



First Comes Love: A Novel

By Emily Giffin

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#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • A pair of sisters find themselves at a crossroads in this dazzling new novel from the author of *Something Borrowed*, *Where We Belong*, and *The One & Only*. *First Comes Love* is a story about family, friendship, and the courage to follow your own heart—wherever that may lead.

Growing up, Josie and Meredith Garland shared a loving, if sometimes contentious, relationship. Josie was impulsive, spirited, and outgoing, Meredith hardworking, thoughtful, and reserved. When tragedy strikes, their delicate bond splinters.

Fifteen years later, Josie and Meredith are in their late thirties, following very different paths. Josie, a first grade teacher, is single—and *this close* to swearing off dating for good. What she wants more than the right guy, however, is to become a mother—a feeling that is heightened when her ex-boyfriend's daughter is assigned to her class. Determined to have the future she's always wanted, Josie decides to take matters into her own hands.

On the outside, Meredith is the model daughter with the perfect life. A successful attorney, she's married to a wonderful man, and together they're raising a beautiful four-year-old daughter. Yet lately Meredith feels dissatisfied and restless, secretly wondering if she chose the life that was expected of her rather than the one she truly desired.

As the anniversary of their tragedy looms, and painful secrets from the past begin to surface, Josie and Meredith must not only confront the issues that divide them but also come to terms with their own choices. In their journey toward understanding and forgiveness, both sisters discover that they need each other more than they knew—and that in the search for true happiness, love always comes first.

Praise for *First Comes Love*

“An engaging story of sisterly love . . . Illuminating and engrossing.”—*People*

“[Emily] Giffin delivers another emotionally honest work. . . . *First Comes*

Love is a heart-stirring novel about the many layers of sibling rivalry.”—*Associated Press*

“*First Comes Love* brings [Giffin] back with a vengeance. Tales of sisters have been at the core of other great novels, but Giffin turns that relationship upside down and makes her view a fascinating one.”—*Huffington Post*

“Moving and complex, [*First Comes Love*] proves [that Emily Giffin is] still at the top of her game.”—*Booklist*

“Giffin juggles Josie’s quest for motherhood and Meredith’s internal conflicts deftly. . . . Giffin paints a realistic portrait of the troubled and complex relationship between a pair of sisters.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“This is Giffin at her finest—a fantastic, memorable story.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“*First Comes Love* is an un-put-down-able, smart, and thoughtful novel that will make you think about the nature of family and how our past informs our present.”—*PopSugar*

“Giffin’s talent is pretty much unparalleled when it comes to the modern woman’s story about life, love and family.”—*Redbook*

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Editorial Review

Review

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“Kudos to Giffin for it takes a talented and resourceful writer to create a wealth of characters and have them all be fully described for the reader to understand and enjoy. . . . Two years is too long to have to wait for a new Emily Giffin book, but *First Comes Love* brings her back with a vengeance. Tales of sisters have been at the core of other great novels, but Giffin turns that relationship upside down and makes her view a fascinating one.”—*Huffington Post*

“This well-written and engaging story explores how relationships evolve and people can surprise us if we let them. . . . [*First Comes Love*] is sure to be a great discussion starter for book groups and a hit with [Giffin’s] many fans.”—*Library Journal*

“[A] well-written family drama.”—*Real Simple*

“Fans will be entertained by the author’s humor and satisfied by her storytelling”—*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

“Another engaging hit from Emily Giffin . . . The characters are richly developed and their situations and conflicts are compelling. . . . Very engaging, fast-paced, witty and satisfying.”—*Fredericksburg Free Lance-Star*

“In an enthrallingly emotional journey of understanding, happiness and forgiveness, *First Comes Love* is this year’s most powerful reminder to never give up on family.”—*SheKnows.com*

“With her tale of love, loss, and self-exploration, Giffin adds what will surely be another fan favorite to her repertoire. With each release, the author proves to be one of the leading ladies of the . . . genre.”—*RT Book Reviews*

“This is Giffin at her finest—a fantastic, memorable story.”—*Publishers Weekly*

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Daniel's girlfriend at the time of his death. Giffin's fans will be pleased with this fast-paced, witty, and thoughtful new offering."—*Kirkus Reviews*

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Praise for Emily Giffin

"Emily Giffin ranks as a grand master. . . . She has traversed the slippery slopes of true love, lost love, marriage, motherhood, betrayal, forgiveness and redemption that have led her to be called 'a modern-day Jane Austen.' "—*Chicago Sun-Times*

"A dependably down-to-earth, girlfriendly storyteller."—*The New York Times*

"Giffin's talent lies in taking relatable situations and injecting enough wit and suspense to make them feel fresh."—*People*

"Emily Giffin is the creator of characters so real and so enthrallingly flawed that people sometimes forget they are fictional."—*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

"When it comes to writing stories that resonate with real women, bestselling author Emily Giffin has hit her stride."—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Giffin knows a thing or two about writing a page turner."—*Southern Living*

"Giffin's writing is true, smart, and heartfelt."—*Entertainment Weekly*

About the Author

Emily Giffin is the author of seven internationally bestselling novels: *Something Borrowed*, *Something Blue*, *Baby Proof*, *Love the One You're With*, *Heart of the Matter*, *Where We Belong*, and *The One & Only*. A graduate of Wake Forest University and the University of Virginia School of Law, she lives in Atlanta with her husband and three children.

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PROLOGUE

Time is a tricky thing, Daniel said to his mother when he was still very young. When you wanted to savor something, it would speed by in a blur. When you wanted to get past something, it would drag on forever. Elaine Garland recorded the quote in her journal, because it was such an astute observation for an eight-year-old.

Much later, she would go back and read the entry, and think to herself that memories were that way, too. When you wanted to forget, everything would return in raw, brutal focus. When you wanted to remember, the details would slip away like a dream at dawn. It was that way for all of them now, though it was

something they seldom discussed, at least not with one another. Nearly fifteen years had passed, both slowly and suddenly.

It happened the day after Daniel's twenty-fifth birthday, and three days before Christmas. He was halfway through his third year of medical school at Yale, and had just returned home for the holidays following his clinical neuroscience rotation, bringing with him his girlfriend, Sophie, a beautiful, upper-crust Brit whom Daniel once called the most charming woman he'd ever met. The two had been dating for more than a year, but this was her first visit to Atlanta, as well as the first time meeting his parents and sisters. Everyone felt varying degrees of anxious, eager, hopeful. Elaine worried the most, both because she was the worrying kind and because Daniel didn't have the best track record when it came to girls. His high school sweetheart had been clingy, his college girlfriend controlling.

But within seconds of their arrival, she felt enormous relief, taking to Sophie at once. A keeper, Rob called her, clearly proud that his son not only was in medical school but also could land such an exquisite creature. Daniel's sisters approved as well, Josie dazzled by Sophie's style and beauty, openly admiring her expensive European clothes and shoes, while Meredith, who often accused her sister of being shallow, liked Sophie in spite of those trappings. Most important, they could all tell that she brought out the best in Daniel—which was saying a lot. He was, without a doubt, the shining star of their family.

Sophie earned more points the following morning when she insisted that Daniel and Rob keep their long-standing father-son birthday-breakfast Waffle House tradition. She kissed him good-bye, pushed him out the door, then helped Elaine bake a chocolate cake from scratch, another Garland tradition.

"What was Daniel like as a child?" she asked as she awkwardly stirred the batter, after confessing she was clueless in the kitchen.

Elaine thought for a moment, then said he was exactly the same now as he'd always been. The classic, driven firstborn. A perfectionist. But also sensitive and sentimental, quirky and kind. "The only real difference is his temper," she added with a laugh. "Thank goodness he grew out of that."

"Oh? He used to have a temper, did he?" Sophie asked.

Elaine nodded, then told her favorite tantrum tale—the time Daniel hit his bedroom wall with a wooden bat after Josie scribbled pink crayon graffiti on his treasured Hank Aaron card. "You can still see the plaster where it was patched," she said fondly.

"Wait. Is this the baseball card he still carries in his wallet?" Sophie asked, her accent making everything she said sound so earnest.

"That's the one," Elaine said, then went on to tell her about the home run Daniel hit the day after the incident—and how he had christened the card his good-luck charm.

That evening, they all went to Blue Ridge Grill for Daniel's birthday dinner. Looking Ivy League sophisticated, Daniel wore a jacket, silver knot cuff links (his gift from Sophie), and sleek black loafers with a long European toe that were unlike anything in Rob's preppy wardrobe. The two teased each other as they got out of the car at the valet stand: *Where the hell did you get those, Danny boy? . . . Lose the old-man tassels, Dad. . . . You're wearing enough hair gel to choke a horse. . . . At least I have hair.*

Elaine knew their banter was a sign of their closeness, and her heart swelled with affection and gratitude as they were escorted to the round table near the fireplace that Rob always requested. She wasn't sure when it had happened exactly, but her son was now a man, and very nearly a doctor, the first in their family. And it wasn't just Daniel who was thriving. They were all in a good place, she thought. Rob was doing well at work, and hadn't had a drink in three years. Their marriage wasn't perfect, but it felt solid. Josie and Meredith were works in progress, one a little too wild, the other far too moody; yet each was following her passion, studying to be a teacher and an actress, respectively.

The conversation that night was smart and lively, heavy on current events. September 11 was still a fresh wound. The war in Afghanistan was under way. Enron had just filed for bankruptcy, and Winona Ryder had shoplifted. And in news that seemed to interest only Daniel and Sophie: the Earth's record high barometric pressure had just been recorded in Mongolia—over a thousand hectopascals, a measurement that meant absolutely nothing to the rest of them but would remain lodged in Elaine's brain for years to come.

"You're such a nerd," Josie ribbed her brother at one point, though she secretly admired his intelligence. She had always relied on the force of her personality, but a girl like Sophie made her rethink things, and she vowed to get more serious about her studies in her final, fifth-year stretch of college. Meredith, too, reflected on her life that evening. She was as diligent and hardworking as her brother, but she was more of a loner than he, and often felt a void she could never quite pinpoint. Maybe it was love, she thought that night, watching Daniel with Sophie. Maybe that was what was missing.

After dinner, they went home to have cake in the dining room, Elaine pulling the good china and silver from the butler's pantry. Rob lit twenty-five candles, then they all sang off-key (except for Sophie, who had a clear soprano voice) and watched Daniel close his eyes for several seconds before blowing out the flames in just one try.

"What did you wish for?" Josie asked, the way someone always did.

Of course Daniel wouldn't say. He just smiled a secretive smile before Rob cut the cake and he opened his family presents—a leather briefcase from his parents, flannel pajamas from Josie, a coffee-table book about baseball from Meredith. They all retired a short time later, Elaine pretending that she didn't hear the creaky floorboard outside the guest room.

The next morning she awoke early to the sound of rain on the roof and Rob packing for a quick trip to Memphis, his last-ditch effort to settle a case before year-end. She got up to make him coffee and send him on his way, then went to the gym with her daughters, all of them wishing to lose five pounds, especially knowing that after the holidays, it would be ten. They came home, showered, and spent the rest of that day

shopping, fighting gridlock traffic and Lenox Square mall crowds, and getting into occasional squabbles with one another.

They returned home at dusk, just as Daniel was leaving to take Sophie to the airport for her red-eye back to London. The rain had finally cleared, but the temperatures had plummeted, and they stood in the driveway, shivering as they hugged and kissed and wished one another a very merry Christmas. As they got in the car, Sophie said a final thank you.

“We’ll see you soon,” Elaine replied, because she’d never liked saying goodbye.

About an hour later, as Elaine wrapped presents at the kitchen table, Daniel burst in the side door with a gust of cold and a trace of Sophie’s perfume. Elaine quickly drew a piece of wrapping paper over the slippers she was giving him and told him not to peek.

“I won’t,” Daniel said, shaking his head. He had never been one to peek, unlike his sisters, who prided themselves on finding the most cleverly hidden presents.

He sat at the table and sighed, looking wistful, clearly missing Sophie already.

“Where are the girls?” he asked—the way he always referred to Josie and Meredith.

“Meredith’s up in her room. . . . Josie went out . . . somewhere.”

He nodded, then helped her wrap, handing her pieces of tape or holding ribbon in place with his thumb while she tied. He wasn’t a big talker but was unusually chatty that night, and couldn’t stop gushing about Sophie. He confided that they were serious, committed to doing their surgical residencies together.

“You think she’s ‘The One’?” Elaine asked.

“I do,” he said, looking starry-eyed. “She’s so amazing . . . and I couldn’t imagine a better mother for my children.”

Elaine smiled at her son, thinking that as young and ambitious as he was, he seemed to understand what really mattered most in life. She wondered whether she and Rob deserved credit, or if he’d simply been born this way. She decided it was a little of both and kissed Daniel’s forehead before he went upstairs to shower.

On his way to his room, he passed by Meredith’s open door. She looked up and asked if she could borrow his Macy Gray CD. He went and got it for her, telling her to be careful, not to scratch it.

"I'm not Josie. I don't trash things," she said. She knew her expression was morose, but she couldn't change it, blaming PMS, the weather, and her older sister, who had pissed her off before she left the house in jeans too tight and a top too small.

"You okay?" Daniel asked her.

"What do you mean?"

"You seem sad."

"This is just my face," she said.

He sat on the edge of her bed and asked her a few more questions about her acting classes and whether she liked anyone. As in a boy. She hesitated, very nearly telling him how lonely she'd lately felt, but decided against it. So he gave up and went to take his shower. After he left, she felt guilty that she hadn't said anything about Sophie, how much she liked her. She would do that tomorrow. She would be nicer to everyone tomorrow, she told herself, closing her eyes and listening to Macy Gray singing, "I believe that fate has brought us here."

About an hour later, after his shower, Daniel reemerged in the kitchen, his mother still busy putting ribbons on the tins of homemade cheese straws she always delivered to their neighbors.

"I'm running out for a quick burger," he announced.

She glanced up at him and frowned. "With a wet head? You'll catch a cold."

He grabbed his Yale baseball cap and green plaid scarf from a hook by the door, put both on. Satisfied, she nodded, then returned her gaze to a big red bow.

"Be right back," he told her as he opened the door.

"All righty," she said, this time not looking up, not knowing that it would be the last thing she'd ever say to her son.

At Daniel's funeral, Rob talked about those final days, what a good son he had been, how much he had loved his family and friends and Sophie. He talked about how proud he and his wife were of all that Daniel had accomplished, but how that paled in comparison to their pride in his character and compassion.

“He never once, in twenty-five years, let us down,” Rob said, his voice shaking, his pauses painfully long as he tried to keep it together. “Not once.”

Later, Elaine would wonder how many in that church thought her husband was exaggerating. Of course a father is going to speak in superlatives about his dead son. Of course he’s going to paint his child as extraordinary. Yet Daniel really was extraordinary, and sometimes it actually, illogically, seemed to her that being so special had made him more susceptible to tragedy. That if Daniel had been deeply flawed, or simply a more typical, aimless, inconsiderate twenty-something, off getting drunk or having meaningless sex with forgettable girls, then maybe he’d still be alive. But he was a golden child, too good for the world.

Sometimes she even asked herself if she’d make that trade—one of the endless variations of the pointless and cruel what-if game. *What if Daniel hadn’t gone out to get that burger? What if she had insisted that she scramble him eggs instead? What if she had stalled him just long enough to tie the plaid olive-green scarf dangling around his neck, one side longer than the other? What if she had simply gone to him, kissed his unshaven cheek, said something, anything, more than all righty?*

She knows the answers. She knows that’s all it would have taken for Daniel to miss the Denali sliding on a patch of ice at the intersection of Moores Mill and Northside, less than two miles from home. And that she would never have laid eyes on that soft-spoken, gray-haired officer who appeared in their doorway some thirty minutes later, his patrol lights casting eerie red and blue flashes across the front lawn. She wouldn’t have called Rob, frantically hitting redial, redial, redial until he finally answered from the airport in Memphis. She wouldn’t have had to say those words aloud to him, or to awaken Meredith moments later, repeating the news for the second time. She wouldn’t have tried in vain to track down Josie, before she drove to Grady Hospital with one of her three children, selfishly praying for a case of mistaken identity, hoping that it was anyone but Daniel. She wouldn’t have the horrifying memory of watching her now ex-husband, when he arrived later that night, clinging to their dead son, sobbing his name, again and again and again.

Instead, in an alternate universe, the one they all futilely imagined, Daniel would be happily married to Sophie, the father of two or three children. He would be practicing medicine somewhere, likely right here in Atlanta, making a real difference, saving lives. He would be turning forty at the end of this year, an older, wiser version of the young man he had been. The kind of person who understands that nothing is as important as family. That love comes first.

They tried to remind themselves of this—of what Daniel stood for and what he would have wanted for them. Sometimes they even made choices in his memory or imagined him watching from above. But that was just something they did, and it never really eased their pain. Instead, nearly fifteen years later, he would remain gone, and they were still right there where they’d always been. Still reeling, regretting, wondering *what if*.

Chapter one

JOSIE

It is the first day of school, a symbolic and hopeful fresh start, at least that’s what I tell myself as I stand before my captive, well-scrubbed audience of ten boys and eleven girls in my J. Crew finest— gold ballet flats, gray pants, and a pink, sequined sweater set. Sitting cross-legged on the braided rug, some children

beam back at me, while others wear blank expressions, waiting without judging. It is the beauty of first graders. They are guileless, not a jaded one among them.

Odds are good that they'd heard that they'd scored in the great, mysterious teacher lottery before they even walked through my classroom door, adorned with a construction-paper maple tree, cut-outs of twenty-one personalized bluebirds, and a banner swinging from the boughs that exclaims: WELCOME TO MISS JOSIE'S NEST!

After fourteen years teaching at the same elementary school, I have a reputation as fun, energetic, and creative. I am not considered strict, but not a pushover, either. Incidentally, I am also known as the "pretty teacher," which some parents (fathers and mothers alike) seem to value as much as anything else, including straight-up intelligence, a sentiment that has always confounded and vaguely annoyed me. I mean, I know I'm not teaching quantum calculus, but I am instilling critical survival skills in children, teaching them how to add and subtract, tell time, count money, and most important, really *read*, unlocking the mystery of consonant combinations and abstract sounds, blended and pronounced as words, strung together in sentences, filling the pages of books, whether with or without pictures. It might seem like *Groundhog Day* to some, including a few of my colleagues who really need to change professions, but I am passionate about what I do, thrilled to watch things click for a new crop of children every year.

Yet amid the anticipation is always a melancholy feeling that the summer is over, coupled with a familiar prickling of self-doubt and anxiety that has marked all my first days of school, both as a teacher and as a student before that. I consider the many potential obstacles ahead, wondering how many of my kids will have ADHD or dyslexia or other garden-variety learning issues. Who will become frustrated or disheartened when they fall behind their peers? Which children will have impossible-to-please parents who will bombard me with emails and calls, make outlandish suggestions for our curriculum, or point out grammatical errors in my newsletters under the guise of constructive criticism? (No matter how many times I proofread my correspondence, it is inevitable that at some point during the year I will misspell a word or misplace an apostrophe, mistakes that somehow seem more egregious from a teacher than, say, a lawyer or doctor.)

Then there is the disturbing matter of Edie Carlisle, the firstborn of my most significant ex, Will Carlisle. Will and I broke up years ago—eight to be exact—but I'm not yet over him, at least not completely. And I simply can't believe that his little girl has been assigned to *my* class, a fact I try in vain to forget as I launch into my script, a variation of what I say every year.

Hello, boys and girls! My name is Miss Josie! I grew up right here in Atlanta and graduated from the University of Georgia. Go Dawgs! I love animals and have a rescue dog named Revis. I have one sister and a beautiful four-year-old niece named Harper. My favorite color is pink, like my sweater. My hobbies include swimming, reading, baking cookies, dancing, and playing board games. I'm good at keeping secrets and being a trustworthy friend. I hope you will all be good friends to one another this year. I'm so excited to get to know each and every one of you and I feel very lucky to be your teacher!

It sounded pretty good, the exuberant delivery elevating it to a solid A, even though I could hear the annotated version in my head, which went something like this:

Every time I say “Miss Josie” I think it sounds like a stripper—a job I fleetingly considered taking one summer in college because strippers make a hell of a lot more money than waitresses. And teachers, for that matter. I have a dog, and a sister named Meredith. She drives me nuts, and I would mostly avoid her altogether if it weren’t for my niece, Harper. I used to have an older brother, but he died in a car accident a long time ago, something I don’t like to talk about, especially to my students. I think the subject of one’s favorite color is supremely boring because it really doesn’t tell you much of anything (color for what—a car or a purse or your bedroom walls?), but for some inexplicable reason, you all seem hyper-focused on it, so I’m going to say pink because roughly half of you will be pleased with my choice and at least a third of you will marvel over the coincidence of sharing the same favorite hue. Swimming isn’t really a hobby, just a thing I sometimes do at the Y in an attempt to keep off the weight that I’m prone to gaining around my midsection (from all the cookies I bake, then eat), something you seem not to notice or at least not to judge. I do enjoy board games, but I’d rather play drinking games with my friends—or go dancing with them (did I mention I could have been a stripper fifteen pounds ago?). I can keep secrets, especially my own, which is a good thing, because if your parents knew some of my skeletons, they might send around a petition to have me fired. Friendship means everything to me because I’m thirty-seven and can’t find a decent man to marry, which is depressing both because I don’t want to be alone and because I adore children more than anything else in the world. I know I’m running out of time, at least to birth my own. Please be nice to one another this year because the one thing I will not tolerate on my watch is mean girl (or boy) escapades—though fortunately those dynamics don’t really kick in until next year, yet another reason to teach the first grade. I’m so excited to get to know each and every one of you, and that includes you, Edie Carlisle. Did your father tell you that he dumped me right before he married your mother and had you? I will do my best not to hold this against you, but please show a little mercy and keep your happy-home anecdotes to a minimum.

I smile down at their eager, shining faces and say, “So? Do you have any questions for me?”

Four hands shoot into the air, and as I consider who is the least likely to ask the one query I have come to loathe, a fidgety boy with messy hair and ruddy cheeks blurts it out: Do you have a husband?

Three seconds flat. A new record. Congrats, Wesley, I think, glancing at his laminated name tag which I made over the weekend, and making a mental note to work into the curriculum that a bare left ring finger means please do not ask questions on the topic of marriage. Perhaps I could squeeze it in between our weather unit and the introduction to the metric system.

I force a bigger, brighter smile, doing my best to ignore the knot in my chest. “No, Wesley. I’m not married. Maybe one day! And let’s try to remember to raise our hands before we call out. Like this,” I say, raising my hand for a visual demonstration. “Okay?”

Wesley’s head bobs up and down while I reassure myself that surely Edie knows nothing about my relationship with her father. After all, any knowledge of his romantic past would indicate inappropriate mothering—and I’m sure that Andrea (pronounced on- DRAY-ah) Carlisle has immaculate judgment to go along with her impeccable taste, which I’ve gleaned from stalking her Pinterest page. *Gluten-free snacks! Homemade Halloween costumes! Post-pregnancy workouts you can do with your child! Paint colors for a serene master suite!* Thank God the woman’s Instagram and Facebook profiles are set to private—a small blessing from the social media gods.

As if on cue, Edie raises her hand as high as it will go, elbow straight, fingers erect and skyward. She is holding her breath, her little chest puffed out, her bright blue eyes wide and unblinking. I look right past her, though she is seated front and center, and field a question from the back of the rug about my favorite food (pizza, unfortunately) and then my second favorite color (yawn).

“Hmmm. Maybe blue. Or green. Or orange. Orange is good,” I stall while doing a quick scan of Edie’s features, searching for a resemblance to Will. She has his olive complexion and his mouth, her lower lip significantly fuller than the upper one, but the rest of her features belong to her mother, who often appears in the pages of *The Atlantian*, either cozied up to Will or expertly posing, hand at her waist, elbow jutting out, with one of her couture-clad gal pals. I’ve only seen her in person once, about four years ago, as she strolled down the cereal aisle of Whole Foods, pushing her precious Lilly Pulitzer-clad toddler in her well-organized, produce-rich cart. (Even back then, I knew from the usual two degrees of Buckhead separation that her child’s name was Edie, short for Eden, Andrea’s maiden name.) Wearing black Lululemon workout gear and flip-flops, Andrea looked effortlessly chic. Her skin glowed from a recent workout or facial (perhaps both); her limbs were long and toned; her thick, wavy blond ponytail was threaded through a Telluride baseball cap. I covertly trailed her for three aisles, torturing myself with her self-possessed air, graceful gait, and the deliberate way she checked labels while murmuring nurturing commentary to her daughter. I hated myself for being so mesmerized with her every move, and felt something approaching shame when I plucked her truffle oil of choice from the shelf, as if that single overpriced ingredient might bring me one step closer to the life she had, the one I so coveted.

Not much has changed since that day, other than the addition of Edie’s little brother, Owen (with whom Andrea was actually five weeks pregnant at the time, I later calculated). I catch myself staring now at Edie, who is propping her raised hand up with the other, demonstrating that she has as much staying power as her mother. Reminding myself that it isn’t Edie’s fault that her father left me, or that I never learned what to do with that damn truffle oil and really had no business shopping at Whole Foods, aka Whole Paycheck, in the first place, I force myself to acknowledge her. “Yes? Edie?”

“Um,” she says, her expression blank, her eyes darting around the room as her hand falls limply to her lap. “Umm . . . I forgot what I was going to say.”

“That’s okay. Take your time,” I say, smiling, a portrait of patience.

Her face lights up as it comes to her. “Oh, yeah! Um, do you have a boyfriend?” Edie asks, throwing salt on my wounds.

I stare back at her for a paranoid beat, then make the sick split-second decision to lie.

“Yes! Yes, I *do* have a boyfriend,” I announce, lifting my chin a few inches, clasping my hands together. “And he’s amazing. Just amazing.”

“What’s his name?” Edie fires back.

“Jack,” I say; it has been my favorite boy name since I first watched *Titanic*. I am also a sucker for all things Kennedy, choosing to focus on the Camelot version of JFK rather than the sordid Marilyn Monroe side.

“What’s his last name?” Edie presses.

“Prince. Jack Prince,” I say, then add a wistful footnote. “Unfortunately, Jack doesn’t live in Atlanta.”

“Where does he live?” asks a girl named Fiona, whose brutally short bangs do not take into account her cowlick. An oversize bow perches atop her head, seeming to mock the unfortunate back-to-school cut.

“Africa,” I say. “Kenya to be exact. He’s a doctor in the Peace Corps. Working at a refugee camp.”

The lie feels therapeutic, as does my silent afterthought: *Take that, Edie. Your daddy’s in wealth management, a euphemism for playing golf with his blue-blood friends while occasionally shuffling around family money they never earned.*

“Has Jack ever seen a lion?” asks a miniature boy named Frederick with a soft voice but perfect diction. I feel instantly protective of wee Freddie, projecting that he will become a favorite. (No matter what they tell you, all teachers have pets.)

“I’m not sure, Frederick. I’ll ask Jack that question later when we Skype—which we do every day—and get back to you tomorrow,” I say.

Because after all, it is *way* tougher to answer a yes-no question about lion spotting than it is to manufacture an entire transcontinental relationship.

A barrage of frantic questions ensues about whether Jack has had any run-ins with tigers or alligators, hippos or monkeys. First graders love a good tangent. So do I, actually, and as tempting as it

is to keep talking about my do-gooding beau, I know it’s time to take control of the situation and actually teach.

The rest of the day hums along smoothly, as I memorize my students’ names and get to know their personalities. I even mostly manage to forget about Will until Edie loses her bottom left front tooth while eating her carrots and hummus at snack time. She’s already missing her bottom right, yet she is as jubilant as a tooth virgin as her classmates gather around to examine the bloody trophy. A veteran at loose and missing teeth, both in the actual pulling and in the recovery and storage, I help her rinse out the gap in her gum, then clean the tiny tooth, stowing it safely in one of the Ziploc baggies that I keep in my desk for such occasions. I pull out a pink Post-it note from another drawer and write “for the Tooth Fairy,” then draw a heart and slide the note into the baggie, sealing it.

“What do you think she’ll bring you?” I ask, gazing down at my plump heart, then looking right into Edie’s pretty eyes.

“Same thing she brought me for this tooth,” Edie says, pointing to the inside of her mouth as she thrusts her tongue into the hole. Her voice is low and raspy—the kind that will one day drive guys crazy.

“And what was that?” I ask, wondering about her mother’s voice, knowing that I’ll be unable to resist gathering intelligence all year long. I have already asked several questions about her little brother, learning that Owen’s nickname is O, that he has an airplane-motif bedroom, and that he “goes to time-out a lot.”

“She brought me a dollar coin,” Edie replies, which gives me a fresh pang, along with a wave of disappointment that I can’t paint Will and Andrea as overindulgent parents. Most Buckhead tooth fairies *vastly* overpay, but a dollar coin is both an appropriate amount and more satisfying than a crumpled bill. *Damn.*

As I hand the baggie to Edie, I regret my heart on the Post-it, worried that her parents will read into the artwork. But it is too late for a re-do, as Edie is already gripping it with a proud smile. She then marches over to her cubby and stows it in the back pocket of her monogrammed pink butterfly backpack. I tell myself that it’s no big deal, that Andrea and Will are likely too busy and too happy to scrutinize something so trivial. More important, I tell myself that I am a good teacher and a good person—and that sweet Edie deserves that heart even though her father shattered mine.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Irma Patterson:

Have you spare time to get a day? What do you do when you have much more or little spare time? Yep, you can choose the suitable activity intended for spend your time. Any person spent their particular spare time to take a stroll, shopping, or went to the actual Mall. How about open or even read a book called First Comes Love: A Novel? Maybe it is to become best activity for you. You already know beside you can spend your time together with your favorite's book, you can wiser than before. Do you agree with it is opinion or you have some other opinion?

Clarence Jenkins:

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