

Chapter One

I was in my condo washing the yellow Pyrex mixing bowl I'd swiped from Mom's house when I first thought it:

It might be fun to have a family of my own someday.

From there my thoughts turned to having a baby and I was annoyed, at first, by the notion of excess baggage weighing down my light load. "No kids" had been my mantra since seventh-grade health class and it hadn't occurred to me until then to change my tune. As I grew into my early twenties, several of my friends shared dreams of large families, but I never thought that far ahead. Whoever coined the phrase, "Live in the moment," had me in mind.

But that day, washing dishes, my mind ran wild like I was a five-year-old playing house. I imagined my husband and my child—a faceless, nameless little sprout—urging me to finish the dishes so we could head off to the Hennepin County Fair.

"Just a minute," I would tell my little family with a syrupy sweet voice that could put June Cleaver to shame. "I can't bear the thought of coming home to dirty dishes."

My imaginary child would tug on my leg and plead, "Pleeeeeease, Mommy," and I would wipe my hands on the dish towel and throw it on the counter.

"Oh, what the heck!" I'd say. "The dishes can wait!"

My mind perked up at the family fantasy, despite the fact that there was nothing *Leave it to Beaver* about my current lifestyle. I was freshly single, had recently bought my own two-bedroom condo, worked full-time as the editor of a weekly community newspaper, and went out more nights than I stayed in. I was twenty-four and incredibly proud

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of the work I did, especially since my college education ended with a two-year associate of arts degree from a local community college. I had started as an intern at the weekly newspaper a few months after turning twenty, and over the next four years I'd worked my way up the small company's ladder from intern to receptionist to staff reporter to assistant editor and finally, to editor.

Dad had a tendency to announce my title to random acquaintances when we were together. I was the first one in our family to go to college, unless of course you counted Dad's auto body classes at Dunwoody Technical Institute. He couldn't spell to save his life and Mom said some of her worst childhood memories involved writing papers for school. So, it was a mystery to our entire family how I'd picked up the writing gene.

The chaos of the newspaper world had a way of bringing out the best and the worst in me. Looming deadlines molded me into what the position required: a strong-minded, "work-is-my-life" twenty-something that was content with an income hovering just above poverty level.

I had recently vowed to take a break from serious relationships. The one-, two-, and three-year relationships that had followed each other back to back left me concerned that the next one might be four years and I'd wind up just as empty-hearted. I maintained an active social life with my coworkers, though, mixing business and pleasure like a high-octane cocktail.

Janelle sold advertising and was single, too. She called me "Little Lulu" and quickly became the big sister I'd never had. She was genuine and supportive of all of my decisions, especially when I announced to her that I needed to fill my free time with yoga and kickboxing classes. She gently pointed out that I was too high strung to relax into a yoga class and there wasn't an aggressive bone in my body for kickboxing. I knew she was right, but I needed to fill my time. It was hard for me to be alone—used to the company of *someone*, even if he wasn't *the one*—and I reasoned that the yoga and kickboxing classes could propel me into a new dimension where I could learn how to feel comfortable by myself. And, just as important, the classes would undoubtedly tone my body, which would be a bonus when Mr. Right did come along.

"But you do what you need to do, Little Lulu," she said to me on the phone the afternoon of my twenty-fourth birthday. "It's all about taking care of you now."

That night I celebrated at her apartment in Minneapolis. She'd invited several of our friends from work and some friends I'd never met. She baked me a chocolate cake with a flaming "24" candle on top.

"This is going to be the best year yet," she whispered to me as someone took our picture...

The next day was a Sunday and I woke crumpled in a hung-over ball on Janelle's futon, which she lovingly covered with blue and yellow daisy sheets on the nights she figured I'd be staying over. As I lay there, face down, I tried to piece together the events from the night before. Each time I thought I had compiled a complete rundown of goings-on for the night, another scene played out on the backs of my eyelids, and the more that came, the more mortified I felt.

I pushed myself up slowly and sat on the edge of the futon, then collected the contents of my purse, which were strewn next to me. I flipped open my cell phone and saw an unfamiliar number, then noticed that I had had a conversation with the owner of that unfamiliar number for nearly an hour after bar close. I wanted to wake Janelle to ask her about the mystery person but, like me, she wasn't much of a morning person. I flipped the phone shut and saw that it wasn't even 8 a.m. I felt sick to my stomach, but even more disconcerting was the unexplainable urge I had to go to church. I wanted to confess my sins and do whatever it was that good Christians did to make themselves feel clean in their own dirty skins. However, I only knew for sure of one Lutheran church in the metro area besides my childhood institution, which I had vowed never to step foot inside again. The stench of being reprimanded in confirmation class for questioning the validity of Mary's Immaculate Conception still hung too fresh in the air. And I was pretty sure it was against the rules to go to a church outside of the denomination in which you were raised.

Propelled by who knows what, I straightened my tank top with a quick yank, unfurled my jeans from their tight twist around my legs, collected my belongings and slipped into my shoes—still sticky from spilled drinks the night before. I headed toward home, a two-bedroom condo just outside of Minneapolis that I'd bought that spring. It was located in the city where my parents grew up and near the high school from which they both graduated. Although my mom, dad and younger sister had moved to Florida a few months earlier after my dad's retirement, I took comfort in walking the streets Mom and Dad had walked as teenagers and eating at some of the restaurants they'd

visited while dating. It connected us despite the distance. Now my parents were in the process of a fairly-civilized divorce and, ironically, I felt close to them as I pulled into the parking lot of Gethsemane Lutheran Church where they were married thirty-two years earlier.

Happy families made their way into the bright white, square-shaped church. There was a traditional Mary-and-the-halo stained-glass window out front and off to the side an enormous white steeple jutted toward the sky as if to scream, *I'm overcompensating for something!*

I parked and popped open the glove box. No mints. I raked a brush through my tangled hair, which I'd recently dyed from blonde to "crushed garnet."

"What am I doing here?" I grumbled as I slid out of the car and headed toward the entrance. Halfway there, I dared to look down at my ensemble. In a sea of fresh faces and crisply dressed children of God, I stood out like a ragamuffin—maybe still a little drunk from the night before. Grandpa once told me that God didn't care how you came to church as long as you got yourself there, and I sure hoped that was true.

The double doors had colorful panes of stained glass and an elderly gentleman pulled the wooden entrance open for me. "Welcome," he said, and I felt like we were off to a good start, this church and me. But then the stares came as I walked into the waiting area on the way to the sanctuary and I knew Grandpa was wrong. These people *did* care how I came to *their* church. I could read the judgment in their expressions as they sipped coffee from mugs that should have been inscribed with the words: *Regular member who tithes*. I felt so far away from my comfort zone that I couldn't even turn around and run. So, I pretended to be one of those aloof girls who march to the beat of their own drums and just didn't care what other people thought about the tune. For all they knew, I'd carefully selected that particular pair of jeans, top, and flip-flops out of my closet that very morning, rather than the morning before.

I slid into a spot at the end of a pew near the back of the church. During the opening prayer I linked my fingers together and spotted faded markings on my palm. I looked more closely and made out numbers scribbled onto my skin, the same number I had called after bar close. I tried to smear the digits away with my thumb, but the ink was there to stay.

It was very possible I dozed off during the sermon. The whole deal seemed to wrap up pretty quickly, and when everyone shuffled up for communion, I stayed put. I felt like a little demon was using my intestines as a slip-and-slide and I didn't want to risk the "body and blood" triggering my gag reflex. I thought about ducking out when my row headed up front, but I was determined to push through and get something out of this service. Some sort of quick fix. After all, that was what I was there for, wasn't it? My life just didn't feel right, so I came to God, to his house of worship. The least he could do was inspire me.

When we stood for the last gospel reading, hot flashes pulsed behind my eyeballs, and the little brat next to me obnoxiously squeezed herself between her mother and the pew in front of them.

"Mommy, no!" she hissed as her mother forced her back into the space next to me. "She smells like stinky cigarettes."

My face burned and I tried to step to my left but hit the edge of the pew. I was trapped, again, in a church, just like the days of confirmation class. I stared straight ahead, my heart pounding as I recited the Lord's Prayer from memory. That little ditty had been burned into my brain.

As soon as the pastor began the closing prayer and the other church-goers shuffled their belongings together, I snatched my purse off the floor and high-tailed it out the side door. I knew better. I was not a church person and never would become one. All of those little androids reciting words written by other people annoyed me... Half of them looked comatose and no one looked happy. Weren't people supposed to be happy at church? Or maybe they just saw church services as mandatory meetings to qualify them for entrance into Heaven. Either way, it wasn't my scene.

I shoved into my car and glanced in the rearview mirror. My heart lurched up into my throat. The random digits written on my hand from the night before had transferred themselves onto my left cheek sometime during the night. Just like little scarlet letters.

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