

CHAPTER 1



April 14, 2011

Killing him was unavoidable. Noah saw the fat squirrel plop off the curb and lumber like a sumo wrestler across Ox Road. The animal reached the center line before doubling back into the path of Noah's gold 2006 Dodge Dakota.

"Dude!" Noah shouted above the thuds and clunks. He yanked the wheel to the right much harder than he intended. First he thumped the squirrel, then he hopped the crumbling low curb, before finally hitting a woman riding a bright green mountain bike.

He was pale and mumbling a few of his mother's replacement swear words as he jumped out of the truck. "Are you OK?"

The woman, lying some five feet from the front right corner of the truck, rolled onto her back, one foot stuck between the bike's rear tire and the chain. Her hand went to a bleeding

raspberry on her left cheek. One temple of a cracked pair of Oakley sunglasses poked out from under her bike helmet.

“Are you all right? I am so sorry. I totally did *not* see you.” He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and dialed 911.

The woman unhooked her helmet below her chin and tossed it to the side. “Oh, really?” she said. She struggled to remove her backpack from both shoulders.

Noah reported the accident and he thought he heard the 911 operator say she’d stay on the line until help arrived, but he hung up anyway. “Totally didn’t see you.” Noah dropped to one knee. “Is anything broken?”

She tried to sit up but couldn’t free her foot. “You mean besides my bike?”

“Let me,” Noah said. “Hold on.” He pushed the chain the rest of the way off its sprocket and tried to pull her foot forward.

“That hurts, no! That hurts! *What is wrong with you?*”

“What hurts?”

“Does it matter, you idiot? The foot, the ankle—it *all* hurts.” She put one hand on her forehead and the other back on the raspberry on her cheek.

“You might be in shock. Just stay down.” Noah jumped up and moved to the other side of the bike’s bent frame. He lifted and twisted it a few degrees until the woman could remove her foot without contact.

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She sat up, braced herself with her palms flat on the sidewalk, and looked up at the sky. “Really God? Today? Really?”

Noah sat near her. “Take a deep breath. I feel so terrible. My gosh. Really terrible. The ambulance should be here soon.” He stuck his hand out. “I’m sorry, I’m Noah Cooper. I didn’t get your name.”

“When exactly would you have gotten my name? Before or after running me down?” She rubbed her hands together, dislodging tiny pebbles, before shaking his hand. “Rachel.” She held his hand firmly an extra beat before adding, “And you nearly killed me.”

“Yeah, sorry, I realize that.” He pointed to the lump of sumo squirrel in the road. “I was avoiding him.”

“You didn’t.”

“Yeah, I realize that, too.”

Rachel stretched her neck to the left and right, and they sat quietly until Rachel began removing her shoe.

“Can I help?”

Rachel’s eyes said, *Haven’t you helped enough?*

“I’ll just move the truck. Be right back.” Noah heard Rachel mutter something that was definitely not one of his mother’s replacement swear words. He hopped in the truck, put it in reverse, rolled off the sidewalk, and backed into a parking space. An ambulance and a Fairfax County police cruiser arrived on scene just as Noah returned.

While the EMTs treated Rachel, an officer named Kusel

stood next to Noah, asking questions and filling out an accident report.

“Just look at it,” Noah said, leading Kusel to the squirrel. “It’s the fattest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Kusel smiled, made a note on his report, and quipped, “You obviously haven’t met my ex-wife.”

The two men laughed and Noah glanced at Rachel, who was watching them as she was being strapped onto a backboard. Her look could have killed a thousand fat squirrels.

“No, we’re not—” He gestured at the roadkill. “Oh, forget it.”

Kusel continued scribbling his report, followed that with a quick ticket for Noah, and said he’d be trailing the ambulance to the hospital to finish his paperwork.

“Can I come too? I want to be sure she’s going to be all right.”

They both looked at the ambulance. With the rear door open, they could see three EMTs hovering over Rachel. One knelt at her feet, fastening a black brace to her ankle, another appeared to be checking her pulse, and the last made notes on a clipboard.

“You’ll take care of the bike?” Kusel asked.

“Sure.”

“Fine. Toss it in the truck and hop in with me.”

The two followed the ambulance along the edge of the George Mason University campus, then on to the parkway toward Inova Fairfax Hospital. Noah explained that he’d been

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heading to an exam study group. He quickly sent a text to a friend with the news he'd be late.

"What are you studying?"

"I'm graduating, hopefully in a couple weeks, with a BFA."

"Fine arts?" Kusel asked.

"Yeah," Noah said, impressed.

Officer Kusel noticed. "Not all cops are idiots," he said. "No matter what the ex says."

The small talk continued. Noah explained he was from Woodstock, Virginia, about ninety miles to the west. "Ever been out on 66? Just keep going until you hit 81, then go south fifteen or twenty miles. There's Woodstock."

Kusel cocked his head. "The same one where—"

"No, not *that* Woodstock," Noah stopped him. "Not the one where people got hammered and mud-wrestled in their underwear."

"Too bad," Kusel chuckled. Moments later, he pulled up behind the ambulance parked under the Emergency Room canopy and turned off the cruiser. "Here we go."

They followed Rachel on her rolling stretcher through the ER's automatic doors and into a treatment bay. They stood aside as she was carefully transferred to a hospital gurney. Then an EMT gathered a signature, handed over a report, dropped Rachel's backpack in a chair, and disappeared.

"Everything looks fine," a nurse said to Rachel, scanning

the report. “Nothing urgent. A doctor will be right here, OK, sweetie?”

Rachel cringed.

For five minutes Noah stood just outside the curtain and listened as Officer Kusel took Rachel’s colorful statement. When he finished, he said good-bye with a greasy wink, slapped Noah on the back as he passed, and strode toward the nurses’ station.

Noah stepped in, closed the curtain behind him, and approached Rachel’s bedside. “You hanging in there?”

“You’re still here? I thought you’d be arrested by now.”

“Ha-ha. Of course I’m still here.”

“You really don’t need to be.”

“Yes, I’m pretty sure I do. Are you in pain?”

She shook her head and relaxed. “No, they gave me something on the ride over.”

“What else can I do? I am *really* sorry about all this.”

She contemplated. “Can you go to a meeting back on campus for me?”

“Sure,” Noah answered with utter confidence. “Anything. Name it. I’m your guy.”

“Great, hand me my backpack, Superman.”

He did and she rifled through it, producing a folder bulging with notes. She held it out to him. “Can you defend my master’s thesis?”

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Noah didn't know whether to run, cry, or run away crying. "You're kidding."

"No, I'm afraid I'm not."

He sat in a chair near the bed. "I am so sorry. So totally and completely sorry."

Rachel shoved the folder back in her bag and held it out for him. He took it and set it on the floor.

"Don't worry. It's covered," she said. "I texted my advisor from the ambulance. Turns out there are not many things that get you this kind of reprieve, but being run over by a truck is one of them." She half-smiled at him, and for the first time since the accident, Noah exhaled fully and took a deep, calming breath.

Noah reeled her into playing get-to-know-you while they waited over a half hour for a doctor.

Noah told her how thrilled he was to be graduating with an art degree and about his dream of publishing children's books. "I'm the next David Wiesner."

Rachel gave him her last name. "It's Kaplan." She also mentioned her graduate degree, an MA in sociology, and her master's thesis: "Private Sector Cures to Inner-City Violence in Washington, DC."

"Does me hitting you with my truck count as inner-city violence?"

Rachel laughed, even though she really didn't want to. It wasn't much, Noah thought, but it was definitely a laugh. He

nearly lost himself in the realization that her eyes were as bright and big and beautiful as he'd ever seen.

Eventually a doctor came. He checked the bruise on Rachel's cheek, applied a fresh bandage, and manipulated Rachel's ankle in every possible direction before ordering X-rays.

An hour later, the same doctor told Rachel she had a high ankle sprain, but no break. He wrapped it, advised her to apply ice and to stay off it for a few days. He gave her an extra bandage, crutches, a prescription for an anti-inflammatory drug, and sent her home.

Noah helped Rachel into a cab and surprised her by getting in the other side.

"Are you kidding me? We're sharing cabs now?"

"I've got your bike in my truck. You want it back, don't you?"

"You're insufferable!" She laughed, but was already thinking:
More like irresistible.

They took the cab back to his truck near the GMU campus. Noah drove them to a CVS pharmacy, insisted on paying for the prescription and re-freezable ice pack, and then followed Rachel's directions to an apartment complex a few miles away.

He helped her up a flight of stairs to her front door and held it open as she hobbled inside. Without turning around or stopping her momentum, she said, "Yes, you can come in."

Noah put the ice pack in the freezer and filled a small bag of ice to use in the meantime. He also slid the coffee table close enough for her foot, and, without being asked, searched for and

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found a pillow to go underneath it. Though she begged him not to, he scavenged through her refrigerator and found Chinese food. “How old?” he asked.

“Three months,” she called back into the kitchen.

“Ha.”

“It’s from last night.” Again without her blessing, he warmed the food in the microwave and the two shared what was left of orange chicken and noodles.

Noah asked about roommates and learned Rachel hadn’t had one since finishing her undergrad. He didn’t comment, but it was clear to Noah from the unusually nice college apartment and its furnishings that Rachel didn’t need a roommate to make her monthly rent.

Rachel asked about his roommates, and Noah said that with their divergent schedules he hardly knew them. “They put a check on the corkboard every month, that’s about it.”

Noah asked about Rachel’s family.

She said very little.

Rachel asked about his, and Noah talked for ten minutes.

An hour after arriving, he left with a pledge to get the bike fixed and return it ASAP.

A week later, after twenty-two text messages from him and ten increasingly friendly messages back, Noah returned with a good-as-new bike, a pair of Oakley sunglasses, and something he’d visited six toy stores to find: a fat, plush, stuffed squirrel.

CHAPTER 2



D *omus Jefferson* was quiet.

There were times when Malcolm and Rain loved the silence. They often looked forward to the weekends with no guests, no late night crises, no 3:00 A.M. ding-dongs at the doorbell. On those nights they'd lie in bed and bathe in the spirit of the Inn and in the spirit and history of Thomas Jefferson, whose image and interests lined the walls and crammed the bookshelves.

Rain and Malcolm had built an entire marriage at the Inn. It wasn't just a bed-and-breakfast; it was a home. It was the only home they'd shared as a married couple.

Recently, however, what had settled in the air at the Inn just south of Woodstock, Virginia, was a sadder sort of quiet. It was the quiet only doubt knows, the quiet that portends uncertain change.

Since the bailouts, failures, presidential election, and economic collapse of 2008, business had been slower than ever.

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Malcolm had been a part of *Domus Jefferson* since his parents had bought it in 1968. He had been thirteen years old then and had seen wild swings in business and occupancy rates through the years. He often reminded Rain that the ups and downs were part of the life of owning and running an inn.

They knew that every inn from Virginia to Vancouver had months when the proprietors wonder if it is really worth it anymore. But then a couple on their honeymoon, or a dying man on his last adventure before leaving the world, or a mother and daughter reconnecting after far too long, find their way to one of the many B&Bs still standing and make all of those slow patches worth it.

Domus Jefferson, situated so perfectly at the feet of the famed Skyline Drive, Luray Caverns, and all the history of the Shenandoah Valley, had sustained and outlasted, even thrived, through many economic droughts. But this one, they feared, they could not survive.

They thanked God daily that they had a security blanket: a series of inherited investments Malcolm's older brother, Matthew, had managed since their parents' deaths. It wouldn't make anyone wealthy, but it was enough to patch the occasional holes in the profit-and-loss statement. Malcolm and Matthew had not always been best-of-friend-brothers, but when it came to money, Malcolm trusted him with every last penny.

On just another of many quiet mornings, Rain made herself

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comfortable in her favorite place on earth, a small garden on the south side of the Inn. A fence that few animals respected marked the twenty-by-forty-foot plot. Every time a deer or rabbit enjoyed breakfast at Rain's expense, Malcolm suggested an electric fence, but she only pretended to consider it.

Rain worked in the garden until her fingers were sore. During one of the dips in business, Rain decided the Inn could set itself apart in some small way from their competition by offering natural, locally grown foods every morning at the breakfast table. The small garden hadn't attracted much new business, but it had turned into something even more important for Rain. It was her very own temple, a spot of complete peace, a place to feel God's love and to be reminded she—and the Inn—were never alone.

If Malcolm needed her and she couldn't be found inside, there was only one other place he ever checked.

Malcolm watched her from the kitchen window. He thought it ironic he couldn't tell from where he stood whether she was weeding or praying. He sipped his orange juice and smiled at the sight.

This moment and this view, he thought. This is what I'll miss most about Domus Jefferson.

The two would only admit to one another that it wasn't just about the economy. Their passion for the Inn seemed to be dipping with the markets. They wondered if it was worth the stress,

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worth the routine of checking people in and out for twenty years. The mixture of it all had them thinking a change might be due.

Rain and their only child, Noah, frequently nudged Malcolm about the novel that everyone knew wasn't going to publish itself. Malcolm's book, set primarily in Brazil, was two decades in the making. The story advanced a chapter or two now and then, a few hundred words here, a few hundred more there, but the story he wanted to tell was still much longer than the actual manuscript.

Rain enjoyed poking him in a loving tease, "Your hundred-and-fifty-page manuscript is the longest short story in the history of literature."

Ever since Noah was a child, he'd told his parents that his dream was to take over the bed-and-breakfast. He would tell the guests as they left that they should come back someday, because when *he* was in charge, he would do things better. "Not just different," he said, "but better."

Through the years Noah had coached his parents in the art of customer service, and they took it in good-natured stride. Most of the guests enjoyed the precocious boy and rewarded him with pats on the back, firm handshakes, the occasional tip, and even a gift or two that return visitors had hauled across the country. A handful of couples had become so close to Noah that they sent Christmas and birthday cards even many years after their most recent visit.

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Noah had been twelve and in the sixth grade at Peter Muhlenberg Middle School when he realized that running the Inn was no longer his dream. As is the case with many young men and young women, something happens during their teen-aged years. Just as they start noticing cute boys and attractive girls, they realize how much smarter they are than their teachers, parents, and pastors, and they begin to yearn for more. They discover a desire to see the rest of the world. Many return to their homes, to familiar streets, churches, and the small-town shops that took their money and made their memories as children.

But many do not.

Noah was noncommittal on whether the Shenandoah Valley would be home again after college, but he was certain his professional future held more than just running the Inn. His constant doodling during school had uncovered an undeniable talent. There was nothing he couldn't draw, and his imagination played out impressively on whatever canvas he chose. His drawings and paintings through the years found their way into antique-looking frames, and not a single room at the Inn was decorated without at least one piece of Noah's art.

A&P Prestwich appeared in the distance through the kitchen window and Malcolm smiled. She was walking Putin, her newest cat, on the same leash she'd walked Castro, the first cat she'd adopted. There had been many world leader cats in between. As

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was her custom, A&P took her sweet, slow time, making her path toward Rain and the garden.

Twenty years after the funeral of Malcolm's parents, Jack and Laurel Cooper, A&P continued to live in a fabulous Southern mansion on an adjacent lot with several unused guesthouses. She'd discovered the valley, and the property, not long after her husband was killed in 1984 in a plane crash near their home in the Florida Everglades.

Not much had changed since her first stay at *Domus Jefferson*. She had continued being extraordinarily kind to Jack's brother, Joe, until his death at a nursing home in Strasburg. She even insisted on paying for his funeral and burial at the same cemetery that held Laurel and Jack.

A&P also continued leaving ridiculously generous tips every time she visited the Inn or any of the local restaurants around town. It was her way of spreading her husband's wealth, and she'd committed to leave nothing behind when she met him again in heaven. Of course she was now well aware that her tips at the Inn went to a number of charities of interest to the Coopers. Some were in the valley, some as far away as Washington, DC. But the game pleased her, and her happiness pleased Malcolm and Rain even more.

A&P also knew about and had finally embraced the fact that a small children's shelter in the city bore the name of her and her husband. She'd only been there in person once, but she knew

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she'd never forget sitting in her car in front of a building her husband's wealth had built and knowing that, save for an early exit from life, he would have done the same thing himself. The tears and longing for the only man she'd ever loved made it difficult to return.

Malcolm took a seat at the kitchen table. He finished his juice and looked at his watch: 8:30 A.M. He looked at the seven empty chairs pushed in carefully around the table and the seven place settings besides his. He admired the place mats Rain had purchased at a craft fair in Petersburg, West Virginia. She had purchased dozens of matching place mats and napkins through the years, forever concerned a guest might return to the Inn to the same place setting they'd used on their last visit.

Malcolm couldn't remember the last time every seat at the table had been filled at 8:15 in the morning. There had been many mornings in the Inn's history, both when his parents ran it and after he and Rain took over, that not only had every seat been filled, but someone would be lingering in the kitchen or in the doorway. Another couple might have been reading the paper in the oversized chairs in the living room, patiently waiting for seats to open up.

Those were memorable mornings. They came after nights when every room was full and when some last-minute, tired travelers had to be turned away with directions to another nearby inn

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or highway hotel. It had been quite some time since Malcolm had watched Rain scurry about in the morning, hair and flour flying as she readied breakfast for as many as sixteen people.

I will miss this, Malcolm thought.

But as the words passed from one side of his mind to the other, he realized he didn't know exactly what he'd miss. Was it the quiet moments, the guests, the land around them, the fulfillment of knowing that the Inn was full of good people passing through for good reasons? Was it the thank-you notes? Was it the romantic notion that guests were allowed to take a pocketful of the Inn's magic with them, leaving plenty behind for the next guests to absorb and enjoy?

I will miss it all, he thought.

CHAPTER 3



How long has it been since we slept until 8:30?”
“Too long,” Shawn said. “But enjoy it while it lasts, because a grandchild isn’t going to let you sleep in past 6:00, never mind 8:30.”

Samantha knew he was right, but didn’t mind a sleepless wink. Her daughter, Angela, was a mother for the first time at age thirty-five and was headed for an extended stay in Woodstock. Samantha had wanted nothing more than to be there when Angela’s baby had arrived in a small, suburban hospital in Florissant, Missouri. But there were simply too few officers and too many man-hours to fill in the county sheriff’s office for her to escape to Missouri for the big day. With her grandbaby just two weeks old and cleared to fly, Samantha convinced herself it was nearly as good as having been there herself for the delivery.

Samantha rolled toward Shawn and pulled the covers up to her chin. “Why do I feel like I’m not really a grandma?”

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“Because you slept on the warm side of the pillow?”

Samantha pulled a hand from under the comforter and gave him a thumbs-down. “It just doesn’t feel real yet,” she said. “Seeing Ang get married took enough adjustment. But now my baby has a baby? It’s hard to digest. Suddenly I’m so, so *old*.”

Shawn put his hands under his head and looked up at the ceiling. “No comment on being old. But there’s no escaping that you, my dear, are indeed a grandmother. And in a few hours when Angela makes her way through that front door with her baby, you’ll be no more grandmother than you were two weeks ago when she was born. And, if I might add, you’ll be the cutest grandma sheriff in the state.”

“You’re just saying that because there’s a gun on the nightstand.”

“True.”

Samantha admired a wedding picture of Angela and her new husband on the nightstand. “I wish Jake could be here, too. Sort of a bummer.”

“Bummer indeed.”

Samantha offered a few words in a silent, thankful prayer that after what felt like two dozen close calls, her daughter had finally found a man who treated her as if she wore a crown. As much as she wished Jake were coming for the visit, she knew his job in St. Louis kept food on the table and she also knew that there had been weekly rumors of layoffs. Samantha was grateful that Jake

was the first man who'd told Angela if she wanted to stay home and raise children, he'd move heaven and earth—and pallets in a warehouse—to make it happen. And so far he had.

Shawn noticed Samantha lost in the photo. He, too, gazed into the memory, and his eyes settled on the thick book Angela held in her hands in the photograph.

“I wonder if she's read all the letters yet,” Samantha said.

“How long have they been married? A year and a half now?”

“Uh-huh,” Samantha said.

“Probably so then. Probably so.”

The long, smooth quiet that came next was broken by Samantha's loud yawn. “I wish I didn't have court today.”

“Me too,” Shawn said and kissed her on the end of the nose.

“I could play hooky,” Samantha said.

“I don't think they call it that when you're in charge. Shoot, you could probably skip work all week—Isn't that one of the perks of being the sheriff?”

Another smile. “I think *you're* one of the perks of being the sheriff.” Another yawn. She made a gun with her thumb and index finger. He did the same and they touched gun barrels, the tips of their fingers in the space between their two pillows in their king-size bed.

“I'd take a bullet for you,” Samantha whispered.

Shawn whispered the same.

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The two had met on September 12, 2001. Shawn was working in the Pentagon when American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into the west block of the building. Shawn was nowhere near the impact zone, had never been in any danger that day, but he had struggled with the memories.

Shawn was a contractor for a defense corporation based in an office in North Carolina. He was staying in a hotel near the Pentagon the week of 9/11. After the attack, he wandered the area in shock, feeling guilt that he hadn't been in the right place at the right time to do anything for anyone but himself.

He spent the evening of 9/11 at a hotel in Arlington, glued to the news coverage like millions of other people around the world. The next morning he got as close as he could to the crash site, which wasn't close at all. Later in the day he checked out of his hotel and began the trek back to North Carolina. He drove west and then picked up 81 South. He listened to nonstop coverage on WTOP radio until the static and scratches overtook the weary announcers.

When he reached Shenandoah County, he was emotionally and physically drained. He was desperate to crawl into bed—and bed—and turn off his anxiety and let the night drape his concerns about what the world would look like in the days and weeks ahead.

He exited in Woodstock and asked at a Handy Mart about local lodging. The two hotels near the freeway were booked but the young woman behind the counter gave him directions to *Domus Jefferson*. “Don't know if they've got room, but it's peaceful there.”

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Shawn could tell she'd been crying.

He said good-bye, easily found his way to the Inn on Route 11 between Woodstock and Edinburg, and was relieved to find they had a room for him. He set his things down and fell on the bed. Tired of being in the car and tired of being alone, he returned downstairs to the living room and introduced himself to two women, Samantha and Rain, and a young man, Noah. The three Coopers invited Shawn to join them in a game of Uno. "We needed a break from the news," Rain said as she dealt the cards.

Rain played until retiring for the evening.

Noah wandered off an hour later to the same guesthouse behind the Inn where Samantha and Malcolm had grown up.

Samantha and Shawn played until 2:00 A.M.

Later that morning, Shawn checked out, drove home to North Carolina, and thought about Samantha with every passing mile.

He returned one week later.

They married the next spring.

The couple settled into life in Woodstock and into a new home they purchased on Eagle Street. Samantha was on her second marriage; Shawn was on his first. A few years later, Samantha was elected in a tight race against Sheriff Carter. Shawn worked from home as a consultant for a new defense contractor. Twice a month he spent the day in meetings at a corporate office in Herndon.

Simple life. Simple town. Simply ideal.

CHAPTER 4



May 7, 2011

You know I really don't have time for this, right?" Rachel pulled her long, dark chocolate brown hair behind her and tied it into a loose knot behind her head.

Noah had kidnapped Rachel Kaplan for a day-trip to the valley less than a month after sending her flying across the sidewalk in the opposite direction from the university and her appointment to defend her thesis.

"Rachel, if we wait for you to have time to meet my family, you'll be meeting them at a funeral. *Their* funeral."

"Ha," she mocked.

"Not two *ha*'s?"

"Be lucky you got one."

"I'll take it." Noah merged into traffic onto 66 West. "Look, you know I've been talking a lot about you to my parents. So before they send me to a shrink for having an imaginary girlfriend,

I thought it would be nice if they actually laid eyes on the real thing.”

Rachel groaned. “Please tell me you didn’t actually use the word *girlfriend*.”

“Is that a question?”

“Yes, that was a question—did the rise of my voice at the end not give it away?”

“Just checking. And no, not exactly, I don’t think I used the word *girlfriend*. I’m pretty sure I said we were seeing each other. Yes, that’s what I told them. That we’re seeing each other. That’s cool, right?”

Rachel grinned. “Yes. You know I just hate the word *girlfriend*. Always have. Don’t really know why, it just creeps me out.”

“I know, I know. Just humor me for the day, OK? Make me look cool to my folks?”

“I suppose,” Rachel answered. She leaned her arm on the fat cloth armrest between them and took his hand. “It won’t be easy, but I’ll try.”

Noah squeezed her hand back and drove them westward. “Honestly, Rach, I think this will do us good. Don’t think of it as meeting my family, think of it as a mental health day for us both. My finals are over, and you’re still waiting for a phone call, right?”

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Rachel crossed her fingers. “I hope so. It’s time to put all those *Rachel Kaplan* business cards to use.”

“It’ll happen,” said Noah. “Come on, if the honchos at the Department of Justice don’t hire you, they’re insane. Plus, you can count today as an educational adventure. You wouldn’t believe how many people think there’s nothing west of northern Virginia.”

“You mean we won’t fall off the face of the earth once we clear the beltway?”

Noah set the cruise control on his truck as they passed under the Haymarket exit and traffic thinned. He’d shared with Rachel more than once the details of his deep love of the valley, and as the miles rolled by, Rachel saw Noah’s face relax and a smile begin to grow.

As they drove in quiet, Rachel noticed the exits appearing farther apart. She enjoyed watching the trees become taller and the groves denser. She smiled that even the hills were taller and more distinctive. And everything, *everything*, was green. She’d always appreciated the color of the East Coast, but as they put more and more distance between themselves and the city, she felt as if they were driving into a jungle.

“Don’t you just love it?” Noah said, looking out his window.

Rachel rested her left hand on his headrest and drew circles in the back of his thick hair.

Noah enjoyed the city. He loved the Washington Nationals,

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despite their horrid record. He loved walking around Georgetown and eating in Adams Morgan. But there was something about the Shenandoah Valley, something about the air, the soil. There was a peace that rose from the earth through his feet and took over his soul every single time he returned home.

Rachel looked concerned when Noah took the Strasburg exit for Route 11. “This isn’t right, is it?”

“No, it’s the long way. But it gets us there just the same.”

They drove south through downtown Strasburg and Noah eagerly pointed out landmarks.

Rachel couldn’t decide what was more interesting, the scenery or Noah’s reaction to being home.

They continued south and Noah gave a history of the Old Valley Pike road. They rolled through the tiny towns of Toms Brook and Maurertown. When they hit the northern end of Woodstock, Noah pulled into a shopping center parking lot. “See that? That was a Ben Franklin department store until just last year. My mother’s favorite place to buy little things for the Inn. Not many of the old five-and-dimes left.”

“You sound like an old crusty retiree,” Rachel teased.

“Ha-ha,” Noah answered with punched sarcasm.

“Just two?”

“Yes, and just for that, we’re going to the Woodstock Tower first.”

“Excuse me?”

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Noah pulled out of the parking lot and turned toward the eastern mountain and the winding road that would lead them into the George Washington National Forest and, ultimately, to the tower the Cooper family knew very well.

They walked the path from the gravel-covered parking pull-out on the narrow road to the metal tower.

“You’re going up there?” Rachel asked.

“Correction. *We*.”

With modest coaxing, Rachel followed Noah up the three flights of grated stairs and onto the platform that sat atop the mountain.

“Gorgeous,” she said simply, admiring the stunning vistas on both sides.

Noah shared some of his favorite memories from the tower and pointed out the more interesting landmarks across the horizon. “I come up here sometimes to draw or paint. There’s not a better place in the valley for that, there really isn’t.”

Rachel was energized by Noah’s sincerity.

“It’s such a quiet place to just reflect on life, to figure things out. I love being able to see valleys on both sides. There aren’t many places where you can look forward and backward with such clarity.”

Rachel took a picture of each valley with her phone.

“But even with this majestic view,” Noah said, pulling her into his arms. “There’s still nothing more beautiful than you.”

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“Wow. I am *not* the first girl you’ve brought here, am I, Noah Cooper?”

“Have I mentioned how beautiful you are?”

They hiked down to the truck and took the windy, switch-back road to Route 11. Noah pointed out Dellinger’s Funeral Home and complimented them on how sensitively they’d handled his best friend’s passing in high school. He called out other area staples: the movie theater and the next-door office of a reclusive, oddball novelist, the county courthouse, which was the oldest continuously operating courthouse west of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and Lawyer’s Row, where Nathan Crescimanno, Rain’s only serious boyfriend before Malcolm, had had an office before the controversy around Noah’s grandparents’ death landed Nathan on probation and out of the valley.

“Coming up on your left, you’ll see the Chamber of Commerce office where a young Noah Cooper interned one summer for the perky, attractive executive director.”

“Oh, *really*? Is she still attractive?”

“Not at all. Perky? Yes. Attractive? No, why would you say that? No, definitely not, not in the least. She’s ghastly, in fact!”

“Uh-huh.”

They moved on and Noah dropped nostalgia about the historic Walton and Smoot Drugstore, Woodstock Café, and Joe’s Steakhouse. He spoke fondly of his dear family friend, Mrs. Lewia, who was still running the town museum with an iron fist

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and working to preserve the history and reputation of the town and the valley. He pointed at the Massanutten Military Academy and then a Cooper family favorite, Katie's Custard. Each spot got a point and a nugget of information Noah found fascinating. Even if Rachel didn't always agree, she played along just as he hoped she would.

They pulled into the long driveway at *Domus Jefferson* a few minutes before 11:00 A.M. Rachel popped the sun visor back into place and gazed up the hill toward the Inn. "Wow. Gorgeous," she said.

"Yes," Noah said, looking first at the Inn then pivoting toward her. "Gorgeous."

CHAPTER 5



There he is!” Rain had her arms open before Noah had shut the truck door behind him.

Noah scampered around the Dodge to open the door for Rachel, but she was already stepping out by the time he got to her.

“Come here,” Rain said, stepping off *Domus Jefferson’s* wide porch steps and onto the gravel driveway. She hugged him, kissed his cheek, then hugged him again.

“Come on, Mom, it hasn’t been *that* long.”

“Long enough,” she said. “Long enough.” Then she hugged him again for good measure. When she finally let him go, she kept her arms open and reached for Rachel. “And you must be the one.”

“The *one*?” Rachel answered. She placed her hands lightly on Rain’s back and endured the hug.

“The one he’s been talking so much about. The one he met

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in the . . . well, in the most *unusual* way. You're Rachel, right?" Rain released the tight embrace and eased back but kept her hands on Rachel's shoulders.

"Then, yes, I'm the one." She glanced toward Noah. "Unless there's another Rachel he's pegged with his truck lately."

Noah put his hand on his chin and looked up. "No, there have been other accidents, but not with any Rachels."

"Boys," Rain said, looking back at Rachel. Then she hugged her again, quicker this time, and led her up the stairs. "I am so glad to meet you. Noah has never—and I mean *never*—talked about a young lady as highly as he's talked about you."

"Uh-oh." Rachel looked over her shoulder at Noah as they climbed the stairs.

"All good," Rain assured her. "It's all been good."

Rain led them into the Inn, past the rustic rolltop registration desk, past the family photos on the wall, and into the large living room. "Sit anywhere, dear."

Rachel dropped into an oversized, black leather recliner.

"Can I get you something to drink? Or a snack? It's a long drive."

"I'm good for now, thank you."

Rain sat on the stone hearth, and when Noah appeared in the doorway, she slapped the slab next to her.

Rachel breathed it in. The walls, heavy with years and memories, the country décor, the Civil War history, the knickknacks.

“This is really a lovely home, Mrs. Cooper. I don’t think I’ve ever been in a bed-and-breakfast.”

“No kidding?” Rain stood. “Would you like a tour?”

Noah smiled as his mother took Rachel by the hand and led her through the door to the kitchen. “Have fun,” he said as the swinging door shut and the women disappeared. After a moment or two, he stood and stretched his arms above his head. “Is Dad around?” he said to no one.

A moment later, giggles rolled from the kitchen and Noah smiled again. Then he walked out of the living room, down the hall, and through the front door. “Dad?”

Seconds later, Malcolm appeared from the south side of the house. He wore jeans and the same leather jacket he’d owned for as long as Noah could remember.

“Hey, old man,” Noah said as Malcolm walked up the steps.

Malcolm reached out to shake his hand, but Noah pulled him into a bear hug. “Has Mom taught you nothing, Dad?”

“I should know better,” Malcolm answered as they separated. Then he faked a punch to his son’s gut and pointed to one of the rockers on the porch. “Where’s the lady?”

“Mine or yours?” Noah said.

“Yours. And if your mother hears you say that, she’ll whack you.”

“So would mine,” Noah said. “They’re taking the grand tour.”

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Malcolm nodded.

In the comfortable, cool spring air, father and son caught up face-to-face for the first time in more than a month. They discussed Noah's finals, his updated plans for the summer, and Malcolm's recent run-in with one of the county commissioners.

"So, you like this one."

Noah rocked his chair back a little higher. "What makes you say that?"

"Oh, please, son."

"What?"

"When's the last time you brought a girl out here?"

Noah thought for a moment. "Melissa Skinner."

"Who?"

"The drama major."

Malcolm squinted his eyes. "Oh, yeah. I liked that one."

Noah laughed. "Want her number?"

The two men could hear more girlish giggling from inside the house as Rain and Rachel climbed the stairs to the second floor.

"Who else . . ." Malcolm said to himself as the rocking resumed. "Oh, yeah, Kayla. The blonde. Remember her? Wasn't she the one with a sister who you also went with?"

Noah threw his head back. "Dad, seriously, no one has said *went with* since like the 1800s."

Malcolm stopped rocking and stared at his son, eyes focused and narrow. "Boy, don't make me do something I'll regret." He

tried to sound gruff and intimidating, but he started to smile before he could finish his threat.

“Yes, Dad, I *went with* her sister, too. Cami. But she never came out here. Cami was too much a city girl for this place.”

Malcolm nodded toward the Inn. “Isn’t she a little bit city, too?”

“Yeah, she’s all about the city, no doubt about it. But she’s way more layered than that. She doesn’t fit any of the molds like a lot of the girls I’ve liked at Mason. She’s been around the world and seen some cool stuff. She always looks comfortable wherever she is, you know? Like she belongs wherever she lands. A local in any town.”

Malcolm’s eyes were wide and his unibrow even more uni than normal. “A local in any town?”

“What?” Noah asked.

“You’re in deep, boy.”

Noah looked away and scanned the tree line to the south.

“You are in something deep. Deep, deep, deep.”

“I like her, Dad.”

Malcolm began drumming on the armrests of his rocker with his thick thumbs. Without realizing it, Noah began doing the same. “Does she feel the same?” Malcolm asked.

“I think so. I mean, she’s here.”

Malcolm nodded. “True enough.”

They continued rocking back and forth, the only noise

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coming from the porch's well-worn floorboards. The two Coopers enjoyed the morning's transition to afternoon and the sun's ascent into the soft blue sky.

"Dad?"

"Yeah."

"When did you know?"

"Know what?"

"About Mom. That she was the one."

Malcolm stopped rocking and stretched back in his chair, extending his feet and crossing his arms. "I guess I just knew."

"But when? When did you first look at her and say, *She's the one.*"

Malcolm closed his eyes. "When I first looked at her."

"The first time you saw her?"

"Exactly."

Once again Noah relived the moment his truck met the tire of Rachel's mountain bike. Though weeks had passed, there on the porch, breathing in the crisp valley air, over a hundred miles away from the accident site, he could still see her sprawled across the sidewalk. He saw her backpack twisted and her hair exposed from the back of her helmet. The potentially tragic accident, particularly when Rachel retold the story, had become so slapstick that even the memory of a red raspberry on her face made Noah smile.

“You’re in deep,” Malcolm said again, and Noah realized his father had stood and descended the porch steps to the driveway.

Noah shrugged.

“Come walk with me.”

Noah followed his father to the Inn’s workshop, a small stand-alone building Malcolm had built shortly after taking over the Inn after his parents passed away. Malcolm picked up a long, freshly stained plank of wood from a table saw, removed a wrench and a cordless drill from the wall hooks, and fished several pieces of hardware from a jar.

Malcolm led them out of the workshop and around the back of the Inn to the swing that Jack and Laurel had enjoyed thousands of times during their years at *Domus Jefferson*. It was the same swing Malcolm and Rain had sat on together after his return from Brazil.

“Grab that end, would you, please?”

Noah secured one end of the swing as Malcolm struggled to loosen an orange rusted bolt. Once the bolt was free, they switched places and Malcolm worked the other side. Together they removed the fat ropes from the front and back of each side and set the swing on the ground.

“Been meaning to do this for a long time,” Malcolm said. Using his drill, he removed a broken plank from the middle of the swing’s seat and carefully slid the replacement into its place.

“Not quite the same color, Dad. Do you care?”

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“It will be.” Malcolm winked at his son.

“How long?”

“That depends on Mother Nature. But in time, they’ll fit. They’ll start to look alike. They always do.”

Malcolm secured the new plank into the swing with screws in new holes. When it was snug in the seat, they rehung the swing one rope, one clamp, one bolt at a time. When it was secure, Malcolm gave it a shove into the air. “Perfect.”

Before the swing had come to a stop, Rain and Rachel appeared through the back door, stepped off the stairs, and spotted Malcolm and Noah.

“Noah,” his mother called. “Lunch here or out?”

“Here is fine,” he yelled back.

Rain said something to Rachel, squeezed her arm, and walked back into the Inn alone. When Malcolm saw Rachel sauntering their way, he gathered his tools from the ground, winked at Noah, and vanished back to his workshop.

Noah slid onto the swing and kept his feet grounded long enough for Rachel to join him. Then he pushed off and sent them into motion.

“How was it?” Noah asked.

“Pretty amazing. I had no idea what a place like this really was.”

“Really?”

Jason F. Wright

“Well, yeah. My sort-of-stepdad had money when my mother was with him, and he was used to five-star hotels and resorts.”

“B&Bs get pretty good ratings, too, you know.”

Rachel slapped his thigh. “I didn’t mean anything like that. I just meant that he was used to room service, a restaurant, a bar—all those luxuries.” She looked back to the Inn. “But this place is lovely, really lovely.”

Noah reached over and took her hand. “You don’t talk much about your family. What’s a *sort-of-stepdad*?”

“He and Mom never got married, but he took really good care of us. We were basically a family, just not officially. I call him my stepdad anyway.”

“Do you see him often?”

Rachel took a few beats to recall his most recent visit to DC and their short meeting over Thai food in Alexandria. “What’s often?” she asked.

“You tell me.”

“He and my mom aren’t together anymore.”

“Oh. Is it recent?”

“What’s recent?” she asked with a sparkle. “Just kidding. They separated when I graduated from high school and left home.”

“Oh.”

Rachel shrugged. “It’s complicated. He found us in a bad

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place and took us in. He became like a dad to me and really helped us. Still does.”

It hadn’t taken long for Noah to learn when it was best to switch topics, even when his boyish curiosity thirsted for more. “Play a game?” he asked.

“Sure.”

“I tell you one thing, just one, that you don’t know about me. Then you follow. If I say something you already knew, I have to go again and say *two* things. Same for you.”

“Hmm. This sounds dangerous,” Rachel said.

“I’ll start.” Noah pushed them into motion again and the swing creaked a bit on the tired branch above. “My middle name is Joseph.”

“OK. I don’t have a middle name,” Rachel replied.

“I knew that.” Noah smiled and pointed at her. “You owe me two.”

“Why do I think getting hit by your truck again would be more fun?” When Noah didn’t let her off the hook, she continued. “I’ve been to twenty-eight countries.”

“Wow. Twenty-eight? I knew you traveled, but twenty-eight? That’s impressive.”

Rachel made a *how-about-that* face.

“You have to say—”

“One more—I know,” she stopped him. “Patience, patience.” Rachel looked around the yard as if searching for something of

interest. “I broke a toe playing horseshoes when I was a kid. My dad—my real dad—threw one the wrong direction and it landed on my foot. Broke two toes, actually.”

“Ouch. OK, me again. Let’s see. Hmm. My grandparents, the ones who bought this place and moved my dad here from Charlottesville, they wrote letters. Actually Grandpa Jack did the writing. He wrote Grandma a letter every Wednesday of their entire marriage.”

“Really?” Rachel said, her mouth dropping open slightly.

“Yep, they called them the Wednesday Letters. Lots of secrets in them. Lots of adventures. Crazy, huh?”

“I’ll say.”

“Top that,” Noah taunted.

Rachel thought for a minute. “My mom and my real dad split up when I was seven. I haven’t seen him since.”

“That doesn’t count, I knew they’d split up, you told me that once.”

“But did you know how old I was?”

Noah tilted his head to the side. “Technicality, but I’ll give it to you.” He let the wind clear the moment. “You ready for this? I didn’t know who my real grandfather was until I was eighteen and moving up to Mason as a freshman.”

“What?”

“You heard right. Grandpa Jack wasn’t my biological grandfather.”

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“What? Your dad’s dad?”

“Uh-huh. Obviously Grandpa Jack raised my dad—and my aunt and uncle too—but he wasn’t Dad’s biological father.” Noah hesitated to finish; he hated saying the words aloud. “Grandma Laurel was attacked.”

Rachel’s mouth fell the rest of the way open.

After a period of processing Noah’s latest entry in the game, Rachel took his hand again and said, “Can we quit?”

“Are you OK?”

Rachel looked away.

“Rach?”

Without turning back, she said to the wind, “Let’s just quit for now, OK?”

Noah stood up from the swing and faced her. He took her hands and tugged her to the edge of the swing. “I’m an idiot. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ruin a good thing.”

“You didn’t.” Rachel inched off the swing and hugged him. “You didn’t at all.”

The two walked arm-in-arm back through the yard toward the Inn. Masking a perplexed expression as best she could, Rachel wondered how she and her heart had traveled from a heap of broken bicycle pieces and a sprained ankle to this charming young man’s childhood home so quickly.

Noah wondered much the same thing, but his face featured a pleasant smile he didn’t bother hiding.

CHAPTER 6



That was the best sandwich I think I've ever had." Rachel wiped her mouth and placed the green cotton napkin on the matching place mat next to her plate.

"Thanks, sweetheart."

"No, I'm serious, Mrs. Cooper, that was really delicious. Is it the bread?"

The *I told you so* look Rain launched at her husband couldn't have been any louder if she'd screamed the words through a bullhorn. "Spot on, Rachel. It's all about the bread. A ham and Swiss sandwich is a ham and Swiss sandwich. Not a great deal of mystery to that. And, of course, the vegetables are fresh and both the ham and cheese come from the valley, but the bread is what makes it a sandwich, and I make the bread right here."

Malcolm snorted, but Rain continued, undeterred. "Our neighbor on that next hill, A&P, she taught me how to make

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bread twenty years ago, maybe longer, and we just get better and better with every loaf.”

Malcolm snorted again, much louder for effect, and Rachel raised her hands. “What am I missing here?”

“Not a thing, sweetheart. My husband here has no taste buds. None. Doesn’t matter how much I insist one loaf or one recipe is different from another, he can’t taste the difference between my homemade seven-grain and a loaf of Wonder Bread. My painstakingly honed baking skills are completely lost on him.”

“And you?” Rachel gave Noah a playful elbow in the seat next to her.

“Not me. I must have been born with an extra batch of good taste. I can seriously taste Mom’s bread before she’s even baked it. Sometimes she sends me pictures of a steaming hot loaf right out of the oven. Anything to persuade me to come home, right, Mom?”

“That’s my boy,” Rain said, blowing him a kiss across the table.

Malcolm stood and began clearing plates. “Oh, give me a break. I may not be able to taste like Julia Child over there, or what’s his name, Emeril the Chef Dog Whisperer, but I can smell like a hound dog, and it’s starting to smell like you-know-what in here.”

“Malcolm Cooper! We’ve got company.”

He reached down and took Rachel’s plate. “We are who we are, right, Rachel?”

“Wouldn’t want to meet you any other way.” She grinned.

After each enjoyed a caramel-walnut brownie and a scoop of vanilla ice cream, Malcolm again cleared the table, kissed Rain on the top of her head, and invited Noah to join him on a trip to town. “Be gone an hour. Hitting Tractor Supply, post office, Four-Star Printing.”

Rain and Rachel waved approving good-byes as the front door shut. The women chatted about food, place settings, and chocolate as they did the dishes side-by-side. Fifteen minutes later they settled into the living room. Rain sat in a small chair she used for reading and Rachel sat in the oversized black recliner.

Rachel eyed a large, leather-bound binder on the coffee table. “Pictures?” she asked.

“Letters actually. Help yourself.”

Rachel leaned forward, picked up the heavy book and slid back into her soft chair. “Are these the Wednesday Letters?”

“Oh.” Rain didn’t mean to sound as startled as she did. “He told you?”

“About the weekly letters, yes, ma’am. He said his grandfather wrote his grandmother every Wednesday while they were married.”

“That he did. Quite a romantic, don’t you think?”

“And then some,” Rachel said, holding the book on her lap with the cover half-opened.

“Guess who else writes letters like that,” Rain said.

“Mr. Cooper?”

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“The very same. He’s not quite as precise now. They don’t always come on the same day, and he’s missed weeks now and again. But I’ve got boxes of letters from that nutty husband of mine.”

Rachel couldn’t wait. “And these?” she asked as she flipped the cover over and looked at the first page. It was a letter slid into a thick plastic sheet protector.

“Those are something different. Those are my Wedding Letters.”

Rachel looked up. “Wedding Letters?”

“It’s a tradition that started with my wedding. Did I mention A&P, our friend next door?”

“You did.”

“When Noah’s dad and I finally became engaged—and that’s a long story for another day—A&P contacted just about everyone we’d ever known. Friends from town, old neighbors, people who’d stayed at the Inn, a few politicians, even some celebrities, and had them write a letter to us. She was very secretive about it. She had a lot of the letters mailed to her place. Others she drove all around the valley to pick up. And if someone even breathed the word *letter* in our presence, she’d get all paranoid and change the subject.”

“What a nice woman,” Rachel said.

“The nicest. She’s as much family as my own sister and brother-in-law.”

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“So when did you get the letters?”

“At our reception. Right here at the Inn. A&P said she bought the nicest binder she could find and then apologized that it was just a binder. The book was wrapped like any other gift.”

Rachel looked back down at the first letter in the book. “So what are they? Letters of advice?”

“Some of them, yes. Some were just congratulatory notes. Some were funny, or clever. Definitely some advice to follow and, quite honestly, some to ignore.” She laughed out the final words.

“How many did you get?”

“I never counted, believe it or not. It felt like every time I opened the book, there was another gem. There must be more than a hundred in there. Even today, when I open the binder, I swear I see letters I’ve never read before.”

“May I?” Rachel asked as she flipped to a random letter in the middle of the book.

“Of course.”



Dear Rain and Malcolm,

I am so happy for you!!! I am so happy you're finally doing what we all knew was going to happen one day!!!

A&P asked for a few words of advice. Mine is really simple,

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kids: Find out what matters to the other, what's really important, and make it important to you.

Before Randy and I got married, I didn't know the difference between a racecar and taxicab. When Randy told me he was addicted to NASCAR, I thought it was some kind of drug or something. The first time he dragged me to a race down in North Carolina I thought I'd found evidence of aliens on this planet. I mean have you been to a NASCAR race before? WOW!!!

But listen when I say this: I learned to love racing. I love it because Randy loves it. I love it because it makes him happy. We have been married over forty years, and I know in my heart it's because I learned to love what he loved and he learned to love what I love.

We have been to races, we have been to beauty supply shows, we have hunted ducks together, we have made quilts every Christmas for each of our grandkids. We have done it together, side by side, sitting in front of some TV show I don't like or some TV show he doesn't like. But we've done it all together.

I love him. He loves me. I know it. He knows it. And people all around this valley know it!

I wish I had some advice more important sounding or better written down. But that's it.

Congrats, kids!

*Love,
Nancy Nightbell*

Jason F. Wright



*To Malcolm, my second favorite brother,
and to Rain, my very best friend in the world,*

Is it real? After so many years and so many disasters, are you two really tying the knot? There are mornings I wake up and feel such excitement for you two that I have to remind myself it's not my wedding. Insane, I know.

First, my advice for Rain: Be patient, dear. I know my brother better than anyone alive and I know there will be days when you want to break multiple laws and many of his bones. He will drive you mad. He has a short fuse, which you already know. But I can promise you that you will never be on the wrong end of it. The same may not be said for Ping-Pong paddles, pool cues, or cereal bowls. (Ask him about those stories sometime.)

Malcolm is a good man. A great man. He loves this town, the Inn, his family, his writing, and Brazilian food.

But there is nothing in this world or any other that he loves more than you. I've seen it in his eyes since you first met. I've heard it in his voice.

I believe with all my heart he is meant for you.

And now a few pearls of wisdom for my knuckle-chops brother:

Read what I've written for your new bride. If anything I said doesn't come true, if you say an unkind word, raise a hand, stray from her, or break her heart with even the tiniest little crack, I will

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come down on you with the full force of the law. There will not be a country far enough away for you to hide in. Got it, bro?

I love you, Malcolm. Thank you for being the only man I ever believed could make Rain happy. Thank you for being a son that Mom and Dad could love unconditionally.

I am proud of a lot in my makeshift, make-the-best-of-it life. But nothing makes me prouder than to call you my brother.

I love you both.

Sam

CHAPTER 7



Rachel would have said something if she could speak at all. “So?” Rain said.

Rachel hadn’t realized that while she had been reading the letters aloud, Rain had changed chairs and now sat right next to her on a wooden stool topped with a heavy slice of polished tree trunk.

“Are you all right?” Rain put her hand on Rachel’s forearm.

Rachel sniffled and closed the book, gingerly setting it back on the table in front of her. Then she swiped under her eyes with the tips of her index fingers and sniffled a second time. “Huh,” she said, looking to her left and making eye contact with Rain. “I didn’t see that coming.”

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart. Do you want to talk about something?”

Rachel smiled. “Seriously—you Coopers do like to talk, don’t you?”

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Rain smiled back. “It’s the only way.”

With both hands Rachel covered her face briefly, massaging her forehead with her fingertips. “I’m so embarrassed,” she blurted and the volume surprised them both.

“Don’t be. Many of the letters are quite touching. I cry all the time, too, and I’ve been married twenty-five years.”

Rachel looked back down at the book. “So much honesty. I don’t think my family has ever known that kind of truth. Good, bad, ugly—it doesn’t matter.” She took a long breath. “I hope I get letters like that some day.”

When Rain was sure Rachel was done, she added with all the confidence of a mother: “You will.”

The two women talked about the Shenandoah Valley, A&P, the challenges of running a B&B, local restaurants, shopping in nearby Harrisonburg, and Rachel’s master’s degree and future—she hoped—at the Department of Justice working on a first-year grant. “It’s about encouraging corporations to invest in solutions to violence in the nation’s capital. Getting government and business to work together, you know?”

Rain raised her head as if complimenting her own daughter. “I love that passion.”

“I just really believe in this,” Rachel said in one of her most genuine, revealing moments of the day.

They chatted about Samantha, Samantha’s daughter, Angela, and Angela’s new baby, Taylor. Rain told stories about Uncle

Matthew, his wife Monica, and their adopted son, Jack. “Most of us call him LJ, short for Little Jack. He was named after his grandfather before the adoption was even final.” Rain added proudly that he’d become an all-American track-and-field star at Arkansas.

Rain shared anecdotes about Laurel’s eccentric and thoroughly adorable sister, Allyson. “Believe it or not, Allyson wrote a *New York Times* bestselling book at the age of seventy-one. It’s an autobiography, or a memoir as they are calling them now. It’s hilarious and very, very Allyson.”

“She lives nearby?”

“She lives—I should say *runs*—a very hoity-toity retirement facility out west in Las Vegas.”

“Oh, so she’s a manager?”

“No,” Rain chuckled. “Just a resident, but she runs it anyway. Think of it like this. Allyson is the kind of woman that if she were, say, a junior chef at the White House, she’d be the one actually running the country and pushing all the buttons.”

“Scary,” Rachel said.

Rain laughed. “You have no idea.”

Rain pulled a photo album from a shelf and described the night the family found Jack and Laurel’s stash of letters. She shared some of the more entertaining stories and even excused herself to retrieve the Tennessee license plate still hanging on one of the bedroom walls upstairs.

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She handed it to Rachel. “Read it.”

Rachel turned it over and read the message on the back, written in black Sharpie that had faded little in forty-one years. “To Laurel and Jack,” Rachel read. “Enjoy your last days. Elvis and Priscilla, 1970.”

She flipped the license plate back over. “Are you kidding me with this?”

“Not. An. Ounce.” Rain punched each word for effect.

Rachel handed it back to her. “That’s crazy cool.”

They chatted on until they heard Malcolm and Noah’s voices outside and growing louder as they raced toward the house. Their arms and legs tumbled in a tangled heap as they fell through the front door.

“*Bam!*” Noah shouted. “My foot hit the inside first!”

“Cheater,” Malcolm mumbled as he regained his balance and followed Noah down the hallway.

“My boys getting along?” Rain said when they arrived in the living room.

They took turns rattling off their self-described impressive list of accomplishments during their trip into Woodstock.

“Isn’t that so like men?” Rain said, turning to Rachel. “They run a few errands all by themselves and suddenly they think they’ve solved gridlock in DC.”

Rachel agreed with an exaggerated nod, and Noah reached down for her hand. “Shh. Don’t say anything,” he whispered

loud enough for all three to hear. “It’s a trap. Next she’ll ask for your voter registration card to see if you have chosen a political party.”

“Watch it, kid. I still bake the bread,” Rain said.

The good-byes took longer than usual and Rain threw a thousand options at the couple to occupy more time in the valley, one of which involved taking advantage of another evening without guests and staying the night in separate rooms. “You can go home in the morning.”

“We need to head back, Mom. I promised Rachel we’d get home at a decent hour, and I still want to take the Skyline Drive.”

Even though Noah didn’t need them, Malcolm gave his son detailed directions for entering the scenic byway off Route 33 east of Harrisonburg and exiting in Front Royal.

“Thanks, Corn Pops.” Noah wrapped his arms around his father’s lower back and with a grunt lifted him off the ground. Then he hugged his mother, told her he loved her and waited for Rachel to say her good-byes as well.

“I won’t try to lift you,” she said to Malcolm, shaking his hand firmly and flashing her broad smile and model-white teeth.

“She’s a smart kid.” He yanked playfully on Noah’s ear. “See what a master’s degree would get you?”

Rachel instinctively extended her hand to Rain as well, but Rain stepped toward her and hugged her tight. “You are a gem of a woman, Rachel. I just loved having you here today.” Then she

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whispered in her ear, “Come back anytime. You don’t even have to bring Noah.”

Malcolm and Rain trailed the young couple down the hallway and outside. They called another round of good-byes from the porch as Noah beat Rachel to the door and waited for her to offer her own final wave. She stepped up and into the truck.

As he circled around to the driver’s side, his mother called out once again. “Wait,” she said and bounded down the porch stairs. She wrapped her thin arms around Noah’s shoulders and said, “Drive safe, son.”

“I always do, Mom. Love you.”

Then his mother glanced at Rachel fiddling with her seatbelt and said softly in his ear, “Don’t let this one go.”