

The Life Intended

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Sliding Doors meets P.S. I Love You in this richly told novel from the author of *The Sweetness of Forgetting* about the struggle to overcome the past when our memories refuse to be forgotten.

After her husband's sudden death over ten years ago, Kate Waithman never expected to be lucky enough to find another love of her life. But now she's planning her second walk down the aisle to a perfectly nice man. So why isn't she more excited?

At first, Kate blames her lack of sleep on stress. But when she starts seeing Patrick, her late husband, in her dreams, she begins to wonder if she's really ready to move on. Is Patrick trying to tell her something? Attempting to navigate between dreams and reality, Kate must uncover her husband's hidden message. Her quest leads her to a sign language class and into the New York City foster system, where she finds rewards greater than she could have imagined.

Kristin Harmel is the international bestselling author of a dozen novels including *The Book of Lost Names*, *The Winemaker's Wife*, *The Room on Rue Amélie*, and *The Sweetness of Forgetting*. Her work has been featured in *People*, *Woman's Day*, *Men's Health*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*, among many other media outlets. She lives in Orlando, Florida. *The Life Intended*

One

It was 11:04 when Patrick walked through the door that final night almost a dozen years ago.

I remember the numbers glowing red and angry on the digital clock by our bed, the sound of his key turning in the lock. I remember his sheepish expression, the way his five o'clock shadow had bloomed into an almost-beard, the way his shirt looked ruffled as he stood in the doorway. I remember the way he said my name, Kate, like it was an apology and a greeting all in one.

I'd been listening to Sister Hazel's *Fortress*, my favorite album at the time, as I waited for him to come home. "Champagne High," the fourth track on the CD, was playing, and just before he walked in, I was mouthing the lyrics, thinking to myself how "the million hours that we were" was such a poetic way to describe a life together.

Patrick and I were just four months into our marriage, and I couldn't imagine a day when we'd no longer be with each other. I was twenty-eight then, Patrick twenty-nine, and the years seemed to stretch before us into an endless horizon. I remember reflecting that a million hours—just over a hundred years—didn't sound like enough time.

But as it turned out, our hours together were almost up. The number that defined us in the end was only fifteen thousand and nine.

That was the number of hours that had passed since we'd met at a New Year's Eve party on the last night of 2000, the number of hours we'd spent knowing we'd found our soul

mates, the number of hours we'd spent thinking we had it all. But fifteen thousand and nine isn't even close to a million.

"Honey, I am so, so sorry." Patrick was all apologies as he fumbled his way into the bedroom, where I sat on top of our comforter, knees pulled up to my chest, checking my watch pointedly. The relief that he was home safely was being quickly supplanted by annoyance for making me worry.

"You didn't call." I knew I sounded petulant, but I didn't care. We had made each other a promise the year before, after my uncle had been killed in a hunting accident, that we'd always make an effort to let each other know when we were going to be late. My aunt had been blissfully unaware of her husband's death for nearly twenty hours, which had horrified Patrick and me.

"I just got caught up in something," Patrick said, averting his gaze. His thick black hair was mussed and his green eyes were full of concern when he finally looked back at me.

I glanced at the phone on our bedside table, the phone that had been silent all night. "You were stuck at the office?" I asked. It wouldn't have been the first time. Patrick was a risk management consultant for a firm in Midtown. He was young, hungry, one of those people who would always pitch in if there was extra work to be done. I loved that about him.

"No, Katielee," he said, using the affectionate nickname he'd been calling me since the night we met, when he'd mistaken my maiden name, Kate Beale, as I shouted it above the din of the crowd. "My beautiful Katielee," he murmured as he crossed the room and sat down beside me on the bed. The back of his right hand grazed my left thigh, and I slowly unfolded my legs, melting into him. He inched toward me and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. He smelled like cologne and smoke. "I was with Candice," he said into my hair. "She had something important she needed to tell me."

I pulled away from him and scrambled out of bed. "Candice? You were with Candice? Until eleven?"

Candice Belazar was the girl he'd dated just before me, a bartender at a smoky dive in Midtown. It had been a short-term fling and they'd broken up two months before we met, but she'd been a thorn in my side as long as I'd known him. "It was just a physical thing," he'd tried to explain the first time he told me about her. "I was in a rut, and she was there. I got out of it as soon as I realized how wrong we were for each other." But that hadn't been much comfort.

We'd run into Candice once at a restaurant in Little Italy, and having a face to put with the name only made things worse. She was several inches taller than me, with huge, obviously fake breasts, stringy bleached blond hair, and hollow eyes. She had smirked as she looked me up and down, and I'd heard her stage-whisper to her friend that Patrick apparently couldn't handle a real woman anymore.

"Kate, honey, nothing happened," Patrick said quickly, reaching for me. "I would never do anything to hurt you."

"Then why didn't you call?"

"I'm so sorry." He raked his fingers through his hair. "There's no excuse. But I would never, ever cheat on you. Ever. You know that." His voice caught at the end of his sentence, but his eyes were as guileless as ever. I felt my shoulders relax a little as some of my indignation rolled away.

"Whatever." I huffed, because I couldn't think of a better response. I knew he was telling the truth, but the thought of waiting at home while he sat in a bar with his ex-girlfriend still stung. I wasn't going to tell him it was okay, because it wasn't.

"I'm totally wrong here," he said, spreading his palms in a mea culpa. "But it was a heavy conversation, and I didn't feel like I could walk away to make a phone call."

"Yes, heaven forbid you offend Candice," I muttered.

"Kate . . ." Patrick's voice trailed off.

"I'm going to bed." I knew I was supposed to soften, to tell him it was all right. But I couldn't bring myself to.

"Don't you want to talk about this?" he asked.

"No."

Patrick sighed. "Kate, I'll explain everything tomorrow."

I rolled my eyes, stormed into the bathroom, and slammed the door behind me. I blinked at my reflection in the mirror, wondering how, nearly two years after they'd broken up, Candice still managed to hold some kind of power over my husband.

But as I climbed into bed ten minutes later, I could feel myself thawing a little. After all, Patrick had told me right away where he'd been. I knew he was being honest. And besides, he'd chosen me, and deep down, I knew that he would choose me every day for the rest of our lives. As I pulled the sheets over me, my anger receded in slow, steady waves.

I was already half asleep when Patrick came to bed. I turned away from him, facing the wall, and after a moment, I felt his arms encircle me. He moved closer, pressing into my back, entwining his legs with mine.

I thought for a moment about pulling away, but it was Patrick, my Patrick. He would tell me in the morning what had happened, and I would understand. So after a pause, I relaxed into his warmth.

"You know I'd never hurt you, Katielee," he whispered. "Ever. In a million years. Nothing happened."

I closed my eyes and breathed in. "I know."

Patrick kissed the hollow beneath my left ear, sending a shiver up my spine. "I knew before I met you-" he murmured, just as I began to drift off to sleep.

I smiled. "-that I was meant to be yours," I replied. It was the way we always said I love you, our own special language.

I knew I'd feel that way for the rest of our lives.

Sunlight streamed into the bedroom along with the scents of coffee and bacon when I awoke the next morning. I blinked and rolled over to look at the clock. It was 6:47, and Patrick was already up, making me breakfast. I knew it was his version of an apology, but in truth, he was already forgiven.

"Morning," I said, covering a yawn as I walked into the kitchen a few minutes later. Patrick turned around holding a spatula, and I began to laugh. He was wearing a yellow KISS THE CHEF apron over his I LOVE NY boxers and white T-shirt. His feet were bare, his hair sleep tousled.

"Le chef eez at your service," he said in an exaggerated French accent, which made me laugh again. "Sit, sit," he said, gesturing toward our tiny kitchen table with his spatula. "Breakfast is served, madame."

He set two plates of scrambled eggs, crispy bacon, and toast with strawberry jam on the table with a flourish. A moment later, he returned with two steaming cups of coffee, already lightened with cream and sugar, and sat down beside me.

"You didn't have to cook, honey," I said with a smile.

"Mais oui." He kissed me on the cheek. "Nothing but the best for my girl."

I took a bite of my eggs and looked up to see him watching me, his gaze intense. "What?" I asked, my mouth still full.

"There's no excuse for me not calling last night," he said, his words tumbling out. "I feel terrible. I didn't mean to make you worry."

I take a sip of my coffee, then I draw a deep breath. "It's okay," I said.

Relief spread across his features like a sunrise. "You forgive me?"

"I know I overreacted."

"No, you didn't," he said quickly. He took a bite of his bacon, and I watch his strong jaw work as he chewed. "Look, there's something I'd really like to talk to you about," he said. He blinked a few times, and his expression made me suddenly uneasy. He seemed almost nervous. "Can I take you to dinner tonight? The restaurant at the Sherry-Netherland, maybe? I know you love that place."

I smiled. "Sounds great."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Patrick asked a moment later, as I crunched on a piece of bacon.

I looked up. "What?"

He pulled his apron taut and turned to face me. "It says Kiss the Chef." He smiled at me, and when I met his eye, he winked. "And it's only polite to follow apron instructions."

I laughed. "Is that right?"

"It's one of the laws of kitchenocracies around the world."

"Kitchenocracies?"

"Of course. Sovereign kitchen nations. Like this one."

"I see," I said quite solemnly. "Well, I don't want to violate any laws, sir."

"It's probably in your best interest to just follow along, then." He smiled at me, stood, and held out his arms.

I laughed and got up. He bent his head, I stood on tiptoe, and our lips met.

"Good enough?" I whispered after a moment as he wrapped his arms around me, folding me in.

"Not even close," he murmured back. Then he was kissing me again, parting my lips gently with his tongue.

We made love that morning, quickly, urgently, drinking each other in. Then I cleaned up our breakfast dishes while he showered and dressed for work.

"Looking good!" I marveled with a whistle as he reemerged into the kitchen with freshly washed hair, charcoal pants, a crisp blue shirt, and a striped gray tie.

"I didn't think the apron and boxers would cut it at the big meeting I have this morning," he

said, "although-and I don't want to brag here-I do have some seriously sexy legs."

I laughed and stood on tiptoe to kiss him good-bye. "Good luck with the clients."

"Who needs luck?" he asked with a crooked, dimpled smile. "I have the greatest wife in the world. Life is good."

"Life is good," I agreed. I kissed him again, and this time, it was Patrick who pulled away too soon.

When I opened my eyes, he was holding up a silver dollar from his grandfather's old collection. "Listen, would you hang on to this for me until tonight?" he asked.

I took it with a nod. "What's this one for?" Patrick had a tradition of tossing a silver dollar somewhere nearby whenever something good happened to him. You have to pass the good luck on, he always used to say. That way, someone else gets to make a wish. We'd thrown a silver dollar into Central Park the day I'd gotten into graduate school, another into the fountain outside City Hall when Patrick got a big promotion last year, and a third into the ocean near his parents' house on Long Island after we got married in the spring. "Must be something big," I added.

"It is," he promised. "You'll see. I'll tell you at dinner. We can throw it into the Pulitzer Fountain after we eat. And Katielee?"

"Yeah?"

He stood in the doorway and stared at me for a long moment. "I knew before I met you-" he finally said, his voice soft.

My heart fluttered. "-that I was meant to be yours."

The door closed behind him at 7:48 a.m.

I never saw him again.

I was out for my morning run when it happened. While I was jogging north along the Hudson River greenway, marveling at how bright and clear the sky looked after a few days of rain, a thirty-seven-year-old woman named Gennifer Barwin, a tourist from Alabama, was finishing off the bottle of vodka she'd started drinking at three in the morning after a fight with her boyfriend. While I was mentally replaying a lecture I'd heard the day before in the music therapy graduate program I'm just started at NYU, she was strapping her seventeen-month-old daughter Lianna into a car seat in her 1997 Toyota Corolla. While I was thinking how lucky I was that Patrick had encouraged me to quit my banking job to pursue the career I'd always wanted, she was pulling out of the parking lot of Hoboken's Starlite Motel.

You have to do what your heart tells you to do. Patrick's words of encouragement rang in my ears as my feet pounded the pavement. Life's too short not to follow your dreams, Kate. As I looked up at the sky that morning, reflecting on how wonderfully supportive my husband was, Gennifer Barwin was swerving through the Lincoln Tunnel, headed for Manhattan. As I turned south to head home, she was taking the exit for West Fortieth Street, sideswiping a sign after she got off the highway.

And as I smiled to myself, wondering what piece of good luck had made Patrick hand me a silver dollar that morning, Gennifer Barwin was driving at 47 mph directly into the back passenger-side door of the taxi my husband was riding in.

Thirty minutes later, I rounded the corner to our fifth-floor apartment, still breathing hard from my run, and found two uniformed police officers standing outside my front door.

"Mrs. Waithman?" asked the younger one. I'm not sure whether it was his eyes full of sympathy, his somber expression, or the way he said my name, but in an instant, I knew something was terribly wrong.

"What happened?" I asked, my knees buckling beneath me. The young officer caught me before I could hit the ground.

"Ma'am, we're very sorry, but your husband was involved in a serious car accident this morning," he said, his voice flat. "He was in a cab, ma'am. Near Times Square."

"No, that can't be right," I protested, looking back and forth between the officers. Their faces were suddenly blurry. "He's at work. He takes the subway to work." But he had that meeting, I realized immediately, the one with some of his most important clients. He would have taken a taxi from his office to theirs. "Oh God."

"Ma'am-?"

"You're sure it's him?" I choked out.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm afraid so."

"But he's okay, right?" I asked into the strangely heavy silence. "Of course he's okay?"

"Mrs. Waithman-" the younger one began uncertainly.

"Where is he?" I cut him off, glancing at the older officer, who reminded me of my dad, someone who would surely make everything okay. "Which hospital? Can you take me? I have to help him."

From the thin slice of stillness that lingered between them, the way neither of them made a move, I knew before they said the words.

"Ma'am." The older one finally spoke, his eyes watery. "I'm afraid your husband was pronounced dead at the scene."

"No. Abs...

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