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The Exchange: A Novella

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THE EXCHANGE: A NOVELLA

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Bachelor Degree of Arts with
Honors College Graduate Distinction
at Western Kentucky University

By
Katie Knecht

* * * * *

Western Kentucky University
2012

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2012

ABSTRACT

Grace Schmeidler is dealing with her recently broken engagement, which is horrible enough, what with her perfect wedding plans gone to waste. If she think nothing could be worse than the embarrassment she feels now, she is wrong. Her best friend, Audrey, shows up to deliver the only news that could have made her desire to be invisible even stronger; her ex-fiancé married someone else using all of Grace's wedding arrangements. As if this weren't enough, Grace's mother calls with equally unsettling news. Work no longer provides Grace with an escape, and she is forced to deal with life's circumstances from a point of view she is unfamiliar with. This is a narrative about her journey through—not around—a situation she never dreamed she would find herself in.

Keywords: Novella, Exchange, Internal Conflict, Fiction, Wedding, Relationship

Dedicated to the beautiful campus of
Western Kentucky University

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My Creator deserves all my thanks and more, eternally.

My first reader, Dr. David LeNoir, had no intention of being involved in this endeavor when the school year began. I took my first and only creative writing class in the fall of 2011, and he was my professor. After struggling with a topic choice for my thesis, I narrowed in on writing a short novel, and I had no mentors to turn to in the creative writing world. Dr. LeNoir, not knowing my writing or me personally, agreed to work with me throughout the school year in completing my thesis. He has been an excellent mentor and provided guidance that, without, I would not have the finished product I do today.

My second reader, Mac McKerral, on the other hand, has known me since I was a junior in high school and I came to WKU for a tour of campus and the School of Journalism & Broadcasting. He has never officially been my academic advisor, but it was always him I went to to discuss classes and scheduling. More importantly, he has been a mentor throughout my college career, whether I was stressing about his Press Law and Ethics exam, choosing where to study abroad, or dealing with a personal issue. There was no question to me that he would be on my thesis team, and I am very thankful to have had him as a guide during this important time in my life.

My friends and family, all of whom I wish I could name individually, deserve a special thanks for listening to me fret about completing my thesis all year long. I appreciate

all the offers people made to read through my work, even if I was too shy to accept them, which I usually was.

I want to specially thank my dad, who was there for me to bounce ideas off when I first began writing "The Exchange." Aside from listening to me ramble about possible plot lines, he has been more than a daddy's girl could ever ask of a father. I wouldn't be the person I am today if not for him.

Thank you to anyone who has influenced or helped my interest in writing grow. A huge thank you to the Honors College at WKU for providing my college family for four years, and for giving me the encouragement I needed to complete this project. I am proud to present "The Exchange."

VITA

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PREFACE

AN IDEA IS BORN

It wasn't the first time I ever watched *Runaway Bride*, and I wasn't trying to come up with ideas for my thesis, but it happened. After struggling with various ideas I didn't have the time or resources to tackle for my Honors College CE/T project, one fell into my lap one afternoon over the summer of 2011. I was at home, casually watching Maggie (Julia Roberts) fall for Ike (Richard Gere) in *Runaway Bride*. Although she is engaged and has her wedding to another man entirely planned, she chooses to marry Ike instead, but she doesn't change any of her wedding arrangements; she simply exchanges grooms.

This idea struck me as ridiculous. Who would ever feel comfortable marrying someone in the same church they had planned to marry someone else in, with the same flowers, in the same dress or tux, and with the same band serenading the reception? I thought it was completely unrealistic—and then the idea of writing about that actually happening fell into my head.

The same summer, I attended to a keynote address given by Emily Giffin, one of my favorite authors and greatest inspirations. She spoke about her book *Something Borrowed*, in which the meeker of two best friends has an affair with the bold best friend's fiancé. She said it didn't strike her until she was writing the book to make the shy friend betray the other; she said to take the path that might seem unlikely and see how the characters developed. I chose to go for it, and I immediately began writing "The Exchange."

THE STORY DEVELOPS

I chose Louisville as the setting of this story because over the last year or so, I spent a lot of time visiting the area. I wanted the tale to be in a large enough city that Grace could work at a newspaper and have the opportunity to meet new and interesting people, but keep it close enough to home that I could make it realistic. I haven't been to all of the places I mention in "The Exchange," but I tried to keep everything accurate and true to life through research. The journalism and history nerd in me comes out in this area; I want all my facts to be correct.

Grace Schmeidler is the protagonist and central character to the story. The plot begins with Grace waking up to her best friend, Audrey, informing her that her ex-fiancé, David, married someone else using her wedding plans. Grace is almost more hurt that her wedding was hijacked than she is upset over the demise of her relationship. Her type-A, intense personality is a key factor in this. Although Grace used to be much less outgoing, she has become more confident in general and in her relationships, including the one she shared with David for four years. Her move away from home, her quick promotion at the *Courier-Journal*, and her relationship with David has boosted her self-assurance. However, the speed with which she moves up the ranks at the newspaper causes her coworkers to resent her, creating tension in her work life.

On top of the news of David's new marriage, Grace finds out her father is filing for divorce from her mother. Although she always knew her parents were unhappy, she

thought they accepted the way things were to avoid the embarrassment of admitting a failed marriage. Grace has always wanted to avoid this path, and attempts to remove herself from the "American Dream" life, complete with a white picket fence and emotions swept under the rug, her parents brought her up to desire by moving to Louisville and focusing on her career. Relationships were second tier to her. Grace's mother moves in with her, and the parallels of their situations strike Grace as she realizes how overconfident she had become in her relationship with David.

The rest of the story follows Grace's journey in searching for a balance she never had when she was with David, and includes flashbacks to her relationship with him. As she searches for an inner peace, Audrey supports her as any best friend would support another; Avery, Grace's boss and mentor advises her; and an artist named Max provides a distraction from David. The narrative's conflict is generally internal, with a few instances of outward confrontation.

The climax of "The Exchange" occurs when Grace finally decides to half-way give Max a chance, and she comes face-to-face with her ex-fiancé and new wife, who Grace thought was no longer in the picture, at a birthday party for a mutual friend. With the help of a few glasses of champagne, Grace confronts David and realizes that her life with him is truly over. There is no way to return to the happiness they once had, and she can't allow him to lead her on. She has to take the opportunities life affords her as they come.

In the prologue, Grace and Max are at Audrey's baby shower, and it is clear that Grace has moved on from her life with David; she ignores his attempts to speak to her. She has also quit her stressful job at the *Courier-Journal* and devotes time to her writing for herself. At the end of

the story, the reader finds out that "The Exchange" is actually the product of Grace's personal writing.

LITERARY FOCUSES

"The Exchange" is very much a character-focused and character-driven story. I wanted to highlight Grace's

transformation from a self-confident, career-driven woman to her self-realization as a humble, modest woman. There are a few major events throughout the novella, but it is not action packed. The conflict is an internal one, and the plot is driven by the actions of the characters.

I chose to write the story in first person because it is easy for me to weave emotion through a person rather than from a narrator's perspective. As in Emily Giffin's novels, I wrote the story in present tense, which is something I had never done before. I liked the idea of writing events in the present, while referring to past happenings that helped mold Grace into the person she is during the novella. It represents the reflection Grace does on her own life throughout the story, and allowed for little confusion between past and present events.

Dialogue is also a heavily used literary device in my novella. I listen to the words of those around me in order to make conversations as natural and realistic as possible. I wanted to show, rather than tell, the accounts as much as possible, through both dialogue and visual description.

PRODUCTION

I began writing this story in the summer of 2011, although less than the first chapter was completed by the time school began in the fall. I created a timetable with my first advisor to continue adding steadily to the novella. My main concern with this approach was that, along with the distraction of classes and extra curricular activities, it would be obvious that my writing had been done in blocks. I wanted to ensure that the story was cohesive, which I think I ultimately achieved through editing.

My greatest challenge in completing "The Exchange" was getting started with each writing session. As anyone who writes creatively will tell you, it is easy to develop a love-hate relationship with the art. The most difficult part for me was allowing myself to become invested with the story each and every time, although that became easier as the plot developed. Another interesting aspect of writing this novella was that each time I sat down to add more, I was unsure of what might happen. I had a general idea of what direction the story would take, but the details came to me as I wrote and, as cliché as it sounds, spontaneously in the middle of the night or during class.

I read once that all fiction writers project at least a bit of themselves into each character in their writing. This is certainly true for myself with Grace, the main character. Incorporating journalism into the story was not difficult for me, as I have had experience in a newsroom and I shadowed at the *Courier-Journal* for a day. Her personal experiences are ones I can generally relate to, especially

those involving relationships and heartbreak. As I was working on "The Exchange," I experienced a heartbreak that lent itself to the emotional aspect of the narrative. I found, as Grace did, that it is indeed darkest before the dawn.

REFLECTION

For the last half of my college career, when people asked me what my dream job would be, I have answered that I want to be a novelist. It is a lofty and somewhat vague goal, so when I decided to take on completing a short novel for my thesis, I knew it would be a test to this assertion. Although I struggled at times with the task I had assigned myself, and there were moments when I wasn't sure what would happen next in the plot, I never felt more like myself than when I was writing. It is such second nature to me that it is almost my first nature; it is easier for me to express myself through words on paper than through dialogue. After completing "The Exchange," I am confident I will one day be able to write fiction that has the potential to be published.

I feel that, given more time and less responsibility in other areas, I could expand "The Exchange" into a full-length novel, devoting more time to the exploration of Grace's relationship with David and with her parents, especially her father. Grace's evolution could be further considered, as well as the role Max plays in her realizations. These elaborations would create a novel that has the promise of being published.

CHAPTER 1

A dull buzzing gnaws at my consciousness. A tiny part of my brain recognizes this sound and what it means, but it cannot reach the rest of my mind, still in foggy confusion. Abruptly, the buzzing alters to music, a combination of notes that resembles the chorus of "Quit Playing Games with My Heart" by the Backstreet Boys, circa 1996. Finally, I understand that my phone is ringing, and that song means my best friend is calling, and at an unusual hour, since it doesn't seem to be light out yet. Then I remember everything—David. His sad eyes. The dress hanging in my closet.

My hand slides across what I know to be my cream sheets, and I hope that if I don't open my eyes, I won't actually have to wake up. It's too early to have to communicate, much less face the world that is now mine.

At last my hand wraps around my cell phone, and I pick up.

"Hello?" I say in a sleepy voice.

"Grace!" Audrey's voice comes through the speaker as though she hadn't expected me to pick up.

"Aud?" I say tentatively. "Are you okay?"

"Oh, I'm fine! Just fine." She now seems overly calm. "Um...what are you doing?"

If something were seriously wrong, she would have told me. Audrey can't keep much from me for long, especially in a crisis situation. I'm sure no one we know is hurt, and my mind moves to other potential problems: an argument with her husband, Graham? A worry about her daughter, my goddaughter?

"It's—" I check the wooden clock on my bedside table, "six forty-two on a Sunday morning."

"Oh, I know! You're sleeping! Of course you're sleeping."

"Audrey? What's going on?" There has to be a reason she's called so early. She knows I sleep in on Sunday mornings when I can since I have to be up early during the week.

"I—oh—well. Just call me back when you wake up. *Right* when you wake up, okay?" she asks, a hint of panic in her voice.

"Right. I'll just hit the hay again now that you've freaked me out." I sit up in bed. "Come out with it."

"Well—I'll come over," she says. "Just hang tight, okay?"

"Alright, Aud. You sure you're alright?"

"Promise. I'll see you soon."

I shake my head and wonder what she could possibly have to tell me that I could care about. It is day eight, but I don't feel any less humiliated than I did last Sunday afternoon.

I slide out of bed and use the restroom, then splash cold water on my face. I stare at my blue eyes in the mirror and wonder what made David so mistakenly think he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me. He used to look into these very eyes and tell me he had never felt so overwhelmed with love and that he couldn't believe he had been so lucky to find me and call me his own. And now these eyes are alone, and who knows how long it will be before anyone looks into them with thoughts of a future with me.

I turn away and tell myself to keep it together because Audrey needs me. For anyone else, I would change out of my pajamas and at least slide on some mascara, but it's only Audrey, who has seen me in worse than sleepwear, and I'm

still feeling exhausted. Thankfully, my coffee pot is already working its magic since I am up for work this early during the week. I realize that if I were on my honeymoon in Jamaica like I had planned, this coffee pot wouldn't even be crossing my mind.

My thoughts have begun to cycle in the same way, always leading to the same place: My wedding did not happen. My carefully planned, prepared, beautiful wedding did not happen. And not only that—I'm single to boot. Humiliated by my fiancé of one year with a canceled wedding, and I'm left to pick up the pieces alone.

It is impossible to grasp what an unfair situation this is. I am so angry with David for doing this to me. What's worse is that he was as kind as he could have been, considering the circumstances, and his eyes were so sad when he told me he couldn't go through with it. He said that marrying me when he wasn't 100 percent certain that it was the right thing would have caused more hurt in the end. His reasoning sounded pretty noble, but I wanted to hit him in a multitude of places for making me cancel a wedding I had perfected down to the last detail.

After he went home that evening, as if the world were giving me a break it knew I deserved, David had called me to tell me he and his parents would call the venue, the florist, the band and the caterer to take care of everything. I was so thankful that I hardly asked any questions and got off the phone before I started crying again. I think he owed me at least that. I haven't talked to him since then, and I'm honestly glad. I know he is being respectful by not contacting me until after our wedding and honeymoon would have been over. I appreciate his thoughtfulness, even when I want to hate him so much.

I pour my first cup of coffee, add sugar, and wait. I stare at the cup in my hands I randomly chose from the

cabinet: a Disney World mug, featuring Ariel the mermaid. A gift from David when he and I visited the theme park last year. He bought it without my noticing while I gazed around the shop in amazement (my parents had never taken me) and gave it to me once we were back in Louisville. He knew Ariel was, and still is, my favorite Disney princess. Now I can never drink out of this mug without feeling sad. And I'll probably never be able to enjoy *The Little Mermaid* again. When my cup is halfway empty, I finally hear Audrey's knock.

I open the door to find my best friend looking worried and still tired.

"Is everything okay?" I ask. "Why are you up so early?"

She waves her hand. "Callie had me up at five. The girl can't sleep for more than six hours." Seeing the look on my face, she adds, "Don't worry, she's fine. She's with Graham."

She comes inside my apartment, and for the first time I notice she is carrying a newspaper. She sits down matter-of-factly on the couch. "I need to show you something. It's not good news, and you're not going to like it. At all."

I really have no idea what she could be talking about. I had felt certain that if someone we knew had been injured, she would have told me right away. Is she about to open the paper to show me an obituary?

"Tell me already!" I say, sitting down next to her. "Just tell me."

She opens the only portion of the newspaper she brought with her, and I see today's date on the front of the "Lifestyle" section. She glances at me warningly before turning the paper around to face me.

"There." She points to a bolded wedding announcement. It says David Smith was married yesterday.

"Oh no!" I cry. "Our wedding announcement got printed?" Tears immediately begin to form. "David promised he would

take care of
everything—

But Audrey shakes her head.

“What—?”

“Keep reading.”

“‘David Smith wed to . . . Sage Whitehouse’? Who in the world is that?” I have never heard of this girl, and now I understand. Another David Smith in the city was married yesterday, and now people are going to be confused because they were told our wedding was canceled. After all, David Smith is a common name; I work with a David Smith and know there must be several others in the area.

Now Audrey looks like she’s about to cry. “Keep going,” she says quietly.

I don’t know why the details of their wedding should matter, but I keep reading.

“‘Married Saturday, September 16 . . . at Gardens at Ray Eden,’ ugh . . . ‘with local band Ocean Breeze as entertainment.’ Well, they rebooked quickly. . . . ‘David’s parents . . . *Kim and Tony Smith*’?”

And suddenly the couch falls away, and I am no longer able to breathe or think or hear or comprehend. There is no way what I just read can be right. There has been a terrible mistake, a cruel and terrible mistake.

Audrey’s voice reaches me from what seems like an ocean away. “Gracie, I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

She hugs me and I try to move to hug her back, but I cannot make myself move or speak or think. This is not real.

“Is it . . . is he . . . David? Got married? *My David*?” I fumble with my words.

Audrey nods. “He didn’t cancel anything, Grace. The only thing that changed was the bride. He is a horrible, horrible person, and I will never forgive him for this,” she finishes, looking at me as though I should make the same

commitment.

"I. . . ." I put my hand on my forehead. "He. . . . No. . . ."

Audrey rushes to the bathroom and comes back with a wet cloth, which she promptly places on my forehead, and urges me to lie down. I close my eyes as the cool wetness soothes me in the same way it used to when I was little and had a fever. But this is a sickness I know will not fade with medicine or a good night's rest.

"It's going to be okay, Gracie," Audrey says. "I'm right here."

But David is not right here. He is basking in his brand-new marriage to a girl who isn't me.

I didn't think it was real when Carrie Bradshaw slept for two days straight when Mr. Big called off their wedding in the first *Sex and the City* movie. Just stuff for the big screen. But it is Tuesday night, and all I want to do—all I can do—is sleep. And when I'm not sleeping, I'm lying in bed, unable to move. I cannot leave my apartment and enter a world where people know how badly I've been wronged. It's the most humiliating thought I can imagine. I called into work for the entire week, after I had already told my boss I would be in because my honeymoon was canceled. All I know is I can't face anyone at work, even though most of them probably have no idea my ex-fiancé of one week married someone else—and not that they would care. Tensions with my coworkers have been on the rise since I got promoted, and some of them would honestly probably love to hear this huge failing in my life.

You know, the one where a random stranger married the love of my life. In my carefully chosen venue, with my beautifully arranged flowers, with my custom-picked menu, and with the seventh band that auditioned for David and me

in his parents' garage. I'm sure David's eight-year-old niece was the flower girl, wearing the same white dress I selected for her seven months ago. I can only imagine what was going through her mind: *Where's Aunt Gracie? Who is this new lady? Why isn't Aunt Gracie here to see me in my dress?*

The thought brings on a fresh wave of tears in the darkness of my bedroom. The weight of what has happened to me is so heavy that I can hardly do anything but think about it when I'm awake. I don't want to eat, I don't want to read or write or watch television or go outside. There is nothing that could motivate me to put on anything except pajamas or even think about putting on makeup. There is no one I care about impressing. I feel such an emptiness of any joy that only pain and anger are left. Sleep is my only relief, but it's temporary, because I dream about David and his new, faceless bride nightly, and wake to find myself overwhelmed with a pain I swear I can feel deep in my chest.

I cannot believe *my* David—sweet, gentle David—would ever do something like this. It is simply not in his nature. People can change, but they don't change in a week's time. I keep thinking that the next time I wake up, David will be lying next to me, and we will excitedly go over all the details of our special day again and again. I keep thinking that this has all been some horrible nightmare I got mistakenly dropped into, and Audrey will come over with Chinese takeout and help me choose the perfect shade of lipstick to go with my wedding gown. I keep thinking, ashamed as I am to admit it, that these sorts of things do not happen to me. They just don't.

I'm the girl everyone wanted to date in high school. I'm the girl everyone *tried* to hook up with in college. I'm the smart, successful, recently promoted Assistant Metro Editor at the *Courier-Journal*, with enough income to support myself. I care about my weight and looks, and I maintain

them both. I like to take charge of plans and ideas, and I am good at following through. I have led a relatively above-average life until the world's largest catastrophe happened to land in my lap. Why me? Why now?

And it's not like our wedding just got called off. It's not like I only got dumped. The prick and his new wife *stole* my wedding. Stole it! How in the world could I have predicted that, especially with the way David ended everything?

It was last Sunday morning. He called me around 11 o'clock and said he was headed over. This was our usual routine for Sunday mornings, and we often spent the day recovering from whatever we had done the night before, resting up for the week of work ahead. On this particular morning, we were both recuperating from our bachelor and bachelorette parties the night before. David went out with his buds to Bardstown Road, and Audrey took a few friends and me to Fourth Street Live because in the three years I'd lived in Louisville, I had never been.

I was excited to tell David about my night of dancing on the bar at Howl at the Moon, getting free shots from strangers, and laughing with Audrey and the girls. But when I let him in, something seemed off. I couldn't quite place my finger on it. Maybe he had gone to a strip club or had too much to drink and felt guilty about it or something.

"Davie," I said sweetly and threw my arms around his neck. I didn't really notice until after he left, but he didn't kiss me like he normally does when we first see each other.

"Hey there," he said, giving me a quick squeeze.

I had changed into my David-appropriate pajamas (striped cotton shorts with a lacey tank) and we headed back to my bedroom to, I assumed, talk about our nights and maybe take a nap.

As soon as David sat down instead of lying down next to me, I knew something was really bothering him. I sat up.

"You're being weird. What's wrong?"

He was quiet for a moment, which is not unusual for him. I honestly expected him to be worried about some stupid stunt his friends talked him into pulling last night, which I knew wouldn't be as big of a deal to me.

David looked up from his hands and into my eyes. "Grace, you know how much I love you."

I scooted closer to him. "Of course I do."

"I . . . I can't . . . be with you. I can't marry you."

I could never have imagined those would be the words he said next.

"What?" I whispered. "What do you *mean*, you 'can't be with me'?"

"Gracie—" he said, reaching out to me. Suddenly, the thought of him touching me felt so wrong. So invasive.

"Don't!" I said, standing up and backing away from him. "Don't call me that."

He looked down again. "I love you, Grace. But last night made me realize this marriage is actually going to happen, and I . . . I can't go through with it. It wouldn't be right for me to marry you when I'm not completely sure it's what I want."

I had no idea how to respond. I really wanted to punch him repeatedly. "How can you say that? After all these years together, our four-year relationship? Doesn't that mean anything to you? Are you not in love with me anymore?"

"I just . . . I don't know," he said quietly. "I don't know how to explain it. All I know is it would be wrong of me to go through with it. Please try to understand."

"Well, I don't," I said angrily. "It makes absolutely no sense for you to call off our wedding that's supposed to take place in a matter of days out of *nowhere*. You have to

be kidding me."

I thought that if I played the rational card, he would see how illogical he was being. I truly didn't think he would follow through with any of this.

"I'm so sorry," he said, looking at me with blue eyes that were sadder than I had ever seen. "Please know that I'm only doing this because I think it's the right thing. The best thing. For us."

"There is no us!" I said, my voice raised. "You've ruined everything!"

I honestly expected him to recant everything he'd said at any moment and tell me he had no idea what he was saying. That he had gotten nervous for a moment, but everything was perfectly fine, the way we had planned.

"Please—"

"Just go, David."

But even with the threat of parting ways, still he didn't change his mind.

He stood up. "Gracie, don't hate me," he said softly. I didn't want to, but I couldn't help but give in to his hug. Was this really happening? We stood there, embracing each other for a moment.

"I could never hate you," I said, meaning it.

He left me alone in my apartment after a kiss on the forehead and a final goodbye. I cried alone all afternoon before I called Audrey and my mom to tell them what had happened.

After what Audrey showed me in that newspaper, I'm angry at myself for believing one word of his melodramatic lies.

I cannot believe this has actually happened to me. This doesn't happen to anyone, especially someone who worked so hard to do everything right. I drift to sleep lost in tears and memories, with the lingering hope that next time I wake up, I will be in the pajamas I had on last Sunday, and this

last week and a half will not have happened, and my life will return to its normal state.

Instead, Backstreet Boys wakes me up again on Wednesday morning and I know an intervention is about to occur.

"I'm at your front door. Open up!" Audrey says through the phone.

She has checked on me regularly since she left on Sunday night after spending the entire day by my side, even though I hardly spoke. I guess now she sees my mourning period as over. With no energy to argue, I let her in with a feeble attempt at a smile.

She is carrying a large duffle bag and her two-year-old, Callie, who screams, "Gwace! Gwace!"

I know this is part of Audrey's plan to perk me up, and indeed, I can't help but smile at Callie's sweet brown eyes and dark curls. "Hey, sweetie," I say, giving her hand a squeeze.

"Shower," Audrey says. I stare at her. "I'm serious, Grace! This is what you always did for me. Now, go."

It's true. I used to be the one to show up at Audrey's door with a day's worth of activities piled into a bag and a plan to pull her out of a slump that usually involved one jerk of a guy or another. Now she is happily married, has a beautiful little girl, and the roles are reversed.

"Fine," I mumble and head to the bathroom.

With the warm water washing over me, I let myself cry. I don't usually cry—you know, the good, hard kind of cry when you feel like sadness is leaving your body in the form of salty tears. But I do this morning. I cry, and I think about how much I miss David and how he used to take showers with me here. I see him everywhere—in the soap we used to share, in the silly loofa he was with me when I bought. He would gently scrub every part of my body, and I would do the same in return, and we would hold each other under the water

until it turned cold, laughing at our shivering bodies and chattering teeth. I know now that he will never be here again; his wedding announcement has made that quite clear. The sooner I can accept it, the better off I will be. When I finally get out and dry off, I feel cleaner, a little lighter.

"Now, we have several options," Audrey says when I sit down beside her and Callie on the couch, wearing an actual shirt, albeit a v-neck tee, and comfy shorts, my wet hair hanging down my back. A step up from pajamas, anyway, but I can't help but associate it with David. I wore this shirt a couple of weeks ago when we went to Molly Malone's, a fun Irish-style bar and restaurant. I've worn practically all of my clothes with or around David. It just happens when you date for as long as we did. "We have board games, facials, manicure and pedicure kits, movies—all action, no romance—we have coloring books, seasons four, five, and eight of 'Friends,' and four episodes of 'Dora the Explorer,'" Audrey lists carefully.

"Coloring!" Callie says excitedly. "Color, color, color!"

"Coloring it is," I say.

Using crayons is something I never do, so it's actually pretty fun, getting back to the basics of art. Honestly, I haven't done much art or personal writing at all lately. I've been so busy with deadlines and new duties at work and preparing for the wedding that there hasn't been much time.

Callie works quietly and seriously, and I tell Audrey she's got a little artist on her hands.

"Great," she says. "You can give her lessons, because we all know I don't have a creative bone in my body."

I grin and continue working on giving life to a scene depicting Barbie lounging by the pool in a polka-dot bikini. Audrey makes us omelets, and we spend the morning giving

each other facials and manicures while our favorite seasons of "Friends" play. We order a pizza for lunch and use the afternoon to watch "Dora the Explorer" until Callie falls asleep for her nap.

"Thanks for coming today," I tell Audrey.

"I had to do something," she says, tucking a blanket around Callie.

I don't disagree. I feel a little better.

I ask the thought that has been nagging at me since the moment I saw the wedding announcement. "Audrey . . . do you think *they* were together . . . while we were together?"

"I don't know," she says. "I guess it's possible. . . ."

But I know it's more than possible. It's probable. People don't start dating and decide to get married in less than a week, which would have been the case if David had honestly broken up with me and started a new relationship the next day. No, they must have started their relationship long before mine was over.

I nod. "Aud, what am I gonna do?"

"Have you thought about going home?" Audrey asks.

Tears are filling my eyes, threatening to brim over. I swallow and try to keep my voice steady. "And face my father's disappointment?"

"A trip home might be good, Grace. You could get out of town for a while, spend some time with your mom."

"I don't know. . . ." I will have to face my parents and hometown of Metropolis, Illinois sometime, but I want to put it off for as long as possible. I appreciate my parents—don't get me wrong. But going home and getting sympathy from my family, with gossip reaching every street corner about what happened to me, would be like solidifying it. Once I accept "sorrlys" and "it's going to be okays" from people, I have accepted this situation. And I don't want to do that.

"The worst thing you can do for yourself is sit in this

apartment for a week," my best friend says, somewhat sternly. I'm not used to this side of her; then again, I'm not often in need of being comforted. "Everything here is going to remind you of David, so going home will do you some good."

If it were me, I would have already bought Audrey's plane ticket home and packed her suitcase, but she's not quite as straightforward as I am. I have to commend her on this piece of advice that I know is probably right. She does have a point.

CHAPTER 2

Ever since I could afford to buy a ticket for the 45-minute flight back home, I've done that instead of driving. It's about a four-hour drive, but it's miserably boring, especially if I'm alone. David and I have made the drive from Louisville a few times, but I couldn't exactly call him up and ask him to join me this time. His new wife probably wouldn't appreciate that.

After I get my luggage for the weekend from the baggage claim, I find my parents waiting for me, my mom practically squealing with excitement and my dad standing back from the scene.

"Gracie!" she says, throwing her arms around me. She's shorter than I am, but I'm pretty sure she's stronger.

"Hi, Mom," I say as I nearly topple over.

"Welcome home," my father says with a shoulder squeeze. I assume that my mother spent most of the drive to the airport lecturing my dad on how to act around me. She probably told him I'm feeling fragile and one of his buck-up-and-deal-with-it talks he liked to give me when I was growing up won't do much good right now.

"We're so excited you're here!" Mom says as we head to the parking lot. "I'm making your favorite meal tonight." She glances at me and, as though I have forgotten, says, "My homemade lasagna!"

I smile and tell her I'm excited, but I suddenly feel like coming home was a mistake. I don't know how long I can deal with my mother's enthusiasm for life—which is especially increased during difficult times, as though being

peppy will erase debt, death, or, in this specialized case, the complete hijacking of my wedding.

Walking into my childhood home isn't as threatening as anywhere in Louisville; David has been here, of course, but there are many more years of memories involving homemade birthday cakes, Disney movies and math homework. I make a conscious decision to push my ex-fiancé to the back of my mind as I settle into the now-guest room, my old room. The scent of Mom's lasagna drifts up the stairs, surrounding me with the smell of comfort and home that I hope will last the night.

We make small talk during dinner, and I'm forced to wonder what my parents' lives are like when there isn't a guest, which is what I have become. Surely my mom can't remain this excited from one carefully prepared dinner to the next, and I know my father doesn't offer much more enthusiasm about her meals than a grunt of approval when she asks for it. I can't even fathom them having a physical relationship; I have always assumed that was pretty much over after I was born. It's like my dad did what he had to do in order to live that American dream kind of life, complete with a white picket fence he built around the house that my parents have lived in my whole life. Their marriage has always seemed very sad to me, and it's something I have been determined to avoid in my own life. I thought that David's love for me would only grow stronger with each smile, each kiss, each day. But I am apparently a horrific judge of character, so I won't trust myself again anytime soon.

The evening hours pass by as my mom shows me her most recent quilting projects and I try to explain to her the basics of Facebook so she can "keep up with my crowd." This may or may not be a ploy to ensure I'm not threatening suicide on my statuses. My mom: forever overreacting.

By the time David (why does it have to be such a common name?) Letterman comes on in my parents' living room, I am subdued. I can no longer do all the fake smiles and light conversation. I stare at David, unable to comprehend his words, as he throws joke cards behind him, accompanied by the sound effect of a breaking window. At least some things never change.

"Gracie Lou," my mother begins, using her old nickname for me. "We know you might not be ready, but we're here to talk whenever you are. . . ."

I know my mom means well, but I hate being treated like a victim. Which is exactly what I am, and that kills me. I'm living a life I'm no longer in control of. All of my plans with David have evaporated, like spilled lemonade on a hot summer sidewalk.

"Thanks, Mom," I say, hoping she will understand her assumptions that I prefer to keep quiet were indeed correct.

"I always said he was an idiot," my father chimes in. I knew he couldn't keep quiet for long.

"Frank!" my mom squeals. "What did we talk about!"

"Dammit, Shirley! I have a right to an opinion. Grace should have dumped him when she found out he wanted to play with computers all day. Damn gadgets!"

"He was in information technology, Frank!"

I see my dad turning a shade of pink, and I decide to escape before any more less-than-dignified comments get thrown at me. I stand up and head toward the stairs.

"Gracie, please," my mom cries. "Come sit back down. Finish the show with us!"

I turn with a snap toward my parents.

"I'm in no mood to discuss David or our relationship," I say, my voice uneven with nerves. "Thank you for dinner, Mom. Goodnight."

The morning is chilly, a sign that the Midwest is slowly entering the fall season. There will be more warm days, but eventually the cool mornings will give way to days that grow shorter and darker. I'm on the back deck, wrapped in a blanket from the living room, staring out at the sky that is slowly turning purple and pink as the sun begins its day.

Unable to sleep and restless with thoughts, I had decided to check my email and check on return flights until the brightness of the old PC screen in the guest room made me sleepy. I logged onto Facebook to accept my mom's friend request, and I realized I could probably find out more about David's most recent . . . episode. I still can't bring myself to call it his "marriage." In my mind, there is no way it can be legitimate.

I paused for a second, unsure of whether or not I wanted to see what was there—status updates about his new bride, tagged photos of him in the tuxedo I chose for him, congratulatory wall posts—but I couldn't push the curiosity aside. I typed "David Smith" in the search bar and clicked on his name. It went straight to his page—with the option for me to send him a friend request.

I absolutely could not believe it. He *removed* me as a friend on Facebook? The man I had been "engaged to" on Facebook until mere days ago? What was this, eighth grade? I could only see his profile picture and basic information. It was my first sighting of the alleged "Sage Whitehouse." She had obviously taken a photo of David and herself with an outstretched arm. She had bleached blonde hair (gross), straight white teeth, and way too much makeup on. I wanted to laugh for a second at the ridiculousness of David dating—excuse me, marrying—this kind of person. The very kind of girl we used to make fun of together—fake blonde, ditzy in an attempt to get attention, and much less appealing without red lipstick and nine layers of mascara plastered on.

Instead, I started crying. I could hardly read his info through my cloudy eyesight:

David Smith

Male

University of Louisville graduate

Married to Sage Whitehouse

I could have clicked on her name, but by then I was full-on bawling. It struck me then that she has his last name now: Sage Smith. I bet she thinks she's so clever with her alliterative first and last names; actually, she probably doesn't even know what that word means. I used to dream about signing "Grace Smith" on receipts and in my checkbook. Such a clean, fresh name, especially opposed to "Grace Schmeidler." Schmeidler is difficult to spell, pronounce, and especially convey to a hostess at a restaurant. I was so looking forward to the simple change—with the added bonus of keeping my same initials! All of that potential—gone.

After regrouping in my childhood bathroom, still adorned with purple polka dots that I painted myself in the ninth grade, I decided to mingle with the wildlife in our backyard and see how it felt. I went out onto the deck, I thinking maybe I would turn into a nature girl and trek all over the United States with my newly-found, bearded boyfriend Carl and a backpack stuffed full of cans of tuna and energy drinks. But sadly, the idea of only having one change of clothes and kissing someone with a hairy face is just as unappealing to me now as it was before my engagement ended.

I think about the last visit David and I made to my hometown back in July. I planned it out perfectly: we would visit Metropolis in late July, which would give me time to get a good base tan at the country club and go over the last few details of the wedding with my mom. Then I would spend all of August making periodic visits to the tanning bed so

by the time my September 16 wedding rolled around, I would be evenly golden, without looking like I tried too hard—which, of course, I had.

David and I had gone to the pool while my dad played nine holes with his golfing buds and Mom gossiped in the lunch café with all the other wives. We were cooling off in the water, and I remember seeing a family with a little girl, about two years old, waddling around in her built-in-floatie swimsuit.

“Look,” I told David over his shoulder, wrapping my arms and legs around him. “We’re going to have one of those someday.”

He had grinned and said, “I can’t wait.”

“I can!” I told him. “I’m so not ready to lose my figure.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re supposed to gain weight when you’re pregnant,” he said. “That’s just what I’ve heard.”

“I’m only saying,” I said. “I don’t want to be your fat wife.”

He spun around quickly and caught me before my chin touched the water.

“You know you’ll always be beautiful to me.”

But I had stopped listening. He had told me I was beautiful so many times that I was immune to it.

What I wouldn’t give to have that moment back and reply differently. A simple thank you would have been better than the way I shrugged and swam away, always playing a game of cat and mouse with him. Maybe if I had smiled and hugged him, we would still be together, asleep in his apartment at this very moment. Why had I become so comfortable? Why had I allowed myself to believe I really had it all together? Sometimes things really are too good to be true.

Tears begin to escape as I lose myself in regrets, so I go inside to shower and pack. It is Thursday morning and I

have already booked my flight for noon today. I'm fairly certain my father won't have a new outlook on my relationship by the time he wakes up, so staying here can't do much good.

My suitcase is by the door and I'm already on my second cup of coffee by the time my mom comes downstairs in her bathrobe and house slippers.

"Honey-no, no, don't tell me you're leaving-your father was out of line last night, he knows it--"

"Mom, stop," I say. "Please don't worry about it. Dad has his opinions, and that's fine. I just think it's too soon for all of this. I'm not ready to talk about it, and you are. Let's give it some time, okay?"

With shiny eyes and a quivering chin, my mom rushes toward me and squeezes me so tightly I have to ask her to stop.

"Sweetie, I'm so sorry this happened to you," she says, wiping her cheeks. "It's not fair. It's really not."

I smile with strength that I didn't know I had. "It'll be okay, Mom. It will."

I think I'm telling myself that more than my mom.

CHAPTER 3

A new energy has enveloped me, a desire to regain control over what I can in my life. I'm not sure where it came from, but I'm not asking questions. Since my return to Louisville, my level of productivity has skyrocketed, although that's not saying much, considering I spent two days straight in the same clothes after Audrey came over with the newspaper. But I think the wedding-planning fervor I experienced has transferred to my actual life—the one with a job and a rent payment—now that there are no place settings or bridesmaid shoes to select.

I spend the whole of Friday cleaning my apartment: dusting furniture, vacuuming floors, organizing bookshelves, washing dishes, scrubbing the bathroom, rearranging any moveable furniture, and de-David-ing my entire place. No more Ariel coffee mugs, no souvenirs from our trip to Spain, no more goofy socks he had given me as a joke every Christmas we were together. I put my wedding dress for sale on eBay (which hurts like hell), remove any clothes from my closet I haven't worn in the last year, and take them to my go-to consignment shop. With my bed against a different wall, my kitchen table turned hotdog style instead of hamburger style, and no visible trace of David's existence, it's almost as if I have a new place.

I spend Saturday actually replying to emails I've only skimmed through until now, and I take time to read the book I started weeks ago but has lain on my bedside table, ignored. I order chicken and rice from my favorite Chinese place, douse it in soy sauce, and watch 'Friends' for so

long my eyes can't stay open anymore. I fall asleep on the couch with a vague longing for someone to hold onto, an arm to wrap around me, as I drift off.

Sunday I sleep in and make myself a brunch of scrambled eggs with cheese and toast. David used to make us "pirate-eye toast," where he would cut a hole out of the bread and fry an egg in the space. I close my eyes and struggle to find the strength to push David standing in my kitchen, working with the very spatula I hold in my hand, to the back of my mind. I force down some of the food, then head to The Shop.

The Shop is a locally-owned café on Bardstown Road, and my go-to place when I'm writing on a deadline, as it is for many other *Courier-Journal* employees. This place is not heavily associated with David, although he's accompanied me a couple of times and knows it's my favorite spot. I want to regain ownership here. I don't see anyone I know this evening, aside from James, the young barista who knows me by name and makes my order without asking (a grande caramel macchiato, no whipped cream), which I'm glad for. I don't think I can face my co-workers yet.

The warm air filled with the scent of coffee and bagels and the soft Michael Buble CD as background music gets me in writing mode. I jot down a few notes, a few lines that could be the chorus of a song, but I spend most of my time reading through old things I've written—beginnings of short stories, poems that have potential, and chapters of novels I've randomly had ideas for in the past. I'm excited to get back into writing what I'm interested in.

After a few hours, I decide to return to an old tradition of my family's: visiting the pet shop. There aren't many things cuter than tiny puppies staring up at you or little kittens meowing for your love. This turns out to be the worst best decision of the weekend, because I

absolutely fall in love with a white Maltese puppy. His hair is long and silky, and his black eyes are so full of love I could die.

I hold him for a good twenty minutes as he licks my hands delicately. Maybe this is exactly what I need—something to call my own. This puppy has nothing to do with David or the past couple of weeks of my life. This puppy could be mine, and no one else can take part in this decision. I had so much invested in my life with David, and now that it's all gone, I need to claim my own existence.

Two hundred dollars, a food bowl and water bowl, leather leash, and a bag of puppy chow later, I have my first pet. I don't want to rush into choosing his name, so I call him my "puppy duppy" for now. After a warm bath, Puppy Duppy cuddles with me all night, filling a small portion of the gap in my heart.

I wake up early Monday morning, feeling less exhausted than I have the past few days. I take Puppy Duppy for a walk and get ready for work, only allowing a short five-minute breakdown while putting on mascara, as I think of how David used to wrap his arms around me from behind and tell me no amount of make-up could make me any more beautiful.

I wince as I walk through the doors of the *Courier*, memories of my first moments with David here. I make it through the day and work until nearly six o'clock that evening when my boss tells me it's quitting time.

"Surely you can't have that much to catch up on," Avery Cooke, the Metro Editor for the *Courier-Journal*, says. "When's the last time you were here one second past four-thirty?"

His grin lets me know he's joking, but only halfway.

"I've been way too preoccupied with . . . other things," I say as I close out of my email. "Not that I haven't always taken my career seriously, but I'm especially focused now."

Of course I've always taken it seriously, but for the past four years I thought I had David's salary to count on too, a fact I'm embarrassed to admit even to myself.

I smile my professional smile at Avery, an experienced journalist whom I've looked up to since I started working here as a reporter.

"Not the usual attitude of a newlywed," he says, and with a half-second glance at my left hand, he sees he has made a mistake. He opens his mouth to recant, but I stop him.

"Avery, really, don't worry about it. Things didn't . . . work out there. But I'm ready to work here."

"My apologies," he says with a nod. "I'll see you tomorrow."

It's the first interaction like that I've had today because I have kept my door closed and asked not to be bothered so I could spend the day catching up, and I know it's only the tip of the iceberg. I haven't gone out of my way to inform anyone aside from my parents, so I know the rumors must be circulating. My co-workers would love nothing more than this news, unfortunately. After getting hired at the *Courier* as a reporter, I was promoted to Assistant Metro Editor only 11 months later, above reporters who had worked there for years. This caused resentment of epic proportions, and a rocky relationship with those who work under me, and a poor balance of power in my position.

My apartment may be clean and I may be caught up on my email, but I'm not ready to announce to the world that I'm newly single. Single doesn't really sound like the right term. That sounds like I'm looking to mingle, too. It's more like . . . without boyfriend. Boyfriendless. Alone.

I hurry home to check on Puppy Duppy—whose name may or may not become Max, thanks to a story idea I got from a reporter today, involving a local artist named Max—and

change into work out-appropriate clothes. I love the fresh, clean sound of Max.

I pick Audrey up on my way through town for my first trip to the gym since the breakup. I generally allow myself one day off a week from working out, so I feel almost excited to run, sweat and push myself after more than two weeks without physical activity.

"Brought you a present," Audrey says as she slides into my Jetta. She hands me a cupcake with icing and sprinkles that look suspiciously like a three-year-old might have added them.

"Seriously, Aud? We're going to the gym!" I say, a small laugh escaping. Audrey only goes to the gym when I drag her there, and she has very little will power when it comes to sweets. She's lucky she inherited her dad's metabolism, but with a little extra work she could be a size four instead of the size six she's hovered around since Callie was born.

"It's from your goddaughter-hey! Was that a laugh I heard?"

I shrug.

"So your dad gave you the old talk, did he?"

"Let's not discuss my parents just now. Mom's driving me nuts. She's called me three times today already." I had answered only once to tell her I would call her back later, which I hadn't decided if I would actually do or not. She was keeping up the whole "I'm here when you're ready" façade, reminding me of it every other minute or so.

"Okay, okay," Audrey concedes. "Anyway, Callie made it for you. You can't say no!"

"It'll be a reward for afterward. How about that?"

"Your self-control is disgusting. *Fine*. Let's go get skinny," she says as we pull into the parking lot.

We sign in at the desk and put our jackets in my locker, and I hop on the treadmill and warm up for my three-mile

run. I'm about two miles in, really feeling like my heart is pumping and my muscles are finding their groove, when I see him.

There, in the flesh, is my ex-fiancé, putting his backpack (which I happen to know contains an extra pair of socks for him to change into after working out, and most likely a NutriGrain bar) into a locker. He appears to be alone, thank God, but I don't stick around to find out for sure. I rip the cord out of my treadmill, automatically shutting it off, grab my iPod and water bottle and walk as quickly as possible without running toward Audrey, who is cycling in place.

"Audrey," I hiss, practically running into her machine because my legs are so wobbly, for more than one reason.

She snaps her head toward me. Before she can even open her mouth to reply, I say, "We have to go. Now. He's here."

A couple of seconds of recognition later, my best friend flies off her bike and leads me to the abdomen workout area, laden with bouncy balls and medicine balls, where we are out of sight.

"You saw him?" she says.

"It's him. For sure."

"Is he-?"

"Alone," I say, my heartbeat resounding in my ears. "I think."

"Okay," Audrey says, her eyes darting around as she comes up with a plan. She isn't made for crisis mode like I am, but I'm counting on her here. I can't help but feel like I'm in the middle school bathroom, afraid to reemerge into the hallway in case I see the guy who checked "maybe" on my list of options for whether or not he liked me in the note I passed him during second block.

For some reason I didn't think David would come back here. I have been going to this gym since I moved to

Louisville, and David only joined after we started dating. Going to the gym was something we both enjoyed, so it only made sense to go together. He switched over to my gym after I (rightly) convinced him it was much more up-to-date than his. I assumed (wrongly) that David would give me back everything that was mine. This gym is mine. I can't believe he had the audacity to come back here.

"Alright," Audrey says. "I'm going to check it out."

She peeks around the corner, leaving me standing on a squishy red mat, feeling like a child waiting on her mom to tell her it's okay to cross the street.

"Oh . . . dear. Oh no," I hear her mutter.

"What? What is it? Is he coming over here?"

She turns to me. "He's . . . not alone."

"That son of a bitch," I say, unable to stop myself.

He brought his new wife to *my* gym? Suddenly, I am overcome with anger. I'm no longer nervous or afraid to see him. I'm not going to hide back here like a child.

"Let's go," I say, this time taking Audrey by the hand.

"Grace, no," Audrey begs. "Just ignore them!"

But my mind is made up and I'm ready for a confrontation.

I reenter the gym, Audrey trotting behind me, whispering requests that I stay calm and not do anything stupid. I spot them stretching together by the gym's entrance—how original of him, it's not like we ever did that together—and my vision becomes blurry and focused at the same time. The pair of them slide in and out of view, his black t-shirt and sandy hair, her purple shorts and long blonde ponytail.

Before I've thought of anything to say, we are approaching them. David and I lock eyes, and his jaw visibly drops.

"Hey, David!" I say, knowing my voice is coming out as unnaturally peppy, even if I weren't speaking to the guy who

dumped me a mere two weeks ago and has already moved on in a most permanent way.

"Gr-Grace-" he stutters, pulling his legs together after stretching his hamstrings.

Sage looks up from her toes, recognition dawning in her eyes, which become round and deer-like. I can feel Audrey standing behind me, silently begging me to keep walking.

"Grace . . . hey. Hi, Audrey," he says slowly, not taking his eyes off me, clearly terrified of what is about to happen. "How are you guys. . . ." he mumbles.

"Great! Just finishing up a workout," I say cheerily. "I love this gym, don't you? You two have a good one!"

And with that I walk away, fully aware that David is staring at my back, sparkling with sweat from my run, and I'm hopeful that this strikes a memory chord, and he can see us together as clearly as I can—flashes of the two of us in his bed, me in his arms, his hands on my back, on my waist—making him question his decision, if even for a second.

Back in the car, I sit fuming, wondering if steam might actually be coming out of my ears. Audrey sits idly by, letting me cool off.

After a few moments, she reaches a flat palm with a cupcake on top across the console. "Cupcake?" she asks meekly.

I can't help but laugh at her mild suggestion, even as I feel like I'm drowning in a mixture of confusion, anger and sadness.

The rush of emotion and anger I felt when I saw David isn't nearly as exciting after the fact. As I rinse off before bed, I contemplate the incident. I certainly feel like I have the upper hand; I mean, surely he realized that bringing *her* to what used to be *our* gym was a horrible idea the moment he saw me. But now the details of his face, his

eyes, even his faded tennis shoes have been sharpened, and it's proving to be difficult to feel like our meeting was at all positive.

Now he has become a real person to me again, not some character from a Tuesday-night sitcom I was unfortunate enough to be cast in as well. He is a living, breathing human being who used to spend time with me in this very apartment, who promised to commit his life to me; and now he is with someone else, and she is a three-dimensional person, not a flat face on my computer screen. It's all becoming too concrete.

She has seen me. She knows what I look like in person, and she is probably terrified. I know I would be; I was acting kind of crazy, being so obviously overly cheerful at the sight of them. Not only that, but there is no way I would feel confident in my relationship with David if I were her. Even if they had been dating for months while he and I were still together (the thought sickens me), he still cheated on someone. And if they got together and decided to dedicate their lives to one another in a matter of six days, post-break up with me, she had to be curious about his incredibly recent engagement. There is no way anyone truly moves on that quickly.

And even though David did something a shitty person would do, I know that deep down he's not. I still know David and I know that behind his façade of a life on track, he has moral conflicts and questions about his decisions. He is going through an inner struggle, no matter how put together he may seem. He's not the kind of person who can hurt someone without a guilty conscious. I can't stop wondering what went through his head when he saw Audrey, someone he became quite close with via our relationship, and me, bopping through the gym.

Did he question his actions at all? Did he wish, for one

quick second, that he were stretching and preparing for a workout with me instead? Did he feel the same rush of familiarity yet strangeness that I did? Did he question the justification he had certainly built up in his head for the way he behaved?

I reluctantly turn off the warm water, quickly towel dry and slip into my pajamas. I feed Max (that's officially his name) and marvel at his cuteness. I decide I should probably call Mom back and fill her in—I'll have to do it sooner or later, and going to bed will be a good excuse to get off the phone.

I grab my iPhone, and I'm surprised that I have four missed calls from my mom. I don't bother with listening to her voicemails—calling four times in a row in a matter of fifteen minutes must mean a serious situation. It better, anyway.

After two rings, I can hear someone pick up, accompanied by much sniffing.

"Mom?" I ask. "Hello?"

"Gracie. . . ." she mumbles.

"Mom, what is it? Are you okay?"

"Grace," she begins again, "your father. He's . . . leaving. He's leaving me."

CHAPTER 4

I still haven't processed what my mom told me nearly four hours ago over the phone: that she and my dad are getting a divorce. Rather, my dad is divorcing my mom.

On my way to the Louisville airport to pick her up, I can't help but feel a bizarre connection between the ordeal she is beginning and the one I am only a few weeks into. The situations are so different—a 27-year marriage ending, and a yearlong engagement and four-year relationship over—yet related so heavily to the same emotions of anger, broken-heartedness and fear of what is to come.

The way my poor mom found out makes it even worse. She got online to check Facebook, and she pulled up an already-open Internet window. It was an email exchange between my dad and his lawyer, whom he had apparently hired without my mom's knowing, discussing the final arrangements of sending divorce papers to my mother in her own home.

My dad planned a business trip for the next week, when the papers would be delivered to my unsuspecting, lasagna-making mom in her home, all alone. On second thought, I'm thankful she found out before then. I don't know how she would have handled being handed divorce papers without a final confrontation, which, according to her, went something like this:

She printed off the email (a rather ballsy move on her part), and handed the papers to my dad, who was watching football in the living room.

He stared at them, then looked up at her.

"What is this?" she demanded.

A pause.

"Shirley, you weren't supposed to find out this way. . . ."

She said she was so angry she couldn't stop her next words.

"Damn right! Now I'm leaving you!"

And she ran upstairs, threw anything she thought would be remotely useful in her suitcase, and headed to the airport before my dad could so much as put the footrest on his recliner down, which is when she began calling me frantically.

Of course, she is only physically leaving my dad. He is still going to file the papers, which I simply cannot believe. I'm appalled that he's doing this to my mom after what just happened to me. I take it as a personal insult. I want to call him and tell him to go to hell, never to call me again; but at the same time, he's still my father. The one who taught me how to ride a bike by raising my training wheels without telling me, and the one who refused to let me have dessert until I ate my last green bean. I know I'll regret what I say to him in anger right now, so I'll wait. But our already distant relationship has no chance of a full recovery.

I pull around to the pick-up area and see my mom waiting for me with her single suitcase and the same cream-colored purse she's had for years. She looks so small and frail and alone that I want to break down, but I keep my composure; Mom needs me right now. It's hard to imagine a woman I've always looked to for strength as someone who needs mine.

Rolling out of my Jetta in sweatpants on top of my pajamas, I greet my mom with a hug, which she reciprocates with a steady stream of tears that I apparently unleashed with my touch.

"Grace. . . ." she sobs into me.

"Come on, Mom. Let's get you loaded up," I say, taking her suitcase and opening the door for her.

Once in the car, she is hardly coherent between sobs and hiccups.

"I just-don't-understand. . . . I never knew he was so unhappy. . . . I always thought-he was-just . . . quiet. . . ."

I feel so horrible for my mom that I can't bring myself to say it was pretty obvious how unhappy my dad has been for a number of years. I always assumed there was a silent agreement that he would rather maintain his reputation by remaining married than confront my mom about her nagging ways and their likely less-than-frequent bedroom activity.

Suddenly, I wonder if everyone but me knew that David was unhappy. Should I have seen it coming? Did I nag him like my mother did my dad? Was I too self-centered to see that I was being selfish in our relationship?

Snapping myself back to the crisis at hand, I offer a few words of comfort to Mom, and I'm a little ashamed at how good it feels to be in control of a situation and have someone depending on me. I'm not the one pathetically crying this time; I'm the one who will provide hot soup, my mom's favorite movies, and music that is either not at all romantic or is completely guy-bashing. It's not an easy genre to locate, but I have several playlists saved up from when Audrey went through heartbreak after heartbreak in college.

Although I'm shocked at how my dad is approaching this ordeal, I can't say I'm terribly surprised to find out how he really feels. It's not the same for someone who is twenty-four to go through their parents' divorce as it is for a child who is still developing. My entire life won't be defined by this moment or by splitting time between parents' houses. Now I'm the one my mom is depending on to get her

through the day.

With Mom tucked into a makeshift bed on the couch, post-cup of warm tea and a solid crying session, I climb into bed at almost three in the morning. I quickly realize my mind is moving at too high of a speed to consider sleep, so I turn on my lamp and open my bedside table drawer to read a chapter or two of my book. Unfortunately, this is one area I didn't comb over during the de-David-ing of my apartment. Staring at me, stuck to the side of my drawer, is a miniature post-it note that says, "You're beautiful."

The wall of strength I've built up over the past few days comes tumbling down. I can see it in my mind—bricks released from crumbling mortar and stones breaking down into pebbles, as a tide of emotion rises and crashes into the edges of my mind, spreading slowly throughout my body as I'm consumed with thoughts of David again. I involuntarily return to one of my fondest memories of us: the first time I ever saw him.

I can see the moment we met so clearly, as if I'm watching a scene from a movie I have seen one hundred times.

It was February of my senior year at Clemson University. I had gone home with Audrey for the weekend to help her house hunt with Graham. The two had their wedding planned for the following summer, and they wanted to put a down payment on a house before they moved back to Louisville, where Audrey is from originally. Graham is from Taylorsville, a small town about forty-five minutes from the city.

I had planned a meeting with Avery Burnett, Managing Editor at the *Courier-Journal*, for that weekend to learn more about the newspaper in my process of looking for jobs. Audrey had always told me it was a solid publication, and "How awesome would it be if we lived in the same city?!"

she'd say.

Audrey dropped me off outside the building with a wish of good luck, and seconds later, my life changed forever.

I saw a tall, sandy-haired man through the glass of the front door of the building, saying goodbye to the desk clerk. He turned toward the door, toward me, and I saw his blue eyes, then a smile he later told me he couldn't control upon seeing me.

I silently thanked Audrey for helping me choose my new slimming black business skirt and blazer for the meeting. I felt unusually confident.

I smiled back—not too widely—and he opened the door for me.

"Thank you," I said shyly.

"You're welcome," he said. I continued to walk toward the desk clerk, with the sinking feeling he wasn't going to say anything else, but—

"Hey," he said quietly. I turned toward him. "Hi," he said, this time a little louder, with an uncertain smile. He was so awkward, and it was so adorably cute.

"Hi," I said.

"Are you—do you work here?"

I was flattered.

"No, but I might."

"So it's like an interview?"

I nodded. "It's . . . like an interview, yes."

"Would you . . . want to meet up afterward? We could get some coffee. . . ." He trailed off.

"I'd love to," I said, smiling. "I'm Grace, by the way," I added, extending a hand.

He threw his right hand out and grasped mine. "Right, right! Of course—hi. I'm David. I'll just . . . wait outside, okay?"

"Okay." And I turned away, the feeling of pure,

untainted excitement in my stomach.

My meeting with Avery went smoothly, and he was impressed with the amount of time I had put into my grades and extracurricular activities at Clemson. Ever since tenth grade, when I became what our journalism teacher called a "field reporter" for my high school's weekly news program (although anything not filmed in the school lobby was considered "the field"), I knew I wanted to be a journalist. Not in front of the camera, though—I was too shy for that. I've come out of my shell quite a bit since then, or so I've been told.

I met David outside after my meeting, and we walked four nervous blocks to Starbucks. He refused to let me buy my own drink, and we settled in at a booth in the corner. It was there he told me about his love for technology—in fact, he had been interviewing at the *Courier-Journal* to work in their information technology department. Not his first choice, but he had to pay the bills somehow. He had grown up in Louisville, graduated from the University of Kentucky with a degree in computer science two years ago, and decided to get his own apartment in the Highlands in Louisville. He was twenty-three and single.

I was twenty-one and barely single at the time. My ex-boyfriend, Drew, and I had broken up over Christmas break. On Christmas, to be precise. The day I found out he cheated on me.

I decided to keep that information from David until I saw him again—if I did—and sure enough, he asked for my number as our coffees dwindled down to cool remains.

"Sure," I said. "Let me grab my pen—do you have something to write on?"

But it turned out neither of us had a writing utensil or anything to write on, which was funny considering I'm a writer, so I borrowed a Sharpie from the counter and wrote

it on his plastic coffee cup.

"There," I told him, handing the cup back. "Keep that cup forever!"

I was only joking, but David did keep it. He stored it in the cabinet below his bedside table drawer as a reminder of our first date.

It's probably in a dump somewhere by now.

A second tide of tears reaches the shore of my mind as I think about how David probably "de-Grace-ed" his apartment the way I "de-David-ed" mine. I wonder if he threw away the spare outfit I kept at his house, or the beige-and-teal bath towels I helped him choose one rainy Saturday afternoon at the mall. Did it all mean nothing to him?

I want to find out. And I know how to do just that.

CHAPTER 5

"Your dad has always been so nice though!" Audrey cries in disbelief.

"I mean, not really. You always want to see the best in people, Aud," I tell her through a bite of my turkey and cheese melt at McAlister's Deli.

"The way your mom found out, though . . . that's the worst part." Audrey leans over to Callie and cuts off a tiny bite of her ham sandwich, placing it in her small fingers. Audrey sits up in sudden realization. "Should we have invited her to lunch?! Oh my gosh, I feel terrible—should we call her?"

"Relax," I manage to cut in. "She's all set up at home with all those action movies you brought over for me. I left her numbers for delivery and told her not to move all day. She's allowed a moping day."

"Or two," Audrey says slyly.

"Oh, ha ha." Maybe now would be a good time to bring it up. "I was thinking about . . . getting in touch with David. To ask for my things back."

Audrey eyes me suspiciously. "What things did you leave there?"

"Some clothes . . . and I can't find that pair of earrings I bought at Hilton Head. Remember those?"

This brings a smile to her face. "Oh yes, the days of Audrey and Bo."

We both laugh, thinking about the spur-of-the-moment trip we took to Hilton Head Island with Bo, Audrey's relationship of the moment, and Drew. It was the start of

both of our relationships, so it was pure bliss. Sunshine, swimsuits, alcohol, all day, every day for nearly a week. I bought a pair of beautifully handmade turquoise earrings from a vendor on the beach. It's been a few weeks since I've seen them. David and I stayed at each other's places often, so there's a good chance I left them there—not that that ensures he still has them. Who knows what happened to my things when *she* moved in.

Audrey sighs. "Well, you can't let those things stay missing. Want me to come with you?" she asks, wiping snot from Callie's runny nose.

"I think I'll be okay."

"Because you behaved so rationally last time," she counters.

"I was not at all prepared for that!" I say defensively. "Plus it's *my* gym. I want to be finished with this business. Move on." The words come out, but I don't mean them.

Audrey can't argue with that logic, so I agree to update her tonight on my exploit.

After my lunch break, I head back to work, still feeling weak from the mad turns my life has taken recently (and the fact I can't make myself eat more than half a meal at a time). Two and a half weeks ago, my engagement ended. Six days after, I found out my ex-fiancé married another woman without bothering to alter the details of our wedding. Nine days after that, I found out my dad is filing for divorce, and now my mom has basically moved in with me. I'm exhausted from not getting to sleep until after four in the morning—and from life in general. I can't wait until this year is over, but unfortunately I still have almost three months to go.

Back in the office, I finish up some editing and answer emails. I meet with Avery to discuss the stories that are in progress, and finally, I feel ready. With fifteen minutes

left in the day, I send David an email since we are no longer Facebook friends.

Hi David,

I hope you're doing well. I wanted to see if I could stop by sometime soon and pick up a few things I left at your place. Let me know when would be good for you.

Grace

I can't bring myself to add any extra pep like "Thanks!" or "Talk to you soon!" Not that he deserves it, but I want him to think I'm doing fine on my own. I completely glossed over the whole gym incident—maybe he really thought I was being friendly when I commented on how great the gym is? He probably knows me too well not to sense my sarcasm though.

I click 'Send' and start to gather my things up to head home. I'm taken aback when I hear my email notification go off, but alas, it's only a reporter, Lindsey—one of my least favorites—giving me an update on her story about Max, the artist from Louisville who was recently recognized in *Good Housekeeping* for donating several paintings to Kosair Children's Hospital. I get another email from eBay, informing me someone bid on my wedding dress. It's a horribly sad thing to see, in writing, that you will never be wearing your own wedding dress. My instant reaction is to take it off the website and tell this girl who thinks she's going to purchase my gown that she's crazy. I close my eyes and try to collect myself—this is what I have to do.

Then there's another ding. It's him!

Grace,

You could come this evening. I should be home until about 7:30. Will that work?

David

Hmm. It's very polite. I would even venture to say it's kind. That seems strange. Maybe he really did think I was being genuinely friendly at the gym. I reply that I am leaving work soon and I will head over shortly.

I make a pit stop in the bathroom to freshen up, thankful that this morning I prepared for the chance of seeing David today—not that I had any reason to think I would. I still find myself getting ready and choosing clothes based on what he might like on the off-chance I might run into him. Or arrange a meeting like this one, which I'm slightly surprised is even happening. A cream button down, lavender blazer, and tan skirt with high-heeled boots reflects in the mirror. I think I look relatively nice enough that my ex-fiancé might find me attractive, but my judgment hasn't been too on par lately, so who knows.

My stomach is drowning in hot nervousness when I pull up to his apartment. This place is so familiar, but it's like I'm not supposed to be here. I leave my purse in the car to make it obvious I don't plan on staying long, even though I'm hoping for a segue into conversation. Can't let him think I'm too interested, though.

I knock on his apartment door, feeling ridiculously formal. I always knocked in the past, but I knew what awaited me on the other side: warm hugs, soft kisses, and stability. Now I have no idea what the door will open to reveal.

Then he's standing there in a navy sweater, and the smell of his cologne reaches my nostrils, which my brain immediately recognizes and associates with a thousand memories I don't want to be thinking about right now. New Year's Eve in California, under the stars, kissing at midnight. Trying on clothes at Dillard's when he whisked me into the changing room, pushed me against the wall and slid

his hands under my shirt while I tried to keep from giggling too loudly. Here, in his apartment, making pasta, when he wrapped his arms around me and lightly kissed on my neck.

No. None of that. I shove it from my mind.

"Hi," I say, stupidly reminding myself of our first-ever meeting.

"Hey. Hi," he says. He steps back. "Come on in."

I walk inside, unsure of how my legs are getting the message to move forward. His blue eyes, sandy hair. He looks the same.

We stare at each other for too long before I break the silence.

"Right-so, do you have some stuff for me?"

He picks up a Macy's bag from the couch. "I think I got everything," he says, handing it to me.

I can tell that this is my Macy's bag—the one I kept in his closet with an extra t-shirt, bra, pair of shorts and underwear, along with an extra contact case and solution, just in case.

"Are my earrings from Hilton Head in here?" I somehow ask. My brain is functioning much more aptly than my body is right now.

"Um. . . ."

"The turquoise ones?" I ask quietly.

He remembers. "Right, right. I don't remember seeing them—I can check my room—"

"I think I know where they are," I say. But I don't. I am being stupid, stupid, stupid. I'm going to go into his bedroom and hope he will follow me. Is this really what I've come to?

He shrugs lightly, I set the Macy's bag down, and I follow the habitual steps to his bedroom. Everything looks the same. The pale blue comforter, the band posters on the wall. She hasn't moved in. Why not? They're married, after

all. It's strange.

I pretend to know what I'm doing and check the tiny dresser I often set my jewelry on when I slept over. No sign. Not on his bedside table. Then I remember—he always kept the Starbucks cup in here. Does he still have it?

I squat down. The small wooden door creaks when I open it. My eyes are shut tight, afraid of what I'll find. Then—there. With my phone number on it. The Starbucks cup. I want to smile and cry and hide and hug David all at the same time.

"Find them?" David's voice startles me.

"I—no. But I found something else," I say bravely. What do I expect him to do?

I turn around, holding the cup. He doesn't seem surprised.

"I couldn't make myself get rid of it," he admits.

Adorable. Yet disgusting. Isn't he married?

All I can do is nod. My eyes are watering. None of the words forming in my mouth seem like the right things to say.

"Grace. . . ." he mutters, his eyes shifting from side to side. No matter how smooth David tries to be, he still has a little bit of awkward in him, a quality of vulnerability that always drew me to him.

I want to stop him. I don't want to hear him apologize. He can't fix what he's done, but at the same time regret is the only thing I want him to tell me he feels. That he's sorry, he doesn't know what he was thinking. He'll take me in his arms and the world will turn right-side-up again.

"I'm sorry," he says, taking a step toward me from the door. I just stare at the cup in my hands. "I'm so, so sorry." He's still moving closer. I shake my head. My tears are flowing freely now. When I look up, he's two feet away. "I never wanted this. To hurt you like this."

I want to scream at him. *You did hurt me! You ruined*

everything I ever believed in. Relationships. Marriage. Weddings. My parents are getting divorced and I have to deal with it alone. You were supposed to be by my side forever! But I keep my mouth closed, looking at him. My David.

"Grace," he says, reaching up to wipe the tears sliding down my cheeks. I close my eyes and feel his cool skin on my hot tears, the hands that have been there to comfort me in sadness so many times before. His other arm sweeps behind my back, inviting me closer. I fall into him, dropping the cup on his bed, bury my head in his shoulder and try not to let him hear me cry. It's embarrassing. If Audrey could see me now, she would be appalled. Me, Grace Schmeidler, the one who wipes everyone else's tears, standing here, sobbing into the shoulder of the guy who ruined everything.

I realize this is pointless. Who cares if he still has the cup? It doesn't matter. He chose her. I pull my head up, drying my eyes on the back of my wrist, but his arms are still tight around me. I can feel his body against mine. My hands have nowhere to go, and my eyes automatically find his. He's going to kiss me, I can feel it. I know him well enough to be able to see a kiss coming.

But I can't let it happen. Maybe I want to, but I can't. A kiss from David could be the worst thing for me right now. What can come of it? Well, a lot of things, I guess. But nothing good.

"David," I say. "I should go."

I can feel his breath when he answers after a pause. "Okay."

I'm out the door, Macy's bag in hand, with only a small glance and wave goodbye. Mascara is surely running down my face. And I never found my earrings.

CHAPTER 6

The lead singer of Ocean Breeze is singing a strange version of "Nothing Fancy," by Dave Barnes, but I'm not sure where the sound is coming from. My apartment is unusually cold, and I make my way down the hall to turn up the heat. David is there, waiting for me.

"Grace, where did you go?" he asks.

"I've always been here," I say, wrapping my arms around myself and sliding them up and down to keep warm.

He shakes his head. "You left me. You left."

I try to reach out to him, but my arms seem to be glued to my sides. My mother appears from the kitchen with a grilled cheese, cut into perfect triangles, on a plate.

"Snack, Gracie Lou?"

Something soft nuzzles my cheek. A wet feeling on my eyelid. I open my eyes to see the white blur of Max close to my face and realize—it was a dream. The band, David, my mom. But it seemed so real.

It doesn't exactly make sense, but I can see where some elements came from. "Nothing Fancy" is a favorite song of David's and mine, and Ocean Breeze was the band we chose to play at our wedding. Instead, they serenaded the guests of David and Sage's wedding. The thought makes me nauseous.

I put my hand to my forehead and attempt to sink into my pillows as the memory of yesterday's visit to David's seeps into my mind. I force myself to return to the dream. I'm not sure what Dream David meant by "You left me," considering that's clearly not what happened. Dream Mom showing up with the grilled cheese probably has something to do with the

fact that my mom now lives with me, and it's apparently reminding me of my favorite after-school snack from my younger years. Speaking of my mom, I should probably check on her.

I throw on a sweater, scoop up Max, and walk into the living room. Mom is lying on the couch, staring up at the ceiling.

"Morning, Mom," I say, sitting down on the couch next to her.

She glances at me with a glazed expression. "Hey, sweetie," she says in a small voice.

"How're you feeling?" Max wriggles out of my arms and starts to lick her arm, which produces a laugh from her, albeit small.

"Oh, I'll be alright," she tells me unconvincingly.

I pat her on the leg. "Of course you will."

I get Max's leash from the table by the door and I'm hooking it to his collar when my mom takes me by surprise. "You knew this was coming, didn't you?" She doesn't say it in an accusatory tone. More like she knows it's true, and she just needs me to confirm it.

"Mom, no one expected Dad to do this."

"But you could see he wasn't happy. Why couldn't I?" she asks, her voice wavering.

I shrug as Max struggles against my hold on his leash. "I guess you saw what you wanted to see."

She nods and I know I should leave her alone. I slip on my house shoes and open the door, much to Max's excitement, and think about our conversation.

It's obvious to me that she wanted to believe she and my dad had the perfect life, so that's what she saw. Could the same idea be applied to my situation? Was I seeing what I wanted to see—that David and I were happily engaged, when he was clearly not content?

But why wouldn't he have been happy? He was so obsessed with me from the beginning; he was talking about our future together only a few months into dating. I never doubted that he would always be crazy in love with me. Maybe I took his feelings for granted.

Max sniffs around in five spots before he decides on one that's apparently appropriate enough to pee on.

Now that I think about it, I know I took him for granted. Why else would I have been so shocked when he broke up with me? About a year into our relationship, when I started to feel comfortable, I would play little games with him to keep things interesting, never questioning his feelings for me. I would pretend to get mad at him for something silly so he would come back with assurances that I was perfect and he was in the wrong. I would plan outings with friends and not tell him about it until the last minute, just to keep him on his toes. To show him I was as interesting and independent as the girl he fell in love with, when in reality I came to depend on him way more than I ever wanted to admit. I was too confident to make myself very vulnerable.

Max leads me behind a bush to finish taking care of business, but I'm hardly paying attention. I haven't always been so afraid. When David and I began dating, I was much more shy and unsure of myself. Surely gaining more self-confidence wasn't what turned him away, was it? The longer David and I were together, the more I wanted to prove how successful I could be. (And successful I was, which landed me in a job I want so desperately to love, but apparently I'm the only one who feels that way.) But why?

I think about my childhood—growing up with clothes from secondhand stores and off-brand foods in our unfinished cabinets, never eating out more than once a week, as my dad worked overtime at the plant to provide for the perfect

family. My mom played her part as the all-American wife, cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, attending PTA meetings, and being a mother to me. I wanted so badly to separate myself from that life—where I knew my parents weren't genuinely happy—that I fought to keep my independence in a relationship I never thought would be gone. I didn't want to be like my mother and wait on my husband hand and foot. I wanted to prove to David that I was a strong person, and the way I rose through the ranks at work gave me the confidence to do so.

So am I to blame for David ending our relationship? Was it my desire to be so unlike my mother that I pushed him away with independence?

I shake my head and beg my mind to wander to another place, if only for a moment. Analyzing my relationship with David and comparing it to my parents' is exhausting, especially before I've even had a cup of coffee.

A relieved Max trots ahead of me back inside, where I try to prepare for the day ahead. Work, gym, and a girls' dinner date with Audrey and my mom. (Audrey wants to try to cheer her up.) I head to the bathroom and turn on the water, undress to get in the shower, and can't help but wonder if David is thinking about me even half the amount I'm thinking of him.

Phones ringing, papers shuffling, keyboards rattling away. I close my eyes in my office and try to appreciate these sounds that I have always loved, the ones that offer comfort and security. When all else fails, I have always been able to write, whether it was a paper for a history class or a five-page journal entry before I went to bed. It's such a release of emotion and energy, and I'm thinking I need to start using it as an outlet now that my life is slowly deteriorating—historians will perhaps one day compare

my fall to that of the Roman Empire: the perfect relationship meeting its end in a manner that no one can be sure of why, or pinpoint the exact date it began declining. I need to document it carefully, in that case.

Appreciation is hard to come by at this moment because I'm so frustrated with my staff. It's 1:30 and the weather report, which is an article that can easily be completed by mid-morning, is still not in; another reporter is skirting my calls because he's having trouble finding an angle; and Lindsey is avoiding me because she can't get Max—the namesake for my dog—to agree to an interview.

Finally, my phone rings, and it's Lindsey, the young reporter who claims Max refuses to meet with her.

"Hey, Grace. So sorry for not returning your call until now—"

"Right," I cut her off. It's clear she isn't actually sorry; the sarcasm is dripping from her voice. "Have you gotten in touch with Max yet?"

"Well, kind of."

"And?"

"I mean, we talked on the phone. But he won't exactly agree to do an interview. He says it's not his style."

"Give me his number. I'll straighten it out," I say, and take down the number.

Why an artist who did something as kind as donating paintings to a hospital won't sit for an interview is beyond me. It seems like the publicity could only help his sales, and it was a really neat thing he did. The story won't be much without his voice.

I dial, ready to deal with a confrontational, stuck-up artist, so I'm surprised by our first seconds of communication.

"Hello?" says a low voice.

"Hi, this is Grace Schmeidler, Assistant Metro Editor

for the *Courier-Journal*. May I speak with Max?"

"This is he."

Correct grammar. Impressive. I soften a little.

"Max, I'm hoping you'd like to say a few words about what you did for the children's hospital downtown—"

"Look, I'm sorry. I told your reporter—it's not my thing to be featured in the paper."

"I understand that you don't want a lot of recognition, but what you did was really great. We'll only include you for a few quotes. No big front page pictures or anything."

There's a slight pause in which I think I might have convinced him.

"Grace, right?"

"That's right."

"Grace, you don't look nearly as stern as you sound over the phone."

"Um . . . excuse me?" I say, a little nervously.

"Relax, I'm just on your website." I cringe, thinking about the tiny, plain photo of me on our staff page. "Tell you what, let me take you to dinner, and I'll think about doing the interview."

I am so taken aback that I am literally speechless for several seconds. This guy—the guy who unknowingly inspired the name of my puppy—is asking me on a date, over the phone, having known me for about thirty seconds? I have no clue what this guy even looks like. His voice sounds cute, but then there are some people whose voices don't match their bodies or personalities at all.

"Hmm, interesting proposition," I manage to get out.

"Friday night?"

He's so confident that I can't really think of a reason to say no.

"Well . . ."

"Come on, I know you want that interview," he says, and

it's like I can hear him smile through the phone.

"Okay," I agree. "One dinner in exchange for one interview." I feel like I need to clarify that this isn't a date—I'm in no place in life to be going on dates.

"Deal. I'll wait for you outside the *Courier*—when do you get off work?"

"I'll see you at 5:30," I say, trying to gain some control of the conversation.

"Catch ya later, Grace."

And like that, I'm going, for lack of a better term, on a work-date.

"A work what?" Audrey practically yells into her phone over the cries of Callie, who is begging for another peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

"A work-date," I say loudly and clearly. "A freaking work-date! I don't even know how it happened!"

I'm on my way to the gym, Audrey-less. She says visiting the gym two times in a week is against her laws.

"Callie, *one second!* That'll be good though, sweetie! Something to get your mind off everything going on. He sounds like a nice guy!"

"Yeah, a nice guy who refuses to do an interview for some noble act he did out of the kindness of his own heart. And then asks women out over the phone in exchange for work favors after knowing them for less than a minute."

"Well—he's interesting, at least?"

"Ugh, Audrey, he's going to be a total creep-o. I just know it!"

"Then you'll have a funny story—" I hear scuffing in the background. "Callie! Stop! Listen, I've gotta go, see you tonight?"

"Okay, later alligator."

"After while, crocodile," Audrey finishes the parting

we've said for years now.

My workout is intense, and I feel stress melt out of me as I increase the speed on the treadmill and add to my reps in the ab center. This dinner Friday night is strictly business. Maybe I'll even do the interview myself to get it out of the way; it's been a while since I had a byline of my own. Maybe David will see it when he reads the paper (like I know he does every morning as he sips his coffee—two sugars, no cream).

I am curious as to why his wife (ugh) hasn't moved in with him yet, and even more curious as to why he was about half a second away from making a move on me—his ex-fiancé. None of it adds up. Why did David, a rational human being, end things with someone he supposedly loved for four years and marry someone completely not his type a mere week later? Not to mention, how did his conscience bear using all the wedding plans we made together? Or plans I had made, anyway. Come to think of it, David didn't really seem to care about the choices I made for the wedding.

"How about this for the tablecloths, Babe?" I had asked him one afternoon in a fabric shop downtown. I was running my hand over a cream-colored fabric with a detailed bronze design. His mother had offered to make the tablecloths herself—she was very handy with the sewing machine—with any fabric we chose.

"Hmm?" he asked, gazing around the store. He looked at the one I was pointing out. "Sure, Hon. Looks great."

I was glad he wasn't one of those picky grooms-to-be. This was *my* day, after all—the one I had been planning since I was fourteen.

But looking back, why hadn't he offered more opinions? And why hadn't that bothered me? He was very supportive of my interests, sure. But that didn't mean he didn't have a voice of his own.

I mull over this as I go home, shower, and get ready (while nibbling on the sugar cookies mom baked this morning) for dinner with Mom and Audrey. I try to stay engaged as we eat a truly delicious meal at Martini's, an Italian restaurant, but it seems like my mind is more focused in other areas than it has been in weeks, and I can't seem to concentrate on our conversation. It's like I can suddenly see my situation from above instead of from within, and I can't stop looking.

David didn't care about the details of the wedding for one, maybe two, reasons: he was already seeing Sage and knew our wedding wasn't going to happen, and/or I had become so controlling that it wasn't even worth his time to voice his opinion. I know I didn't always treat David the way he deserved—everyone makes mistakes—but maybe I really took advantage of his kind, quiet nature because I thought he would always be there. I never, not even once, considered that he might leave me. Was that where I went wrong? Did my confidence push him so far away that he thought I deserved nothing more than to be left alone in my self-absorbed world, a week before our wedding day?

"Yoo-hoo! Over here!" Audrey says, waving her hand in front of my face.

I blink and bring myself back to reality, forcing a smile. "Sorry—what?"

"I was just going to tell you, Honey," my mom says. She looks so sweet with her pale hair pulled back in a clip. "I want to look for my own place here. In Louisville."

I'm unsure of how to react—of course I love my mother, but I haven't lived within a hundred miles of her in five years. Still, I find myself smiling, reaching over to hug her, and telling her I'll give her a proper tour once she's settled in.

"Oh, Sweetie. It's a new life for both of us!" she says,

a tear rolling down her cheek as she pats my arm.

Maybe the all-American woman my mom has been aiming to be is slowly melting away now that my dad is leaving. Maybe she can finally be herself.

Once I'm home, I can't sit still. I feel invigorated with this new line of thinking, and it's like my feelings are trying to burst out of me. I grab my laptop and head to The Shop, fuel up on some coffee, and start writing. My fingertips are flowing with my emotions and getting them out on paper is such a relief. I don't know if anyone will ever read this, but it does feel good to know that writing is still my home.

CHAPTER 7

As I stare into my closet Friday morning, I try to tell myself I will select an outfit I'd wear to work on any regular day, but the truth is I have only my work-date in mind when I choose a flowing, high-waisted purple skirt, paired with a black top and black heels. It's one of my favorite outfits, and I'm forced to admit that knowing Max will see it makes me slightly . . . something. Nervous? Excited? Antsy? All of the above. It's stupid. But I haven't been single and alone with a guy since before I met David four years ago. It's only natural.

On my way to work, I take the big box containing my wedding gown to the post office to be sent to the highest bidder, a woman from Oklahoma. It's strange to me that she has no idea what this article of clothing means—meant—to me, and how it is a symbol of how my life has so drastically changed. Ultimately, I know keeping the dress would be futile, but selling it seems so permanent. I'm not ready to close this door forever.

The hours slip by at the *Courier* as I read, edit and assign stories, meet with Avery about this Sunday's paper, answer emails, and do some of my own research on Max Winthrop. Lindsey brings donuts to the office and doesn't bother to personally let me know the way she does for everyone else. I don't want one, but it's irritating that she holds such a grudge against me in our workspace.

Max doesn't have his own website, which is somewhat surprising since he's an artist in Louisville, which has a great market for all things creative. But considering he has

to be bribed to do an interview for the newspaper, I guess it's not all too strange. He's mentioned on the Kosair Children's Hospital website for donating his artwork, but there are no photos of him. Only his art. Breathtaking swirls of color—violet, burgundy, olive, gold—work together to create a gorgeous sunset over a reflective lake. It's absolutely beautiful, and it's enormous. The painting spreads over three canvases, practically floor to ceiling, that become one amazing image. Wow.

I feel more than a few butterflies breaking out of their cocoons in my stomach, and when 5:30 arrives, I feel a wave of panic coming on. I honestly don't know how to act around a guy anymore. I don't want to *flirt*, but I don't want to be a dud either.

I march out the doors of the *Courier*, trying to ignore the fact that this is where I first laid eyes on David, a man who would bring me so much joy and so much pain, and fill myself with what little confidence I have left. At least my skirt is cute, right?

I shield my eyes from the setting sun and glance around. There is a rush of people bustling about. I play one of my favorite games: people guessing.

A tall man with gelled hair passes me in a tailored pinstriped suit; I would bet he's a CEO going to meet his mistress before dinner with his wife and son. A middle-aged woman with her hair in a tight bun walks briskly by; she volunteers at the local dance studio, and her husband of thirty years will pick her up at 7 o'clock on the dot and they'll have dinner at the restaurant where the staff knows them by name. A young mother passes by with her baby in a stroller; she looks tired, but she couldn't take being cooped up in the house all day again. She's ready to go home to her husband, put the baby to bed, order pizza and watch her DVR'd episode of "Grey's Anatomy" before mercifully

falling asleep. A young guy in a tucked-in Polo shirt slowly walks toward the *Courier*—could it be Max?—taps his pockets, and turns to walk in the other direction; ah, no, he must have forgotten his car keys at the office. A woman about my age in a slinky top and hair poofed up with so much hairspray it seems to defy gravity passes, her clunky red heels clapping with each step.

“Wonder where she’s off to?” a voice says from behind me.

I turn to find dark brown eyes, framed by dark hair and a rather strong jaw line, looking at me. He smiles, extends his hand. “I’m Max.”

“Hi,” I say, shaking his hand, unsure of how he got here without my noticing. “Grace. As you obviously knew,” I joke with a smile.

“Clearly, thanks to my high-speed internet,” he says. “Shall we?” He gestures to the left, and we begin to walk down the street.

Okay, so he’s cute. Quite cute, actually, in his brown corduroy pants and light blue button-down. I still can’t decide how I feel about his forward effort in getting me to go out with him, so I really shouldn’t flirt.

But why not? Because of David? *He’s married*, I remind myself as my heels click on the sidewalk. *MARRIED*. It can’t get much more final than that. So he wanted to kiss me. It was a moment of weakness. Is he really going to file for divorce and beg for me to return to him? I don’t know, but I do know that I no longer belong to him, so why am I acting like I do? I don’t have to like this guy. I don’t even have to be ready to move on. But I can at least relax and enjoy myself without feeling like I’m cheating on David. Because I’m not. I deserve that much.

Max instantly draws me into conversation, asking if I’ve heard of Henry Watterson.

"Sure. He won a Pulitzer, didn't he?" I ask, racking my brains for more information on this man whose name sounds so familiar.

"Ahh, indeed," Max says in his low voice. "He was also the namesake for—"

"The Watterson!" I exclaim, suddenly embarrassed by my outburst. "I mean, I-264. That's the Watterson, right?"

Max smiles and nods. "He also happens to be my great-great-grandfather—and the founder of the *Courier-Journal*."

I stop dead in my tracks. "No way!" I say, stunned. I realize I am coming off like a total nerd, so I keep walking and we turn onto Fourth Street and I try to act like it's normal that I'm walking down the street with the heir of a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist.

"Yes way," Max says. "Not that it has much to do with the place now. My family hasn't been involved for years. Just thought it might interest you."

Max puts his hand gently under my elbow and steers me into a restaurant I've never been to, called the Marketplace at Theater Square. It's cozy, somewhat posh, and the soft yellow lighting instantly warms me.

"I've never—" I say at the same time he asks, "Have you been here before?" We grin at each other and are led to our table by a young hostess.

It feels strange to be alone with a guy and know that there is potential for something to develop—not that that's there with Max. But simply knowing that I have no one to return home to, no one to update with details about my evening, no lover to call before I fall asleep, I feel strangely free.

I sip on the water that's already at the table and attempt to get down to business.

"So, now that we're out to dinner, are you ready to answer a few harmless questions?"

His brown eyes look downward modestly. "Sure. My name is Max Winthrop, I like to paint, and I wouldn't tell anyone I donated that art to Kosair if the hospital hadn't publicized it." He's grinning, but I know he's serious.

"Why so modest?"

"I make art for the purpose of making art. I don't need someone to tell me I did a good job or buy my work to feel successful," he tells me. I get the feeling he's answered this question before. "I'm not trying to get recognition. Just doing what I love to do."

"How very altruistic. Reminds me of Bon Iver winning a Grammy," I say reminiscently.

"Yeah, Best New Artist! That guy's been around for—"

"Five years!" I finish, and we laugh. "Okay, so if you don't want to be recognized, why agree to the interview? Why not keep ignoring our calls?"

He pauses a moment. "If it weren't for the chance to take you out, I might not have agreed to answer some of your so-called harmless questions."

He says it so calmly and confidently that it takes me a second to realize what he's said—and with proper use of the subjunctive mood too! I can't help but think that David would never have been so straightforward. He was always so shy, something I found cute. And if I'm honest, I liked being the outspoken one. So this is a new experience.

"Well . . . here we are, then," I say lamely.

Fortunately, our waiter arrives and Max orders us an appetizer, margherita flatbread, without looking at the menu—he must be a regular here—and I take the opportunity to pull out my notepad and pen.

"Oh, no. It just got real, ladies and gentlemen," Max says, running his hand through his hair, a habit I have already noticed about him and find somewhat endearing.

I smile but begin with the basic questions—his full

name, hometown, general background information—and move to asking about his inspiration, his artistic methods, his favorite media, and how he decided to donate work to the children's hospital. The conversation flows, although I'm not sure if I can attribute that to the fact that it's part of my job to make people feel comfortable with telling me personal details, or if we are connecting on any level other than a professional one. I push the thought from my mind and continue jotting down the information he shares over the next ten minutes.

"I think I've got everything I need," I say, scanning my notes.

"And just in time," he says, looking over my shoulder. Our waiter arrives with our appetizer and takes our dinner orders. I'm surprised at how pricy the menu is, and opt for meatballs and bucatini, one of the least expensive main course dishes. I don't know if Max is going to pay for my meal, and I don't want to order the thirty-two dollar filet mignon if so—not that I would anyway.

It turns out that he refuses to let me even finish the sentence, "I'll take care of my half" (I only get to "care"), and by the end of the evening, I'm partially convinced this interview was worth the dinner. Or maybe the dinner was worth the interview.

For the first time in what seems like years, I notice the stars in the sky above my head and the chirping of the crickets in the early fall air. Walking up the sidewalk to my apartment building, I feel a small flame inside me that has been extinguished for months. It's flickering in the wind—it's not strong yet—but the burning love for living, separate from David, I have felt before is trying to return. I have hope that there will be more for me in life, more than obsessing over my marriage that never happened.

So I'm floored when I open the door to my apartment

lobby and find David standing before me.

CHAPTER 8

Any thoughts I've had about moving on instantly flee from my mind as I'm again face-to-face with the man who changed everything. He looks to me with sad eyes that take me back to a hundred different memories I've indulged in daily since our split. It's only the two of us in my dimly-lit apartment lobby.

"What are you doing here?" is all I can get out when I walk through the door, which shuts itself behind me.

As is typical of David, he takes a moment to gather his thoughts. "Grace . . . I-I found your earrings," he says, holding up a tiny, pathetic-looking plastic bag containing my beaded turquoise jewelry from Hilton Head.

I stare at him. Why did he feel the need to come here and hand deliver them? My heart feels like it's going to fly out of my chest. I don't make a move toward him, so he steps forward, hand extended with my earrings. I take the bag with unsteady hands.

"Thanks," I whisper. My vision is blurring. I'm overwhelmed at seeing David so unexpectedly. It seems like each time I try to build a wall of defense against our past he tears it down. This time, simply by being in my presence.

"Could we . . . talk?" he asks, glancing upward toward my apartment.

I nod—because what else can I do? Maybe before David broke my heart, I could have imagined this scenario and seen myself telling him to go to hell, like they always do (very dramatically) in romantic movies. I think the idea of acting so independent was what I wanted, not who I really was. So

now here I am, David following me up the stairs, tracing the same path we've walked so many times before, after late movies, dinner dates, and weekend camping trips. Who am I, really? How will I respond?

I'm keenly aware of the decision that might lie before me, as well as every creak the floor makes as we reach my door. I panic as I put the key in the lock, realizing my mother may very well be waiting on the other side of the door. And then I remember she had an appointment with a realtor this afternoon, and they were going to look at several different apartments. Leave it to my mom to hire someone to look for an apartment when I could have done it for her online. Nonetheless, I'm glad she did, or the situation would have gotten much more awkward than it already is.

I push the door open, silently thank my mom for insisting on clearing her couch-bed away each morning and for leaving out a tray of brownies (which makes me look infinitely more domesticated than I am), and sit down.

"Your place looks so . . . neat," David says, still standing.

"I went on a bit of a cleaning spree."

We're both hanging in the air, suspended by a relationship that is undoubtedly clouding both of our minds, waiting for the strings to finally be snipped and for something, anything, to happen. Will this be our moment of closure?

As though he were holding his breath and suddenly let it out, David quickly slides across the room, sits next to me, and blurts, "I made a mistake."

The strings have been cut and I feel like I'm free falling—with the ground nowhere in sight.

"What?"

"I know, I know," he says nervously, putting his head in

his hands. "I'm an idiot." He looks back at me. "I didn't know what I was doing when I ended things with you. I was so confused. I'm sorry, Grace."

I'm still falling. My stomach is in my throat. Then my feelings explode.

"How about when you got married? Using *our* wedding plans? Were you confused then? I bet that was so hard for you to go through with." I suddenly feel angry that he would come here and try to wipe away all the progress I've made.

"I—I can't even defend myself. I'm horrible for doing that. To you. I hurt the person I love more than anyone—"

I jump up from the couch. "No!" I say, tears threatening to fall. "You don't have the right to come here and tell me you love me and that you made a mistake and try to make everything okay. You will *never* understand what I went through when you left. Never."

He shakes his head and stands up. "I won't. If you could just trust me. Give us a another chance. You're . . . the one for me. It's always been you."

His quiet tone calms me slightly. "How do you expect me to *trust* you? After all you did?" I whisper, my voice cracking over the words, along with my resolve.

"You have to let me prove it to you."

He closes the space between us and I'm in his arms again, wonderfully safe, the smell of his body wash filling my head, as familiar as though we had never been apart.

"I have to know," I say. "Were you with her when we were still together?"

He looks down shamefully and nods. "It was the biggest mistake of my life. I know that now."

His answer doesn't cause me to kick him out or tell him to go to hell, though.

"But why?"

"It was me. No one else. I was bored with everything in

my life, and that's how I dealt with it. At my bachelor party . . . I somehow convinced myself I wanted that crazy, social lifestyle with her. It was completely not me, and I still don't know what I was thinking."

Our eyes hold each other's and I somehow accept this response, at least for now.

He leans down and kisses me softly, and then the months of separation push us further together, our lips relearning the shape of the other's. He walks me back toward the couch, lips still on mine, and we sink down, him on top of me. It doesn't feel as though we haven't been intimate in weeks, or that we're no longer engaged, or that he has a wife waiting for him at home—or does he?

We pause for air and I have to ask.

"What about her now?"

He shakes his head. "We're not—it isn't working. She never even moved in."

And knowing that this is probably what any psychologist would advise against, I take David's face in my hands and kiss him again. He's not happy with Sage and he misses me. All I've wanted—on some level—is for him to show up at my door and tell me he wanted me back, and I don't know how to say no to the man I loved for four years.

David is so sweet and gentle, just the way I remembered him. He kisses me like I'm the only one he's ever thought about; he undresses me slowly, taking time to cover what seems like every inch of my skin with his hands. I deny entry to the thoughts knocking at my door, asking if this is the right thing to do. I let it happen.

I peel David's shirt off, feeling no shame or awkwardness; this territory is familiar, the emotions recognizable.

He leans in close to me. "I've missed you."

I kiss him back in response and wrap my legs around his

waist. I don't even have to look down to know which belt of his I'm unbuckling (a brown leather one he bought from Macy's), and before I can think it through any further, David and I are sinking into each other, back to the familiar touches, kisses, and motions we clearly aren't ready to forget.

"Quit playing games with my heart . . . with my heart . . . baby. . . ."

My mind awakens before my eyes do, but when I remember what happened last night, they snap open wide. I grab my cell phone that's buzzing, singing, and lighting up on my bedside table. I sit up and answer in a whisper. David is still in bed with me.

"Hello?"

"Where have you been?" Audrey hisses. "I tried calling last night and texting—"

"David's here," I whisper.

An audible gasp from Audrey's end of the phone. "What? What about your date?"

Max. Adorable Max.

"It wasn't a date!" I remind her, quietly getting out of bed, going to the bathroom, and shutting the door behind me. "Okay, I can talk now. It was fine. Max was really nice and I got my interview. David was here with those earrings when I got back last night. And then we. . . ."

"Grace! You didn't!"

I'm thankful I don't have to say it out loud. In the light of day, I'm kind of embarrassed by my actions. My guard came down so quickly, it's pathetic.

"I did. We did," I say, looking at myself in the mirror as I talk. "What a mess."

"No kidding," Audrey snaps.

"I mean, he was here, and I didn't know what to do—"

"You should have said no. You knew this was a bad idea, right? After everything he's done to you."

"It's just that it's David. I still care about him," I say, feeling defensive.

"I know exactly who David is," she says. "And I know I'm not the one who was engaged to him, but you're hurting yourself by giving in. He's still married, Grace!"

"It's not working out for them!" The longer this conversation goes on, the quicker I want it to end.

"I just don't want to see you hurt. I'm glad you're okay. Call me later, alright?"

I open my mouth to reply, but she's already gone. I'm instantly hurt by Audrey's reaction to what I thought was a good idea last night. The situation I've awoken to is much more complicated than it was this time yesterday. Maybe it wasn't the smartest thing I've ever done, but this is what I've wanted for so long. How can Audrey not at least try to be supportive?

I freshen up with a splash of water to my face and go back to the bedroom where David is still sleeping. I look at his bare back and suddenly feel uncomfortable in my t-shirt and underwear. I slip on a pair of shorts and contemplate what to do next. It's 6:30. I'm assuming my mom is still asleep on the couch, so I may be able to sneak David out without her knowing he was ever here. It feels a little bit like high school, but I certainly don't want to have to explain this situation to her in front of David, and at this point, I don't think I would know where to begin.

I shake his shoulder gently.

"Hey," I say quietly. "You should probably head out before my mom wakes up."

"Your mom?" he asks sleepily.

I realize he has no idea she's in the living room at this moment. "Um . . . yeah. She's staying with me right

now."

This seems to wake him and he slides out of bed and into his jeans and t-shirt. I have never felt so awkward around David. It was certainly nerve-wracking to go to his house, but the tension hanging in the air is tainted with something else now—regret. The fact that we haven't even touched, save me waking him, this morning signals that he's feeling as weird as I am.

"So," he says, moving toward me. "Thanks for last night."

I'm not sure what else to do besides mumble a strange mixture between a laugh and "mm-hmm." He gives me a hug and a kiss on the lips that has none of the passion between us that was there last night. Audrey's guilt trip must have really done a number on me.

"I'll call you," he says. And then he's gone, thankfully without the notice of my snoring mother.

CHAPTER 9

But he doesn't call. Not for two days. I don't even know that I want him to, but it annoys me that he said he would and he hasn't. The whole thing is completely bizarre—him showing up at my house, convincing me everything was going to go back to the way it was in a matter of moments, and melting my resolve with a simple kiss. As much as I absolutely do not want to admit it to myself, things can't be the same with David and me.

Say this I-made-a-mistake revelation of his is real. Say he gets a divorce, apologizes to me over a homemade, candle-lit Italian dinner, and promises to be my David forever. But he would never be *my* David again. Our relationship would forever be tainted by the fiasco that has been the last month of my short life—the abrupt end to our engagement, followed by the movie-worthy scheme of his marriage to another woman using the wedding plans we created together. How would I ever be able to trust him again? It's so hard to fully close and lock the door on our relationship because it's all I knew for so long. I think I know, deep down, that our lives could never return to the happiness I thought we had together. He's not the quiet, gentle person I thought he was. Maybe my personality forced him to be that way—but his actions prove there is a layer to him I never knew of. Acknowledging the truth of this idea is going to take time though.

As I wander through aisles at the grocery store, post workout, taking my time with finding the best deal on all the necessities to stock my kitchen, I want to call Audrey

and tell her this development of feelings, but I've hardly spoken to her since *The Morning After*, three days ago. Since then, I've felt increasingly guilty about sleeping with David, and I can't blame it on Audrey. I know it was wrong. So very far beyond wrong. He's *married*, for God's sake!

Not to mention I knowingly entered myself into a dangerous emotional situation—one that my mom could have walked in on at any minute. I think that freaks me out more than anything else. How disturbing would it have been—for all parties—if my mom's key had turned the lock open to find her daughter naked with her ex-fiancé, rolling around on the couch she sleeps on? I shudder imagining the look on her face and grab two boxes of Great Value bow-tie noodles, promising myself I will make pasta for dinner with my mom as my secret apology for almost scarring her for life.

I'm disappointed in myself for allowing this regression. Sleeping with someone you're trying to get over probably isn't the greatest move toward a successful outcome. I was feeling more in love with life than I had in days before I walked through the door to my apartment lobby that night. My work-date with Max had distracted me and, if I'm honest, it was quite an enjoyable experience. He had been witty, intelligent, and clearly passionate about his work. And he bought me a nice dinner just because. A perfect gentleman gave me a pleasant evening, and I repaid his kindness by forgetting about him the moment I saw David. Max hasn't contacted me, and I feel too guilty to get in touch with him. If he knew how poor my character was that night, he'd probably have no interest in even being my friend anyway.

I shake my head and tell myself to focus on my grocery shopping. It's about the only thing I know I have a say in at this point in my life.

* * *

I knock on the door with a feeling of nervousness I'm

unaccustomed to here. I hear the pounding of tiny feet, followed by the footsteps of a mother, and Audrey opens the door.

I immediately thrust the drink tray, filled with three Styrofoam cups, forward. "I brought our favorite milkshakes," I say with an apologetic smile.

"MILKSHAKES!" Callie screeches, and Audrey smiles.

"You have a sweet aunt, Cal," Audrey tells her daughter, and I step inside.

While Callie slurps on her strawberry shake from Graeter's Ice Cream, my best friend and I sit on her couch.

"So, I was really dumb," I say.

"Really, really dumb," Audrey adds.

I nod. "Seriously. You were right. It was stupid, and I knew it. I know I have to close the door to our relationship. It's just not easy."

She squeezes my knee. "I know. But you'll get there eventually. How often did you have to tell me 'it just takes time'? It really does. You know that."

I smile and start on my chocolate milkshake. Unparalleled texture and flavor fills my mouth. "Oh!" I say, excited to share more news. "My mom found a place! A duplex closer to downtown. About fifteen minutes from me."

"Finally!" Audrey says, sipping on her vanilla shake. "I know you love your mom—but I'm so glad she found her own place. It's going to be really good for both of you. How's she holding up?"

I shrug. "We made dinner together last night and had a good time. She's so sad still, and I can't blame her. Neither of us has heard from Dad. It's all so strange."

"It'll be weird for a while. It's that time thing again."

"Always rearing its ugly head," I say, and we laugh.

Friends usually know best. Even when you don't want to

believe them.

CHAPTER 10

A perk about being Assistant Metro Editor at the paper is that I can decide to write a story I'm particularly interested in. Since I did Max's interview, it makes sense I would write the article, but for some reason I look back and forth between my notepad and computer with nothing to write. Every angle I try to approach the story from seems either too generic or too emotional. I don't know how to capture Max's essence—his simple, straightforward views on his art and his life.

I sigh and move onto other work that needs to be done and act like I don't notice when two reporters who work under me pass my open office door, discussing where they ought to go for lunch. I don't get invited to these coworker lunches, and I would be lying if I said it didn't bother me. I used to be able to vent to David each evening about what my fellow workers may or may not have done to get under my skin that day, but now I find those emotions piling on top of me with no escape.

Just as I'm gathering up my things to go get a sandwich from Jimmy John's, Avery walks in.

"Grace—lunch plans?" he asks, hand on the doorframe.

"I was leaving to grab something," I tell him, pulling my purse strap over my shoulder.

"Could I join?"

Avery and I have lunched together before, but something about this request feels different.

"Sure. Jimmy John's okay?"

He nods and we set off together, making small talk about

work and the unusually warm weather today until we're both seated in a small booth, sandwiches in hand.

"Grace," he begins seriously, and I wonder if I'm about to be chastised for my less-than-stellar relationship with my coworkers. "I feel that, as your boss, and sometimes your mentor—I like to think, anyway—there's something I need to discuss with you."

I slowly tear open the paper wrapping on my sandwich and try to act like I'm not worried. The last thing I need right now is to lose my job. I smile and nod, inviting him to continue.

"You're a great journalist. You know this. You're very good at what you do, which is the reason you were given the job you have now so soon after you started working. I couldn't be more pleased with the work we've gotten under your direction." He pauses and smiles tentatively. "But I'm worried about you." He holds his hands up as I open my mouth to interject, to defend myself and let him know everything I've been going through. "I understand there has been a lot going on personally. That happens. But I've been concerned about your happiness here for many months."

"Avery, you know I love my job—"

He stops me again. "I know that you *like* to direct others and you *like* to edit. But you *love* to write. When was the last time you wrote something for you?"

I pause. "I mean . . . I read through some of my old stuff not too long ago, I just haven't had the chance to do much else. . . ."

Avery holds my glance. "The Grace I interviewed two years ago couldn't get enough of writing. All she wanted to do was write—she didn't care what it was. And what was her ultimate goal? To be a novelist. That's what you told me. Is that still true?"

I shrug, pushing my sandwich away. My appetite seems to

have left me. "It's just not very practical, you know?"

"It's also not very practical to work somewhere that doesn't fulfill you every single day. I love this job, Grace. I've been doing it for two decades, and I can't wait to come in to work every day. I want the same for you, and I'm afraid you might settle for a job that pays the bills and nothing more." He pauses and adds, "Please don't misunderstand me. I don't want you to leave the *Courier*. But more so, I want you to be happy and to use your talents to the best of your ability."

I smile and attempt to soak in everything he's told me. My brain seems to be racing in at least twenty different directions. "I really appreciate this, Avery," I tell him sincerely. How many bosses look out for their workers' well-being in this way? "Thank you."

We move onto the topics of his wife and two kids, one of whom was recently married, and I nibble on my sandwich, all the while contemplating what Avery has told me.

I return to my desk after lunch to find a dozen red roses waiting for me. David sent me flowers at work a few times when we were together, but I would be surprised if he took the chance of others finding out now, especially since we haven't spoken since *The Morning After*.

But, alas, the card reads:

Thinking of you. See me Saturday night, 7 o'clock, my place? I'll cook your favorite. Text RSVP. -D

A thrill of excitement runs down my spine, and I begin to ask myself unanswerable questions. Where is Sage? If she's not around to see his text messages, are they split up for good? Have they filed divorce papers? Does David plan to ask me to take him back on Saturday night? It's exactly the romantic evening I would have planned, had I been able to do it myself—but should I go? Audrey will kill me. Absolutely

murder me. I know I shouldn't even consider it, but it can't hurt to find out what he wants, right? What if we're meant to be together?

I hear a cat call behind me as someone walks past my office. "Ooooh, Grace has herself a boyfriend! That didn't take long. . . ." Lindsey taunts, and her mousy-looking companion giggles.

The conversation I had with Avery fills my mind, and suddenly I wouldn't be so opposed to decking this girl and walking out of the office forever.

I can't focus on anything anymore today. My head is too filled with Avery's advice and David's flowers. I decide to check out early for the day, and get in a good long workout. A solid three or four miles might be able to alleviate some of this stress.

Amid cardboard boxes and trash bags full of clothes the next day, I sit on the hardwood floor of my mom's new apartment and glance around. I think I like the place more than she does—it's full of character, with a blue front door and an old brick fireplace. You can tell it isn't brand new, but that's what I like about it.

My mom walks in, trailed by two movers who carry in the sofa that used to be in her living room in Metropolis. She directs them where to place the couch, and I watch as they place a piece of furniture that was the setting for so many of my childhood memories in a new place. It's a strange feeling—one that I never thought I'd have to experience, certainly. Most people assume that once they make it through high school and their parents are still together, they're good to go. But life doesn't stop throwing you curve balls just because you're a legal adult.

"That's the last of it, ma'am," one of the movers tells Mom, tipping his hat. "The bill is to be sent to your former

residence?"

"That's right," she replies. "Thank you boys for your help—and don't forget those cookies!"

I roll my eyes and laugh. It's not at all surprising that she spent an hour making chocolate chip cookies from scratch for these guys while I sat in the living room and packed up her things. She sent a very specific list of everything she wanted from the house to my dad, who was apparently willing to get all her items together for the movers, and foot the bill. As he should. The entire day went off without a hitch.

"Thanks for your help, sweetie," Mom says. "I know you're busy with work."

"I didn't mind taking a day off, actually," I tell her, using my shirtsleeve to wipe my sweaty forehead. "Feels good not to be in business attire on a weekday."

I am going to miss my mom's cooking, but I have to admit I'm glad she found somewhere for herself. Our rooming situation actually went much better than I could have guessed, but we both need our space. I'm a little worried about my mom being on her own in this city, but Audrey already promised to set her up on a girls' date with her mother, and I have a feeling they're going to hit it off. They both love baking and gossiping. What could go wrong?

I check my phone and see that it's past five, which is the personal deadline I set with myself to give David an answer. I open a new text message to David, which I haven't done in weeks, and stare at the screen, my fingers poised over the keyboard. I have been having a lot of trouble lately for someone who is supposed to be so good with words.

My phone buzzes, alerting me to a new email, and I choose to be distracted instead of making myself compose this message. It's from Max, and my heart is suddenly in my throat.

Hi there.

Hope you're doing well. How's that story coming along? I look forward to reading your work. Would you be interested in being my date to a friend's birthday party this Saturday night? And by date, I mean that you won't be interviewing me during our time together. And by birthday party, I mean a seriously fancy event celebrating a family friend's fiftieth, where I would be lucky to have a date as beautiful as you. Let me know what you think.

Max

Sigh. I feel guilty for not getting in touch with him sooner. Seeing David moments after our dinner together set me spinning in a crazy direction. I imagine how it would feel to tell my married ex-fiancé that, no, I can't come to dinner on Saturday because I have a date. It feels like what a logical person would do, but love makes you hold on until there's no chance of squeezing any more water out of the sponge. If I don't go, I would always wonder what would have happened if I had taken David up on his offer.

I switch back to my text messages and type: "I'll see you Saturday at 7. Looking forward to one of your famous Italian dinners. The flowers are beautiful :)"

I press send before I can change my mind—not that I would—and look up to Mom coming toward me, plate of cookies first. Some things will never change.

CHAPTER 11

It's Saturday afternoon and I'm freaking out. Actually, that's an understatement. I'm sprawled out in my bathroom floor, fresh out of the shower, bra and underwear on with my hair wrapped in a towel. I can hardly catch my breath and my heart is beating so quickly I think I might be having a panic attack. I didn't breath this hard on the treadmill earlier this morning. Max, my tiny pup, is sniffing and licking at the lotion I applied to my legs before I started hyperventilating, which honestly doesn't feel too bad at the moment.

I blindly reach up to the counter and feel around for my phone and redial my most recent call. Three rings—and relief.

"Hellooo dear—"

"How do you know if you're having a panic attack?"

"What?" Audrey says. "You're not having a panic attack!"

"I'm lying in my bathroom floor in my underwear and I can hardly breathe. I'm going to see him in a matter of hours. I don't know how to prepare for this!"

"Hate to tell you this, but there are some things you can't plan for. I want you to go and see what he has to say and decide how you feel after that. I don't like it, but I know you need this if you're going to move on, whether it's with him or not. Just be yourself. You know who you are."

I consider this. Do I know who I am? I know who I used to be, when I was with David. That's certain. But have I changed?

"Grace, you're going to be fine."

I let out a deep breath. "Okay, you're right," I say. "Whew. Okay. It's going to be fine—"

A call beeps in and I check my screen. It's David. I ask Audrey to give me a second.

"Hello?" I say in a voice that I hope sounds much more put together than I actually am.

"Grace," he says flatly. My heart sinks to the first floor of the building—maybe even lower. Whatever is coming can't be good news. I know the tones of this man's voice better than I know the AP Style book.

"Yes?" Even I can hear the shakiness in my voice.

"I'm so sorry, but tonight isn't going to work."

"Right," I say. I think I was almost expecting this, but I can't help but wanting to slam my fist through the phone and get to his face.

"I've just got a lot—"

I cut him off. "I get it," I say.

We both pause for a second, but neither of us says anything. I switch back to Audrey and I'm already crying.

"Damn him," she says. "I'm on my way."

Only Audrey could convince me to agree to what I'm doing right now. Or what I'm about to do, rather. I make eye contact with myself in the full-length mirror in my bedroom. Audrey has fixed me up the way I used to do for her in college. My eyes are lightly smoky in order to not outweigh my fire-engine-red lipstick. My hair is twisted in a messy knot at the base of my hairline, with a few loose pieces framing my face.

I'm in the black dress I bought for my rehearsal dinner that has never been worn. It has a sweetheart neckline and the fabric hugs me tightly until my waist, where it flares out into an A-line that hits just above my knees. Black lace overlays the entire piece and continues above the neckline,

creating a lacy necklace for me. Red heels to match my lipstick complete the look. I haven't tried this hard to look nice since my engagement ended, but I must admit that I think it will go over well.

Audrey makes a cat call behind me, and I watch as she pretends to check me out in the mirror. "You look hot!"

I smile and turn away from the mirror. "All thanks to you."

She hands me my black clutch and says, "Go get 'em. You're gonna have a great night."

"Thanks for doing this, Aud. I mean it," I hug her tightly so she knows how much I really appreciate her. She didn't want me to go to David's but she supported my decision to accept his invitation, and she's still here even after he let me down.

"Nothing you haven't done for me before," she says and we laugh. I couldn't count on two hands the number of nights I spent in college urging Audrey get over some jerk by hitting the town, and ending up forcing her into a skirt and sliding on her mascara before dragging her out the door with me.

I glance at the clock—it's 6:58, and I try to push the idea of walking up David's sidewalk out of my brain—and I hear a knock. Audrey and I exchange excited glances like we're thirteen and nervous because the cute pizza delivery boy just rang the doorbell.

I make my way to the living room as Max follows, yipping at us all the way. Nothing excites him like someone making their presence known at my apartment.

I open the door and find that his dark eyes and dark hair look as I remembered.

"Hey there," he says.

"Hi," I reply, turning around to Audrey. She gives me a covert thumbs-up before going in for a handshake with Max as

I introduce her as my best friend.

"Pleasure. Great band," he says, nodding at her Backstreet Boys t-shirt. We all glance at each other and crack up. I don't really know why because Audrey and I actually do love the BSB (we've seen them in concert three times), but something about the way he says it makes me feel ridiculous.

"Right?" Audrey says. "You kids have fun. I'll take Max out and lock up for you," she adds to me, grabbing the leash from the hook by the door.

I widen my eyes at her—I have yet to mention the name of my dog.

"Max?" human Max asks.

I laugh nervously. "My dog's name," I explain. He doesn't have to know he's the one who inspired it, right?

"How interesting." He grins, bending down to pet his animal counterpart. His whole five o'clock shadow thing is really working with his cream button-down paired with gray slacks and a black fitted blazer. "Shall we?" he asks, standing.

I nod. "We shall."

After Audrey found me in my less-than-stellar state earlier this evening, she talked me off the ledge and convinced me to call Max (who had given me his phone number at our interview) and tell him the (made up) plans to help my mom move in to her new place (that I had given him as an excuse) ended early, and I was free to be his date for the evening. He said he was glad my plans had changed and he would pick me up at 7 o'clock—meaning he hadn't asked anyone else to be his date. I was apprehensive but trying to find it in myself to be excited.

Effortless small talk takes us to the Founders Square, a beautiful downtown venue that exudes elegance. A valet takes the keys to Max's silver Accord, which seems relatively new,

and he leads me inside with his hand on the small of my back. The juxtaposition of Max's identity as a rugged, hipster artist and his new car and sharp blazer interest me. I want to figure him out.

"These people are a bit . . . swanky," he says with a grin. "Not really my scene; but I'm a lot different from my parents."

"I can relate," I tell him.

As we walk under a canopy of tiny lights and enter the building, Max says quietly, "You look beautiful tonight."

As he says it, he continues looking ahead and locks eyes with someone he knows, strategically not giving me enough time to reply or feel awkward, whichever it may be. He introduces me to a friend, Keith, and we work through the crowd of beautifully dressed people of all ages. I meet several more of Max's friends, including the man of the evening, Danny, who is turning fifty, and his wife.

I'm smiling, drifting into this world of white tablecloths, extravagant centerpieces and complimentary champagne ("Please, madam!" the server insisted in French accent as he handed me a glass), and suddenly it all seems so silly. There is so much money in this room in an inventory of gowns, flower arrangements, and perfectly selected hors d'oeuvres, but what does it all mean? They will be gone and forgotten, save a few fancy photographs, by tomorrow. How bizarre that I was nearly more crushed over not being able to use the place settings and silverware I chose for my wedding, than actually losing the man I thought I wanted to be with forever.

I get the sense that, with someone like Max, the nonsensical focus on materials things would never fly, not that I would ever have reason to experience that with him.

Max and I continue floating around the room, and he tells me anecdotes about each person we meet.

"That's Danny's aunt," Max says in my ear after I meet an elderly woman named Noreen. "She's known to go a little heavy on the champagne at these things."

I giggle and silently acknowledge that I can feel my drink going straight to my head. I've hardly eaten today due to nerves, and champagne takes no prisoners.

We make our way to the appetizer table, which is actually more like a full-on buffet of miniature foods, and I find myself to be downright starving. I grab a mini turkey sandwich and eat it in one bite, then take another.

"I probably should have suggested you eat dinner before this thing," Max says, snagging a couple of sandwiches for himself. "I always leave feeling like I ate a peanut."

After more mingling, we're directed to sit at "any of the non-reserved tables, mademoiselle," and we hear a round of speeches from Danny's brother, a life-long best friend, and his daughter. I am losing track of who's who by the time I finish my third glass of the bubbly.

"You're getting silly," Max says as people begin to move to the dance floor, and he finishes his drink in a dramatic gulp and pretends to slam it down on the table.

"You're silly. You know," I say, feeling inspired by my liquid encouragement, "this is the kind of life I used to want. I planned my wedding to be just like this, all fancy and everything. But all of it is so . . . so . . . silly," I finish, sweeping my arm to include the whole room.

"Your wedding?" Max inquires.

Shit. Guess I haven't filled him in on that quite yet.

"It's kind of complicated. . . ." I trail off in hopes he isn't interested in hearing more. Unfortunately, he is, because he's looking at me expectantly. "I was engaged . . . obviously. . . . We were together for four years. He broke it off hardly a week before the wedding."

"That's awful," he says, resting his chin on his hand

and looking truly interested.

"It gets worse," I promise him. "He married someone else using all our wedding arrangements."

I drop the bomb and wait for him to ask—what did you do that pushed him away? What's so awful about you that he didn't have the decency to wait more than a week before moving on?

"What a dick," he says instead, with a look of dead seriousness on his face.

For some reason I start cracking up. "I know!" I say between laughter. "He's such a dick!"

Max starts laughing because I'm laughing, and soon we look like a couple of four-year-olds on the playground. He stands up slowly and takes my hand.

"Hey, let's dance. Do you like to dance?" I nod, and he leads me toward the other party-goers currently slow jamming to "Time of My Life" by Bill Medley. "I know I don't really know you, but I know you didn't deserve that," he says. We begin swaying, somewhat unsteadily, my left arm on his shoulder and my right hand in his. "Maybe it's the champagne talking, but I'm just going to tell you. You're beautiful and smart, and I think that guy was crazy to trade you in for someone else. Anyone else."

Maybe it's the champagne controlling my brain, or heart, or whatever this is, but I am overtaken with the urge to kiss this man.

I look down modestly and say, "I like you, Max." I don't know how or why the words are coming out, but they are. I lift my eyes and do a double take. No.

No.

David is standing in the entryway, Sage Whitehouse hanging onto his arm.

I'm fairly certain my jaw physically drops, because Max sees my face and turns toward the door as though there might

be a lunatic with a machine gun, ready to kill us all. He snaps back to me when he sees what appears to be a couple (who is extremely late, I might add) arriving to this birthday shindig.

"What's wrong?" he asks. The song changes to a more upbeat tune that everyone starts singing along to, but I can't even place what it is.

"That . . . him," I mumble, still staring at David, who is shaking hands and trying to fit into a scene that Sage so clearly belongs to. She is wearing a white, floor-length gown covered in sparkles that shimmers as she turns. Her white-blond hair is pulled back into a sleek ponytail. She is kissing cheeks and making introductions for David, who keeps his hands in his pockets when possible.

"The guy who dumped you?" Max asks incredulously. "He's here?"

I nod robotically, unable to look away from these two people. So many questions flood my already foggy mind, and part of me wants to waltz up and ask them.

What the hell are you doing here?

This is why you canceled our romantic evening?

Why are you here with her if things aren't working out?

Are you so glad you made the decision you did?

Is everything working out perfectly for you?

But instead of asking him the questions, I'm going to give him the answers this time.

I start toward David, who still hasn't spotted me in the crowd. A sturdy hand closes around my wrist.

"Grace, no," Max says quietly, looking me straight in the eyes. "Don't do something you'll regret."

I shake my head and try to steady myself. There may be alcohol involved, but it won't change what I feel. It will only change whether or not I have the courage to say it.

"This will only take a minute," I tell him. "Then can we

go?"

His eyes question me.

"With you," I tell him. "I want to go with you."

He looks highly relieved that I still intend to leave with him, and he visibly relaxes.

"Of course."

I have one of those slow motion movie scene moments as I walk toward the two, who have made their way to a table. It seems like the click of my heels is louder than the music and only David is in my line of vision. When he finally meets my eyes, his reaction is priceless. He's clearly shocked beyond all measure. His eyes grow wide and his mouth is agape. Finally, we're only feet from each other.

"Hello there," I say generically.

David seems even more gangly and awkward than usual and has no response for me; just a confused gaze to up at me with. Sage looks away from the conversation she's in, and over her shoulder to see whom her husband is staring at, and practically jumps out of her dress.

"Hi," I add to her. "Listen," I say, turning back to David. "I don't know what you're trying to pull here, but I can't do it anymore. You made your decision the second you ended our engagement and this"—I gesture to them as a couple—"is what it took for me to realize that. We're all better off this way. Don't call me, don't talk to me. I'll see you when I see you," I say. As an afterthought, I add, "Good luck to you two."

Neither of them says a word, and as though someone in the director's chair yells "Action!", Max is by my side and we're gliding out the door and into the crystal clear November night.

PROLOGUE

I've hardly closed my car door when Mom comes outside, fully armed with an apron and spatula.

"My brownies only have two minutes left!" she says excitedly. "Hurry in!"

"Hi, Mother. Nice to see you too."

"Hi, Gracie Lou," she says, giving me a quick squeeze. "You realize what time it is? People will be arriving—"

"In like an hour, Mom. Relax," I tell her, laughing. She acts like she's stressed out, but I know she loves that I've asked her to host the shower.

I pop the trunk and open my car's back door, and we begin unloading decorations.

"You've got this?" I ask.

"I've been working out," Max says, smiling, as he walks around from the driver's seat and lifts our gift out of the trunk.

"Max, you be careful now!" Mom cries as we make our way to the front door.

"Full-on mom mode?" he asks, and I nod vigorously. "No worries Mrs. Schmeidler," he adds to her. Sometimes I think Max knows how to handle my mom better than I do.

We begin setting up in my mom's foyer, living room and kitchen as the smell of fresh brownies fills the air. Audrey's mom (now my mother's BFF) arrives moments later. Mom quits spazzing out on us and moves on to asking Audrey's mom to taste the cinnamon raisin cookies because she could swear there's a pinch too much cinnamon.

I've seen my mom come alive again, and I'm no longer so

frightened by the things we have in common. She's a strong woman. My dad still lives in Metropolis, and we've made minimal, albeit pleasant, contact since their divorce became final. I think our relationship will continue to improve (there's nowhere to go but up), although there is only a certain plateau we can reach. And I'm okay with that.

Max gently slides his arm around my waist, and I get that silly feeling in my stomach. It's been ten months, but it hasn't gone away.

He turns me toward him and places a kiss on the tip of my nose before going back to arranging a yellow tablecloth for the gift table. I know there are guys who help their girlfriends with things like this every day, but for the first time, I don't feel like I'm forcing anyone to do anything. Max wants to be here. He wants to be setting up a tablecloth, because he knows it helps me.

The guest of honor finally arrives with Callie and Graham in tow, and I immediately place my hand on Audrey's belly to say hello to my second Godchild.

"How're you feeling?" I ask as Callie tugs at my hand. I pick her up and plant a huge kiss on her forehead, which causes her to beg me to put her down.

"Much better today," she says, and Callie streaks through the foyer to the kitchen, toward the sweets. It's really true what they say about pregnant women. Audrey has that glow. "So ready for some of your mama's baked goods."

"Me too, and I have no excuse—I'm not eating for two," I joke.

I slip off to the restroom and check my phone on the way down the hallway.

A new text message from David.

"The divorce is final. I miss you. I hope you're doing okay."

A moment's acknowledgment is all I need before deleting

the message and moving on. David has tried to contact me over the months since the birthday party incident, but I never respond. It's the way it has to be. Maybe one day we can be friendly, but not anytime soon.

Seeing David with Sage that night sent me over the edge, and in a good way. I no longer felt the need to prove anything to two people who suddenly seemed so pathetic. The stunt they pulled by replacing me in my own wedding made me feel insignificant, but did I really want a marriage with someone capable of that? I knew that the answer was no all along. It took a few mistakes, an ocean's worth of tears, and the realization that there are things more important in life than China patterns and seating arrangements.

A guy named Max didn't hurt either.

After we left the birthday party that night, we pulled through a 24-hour McDonald's drive-thru (in our finest clothes) and talked in the parking lot until four in the morning. I told him my story, and I felt strangely compelled to share all the details, including the fact that my excuse for almost not joining him that night was made up. He listened intently and sipped on his sweet tea as I opened up to him. It turns out Max went to high school for a year with Sage—she's four years younger than he is—and her parents were members of the same country club, along with the birthday man, Danny.

We continued to see each other casually for coffee, ice cream, and a hilarious day of ice-skating for a few weeks before Audrey finally got me to admit I liked the guy. The feelings terrified me, and he knew that. It wasn't until I told him I had feelings for him that I was able to write the *Courier* article about him. I focused on the life from which he came—an upscale, high-end Louisville family—to the life he maintained now. His small flat in downtown Louisville, which he mostly used as an art studio and slept somewhere in

between the paintings and palettes. His modesty at even being mildly artistically talented. His openhearted, no-regrets, positive outlook on life fascinated and inspired me. It still does, and I'm still learning from him. That article was my last for the paper. Leaving the *Courier* was when I bid my life with David farewell for good. I didn't want to walk through the doors of a place that reminded me of our first meeting every day. I didn't want to continue working with staff members who couldn't respect me. And I certainly didn't want to give up on my dream of becoming a writer.

I smooth my skirt and return to the living room to continue helping with set-up and baby shower game preparation.

"How's the manuscript coming along?" Audrey asks as we arrange cupcakes on a tray.

I grin. I can't help it.

"She's almost there," Max chimes in.

Aud looks at me with big eyes. "Seriously?"

I nod. "I think I just want to add a prologue and I'll be finished."

Clearly today is one of Audrey's happy hormone days, because she squeals and hugs me as best as she can around her baby belly. "This is so exciting! My best friend is going to be a famous author!"

Maybe. Maybe not. But I do know I'm much happier writing freelance for magazines and creative journals, making coffee at The Shop, and working on my personal writing in my free time. Maybe Max and I will stay together. Maybe we won't. But I've learned more about myself in the last year than I knew in the previous twenty-three years combined, and he is partially to thank. I may have been an exchangeable bride to one man, but that experience allowed me to exchange one complicated, stubborn outlook on life for a far simpler one.

Because, really, it's not that complicated. Do what you love and love who you do it with.

Maybe some will appreciate this novel, ten months in the making, and maybe some won't. But if I can impact one life by sharing my story and the idea that sometimes we have to go through the forest to get to the open field, it will have been worthwhile.