

I

Her father was dead, and all Grace could think about was pie.

Sure, it wasn't just any old pie—the box an early mourner had delivered was crisp and white, boasting the logo from the best patisserie in San Francisco—but even as she wondered what kind of filling was hidden inside (blueberry, maybe, or a fluffy lemon meringue), Grace was hit with a crushing sense of shame. Meditating on baked goods during her father's funeral made her a Truly Terrible Person.

“John was taken from us too soon,” the priest murmured up front. Grace's older sister, Hallie, let out a wretched sob. For once, her hysterics weren't an overreaction—no, this time, Grace was the inappropriate one. She sank even lower in the hard wooden pew,

as if everyone could see the visions of pastries dancing in her head.

She didn't even like pie! She hadn't had a sweet tooth since fourth grade, when her overzealous dentist warned her that sugar would make her teeth fall out. Grace had barely opened her mouth for two weeks, until her father noticed her trying to slurp mashed potato through tight lips and gently explained that her molars weren't about to scatter on the floor that very moment.

But that had been when he was around to explain things. When he'd been around at all.

“. . . and it's this zest for life that he'll be remembered for—”

The priest was cut short by a piercing wail. In the front pew, baby Dash began to scream, red faced and shaking with rage. Her brother. Half brother, Hallie was always quick to snap, but Grace always thought that sounded even more useless. Like their father had only half left them, or half married someone else.

“Shh!” Grace's stepmother, Portia, bounced him, her black veil quivering, but Dash only screamed louder, his cries echoing in the cavernous church.

Behind her, someone tutted softly. “Poor thing, he'll never know his daddy.”

Grace felt Hallie stiffen. “He's lucky,” Hallie whispered. “He won't miss him at all! We're the ones they should be sorry for.”

Grace said nothing. Dash screamed on, until finally, Portia thrust his flailing body at the waiting nanny. The poor Swedish girl fled with him down the aisle; Dash's

wails receding until the main church doors closed behind them and there was quiet again.

Grace wished it could be so easy for her: the escape route, and the tears. She still hadn't cried yet, there hadn't been the time. Her mother had collapsed into bed when she heard, refusing to eat or drink anything until Grace called in their family physician to prescribe her something to sleep. Hallie had sobbed for days in such a fit that, in the end, Grace had crushed up a pill in her food as well, so that they might all get some peace. Then, she'd sat alone in the formal living room—the one they rarely used since her father left—with a stack of her mother's old address books, and made the calls. Third cousins, and old neighbors, and distant friends from college. The calls Portia wouldn't know to make, if she even cared to at all.

The priest cleared his throat. "Let's take a moment to share some of our happy thoughts and memories of dear John."

This was Grace's cue. She rose from the pew, her fingers curled around the poem she'd chosen, but before she was even two steps down the aisle, Portia slipped out of her pew and glided up the stairs to the lectern. She carefully lifted her veil, folding it back over her elegant chignon. "John and I were soul mates," Portia began, gazing out across the church with a wounded look.

Beside Grace, Hallie hissed with a sharp intake of breath. "She didn't!"

But she did. And she was.

Grace slid back into her seat as Portia clasped a lace-gloved hand to her chest. "I knew from the moment we

met that we were meant to be together,” she continued. “He was my destiny.”

A destiny that was already married with children at the time, but now, as then, Portia seemed unconcerned with such trivial details. Grace looked anxiously to her mother, but her face was blank, as if she couldn’t hear a word.

“He was the best man I’d ever known. Kind. Honorable. Loyal.”

Hallie shot to her feet. Grace yanked her back down.

“Are you going to sit here and listen to this?” Hallie demanded. Her face, which had for days been drained and ashy, was now bright with outrage; eyes lit up with a fury Grace knew all too well signaled trouble. Very public kind of trouble.

“Please,” Grace whispered, looking nervously around. “Just let it go.”

“Let what go?” Hallie hissed. “The fact she stole him away, or that she’s standing up there acting like we never existed?”

“All of it. Hallie, come on,” Grace pleaded. There wasn’t just the funeral to get through, but a reception after, too: hours of politely accepting condolences from people they’d never met. “She’s allowed to be sad too, you know. He was her family.”

It was the wrong thing to say.

“We were his family!” Hallie wrenched her arm free and clambered out of the pew, trampling on Grace’s toes.

“Hallie!” Grace whispered desperately, but it was too late.

“ . . . said that he was happier than he’d ever been—”
Portia stopped midsentence as she saw Hallie standing in the aisle. Their eyes met, and for a terrible moment, Grace waited for the explosion. But none came. Hallie shuddered and gave a desperate sob, then she turned and fled.

Grace exhaled with relief. She waited a moment for Portia to continue, then murmured in her mother’s ear, “I’ll go.”

There was no response; her mom was still staring numbly ahead with the same vacant expression she’d had all week. Grace edged out of her row and scurried for the back door, head down to avoid the stares she was so sure followed her out.

Grace found her sister wandering the graveyard, dark hair tangling in the wind. Hallie had forgotten her coat, and her long black skirt billowed out around her, like a silhouette from a gothic novel. Grace sighed, trudging through the muddy grass toward her. Trust Hallie to pick pneumonia for the sake of a dramatic scene—she wouldn’t be the one delivering cough syrup up two flights of stairs for the rest of the week.

“Look at this place.” Hallie gestured wildly, her arms wide. “We shouldn’t be here. *He* shouldn’t be here!”

Grace wasn’t sure if Hallie meant any graveyard, or just this one. The crumbling mausoleums and gleaming granite headstones marched around them in stiff rows marked with huge displays of roses and wilting lilies. Her father had always joked about cremation—that he wanted his remains scattered in the dugout at the Giants’

stadium—but when Grace had tried to bring that up with Portia, she'd looked at Grace in horror. Of course John would be buried, and since her family plot was all the way back East in Connecticut, then only the best, most prestigious church in San Francisco would do.

Perhaps it was better this way. He hadn't taken Grace to a game in years, and at least here, she'd have a place to visit him.

“Come on, Hallie, let's go back inside.”

“No! Leave me alone.” Hallie turned away from her. She was shivering now, so Grace shrugged off her coat and put it around Hallie's shoulders. It draped, too big around her slight frame. People who didn't know them often thought that Grace was older. She'd caught up with Hallie height-wise two years ago, and then kept right on growing. This year, Grace's figure had filled out too, so at sixteen she was left feeling like a stranger in her own body: off balance from the inconvenient curves that made her already-poor gym class performance just plain embarrassing, and caused her pimply lab partners to stutter and stare.

“Mom will be worried,” Grace tried reasoning. “We don't even have to sit through the rest of the service, we can just wait in the lobby until it's over.”

“I don't understand you!” Hallie pressed her palms against her face, wiping the lonely streak of mascara on each cheek. “How can you even look at her and not want to rip her prissy head off? And him! All this bullshit about what a great guy he was. I would kill him again if he weren't already dead!” She collapsed into sobs again.

“You don’t mean that.” Grace patted her shoulder in what she hoped was a soothing fashion.

“I do! I hate him!” Hallie sniffled. “He ruined everything, and now he’s not even around to blame anymore.”

Grace stood, patiently waiting for the sobs to subside. Hallie’s outbursts came like a tempest—flaring up at the slightest provocation, whether glee of landing the lead in the spring play, or desolate sobs over the season finale of her favorite TV medical drama—but she always wore herself out soon enough.

At last, Hallie seemed to calm, and Grace steered her back toward the church, glad she’d worn her thickest black tights under her stiff formal dress. It was May, but in San Francisco that only meant the slight possibility of sunshine escaping the thick, gray clouds above.

“Let’s just get through today, OK?” she said, a pleading note in her voice. “Then Portia and everybody will be gone, and we can try to get back to normal.”

“Normal?” Hallie gave her a scathing look. “How can you even say that? It’s like you never loved him at all.”

Grace froze. Hallie grabbed her hands. “I’m sorry! That was awful. I take it back!”

Grace tried to pull away, but Hallie held on tight. “I didn’t mean it, Grace. I’m, like, the worst sister in the world! Forgive me. Please?”

“Hallie, it’s OK.” Grace was too tired for this. Only her sister could switch from wishing she’d killed their dad herself to blaming Grace for not loving him enough, all in a single breath.

“No, I mean it!” Hallie cried, wide-eyed. “I know

you cared, of course you do. I just don't understand how you can be like this. So, *calm*."

Grace didn't reply. Hallie said "calm" like it was a dirty word, but Grace didn't see what choice she had. Anger wasn't getting Hallie anything, besides headaches and dehydration, and denial may suit her mom just fine, but Grace preferred to function in the real world. The world hadn't stopped when their father left them, and it wouldn't cease spinning now that he was dead. There were distant relatives to console, a chem paper to write for school by Monday, the search for a summer job.

They'd managed well enough with a part-time father these last two years. Grace suspected they'd manage just fine without him around at all.

II

Portia's penthouse was apparently besieged by renovations, so the reception was held back at their house. By the time Grace and Hallie arrived, the block was jammed with shiny cars parked inches apart on the perilous incline. The neighbors had all long since succumbed to big-money developers who put up luxury apartment complexes with wraparound decks; charging young professional types half a million dollars or more for a one-bedroom condo with a view all the way to the bay. But Grace's parents had always held fast. The ramshackle, three-story Victorian sat squarely at the top of the hill, surrounded by an overgrown garden plot that was equal parts wild roses and weeds, and spelled death to any mower that tried to tame it.

"I'm so sorry for your loss." Another well-wisher clasped Grace by the hand. "Is Valerie around?"

“In her studio, I think.” Her mom had disappeared up to the attic as soon as they got home, and Hallie too, leaving Grace alone on the front line to handle the torrent of platitudes. “Thank you for coming.”

“So brave.” The middle-aged woman cupped Grace’s cheek. Grace tried not to recoil from the touch. “Such a tragedy.”

“Thank you,” Grace repeated. “There’s food set up in the living room, and drinks, if you want.”

The woman finally moved off, and another mourner took her place. “What a terrible waste.”

Grace nodded numbly. Out of church, it was easy to see the divide, between her father’s old life, and his new one. Her stepmother’s crowd was straight backed, adorned with hats and designer black mourning attire. They carried tiny dogs, and wore family jewelry, and probably did things like play golf, and yacht. And they were white. A sea of pale faces; Jewish at best, Grace noticed wryly; they were barely even tan. Their group—their mother’s group—was a more motley crew: college professors, artists, activists. The people who had known and loved her father before. Before the long hours and corner office. Before the personal trainer and new suits. Before he’d made enough money to catch the eye of his East Coast event planner, and decided that he wanted an “after,” after all.

“Grace, dear.” She felt a tug on her sleeve, and turned to find Portia frowning at her. “Are those shrimp puffs on the buffet gluten-free?”

Grace blinked. “I don’t know,” she answered slowly. “You’d have to ask the caterer.”

“I can’t find her anywhere,” Portia tutted. “And you know Dash has a wheat intolerance. I e-mailed you a list of his diet requirements.” She looked at Grace expectantly, her skin stretched tight and luminous over the sharp angles of her cheekbones.

“There are vegetables too,” Grace offered. “I think I saw crudités?”

“Yes, but Dash wants the shrimp puffs.” Portia looked impatient. Grace sighed.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “I’ll go find out for you.”

“Please don’t be long.” Portia’s tone belied the politeness of her words. “He gets so cranky when he’s hungry.” She saw somebody behind Grace and lit up. “Delilah! Darling!”

Grace watched her waft across the room. She was beautiful, there was no doubt about it, but to Grace it had always seemed a cool, precise kind of beauty: her hair smoothed back, her outfits always crisp and formfitting. Grace had met her around her father’s office a couple of times before—well, before *it* happened—and remembered feeling intimidated by her glossy kind of perfection. Like Portia had read a memo on how to be a woman that Grace couldn’t even decipher.

She’d never suspected for one moment what was to come.

The room was suddenly unbearably hot; her wool

tights prickling against her skin. Grace retreated to the kitchen, but there was no sign of the caterer.

“You must be one of the daughters.” An older woman squinted at her through wire-rimmed spectacles. “Helena, isn’t it?”

“That’s my sister, I’m Grace,” she corrected, but the woman was already beckoning over a group of proper-looking guests in starched shirts and high-necked blouses.

“This is one of them. You know, the girls from his first marriage.” She said it with a hushed voice, like it was a scandal.

One of the men assessed her curiously. “You can’t really see it, not like with Dashwood.”

“Oh, I know!” the woman exclaimed. “That boy is the spitting image of his daddy. You have your mother’s looks,” she added, patting Grace absently on the arm.

They were wrong. Both girls looked like their father, he had always said so. Grace had his eyes and his laugh, and Hallie shared his smile. But Grace didn’t bother correcting the group; to them, there was no way two black girls could look like their white father. They may not have been half as dark as their mother—second-generation Nigerian, by way of Philadelphia—but Grace had learned years ago that there were some people who would never look long enough to register the difference. Black was black, regardless of shade or hue.

“Such a tragedy. You at least had time with him,” another woman told Grace. “And poor, poor Portia . . .”

“Poor Portia,” they all echoed.

Grace tried to catch her breath. Her head was throb-

bing now, and the crowd seemed to close in on her, a mass of dark tailored clothing and insincerity. “Excuse me,” she murmured, backing away, but the moment she stepped back into the living room, she was accosted by Portia’s impatient call. “Grace? Grace, the puffs!”

Grace quickly turned to head the other direction, but bumped straight into another guest.

“Grace, sweetheart, I’m so sorry.” The woman crushed Grace against her generous chest. She was an artist friend of her mother’s, Grace remembered, a wild-haired woman with a penchant for spoken-word poetry and healing crystals. “You must be devastated. Wrecked!”

Grace struggled to breathe.

“Let it out, I always say. You have to let it all out!”

“I . . . I can’t. . . .” Grace pulled away, gasping for air. “I’m sorry, I have to . . .” She turned and dashed toward the back kitchen door, the woman’s words calling after her.

“Work through the pain, sugar!”

Outside, it had begun to rain, a misty drizzle that clung to Grace’s face as she hurried across the overgrown lawn and into the thicket of elm trees at the back of the yard. The trees were wide and shady here, a natural hideaway out of view from the house.

Grace made straight for the largest tree and scrambled up the ladder nailed to the side of the gnarled bark. The tree house had been her father’s pride and joy, the greatest achievement of a man who could barely replace a blown fuse. It was simple, sure—a sturdy floor lodged over the

V of two wide branches, planks hammered into uneven walls, a dripping roof—but it was hers. Grace had spent hours up here as a child, cataloging leaves and bugs into her notebooks, while Hallie danced around with the fairies below, and staged dramatic readings of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Later, her father had brought up a telescope, and shown Grace her first glimpse of the infinite possibility of the night sky: that the random scattering of stars was actually a precise moving equation, a million forces pinning the whole universe together.

Grace pulled an old blanket from the chest in the corner and settled cross-legged on the damp floor, looking out through the trees to the city below. From here, the world was shrouded in thick white mist, only the vague outline of the bridge visible in the distance. Grace shifted, and heard the rustle of paper in her pocket. Her poem.

She pulled it out, crumpled and creased, but didn't unfold it. She didn't need to.

“‘When I am dead, my dearest,’” Grace began, her voice soft. “‘Sing no sad songs for me.’”

She'd learned it in fourth grade, for an intramural speaking contest. Her father had helped her, drilling the lines every night with the promise of a dollar to spend at the bookstore for every time she made it through without an error. In the end, she'd lost the competition to a whey-faced girl reciting a limerick about her dog, but it didn't matter; Grace's father had presented her with a beautiful leather-bound guide to the night sky, illustrated with every constellation. Roxy Heatherington could keep

her silly certificate; Grace had won the prize that really mattered.

“Plant thou no roses at my head, nor shady cypress tree.” Her voice was stronger now, the lines spilling from her lips with barely a conscious thought. “Be the green grass above me, with showers and dewdrops wet, and if thou wilt, remember, and if thou wilt, forget. . . .”

Grace paused, the words catching in her throat. She hadn’t grasped it as a child. This was a poem about death. About what happened after we were gone—or didn’t happen. Was her father dreaming through his twilight? Did he remember, or was there nothing left of him with which to even think? Hallie was the one who believed in spirits, in souls; Grace had always believed in science instead.

“Rossetti, right?” A voice came from below. Grace made a startled noise, and grabbed the door frame to stop herself from tumbling right out of the tree.

“Sorry! I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Grace caught her breath and peered down. A teenage boy was staring up at her. Hallie’s age, maybe a little older, wearing a black jacket with something under his arm. He had square-rimmed glasses, his brown hair already tufting in the rain. “I always liked that one,” he added. “The poem, I mean. And ‘Do not stand at my grave and weep.’ Mary Elizabeth Frye, I think.”

Grace recovered. “Can I help you?” she asked, trying to sound polite.

“I was actually looking for a place to hide.” The boy glanced back toward the house, then gave Grace a

rueful smile. “It’s pretty crowded in there, and my sister is being . . . let’s just say, demanding.”

He wanted to join her in the tree house, Grace realized with dismay. “I don’t know if it’ll take the weight.”

“I have food.” The boy offered up a box from under his arm with a hopeful expression. *The* box.

Pie.

Grace relented. “OK, but be careful, the ladder is kind of . . .” She trailed off as the boy expertly scrambled up the tree. “Weak,” she finished as he collapsed on the floor beside her.

“Practice,” he explained. “I climb rigging all the time out on the water.”

“Oh,” she said, disappointed. “You’re one of *them*.” He looked quizzical. “The people who yacht.”

The boy laughed, then offered his hand. “I’m Theo.”

Grace shook it carefully. “Grace.”

“I know,” he replied, easing open the pastry box. “We met before, at the christening.”

Grace paused, assessing him again. But she had nothing. “I’m sorry, I don’t remember. That day was kind of . . . a blur.”

It was the only other time she’d stepped foot in that fancy church, exactly nine months after her father had left them. (The math was unavoidable.) Hallie had refused to go, of course, so it was left to Grace to stand politely in the front pew while baby Dash wailed so loudly even the pastor looked nervous to bless him. All Grace remembered was the reception afterward at some upscale hotel,

and the fancy layer cake with chocolate frosting she'd eaten until she felt ill.

Faced with the pie there on the floor between them, Grace brightened. Maybe she wasn't a terrible person, after all; maybe that was just her mind's way of dealing with tragedy. In times of unbearable sadness, she thought about baked goods.

Theo must have seen her expression. "You like blueberry?" He pulled a fork and some napkins from his breast pocket and passed them over. "Go ahead."

Grace cut a couple of misshapen slices. "So how did you know my dad?" She passed a crumbling wedge to Theo. "You're one of Portia's crowd, aren't you?"

"You could say that." Theo took a bite, smearing blueberry filling across the side of his face. He laughed awkwardly, wiping his mouth. "She's my sister."

"Oh." Grace blinked. She'd known Portia had a younger brother, two of them, in fact, but had always pictured them just like her: perfectly coiffed hair and an elegant smile. Theo's tie was askew, his hair stuck out in wet tufts, and there was still a blueberry smudge on his chin. Still, there was something comforting about his haphazard appearance; she'd had just about all the fake perfection she could take.

"How is Portia doing?" Grace ventured at last, more because she felt she ought to than because she actually cared.

Theo gave a sad kind of smile. "She's holding up for now, but . . . she wasn't prepared for this."

"None of us were."

If Theo noticed the edge to Grace's voice, he was too polite to say. "I'll be sticking around for a while, to help out with Dash and . . . the arrangements."

He lived in New York, Grace remembered now. There were trust funds, and a town house on the Upper East Side, and a grandmother who ruled them all with an iron fist. Her father had explained about her new stepfamily, but Grace had done her best not to listen.

"My brother, Rex, is tied up with school in London at the moment." Theo added, "He sends his apologies."

"It's OK. Everyone's a blur to me," she admitted. "They all have the same look on their face, the same platitudes. 'I'm sorry for your loss.'" Grace sighed. "But I guess there's nothing else to say."

Theo swung his legs off the edge of the tree-house floor, back and forth. "Your dad talked about you all the time," he offered. "You and Hallie."

Grace looked over.

"Whenever I saw him at functions," Theo continued. "You know—Christmas, anniversaries." He made a wry face at that, then explained. "The Coates family is big on black-tie events. He said you were doing really well in school. Science, right?"

She nodded slowly. Grace never liked to think of her father off in his new life. It was easier, somehow, to leave it just a vague space, instead of imagining the realities of his day-to-day existence. Breakfast at someone else's table. Watching the nightly news, feet up on someone else's lap. But of course, he had a whole world, with people to talk to. About them.

“Astronomy,” she said finally.

“And your sister’s going to Juilliard.” Theo smiled. “He was really proud of you both.”

For the first time all week, Grace felt the sting of tears in the back of her throat. She quickly turned her face away. “I should get back,” she said, swallowing them down. She scrambled to her feet, brushing the dust from her dress. “My mom, and Hallie . . .”

“Right. Of course, I’m sorry I kept you.” Theo leaped up, but Grace waved him away.

“It’s OK, you can stay.”

“I shouldn’t. This is your place.” Theo gestured to the ladder. “After you.”

Grace slithered back down the tree, and Theo followed. They lingered awkwardly for a moment.

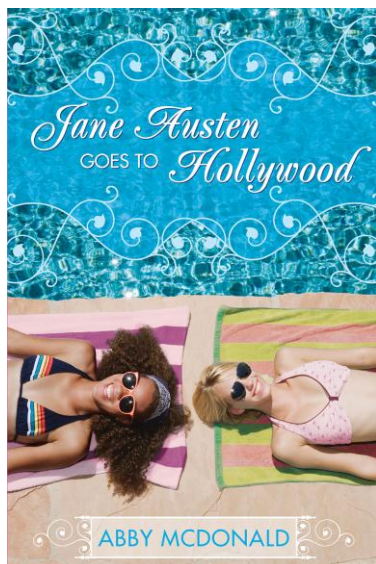
“Thanks,” Grace offered, forcing a tiny smile. “For the pie.”

“No problem.” Theo shoved his hands in his jacket pockets. “And, I know it doesn’t mean anything, but . . . I’m sorry.” His eyes met hers, quiet, sincere. “For your loss. For everyone’s. He was a good man, and he loved you all so much.”

Grace felt her control slipping. If she opened her mouth to say a single word, she knew she’d be powerless to stop the tears. She couldn’t cry, not yet—not in front of Theo—so instead, she just nodded at him briskly, folding her arms tight around her, as if she could physically hold everything inside, and then hurried away, back to the house.

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