

Chapter 1

Somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, Olive enjoyed the sensation of someone next to her in bed. There was no physical contact, just the soft radiation of warmth and breath, and the vague, tugging feeling of a body close to hers. Daylight brightened the inside of her eyelids, and still she resisted, clinging to the edge of sleep and the elusive presence of her companion. It had been almost six months since she had shared a bed. She'd forgotten what a delicious feeling it was—they were as snug as a pair of mice burrowed into a pile of wood shavings.

The brush of a calf against her own bare leg broke the spell. It was a very solid, very hairy calf. Olive opened her eyes. Her gaze fell on white vertical blinds tapping gently against the window as if they were large piano keys being played by an invisible hand. She was not in her own bedroom. She slowly turned her head toward the owner of the hairy

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calf. He was concealed under the blanket and facing the other direction. Only a few inches of his brown hair peeked out.

Had Alex persuaded her to stay over at his place? She didn't remember going home with him, only how lonesome the ICU had been—she'd been stuck working the night shift on New Year's Eve of all nights—until Alex had been called in to check on his congestive heart failure patient. He had fastened a party hat to Olive's head and kissed her at midnight. Sure, he'd also kissed Mrs. Conrad, the seventy-two-year-old wife of Olive's patient, but only because Mrs. Conrad had been determined to stay up and watch the countdown on TV. No one should ever ring in the new year alone, Alex had said.

Olive lifted the sheet to look down at her body. Oh, shit. She wasn't naked, thank God for that, but what she was wearing wasn't much better: a black camisole and hot pink underwear. She lifted the sheet a little higher to see if she could discern Alex's state of dress, but the sheet was tucked tightly beneath him. She couldn't believe this. Just when they had started to reconstruct a semblance of a professional work relationship. What had she been thinking? After working a twelve-hour shift, she typically went straight home to bed. Had they gone out for celebratory drinks instead? It was disconcerting that she couldn't remember. She felt sleazy.

She slipped out of bed and began to hunt for her navy blue scrubs. They weren't on the floor next to or under the bed. She crept to the other side of the bed and looked down at the blanketed cocoon. Alex's face was covered. He didn't stir.

No clothes on the floor. No socks, no pants, no boxers, and certainly no blue scrubs. Only a TV remote, a man's watch, and a folded newspaper littered the beige carpeting. Alex's

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bedroom looked less cluttered than she remembered it. Where were his skis, his swim fins? His precariously stacked medical reference books? Still, the room looked awfully familiar. She stopped in front of the dresser. Definitely not Alex's dresser, which was a huge German wardrobe, a family heirloom. This dresser was six drawers high with a scratched mahogany finish. It was as recognizable to her as her own childhood dresser, which had been painted white with pink stenciled bows.

On top of the dresser, next to a halogen lamp and a large metal Slinky, stood a silver-framed photograph of her face. It was a picture she knew well, one taken of her in college. In it, she wore a gray woolen cap with a red pompon on top. Her nose was pink from the cold; her eyes were slits against the glare of the snow. It was a picture only one person had ever admired.

"Phil?" Her voice sounded loud in the silent room.

"What?" was the muffled reply from the bed.

"Phil?" she repeated in disbelief. The lump under the blanket squirmed a little. She hurried to his bedside and gently pulled the blanket away from the face of her ex-boyfriend. His features were at once both familiar and foreign to her. A shock of dark brown hair. Neat, thick eyebrows. A long, slightly crooked nose. Brown stubble above his lip and across his cheeks and chin. A small, dark freckle under his left eye. Her breath caught in her throat as she stared down at him. Her worry dissipated and was replaced by a kind of relief. A flutter of joy.

Without opening his eyes, he reached out and grabbed Olive around her waist and pulled her toward him. "Come back to bed," he mumbled.

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She resisted his embrace and took a few steps backward. “How did I get here last night?” she asked. “I don’t remember coming here at all. Did you stop by the hospital?”

Phil opened his eyes. They were bottle green and flecked like a snake’s skin. “I hope you didn’t forget *everything*,” he said. “Now come here.” His arms were clumsy with sleep. He reached out again but could barely touch her where she was standing. His fingers brushed against the bare strip of skin between the bottom of her camisole and the waistband of her underwear. Her skin tingled.

“Did we sleep together?” she asked.

“If by *sleep together*, you mean have wild, passionate sex, then yes.” He was more awake now and scrutinizing her. A mischievous smile touched his lips.

Olive pulled her tank top down to cover her stomach but only succeeded in exposing the tops of her breasts. She crossed her arms and tried to look stern. Surprised as she was, this was Phil. It was hard to resist smiling back at him. Phil Russell, whom she had dated and loved for over three years, and broken up with—quite badly—last February. She hadn’t seen him since and had only spoken to him on the phone a few times throughout the year. Once, when she’d heard his mother, Carol, was in the hospital for knee surgery. Another time to tell him she’d found one of his Nike golf shoes at the bottom of her closet and did he want it back? She had spitefully withheld his left shoe when she’d returned a box of his belongings. He hadn’t wanted it anymore; he’d already thrown out its mate.

“Look,” Olive started. “I have no idea how I ended up here, and if I gave you the wrong impression last night, I’m sorry. But I really should get going now.”

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“Go?” His playful grin changed to a look of concern. The skin between his eyebrows puckered. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Where are my clothes?”

Phil raised one eyebrow. “In the kitchen where we took them off.”

She pushed open his bedroom door, nearly hitting Cashew, who had apparently had his nose pressed against the door, in the face. Cashew was a flat-faced, swirly-furred, brown-and-tan shih tzu. He was supposed to be Carol’s dog, but he had gone through such periods of doggy depression when Phil had left for college that Carol had agreed to let her son have him.

Cashew leaped and danced around Olive, wriggling and twisting into the shape of his namesake. Olive had always adored the little dog as much as he adored her. She had been almost as devastated to lose Cashew as she had been to lose Phil. But what could she have done after their cataclysmic breakup? *Hey, Phil. Do you think it would be okay if I stopped by your apartment when you’re not home to visit your dog?* There had been so many casualties when they’d separated.

She scooped Cashew into her arms and walked out into the living room. Everything was arranged the same as when they’d been dating. The mismatched armchairs and futon, the glass coffee table he’d inherited from his grandmother, the bookcase crammed with three-ring binders and science textbooks, his Bowflex looking like some kind of ancient torture device in the corner of the room. Remnants of a quasi-romantic evening—a pair of wineglasses and a pizza box—rested on the coffee table. Olive glanced back and realized that Phil was following her to the kitchen in his boxers.

Of all the possibilities she could’ve imagined for herself

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in the new year, waking up in bed with her ex-boyfriend had not been one of them. Even though she couldn't remember the path that had gotten her to his place, and even though she knew it was a mistake, she still thought it was a perversely pleasant one. Just to see Phil's sleeping face in the fuzzy morning glow had made this strange escapade worthwhile. Ten months of separation had dulled the pain of proximity for her, and seemingly for him as well. Perhaps they could even be friends now if she hadn't just messed things up by somehow landing herself in his bed. Still, she wished she could remember last night's sex. Phil was a spectacular lover.

She found a pile of discarded clothes under the kitchen table—a tangle of jeans, socks, and a turtleneck sweater. Her blue scrubs were still nowhere to be found. She nuzzled Cashew against her chin one more time and then set him down.

"Can my chocolate chip pancakes convince you to stay?" Phil asked. He opened an overhead cupboard and retrieved a bag of chocolate chips.

Olive pulled the turtleneck sweater over her head. She wanted to ask why he was being so nice to her. Had he forgotten how things had ended between them? The unforgivable thing she had done? And when she'd confessed, the way he'd held the door open for her and ushered her from his apartment and life as though she were a stranger?

"You're sweet, Phil. But trying to re-create our New Year's Eve together from last year is really too much. Wine and pizza, the chocolate chip pancakes. I don't understand why you're going to such lengths for me. Why now? What's changed?"

"What do you mean? I thought I was being original," he



said, and set the chocolate chips down on the counter. “Gosh, Cashew is going nuts! Ha-ha, pun intended. You’d think he hadn’t seen you in months! I love that about dogs. Rolling out the red carpet for you even if you’ve been gone for only a few hours.”

Olive looked down to see that Cashew was snuffling her sock with the intensity of a bomb-sniffing dog. He paused in his inspection and gave her ankle a good slurp. “But he hasn’t—” she started to insist.

But Phil had already disappeared into the fridge. He emerged with eggs and milk. “Anyway, didn’t we spend New Year’s Eve last year in Las Vegas?”

“We spent New Year’s in Vegas in 2009.” She turned away from him and zipped up the fly of her jeans.

“Right.”

“And we spent New Year’s at your place in 2010. We watched the ball drop on TV.”

“Right. Last night.”

“Is this some kind of joke?” she asked. “Because I’m really not in the mood for this.”

“I’m just as bewildered as you are. You seemed fine last night, but you must have had too much to drink. Maybe you should go back to bed and sleep it off.”

“What I need to do is drive home and figure out what possessed me to come here last night,” she muttered. Her purse was sitting on the counter next to a potted bonsai tree. It was a yellow leather hobo bag, an older purse she didn’t recall bringing to work. She must have gone home to change clothes and purses last night. It seemed unlikely, but no more unlikely than spending the night with her ex.

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She swung the yellow purse over her arm and took a step toward the door, but Phil blocked her with his body. She was extremely conscious of his bare chest; she had forgotten how good he looked with his shirt off. His chest and stomach looked as smooth as rock that had been shaped by rippling water. God, she'd missed that.

"You're acting really strange. I don't know if it's a good idea for you to drive."

"I'm fine."

Phil looked skeptical. "Will you call me as soon as you get home?"

She nodded. He would come to his senses by then. Whatever had happened between them last night was a mistake, much like the horrible mistake she had made last February. But standing there in his affectionate gaze, she couldn't refuse the hug he offered her. Even though he hadn't showered yet, the scent of his woodsy soap still lingered on the bare skin of his neck and shoulders. His embrace was firm and gentle, and it carried with it three years of memories.

Olive had barely reached the stairwell when she heard a door flung open and Phil's voice trailing after her. "Hang on a sec," he called. "I just remembered *I* drove last night. I'll drive you home as soon as I'm dressed. I need to let Cashew out quick, too. Just give me one minute."

"What?" she called back to him, but he had already closed the apartment door. The puzzle of last night's events was becoming more and more complex. Had Phil stopped by the ICU to visit her, or had their paths crossed somewhere else? She was tired—and a little ashamed—of trying to give shape and substance to the black hole in her memory of last

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night. She would ask Phil the specifics sometime soon, but right now, she didn't want to give him any more reason to be concerned about her. Frankly, she was concerned about herself. Blacking out and sleeping with her ex? Definitely not a very good way to start the new year.

She heard Phil's door open and shut again, and he was soon at her side.

"Are you sure you don't mind driving me?" she asked. "I mean, do you have the time? Because I could call a taxi or something."

Phil laughed. "Um, yeah, I have the time."

His ancient tan Mercedes-Benz was parked in one of the farthest spots in the parking lot. It was a 1987 diesel, a car he had told Olive he bought back in high school when driving a Mercedes, no matter how old, was considered cool. But more than nine years later, the thing still wouldn't die. Phil was too reasonable to trade the Mercedes in for a newer car when it was still running all right. Prudence was his religion.

He pulled out of the parking lot and turned onto Regent Street. Debris from last night's parties littered the lawns and sidewalks. Beer bottles, empty kegs, old couches with rips like wounds revealing their stuffing. Undergrads, bed-headed and hungover, slunk down the sidewalks, trying to look nonchalant in their walk of shame.

"Why are you turning here? You need to stay on Park to get on the Beltline."

"Why would I want to take the Beltline?" He made another turn onto Orchard this time, and Olive recognized every house they passed. They were relics, taken over and run down by college kids and landlords who were tired of putting

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in the effort. The three-story white colonial that had been converted into a law office. The green-and-maroon Victorian with the gingerbread lattice. The mossy brick house with the lawn full of political signs. The house with the missing balcony that had smashed to the ground, injuring five college students a couple of years ago.

Olive stared at Phil in disbelief as the car slowed to a stop. “Talk about a trip down memory lane,” she said softly. She turned her head to look out the window. They were parked in front of her old house, a two-story clapboard painted Pepto-Bismol pink. She and her old roommate Kerrigan Morland had lived in the upstairs flat for seven years. She identified her old bedroom window. A plant was sitting there. The familiar touch made her smile, remembering the African violet she had kept in the window when she lived there. It had been the plant she’d kept alive the longest. In November, it had finally crossed over.

“So, here we are,” Phil said.

“Here we are,” Olive repeated. “Just as glorious and gaudy as I remembered.” Phil was waiting for her. Was he waiting for her to get out of the car? A prickly shiver buzzed across the back of her neck. Something was not quite right here. The house, the street, the entire morning. She felt as though Phil were following a script while she was simply saying whatever it took to get herself offstage and back safely into the wings.

“Do you want me to come up?” he asked.

“You know that I don’t live here anymore,” she said, “and I haven’t lived here in almost a year. Please just take me home. I’m tired. I’m tired of this. Please, Phil.” She waited for his sigh of resignation. She waited for him to put the car in drive

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and take her back to her condo on the east side. “Phil?” She suspected he was putting together his own monologue. She could tell by the way he was flexing his lips, pursing and then relaxing them.

“You’re scaring me, Olive,” he said so softly that she had to lean in to hear the words that followed. “You don’t remember how you got to my place last night? Well, I do, and I’ll tell you every detail if it will wake you up out of this . . . *state* that you’re in.

“Kerrigan wanted to have a party for New Year’s Eve, and you didn’t. She told you she’d keep it small, and you agreed to it. We were there, Kristin and Brian were there, Jeff was there, Robin and Lisa, Ciara, Steve. You made the sangria, Kerrigan made cupcakes with little plastic babies on top. More people kept coming, and it started to get so loud and crowded, that you said you wanted to go to my place.

“We drove over to my place around eleven o’clock. We ordered a pizza, but it didn’t show up until two. We had to call Luca’s about ten times to figure out where the heck the delivery guy was. Apparently, it’s one of their busiest nights of the year. We watched the ball drop *twice*, once for the Eastern time zone, another time for the Central time zone. We kissed both times. I went into the kitchen to find a corkscrew for the wine, and you followed me, and we—”

“That’s exactly right,” Olive interrupted. She remembered the noisy party and the late pizza, the sangria and the pretense of helping Phil find the corkscrew. She even remembered Kerrigan’s cupcakes and the plastic Mardi Gras babies she’d reused as decorations to symbolize Baby New Year. “Every last detail. But that all happened a year ago.”

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“I don’t know what you mean by that! A year ago? 2009? We already agreed we were in Vegas.” He splayed his fingers and drummed them against the steering wheel.

“No, I mean last year, 2010.” That wasn’t what she meant. That was Phil’s definition. Her language was becoming imprecise. The boundaries between the years were starting to confuse her, and Phil was complicating things by making her pin numbers to years instead of allowing her to say “last year” and “this year.”

“This is giving me a headache. Can we just go inside and figure this out somehow?” He formed fists with his hands and punched the steering wheel. His fists connected with the horn, and it let out a squawk like a sick bird. At the sound, a young woman poked her head out the door of the mossy brick house next door.

“Go inside? We can’t. I don’t know who lives here anymore.”

“*You* live here. Kerrigan lives here.”

“I just told you I *don’t* live here, and Kerrigan doesn’t live here anymore, either. She couldn’t keep up with the rent after I left. She moved in with Ciara.”

“Olive. Please. Just trust me.”

At this moment, she couldn’t have trusted him less. To trust him meant doubting herself and a year’s worth of memories. But she was tired of sitting aimlessly in his car, and the sooner they got out of the car, the sooner she could disprove him.

The outside stairs leading to the upper flat on the left side of the house—these, too, were painted Pepto-Bismol pink—were rickety and unsafe. Obviously, the landlord hadn’t gotten around to fixing them yet. She felt the boards sway

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beneath her and Phil as they made their ascent. Her hand was on the doorbell when Phil brushed it away.

“Don’t,” he said. “You’ll wake Kerrigan.”

“Right. Kerrigan. How considerate of you.”

He pulled his keys from his pocket and rifled through them. He’d kept a copy of her old apartment key! She had turned in her own copy, even though her landlord had insisted he would change the locks. Phil found the key and held it up to the lock. It was Olive’s turn to brush his hand away.

“We are not letting ourselves into somebody else’s apartment.”

He unlocked the door and stepped inside. She stood resolutely on the threshold.

“They’re going to call the cops,” she whispered.

“If you don’t tell, I won’t tell,” he whispered back. He caught her hand and pulled her inside.

Peeking in on the new tenant was like returning to her elementary school and realizing how short the lockers were and how low the bubbler was. The strip of pink seashell-patterned linoleum in the kitchen looked as though it were better suited to a bathroom. The row of three giant picture windows let in buckets of sunlight but let out any warmth generated by the congested electric heater. The water-stained ceiling resembled a map of the world. But then there was the furniture. The black-and-white floral couch from IKEA. The black-cushioned papasan chairs. The red throw pillows. A geometric black-and-white rug, also from IKEA. Olive’s brain needed a second to catch up with her eyes. Then she sat down directly where she was standing. She didn’t collapse or keel over. Her knees didn’t fail her. She just sat down. Hard.

Bristly fibers scratched against her hands. She looked

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down and found she was sitting on a coir and rubber welcome mat. She scooted her butt over to read the message she knew by heart. *Did you remember to wipe?* She laughed out loud.

Phil turned around and looked down at her. He extended his hand to help her up, but she refused it. “Are you okay?” he asked, but she could barely hear him over her own laughter. The welcome mat’s message wasn’t even what tickled her so much. It was the ridiculousness of that fashionable, uncomfortable couch, standing in a place that Olive knew, according to all laws of nature, it shouldn’t be standing in. She knew that because she had left it positioned in her own living room at High Pointe Hills Condominiums, fifteen miles away, on top of the same geometric rug. Her stupid IKEA living room set was disrupting the order of the universe.

“See? You remember now?” Phil was saying. He hoisted her up by the armpits and led her to the couch. She didn’t want to sit on it, so she shook herself loose of his grip and sat with her knees bent under her on the rug. Plastic cups and paper plates were tossed everywhere. On the coffee table and rug, stuck in the cushions of the couch.

“I’m so sorry,” a familiar female voice said from across the room. Olive craned her neck upward but couldn’t see over the couch. “I’m going to clean this up, I promise. You won’t have to lift a finger. I was going to do it before you came home, but you surprised me.”

“Kerrigan?” Olive asked. Her friend’s blond head peered over the couch. Kerrigan’s expression was cautious, as though she expected Olive to scold her. Olive could only gape. The red pillows, papasan chairs, and party debris were crushing

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her. And on top of that, she sensed Phil hovering. She tried to ignore the muted conversation going on above her.

She bent forward and rested her forehead on her knees, in the agile position her dad had always identified as “the Yoga Thinker.” As a child, she had curled herself inward like this whenever times seemed especially tough or uncertain. It was a way of holding the world at bay.



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