

CHAPTER ONE

I was late getting to the Faculty Club that night, the closest I could come to not showing up at all. I hated to admit that at thirty years old, I still found it intimidating to say no to my mother. But, then, who wasn't cowed by D. Liz McGavock – hematologist extraordinaire, administrator de la crème, power in an Evan Picon suit.

I'm not exaggerating. I wish I were.

The air that October evening was chilly and damp as I hurried across the Stanford campus, past the mission-style buildings that breathed academia. All *I* could breathe was my mantra: Don't let her get to you, Jill. You're thirty – she's fifty-five. You haven't had time to accomplish as much as she has. She can't knock you down for that. She can't knock you down for anything.

But I could feel my face twisting into a smirk as I cut across the grass and took the last few steps to the club at a virtual canter. Who was I kidding? One appraising look from my mother, one switchblade remark, and I'd be down for the proverbial count.

I hurried up the walkway feeling like a truant sixth-grader. Unlike most such facilities that are housed in old, traditional, ivy-covered buildings, the Stanford Faculty Club was a modern affair that looked like someone's upscale, rambling rancher. Who knows – maybe it was designed that way to give it a homey touch. My mother certainly felt at home there after twenty-five years on campus, although tonight she was the guest of honor.

The front door opened, and an undergrad, attired in the traditional garb of the campus banquet crew, chanted "Good-evening-are-you-here-for-the anniversary-banquet?" as if he were reading it off a teleprompter.

I'm not here for the cuisine, kid, I wanted to say to him. But I just nodded, and he pointed toward the door to the main dining room. So, Mother had made the big time. They'd opened up the Taj Mahal of banquet rooms. Not surprising.

I forced a smile at the kid and made a beeline for the ladies' room.

Fortunately, nobody was in there, though if every stall had been full it wouldn't have stopped me from doing what I did, which was survey myself coolly in the mirror. Good paternal genes had given me fair skin of decent texture, dark eyes, and dark hair. My mother had been pontificating since I hit puberty about the need to wear makeup in order to look polished. I never wore any. She'd also held forth on more than one occasion about how much more professional I looked with my hair up. I pulled out the clip that held it in place and let it fall down to my shoulders in its straight, dark panels.

I could almost hear her saying, "If you insist on wearing it down like a Russian wolfhound, at least don't drag your hand through it. You might as well bite your nails or pick your nose while you're at it."

I neither picked nor bit, but I did rake my fingers through my hair and shake it out so that it had its usual tousled, I do-not-have-time-to-think-about-my-appearance look. Then I slung my purse over my shoulder and, with one more rake through the hair, I headed back toward the dining room, my black jacket flapping behind me. I was so unpolished my mother would probably come down from the podium with a can of Pledge.

Forks were already clinking when I walked in. Big, teddy-bear Max stood up at a table near the front and waved to me with his usual effervescent enthusiasm, his signature shock of dark, wavy hair tumbling onto his forehead. Everyone within a two-table radius brought his or her respective head up from the smothered chicken and cold broccoli to stare. It was always hard to tell whether Max was directing Beethoven's Fifth or just saying hello.

He was in Jewish-mother mode when I got to him. Make that New York Jewish mother.

"I was worried sick," he said, gesturing toward his plate. "Look at this. I could barely eat."

"Only because it isn't veal scaloppini," I said. And then I submitted to the customary kiss on each cheek, which I always tolerated because there was no sense doing otherwise. Max never asked me if I *wanted* to be fawned over like fifth-century sculpture – he just did it.

"Sit down, sit down," he said. "I had them cover your plate. It's probably stone cold anyway. You want me to order you another one?"

"No," I said. "I don't think it'll make much difference."

"I've given up on banquet food improving." Max's words were always more gushed than spoken. "I've tried to tell them – heaven knows, I've tried. A university of this caliber – all the guests we have . . . Jill, honey, eat, eat. God forbid you should still be on the dessert when your mother gets up to give her speech. You know everyone here? What am I – I'm a miserable host. Jill McGavock, Liz's daughter –"

There was probably no need for an introduction. From the expressions on the four faces that looked back at me, they had been hearing about nothing but me and my whereabouts since they sat down. And they were undoubtedly relieved that I had finally arrived so Max would move on to another topic. Not that he wasn't charming – but enough already.

"Dr. Wang from pathology," Max was saying. "And his wife, Stephanie. Look at her. Is she a picture? Beautiful lady."

"Definitely," I said to the mousy woman with the bad perm. "We've met."

"Ellen Van Dyke," Max continued, gesticulation in high gear. "New in hospital administration. Fascinating. You'll hear her stories about China – she's an expert." And with a raised hand, "No, Ellen you are. Don't argue with me."

"I can't wait," I said.

"And this is . . . what am I, slipping. What is your name again? Please forgive me."

The man whose arm Max was by now wringing like a dishrag grinned. "Sam Bakalis," he said. "I tagged along with Ellen. Free food."

"You'd have done better standing in line at the soup kitchen," I said. "That's a little higher on the chain."

Sam grinned again and nodded toward my plate. “So does that mean your share is up for grabs?” Then he squeezed Ellen’s hand and said, “No, seriously, I came for the delightful company.”

“Save it, Sam,” she said. “You’ve heard all my China stories. And so has just about everybody else here, so you’re going to be spared tonight, Jill.”

“Stop by her office and see her sides, though,” Sam said.

“So, you work at the hospital, too?” Max said, nodding at Sam.

“No, no. I’m in the philosophy department.”

What are you, the file clerk?

He obviously wasn’t. Stanford Hospital administrators didn’t date the office staff. But this Sam person didn’t look like your standard academic. Not that there was a ‘look.’ When you were riding across campus in the middle of a flock of bicyclists, you saw staff members wearing everything from berets to dreadlocks. But few of them did the I-look-like-a-student thing, and Sam had it down to an art form. He had dark curly hair that was on the shaggy side, which sneaked out over his ears as if he’d spent the money his mother had given him for a haircut on baseball cards. His eyebrows were thick – no professional trim at the barber. And he smiled – no, grinned – more than most people in academic pursuit. Besides all that, his shirt and blazer both had an almost-rumpled look, as if he’d pulled them out from the bottom of the stack on the chair.

He must be looking for a wife. Don’t look at Ellen. She falls more into my mother’s class. Women in Gotchy shoes don’t marry guys who look like unmade beds.

I looked up then to find the unmade bed in question staring back at me.

“Max tells us you’re a graduate student,” he said.

“I am,” I said. “Fifth year.” And I don’t go for unmade beds either. Or any beds, for that matter.

“Math, right?” Dr. Wang said.

I nodded and pushed my plate aside to see if the salad was any better than the rice pilaf.

“Math. You’re a sick woman, Jill,” Ellen said. “But I’m sure your mother is extremely proud of you.”

“Proud?” Max said. “She’s a peacock when she talks about Jill.”

Even though that was definitely not accurate, Max could never be convinced otherwise. He was completely biased when it came to my mother. I’d discovered years ago that the Liz McGavock he saw and the one the rest of us had to live with were not the same person.

“So, fifth year,” Sam said. “You’re pretty far into your dissertation, then.”

“I am,” I said. “I’m close to proving my thesis, actually.”

“Good thing,” Dr. Wang said. “Don’t you have to finish in five years?”

“You don’t have to finish, but you don’t get funding after five. And, yeah, they wonder about you if you can’t pull it off by the end of that time.”

“And your thesis is--?”

I looked at Sam, who was surveying me through his thin-rimmed glasses. What I hadn’t picked up on before, when I was putting him into the secretarial pool, was the intensity in his eyes. They were hazel, kind of a neutral color but focused as if there were something behind them fine-tuning their lenses.

“Do you actually want to know what my thesis is?” I said. “Or are you just being polite?”

“Polite isn’t a word I’d use to describe Sam,” Ellen said with a laugh.

“Besides, differential calculus doesn’t usually constitute small talk,” Dr. Wang said.

“I guess I have no choice but to say I really want to know.” Sam was still grinning.

“If they had just put a little basil in this sauce,” Max said, “it would have made all the difference.”

“Nice try, Dr. Ironto,” Sam said to him. “But let me just get my question answered before we go off into the culinary world.”

Max looked like the host whose tea party has just been crashed by the Hell’s angels. He knew me.

“So how much algebraic topology have you had?” I said.

“None,” Sam said. “I didn’t even know it existed.”

“I’d have to give you a crash course, then. You sure you have that kind of time?”

Sam shrugged. “Sure. I should be able to get that down before they bring the dessert.”

I set my fork on the edge of the plate and folded my hands. My eyes locked onto his. “I’m specifically in the area of K-theory, working with vector bundles. We can take any shape and assign a vector space, so that for every point on the shape we end up with a vector bundle. K-theory studies those vector bundles.”

Sam’s full lips were twitching. “Ah, that certainly clarifies it for me. How about the rest of you?” He grinned while surveying everyone at the table.

“I’m good to go,” Ellen said.

“Okay, but here’s my real question.” Sam leaned over his broccoli. “Why? Why do you want to fool around with shapes in the first place?”

“Because I can,” I said.

“She has a terrible image problem,” Max said, straight-faced. “We’ve tried therapy, but still, always with the inferiority complex.”

“All right,” I said. “I do it because it’s beautiful.”

“Math is beautiful?” Mrs. Wang said.

Ellen was shaking her head. “No, Jill. A sunset at Half Moon Bay is beautiful. Geometry is not beautiful. What were saying about basil, Max?”

“No, really, indulge me here,” Sam said. “I’m intrigued.”

He had yet to take his eyes off me. I, in turn, was holding my own in the who’s-going-to-look-away-first contest, even amid the banquet chatter and dish clatter that was going on around us. No man won that competition with me.

“So it’s all about the beauty of it for you,” he said.

I leaned forward. “That’s pretty simplistic.”

“So work with me. I’m a layman.”

“For me, yes, it is about the elegance of it. What I’m working on is going to help us understand the mathematical big picture.”

“So you’re learning math so you can . . . learn math.”

“Again, that’s a little simplistic. If you have to have a practical reason, K-theory has some applications to quantum physics.” I shrugged. “But there isn’t much applied math here at Stanford.”

“That would be too mundane, wouldn’t it?” he said. “I try to make a practical application in the philosophy department and they’re ready to give me the hemlock.”

“What is it exactly that you do there?” I said, eyes still fixed.

“I teach.”

“You’re a TA.”

“No, I’m a professor. But not tenured. Don’t be too impressed.”

I wasn’t. But I was surprised. The Midwest tang and the shaggy do had me fooled. And I don’t fool easily.

“Ah, the *piece de resistance!*” Max said, with more fervor than was warranted by the slices of carrot cake that were being served.

I knew he was ready for a subject change, and I reluctantly let him make it. If I ever cut anybody any slack, it was Max. He hated any dissonance that didn’t come from Rachmaninoff piece. At that moment, he was bowing his silver-streaked head to each of us as the cake was being distributed, as if he’d baked it himself. As he handed me my piece, his soft brown eyes practically begged me not to mar my mother’s special night. I gave in and looked around for the mother in question.

She was at the head table, of course, next to Dr. Grant, chief of all the Stanford labs. Her face was turned away from me as she talked to him, more than likely treating him to her opinion about something. Anything. There was nothing she couldn’t hold forth on with complete eloquence at the drop of a toupee. I didn’t have to hear her to know her voice was deep and rich in Grant’s ear – that her articulation was impeccable, that every word was slicing into him like a scalpel. As always, she was almost perfectly still as she talked. My mother never seemed to feel a need for gestures or anything else that didn’t contribute to the collected image she projected.

Right about now, Grant was probably saying to himself, ‘Is this woman human?’ Don’t give yourself credit for an original thought, Pal. I’ve wondered that all my life. The real question is –

But the real question faded right there in my frontal lobe as my mother turned her head to address the tuxedo-clad gentleman on her other side. I could see her face, and it stopped me cold.

Did I miss the cyclone she survived to get here?

That was only a slight exaggeration considering the package my mother always -- *always* -- presented to the world. I’d expected the thick mane of dark hair peppered with gray to be in its perpetual cut-fashionably-short, not-a-hair-out-of-place condition. The square, handsome face to be flawlessly made up. The 22-karat understated gold necklace to hang in tasteful elegance against something in pure silk.

What I saw was a woman who had thrown herself together en route to the banquet and hadn’t bothered to look in a mirror since then.

She was at least two months past the last due date for a haircut. The Riot Red lipstick she saved for evenings at the opera with Max looked like it had been applied with a crayon. And although she was indeed wearing a silk blouse, the points of its collar were at right angles to each other, fouling the two -- make that three -- chains around her neck.

Two of them were silver. One of them gold. I looked like I'd just had a Merle Norman makeover compared to her.

Max was leaning toward Ellen, hanging on her every word, but I nudged him anyway.

"Why does Mother look like she's running from the glamour police?" I hissed in his ear.

Max shifted his gaze to the head table, and his smile melted into I'm-looking-at-Liz mode. "Isn't she a beauty? Your mother is a beauty."

"Not when she's playing fashion fugitive. Look at her, Max."

He did, and then nodded. "She should have worn the diamond earrings. I told her, 'Wear the diamonds – this is the night to drip with them.'"

I gave up. Max himself had donned his customary ascot and velvet jacket, and as always his hair was more tousled than mine. Someone who always looked as if he'd just finished conducting the 1812 Overture could not be counted on to reliably assess grooming.

I considered asking Stephanie Wang. She wasn't exactly cover girl material herself, but she had probably seen my mother more than I had in the last six months.

Which was not my fault, I reminded myself. What was I supposed to do when she didn't return my calls?

What I had done, of course, was tell myself I was better off not having to listen to my mother's latest evaluation of my life. But at the moment, that wasn't the point. The point was, Dr. Elizabeth McGavock did not show up at functions given in her honor looking the way she did right now.

I looked across the table at Stephanie, but both she and Dr. Wang were obviously engrossed in what Sam Bakalis was expostulating about to Ellen. Stephanie looked like she was mesmerized by his eyebrows.

"So let me ask you this," Sam was saying. "I know for a long time you've been able to determine that a baby, before it's even born, has genes for a certain disease. But is it standard procedure now to run those tests?"

"It isn't standard," Ellen said, "but we can do it if there's reason to suspect the fetus might be at risk. You know, family history, that kind of thing."

"You used the word 'fetus'," Sam said. "Does that reflect your views on life before birth?"

Stephanie Wang giggled nervously. "Maybe we'd better get back to that basil, Max."

The current state of my mother's style sense slid out of focus. This was too good to pass up.

"And does your picking up on her use of the word fetus reflect yours?" I said.

Sam met my gaze head-on. "It does, actually. Why do you ask?"

"Are we talking religion here?" I said. "I'm only asking because if we're about to be spiritually mugged, I need to find another table."

Sam raised both hands. "I'm unarmed. But I do reserve the right to present a viewpoint."

"Just be forewarned: I don't think science and religion are going to mix at this table." I looked at the Wangs. "Am I right?"

Stephanie looked like she'd rather be having a root canal.

Dr. Wang folded his hands neatly on the table. "I'm open to a lively discussion."
Max groaned. "How lively do you want it?"

"What, are we going to see verbal WWF?" Ellen said. "Should I clear the table?"

Sam's eyes were still on me. "I can stay above the belt if you can."

I hated that. The minute you started to debate with a man, he had to pull out the sexual innuendo. But I forced myself not to narrow my eyes at him.

"You're on," I said.

"I think it was my turn to counter," Sam said, his eyes focused in even more. He obviously relished an argument as much as I did. I doubted that he hated losing one as much, though. "You're saying there is no blend of science and religion."

"Not if you're going to be completely rational, no."

"You're a mathematician."

"She's brilliant," Max put in.

"Then you've heard of Pascal. Blaise Pascal? Father of geometry?"

"I think you would have to build a case for his paternity, but yeah, I'm familiar with Pascal."

"I'm a little rusty," Ellen said. "Refresh my memory."

"Seventeenth century mathematician," I said. "He did some work on vacuum theory. He's credited with developing the first calculator."

"They named the computer language after him," Dr. Wang said. "The same fella, yes?"

"Yes," Sam said. He was all but licking his chops. "Physics, math, he was pure science. All about rationality. The whole ball of wax. But after his conversion to Christianity –"

"Conversion from what?" I said.

"From what I'd guess you'd call perfunctory piety. He went through the motions, but he didn't internalize any of it. Anyway, after his conversion, he continued to invest all of his energy in science. Matter of fact, his more productive scientific work was ahead of him. But my point is, he was also about to deepen his understanding of human nature, and that is what he's best known for."

"So he studied psychology," I said. "That's considered a science."

"Mmm, that's debatable," Dr. Wang said.

"And it's a moot point anyway," Sam said. "He didn't study psychology. He studied faith."

"In what?"

"In God."

I pulled my eyes away from his long enough to roll them. His eyebrows shot up.

"You don't believe in God," he said.

"Uh – let me think about it -- no." I knew my voice sounded spiky, but I was vaguely disappointed. I'd hoped for some interesting banter. "You will never convince me that there is some spiritual force that controls everything."

"Why?"

"Because it can't be proven."

"So you only believe in things for which there is hard evidence."

"Right." I gave a dismissive shrug. "I'm a mathematician."

"You deal with infinity in mathematics?"

“Ugh, this is bringing back memories of college math,” Ellen said. “Dr. Rosenberg, 8:00 a.m., Tuesdays and Thursdays.” She shuddered. “I’m going to need another piece of that carrot cake.”

Max looked relieved to oblige and raised his hand to hail a server. I turned back to Sam’s intense eyes.

“Yeah,” I said. “Mathematics has an infinity of infinities of propositions to expound. And they are infinite also in the multiplicity and subtlety of their principles. Those that are supposed to be ultimate don’t stand by themselves – they depend on others, which depend on still others, and thus never allow for finality.” I slipped in a smile. “How do you think every math grad student finds a thesis to prove? Anyway, that’s infinity.”

“I have a headache,” Max said. “More wine!”

“Infinity,” Sam said, “sounds an awful lot like God to me.”

“To me it sounds like a concept.”

“Which you can’t prove unless you someday find the end of it. Never finding the ‘finality’, as you called it, doesn’t prove there is no finality – it just means you haven’t found it yet.”

“And your point is?”

“My point is that just because you haven’t found God yet doesn’t mean God doesn’t exist.”

Dr. Wang tapped his spoon against his wine glass. “I think round one goes to Sam.”

“No,” I said. “The round isn’t over yet.” I homed in on Sam again. “What visible difference does believing in a God make? I don’t believe, you do believe, but both of us are going to die. Show me the difference.”

“Now we’re getting into the nature of God. If you’re looking for a god who is going to allow you to live on earth forever, you’re not going to find that God because that God doesn’t exist.”

“Besides,” Ellen said, “I think there’s more to life than just hanging out until you die.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Max said, lifting his glass. “To all that is in between. Good music, good friends –“

“Good conversation,” Sam said. He tilted his water glass toward me.

I knew then why I always wished born-again Christians had never been born the first time.

Sam had gotten preachy as far as I was concerned, and I was again disappointed. There was something attractive about him. His intensity? No. His casual command over his intensity, perhaps? No. Maybe it was his chin.

Would you stop? He’s a pompous jerk you don’t have time for.

“Coffee anyone?” Stephanie Wang said. “Last call before the speaker.”

I nodded at the kid with the coffee pot who stood at her elbow. I was going to need some caffeine for the rest of this evening. I was about to reach for the cup when Sam put his hand on top of mine. I glared at it, but that didn’t seem to have the freeze drying effect my glare usually had on guys reckless enough to try to play touchy-feely with me.

“*What?*” I said.

“Just consider this one argument and then I’ll drop it.”

“Can I have a signature on that?” I said.

He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a pen.

“I was speaking figuratively,” I said.

But he was already scrawling his name across a cocktail napkin. I noticed the skin on his hands was smooth and olive-colored. Not that it mattered.

He pushed the signed napkin toward me, and I gave it a bored glance. His eyebrows were expectant.

“Go for it,” I said. “What’s your argument?”

“It’s not an argument exactly – it’s more of a wager. And it isn’t mine. It’s Pascal’s.”

Dr. Wang snapped his fingers. “Pascal’s Wager.”

“You’ve heard of it,” Sam said.

“Yeah, but give me a refresher course,” Dr. Wang said, smiling at me.

Sam leaned back in his chair and folded his hands behind his head. My mother would have been appalled. She would have said he learned his social skills in a pool hall.

“It goes like this,” Sam said. He focused on the chandelier, as if to get his cues from it, and yet his eyes went beyond it. He was being a little dramatic, in my view. But I listened, as did everybody else at the table. Even Max looked entranced.

“At the far end of what we’re calling infinity,” Sam said, “a coin is being spun. It will come down heads or tails. How it lands will reveal to you whether there is a God – heads – or whether there isn’t – tails. You have to wager. We all do. A choice has to be made.”

“I’ve made mine,” I said. “Tails.”

“Based on what?”

“Based on reason.”

Sam dug hungrily into his pants pocket and produced a nickel, which he placed on his thumbnail. “Can you reasonably tell me how this coin is going to land if I flip it?”

I shook my head.

“Reason can’t make the choice for the figurative coin either. We’ve already established that reason – hard evidence – can’t prove either way. So the wager posits this: If you wager that there is a God and you live your life as if there is one – if the coin comes up tails – you’ve lost absolutely nothing. But if it comes up heads and there is a God, you’ve won everything.”

The eyes I’d been watching all through dinner took on a fiery quality, as if they were in the throes of some deep passion. I went for the cream and stirred my coffee.

“I remember that now,” Stephanie Wang said. “I read it – it’s the wager that every man makes.”

“But I’m not so sure about every woman,” Ellen said. She was half-smiling at me.

“Heads is a safer bet,” Sam said.

“I’ll pass,” I said. I nodded toward the podium where some campus muckety-muck was adjusting the microphone. “Looks like it’s show time.”

Everyone else started scraping chairs and rearranging themselves in their seats. Sam just looked at me. I waited for, “Can we finish this discussion over coffee sometime?” But it didn’t come. I had to concede the eye-holding contest and shift my focus to the front. The introduction of Dr. Elizabeth McGavock was just winding down.

“Tonight, as we hear her speak, I’m certain it will become clear to you why we are honoring not only Dr. McGavock’s twenty-five years at Stanford Hospital but also the quality of work she has done in that time. Ladies and gentlemen, Dr. Elizabeth McGavock.”

The room erupted into applause, and my mother rose from her seat. In the instant it took her to get from there to the podium, I placed a wager I had absolutely no doubt about. I would have staked my last four years on it: Dr. Elizabeth McGavock was drunk.