

## Chapter 1: Sadie

On the morning my life began to unravel like the hem of my worn-out sweater, I found an old love letter from my almost ex-husband in the bottom drawer of my home office desk. The paper, at least fifteen years old, felt as thin to my fingertips as the lace on the bodice of my wedding dress. Inside the folds of the sheet, Theo had printed a few lines of text in his block scrawl—some words he'd written on his own, some he'd borrowed from our favorite poet, Rumi.

*You have disturbed my sleep, the text read. You have wrecked my image. You have set me apart.*

Times had changed.

*Without you, I can't cope.*

And yet, they hadn't.

The edges of the letter scraped my fingertips one last time before I placed the paper into a file folder near my computer. The humidity of the summer morning made the drawer stick, and I pushed it closed, upsetting the small pile of bills balanced on the right corner of the desk. Water sloshed from the tall glass near the computer—Theo had probably left it out all night—reminding me that dishes still needed to be washed and put away. Moving toward the door, I kicked a toy car with a missing wheel, which caused the vehicle to crash against the wall and come to rest near a singing-alphabet snail that had been waiting for new batteries for two weeks.

*From sweet love letters to dirty glasses and broken toys.*

A round of insane giggles from the next room interrupted my progress, and the scene unfolded before me: Theo on hands and knees, three rambunctious children scattered across his back. Make that *hand* and knees—he possessed enough strength to balance on one hand. His arm

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muscles rippled against his favorite blue T-shirt as he tickled the bellies of the children. One tumbled off Theo and onto the carpet, while the second attempted to pull on his shirt. The youngest, a pile of curls and drool, peered up at her father, joy radiating from her eyes as her pudgy fingers gripped his waistband. She clenched her teeth and yanked with the strength of a linebacker such that in one fell swoop, a portion of Theo's shorts sprang away from his body. The kids rocked onto their heels, clapping their hands and howling, pointing at their father's underwear. In return, Theo growled, his voice echoing across the rafters of the great room. The guttural noise sent the children to scatter from one toy-filled corner to the other and then back to him again.

I pinched my lips, stifling the laughter, before my gaze met Theo's. It had been a long time since I'd witnessed such life in his eyes and in his actions. In fact, I couldn't remember the last time he'd played with the kids so effortlessly. On many days, the ordinary struggles of the day wore him out long before he had a chance to interact with the children. Impatiently wiping away a tear from my cheek, I smiled—breathing in the happy moment, reveling in the charming family image, hoping that I could hold onto the feeling of contentment that enveloped me as I went about the rest of my full day.

“I’ve got this.” Theo craned his neck to look at me as the children began another round of assaults on his back. “You’re overworked and underpaid. Go do what you need to do.”

“But it’s Father’s Day. I can’t do that to you.”

“Do what? Leave me with my children? I’m right where I want to be.” Theo—in one swift move—flipped his body over, grabbed the children, and clutched them to his chest. The move surprised me and gave me hope that Theo still existed. He did *have this*.

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A mental check of my to-do list: most of the day consisted of tasks that could be accomplished at home—laundry, decluttering the mud room, sorting old toys for the Vietnam Vets pick-up we had scheduled for the next week—except for grocery shopping. “Okay, but at least let me take Lexie to the store. She loves to go and see all her grocery store friends. Plus, Charlie and Delia have been complaining about their lack of Daddy time.”

A year ago, when Lexie turned six months old and Theo had been struggling with PTSD for eleven months, we called it quits. Somewhat. Theo and I as a unit didn’t work, mainly due to his diagnosis. He’d turned inward, and nothing I had tried brought him back. At that time, we stopped sharing our day, stopped touching one another, and eventually, stopped sleeping together. Theo refused to routinely see a therapist with me, claiming we’d be “better off with different expectations of our future together.”

After much thought and debate, and because we still both respected one another, we decided to be frank with the kids and tell them of our separation. The PTSD made sure that Theo needed our help, so he still lived with us in an addition at the back of the house. But with the older kids at all-day camps in the summer and school the rest of the year, Charlie and Delia’s time spent with Dad was at a premium.

He didn’t hesitate. “All right. Take Lexie and go get some grub. It’s Father’s Day. This is one day I’m *not* doing the cooking!” He convulsed with laughter as the kids’ fingers found their way into his armpits.

“Ha! Like you ever do,” I said and winked at him.

Not wanting to waste a moment of time, I pried Lexie from Theo’s legs and nuzzled her belly with my nose, drunk on the scent of my eighteen-month-old daughter. She giggled and squirmed and, like an inch worm, wriggled to the floor, then caught my hand in hers. With a

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quick swipe of the car keys and diaper bag and a check to make sure a snack was easily accessible in the refrigerator for the kids, we wound our way through the back hallway to the garage.

“Do we know what we’re going to get?” I asked Lexie, who held the paper between her thumb and forefinger. She lifted the list into the air and waved it like a flag before crumpling it in her tight, gooey grip. When I pried the list from her hands, her grin stretched as wide as her face.

Once I’d buckled Lexie into her car seat, I grabbed my favorite cotton sweater from the seat beside her. “Okay, sweetie, to the store we go!” I tugged my sweater onto my arms and adjusted the buttons across my chest. It wasn’t until later, as I hung the sweater on the drying rack in the laundry room, that I noticed the loose thread at the bottom hem.

“Lexie, please. I need you to sit still. We’re almost finished here.” I handed my stack of coupons to the cashier, then rummaged in my purse for my shopper’s card.

A sharp squeak of a cart’s wheels suddenly fought for attention with the piped-in music streaming from the store’s speakers, and I threw a quick side-glance to the offender behind me. Too concerned that my grocery order was holding up the line, I noticed nothing about him.

The cashier took her time scanning my coupons. *Swipe. Bing! Swish. Swipe. Bing! Swish.* Thankful that we’d saved a good deal of cash on this trip, I turned again toward the man behind the cart, hoping my face held a silent apology for the delay. This time, I saw all of him: warm brown eyes sparkling under the fluorescent store lights, perfect bow lips curving upward, and a dimple flickering on his right cheek.

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“Hey, no worries,” he said. “It’s Sunday and I don’t have anywhere else to be.” A slight drawl clung to his words—a simple protraction that drew me in and made me want to hear more. Butterflies collected in my stomach as I stared at him.

Lexie’s babbling helped to focus on the task at hand: squaring myself in front of the cashier and sliding my credit card through the reader. With a single piercing gaze of his eyes, this man had rattled me. What was *that* all about?

“Happy Father’s Day to you!” the cashier said to the man, interrupting the spinning inside my head. She gestured to the belt that he should empty the cart of its items. “You should take the day off and spend some time with that sweet daughter of yours.” The man nodded and moved his squirmy child away from the edge of the almost-full grocery cart before looking directly at me.

“When you have kids, there is no day off, is there?” The words escaped before I could think better of it, and a current of heat ran through my body, from my stomach to my heart then to my neck. I averted my eyes: partly to mask the blush, partly to look at the credit card reader as the need to ground myself overwhelmed me.

“So true, so true,” the man replied. “How many do you have?”

“Three. She’s the youngest.” Lexie took that moment to reach for the receipt, which I gladly gave her. Much to my chagrin, words continued to flow. “The others are eight and eleven. What about you?”

“This little bug is three, and I have a son who’s seven. I’d have liked more but . . .”

“You get what you get, and you don’t get upset?” My ears warmed, a not-so-subtle indication that another blush had spread throughout my face, and I moved Lexie and strapped her into the front of the cart.

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“Said like a true mom.” Crinkles formed at the corners of his eyes, and his mouth turned upward.

Something in his tone—a hint of admiration or respect—hit me out of the blue, reeling me forward, making me want to hear more. “Do you have plans for Father’s Day?” I asked

“Not a whole lot, which is exactly the way I’d have it. And you?” He pulled his wallet out of his back pocket with his right hand—no chance to see if he wore a ring or not.

“Some dinner with the family.” *Family*. Not alluring man at the grocery store.

The conversation needed to end, and I had to be the one who ended it. Walk away, I willed myself. Walk away. “Hope you enjoy the afternoon,” I said and added a quick “Thank you!” to the cashier and then the bagger, nodding my head in the man’s direction. My short heels clicked on the blue and white tiles like old-fashioned typewriter keys, so desperate was I to flee before I said or did something regrettable.

Disbelief at my reaction washed over me. Noticing strangers at the grocery store. Flirting, stammering, and blushing at the view of a handsome man. Sadie Rollins-Lancaster—a woman with three children at home, a woman who technically still lived with a man she once truly loved? These behaviors weren’t normal.

Our cart bumped over the crevices of the parking lot and my world moved in slow motion. One half of my attention on the purchases, the other trained on the sliding doors of the store, I loaded my groceries into the rear of the minivan and babbled with the baby. After securing Lexie in her car seat, I pulled the seat belt strap over my midsection, clicked it into place, and checked my mirrors before putting the vehicle into reverse. “Be real, lady,” I said to myself. “You’re stalling.”

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At that moment, the man exited the store, and like a stalker, I followed his movements as he ambled toward his car. He performed the same mundane motions I just had as he chattered to his child. My heart skipped at his deep voice, carried by the wind to my open car window, and my pulse quickened at the sight of arms that would hold his daughter with ease.

“I can’t believe this.” Muttering to myself, I slammed my hands against the steering wheel and then jerked on it, finally pulling out of the parking space. “Really!”

“Wha?” Lexie asked. A glance in the rearview mirror showed my own personal cherub, a beautiful example of how well Theo and I blended. A tear of regret sprang to my eye.

“Nothing, honey . . . I . . . I love you.”

Pretending that the high noon sun blinded me, I hoped that the man didn’t catch me taking one last, longing look in his direction as I turned right out of the parking lot and onto the road. My entire body trembled, and I drove home on autopilot, my mind numb, the warm June wind whipping my hair through the open window.