

Evvie Drake Starts Over

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First

GO NOW, OR *you'll never go*, Evvie warned herself.

She didn't want to be there when he got home from work. It was cowardly, yes, but she didn't relish the whole *thing* it would turn into, the whole *mess*. He'd say, not unreasonably, that leaving with no warning at all was a little dramatic. After all this time, he would wonder, why now? He wouldn't know that, today exactly, Evvie had been with him for half her life. She'd figured it out on the back of a grocery receipt a few months earlier, and then she had circled this date on their wall calendar in red. He'd walked by it over and over and never once asked her about it. If she let the day pass, she thought she might start to disappear, cell by cell, bone by bone, replaced by someone who looked like her but wasn't.

She popped the trunk of her Honda and stuffed a fat envelope of cash into the glove compartment. This part might be silly. She didn't think Tim would cancel the credit cards or close the accounts. But her life had a lot of "just in case" in it, and she needed money just in case she didn't know him as well as she thought. It wouldn't be the first time she'd stumbled while trying to predict him.

She went into the house and opened the hall closet. She pulled

down the worn, hard-sided blue suitcase with the stickers all over it—PARIS, LONDON. It was light, and it rattled from inside as she made her way down the porch steps and pushed it into the backseat of the car. The sounds of her feet on the driveway pavement tempted her to smile.

There was more to retrieve from the house, but she slid into the front seat and closed the door, leaning back against the headrest with her eyes closed. *Holy shit, I'm really going.* In a few hours, she would be in some chain hotel with scratchy bedspreads and a ragtag cable lineup. She would buy a bottle of wine, or a box of it, and she'd lie dead center in the king-sized bed and drink and wiggle her toes and read for as long as she wanted. But then she began to wonder what she would do tomorrow, and there wasn't time for that, so she took a deep breath and got out of the car to get the rest of her things. She was walking up the driveway when her phone rang.

The ringtone always startled her a little bit—a metallic arpeggio that sounded like an electric harp. The call was from the hospital in Camden where Tim sometimes saw patients. She didn't want to talk to him, but she needed to know if he would be home early.

"Hello?"

"May I speak to Eveleth Drake?"

It was not Tim.

"This is Evvie."

"Mrs. Drake, my name is Colleen Marshall, I'm a nurse at Camden Hospital. I'm calling because Dr. Drake was brought into our ER about half an hour ago. He's been in a car accident."

A thump in Evvie's heart traveled out to her fingertips. For one tenth of one second, she wanted to tell the nurse to call Tim's parents, because she was just leaving him.

"Oh my God," she said instead. "Is he all right?"

The pause was so long she could hear a doctor being paged in the background. "He's badly hurt. You should come in just as soon as you can. Do you know where we're located?"

“Yes,” she choked out. “I’ll be there in, ah . . . probably twenty minutes.”

Evvie’s hands shook as she tapped out a text to Andy. *Tim was in a car accident. Bad. Camden Hospital. Can you tell my dad?*

She turned her key in the ignition and pulled out of her driveway, heading toward Camden. She later figured, from her phone and all the paperwork, that he probably died while she was waiting at the stoplight at Chisholm Street, a block from the church where they got married.

FALL



One

EVVIE LAY AWAKE on the floor in the dark. More specifically, on the floor of the empty little apartment that jutted awkwardly from the back of her house into the yard. She was there because, upstairs in her own bed, she'd had another dream where Tim was still alive.

Evvie's Scandinavian grandmother had claimed that young women dream about the husbands they want, old women dream about the husbands they wanted, and only the luckiest women, for a moment in the middle, dream about the husbands they've got. But even accounting for the narrow ambitions this formulation allowed, Evvie's dreams about Tim were not what her nana had in mind.

He was always angry at her for leaving. *Do you see what happened?* he would say, again and again. He'd felt so close this time that she'd dreamed his cinnamon-gum breath and the little vein on his forehead, and she was afraid if she turned over and went back to sleep, he'd still be there. So she'd thrown off the blankets and made her way down to the first floor of the house that had always been too big and was *much* too big now. Descending the wide curved staircase still felt like transgressing, like sneaking down to the front desk of a hotel late at night to ask for extra towels. She'd stopped in the kitchen to put on

a pot of water for tea, come directly into the apartment, and stretched out on her back to wait.

When they'd first bought the house—when *he'd* first bought the house—they'd planned to rent out the apartment. But they never got around to it, so Evvie had painted it her favorite shade of peacock blue and used it like a treehouse: *KEEP OUT*. It was still her favorite place in the house and would remain so, unless Tim's ghost started haunting it just to say he'd noticed a few little bubbles in the paint, and it would really look better if she did it over.

Nice, she'd thought to herself when that thought first intruded. *Welcome to Maine's most ghoulish comedy club. Here is a little joke about how my husband's ghost is kind of an asshole. And about how I am a monster.*

It was a little after four in the morning. Flat on her back in her T-shirt and boxers, she took rhythmic breaths, trying to slow the pounding in her temples and belly and wrists. The house felt empty of air and was totally silent except for the clock that had ticked out *pick-a-pick-a* for thirty-five years, first in her parents' kitchen and now in hers. In the dark apartment, she felt so little of anything, except the prickle of the carpet on her skin, that it was like not being anywhere at all. It was like lying directly on top of the earth.

Evvie thought from time to time about moving in here. Someone else could have the house, that big kitchen and the bedrooms upstairs, the carved banister and the slick staircase where she'd once slipped and gotten a deep purple bruise on her hip. She could live here, stretched out on her back in the dark, thinking all her worst thoughts, eating peanut butter sandwiches and listening to the radio like the power was out forever.

The kettle whistled from the kitchen, so she stood and went to turn it off. She took down one of the two public-radio fundraising mugs from the cabinet, leaving behind the one with the thin coat of dust on its upturned bottom. The tag on her chamomile teabag said, *There is no trouble that a good cup of tea can't solve*. It sounded like

what a gentleman on *Downton Abbey* would say right before his wife got an impacted tooth and elegantly perished in bed.

Blowing ripples in her tea, Evvie went into the living room where there was somewhere to sit and curled up on the deep-green love seat. There was a *Sports Illustrated* addressed to Tim sticking out of the pile of mail on the coffee table, and she paged through it by the wedge of light from the kitchen: the winding down of baseball season, the gearing up of football season, an update on a college gymnast who was quitting to be a doctor, and a profile of a Yankees pitcher who woke up one day and couldn't pitch anymore. That last one was under a fat all-caps headline: "HOW TO BECOME A HEAD CASE." "Way ahead of you," she muttered, and stuck the magazine at the bottom of the pile.

By the clock on the cable box, it was 4:23 A.M. She closed her eyes. It had been almost a year since Tim died, and she still couldn't do anything at all sometimes, because she was so consumed by not missing him. She could fill up whole rooms with how it felt to be the only person who knew that she barely loved him when she'd listened to him snoring lightly on the last night he was alive. *Monster, monster*, she thought. *Monster, monster*.

Two

“LILLY CHUCKED HER milk at the floor.” Andy took a sip of coffee. “I’m in trouble with her teacher.”

Andy and Evvie’s Saturday breakfasts at the Compass Café had started four years ago when he got divorced, and they’d never stopped. Some husbands might have minded, but Tim hadn’t. “I have plenty of work to do, so as long as you’re not complaining to him about me, I don’t care,” he’d said.

Andy would have the ham and cheese omelet, and Evvie would have the blueberry pancakes, a side of bacon, and a large orange juice. They drank at least two pots of coffee and reviewed the weeks past and ahead. They stayed as the place filled and emptied and filled again. They eyeballed the tourists and tipped extravagantly, and locals they knew wandered by and said something about the weather or asked what Andy’s little girls were up to. And, for this last year or so, people would stretch their necks to peek, or happen to stand at a politely investigatory distance, to check on Evvie and satisfy themselves, just *make sure*, that the death of her husband hadn’t turned her into a shriveled little husk, sitting at home humming ballads to

Tim's favorite shirt as she rocked back and forth, clutching it to her chest.

"Why did Lilly chuck her milk at the floor?" Lilly was Andy's younger daughter, who had recently started kindergarten.

"Good question. The teacher says she just threw it. No warning. Yelled, 'Milk is melted yogurt!'"

Evvie smiled. She could picture it, including the face full of fury Lilly had worn on and off since infancy. "I see how she got there, I guess."

"So the teacher tells me she gave her a time out. I say, 'That seems fine.' And the teacher says, 'I think it would also be good to follow up at home about respect.' I say, 'Respect for you?' And she says, 'Well, yes, but also for property.' And I'm thinking, *Are we talking about teaching my daughter respect for milk?* Because I can't figure out what else she wants me to teach her. What she means by 'respect for property.'"

"Capitalism?"

"Maybe. Anyway, I'm working on it. I'm working on teaching Lilly to have more respect for her teacher. And respect for milk."

"Lacto . . . reverence? Lactoreverence? Is that something?"

"No." Andy paused to push his coffee cup out to get a refill from Marnie, a young mom with a grown-out stripe of purple in her hair who had been their regular server for a couple of years. "I'll tell you, she was a biter when she was little, but I don't know what this is. Even when she's loving all over me, she's *so mad*. I went to pick her up the other day, and she goes, 'Dad! Hug me!' But she shrieks it, like a howler monkey. Very take-charge, if you want to think about it that way, like she's . . ."

"Jerry Orbach."

He frowned. "In *Dirty Dancing*?"

"In *Law & Order*."

"Fine, Jerry Orbach." He paused. "My point is she's bullheaded, which I think is great, but I don't want to be bailing her out of jail when she's nine."

Evvie smiled again. "I can't wait for her teenage years."

“She can come live with you.”

“Oh, no. I’ll do periods and bras and birth control, but I live alone.”

“Well, for now,” he said. “I meant to ask you, are you still thinking about renting out the apartment?”

She chewed on a piece of bacon. “Maybe. Eventually.”

“You’re not using it, right?”

“Not except to lie on the floor in the middle of the night and contemplate my existence.” He stopped chewing and his eyebrows popped up. “I’m kidding,” she said. He wouldn’t understand. He’d just worry. “I never go in there.”

“I was thinking, you know, it’s money you’re leaving on the table if you let it sit empty. Finance-wise.” The logic was impeccable. It was probably a trap.

“I suppose that’s true,” she said suspiciously.

“It is true.” He pointed. “Your sleeve is in the syrup.”

She dabbed at a sticky dot on the cuff of her shirt. “Do you want me to rent it to someone in particular? Are you evicting Rose now?”

“Ha.” He didn’t laugh. “No, I think the kids should be at least ten before they’re fully independent.” He took a slug of coffee. “By the way, before I forget, Rose has a dance recital a week from tomorrow, and she told me to tell you that she’d like you to come over and do ‘the hair with the swirly braids.’” Rose was seven, and she did not trust her father with her recital hair or her Matchbox cars.

“She’s a planner, that one.”

“The other day she called me ‘Father,’” he said. “Like we’re on *Little House on the Prairie*.”

Evvie frowned. “That’s ‘Pa,’ though.”

“Who am I thinking of? Who’s called ‘Father’?”

“Priests,” she said. “And Captain von Trapp.”

“So can I tell her you’re coming?”

“Of course,” Evvie said. “Now tell me who you want to stash in the apartment.”

“Right, right. I actually have a friend who’s going to be in town for a few months, and he’s looking for a place to live.”

She frowned. "What friend? Somebody I know?"

"My friend Dean."

Her eyes got a little wider. "Baseball Dean?" She knew one of Andy's friends was a pitcher, but she'd never met him.

"Not anymore," he said. "He retired recently. He's going to come up here and take it easy for a while. Enjoy a little of our fine salt air and all that."

"I always forget professional athletes retire in different decades from normal people. What is he, mid-thirties? And he retired? Must be nice."

"It's a little more complicated than that. Which you would know if I didn't steal all your issues of *Sports Illustrated*."

"I probably still wouldn't read them," she admitted. "There's a new one at the house, by the way."

"I know," he said. "Dean's in it."

She snapped her fingers. "Wait. Baseball Dean is the head case?"

Andy squinted at her. "He's not a head case. He lost his arm. I mean, not his *arm* arm; he lost his pitching arm. He has both arms. And he's not crazy."

"What's wrong with him?"

"Well, he was a very good pitcher, and then all of a sudden, he was a very bad pitcher. Other than that, no idea."

Just then, Diane Marsten stopped by the table. She ran the thrift store Esther's Attic, which had been her mother's before it was hers. Diane often ate at the Compass on Saturdays with her husband, sometimes in the unsanctioned company of her little dog, Ziggy, who didn't seem to be around to thumb his tiny nose at the health code today. "Morning, you two."

"Hey, Diane," Andy said. "How are things?"

"Can't complain." This, Evvie knew from experience, was not true. Diane turned and put a hand on her shoulder. "Good to see you out and about."

Evvie shot a look at Andy, then screwed on her smile. "Thank you, Diane. It's good to see you, too." Diane provided a few updates about

neighbors with ailments (politely vague to the point of futility, like “troubles with his system”) or personal issues (same, like “the business with the one daughter”), then went off to enjoy her French toast. “Honestly,” Evvie sighed.

“She cares about you, Ev.”

“I know. I know. But they all . . . hover. ‘Out and about,’ she says, like I had the flu. They act like all I’m doing is”—she switched to a hard whisper—“sitting at home grieving.”

“She said it was good to see you.”

Evvie shook her head. “It’s the *sympathy*. It’s all the pats on the arm, all the soft voices. That tree-planting thing at the clinic is in a couple of weeks, and it’s going to be even worse then. Everybody’s just going to sit there and watch me cry.”

“You don’t have to cry. Everybody knows how much you loved him.”

In fact, everybody didn’t know. Andy didn’t know.

“I don’t get it,” Evvie said. “Nobody pities Tessa Vasco because her husband died and she’s not out partying all the time.”

“Tessa Vasco is ninety-two.”

“So?”

“So you are *not* ninety-two. And unlike Tessa Vasco, you don’t need a walker or an oxygen tank to go to the grocery store.” He wiped his mouth. “And not to pile on, but I feel like I have to point out that Tessa does water aerobics.”

“Why would you know that?”

“Because my mom also does water aerobics. She’s only sixty-nine, though. Little less embarrassing for you.”

Evvie put one hand up. “All right. It was a bad example.”

“So can I get back to trying to sell you on a tenant?”

She looked around the restaurant, then back at Andy. “Why does a professional athlete want to rent an apartment in my house? I thought they lived . . . I don’t know, on private islands or something.”

“Dean lives in Manhattan. World’s least private island. He says he

can't get a cup of coffee without somebody taking his picture. He wants to get out of the city for a while, and I told him I thought up here, people would leave him alone. He's not staying long enough to buy a place, but he's staying too long for a hotel. I can't put him up because I have the kids. I thought maybe he could have the apartment. That way, I'd know he wasn't renting from somebody who was going to Snapchat him in the bathroom or sell his trash to TMZ. You'd get some money coming in, and maybe you'd be friends. Win-win. I told him maybe you'd take \$800 a month."

It would take a big bite out of the bills. "\$800 would be okay."

"So, yes?"

She looked into her coffee cup, with its lazy hairline curl of cream still on top. "So, bring him by the house." Evvie sensed a tiny puff of exasperation, and she tensed. "I've never met him, Andy. What do you expect me to say?"

"You'll like him," Andy said. "I like him."

Evvie straightened her back. "You like a lot of people. Who knows what smelly college drinking buddies you would drag through my kitchen if I let you."

"I didn't meet him drinking. I met him in Cub Scouts. He was in my wedding, Ev, you've seen the pictures. And if you remember, he's the one who sent me and the girls to Disneyland after the divorce. He's not going to steal your jewelry."

Evvie smiled. "I don't own much jewelry."

"Well, he's not going to steal your . . . cozy sweaters with holes in them, whatever."

She frowned. "Low blow. Look, like I said, bring him by and let me meet him. If it seems like a good fit, I'll be glad to have the money." She thought briefly about the overdue bills that were rubber-banded together in the kitchen drawer. That was what a year without a doctor's income would do. She could put somebody in the apartment, leave the door closed, collect the rent, and she might not even notice he was there.

Andy sighed. “Thank you. He needs . . . I don’t know, quiet. Plus, like I said, it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world if you had company.”

“I have company,” she said. “I’m sitting here with company.”

“Company other than me. And my kids. And your dad. You know”—he gestured at her with a fork full of eggs—“it’s not good to be alone too much. It’ll make you weird.” Andy’s sandy, wavy hair and narrow frame made him look like he was in an indie band, perpetually about to put on something plaid and pose for the cover of an album where he played a lot of washboard. But the dad in him ran deep, seven years in.

“I’m fine. I’m not weird. If I get bored, I’ll get Tessa Vasco to take me to a Zumba class.” He looked dubious. “Andy, I’m fine. I’ll meet your friend.” Suddenly, Evvie narrowed her eyes at him. “This isn’t a setup, is it?”

Andy laughed through a bite of his breakfast, swallowed, and washed everything down with coffee. “That’s what he said, too: ‘Is this a setup?’” She didn’t laugh. “It’s not a setup. After all, I think my mom still hopes I’m going to marry you, which definitely won’t happen if I set you up with former professional athletes.”

“Oh, no,” Evvie said. “Would you tell her already?”

“Tell her what?”

“‘Tell her what.’ Tell her we earnestly tried to look meaningfully at each other. And that it was the least sexy thing that has happened between two humans, maybe ever.”

“She wouldn’t believe me,” he said.

“She would if she’d been there,” Evvie said.

“Oh, when you cracked up laughing? That’s the truth.”

“We both cracked up laughing.”

“You laughed harder,” he said, accusing her with the points of his fork.

“Okay, I’ll give you that.”