

HAPPILY MARRIED



If all we need is love, why do we always want more?

I dial her number. Again. Finally, she answers.

"I'm on my way, almost there," my wife says without me having to ask. I can hear that she is driving, so she *is* heading home, but *almost there* sounds like a lie. She has a habit of stretching the truth into something more agreeable these days.

"You said you would be here," I reply, sounding like a petulant child instead of a grown man. "This is important to me."

"I know, I'm sorry. I'll be there soon, promise. I've picked up fish-and-chips."

Fish-and-chips is how we have celebrated almost every major milestone. It's what we ate on our first date, when we got engaged, the day I got an agent, and when we bought our dream house. I'm a little in love with this old thatched cottage on the south coast, just over an hour from London but a million miles from the city. Our only neighbors these days are sheep. Tonight, fish-and-chips was how I hoped we might celebrate my first *New York Times* bestseller, washed down with a bottle of champagne I've been saving for five years. My editor in America said she would call if

it was good news, but it's nearly 9:00 P.M. (4:00 P.M. in New York) and she hasn't been in touch. Nobody has.

"Heard anything?" Abby asks. I hear her turn on the wind-screen wipers, and I picture the rain streaming down the glass like tears.

"Not yet."

"Well, get off the phone or they won't be able to get through," she says and hangs up.

Abby was supposed to be by my side when I got the call, but she's late home. Again. She loves what she does—working as an investigative journalist and finding good stories about bad people. Men, mostly. My wife's whole life has been mapped out by her moral compass and an insatiable desire to expose wrongdoing, but I worry about her upsetting someone she shouldn't. Abby has been receiving anonymous threats sent to the newspaper where she works. She's become so paranoid that she's started recording all of her incoming calls, but she still won't quit.

My wife tells stories that matter, trying to save the world from itself.

I tell stories that matter to me.

My books have always been a place to hide myself inside myself when the real world gets too loud.

Marriage is made of a million beautiful and ugly moments stitched together into a shared tapestry of memories, all of which are viewed and remembered slightly differently, like two people staring at the same painting from opposite ends of a room. I didn't believe in love when I was younger. There wasn't enough love to go around in our house when I was growing up, so I spent my childhood hiding inside books and dreaming of writing my own. Based on my parents' relationship *happily married* was an oxymoron, so marriage was something else I didn't believe in. Until I met Abby. She changed the way I looked at the world and she changed my mind about love. She made me feel things I didn't

know I was capable of feeling, and I could never love anyone the way I love my wife.

When we first got together, we couldn't keep our hands off each other. If I close my eyes and concentrate, I can still remember the first time she let me touch her. Her perfect face, the softness of her skin, the delicate floral scent of her shiny dark hair, the taste of her mouth, the way she gasped when I pushed myself inside her. We used to stay up all night, sometimes just to talk, to tell each other our stories. Keeping the spark alive when you've been married as long as we have isn't easy. I try, but what's important changes as we grow older. At least, I think it does. It has for me. What we have now is all I ever wanted.

Columbo wanders into the room, wagging his tail as though he hasn't seen me for days, even though it has been less than five minutes since he fell asleep in the kitchen. He sits by my side and stares at the phone in my hand as though he is waiting for it to ring too. I prefer dogs to humans. *Dogs* are loyal. My wife bought Columbo for me as a surprise when he was a puppy. She said she thought I needed companionship, and we've been inseparable since. Abby worries about how much time I spend on my own and doesn't seem to understand that I prefer solitude. I need quiet to write, and if I can't write it feels like I can't breathe. Besides, I have my characters for company and I prefer them to real people too. My characters don't lie—at least, not to me—but before Abby, there wasn't anyone I could trust. People rarely do what they say they will or what they should. The only thing I don't like about being alone is the amount of time it forces me to spend with myself.

My path to becoming a bestselling author has been bumpy to say the least. I am the overnight success story that was ten years in the making, and for a long time I felt like the understudy in my own life. There were years of obscurity, shitty reviews, disappointing sales, and being dropped by multiple publishers. I

was on the verge of giving up, but then I met my wife and she introduced me to my dream agent. Everything changed after that, so you could say I owe her everything. Writing books is the only thing that makes me truly happy. I know Abby's job is important, and that I just make things up for a living, but I so badly wanted her to be by my side tonight. If my latest book really is a *New York Times* bestseller she might be proud of me again. Look at me the way she used to.

My mobile buzzes, and my editor's name lights up on the screen.

My fingers are trembling as I answer the call.

"Grady, it's me," Elizabeth says. I can't tell from her neutral tone whether the news is good. "We're all here, the entire publishing team. Kitty is on the line too."

"Hi, Grady!" The glee in my agent's voice ends the suspense, and I surprise myself when I start to cry. Big, fat tears roll down my cheeks, and I'm relieved nobody—except a large black Labrador—can see me. The dog looks up as though concerned.

My editor continues, no longer able to disguise her excitement. "So, as you know, there's been a lot of buzz around this book and we're all so happy to have worked on it. We love you, and we love your books, which makes it even more wonderful to be able to tell you that . . . you are a *New York Times* bestseller."

There is cheering and screaming on the other end of the line. My legs seem to give way, and I find myself folding down toward the floor until I sit cross-legged, like the child who dreamed of being an author all those years ago. Columbo wags his tail and licks my face, and though I appreciate his unlimited affection, I wish my wife was here. My success still seems unreal to me and I don't recognize my own life in this moment. It feels too good to be true. Which makes me worry that maybe it isn't.

"Is this real?" I whisper.

"Yes!" my agent yells.

"I can't believe it," I say, unable to hide the wobble in my voice. "Thank you, thank you, thank you. This means so much to me, I . . ."

I can't seem to speak. I am filled with gratitude and astonishment.

"Are you still there, Grady?" my agent asks.

"Yes. I'm just so . . ." It takes me a while to find the right word. "Happy," I say eventually, trying on this unfamiliar emotion to see if it still fits. I think I might have to grow into it. "Thank you. All of you. I'm completely overwhelmed and so grateful."

I think this might be the best day of my life, and I wanted to share it with *her*.

Instead, it's just me and the dog, and he's already gone back to sleep.

I do my best to properly thank all the people who made this dream come true: my amazing agent, my wonderful editor, brilliant publicist, the fantastic sales and marketing teams. Then the call I've waited forever for ends, and suddenly everything is quiet. Too quiet. I am alone again. I pour myself a little glass of whiskey from one of the good bottles, then sit in silence, letting the news sink in. I want to treasure this special moment and hold on to it for as long as I can. When I have composed myself, I call my wife. I want to surprise her. I can picture Abby's mobile attached to the dashboard of her car, displaying her journey on a moving map just like always. The phone barely rings before she answers.

"Well?" she asks, her voice oozing expectation. I wish I could see her face.

"You are speaking to the author of a *New York Times* best-seller."

She screams. "Oh my god! I knew it. I'm so proud of you!" I can hear genuine emotion in her voice and think my wife, who never cries, might be crying. "I love you," she says. I can't remember when we last said that we loved each other. We used to say it

every day. I like the sound of her words and how they make me feel. Like when you hear an old song you haven't heard for years on the radio, one you used to love.

"I'm almost home," she says, interrupting my mess of nostalgic thoughts. "Take the champagne out and—"

I hear the sound of screeching brakes, then silence.

"What's happened?" I ask. "Are you okay? Can you hear me?"

The silence continues, but then I hear her voice again. "I'm fine, but . . . there's a woman lying in the road."

"What? Did you hit her?"

"No! Of course not. She was already there, that's why I stopped," Abby says.

"Where are you now?"

"I'm on the cliff road. I'm going to get out and see if—"

"No!" I shout.

"What do you mean, *no*? I can't leave her lying in the lane, she might be hurt."

"Then call the police. You're almost home. Do not get out of the car."

"If you're worried about the fish-and-chips getting cold—"

"I'm worried about *you*."

She sighs and I hear the faint *click* as she releases her seat belt.

"I think you've read too many Stephen King books—"

I think doing the right thing isn't always the right thing to do.

"Please *don't* get out of the car," I say.

"What if it were me in the road? Wouldn't you want someone to stop and help?"

"Wait, don't hang up!"

"Fine, if it makes you feel better." It has never been possible to change my wife's mind about anything. The more you urge her not to do something, the more determined she is to do it. Abby opens the car door. "I love you," she says again. By the time I

think to say it back it's too late. She must have left her phone attached to the dashboard because all I can hear is the sound of her footsteps as she walks away.

One minute goes by, then another.

I can still hear the indicator and the windscreen wipers.

Five minutes later the call is still connected, but I can't hear Abby.

Have you ever known something terrible was about to happen before it did?

Or felt an overwhelming, inexplicable fear that someone you loved was in danger?

I am holding the phone pressed to my ear and have started pacing.

"Can you hear me?" I ask, but she doesn't answer.

Then I hear footsteps again.

It sounds as though Abby might be getting back into the car, but she still doesn't reply.

The only thing I can hear is the sound of someone breathing.

It does not sound like my wife.

A moment ago, I was happier than I had ever been. Now I am paralyzed with fear.

This is the worst best day of my life.

I know the stretch of road she is on. It leads directly to the coast, and is not far from the house. The nearest building is a mile away, there is nobody close by I can call for help. I start walking. Then I run. I'm still holding the phone to my ear with one hand, breathless but calling her name. She doesn't answer.

The night is too dark, too cold, too wet. There are no streetlights in the countryside, only shadows. All I can see is an anthracite sky speckled with stars, a silhouette of fields on one side of the road, and a moon-stained sea on the other. All I can hear are the waves slamming into the cliff, and my own labored breaths. I

see her car parked on the verge, and I slow down, taking in the scene. The headlights are still on, the indicators are flashing, and the driver's door is open.

But Abby isn't here.

There is no sign of a person lying in the road either. No signs of life at all.

I spin around, squinting into the darkness at the empty lanes and rolling hills. I shout her name and hear my voice echo on the phone attached to the dashboard. She is still on the call to me. Except that she isn't. The fish-and-chips are still on the passenger seat, along with Abby's handbag. I look inside it, but nothing appears to have been stolen. The only unfamiliar thing in the car is a white gift box. I open the lid and see a creepy-looking antique doll with shiny dark hair and dressed in a red coat. Her big blue glass eyes seem to stare right at me, and her mouth has been sewn shut.

I take another look around, but everything is still and silent and black.

"Where are you?" I shout.

But Abby doesn't answer.

My wife has disappeared.