

FRIDAY, JULY 15

NEWPORT BEACH, CALIFORNIA

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PAIGE

My heart fills with a sinking feeling, a weight I can't shake. That's the only way I can describe it to my husband, Ted. He's driving and I'm trying to be calm. It's not working.

"I suppose that's apropos of something, sweetie, given we'll be boating this weekend." Ted grins. In front of us, the light changes. He pounds the steering wheel in frustration. "Seriously? Another red light? We're going to be late now, for sure."

Most of the reason for our tardiness lies with me. I hate leaving the kids. Even now. They're teenage twins, just graduated high school, and they're fine without me for one night, I know. It's an irrational, deep-seated-control thing called *motherhood*. As I think about it, I swallow a lump in my throat. This has been our goodbye year. They are off to college in the fall. I'm not ready for the empty nest they'll leave in their wake. Sure, I help run Orange County's food bank—one of the largest and, in fundraising terms, most successful in the nation. But it's as a volunteer. I told them years ago when they offered me the CEO position—and every year since—Ted and I decided I'd be a mom full-time. And I have been.

I glance at Ted and push down the sorrow. It's not like I will be empty-nesting alone. Ted and I will reconnect, have date nights. We'll have a real relationship again. It will be wonderful, I tell myself. I hope this trip will bring us closer.

But I'm still worried about being away from the girls, no matter how much Ted and I do need some alone time. For some reason, he is unaffected by any such tension or worry. I believe that

may be called *fatherhood*. Still, if he touches me again—like a wife instead of a roommate of sorts—well, I’ll forgive him for the months of distance and sexual disinterest. I can’t seem desperate for his attention, his affection; I know that much about my husband. Instead of bringing up our lack of romance, I’ll focus on my very real fear of this boating trip. That way, Ted can be my knight in shining armor and we’ll be partners again, in everything. That’s my dream, at least.

“Maybe all these red lights are a sign we should stay home? Did you know that the water between here and Catalina Island forms one of the deepest saltwater channels in the world? We’ll be crossing over four thousand feet of deep, dark ocean,” I say and grip the passenger armrest of Ted’s Tesla. I’m not an ocean person, despite growing up in Southern California. Give me a nice pool, and I’m happy. I’ll walk the beach, too, with the best of them. But swim in the sea? Never.

Likely, it was a bad idea to spend so much time on the website I found, reading about all the tragic deaths that have happened on Catalina Island. I may have become addicted to the stories, and now I’ve scared myself over all the things that could possibly go wrong during this weekend. On land or at sea.

“Good thing we’re not swimming to Catalina,” Ted says, punching the accelerator, as the car shoots from zero to sixty, leaving the other cars idling at the now-green light. Ted enjoys his emission-free power. “You don’t have a thing to worry about, anyway. I haven’t seen you go in the ocean for years.”

True. Despite his cajoling, I haven’t been in the ocean past my knees since the girls were young. *The girls*. I swallow. I should have been fixating on stories about leaving teen girls at home alone rather than reading newspaper articles about tragic deaths on Catalina Island. Oh God. My heart thumps in my chest.

“I’m just worried about Emily. What if she has a party?” Our oldest by a minute is a good girl, I know, but she is seventeen. She is also our social twin. Amy is serious, and more of a bookworm—like me, truth be told. Amy will run a company someday and, for now, keep Emily in line this weekend. I hope. We are terrible parents to have done this, I’ve decided. Ted says we’re empowering the kids to make good decisions.

“Amy will tell on her. We have a built-in narc. It’s great,” Ted says. “We’ll have phone service on the yacht. Honey, relax—please. For me. I feel like we’re due for a vacation. Teenagers are draining but they’re almost adults. They’re fine. I’m trusting them to take care of Peanut.”

“Your dog will be fine. It’s the girls I’m worried about,” I say. Peanut, a small rescue mutt Ted brought home for the girls two years ago, is completely bonded to him. It’s cute, their connection. But he should be worried about our daughters, not his dog.

“Come on. Let’s focus on us. Let me see your smile, gorgeous. Remember how you always close the deal, no matter what? That’s the Paige I need to see this weekend. Oh, and try to have fun for once,” he says, grinning.

And there it is. The perennial judgment: Ted is fun. I am boring. Ted is spontaneous. I am a worrying planner. Ted is a gregarious salesperson. I’m a skilled fundraiser who knows how to go in for the kill. I hear myself sigh as I glance at my husband in the driver’s seat.

Ted has a trendy movie-star haircut and in-vogue facial stubble. He’s completely into personal grooming and looks almost as handsome—perhaps *more* handsome—than the day we met, when I was a college senior interning for his family’s company. He strolled into the marketing office, full of confidence, and all the women in the department paused, watching him. He’d walked over to my desk, stuck out his hand, and said, “Ted Kingsley. You’re new?”

I could barely speak, he was so handsome. “Yes, Paige, nice to meet you.” I tucked my blonde hair nervously behind my ears, feeling the heat on my face.

“The pleasure is all mine,” he said. “Can I help you with those?”

He pointed to the stack of presentation binders I was assembling for an important business pitch that afternoon. My heart raced in my chest. “Uh, I think I have everything under control. But thank you.”

“Wait, did you go to USC? You look familiar,” Ted said.

“I’m still there, yes,” I said.

“I just graduated. I knew I recognized you.” He grinned. “If you need anything, just let me know. It’s hard to be the new kid on the block.” I was stunned by his kindness, his courtesy, his warmth. Of course I knew who he was. Ted Kingsley was one of those big men on campus. College famous.

“Thank you. That means so much. I need to get back to work, you know. Don’t want to let anyone down on my first day,” I said. “Nice to meet you.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’re doing a great job already. I can tell. Say, how about I take you to lunch today?” he asked. “A welcome-to-the-team lunch of sorts.”

“Sure, that would be great,” I managed to answer, simultaneously wondering if he invited all new staffers to lunch. Something told me he didn’t. He likely wasn’t part of the official welcome-to-Kingsley committee, so I was flattered. Even if it was just lunch.

“I’ll swing by around noon,” Ted said. “I’ll be looking forward to it.”

And from that moment on, I was smitten. I knew he was the one. He says he did, too, and I believed him, back then. For a long time, we were that connected, that in love. Sometime along the way, we lost our spark. At least, he did.

I've done my best to stay attractive for Ted, I really have. I pull down the passenger visor and peek in the mirror. My shoulder-length blonde hair is too blonde, a by-product of playing team tennis in the constant California sunshine. My blue eyes shine through my sunglasses. I'm always watching. I'm trying not to seem desperate for his attention. But I am. When the girls leave for college this fall, I'll be devastated. I need my husband to love me again.

I side-eye Ted before closing the visor and pasting on a smile. "See, I'm smiling," I say. I'm trying—I am. I can be fun again. Maybe I'll take the CEO position at the food bank once the girls leave for college. The board has begged me to take the leap, and I'm considering it. I've raised the profile of the organization, as well as revenues, and I know I can do more. That would give my life more purpose, and I will have plenty of time with the girls away at college. I think about the marketing and development campaigns I created, targeting the top one hundred largest companies in the region. I met with every CEO personally and closed the deal with almost all of them. Food insecurity is a major issue, in Orange County and across the country. I just needed these important CEOs to understand the mission, and once they did, they opened their checkbooks.

I fold my arms across my chest and stare out the window. I'm dreading this weekend, and it's my own fault. I have anxiety, and this trip has triggered it big-time. It's been hard to sleep ever since Ted accepted his dad's invitation to join him on his new toy: an eighty-five-foot yacht, the *Splendid Seas*. I know it's irrational. But I come from a long line of worriers.

"It's going to be the time of our lives, Paige! Imagine. We've never been to Catalina Island. Our first time, and we're going in style," he says, driving through a yellow light as I grip the armrest. "Dad and Serena only invited us. That means big things for us. Big things for you and me. We're the perfect team. We're going to take over Kingsley Global Enterprises. You and me, sweetie."

My husband's eternal optimism is cute, and I love that he called us a team. I really want us to be a team, in everything, again. But the truth is, Ted has no idea why Richard has invited us on the trip this weekend. It could be just to toy with us, make us squirm under his all-powerful eye for a weekend. I wouldn't put it past him. I feel sorry for my husband when it comes to his father. He keeps looking for love that's often not returned—not at all. He does have it better than his siblings; from what I can tell, Ted is the golden son. But that's not saying much when it comes to Richard. That's probably one of the reasons I put up with Ted's shenanigans. He needs unconditional love from someone, and that someone, for the longest time, has been me.

“You want me back at the office? You and me, like the beginning?” I ask. Back when I was vice president of marketing and Ted was vice president of sales, we were unstoppable. We repositioned what was once a mature, stagnant company and turned Kingsley into a powerhouse. I'd like to think my quick adaptation of emerging technology played a big role. I know it did.

“Yes. Dad can't resist you—and, by extension, you and me as the face of Kingsley. It will be great,” he says. “Remember those pitches we did together? We doubled Kingsley's land acquisitions in four years, record expansion for the company at the time. We can do it again.”

As he continues his excited proclamation, I try to absorb what he's saying. We'll work together again. I want to pinch myself, but then reality sets in. I worked my way up to vice president of marketing at Kingsley before deciding to stay home and raise our twins. Does a seventeen-year employment gap disqualify me? Maybe they'd consider my volunteer experience with the food bank. I know they should.

“Would Richard value my experience with the foodbank since I'm essentially their de facto volunteer CEO?” I ask.

“Sure, of course. Marketing is at the heart of everything we do,” he says.

“I do a lot more than marketing. I’ve raised revenue tenfold, led us through a huge capital campaign that funded our new facility—and I’m good at what I do,” I say.

“I know. Besides, I’ll be by your side,” Ted says, a twinkle in his blue eyes. “Just follow my lead. And relax already.”

I take a deep breath and try not to obsess over crossing the ocean in my father-in-law’s new yacht. I remind myself he can buy anything he wants, of course, and does. He’s Richard Kingsley, scion of the Kingsley family and a rather terrifying control freak. I tell myself he will also purchase or hire the best yacht crew money can buy. We’ll be safe—we will be. But still, the seemingly beautiful Pacific Ocean is actually menacing and cold, waiting to grab anyone who innocently challenges her authority.

“Did you know there have been a lot of deaths in the water around Catalina Island? I found a list of all of them. I can’t stop reading the stories.” I pull up the Deaths on Catalina site. “Like this one. Tony the Greek. Back in 1908. He was a renowned captain, and then he just disappeared one night when he was taking a family around the island on his boat named *Zeus*. These people wake up in the morning, and they’re drifting in a storm without a captain. They have two kids. They were adrift for two days with no food or water. Can you imagine? Oh my God.”

Ted rolls his eyes. “Look at that. We made it right on time,” he says, turning in to the Newport Beach Yacht Club marina.

I attempt to meet his words with a happy face even as a shudder rolls through me. I can’t shake the dread this weekend has created in my heart. Is it because of all the scary stories I’ve read about the waters around Catalina, or is it because my life is about to be crushingly lonely and empty unless I can reconnect with my husband? Ted must want our relationship back on track, too. He

keeps talking about being partners, so that's a step in the right direction. I tell myself to enjoy the moment.

“Yes, this is going to be fun,” I say. “I love you, Ted.”

“We are a great team. Richard knows that. I can't wait to see you in a business suit again,” Ted says with a wink. He pulls to a stop and stares out the window. “Look at the size of that boat! This is going to be great. Smooth sailing from here on out.”