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Six Years

Written by Harlan Coben

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HARLAN

COBEN

SIX YEARS



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Chapter 1

I sat in the back pew and watched the only woman I would ever love marry another man.

Natalie wore white, of course, looking extra mock-me-forever gorgeous. There had always been both a fragility and quiet strength to her beauty, and up there, Natalie looked ethereal, almost otherworldly.

She bit down on her lower lip. I flashed back to those lazy mornings when we would make love and then she'd throw on my blue dress shirt and we'd head downstairs. We would sit in the breakfast nook and read the paper and eventually she'd take out her pad and start sketching. As she drew me, she would bite down on her lip just like this.

Two hands reached into my chest, grabbed my brittle heart on either side, and snapped it in two.

Why had I come?

Do you believe in love at first sight? Neither do I. I do, however, believe in major, more-than-just-physical attraction at first sight. I believe that every once in a while—once, maybe twice in a lifetime—you are drawn to someone so deeply, so primordially, so immediately—a stronger-than-magnetic pull. That was how it was with Natalie. Sometimes that is all there is. Sometimes it grows and gathers heat and turns into a glorious inferno that you know is real and meant to last forever.

And sometimes you just get fooled into thinking the first is the second.

I had naively thought that we were forever. I, who had never really believed in commitment and had done all I could to escape its shackles, knew right away—well, within a week anyway—that this was the woman I was going to wake up next to every single day. This was the woman I'd lay my life down to protect. This was the woman—yes, I know how corny this sounds—whom I could do nothing without, who would make even the mundane something poignant.

Gag me with a spoon, right?

A minister with a cleanly shaven head was talking, but the rush of blood in my ears made it impossible to make out his words. I stared at Natalie. I wanted her to be happy. That wasn't just lip service, the lie we often tell ourselves because, in truth, if our lover doesn't want us, then we want her miserable, don't we? But here I really meant it. If I truly believed that Natalie would be happier without me, then I would let her go, no matter how crushing. But I didn't believe that she would be happier, despite what she had said or done. Or maybe that is yet another self-rationalization, another lie, we tell ourselves.

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Natalie did not so much as glance at me, but I could see something tighten around her mouth. She knew that I was in the room. She kept her eyes on her husband-to-be. His name, I had recently found out, was Todd. I hate the name Todd. Todd. They probably called him Toddy or the Todd-Man or the Toddster.

Todd's hair was too long, and he sported that four-day-stubble beard some people found hip and others, like me, found punch-worthy. His eyes smoothly and smugly skimmed the guests before getting snagged on, well, me. They stayed there a second, sizing me up before deciding that I wasn't worth the time.

Why had Natalie gone back to him?

The maid of honor was Natalie's sister, Julie. She stood on the dais with a bouquet in both hands and a lifeless, robotic smile on her lips. We'd never met, but I'd seen pictures and heard them talk on the phone. Julie, too, looked stunned by this development. I tried to meet her eye, but she was working that thousand-yard stare.

I looked back at Natalie's face, and it was as if small explosives detonated in my chest. Just boom, boom, boom. Man, this had been a bad idea. When the best man brought out the rings, my lungs started shutting down. It was hard to breathe.

Enough.

I had come here to see it for myself, I guess. I had learned the hard way that I needed that. My father died of a massive coronary five months ago. He had never had a heart problem before and was by all accounts in good shape. I remembered sitting in that waiting room, being called into the doctor's office, being told the devastating news—and then being asked, both there and at the funeral home, if I wanted to see his body. I passed. I figured that I didn't

want to remember him lying on a gurney or in a casket. I would remember him as he was.

But as time went on, I started having trouble accepting his death. He had been so vibrant, so alive. Two days before his death, we had gone to a New York Rangers hockey game—Dad had season tickets—and the game had gone into overtime and we screamed and cheered and, well, how could he be dead? Part of me started wondering if somehow there had been a mistake made or if it was all a great big con and that my dad was maybe somehow still alive. I know that makes no sense, but desperation can toy with you and if you give desperation any wiggle room, it will find alternative answers.

Part of me was haunted by the fact that I never saw my father's body. I didn't want to make the same mistake here. But, to keep within this lame metaphor, I had now seen the dead body. There was no reason to check the pulse or poke at it or hang around it longer than necessary.

I tried to make my departure as inconspicuous as I could. This is no easy feat when you're six-five and are built, to use Natalie's phrase, "like a lumberjack." I have big hands. Natalie had loved them. She would hold them in her own and trace the lines on my palm. She said they were real hands, a man's hands. She had drawn them too because, she said, they told my story—my blue-collar upbringing, my working my way through Lanford College as a bouncer at a local nightclub, and also, somehow, the fact that I was now the youngest professor in their political science department.

I stumbled out of the small white chapel and into the warm summer air. Summer. Was that all this had been in the end? A summer fling? Instead of two randy kids seeking activity at camp, we were

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two adults seeking solitude on retreat—she to do her art, me to write my poly-sci dissertation—who met and fell hard and now that it was nearing September, well, all good things come to an end. Our whole relationship did have that unreal quality to it, both of us away from our regular lives and all the mundanity that goes along with that. Maybe that was what made it so awesome. Maybe the fact that we only spent time in this reality-free bubble made our relationship better and more intense. Maybe I was full of crap.

From behind the church door I heard cheers, applause. That snapped me out of my stupor. The service was over. Todd and Natalie were now Mr. and Mrs. Stubble Face. They'd be coming down the aisle soon. I wondered whether they'd get rice thrown at them. Todd probably wouldn't like that. It'd mess up his hair and get stuck in the stubble.

Again I didn't need to see more.

I headed behind the white chapel, getting out of sight just as the chapel doors flew open. I stared out at the clearing. Nothing there, just, well, clearing. There were trees in the distance. The cabins were on the other side of the hill. The chapel was part of the artist retreat where Natalie was staying. Mine was down the road at a retreat for writers. Both retreats were old Vermont farms that still grew a bit of the organic.

"Hello, Jake."

I turned toward the familiar voice. There, standing no more than ten yards away from me, was Natalie. I quickly looked toward her left ring finger. As if reading my thoughts, she raised the hand to show me the new wedding band.

"Congratulations," I said. "I'm very happy for you."

She ignored that comment. "I can't believe you're here."

I spread my arms. “I heard there would be great passed hors d’oeuvres. It’s hard to keep me away from those.”

“Funny.”

I shrugged while my heart turned into dust and blew away.

“Everyone said you’d never show,” Natalie said. “But I knew you would.”

“I still love you,” I said.

“I know.”

“And you still love me.”

“I don’t, Jake. See?”

She waved the ring in my face.

“Honey?” Todd and his facial hair came around the corner. He spotted me and frowned. “Who is this?”

But it was clear that he knew.

“Jake Fisher,” I said. “Congratulations on the nuptials.”

“Where have I seen you before?”

I let Natalie handle that one. She put a comforting hand on his shoulder and said, “Jake has been modeling for a lot of us. You probably recognize him from some of our pieces.”

He still frowned. Natalie got in front of him and said, “If you could just give us a second, okay? I’ll be right there.”

Todd glanced over at me. I didn’t move. I didn’t back up. I didn’t look away.

Grudgingly he said, “Okay. But don’t be long.”

He gave me one more hard look and started back around the chapel. Natalie looked over at me. I pointed toward where Todd had vanished.

“He seems fun,” I said.

“Why are you here?”

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“I needed to tell you that I love you,” I said. “I needed to tell you that I always will.”

“It’s over, Jake. You’ll move on. You’ll be fine.”

I said nothing.

“Jake?”

“What?”

She tilted her head a little. She knew what that head tilt did to me. “Promise me you’ll leave us alone.”

I just stood there.

“Promise me you won’t follow us or call or even e-mail.”

The pain in my chest grew. It became something sharp and heavy.

“Promise me, Jake. Promise me you’ll leave us alone.”

Her eyes locked on to mine.

“Okay,” I said. “I promise.”

Without another word, Natalie walked away, back to the front of that chapel toward the man she had just married. I stood there a moment, trying to catch my breath. I tried to get angry, tried to make light of it, tried to shrug it off and tell her it was her loss. I tried all that, and then I even tried to be mature about it, but I still knew that this was all a stall technique, so I wouldn’t have to face the fact that I would be forever brokenhearted.

I stayed there behind the chapel until I figured everyone was gone. Then I came back around. The minister with the cleanly shaven head was outside on the steps. So was Natalie’s sister, Julie. She put a hand on my arm. “Are you okay?”

“I’m super,” I said to her.

The minister smiled at me. “A lovely day for a wedding, don’t you think?”

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I blinked into the sunlight. “I guess it is,” I said, and then I walked away.

I would do as Natalie asked. I would leave her alone. I would think about her every day, but I’d never call or reach out or even look her up online. I would keep my promise.

For six years.

Chapter 2

SIX YEARS LATER

The biggest change in my life, though I couldn't know it at the time, would arrive sometime between 3:29 P.M. and 3:30 P.M.

My freshman class on the politics of moral reasoning had just ended. I was heading out of Bard Hall. The day was campus-ready. The sun shone brightly on this crisp Massachusetts afternoon. There was an Ultimate Frisbee game on the quad. Students lay strewn all over the place, as though scattered by some giant hand. Music blasted. It was as if the dream campus brochure had come to life.

I love days like this, but then again, who doesn't?

"Professor Fisher?"

I turned to the voice. Seven students were sitting in a semicircle in the grass. The girl who spoke was in the middle.

"Would you like to join us?" she asked.

I waved them off with a smile. "Thanks, but I have office hours."

I kept walking. I wouldn't have stayed anyway, though I would have loved to sit with them on such a glorious day—who wouldn't? There were fine lines between teacher and student, and, sorry, uncharitable as this might sound, I didn't want to be *that* teacher, if you know what I mean, the teacher who hangs out a little too much with the student body and attends the occasional frat party and maybe offers up a beer at the football game tailgate. A professor should be supportive and approachable, but a professor should be neither buddy nor parent.

When I got to Clark House, Mrs. Dinsmore greeted me with a familiar scowl. Mrs. Dinsmore, a classic battle-axe, had been the political science department receptionist here since, I believe, the Hoover administration. She was at least two hundred years old but was only as impatient and nasty as someone half that age.

"Good afternoon, sexy," I said to her. "Any messages?"

"On your desk," Mrs. Dinsmore said. Even her voice scowled. "And there's the usual line of coeds outside your door."

"Okay, thanks."

"Looks like a Rockettes audition back there."

"Got it."

"Your predecessor was never this accessible."

"Oh, come now, Mrs. Dinsmore. I visited him here all the time when I was a student."

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“Yeah, but at least your shorts were an appropriate length.”

“And that disappointed you a little, didn’t it?”

Mrs. Dinsmore did her best not to smile at me. “Just get out of my face, will you?”

“Just admit it.”

“You want a kick in the pants? Get out of here.”

I blew her a kiss and took the back entrance so as to avoid the line of students who signed up for Friday office hours. I have two hours of “unscheduled” office time every Friday from 3:00 to 5:00 P.M. It was open time, nine minutes per student, no schedule, no early sign-up. You just show up—first come, first served. We keep strictly on the clock. You have nine minutes. No more, no less, and then one minute to leave and let the next student settle in and have their turn. If you need more time or if I’m your thesis adviser or what have you, Mrs. Dinsmore will schedule you for a longer appointment.

At exactly 3:00 P.M., I let in the first student. She wanted to discuss theories on Locke and Rousseau, two political scientists better known now by their *Lost* TV show reincarnations than their philosophical theories. The second student had no real reason to be here other than to—and I am being blunt here—suck up. Sometimes I wanted to hold up a hand and say, “Bake me some cookies instead,” but I get it. The third student was into grade groveling; that is, she thought that her B+ paper should have been an A-, when in fact it probably should have been a B.

This was how it was. Some came to my office to learn, some came to impress, some came to grovel, some came to chat—that was all okay. I don’t make judgments based on these visits. That would be wrong. I treat every student who walks through those

doors the same because we are here to *teach*, if not political science, maybe a little something about critical thinking or even—gasp!—life. If students came to us fully formed and without insecurities, what would be the point?

“It stays a B plus,” I said when she finished her pitch. “But I bet you’ll be able to get the grade up with the next essay.”

The buzzer on the clock sounded. Yes, as I said, I keep the times in here strict. It was now exactly 3:29. That was how, when I looked back at all that would happen, I knew exactly when it all first began—between 3:29 P.M. and 3:30 P.M.

“Thank you, Professor,” she said, standing to leave. I stood with her.

My office hadn’t been changed one iota since I became department head four years ago, taking over this room from my predecessor and mentor, Professor Malcolm Hume, secretary of state for one administration, chief of staff for another. There was still the wonderful nostalgic essence of academic disarray—antique globes, oversize books, yellowing manuscripts, posters peeling off the wall, framed portraits of men with beards. There was no desk in the room, just a big oak table that could seat twelve, the exact number in my senior thesis class.

There was clutter everywhere. I hadn’t bothered redecorating, not so much because I wanted to honor my mentor as most believed but because, one, I was lazy and really couldn’t be bothered; two, I didn’t really have a personal style or family photographs to put up and didn’t really care for that “the office is a reflection of the man” nonsense or if I did, then this indeed was the man; and three, I always found clutter to be conducive to individual expression. There is something about sterility and organization that in-

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hibits spontaneity in a student. Clutter seems to welcome free expression from my students—the environment is already muddled and messed, they seem to think, so what further harm could my ridiculous ideas do to it?

But mostly it was because I was lazy and couldn't be bothered.

We both stood from the big oak table and shook hands. She held mine a second longer than she had to so I disengaged intentionally fast. No, this doesn't happen all the time. But it does happen. I'm thirty-five now, but when I first started here—the young professor in his twenties—it happened more often. Do you remember that scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* where one student wrote “LOVE YOU” on her eyelids? Something like that happened to me in my first semester. Except the first word wasn't “LOVE” and the second word had been switched from “YOU” to “ME.” I don't flatter myself about it. We professors are in a position of fairly immense power. The men who fall for this or believe that they are somehow worthy of such attention (not to be sexist, but it was almost always men) are usually more insecure and needy than any daddy-issued coed one might happen upon.

As I sat down and waited for the next student to arrive, I glanced at the computer on the right side of the table. The college's home screen was up. The page was typically collegiate, I guess. On the left, there was a slideshow of college life, students of all races, creeds, religions, and genders having a studiously good time, interacting with one another, with professors, extracurricular activities, you get the idea. The banner on the top featured the school's logo and most recognizable buildings, including prestigious Johnson Chapel, a large-scale version of the chapel where I had watched Natalie get married.

On the right part of the screen, there was a college newsfeed and now, as Barry Watkins, the next student on the sign-up sheet, entered the room and said, “Yo, Prof, how’s it hanging?” I spotted an obituary in the feed that made me pause.

“Hey, Barry,” I said, eyes still on the screen. “Take a seat.”

He did so, throwing his feet up on the table. He knew that I didn’t care. Barry came every week. We talked about everything and nothing. His visits were more watered-down therapy than anything in the realm of academia, but again that was perfectly okay with me.

I took a closer look at the monitor. What had made me pause was the stamp-size photograph of the deceased. I didn’t recognize him—not at that distance—but he looked young. In a way, that was not unusual for the obituaries. Many times the college, rather than securing a more recent photograph, would scan in the deceased’s yearbook photograph, but here, even at a quick glance, I could see that this was not the case. The hairstyle wasn’t something from, say, the sixties or seventies. The photograph wasn’t in black-and-white either, something the yearbook had been up until 1989.

Still we are a small college, four hundred or so students per class. Death was not uncommon, but maybe because of the size of the school or my close affiliation as both a student and member of the faculty I always felt somewhat personally involved when someone from here died.

“Yo, Teach?”

“One second, Barry.”

I was now infringing on his clock time. I use a portable scoreboard timer, the kind you see in basketball gyms all over this country, with giant red digital numbers. A friend had given it to me as a gift, assuming because of my size that I must have played hoops. I

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hadn't, but I loved the clock. Since it was set to automatically count down from nine minutes, I could see now that we were on 8:49.

I clicked on the small photograph. When the larger one came up, I managed to hold back the gasp.

The name of the deceased was Todd Sanderson.

I had blocked Todd's last name from my memory—the wedding invite had just said “Todd and Natalie's Nuptials!”—but, man, I knew the face. Gone was the hip stubble. He was clean-shaven here, his hair closer to a buzz cut. I wondered whether that was Natalie's influence—she had always complained that my stubble irritated her skin—and then I wondered why I would be thinking about something so asinine.

“The clock is ticking, Teach.”

“One second, Barry. And don't call me Teach.”

Todd's age was listed as forty-two. That was a little older than I expected. Natalie was thirty-four, just a year younger than me. I had figured that Todd would be closer to our age. According to the obituary, Todd had been an all-league tight end on the football team and a Rhodes Scholar finalist. Impressive. He had graduated summa cum laude from the history department, had founded a charity called Fresh Start, and during his senior year, he had been president of Psi U, my fraternity.

Todd was not only an alumnus of my school but we had both pledged the same fraternity. How had I not known any of that?

There was more, a lot more, but I skipped down to the last line:

Funeral services are Sunday in Palmetto Bluff, South Carolina, near Savannah, Georgia. Mr. Sanderson is survived by his wife and two children.

Two children?

“Professor Fisher?”

There was something funny in Barry’s voice. “Sorry, I was just—”

“No, man, don’t be. You okay though?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“You sure? You look pale, man.” Barry dropped his sneakers to the floor and put his hands on the desk. “Look, I can come back another time.”

“No,” I said.

I turned away from the monitor. It would have to wait. Natalie’s husband had died young. That was sad, yes, tragic even, but it had nothing to do with me. It was not a reason to cancel work or inconvenience my students. It had thrown me for a loop, of course—not only Todd dying but the fact that he had gone to my alma mater. That was a somewhat bizarre coincidence, I guess, but not exactly an earth-shattering revelation.

Maybe Natalie simply liked Lanford men.

“So what’s up?” I asked Barry.

“Do you know Professor Byrner?”

“Sure.”

“He’s a total tool.”

He was, but I wouldn’t say that. “What seems to be the issue?”

I hadn’t seen a cause of death in the obituary. The campus ones often didn’t have one. I would look again later. If it wasn’t in there, maybe I could find a more complete obituary online.

Then again, why would I want to learn more? What difference did it make?

Best to stay away from this.

Either way it would have to wait for office hours to end. I fin-

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ished up with Barry and kept going. I tried to push thoughts of the obituary aside and focus on my remaining students. I was off my game, but the students were oblivious. Students cannot imagine that professors have real lives in the same way they can't imagine their parents having sex. On one level, that was fine. On another, I constantly remind them to look past themselves. Part of the human condition is that we all think that we are uniquely complex while everyone else is somewhat simpler to read. That is not true, of course. We all have our own dreams and hopes and wants and lust and heartaches. We all have our own brand of crazy.

My mind drifted. I watched the clock trudge slowly forward as if I were the most bored student in the most boring class. When five o'clock came I headed back to the computer monitor. I brought up Todd Sanderson's obituary in full.

Nope, no cause of death was given.

Curious. Sometimes there was a hint in the suggested donation area. It will say in lieu of flowers please make a donation to the American Cancer Society or something like that. But nothing was listed. There was also no mention of Todd's occupation, but again, so what?

My office door flew open, and Benedict Edwards, a professor in the humanities department and my closest friend, entered. He didn't bother knocking, but he never had or felt the need to. We often met on Fridays at five o'clock and visited a bar where as a student I worked as a bouncer. Back then it was new and shiny and hip and trendy. Now it was old and broken-down and about as hip and trendy as Betamax.

Benedict was pretty much my physical opposite—tiny, small-boned, and African American. His eyes were magnified by giant

Ant-Man glasses that looked like the safety goggles in the chemistry department. Apollo Creed had to be the inspiration behind his too big mustache and too poufy Afro. He had the slender fingers of a female pianist, feet that a ballerina would envy, and he wouldn't be mistaken for a lumberjack by a blind man.

Despite this—or maybe because of it—Benedict was also a total “playah” and picked up more women than a rapper with a radio hit.

“What’s wrong?” Benedict asked.

I skipped the “Nothing” or “How do you know something’s wrong?” and went straight to it: “Have you ever heard of a guy named Todd Sanderson?”

“Don’t think so. Who is he?”

“An alum. His obituary is online.”

I turned the screen toward him. Benedict adjusted the goggle-glasses. “Don’t recognize him. Why?”

“Remember Natalie?”

A shadow crossed his face. “I haven’t heard you say her name in—”

“Yeah, yeah. Anyway, this is—or was—her husband.”

“The guy she dumped you for?”

“Yes.”

“And now he’s dead.”

“Apparently.”

“So,” Benedict said, arching an eyebrow, “she’s single again.”

“Sensitive.”

“I’m worried. You’re my best wingman. I have the rap the ladies love, sure, but you have the good looks. I don’t want to lose you.”

“Sensitive,” I said again.

“You going to call her?”

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“Who?” I asked.

“Condoleezza Rice. Who do you think I mean? Natalie.”

“Yeah, sure. Say something like ‘Hey, the guy you dumped me for is dead. Want to catch a movie?’”

Benedict was reading the obituary. “Wait.”

“What?”

“Says here she has two kids.”

“So?”

“That makes it more complicated.”

“Will you stop?”

“I mean two kids. She could be fat now.” Benedict looked over at me with his magnified eyes. “So what does Natalie look like now? I mean, two kids. She’s probably chunky, right?”

“How would I know?”

“Uh, the same way everyone would—Google, Facebook, that kinda thing.”

I shook my head. “Haven’t done that.”

“What? Everyone does that. Heck, I do that with all my former loves.”

“And the Internet can handle that kind of traffic?”

Benedict grinned. “I do need my own server.”

“Man, I hope that’s not a euphemism.”

But I saw something sad behind his grin. I remembered one time at a bar when Benedict had gotten particularly wasted, I caught him staring at a well-worn photograph he kept hidden in his wallet. I asked him who it was. “The only girl I’ll ever love,” he told me in a slurry voice. Then Benedict tucked the photograph back behind his credit card and despite hints from me, he has never said another word about it.

He'd had that same sad grin on then.

"I promised Natalie," I said.

"Promised her what?"

"That I'd leave them alone. That I'd never look them up or bother them."

Benedict considered that. "It seems you kept that promise, Jake."

I said nothing. Benedict had lied earlier. He didn't check the Facebook page of old girlfriends or if he did, he didn't do it with much enthusiasm. But once when I burst into his office—like him, I never knocked—I saw him using Facebook. I caught a quick glance and saw that the page he had up belonged to that same woman whose picture he carried in his wallet. Benedict quickly shut the browser down, but I bet that he checked that page a lot. Every day, even. I bet that he looked at every new photograph of the only woman he ever loved. I bet that he looked at her life now, her family maybe, the man who shared her bed, and that he stared at them the same way he stared at the photograph in his wallet. I don't have proof of any of this, just a feeling, but I don't think I'm too far off.

Like I said before, we all have our own brand of crazy.

"What are you trying to say?" I asked him.

"I'm just telling you that that whole 'them' stuff is over now."

"Natalie hasn't been a part of my life in a long time."

"You really believe that?" Benedict asked. "Did she make you promise to forget how you felt too?"

"I thought you were afraid of losing your best wingman."

"You're not that good-looking."

"Cruel bastard."

He rose. "We humanities professors know all."

Benedict left me alone then. I stood and walked over to the win-

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dow. I looked out on the commons. I watched the students walk by and, as I often did when confronted with a life situation, I wondered what I'd advise one of them if they were in my shoes. Suddenly, without warning, it all came rushing in at once—that white chapel, the way she wore her hair, the way she held up her ring finger, all the pain, the want, the emotions, the love, the hurt. My knees buckled. I thought that I had stopped carrying a torch for her. She had crushed me, but I had picked up the pieces, put myself back together, and moved on with my life.

How stupid to have such thoughts now. How selfish. How inappropriate. The woman had just lost her husband, and prick that I am, I was worried about the ramifications for me. Let it go, I told myself. Forget it and her. Move on.

But I couldn't. I was simply not built that way.

I had last seen Natalie at a wedding. Now I would see her at a funeral. Some people would find irony in that—I was not one of them.

I headed back to the computer and booked a flight to Savannah.