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Finding Grace

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CHAPTER ONE

The last time we were at the Ritz in Paris I had my fifth miscarriage at breakfast.

This Christmas, I was no longer in contention for the same bizarre privilege. Now that I'd had my ovaries confiscated by my doctor, I found myself oscillating between staring at my husband and daughter adoringly and wondering how long it would take to drown myself in the Seine. It had become an unwritten family tradition that we always came to the Ritz for Christmas. This year, as we drove to the hotel, with the moon beside us—a fine lick of chrome in an upside-down crescent—the driver pointed out landmarks I already knew well. I nodded, feigning interest before cutting him off to ask if he had a Motorola phone charger.

“Non, madame, non.”

“Ce n'est pas grave,” I said, sinking back into the front seat of the car. We drove past La Madeleine, lit up from below to emphasize its imposing Corinthian beauty. The few times I'd chosen to

pray for my fertility, it had been in that church. Perhaps that's why my prayers for another baby had yet to be answered—maybe God could sense my secular proclivity.

The driver continued to prattle on about Napoleon, then Sarkozy. I gave him a tight-lipped smile; I wasn't really listening. The truth was I could've been in Paris or Putney, it didn't matter. Of course, I knew Paris was beautiful. Everyone did. But it was like I was trapped inside a snow globe that nobody was shaking. All I could think about was life back home. I kept hearing the doctor's voice in my head telling me the exact thickness of our surrogate Jess's uterine lining and wondering if she'd been taking enough folic acid in preparation for the embryo transfer.

We stopped at a red light, where a young couple crossed the road holding hands. The girl was laughing at something her boyfriend said, throwing back her head and playfully pushing him away. I rolled up my window. It had started spitting and my coat was cashmere. The hail came out of nowhere, pelting little wet bullets against the car's windshield. I held down the power button again on my phone, but still nothing.

"Fuck," I said, which seemed to take the driver by surprise. "*Pardon, monsieur,*" I added, quickly returning to my French sensibility. I turned around to face Tom in the backseat. "Tom, is your BlackBerry working?" He was still in his suit but without the tie. His eyes were closed, his head resting against the window. Our daughter, Chloe, was asleep with her head on his lap, her little body curled up like a kitten beside him. On paper, the picture was idyllic. A healthy, happy child, born with a double set of lashes, safe in the lap of her father. But even the fortunate hand I'd been dealt didn't stop my longing for one more baby.

"Tom, can you check if your phone is working?" I said again. "Mine isn't."

"I'll do it at the hotel," he said, rubbing his face, his voice sleepy. "I don't want to wake Chloe up."

“Could you just check? Jess might’ve texted us.”

“Oh, so now you *want* me to be on my phone. I’ll get it once we’re at the hotel.” I clamped my lips tightly between my teeth. I jabbed at the button that switched off my heated seat; the sudden flare of concentrated warmth was making me want to vomit. Then I heard that familiar faint *dink* of Tom’s BlackBerry.

“Can you see who that is?” I said, my throat slightly dry from the recycled air on the plane.

“Honor, we’re less than two minutes from the hotel.”

“I’m not asking how far we are from the hotel. I’m simply asking you to check your phone.” A slight edge had crept into my voice, a tone I recognized as my mother’s, sharp and unlikable. Chloe woke up then. She shot upright, like most four-year-olds discombobulated by not being in her own bed.

“Are we there yet, Daddy?”

“Almost,” he said, pushing the hair off her face.

“Tom? The phone?” He didn’t look at it, he just shoved it into my palm.

Our fertility doctor insisted we not take a pregnancy test for two weeks after any embryo transfer, but there was no harm in asking Jess how she was feeling; there might be early signs that the transfer had worked. Of course, it wasn’t Jess who’d texted, it was the alarm company, duly followed by another from our friend Lauren, telling us she had accidentally put the code in wrong when she was picking up our dog Duke’s lead. I replied, then texted our surrogate Jess on Tom’s phone, trying to compose a message that seemed “happy-go-lucky” but most likely read “desperate.” I knew I was teetering on overbearing, but at this point I had ceased caring about propriety.

The two-week wait for Jess to take a pregnancy test in tandem with my lofty drop into medical menopause at thirty-three had done little for my Christmas spirit. The irony of sitting in the waiting room at a fertility doctor’s office to discuss having another baby when there was nothing in my arsenal wasn’t lost on me. Nor was

the fact that Tom and I hadn't had sex since Chloe's birthday six months ago. Apparently, infertility was an underrated but effective method of contraception.

By the time we pulled up outside the hotel, the rain had dwindled to a drizzle. The French flag draped above the entrance, catching ever so slightly in the damp breeze. Two bellhops dressed in Ritz blue stood by the door. They ran to the car, umbrellas up and at the ready.

"*Bonsoir, Messieurs-dames,*" said the taller of the two. There was a slight wobble to his voice. I didn't recognize him from previous years and his bumfluff indicated that this was a temporary job between life choices. They took our suitcases, and I watched Chloe and Tom trot away from me up the red-carpeted stairs, Chloe's velvet coat blending into the carpet's rich pigment, before they disappeared through the revolving doors.

The lobby was filled top-to-toe with the bustle of Christmas. The grand piano had been set aside to make way for the giant tree, a sparkling, verdant spectacle, decorated in the hotel's signature palette of peach and champagne, with a light dusting of Ritz-blue baubles sprinkled here and there.

I pocketed my gloves and put my bag down on one of the gilt chairs by the reception desk. Chloe was making the most of the empty lobby, pirouetting up and down the length of the foyer. It didn't matter how many years we'd been coming to the Ritz, I never got used to the height of its ceilings or the grandeur of its old-world beauty, a stark contrast to the dingy cottage my mother rented every summer in rural Normandy.

I stood breathing in the smell of amber and freshly dropped pine needles, trying to remember the last time we'd been in the lobby this late at night. It must have been before Chloe was even born, when we used to stumble in blurry-eyed after one too many dry martinis at Harry's Bar.

Tom turned and asked me for his BlackBerry. I walked over

and put it on the reception desk, making sure it slammed hard enough to make a point, but not hard enough to damage it. He didn't bite, though, which only wound me up more. We'd been having the same argument about my insistence on having another baby for the best part of two years.

I picked up my bag and marched off in an exaggerated huff before calling the lift. It was only when I pressed the button that I realized I should've left it for Chloe.

"You know she likes doing the buttons," Tom said as he joined me by the polished doors.

"She can press the ones inside," I said. "Chloe, come on. It's late!" But as soon as she saw the button illuminated, her bottom lip began to tremble. "I'm sorry, darling, I don't know what I was thinking. You can press the ones to go up. And all the other buttons that need pressing forever and ever, okay?" She nodded, but her lip was still turned down. The lift doors opened, and I squinted as we stepped inside. The light was unnecessarily bright and there were mirrored panels on all sides, dominoing us into oblivion. As the doors closed, the collar of my coat tightened around my neck. The lift suddenly seemed to shrink like an airless incubator.

Tom pointed to our floor, so Chloe knew which button to press. It was the little things with Chloe. I used to be the same about my coffee or starting a new notepad. But now my mind was in a constant fog of Jess's synthetic progesterone injections and phantom colostrum production.

I undid my top button and bent down beside Chloe, my long navy coat falling around me like a cape.

"Can I show you a trick?" I whispered. Her eyes widened. I took her little hand in mine and swiped her fingers down every brass button. Chloe let out a little giggle, knowing her mummy had just done something naughty. I stood up. Tom wasn't laughing, and when the doors opened on the next floor, he exaggerated his yawn for Chloe's sake and got out.

“Daddy needs some exercise, cherub,” he said, before kissing her head goodbye but saying nothing to me—so different from when we’d role-played him chatting me up in this very lift before escorting me to his “room.” Tom liked to take the stairs, but that wasn’t why he was doing so tonight.

We were already in our suite when Tom walked in shortly after us, still visibly seething over my behavior. The rift continued throughout our bedtime routines, without a détente in sight.

“There we go,” I said to Chloe as I tucked her into her adorable little bed. Her eyes were at half-mast and her fingers were stroking her cuddly, Hedgeie. We’d packed last year’s white-and-pink-striped pajamas. They were big then; they were getting a touch too small around the ankles now. Nothing like a child to mark the passing of time. When Chloe was a baby, Tom would order a bottle of Pol Roger while I was getting Chloe to sleep. He would have a cold glass waiting for me as I crept out of her bedroom, being careful not to make a peep and wake her. But there was little chance of any champagne corks popping tonight.

My phone lit up as soon as I plugged it in. I held my breath anticipating Jess’s name, but there was only a message from my editor, which I barely read. I texted Annie, my closest friend since day one of university.

Tom is already in a mood, and I have to see
my hideous mother tomorrow. I can’t imagine
why you didn’t want to join us!

Annie texted me right back like she always did.

How many more days until Jess takes the
pregnancy test?

Seven sleeps. Love you.

Call you tomorrow. And don't listen to anything
your mother says about surrogacy. Kiss my
darling goddaughter for me.

I flipped my phone shut and rubbed my thumb over the rainbow sticker Chloe had stuck on during the flight. She'd already fallen asleep, making her little snuffly sounds, her breathing slow and rhythmic. I momentarily considered squeezing in next to her. It wouldn't be the first time in recent years. But that would mean I was declaring trench warfare, when the truth was I hated sleeping apart from Tom, even during an argument. By the time I got into our room, Tom was already in bed. A lumpy shadow beneath a duvet turned down in expectation of romance, but instead it got silent resentment.

"Tom?" I said, but he didn't answer. I blew my fringe off my face and put my coat over the back of the upholstered desk chair.

The bedroom was the quintessence of French taste: the canopy bed fit for a duchess, held together with layers of salmon-colored silk, the famous apricot sheets without a single crease. I used to go weak at the knees at the sight of this room, but tonight I didn't even pull back the curtains to look at the Place Vendôme. Instead, I had to fight every urge to scream into the nearest goose-down pillow.

I light-footed to the bathroom and closed the door. Running my finger over the neck of the gold swan tap, I remembered how many times Tom had bent me over this sink back when I was "fun." I splashed water on my face and let my mascara run down my cheeks, not bothering to wipe it on the towel. I just looked at the woman staring back at me in the mirror, wondering when she'd become such a shrew. I toggled off the bathroom light and stole a T-shirt out of Tom's suitcase. It was already open on the floor, and I couldn't face unzipping mine.

I took off my knickers and slid inside the cold sheets of our bed before clicking off my bedside light. Then I waited. I waited to see

who would break first. I gave it another ten seconds. Then I slowly tiptoed my fingers over the hill of Tom's back onto his chest until they found his hands. He took them tight and held them against his body, the way I'd hoped he would. I pressed my lips up against his back. We were safe from one another in the darkness now.

"I'm sorry for being a dick in the lift," I said, as he kissed my fingers.

"Thank you for saying that," he said, turning his body to face me, our noses barely an inch apart. "Honor, I really want this week to be about us—me, you, and Chloe. I don't want to keep arguing all the time. It's driving me mad. I miss us so fucking much."

"I do too," I said, pressing the inside of my bottom lip up against his cheekbone.

"That means not talking about the baby." His tone was blunt, and I felt my body go rigid in his arms. "The baby we *might* have, or might *not* have, or the one we don't have—just while we're in Paris. Once we land back in London, I'll talk about it until the cows come home. But not this week, not over Christmas. I just want Chloe to hear us talking about *her* for once. I want her to hear us laugh with each other again." He held my hands tighter now, perhaps sensing my urge to pull away.

"Okay," I said, though my body conveyed otherwise, "I won't talk about it." I was glad the lights were off; had they not been, he would have been able to tell how inconceivable that idea was. He knew my intentions better than anyone. My nights at boarding school had been so desolate, and I couldn't bear the idea of Chloe experiencing even a whisker of the loneliness I'd felt as an only child.

Tom cuddled me a few moments longer, and we found our feet while talking about how wonderful Chloe had been on the flight and how tall she seemed in the lift in comparison with last year. Tom lifted his head off the pillow and found my lips. His hand began traveling up my thigh over my hip bone, following the familiar path to my waist.

“Say it,” he said, his lips never leaving mine. I could feel Tom straining at the lead. “Say our poem, baby.”

“*Do you come from Heaven or rise from the abyss / Beauty? Your—*”

“No, in French,” he said, but I carried on in English, reciting the poem I always did whenever we made up after a fight: *Hymn to Beauty* by Baudelaire. I knew all too well that if I spoke French in the dark, especially that poem—the first words he ever heard me speak on the lawn at Annie’s—it would inevitably lead to sex, and my brain was elsewhere, fixated on what was occurring between our surrogate’s legs and not my own.

The following morning, I was still managing to nourish my obsession from the depths of a pearly-white bath. It seemed there was no tub deep enough, coffee strong enough, or martini cold enough that could distract me from the relentless yearning that a year ago a therapist had promised would eventually fade. In one of the many meetings with my fertility doctor, I’d been advised against not only carrying our next baby but also continuing to try with my own eggs. Such an unexpected turn of events, considering I couldn’t even pinpoint the shag that led to Chloe, and now here I was, down with the IVF lingo and on a wait-list for an experimental implantation treatment in Sweden.

According to my doctor, I had developed too many fibroids, my eggs were of low quality, and “my oven wasn’t hot enough.” After I’d had my ovaries out just under a year ago, a surrogate and an egg donor became our only hope. Lying in the bath, I was so engrossed in my thoughts that I didn’t hear Tom calling me from the bedroom. It wasn’t until he came in and nudged my shoulder that I realized he was standing beside me.

“Babe?” he said again, his voice tentative.

“Yeah?” I said, looking up at him. His features were somewhat perturbed, but I pretended not to notice.

“Chloe’s been calling for you. She wants to show you the card she’s made for Annie and Oliver.”

“Sorry,” I said. I pushed myself out of the now tepid bath. Tom opened one of the thick, peach dressing gowns that was hanging on the back of the door and coaxed me into it. I pulled out my wet hair from the back and found the matching embroidered salmon slippers.

“I’m coming, angel,” I called through the door. Chloe murmured something back, but I didn’t quite catch it. Tom tightened the towel around his waist while I carefully avoided his reflection in the mirror.

“Let’s just say we asked Jess to do a pregnancy test at home,” I said. “If she was pregnant, she’d be showing as positive by now, wouldn’t she? She must be.”

Tom took a sip of his cappuccino and swallowed slowly, before putting the cup down just that little bit too hard on the lip of the sink. Our eyes met in the mirror.

“Baby, we said we weren’t going to talk about this until we were home.”

“*We* didn’t,” I said.

“I’m not going to rise to this, Honor,” he said. His BlackBerry pinged beside him.

“Oh, that’s convenient. Your phone’s flashing. Go on. Start tapping away.”

Tom forced shut the bathroom door. “Honor, you know what—and you aren’t going to like this—but tough shit.” I braced myself for what I feared was going to be a home truth. “If you spent half as much time with our daughter as you do obsessing over wanting another child, you might realize what we have instead of what *you* feel we don’t.”

The goose bumps rose on my neck like a dog’s hackles and my eyes turned watery. I reached for my bottle of Chanel Sycomore and sprayed too much of it just to have something to do with my hands.

“Words land, you know,” I said, my voice shaking. I wiped the one tear that had escaped onto my cheek.

“I *really, really* hope that’s true,” he said. “Because I need you to

listen. This is the last time I'm doing this. I mean it. If this doesn't work with Jess and the egg donor, then I'm not—I'm not doing it again. I will not continue to do this to our family. To Chloe. You've lost sight of everything," he said, pointing his finger at me. "You say you want to be a mother, so be a mother. Be a mother to the child we actually have. Answer her. Answer our daughter when she's calling for you." His arms stiffened towards the door, like a flight attendant indicating emergency exits.

"Go fuck yourself!" I said, my fingers shaking against the soft laundered towel of my dressing gown. My breath had turned short and quick. He'd pressed the bruise. I picked up the shirt I'd worn the day before from the chair by the window. Then I tried to swing open the bathroom door, but it was heavy and unwilling.

Tom didn't follow me like he usually did. I just heard the door click shut. If Chloe hadn't been in the next room, I would've screamed until my throat bled. I stalled a little longer in the bedroom, still fuming but hoping he would change his mind. I could have fought about this topic forever. But instead, I heard his voice barely audible through the door.

"Yeah . . . Merry Christmas to you too, Honor."

I walked into the adjoining sitting room, where Chloe was on the floor. Thankfully, the TV was on loud. She was drawing with a red pencil, sitting with her feet pointed under her bottom.

"Look, Mummy," she said, lifting her picture. I came closer, holding my hands behind my back so she wouldn't see them shaking. She'd drawn the three of us in front of the Ritz, with a bright yellow sun in the corner and a navy-blue sky. I had to hold every muscle tight to keep my eyes from combusting. Never cry in front of your child. They never, ever forget it. My mother never did forgive me for the time I walked in on her hunched over her dressing table weeping into her forearms.

"It's beautiful, Coco. Well done," I said, kissing the peppermint shampoo of her crown.