and face. She made me believe in me. Me, Birdie Tyson, former delinquent.' She named her highest selling shampoo Marie Elise's Pink.

Some say it was my momma's parents' money that got her out of jail because of the supersmart attorneys they hauled on in. Most said it was because the men she shot deserved it and more. But I knew why my momma's life was spared.

It was because of Marie Elise's French Beauty Parlour. Yes, the magic my momma brought to her beauty parlour saved her life.

At least that time it did.

CHAPTER TWO

‘Ladies,’ I boomed out, my arms spread high in the air, spotlights shining down so bright I could barely see the thousands of Texan women screaming in the audience, ‘I want you to ask yourselves this question: Do you want to live your life like a mouse – a timid, tepid, squeaking, ineffectual, irritating mouse – or do you want to live your life like Mrs Spinoza? Which one? *Which one?*’

‘Mrs Spinoza! Spinoza!’ thousands of women shouted back at me. ‘Spinoza!’

‘That’s right! You want to be a Mrs Spinoza!’ I fisted my hands in victory in the middle of the stage as I concluded my speech. My proper black, boring, expensive business suit and I were projected onto three screens in the auditorium. It was what I thought a life coach who needed armour should wear.

‘Spinoza, Spinoza!’

‘Ladies, Mrs Spinoza was fearless. She was adventurous. She was curious. She was a ball-breaking, get out of my way, I’m going to live my life with no boulders in it kind of lady!’

What are you going to do with your boulders?’

‘Crush them, crush them!’ they yelled back at me.

‘What are you going to do with the mountains in your life?’

‘Climb them, climb them!’

‘That’s right, you’re going to climb them! You’re going to put your heels on and climb over them! Put your heels on, scream it with me!’

‘Put your heels on!’ they screamed, a wave of feminine rage, freedom, and defiance. ‘Put your heels on!’

I strutted across the stage in my heels. Not high-stylin’ heels, boring ones. The ones that say: I mean business. ‘No squeaking, ladies. Speak your mind even if your voice wobbles. Speak up for yourself, no one else will! Don’t restrict yourself and the wacky-cool possibilities in your future, and stop allowing others to restrict you! If they don’t like the new you, go out and make yourself some new friends, make yourself a new family with people who love to live, to laugh, to have adventures! And stop worrying about what you look like, for heaven’s sakes! We’ve had enough of men telling us how to look, haven’t we?’

‘Yes. We. Have!’ they roared.

‘Let your hair down, Texas!’ I ripped a rubber band out of my hair and shook loose my dark brown straight hair. It had been mercilessly flat ironed because the curls reminded me of something I tried every day to forget. ‘Let it dry in the wind while you explore Norway! Let your nails chip and split while you volunteer to dig wells in Africa! Leave your make-up at home when you trek through India! And when you’re back in the workforce, put those red high heels on and stride like you mean it! Stride, don’t step. Stride! Like you mean it!’

Whoeee. Yell and shout. Screams from the bottom of those women's feisty souls.

'Ladies, thank you,' I hollered into a massive standing ovation. 'Now get out there and live the heel-kicking life your gut tells you to live! Kick your heels!'

I left the stage, the screaming crested, stayed there, deafening, and I was hustled back on. My final words: 'Don't forget the O'Shea number one principle!'

I waited for a millisecond, until they shouted it back at me.

'Kick some girly ass, kick some girly ass,' they chanted while clapping in sync, as I'd taught them. '*Kick some girly ass!*'

I laughed, waved, left the stage.

I was hustled out of the auditorium, hugged and thanked by the Ladies Power organisers as they insisted I come back next year, and gently shoved into a limo. The limo pulled away before the crowd left.

I leant back in the seat and started to shake. I shook like someone had turned a blender on high inside my stomach.

I am a life coach, specialising in relationships, mostly for people with vaginas. I tell people what to do with their lives and who to have in it.

And I had told, over a three-day period, a whole bunch of women that they had to take charge of their lives, be adventurous like Mrs Spinoza, my neighbour for years before she died at the age of ninety-nine at the Great Wall of China, her camera slung around her neck. She had been talking to two young Swedish men about the joys of Russian vodka and toppled right on over. 'A death you can be proud of,' I said.

I told them not to take any crap, 'Live a Crapless Life'; to

try new things, ‘Try New, No Wallowing in the Mouldy Old’; how not to feel caged by guilt, remorse, or regret, ‘Unstrap Your Emotional Corsets’; and to re-examine commitments made decades ago to a life they no longer wanted to lead, ‘Release Yourself From Your Personal Prison.’

I am pathetic.

Emotional crap wraps me like bondage. I am hounded by guilt. Remorse smothers me. I have so many regrets I could lay them end to end and they would cover Uranus. I have an emotional corset over my entire face. In my semi-electrocuted mind, I am wallowing in my own personal prison with very wide iron bars, a dirt floor, and no windows.

Here is the truth: I am a lie. I am a lie to others, I am a lie to myself.

I kept shaking.

‘You all right, ma’am?’ the limo driver said, his brow wrinkled in concern.

‘Yes. Fine. Fine. I’m fine.’ Sure. Sure I was.

I heard the violin music in my head, a single violinist. I’ve been hearing violinists and full orchestras my whole life. I don’t know why this is, I don’t know where the concerts come from, I don’t know why no one but me hears them. It’s a tricky phenomenon I can’t explain. I only know that the violin music is as much a part of my life as my lungs are a part of my breathing.

The violinist was playing Beethoven’s *Für Elise*.

How fitting.

Very late that night I flew into Portland, Oregon, drove down a couple of freeways, and returned to the house I live in that I do not like.

It's built like a square spaceship. The lines are smooth and hard, and the furniture's the same way. Modern and edgy, like what you'd see in one of those architectural magazines. In fact, it has been in architectural magazines.

I like the view. I can watch the weather become emotional, but I don't like where I'm standing when I look at it.

Why did I buy it?

Besides the fact that it's exactly, purposefully, totally opposite from the home I grew up in, I bought it so I can prove that I'm someone. I live here because it's an impressive house. It's expensive. Prestigious address. Do I care? Obviously I do. Why? I'm working on that.

My decorator picked all of the hard-edged, oddly shaped furniture. I was not interested in helping.

'Don't you want to shop with me, Madeline?'

'No. I hate shopping.'

'Don't you want to look at colours together, designs?'

'No, that would bore me.'

'Don't you want to choose the furniture for your own house?'

'No.'

'Why not?' She was baffled.

'Because I don't care.'

She didn't get it, didn't get me. No surprise. Few people do. I wrote the cheque, she did the work. I now have a house decorated in angles, planes, corners. It's geometric decorating. You didn't like geometry in school? Me either. And yet I live in geometry.

To fill the cold, detached space, I play my violin. I have played my violin to fill every cold, detached place in my life since I was a child. I am a rebel violinist and I had a

rebel violin teacher from the time I moved to Oregon. I play classical, bluegrass, Texan-style fiddling, Irish reels and waltzes, and swing music.

My violin has small scratches and dents and a bloodstain on the inside. The blood has sunk into the wood, and if you turn it this way and that, it resembles a smashed butterfly. I know it's blood because my grandma made the mistake of answering me truthfully one night when I was a teenager.

We were sitting on her expansive white deck on The Lavender Farm, which Granddad built for her because he knew she loved the view of the rows of lavender. I had just finished practising Kuchler's Concertino in D Major, opus 15 and I asked her about the butterfly spot. In French she said, 'Oh, that mark? That is blood.'

'*That's blood?*' I answered in French. My grandparents and my momma were from France, and taught Annie and me French. My grandparents also taught us, as they had our momma, German. We are better at French.

Her face shut down. Slammed shut.

'Grandma, blood?' I knew the violin had been my momma's. 'How did it get there?'

She waved me off, her jumbo-sized diamond wedding ring flashing. She muttered in German, 'I don't know. Silly me. I don't know why I said that.'

'But Grandma,' I said back to her, in German, 'I want to know about the blood.'

'No, you don't,' she snapped, then seemed to regret her clipped words, her lips tightening. She tucked the waves of her thick white curls back into a ball on top of her head. 'It is not blood. It is . . . a stain. I think it is from red grapes.'

'Red grapes? How would a red grape get in there?'

‘It’s a question mark, isn’t it?’ She patted my hand. ‘Maybe a peasant with a swirling black cape borrowed the violin from your momma and was playing it by a grapevine and one ripe, juicy grape popped in. Or maybe a falling star knocked the grapes off and they landed in the violin when your mother was dancing in a field with a fawn, a crown of daisies on her head.’

As my grandma was an incredibly popular children’s author and illustrator, her answer was not surprising. ‘What about all these other scratches and these dents?’ I pointed to them, here, there, everywhere. It was an old violin.

She ran a gentle hand over my cheek, then spoke in French again, her luminescent blue-green eyes filling with tears. ‘All those marks are a mystery to me. A mystery. Perhaps a grumpy bluebird came down and scratched the violin when we weren’t looking. Perhaps a bear’s paw made that dent as he danced a jig. Perhaps an elf came and hit it against his knee. All a mystery.’

But I knew the marks weren’t a mystery to her. I knew she was lying. I knew because her hands shook and she blinked to clear a wall of tears.

‘Grandma . . .’ I didn’t like to upset my grandma. I loved her dearly. She had saved me, saved us, but I wanted to know about the blood.

‘All I know for sure is that I love you, my darling.’ She kissed my cheeks, four times, back and forth, as the French do. My grandma was slim and trim – she walked five miles a day over the hills of her property – and she always dressed impeccably. Scarves, jewellery, hats on special occasions, heels. She dressed *French*. Even her hands still looked young,

especially when she was drawing and painting the swans that graced her children's books, her imagination a free-flowing, curving, colour-filled playground.

'Come, let's walk between the lavender rows. We'll drop a few marbles between the plants for magic and I'll tell you a story about a wee swan who always wore pink, not black like all the other swans in her school. She loved the colour pink and she loved sparkling shoes for her webbed feet. Now, one day, this swan . . .'

But lately, long years later, I don't have the same grandma. She has rounded the corner into dementia, and she says things like, 'If you go to the left you will die, if you go to the right you will live but they will pull off your arms and legs and run you naked where the swans can't come' or 'Pile up, pile down, the black ghosts are coming and we have to hide in the lavender or a barn. Be quiet!'

Always, always, I have known that there are secrets in my family, lies, if you will, loving lies, cover-up lies, but lies all the same. With my grandma's dementia, however, those lies are being exposed, via the scratches, dents, and blood on a violin my mamma gave me, who received it from Grandma.

So, in my more brutal moments, I acknowledge this truth: I am a lie. I come from a family of liars. What saves me is that I love the liars.

'She's on the phone again,' Georgie told me.

'Tell her I don't want to talk to her.' I clenched my teeth and shook my head. I had come to hate the woman on the phone. It wasn't personal. I hated her because of what she was trying to do to my carefully constructed, fragile life and to my sister's carefully constructed, fragile life.

‘Ms O’Shea is not available to speak with you right now, Marlene,’ Georgie said with firm professionalism.

Georgie is my assistant. She has a dog, Stanley, who barked twice at me, then lifted a paw. I shook it. He barked again. I knelt and hugged him, the dog’s head cuddling into my neck, paws on my shoulders. If I don’t hug him, he won’t stop barking. When I tried to pull away, he held on tight and wheezed in my ear.

‘I said, no,’ Georgie said. ‘That is a refusal. A negative. A denial.’ Her tone clashed with her dyed, snow white hair with pink tips, her lace skirt, and her cowboy boots. She is twenty-five and can wear anything. I look at her and am reminded that I have broken and smashed my momma’s cardinal rule on clothing: Don’t you dare be a frump. Don’t you dare! Let yourself *shine*.

‘Why are you having such inner turmoil with the word no?’ Georgie went on. ‘Ms O’Shea is not available. This is not a wishy-washy philosophical difference that you can play with and manipulate at will. Your spectrum of denial is puzzling me.’

I didn’t know what a spectrum of denial was. I would ask later.

‘Ms O’Shea has already given you her answer. She does not want to be interviewed for the article . . . No, she does not have to participate. There is free choice in her spiritual and in her legal reign . . . No, you are not to call her family, either. Do not contact the Laurents. They are elderly and do not wish to speak to you. Fry me on that one.’

I shuddered and took a ragged breath as a sense of wretched doom tripped along my nerves. Stanley squeezed my neck. He is so affectionate.