

# KRISTAN HIGGINS

*'A powerful,  
emotionally  
textured winner'*

- Kirkus

## *If You Only Knew*

A story about what we think we know, what  
we think we want and what we truly deserve.

***The drama, hilarity and tears of sisterhood are at the heart of the thoroughly captivating new novel by New York Times bestselling author Kristan Higgins—a funny, frank and bittersweet look at marriage, forgiveness and moving on***

Letting go of her ex-husband is harder than wedding-dress designer Jenny Tate expected...especially since his new wife wants to be Jenny's new best friend. Sensing this isn't exactly helping her achieve closure, Jenny trades the Manhattan skyline for her hometown up the Hudson, where she'll start her own business and bask in her sister Rachel's picture-perfect family life...and maybe even find a little romance of her own with Leo, her downstairs neighbor, a guy who's utterly irresistible and annoyingly distant at the same time.

Rachel's idyllic marriage, however, is imploding after she discovers her husband sexting with a colleague. She always thought she'd walk away in this situation, but her triplet daughters have her reconsidering her stance on adultery, much to Jenny's surprise. Rachel points to their parents' perfect marriage as a shining example of patience and forgiveness; but to protect her sister, Jenny may have to tarnish that memory—and their relationship—and reveal a family secret she's been keeping since childhood.

Both Rachel and Jenny will have to come to terms with the past *and* the present and find a way to get what they want most of all.

# **IF YOU ONLY KNEW**

*Kristan Higgins*

To Shaunee, Jennifer, Karen and Huntley, with heartfelt thanks for the laughs, the wine  
and especially the love.

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## Jenny

Today is one of those days when I realize that staying friends with my ex-husband was a huge mistake.

I'm at the baby shower for Ana-Sofia, Owen's wife and my replacement. Indeed, I'm sitting next to her, a place of honor in this circle of beaming well-wishers, and I'm probably beaming just as hard as everyone else. Harder, even, my "gosh, isn't it wonderful, she's so radiant" smile that I give at work quite often, especially as my brides get bitchier or their mothers get more critical or their maids of honor get more jealous. But this smile, the baby-shower smile...this is superhuman, really.

I know that coming today is incredibly pathetic, don't worry. It's just that I didn't want to seem bitter by not showing up—though I'm pretty sure I *am* bitter, at least a little. After all, I'm the one who always wanted kids. Every time I brought it up, though, Owen said he wasn't sure the time was right, and he loved our life the way it was.

Yeah. So. That turned out not to be quite true, but we did stay friends. Coming today, though...pathetic.

However, I woke up this morning utterly starving, and I knew the food would be amazing at the shower. Ana-Sofia *inspires* people. Plus, I'm moving out of the city, so for the past three weeks, I've been trying to eat or give away every morsel of food in my apartment. Let's also mention that I couldn't figure out an excuse that people would buy. Better to be an oddity here than Poor Jenny at home, scrounging through a box of Wheat Thins of indeterminate age.

Ana-Sofia opens my gift, which is wrapped in Christmas paper, despite it being April. Liza, my host, glowers; the red-and-green cocoa-swilling Santas are an affront to the party vibe, which Liza noted on the invitations.

In an effort to create a beautiful and harmonious environment for Ana-Sofia, please adhere to the apricot-and-sage color scheme in your clothing and gift-wrapping choices.

Only in Manhattan, folks. I'm wearing a purple dress as a middle finger to Liza, who used to be my friend but now posts daily on Facebook that she's LOL-ing with her BFF, Ana-Sofia.

"Oh! This is so lovely! Thank you, Jenny! Everyone, look at this! It's beautiful!" Ana-Sofia holds up my gift, and there are gasps and murmurs and exclamations and a few glares that I have brought the best present. I cock an eyebrow at the haters. *Suck it up, bitches*. My gift was actually dashed off last night, as I kind of forgot to buy a present, but they don't have to know that.

It's a white satin baby blanket with leaves and trees and birds stitched into it. Hey. It only took me two hours. Nothing was hand-stitched. It wasn't that big a deal. I sew for a living. A wedding-dress designer. The irony is not lost on me.

"Couldn't you have just bought a stuffed animal like a normal person?" murmurs

the person on my left. Andreas—born Andrew—my assistant, and the only man here. Gay, of course—do straight men work in designer bridal wear? Also, he hates and fears children, which makes him the perfect date for me under the circumstances. I needed an ally.

Have I mentioned that the shower is being held in the apartment I once shared with Owen? Where, so far as I could tell, he and I were extremely happy? Yes. Liza is hosting, but the power went out in her apartment, thanks to the ham-fisted construction crew installing her new glass countertops—granite being so very last decade—and so we're here instead. Liza is sweaty and loud, rightfully worried about being judged on her prowess as hostess. This is the Upper East Side, after all. We're all about judgment here.

The gifts—including mine—border on the ridiculous. The shower invitation—engraved from Crane's—asked, at the behest of the parents, for donations to the clean-water charity Ana-Sofia founded—Gushing.org, the name of which brings to mind a particularly bad menstrual period, but which raises funds for wells in Africa. Yeah. Therefore, everyone donated fat checks *and* tried to outdo each other with gifts. There's a Calder mobile. A 1918 edition of Mother Goose stories. A mohair Steiff teddy bear that costs about as much as the rent on my soon-to-be former apartment in the Village.

My gaze drifts across the now-tastefully furnished apartment. When I lived here, it was cozier and boho—fat, comfortable furniture; dozens of pictures of my three nieces; the occasional wall hanging from Target, that bastion of color and joy for the middle class. Now the decor is incredibly tasteful, with African masks on the wall to remind us what Ana-Sofia does, and original paintings from around the globe. The walls are painted those boring neutral colors with sexy names—October Fog, Birmingham Cream, Icicle.

There's their wedding photo. They eloped, so thank God I didn't have to go to that—or, heaven forbid, make her gown, which I would've done if asked, because I'm still pretty pitiful where Owen is concerned and can't figure out how to divorce him out of my heart. Though the photo was taken by the justice of the peace in Maine, it's perfect. Both bride and groom are laughing, slightly turned away from the camera, Ana's hair blowing in the sea breeze. The *New York Times* featured the photo in the Sunday Vows section.

They really are the perfect couple. Once, it was Owen and me, and while I didn't expect perfection, I thought we were pretty great. We never fought. My mom felt that since Owen is half-Japanese, he was a better bet than “those simpletons” I dated—all of whom I hoped to marry at one point or another, starting with Nico Stephanopolous in eighth grade. “The Japanese don't believe in divorce,” Mom said the first time I introduced her. “Right, Owen?”

He agreed, and I can still see his omnipresent, sweet smile, the Dr. Perfect Smile, as I called it. It's his resting expression. Very reassuring to his patients, I'm sure. Owen is a plastic surgeon, the kind who fixes cleft palates and birthmarks and changes the lives of his patients. Ana-Sofia, who is from Peru and speaks five languages, met Owen eleven weeks after our divorce when he was doing his annual stint with Doctors Without Borders in the Sudan and she was digging wells.

And I make wedding dresses, as I believe I've already said. Listen, it's not as

shallow as it sounds. I make women look the way they dreamed they would on one of the happiest days of their lives. I make them cry at their own reflections. I give them the dress they've spent years thinking about, the dress they'll be wearing when they pledge their hearts, the dress they'll pass on to their own daughters someday, the dress that signifies all their hopes and dreams for a happy, sparkling future.

But compared with what Owen and his second wife do, yeah, it's incredibly shallow.

In theory, I should hate them both. No, he didn't cheat with her. He's far too decent for that.

He loves her, though. Ostensibly, I could hate him for loving her and not me. Make no mistake. I was heartbroken. But I can't hate Owen, or Ana-Sofia. They're too damn nice, which is incredibly inconsiderate of them.

And being Owen's friend is better than being without Owen entirely.

The quilt has made the rounds of admiration and is passed back to Ana. She strokes it tenderly, then looks at me with tears in her eyes. "I don't have the words to tell you how much this means."

*Oh, shut up, I want to say. I forgot to buy you a gift and dashed this off last night with some leftover Duchess satin. It's no big deal.*

"Hey, no worries," I say. I'm often glib and stupid around Ana-Sofia. Andreas hands me another cream puff. I may have to give him a raise.

"I'm so excited about your new shop," Ana continues. "Owen and I were talking about how talented you are just last night."

Andreas gives me a significant look and rolls his eyes. He has no problem hating Ana-Sofia *and* Owen, which I appreciate. I smile and take another sip of my mimosa, which is made with blood oranges and really good champagne.

If I'm ever pregnant, though the chances of that are plummeting by the hour, I imagine I'll have the unenviable "I sat on an air hose" look that my sister had when she was percolating the triplets. There was no glow. There was acne. Stretch marks that made her look as if she'd been mauled by a Bengal tiger. She gnashed on Tums and burped constantly, but in true Rachel fashion, my sister never complained.

Ana-Sofia *glows*. Her perfect olive skin is without a blemish or, indeed, a visible pore. Her boobs look fantastic, and though she is eight and a half months pregnant, her baby bump is modest and perfectly round. She has no cankles. Life is so unfair.

"We just found out that our daughter's classmate is her half brother," says the taller woman in Lesbian Couple #1. One of them just became a partner in Owen's practice, but I don't remember her name. "Imagine if we hadn't known that! She could've ended up dating her half brother! Marrying him! The fertility clinic gave out *fourteen* samples of that donor's sperm. We're filing a lawsuit."

"It's better than adopting," says another woman. "My sister? She and her husband had to give back their son the fourth time he set fire to the living room."

"That's not so bad. My cousin adopted, and then the birth mother came out of rehab and the judge gave her custody of the baby. After two years, mind you."

On the other side of the circle, there seems to be a heated debate over whose labor and delivery was most grueling. "I almost died," one woman says proudly. "I looked at my husband and told him I loved him, and the next thing I knew, the crash cart was there..."

“I was in labor for three *days*,” another states. “I was like a wild animal, clawing at the sheets.”

“Emergency cesarean eight weeks early, no anesthesia,” someone else says proudly. “My daughter weighed two pounds. NICU, fifty-seven days.”

*And we have a winner!* The other mothers shoot her resentful looks. Talk turns to food allergies, vaccines, family beds and the sad dearth of gifted and talented programs for preschoolers.

“This is fun,” I murmur to Ana-Sofia.

“Oh, yes,” she says. Irony is not one of her skills. “I’m so glad you are here, Jenny. Thank you for giving up your afternoon! You must be very busy with the move.”

“You’re moving?” one of her extremely beautiful and well-educated friends asks. “Where?”

“Cambry-on-Hudson,” I answer. “I grew up there. My sister and her family are—”

“Oh, my God, you’re leaving Manhattan? Will you have to get a car? Are there any restaurants there? I couldn’t live without Zenyasa Yoga.”

“You still go to Zenyasa?” someone says. “I’ve moved on. It’s Bikram Hot for me. I saw Neil Patrick Harris there last week.”

“I don’t do yoga anymore,” a blonde woman says, studying a raspberry. “I joined a trampoline studio over on Amsterdam. Sarah Jessica Parker told me about it.”

“What about brunch?” someone asks me, her brow wrinkling in concern. “What will you do for brunch if you leave the city?”

“I think brunch is illegal outside Manhattan,” I answer gravely. No one laughs. They may think I’m telling the truth.

Now, granted, I love Manhattan. To paraphrase the song, if you make it here, the rest of the world is a cakewalk. And I *have* made it here. I’ve worked for the best—even Vera Wang, as a matter of fact. My work is sold at Kleinfeld Bridal and has supported me for fifteen years. I was named one of the Designers of the Year when I was at Parsons. I’ve been to not one, but two parties at Tim Gunn’s place. He greeted me by name—and yes, he’s as nice as he seems.

But while I love the city, its roar, its buildings and smells, its subways and skyline, in my heart of hearts, I want a yard. I want to see my nieces more often. I want the happily-ever-after that my sister nailed, that’s unfolding for my ex-husband and his too-nice wife.

I hope I’m running to something, not away. The truth is work has felt a little flat lately.

Cambry-on-Hudson is a lovely little city about an hour north of Manhattan. It has several excellent restaurants—some even serve brunch, shockingly. The downtown has a movie theater, flowering trees, a park and a Williams-Sonoma. It’s hardly a third-world country, no matter what these women think. And the latest shop is Bliss. Custom-made wedding gowns. My baby, in lieu of the human kind.

My phone beeps softly with a text. It’s from Andreas, who has put in his earbuds in order to drown out the stories of blocked milk ducts and bleeding nipples.

Check out the nose on the great-aunt. I hope the baby inherits that.

I smile at him gratefully.

“Did you hear about the obstetrician who fathered fifty-nine babies?” someone asks.  
“That was an episode on *Law & Order*.”

“Ripped from the headlines,” someone else murmurs. “Someone in my building was one of his patients.”

“Oh. Oh, dear,” Ana-Sofia says.

I turn to her. She looks a bit startled. “It’s probably not true,” I tell her.

“No... I think... It appears my water has broken.”

There is a silence, followed by a collective roar.

I’ll spare you the details. Suffice it to say that, despite there being a dozen women who’ve given birth all jockeying for position, my hand is the one Ana-Sofia clutches. “Oh, Jenny, it’s happening,” she says. “I feel something.” Her beautiful brown eyes are wide and terrified, and then I’m easing her onto the floor and crouched between her still-slim thighs—really, it’s like she’s showing off. I slide off her thong—she’s maintained her bikini wax, FYI—and, holy Mother of God, I can see the head.

I fumble in my purse for the travel-size Purell (if you ride the subways on a daily basis, you carry Purell) and slather some on my hands. “Get some towels and quiet down!” I bark at the other shower guests. I’m kind of good in emergencies. Liza hands me a stack of towels—very soft and about to be ruined by whatever comes out of a woman during childbirth.

“Let me help,” Liza whines. Indeed, this would make a great Facebook post. Just delivered my BFF’s baby, LOL!—with Ana-Sofia Marquez-Takahashi.

“I need to push,” Ana pants, and she does, once, twice, a third time, and a face appears—a baby! There’s a baby coming into my hands! One more push, and I’m holding it, slimy and covered in white gunk and a little blood and incredibly beautiful.

Dark hair, huge eyes. A miracle.

I ease her out all the way and put her on Ana’s chest. “It’s a girl,” I say, covering the baby with a towel.

It seems like just a few seconds later that FDNY clomps in, and I entertain a quick and deeply satisfying fantasy—*The head firefighter is filled with admiration for my cleverness, checks me out and asks me to dinner in the cutest Brooklyn accent the world has ever heard. His biceps flex hypnotically, and at the end of the date, yes, he does pick me up to demonstrate just how easy it would be for him to save my life, and a few years later, we have three strong sons, twin daughters on the way. And a Dalmatian.*

But no, their attention is quite taken with Ana-Sofia—as it should be, I guess, though it would be nice if just one of them checked me out. Someone cuts the cord, and Ana is weeping beautifully over her daughter, and Liza holds her phone to Ana’s ear so my ex-husband can sob his love and admiration for his wife, who just set the land-speed record for labor and delivery.

From down the hall, I can hear Andreas dry-heaving in the tastefully decorated powder room over the murmurs of admiration from the shower guests and the brawny firefighters as they tell Ana how amazing she is, how beautiful her daughter is.

Seems as if I’m leaving the city in the very nick of time.

## Rachel

The last time my husband and I had sex, I fell asleep.

Not after. During.

Just for a second. Adam didn't even notice; I think he just thought I was having my mind blown and it was all part of the grand finale.

But I did. I fell asleep. And it felt so good. The sex felt good, too...but the sleep! That gentle floating sensation, the skittering thoughts, the warm, comforting smell of my husband, the rocking rhythm, and just for a second there, I was...away.

This has been bothering me. I told Jenny about it, and she laughed till she cried. And I did, too, but I was thinking about how I'd vowed never to be that woman. The kind who's too tired for sex. The kind who regards making love as just another chore in an endless blur of days.

"Cut yourself some slack," Jenny had said, patting my hand. "You're an amazing wife. But tell Adam you need a nap, for the love of God! Or have him give you a massage instead next time."

Except I don't want to be one of those wives who'd rather have a back rub instead of sex, though if Adam did give me a back rub, I'd probably cry with gratitude. Fourteen hours a day of lifting kids, buckling car seats, picking up toys, sitting on the floor, lugging diaper bags because Charlotte is still holding out with potty training... Of course my back hurts.

But it's a small price to pay. Our girls are so lovely, so wonderful and precious and miraculous that I can't even believe they're mine.

"Mama!"

My middle daughter, lifted out of me one minute after Grace and one minute before Rose, snaps me out of my reverie. Charlotte's chubby little torso is smeared with paint—nontoxic, made from organic vegetable dye... Once you learn there are products like that out there, it's impossible to ignore them, and the Perfect Mommy faction here in Cambry-on-Hudson, New York, makes sure you know exactly what kind of paint *their* toddlers are using.

We've been finger-painting, and I always strip Charlotte and Rose down for that, Charlotte in her Sesame Street diaper, Rose in her tiny flowered underpants. Rose has moved from her poster board to the kitchen floor, but that's okay. I'll wash the floor later. Grace, on the other hand, is fully clothed, because even at three and a half, she's very tidy. Her little brow is wrinkled as she carefully draws on her paper. My serious baby. Not for the first time, I worry that she's on the Asperger's spectrum; she's too neat, too fastidious. Then again, she has cut my cleanup by one-third.

"What is it, Charlotte?" I ask, stroking her blond curls.

"I poop, Mama. My bum hot." She shoves a hand in her diaper, then withdraws it to show me. "Sticky."

Where's that chapter in the parenting books, huh? "That's fine, honey. Let's get you cleaned up."

I glance around the kitchen; all the drawers and cabinets have safety locks on them,

and the girls and I are fenced in with baby gates. “Rose, Grace, I’m taking Lottie to the bathroom, okay? Stay here.”

“No! I coming, too, Mama!” Rose demands. Both Rose and Charlotte are behind Grace in the speech department, which the pediatrician assured me was normal with multiples. Still. I worry a little.

“Grace, are you okay on your own?” I ask.

“Yes, Mama. I’m making circles.”

“They’re beautiful, honey.”

I scoop Rose up, hold Charlotte so she can’t touch anything with her pooppy hand, and walk down the hall to the powder room. Dang it. Somehow, Charlotte just managed to wipe her hand on my leg, so I’ll have to change again. Well, that’s life with three kids. Laundry every day. Besides, I was going to change anyway before Adam came home.

In the triplet group the girls and I occasionally go to, there are moms who look fifteen years older than they are. Who have inches of gray roots showing, who wear their husbands’ clothes and smell like stale milk and spit-up, who are weepy and exhausted. They terrify me, because some days, I feel as if I’m one inch away from that myself. I never want my girls to think they’re exhausting me; they’re the loves of my life. I’m the mother who actually misses them the four hours they’re at preschool three days a week. Being a stay-at-home mommy was all I ever wanted.

“Time to wash hands, Lottie,” I say now, setting Rose down and turning on the water. “Rose, do you have to go?”

“No,” she says. “No fanks, Mama, I fine.” She smiles, and my heart floods with love. I’ll have to write that down on one of my note cards so I can tell Adam about that. *No fanks, I fine*. I try to store up those little moments to tell him, since he has such long hours. Also, my memory isn’t what it used to be.

I wash Lottie’s hands, then take off her diaper and clean her up.

“I poop more,” she says.

“Okay,” I say, putting her on the potty. Rose and I wait. Charlotte grunts, her face going red. “No poop!” she announces grandly, and the three of us laugh.

I love being a mother so much, it’s a wonder my heart fits in my chest anymore. Adam and I *made* these perfect girls, and I can’t quite get over that. For most of my life, I’ve fought shyness. I’m still shy, even around Adam sometimes. You know how it is... If I have a stomach issue, I use the guest bathroom. I still have to give myself a pep talk before we go to a party.

And while I still blush and feel awkward when I’m out in public sometimes, I have *this*, the knowledge that my girls adore me, that I know exactly who I am and what I’m doing as a mother. The memory of my days as a graphic designer at Celery Stalk, a company that made computer games for kids, are shadowy now, but I remember the effort it took, talking to everyone, trying not to worry so much. How it took an hour for my shoulders to drop after I got home.

This...this is what I’m made for.

We wash hands again, all three of us. The soap dispenser is new, and the girls are still fascinated by its wonders. I put a clean diaper on Charlotte, and we’re good to go.

Just as we leave the bathroom, Rose squats and pees on the floor, soaking through her panties.

“Oopsy,” I say.

“I sorry, Mama.”

The usual stash of paper towels isn’t under the sink. Dang. “No, that’s okay, honey. Don’t worry a bit.” I glance down the hall. “Grace? How are you, sweetheart?”

“Fine.”

I can tell by her voice she’s not fine.

“What are you doing, honey?” I walk down the hall to the kitchen, holding Rose by the hand. She’s dripping, which means I’ll have to wash the hall floor, too.

“Nothing,” Grace says. Then there’s the sound of something spilling.

Cheerios. All over the kitchen floor. Those things have impressive sliding power. “Don’t dump the cereal, sweetheart. That’s our food.”

“I want more circles,” Grace says, emptying the box. “I want to color all circles.”

Charlotte is already stomping on the Cheerios, grinding them into fine powder, which makes Grace scream in fury. Rose hesitates, then joins in the stomping. “Settle down, girls,” I say, scooping up Grace.

“My circles! My circles!” she wails, arching her back so that I nearly drop her.

*Nap time.* Such blessed words. I am eternally grateful that my daughters are such good sleepers.

Twenty minutes later, Rose is in clean clothes but weeping because I won’t let her drink the Windex I used to wipe up her pee. Grace is angry and stony-faced and has told her sisters she hates them, which made me flinch; I don’t think Jenny and I ever said that to each other, and I have no idea where the girls learned the word *hate*, especially in reference to other humans.

Charlotte is making the strained poop face again.

“Mama, more pooping,” she confirms.

“Great,” I say. “Not a problem.”

It’s 1:34 p.m. Bedtime is six hours away.

But no, it’s not that bad. It’s just...well, it’s tiring, having three kids at once. People like to tell me how blessed I am, and trust me, I know that. Four years of trying to have a baby, three on hormones, four in vitro attempts...four years of hope and yearning... Adam and I went through a lot to have this family.

Which doesn’t mean it’s not tiring some days.

“I not sleeping,” Charlotte tells me. “I hate sleeping. I hate! I hate!” Grace’s anger seems to have infected her.

“Sleeping is a happy time,” I say, kissing her head. She rubs her eyes and glares at me, but she’ll be the first one asleep. Grace will be the last, and she’ll need a good twenty minutes of snuggling when she wakes up, flushed and confused. Rose already has her little butt in the air, thumb in her mouth. She gives me a drooly smile and closes her eyes.

Their room is my favorite place in our gorgeous house, yellow and green with mobiles that I made, an overcrowded bookcase and three hammocks filled with stuffed animals. Unlike a lot of the houses I’ve seen, this room isn’t a showplace, an adult’s idea of how a child’s room should be, with four tasteful stuffed animals and books arranged by height. No. This room is real *and* beautiful, sunny and light and airy. These books are read. “Sleep tight, my babies,” I say, closing the door.

Charlotte kicks the wall a few times, but that’s tradition. I now have an hour and a

half of what Adam calls “your time.”

Me Time is spent vacuuming and washing the kitchen floor, cleaning the bathroom, putting the lids back on the paint pots, washing the brushes, chipping dried paint off the table, hanging up Grace’s picture on the fridge. I then wash out the sink and check the menu I made on the weekend. Being organized is kind of a must when you have to grocery shop with three little ones. Tonight’s dinner is salmon with couscous and roasted almonds and a broccoli salad. I stick a bottle of sauvignon blanc in the fridge, take the broccoli and red cabbage out of the fridge, then pause, glancing at the computer.

It’ll just take a second.

I Google “five star hotels, new york city” and scroll through the list. The Surrey—nah, too fussy. The Peninsula—just looked at that one last week. Anything Trump—no, thanks, too overdone.

Ah ha. The Tribeca Grand. I click and look at their suites, then call up. “Hi, I’m interested in booking a suite for a weekend in September,” I tell the woman, who has a gorgeous accent. Swiss, I decide, not that I’d know. “No, just for one person....Business with some entertaining thrown in....Well, I’m looking at that one right now, but I’m not sure that’ll be big enough. Is the penthouse suite free the weekend of the twenty-first?...It is? Great. And the rooftop terrace...that’s for penthouse guests only, correct?”

The dishwasher kicks on as the woman tells me about the cost, the amenities, the restaurant, and I imagine lying on a chaise lounge on the terrace, looking at the city, or sliding into that giant bed, the thrill of those polished cotton sheets. I’d get a martini at the bar; a specialty martini, not something on the menu, but something I’d ask the bartender to make just for me.

Then I glance at the clock, realize I only have forty minutes of Me Time left, thank the Swiss woman and switch the laundry.

\* \* \*

When Adam comes home just before seven o’clock, I’m clean—thanks to taking a shower while the girls played on the bathroom floor with my makeup brushes—and dressed in clean clothes. The house is picked up, I managed to put some flowers in a vase—after scooping a tulip head out of Rose’s mouth and calling the poison hotline to ascertain that she’d be okay. Dinner is in the oven, the wine is in an ice bucket, the table is set, the girls are fed and bathed and sweet and in their little jammies, jumping up and down with excitement at the sight of their father coming through the door.

“Princesses!” he exclaims, kneeling down to hug them. He smiles up at me.

God, I love him.

He’s still so good-looking. Better-looking, one of those boyish faces that’s improved with age since we met ten years ago. His black hair is starting to gray, and smile lines fan out from his eyes. He’s the same weight he was when we got married. So am I, though I’ve had to fight for it, and some of my parts aren’t exactly where they used to be. But Adam is nearly unchanged.

“Sorry I’m late,” he says, standing up to kiss me.

“That’s fine,” I tell him. “We can eat after they go to bed.” We try to eat all together

every night, but sometimes life interferes. And honestly, how nice this will be! Almost a date. Hopefully, Grace won't keep getting out of bed, because if she does, Rose will, too.

"Daddy! Daddy! Daddy!" Charlotte chants.

"Rose, put that down, honey," he says as she tries to carry his briefcase. "Rach, I'll put them to bed, how's that?"

"That would be great," I say. "They'll love that."

A lot of people in this area work in Manhattan. Two of my friends have apartments in the city, and one's husband lives there during the week. A lot of folks don't get home from work until eight or nine. But Adam has always worked here, in Cambry-on-Hudson, ever since he graduated from Georgetown, and it's just one more thing I'm grateful for. He spends more time with the girls than most of my friends' husbands, the type of dad who has tea parties with our daughters, pushes them too high on their swings and has promised a puppy for their fourth birthday.

In Cambry-on-Hudson, being a stay-at-home mom is common, and the lovely neighborhoods are full of slim, highlighted mothers in Volvo Cross Countrys and Mercedes SUVs, moms who get together for coffee at Blessed Bean and go shopping together for a dress to wear to the latest fund-raiser.

I do some of those things, too—Mommy and Me swim class at the country club that I'm still a little embarrassed about joining. Adam said we needed the membership to schmooze for his job as a corporate attorney. But I still feel shy. And incredibly lucky, too.

Adam takes off his suit jacket and drapes it over the railing. "Story time!" he announces, then scoops all three girls into his arms and carries them upstairs. Grace's dark cloud has lifted, Charlotte is shrieking with delight and Rose has snuggled her head against his shoulder and waves to me.

I pick up Adam's jacket automatically and put it in the dry-cleaning bag in the hall closet, then go into the kitchen and pour myself a glass of wine. Fifteen more minutes for the salmon. From upstairs, I can hear Adam singing "Baby Beluga" to the girls.

This little window of quiet is a gift. I look around the kitchen, which I love. I love our whole house, a big 1930s house that has no particular style, but is gracious and warm and interesting. Jenny teases me about being a throwback, and it's true, I love all the homey stuff—baking and gardening and decorating. Our childhood home was nearly perfect until Daddy died, and Mom and Dad were so happy, so solid, so together...that was what I wanted, ever since I can remember.

From the hall closet, I hear a phone chime. I guess Adam's phone is in his suit pocket. Can't have him lose that, because, like most people these days, it's practically an appendage. I retrieve the phone and glance at the screen.

The text is from Private Caller. There's an attachment. No message.

"Baby Beluga" is still being sung upstairs.

The phone chimes again, startling me. Private Caller again, but this time, a message.

Do you like this?

I click on the attachment. It's a slightly blurry picture, but of what, I'm not sure. A...a tree, maybe, though it doesn't look so healthy. It looks diseased, moist and soft.

There's a knothole that looks damp and sick. Whatever it is, I can't imagine why someone would be sending it to Adam. He doesn't know anything about trees.

A vein in my neck throbs. The vampire vein. Maybe it's an artery. I don't know.  
*Baby Beluga, Baby Beluga...*

This was clearly sent to Adam by mistake. That's it, because otherwise, Adam would have this person in his contacts list. His phone is always completely up-to-date. In fact, he lost it last week, and he went a little crazy looking for it. All those contacts, he said. All those saved texts and apps and calendar notes and everything that I don't use on my phone. I just use it to call or text him or Jenny, or in case the nursery school needs to get in touch with me.

I think it's a tree. I'm almost positive.

But Adam doesn't know anything about trees. This was probably meant for the...the...the tree warden or something.

*Baby Beluga...Baby Beluga...*

I forward the picture to my phone.

Then I delete it from his.

That throbbing vein makes me feel sick. I put the phone back in his jacket pocket, put the jacket back in the bag, and then I go back into the kitchen and take a big sip of wine, then another.

The girls' door closes upstairs. Adam is always faster at tucking in than I am.

His feet thud down the stairs. "Babe," he says. "Have you seen my phone?"

"No," I lie. "But I did just put your jacket in the dry-cleaning bag. Maybe it's in your pocket?"

"Right." He goes to the closet, retrieves the phone, checks it. Then he looks at me with a smile. "What's for dinner? It smells fantastic in here."

"Salmon."

"My favorite."

"I know." And then I smile, though I have no idea how my face actually looks, and pour him some wine.

I remember what I wanted to tell him. *No fanks, Mama, I fine.*

I don't tell him. I keep that to myself.

When we go to bed a couple of hours later, Adam checks his phone, kisses my temple and is asleep within seconds.

Usually, we make love on Friday nights, since the next day is Saturday and Adam doesn't have to get up early. He tells me I can sleep in, too; the girls are big enough to play in their room for an hour or so, and he's even offered to get up with them. But he never hears them, so I wake up anyway, and then wake him up, and then I can't ever get back to sleep once I hear the girls moving and talking.

But this Friday night, nothing. A kiss on the temple. No expectant smile, no nuzzling, no "you look beautiful" or "you smell fantastic," his traditional opening volley when it comes to sex.

Maybe he noticed that I fell asleep last time after all. Maybe he's being thoughtful. Or maybe it's something else.

## Jenny

The drive from Manhattan to Cambry-on-Hudson is one I could make in my sleep. COH is my hometown, a place my sister never left except to go to college, a place I visit at least twice a month.

But it's different, coming here to live. On many fronts, it's perfect, because I never did want to stay in Manhattan forever. COH is a pretty town on the banks of the Hudson, saved from true depression by its proximity to the city and some really smart planning on the part of the town council. Years ago, they preserved the riverfront, which is now home to restored brick buildings filled with dress boutiques and home goods shops, a bakery and café, an art gallery and a few restaurants and salons.

And Bliss.

There, in the center of the block, is my new business, the shop name announced in sleek steel letters over the door. Rachel designed the logo, a simple branch of cherry blossoms, and three days ago, we tackled the window display—pink silk cherry blossoms tied to dangling white ribbons. The interior of the shop is the palest pink, the floors a dark cherry, newly sanded and polished.

In the window, being admired by three young women, is a strapless *peau de soie* dress with lace overlay, a pattern of tiny rosebuds woven into the Chantilly.

Cambry-on-Hudson also is home to three country clubs, an equestrian club and a yacht club—it's on the very border of Westchester County, you see. With all those wedding venues and deep pockets in town, Bliss should do just fine. And maybe I'll get the old tingle back, now that I'm not surrounded by memories of Owen.

I'll miss the city, but I admit that I feel a little relieved to get out of there, too. It's a hard place to live—the constant noise, the endless blur of humanity, the exhaust and pavement and strangely sweet steam rising from the subway grates. It takes a toll, all the walking in heels, navigating through crowds, grabbing on to subway poles and stair railings that have been touched by thousands of people. And last I checked, I was allowed to go back to visit, though my friends and colleagues made it feel a bit like I was walking the green mile to my execution. Such is the nature of New Yorkers.

So, yes. This is a good move, a year in the making, and I can't wait to get settled. Life will be quieter here. Easier. I'm not just moving because Owen and I got a divorce. Honest.

I head up the hill from the riverfront, where there is block after block of gentrified old row houses. Some streets are a little careworn and rough, and the other side of Broadway gets seedy fast, as we are not quite as Westchester County as the rest of Westchester County. The Riverview section of the city, where my sister lives, is quite posh, with big sprawling houses and glimpses of the Hudson.

But Magnolia Avenue, where I'm renting, is lovely without being snooty. Real people live here, people who have to work for a living.

As I pull up to Number 11, my phone rings.

I sense my hard-won optimism is about to get a smackdown. The Angel of Death, also known as my mother, Lenore Tate, long-suffering widow and professional

pessimist.

Best to take the call; otherwise, she'll call the police to check on me.

"Hi, Mom," I say, making sure I sound chipper.

"I'm just checking in. Honey, I'm so sad for you. Horrible that you have to move," she says in her trademark tone—mournful with a dash of smug.

"I don't have to, Mom. I chose to."

"You sound so depressed. Well, who can blame you?"

My eye twitches. "I'm not depressed. I'm really happy. I'll be closer to you, and Rachel, and—"

"Yes, but these aren't exactly ideal circumstances, are they? It should've been *you* and Owen, not him and Ana-Sofia. Though she is quite beautiful. The baby, too. Did I tell you they had me over last week?"

"Yes. You've mentioned it nine times now."

"Oh, you're counting. Poor thing. I can only imagine how hard it was, delivering the baby who should've been yours..."

"Okay, I'm hanging up now." She's not exactly wrong, and she knows it. Such is her evil power.

"I'm coming over to help you unpack. Do you have pepper spray? The neighborhood is seedy."

When I went to college, Mom moved across the state border to a posh little town in Connecticut and began viewing COH as akin to the slums of Calcutta. It's irritating, but at least she doesn't live too close by.

"Mom, the neighborhood is gorgeous," I tell her, using my "calm the bride" voice.

"Well, it's not what it was when your father was alive. If he hadn't died, it still might be a nice place to live."

This is one of those illogical and unarguable statements so common from Mother Dear. Westchester County is hardly a hotbed of crime and urban decay. Even if COH was hit by urban blight—which it hasn't been—it's not as if Dad, who was a dentist, would've single-handedly stepped in and saved the day.

"You should've moved to Connecticut, Jenny. Hedgefield would've been perfect for your little dress shop. I still don't understand why you didn't want to come here."

*Because you live there.* "I have to go, Mom. Don't come over. I'll have you up over dinner later this week, okay?"

"I can't eat dairy anymore. It gives me terrible diarrhea. Ana-Sofia made empanadas that were delicious. Maybe you could call her for the recipe, since you're not the best cook."

Cleansing breath, cleansing breath. "Anything else?"

"Well, don't make duck. I'm morally opposed to duck. Do you *know* what they do to ducks at a duck farm? The cruelty! It's barbaric. But I do love veal. Can you make veal? Or is that too hard for you?"

"I'll make something delicious, Mom." I won't. I'll buy something delicious.

"See you in a few hours, then."

"No, no. Please don't come. I won't even be here. I have a bride coming in." A lie, but it's de rigueur when dodging a maternal visit.

"Fine. Maybe I'll call Ana-Sofia. She asked for some advice on getting the baby to burp, so..."

“Okay, bye.” I stab the end button hard. My twitch has grown into a throb.

I’d like to say that Mom means well, but that wouldn’t really be true. When things are good, she looks not for the silver lining, but for the mercury toxicity. When things are bad, her eyes light up, she stands straighter and her life is filled with purpose. She views my move to COH as both my inevitable failure at marriage—she always hinted Owen was too good for me—and also a gauntlet I’ve thrown at her feet. If I do better after my divorce—personally and professionally—it might imply that she should, too.

Well, no point in crying over spilled milk. Spilled wine, yes. But I have a long day of unpacking in front of me, and I want to get started. Unfortunately, the moving truck is nowhere in sight. Luis said he knew the street, but they’re late just the same, even if they left just a second after I did.

Hopefully, this will be the last time I move—which is exactly what I said when I moved in with Owen. He was the fourth boyfriend I lived with, but I thought he had staying power. But seriously, this could be the last time, because my new place is flippin’ beautiful. The real estate lady said it’s possible that it’ll go up for sale next year; it was an impulse buy on the part of the owner, and my lease is only for one year—a hint, she said, that the owner might want to sell it.

So I *could* live here forever, and why not? It’s elegant and cozy at the same time, a four-story brick town house painted dark gray with black trim and a cherry-red front door. Iron window box holders curl up in front of all the windows, and I immediately picture planting trailing ivy and pink and purple flowers in a few weeks. The trees along the street are dressed in green fuzz, and the magnolia across the street is in full, cream-and-pink glory.

My apartment consists of the middle two floors of the building—living room, dining room, tiny galley kitchen and powder room on the first level, then three small bedrooms and a full-size bath up the wide wooden staircase. The Victorian claw-foot tub was impossible to resist. There’s a tiny backyard with a slate patio, which I get to use, and a tiny front yard that belongs to the super, who has the first floor—the pied-à-terre, the Realtor called it, which made it sound very fabulous and European. The fourth floor is being used by the owner for storage. With the three dormered windows up there, the light would be fantastic. If I owned the place, I could use the entire floor as a home studio. Or a nursery for my attractive and cheerful babies.

A man comes down the street, walking a beautiful Golden retriever.

*He looks my way, and our eyes meet. He lives right next door in that gorgeous brownstone, and he’s single, go figure, a chef who’s just signed a contract to let his name be used on a line of high-end French cookware. His sister is engaged, and guess who’s making her dress? Jenny Tate, that’s who! What a small world! The Christmas wedding is at St. Patrick’s Cathedral, and I wear a wine-red velvet dress to the reception and he’s in a tux, and as we dance together, he slides an engagement ring onto my finger and drops to one knee, and his sister—in her gorgeous satin modified A-line dress with green velvet trailing sash—is all for this. In fact, she’s in on the proposal and is already crying happy tears. We get married and buy a charming old farmhouse with views of the Hudson so our twin sons and little daughter can run and play while we harvest vegetables from our organic garden and we’ll breed Jeter, our faithful Goldie, and the kids will all be valedictorians and go to Yale.*

The man fails to make eye contact. Instead, he’s yelling something into a phone