



THINGS
I WISH
I KNEW BEFORE

I Got Divorced

ROCH TRANEL & JENNIFER MERIDA



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DEDICATION

Roch Tranel dedicates this book to The Tranel Financial Group. *Eight Things I Wish I Knew Before I Got Divorced* would not be possible without the commitment of our amazing team and their passion to serve clients to help make everyday amazing. He also dedicates this book to his family, Kat, Jenna, and Alec. Their support has been a source of great encouragement through the years for building multiple businesses and creating many books as resources for others.

Jennifer Merida dedicates this book to her clients and whose real-life experiences went into the book. Furthermore, the team at The Tranel Financial Group, who have helped to make this book a reality. She also dedicates this book to her family, Miguel, Ethan, Paige, Blake, Kaidence, Jordan and Teo who remind her daily of what work, life, and family are all about—empowering everyone to take control of your life and finances to achieve peace of mind.

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PROLOGUE

The word “divorce” elicits a visceral reaction in most people. Whether they’re happily married, separated, widowed, single, or divorced themselves, many have strong opinions on divorce.

Often times those opinions are negative.

- ~ Divorce is expensive.
- ~ Divorce is selfish.
- ~ Divorce is hard.
- ~ Divorce is draining.
- ~ Divorce is the end.
- ~ Divorce is not an option.
- ~ Getting divorced means giving up.

These gut reactions are often a response to something we are told is unquestionably painful and worth avoiding at all costs. But that doesn’t paint the full picture. Divorces aren’t simple, and they are rarely easy, but they are often unavoidable,

necessary, and lead to both parties living happier, more fulfilling lives.

So, let's re-frame the way we think about divorce:

Divorce is common. We all know the statistics – nearly 50% of marriages end in divorce – and while nobody gets married expecting to separate, those going through it understand that it is much more complicated and nuanced than those looking in would expect.

Divorce is not one size fits all. Just as no two marriages are the same, no two divorces are, either. The reasons why people get divorced, vary just as widely as the reasons why they fall in love in the first place. However, just as many people credit their spouse's sense of humor or easy-going disposition as the reason they married them, there tends to be common reasons why people get divorced.

Infidelity, lack of intimacy or communication, addiction, and family tragedies often top the list. None of those reasons are likely a surprise – but the most common cause for divorce may be: money. Whether the couple is in a position to live lavishly or is barely getting by, disagreements over spending or saving habits, stress over future financial stability, uneven power dynamics, or one spouse holding all of the control (or responsibility) for the family's

finances can cause more stress to a marriage than a couple would anticipate.

Divorce is complicated. Physically, emotionally, financially – regardless of the couple’s feelings about each other or the end of their marriage, there are details that need to be agreed upon, assets that need to be divided, and lives inextricably woven together that will soon be fully separated.

Divorce is made even more complicated when hurt feelings cloud judgment, when anger and resentment overpower reason, or the desire to finally leave an unhappy marriage leads to hasty decisions.

Divorce is final. Once the papers are signed, there are rarely opportunities to renegotiate the terms of the divorce, the division of assets, or how much financial support each person is entitled to.

Divorce can be a good thing. For most people, it isn’t just an ending, it’s the beginning of a new chapter, full of opportunities and possibilities. While some may look back on their wedding day as the happiest day of their life – one full of hope, excitement, and different paths laid out before them – many see their divorce in the same light. They see their divorce as new doors opening before them, endless potential, and freedom. Their divorce brings them a sense of relief. It gives them peace.

Divorce is surprising. People learn things about themselves they didn't know. They learn things about their partners, their families, and their goals. They grow as individuals. They often learn that simply talking about divorce doesn't necessarily mark the end of a marriage. It can be a sign that communication has broken down, that the relationship is no longer healthy, and that something needs to change. Sometimes, talking about the possibility of divorce is the first step in healing a marriage.

Many people go through a divorce, and even more have a base understanding of what divorce is and how it works. However, whether it be a desire to move through the process as quickly as possible, underlying feelings of shame or embarrassment over the separation or circumstances that lead to it, or simply a lack of knowledge about the resources available to them, many will face one of the most financially devastating events possible largely in the dark.

Every divorce includes attorneys or some kind of mediator, experts in the laws surrounding divorce. However, lawyers are not financial experts, and even the most financially savvy individuals are rarely well-versed in the intricacies and specific procedures of divorce finance. Because of this, many people look back on their divorce with a laundry list of questions they wished they asked, laws they wished they knew, and financial obligations or structures they wished were clearer.

Enter the Certified Divorce Financial Analyst, or CDFA. These experts in tax law, asset distribution, and financial planning help their clients understand what their options are – how the law will view their financial status and marriage, what they are legally entitled to, and what options they may have for approaching not only their divorce, but life after it.

Divorce is just the beginning, and after it, life will go on.

A CDFA saves clients time and money by communicating thoroughly and clearly with the entire divorce team. A CDFA helps clients look past the present moment and plan for their lives after divorce.

On the following pages, you'll read real divorce stories. You'll learn about a stay-at-home mother, unsure how she'll be able to survive financially when her husband blindsided her by asking for divorce. You'll learn about a high-powered career woman who needed help navigating a divorce after learning her husband of more than two decades was in a long-term relationship with another woman.

You'll read about dividing pensions and retirement funds, buying an absent ex-spouse out of a house, and a marriage riddled with control and financial abuse. You'll even read about couples whose financial issues brought them to the brink of divorce – and how they came back from it all.

You'll learn about the role of a CDFA and how they not only educated their clients, but worked with them and their legal team to protect their interests and financial futures. You'll learn about the common pitfalls and misconceptions individuals face when going through a divorce, and how to avoid them

Divorce is rarely as simple as signing a piece of paper – but in these stories, you'll learn the lessons everybody should know before they get divorced, and how a team of experts can set you up for success.



CHAPTER 1

THE POWER OF MINDSET

It had been nearly three years since her divorce was finalized, but Veronica was still attending marriage counseling with her ex-husband. She wasn't looking to rekindle a relationship – especially one that she considered past salvaging in the first place. She did not still love her ex-husband. She did not want to develop a friendly relationship. She was under no illusions about the fact that their differences were unquestionably irreconcilable.

Veronica went to marriage counseling because her ex-husband demanded it, and, even after all this time, she was terrified to say no to his demands. He refused to give her a portion of the money that he still owed her from the divorce settlement until she gave their marriage one more try. This “one more try” had lasted over two years, and showed no signs of ending.

“You need to tell your lawyer.” Her financial advisor told her. “What he’s doing is illegal. You are owed that money.”

But Veronica didn’t. She had spent too many years living under the control of Louis – 31 years to be exact – and while she objectively knew that he had no right to make any demands of her, she couldn’t help but give in to him.

Throughout every session she’d sit quietly, shaking with fear, listening to him. He’d wave his hands as he talked, and the wedding ring that he still hadn’t removed would catch the light. She’d examine her left hand, where her ring finger rested, totally bare. Even the tan line she once had was completely faded. Veronica found that this centered and reassured her.

The mark he left on her cannot be erased. It’s evident in the way she refuses to say “no” for fear of letting somebody down. It’s in the way she doesn’t smile when she first meets somebody, how she rarely jokes, despite her naturally goofy disposition. It’s the way she never disagrees with anybody, and the way she shrinks herself down to avoid being noticed.

But if you were to just look at her ring finger and the non-existent tan line, it was like Louis had never touched her at all.



“You’re not good with money. You don’t understand how it works.” Veronica had been told this hundreds of times, from when she was a child, until she was in her mid-fifties. It was why her husband never allowed her to have a credit card or access their bank accounts, and why he demanded an itemized receipt anytime he gave her cash to do anything.

It was why, despite legally gaining access decades ago, she had never received control of her trust fund. She didn’t even know how much money was in it. Her father and husband would talk about it sometimes, in hushed voices, when they thought she wouldn’t notice. They’d fall silent the second she walked close to them. If she pressed them for information, they’d question why she needed to know at all. “We’re taking care of it,” they reassured her. “Besides, you wouldn’t understand how a trust works. It would just confuse you.”

She was told that she didn’t understand money in any form – savings accounts, mortgages, college funds, credit cards – so many times that she believed her family. Given the opportunity, she was sure to run herself into the ground, waste money on frivolous things, and hardly leave herself enough to live on. She was convinced that she had no idea how to survive on her own.

If she thought about it harder, she might have realized that she didn’t know how to handle money because she was never given any opportunity to learn, or even try. She never

realized that the constant assertion that she was bad with money was grounded in nothing other than the insistence of those who controlled it for her, claimed so many times throughout her life that it went from being a mere statement to an indisputable fact.

She didn't question why everybody was so desperate for her to believe that she shouldn't have access to her own funds – and didn't realize how much they used them to control her.



Veronica was always under somebody's control. She grew up in a very wealthy family – one that had a large trust fund with her name on it from the moment she was born. But this trust fund had strings attached to it. In a culture where men were expected to lead, and women were required to follow, Veronica's money was dangled over her head as a possibility, but not a guarantee.

Her father framed it as a reward for following his rules and behaving in exactly the way he raised her to. Veronica recognized it for what it really was – a threat. Do what I say, or else.

As she got older, the list of things she was expected to do got longer, as the list of acceptable behaviors for a young lady got shorter. Wash all the dishes, or else. Don't complain, or else. Stop talking so loudly, or else. Don't laugh like that, or else.

“You aren’t good at following rules,” her mother would say, while shaking her head disapprovingly. “You definitely won’t be good with money. You’re really going to need that trust fund – I hope you deserve it.”

Overtime, Veronica began to push down all the aspects of her personality that her parents claimed were unlikable – her goofy disposition, curious nature, and strongly held beliefs – until she was an entirely different person altogether. Shy, quiet, and eager to please, Veronica dressed the way she was told to dress, spent time with the people she was supposed to spend time with, and planned on attending college to earn a respectable degree that her parents picked out and, with any luck, find a husband who would make a lot of money and take care of her.



By the end of her senior year of college, it seemed as though her parents’ wishes were granted. When Veronica met Louis, she was just as timid and meek as she was taught to be. She let Louis do all the talking, only participating in the conversation to ask more questions and encourage him to talk more. When she’d slip up and tell a story about herself or crack a joke, he’d give her a disapproving look that would’ve made her father proud.

She was so used to that look, she thought it was a good thing.

Maybe it was a sign of endearment – Veronica’s parents taught her from a young age that she needed to be kept in line, and she found somebody who was willing to do just that.

The first time Louis met Veronica’s parents, it was love at first sight. Not only was he studying to be a doctor, he came from a wealthy family, just like theirs, and clearly had a handle on Veronica. Her father smiled proudly each time Veronica deferred to Louis to answer a question, even ones that were solely directed at her, or glanced at him for approval before getting up from the table.

As she helped her mother clean up in the kitchen, the excitement in the air was palpable.

“Oh, he’s a good one, Ronnie,” her mother even used the childhood pet name that she wouldn’t dare use in front of Veronica’s father. “He seems like a strong man – you need a strong man running the house. And he’s going to be a doctor. He’ll be able to take care of you. You know, you’re not so good with that sort of thing.”

Veronica grinned to herself, happy that she had done something right in her family’s eyes. Her mom was right, too. Every young girl dreams about meeting a nice, smart doctor who will take care of them. She knew she’d never have to worry about money, which was an even bigger

relief considering how bad she was at managing it.



Veronica began working as a high school guidance counselor and supported Louis as he finished his residency and began his career as a pediatric surgeon. Louis immediately started making a lot of money, and shortly after they were married, they bought a big house with a nicely manicured lawn.

“Maybe I’ll start a vegetable garden,” Veronica mused over breakfast one day.

Louis snorted. “Why? You don’t know the first thing about maintaining a garden. All the plants would die in a year. Besides, we can afford to get our groceries at the store, like normal people.”

He shook his head, and Veronica laughed with him. “Your stupid wife,” Veronica thought. “What was she possibly thinking?” When they were both finished eating, she cleared their plates and left for work.

Despite Louis’s insistence that they had plenty of money and nothing to worry about, he kept a close eye on their finances. Veronica wasn’t allowed access to their bank account, or a credit card, and was emphatically questioned anytime she asked about it.

“What do you need that for? I can give you anything you need. You just have to ask me.”

So, she did. Anytime she went to the grocery store, ran errands, or needed to fill up her tank with gas, she asked Louis for the money. When she got home, he would hold out his hand for the receipt and change, reviewing everything she bought, and making sure she got the right amount back. Anytime the amount of change didn't line up with how much should be left over, he reminded her that this was why she couldn't have access to their accounts.

“I gave you \$70. You should have an extra \$10 of change here. You're lucky I can afford this.” Louis would shake his head. “Can you imagine what would happen if you had all of our money? We'd be lucky to survive the year.”

Veronica would nod in agreement, but sometimes she knew that he had given her less than he claimed. It was no use – he was the man of the house, and his word was final.

This applied to more than just their finances. The first time Louis brought up having kids, Veronica wondered if they should wait until they were both more settled in their careers.

“Why? You've been at your job for 4 years now, and you'll stay at home for a few years anyways. That's a mother's job.”

It was no use arguing. Besides, Veronica always wanted to be a mother. She couldn't put her finger on why exactly she thought they should wait, just that the idea of having children with Louis made her skin crawl, and that she wasn't sure how she could be trusted to care for another person when she couldn't even be trusted to pay for diapers on her own.



The entire time Veronica was pregnant, Louis kept strict control over her spending. "We have to start saving now," he explained, "so that we're prepared for college, and anything else the baby will need."

He questioned anything Veronica asked for. First, it was late night food cravings. "Do you really need that? Are you sure it's healthy for the baby?" Next, it was maternity clothes. "You really should be able to fit into your old clothes, still. You don't need to gain so much weight while you're pregnant. I'm a doctor, you know." Sometimes, it was just a treat she'd get herself during her weekly grocery shopping. "Iced tea? Really? That wasn't on the list. And it's caffeinated. What were you thinking?"

Louis walked away, clearly frustrated, throwing the full, unopened bottle of tea away as he went.

Under his watchful gaze, Veronica felt everything she did was questioned. Louis never raised his voice or got angry, but when he disagreed with anything she did, his frustration was palpable, and Veronica would shrink under his glare, if only to appease him.

After their son was born, Veronica was relieved when Louis went back to work. The entire time he was home, she felt smothered by the constant attention.

She felt her maternal instincts kick in – just as she knew they would – but Louis criticized everything she did. The way she held the baby, the way she fed the baby, the way she changed his diapers. There was nothing she could do right.

Even after Louis went back to work, he sought to extend control over the household. For somebody who thought it was a mother's job to take care of the children, Louis had strict ideas about how his son should be raised.

First, he wanted to be involved in the big decisions – what pediatrician Marcus should see or what kind of formula they should use. As Marcus got older, Louis's nitpicking applied to more and more areas of their lives. He strictly controlled what activities Marcus could try, what restaurants they could attend, what outfits he wore, and what bedtime stories were acceptable and age appropriate.

By the time Marcus was 2 years old, Louis was basically creating a daily itinerary for his wife and child to follow while he worked. Veronica didn't question it – nothing on it was unreasonable, and she knew Louis liked things done in a certain way.

Veronica followed the itineraries to a tee, at least so far as Louis could tell, but it wasn't good enough. He was able to take issue with anything she did. He began to berate Veronica for singing lullabies at night. "Why would you want him to hear you sing when you have such an ugly voice?" Veronica thought Marcus liked her singing, so she continued, but only when she was sure Louis couldn't overhear.



Louis spared no expense when it came to Marcus, but still kept Veronica's financial knowledge on a need-to-know basis. One day, as Louis was getting ready to book an expensive trip, Veronica expressed concern about their ability to afford it.

"We're doing fine. I'd show you, but you wouldn't understand."

Veronica was starting to resent the assertion that she would never be able to figure out their finances, and that she had no idea what was going on. But Louis was right. Anytime she caught a glimpse of a statement or heard about the stock market, she was totally lost.

It's best if I leave all that to him, she thought. It was easier not to rock the boat.



It wasn't long before they decided to have a second child – or, before Louis decided it was time for them to have another child. This time, Veronica knew exactly what to expect. She followed a diet and exercise plan specifically laid out by Louis, and he rewarded her by allowing her to add a few maternity items to her wardrobe.

As much as she felt trapped in her marriage with Louis, incapable of making decisions, or even suggestions, she knew she was a good mom and was excited to have another baby. When she was playing with her son or reading him books, she could be her full goofy, silly self, and nobody would tell her to stop. She could make up funny voices for each of the characters in a book and design an intricate game of make-believe, tailored to whatever Marcus was interested in at the time. Her son wasn't embarrassed by it. In fact, he loved her even more for it.

Louis's list of rules was also easier to follow once their daughter, Hazel, was born. She already knew which parks they could attend, what play groups were acceptable, and what other families they should spend time with. When Hazel started participating in activities, there was a slightly

different list – instead of tee ball and soccer, she was enrolled in dance and music – but Veronica was expecting this.

Her children thrived, and Louis was quick to credit Veronica for following his instructions so thoroughly.



As the kids entered grade school and gained independence, it only made sense for Veronica to gain some, too. Eight years after she took maternity leave, Veronica returned to work as a school guidance counselor, a few towns over.

“The kids won’t want to go to high school at the same place their mom works,” Louis claimed when Veronica considered applying to the high school in their town. “Do you really want to change jobs once Marcus finishes middle school?”

Louis never directly told her she wasn’t allowed to apply or take a job at their local high school – but she knew that was exactly what he meant. The school she started working at was in a different school district, but nearly all of the school breaks lined up. Anytime Veronica had a different spring break than her kids, Louis would preach how important it was that they all got to go on a family vacation. “It’s not my fault you can’t get off work,” he’d argue, as Veronica packed his bags for a vacation that didn’t include her. “It wouldn’t be fair for the kids to miss out just because you can’t come.”

The family would come back from vacation with stories of the beautiful hotels they stayed in, the restaurants they ate at, and the incredible activities they did. But she couldn't help feeling jealous that she wasn't allowed to come along for the fun – and guilty for feeling that way in the first place.

When she was home with the kids all summer, a vacation was out of the question, unless Louis was able to come along, too. He cited money (“How would you pay for it?”), the need to protect his children, (“I can't be sure they're safe if I'm not with them”), and would call Veronica selfish for even suggesting such a thing (“You stayed home with them when they were kids. Haven't you gotten enough alone time with them?”)

Veronica didn't push the issue. Instead, she continued to be careful not to rock the boat – to go to work, to run her errands, to ask for money for groceries, and to give Louis back his exact change, every time.



Veronica's parents continued to dote on Louis, even more than they doted on their grandchildren. Any decision that Louis made for the family was met with praise, while any suggestion Veronica made was instantly written off, if not outright ridiculed. She began to notice the same treatment applied to her daughter, while her son was complimented for taking any kind of leadership or initiative.

One day, while driving home from a Sunday brunch with their parents, Louis was talking a mile a minute, as he always seemed to be. Veronica had gotten good at tuning him out, and nodding at exactly the right moments. He didn't really want her to steer the conversation anyway.

Veronica's ears perked up when she heard, "... and the trust fund is doing incredibly well. I've been able to funnel dividends directly into retirement and the college funds."

"Trust fund? Whose trust fund? My trust fund?"

Louis looked at her as though she was an idiot. "Yes, who else's?"

"I didn't know we had access to it already." Veronica felt dizzy, as though the entire car was spinning in circles.

"Yes, you legally gained access when you were thirty. How could you not know that?" The look on Louis's face bordered on disgust, but she was so used to seeing it that she barely registered the expression.

"How was I supposed to know," Veronica thought, secretly seething, "when you went to such great lengths to hide it from me?"

“Your dad still manages it, of course. He advises many people on their investments, so it only makes sense to have him do it for free.” Louis shook his head, chuckling. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. You’ve always lived in your own little world.”

Veronica tried to hide the revulsion that she was sure was evident on her face, but it didn’t matter. Louis was already onto the next subject, chatting away merrily, not even aware that he’d lost his audience.

For the first time, Veronica clearly thought, “I will leave you. I’m done.”



Veronica didn’t act on her desire to leave her husband – and had to laugh at herself for really thinking she would. How would she manage to live on her own? She had children to take care of, and if she left Louis, she’d have bills to pay. Who would teach her how to manage all of that? She doubted she was even capable of learning.

Still, the thought of leaving Louis, of taking off her wedding rings and never looking back, was so appealing, she was forced to admit that her marriage was no longer based on love. Maybe it never was. Her marriage to Louis was about survival.

Veronica found this knowledge oddly freeing, and she found herself speaking up more often, even daring to talk back to Louis. Each time, he'd bat her down, and each time she'd walk away, defeated. But the defeats didn't seem to bother her as much, and the time between arguments only shortened. The first time she spoke up, it took Veronica nearly six months to gather the courage to do it again. But after five more years, she found herself speaking up on a monthly, if not weekly, basis.

The first time she brought up divorce, it shocked even her. The disagreement was so mundane. She had asked for \$10. Her department was going out to lunch the following day, and she wanted to join.

"What's wrong with the food you bring every day? That's a waste of money."

"It's \$10, Louis. We can afford \$10 for me to go out to lunch."

"How would you know? You have no idea what our financial situation is."

"Maybe I should."

"You wouldn't understand." Louis tried to brush her off, as he always did, but this time, Veronica wasn't having it.

“No, but I’d know if I could go out to lunch. What do I have to do to go out to lunch? Get divorced?”

If the comment shocked Louis, he didn’t let his face show it. Instead, he looked at her, his face cold, with a laugh that didn’t meet his eyes.

“Divorced? I’d love to see you try. You wouldn’t last two months on your own. The kids would hate you for leaving me. And for what? So you could get lunch? Grow up, Veronica.”

And with that, he left the room, leaving Veronica shaking in his wake. The next day, she packed up her lunch as she always did, and didn’t bring up divorce again for two more years.



Every day, on her way into work, Veronica passed the same law office, advertising a top divorce attorney. Every day, she pictured herself turning into the long drive, parking her car, and walking into the building.

Every day, she kept driving straight, arriving at the school where she worked 15 minutes early.

She took this as a sign. “I don’t really want it,” she’d tell herself. “That’s why I haven’t taken the next step.” But she

thought about it daily. She wanted freedom – the freedom to go to the store and get something that wasn't on her list; the freedom to go out to lunch with friends; the freedom to have friends in the first place.

She began to voice to her husband just how unhappy she was. He knew she was thinking about divorce, but it was clear he wasn't taking the threat seriously.

“We can try marriage counseling,” he offered, “but you need to understand that not much is going to change. You're asking for unreasonable things. But if counseling would help you understand that, we can give it a try.”

Louis even went as far as telling their kids, Marcus, now in college, and Hazel a sophomore in high school, that their mom was considering leaving him.

Hazel was furious. “I'll never speak to you again, you know. Why would you do that to daddy? He just wants all of us to be happy. Why are you so selfish?”

Veronica could tell that it was just Louis speaking through Hazel, feeding her the lines. She used the same words, the same expressions, and parroted the same points as her father. But that didn't stop it from hurting when her daughter looked her straight in the eye and said, “I'll hate you.”

Marcus took a more diplomatic approach. He wanted his parents to stay together, but he was at college, far away from home. He didn't have the time or energy to keep up with his parents' drama.

For years, Veronica continued to drive past the same divorce attorney's office, willing herself to turn. For years, she found herself pulling into the high school parking lot, instead.

Until one day, Veronica found herself, as though being controlled by somebody else, flicking her blinker, turning her wheel, and pulling into the parking lot.

"Oh my god." She thought. "Am I really doing this?" She knew in a matter of minutes she'd start second-guessing herself, so she moved quickly, jumping out of the car and running into the office so fast that she forgot to lock her doors.

"Welcome to Chuck Stein's office. How can I help you?" A middle-aged woman sat at the reception desk, smiling at her warmly.

"I'd like to meet with Mr. Stein." Veronica said, shocked that her voice wasn't shaking. "I'm going to divorce my husband."



In many ways, the divorce seemed to move forward quickly. Veronica moved into a small, lakeside condo with three bedrooms. Her daughter came to stay with her every other week, and her paychecks were rerouted to a new account, with only her name on it.

She started receiving financial documents, outlining what was available in all of their accounts – savings, checking, investments, retirement, her trust fund – but couldn't make heads or tails of what any of it meant.

“You don't understand,” Louis would tell her. “And you won't.” She believed him. She was already so confused and overwhelmed; she was ready to stop the divorce proceedings.

Something kept her going, though. It had taken so many years to even gather the courage to file for divorce – if she backed out now, she knew she'd never file again.

Still, her belief that she could never handle her own finances and Louis's continuing assertion that she would never survive on her own, and certainly never own her own home or be able to retire, kept her from moving forward. Paralyzed, Veronica kept one foot in the divorce, and one foot in the marriage.

Again, Louis offered to go to counseling, but reiterated that he did not need to change – it was her expectations that were

the problem. “It can help you understand why things are the way they are, and why they don’t need to change.”

Louis wasn’t the only one who tried to talk her out of it. Veronica’s parents were adamant that her marriage was happy and that she’d never survive without Louis.

“Remember, young lady,” her father would tell her, although she was in her mid-fifties by now. “I manage your trust. I can decide how much you get, and how much Louis gets.”

Chuck Stein tried to tell Veronica that this wasn’t true. “Legally, the money is yours. He may be helping to manage it, but it isn’t his decision how it’s divided.”

Chuck scoured Veronica’s financial documents, trying to figure out why she was so concerned about her financial health moving forward. It was shocking to him – she had plenty of money. Between equity in the home she and Louis owned, to each of the accounts, Veronica had more than enough money to continue her lifestyle and retire comfortably within the next ten years.

However, no matter how many times he told Veronica she’d be fine, she couldn’t make herself believe him. She saw the numbers – but didn’t understand what they meant. She understood that she was still making money, but didn’t know how to use it properly. The words of Louis and her parents

were constantly ringing in her ears. Even if she did have all that money, how long would it last? How quickly would she blow it all?

A year and a half went by, and every 90 days, Chuck would meet with the judge to give a progress report – but there was never any news to give. Nothing had changed since the day Louis was served with divorce papers, and concerns about her financial stability was the one thing stopping Veronica.

The judge was losing his patience. At each progress call, Chuck would confirm that his client was still moving forward with the divorce, but had to admit that there were no new developments to share – or any extenuating circumstances that were realistically slowing her down.

Chuck had been through this before. He knew they were, at most, two progress calls away from the judge throwing away the filing entirely, and was certain Veronica would never try to file again. He knew he couldn't get Veronica past this hurdle on his own – he needed help.



Jennifer had been a Certified Divorce Financial Analyst for nearly ten years. She worked with couples having contentious divorces, fighting tooth and nail over every dime, and with families hoping to find an equitable split while keeping

divorce proceedings as amicable as possible, and just about every situation in between.

Chuck Stein frequently referred clients who were having concerns about their finances, but he knew Veronica was unique. Before Jennifer met with Veronica, Chuck scheduled a quick phone call to share what he had learned. He sent over all the documents, so Jennifer would have a chance to review them before they talked.

“She’s scared, Jennifer,” Chuck explained during their call. “Very timid. She’s not sure she’ll be able to survive without her husband, financially speaking. She’s keeps asking me if she can even get divorced – I don’t know how to communicate it any more clearly.”

“If she can? What do you mean? She’s got plenty of money here – I rarely see people so well set up when they’re leaving a marriage. Is there anything specifically she’s worried about?”

Chuck sighed. “She thinks she’ll never be able to retire, or own a home. She’s worried she’ll blow through all of her money, or that she won’t be able to support herself and her kids.”

The more Chuck and Jennifer talked, the more unbelievable it seemed – Veronica didn’t have any debt, there was no history of spending problems. Her kids’ college was already

saved and paid for. To them, this was a clear no-brainer. The only thing standing in Veronica's way, was Veronica.



Jennifer's first impression of Veronica was that she was timid, shy, and scared of her own shadow. She shook Jennifer's hand with a loose, dainty grip, and never quite met her eye. Jennifer tried to keep count of how many times Veronica apologized during that first meeting, but lost count in the first five minutes.

"I'm sorry, I'm not good with this stuff."

"I know I'm not very smart, I'm sorry."

"I should have more information here, I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand."

The more Jennifer explained what money Veronica could count on in the future, the more confused Veronica got. Jennifer explained how much money was in each account, how to effectively make it grow, and what that meant, but Veronica became increasingly confused.

"I know you're worried about retirement – but you have nothing to be concerned about. When the time comes, you should be just fine."

Veronica leaned forward. “I’m sorry,” she shook her head, “but, how?”

Jennifer realized that Veronica needed things broken down even further, so that she could grasp the basics. She started by building Veronica a simple budget, explaining what her total monthly expenses were, leaving wiggle room in any categories that may vary month to month, like utilities and food costs.

~ EXPENSES ~

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| - Rent: \$1,800 | - Car Payment: none |
| - Utilities: \$800 | - Interest: none |
| - Food: \$1,500 | - Mortgage: none |
| - Car Insurance: \$120 | |
-

TOTAL: \$4,220

Next, Jennifer showed what Veronica’s total monthly income was – without even factoring in what spousal support she was likely to get in the divorce.

~ INCOME ~

- | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| - Monthly pay: \$6,000 | - Child support: \$1,500 |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
-

TOTAL: \$7,500

Jennifer showed Veronica how she arrived at these numbers, and what each represented.

“If you follow this budget, you’ll have an extra \$3,280 each month. You can plan to put \$2,000 into savings, and still have extra left over for fun activities, or buying things for your kids.”

Veronica stared at the worksheet in complete silence, and Jennifer could see the wheels turning in her head.

“Oh my god.” It was barely a whisper. “Oh my god.” Veronica’s head snapped up, and for the first time, she looked Jennifer directly in the eye. “I can get divorced.”



In their next several meetings, Jennifer knew she was making real progress with Veronica. Veronica still had questions, and wanted detailed information about every possible scenario, but she was accepting the answers – and accepting that she really could make it on her own.

First, she was concerned about living on a budget. She didn’t want to feel restricted. More than that, she didn’t want her kids to feel restricted. She knew both of them, especially her daughter, had negative feelings about the divorce. The last thing she wanted to do was place restrictions on their lives.

Jennifer helped Veronica re-frame how she thought about budgeting. “A budget doesn’t restrict you; it sets you free. It puts you in control of your money, and gives you a clear

picture of the future.” She also helped Veronica realize that giving her kids unlimited spending money wasn’t helping them, either. “Kids need to learn healthy spending habits. You want them to grow up knowing how to live on a paycheck and save for the future. Everybody needs boundaries – it’s better that they learn them now.”

Veronica had other concerns. What if she lost her job? What if she needed to reduce her hours at work, or start working part time? Jennifer outlined what each of these scenarios would look like – how Veronica would adjust her spending accordingly, and how her budget would change.

Each time, Veronica was shocked to find that she could still survive on her own, by simply making minor adjustments to the way she lived.

Veronica couldn’t believe how much Jennifer was able to put her mind at ease. Whenever she expressed this, Jennifer reminded her, “you already had what you needed – you just needed some help figuring out how to use it.”



As Jennifer continued working with Veronica on her financials, the divorce finally moved forward. Louis was forced to admit that the divorce was really happening, and his lawyer began to come to agreements with Chuck about how the assets would be divided.

Several times throughout the process, Veronica would question herself. She'd call Jennifer, sometimes in the middle of the night, her voice shaking.

"I can't do this. I'm so bad with money. Please, talk me through it again."

Jennifer would explain everything thoroughly – the current state of affairs, the best-case scenario, and the worst-case scenario. Jennifer told her, no matter what happened, she'd be able to survive. She'd be able to save money. She'd be able to have a full life. She'd be freer than she had ever been before.

Something else interesting happened, too – Veronica found that, removed from her husband's influence, she had her own financial goals. She wanted to be a home owner. The house didn't need to be too big or too fancy, but it had to be hers, and hers alone. The idea of a mortgage scared her. She wanted to buy her house outright, or at the very least, put a 50% payment down.

Jennifer encouraged Veronica to set these goals. "You can definitely do that. Let's try to save a little extra each month." Jennifer showed Veronica how to put more money into savings, and how to make smart investments that would make her money grow faster over time.

“You can do this,” Jennifer would tell her, and Veronica believed her. More than that – Veronica liked feeling as though she was working towards something.



It had been just over three years since Veronica had filed for divorce, and the paperwork was nearly finalized. Veronica knew what she was getting in the divorce, and was proud of herself for not just knowing the dollar amount, but understanding what it meant.

She decided to take control of her money. Her father wanted to keep managing her trust fund, but Veronica knew it was time for it to be managed by a professional.

“You can do it, right?” Veronica asked Jennifer, and was relieved when Jennifer nodded.

“You’re so stupid.” Veronica’s father told her when she said somebody else would be handling her finances. “We always told you, but you didn’t listen. Why would you pay somebody else to manage your money when I can keep doing it for free? You’re wasting perfectly good money.”

Veronica wished she had the gall to say what she really thought – that she didn’t care if having it managed professionally would cost her money because she trusted the people who

were doing it. She trusted them to do what was best for her, and to have her best interests at heart. She knew she'd be given a clear, accurate picture of what was going on, and be included in any decisions that were made. She knew the money wouldn't be held over her head in an attempt to get her to stop the divorce, or remarry her ex-husband.

Veronica knew it was better to know what was going on with her finances and have some control, rather than get free services that came at a high personal and emotional cost.

She knew it was no use telling her father this. She also knew that she didn't owe him an explanation. Veronica was ready to start her life on a clean slate, which meant nobody – not her father or her soon-to-be ex-husband – would be able to manipulate or hide anything from her.

She transferred the money, and moved on.



It was hard to break the level of control that Louis held over Veronica, even after the divorce was finalized. He knew he still garnered some level of influence, and used any tool at his disposal to try and get her back.

He continued to withhold the money he owed her in the house, claiming he would transfer it when she gave marriage

counseling a try. Despite the fact that the divorce was finalized three years ago, despite the legal obligation that Louis had to give her the money, despite Veronica's knowledge that nothing would change and that she had no desire to reenter the marriage, she went.

When Veronica was sitting in close proximity to Louis, she couldn't speak. She'd shake, hearing him talk about their marriage, and wait for the clock to tick down to the end of the hour. He spoke as though there was still hope and that the marriage could be repaired.

Every time he did this, Veronica would look at her left hand, at her ringless ring finger, and muse about the tan line that had long since disappeared. She'd think about the day she signed her divorce papers, and how much lighter she felt with each swish of the pen. She thought about the moment the divorce was final, and how slipping those rings into her pocket felt like removing the chains that had been holding her back her entire life.



Therapist Analyzation

We've asked Dell Bliss, a therapist with over 25 years of experience, to help us understand Veronica's mental and emotional state.

To quote Dr. David Schnarch in *From Intimacy and Desire*, "People who refuse to acknowledge their own hatred, vindictiveness, and punitiveness are the most pernicious people to those they love. You can't control hostile impulses you won't acknowledge having... When you indulge yourself in a glorified self-perception, other people pay the price when you are mistaken."

In other words, it's important that therapy engages the best in people, while not being blind to the worst in them.

Louis and Veronica's relationship is one that is marked by Louis's engagement in Normal Relationship Sadism, or NRS. The solution for overcoming NRS is differentiation – cultivating the ability to balance two powerful, built-in life forces: the desire for togetherness, and the desire for autonomy. Couples with high levels of differentiation are able to live and function on their own and are capable of self-sufficiency when it is needed. Their sense of worth is not dependent on external relationships, circumstances, or occurrences.

The extent to which individuals are able to differentiate can often be traced back to their family of origin. In families that have low expectations and pressures for togetherness or forced showings of love, individuals can develop unhealthy relationships that allow everyone to think, feel, and act with unhealthy, anxious pressures.

Alternatively, poorly differentiated families and groups are marked by an anxious sense of needy togetherness. Family members are fused to each other by what they think is love – which is often unhealthy. These people function in reaction to each other's feelings, pains, and anxieties. In essence, they become extremely emotionally needy and highly reactive to those around them.

Louis and Veronica both need to develop the skills and desire for intimate self-awareness in order to achieve differentiation.



CHAPTER 2

GENERATIONAL LESSONS

The first time Elaine met Bill Jackson, she wasn't sure she'd grow to like him, never mind love him. He was the friend of a friend of a friend, and they met at a housewarming party on an unseasonably warm night in early December. Sure, he was easy to talk to, and knew how to work a room, but Elaine found his booming voice and apparent need to be the loudest person present off-putting.

Elaine was the exact opposite – quiet, soft-spoken, and shy, but still self-assured. She knew what she wanted, and she wasn't afraid to ask for it, albeit in a mannered and polite tone.

Elaine could tell immediately that he was interested by the way he tried to engage her, and only her, in conversation, or how he stared at her anytime she extracted herself.

She wasn't interested – she knew what she wanted, and Bill wasn't it. Her friends always told her she was too quick to judge and needed to give people a chance. Elaine disagreed, but she was sick of hearing that she was impossible to please. Perhaps that was why, when Bill asked her to dinner later that week, she accepted.

They went to dinner, and while Elaine wasn't initially hopeful, she found herself enjoying Bill's company. As they talked, she found that there was more to him than a car salesman with quick wit. He had big dreams for the future – and not necessarily related to his career. He had dreams for his family. He wanted at least three kids (“I was an only child,” he told her. “I always wanted siblings.”), a house in a good school district (“It doesn't need to be too big, but it needs to be cozy. You want your house to feel like a home.”), and to make enough money to provide a great life for his family (“Working isn't my passion. It's a means to an end.”).

They wanted the same things. They had the same goals. The conversation was easy. Elaine could see herself 10 years from now, sitting on a porch swing, watching Bill play with their kids in the backyard.

She didn't know then that they'd get married, or have three beautiful children. She didn't know that their lives would be torn apart by addiction, or the destruction it would leave in its path.

She didn't know that the presence of a persistent disease would expose how differently they thought about everything from raising their children to financing their future. She didn't yet understand how these breakdowns in communication would threaten their entire marriage.



Shortly after they got married, Bill transitioned from his career in car sales to insurance sales. With this change came a more consistent 9-5 schedule, perfect for raising a family, while Elaine was promoted to a job within the federal government.

With their career upgrades came an upgrade in their financial status. No longer middle, or even upper middle-class, Elaine and Bill could only be described as upper class, if not borderline wealthy.

The couple had different ideas on what to do with their newfound financial success. They both wanted to provide the best possible lives for their children. When Elaine found out she was pregnant, they purchased top-of-the-line baby gear and safety equipment. She convinced Bill that a college fund needed to be opened, within weeks of the baby's birth, for each of the three children they had. They moved to an affluent suburb with award winning public schools and found themselves surrounded by the kind of neighbors who shoveled your driveway when you slept in and held impromptu cookouts every night of the summer.

Given their financial success, Elaine felt all of this was perfectly reasonable to give her children the best possible lives. When it came to their education and safety, she didn't want to spare any expense.

But Bill didn't want to spare any expense, period. He wanted to provide lavish, exciting experiences for the family, and although Elaine worried that he was spending too much money, he continued to brush her off. "I never spend more than we have," he'd tell her. "And we can always earn more."



As their kids got older, Bill took pride in being the cool parent. As their oldest son, Dwayne, entered high school, his friends became a permanent fixture in their basement or around their dinner table. Far from embarrassed by his dad, Bill was always welcome to duck his head in and say hello to the boys, or play a game of Madden with them.

Meanwhile, Elaine began to worry that her middle son, Elliot, felt stuck in his brother's shadow. She could tell he was putting distance between himself and the family, and constantly worried about what he was doing when he wasn't at home. After Dwayne left for college, Elliot's frequent absence became all the more obvious.

“You can’t push him too much, Elaine,” Bill would remind her. “He wants to be his own person. Besides, this is how normal teenagers act. You worry too much, you know.”

It was true – Elaine had always been a worrier, and nothing ever came of her concerns. Elaine tried to be more hands off, and Bill promised to keep a close eye on their son.

At first, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Elliot would break curfew, but never by much. “What teenager doesn’t push the boundaries a little?” Bill reasoned. His son was a good kid – Bill must have been imagining the smell of marijuana and cigarettes that lingered on Elliot’s clothes, or how their alcohol seemed to be disappearing faster than usual.

Bill wanted so badly to believe there was nothing to worry about, but there was only so much he could ignore. One day, going through some of Elliot’s pockets while doing laundry, Bill found a small bag, filled with fine, white powder.

When Elaine spotted him, standing over the dryer, he showed her the bag. “Elaine, our son has a problem.”



Just as they were on the same page about buying a house in a great school district, Bill and Elaine were in agreement once again. When it came to Elliot’s recovery, no expense would

be spared. They took their son to the best therapists, recovery centers, and inpatient programs, while privately wondering what went wrong. They were careful not to blame each other – but the thoughts entered each of their minds.

For the next 5 years, Elliot was in and out of rehab. While enrolled in each program, he became an all-star. He threw himself into recovery with so much energy and gusto that his sponsors would become elated with his progress. Still, Elliot would begin to struggle almost immediately when he left the routine and rigor of rehab. He'd relapse, Bill and Elaine would enroll him in a new program, and the cycle would repeat.

And yet, life outside of Elliot went on. Their daughter graduated high school and went away to college, and their oldest son began a PHD program. Bill found himself jealous of them – he was antsy to return to their normal way of life.

He wanted to resume their vacations, even if it was just the two of them, but this concerned Elaine for two reasons. First, what if they were gone and something happened to Elliot? Second, what if they spent all this money on a vacation, and couldn't afford Elliot's next stint in rehab?

“What am I supposed to do?” Elaine would beg Bill for an answer. “Not help my son get better?” They were paying for more than rehab, though, and Elaine knew it. They were

bailing Elliot out of jail in the middle of the night, and allowing him to move back home, even when he'd steal from them to buy drugs.

Bill didn't know the answer, but he knew what they were doing now was only enabling Elliot to continue repeating the same cycle. Elliot's sponsor confirmed that this was correct and Elaine made a concrete effort to be more hands off. It seemed to be working. Elliot would still relapse, but he began to go progressively longer between using each time, until it finally seemed like he was on the right path.



As Elliot appeared to get better, Elaine and Bill's marriage seemed to be more tenuous than before. Bill was spending more money now than ever. In addition to the vacations, cars, and frequent outings, he offered to foot the bill for their oldest son's wedding, threw an extravagant graduation party for their daughter, and even treated the family to a spa weekend getaway after Dwayne received his first position as a professor at a college nearby.

Elaine begged Bill to slow down, but he didn't see anything wrong with his behavior. He was frustrated – instead of asking permission, he would just buy a new car he wanted, or book a vacation without consulting Elaine. When she'd ask him what he was possibly thinking, Bill would just

shrug. “Don’t ask for permission, ask for forgiveness,” became his new mantra.

Elaine found Bill’s insistence that they could afford these luxuries and his refusal to let her be a part of the conversation incredibly disrespectful. As they inched closer and closer to retirement age, Elaine’s anxiety only increased. With how much money Bill was spending, she couldn’t imagine much was being saved. How were they supposed to provide for themselves once they no longer had money coming in?

Elaine tried to talk to Bill about their finances and retirement, but he brushed her off, sure that she was still only thinking about Elliot’s future and what he may need. He refused to explain what plan he had for retirement, what kind of money he had been saving, or what he saw their lives looking like as they got older.

She felt stuck. Unable to stop constantly worrying about their financial status with a partner who was unwilling to create a plan, Elaine wasn’t sure their marriage could survive. She knew healthy marriages were built on two things – trust, and mutual respect. Her relationship had neither.



On a cloudy, gray day, Bill came home from work to find Elaine drinking a cup of tea, staring out at their backyard. He

went to kiss her, and noticed her blank expression.

“Is everything okay?” he asked her, and immediately his mind went to Elliot.

“No,” Elaine shook her head. “I’m not sure I want to stay in this marriage. It may be time to think about divorce.”



In the coming weeks, Bill kicked himself constantly for allowing their issues to get this bad. He knew that not all the blame rested on his shoulders – their disagreements had been festering in the background for years. But he couldn’t help but wonder how many times he refused to talk to Elaine about the things that were bothering her.

Immediately, Bill and Elaine scheduled a meeting with a marriage counselor. In the first session, they realized that they no longer felt like they were on the same team. They were unwilling to compromise, listen to each other, or act as true partners, rather than rivals.

One of the big issues they disagreed on was their finances. Elaine continued to worry; Bill continued to insist there was nothing to worry about. Their marriage counselor helped them communicate more effectively about these issues.

Unfortunately, the marriage counselor could not reassure Elaine that Bill wasn't spending too much or that they would be safe in retirement. She couldn't help Bill communicate why he was so certain they'd be okay, either. When it came down to it, he really didn't know for sure that they would be.

One day, as the session was wrapping up, the marriage counselor made an unexpected recommendation. "I can tell things are getting better. I can see that you're communicating more openly and more productively. But you will not be able to resolve all of this until you have a plan for the future. You need to see a financial advisor."

Elaine gave a deep sigh of relief. She had never considered consulting a financial advisor – she wasn't even entirely sure what they did. But she did know that their disagreements about money had gotten out of hand.

Bill had been putting this off for years, but he knew the well-being of his marriage was on the line. He booked an appointment.



It quickly became clear that meeting with a financial advisor would feel similar to marriage counseling. Elaine and Bill were determined to keep the conversations productive and civil, and employed all of the communication techniques they had learned.

Elaine and Bill realized that neither of them had a clear picture of where their financials stood. When the financial planner showed that Bill had close to \$300,000 in his retirement funds, he felt smug at first – he had been planning for retirement after all. However, as the advisor began mapping out what retirement would look like, Bill realized this was not nearly as much money as he thought. There was no way he'd be able to keep up his current lifestyle once he stopped having a regular paycheck.

Elaine, on the other hand, worked in government jobs for her entire career, and would be earning a comfortable pension once she retired. It was certainly not enough money to continue going on lavish vacations and buying expensive cars, but it was income that they could rely on.

During their second meeting, the financial advisor announced that he discovered something that would take a great deal of strain off of the family in retirement. Bill was entitled to a pension through his employer as well. As the financial advisor talked through the different plans his employer offered, Bill remembered hearing that pensions were available – he had just never thought to look into them.

After weighing their options, Elaine and Bill determined that their best course of action was for Bill to receive a monthly pension once he entered retirement. This, combined with

Elaine's pension and their savings, would allow them to easily pay all of their bills, take vacations, and enjoy their golden years.

The reassurance that they'd be okay didn't stop Elaine from feeling incredibly frustrated with Bill for putting off seeing a financial advisor for so long.

"You had money just sitting there. You had a pension that you were going to let go to waste. Why didn't you listen to me?" Elaine had spent so much time worrying, and it turned out she was right. Left to his own devices, Bill would've lost hundreds of thousands of dollars throughout retirement.

Bill knew that Elaine was right to be upset – he apologized for not taking her concerns seriously and vowed to listen better in the future.



With the big issues sorted out, Elaine and Bill decided to keep seeing both their financial advisor and the marriage counselor. As Elaine and Bill entered into retirement, they both felt confident they could live the lives they wanted to, so long as they kept communicating openly.

Things seemed to be looking up – and this was only confirmed one evening when their oldest son, Dwayne, and his wife,

Jackie, were over for dinner. Perhaps it was mother's intuition, but Elaine knew immediately that something was different – and by the time they announced they were expecting a baby girl, Elaine was already mentally decorating a nursery.

As Jackie and Bill stayed out on the back porch talking business – Jackie was the president of a rapidly growing start-up, and Bill missed talking shop – Dwayne offered to help his mom clear the dishes.

“You seem happy,” he said to her after a long moment.

“Of course I'm happy. I just got the best news in the world.”

“No, it's more than that. You and dad seem like you're in a really good place.” Dwayne paused, and Elaine knew he was looking for something.

“We are. We had a bit of a rough patch there. We didn't need to, though. We would've saved ourselves a lot of anger if we had just talked through our issues when they started.” Elaine explained how their communication broke down, how they worked out their financial issues, and their plan for the next 30 years. The entire time, Dwayne was silent, watching her attentively. She finished washing a glass, and looked up to find him looking concerned.

“Mom,” he said. “I think I’m in trouble.”



Dwayne had always been the son Elaine and Bill didn’t have to worry about – in fact, he helped them through some of the most difficult times of their lives. Now, he needed help, and the problem was one Elaine was all too familiar with.

As it turned out, Dwayne had inherited his father’s love for the finer things in life, as well as his distaste for future planning. Dwayne made a good living as a college professor, but his spending began to quickly outpace his earnings. This was only made worse as Jackie rose through the ranks professionally. He developed a false sense of confidence, never hesitating to buy designer clothes or expensive meals. He put everything on his credit card, and was surprised when he stopped being able to pay the balance each month.

It was easy to hide the problem from Jackie. The couple had always intended to combine their finances after marriage, but between Dwayne’s heavy course load and Jackie’s rapidly growing business, they never seemed to find the time. Managing their finances became less and less of a priority – after all, they were making plenty of money.

Their separate accounts allowed Dwayne to hide a mountain of credit card debt from Jackie, and he couldn’t bring himself

to tell her about it. He got into this mess without her noticing, and hoped he'd be able to get himself out undetected as well.

Of course, that was before they found out they were expecting. With their first child on the horizon, Jackie wanted to buy a house in the same school district Dwayne had grown up in and make a real plan to protect their family's finances. Part of this was combining their accounts. Dwayne knew he'd no longer be able to hide the mess he had landed himself in.

His mom always gave the best advice, but he couldn't bring himself to follow it just yet.

"The sooner you tell her, the better," his mom warned. "Like ripping a Band-Aid. The longer you wait, the more betrayed she'll feel."

Elaine could tell Dwayne was struggling to take her advice, so she thought of something else.

"Go see a financial advisor. Jackie will still find out – she'll have to. But then you can work together to make a plan."

Elaine gave Dwayne the information for the advisor she used, and he immediately made an appointment. Jackie was pleasantly surprised by the initiative. Jackie was clearly the higher earner, and she knew Dwayne found her to be much

more financially savvy. Jackie knew this meeting was overdue, but still felt confident that they had nothing to worry about.

Jackie was surprised, but unconcerned, when Dwayne was unable to attend their first meeting with their financial advisor. The advisor pulled up all of their records and went over the information with her. At first, nothing was a surprise. They were earning plenty of money, and he was going to come up with a plan to help them invest it wisely, allowing it to grow over time.

As they discussed this plan, the advisor reviewed their current spending habits, to see where they could save more efficiently. They were currently paying rent – but not for long, as they had plans to buy a house – and their usual bills. There were certain payments they could bundle and likely save small amounts on, but nothing major.

“Of course, one big thing to get rid of is the \$1,100 a month in interest.”

Jackie tried not to look confused. “Interest? For what?” They had paid off all of her student loans – Dwayne never had any to begin with. What could possibly be generating interest?

“From the credit card debt. The interest alone is costing you so much money each month. It would be much more in

your interest to pay the balance off in full.”

Jackie couldn't even think to hide her shock now. “Credit card debt? We don't have any credit card debt.” She barely registered the look of pity on the advisor's face.

“It looks like your husband has about \$100,000 in credit card debt.”

Jackie felt a loud ringing noise in her ears, and took several deep breaths to keep herself from passing out.



The next few months were filled with tension. Jackie was furious at Dwayne for developing so much debt to begin with, jeopardizing their future, and putting them in a precarious financial position. More than that, she was shocked and hurt that he never told her about it. She understood making a mistake, but she didn't know how she could possibly trust him after he kept this secret for so long.

Dwayne was nothing but apologetic. He didn't try to make excuses, he never got angry with Jackie, or became defensive. He knew he was entirely to blame, and when Jackie would lose her patience or begin to get upset with him, he would sit still and listen, knowing her reaction was entirely warranted.

Jackie knew that it was in their best interest to stop throwing money away on interest payments. She had saved a lot of money over the years, and while it was intended for a down payment on a nice house, she thought it would be better used to pay off the debt in full.

During the next meeting with their financial advisor, Jackie asked him what he thought of her plan. “I know we won’t be able to buy a house anymore.” Dwayne could hear her voice shaking, and he looked down, ashamed that he had put their family in this position. “But we can’t keep paying this much interest. It’s like we’re just setting money on fire.”

Their advisor agreed that the best course of action would be to pay off the debt as soon as possible. “But I don’t think you need to completely rule out buying a house.”

At this, Dwayne and Jackie both perked up. The advisor explained that, given their large savings and high income, they would still be able to buy a house – just with a smaller down payment. They’d likely have to pay mortgage insurance, but it would be around \$300 a month – much less than the \$1,100 they were paying in monthly credit card interest.

Life at home continued to be tense. Jackie wanted to enjoy the last few months of her pregnancy. She wanted to think about onesies and bedtime stories, but she was unwilling and

unable to let go of her anger towards Dwayne. She didn't know if she could trust him anymore.

Jackie knew that their marriage could not continue the way it was, but she still loved Dwayne. More than that, she wanted to work things out so they could be a happy family once their daughter arrived.



Their financial advisor helped both Jackie and Dwayne shift their mindsets. The time for laying blame was over – Dwayne knew what he had done wrong, and now it was time to move forward. The couple worked to build a plan, not just for the coming years, but all the way into retirement.

Their financial advisor realized Dwayne would one day qualify for a pension, which helped Dwayne realize that he was an important part of their financial journey, too. He helped the couple set up a trust fund for their daughter that could be used to pay for college one day. Jackie and Dwayne began to seriously think about their goals for the future, and put a plan in place to achieve them.

When Dwayne first set up a meeting with the financial planner, he thought there was a 50% chance his credit card debt would spell an end to his marriage. He knew how badly he had derailed his family's plan – especially their desire to buy a house.

It was a long road ahead to rebuild the trust that was broken, but Jackie and Dwayne were committed to working through it together.

Dwayne thought back to the issues his parents had faced – not only with irresponsible spending, but their inability to communicate and get on the same page about the future. He learned by watching his dad, and now he knew that he had picked up the wrong habits.

He didn't want his children to go down the same path. Dwayne wanted to be a good example for handling money responsibly, planning for the future, and communicating clearly and respectfully with their eventual partners. It was important to him that he created an environment for his family where his kids and wife knew they could talk to him about anything.



10 months after they first met with their financial advisor, Dwayne and Jackie made another commitment, as they signed the closing documents for their first home together.



CHAPTER 3

BUILDING INDEPENDENCE

Amber took a deep breath before she stepped into the automatic revolving door at a trendy downtown office building. The entire lobby looked like something out of a magazine – a large desk where two security guards sat, a peaceful waterfall streaming behind them, and plants in large, beautiful pots in every corner of the room.

It should have been intimidating, but instead, it put Amber at ease. She loved the way this office felt. She could picture herself coming to work here every day.

When she arrived on the 34th floor, she was five minutes early for the interview, just as she intended to be, and checked in with the front desk receptionist before sitting down. Despite the calm that washed over her, she had butterflies in her stomach and couldn't help feeling apprehensive.

This was her second job interview over the past week. Before that, she hadn't had one in over 25 years. She was hired for her first advertising position immediately out of college, and got promoted so easily that she never needed to interview again. Then, 17 years ago, she went on maternity leave and never came back.

For 17 years she stayed at home with her three children. She heard stories about how much the advertising field had changed with the rise of social media and the internet. She worried that her skills would no longer be considered relevant. She wondered if she needed another degree, or new certifications. She constantly stressed that nobody would be interested in hiring her.

It didn't matter. She had no choice but to try. After nearly 20 years, Amber needed to have her own job again, to make money for herself, and to have a reliable stream of her own earned income. Just as importantly, she was ready. The past 17 years were all about helping her children grow, managing her household, and taking care of her husband. She wouldn't have traded those years for anything in the world, but now she was ready to have an identity outside of being a wife and mother. She was ready to put herself to the test.

“Amber? We're ready for you.”

Despite the nerves she was feeling, Amber rose, cool, calm, and confident, giving the receptionist a big, toothy smile.

“Thank you.”



“For gods’ sake, keep your voice down!”

Amber glanced up the stairs where her children were sleeping in their rooms, praying her husband, Dave, didn’t wake them with his yelling.

“Don’t tell me what to do! You think you can dictate everything. What gives you the right?”

At this point, Amber didn’t even know what they were fighting about, and she doubted Dave did either. All she knew was that they had come to exist in one of two states when their kids weren’t around – awkward, stony silences, and agitated whispers that turned into shouting matches. There was no in between.

“What do you want from me? To let you wake up the whole house? Is that what you want your kids to wake up to?”

Dave exhaled sharply. “No. No, of course not.” He paused, and Amber could see the wheels turning in his head. It looked like

he was working up the courage to say something important. Finally, he opened his mouth. “Jesus, Amber. We aren’t happy. At least, I’m not. But I don’t really think you are either.” Dave paused again. “Do it,” Amber found herself thinking. “Get it all out.” Dave’s eyes softened as he met Amber’s stare. “I don’t love you anymore. And I can tell you don’t love me.”

Amber thought it would hurt more to hear those words, but was surprised to find that it didn’t faze her at all. “Maybe I’m just in shock,” Amber thought. But she knew that wasn’t it. Somewhere along the way, between raising three kids, Dave rising through the ranks as a technology specialist, and the pressures life brings, they had fallen out of love.

She had come to dread the moment when she’d hear the garage door opening at the end of the day. She cringed when she saw Dave walk through the door and as she kissed him hello.

Something about Dave finally vocalizing their issues allowed them to speak honestly, and more calmly, than they had in years. By the time they finished talking, they knew a few things to be true – they didn’t love each other anymore, and there was nothing that would change that; they didn’t make each other happy, no matter how badly they wanted to; and they both wanted to get a divorce.



Amber had always been a go-getter. It was what allowed her to graduate college at the top of her class, score a coveted advertising job immediately following graduation, and raise three beautiful children, now as old as 17 and as young as 10. Once she and Dave decided to separate, it was only natural that she wasted no time getting the process started.

By the end of the following day, Amber had a short list of attorneys she was considering, and by the end of the week, she had made her decision. Divorce papers quickly followed – she knew that if it was left to Dave, she'd be waiting months for him to get it done.

Amber had so many questions as she began the divorce process – nearly all related to her future financially. She hadn't worked or brought in her own income in 17 years – not that it bothered her husband. Between his base salary, recruiting and training bonuses, and company stock, Dave was easily bringing home \$250,000 annually. He and Amber both agreed that she should stay home with their children, especially when they didn't need her to work.

On Dave's salary alone, they were able to live in an expensive suburb, pay top dollar for extracurriculars, go out to dinner with their equally well-off friends, and treat their parents to nice vacations. Truthfully, they never paid much attention to their finances. They just put everything on their credit cards

and moved on. Amber knew they had racked up some credit card debt over the years, probably around \$75,000, but she never worried about it. They'd be able to pay it off.

Of course, divorce changes everything. Amber didn't know how much she could expect to receive, both from their shared assets and accounts, and any ongoing support.

What complicated matters even more was Dave's recent career change. Mere months earlier, Dave had started a new position at a rapidly growing firm, resulting in a significant pay cut. "It may only be \$92,000 a year right now," Dave reassured Amber when he decided to take the job. "But within three years, I'm guaranteed to make \$300,000. And I'll be traveling less." At the time it made sense, but now that they were separating, Amber wasn't sure how this would affect her.



Amber's lawyer didn't need to look too far into the couple's finances to know that this could get complicated quickly, which Amber desperately wanted to avoid. She was sure that if all decisions were kept simple and felt fair to both of them, the divorce would be easier to get through quickly and civilly – which would be easier on her kids.

"I can give you advice, but I'm not a financial expert," Amber's attorney explained. "It would really benefit you to

see a financial advisor who specializes in divorce.”

Amber left the meeting with a business card in her hand, and once again, wasted no time scheduling an appointment.



When Jennifer first met Amber, she felt like she was meeting an old friend, rather than a stranger facing a monumental life event. Amber walked into the office, bubbly and confident, giving Jennifer the impression that Amber was used to owning any room she entered.

After giving Jennifer a little bit of background on the divorce, they started talking about some of the simpler aspects. Legally, Amber was entitled to an even split of all assets and savings accounts. They'd each get half of the equity built in the house (which they had already agreed to sell), savings accounts, stocks, retirement accounts, and cars (unless they preferred to each keep their own vehicle.) Unfortunately, they had credit card debt, which would also be split evenly between them.

“That we can take care of quickly, though,” Jennifer explained. “When you sell the house, you can pay off the debt before dividing the profit you turn. You’ll still both be left with about \$150,000 from the sale, which won’t be taxable, since it was your primary residence.”

Jennifer moved on to explain how paying for higher education – namely, college – would work for each of the kids. “When you’re married, you technically have no legal responsibility to pay for your kids to go to college. That changes once you get divorced.” Jennifer pulled out a piece of paper and a pen, visually explaining how it worked. “When a couple gets divorced, each party is legally responsible for one third of their child’s education, with the child responsible for the remaining third. Of course, there are limits – the amount is typically based on in-state tuition, so you won’t be on the hook to pay for Harvard.”

“We did set up college savings accounts for each of our kids. How does that factor in?”

“That’s great. Do you know if they were 529s?” Amber nodded. “That will essentially reduce the amount each of you is expected to pay. If the estimated tuition is \$40,000 and there is \$10,000 in the account, that brings to total down to \$30,000. Now, you, Dave, and the kid attending college are each responsible for \$10,000.”

“What if they get scholarships, grants, you know, other money towards their tuition?”

“Great question. Most students receive some kind of scholarship, whether it’s academic, athletic, talent-based,

or need-based. Unfortunately, those are only applied to the student's third – they aren't taken off the total."

"Okay." Amber nodded slowly. "We've saved pretty well for their college. My oldest daughter will be graduating high school this year, so she'll be going soon. Obviously, our youngest is only ten years old, so his fund is quite a bit smaller than his siblings. I'm not too worried though – I'm sure we'll be able to keep putting money away over time."

Jennifer checked the clock. Amber had warned her she'd need to leave at 4pm to pick up her youngest two kids from school, and it was already 3:50.

"I know we're low on time, but I just wanted to touch base about child support and also maintenance before you leave. We can always go into more detail the next time we meet."

"What's maintenance?"

Jennifer smiled – she was used to people being unfamiliar with the term. "You may know it as alimony, but that's not what it's called anymore. Basically, you and Dave have been married, and sharing his income, for a long time. Even though you are getting divorced, you're still entitled to receive money from his paycheck each month."

“And that’s separate from child support?”

Jennifer nodded. “Totally separate. Child support is money that would be paid to the parent with primary custody, assuming the other parent makes more money, so that their children are financially supported. Maintenance is to support the ex-spouse with lower income for a time frame and is meant to be rehabilitative while they build up their income to support themselves.

“That makes sense. We have already decided on custody, if that makes a difference. The kids will spend 60% of their time with me, and 40% with their dad. He travels for work a bit, so it just makes sense.”

Jennifer explained that this likely meant child expenses would be split 60/40 as well – with Dave paying 60%. All child-related expenses – clothing, doctor’s appointments, school supplies, and whatever else the child may need – would be split according to this structure.

“The exception is private school. Do your kids currently attend private or public schools?”

Amber felt her heart sink, but tried not to show it. “They’re all in private school. Why wouldn’t that apply?”

“Private school is not considered a necessity, especially when there are good public schools in the district. This one is tricky. If Dave agrees that he wants to keep the kids in private schools, you can write it into the divorce decree, and split the costs the same way you’re splitting everything else. But if Dave is happy to switch to public schools and you want to keep them in private schools, that would become entirely your responsibility.”

Amber noticeably deflated at this news. There was no way she’d be able to keep all of the kids in private school using nothing but the child support or maintenance she received. She had every intention of getting a job, but after being out of the workforce for so many years, that could take time, and she was sure she’d be starting with a low salary.

With so many other big changes taking place, Amber didn’t want to disrupt her kids’ education or social lives, but wasn’t sure she’d have a choice. Jennifer asked if a compromise was possible.

“Your oldest daughter is about to begin her senior year of high school. It would be very disruptive for her to change schools. But the other two children haven’t even begun high school yet – meaning the change for them won’t be nearly as challenging.” Jennifer could tell Amber wasn’t thrilled by this solution, but urged her to think it over.

Finally, they talked about maintenance. The amount of monthly maintenance was primarily based on two factors – how much money each spouse was making, and what the judge determined Amber’s earning potential was.

“Just because you haven’t been working doesn’t mean you aren’t capable of making money. You’ve been out of the job market for a while, so your earning potential will be estimated at around \$20,000 a year – this will offset that amount of money that Dave owes you each month.”

“What if I don’t stay at home? If I get a job, I think I can earn a bit more than \$20,000, even if it takes a little bit of time.”

“If you get a job and the income is more than your earning potential is listed, the maintenance would be adjusted accordingly,” Jennifer explained.

“That makes sense.” Amber nodded. “I’m planning on getting a job, for the record. Even if it means I get less money from Dave, I’m still making more money overall.”

Jennifer was relieved Amber felt this way. Many past clients had worried that getting a job or a pay raise would reduce the spousal support amount they received. This was true, of course, but clients always made more money when they had additional income, even if it meant they received less from their ex-spouse.

Before Amber left, Jennifer asked about Dave's income. He had previously been an exceptionally high earner, but had taken a significant pay cut right before the couple separated. Privately, Jennifer couldn't help but wonder if this was a strategic move, intended to lower Amber's monthly maintenance amounts.

However, as long as true up language was evident in the divorce decree, the amount of money Amber was entitled to would be re-evaluated every year. If Dave's income grew at his new job like it was projected to, Amber's maintenance would reflect that.

With a clear picture of where Amber and Dave's finances stood, Jennifer felt confident that she'd be able to help Amber as the meeting ended.



Amber knew finding a new home would take some time, and she didn't want to make a hasty or unwise decision. She decided to temporarily move in with her mother, which ended up being the perfect solution, because she lived in the same school district, had plenty of room for all of the kids, and loved having her grandchildren nearby. The extra support gave Amber time to get her ducks in a row.

One of those ducks was getting her current house sold. She and Dave had been working on getting the house ready to be put on the market, even though he was still living there for the time being. She'd often stop by to help clean, apply a fresh coat of paint in a room that needed it, or remove personal items and photographs.

She also spent hours researching advertising positions, looking into courses, and wondering what the next best steps were for her career. One afternoon, after a long morning of looking at resumes, Amber needed a break. She decided to run over to her old house, knowing Dave would be at work, and get some cleaning done.

What she found when she got there was not what she expected. Amber heard voices coming from upstairs and, assuming Dave had left the TV on when he went to work that morning, started up the stairs to turn it off. As she got closer to the door, she could clearly hear what the voices were saying.

"I'm just glad you can finally have me over here. You don't need to keep hiding me away down south."

"Aww, don't be like that. You know I wasn't hiding you away."

"I thought you were embarrassed of me." The woman speaking was clearly pretending to pout.

“Never. I just had to be careful so Amber wouldn’t find out. But now...” Amber didn’t give the mystery woman a chance to respond to Dave. Instead, she loudly opened the door, still under the guise of turning off the TV, and acted surprised when she saw her husband in bed with another woman.



Just as she wasn’t hurt that Dave wanted a divorce, Amber found herself shockingly indifferent to Dave’s affair. There were simply more important things to worry about.

Still, when she met with Jennifer later that week, she couldn’t help but bring up what she found. Jennifer was shocked by how well Amber was handling the news. “Either she’s the world’s best actor,” Jennifer found herself thinking, “or the marriage really was over.”

“You should’ve seen their faces when I entered the room,” Amber shared, smiling slightly. “I almost started laughing, it was so ridiculous.” Amber shook her head, and a more somber expression took over her face. “There is one thing that pisses me off, though.”

“One thing?!” Jennifer exclaimed, and Amber gave her a small smile again.

“He had all these business trips to Missouri, or at least that’s what I thought they were. Trainings, recruitment events, meetings. I was told so much of that credit card debt was just ‘necessary business expenses.’ Now I know they weren’t.” Amber took a breath. “It just sucks that we’re both responsible for the credit card debt when some of that money was going to her.”

An idea started forming in Jennifer’s head. “Do you think we could prove it?”



For the next two weeks, Jennifer poured over every credit card statement Amber gave her, frequently asking for more information on suspicious purchases. Jennifer’s goal was to find out how much money Dave had used to fund his affair.

Between weekends at hotels, fancy dinners, gifts, and even a few vacations, it turned out that Dave had spent \$20,000 on this woman. When Jennifer shared this information with Amber, it was the first time she saw her look angry.

“Why are you telling me this? All it does is piss me off. I’m still going to have to pay for it.”

Jennifer shook her head – in her excitement, she may not have explained the significance of this discovery. “No, you

won't. The debt, and the responsibility to pay it off, belongs to both of you. However, any debt that was accumulated funding Dave's affair is no longer your responsibility."

Jennifer continued to break down the numbers. They had around \$75,000 in credit card debt, which would typically mean they'd each be responsible for \$37,500. Since \$20,000 went towards Dave's affair, he was the only one responsible for that amount. This meant that the actual total of debt that would be evenly split between them would now be \$55,000 – reducing what Amber was responsible for by \$10,000.

Amber didn't look as happy as Jennifer thought she would. "It's a lot of money. Really, it is." Amber rubbed her eyes. "But I'm not sure it's worth starting a fight or dragging out the divorce. We've kept things so civil this far. I'm not sure it's worth changing that."

"Oh, Amber. It won't be a fight." Jennifer explained that, in her experience, the spouse who was caught cheating had no choice but to agree to their financial obligations. There was solid proof that Dave had pushed the family further into debt through his affair – there was nothing for him to fight against.

"He won't have a choice, Amber. He'll have to agree to it."



The divorce was nearly finalized, and Amber made her job search her top priority. She was still plagued with doubts and insecurities about finding work after taking so much time off, but knew she couldn't let that slow her down. Amber decided to reach out to her old network, many of whom were still close friends and actively working in the advertising field. She pretended to be looking for advice on what the best first steps for her would be, but secretly, she hoped someone would have a lead.

Amber was overwhelmed by how quickly her network rallied around her. They still thought of or remembered her as personable, confident, and easy to get along with – and they were quick to recommend her for open positions. Amber didn't care that all of the positions were entry level. She was just happy to be considered.

Within two weeks, Amber had gone on four job interviews. She would've been happy to get a position anywhere, but she'd be lying if she said there wasn't a preference. The second firm she interviewed at, in the sleek downtown building with the smooth waterfall in the lobby, just felt like the right fit to her.

As it turned out, Amber was the right fit for them, too. If she was shocked at how quickly they offered her a position, she was absolutely floored when she finished reading her offer letter.

“We might need to re-do that maintenance calculation,” Amber told Jennifer when she picked up the call. “That judge may have been underestimating my potential. I may have, too. I was just offered \$72,000.”



Amber was so proud of herself for securing a job, not to mention one that had a much higher salary than she anticipated. Obviously, it would change what she was entitled to with maintenance, but she wasn't too worried – as Jennifer explained months ago, it was always better to have more income.

Still, the next meeting was entirely focused on maintenance.

Because Dave had taken his new position so close to the couple's separation, Jennifer was able to use his average pay over the last three years to calculate his income, instead of just using the lower salary he was earning now. This gave Amber more money each month that she would have received based on Dave's current position.

However, Amber's new salary put her in much closer proximity to Dave's – reducing the maintenance to less than \$100 a month.

“\$100 a month?” Amber laughed, incredulous. “What's the point? I can get by without the extra \$100. We can just let

him stop paying me until his salary picks back up in a few years and there is a bigger gap in our paychecks.”

“Trust me,” Amber was shocked by the intensity in Jennifer’s voice. “You don’t want to do that.”

Jennifer explained that it was important to never let the maintenance amount fall to \$0 a month. Depending on the language in the divorce decree, if the amount ever falls to \$0, Amber may never be entitled to maintenance from Dave again. Right now, it was insignificant, given their relatively similar salaries. However, if Dave’s projections were correct and his income would grow significantly over the next three years, maintenance payments would become much more substantial.

“We have to be careful here. Even if he only owes you \$10, you should keep the continuous payments so that you’ll keep getting spousal support once his salary rises.”

Jennifer worked with Amber’s lawyer to make sure the language was correct in the divorce decree, but also made sure that Amber got the maintenance she was entitled to, no matter how minor it seemed at the moment, right from the beginning.



Even after the divorce was finalized, Amber continued working with Jennifer to make sure she was planning correctly for her future. Jennifer helped her invest the assets she received in the divorce, create a monthly budget with plenty of wiggle room for future housing payments, and build a plan for retirement.

With Jennifer's help, Amber felt she was ready for everything that came next. She was ready to take on life as a single woman, ready to raise her children, ready to manage her finances independently from Dave, and ready to start a new career.

Exactly one month after the divorce was finalized, Amber arrived for her first day at her new job. Before she could do anything else, they whisked her into a small room to get her picture taken for her security badge.

"Perfect, thank you." The receptionist, doubling as a photographer, said while checking the image. "Nobody wants to have their picture taken on the first day, but it's a rite of passage."

Amber laughed as she stepped away from the camera. "I don't mind."

"Perfect. I'll have you on your way in just a minute. We just need you to sign here so your signature is on the back of your badge."

Amber picked up the stylus. She couldn't help but think about how far she had come as she signed her name.



CHAPTER 4

YOU THINK YOU KNOW

Eliza was 18 years old when she first met Julian. Fresh-faced and far away from home for the first time, the world was full of freedom and possibilities.

Eliza had always been incredibly driven and independent – she was eager for the opportunity to learn and grow, to prove to everyone and herself that nothing could stop her. She accepted a cheerleading scholarship and enrolled in a university thousands of miles from her hometown. In a small college town where football was practically a religion, Eliza found herself thrust into an instant group of friends with a social scene that was as rigorous and extensively scheduled as her college courses.

From the outside, it looked like a dream. She was immediately popular, well-liked, and invited to every party. There wasn't

a single football player who didn't know her by name, and everywhere she went with her squad of cheerleaders, they were treated as though they were royalty.

But Eliza was overwhelmed, insecure, and, despite having so many friends, never felt like she was able to be herself. She was more than just a cheerleader – she was incredibly studious, with dreams of becoming a doctor, a natural leader, and had a bucket list of dream travel destinations that she never stopped adding to. The longer Eliza spent in college, the more she felt herself being boiled down to one single stereotype. She was coming to resent cheerleading altogether.

Luckily, she was about to get a break. There were only five minutes left in the final football game of the season when she noticed a sideline camera paying a little extra attention to her. She blew the camera a kiss instinctively, and then took notice of the man behind it. Tall, slender, and handsome, he was clearly a few years older than her. She caught his eye and gave a wink, clearly intended just for him. After the game was over, he shyly introduced himself.

His timidity caught her off guard. She had grown used to the boisterous athletes, constantly competing over who could talk loudest. Meeting Julian was like taking a breath of fresh air.

He was undeniably charismatic, and although he was only five years older than she was, something about him felt significantly more mature than the people she typically surrounded herself with. Julian was in his final year of graduate school, studying film, and was willing to give her the individual attention she had been missing.

His drive matched her ambition. Several months before his graduation, Julian secured a job that would have him traveling the country, filming football games and other sporting events, while Eliza finished her freshman year in the top 10% of her class. Even though it was years away, Eliza began looking into medical school, and knew what her top choice would be.

Over the next three years, Eliza continued to shine in her classes while Julian quickly rose through the ranks, eventually becoming a lead sideline camera operator for nationally broadcast football games. They talked on the phone constantly when he was traveling, but the calls always turned sour when they talked about her social calendar.

“Why do you spend so much time going to parties with your cheerleader friends?” The word “friends” was always dripping with sarcasm. “You don’t even like them.”

It wasn’t true – once there was less of an obligation to spend every moment together, Eliza found that she did like many of

the girls she cheered with – but she knew it was hard for Julian to be far away, knowing she was going to parties with the entire football team. She began turning down invitations more and more often, until she stopped being invited altogether.

When Eliza started receiving her acceptances to med school, it felt like their plans were falling into place. She was convinced Julian would be elated, proud of her.

Instead, he began to question her dream of becoming a doctor. “I thought we wanted to save money so we could buy a house and retire early. Do you have any idea how expensive med school is?” Eliza brought up scholarships, but Julian looked at her as though she was crazy. “Have you ever thought about going into sales instead? You could easily get a job, and even in the beginning, you’d make a ton of money.”

The more Julian talked, the more Eliza came around to his thinking. She was bubbly and well-liked – sales would probably come naturally to her. She could make a lot of money quickly, rather than taking out endless student loans. They’d be able to afford a small house together in the college town where Julian grew up, and start saving for retirement right away.

Eliza convinced herself that this was what she wanted – but when her classmates announced what med schools they’d be

attending, she wondered if she was giving up her dream in favor of Julian's.



She began a career in pharmaceutical sales, and quickly put those thoughts out of her mind. She was making a lot of money – more than she anticipated – and was too busy to really consider much else. Julian continued traveling frequently for work, and when he was home, they began looking at houses.

It wasn't long before they settled on a small starter home, mere miles from where Julian's parents lived. In a community full of people that Julian grew up with, the couple was well known and well liked. Everybody thought they were the perfect couple, and it was easy to see why.

She was successful and outgoing; he was talented and accomplished. On paper, they looked perfect. But Eliza was quickly learning that things were not always as they seemed.

After nearly every evening they spent with their friends, Julian would tense up the moment Eliza did something he didn't like. As soon as they got in the car to drive home, Eliza would get a laundry list of everything she had done wrong.

“Why did you talk to that person for so long?” he would demand, driving faster and faster the more agitated he got. “You always need to be the center of attention.”

He clearly noticed the way Eliza flinched when he swerved between cars, but he didn’t seem to care.

Eliza hated that she made Julian uncomfortable, or was constantly stealing the spotlight. Just as she had stopped going to parties with her friends in college, she began to adjust the way she acted when they were out in public. After all, these issues were her fault. She knew that she talked too much, laughed too loud, and needed too much attention. Julian was willing to give her that attention – why did she need it from anybody else?



Eliza worked to keep Julian happy, but it seemed that nothing she did was enough. If it wasn’t how much she talked or who she talked to, it was what she wore, the way she looked at people, or what she would order to eat and drink when they were out.

“You should be sitting by me, holding my hand all night,” he declared one evening on the car ride home as he sped up and came to abrupt stops.

“Julian, can you please slow down, you’re scaring me.” Julian’s eyes stayed fixed ahead of him, and as he continued to accelerate, it occurred to Eliza that scaring her may have been exactly his goal.



The couple already owned a house together, and as they made strides professionally, they began to combine the rest of their finances. They opened joint credit cards, bank accounts, and, with the dream of retiring early in mind, retirement funds that they both contributed to.

While Eliza transferred money into savings every month, Julian oversaw their finances on a day-to-day basis. He never asked her opinion, and she didn’t want to risk rocking the boat to ask questions. Besides, he understood all of that much more than she did.

Eliza and Julian’s finances were growing, and it only made sense for their relationship to take the next logical step – marriage.

In the weeks and days leading up to their wedding, Eliza reflected on the relationship more than ever, and knew that something wasn’t right. She knew she shouldn’t be so scared of making her husband angry, or feel like she was constantly walking on eggshells, but she had already started building a life with this man. Not just financially – they had

a vision for the future. They were going to travel the world, have children, and retire early. More than that, she knew they had the drive to really achieve it as long as they were together.

Admitting their problems would mean starting over – and starting over didn't feel like an option. She pushed her concerns aside and married Julian in an outdoor ceremony, surrounded by 150 of their closest friends and family.



Eliza was determined to make her marriage work, so she continued to play her role as the happy newlywed. In many ways this was easy. As they continued to work towards their goals, Eliza and Julian were always busy.

At work, Eliza was promoted to sales manager, now leading a team of 30 people. She found that leadership came naturally to her, and that she was able to funnel all of her excitement and people skills into mentoring new talent. The promotion came with a higher salary, allowing her to contribute more towards their living expenses, while Julian began making larger contributions to his 401k.

It wasn't long before she and Julian were able to upgrade to a larger home, set on several acres of land.

“This is perfect,” Julian said, the first time they saw it. “We’ll have enough space to put in a garage so I can fix up vintage cars, just like I’ve always wanted to.”

Eliza tried to hide her shock. “Like you’ve always wanted to?” She thought to herself. She had never once heard Julian mention anything like this, but she let it go. She didn’t believe for a second that he would actually do it. After all, if he didn’t even want to spend the money to go on a real honeymoon, he’d never spend the money to buy a bunch of old cars.

She was shocked when she came home from work one day to find Julian covered in grease with a bright red mustang next to the house.

“Isn’t she gorgeous?” Julian was clearly elated, but Eliza was seething. She rarely bought so much as a blouse without planning for it in their budget – but Julian could go out and buy a car without consulting her? For the first time, Eliza told him exactly how she felt – how she didn’t understand why they didn’t have money to travel, but had plenty for his hobbies, how she felt there was a clear double standard, that she was disappointed that her needs didn’t matter to him more.

Julian looked at her like she was an idiot. “When I’m done fixing this car, it’ll be worth triple what I paid for it. How

exactly would your vacation do that? Don't talk about things you don't understand. Actually, just don't talk."

Without a second look, Julian went back to his car, leaving Eliza standing there, still angry, feeling foolish.



They continued to build equity, paying off their home and planning for retirement. It was good timing, too. Within a year of their marriage, Eliza discovered she was pregnant. Immediately, the parents-to-be were setting aside money for college. Within four years, they had three beautiful children – two girls and a boy – who became the center of Eliza's world.

Shortly after she returned from maternity leave after the birth of their third child, Eliza brought Julian as her guest to a work event. She visited with her sales team and their guests, confidently owning the room. She loved being a mom, but that didn't stop her from thriving at work. She thought it had been a great night – but as she walked to the car alongside her husband, she could read his body language, and knew exactly what was coming.

They drove home in silence, Julian's hands clenching the steering wheel, and Eliza prepared herself for his outburst.

“You see these people all week, but you just couldn’t help yourself from being the center of attention tonight.” Julian exploded, the moment they walked through the door. “I was surprised you even wanted to go. We just had a baby. Aren’t mothers supposed to spend time with their kids?”

“Mommy?” Eliza saw her daughter, clearly frightened, peering at her from behind a wall. If Eliza thought this would force Julian to calm down, she was wrong.”

“And now the kids are awake! You caused this; you fix it.” Julian stormed out of the house, slamming the door behind him and leaving his crying daughter standing in the hallway.

Eliza couldn’t believe the way Julian spoke to her where their children could hear, or that he questioned her love for them. Of course, it wasn’t long before he changed his tune.

One day, while she was sitting on the floor playing with her youngest daughter, only 18 months old, Julian stormed in. “You baby her too much. Our kids are so attached to you, and I hardly ever see you. Do you know how neglected that makes me feel?”

Finally, Eliza had had enough. There was a lot she was willing to put up with, but she refused to feel bad about loving her kids.

The next time Julian was on the road for work, Eliza packed up her kids and moved into a small condo across town.

It wasn't the expansive land they were used to. In fact, there was no yard, no swing set, or large bathrooms. But it was enough – Eliza was determined to make it so. She had always been self-motivated and (much to Julian's displeasure) fiercely independent. Eliza found that, removed from the constant demands and guilt trips, she still had that same drive.

Every morning, she woke up and repeated her mantra, "I can take care of myself. I can take care of my kids. I don't need anybody. I can do this. We can do this."

Back at their marital home, Eliza's departure seemed to be the wakeup call Julian needed. Despite her previous pleas, Julian had always adamantly refused both marriage counseling and individual therapy – now he was setting up appointments for both. He was ready to work with her on their marriage, and on his own control issues.

Eliza was hopeful that things could be better, and Julian was eager to prove that he was willing to make big changes for their family. He stopped trying to convince her to move back home, and instead suggested that they move to Eliza's hometown and live closer to her family.

Eliza was ecstatic. She was a teenager the last time she lived near her family, and while she was proud of her independence and resilience, she missed the place she called home.

Almost immediately, Eliza started looking for a new job, while Julian put their house on the market and made an offer on a home in their new city. Because Julian was able to keep his job as a camera operator, while Eliza would briefly be unemployed, he convinced her that only his name should be on the mortgage for their new home. They were using shared equity built in the previous home to purchase the new house, so Julian convinced Eliza that it didn't matter whose name was on the paperwork.

The move to Eliza's hometown was meant to spell a new chapter in their marriage. Instead, the cracks returned, deeper and more noticeable than ever before. The shoe was on the other foot – Julian was the one in an unfamiliar place, away from the people he had spent his entire life around. Once again, he resorted to belittling Eliza and attempting to control her behavior.

What surprised Eliza most, was that she wasn't really surprised. She knew again – and this time, she was sure. She needed to divorce Julian.



Filing for divorce was more complicated than Eliza expected.

First, she had to find a lawyer. She was embarrassed to air her family's dirty laundry, so instead of asking for referrals, she called a lawyer she found on a bus ad and immediately signed on as his client.

Next, she had to figure out what she wanted financially from the divorce. Eliza was so burned out that money was the last thing on her mind. She was no longer a sales manager – but she still made good money from her commissions. She was sure she'd be okay.

The hardest part was explaining everything to her children.

“This was your decision,” Julian told her. “You can be the one to tell them.”

With no support from their father, Eliza sat her children down and explained that they she would no longer be living with daddy. The oldest two remembered that they had moved out once before.

“For how long, mommy?” Her son asked her. “Will we move somewhere else when we all live together again?”

Eliza had no idea how to explain to her kids that this would

not be like last time. She would not be moving back in with their father under any circumstances. In the back of her mind, she hoped that was true. He had already reeled her back in once – she was determined not to let it happen again.



Eliza's anxiousness to finalize the divorce as quickly as possible clouded her judgment. When Julian's lawyer requested that they waive the 90-day waiting period, Eliza didn't hesitate – as soon as they came to a financial agreement, she'd be free.

The first asset up for discussion was their new home. Because Eliza wasn't listed on the mortgage, Julian argued that she had no right to the house, or any of the equity that may be in it.

Eliza's lawyer did not explain that, because she had contributed to the down payment and mortgage payments for their previous home – money they had used to purchase their current house – she was entitled to some of the equity. He didn't explain that any money she had contributed to their properties over the years would be lost if she didn't fight Julian for this.

Instead, the lawyer told her that it was possible she was entitled to some of the equity, but didn't push her to pursue it.

Eliza and Julian had separate 401ks through each of their

employers. Because Julian's salary was higher, and his employer was matching retirement contributions, they decided to invest a higher percentage of their income into Julian's account. More of Eliza's income had been used for household bills and day-to-day expenses.

Eliza's lawyer wasn't an expert in dividing financial assets, so he didn't understand that Eliza was entitled to an even split of both accounts. All he saw was that Julian had significantly more money in his 401k, in part because Eliza's income was used for living expenses, while Eliza's 401k held less than half the value of Julian's.

Behind the scenes, Julian was threatening Eliza with a legal battle over the retirement accounts.

"You know I can drag this divorce out. If you even think about going after my 401k, that's exactly what will happen. I will reopen every single decision you thought was done."

When Eliza told her lawyer about the threats from Julian, he did not react. The lawyer didn't notify Julian's attorney, insist that all contact take place on the record, or even tell Eliza to cease any communication, unless both lawyers were present.

Eliza's lawyer didn't provide her with any advice at all. Instead, he asked her what she wanted to do.

“Well, I know I don’t want the divorce to drag out,” Eliza responded. “I guess I’ll just keep mine, and he can keep his.”

“I understand.” Eliza’s lawyer informed Julian’s that they would agree to his terms.

The marital assets had all been divided and the 90-day waiting period had already been waived. There was no time for Eliza to rethink any of her decisions, to consult a financial advisor about the terms of the divorce, or seriously consider whether or not she should fight for more.



Eliza left Julian for the second time in August. By mid-November, the divorce was final. She knew she had left money on the table – far too much money – but didn’t realize just how much of an impact it would have on her life moving forward.

Almost immediately, Eliza was struggling financially. Buying a home was out of the question. She spent so much money paying off her mortgage over the years, and Julian made sure she wouldn’t see a penny of it. Because of this, her savings were virtually non-existent. Eliza rented an apartment with enough rooms for her kids, but not much else to spare.

Eliza was determined to build her savings back up so that she could buy a home for her family and get back on track. She

spent extra time cold-calling potential customers, conducting as many meetings as possible, and attending dinners to network.

Eliza had no room to breathe, but she knew Julian was doing just fine. It began to occur to her that the money she left behind in the divorce could've made a big difference.

She felt crushing guilt – as much as that money would've helped her, it would've made an even bigger difference for her kids. When she had custody of them, she wasn't around as much as she would've liked to be, but what choice did she have?

Her kids were dealing with so many changes, and even though they were putting on a brave face, Eliza knew their lives were more unstable than ever. They were being shuttled back and forth between two homes and spending more time with babysitters than either of their parents.

Even when Eliza was there, she wasn't really there. She was exhausted from working long hours, worried about providing for herself and her kids, impatient, and burned out. On the nights the kids were at Julian's, she'd lay awake in bed, wishing she could make more of the time she had with them.

The kids handled the divorce the best they could – and outwardly seemed to be doing well. If they were able to be

strong, so could Eliza. She resolved to never show them just how much she was struggling.



Eliza's kids were more perceptive than she gave them credit for. This became blatantly obvious at a Mother's Day event shortly after the divorce was finalized. Every kid filled out a sheet where they could share what they love about their mother. Eliza smiled as the other moms shared the cute things their kids had written.

"My mom makes the best cookies!"

"She hugs me when I'm sad."

"My mom reads me books."

"My mom loves to sing."

Smiling, Eliza looked down at what her son had written, and immediately felt her heart break.

"My mom's doing the best she can."



The financial issues created during Eliza's divorce were not solved in a matter of weeks, or even months. It took over

four years before Eliza was able to feel truly comfortable financially again. Four years of stress, four years of missing parent-teacher conferences, soccer games, and playdates. Four years where her children lacked stability and worried about their mother.

For four years, Eliza thought about how these seemingly small missteps snowballed into something much bigger. Although Eliza has recovered financially from her divorce, she missed out on four years of building equity when she was just trying to skate by.

In those four years, Eliza wondered how different everything would've been if she had somebody, anybody, to give her the right advice when she needed it most. She needed somebody to guide her. Instead, she went through the divorce the exact same way she felt throughout most of her marriage – alone.

Unsurprisingly, on the day her divorce was finalized, Eliza really was alone. Julian didn't even bother to show up to court. This only confirmed that she made the right decision leaving Julian and her marriage behind.

Eliza wishes she and her children hadn't struggled more than they needed to – but when she looks back on the day the divorce papers were signed, Eliza associates it, more than anything, with freedom.

CDFA Analyzation

We've asked Jennifer, our CDFA, to take a look at this story and explain some of the common mistakes Eliza made in her divorce, why she believes Eliza made those mistakes, and what she could've done to avoid them.

The average person contemplates getting divorced for two years before they actually file the paperwork, hire a divorce attorney, and move forward. As we saw throughout this story, Eliza had her doubts about her relationship with Julian for much longer than two years – by the time she filed, she was more than ready to put her marriage behind her.

Eliza also had young children, and she felt incredibly guilty and anxious about the possibility of disrupting their lives or causing more drama than necessary. Two of the most dangerous feelings in a divorce are a desire to rush through it, and extreme guilt. Eliza had both, in tenfold.

It is my belief that this is what lead to Eliza making the decisions she did, leaving behind two major assets that could have given her financial security.

First, was her house. Before Julian and Eliza moved to Eliza's home state, they owned a marital home together, which had built up a great deal of equity. They used proceeds from the

sale of this home to purchase their new home – creating instant marital equity in the new home. However, because Eliza was not on the mortgage for the new home, she didn't believe she had any rights to the equity.

This is not true, for two reasons.

First, the money that was used for the down payment were marital funds, meaning the house was an instant marital asset. Second, a marital party does not need to be on the mortgage to have rights to equity built in a home, as the home is a marital asset.

Because most homes have a long-term mortgage, they are often thought of as a debt, rather than an asset. In reality, a home tends to be the second most valuable asset in a marriage. The value of the asset is determined by how much of the home has already been paid off.

For example, if the home is worth \$500,000 and the outstanding mortgage balance is \$200,000, the equity is \$300,000. In the case of a divorce, each party has the right to \$150,000 of the equity built in the home.

The second asset was the 401k. Just as homes are typically the second largest asset to consider in a divorce, retirement funds are usually the biggest – and one that people often do not fight for. They think there is plenty of time to build

up their retirement fund, and don't fully understand the importance of every dollar, or how money grows over time.

Additionally, many people feel guilty for benefiting from a retirement fund if they weren't the party that "earned" the asset – that is, if it came from their spouse's employer's plan or they did not physically contribute to it.

When Julian made empty threats surrounding the retirement assets, Eliza was quick to believe him, without understanding her rights, or the impact of what she was giving up. Eliza had her own (much smaller) retirement fund, and she thought it would be easier to let him have his, while she could keep hers. The desire to get the divorce over with as quickly as possible lead Eliza to the path of least resistance.

Had Eliza consulted a CDFA, she would've understood very quickly that each of their funds should be split evenly, and the significance this would have over time.

Julian's 401k had a balance of \$200,000, while Eliza's had a balance of \$75,000. The difference in the funds was \$125,000, meaning 50% (\$62,500) should have been transferred from Julian's retirement fund to Eliza's. \$62,500 in a retirement fund grows quickly, and often extensively. If that same \$62,500 experienced an average investment annual return of 6%, it would've added \$358,968 to Eliza's account before she reached retirement age.

When going through a divorce, it's important to not only understand what the numbers mean right now, but what they will mean over time. Had Eliza consulted a CDFA, she would have understood not only what she was legally entitled to, but what it could mean for her future.

Attorney Analyzation

We've asked Michone Riewer, an attorney with over 23 years of experience in family and marital law, to help us understand Eliza and Julian's divorce from a legal standpoint.

Unfortunately, Eliza's story is one that, as a divorce attorney, I hear over and over again. One party (in this case, Eliza) wants to divorce so badly that they will accept anything, while the other party (in this case, Julian) takes advantage of their desperation, bullying them into taking much less than they are entitled to. Often times they are drained, emotionally and financially, further stopping them from fighting for what they deserve.

Regardless of the reason the party backs down, the outcome is usually the same – the unwilling litigant loses more than they initially understand, and have a hard time recovering. They,

and often their children, suffer the consequences for years.

These sad, tired, frustrated, and worn-out clients need strong advisors who will advocate for them more than anyone else. They need someone with a strategy, strong knowledge of marital law, and the confidence to insist that a fair settlement is not a luxury that they can go without, but a necessity that they deserve. They need a team that will clearly outline and frequently remind them of the consequences they will face if they don't fight for a fair outcome. They need a strong attorney and an even stronger CDFA.

For my clients who are tired, beaten down, and don't believe they can stand up for themselves, we provide the strength, knowledge, and strategy that they are missing. This is why it is instrumental that the client choose an attorney that is able to fight for them and reach a fair resolution.

Reaching an amicable resolution that both parties feel is fair is always the first choice. If one party is unwilling to resolve the matter fairly, then it becomes the attorney's job to use the court system to obtain a fair resolution.

In addition to not recommending a CDFA, Eliza's attorney did not advocate for her needs, explain what she was entitled to, or bear the burden of achieving a favorable outcome.

Therapist Analyzation

We've asked Dell Bliss, a therapist with over 25 years of experience, to help us understand Eliza's mindset throughout her marriage and divorce with Julian.

From the beginning, Eliza and Julian's relationship reflects a very common challenge in long-term, emotionally committed relationships – Other-Validated Intimacy, or OVI. This method of attaching to others from a weaker style of living is very common in the beginning of relationships. OVI, in and of itself, is not a bad thing, but I would not consider it a strong love, or one that can go the distance.

OVI involves the notion that, if and when my partner is not acting a way that I like, or is not acting in a way that I need them to, I am entitled to throw the best parts of myself under the bus and place the responsibility on my partner, rather than myself. When the partner is also having difficulty soothing their bad feelings, they have very little left to give.

Partners usually resort to soothing their negative feelings in one of three ways: Attack, to get compliance from your partner, and “win”; Sell-out, and give into your partner to keep or regain their approval; Withdraw and withhold from the partner.

Eliza and Julian both exhibit their own preferences of regression and lack of self-awareness surrounding them. Eliza solves her bad feelings by selling out – even early in the relationship, she would give in to whatever Julian suggested, struggling to take a stand. This, in turn, led to Julian’s reactivity of attacking her. Whenever Eliza made an (often feeble) attempt at validating herself, she faced instant retribution.

Julian’s primary method of managing his negative feelings came from exploiting Eliza’s lack of integrity. He would instill self-doubt, demean her, and terrorize her, either to punish her or to get his way. This style of managing emotions cannot go on forever – the compliance he gets from Eliza is not from her own free will, but has been manipulated through force – making it impossible to truly be wanted or desired. This restarts the same painful cycle.

As a therapist, the goal would be to empower Eliza to face her two-choice dilemmas. First, she faced her anxiety so that she felt confident to stop selling-out her integrity as a means of pacifying her husband. Secondly, she faced her own anxiety surrounding a lack of faith in her abilities, which allowed her to soothe bad feelings from a separate and solid sense of self.



CHAPTER 5

THE COST OF COMMUNICATION

Jennifer sat at her desk, resisting the urge to nervously clear her throat for the third time in the same number of minutes. Directly across from her was an older married couple, instinctively leaning as far in their seats as they could, as though they didn't even want to risk breathing the same air as their partner.

They made a point to never look at each other – in fact, they seemed to be looking everywhere except at each other – until one of them would get brave and risk a half glance. When they didn't find the other looking back at them, their expressions would quickly cloud over into one that was somehow haughtier and more upset than before.

Jennifer glanced over at the thermostat. It was colder in here, right? It must be colder. She was surprised to find

that the room was set to 68 degrees on the nose, exactly as it always was.

The woman, Laverne, uncrossed her arms for the first time since she sat down to check the time on her phone. Jennifer couldn't help noticing her phone background – a picture of the two of them at least 10 years ago, with their dog on a Christmas tree farm. Seeing the way the couple related to each other now, Jennifer couldn't imagine a time when they would've been that happy.

Jennifer also couldn't help noticing the time on Laverne's phone. Had it really only been twenty minutes since they arrived? For the first ten minutes, Jennifer tried getting them to talk. She greeted them happily, asked questions about why they were there, and talked about the benefits of meeting with a financial advisor, but she was lucky to even get a one-word response, or anything more than a pointed look and an eye roll.

Jennifer didn't think she could take the silence anymore. In any event, it wasn't a good use of their time – or hers. She cleared her throat again, but this time followed it with a deep breath.

“Look, I know it's not easy. These are hard things to talk about. But we have to start somewhere, or we're not going

to be able to figure anything out. It doesn't need to be at the beginning, just whatever is easiest for both of you."

Lucas chuckled darkly, and looked directly at Jennifer for the first time since he sat down. "We're here because I'm never going to be able to retire. Unless I decide to divorce my wife."



Laverne's hair stylist, Melissa, was putting the finishing touches on her hair, but Laverne wasn't quite ready to stop talking.

"He's just not the same person anymore." Laverne complained, and Melissa nodded in agreement. "He's always so stressed out – and for what! There is no need for it. He doesn't appreciate anything. Do you think he's ever bothered to say thank you? For raising our kids, for cleaning the house while he never lifted a finger, for hosting work event after work event." Laverne sighed. "I'm not sure he even noticed. But I go out and buy a new purse, and guess who suddenly notices everything?"

"Like he can't afford it!" Melissa took off the hair apron before guiding Laverne to the front of the salon.

"You're telling me! Anyways, thank you, honey, for the hair and the chat. It was exactly what I needed."

“Of course, Laverne, I’ll see you in three weeks.”

Laverne smiled fondly as Melissa walked away, before turning to face the receptionist.

“Alright, your total for today is \$150.” Laverne handed the young woman her credit card. Your lashes look amazing, by the way.”

Laverne smiled warmly. Lucas never noticed her lashes – except to complain about how much she spent on them. It was nice to have somebody appreciate how she looked. “You’ve got to try out The Lash Studio. Ask for Vicky, she’ll change your life.” Laverne slid her credit card back into her wallet. “Have a good one, hon, I’ll see you soon.”



“I do this for you, too, you know.” Jennifer felt the same chill in the air the second Laverne and Lucas walked into the office for their next meeting, but at least this time they were talking. “I want to look good for you. When I come to your work events and meet with your clients, you don’t want me showing up looking like I just rolled out of bed. You need me to look presentable.”

“Oh, come on, Laverne.” Lucas was speaking quickly and loudly. “There is a difference between rolling out of bed and

everything you're doing. Nails, hair, lashes, the new clothes, the shoes. I don't have a work event every other week, or even every other month! You do this for you."

"And what's so wrong with that? I deserve to have nice things, too. I've worked hard to raise our family. Just because I haven't worked in an office doesn't mean I don't deserve to enjoy myself."

Laverne's voice was starting to shake, and Jennifer watched Lucas take a few deep breaths. When Lucas spoke again, his voice was calmer. "I never said you didn't. Right now, it's just too much. It all adds up so fast. I'm not telling you to never do anything to enjoy yourself, but this is just... it's excessive, Laverne."

With both of them silent, Jennifer thought this would be the time to interject. "Lucas I know you're concerned about retirement. Now, you do have a great monthly income..."

"See!" Laverne shouted, cutting Jennifer off. "There is nothing to worry about."

"I'm sorry, Laverne, I wasn't finished." Jennifer felt like she was working to diffuse a very fragile bomb – one wrong move could cause the entire room to erupt. "I've also been looking over the rest of your finances. Your savings accounts,

retirement funds, and, of course, current monthly spending habits. I have to say – I do have the same concerns you do, Lucas. While your income is great, not much has been saved. What’s currently in your retirement fund is a good first step, but it won’t keep up with your current lifestyle for long if more money isn’t coming in.”

“What does that mean?” Laverne was tapping her heel, clearly impatient and frustrated by the way the conversation had turned.

“What does that mean?” Although Lucas’s voice was quiet, Jennifer could tell he was barely holding his anger in. “It means that you’re spending too much money for us to save anything. It means that we don’t have enough saved for the future. It means that if you can’t find a way to spend less money, I’ll have to work for the rest of my life so that you don’t have to miss a single nail appointment.”

“I don’t understand.” Laverne looked so confused and hurt, Jennifer almost felt bad for her. “You make plenty of money.”

Lucas’s composure was slipping, and slipping fast. “And you are great at spending it.” Lucas took a deep breath. “I’m never going to be able to retire because of you. Do you even care?” When Laverne didn’t respond, Lucas shifted his focus to Jennifer. “I’m right, aren’t I? I’d be better off if I got a

divorce, just so I don't have to support her anymore."

As Laverne started yelling about how Lucas can't always threaten divorce when he doesn't get his way, Lucas started shouting over her. Jennifer could hardly make out a single word. As she glanced at the clock again, she almost started to miss the stony silence of their first session.



Lucas had long since learned that he couldn't talk to Laverne about their finances. He tried early on in their relationship, but she just didn't understand. At first, it didn't seem like a big deal. Sure, she liked to spend money, but not an unreasonable amount, and he did have a great six-figure salary. He didn't want to rock the boat and ask her to stop spending so much. They could afford it – they'd start budgeting later.

It started to catch up with them. Laverne insisted on a beautiful six-bedroom house in a town with great school districts, fancy restaurants, and beautiful salons. Lucas worried that it was too expensive – they'd need to take out a 30-year mortgage, and would have to cut back in other areas if they wanted to pay down the principal faster – but Laverne talked him into it.

"You make way more than that each month." She'd shake her head, still not understanding his concerns. "It'll be fine."

Lucas relented, convinced he could reel in their spending in other areas, allowing them to put more money towards the mortgage and pay it off ahead of time.

On at least three occasions, he created a budget, and sat down to explain it to his wife. He'd show her how, by cutting back her spending even a little, they could put extra money into their savings and contribute more to their mortgage each month.

Laverne was resistant to these changes. "What difference does it make if we put more towards the house? We're still going to have to pay the same amount next month."

It became clear that they didn't have the same financial outlook. Lucas wanted to plan for the future, while Laverne wanted to enjoy their present. Lucas tried to put a plan in place, but Laverne kept swiping her credit card, making it impossible to get ahead.

Still wary of rocking the boat, Lucas shelved his concerns. He believed their expenses would naturally decrease as their children moved out of the home, but the exact opposite happened.

Laverne believed her children becoming adults meant she'd have more money available to spend on herself. She didn't

understand why they needed to save more money, and she certainly didn't want to learn.

Now, nearly 60-years old, Lucas found himself exactly where he worried he'd end up – with 10 years left on a high mortgage, limited savings, and constantly on the verge of falling into credit card debt. Lucas's resentment had been growing for years – and now, with retirement looking to be at least a decade away, it had begun to boil over.

For three months, he saved every single receipt from every purchase either of them made and filed them into three categories – money spent on shared expenses, like their house, car insurance, and groceries; money spent on his expenses, like the \$30 haircut he got every six weeks, the round of golf every other Sunday, and occasional meals out; and Laverne's expenses; the manicure and pedicure, which had to be done every three weeks, her eyelash refills every two weeks, and her hair appointments every month. And then there were the less predictable expenses Laverne incurred – the new purses and clothes, the impromptu spa days, and lunches with friends several times a week.

Laverne would argue that Lucas spent money, too, but this was solid proof that there was no comparison between how much they each spent. When Lucas tried to show Laverne, she'd get defensive, and either refuse to talk about it or accuse

Lucas of being too controlling. Their relationship became so tense that they rarely spent any time together at all. Lucas moved into the guest room, meals were eaten separately, and they never drove together, even if they were going to the same place.

Lucas knew he couldn't keep living the way they had been. He scheduled an appointment with a financial advisor, knowing this would be his last effort. If nobody could help him explain their situation to Laverne or make her change her ways, he'd have no choice but to leave her.



During their third meeting with Jennifer, Lucas tried his best to stay calm and communicate why he found Laverne's refusal to compromise so frustrating. He felt like his needs didn't matter to her. Laverne was continuing to spend money without even considering what the consequences were for Lucas.

"I don't want to work forever," he pleaded with her. "I want to be able to retire."

Laverne was exasperated. "I just don't understand how me getting my nails done could possibly stop you from retiring!"

Jennifer could see the meeting quickly going in the same direction that the previous ones did. Lucas would tell Laverne

that the money was adding up quickly, and Laverne would cite how much money Lucas makes. They'd go around in circles until, eventually, Lucas brought up divorce.

“Do you really think divorce is the answer? You know I'd get half of your money.”

“Trust me, I know. I've done the math. You'd get half my money, but I'd be able to stop supporting you. I could start saving. And what is there really to miss?” Lucas's face took on a dark expression. “A woman who doesn't care about my happiness or well-being? A wife who prioritizes her appearance over spending time with her husband? Just admit it – you'd rather me work for the rest of my life than make even the smallest sacrifice.”

The hour was up, and the silence was back. Jennifer wondered how she'd ever get through to them. She wondered if divorce was avoidable at this point – or if the marriage was worth salvaging.



The more she looked at their finances, the more Jennifer was sure that if she could just make Laverne understand the reality of their situation, they could make progress.

Unfortunately, Jennifer underestimated the extent of the resentment. During their next meeting, Lucas interrupted

Jennifer to berate Laverne. He brought up divorce constantly and made disparaging comments about how Laverne only cared about herself.

On the other hand, Laverne balked at any mention of changing her spending habits. She was sure there was another way – and was still convinced that there was no problem to begin with.

“He makes plenty of money,” Laverne would say, almost pleading. “I thought when we came here, you’d just tell us that everything was okay and that we’d be fine.

“I’m sorry Laverne.” Jennifer shook her head. “I can’t do that.”



From the first meeting they had, Jennifer could tell how intense the financial discussions had gotten, but until now, she hadn’t realized how dire the situation was.

Lucas no longer had the patience to try and explain their financial situation to Laverne. Laverne was unwilling to listen, or at least unwilling to listen to Lucas. Even in meetings with Jennifer, Lucas would cut her off mid-sentence to make demands of Laverne, and Jennifer could see Laverne shutting down as she became more and more defensive.

Jennifer decided that the only way to move forward was to meet with each of them separately, and then come together to discuss their future plans. One-on-one, Laverne was very friendly, talkative, and personable. In solo conversations with Lucas, he was much softer and clearly very smart. If Jennifer was able to speak with each person separately, in a calmer, less aggressive environment, maybe she'd be able to get through to both of them.

First, Jennifer had a meeting with Lucas. She talked through Lucas's concerns, agreed that they were all valid, and talked about the future. The meeting wasn't long – Lucas had a pretty good idea of where his finances stood, he just didn't know how to move forward.

Second, Jennifer had her meeting with Laverne. Based on previous discussions with both Laverne and Lucas, she knew this would be the more challenging conversation. Jennifer was hopeful that, if the conversation stayed calm and fact-based, she'd be able to make Laverne understand their financial situation.

Jennifer kept things as simple, yet detailed, as she could. She started by outlining Lucas's income. After taxes, health insurance, and employer-based 401k contributions, Lucas was making \$346,987 each year.

Despite their estrangement, they still went on at least one family vacation every year, which usually added up to about \$15,000. This brought the left-over yearly salary to \$331,987, putting Lucas's monthly take home pay at \$27,665.

Jennifer looked up at Laverne. "Do you see how I got to this number?" Jennifer asked patiently. It was important that Laverne understood how Jennifer's calculations worked every step of the way. Laverne nodded, and Jennifer continued.

The couple lived in a \$2.7 million home. Their mortgage payments, including principal and interest, came out to about \$12,000 each month. Property taxes and home owners' insurance were an additional \$8,000. This brought their left-over spending money to \$7,665.

Jennifer paused again and looked at Laverne, but nothing seemed to surprise her so far.

Jennifer then showed the \$750 the couple averaged for groceries, and the extra \$500 for car insurance and gas – bringing the remaining total to \$6,415.

It was time to move on to their individual expenses. Lucas was spending around \$600 a month on his hobbies. This included golfing, shopping for new clothes or accessories, and going out to meals. Meanwhile, Laverne's monthly total

spending ranged between \$5,385 and \$6,385

Laverne laughed and shook her head. “Lucas wants to believe it’s that much. There is no way!”

Jennifer gave her a tight smile before diving into the details. In the average month, Lavern was spending, \$160 on her nails; \$150 on her hair; \$75 on her eyelash refills; \$2,500 on clothes and purses; and anywhere from \$2,500 - \$3,500 on other luxuries, like spa weekends with her friends and meals in fancy restaurants.

Jennifer explained that their total monthly expenses typically ranged from \$27,235 - \$28,235, meaning they spent nearly all of, if not more than, Lucas’s paychecks each month.

Jennifer looked up at Laverne and saw her mouth hanging wide open. It seemed like she was finally starting to get it.

“Do you have any questions so far?” Laverne closed her mouth, and shook her head silently.

Jennifer moved onto the retirement fund, explaining how much money was currently in it and how much they could realistically expect the fund to grow before Lucas reached retirement age.

“Now, if your current monthly expenses stay the same, and the retirement fund grows at the expected rate, once Lucas retires there will be enough in it to support the two of you for about 4 years.”

There was a long silence before Laverne spoke. “But the mortgage. That will be paid off at some point, so our expenses would be lower, right?”

“Yes and no. Your mortgage will be paid off, but not soon enough to make much of a difference. It would likely only be fully paid off a few months before the retirement fund runs out of money, and you’ll still need to set aside money for your property taxes and homeowner’s insurance each month. Of course, all of this also assumes that no unexpected costs or income come up.”

Laverne nodded slowly, but Jennifer could tell she was still in shock.

“When my husband talks about divorce, wouldn’t that be worse? Financially, I mean.”

“In some ways, yes.” Jennifer explained that the exact amount Laverne would receive in the case of a divorce was unknown, but told her the best and worst-case scenarios regarding what Laverne could expect to receive from the division of their

assets, as well as monthly spousal support payments.

“You’d likely both downsize to smaller homes anyways, so you wouldn’t need to spend as much monthly on a mortgage. But it would be very difficult to keep up with your current lifestyle long term.”

Laverne nodded again. It was silent for several moments. Jennifer was about to show Laverne out so that she could have a short break before they reconvened with Lucas that afternoon when Laverne finally spoke.

“I don’t want to get a divorce, you know. I never did.” Laverne signed. “For the life of me, I don’t know how things got this bad. I was frustrated. Lucas kept telling me what to do, but he didn’t tell me why. Or maybe he did and I just wasn’t listening.”

For the first time, Jennifer felt like Laverne really understood what was at stake – now she and Lucas just had to decide what would come next.



Several hours later, Jennifer met with Laverne and Lucas again, feeling more hopeful than she had before any of their other meetings.

Jennifer welcomed both of them back, sharing that she felt a lot of progress was made during the individual meetings. She asked that they each refrain from talking just yet, and she'd ask if they had questions later on.

Jennifer showed both of them a breakdown of their current expenses. It had significantly less detail than the one she shared with Laverne, but categorized each of their major regular expenses. The bottom line was the same – unless something changed, and soon, there was no way Lucas would be able to retire for a long time.

Once she was done speaking, Jennifer asked if there were any questions. Lucas was pointedly not responding, and Laverne was looking at her hands. After a long moment, Laverne cleared her throat.

“So, if I stopped getting my lashes done, went out to lunch less, and cut the spa and shopping in half, do you think that would be enough?”

If Jennifer wasn't so relieved, she would've laughed at the incredulous look on Lucas's face. Given their current financial situation, Lucas would've preferred that Laverne immediately sacrifice a lot more. But this was a start – an acknowledgment that there was a problem and that fixing their marriage may just be worthwhile after all.



For the first time in years, Laverne and Lucas decided to eat dinner together that night. They went out to a restaurant, where they knew a conversation couldn't turn into a shouting match.

Laverne apologized to Lucas. She never took his concerns seriously – partially because she didn't understand, and partially because she didn't want to change her habits. Lucas's income caused her to develop a false sense of security. She recognized that she had been selfish, and that he had been right about her spending.

Lucas apologized, too. He admitted that he should've explained everything to her more calmly. More than that, when the resentment started building up, he should've gotten help from a financial advisor immediately, instead of assuming he could explain it to her and that they could fix it on their own.

As they finished dinner, the couple knew they had a long way to go – and when they returned home, they each retreated to their own bedroom, leaving the other for the night. They knew this one conversation didn't mean their marriage was saved, but it was a step in the right direction.



Over the next several meetings with Jennifer, Laverne and Lucas started making real progress. There were times where the discussion got tense, or Jennifer suggested they take a break to cool down, but Jennifer felt like Laverne and Lucas were finally working towards the same goal.

There were many things they couldn't come to an easy agreement on. While Laverne was willing to make a change, she wasn't willing to give up everything she was used to. She still felt that she deserved some of the comforts she enjoyed. Lucas was plainly frustrated by this – he felt that Laverne should be offering to do more, or trying to make up for lost time.

After about a month, Laverne brought up selling their home. Lucas was floored. He wanted to bring this up several times, but was certain Laverne would be furious.

“We don't really need six bedrooms anymore, do we? Or to live in these school districts.”

By the end of the meeting, they had decided they would move somewhere nearby, with lower property taxes. They could still get a nice, but smaller, house in a good area, but at a much lower price point. They'd be able to cut their monthly payments in half, if not more.



It took months to come up with a plan that they both were on board with, and even then, they had to follow it to a tee. Laverne refused to give up her monthly nail appointments, but also insisted that Lucas continued golfing at least once a month. He may have been willing to stop, but she wanted to make sure he had an activity that he enjoyed, too.

They stuck to their budget, built up their savings, and worked to pay off their new home as quickly as possible. While the resentment continued to bubble up from time to time, Lucas and Laverne were no longer fighting each other. They may have had disagreements, but they were on the same page.

Lucas wasn't able to retire as soon as he turned 66, but thanks to their careful planning and budgeting, he did stop working shortly after his 72nd birthday. Laverne threw a modest surprise party in his honor. Shortly before Lucas arrived, Laverne sat down, and pulled out a congratulatory card.

L,

It's been a long journey to get here, and it hasn't always been easy. I'm so thankful you stuck by my side, and we got through it all together. Congratulations on your retirement. I can't wait to spend every day by your side.

Love,

L



CHAPTER 6

DIVORCE THROUGH INFIDELITY

“You have awakened the sea monster!!!!” Dora looked up and smiled, listening to the sound of her kids shrieking as they ran from her husband. The infamous sea monster grabbed one of Dora’s nephews who had ventured a little too far into the ocean, throwing him over his shoulder.

“You dare enter my home?” Dora’s husband, Owen, caught her eye and gave her a small wink as he continued chasing the kids around the beach.

This week was one Dora looked forward to all year. Each summer, Dora’s parents would rent a house on the beach and gather all of their kids and grandkids for a week of sun, salt water, and laughter. Owen loved playing with the kids – you could rarely find him outside of their company – and Dora loved to watch as they giggled and ran through the sand.

Suddenly, Owen was standing above her. “Would you mind grabbing my baseball cap from the room?” He smiled apologetically, “I think my head is starting to burn.” Owen had started balding earlier that year, but he approached it with humor, just as he approached everything else.

Dora entered their room, which seemed to have a permanent thin layer of sand on the floor, and began looking for Owen’s hat. He always left things lying around – it made it impossible to find anything.

Ding

Dora looked up, confused. She had left her phone at the beach, and Owen had his out there, too. Maybe the previous renters had forgotten a device.

Ding

Dora got on her hands and knees and began looking under the bed for the phone. She was level with her husband’s duffel bag when she heard it again, unmistakably loud.

Ding.

Dora opened the side pocket of the duffel bag to find a small, black flip phone. Her first reaction was one of confusion –

why would he have this? There were five missed texts from Emily Hassel, Owen's assistant. Dora could feel the hair on the back of her neck suddenly standing up. Why would Emily be texting Owen when they were on vacation, especially on this phone? Why did Owen even have this phone? It couldn't be from work – it looked more like a burner phone from a bad spy movie than anything from the past decade.

With a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, Dora opened up the phone to read five messages, all from Emily.

I can't wait for you to come back. One week is too long.

I miss you, baby.

When you get back, I'll show you how much.

Why aren't you answering me? You know how jealous I get.

I guess I'll have to go shower... it always feels colder without you in it.

There was a loud ringing in Dora's ears as she continued to scroll back through the texts. Maybe, just maybe, her husband had never responded. Maybe Emily just had an inappropriate crush. As Dora found the messages her husband sent, she felt her legs give out and she slid to the floor.

I can't wait to rip off your clothes

That was too close. Dora got home right after you left.

Stop it, baby. You know you're the only one I love.

Dora didn't know how much time had passed since she entered the room when Owen came in, joking that she must have gotten lost. Instead of answering him, she wordlessly held up the phone.



Dora was a consummate professional – and part of this was keeping her work and personal life completely separate. She would never let what was going on at home cloud her judgment or personality at the office, or vice versa, which was the only explanation for how she was able to compartmentalize and carry on over the next few months.

At home, she stayed upbeat and cheery, refusing to let her kids see her cry. They knew their father had moved out and that their parents were no longer together, but if it was hurting Dora, she wasn't letting them see it.

At work, she stayed as polished and efficient as ever. She didn't miss a single executive meeting, she reviewed all financial strategies, and even helped vet and hire the new

COO. She had only been the CFO at her new firm for a few months – they had hired her to turn their financial strategy around – and she wasn't going to be anything less than they expected of her.

But inside, Dora was feeling a whirlwind of emotions. She alternated between seething with anger at her husband (23 years of marriage down the drain), feeling completely blindsided (for the life of her, she didn't see it coming), and being deeply hurt. When she confronted him about the affair, he didn't even care enough to ask for another chance or beg her to take him back. She wouldn't have, anyways, but the ease at which he stepped out of her life and into another with no remorse felt like a punch to the gut.

All he could do was say he was sorry she found out like this, but he had fallen in love. He was planning on waiting until the kids were all out of high school to leave her – a marker that was still 8 years away – but now that she knew about the affair, that ship had sailed.

Dora was detail oriented and planned things to a fault, but for the first time in her life, she found herself in over her head. There was so much to do, so many decisions to make, and she didn't even know where to start.



While Dora was angry with Owen, she knew they were on the same page about one thing – their main priority was their kids. They both wanted their children’s lives to be disrupted as little as possible, and as much as Dora would’ve loved to fight for full custody to stick it to Owen, she knew he was a good dad. Her kids would be the ones hurt most of all if she got in the way of their relationship.

Supporting their children also meant that the divorce needed to stay civil. Owen knew what he did was wrong, and while he didn’t show much remorse, Dora knew he felt guilty for hurting her. For the sake of their children, she didn’t want to end up fighting Owen in court, and he felt the same way.

They agreed on a collaborative divorce process, rather than a traditional divorce or mediation. This would give them the opportunity to negotiate and mediate the terms of the divorce, but in a setting that was calmer, more collaborative, and less contentious.

Dora and Owen may have been on the same page when it came to their children, but she knew things could take a quick, ugly turn when it came to dividing their assets and determining their financials moving forward. Dora found solace in the fact that they were both incredibly high earners. Owen easily made \$250,000 a year – more than enough to

live comfortably, take their kids on vacations, and continue living an upper-class lifestyle. Still, Owen's salary paled in comparison to what Dora brought home.

For years she had been earning in the mid-six-figure range, but with her new position as CFO at a large firm, her salary was over \$600,000 a year. This didn't include her stock options, bonuses, traditional retirement accounts, deferred compensation, and more. Her income was calculated and distributed in so many different ways, it was complicated even for somebody with her financial prowess.

Dora knew that, regardless of what decisions were made during the divorce, she and Owen would both be in a good position financially. Still, she wanted to make sure they both got what they deserved.

Given her high income and the breadth of her assets, Dora's lawyer knew it was in her best interests to consult a Certified Divorce Financial Analyst, or CDFA. When it came to business, Dora knew she was a financial expert. But divorce can be very complicated, with different laws, norms, and regulations, and engaging an expert would help Dora to understand not only how to move forward, but also how to do so in a way that kept the entire divorce civil.



Jennifer couldn't help being impressed by Dora before they even officially met. In their emails, Dora stressed how busy she was and that she needed to be as efficient as possible, so Jennifer requested that Dora send over any financial information she could ahead of time. Jennifer could tell instantly that Dora understood finance inside and out – she probably wasn't somebody who would typically consult an analyst.

However, as Jennifer dove into the intricacies of Dora's situation, she couldn't help feeling that Dora made the right choice. Dora had so many different accounts – savings accounts, retirement accounts, investment accounts, stocks, and more – and so many different types of income – her regular salary, deferred compensation, bonuses, and stock options – not to mention the various assets, like the home or cars she owned alongside her soon-to-be ex-husband.

Not only were Dora's financials complicated, but Jennifer knew how quickly a divorce could get contentious when feelings were hurt and so much was at stake.

Dora was exactly 20 seconds early to their first meeting, and Jennifer got the impression that Dora was used to operating on a tight schedule. If Jennifer was impressed before she even met Dora, it was nothing compared to how she felt during their meeting.

Dora was prepared, and not just with the documents. She knew what she wanted. Despite her deep anger and the justified feelings of betrayal she felt towards her husband, she wanted the divorce to be easy on her kids. “Or at least, as easy as it can be. I don’t want them to feel put in the middle or that they’re being asked to take sides.”

Dora wasn’t vindictive, even if a lot of people would think she had a right to be. Dora wanted things to be fair – but knew she and Owen might have different definitions of “fair.”

“He knows I make more money than him, even if he makes plenty on his own. He knows we’re well set – or we were well set – for retirement. I’m sure he knows my accounts are more extensive. But I don’t think he understands how all of that is set up.” Dora gave Jennifer a tight-lipped smile and shook her head. “He doesn’t understand what all of my different compensation structures mean. I’ve given him all the information. Every document that I’ve shared with you, I’ve also shared with him. I would never try to hide anything, but I also don’t think it’s my responsibility to educate him.”

Jennifer knew what Dora was getting at – her retirement fund was larger than Owen’s, a fact he was certainly aware of. But not all of Dora’s retirement savings were indicated in a single fund. Between additional stock options and deferred compensation, her retirement savings were easily three times

higher than her 401k alone would indicate.

Dora made sure all of the information was available to Owen, just as Owen had made sure all of his information was available to Dora. But that didn't mean that Owen understood how each account worked – and Dora felt no obligation to explain it. Besides, there was nothing stopping Owen from hiring a CDFA himself.

Because Dora had sent over so much information ahead of time, Jennifer had already created extensive spreadsheets, detailing her finances. She had broken down Dora and Owen's finances into three different categories:

- Assets, like their shared home and cars
- Money that was currently available to them, like investments and savings accounts
- Money set aside for retirement

Because of the difference in their salaries, Dora knew she'd likely need to pay both child support and spousal support to Owen. She didn't care about child support – she was happy to send Owen whatever money the court decided upon if it was going towards their children's well-being. For their sake, she wanted Owen to live nearby, in the same town, so that their lives weren't disrupted any more than they already had been.

Spousal support, however, was much harder for Dora to come to terms with.

“He makes plenty of money to support himself. Hell, he makes more money than most families with two incomes! He has a good job.” Dora rubbed her eyes, tiredly. “He chose to have an affair. He chose to break up our marriage. It just doesn’t seem right that I have to continue supporting him when he doesn’t need it.”

“I don’t disagree.” Jennifer wanted to validate Dora’s feelings. “He’s a high earner, too. There is no reason why he should need your help to fund his lifestyle. Especially given the reason for the divorce. I’ll look into some options for that. Maybe it can be part of your negotiations.”

They moved on to talk about the shared home they lived in. Dora and Owen both wanted to keep the house, but they both knew it would be much more difficult for Owen to not only buy Dora out of her share, but also stay on top of the monthly payments. Dora could do this much more easily – but didn’t know the best way to do it. Again, Jennifer agreed to look into Dora’s options and come to their next meeting with a few solutions.

As Jennifer and Dora logged off of their Zoom meeting, Jennifer jotted down her first impressions. Dora was strong

willed, and while she was angry, she was incredibly logical. She knew that there were laws around divorce, and those laws limited what Jennifer and her lawyer could realistically do.

That being said, any recommendation Jennifer made or any solution she came up with would be looked at under a microscope. Dora wasn't going to blindly trust anybody, and she was going to thoroughly examine anything presented to her.

But that wouldn't be the biggest challenge in working with Dora. The biggest challenge would be keeping Dora from getting stuck in the minor financial details. Even in this first meeting, Dora wanted to explore every possible scenario and know her options down to the dollar. Moving forward, Jennifer would have to work to keep Dora focused on the big picture.



Just like with the first Zoom meeting, Dora dialed in exactly 20 seconds early and got straight to business. She informed Jennifer that, in their most recent discussions, Owen seemed to agree that they should both keep their own retirement accounts, rather than splitting them both equally.

“Of course, I don't think he realizes how much more money I have in mine.” Dora gave Jennifer a sheepish smile. “And, obviously, it isn't set in stone yet, so I don't want to get ahead of myself. But it may work out.”

Jennifer knew that, in addition to the retirement accounts, spousal support was at the top of Dora's mind. Because Dora and Owen were both such high earners, it was impossible to use the standard spousal support calculator. However, Jennifer could reasonably estimate Dora should expect to pay around \$3,400 a month.

"I know, it's a lot. Most likely, it will be recalculated if either of you gets a raise, or a work-related bonus. Because of that, it can be very tempting to consider a buyout."

"What is that exactly?"

"If you were to agree on a buyout, you'd pay Owen a lump sum, representative of what you'd owe him over the 23 years of spousal support, up front. We'd then no longer need to consider monthly payments, which would go up proportionally with your income. However, in your situation, I wouldn't recommend this." Dora motioned for Jennifer to continue. "You said he plans to stay with his affair partner?"

"Emily. What does that have to do with this?"

"Yes, Emily. Spousal support is terminated under a very specific set of circumstances – one being if the spouse who is receiving support gets remarried or cohabitates with a new partner. If Owen remarries or even moves in with Emily, the

support will be terminated. Do you think that's something he may do soon?"

Dora couldn't help but smile – finally a silver lining! “Oh, they've already moved in together. I'm guessing he didn't know that would matter.” Dora shook her head laughing. “We can probably take spousal support off the table. I want it in writing, though. That he's waiving it. I'll bring it up in our next meeting, but it shouldn't be a hard sell, all things considered.”

“If Owen is willing to agree to each of you keeping your retirement accounts, I'd try to lock that in as well. Once he realizes he won't be eligible for spousal support, it's possible he'll change his mind.”

Dora nodded slowly. “Good idea.” Jennifer could tell she was starting to gain Dora's trust, and wanted to keep the momentum going.

“Child support, of course, will be calculated separately. If you move forward with 50/50 custody, you will need to give him some money on a monthly basis. It will be quite a bit lower than spousal support, however.”

Dora waved her hand dismissively. “That's fine. It's for my kids. Whatever is typically considered the norm, I'm happy to go along with.”

“Great. In that case, let’s talk about your house. We have a few options here to buy Owen out. I’ll walk you through those first, and then I’ll give you my recommendation.”

Jennifer explained that both Owen and Dora were entitled to half the equity built in the house. If they were to sell the house, it would be easy – each of them would keep half of the profits. However, if Dora was going to keep the house, she would need to give Owen the amount of money he could expect in the event of a sale.

One way to do this would be to pull money from a savings account or CD. First, the money in the account would be equally distributed to both Dora and Owen. Then, Dora could use the funds she kept to buy Owen out of the house. The other option, and Jennifer’s recommendation, was to refinance the house. This would allow Dora to keep the rest of her assets intact, and the monthly payments would still be easily manageable. Even if Owen’s living situation changed before the divorce was finalized and he became eligible for spousal support again, Dora would be able to afford the mortgage.

Jennifer also explained that, while the interest rate for refinancing a house and getting cash out above the current mortgage amount, for example, to pay off debt is typically higher than a straight refinance and is referred to as a “cash out” refinance, When someone is refinancing due to a divorce

and using the proceeds to buy out the equity its referred to as a buy out and can normally qualify for the current market rate. “I do have a referral, if this is the path you’d like to take.”

Dora shook her head. “I do think I’ll refinance, but I know somebody at my current bank. I will ask that you look over the paperwork, though.” The way Dora said it, Jennifer knew it wasn’t a question.



Less than a week later, Dora met with her contact at my current bank and had the refinancing paperwork drawn up. Jennifer reminded Dora that it needed to be labeled as a buyout refinance, not a cash out, as that could make a big difference in the mortgage rate.

Still, when Jennifer reviewed the paperwork, she was unsurprised to see the incorrect language – and incorrect rate – was used. When Jennifer alerted Dora, Dora was visibly annoyed. Her contact had assured her that the paperwork was correct and she wondered if it was an accident, or if he was trying to take advantage.

Jennifer explained that he may not have known. Divorces are incredibly complicated – it’s why CDFA’s exist – and if it wasn’t his specialty, he may not have realized why or how Dora could get a lower rate.

Dora scheduled a Zoom meeting with the contact at my current bank, where Jennifer explained his mistake. He was apologetic, and immediately fixed the paperwork, but for Dora, the damage was already done. Dora needed a team she could trust fully – and unfortunately, this guy had lost her trust, whether or not it was an honest mistake.

“Jennifer – your friend – does he specialize in divorce?” Dora asked, almost immediately upon severing ties with her contact.

“Yes, he does. He’ll know exactly what you’re asking for, and the correct way to set it up.”

Dora nodded – it was decided. She’d be working with whoever Jennifer recommended.



Dora had begun to deeply trust Jennifer, and decided it was vital that she, Jennifer, and her lawyer all have a short meeting to prep for the next negotiation with Owen and his attorney. They used this time to go over what Dora wanted – and it paid off.

Owen agreed to waive spousal support as part of the divorce decree. This wasn’t a hard sell, once he realized that he wouldn’t qualify for it, as he was already living with Emily.

The couple also confirmed that they'd be moving forward with 50/50 custody (with Dora paying whatever the necessary child support was), and decided that this custody split would include their beloved golden retriever. Neither one of them was willing to part with the family dog, and they knew the kids would want him with them, regardless of which home they were at. Any vet bills or costs associated with pet care would be split evenly – terms that were added to the official paperwork.

The only thing left to discuss was the retirement funds. As Dora feared, after Owen learned he wouldn't be receiving any spousal support, he was more hesitant to agree that they should both keep their own accounts. Dora tried her best to keep a straight face and avoided speaking too specifically about her understanding of what each account contained.

By the end of the meeting, retirement funds were the only issue left unresolved. Dora could tell that Owen still felt a tremendous amount of guilt, and was confident she'd walk away with most, if not all, of her retirement funds intact.



With only a few weeks left before the divorce was finalized, Dora was feeling cautiously optimistic that she would get everything she wanted. She was keeping her family home, and, thanks to Jennifer, would be refinancing at the market

rate. Owen was waiving spousal support, which Dora made sure was in writing. She had put too much faith in Owen's word before, and she wasn't going to make that mistake again.

In the last month, Owen even agreed to each of them keeping their own retirement funds. Watching Dora handle the divorce with grace while treating him with far more kindness and respect than he treated her with during their marriage had only increased his guilt. He didn't want to take more from her than he deserved – he had already put her through enough.

He was about to put her through just a little bit more. Two weeks before they were set to sign their divorce papers, Emily broke up with Owen and moved out of his new home. Maybe the realities of being with a man 20 years her senior had started occurring to her. Maybe the spark of the relationship was gone now that they no longer were sneaking around. Maybe she wasn't ready to become a stepmom to three kids who, despite Dora's refusal to talk badly about anyone, knew Emily's role in their parents' split. Dora didn't know, and she didn't ask.

Inside, she was giddy. Owen was getting what he deserved, and she didn't have to be the bad guy. She never wanted to stoop to his level or hurt him as badly as he hurt her, but it still felt like karmic retribution. She knew Owen would

move on one day, and she wanted that for him. But she hated having to see Emily's face when she came with Owen to pick up the kids, or knowing that her children were sleeping under the same roof as her.

For his part, Owen finally realized that he had made a mistake, not only in treating Dora the way he had, but in having an affair in the first place. Dora knew her soon-to-be ex-husband better than anyone – after all, they had been married for 23 years – so she was unsurprised when he asked her to give him a second chance only a week before the divorce was set to be finalized.

This was what Dora had been waiting for – and what Owen had refused to give her. From the very beginning, he never fought for her, or gave her any inkling that he found their marriage, that he found her, worth fighting for. And now, here he was, at her door, telling her how full of regret he was. He realized how much he was leaving behind, he hated how much he had hurt her, and he would never forgive himself for what he did to their family. But if she could find it in her, he wanted a second chance to make their family whole.

While this may have swayed Dora a year ago, when the divorce first started, Owen underestimated how much she had grown. For the first time since she married Owen 23 years ago, she was putting herself first. She spent 23 years pouring

all of her energy into serving her children, taking care of her husband, and proving herself to her employer. She forgot to take care of herself, and didn't notice that nobody else was taking care of her either. Owen certainly didn't value her – once she knew about the affair, she was able to see how many other things she had overlooked.

All of this raced through Dora's head as Owen stood, pleading with her, on the doorstep of the house they used to live in together. She immediately realized how carefully she needed to tread. She couldn't laugh in his face, or tell him he got what he deserved. She couldn't slam the door or yell at him.

The divorce wasn't final until the papers were signed. She couldn't risk making Owen angry and having him reopen any of their financial agreements. She didn't want him to realize that spousal support was officially back on the table if he didn't choose to waive it.

She also found that she didn't want to laugh or yell at Owen. She was better off now. She may not be truly happy, but she knew she'd get there. She didn't need to prove anything to Owen – and hurting him wouldn't help her.

"I'm so sorry, Owen. I really am." Dora was careful to let Owen down gently. She told him there was a part of her that would always love him, and that she would always be

thankful that he was such a good dad to their children. She told him she missed him too, even if it wasn't true, but that too much had happened for them to go back.

She never asked him not to change the terms of the divorce. She didn't want to put the idea in his head. He told her he understood and walked back down the driveway, his shoulders drooping as he went.



The day Dora walked into court to sign her divorce papers, she was relieved. She had spent so much time worrying that Owen would change his mind about something at the last minute, but whether it was a lack of realization that he could, or the immense guilt he was clearly feeling, nothing changed in the final days leading up to their divorce.

Dora expected to see scenes from their marriage flash through her mind as she walked across the room and sat down, but instead, she found herself imagining her future. She pictured the beach vacation she was scheduled to take with her friends next month – the first vacation she had ever taken without her family. She thought about dropping her oldest son off at college in two years, or watching him get married. Maybe she'd redecorate her home, or travel to an exotic location that Owen was never interested in. Maybe one day, when she was ready, she'd meet somebody new.

When she first found the texts from Emily, it was impossible for Dora to picture her future past the divorce. Now it was bright, full of possibilities and endless options.

As Dora sat down across from Owen, she gave him a small, friendly wave. She was thankful that this chapter was coming to a close. As she picked up her pen and signed her name, she felt so light and giddy, she was almost surprised she didn't float away.

CDFA Analyzation

We've asked Jennifer, our CDFA, to take a look at this story and explain some of the common mistakes Dora made in her divorce, why she believes Dora made those mistakes, and what she could've done to avoid them.

Dora and Owen's divorce is unique in that both parties are professionals with exceptionally high incomes so that they will both be able to move into the future with financial security. In situations like these, it is the responsibility of a Certified Divorce Financial Analyst to look at the complete financial picture for their clients. Oftentimes, this includes educating the client on their financial assets and debts, ensuring that they understand what they are agreeing to during divorce negotiations.

By using a CDFA during the divorce proceedings, Dora was set up for financial security.

Owen, however, could've benefitted financially from using a CDFA. We're going to take a look at this same divorce from his perspective and explore what advice I would have given him.

First, let's take a look at spousal maintenance. Spousal support refers to payments made by one spouse to the other spouse, allowing them to be rehabilitative and help them to maintain a standard of living.

Owen and Dora both earn large incomes, but there was still a \$350,000+ difference in their annual incomes. Because of this, Owen likely would have been awarded around \$3,400 each month in maintenance. However, Owen was in another relationship, and had moved in with his partner before the divorce was complete, disqualifying him from receiving maintenance immediately. Because of this, he waived his right to it from the beginning.

If Owen had lived on his own and received maintenance for just two years, that would have resulted in a total of \$81,600.

Next was the division of the retirement assets. For Owen, this was the largest missed opportunity in the separation of marital assets.

In one of the first meetings with all of my clients, I ask them to build a work history timeline for themselves and their spouses so that we are able to review the employers and their retirement plans. This helps the client understand what to look for and what information to ask the other party about when it comes to their retirement plans.

Had Owen been my client, I would have requested benefit plan documents from Dora. At first glance, it looked like Owen and Dora had similar values in their retirement accounts. However, Owen didn't understand the value of the three pensions Dora had earned from previous employers, or the value of the deferred compensation from her current employer.

If Owen had fully understood how much money he was entitled to, he could've made an informed decision before waiving his rights to an even split of both of their retirement assets.

Clients only have once chance to make the right decision when going through a divorce. In some cases, having all the information may not change somebody's mind on what they want to pursue, and what they are willing to waive their rights to – but it is always better to be informed.

Attorney Analyzation

We've asked Michone Riewer, an attorney with over 23 years of experience in family and marital law, to help us understand Dora and Owen's divorce from a legal standpoint.

From beginning to end, Dora's divorce was handled wonderfully, not only by the professionals employed, but by Dora and Owen. Given the hurt and anger Dora must have been feeling as a result of her husband's affair, Dora's decision to proceed amicably was both shocking and admirable. Her desire to put her children first, regardless of her personal feelings, was the key to the whole case, and likely saved her family unnecessary turmoil.

Additionally, choosing to make the divorce an amicable one allowed the whole process to be less expensive financially. Hiring an attorney that was willing to finalize the divorce in an amicable fashion assisted Dora in meeting her ultimate goal – doing what was best for her children.

As a savvy financial executive, Dora knew very quickly that she needed to hire a financial professional to guide her through the divorce – and that CDFA ended up being a very good investment. Parties who are unfamiliar with the laws and customs in the divorce arena, despite financial knowledge

in other sectors, often find that their financial outcome is negatively affected, while causing them unnecessary stress.

Clients often ask if it is worth the cost to hire a financial advisor to assist with their divorce, and others are concerned that they don't have enough assets or money to justify the cost. Regardless of the income or savings of the divorcing party, we find that those who choose to hire a financial advisor do not regret the investment.

Therapist Analyzation

We've asked Dell Bliss, a therapist with over 25 years of experience, to help us the mindsets of both Dora and Owen through their marriage and divorce.

There is no question that extramarital affairs generate pain, primarily for the resolute spouse. Largely, this is due to the way society (and therefore, the partner) views affairs. Even the use of terms like "infidelity" or "betrayal" emphasizes the violation of commitment by the adulterer and the impact on the spouse.

The adulterer also often looks for reasons to justify their infidelity. For Owen, this likely stemmed from his perception

of Dora as having more control or dominance in their relationship. The thrill likely gave Owen a sense of defiance, while simultaneously punishing Dora for perceived slights and pushing her away.

When Dora first discovered the affair, it likely elicited the belief that Owen's affair was a negative reflection on her competency and adequacy as a wife and partner. She feels that something was done to her, as opposed to realizing that Owen's behavior is a reflection on him, and him alone. Much like a partner's financial shortcomings would not entitle their spouse to rob a bank, Dora should not take her husband's personal decision as a reflection on her personally.

Throughout the divorce, we repeatedly see that Dora does not allow herself or her adequacy to be defined by Owen's affair. She maintains her own, separate identity, and instead of feeling diminished or embarrassed, she becomes an observer of her partner's loss of integrity and character.

This perspective helps the resolute spouse maintain emotional stability and develop greater differentiation through very destabilizing circumstances. It allows them to use the pain to further develop personally, and give a difficult experience direction and meaning. This reaction is also what can lead to self-reflection and growth for the adulterer – or even the couple working through the infidelity. When the

resolute spouse does not feel hurt or diminished, the affair often ends, forcing the adulterer to address their underlying anger, dependency, and insecurity issues, which initially lead to the affair.

In marriages that last as long as Dora and Owen's, the reasons couples choose to stay monogamous typically changes overtime – but there are four points of balance within a relationship that need to be maintained.

First, both partners need to maintain a solid, flexible self, rather than depending on blaming or insisting their partner is perpetually wrong during times of conflict.

Second, having a quiet mind and a calm heart, allowing each partner to get over emotional wounds.

Third, in conflict resolution and in daily life, partners need to make grounded responses, rather than attacking when transgressions or disagreements are brought to life.

And finally, both partners need to have the ability to endure meaningful pain. Rather than holding grudges and seeing their partner as the enemy, these marriages use pain as an opportunity for personal development.



CHAPTER 7

COST OF NO ACTION

Nadia stared at her email inbox, and her email inbox stared right back at her. She narrowed her eyes slightly, as if blurring her vision would make at least a few of the unread emails disappear.

There were seven from her divorce attorney over the past two weeks, two or three from her financial advisor, and just one from her estranged husband. Nadia found it overwhelming – all of those emails stacked in her inbox, each demanding her attention, each requiring that she make decisions that she didn't know how to make.

Ding.

Nadia sighed in relief at the distraction and quickly pulled up the text that Joe, her oldest son, had sent her.

Are you busy this weekend? I was thinking of coming home for a few days if you're around.

Nadia smiled and immediately wrote back.

Of course you can come, honey. I'll be here.

This was, after all, why it was so important to her to keep her family's home. Even though both boys were away at college and her youngest traveled frequently for football, she wanted them to know that their home was always available, just like she was.

Nadia glanced back up at her computer. There were so many pressing emails to open, but she couldn't look away from Andre, her estranged husband's, name. She clicked on his name, and as the email opened, tried to mentally prepare herself for what was about to come.

Are you f—king crazy, Nadia? I'll never agree to any of this. You know I won't. You're just wasting both of our time being selfish.

I know my rights.

Nadia froze. She should've been expecting this. She rarely received any other kind of email from Andre – why would

this one be any different? She glanced back at her inbox. She knew she should continue reading, especially the notes from her lawyer, Douglas, or her financial advisor, Jennifer. At the very least, she knew these emails would be productive. Instead, she sat in the same position, paralyzed by Andre's words, until it was finally time to go to bed.



Nadia couldn't remember the last time she felt love, or any positive emotion, for Andre. Sometimes, usually right after she received a nasty email, she'd force herself to think back and try to pinpoint exactly when it was that they stopped being lovers, or even partners, and started living more like roommates.

She knew there was a time when she loved him. Certainly, when they first met. She had just secured her first full-time position working as an in-house patent lawyer for a large tech company when she met the young, confident accountant working in the building next door.

They had so much in common and the conversation flowed easily. Both of their families had immigrated from Peru. She didn't have to worry about meeting somebody who didn't understand the value of her culture and traditions. Instead, she found someone who shared them.

She knew she still loved Andre when each of their two boys were born. She loved watching him be a dad – the way he played with the boys, sang them songs in Spanish, and cuddled them close to his chest. Most of the care-giving responsibilities fell to her, but Nadia expected this. It was normal in their culture, and culture was important.

She didn't stop loving him when he lost his job, either. She was already the primary breadwinner – and they could afford to get by on just her salary until Andre was back on his feet.

But Andre never got back on his feet. He found losing his job to be a traumatizing experience and wasn't sure he'd ever want to work again. By this point in his career, he was a financial expert, so when he crunched the numbers and declared Nadia's salary would be plenty for them to live on, she knew he was right. Nadia was bringing home over \$200,000 a year, they had begun saving for retirement the moment they got married. Not to mention, both boys had large college funds set up.

If his income wasn't needed, why should he return to work? Instead, Andre decided he would be a stay-at-home dad.

Nadia tried not to laugh at his plan. Their kids were both in high school. Between study groups and extracurriculars, they weren't home enough to need a stay-at-home parent. Still,

Nadia had been stressed out from working long hours, only to come home and begin cooking dinner, doing daily chores, and arranging rides to and from each of her kids' activities. If Andre was at home, that would take pressure off her.

Andre had a very different idea of what it meant to be a stay-at-home dad. He refused to help with any childcare or household chores, citing that it was Nadia's job as a woman to take care of the home. If something broke, he didn't make repairs, and similarly did not believe it was his duty to call somebody to come fix it.

"This is how we grew up. This is our culture. Why are you turning your back on it?" Andre would ask any time Nadia complained. She recognized the double standard – if it was a woman's job to take care of the home, it was a man's job to provide for his family – but she was always scared to stand up to Andre. She hated the insinuation that she didn't care about their traditions or culture. More than that, she was scared to hurt his feelings. Nadia kept her head down and continued to bring home her paycheck and run their household.

Andre, however, did believe one thing fell within his duties as man of the house – he was going to manage their finances. He would use his experience as an accountant to make sure they were budgeting correctly, saving money, and planning for the future. He kept track of every single dollar Nadia

made, and every single dollar any of them spent.

He wanted a pat on the back for how much he did for their family, but Nadia was too exhausted to stroke Andre's ego anymore. She had been feeling burned out at work for years, and before Andre lost his job, she was considering changing positions, even if it meant taking a pay cut. Now, this was out of the question. With no end in sight to her current workload in the office or at home, she was starting to crack.

She didn't remember exactly when it happened, but somewhere along the way, her marriage was no longer about love, or even convenience. It was just another chore.



Nearly a decade after he lost his job, Andre decided their marriage was a chore for him, too. With the boys in college, Nadia finally prioritized herself and found a job where she'd be making less money, but feel better mentally. She was still making six-figures, and knew they'd be able to get by.

Andre was furious – he was the man of the house, and this should have been his decision. Nadia's blatant disrespect for his authority was the final straw.

By the time Nadia knew Andre had left her and their children, he was already in Peru, where most of his extended family

still lived. He wasted no time in filing for divorce, and letting his demands be known.

He wanted half – of everything. Half of the equity built in their home, half of their savings, half of the retirement funds Nadia had been putting money into since her first day on the job.

Not only did he want half of their existing assets, he believed he was entitled to monthly payments from Nadia. She was sure this couldn't be right – their children were adults; why would she owe him anything?

Nadia didn't know how to feel. She was hurt. She was angry. She was blindsided. She was betrayed. She didn't miss Andre, but she was shocked at the cruelty of his demands. Andre hadn't worked in over a decade – he didn't contribute to their home financially, or otherwise, and had moved to a country where the cost of living was a fraction of what it was where they had raised their family. Yet, he had the audacity to demand half of the assets she had acquired, and thought she'd keep paying him!

She enlisted a lawyer immediately. She had spent their entire marriage doing whatever Andre told her was right. This time, she was not going down without a fight.



If Nadia thought a good lawyer would have a trick up his sleeve to get her out of any and all financial obligations to her estranged husband, she was sorely mistaken. She knew her situation was unorthodox to say the least, so she employed a top divorce attorney, Douglas Feldier, to protect her.

Legally, Douglas wasn't sure there was much he could do – there was no pre- or post-nuptial agreement, and while Andre hadn't worked in a long time, there was no reason for a judge to believe he was anything other than a typical stay-at-home parent.

Douglas went over what Nadia and Andre were each likely to keep in the divorce, as well as what Nadia could expect to pay in spousal support.

“Spousal support?” Nadia asked. “Our kids are over 18. Why would I need to give him any support?”

Douglas shook his head. “Spousal support is different than child support. Think of it this way – if one partner makes considerably more money than the other, or if one partner does not have an income at all, that partner is reliant on their spouse's financial support. In the event of a divorce, they'll still be obligated to help support their ex financially. Andre hasn't worked in a long time – so the obligation would be on you.”

Nadia felt a loud ringing in her ears. “How long would I need to pay him for?”

“Typically, it would be the amount of time you were married. So, in your case, most likely 25 years.”

Nadia’s feelings immediately shifted from anger to fear. She’d have to pay him a portion of her income for 25 years? She was most likely going to lose half of her savings to Andre; now she was going to lose some of her income? Nadia didn’t know if she’d have enough money to live off, or if she’d even be able to stay in her home.

Douglas explained that it would likely be in her best interest not to keep her home, but Nadia wouldn’t hear of it. When her boys visited her on college breaks, where would they stay? Their father had already abandoned them by moving to Peru – she wasn’t going to abandon them, too.

Douglas pushed her to consider selling her house – without it, she could easily get by. But if she needed to not only buy Andre out, but continue to make the monthly payments, it could be more difficult.

They were at an impasse. Nadia felt the same paralyzing fear that kept her from making demands of Andre during their marriage creeping over her. She started ignoring her

lawyer's calls and emails. She knew it wouldn't get easier the longer she waited, but for the time being, she didn't know what else to do.

Eventually, Douglas got through to Nadia. At first, the conversation was civil, if not oddly formal, but the second they started discussing the house, things became contentious again.

"I'm telling you, Nadia, you need to sell the house." Douglas contained his annoyance well, but Nadia could still hear it in his voice.

"Well, Douglas, I'm telling you that I'm not selling my house. You need to think of another way."

There was a long pause, and for a moment, Nadia thought Douglas had hung up.

"I don't know if there is another way. But there is somebody you can talk to who will."



The first time Jennifer met Nadia, she found her to be thorough, but a little disorganized. Nadia arrived at Jennifer's office with all of her paperwork – financial documents, pay stubs, bank statements, and more – stacked neatly in two reusable Trader Joe's grocery bags. The documents were fairly

well organized, but clearly hadn't been examined closely. Some of the envelopes weren't even open.

When Jennifer held out her hand, she could see Nadia's trembling just a little as she extended hers, in turn. She knew it would take some time for Nadia to trust her – or to even relax. She walked Nadia through her process. She was going to review Nadia's financials very carefully and create a spreadsheet and a plan. But before she could dive into the numbers, she needed to know more about Nadia's goals. What was she hoping to keep? What would she consider a best-case scenario?

"Honestly, I just want the divorce to be fair." Jennifer looked at Nadia – she had heard from Douglas that Nadia was being unreasonable – she wasn't expecting this.

"Okay. When you say fair, what does that look like to you? What is an equitable split?"

"He gets nothing." Nadia said it with such a straight face that Jennifer thought she was serious at first. "I'm only kidding. I know that can't happen. It would be fair, though. I just feel like I brought more into the marriage. Andre didn't help in 9 years – not with money, not around the house, not with the kids, nothing. And then he left us. He's lived off of me for long enough, and I don't want to keep supporting him."

The longer they talked, the more Jennifer understood what Nadia was saying – and everything she wasn't saying. She was hurt, not because her husband had left her, but because she felt taken advantage of and used for so long. She hated the idea of continuing to support somebody who didn't deserve it. More than anything, she was scared to navigate so many big decisions alone.

"I understand how hard this is. Really, I do. Legally, him getting nothing is impossible. Your lawyer is right about that. But we can still fight for you to get more, and to hang on to the assets that really matter. What is it that is most important to you, here?"

Nadia took a long pause. "I know it sounds silly. I know it's a stupid decision to make." Nadia shook her head. "I don't want to sell my house. I can't. Douglas says I have to, but... there has to be another way."

Jennifer nodded. "I can't promise that I'll recommend that you keep your house, or even find a realistic solution. But I'm going to go through all of your records, and if there is a way, I will find it."

The more Jennifer and Nadia talked, the more Jennifer realized what it really was that Nadia wanted. Nadia wanted to be in control. Andre had managed the finances their entire

marriage – and now that the marriage was ending, he was making big demands of Nadia financially. Her lawyer, well-meaning as he was, knew that selling her home was the best option, and refused to see Nadia’s point of view.

As Jennifer and Nadia continued to talk through her other financial goals, including those far beyond her divorce, Jennifer wanted Nadia to know that her wants mattered too, and that Jennifer was on her side.

By the time Nadia left their first meeting, she felt noticeably lighter. It wasn’t just that she was leaving behind bags full of financial documents. It was that, for the first time in years, she felt heard.



Jennifer thought her first meeting with Nadia was a success, even if she wasn’t sure how to give her everything she wanted just yet. She knew that Nadia was tired of being pushed around and told what to do. Regardless of what Jennifer found when she went through the records, she knew that what Nadia really needed was to see her options so that she could make a decision.

Jennifer could boil down Nadia’s requests to two key areas: she wanted to know that she’d be able to survive financially once she lost half of her assets and began paying

spousal support; and she wanted to keep her house.

Jennifer started organizing the documents in Nadia's bag and populating the information into a few spreadsheets. One thing was clear right away – with a little bit of planning, Nadia was going to be okay. There were a lot of assets, and even though she'd need to split most of them with Andre, she would have a lot left over.

Andre would get spousal support – there was no legal way around it, unless Andre decided to waive it, which was clearly never going to happen. The only other option was to negotiate a buyout of the spousal support – essentially, Nadia could give Andre a lump sum upfront, rather than continue to pay him monthly.

Nadia's monthly expenses were fairly low, and even with her recent pay cut, she was still a high earner. She would be able to make a reasonable monthly budget that left Nadia plenty of room to travel for her son's football games and save extra money each month.

The difficult part of the budget was the house. The more Jennifer looked at the finances, the more she was inclined to agree with Nadia's lawyer – it was in Nadia's best financial interests to sell her house. Of course, Nadia had made it clear that she did not want to do that. It meant more to her than

the amount of money it was worth. It was the place she raised her children, and even though they were away at school, it was still what they considered home.

Financially, Jennifer knew it was in Nadia's best interests to sell the house, and she'd tell her that. But she also knew that some decisions couldn't be made devoid of emotion. Nadia was only human, after all.

After reviewing all of Nadia's finances and coming up with options for how to approach each facet of the divorce, Jennifer was ready to meet with Nadia again. She was determined to prove to Nadia that she was going to be her advocate every step of the way.



As Jennifer walked up the cobblestone path to Nadia's Brownstone style home, she couldn't help but feel a little nervous. She had rehearsed what she was going to say in the car the entire drive down, determined to prove to Nadia that she had heard her in their first meeting and was on her side.

It had taken much longer than Jennifer was used to to get a response from Nadia, never mind getting this meeting on the calendar. As Jennifer rang the doorbell and waited for Nadia to answer, she was a little concerned that Nadia would send her away at the last moment, or not even be home.

As it turned out, Jennifer didn't need to worry.

Nadia greeted Jennifer warmly, welcoming her inside and giving her a small hug. She was still reserved, but was clearly more comfortable being in her home. Jennifer immediately understood why Nadia was so attached to the house. Nothing was ostentatious or flashy, but everything was well taken care of and had the unmistakable air of comfort.

As they sat down in the dining room, Nadia slid into the seat at the head of the table. "I always sit here," she explained to Jennifer. "Andre would say it was the seat for the man of the house – but I like sitting here."

Jennifer smiled. "It suits you."

As Jennifer pulled out the spreadsheets she had drafted for Nadia, she reminded herself to take things slowly. Nadia was easily overwhelmed when bombarded with information, so it was important to explain everything one step at a time. She walked Nadia through each category of assets – savings, CDs, and anything else that was available to her immediately; assets, such as the house or cars; income; and retirement funds.

Nadia seemed pleasantly surprised by how much money she had accumulated over time. She asked questions

occasionally while they went, and while she didn't take notes, Jennifer could see her listening intently.

Once Nadia had a full view of her financials, Jennifer moved on to talking about the divorce. It was unrealistic to believe that Andre would get nothing. Pushing that idea would only delay the divorce, and it was in Nadia's best interest to finalize everything as soon as possible.

"Why?" Nadia asked. "Why is it better for me to get through it faster?"

"Every day, you're continuing to make more money. Your retirement funds and savings are growing. Your house is likely gaining in value. It may seem like a small amount, but it adds up quickly. The longer you wait to finalize the divorce, the more time these accounts will grow – which means there will be more money to split."

Nadia nodded, but looked upset. "I hate this. I don't want to give him anything. I worked so hard for so long. I hate that I have to give him so much."

Jennifer put her pen down and considered Nadia carefully. "You can't think of it that way. It's not about what you have to give him, but what you get to keep. Your lives have been intertwined for 25 years. You want to fully untangle him

from your life, right? This is the cost of doing that.”

“Is the cost of that going to be my home? Because I really don’t think I can bear that.”

Jennifer knew they were coming to this point. “I’ve been looking into your home, along with everything else. I have to warn you that I agree with Douglas. Financially, it is in your best interest to sell.” Nadia looked deflated. “However, it isn’t impossible for you to keep it.”

Nadia looked up quickly. “Tell me how.”

Jennifer explained that Andre was entitled to half of the equity in the house – whether or not he received those funds from the sale of the home or from another account didn’t matter. The house was worth about \$300,000, and \$180,000 was already paid off. This meant that Andre and Nadia were each entitled to \$90,000 from their home.

“If you sell the house, it’s easy. He gets half, you get half. But if you don’t sell, you just need to find a way to buy him out of the house. This could come from your retirement funds, savings or CD accounts, or by selling other assets.”

Nadia wasn’t as happy as Jennifer expected her to be. “It isn’t fair. I owe him \$90,000 to keep the house that I pay for. I’m

the only one that pays for it! I'm the only one that's paid for it for years! And now, I need to give him \$90,000 if I want to keep it."

"I know it's tough to swallow. But don't think of it like that. Think of it like this – you love this house. You don't want to lose this house. \$90,000 is the cost of keeping it."

Jennifer was dreading the part of the conversation that came next, but she was ready for it nonetheless. "Let's talk about spousal support."

The tone in the room immediately changed. "I'm not paying spousal support. There's no way."

"It's required by law, Nadia. I know it's not fair, and if there was a way to avoid it all together, I would tell you."

"Do you have any idea how guilty I felt, or any idea how guilty he made me feel when I so much as took a pay cut for a job with better hours? He didn't work for years because he didn't want to. Thanks to me, he probably never will again."

Jennifer listened to Nadia's rant. She knew it wasn't about her or the plan she came up with. Nadia was frustrated in general, and she wanted some acknowledgment that she had a right to be.

Jennifer tried to keep the conversation rooted in facts moving forward. First, focusing on the legal aspect – what is typically required by the law, the amount of time, and what circumstances (such as cohabitating with a new partner or marriage) would disqualify Andre from receiving any more support.

She also explained what would change the amount of support he was given each month. If Andre received a new job and started making more money, the amount of spousal support would be recalculated, so long as there was true up language in the divorce decree. Additionally, just because Andre chose not to work didn't mean he had no means to make money. The judge would take into account what Andre's earning potential was, and base his calculations off of that.

Nadia started asking questions – not just about how to get out of paying spousal support, but specific questions, which made Jennifer feel like Nadia was starting to come to terms with the monthly payments. She wanted to know how the amount would change if the judge determined Andre's earning potential was lower or higher. She wanted to know what would happen if she got a raise at work, or took a job with a bigger pay cut.

Jennifer patiently walked her through each of the different scenarios, confident that this was a turning point.

After talking about spousal support for nearly 30 minutes, Nadia paused. “I’m still angry, you know. I don’t want to pay it at all. I don’t think he deserves it.”

“You’re probably right.” Jennifer gave Nadia a reassuring pat on the hand. “But remember, this isn’t about what you’re giving him – it’s just the cost of separating from him entirely. And once you do that, you’ll get to move on. You’ll be free.”

“I think I’d like that,” Nadia whispered, and Jennifer was surprised to see tears in her eyes. “I’m ready to divorce him.”



Jennifer thought she and Nadia had made huge strides, but progress remained slow. Nadia wanted to personally negotiate with Andre, who seemed to be purposely slowing down the divorce process. His responses were few and far between – and the ones he did send were full of vitriol, sending Nadia into a tailspin.

Jennifer knew whenever Nadia got one of these emails, because she would become unreachable. Holed up at home, riddled with anxiety, Nadia would become convinced all over again that she couldn’t do this. She didn’t love Andre anymore – but she did fear him, and he knew exactly how to use that to his advantage.

One day, after two months of silence from Nadia, she finally shared everything with Jennifer. “You have to expect pushback,” Jennifer explained. “It’s like spring cleaning. You pull all of your clothes out of your drawers and make a huge mess. But then you put them back the right way. You know this is going to get messy – but then you get to clean up the mess. And I’ll help you do it.”

Logically, Nadia knew Jennifer was right. But following through was a whole different ballgame. She was so conflicted – she needed to move forward, no matter how slowly, to free herself from the marriage, but every time she received one of Andre’s emails, she couldn’t help but shut down.



Several hours after Nadia opened Andre’s latest email, she was still lying awake in bed. She thought about the rest of the unread emails from Douglas and Jennifer. It had been far too long since she last responded, but it wasn’t getting any easier. One step forward, two steps back. She knew she was letting herself be controlled by fear.

Enough was enough. She got up and walked over to her computer, turning on a desktop lamp as she sat down. She opened up the past several emails from Douglas – they alternated between begging her for a response and berating her for not taking action. She could hardly blame him.

She opened an email from Jennifer. This one was softer. She didn't know how Jennifer stayed so patient.

Nadia,

It's been so long. How are you doing? I know this is overwhelming, but once it's done, it's done. If you want to talk through anything again, I'm here.

Best,

Jennifer

Nadia hit respond and began to type, but immediately thought better of it. There was nothing Jennifer could say at this point that would reassure her. She knew she'd survive financially. They had a plan, and Jennifer had already shown her how they could adjust it and make changes if they needed to.

She trusted Jennifer. Money was no longer her hesitation.

She was scared, and the fear was paralyzing her. She was scared of Andre; she was scared of letting down her boys; she was scared of making the wrong decision. She was scared of making any decision at all.

Her hesitation was purely in her own mind, and she was the only one who could decide to push through it.

Nadia opened her drawer and pulled out a folder Douglas had given her. There was an intake form that she had already filled out – she just needed to find the courage to drop it off. As she reviewed the questionnaire from the therapist Douglas recommended, she resolved to drop it off the next day. It was time for Nadia to get out of her own way. She signed her name at the bottom of the form, and went back to bed.

CDFA Analyzation

We've asked Jennifer, our CDFA, to take a look at this story and explain some of the components of Nadia's ongoing divorce.

From the beginning, Nadia's hesitancy to move forward with her divorce is palpable. Andre is not living in the same home with her, or even located in the same country, so it is easy to put off the divorce. After all, out of sight is out of mind. This, combined with Nadia's fears of the future, make it much easier to go about her life as though nothing has happened.

In situations like these, people often think it is easier to wait, or just not do anything at all – but what they don't understand is the high price of inaction.

For Nadia, this can be seen in three ways.

First, in the growing equity of her home. Throughout the past decade of her marriage, Nadia had been the sole income earner, paying all of the family's expenses and bills. With each mortgage payment, Nadia is increasing the marital equity in the home. As Andre is entitled to half of the value in the home, he is directly benefitting from this. Additionally, house values tend to increase dramatically overtime (as proven by the 2021 price surge), further increasing the amount of equity that Nadia will need to pay out to Andre if she moves forward with keeping the home.

Second, in retirement asset value fluctuation. The stock market is unpredictable, so it stands to reason that the only time you can be sure of the exact value of an asset is during the present moment you are in. When Nadia began the divorce process two years ago, her 401k balance was \$900,000. Within two years, it grew to \$1,030,892. In addition to reflecting changes in the stock market, this takes into account Nadia's payroll contributions each month. In just two years, the half Andre was entitled to went from \$450,000 to \$515,446 – costing Nadia an additional \$65,446.

Finally, throughout the divorce, assets are being depleted. Savings can be dissipated in many ways throughout a divorce – from attorney fees to other advisors, mediators, court fees,

and more, when it comes to divorce, time is money. The faster decisions are made, numbers are finalized, and the divorce is completed, the less depletion there will be throughout the divorce process – allowing savings to not only be undisturbed, but to continue to grow.

The largest financial take away from Nadia's story is the impact of time. Taking more time than necessary can be a danger for many reasons. While it is often difficult to make these kinds of decisions, once the clock is ticking, both parties will be in a better place to move forward financially and emotionally.

Therapist Analyzation

We've asked Dell Bliss, a therapist with over 25 years of experience, to help us understand Nadia's journey as she divorces an absent husband.

Throughout her marriage with Andre, one of Nadia's largest challenges was her fear of hurting Andre's feelings, even when they were inconsistent and he fell into a pattern of Normal Relationship Sadism. Initially, Andre claimed that losing his job was traumatizing – something that could have been influenced by his culture and typical gender roles. However,

he was perfectly happy to lay under Nadia's income, while refusing to take on more responsibilities in the home.

Nadia's reluctance to talk to Andre about these issues kept her from knowing the full extent of Andre's malfunctioning. Perhaps he felt emasculated by Nadia's competency as the bread winner or his inability to keep up with typical patriarchal expectations. Alternatively, he may have just been lazy, happy to allow Nadia to handle household and financial responsibilities. Andre began identifying as a victim, masking his own Normal Relationship Sadism (much like Louis and Veronica).

In long-term relationships, there is a trap many couples fall into, related to Other Validated Intimacy (OVI), where there is an increased importance on what your partner thinks, feels, and does, giving you a profound dependency on them. For Nadia, a significant part of her identity is based upon Andre. Shifting to Self-Validated Intimacy (SVI), where a person is capable of being in close contact with others emotionally, but is able to self-soothe and control their own emotions, would help Nadia not only maintain but grow her own autonomy and self-worth.

This shift would help Nadia say the important things that are on her mind and in her heart. During her marriage, this could have been beneficial for Andre as well, as it would have

validated what she knew about Andre's issues and enable her constructively speak about them. Obviously, this does not guarantee that Andre would respond well, but it would give him the potential for growth while keeping Nadia's fears from diminishing her.



CHAPTER 8

THE VALUE OF PENSIONS

Jennifer first met Lee and his wife, Ana Maria, when he was interviewing different financial advisors. As a partially retired manager at a midsized advertising agency, Lee had taken the majority of his pension as a lump sum. This, combined with the money he had been meticulously setting aside in his retirement fund for the past 30 years, had resulted in \$1.8 million.

It was currently divided amongst a number of stocks, bonds, and mutual funds, but Lee was no expert in finance. As he got older, he desperately wanted guidance.

Before he even scheduled the appointment with Jennifer, he checked his wife's calendar. Although he and Ana Maria had kept their finances entirely separate throughout their marriage, he wanted her by his side at every meeting he attended, hoping it would help him pick the best financial advisor.

Ana Maria agreed to come along, but warned him ahead of time that she would not be much help. “This is your money, Lee,” she reminded him as she packed her latest brain puzzle book into her oversized purse. “You have to decide what to do with it.”

Lee agreed, but they both knew it was only a matter of time before Lee would start asking Ana Maria’s opinion, and that he’d be unable to make a decision until she weighed in.

At the meeting with Jennifer, Lee poured over the spreadsheets she had made, reviewing not only her initial thinking about his assets, but his finances overall as he approached full retirement. Ana Maria did not even glance at the sheets – she sat in the corner of the room, her pencil furiously scratching at her sudoku, refusing to be a part of the conversation.

“I think this looks good. What do you think, honey?” Lee asked three, no, four times in the first 15 minutes alone.

Each time, Ana Maria glanced up from her puzzle with a cold look that bordered on disgust. “I do not care.” Halfway through the meeting, she stopped looking up, and eventually stopped responding, save for a small grunt to confirm that she had heard Lee.

Between Lee pestering her with questions, Ana Maria would glance up and register the shock on Jennifer's face. Ana Maria knew she wasn't coming across very well. She vaguely wondered what Jennifer must think of her, but couldn't find the energy to care. If Jennifer put up with what Ana Maria had over the past 30 years, she would understand.



Lee was indecisive – to put it mildly. He had always been indecisive, relying on Ana Maria to guide him, make difficult decisions, and reassure him that he was doing the right thing. Lee felt that this was simply part of his personality, but over time, he became more and more reliant on Ana Maria, until he was incapable of doing anything without asking her what he should do.

What shoes should he wear with his outfit? (The brown ones, they match the belt.) Should this load of laundry be washed with hot water or cold water? (Cold, otherwise the colors will run.) What was the best way to wash this pan? Should he fill up his gas tank now, or wait until the end of the week? What book should he read next? Which news channel should he watch? Should he go to the bathroom now, or wait until right before they were leaving? Would this pasta dish be better served on a plate or in a bowl? And should he eat it with a fork or a spoon?

He would ask the same questions over and over again, no matter how many times Ana Maria gave him the answer or how insignificant the decision may seem. He could hardly even tie his shoes with asking which foot he should attend to first.

It was annoying, of course, to feel like she had to micromanage Lee's life, but it was more than that. She stopped feeling like Lee was a true partner – Ana Maria couldn't count on him to do anything for himself. Grocery shopping? If she gave him a list of 20 items, he'd call her at least 20 times to make sure he was getting the right brands and quantities. Making dinner? He needed to be instructed on which ingredient he should cut and prep first, which bottle of olive oil he should use, and which spatula would yield the best results. He didn't trust himself to do household chores, unless Ana Maria was standing over him, walking him through every single step, every single time.

He couldn't even help their three sons with homework, or later college admissions essays. He simply didn't trust himself to know the right answer, and would insist that Ana Maria double-check everything, too.

After 30 years of marriage, Ana Maria didn't feel like Lee's wife, or even his friend. She felt like she was his mother, constantly having to tell him what to do and how to do it. For

three years Ana Maria had been voicing how unhappy she was in the relationship, and that if nothing were to change, she would need a divorce.

“We can’t get divorced,” Lee would tell her, although he made no attempt to change. “I need you.”



Lee’s finances were the one thing he felt comfortable making his own decisions about. The couple had kept their accounts, finances, and income fully separate throughout their marriage, and Ana Maria liked it that way. She knew the second her name was added to any account, suddenly Lee would need her input on everything.

Which is why, when he asked her to come along to meetings with financial advisors, she felt a sense of dread in her stomach. She was not being roped into this, in yet another facet of their lives.

Forced to make the decision for himself, Lee ended up not moving forward with Jennifer. “That’s too bad,” Ana Maria mused to herself. She liked Jennifer – that’s who she would’ve gone with.

“Maybe I should,” Ana Maria found herself thinking. She had her own savings account – it was nowhere near what Lee

had, not even close. But she had recently retired from her job as a forensics analyst, and knew she could benefit from somebody looking over her savings and pension to make sure she was managing it all correctly.

Ana Maria came prepared to her first meeting with Jennifer, ready to talk about the future, but as Jennifer asked what Ana Maria's goals were, only one thing came to mind.

"I really can't stand my husband," Ana Maria found herself saying. "What I need, is a divorce."



Jennifer could tell that Ana Maria had been considering divorce for a long time. While it seemed like the words just slipped out of her mouth, there was an ease to which she vocalized her needs – and once she had said them, there were no take backs or apologies. Ana Maria knew what she wanted, and although she had considered divorce for a long time, something about saying it out loud, and to somebody other than Lee, lit a fire under her. She was finally ready.

She hired Jennifer on the spot to use as a financial advisor, but felt confident that she didn't need to use Jennifer's skills as a Certified Divorce Financial Advisor.

“This will be very straightforward. We’ve kept our finances separate throughout our entire marriage. There’s no reason for that to change now that we’re separating.”

Once Ana Maria had made up her mind, she moved quickly. She hired a lawyer that Jennifer had recommended, moved out of the family home, purchased a small condo nearby, and told her sons.

Her three sons, now in their early to mid-thirties, were independent and self-sufficient. They were sad, just as Ana Maria knew they’d be, but what she wasn’t expecting was their understanding. They had watched their parents together for years, and while they loved their father, they could see how his inability to do anything on his own was wearing their mother down.

“He’s a great dad,” her youngest son confided in Ana Maria one day. “But my wife would definitely leave me if I was as needy as him.”

Lee didn’t take the divorce as hard as Ana Maria thought he would, either. His concerns were purely selfish. He wondered how he’d possibly get things done without somebody there to guide him. If he was sad about their romantic relationship ending, he never let it show.

Meanwhile, Jennifer tried to convince Ana Maria that utilizing her services as a CDFA would be a huge benefit to her. She knew Ana Maria's plan – she would keep her own pension, totaling around \$6,000 of income a month, any savings or retirement funds in her name, and split equity in any large assets, like the downtown townhome they lived in throughout their marriage. Lee would keep everything with his name on it. Ana Maria thought this was simple – why would she need anyone's help?

Jennifer worried that Ana Maria's desire to move through the divorce as quickly as possible was clouding her judgment. Even though they had kept their finances separate throughout the marriage, Ana Maria was still entitled to half of everything.

“You never know what the future could hold,” Jennifer tried to tell her. “Your income is great, but what if there is an emergency? What if you want to buy a house, or go on vacation? You need more savings.”

Ana Maria waved her off – she knew what she was doing.



Or at least, she thought she did. During their first meeting with their judge, he reviewed their plan for their finances, his face poorly concealing the shock he felt. When he finally spoke, his tone was incredulous.

“I cannot, in good conscience, allow you to move forward without advising that you reconsider everything that is laid out here. This isn’t an even distribution of assets. This isn’t equitable. It’s not even close!” The judge removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. How many times had he sat in this very room, telling couples their expectations were unreasonable? Now, here he was, doing the opposite.

“If you want to keep things simple and move this along quickly, the easiest way would be to agree to split everything. Every asset, every savings account, each of your retirement funds, and Ana Maria’s pension.”

At the end of the meeting, Ana Maria and Lee were both unhappy with the judge’s idea of a fair split. Lee didn’t want to lose half of the \$1.8 million he had to his name, and Ana Maria didn’t want to split her \$6,000 pension every month for the rest of her life.

Ana Maria knew they could choose to ignore the judge’s advice and move forward with the agreed-upon terms anyways. However, having a true impartial party beg her to reconsider what she was leaving behind finally gave her pause. Was she being too hasty? Was she giving up too much?

Ana Maria decided it was time to consult an expert.



Ana Maria hired Jennifer as her CDFA the very next day. She was eager to prove to both the judge and to herself that she knew what she was doing, and that her original agreement with Lee was not as outrageous as they thought.

Short of that, Ana Maria wanted a plan that allowed her to keep her entire pension, and allowed Lee to keep the majority of his assets. She believed there was a way to split their finances more equitably without splitting everything down the middle.

Jennifer showed up to their first meeting armed and ready to go – she had been begging Ana Maria for the opportunity to help her with the financial aspects of her divorce for months, so she was more than ready to explain how the entire process should look.

Jennifer started by explaining that, despite their finances being managed separately throughout their marriage, nearly everything they had was considered a marital asset. Their shared townhouse, which was fully paid off; the small condo Ana Maria had purchased after they separated, which was not fully paid off; their checking accounts, savings accounts, stocks, retirement funds, and all other assets.

There was only one thing that wouldn't qualify – a relatively modest inheritance Lee had received and deposited into his

own account. Inheritances are considered marital assets only if they are stored in a shared account, so that would not be a factor.

Jennifer showed Ana Maria a spreadsheet, breaking down what asset each of them had, and what they were each entitled to in the split. They would each be getting half the equity in the house and Ana Maria's condo, and although their value wasn't exactly equal, they would each be keeping their own cars. This was all very straightforward.

They moved onto the retirement savings, which is what the judge was most concerned about. Despite Ana Maria's regular income through her pension, she had only about \$42,000 listed under "retirement savings," whereas Lee had \$1.8 million. However, Ana Maria had regular retirement income, and Lee did not.

While the judge was correct that the couple could agree to split everything evenly (including the monthly pension payments), there was another way to come to an equitable split. In order to do this, Jennifer needed to show not just what income Ana Maria was receiving from her pension, but what the present value of that stream of pension income is now.

Jennifer did an actuarial calculation – a calculation that takes into account a variety of factors, such as the income, the

expected lifespan of the person receiving the income, how it would be expected to grow overtime, and the present value of the future income stream.

According to Jennifer's calculation, the present value of Ana Maria's pension would be around \$473,000. Combined with the \$42,000 that was already in Ana Maria's retirement fund, her retirement savings were now valued at \$515,000. This meant the difference between her and Lee's accounts was much smaller than the judge had assumed.

Rather than split Ana Maria's retirement income and Lee's retirement savings evenly, Lee could pay Ana Maria a lump sum of \$385,000. This, combined with the \$515,000 Ana Maria's retirement income could be valued at, would make the split equitable for both of them.

Looking over the numbers, Ana Maria was relieved. She could prove to the judge that they could equitably split their funds without doing an even split of all income and assets. She would be able to keep the entirety of the monthly income she had come to expect, and Lee would not be forced to give up half of his retirement savings. She knew the smaller amount would be much more palatable to him.

More than anything, Ana Maria felt that this would allow for a clean break. Jennifer had assured Ana Maria that splitting the

pension would not require her to keep interacting with Lee – any ongoing shared financials would be handled through the court. However, Ana Maria knew that Lee would use it as an excuse to continue interacting with her, and it wouldn't be long before he'd start asking her advice on what to do with the monthly income, or where he should go for dinner, or what kind of dish soap to buy.

The plan Jennifer came up with would give Lee no excuses, allowing Ana Maria to sever communication, once and for all.



Ultimately, Ana Maria was relieved that the judge forced her to pause and that Jennifer helped her not only understand how they could split the money more evenly, but why having a large savings account, and not just a monthly income, mattered.

Ana Maria would have been able to live comfortably on her pension income each month. She could pay her bills, go out to eat, go shopping, and have the fun, flexible retirement she wanted. But life can be unpredictable – and in the case of an emergency, Ana Maria would need savings, not just monthly income, to take care of any large, unexpected costs.

Jennifer also helped Ana Maria see that having savings wasn't just about planning for the worst-case scenario. It was about giving yourself breathing room and facilitating fun

experiences. The money Ana Maria received in the divorce would allow her to buy new furniture, go on vacations, and buy a new car. When the time came, that money could help her put a large down payment together for a new home.

Which is exactly what Ana Maria did. Shortly after the divorce was finalized, with both Lee and the judge accepting the approach that Jennifer recommended, Ana Maria decided to move several states away and start fresh. She relocated to a resort town where she was able to get a small cottage, big enough for her sons and grandkids to visit, right on the beach.

It was something she never would've done before, but as she looked forward to her next chapter, she was filled with excitement. Exactly one month after she closed on her cottage, she stood in the back doorway, looking out at the ocean, drinking a cup of coffee while her brand-new living room furniture set was being delivered.

"Excuse me. Ma'am?" Ana Maria's train of thought was interrupted by one of the men delivering her furniture. "We're all set here. Can you sign?"

Ana Maria looked around at her crisp white couch and padded wicker chairs before smiling warmly at the man. "Of course," she said, and signed her name, before turning back to the water.



EPILOGUE

As you read these stories of real people who experienced divorce, are in the process of getting divorced, or worked through their marital challenges, we hope you learned something new. Perhaps it relates to laws around spousal support and college tuition, special mortgage refinancing rates, the many different ways an equitable split can be calculated, or something else entirely.

If there is only one thing you took away, we hope that it is this – you don't need to go through a divorce alone. Just as a lawyer is there to help navigate the legal terms of a divorce, and friends and family may provide emotional support, a CDFA is there to assess the financial situation, help to avoid common pitfalls, understand long term financial goals, and help to achieve the ideal financial life following divorce.

We also hope you learned about the importance of communication, not just in a marriage, but when going through a divorce.

For Veronica, honestly communicating her concerns with Jennifer, freely asking questions, and breaking down the complicated aspects of her marriage allowed her to thoroughly understand her situation and what life after divorce could look like for her. Without this, she never would have had the courage to leave her abusive husband.

For Nadia, expressing that she would be unable to move forward in a divorce if it meant giving up her house allowed her team to find a solution that would work for her, even if it wouldn't have been their top recommendation. If Jennifer was unable to present Nadia with an option to keep her home, divorce proceedings would've stalled even further, and the judge would've had no choice but to dismiss the case.

Similarly, Dora's desire to talk through every decision with both her lawyer and Jennifer not only helped her settle the terms of her divorce faster, but kept her from getting roped into a mortgage with an incorrect, much higher refinancing rate than she was entitled to.

You also saw how acknowledging the possibility of divorce doesn't necessarily mean that the marriage is over.

You learned about Elaine and Bill Jackson, whose disagreements on how to handle their financials nearly spelled the end of their marriage – and how open, constructive communication ultimately allowed them to avoid divorce, build back trust, and thrive as they entered retirement. For Elaine and Bill, talking about divorce didn't mean it was inevitable – but recognizing how serious their situation had become allowed them to course correct before it was too late.

Similarly, an inability to communicate – and therefore an inability to understand the other's point of view – had brought Lucas and Laverne to the breaking point. Even though they were able to reconcile and stay together, communicating openly, clearly, and calmly enough to reach an agreement would not have been possible without outside help.

In these cases, acknowledging that divorce was an option didn't mean it was the only option. With help, and by talking about their needs, they were able to mend their relationships.

We know that there is a stigma attached to divorce, and this stigma often keeps people from getting the help they need to set themselves up for success. At Tranel Financial Group, we are dedicated to breaking that stigma. We know that, while divorce is complicated and often emotionally draining, it can also be liberating.

Divorce is seen as one of the most financially devastating events a person can encounter – but by guiding our clients through the process, informing them of their rights and options, and recommending the best course of action, we are removing barriers and setting them up to not only survive, but thrive in their lives after divorce.

If you want to learn more about how Jennifer and Tranel Financial Group can help you achieve financial freedom and stability in your divorce or your marriage, don't hesitate to reach out!



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Roch Tranel

Roch Tranel, CERTIFIED FINANCIAL PLANNER™ professional, is CEO and founder of The Tranel Financial Group located in Libertyville, Illinois. Roch has been helping individuals reach clarity and confidence about their financial future for over 30 years. Helping people Enjoy a Better Life™ through successful financial planning is Roch's passion in life. Roch has assembled a team of professional financial advisors who are committed to the same principles and share the same commitment to providing an unparalleled client experience.

Roch has great enthusiasm when it comes to mentoring others. By doing so, he has spoken at 100+ seminars in front of industry leaders as a keynote speaker, hosted numerous training sessions, consulted with other advisors and clients to help them get an edge on investing. His accomplishments over the last 32 years include being the #1 advisor at Money Concepts for over 25 years, holding numerous board and member positions at Rotary, Toastmasters, Chambers of Commerce, church, and scouts.

Roch is the author of three other books, *The Friend Economy* and *Sunny Side Up*, and *Eight Things I Wish I Knew Before I Retired*. Roch resides in Illinois, with his wife, Kathleen, and their children, Jenna, and Alec.



Jennifer Merida

Jennifer started with The Tranel Financial Group in January 2019 as a Financial Advisor and Certified Divorce Financial Analyst. She started her finance career in 2002 as a Retail Vice President of First Security Bank, managing 14 retail banking locations. She moved on to be a Premier Banker at BMO Harris for mass affluent wealth clients managing their investment and banking relationships.

Jennifer enjoys empowering people that are going through difficult times like divorce by helping them gain clarity and control over their finances. Her desire to help them cultivate a new phase of their lives with confidence is something that gives her energy. A CDFA, such as Jennifer Merida, can play a crucial role in helping accelerate the process and ensuring both parties feel the split was equitable and fair to avoid a trip back to court.

Jennifer relishes gardening and working out/running all while playing with her 6 kids; Ethan, Paige, Blake, Kaidence, Jordan and Teo.

Crandell (Dell) Bliss

Dell is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor in the Northwest Chicago Suburbs. Dell received his B.A. in Bible/Theology from Wheaton College, and his Masters of Counseling Psychology from Trinity International University. Since 1997, Dell has been the sole proprietor of Bliss Counseling, specializing in empowering Individuals in their relationships to develop a more solid sense-of-self, increasing their ability to manage the anxieties that often get in the way of good decision making.

These new skills and growth become a catalyst that empowers others, both personal and professional, toward better relational functioning. Dell supports utilizing the natural, built-in processes in all relationships to overcome the tar pits people so easily get trapped in. Currently, he is applying this specialty into the designing and implementing a CEO training program to empower leaders towards the ability to maximize their potential in the face of adversity at multiple levels.

Michone J. Riewer

Michone received her Juris Doctor from Georgia State University College of Law. She has been practicing law for over 23 years with experience in all areas of family and matrimonial law, including custody and visitation, parental decision making, maintenance formerly known as alimony, child support, financial issues, corporate valuations, pre-nuptial and post-nuptial agreements, adoptions, post-decree actions, and civil litigation. Ms. Riewer is a Lake County approved mediator. She also has experience in corporate law and estate planning.

Ms. Riewer is a member of the Illinois Bar Association, Lake County Bar Association, The Association of Women's Attorneys of Lake County, Lake County Bar Family Law Committee, the American Bar Association and she is an advisory board member of the American Academy for Certified Financial Litigators.