204 Rosewood Lane

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Extract

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One

Grace Sherman stared down at the legal form that would start the divorce proceedings. She sat in the attorney's office with Maryellen, her oldest daughter, who'd come with her to offer support. Grace reminded herself that this should be straightforward, that her decision was made. She was ready to end her marriage, ready to piece together her shattered life. To begin again… But her hand shook as she picked up the pen.

The inescapable fact was that she didn't want this—but Dan hadn't left her with any other option.

Five months ago, in April, her husband of almost thirty-six years had disappeared. Vanished without a trace. One day everything was perfectly normal, and the next he was gone. Apparently by choice and without a word of explanation. Even now, Grace had difficulty believing that the man she'd lived with, the man she'd loved and with whom she'd had two daughters, could do anything as cruel as this.

If Dan had fallen out of love with her, she could accept that. She would've found enough pride, enough

generosity, to release him without bitterness. If he was that miserable in their marriage, she would've gladly set him free to find happiness with someone else. What she couldn't forgive was the misery he'd heaped on their family's shoulders, what he'd done to their daughters. Especially Kelly.

Dan had disappeared shortly after Kelly and Paul had announced that after years of trying, they were finally, excitedly, pregnant. Dan had been thrilled, and Grace, too. This baby was going to be their first grandchild. They'd waited so long.

Kelly had always been close to her father and his disappearance at this critical time in her life had devastated her. She'd pleaded with Grace to postpone the divorce proceedings, convinced that her father would return before Tyler was born. When Dan did return, he'd have a logical reason and would explain everything to their satisfaction.

He hadn't come back, though, and there'd been no further information. Nothing but doubts, questions and a churning, deepening anger that intensified in the endless weeks that followed.

When Grace couldn't stand not knowing any longer, she'd hired Roy McAfee, a private detective and former policeman she trusted. Roy had done an extensive search, certain that Dan had left a paper trail, and he'd been right. What Roy had uncovered was a complete shock to Grace. A year earlier, Dan had purchased a travel trailer, paying cash for it. Grace had no idea where he'd gotten that kind of money, nor did she know anything about the trailer. He'd never mentioned it, nor had she seen it. To this day she had no idea where he'd kept it all those months. Or where it was now.

Given the mounting evidence, she had her suspicions. Grace believed that Dan had used the travel trailer to sneak away with another woman. There'd been one sighting of him and it had come late in May. It almost felt as if her husband had orchestrated this brief reappearance, as if he was taunting her, challenging her to find him. That day had been a low point for Grace.

A co-worker of Dan's had spotted him at the marina and Maryellen had hurried to the library to fetch her. But by the time Grace reached the marina, Dan was gone. A woman had pulled up to the curb and Dan had climbed into the vehicle and driven away, never to be seen or heard from again.

In retrospect, she'd come to believe that Dan was providing her with the answers she so desperately needed. She could think of no other reason he would mysteriously arrive at the busiest place in town, where he was most likely to be seen—and recognized. The library where she worked was less than two blocks away. Clearly, her husband lacked the courage to tell her there was someone else. Instead he'd chosen another, crueler way to inform her; he'd humiliated her in front of the entire community. Grace knew without being told that everyone in Cedar Cove pitied her.

That sighting had settled the matter in Grace's mind. Whatever love she still felt for Dan died that afternoon. Until then, she hadn't wanted to believe there was someone else. Even when the VISA bill showed up with a hefty charge from a local jeweler, Grace had refused to accept that her husband was involved with another woman. Dan just wasn't the kind of man who would be unfaithful to her. She'd trusted him. Not anymore.

"Are you okay, Mom?" Maryellen asked, touching her arm.

Grace's hand tightened around the pen. "Fine," she snapped, instantly regretting her tone. She hadn't meant to sound so sharp.

Her daughter looked away. Grace focused on the divorce papers, hesitated a moment longer and then with haste signed her name.

"I'll see that this is filed immediately," Mark Spellman said.

Grace relaxed, leaning back in her chair. This was all there was to it? You could end a thirty-five-year marriage simply by signing your name? "That's it?"

"Yes. Since you haven't heard from Daniel in five months, I don't foresee any legal complications. The divorce should be final in a few weeks."

Almost four decades tossed out the window like so much garbage. The good years, the bad years, the lean ones, the years they'd scrimped and saved. Like all couples, they'd had their share of problems, but despite everything they'd held their marriage together. Until now, until this–

"Mom?" Maryellen whispered.

Grace nodded abruptly, surprised at the emotion that choked her. She'd shed all the tears she intended to. In the months since Dan's disappearance, Grace had deeply grieved the loss of her marriage and the man she thought she knew. The truth of it was, she no longer had a choice; divorce had become inevitable. It was essential that she protect her financial interests. According to the attorney, she couldn't afford the luxury of doing nothing.

Her legal situation was one thing, and she'd dealt with that, but the emotional impact had left her badly

shaken. Despite her resolve, the grief hadn't diminished. And the humiliation of what Dan had done was with her constantly. Everyone in town was aware of her circumstances and the fact that her husband had walked out on her.

Slowly, Grace set the pen aside.

"I'll wait to hear from you, then," she said to her attorney, rising out of the chair. Maryellen stood with her.

The attorney, a young man closer to Maryellen's age than her own, escorted them to the office door. He began to say something, then merely looked down and murmured a brief goodbye.

Outside his small home office, the sky had turned a depressing leaden gray. Grace felt a burden of sadness settle over her; she'd known this appointment wasn't going to be easy, but she hadn't expected it to exact such a toll on her self-confidence.

Maryellen glanced at her watch. "I need to get back to the gallery."

"I know," Grace said. Her daughter had offered to go to this appointment with her for moral support. Although she was grateful, Grace had thought it unnecessary. But Maryellen was right.

Her daughter was divorced, too. Maryellen had married young and unwisely, and the marriage had ended in less than a year. The experience had so biased her against men, she'd steered away from relationships ever since. Grace had tried to assure her that she'd meet a wonderful man someday, a man waiting for someone exactly like her. Maryellen had considered that naive and refused to listen and now Grace understood why. Divorce *hurt,* and it was the kind of vicious pain that reached deep inside a person.

Grace felt off balance and guilty, as though she had somehow failed. As though it was all her fault. Maryellen knew what it was like because she'd experienced these emotions herself when she was much younger and without the wisdom or perspective maturity brings.

"Will you be all right?" Maryellen asked, obviously reluctant to leave.

"Of course," Grace said, forcing a smile. She ought to be feeling a measure of relief, after all. She'd finally taken action. She'd given Dan every opportunity, even issued a series of mental ultimatums and deadlines. He would come back when Kelly's baby was born. By the Fourth of July. By their wedding anniversary. First one, then another, until she faced the truth. He *wasn't* coming back. If she hadn't heard anything from him by now, she shouldn't expect that she ever would. Dan had no intention of being found.

"Are you going back to work?" Maryellen asked.

"No," she said, refusing to allow herself to succumb to self-pity. "I'm going to lunch."

"Lunch? It's after four. You didn't eat earlier?"

"No." Grace didn't add that her appetite had been nonexistent for days as the appointment with the attorney grew closer. Then, because she knew her daughter was worried, she added emphatically, "I *am* going to be all right, Maryellen."

Maryellen gazed down the steep hill toward the waterfront, where boats gently bobbed in the protected waters of the cove. Vehicles cruised down Harbor Street, so close together they looked like one continuous line. The Bremerton shipyard workers were out, and traffic filled the roads as husbands and fathers hurried home to their families. The same way Dan once had.

"I'm so furious with Dad I don't know what I'd do if I ever saw him again," Maryellen said between gritted teeth.

Grace knew, though. She was convinced that Maryellen would be grateful, that she wouldn't care what he'd done as long as he came home. And Kelly, their youngest, would shout with joy and tell them all how wrong they'd been. She'd run to her father with open arms, eagerly awaiting the excuse that would explain everything.

"I'm fine," Grace insisted. "Really."

Still Maryellen hesitated. "I hate to leave you."

"I'll get over this." Although that was hardly the way she felt. But if Grace had learned anything in life, it was the importance of balance. For each loss, there were compensations, and she reminded herself to keep the good things firmly in sight. "I have so much to be grateful for. You and Kelly, and now a grandson. I'm so sorry it had to end this way with your father and me, but I'm going to come back stronger than ever." Even as she said the words, Grace knew they were true. The sense of loss was profound, but balance would return to her life and so would joy.

It was Justine Gunderson's lunch break, and all she wanted to do was run home and check the mail. She hadn't heard from Seth in nearly a week. All right, five days, but each one of those days felt like a year. Her husband of little more than a month was in Alaska, fishing the crab-rich waters of the Bering Sea. Seth had warned her when she drove him to the airport that he'd be working sixteen-hour days. He'd assured her that he was crazy in love with her and would be back before she had time to miss him.

Make time for friends. Make time for ***Debbie Macomber****.*

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204 ROSEWOOD AVENUE
311 PELICAN COURT

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A GOOD YARN
OLD BOYFRIENDS
WEDNESDAYS AT FOUR
TWENTY WISHES

THURSDAYS AT EIGHT

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