

## PRAISE FOR BETH K. VOGT

“Vogt is paving a way for herself in the world of women’s fiction. The Thatcher sisters deal with real issues and, despite their trials, find love and friendship in the midst. The ending of *Moments We Forget* will leave readers delighted.”

RACHEL HAUCK, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

“In *Moments We Forget*, Vogt again proves she’s a master at peeling back the layers while gently navigating the dynamics of faith, family, and sisterhood. This book challenges the tough, the real, and the exquisite journey that is the life we live—shining a spotlight on the hope we cling to when all points don’t line up the way we’d first planned. I was at once encouraged and soon blown away by this book!”

KRISTY CAMBRON, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE LOST CASTLE* AND *THE BUTTERFLY AND THE VIOLIN*

“Delightful to spend time with the Thatcher sisters once again! Jillian shares her vulnerability and growth in completely relatable ways. We feel like part of the family and cheer as Jillian, Johanna, and Payton find their way back to each other.”

KATHERINE REAY, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE AUSTEN ESCAPE* AND *A PORTRAIT OF EMILY PRICE*

“In *Moments We Forget*, Beth Vogt tackles the topics of childlessness, infidelity, and faith, weaving them with sensitivity and grace into a gripping novel that’s impossible to put down. Fans of family dramas won’t want to miss this one!”

CARLA LAUREANO, RITA AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *BRUNCH AT BITTERSWEET CAFÉ*

“With deftness of pen and intuitive sensitivity to such tender issues as family tension, sibling conflict, and infertility, Beth Vogt brings yet another beautiful story of redemption in the midst of pain to her readers. An emotional, captivating continuation of the Thatcher sisters’ story, sure to satisfy readers longing for this sequel. Bravo!”

AMY SORRELLS, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *BEFORE I SAW YOU*  
AND *LEAD ME HOME*

“It’s rare when a second novel in a series surpasses the first, but *Moments We Forget* is just such a book. This continuing story of the Thatcher sisters is rich in emotion as the sisters explore issues of family and faith, find healing for troubled relationships, and forge exciting new ones. I can’t wait for the next novel in the series!”

DEBORAH RANEY, AUTHOR OF THE CHANDLER SISTERS NOVELS AND  
*A VOW TO CHERISH*

“What a delight to catch up with the Thatcher sisters in this second installment of Beth Vogt’s series. I so appreciate the authenticity of the way the Thatcher family is portrayed and I especially enjoyed getting a little more insight into oldest sister, Johanna. Handled with grace and threaded with poignancy, *Moments We Forget* weaves through the many layers of relationships to get to the heart of what it means to be a family.”

MELISSA TAGG, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF THE WALKER FAMILY  
SERIES AND THE ENCHANTED CHRISTMAS COLLECTION

“Beth Vogt is a writer who sees deeply into people and relationships, and that insight translates beautifully into her novels.”

CARA PUTNAM, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *SHADOWED BY GRACE*  
AND *BEYOND JUSTICE*

“*Moments We Forget* is a beautiful exploration of the often-complicated and messy relationships between sisters. Vogt skillfully weaves a tale infused with tender truth-filled moments, gentle grace, and the hope and healing found through faith.”

CATHERINE WEST, AUTHOR OF *WHERE HOPE BEGINS*

“Written with her characteristic depth, Vogt’s *Moments We Forget* explores the sometimes-unpleasant realities of the world, but still manages to leave the reader with beautiful hope. By the end, the characters were friends. I wanted to sit beside them, cry with them, and wrap my arms around them as they wrestled through questions everyone must ask at some point in life. Vogt’s books have always belonged at the top of my must-read list, and *Moments We Forget* is no exception.”

LINDSAY HARREL, AUTHOR OF *THE SECRETS OF PAPER AND INK*

“Beth Vogt writes with honest warmth, with a true understanding of her characters. What excellent weaving of stories. I never want to stop reading her novels!”

HANNAH ALEXANDER, AUTHOR OF THE HALLOWED HALLS SERIES

“With her latest book, *Moments We Forget*, author Beth K. Vogt has put me in a dilemma. The story is so compelling that I want to devour it in one sitting. Yet it’s so incredibly well written I want to savor every word. Vogt is truly a master storyteller and now every book is automatically on the top of my must-read list.”

EDIE MELSON, DIRECTOR OF THE BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS  
CHRISTIAN WRITERS CONFERENCE

“With tenderness and skill, Beth Vogt examines the price of secrets, the weight of tragic loss, and the soul-deep poison of things left unsaid.”

LISA WINGATE, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *BEFORE WE WERE YOURS*, ON *THINGS I NEVER TOLD YOU*

“Once again Vogt’s beautiful writing captures the struggles and hopes of her broken characters, this time with a cast of sisters who find themselves forced to confront their pasts, their fears, and the healing power of forgiveness. Powerful, moving, and redemptive. Everything I hope for in a Beth Vogt novel.”

SUSAN MAY WARREN, *USA TODAY* BESTSELLING, CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR, ON *THINGS I NEVER TOLD YOU*

“Questions, regrets, and memories hang over all our lives. *Things I Never Told You* authentically explores past and present hurts in a way that will take readers deeper into the heart. Beth’s story will give real hope to anyone struggling with fractured relationships.”

CHRIS FABRY, CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *DOGWOOD* AND *THE PROMISE OF JESSE WOODS*



BETH K. VOGT

# Moments We Forget

a  
Thatcher  
Sisters novel



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*“A sister is both your mirror—and your opposite.”*

ELIZABETH FISHEL (1950-) JOURNALIST & AUTHOR

*Moments We Forget is dedicated to all sisters who struggle in their relationships with one another. Who fight to find their place between “me” and “us.” No sister relationship is perfect. And some sister relationships are bound in pain. But even then, there can still be love.*







I HAD HALF AN HOUR, no more than that, to get my life in order so my sisters would never suspect how unprepared I was for this morning.

I kicked the back door shut, dumping the plastic grocery bags onto the kitchen counter, easing the ache in my arms. If Johanna were hosting this morning, she'd have something homemade baking in her oven, the appealing aroma filling her immaculate kitchen.

Well, one thing was for certain—I was not Johanna.

Winston's frantic barks sounded from upstairs. Seconds later, he was scampering around my feet, his sudden appearance meaning I'd forgotten to lock him in his kennel. Again.

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“Bad dog.” A halfhearted reprimand. “You’re not supposed to be down here.”

I pulled items from the plastic bags. *Please don’t let me have forgotten anything during my mad dash through the grocery store.*

Cream for Johanna’s and my coffee—although she was going to have to make do with my Keurig coffeemaker, not French press.

A small box of sugar so Payton could enjoy her coffee with the preferred three heaping spoonfuls per cup.

A premade fruit salad.

Blueberry muffins.

Keurig pods.

Nothing fancy. But at least I wouldn’t look like a complete failure.

I suppose to a casual observer, Johanna, Payton, and I—the three remaining Thatcher sisters—appeared successful. And yet, while we might claim certain professional and romantic achievements, we still struggled to find our way as sisters.

At times Pepper’s words—the ones Payton had shared with Johanna and me several months ago—seemed more of a taunt than an encouragement.

*“Sometimes you just have to forget all the other stuff and remember we’re sisters.”*

Shouldn’t a role you acquired at birth be simple? Something you learned to do, along with walking and talking and navigating adolescence?

But then Pepper’s death at sixteen splintered our already-precarious bonds.

I selected three mugs from a kitchen cupboard. This was no time to try to unravel the complicated dynamics between me, Johanna, and Payton—not when they'd be here any minute. And not with so much riding on this morning.

It's funny how much hope people put into a cup of coffee.

Social media—Facebook and Instagram and Twitter and Pinterest and even millions of people's text messages around the world—overflow daily with memes and GIFs lauding the miracle qualities of coffee.

*Coffee is the gasoline of life.*

*All I need is coffee and mascara.*

*Behind every successful person is a substantial amount of coffee.*

*I drink coffee for your protection.*

*Drink coffee and do good.*

And now . . . now coffee would be the glue that bonded the three of us together.

Coffee and a book, if Payton's latest "we should do this!" idea succeeded.

Despite our determination to try to be better sisters—to overcome the damage to our relationships caused by Pepper's death . . . and secrets . . . and not knowing how to even relax with one another—it was all too easy to succumb to a lifetime of bad habits.

Of course, I knew my given position in the Thatcher sisters, volunteering to have our first Saturday morning book club meeting at my house. There were times I doubted that I'd ever get my "Is everybody happy?" theme song out of my head.

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It didn't matter that I had a full-time job. That I battled unrelenting fatigue. That Geoff and I were starting renovations on our house next week. I laughed and brushed off their multiple "We can do this, Jillian," offers with light-hearted responses of "I'm good. Really. This isn't a problem at all."

And then I'd resorted to a last-minute trip to the grocery store for premade options for this morning's breakfast.

"A girl has to do what a girl has to do" was fast becoming my mantra. Only I was doing less and less and hoping to get by.

Winston scratched at the back door leading from the kitchen to the yard, distracting me from my musings on the power of caffeine mixed with a heavy dose of self-doubt.

I bent down and ruffled his white ears before opening the door. "Sorry to leave you sitting there."

He ran off along the chain-link fence, barking at a squirrel or a bird. No, wait. That was our next-door neighbor, Gianna, out with her toddler.

"Good morning. Sorry about the barking." I stepped outside, snapping my fingers. "Hush, Winston!"

"It doesn't ever bother us." Her daughter knelt, reaching through the fence. "Oh, don't do that, Avery!"

I grabbed Winston's collar, tugging him back beside me. "He won't bite, but he is a nonstop licker."

"We've talked about getting a dog, but right now my hands are full trying to keep up with a two-year-old."

"I can imagine. But she's a cute handful." I checked my watch. Almost nine o'clock. Johanna and Payton would be

here anytime now. "I'm sorry. I need to go. My sisters are coming over this morning."

"How fun. I wish I had a sister." Gianna took Avery's hand, helping her stand and brushing off the knees of her jeans. "And I need to try and tire this one out so she'll take a nap for me later."

"Good luck with that."

She tossed a wave over her shoulder. "See you later. Come on, Avery."

I released Winston. "Gianna—"

"Yes?"

"I did mention Geoff and I are renovating our kitchen, right?"

My neighbor kept a firm grip on her daughter's hand, despite Avery's attempts to squirm loose. "I noticed the huge dumpster in your driveway—a pretty big clue—and you also said you were thinking about it earlier this summer."

"I guess that thing is hard to miss." Winston sniffed around my feet. "I just wanted to warn you there'll be workmen around during the day, but most of the noise will be inside the house. A friend is acting as our project manager, and he knows all the workers."

"Great. Thanks for letting me know."

A knock at the front door as I entered the house signaled the arrival of one sister—most likely Johanna, who was always early.

She greeted me with a quick hug, setting her leather purse and her book on the small oak table Geoff and I kept

by the front door. At least she'd brought her copy of the book we'd chosen. The question was, had she read it?

"Good to see you, Joey. How are you?"

"Tired." Johanna slipped off her leather sandals, looking trim in black capris and a red flowing top with cutout shoulders. "Between my work and Beckett's schedule at the Air Force Academy, life's crazy."

"Still, it must be nice having him in the same state at least."

"He might as well have kept his original assignment in Alabama. The superintendent at the academy keeps him so busy dealing with speeches and briefings and I don't know what else, we barely see each other."

"But you see him more than you did when he lived in another state, right?" And not seeing each other was the norm for Beckett and Johanna.

"I'm not keeping track of hours and minutes."

"One thing I know is you and Beckett can do this. You've managed a long-distance relationship for years, which means you can manage crazy hours with both of you living in the same town. I remember how excited you both were the weekend he drove into the Springs."

"You're right, Jilly. I'm still getting used to this new phase. It was so sudden."

"Why don't you go make a cup of coffee? I apologize that it's from a plastic pod and not your preferred French press. But I do have cream . . ." Had I taken the time to put it in the fridge? Payton pulled up in front of the house as I started to close the door. "I'll wait here for Payton."

“Sounds good.” My oldest sister disappeared in a light cloud of her Coco perfume.

Payton released her long auburn hair from its ponytail as she half ran up the sidewalk. “Hey!”

“No need to run—you’re not late.”

“I lost track of time.” She shook her head, strands falling around her shoulders.

“Well, come on in.” We shared a quick hug. “Do you want coffee or water?”

“Both sound great. I’m dehydrated and undercaffeinated—a bad combination, especially if I want to get along with Johanna this morning.”

“Don’t start.” I resisted the urge to shake my finger at Payton.

“It was a joke.”

In the kitchen, Johanna had arranged the fresh-from-a-plastic-container muffins onto a plate. The premade fruit salad now sat on the counter in a white ceramic bowl.

“Thanks.” I retrieved a serving spoon from the drawer. “I could have done that.”

“I figured I would make myself useful while I waited for my coffee.” She gave Payton a slow once-over. “Did you just come from the gym?”

“Technically, yes, but I was coaching, not working out. I met one of my JV girls for a private lesson. She wanted to work on blocking.” She raised both hands, waving aside her explanation. “Sorry if you’re offended, big sister. I couldn’t shower if I wanted to be here close to on time.”

Johanna hadn’t commented on my casual attire of relaxed

jeans and a navy-blue Broncos T-shirt—a well-loved gift from Dad. But Johanna and Payton would find something to bicker about even if they'd taken a vow of silence. And me? I would always be the designated driver of the emotional vehicle that carried our merry little trio.

“You look fine, Payton. This is a book club, not a formal affair. Grab yourself some coffee and I'll get your water.” I retrieved a glass from the closest cupboard. “I thought I could walk you both through the kitchen—tell you about our renovation plans—before we sit down and talk about the book. Zach was here last night, finalizing everything.”

There was no overlooking how Payton's eyes lit up at the mention of Zach. Maybe someday soon she'd share more about their relationship. For now, she maintained a “just friends” demeanor and kept all details to herself. Of course, even friendship with the man she once blamed for Pepper's death would be considered progress by a lot of people.

“I still don't understand why our family—and Payton in particular—is so chummy with Zach Gaines.”

Payton stiffened at Johanna's comment.

“Zach helped us select these beautiful white cabinets—” I spoke up, hoping if I kept talking, I could divert the brewing tension—“that he'll custom design and install for us. A few will have inset glass. They'll work so well with the counter-tops we picked out. The counters are made from pressed paper, if you can believe that.”

“Pressed paper?” Johanna's brow furrowed as if I'd suggested we were using blue-lined notebook paper for our kitchen counters.



“It’s a new green alternative. We selected a pewter color. Between enlarging the window over the sink and knocking out the wall between the kitchen and the dining room, everything is going to feel so open and light.”

Payton finished chugging her glass of water, ignoring Johanna’s glare. “Zach told me that he also agreed to be the project manager.”

“Geoff asked him about that when we first started discussing renovating the kitchen. What with Geoff taking on some extra projects at work and me being gone at the bank, we figured we needed someone to oversee the renovation. Zach talked with his boss, who agreed to a four-day workweek for him in the office and one day from home.” My explanation was more for Johanna’s benefit than Payton’s, who I’m certain already knew this. “Geoff and I have so much more peace of mind, knowing Zach is going to make certain everything stays on track.”

“What else are you planning?”

Before I spoke, I prepped Payton’s coffee, silently counting off three sugars. “We picked out dark wood floors last weekend. And I finally decided to splurge on a waterfall counter for the island. I also asked Zach to check on replacing the back door with French doors.”

“Those will be expensive.” Johanna found plates and silverware, obviously ready to eat.

“Yes, but my bonus was bigger than we expected, and Geoff had been saving for this before we got married. Besides, we want to do the kitchen right and not have any regrets later.”

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Johanna offered both of us plates. “You’ve been watching too many home makeover shows.”

My big sister was not going to talk me out of my fun—or convince me to be more economical. Geoff and I knew what we were doing. And it wasn’t as if we’d spent a lot of money on a lavish wedding.

“We’re considering this renovation a belated wedding gift to ourselves.” I added cubes of cantaloupe, honeydew, and watermelon to my plate. “We’re both ready to have this curling laminate pulled up. The old, worn cabinets torn out.”

Geoff and I were looking ahead—not back over our shoulders at everything that had overtaken us during the past year after my breast cancer diagnosis and treatment.

“Why don’t we each get something to eat, refresh our coffee if we need to, and go sit in the living room so we can talk about the book?” Winston scratched at the back door again. “I’ll let Winston inside and put him in his kennel.”

Payton selected a muffin, pausing to take the plate that Johanna held out to her. “Oh, don’t do that. He won’t be a bother.”

“Right.” I couldn’t help but laugh. “We all have food. You know he’ll wander around begging.”

“We won’t feed him, will we, Johanna?”

Johanna sniffed. “I’m not the one who sneaks food to that dog.”

“I’ll behave.”

“You’re as bad as Dad when it comes to Winston.”

In a few moments, we were all settled—Johanna and I on

the couch and Payton in Geoff's favorite oversize chair, with Winston sitting at attention at her feet.

Payton made a display of ignoring Winston's whines. "So what did you all think of the first chapter?"

"I don't like the idea of having to read a biography. I feel like I'm back in college."

Payton groaned. "Johanna, you said that about the classics Jillian suggested—and this was the one book we all agreed on. Besides, I'm the one back in college."

"I just think we should have looked at more options."

"We made the decision to read this book." Payton held up her copy. "We all bought it. It's done."

Before I could decide if I was going to jump in and referee this early, my phone pinged with a text message.

"This might be Geoff checking with me while he's finishing up at the gym. He probably wants to see if we need anything at the store." I angled the phone where it sat on the coffee table, ready to silence it. But instead of Geoff's familiar face, Mom's name appeared.

**How are you feeling today? You've looked so tired lately that I was worried, but then Johanna explained that it's a common side effect of the medication you're on.**

*What?*

I gripped my phone, rereading the message, ignoring the fact that Johanna and Payton were both watching me. "Johanna, you're talking to Mom about my medication?"

"What do you mean?" Johanna sipped her coffee, eyeing me over the rim of her cup.

Before I could answer, there was another ping.

**And I can understand if you're also upset that you can't get pregnant while you're on Tamoxifen.**

*No.* I pressed my lips together, struggling to think of what to say—how to respond to Mom's text. To what Johanna had done.

If the first text was bothersome, the second one was as if Johanna had invited herself and all of the family—Payton, our parents—to my various doctors' appointments. She might as well have included Beckett and Zach Gaines in the group, too.

"You told Mom that I can't get pregnant?"

Johanna's facial expression didn't change as she took another sip of her not-French-press coffee before replying. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about these two texts from Mom." I held up my phone. "She says you explained how my medication is making me tired. And told her that I can't get pregnant while I'm on Tamoxifen."

"Oh, that. We were talking . . . I can't remember when. And she said she was worried about you." Johanna nibbled on a cube of watermelon. "I took the time to explain things to her so she would understand what was going on."

"Why would you do that?"

"Because she was worried about you." Johanna spoke slowly, as if I needed her to enunciate so I would be able to understand. "I just told her things everybody knows. Fatigue is a common side effect of that medication—"

"Everybody knows?" My voice was getting louder, but I didn't seem to have any control over it. "Does everybody

know I can't get pregnant? Did you post it on a billboard along I-25?"

"Now you're being ridiculous, Jill." My sister dismissed my questions with a shake of her head. "People know you can't get pregnant while you're on Tamoxifen."

"You know, Johanna." Payton spoke up. "*You* know."

"Of course I know. I'm a pharmacist."

"That's exactly my point." Payton was in full-on offensive mode now. "You had no right to talk to Mom. Will you just admit you invaded Jillian's privacy?"

It was as if I could see my words, Johanna's words, and now Payton's words swirling around me like a verbal tornado, the strength of it already threatening to pull me apart. Johanna leaned back. Payton leaned forward. Both of them ignorant of the increasing danger.

"I shouldn't have said anything." I tossed the statement like a white flag. "Can we just talk about the book?"

Payton twisted to look at me. "Are you kidding me? Of course you had to say something. Johanna never should have talked to Mom without asking you if it was okay first."

"You're both overreacting." With a wave of her hand, Johanna dismissed both Payton and me. "Mom asked a few questions. I answered them."

"You, of all people, know about HIPAA and patient privacy, Johanna."

Johanna gritted her teeth. "We're family, Payton."

"Family takes care of each other. Family respects each other. You never have our backs."

"It's nice to know how you really feel."

“It is how I feel. It’s how Jillian feels, too.”

And now I was being dragged into Johanna and Payton’s fight.

“Don’t speak for me, Payton.”

Payton’s eyes widened. Then she crossed her arms. “Fine. Speak for yourself.”

“I would, if I thought anyone was listening.”

At last I had my sisters’ attention.

Being with Johanna and Payton was like competing with athletes when you knew they played dirty—and wanted to win at any cost.

Silence.

No one was saying anything. And none of us had been listening to each other, either.

“Did you have something to say, Jillian?” Payton’s voice was quieter, but there was an edge to it, an unspoken challenge.

No matter what I said, one of my sisters would not be satisfied.

Better to focus on the original reason we were together.

“What I wanted to do today was have coffee and talk about a book.” I glanced at my phone again. Set it aside. Maybe I could let Johanna know how I felt about all this . . . just say it and be done with it. “Not find out Johanna had talked to Mom about my private life.”

“I don’t understand why you’re making such a big deal about this, Jillian. You would have told Mom eventually.”

“Maybe. Okay, yes, I probably would have talked to Mom—but that’s the whole point.” I focused on Johanna,

hoping she would understand. “I would have told her. Not you. Me.”

How did Payton and Johanna spend so much of their lives arguing with one another? Listening to them disagreeing, pushing and pulling for the chance to occupy the right position, always exhausted me. The rare occasion I stood up to Johanna wore me out within minutes. And now, with everything else going on, I might as well be trying to stand up for myself while running on an out-of-control treadmill.

“I don’t understand why you can’t see I was only trying to help. Mom was worried and I gave her the information she needed so she would be calmer.”

“It wasn’t your place—” Payton stepped back into the conversation.

Johanna immediately turned on her. “I was talking to Jill—”

Confronting Johanna had been a bad idea. I was the peacemaker, not the one who challenged her. That was Payton’s role.

“To get through this first book club meeting, are we going to need to pretend we’re back in elementary school and read our books in silence?”

My attempt at humor failed. Whatever fragile truce we’d declared the past few months seemed to rip apart.

“I think—” Johanna stood—“I’ll just call it for today.”

I scrambled to my feet, causing Winston to jump up from where he was resting in front of the fireplace. “Johanna, don’t leave.”

“Obviously my attempts to help Mom are being

misinterpreted. And I didn't come here to be attacked or to join a . . . a reading circle."

And with that, Johanna collected her book and her purse and stalked toward the front door. Winston scampered around her feet, impeding her getaway.

I covered my face with my hands, the slam of the door echoing in my head. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"Don't be silly." Payton sounded as if she wanted to laugh. "Of course you should have."

"But now Johanna's upset . . ."

"She wants you to think she's upset. She's made a scene and walked out, and she hopes you'll call her later and apologize. That way she doesn't have to say she's sorry."

"What?" I peered at Payton over my hands.

"Think about it. Has it ever occurred to you that Johanna likes to be upset? That she uses it to keep us in our place?" Payton offered me a smile. "Whatever you do, don't call and apologize. You didn't do anything wrong."

"But I—"

"You didn't do anything wrong." Payton slipped Winston a bite of blueberry muffin. "And I bet you that Johanna will still be here tomorrow with everyone else to prep for the renovation."



Colorado Springs knew how to do Septembers.

The trees in our neighborhood were hinting at autumn with leaves changing to brilliant yellows and oranges and reds, even as the temperatures remained warm, but not in



the “why is it still so hot?” range. September was like an anticipated visit with a pleasant friend who stopped by once a year and never overstayed their welcome.

I looped my arm through Geoff’s, my head just brushing his shoulder. His verbal command released Winston from a heel to walk in front of us.

“He’s doing well at obeying you when we’re out on a walk.”

“Better. He’s doing better.” His eyes shielded by both his glasses and the brim of the baseball cap that tamed his unruly brown hair, Geoff tugged on the leash to remind Winston that he wasn’t his own boss. “If he wasn’t on this leash, he’d take off running for no reason at all.”

“It’s such a nice afternoon. Although I do look forward to seeing snow on the Peak again.”

“Well, it’s shown up in August before, so it’s not impossible to happen anytime now.” Geoff adjusted his long-legged stride to my slower pace. He probably wasn’t even aware he’d developed the habit during the past months. “I just realized you never told me how the book club went this morning.”

“We may have had our first and last Saturday book club . . .”

“Oh, come on. What could go so wrong?”

“Well, Johanna walked out in a huff.”

Geoff chuckled. “What did she and Payton argue about this time?”

“They didn’t argue . . . well, they did. But it started off with me and Johanna arguing. . . .”

“You . . . argued with Johanna.” Now Geoff had the nerve

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to laugh—his familiar full-on head-thrown-back burst of laughter that caused Winston to glance back at him. “I’m supposed to believe that?”

I pulled away from Geoff. “I know, right? What would you say if I told you I snapped at Payton, too?”

“I would most definitely not believe that.”

“It was a mess.”

“I can see why you said it may be your first and last Saturday book club. The three of you couldn’t even discuss a book together?”

“It had nothing to do with the book.”

“What was the problem then?”

“I found out Johanna talked to Mom—without my permission—about my medication and the side effects. About the fact I can’t get pregnant until I’m off the Tamoxifen.”

“Okay.”

Geoff might as well have said, “*Is that all?*”

“Why aren’t you upset about that?”

He shifted the brim of his baseball cap. “I didn’t realize you expected me to get upset—”

“Geoff, that’s personal information!”

“Johanna told your mom, not a stranger.”

“Why are you taking her side?”

“Whoa.” Geoff stopped on the sidewalk, turning to face me and bringing Winston to an abrupt halt. “No taking sides here—and if I was, I would be on your side. Just processing things out loud, which I will stop doing immediately because it’s not helping either of us.”

I leaned closer to him, resting my head against his chest.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize how much it still bothered me. It didn’t help that I was tired and nervous about not having done enough to make things nice for the book club.”

“I’m sure Johanna and Payton were happy with what you had—”

“I told them about the kitchen renovation, and Johanna questioned all our choices. How much money we’re spending. And then we’d barely started talking about the book—and Jo was complaining *again*—and Mom texted, which is how I found out she knew about my not being able to get pregnant.”

Geoff slipped his arm around my waist, easing me forward, and started walking again.

“Maybe we should have said something up front to everyone, back when we decided to freeze my eggs. But it’s a little late to rethink our decision to keep that private, right?”

Geoff didn’t respond—keeping quiet like he often did when we talked about my cancer and especially when we talked about the reality that I might struggle getting pregnant. Always so careful not to upset me.

A few more moments of silence and then, “We’ll figure it out together—like we always do.”

“Was I wrong?”

“Wrong?”

“To get upset about Johanna telling Mom?”

Geoff stopped again. His eyes warmed as he leaned closer, his kiss gentle. “You know I will always be on your side, Jill.”

I closed my eyes, allowing the moment to lengthen.

MOMENTS WE FORGET

Forgetting we were on a walk, until Geoff jerked away as Winston pulled on the leash.

“Sorry.” He gave me a slow wink.

“It’s okay.” I faced forward as Geoff allowed Winston to tug him along. “So tell me, what’s going on with you?”

“Work got interesting yesterday.”

“When is cybersecurity not interesting?”

“True. But yesterday my boss asked me to consider speaking at a conference on ethics in cybersecurity.”

“Ethics?”

“Yes.” Geoff ducked under a low-hanging tree branch, filled with leaves turning a bright orange. “There are different ways to approach the issue, so I need to figure out if I want to do it and, if so, what they’re looking for.”

“*They* being?”

“My bosses. The conference is in Denver early next spring.”

“This sounds like a great opportunity.”

“It’d be different. I’m used to doing my work, coming home—maybe *attending* a conference. I’ve never even thought about speaking at one.”

“You’d be great at it.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“How soon do you have to let them know?”

“They mentioned it yesterday. I said we’d talk again next week.”

“I know you need to think about it some more, but my vote is yes.”

He paused long enough to press a quick kiss on the top of my head. “And thanks for that.”

This was a chance to support my husband, an opportunity to turn the spotlight off me, my cancer, and put it onto Geoff. Onto something positive. This speaking opportunity was an indicator that things were better. Not perfect, but better.

We were passing Gianna's house—almost home. “I reminded Gianna about the kitchen renovation when we were talking earlier today.”

“Why?”

“Because workers will be around. Cars and trucks parked in front of our house—possibly in front of her house. I just thought it was the neighborly thing to do.”

“Right. I hadn't thought about how the renovation might affect the neighbors—I mean, beyond the fact that they have to look at that dumpster.”

“Avery, her little girl, loves Winston, but Gianna says she has her hands full with a two-year-old.”

“I can only imagine.”

“What would you want?”

“What?”

“Would you want to start our family with a son or daughter?”

Geoff adjusted his glasses. “I hadn't really thought about it.”

“No preference for a boy or girl?”

“No . . . no preference.” Geoff stopped by the gate leading into the backyard and handed me Winston's leash. “Here, take him on inside. I'll go get the mail.”

“We can get the mail . . .”

He jogged away with a quick wave. “I'll be waiting at the front door.”

“Okay. Fine.”

That was a bit abrupt. But it gave me the chance to appreciate my husband as he jogged around to the front of the house . . . a moment to daydream about the day we’d go for a walk with our son or daughter. Of course, I’d learned not to think too far ahead, but it was good to allow myself to dream again, if only for a few moments.



The Thatcher sisters were together two days in a row—a rare event now that we were all adults. And a risky one, given the interpersonal fiasco during our first-ever book club meeting.

Also risky considering how I had listened to Payton’s recommendation and hadn’t called and apologized to Johanna.

Hadn’t made things all better.

Of course, when Geoff and I talked more Saturday night, he’d agreed with Payton, telling me not to call Johanna—and not to worry so much. So it was two against one opposing me about contacting my older sister. Instead, to resist temptation, Geoff and I had watched a movie, and then I’d gone to bed early and slept late.

It wasn’t all an escape—sleep was survival nowadays.

Now my house seemed to overflow with people moving between the main floor, the upstairs, and the basement. The cupboards in the soon-to-be-renovated kitchen stood open, half-empty. Mom faced the fridge, either setting the contents onto what little counter space we had, adding them to a pot of soup simmering on the stove, or throwing them into a big black trash bag. Payton and Zach, who’d come later

than everyone else because they'd probably attended church, wrapped and stacked plates and bowls in a large blue plastic bin. They didn't mention where they'd been and no one asked because Thatchers didn't "do" God—but Payton seemed to be curious, thanks to Zach's faith. Johanna staked out her own corner and analyzed my spice rack, tossing outdated square tins and glass bottles into the trash.

"Where's Winston? Who let him out of his kennel? Winston?" I stood at the bottom of the stairs that led up to our bedrooms. "Did someone put him in the backyard?"

"Yes. Dad has him outside." Mom leaned around the fridge door. "If you're not careful, he's going to steal that dog one day."

With my mischievous dog found, all I had to remember was what I'd been doing before I realized Winston wasn't in his kennel.

"Did you find those other plastic containers?" Payton closed an empty cupboard door.

"Right! I left them upstairs."

"I'll get them." Geoff gave me a quick kiss in passing. Zach offered to carry down more storage bins and followed behind him.

"I thought I'd done more to get ready for demo day." I pressed both hands to my face. "But what with Geoff and I both working . . ."

"We'll get it done." Payton came and stood next to me, offering me a side hug. "This is a great time to clean house, no pun intended. Mom will wipe down the fridge for whoever is picking it up later. Zach promised to make a run

to the thrift store with the giveaway box. Johanna's going crazy checking dates on all your spices and canned goods, so you'll be all set when you're restocking your brand-new kitchen."

We all observed the invisible boundary lines, first set up by Johanna dragging the trash can over to the counter and turning her back on everyone. Enough distance so there was no discernible friction—and no real conversation, either.

But working together was better than arguing.

"Jill, the fridge is empty and the veggie soup is simmering. Your dad wants to take Winston for a walk." As I moved away from the stairs, Mom nodded to where Dad now waited by the front door, Winston prancing around his feet on the end of his leash. "Is it okay if I go with them?"

"Go. Relax. Tackling the fridge was a huge job."

"When we get back, we'll run to the store and get bread to have with the soup."

"You don't have to do that."

"Soup is always better with bread. I'll grab something for dessert, too."

And it would make Mom happy to feed everyone today and to know Geoff and I would have leftovers tomorrow.

Geoff stopped beside me. "All the storage containers go in the basement until after the renovation, right?"

"Yes. We just need to make sure they're labeled."

Johanna spoke up from her corner of the kitchen, still facing the spice rack. "Dishes, glassware, and utensils are labeled with blue duct tape. Food items are labeled with yellow duct tape. Pots and pans—silver. Other cookware items—white."



“Okay.” I guessed that rapid-fire announcement counted as talking to me. Sort of.

“You mentioned you were using a small fridge during the reno, so I made up a box of items for you and Geoff.” She still hadn’t looked at me. “Keurig, paper plates, bowls, cups, napkins, plasticware.”

I tried to keep up with all she’d said. Colors. The items she’d put in the box. Where had she said she’d put it?

“Did you tell Geoff?”

“No.” Johanna tossed a quick glance over her shoulder. “Do you want me to?”

“No. It’s fine. I just wondered.”

I would act like I was following along. It was what I did more and more these days—struggle to follow along. Pretend.

Johanna tilted her head, watching me as if she detected my confusion. I needed to choose to ignore one or the other—the confusion all around me or the confusion swirling inside me. And I needed to remember it was okay to forget things every once in a while. Everybody did that.

“Where’s the number of the guy who’s coming to pick up the fridge?”

Geoff. Back with another question.

“Didn’t I give it to you when we were talking last night?”

“No. You said you’d give it to me today. I want to call him and confirm when he’s coming over.”

“Oh. Right.” I scrambled to separate today from the details of yesterday and something that happened several weeks ago. “We posted the fridge on craigslist, right?”

Geoff had grabbed a bottle of water off the counter and

gulped half of it down while waiting for me to answer. “We were going to. But then you said that one of Harper’s neighbors bought it to use in his garage.”

“Right. Right.”

Now if only Geoff would keep feeding me clues—bits of information that would help me remember where I’d left that phone number.

“I think his name was . . . Rick . . . or maybe Ron.”

“Do you want to call Harper and ask her?”

That would be easier. But I had written the information down. It wasn’t like I could call my best friend every time I forgot something. “Let me find the number. I know I have it.”

Ten minutes later, after searching the messages on my Facebook page, my texts, and my voice mails, as well as a pile of papers on my bedroom dresser, I found the information Geoff needed. It was like playing a virtual game of Memory with my brain, flipping over different things to find the matching details and put together the question and answer I needed. *No . . . no . . . no . . . yes!* And behind me, I left a pile of papers strewn across our bed, which I’d have to deal with later.

What would be the next question that would cause me more mental muddle?

Dinner was a welcome respite from a day of nonstop activity. And we didn’t use any of the paper products Johanna had brought, thanks to Mom picking some up at the store, along with the bread, butter, a half gallon of ice cream, and a tiny container of vegan Häagen-Dazs for Payton.

A lull in the conversation as we all sat around the dining room table seemed like the appropriate time to thank everyone for their help.

“I hope you all know how much Geoff and I appreciate everything you’ve done to help us get ready for tomorrow.” I was careful to scan the table, making eye contact with no one specific for longer than half a second, if that.

“Beckett’s sorry he got called into work.” Johanna still didn’t quite look at me when she spoke, but at least it seemed that comment wasn’t meant for the group at large.

“We understand work trumps packing up our kitchen.”

Johanna offered me a glimpse of a smile. “Thanks.”

“I’ll check with the guys one last time.” Zach spoke to Geoff. “Make sure they’ll be here bright and early.”

“I hope not too early. I know you’re not sleeping well, Jillian. . . .” Mom’s voice trailed off as she traded a look with my older sister. “I mean, Johanna mentioned . . .”

And now glances were exchanged between Mom and Johanna. Payton and me. Mom and me. An awkward game of visual avoidance.

Somebody had to say something.

*Fine.*

“I know you and Johanna have talked about my . . . my health, Mom. But I . . . I would prefer you didn’t.”

Now not only was I taking Payton’s advice and not apologizing to Johanna, but I was correcting her and Mom. At the same time. In front of everyone.

What little soup I’d eaten threatened to rise back up my throat. I tried to swallow, massaging my collarbone.

“I wasn’t trying to talk about you behind your back.” Mom’s voice wavered.

“I understand that.” Johanna’s heated stare seemed to scorch my face. “But Johanna shouldn’t have discussed the side effects of my medication and . . . and the fact that I can’t get pregnant while I’m on Tamoxifen without talking to me about it first.”

I could almost hear Payton cheering me on from the sidelines, adding an invisible cartwheel just for fun.

“But why didn’t you tell me?”

Mom’s question, weighted down with the unspoken words “*after all, I’m your mother,*” silenced me for a moment . . . and then backed me into a corner.

“I’m sorry, Mom.” The words whooshed out of me like helium from a deflating balloon. “Maybe I should have talked to you sooner. . . . If I had, I could have avoided all this.”

And with that simple apology, all was as it should be in the Thatcher family again. I’d assumed my expected place, which so often included an apology of some sort. And Johanna and Payton were once again at odds—with me in the middle.

“Oh, Jill, I understand.” Mom’s smile encompassed my mistake with instantaneous forgiveness. “You were trying to do what you thought was best.”

And I’d made a mistake.

Now that I’d admitted it, everything was better—the world was right when I was wrong.

It looked as if Payton was going to say something, but Zach gave a quick, almost-imperceptible shake of his head. She pursed her lips and exhaled . . . and said nothing.

I waited for Johanna to step in. Maybe follow my lead with her own apology.

“I’m sorry this was even a topic of discussion again.” She stood, gathering her bowl and napkin. “I explained yesterday that all I was doing was answering Mom’s questions—not attempting to invade anyone’s privacy.”

Not quite the apology I’d hoped for.

“Johanna, don’t try to make it sound like what you did was right.” Payton jumped past Zach’s restraint.

“We’re family. And like it or not, we are all affected by the fact that you had breast cancer, Jillian. I, for one, would rather talk about things. Not hide things.”

Oh, there were so many things our family didn’t talk about.

How Pepper’s death had affected Payton. How it had affected all of us. How Johanna had read Payton’s journal and that led to the decision to send Payton away for medical help when she was sixteen . . . We chose silence over words again and again.

My sister’s words slammed against me, scattering what was left of any defense I’d tried to muster. I wasn’t hiding when I decided not to discuss every little medical detail with my family . . . I was trying to deal with my life. One day, one reality, at a time.

If anything, I should have started and finished with the apology. I knew the routine and shouldn’t have deviated from it. What good had it done?

My family was horrible at respecting boundaries. And apparently the temporary cease-fire between the Thatcher sisters was at an end.



# 2

I COULD FIX THIS.

Given a moment—one single, uninterrupted moment—I could fix this.

First I needed to figure out what was wrong. Why my boss was standing in my office asking, “Where were you?” as if he were my father and I were some delinquent fifteen-year-old daughter sneaking into the house after curfew.

“Jillian, why didn’t you answer my phone calls? My texts?”

“I was at lunch—” I searched my purse—“and I didn’t get any calls or texts.”

I ransacked the depths of my canvas tote bag. ChapStick. A metal tin of peppermint Altoids. An almost-empty package

of tissues. My car keys. Two tubes of lipstick. My wallet. Half a movie ticket. An endless assortment of crumpled receipts. One of Winston's chew toys.

Oh, that would impress my boss.

Where had I left my phone?

Harper, my ever-reliable friend, slipped around me, deposited the bag containing my leftover lunch on my cluttered desk, and began opening and closing various drawers, finally producing my cell phone. "Here it is."

Mr. Hampton remained facing me.

"I'm so sorry. I left it . . ." The words stalled in my throat. No sense in stating the obvious. "What did you need me to do?"

"Where's the closing package for the Spencers? Everyone's waiting at Ascent Title—they were supposed to close on their new house forty-five minutes ago."

I stepped forward even as heat coursed through my body. "I e-mailed that to the title company right before I left—"

"They never received it. They sent you several e-mails. Called your office. Your cell. And now they're calling me."

As if on cue, both my cell and office phones rang, the sound traveling up my spine and lodging in the base of my brain. "I—I'll handle this."

"Do that. Please." My boss pivoted like a soldier on guard duty and left without another word.

"What can I do?" The shrill rings of competing phones almost drowned out Harper's question.

"Nothing." I took my cell and muted it as I eased into the chair behind my desk. "This is my problem."



“Are you sure—?”

“Harper!” I stopped. Modulated my voice down from panic mode. “Just let me do this, please.”

“Sorry. Tell me if you need anything.”

As Harper disappeared with an encouraging thumbs-up and a smile lighting her brown eyes, I answered my phone. “Jillian Hennessey. How can I help you?”

“Jillian, where’s the blasted paperwork for the Spencer closing?” The familiar voice of one of the loan officers over at Ascent Title seared my ear. I scrambled to remember his name. Joe? Joseph? Jonas?

Jonah.

“I e-mailed it to you an hour ago, Jonah.” I powered up my computer.

“Never got it.”

“That’s impossible.” I wouldn’t deny being forgetful, but I knew I’d sent that paperwork. I could even have Harper vouch for me—if I hadn’t just banished her from my office—because I’d asked her to wait while I finished up. “Did you check your spam folder?”

“I’ve checked everyone’s in-box and everyone’s spam folder. It’s not in this office.” Jonah almost spat the words at me. “I’ve got two angry parents in my conference room. Their three kids are hyped up on soda and cookies and have used all of my computer paper to color on. My receptionist had to take their dog—their very large German shepherd—for a walk to get it out of our storage room! Did I mention my receptionist is allergic to dogs?”

As Jonah talked, I scrolled through the e-mails in my Sent

folder. And there! There was the Ascent Title e-mail with the attached closing package. I switched to my in-box . . . only to find the e-mail returned as undeliverable.

I'd sent the package to an old, outdated e-mail address.

A groan welled up from deep within me and escaped through the phone.

"What? What did you do?"

"I was right . . . and I was wrong." Even as my brain wanted to shut down, as my throat tightened, I knew I had to be professional and own my mistake. And then fix it. "I accidentally clicked on the wrong e-mail address. Then I left for an early lunch and forgot my cell phone. Which is why I didn't respond sooner."

Within seconds, I'd corrected my error and resent the information, but only after double-checking the e-mail address. "The package is on its way to you. I'm so sorry, Jonah. Really, really sorry."

"I don't have time for apologies, Jillian. But you owe me." With a click, the line went dead.

I dropped the phone onto my desk, collapsing with my forehead pressed against my crossed arms. How stupid could I be? Not that I'd be asking that question out loud to give anyone the chance to volunteer an answer.

Too many mistakes. Too many things left undone at the end of the day that were then waiting for me when I came to work each morning. Too many days that started off with me determined to do better, to accomplish everything I needed to do, to catch up . . . and by midday, fatigue overtook my

best intentions, confusion befuddled my brain, and anxiety strangled my confidence.

An hour later, Harper tiptoed into my office. Her exaggerated wide-eyed glance left and right, tossing her black hair against her shoulders, was almost enough to make me laugh out loud. Almost. “All clear?”

“Yes. Crisis dealt with.” I leaned forward, resting my head in my palms. “I assume Mr. Hampton is in his office, letting me handle anything else that comes up.”

“What happened?” Harper settled into one of the blue cloth chairs in front of my desk.

“Before that, I need to say I’m sorry for snapping at you earlier.”

“Forget it. You were stressed.” Harper waved away my apology. “Now tell me.”

“You heard what happened. The closing package went missing—”

“How?”

“You saw me send it before we left, but I somehow clicked on the wrong e-mail address.”

“Everyone’s done that.”

I ran my fingers through my short hair. “Yes, everyone does that. But I used to be so punctual and now . . . now I’m not. Everything . . . everything takes longer. Getting ready for work. Doing work. I don’t remember things like I used to . . .”

“You need to give yourself a little time. We just passed the one-year anniversary of your diagnosis, Jillian. You’re barely

past your treatment. What happened earlier was an honest mistake.”

“It was me—making another mistake.” I jabbed my index finger into my solar plexus. “I come in late. I leave early.” With every word I said, I added to my ever-growing list of faults. “And this week has been even worse, what with the kitchen renovation being delayed—not that it’s my fault.”

“Wait—what? The workers never showed up?”

“I’ve been so busy, I haven’t had time to think about it. They’re finally coming tomorrow—on a Saturday. They’ve promised Zach that they’re finished with the other house project and that they’ll start demoing our kitchen tomorrow.”

“You’re only five days behind. It could get—”

“Don’t say it, Harper.” I wanted to plug my ears with my fingers like a little girl but shook my head instead. “I’ve watched plenty of home renovation TV shows. I made the mistake of doing a search online of kitchen renovation horror stories. I know it could get worse. Just don’t say it, okay?”

The faint spicy scent of roasted chicken and grilled peppers and onions tickled my nose. Why did I smell fajitas? Wait—there, on the corner of my desk, sat my abandoned white-paper sack of lunch leftovers. Perfect. With one swift move, I tossed them into the wastebasket beside my feet.

“What are you doing? I thought you were taking those home for dinner tonight.”

“I never put them in the fridge.”

“They’re fine, Jill. And you hardly ate anything at lunch.”

“No, thank you. My appetite is off.”

A shadow filled the doorway of my office as Mr. Hampton

appeared again, his glance skimming past Harper to me. “Jillian, could we talk in my office?”

I half rose, wiping my palms against the material of my linen pants. “Now, sir?”

“I don’t want to interrupt.” His glance ricocheted between Harper and me. “Fifteen minutes is fine.”

As he disappeared, I collapsed into my chair, causing it to roll backward. “Well, that’s just perfect.”

“What?”

“He probably thinks we were sitting here wasting time talking about the latest story on the British royals.”

“I seriously doubt the man even knows William and Kate, much less Harry and Meghan, exist. And I work here, too. We could have been talking business.”

I repositioned my chair. “What am I going to do, Harper?”

“Do? You’re going to go talk to Hampton. It’ll be fine.”

“But he came by and we were just sitting here . . .”

“Exactly.” Harper stood, motioning me to my feet. “We were talking, not playing cards or surfing the Internet, looking at clothes or vacation spots. Stop imagining the worst.”

Harper ushered me out of my office with a pat on the back and one of her trademark positive thoughts. “Mark Twain said this—‘I’ve had a lot of worries in my life, most of which never happened.’”

Despite her encouragement, today was almost as bad as the day I’d gotten the biopsy results. When I knew I had breast cancer but didn’t know how bad it was.

No. Nothing . . . *nothing* would ever be as awful as that day. Cancer had snuck up on me the night of my engagement

party as soundlessly as my footsteps along the carpeted hallway between the bank's offices.

Cancer had ravaged my health. Undermined my future. I'd almost allowed it to destroy my relationship with Geoff, except he'd ignored my "You can't love me" protests and proved me wrong.

Now was not the time to remember all of this. I needed to be calm. Unemotional. Not to assume anything and overreact.

Mr. Hampton welcomed me into his office with a nod, indicating I should sit in one of the faux leather chairs positioned side by side in front of his desk. He looked as neat and put together at four o'clock as he had when he'd arrived at seven thirty—his customary start of the day. Dark suit. Light-colored dress shirt. Patterned tie. Shaved head. And the menthol aroma of some sort of aftershave lingered in the room.

An abstract print in blue, yellow, and orange hung on the wall behind his desk, and a small window allowed some natural light in. A low bookshelf contained an orderly array of binders and books, and several family photos placed just so indicated that yes, Mr. Hampton was a family man, too.

My boss cleared his throat, but before he could say anything, I rushed ahead. "Mr. Hampton, I wanted to apologize again for what happened. I accidentally clicked on an outdated e-mail address—"

"Thank you, Jillian." Mr. Hampton folded his hands on top of his desk. "I understand. And I hope you know that you've been an excellent employee."

He paused, his words putting me on alert. I shifted in my seat, maintaining both eye contact and silence.

Mr. Hampton cleared his throat. “I also want you to know my decision is not based solely on what happened earlier today.”

“Your decision?”

“Yes. Jillian, I’m sorry, but your position here at the bank is terminated.”

I swallowed, my mouth dry. “You’re firing me?”

“Again, I’m sorry.” My boss rubbed his palm against his bald head. “We both know you’ve had a challenging time with your workload the past few months. And it’s not that I’m not sympathetic. I am. Things just aren’t getting done in a timely or thorough manner. Your job here is a full-time position but, what with you coming in late and leaving early, you’re still keeping part-time hours.”

What was I supposed to say? He might as well have listened in on my earlier conversation with Harper.

“It was understandable when you were originally diagnosed with cancer—with the expectation that you would eventually get back to your normal work schedule. And I know that you made every effort to maintain your hours and workload. What happened with the closing today is merely another indicator of your inability to keep up with the demands of your job.” He shuffled some papers on his desk. “I’ve talked with some of the management team, and they agree there are extenuating circumstances here. Confidentially, there are also some changes being set in place for the company.”

I tried to keep up with what he was saying. “Changes?”

“Nothing I can discuss openly at this time, except to say there will be some downsizing in the months to come. The banking industry is more and more about digital interfacing. In light of all of this, Jillian, we’d like to offer you a decent severance package.” He lifted a slim manila folder from his desk. “You can look this over, discuss the details with your husband if you’d like to, and let me know if it meets your approval.”

I was being shown the exit in the nicest way possible—and also being asked if that was okay with me.

My fingers trembling, my first attempt to take the folder failed. I couldn’t even get fired without messing it up.

What was I supposed to say? “*Thank you*”?

“We’ll talk on Monday. Is that all right with you?” Mr. Hampton saved me from trying to figure out the appropriate words.

“Yes, sir.”

Whatever was in the folder, I was as good as fired. It wasn’t like I would turn down the offer. The only thing I had to figure out was how to tell Geoff. But right now I needed to stay calm. Somehow be appreciative . . . although all my job training never prepared me to thank my boss for firing me.

I needed to pretend I was some award-winning actress playing the part of a gracious woman who smiled though her heart was breaking. Discover the technique for talking while fighting back tears. My gaze made it as far as the bridge of Mr. Hampton’s nose. I smiled, hoping the action stopped my lips from quivering. Stood. Shook his hand. Heard my thank-you collide with his.

One more thing lost to cancer.





My best friend did not take no for an answer.

It didn't matter how many different ways I tried to decline her impromptu suggestion for a Girls' Night. Harper was having none of it.

"I know Geoff's working late, so there's no rush for you to go home." Harper tilted her head, one eyebrow raised, giving me her "I mean business" look. "We'll be sitting down—not working out at a gym, so it doesn't matter if you're tired."

"I just don't want to." I stood next to her car in the bank parking lot, the manila folder in one hand, my purse slung over my shoulder. My sunglasses hiding the fact that I'd spent five minutes in the ladies' restroom crying. Not that crying had done anything except ruin my makeup, what little I wore. But when your eyelashes are almost nonexistent thanks to chemo, mascara is a must.

"Which is exactly why we're going to do this. Besides, we got lucky. We've got reservations at The Melting Pot. Me. You. And a pot of chocolate fondue." Harper laughed, slipping on her sunglasses. "And no, I didn't intend for that to rhyme. See you there."

With that, she rolled up her car window and drove away. I debated whether I'd meet her or just go home, but Harper was right, this was a good idea—and she didn't even know how my day had ended. I didn't want to be alone with the memory of being fired on constant replay in my mind.

Thirty minutes later, we sat in a small booth for two,

sipping glasses of wine, while our waiter prepared the Flaming Turtle chocolate fondue, complete with milk chocolate, caramel, and pecans.

“I figured you needed this. I know you feel bad about the mix-up with the closing package.” Harper raised her glass and nodded toward the silver pot of fondue. “Can’t go wrong with warm, decadent chocolate, right?”

The waiter set a white china plate filled with sliced strawberries, bananas, marshmallows, and brownies on the table with the encouragement to enjoy. Harper speared a piece of fruit. “Dig in—and talk to me.”

Tonight was like so many of our Girls’ Nights. Necessary. Therapy. No matter what, Harper and I made time for each other.

“Remember back in college, when a Girls’ Night meant popcorn and a movie?”

“Look at us now, all grown-up and indulging in fondue and a glass of wine.”

There were other less subtle changes, too. I was a newlywed . . . and a breast cancer survivor. Harper would be divorced soon, facing the unwanted reality that her husband would marry his former high school girlfriend as soon as the divorce was final.

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned in the last year, it’s that life is uncertain.”

Harper pierced a piece of brownie with her fondue fork and raised it like a torch. “Hear, hear.”

I touched the tip of my fork to hers.

“No, you have to put something on it.”

I added a strawberry and returned the fondue-food-fork salute. “The other thing I know is that I want to be more like you—my always-glass-half-full friend. And if someone’s glass is empty, you find a way to fill it up for them.”

“Eat your fruit. You’re making me cry.” Harper dunked the brownie into the fondue pot. “Was there any more fallout from the closing snafu this morning?”

Where to start?

“I, um, spent the afternoon apologizing. I sent e-mails to Jonah and his boss. And I asked for the Spencer family’s new address so I could send them a fruit basket or something nice.”

“Hey, if you really want to make good with the parents, send something for the kids. They’ll love that. Not a fruit basket—no kid wants grapefruit and apples. Maybe a movie gift card?”

“Have I ever told you that you’re brilliant, Harper?”

“Yeah. Many times.” Harper selected a second piece of brownie. “Then you’re all good.”

There was no sense in delaying the truth, even if talking about it ruined our fun night out. “No, I’m not.”

Harper paused with her fondue skewer in midair. “What’s going on? Jonah send you a nasty e-mail? Ignore it.”

I indulged in a bite of banana dipped in melted chocolate, but it seemed to get clogged in my throat. I grabbed my glass of ice water and took a sip. And another. Waved away Harper’s look of concern.

“I’m okay. I just . . . I lost my job.”

“They can’t fire you!” Harper’s fondue skewer clattered against the side of the pot.

“Yes, they can. And they don’t have to give any reason why, either. Have you forgotten that Colorado is an at-will state?”

“But you’re one of the bank’s best employees—”

“No.” I had to stop Harper’s loyal defense. Best friend or not, she was wrong. “I’m not. Not since my diagnosis. Not since the chemo. The radiation. Mr. Hampton offered me a decent severance package. And I got my bonus . . . so this could be a lot worse.”

Here I was trying to tell Harper all the reasons losing my job was acceptable. Almost to be expected. Maybe by the time I talked to Geoff, I would be able to pull this off with a smile. Convince him, too.

“You’re not going to fight this?” Harper slumped back against the padded booth.

“What good would that do me?” I needed to remember I couldn’t tell Harper everything because some of what Mr. Hampton told me was confidential. I selected a strawberry, dipping it in the fondue. “The truth is, my future is as muddy as the chocolate in this pot.”

“Now that’s appetizing.” Harper’s laugh was brief.

“Some days it feels like I lost myself the day I was diagnosed with cancer. . . . I’m like Gretel in that fairy tale. Trying to find my way out of the woods, but I didn’t drop any breadcrumbs to lead me back home—back to the woman I was before all of this happened.”

“It takes time, friend. Time.” Harper reached across the

table and squeezed my hand. “You haven’t told Geoff, have you?”

“No. It’s not the kind of thing you mention in the middle of the day when your husband calls to check in, you know?”

“I would have to agree with you.”

No need to tell her that I’d let Geoff’s call go to voice mail. That would be admitting out loud that I was a coward. Even though Harper was my closest friend . . . even though she knew me at my best and my worst . . . I still didn’t want to say it.

“I have to figure out how to tell him what happened. It’s going to be a shock—and a bit of a jolt to our finances, especially since we’re remodeling the kitchen.”

The blended music of laughter between a man and a woman pulled my attention to a couple in a booth across from Harper and me. They were snuggled up close, the man’s arm draped across the woman’s shoulders. An assortment of colorful helium balloons floated above the booth, while a small bouquet of red roses decorated one corner of the table.

“Look at them. They’re so young. So in love.”

“Isn’t it sweet?” Harper rested her chin on her upturned hand.

“I was going to say, ‘They’re so clueless.’”

Harper’s eyes narrowed. “Why would you say something like that?”

“It’s the truth. They obviously haven’t hit any bumps in the road of life yet—but they will.”

“When did you become such a cynic?”

“I’m not a cynic. I’m a realist.”

“And what good does that kind of negative outlook do for you?”

“I’m dealing with real life. You of all people know that life happens. That love doesn’t always mean happily ever after—”

Harper crossed her arms, leaning away from me. “Right. My husband cheated on me. I’m getting a divorce. But I am going to have a good life despite that.”

“I’m sorry . . .”

Two apologies to Harper in one day. If I’d gone home, I would have at least kept it to one.

Harper shook her head, her black hair brushing her shoulders. “Forget it.”

“Harper.” I waited until she made eye contact. “I am sorry.”

“I know. We’re good.” She shrugged. “Look, Trent wasn’t who I thought he was. He’s a cheater. I know that. You know that. But I can’t stay angry with the guy because if I do, he wins. He’s already ruined our marriage. I’m not going to let him ruin the rest of my life.”

“Maybe I need to treat cancer like you treat Trent.”

“What do you mean?”

“Cancer doesn’t get to ruin the rest of my life—even if it’s ruined my body . . . and my wedding plans . . . and now it’s taken my job.”

Harper’s laughter lightened the mood. “I like the way you’re talking.”

“Yeah, because I sound like you.”

“Well, you’re trying to sound like me. It’s gonna take some practice to get it right.”

Now our laughter fused together—and I couldn’t help but glance over and see the couple smiling as they watched us. Two best friends having a fun night out.

The laughter lingered in my mind as I returned home later that night, only to be dispersed by Winston’s desperate cries from his crate upstairs.

“Oh, poor puppy!” I dropped my purse as I scrambled up to the second bedroom to let him out, bracing as he jumped up and then leading him down and through the should-have-been-dismantled kitchen. “Let’s go outside.”

Tomorrow. Zach had promised the workers would show up tomorrow and start taking the kitchen apart.

Change . . . change . . . change . . . and yet getting nowhere fast.

And Geoff wasn’t even here so I could talk to him about how my life had fallen apart. Again.

It was after ten, and I was alone.

Scratching at the back door reminded me that no, I wasn’t alone. Winston was here. I swooped him up into my arms, cradling him close as he nuzzled my neck.

“What do you think, Winston?” I scratched behind his ears. “What should I do? Is it time for the ‘Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference’ quote?”

If talking to a dog wasn’t ridiculous, quoting Winston Churchill to him certainly was—but then again, the British statesman was his namesake.

## MOMENTS WE FORGET

“No comment?” Winston snuck a quick lick across my face. “You up for a movie, then?”

I settled on the couch, Winston curling into my lap as I restarted *What's Up, Doc?* where I'd stopped it last night, right when Barbra Streisand told Ryan O'Neal to meet her under the table and then said, “Oh, my goodness! There goes my napkin!”

Maybe laughter was the best medicine.

If nothing else, the romantic comedy entertained my faithful furry companion and me while I waited for my husband to come home. Maybe by listening to some scripted witty repartee, I'd figure out how to tell Geoff that I was now unemployed.