



Forever, Interrupted: A Novel

By Taylor Jenkins Reid

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This heartrending debut novel weaves a beautiful love story with an homage to the redemptive power of female friendship.

“Have you ever heard of supernovas? They shine brighter than anything else in the sky and then fade out really quickly, a short burst of extraordinary energy. I like to think you and Ben were like that . . . in that short time, you had more passion than some people have in a lifetime.”

Elsie Porter is an average twentysomething and yet what happens to her is anything but ordinary. On a rainy New Year’s Day, she heads out to pick up a pizza for one. She isn’t expecting to see anyone else in the shop, much less the adorable and charming Ben Ross. Their chemistry is instant and electric. Ben cannot even wait twenty-four hours before asking to see her again. Within weeks, the two are head over heels in love. By May, they’ve eloped.

Only nine days later, Ben is out riding his bike when he is hit by a truck and killed on impact. Elsie hears the sirens outside her apartment, but by the time she gets downstairs, he has already been whisked off to the emergency room. At the hospital, she must face Susan, the mother-in-law she has never met—and who doesn’t even know Elsie exists.

Interweaving Elsie and Ben’s charmed romance with Elsie and Susan’s healing process, *Forever, Interrupted* will remind you that there’s more than one way to find a happy ending.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Forever, Interrupted*:

"Touching and powerful...Reid masterfully grabs hold of the heartstrings and doesn't let go. A stunning first novel." (Publishers Weekly, starred review)

"A moving novel about life and death." (Kirkus)

"You'll laugh, weep and fly through each crazy-readable page." (Redbook)

"*Forever, Interrupted* weaves a beautiful love story with a terrible tragedy. Told in alternating timelines, each chapter progresses sequentially from two different arcs: one of a blooming, forever love and another of overcoming a sudden, inexplicable loss. Each storyline moves effortlessly and seamlessly through the connected stages, while also emphasizing the strengthening of old friendships and the forging of new ones. Whether told in past or present voice, Reid's debut is a superb read from start to finish!" (Romantic Times)

"Moving, gorgeous and, at times, heart-wrenching. Taylor Jenkins Reid writes with wit and true emotion that you can *feel*. Read it, savor it, share it." (Sarah Jio New York Times bestselling author of *The Violets of March*)

"Taylor Jenkins Reid has written a poignant and heartfelt exploration of love and commitment in the absence of shared time that asks, what does it take to be the love of someone's life?" (Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus New York Times bestselling authors)

"Sweet, heartfelt, and surprising, *Forever Interrupted* is a story about a young woman struggling to find her way after losing her husband. These characters made me laugh as well as cry, and I ended up falling in love with them, too." (Sarah Pekkanen author of *The Best of Us*)

"This beautifully rendered story explores the brilliance and rarity of finding true love, and how to find our way back through the painful aftermath of losing it. These characters will leap right off the page and into your heart." (Amy Hatvany author of *Heart Like Mine*)

Praise for *Maybe in Another Life*:

"Entertaining and unpredictable; Reid makes a compelling argument for happiness in every life." (Kirkus (starred review))

"Readers looking for a romance with a twist won't be disappointed" (Library Journal)

"A newly single 29-year-old moves from NYC to her native L.A. and reconnects with a sexy ex. From there, twin narratives suggest two possible paths, each leading to a different suitor. Her twisted quest for love turns out twice as nice." (Us Weekly)

"Tired of meaningless jobs and fresh from a breakup, 29-year-old Hannah goes home to L.A. seeking a new start. What she encounters first is her old boyfriend Ethan in a bar. Is it fate? Should she stay with him or leave with her friend? In parallel story lines, Reid plays out the consequences of each decision. It's not a spoiler to say: Love wins." (People)

"Meet your new fall read. About the two completely different lives a woman could've led, based on who she goes home with one night. It's like the book version of "Sliding Doors," minus Gwyneth. (The Skimm)

Praise for *After I Do*:

"Written in a breezy, humorous style familiar to fans of Jane Green and Elin Hilderbrand, *After I Do* focuses on Lauren's journey of self-discovery. The intriguing premise and well-drawn characters contribute to an emotionally uplifting and inspiring story." (Booklist)

"Taylor Jenkins Reid offers an entirely fresh and new perspective on what can happen after the "happily ever after." With characters who feel like friends and a narrative that hooked me from the first page, *After I Do* takes an elegant and incisively emotional look at the endings and beginnings of love. Put this book at the top of your must read list!" (Jen Lancaster New York Times bestselling author)

"Taylor Jenkins Reid delivers a seductive twist on the timeless tale of a couple trying to rediscover love in a marriage brought low by the challenges of domestic togetherness. I fell in love with Ryan and Lauren from their passionate beginning, and I couldn't stop reading as they followed their unlikely road to redemption. Touching, perceptive, funny, and achingly honest, *After I Do* will keep you hooked to the end, rooting for husbands and wives and the strength of true love." (Beatriz Williams, New York Times bestselling author)

"As uplifting as it is brutally honest—a must-read." (Kirkus)

"Moving, gorgeous and, at times, heart-wrenching. Taylor Jenkins Reid writes with wit and true emotion that you can *feel*. Read it, savor it, share it." (Sarah Jio New York Times bestselling author of *The Violets of March*)

"Taylor Jenkins Reid writes with ruthless honesty, displaying an innate understanding of human emotion and creating characters and relationships so real I'm finding it impossible to let them go. *After I Do* is a raw, unflinching exploration of the realities of marriage, the delicate nature of love, and the enduring strength of family. Simultaneously funny and sad, heartbreaking and hopeful, Reid has crafted a story of love lost and found that is as timely as it is timeless." (Katja Millay author of *The Sea of Tranquility*)

About the Author

Taylor Jenkins Reid lives in Los Angeles and is the acclaimed author of *One True Loves*, *Maybe in Another Life*, *After I Do*, and *Forever, Interrupted*. Her books have been named a "Best Book of Summer" by *People*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, *InStyle*, *Good Housekeeping*, *USA TODAY*, *Redbook*, *Us Weekly*, *Parade*, *PopSugar*, *Buzzfeed*, *Bustle*, *Brit+Co*, *Goodreads*, and others. To learn more, visit TaylorJenkinsReid.com.

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Forever, Interrupted

JUNE

"Have you decided if you're going to change your name?" Ben asks me. He is sitting on the opposite end of the couch, rubbing my feet. He looks so cute. How did I end up with someone so goddamn cute?

"I have an idea," I tease. But I have more than an idea. My face breaks into a smile. "I think I'm gonna do it."

“Really?” he asks, excitedly.

“Would you want that?” I ask him.

“Are you kidding?” he says. “I mean, you don’t have to. If you feel like it’s offensive or . . . I don’t know, if it negates your own name. I want you to have the name you want,” he says. “But if that name happens to be my name”—he blushes slightly—“that might be really cool.”

He seems too sexy to be a husband. You think of husbands as fat, balding men who take out the trash. But my husband is sexy. He’s young and he’s tall and he’s strong. He’s so perfect. I sound like an idiot. But this is how it’s supposed to be, right? As a newlywed, I’m supposed to see him through these rose-colored glasses. “I was thinking of going by Elsie Porter Ross,” I say to him.

He stops rubbing my feet for a minute. “That’s really hot,” he says.

I laugh at him. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” he says, starting to rub my feet again. “It’s probably some weird caveman thing. I just like the idea that we are the Rosses. We are Mr. and Mrs. Ross.”

“I like that!” I say. “Mr. and Mrs. Ross. That is hot.”

“I told you!”

“That settles it. As soon as the marriage certificate gets here, I’m sending it to the DMV or wherever you have to send it.”

“Awesome,” he says, taking his hands off of me. “Okay, Elsie Porter Ross. My turn.”

I grab his feet. It’s quiet for a while as I absentmindedly rub his toes through his socks. My mind wanders, and after some time, it lands on a startling realization: I am hungry.

“Are you hungry?” I ask.

“Now?”

“I really want to get Fruity Pebbles for some reason.”

“We don’t have cereal here?” Ben asks.

“No, we do. I just . . . I want Fruity Pebbles.” We have adult cereals, boxes of brown shapes fortified with fiber.

“Well, should we go get some? I’m sure CVS is still open and I’m sure they sell Fruity Pebbles. Or, I could go get them for you.”

“No! I can’t let you do that. That would be so lazy of me.”

“That is lazy of you, but you’re my wife and I love you and I want you to have what you want.” He starts to

get up.

“No, really, you don’t have to.”

“I’m going.” Ben leaves the room briefly and returns with his bike and shoes.

“Thank you!” I say, now lying across the sofa, taking up the space he just abandoned. Ben smiles at me as he opens the front door and walks his bike through it. I can hear him put the kickstand down and I know he will come back in to say good-bye.

“I love you, Elsie Porter Ross,” he says, and he bends down to the couch to kiss me. He is wearing a bike helmet and bike gloves. He grins at me. “I really love the sound of that.”

I smile wide. “I love you!” I say to him. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I love you! I’ll be right back.” He shuts the door behind him.

I lay my head back down and pick up a book, but I can’t concentrate. I miss him. Twenty minutes pass and I start to expect him home, but the door doesn’t open. I don’t hear anyone on the steps.

Once thirty minutes have passed, I call his cell phone. No answer. My mind starts to race with possibilities. They are all far-fetched and absurd. He met someone else. He stopped off at a strip club. I call him again as my brain starts to think of more realistic reasons for him to be late, reasons that are reasonable and thus far more terrifying. When he does not answer again, I get off the couch and walk outside.

I’m not sure what I expect to find, but I look up and down the street for any sign of him. Is it crazy to think he’s hurt? I can’t decide. I try to stay calm and tell myself that he must just be stuck in some sort of traffic jam that he can’t get out of, or maybe he’s run into an old friend. The minutes start to slow. They feel like hours. Each second passing is an insufferable period of time.

Sirens.

I can hear sirens heading in my direction. I can see their flashing lights just above the rooftops on my street. Their whooping alarms sound like they are calling to me. I can hear my name in their repetitive wailing: Elsie. El-sie.

I start running. By the time I get to the end of my street, I can feel just how cold the concrete is on the balls of my feet. My light sweatpants are no match for the wind, but I keep going until I find the source.

I see two ambulances and a fire truck. There are a few police cars barricading the area. I run as far into the fray as I can get before I stop myself. Someone is being lifted onto a stretcher. There’s a large moving truck flipped over on the side of the road. Its windows are smashed, glass surrounding it. I look closely at the truck, trying to figure out what happened. That’s when I see that it isn’t all glass. The road is covered in little specks of something else. I walk closer and I see one at my feet. It’s a Fruity Pebble. I scan the area for the one thing I pray not to see and I see it. Right in front of me—how could I have missed it?—halfway underneath the moving truck, is Ben’s bike. It’s bent and torn.

The world goes silent. The sirens stop. The city comes to a halt. My heart starts beating so quickly it hurts in my chest. I can feel the blood pulsing through my brain. It’s so hot out here. When did it get so hot outside? I

can't breathe. I don't think I can breathe. I'm not breathing.

I don't even realize I am running until I reach the ambulance doors. I start to pound on them. I jump up and down as I try to pound on the window that is too high above me to reach. As I do, all I hear is the sound of the Fruity Pebbles crunching beneath my feet. I grind them into the pavement each time I jump. I break them into a million pieces.

The ambulance pulls away. Is he in it? Is Ben in there? Are they keeping him alive? Is he okay? Is he bruised? Maybe he's in the ambulance because protocol says they have to but he's actually fine. Maybe he's around here somewhere. Maybe the ambulance was holding the driver of the car. That guy has to be dead, right? No way that person survived. So Ben must be all right. That's the karma of an accident: The bad guy dies, the good guy lives.

I turn and look around, but I don't see Ben anywhere. I start to scream his name. I know he's okay. I'm sure of it. I just need this to be over. I just want to see him with a small scrape and be told he's fine to go home. Let's go home, Ben. I've learned my lesson to never let you do such a stupid favor for me again. I've learned my lesson; let's go home.

"Ben!" I shout into the nighttime air. It's so cold. How did it get so cold? "Ben!" I shout again. I feel like I am running in circles until I am stopped in my place by a police officer.

"Ma'am," he says as he grabs my arms. I keep shouting. Ben needs to hear me. He needs to know that I am here. He needs to know that it's time to come home. "Ma'am," the officer calls again.

"What?" I yell into his face. I rip my arms out of his grasp and I spin myself around. I try to run through what is clearly a marked-off area. I know that whoever marked this off would want to let me through. They would understand that I just need to find my husband.

The officer catches up to me and grabs me again. "Ma'am!" he says, this time more severe. "You cannot be here right now." Doesn't he understand that this is exactly where I must be right now?

"I need to find my husband!" I say to him. "He could be hurt. That's his bike. I have to find him."

"Ma'am, they have taken your husband to Cedars-Sinai. Do you have a ride to get there?"

My eyes are staring at his face, but I do not understand what he is saying to me.

"Where is he?" I ask. I need him to tell me again. I don't understand.

"Ma'am, your husband is on his way to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. He is being rushed to the emergency room. Would you like me to take you?"

He's not here? I think. He was in that ambulance?

"Is he okay?"

"Ma'am, I can't—"

"Is he okay?"

The officer looks at me. He pulls his hat off his head and places it on his chest. I know what this means. I've seen it done on the doorsteps of war widows in period pieces. As if on cue, I start violently heaving.

"I need to see him!" I scream through my tears. "I need to see him! I need to be with him!" I drop to my knees in the middle of the road, cereal crunching underneath me. "Is he all right? I should be with him. Just tell me if he is still alive."

The police officer looks at me with pity and guilt. I've never seen the two looks together before but it's easy to recognize. "Ma'am. I'm sorry. Your husband has . . ."

The police officer isn't rushed; he isn't running on adrenaline like me. He knows there is nothing to hurry for. He knows my husband's dead body can wait.

I don't let him finish his sentence. I know what he's going to say and I can't believe it. I won't believe it. I scream at him, pounding my fists into his chest. He is a huge man, probably six foot four at least, and he looms over me. I feel like a child. But that doesn't stop me. I just keep flailing and hitting him. I want to slap him. I want to kick him. I want to make him hurt like I do.

"He passed away on impact. I'm sorry."

That's when I fall to the ground. Everything starts spinning. I can hear my pulse, but I can't focus on what the policeman is saying. I really didn't think this was going to happen. I thought bad things only happened to people with hubris. They don't happen to people like me, people that know how fragile life is, people that respect the authority of a higher power. But it has. It has happened to me.

My body calms. My eyes dry. My face freezes, and my gaze falls onto a scaffolding and stays there. My arms feel numb. I'm not sure if I'm standing or sitting.

"What happened to the driver?" I ask the officer, calm and composed.

"I'm sorry?"

"What happened to the person driving the moving truck?"

"He passed away, ma'am."

"Good," I say to him. I say it like a sociopath. The police officer just nods his head at me, perhaps indicating some unspoken contract that he will pretend he didn't hear me say it, and I can pretend I don't wish another person to have died. But I don't want to take it back.

He grabs my hand and leads me into the front of his police car. He uses his siren to break through traffic and I see the streets of Los Angeles in fast-forward. They have never looked so ugly. Forever, Interrupted

DECEMBER

It was New Year's Eve and Ana and I had this great plan. We were going to go to this party to see this guy she had been flirting with at the gym, and then we were going to leave at 11:30 p.m. We wanted to drive to the beach, open a bottle of champagne together, and ring in the new year tipsy and drenched in sea spray.

Instead, Ana got too drunk at the party, started making out with the guy from the gym, and disappeared for a few hours. This was fairly typical of Ana and something that I had come to love about her, namely that nothing ever went as planned. Something always happened. She was a nice reprieve from my own personality. A personality for whom everything went as planned and nothing ever happened. So when I was stranded at the party waiting for Ana to pop out of wherever she'd been hiding, I wasn't angry or surprised. I had assumed things might take this turn. I was only slightly annoyed as I rang in the new year with a group of strangers. I stood there awkwardly, as friends kissed each other, and I just stared into my champagne glass. I didn't let it ruin my evening. I talked to some cool people that night. I made the best of it.

I met a guy named Fabian, who was just finishing med school but said his real passion was "fine wine, fine food, and fine women." He winked at me as he said this, and as I gracefully removed myself from the conversation shortly thereafter, Fabian asked for my number. I gave it to him, and although he was cute, I knew that if he did call, I wouldn't answer. Fabian seemed like the kind of guy who would take me to an expensive bar on our first date; the kind of guy who would check out other girls while I was in the bathroom. That was the kind of guy who found victory in sleeping with you. It was a game to him and I . . . just never knew how to play it well.

Ana, on the other hand, knew how to have fun. She met people. She flirted with them. She had whatever that thing is that makes men fawn over women and lose their own self-respect in the process. Ana had all the power in her romances, and while I could see the point in living like that, from an outside view it never seemed very full of passion. It was calculated. I was waiting for someone that would sweep me off my feet and would be swept up by me in equal parts. I wanted someone who wouldn't want to play games because doing so meant less time being together. I wasn't sure if this person existed, but I was too young to give up on the idea.

I finally found Ana asleep in the master bathroom. I picked her up and cabbled her home. By the time I reached my own apartment, it was about 2:00 a.m. and I was tired. The bottle of champagne intended for our beach rendezvous went unopened and I got in bed.

As I fell asleep that night, eyeliner not fully cleaned off my face, black sequined dress on the floor, I thought about what this year could bring and my mind raced with all of the possibilities, however unlikely. But out of all the possibilities, I didn't think about being married by the end of May.

I woke up New Year's Day alone in my apartment, just like I woke up every other day, and there was nothing in particular that seemed special about it. I read in bed for two hours, I took a shower, I got dressed. I met Ana for breakfast.

I'd been up for about three and a half hours by the time I saw her. She looked like she hadn't been up for five minutes. Ana is tall and lanky with long brown hair that falls far beyond her shoulders and perfectly matches her golden brown eyes. She was born in Brazil and lived there until she was thirteen, and it's still noticeable every once in a while in some of her words, mostly her exclamations. Other than that, she's fully Americanized, assimilated, cleansed of all cultural identity. I'm pretty sure her name is supposed to be pronounced with a long a like "ahn-uh" but somewhere in middle school she gave up explaining the difference, and so now, she's Ana, any way anyone would like to pronounce it.

That particular morning, she was wearing big sweatpants that didn't make her look fat because she was so skinny, and she had her hair pulled up into a ponytail, a zip-up sweatshirt covering her torso. You could barely tell she wasn't wearing a shirt underneath her sweatshirt, and it occurred to me that this is how Ana does it. This is how she drives men crazy. She looks naked while being entirely covered. And you would

have absolutely no indication she does this on purpose.

“Nice shirt,” I said, as I pulled my sunglasses off and sat down across from her. Sometimes I worried that my own average body looked oversize compared to hers, that my own plain, all-American features only served to highlight how exotic she was. When I made jokes about it, she would remind me that I am a blond woman in the United States. She’d say blond trumps everything. I’ve always thought of my hair as dirty blond, almost mousy, but I saw her point.

Even with how gorgeous Ana is, I’ve never heard her express satisfaction with her own looks. When I would say I didn’t like my small boobs, she’d remind me that I have long legs and a butt she’d kill for. She’d always confess how much she hated her short eyelashes and knees, that her feet looked like “troll feet.” So maybe we’re all in the same boat. Maybe all women feel like “before” photos.

Ana had already made herself comfortable on the patio, having a muffin and an iced tea. She pretended like she was about to get up when I sat down, but just reached for a half hug.

“Are you ready to kill me for last night?”

“What?” I said as I pulled out the menu. I don’t know why I even bothered to look at the menu. I ate eggs Benedict every Saturday morning.

“I don’t even remember what happened, honestly. I just remember parts of the cab ride home and then you taking my shoes off before you pulled the covers over me.”

I nodded. “That sounds about right. I lost you for about three hours and found you in the upstairs bathroom, so I can’t speak to how far you and that guy from the gym got, but I would imagine . . .”

“No! I hooked up with Jim?”

I put the menu down. “What? No, the guy from the gym.”

“Yeah, his name is Jim.”

“You met a guy at the gym named Jim?” Technically, this wasn’t his fault. People named Jim should be allowed to go to gyms, but I couldn’t shake the feeling this somehow made him ridiculous. “Is that a bran muffin?”

She nodded, so I took some of it.

“You and I might be the only two people on the planet that like the taste of bran muffins,” she said to me, and she might have been right. Ana and I often found striking similarities in each other in meaningless places, the clearest one being food. It doesn’t matter if you and another person both like tzatziki. It has no bearing on your ability to get along, but somehow, in these overlaps of taste, there was a bond between Ana and me. I knew she was about to order the eggs Benedict too.

“Anyway, I saw you making out with Jim from the gym, but I don’t know what happened after that.”

“Oh, well I’m going to assume that it didn’t get much further because he’s already texted me this morning.”

“It’s eleven a.m.”

“I know. I thought it was a bit quick. But it is flattering,” she said.

“What can I get for you two?” The waitress who came up to us wasn’t our usual waitress. She was older, had been through more.

“Oh, hi! I don’t think we’ve met before. I’m Ana.”

“Daphne.” This waitress wasn’t nearly as interested in being friends with us as Ana might have hoped.

“What happened to Kimberly?” Ana asked.

“Oh, not sure. Just filling in for the day.”

“Ah. Okay, well, we’ll make this easy on you. Two eggs Benedict and I’ll have an iced tea like she has,” I said.

“You got it.”

Once she left, Ana and I resumed our earlier discussion.

“I’ve been thinking about resolutions,” Ana said, offering me some of her iced tea while I waited for mine to get there. I declined because I knew if I had some of hers, she’d take that as license to drink some of mine when it arrived and she’d drink my whole damn glass. I’d known her long enough to know where to draw my boundaries and how to draw them so she wouldn’t notice.

“Okay. And?”

“I’m thinking something radical.”

“Radical? This should be good.”

“Celibacy.”

“Celibacy?”

“Celibacy. Not having sex.”

“No, I know what it means. I’m just wondering why.”

“Oh, well, I came up with it this morning. I’m twenty-six years old and last night I got drunk and can’t be entirely sure if I slept with someone or not. That seems to be the closest to slut rock bottom that I want to get.”

“You are not a slut.” I wasn’t exactly sure if this was true.

“No, you’re right. I’m not a slut. Yet.”

“You could just stop drinking.” I had an interesting relationship with drinking in that I could take it or leave it. Drink, not drink, it did not matter to me. Most people, I’d found so far, fell strongly on one side or the other. Ana fell strongly on the “drinking” side.

“What are you talking about?”

“You know, stop getting drunk.”

“At all?”

“Stop it. I’m not saying something preposterous here. There are plenty of people that just don’t drink.”

“Yeah, Elsie, they’re called alcoholics.”

I laughed. “Fair enough, drinking isn’t the problem. It’s the sleeping around.”

“Right. So I’m just going to stop sleeping around.”

“And what happens when you meet someone you really want to be with?”

“Well, I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it. I didn’t meet anyone last year worth my time. I can’t say I expect that to change this year.”

Daphne showed up with two eggs Benedicts and my iced tea. She put them down in front of us, and I didn’t realize how hungry I’d been until the food was staring me in the face. I dug right in.

Ana nodded, chewing. When it started to look like she could speak without spitting food, she added, “I mean, if I meet someone and fall in love, sure. But until then, nobody’s getting in here.” She made an x in the air with her utensils.

“Fair enough.” The best part about this place was they put spinach in the eggs Benedict, kind of an eggs Benedict Florentine. “This doesn’t mean I can’t sleep around though, right?” I said to her.

“No, you still can. You won’t. But you still can.”

Ana was soon on her way back to the other side of town. She was living in Santa Monica in a condo that overlooked the Pacific Ocean. I’d’ve been jealous enough to resent her if she hadn’t offered on a regular basis for me to move in. I always declined, knowing that living with Ana might be the only thing that could teach me to dislike her. I never did understand how Ana could live the way she did on the salary of a part-time yoga teacher, but she always seemed to have enough money for the things she wanted and needed when she wanted and needed them.

After she left, I walked back to my apartment. I knew exactly how I’d be spending my afternoon. It was a new year and I always felt like a new year didn’t feel new without rearranging the furniture. The problem was that I had rearranged my apartment so many times in the two years I’d lived there that I’d exhausted all rational possibilities. I loved my apartment and worked hard to afford it and decorate it. So as I moved the couch from wall to wall, ultimately realizing that it really looked best where it was originally, I was still satisfied. I moved the bookcase from one wall to another, switched my end tables, and decided this was enough of a change for me to commemorate the year. I sat down on the couch, turned on the television, and

fell asleep.

It was 5:00 p.m. when I woke up, and while it was technically a Saturday night and single people on Saturday nights are supposed to go out to bars or clubs and find a date, I opted to watch television, read a book, and order a pizza. Maybe this year was going to be the year I did whatever the hell I wanted, regardless of social norms. Maybe.

When it started raining, I knew I'd been right to stay inside. Ana called a few hours later asking what I was doing.

"I wanted to make sure you're not sitting on the couch watching television."

"What? Why can't I watch television?"

"It's a Saturday night, Elsie. Get up! Go out! I'd say you should come out with me but I'm going on a date with Jim."

"So much for celibacy."

"What? I'm not sleeping with him. I'm eating dinner with him."

I laughed. "Okay, well, I'm spending the night on my couch. I'm tired and sleepy and . . ."

"Tired and sleepy are the same thing. Stop making excuses."

"Fine. I'm lazy and I like being alone sometimes."

"Good. At least you admitted it. I'll call you tomorrow. Wish me luck keeping it in my pants."

"You'll need it."

"Hey!"

"Hey!" I said back.

"Okay, I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Bye."

With the phone in my hand, I ordered a pizza. When I called Georgie's Pizza to order it, the woman on the phone told me it would be an hour and a half before it was delivered. When I asked why, all she said was "Rain." I told her I'd be there in a half hour to pick it up.

Walking into Georgie's Pizza, I felt nothing. No part of my brain or my body knew what was about to happen. I felt no premonition. I was wearing bright yellow galoshes and what can only be described as fat jeans. The rain had matted my hair to my face and I'd given up pushing it away.

I didn't even notice Ben sitting there. I was far too involved with the minutiae of trying to buy a pizza. Once the cashier told me it would be another ten minutes, I retired to the small bench in the front of the store, and

it was then that I noticed there was another person in the same predicament.

My heart didn't skip a beat. I had no idea he was "it"; it was "he." He was the man I'd dreamed about as a child, wondering what my husband would look like. I was seeing this face I had wondered about my whole life and it was right here in front of me and I didn't recognize it. All I thought was, He'll probably get his pizza before I get mine.

He looked handsome in a way that suggested he didn't realize just how handsome he was. There was no effort involved, no self-awareness. He was tall and lean with broad shoulders and strong arms. His jeans were just the right shade of blue; his shirt brought out the gray in his green eyes. They looked stark against his brown hair. I sat down next to him and swatted my hair away from my forehead again. I picked up my phone to check my e-mail and otherwise distract myself from the waiting.

"Hi," he said. It took me a second to confirm he was, in fact, speaking to me. That easily, my interest was piqued.

"Hi," I said back. I tried to let it hang there, but I was bad with silence. I had to fill it. "I should have just had it delivered."

"And miss all this?" he said, referencing the tacky faux-Italian decor with his hands. I laughed. "You have a nice laugh," he said.

"Oh, stop it," I said. I swear, my mother taught me how to take a compliment, and yet each time I was given one, I shooed it away like it was on fire. "I mean, thank you. That's what you're supposed to say. Thank you."

I noticed that I had subconsciously shifted my entire body toward him. I'd read all of these articles about body language and pupil dilation when people are attracted to each other, but whenever I got into a situation where it was actually useful (Are his pupils dilated? Does he like me?), I was always far too unfocused to take advantage.

"No, what you're supposed to do is compliment me back," he said, smiling. "That way I know where I stand."

"Ah," I said. "Well, it doesn't really tell you much if I compliment you now, does it? I mean, you know that I'm complimenting you because you've asked . . ."

"Trust me, I can still tell."

"All right," I said, while I looked him up and down. As I made a show of studying him, he stretched out his legs and lengthened his neck. He pulled his shoulders back and puffed out his chest. I admired the stubble on his cheeks, the way it made him look effortlessly handsome. My eyes felt drawn to the strength of his arms. What I wanted to say was "You have great arms," and yet, I didn't have it in me. I played it safe.

"So?" he said.

"I like your shirt," I said to him. It was a heathered gray shirt with a bird on it.

"Oh," he said, and I could hear honest to God disappointment in his voice. "I see how it is."

“What?” I smiled, defensively. “That’s a nice compliment.”

He laughed. He wasn’t overly interested or desperate. He wasn’t aloof or cool either, he just . . . was. I don’t know whether he was this way with all women, whether he was able to talk to any woman as if he’d known her for years, or whether it was just me. But it didn’t matter. It was working. “Oh, it’s fine,” he said. “But I’m not even going to try for your number. Girl compliments your eyes, your hair, your beard, your arms, your name, that means she’s open to a date. Girl compliments your shirt? You’re getting shot down.”

“Wait—that’s not—” I started, but I was interrupted.

“Ben Ross!” the cashier called out, and he jumped up. He looked right at me and said, “Hold that thought.”

He paid for his pizza, thanked the cashier genuinely, and then came and sat right back down next to me on the bench.

“Anyway, I’m thinking if I ask you out, I’m going to be shot down. Am I going to be shot down?”

No, he was absolutely not going to be shot down. But I was now embarrassed and trying hard not to seem eager. I smiled wide at him, unable to keep the canary feathers in my mouth. “Your pizza is going to get cold,” I told him.

He waved me off. “I’m over this pizza. Give it to me straight. Can I have your number?”

There it was. Do-or-die time. How to say it without screaming it with all of the nervous energy in my body? “You can have my number. It’s only fair.”

“Elsie Porter!” the cashier yelled. Apparently, she had been calling it for quite a while, but Ben and I were too distracted to hear much of anything.

“Oh! Sorry, that’s me. Uh . . . just wait here.”

He laughed, and I walked up to pay for my pizza. When I came back, he had his phone out. I gave him my number and I took his.

“I’m going to call you soon, if that’s okay. Or should I do the wait-three-days thing? Is that more your style?”

“No, go for it,” I said, smiling. “The sooner the better.”

He put out his hand to shake and I took it.

“Ben.”

“Elsie,” I said, and for the first time, I thought the name Ben sounded like the finest name I’d ever heard. I smiled at him. I couldn’t help it. He smiled back and tapped his pizza. “Well, until then.”

I nodded. “Until then,” I said, and I walked back to my car. Giddy.

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