

Anguish knocks another one out of the park as she perfectly captures the angst in a marriage after the newlywed euphoria wears off. When her fictional couple realizes marriage isn't a fairy tale. That small annoyances can pile up and build a wall hard to scale. That a relationship requires nurturing and tending, sacrifice and compromise, hard work and listening to God. The story sucked me in and I rooted for them as they fought hard for happily-ever-after.

— SHANNON TAYLOR VANNATTER, MULTI-
PUBLISHED AUTHOR AND RECIPIENT OF
THE INSPIRATIONAL READERS CHOICE
AWARD

FOR *Better*
OR FOR
GRANTED

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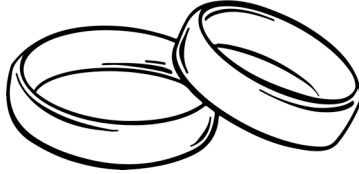
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All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either factual or historical, is purely coincidental.

To those who refuse to quit but instead choose to love every day.

What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.
—*Matthew 19:6*



Finally.

Scott Stewart eased back into his recliner, a tiny bit of the tension in his back letting go. A few flicks of his fingers on the remote, and a basketball game flickered across the TV screen. What a day. This was just what he needed.

“Seriously?” Genevieve’s voice warned him a second before a box hit him in the chest.

“What in the world?” He held up the cracker box and frowned. “This is empty.”

“Exactly.” She pointed at him. “But it was sitting in the pantry.”

He set it on the table next to him. “Okay. So, throw it away.”

A whistle blew on the television, and his eyes sought out the cause.

Genevieve stepped in front of the screen.

“Gen.” Trying to see around her, he straightened some in his chair.

“It’s over.” Genevieve said the words as if she were greeting a friend in the store. What was she talking about?

Scott waved at the television behind her. "It's only the third quarter. There's still time."

Her hands moved from her hips to the power button with enough force to set the flat screen rocking. "I'm not talking about the stupid game."

"Hey!"

"Scott, it's over. This ..." She pointed to him and then back to herself. "Isn't working."

He sat the recliner up so fast he almost fell out. "This? This what?"

"Us." The word hissed between her teeth. "We're not working anymore. I can't keep living like this."

He frowned. "Gen, I don't understand."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Maybe we need to get a divorce."

Words she wasn't ever supposed to say. Words not allowed in their marriage. But there they were, taking up all the breathing space in their living room. She didn't open her eyes. Surely she was joking. This was all a bad dream, right?

He eased out of the chair and inched across the room, afraid to startle her. "Genevieve."

She jumped. Blinked a few times. Then, shrugged her arms away from his touch.

"I've got to go."

"Go?" He reached out again, but she slid away. "Go where? You can't say something like that and then walk away without at least an explanation."

"Explanation?" She threw her hands up in the air. "Doesn't our life speak for itself? The fact you don't know where I'm going should be your first clue about why I said what I said."

She didn't repeat that awful word again, but it hung there in the air, practically suffocating him.

"What's that supposed to mean?" He folded his arms across his chest, a pose that intimidated quite a few of the students

who met him face-to-face in his office, but didn't work on her. No, sir.

"It's Tuesday, Scott." She raised an eyebrow. "What always happens on Tuesdays?"

The light flickered in his mind. "Dinner at your parents'."

"Same thing every week since we got married." She shook her head. "Not that you've gone with me for probably a year now." She glanced at her watch. "I'm already late. I don't expect to see you when I get back."

"What?"

"I'm serious about this. The way our life has been going lately—I can't handle it." She hooked her purse over her shoulder. "This isn't what I signed up for when I agreed to marry you. Please be gone before I get back. We can work out the rest of the details later."

"Gone?" He caught the garage door before she could shut it. "Why should I leave? You're the one who wants out."

She let out a breath but didn't stop. Didn't answer.

"You still haven't told me what I've supposedly done wrong."

"I shouldn't have to tell you." She slid into her car and started the engine before he could stop her again.

She didn't even glance his way as she backed out of the garage and down the driveway. What just happened? Where had all this come from?

Scott sank down at the kitchen table, his head in his hands. Never in his life had he expected his sweet wife to demand a divorce. Their fifth anniversary was still three months away. Hadn't even been able to put all their plans in action.

Plans he'd thought were right on track.

Step one, get married. Check.

Step two, work his way up to principal. Check.

Step three, save enough so Gen could stay home with babies.

“Almost check.”

But apparently, Gen had changed her plans. Or something. He still wasn't sure.

Did I forget something important? A glance at the calendar proved Valentine's Day had been the week before. He remembered the balloons in the hallways and all the flowers coming through the office. It had crossed his mind that he needed to pick something up for Gen on the way home, but then he'd gotten caught in a late meeting and completely forgotten by the time he left.

She wouldn't demand a divorce over missing a silly holiday, though. Right?

His stomach grumbled and reminded him he'd been counting on her to figure out dinner tonight. Tuesdays were one of the rare nights he didn't have much else going on. And while he loved his in-laws, he didn't think now was the best time to follow her to their house and join in that standing dinner invitation.

Did they have a clue what their daughter was thinking? Did they support her? Was her dad still going to keep his promise to make Scott regret it if anything ever happened to break Genevieve's heart?

Scott rubbed his chest.

Surely Dan wouldn't stick to that promise if Scott didn't know how Genevieve's heart had gotten hurt in the first place, right?

One thing was for sure. “I'm not leaving. This is my house too. In fact, my name is first on the deed. If she wants to go through with this crazy plan, *she* can leave.”

He slapped his hand on the table and pushed up. The fridge showed several leftover containers, but nothing looked appetizing. A sandwich would have to do.

He needed to get some more work done before bed anyway, so it was just as well she'd flown out of here faster

than students at the three o'clock bell. Maybe she'd talk to him when she got back. Explain what had provoked such insanity.

With the last few minutes of the ballgame as background noise, he munched his ham and cheese and checked emails. A high school principal's job was never done. But his attention didn't stay on the laptop or TV. It kept wandering several blocks over to where Gen ate dinner with her parents.

DADDY WASN'T GOING to take her side this time. Genevieve released her pent-up breath in a trickle. Her parents would automatically know something had happened. How would she tackle this coming maelstrom?

She steadied her shaking hand and pressed the doorbell.

"Hey, sweetie." Mom's warm hug wrapped Genevieve in a physical embrace as did the floral scent Mom had worn for as long as Genevieve could remember. "We were beginning to wonder if something had happened. You're usually here before now."

"That husband of yours have another ballgame tonight?" Dad leaned against the doorframe, his arms crossed over his chest.

She avoided his gaze. "On TV."

"And that's more important than family dinner?" She didn't have to look to know what expression her father's face displayed. That look of disapproval had made her uncomfortable for years. At least this time, it wasn't directed at her ... yet.

"Dan." Her mother's tone warned to not stir things up.

"What?" He grumbled. "A father can't look out for his daughter's best interest?"

"You know when you put her hand in his on their wedding

day that you were passing that task on to someone else. Now, come on. The pork chops are getting cold.”

Genevieve swallowed the lump of disappointment in her throat. Her dad had trusted Scott enough to give him her hand, and what had Scott done with it? She blinked hard. She could do this. Just dinner with the parents, like every week. She sat in the chair between them like she had her whole life. No one mentioned anything else about the empty place setting across from hers.

“This looks delicious, Mom.”

They all held hands and bowed their heads while her father rattled off his standard blessing. As soon as the “amen” sounded, he reached out and forked a slab of meat.

“Maybe you should take Scott a plate when you go home.” Her mom handed the mashed potatoes her way. “He used to love my pork chops.”

Genevieve didn’t say anything as she spooned the creamy spuds onto her plate.

“Gen?”

She glanced up. Both her parents stared at her. She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth and passed the bowl to her father. So much for getting through dinner before having this discussion.

“I don’t expect him to be there when I get back.”

“Some late-night meeting?” Her dad shook his head. “People didn’t have business meetings at all hours of the day when I was your age.”

“No meeting.” Genevieve plopped some green beans next to her pork chop.

Her mom set the meat platter down with a rattle, despite the fact she always chided everyone else to be careful with the family heirloom. “Genevieve Rose? Spill it.”

“We might be getting divorced.”

What was it about this day that kept making the rooms she

occupied so stifling and airless? She pressed her fork down on her pile of potatoes as if their arrangement were the most important thing in the world. The clock ticked steadily in the front hallway. Somewhere in the back of the house, Mom's cat let out a soft "meow." Genevieve finally looked up to meet the stunned glances of her parents.

"Divorce ..." Her mom's hand reached her way and stopped as if Genevieve's problems might be catching.

"Did he cheat on you?" Her father threw his napkin on the table with such force the saltshaker spilled. "If he did, I'll—"

"Daddy, he didn't cheat on me." Genevieve waved him back into his seat. "Not with another woman anyway."

Her daddy slowly sank back into his chair and set the shaker upright.

"What do you mean?" Her mom shook her head. "What brought this on?"

"Everything." Genevieve shrugged as if the situation weren't tearing her up inside. "Our marriage isn't like yours. We started out okay, but ... but now we're like strangers who happen to live in the same house."

"Gen, that's not a reason for divorce." Her mother straightened her spine. "That's a reason for counseling."

"And our marriage isn't perfect, either." Her father half-grinned.

"Says who?" Her mother chunked the extra napkin at him.

"Mom, you don't understand." Genevieve pushed her pork chop across her plate. "I know this all sounds petty and sudden, but I've been thinking about it for a while now. And I've come to the conclusion, I just can't live this way anymore."

"We raised you better." Her father's voice was gruff, but she could hear the concern lacing the edges of it.

"I know." Genevieve set her napkin aside this time. "Good Christians don't get divorced." She stood up and put her hands on her hips. "Except they do. All the time."

“What?”

“Half my friends are divorced. And some of them didn’t make it four years. Obviously, it’s not as big of a deal now as it used to be.” She waved her hand as if to show her parents proof all around them. “Besides, you don’t know how miserable I am.”

“So, tell us.” Her mom rose and leaned over the table. “Help us understand. You haven’t mentioned being miserable until now. How were we supposed to know you two were having problems?”

“Evidently, no one can see it but me.” Genevieve shook her head. “Even Scott was shocked when I brought it up.”

“What does that tell you?” Her father raised his eyebrows, as if back in college professor mode. “Maybe you’re the only one who can see the problem. Maybe if you’d talk to Scott, you two could work it out.”

She let out a breathy laugh. “Like Scott has time to talk to me!”

“You promised him for better or for worse.” Her mother put a hand on her shoulder. “Obviously, this is a worse time, but that doesn’t mean it has to stay that way. How can things improve unless you communicate?”

“You make it sound so easy, but it’s not.” Genevieve shook her head. “I don’t think I’m hungry anymore. Thanks for dinner.”

“Stop.” Her father’s voice carried enough authority to halt her momentum and glue her feet to the floor.

“Daddy, please.” She leaned her head back and stared at the ceiling. “This is hard enough as it is. It’s not like this was in the plans when I agreed to marry him. I didn’t want us to end up this way.”

“No one has written ‘the end’ on your story yet.” Her mom’s voice was gentle and calm, a perfect contrast to the emotions roiling inside of Genevieve. “There’s still time to fix it.”

"I'm not sure we can." Genevieve shook her head.

"Divorce isn't the only option in a bad marriage, you know." Her dad turned in his chair. "There are other possibilities."

She continued to shake her head.

Her dad stood and moved to face her directly. "You will always be my little girl, and I will always love you. But until now, I've never been disappointed in you. I don't want that to change. Please, don't give up on this marriage yet. If not for yourself, then for me."

"Daddy." Her shoulders slumped.

He raised her chin, forcing her to look at him. "And for your other Father too."

Her chin trembled. She'd been so sure this was the right decision. For weeks, it had resonated with nothing but truth in her innermost being. Could she be wrong? Or did Dad just want her to be miserable for the rest of her life? Moisture pooled in the corner of her eyes. He didn't understand.

"Have you talked to anyone else about this?" Her mom placed her hand on Genevieve's shoulder.

"No." She took a deep breath. "I only told Scott tonight."

"What if you go talk to Marty?" Her mom tilted her head. "I'm sure he'd be happy to give you guys some counseling."

"But he's known me my whole life." Genevieve widened her eyes as she contemplated baring her soul in front of their associate minister. "Won't that make it weird?"

"Or maybe it will make it easier. After all, you know he loves you almost as much as we do. Wasn't he the one who baptized you at summer camp all those years ago?"

Genevieve's lips turned up at the happy memory. "He was."

"And you know he'd be honest and tell both of you what you need to hear. You just have to be willing to listen." Her dad nudged her.

"And I suppose you don't think I listen well?"

"Never have listened when you didn't want to." He winked.

“But I also know you well enough to know you’ll do the right thing.”

“Pray about it, if nothing else, Gen. This is a big decision. I know the world takes divorce for granted, but you know that’s not the way God intended it to be. And think about talking to Marty.”

She nodded. She’d agree for now, if only to get them off her back. They hugged her tightly before she was allowed to leave, a plate of food tucked into her hands in case she decided she was hungry later.

As she neared her house, she searched for signs of life within. Had Scott taken her ultimatum seriously? Was he still here, or had he left for—at least the night? Which one did she want more?

His truck still sat in its spot in the garage. She needed more time before she walked into whatever awaited her inside.

Mary’s trash receptacle remained at the edge of her driveway. Genevieve headed to the road and tugged her neighbor’s trashcan toward her dark house. Mary must be working a night shift again. As much as Genevieve loved being a nurse, she never envied Mary’s crazy emergency room shifts. Working at a high school had been a dream come true for her.

Before she married the man who was now the principal.

She brushed her hands off once Mary’s trashcan was in place. If Genevieve had to work such crazy hours, she’d hope someone else would do the same for her.

She spun and faced her own house again. Much as she dreaded going inside, she couldn’t stay out here all night. Tomorrow was a workday. Maybe Scott would already be asleep, and she could avoid discussing this.