



ONE
LAST
THING

REBECCA ST. JAMES

AND NANCY RUE

ACCLAIM FOR REBECCA ST. JAMES AND NANCY RUE

Sarah's Choice

“A thought-provoking and stirring story of painful choices and their ramifications. For any woman who has had to make a difficult decision, this book, cowritten by Grammy Award–winning St. James and Christy Award–winning Rue, will provide inspiration, hope, and solace to battered souls.”

—LIBRARY JOURNAL

“The realities of being single and pregnant are not sugarcoated in *Sarah's Choice*. The protagonist's struggle to do the right thing reinforces that her decision is not one to be taken lightly. The writing style is conversational, making it easy to engage in the novel. This story provides a bit of encouragement and hope to those facing a difficult decision.”

—ROMANTIC TIMES, FOUR STAR

“Written with deep compassion, gentle humor, and incredible insight, this story takes Sarah through a maze of turbulent emotions on a journey that ultimately leads back to a God she had turned her back on when her father died. An excellent book for a woman facing an unplanned pregnancy, this book is also an inspired guide for friends and family to model helpful responses to a young woman's dilemma.”

—CBA RETAILERS + RESOURCES

“Welcome to Sarah's world! And right now, it's not an easy place to be. With poignant insight and passion, Rebecca St. James and Nancy Rue have birthed a story that immediately draws you in, and before letting you go, will touch the deepest levels of your heart.”

—ROBERT WHITLOW, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE CONFESSION*

“Rebecca St. James and Nancy Rue have crafted a beautiful and moving story about how an unexpected difficulty can truly be a blessing in disguise. Anyone reading will not only be entertained but also inspired as *Sarah's Choice* reveals that no matter the circumstances, God does work everything for our good. Having traveled the country to speak to thousands of young people, I think this book is especially timely for the challenges many of us are facing. I am sure this book will touch many hearts!”

—LILA ROSE, PRESIDENT OF LIVE ACTION, A MEDIA-BASED
NONPROFIT DEDICATED TO BUILDING A CULTURE OF LIFE

The Merciful Scar

“Grammy and Dove Award–winning St. James (*Wait for Me: Rediscovering the Joy of Purity* and *Romance*) and Christy Award winner Rue (*The Reluctant Prophet*) tackle a tough topic with sensitivity and forthrightness in an intense novel about self-injury, self-esteem, and the numerous shades of love.”

Highly recommended, with crossover appeal for New Adult readers.”

—*LIBRARY JOURNAL*, STARRED REVIEW

“St. James and Rue show their amazing teamwork by focusing on an issue that could be a little unsettling for some readers: cutting. The authors paint a very realistic picture of a bright young woman’s non-suicidal self-injury habits with a smooth and relatable writing style that’s certain to pull the audience in.”

—*ROMANTIC TIMES*, 4-STAR REVIEW

**ONE
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Also by Rebecca St. James and Nancy Rue

The Merciful Scar

Sarah's Choice

Also by Rebecca St. James

What Is He Thinking??

Pure

Wait for Me

Sister Freaks

SHE

Loved

40 Days with God

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The Reluctant Prophet series

The Reluctant Prophet

Unexpected Dismounts

Too Far to Say Enough

The Sullivan Crisp series

Healing Stones

Healing Waters

Healing Sands

Tristan's Gap

Antonia's Choice

Pascal's Wager

Mean Girl Makeover series

So Not Okay

**ONE
LAST
THING**

A NOVEL

*REBECCA ST. JAMES
AND NANCY RUE*



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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*For Marijean Rue, who moved out of the pain and
into herself.*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFLECTION QUESTIONS AND RESOURCES FOR ONE LAST THING

AN EXCERPT FROM THE MERCIFUL SCAR

PART ONE

What happened to Seth and me changed everything. Everything. And yet it began with a completely innocuous question: *Where are we going to put the couch?*

As a romantic I wish it had started with Seth coming to me and looking into my eyes and saying how he needed to share something with me, something deeply personal and disturbing, so I could help him, walk beside him, stand behind him. You know—be every preposition a woman can be to her man. If I'd found out that way, the whole thing might have unfolded differently. More like a bolt of silk.

Instead it reeled off slowly and painfully like a spool of barbed wire.

We were standing in the empty living room of our townhouse, Seth and I. Actually it was still technically Seth's townhouse for twenty-one more days. As soon as we could get to the bank after we exchanged *I dos*, then it would be ours.

Ours was at that point among my favorite words—right up there with *scathing* and *translucent* and *feckless*. You don't earn a master's degree in literary criticism without befriending your vocabulary. The simple word *ours* breathed from me like Jane Austen prose.

As I said, we were standing there, both of us in our bare feet on the heart-of-pine floor. Seth had the tape measure. I had the dimensions for the couch we'd ordered written on a slip of good stock parchment paper with *Tara Grissom* printed in burgundy at the top in Lucida typeface. Even though I was still Tara Faulkner, a whole set of matching notepads, sticky notes, note cards, envelopes, and shopping lists had arrived from GrandMary two weeks before, so I could get used to seeing my new name. Little did my grandmother know I'd been writing it on notebooks, textbook covers, and just about any other surface I could put a pen to since I was fifteen years old. But I digress.

"It'll fit," Seth said.

"I know it'll fit," I said. "But will it look right? I mean with the end tables and the coffee table and two chairs? I was going more for casual elegance—not doctor's office waiting room."

Seth put his hands on hips no wider than a snake's and smiled until the almost-dimples almost appeared just above his dark beard. "You have absolutely no sense of spatial relations whatsoever, do you, Tar?"

"I don't even know what that is."

"Okay . . ." Seth went to the wall we'd just measured seven times and stretched out against it on the floor. On the *floor* in a starched white Oxford shirt and pressed jeans.

"What are you *doing*?" I said.

"I'm six-two. How long is that couch again?"

"If I have no spatial relationships—"

"Relations."

"Then you have no memory. It's eighty-six inches including the arms."

Seth stretched his over his head. "I'm the couch."

He was nothing like a couch. Six-pack abs. Cut pecs. Ripped everything that was supposed to be ripped. Seth was the exact opposite of a couch.

“Picture an end table at my head and one at my feet.”

I dove for him and planted what we in the South call my fanny on his belly and lounged. “Cute,” said, “but not very comfortable.”

He rolled out from under me and came up on one elbow, dark eyes twinkling. If I were critiquing a piece that had *his eyes twinkled* in it, I’d comment about cliché. But his actually did. They were right up there with the proverbial little star we all wonder about in song as toddlers. He gave one of my long curls a signature tug and twirled it around his finger.

“We’ll figure it out when they deliver it,” he said. “What else are they bringing besides the living room furniture?” Another tug. “Or do I even want to know?”

My turn to twinkle, although my eyes—blue—tend to ponder rather than sparkle. Or so I was told by a street artist on the Parisian Left Bank when I was thirteen. I’ve hung on to that description ever since.

“Bookcases and a desk and a big ol’ comfy chair,” I said.

“For?”

“The study?”

Seth eased his fingers into an entire hunk of my mop. “What study?”

“Mine?”

“Did we decide on that?”

I poked at a dimple. “Like I said, you have no memory. Or maybe it’s just selective.”

“Uh-huh.” Seth gave me a quick kiss and vaulted to his feet. A long-fingered hand reached down for me, but I batted it away and untangled myself.

He headed for the kitchen. “What did you bring me?”

“That was a total non sequitur,” I said.

Feet padding on the still-rugless hardwood, I trailed him between the french doors and through the vacant, large-windowed dining room and tried to get to the Tupperware container on the kitchen island before he did, but he slid it off the granite countertop and put it behind him in one smooth move.

I took a second to savor that countertop: vanilla cream with flecks of gold and chocolate and cranberry. Seth’s mother said it wasn’t practical. Mine said it was a dream. What mattered was that I’d picked up the brass in the pot hanger over my head where the All-Clad sauté and saucepans were going to hang.

“Cookies,” Seth said. He peeled up a corner of the lid and sniffed. “Madeline make these?”

“I am so insulted right now. No, my mother did not make these. I did. They’re *dulce de leche*.”

Seth grinned. “Sounds more like a cocktail.”

“I can always take them home,” I said. “Kellen’ll eat them.”

But Seth already had half of one in his mouth. His eyes closed as he chewed and a soft moan furred from his throat. Seth always had the right response. He didn’t even have to mean it and it still worked.

“You having one?” he said. An oatmeal-colored crumb escaped and rested on his lower lip. Luck and crumb.

“Uh, no,” I said. “My last fitting’s tomorrow and I have to be able to zip that dress. You’re going

to want milk with that.”

“The dress?”

I opened the refrigerator. “Don’t you have any real milk?” I’m seeing Almond Silk . . . Rio Dream . . . organic soy. “You obviously just made a Brighter Day run.”

“Cow’s milk is for baby cows,” he said, mouth still stuffed.

“So . . . isn’t soy milk for baby beans? Sproutlets? How do they get milk out of a bean anyway?”

I closed the fridge and turned to Seth. He was biting into cookie number two.

“You’re eating another one?” I pressed my hand to my chest, feigning shock. “Look out, now darlin’—you won’t fit into that tux.”

Seth’s mouth stilled in mid-bite. The air in the kitchen went abruptly testy.

“What does *that* mean?” he said.

I laughed. He didn’t. There wasn’t a twinkle within a Savannah city block.

“I was joking,” I said.

“Were you?”

“For the love of the land, Seth, you could probably eat the whole dozen and still not gain a ounce.” I wrinkled my nose at him. “Not that you couldn’t stand to.”

Seth’s eyes deadened as if someone had pulled the plug on them, and he pushed the container away. It bounced nervously against the umber Southern Pottery jar that held a bouquet of virgin wooden spoons. He spread his hands and looked down at his waspish waist. “Is this a problem?”

“What? Your body?” I could feel my eyebrows intersecting over my nose. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Are *you*?”

“I said I was.”

It was getting weird. As in, this kind of stupid bickering never happened between us and I had no idea what to do with it. I just stood there staring at him in the sudden silence. The only sound was the rain splatting against the window behind me.

It wasn’t quiet in my head. My brain started about six questions: *Is he . . . did I . . . was it just me . . .?*

I finally came out with, “What just happened?”

I still expected a soft grin, a shrug of those shoulders, a reach for the hair I was piling on top of my head with one clueless hand. I got none of that.

“Nothing. Forget it,” he said, and snapped the lid onto the container.

That was a glimmer of the Seth I knew. It was every guy I *ever* knew, including my father, my brother, Kellen, and the last thirteen-year-old boy I saw standing sullen-faced with his mother in the checkout line at Publix. Every guy who tells himself, *You just said something stupid. Shut up. Shut down. Wait for the Coax.*

I was good at the Coax.

“Darlin’, have you ever heard me complain about your body?” I put my arms around his neck and looked up the eight inches between us.

He turned his face away, but I kissed the side of the beard that browned his chin like it had been painted on by Rembrandt. I punctuated each word with another kiss, making my way to his mouth

“You. Are. A. Crazy. Person.”

His lips hesitated at first, but that was the game, right? I persisted—one, two, three—and he was kissing me back.

It was the five thousand and third time I wondered how we were keeping our vow not to sleep together until we were married. Three years is a long, long time when the man is tender, unselfish . . . and hot.

Seth’s arms tightened around me and he lifted me off my feet. I kicked one foot up the way Don Day always did in the Rock Hudson movies—couldn’t help myself—and nuzzled next to his ear.

“Tell me again why we’re waiting twenty-one days?”

He let me go. I staggered against the dishwasher and it swooshed within, and Seth seemed to snore back from wherever he’d gone.

“You turned it on with your fanny,” he said, sounding too forced for talk of fannies and cookie and waistslines. He also made a far bigger deal than he had to out of pushing buttons, opening the door, closing it again.

What. On. Earth?

We were back in unmarked territory, and I didn’t know which way to go. “Okay,” I said finally. “Let’s review: we’ll feel better if we wait.”

“We’ll *be* better if we wait,” he said to the control panel.

I wrapped my arms around myself. “Does that mean we can’t even kiss? I’m feeling like a piranha at the moment. No, pariah. What the heck am I trying to say?”

I tried to laugh again. He didn’t again.

“I just don’t want us to start something we shouldn’t finish.” As Seth turned to me, his voice took on a tone even too paternal for my father. “Come on, Tar, we’ve talked this to death.”

“Are you *scolding* me?” I said. “What am I, five?”

My own voice did a thing it never did with Seth—hadn’t done with anyone since middle school when I tried to flirt with an eighth-grader and came off like a mosquito.

Seth’s face was impatient. “No, I’m not scolding you. I’m just hitting replay.”

“Really?” I said. “Because I feel like I’m being reprimanded for wanting you.”

“You’re not,” he said. With a martyred sigh. It was the sigh that wouldn’t let me leave it alone.

“Correcting, then,” I said. “Rebuking? Remonstrating?”

He opened his mouth but I held up both hands. Time to end this stupidity. “Never mind. I need to go. Can we just forget we had this conversation?”

“I’m good with that.” Soft places appeared around Seth’s eyes. “You know this is about respecting you.”

Respecting. Not lecturing?

I didn’t say it. His sudden attempt to lighten up was glaring in my face.

“You meeting the Bridesmaids?” he said.

“Just like every Sunday afternoon,” I said.

He followed me through the dining room and then the living room, where I grabbed my purse from the mantel and shoved my feet into a pair of black ballet flats.

“What minutia are y’all down to at this point? Who’s gonna wear what color on which

fingernails?" He reached for a curl but I shook him off.

"It's like a thing now," I said. "See you tomorrow?"

I pecked his cheek and turned to go toward the foyer, but he wrapped his fingers lightly around my wrist. "Not later?"

I put my face close to his. "Aren't you afraid we'll start something we shouldn't finish?"

Another peck and I was gone. I'd just extinguished the twinkle again.

It always seemed ridiculous to drive in the Savannah historic district when everything was so close to everything else. I could have walked to the Distillery on Montgomery in fifteen minutes. But I arrived at our townhouse on Jones earlier with a carload of everything I'd even glanced at on my last trip to Pottery Barn with my mother, and which she'd insisted I had to have if I were going to be even slightly content as a new bride, so I was saddled with her Beamer SUV.

Still, as I wended my way around Pulaski and Orleans Squares—two of the twenty-two charming spaces that gridded Savannah—I wished I'd left the car and walked. Even with the rain slanting down in sheets, I could have sorted things through more easily. I knew the predictable nineteenth-century rowhouses with their Georgia grey bricks and the clapboard homes with their high stoops would whisper . . . *You're making life more complicated than it is . . . Come in . . . Have a sweet tea.* Driving I had to pay too much attention to what I couldn't see between slaps of the windshield wipers.

By the time I pulled into the parking lot at the Distillery, all I had in my head was how the scene between Seth and me *should* have played out.

ME: (*presses hand to chest, pretending astonishment*) You're eating another one? Look out, now, darlin'—you won't fit into that tux.

SETH: I know, right? (*selects another cookie*) It was only a matter of time after I put the ring on your finger that I would let myself go.

ME: Well, give me one, then.

TARA *reaches for a cookie. SETH redirects her hand around his neck and kisses her tenderly.*
FADE TO BLACK

It needed editing. Even *I* wasn't quite that sappy. It should definitely take a more Austen-esque tone. But what *did* go down wasn't any closer to reality, at least as we knew it. Again, Seth could do "Never mind—forget it—I'm going to pout" with the best of the male population. But testy? Scolding? Holier than freakin' thou? That right there—that was a first.

The rain was pounding by then and the wind wailed so wild I ditched the idea of using the umbrella and bolted from the car and splashed across the parking lot. A total of fifteen seconds and my feet were squishing in my flats and my hair stuck in tangled hunks to my face. Give it fifteen *minutes* and it would be frizzed out so far I wouldn't be able to pass through an antebellum doorway. I stood inside to drip and regroup.

When the Distillery wasn't being touted as "Savannah's Only Craft Beer Bar," it was advertised as "A Prohibition-Style Pub." The Bridesmaids and I met there because it was close to the SCA bookstore where Lexi worked on Sundays and because it had the best alligator tail in Georgia, beer-battered and fried Southern-swamp style, with a honey jalapeño remoulade. That wasn't on my prenuptial diet, but the first time we came here after the wedding, I was so ordering it.

The other reason was the ambience. The building went up in 1904, which is new by Savannah standards, but the folks who turned it into a local watering hole in 2008 had done a fabulous job

making the cement floor and the brick walls and the steel posts work with remoulades and ganache and caramelized onions. Lexi, Jacqueline, Alyssa, and I were retro-and-remoulade kinda gals.

That Sunday, just a few days after Thanksgiving, lit garlands festooned the bar and the railings of the stairs I climbed to get to the Bridesmaids. I knew they'd be up there at our usual round table in the corner, the one that rocked and had to be shimmed with several folded napkins so Jacqueline didn't lose her mind. Stuff like that drove her right up the crazy tree.

Seth was right. We'd planned all the bridesmaidsy details of my wedding over the last six months right there in that corner every Sunday afternoon. We'd discussed and debated and decided everything from the pros and cons of false eyelashes to whether they should go down the aisle in descending or ascending order of height. I had drawn the line at them wearing matching lipstick. But the four of us got so used to meeting, we just kept showing up. Once Lexi asked if we'd still be doing it after Seth and I were married. The responses were, simultaneously:

JACQUELINE: Well, yeah. Why not?

ALYSSA: Only if Seth lets her out of bed long enough.

What does *that* tell you about their personalities?

As I headed for them, Vic, the ponytailed server who even had freckles on his lips, called out, "What are ya drinkin', Tara?"

"Coffee," I told him. "With cream. No, hold the cream. Skim milk. Okay, maybe two percent."

"This isn't Starbucks, sweet cheeks. All we got is half-and-half."

I nodded and moved on to the corner. I heard him tell a table of Guinness drinkers, "Dude, I'll be glad when she finally gets married."

I was halfway out of my trench jacket when I got to the table. Alyssa stood up to reach across for a hug and stopped when her hand slithered down my arm.

"Geesh!" she said. "You look like a shampooed poodle."

"Nice." That came from Lexi, who politely pretended I wasn't dripping on her like said dog.

Jacqueline blinked very bright brown eyes as I hung the jacket on the back of my chair and sat.

"You're the only person I know who wears a pink trench," she said.

Alyssa shook her head. Precisely blonde shoulder-length hair dared not fall into her eyes. "Leave her alone. She looks amazing."

"I didn't say she wasn't amazing. She's just . . . pink."

I glanced almost unseeing at the table and barely registered their already half-empty glasses and the hummus plate that had apparently only recently arrived because the pita points were still steaming. My *head* was still teeming with the scene I'd just walked out of.

Lexi gave my hand a squeeze. "You okay?"

"Clearly not." Alyssa brought her very round, very blue eyes down into slits. "Something's wrong. What's wrong?"

"Cripes, give her a chance to answer." Jacqueline squinted at me too. "Yeah, you do look vexed."

Alyssa raised a pair of tailored eyebrows at her. "You did not just use the word *vexed*."

I was fine with her and Jacqueline getting into a discussion of J's lexicon because I wasn't ready to discuss what was now defined in my mind as the Seth Scene. I snatched up a menu, stuck it in front of my face, and said, "What's everybody having?"

Twelve years of friendship—nearly half of our twenty-five years of life—hadn't been wasted on them. Alyssa grabbed the menu and tossed it aside. Jacqueline leaned into the table, arms folded over her appetizer plate, and Lexi rested her wide, soft, creamy face on her hand, smushing her shoulder-length honey-brown hair into her cheek. I wasn't getting off without at least a vague explanation—if not a detail-by-detail account of my last two hours. That must be what comes from going through middle school and high school together and landing back in the arms of your hometown after the obligatory want-to-see-something-of-the-world-besides-this-place foray into the larger world.

"Someone tried to mug you," Alyssa said. "Right? No."

"No," I said. "Seth and I just had a . . . discussion."

"Discussion." Jacqueline tucked the sides of her fudgy-brown bob behind her ears. One strand of hair caught in a gold hoop and hung there. "No, see, a discussion doesn't leave you looking like you just got knocked sideways."

"He hit you?" Alyssa said.

I was aware that the Guinness drinkers had stopped talking, foam unwiped on their lips.

"No!" I said and waited for them to go back to their pilsners. "We were just talking and it got weird and I left."

Jacqueline edged closer to the table. "Weird how?"

"Maybe it's none of our business," Lexi said.

Alyssa waved her off. "Of course it is. Isn't it?"

"It's no big . . . I mean, the thing is . . . I'm just—"

Jacqueline waved both palms. "Stop. Just stop, and then start from the beginning."

"If you want to," Lexi said.

"She wants to," Alyssa said. "You do, right?"

I told the story and tried to go with the slant that I was only doing it so they'd get off me. Truthfully, I did want to talk it out, and although I could have predicted their responses, there would be something comfortable about hearing them.

Alyssa, I knew, would say some outrageous thing. She was always the most out-there friend I had. Beautiful in that sexy-but-not-slutty way, she was the kind who made the girls in high school think she was trampy because all her friends were guys and all of them wanted to date her. She definitely played them but they knew it. I was basically the only girl who was friends with her back in our Veritas Academy days, and that was probably because I wasn't a threat to her in the boy competition. As in, she didn't even enter. She made me laugh and at times made me go, "ALYssa!" especially when she was describing her escapades as a concierge at the Mansion Hotel. I suspected she did it on purpose, just to get me to show some shock-and-disapproval. Because her parents never did.

Jacqueline, on the other hand, would come up with a practical solution for me. Though cute as a bug or a button or any of those other things often referred to as adorable but in actuality are not, she was far from cutesy. She was the smartest of the four of us and had gone straight from grad school at Auburn to a job in PR at the Savannah Tourism Bureau and could out-Google the Internet. She had an in-your-face style that would have been a downer if it wasn't for the thousand-watt smile that flashed on just when you were thinking, *Get OFF me*.

As for Lexi, she probably wouldn't give me any advice at all, which was why I considered her my best friend. She had been a "scholarshipper" at Veritas and couldn't afford to get anything lower than

a B. In fact, she couldn't afford much of anything, but her not being in our socioeconomic class—i.e. a few pegs lower than Bill and Melinda Gates—made no difference to me.

I was spot-on about their responses.

“You have to go back over there right now and fix this,” Alyssa said.

“How?” I said.

“Seduce him.”

“*What?*” Jacqueline said.

“I'm totally serious. He says he wants to wait until your wedding night, but this whole testy thing— He's just sexually frustrated—”

“I am so not going to do that!” I said.

“Did you miss the part where he was practically shaking his finger at her?” Jacqueline said. “You should go with the other issue.”

“There's another issue?” Alyssa said.

“The deal with him not fitting into the tux. Take him a dessert. Take him one of the double chocolate, deep-fried moon pies.”

“He got mad when she teased him about a second cookie,” Alyssa said. “He's not gonna eat caramel sauce.”

Jacqueline rolled her eyes. “That's the point. It shows him that she thinks his body is awesome no matter what he eats.” She turned to me, tucking her hair anew. One strand was still wrapped around a earring. “You attacked his manhood. The boy pumps iron like he's going out for the Falcons.”

“How do you know?” Alyssa said.

“We work out at the same gym. I'm not saying he's vain, but he does like to keep himself in shape.”

Alyssa wiggled her eyebrows. “Yes, he certainly does. Which brings me back to *my* suggestion—”

“Y'all come on.” Two red blotches had formed at the tops of Lexi's creamy cheeks. “Tara's not doing either one of those things.”

“What have *you* got then?” Alyssa said.

“I got nothin'. I think it's just pre-wedding jitters.” Lexi shrugged. “Guys get freaked out too. They don't cry because you can't get daisies in December, but they have to show their stuff somehow.”

“She could have a point,” Jacqueline said to me. “You have been like the total opposite of Bridezilla this whole time, but something could just hit you wrong and you could get snappy.”

“Nothing ever hits Tara wrong.” Alyssa pointed a manicured finger at me as if she were making an accusation. “You're like the poster child for patience. If I didn't love you so much, I'd hate that about you.”

I suddenly noticed that Vic must have brought my coffee, and I cupped my hands around the lukewarm mug. “I wasn't all that patient tonight. He tried to make up with me and I just left.”

“All the more reason to get over there now and make it up with *him*,” Alyssa said. “You don't even have to try to seduce him—”

“Thank you,” I said drily.

“I agree with Lyss,” Jacqueline said. “Put your little pink coat on and go back to the townhouse.”

“But put your hair up first,” Alyssa said. “You’ve got that whole Irish girl ’fro thing goin’ on right now.”

I laughed and got up and hugged them each in turn. Then I pulled on my jacket as I trotted down the stairs and dodged the puddles toward the car.

But I didn’t put my hair up. Seth liked it down, where he could tug on my curls.



The rain had stopped when I got to the townhouse and went up the sideways front steps. They were the nineteenth-century owners’ way of avoiding taxes on front yards. As in, there were none. I stood on the small square-pillared porch the rowhouses were known for and got myself into this-is-our-home mode again.

I really did love everything about it. The traditional front door painted red, ostensibly to ward off evil spirits. The dolphin down-spouts found only in Savannah. The windows long as the doors with the shutters we would close when a storm threatened.

My favorite part, however, was the memory of Seth surprising me with the keys in May, the day I graduated from Duke. We both got tangled up in my master’s mantle and my hair and the unending promise of our life together. And why shouldn’t we?

We’d been in love for three years. Much longer than that for me alone.

Our families loved and supported us and each other and had since before I was even born.

On Thanksgiving Day, when we went around the table while Dad was carving the turkey, telling what we were thankful for as fast as we could so the mashed potatoes wouldn’t get cold—because, according to my brother, Kellen, there is nothing on this earth worse than cold mashed potatoes—drowning a slow death under congealed gravy—Seth nonchalantly said he was thankful that he had just been promoted to CFO of Great Commission Ministries. Which meant I could focus on my doctorate without having to work.

We were going to seal it all with a wedding that rivaled the British royals’. My father pretended to wince every time my mother and Seth’s mother and I regaled him with another layer of plans—coach and two, a reception at the Harper Fowlkes House, a five-piece orchestra for the dinner followed by a jazz quartet for the dancing—but with tears in his eyes the day Seth and I were engaged, Dad had whispered, “Have your fairy tale wedding, sugar. Have everything you’ve ever dreamed of. This is a good man.”

So why was I turning one ridiculous discussion into the Lincoln-Douglas debates? I could wait twenty-one days and have the happily-ever-after honeymoon night to go with the Cinderella wedding. Seth’s motivation was admittedly more biblical than mine, but that was a gift, too, right? Son of a pastor—the pastor I grew up with—spiritual head of the household and all that. Granted, I probably wasn’t as godly as he was, but I was trying to get there. I’d have more time to devote to that after the wedding. The last time I tried to read the Bible—the story of Jesus turning the water into wine—I found myself thinking if those people had hired the right caterer they never would have run out of cabernet in the first place. Yeah, it was a little hard to focus at that point, but Seth and I had plans to make quiet time a regular part of our life together.

Right now the only thing in my head was the impending scene. I previewed it as I let myself in and peeled off my soggy shoes in the marble-floored foyer and soundlessly closed the red door behind me.

SETH: Tar! You surprised me!

ME: That was my plan. I hope it's a nice surprise.

SETH: The best. Come here.

SETH takes TARA into his arms and sighs into her hair.

ME: Sorry I was snitty.

SETH: I was the snitty one.

ME: Love me?

SETH pulls TARA out to look into her eyes.

SETH: You can ask me that as many times as you want, but just know this: You never *have* to ask. It will always be true.

ME: Do you want a cookie?

SETH: No. I want you.

ME: Twenty-one more days.

SETH: I'm counting the minutes.

It didn't quite achieve *Pride and Prejudice* status, but I was getting closer.

I wriggled out of my jacket and tossed it with my purse on the one piece of furniture we had downstairs, the Frances Herrera console I'd fallen in love with at a home show in Atlanta, the fourteenth item my mother had deemed "a wedding present from your father and me." I shook out my hair a little, imagined a long finger twirling a curl, and only then noticed that the place was strangely quiet.

I knew Seth was there because his Audi was parked at the curb and he wasn't the walker I was especially in the rain. He also wasn't one to sit around in a soundless house. There was always music or the TV or a YouTube video. Grey noise, he called it. When I'd checked my cell phone in the car, it was only five o'clock. No way he was taking a nap. I was the napper. If he was sleepy during the day, he got on the treadmill.

I listened. I didn't hear that either.

These were the times when my love affair with film did not serve me well. As I crept through the long dining room and into the kitchen, every man-shot-execution-style-in-his-home movie I'd ever seen suddenly vied for a viewing. I flipped through all of them in my mind and literally shook myself out. This was absurd. He was probably at his computer. He'd mentioned upping his megabits per second or some other Internet speed thing, a goal he worked at as hard as he worked at his abs. That's where he was: so engrossed he didn't even hear me come in the house.

Internally swearing never to watch another girlfriend-discovers-the-body thriller, I grinned at myself as I went through the other set of french doors to the stairs and began my tiptoe ascent up the wide wooden steps. The computer was in the master bedroom—he'd promised to relocate it before he moved in—and that's where I headed. I could barely stifle a giggle. Seth was harder to surprise than Leroy Jethro Gibbs. The Bridesmaids were right: if I pulled it off, this was going to be good.

When I reached the bedroom door I fluffed out my still-damp hair and held my breath. That was when I heard it. A low, droning moan like that furry-soft sound he'd made over the *dulce de leche*. Only thicker. And almost desperate.

It was a sound that made me wrench the knob and shove the door open.

What I saw inside became a montage.

Of Seth jerking up from the desk chair in a spasmodic reach for a Kleenex box . . .

Of the box tumbling toward the floor and Seth snatching it from the air and pressing it against himself . . .

Of the computer screen exposed and filled with a thick mane of dark female hair that flipped back and revealed the head of the man she had been leaning over—and her own rolling, sweating, naked body.

Seth turned and fumbled with the keys and it was gone. The screen went blank and all I could see was Seth's face coming toward me.

Or was it Seth? I had never seen that look of doggish shame. This was some stranger who came to me with his arms straining forward. Some person I didn't know saying, "Tar, it's not what you think!"

Perhaps if he had uttered anything else but those lying words used by every man caught in an act of infidelity in every B-grade movie ever made, I might have reacted differently.

Or not.

No matter what he'd told me, I would still have been caught in an unwinding spool.

Porn. He was watching porn. And not just watching it—

"Tar, please," Seth said. He reached for my hair.

Rage ripped into the horror and I slapped his hand away. Slapped it as hard as I could and recoiled backwards from the room and into the hall, where a few moments before I'd stood with my ear to the door thinking he was eating my cookies.

Seth moved with me but my straight-arming brought him up short. "You have to listen to me," he said. "It doesn't mean anything."

"Stop! Just stop!"

He didn't. I was screaming as I stumbled down the stairs, but he didn't stop saying it over and over—"It doesn't mean anything!"—as he tore after me.

I didn't stop either screaming or running. I didn't stop until I was at the front door with my pig trench coat and my purse. I didn't stop until he said it one more time, with tears clogging his voice.

"Tara, it doesn't mean anything."

Slowly I turned and stared at him. "No, Seth," I said. "It means everything."

THREE

I didn't sleep.

I went straight to my room, grateful that at least my parents were out, and I stood in the shower until my skin pruned and the water went tepid, and then I spelunked my way under the covers. But I didn't sleep. Not until nearly dawn, and even then I was aware of lying just beneath the thin slumber line that could break through to awful wakefulness if I moved or blinked or breathed.

I finally gave up when nausea brought me groaning from beneath the comforter that didn't comfort me because nothing could, not even the thought I'd had every morning for the last 345 days: *How many more days until I marry Seth?*

Only twenty until the church packed with loved ones and roses—and the five-course dinner for two hundred—and the custom-designed gown that ran my father into five figures. Twenty more days until the dream that had become a nightmare in one horrific glance at a computer screen. One sickening look at Seth's face.

I couldn't go there again. I'd already spent the entire night in that place and had come out with nothing but what I was sure were eyes swollen almost shut.

I heaved the covers back and avoided the mirror over the dresser as I made my way to the window seat. I hadn't even bothered to close the shutters when I'd torn off my clothes and hidden in the bed so the dawn-light seeped in unhindered. I grabbed the corner of a throw and pulled it out from under my wet coat on the chair and wrapped it around me like an old lady's shawl. I did feel old.

My fourth-floor bedroom overlooked Forsyth Park, an expanse too long to be classed with the cozier squares the town was known for. A Savannah early morning mist hovered, fine as romance. All I could see were the outlines of the live oaks and the Spanish moss hanging like grey wedding veils. And all I could think was—

What. Am I going to do?

During the night all I'd been able to conjure up was the scene on the computer screen and the look of Seth and the meaningless protests coming from his mouth. All I could do through the darkest hours was throb with the hurt and the horror and the disbelief.

But now, with the lights winked on at Seth's parents' house kitty-corner from ours on Whitaker Street, all I had in my mind was what lay at stake beyond that. Beyond how it felt to discover something horrific you didn't know about the love of your life twenty days before you were supposed to marry him.

Obscene amounts of money had been spent on the wedding. My parents never talked about the number, but I knew how much things like sit-down dinners prepared by food network-worthy chefs cost.

Out-of-town relatives with nonrefundable plane tickets and hotel reservations had planned the Christmases around it. Fritzie had rearranged her whole work schedule to come. GrandMary had already sent her grandmother-of-the-bride dress ahead so she wouldn't have to carry it on the plane.

GrandMary. I shifted miserably on the window seat. In a little over a week she would be sleeping right across the hall in the bed she and Granddaddy had always shared, the one Kellen and I used to crawl into when they visited from Williamsburg and snuggle with her wonderful smells while Granddaddy sat in an armchair by the fireplace and crackled his dry comments like the flames themselves.

They were the reason I knew Seth was the One. When something amused them, something they couldn't be acknowledged out loud, they used to nudge each other; it meant, "We'll laugh about this later." The first time Seth did that to me, I knew. I was fifteen. He was twenty. He thought of me as Kellen's annoying little sister. But he nudged me when *his* little sister, Evelyn, said "hanga burger" for hamburger and I knew. I really thought I knew.

Now what would GrandMary be showing up for? A wedding as false as reality TV? She would see through that. She was Virginia aristocracy and Tidewater class, and she saw through everything that wasn't what it should be. Or would she come to find me broken and fooled in a way she never would have been?

A figure emerged from the mist below, and for an awful moment I thought it was Seth, but it was Kellen, leaning around a bend in Forsyth Park on his run. He was shorter and slighter than Seth, and he'd recently shaved his head because even at thirty his hairline was receding according to the Faulkner male tradition. But it was still easy to mistake him for Seth and Seth for him.

They had been inseparable since they were five years old and we'd moved into this house on Gaston Street, diagonal from the seven-bedroom Victorian Seth's mother, Randi, had inherited from her grandparents, just as my father had inherited ours from mine. Some of my first memories were of Kellen and Seth going off to school with their matching Spider-Man backpacks and lunch boxes while I stood wailing and left behind in the doorway.

Kellen and Seth tearing around the park on their five-speeds as I tried valiantly to keep up on my pink tricycle.

Kellen and Seth coming back from crabbing with Dad or playing tennis with Granddaddy, visibly more grown-up than when they left.

Kellen and Seth.

I let my forehead crash into my knees. Even I couldn't envision telling my brother his best friend gave me the righteous purity speech an hour before he turned on a porn site and . . . *participated* in it. With that the avalanche cracked and broke and roared over me.

Seth's father. The head of one of the largest churches in Savannah. A spokesman for the faith in his books. A face of Christianity in the South.

Seth's mother, like my father, a highly visible community figure, both of them with careers that were balanced on their images of integrity and values.

Seth himself, an executive officer in one of the most respected Christian ministry organizations in the nation. A ministry that was all about living with purity in an impure world.

Bring all of that down? Or pretend that, like Seth said, it didn't mean anything?

I dug my fingers into the throw pillow by my foot and hurled it across the room. And then another one. And then another until the window seat was naked and all I had left to throw were the words that spurted out between my teeth. Words I'd never said before and won't now. They were the only words that could give voice to the rage.

The nonprofane ones were these: *Look what you've done, Seth. All I'll see when I walk down the*

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