

heart of the matter

by emily giffin

-Chapter One-

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"Heart of the Matter"

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TESSA: chapter one

Whenever I hear of someone else's tragedy, I do not dwell on the accident or diagnosis, or even the initial shockwaves or aftermath of grief. Instead, I find myself reconstructing those final, ordinary moments. Moments that make up our lives. Moments that were blissfully taken for granted—and that likely would have been forgotten altogether but for what followed. The *before* snapshots.

I can so clearly envision the thirty-four-year-old woman in the shower one Saturday evening, reaching for her favorite apricot body scrub, contemplating what to wear to the party, hopeful that the cute guy from the coffee shop will make an appearance, when she suddenly happens upon the unmistakable lump in her left breast.

Or the devoted, young father, driving his daughter to buy her first-day-of-school Mary Janes, cranking up *Here Comes the Sun* on the radio, reminding her for the umpteenth time that the Beatles are “without a doubt the greatest band of all time,” as the teenaged boy, bleary-eyed from too many late-night Budweisers, runs the red light.

Or the brash high-school receiver, full of promise and pride, out on the sweltering practice field the day before the big football game, winking at his girlfriend from her

usual post at the chain-link fence, just before leaping into the air to make the catch nobody else could have made—and then twisting, falling headfirst on that sickening, fluke angle.

I think about the thin, fragile line separating all of us from misfortune, almost as a way of putting a few coins in my own gratitude meter, of safeguarding against an *after* happening to me. To *us*. Rosie and Frankie, Nick and me. Our foursome—the source of both my greatest joys and most consuming worries.

And so, when my husband’s pager goes off while we are at dinner, I do not allow myself to feel resentment or even disappointment. I tell myself that this is only one meal, one night, even though it is our anniversary and the first proper date Nick and I have had in nearly a month, maybe two. I have nothing to be upset about, not compared to what someone else is enduring at this very instant. This will not be the hour I will have to rewind forever. I am still among the lucky ones.

“Shit. I’m sorry, Tess,” Nick says, silencing his pager with his thumb, then running his hand through his dark, wavy hair. “I’ll be right back.”

I nod my understanding and watch my husband stride with sexy, confident purpose toward the front of the restaurant where he will make the necessary call. I can tell, just by the sight of his straight back and broad shoulders navigating deftly around the tables, that he is steeling himself for the bad news, preparing to fix someone, save someone. It is when he is at his best. It is why I fell in love with him in the first place, seven years and two children ago.

Nick disappears around the corner as I draw a deep breath and take in my surroundings, noticing details of the room for the first time. The celadon abstract painting

above the fireplace. The soft flicker of candlelight. The enthusiastic laughter at the table next to ours as a silver-haired man holds court with what appears to be his wife and four grown children. The richness of the cabernet I am drinking alone.

Minutes later, Nick returns with a grimace and says he's sorry for the second, but certainly not the last, time.

"It's okay," I say, glancing around for our waiter.

"I found him," Nick says. "He's bringing our dinner to-go."

I reach across the table for his hand and gently squeeze it. He squeezes mine back, and as we wait for our filets to arrive in Styrofoam, I consider asking what happened as I almost always do. Instead, I simply say a quick, simple prayer for the people I don't know and then one for my own children, tucked safely into their beds.

I picture Rosie, softly snoring, all twisted in her sheets, wild even in her sleep. Rosie, our precocious, fearless firstborn, four going on fourteen, with her bewitching smile, dark curls that she makes even tighter in her self-portraits, too young to know that as a girl she is supposed to want what she does *not* have, and those pale aquamarine blue eyes, a genetic feat for her brown-eyed parents. She has ruled our home and hearts since virtually the day she was born—in a way that both exhausts me and fills me with admiration. She is exactly like her father—stubborn, passionate, breathtakingly beautiful. A daddy's girl to the core.

And then there's Frankie, our satisfying baby boy with a cuteness and sweetness that exceeds the mere garden-variety-baby cute and sweet, so much so that strangers in the grocery store will stop and remark. He is nearly two, but still loves to cuddle, nestling his smooth round cheek against my neck, fiercely devoted to his mama. *He's not my*

favorite, I swear to Nick in private, when he smiles and accuses me of this parental transgression. I do not have a favorite, unless perhaps it is Nick himself. It is a different kind of love, of course. The love for my children is without condition or end, and I would most certainly save them over Nick, if say, all three were bitten by rattlesnakes on a camping trip and I only had two anti-venom shots in my backpack. And yet, there is nobody I'd rather talk to, be near, look at, than my husband, an unprecedented feeling that overcame me the moment we met.

Our dinner and check arrive moments later, and Nick and I stand and walk out of the restaurant into the star-filled, navy night. It is early October, but feels more like winter than fall—cold even by Boston standards—and I shiver beneath my long cashmere coat as Nick hands the valet our ticket and we get into our car. We leave the city and drive back to Wellesley with little conversation, listening to one of Nick's many jazz CDs.

Thirty minutes later, we are pulling up our long, tree-lined driveway. "How late do you think you'll be?"

"Hard to say," Nick says, putting the car into park and leaning across the front seat to kiss my cheek. I turn my face toward him and our lips softly meet.

"Happy anniversary," he whispers.

"Happy anniversary," I say.

He pulls away, and our eyes lock as he says, "To be continued?"

"Always," I say, forcing a smile and slipping out of the car.

Before I can close the door, Nick cranks up the volume of his music, dramatically punctuating the end of one evening, the start of another. As I let myself in the house,

Vince Guaraldi's *Lullaby of the Leaves* echoes in my head where it remains long after I've paid the babysitter, checked on the kids, changed out of my backless black dress and eaten cold steak at the kitchen counter.

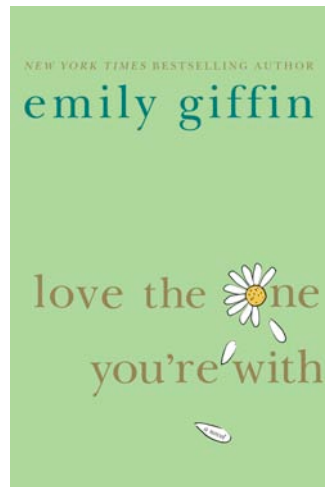
Much later, having turned down Nick's side of the bed and crawled into my own, I am alone in the dark, thinking of the call in the restaurant. I close my eyes, wondering whether we are ever truly blindsided by misfortune. Or, somehow, somewhere, in the form of empathy or worry or a premonition deep within ourselves, do we feel it coming?

I fall asleep, not knowing the answer. Not knowing that this will be the night I will return to, after all.

-end chapter one-

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