

# One

It started out like any other Sunday, as Annabel imagined most Sundays did—even the ones that ultimately bore the burden of cataclysmic news. She peeled one eyelid open, then the next, and sat upright. Already she was disappointed that any lazy tendencies, any desire to roll over and go back to sleep, had been supplanted by a breathless urgency to commence the household chores that confronted her.

Then there was Henry, lying next to her on his back, with his arms folded across his chest, one hand on top of the other, as his lungs filled with air and exhaled with the crackle of a sputtering carburetor. Deviated septum, he insisted. Extra thirty pounds was more like it. She watched silently as his nose twitched and his lips quivered. He barked a phlegmy cough and rolled onto his side to face her, his heavy arm landing on the pillow where her head had been just moments earlier.

Emily Liebert

Sleeping in the same bed with Henry had become a competitive sport—every man for himself. It was all about who could strategically gather the most sizable chunk of mutual real estate while, at the same time, guarding his or her own. All the while making certain not to relinquish an extra inch or two of sheet or comforter. How many times had Annabel awakened in the middle of the night, shivering beneath the frigid squalls of air-conditioning—because Henry insisted on air-conditioning 365 days a year—and been forced to wrestle her way back into the cocooning warmth that her husband had been monopolizing during their precious hours of REM? Too many times to count.

She wondered absently how long he would lie there if she let him. If she didn't launch herself out of bed with the determination of an Olympic pole vaulter to vie for a gold medal in domestic efficiency. There was always so much to *get done*. Seemingly endless check boxes to tick in her eternal pursuit to finally reach a point where she could relax.

That morning, in a rare state of affairs, her resolve was dulled, if only slightly, by the absence of their twin five-year-old boys, Harper and Hudson—names for which Annabel had endured interminable eye rolls and disapproving shakes of the head. Henry had wanted to know why they couldn't call them Ben and Scott or Matt and Jason. He'd even agreed, albeit begrudgingly, to Dylan and Taylor, until two other babies in the hospital nursery—two girls—had assumed the newly minted unisex monikers. In the end she'd convinced him that having sons with the same first initial as their father was an honor that he should embrace rather than rebuff. And then she'd prayed he didn't suggest Harry and Harvey or Hank and Howard.

Annabel plodded doggedly toward the bathroom, intimidated

## Some Women

by the aberrant silence. Typically by this point, Harper would have been up for at least an hour. He'd have come stumbling into their room, barely alert, crawled into his spot between the two of them, and curled his body into hers. "Snuggle," he'd have uttered, almost imperceptibly, and she'd have cuddled him close, dotting his plump, rosy cheek with the softest kisses. Faultless indulgence at its finest.

No less than thirty minutes later, Hudson would have made his grand entrance, bursting onto the scene by catapulting all thirty-eight pounds of himself on top of everyone, thereby instigating indignant shrieks from his brother, grumbles of protest from his father, and roguish laughter from himself.

Harper and Hudson. Angel and devil. As different as any two children could be, especially identical twins, although they barely looked alike to her. Harper was Annabel's lover-not-fighter. Her sensitive thinker. The one who, at four years old, had reminded Henry to buy her flowers on Mother's Day. Not because he expected a reward or even a pat on the back for it, but because he'd wanted to make sure she was happy. He'd wanted to make sure that all of the efforts she put forth on any given day, the many strands of silk she wove to construct the intricate web that was their life, didn't go unnoticed. Hudson, on the other hand, was a silent manipulator. A child who had your number before you knew there was a number to be had. A child who could use any weakness to his advantage while making you believe *he* was doing *you* a favor. To know Hudson was to work for Hudson, whether you'd voluntarily initiated your employment or not.

Still, now, with the boys at her parents' house, where they'd slept the previous night so she and Henry could attend his assistant, Liberty's, wedding—*and he thinks Harper and Hudson are odd*

Emily Liebert

*names*—it was hard not to miss them, devious behavior and all. That was the funny thing about children. When they were around, you wanted peace and quiet. A mere moment to yourself. You felt absolutely desperate to go more than three minutes without hearing the word *Mooooooooom* echoing throughout the house. To go to the bathroom or—if luck was really on your side—to take an uninterrupted shower. Yet, when they were absent, no matter how infrequently that happened, it felt as though someone had amputated your limb and left a stinging open wound in its place. And you craved them like a cold beer on a blistering summer day.

Annabel brushed her teeth and splashed tepid water on her face before patting it dry and massaging a thick white cream around her eyes. *Deflates the puffiness*, read the bottle, a promise she trusted it would live up to. After all, no one wants to look like she's squinting until midafternoon. She pulled her robe off the hook by the shower, slid her arms into the sleeves, wrapped it around her body, and cinched it at her waist. Her waist, which was no longer as cinchable as it used to be. Unfortunately, when she'd attempted to zip up her favorite black dress for Liberty's big day, she'd had the unwelcome realization that any efforts to regain her prebaby figure had been infuriatingly futile. She'd danced. She'd jiggled. She'd even tried Vaseline—a tip she'd read in one of the women's magazines in her dentist's office. Until, finally, yesterday she'd resigned herself to donning a remotely flattering navy blue maternity dress, which she'd hoped no one would actually notice was a maternity dress. Unfortunately, Gary Blank's wife—who was, in fact, pregnant—had been wearing a strikingly similar one in a lighter shade of blue. Even more depressing was the fact that she'd carried it off far better than Annabel had.

## Some Women

Minutes later, she found herself downstairs in the kitchen, prepping the kids' backpacks for school the following day, making their lunches, loading and running the dishwasher, finishing a basket of laundry, ordering the week's groceries online, and emptying the garbage cans—which she'd reminded Henry to take care of before going to bed. Again, no such luck. As the clock struck nine, her groggy husband finally made his way downstairs, rubbing his eyes with his fists, then stretching his arms above his head before emanating an onerous moan. Apparently, all that rest could really take it out of a guy.

“Look who it is.” He'd barely come to life and already she was anxious for him to pitch in. “Did you make the bed?” *Seriously, let's get to the point.*

“Nope,” he called from the family room, where she found him reclining on the couch with the television remote already in hand.

“Do you really need a rest after eight hours of sleep?” Hands on hips. *Hello? Do you see that? Hands. On. Hips.* Men could be exasperatingly oblivious.

“The race is on.”

“What race?”

“NASCAR. It's just another forty-five minutes. *Relax.*”

There it was. The state of being that purportedly held the key to her infinite happiness: relaxation. Except how exactly was she supposed to kick up her feet and chill out when there were still three more loads of laundry to be done? Not to mention dinner to queue up for that evening—for them and the boys. Because God forbid everyone in the house should eat the same thing. Actually, it would be remarkable if even two people ate the same thing. Harper subsisted solely on a diet of peanut butter and jelly, fruit,

Emily Liebert

and spaghetti with *no sauce*, while Hudson—who was allergic to peanut butter—preferred chicken, apples, and carrots at every meal. Every meal, including breakfast. Henry was on a diet, which he'd been on since Nixon was in the White House, so he was off carbs completely, save for the family-sized bags of Peanut M&M's he would devour after she'd gone to sleep at night. And although Annabel would have loved to shun bread, pasta, and rice for all eternity—perhaps then she'd be able to zip up that black dress—she'd found they were integral to both her sanity and her well-being.

“Right. Sure, I'll just do that. When does our slave arrive? Oh, wait a minute—she's here! And it's me!” Annabel laughed. Henry did not.

“Come on, stop it. No one thinks you're a slave,” Henry grouched, focusing his attention on a pack of shiny, sleek cars whipping around a track. It didn't make any sense to her. They were driving. That was all. Fine, so it was really, really fast driving. But where was the ball? The puck? The goal? There wasn't even a gritty fistfight to flinch through.

“Do you have any idea how much I've already done today and how much there still is to do before my parents bring the kids back in a few hours?” Because once that happened, the house would turn into a circus. Quite literally. Okay, minus the live animals. Though Hudson had been begging for three dogs. Annabel wasn't sure why one wouldn't suffice, but he was pretty damn set on three. And, in thinking about it, hey, maybe they could charge for spectators. *Come one! Come all! Front row seats to see the crazy show at the Ford house!* She could even be convinced to throw in some microwave popcorn.

## Some Women

“I know, Annabel. You remind me every day.” She didn’t see him roll his eyes, but was fairly certain he had.

“I do not.” Arms crossed. Affronted scowl.

“Whatever you say.”

“Don’t do that.”

“What?” He sat up now, visibly riled.

“Placate me.”

“How about this? Why don’t you tell me what it will take for you to be quiet and let me watch my race?”

“Don’t tell me to be quiet! All I’m trying to do is make sure everything gets done.”

“I understand that, but does everything really have to be done before ten in the morning? We have the whole day.”

“We do not have the whole day.” Why didn’t he see that? Didn’t he know that it was impossible to even complete a thought when the kids were around? “Maybe, just maybe, you could set aside your race. And, wait—here’s a revolutionary idea: help out!”

“Help with what?” Henry got up and tossed the remote onto the couch, as if to indicate *Now I’m up. I’m actually standing on my own two feet. I’m just that irritated. I’ve also paused the all-important race and thrown the remote. So, clearly, I mean business.*

“Everything.”

“Annabel,” he exhaled dramatically. “Unless you have something specific that needs to be done right now, please get off my back for once.”

*For once.* “Well, you could start by making our bed.”

“I’ll make it when I go up to take a shower.”

“Yes, of course. Why do now what you could do later?” *When we both know I’ll have done it already.*

Emily Liebert

“For fuck’s sake.” He stomped back up the stairs, and for the next twenty minutes all she could hear was a lot of thumping about. Honestly, it wasn’t that hard to make the bed.

By the time Henry made a reappearance, Annabel had shoveled down half a bagel with butter and was surprised to find him showered, dressed, and toting a large suitcase. *Surprise vacation!* Maybe her parents were keeping the kids for another week while they jetted off to Cabo San Lucas for fish tacos and margaritas. She could already feel the warm breeze against her pallid skin and imagine her auburn highlights brightening beneath the blazing sun.

“Are you going somewhere?” She arched an eyebrow, which reminded her that she desperately needed to get them waxed. Hell, if they were heading to the beach, she’d throw in a bikini wax for good measure.

“I’m leaving.” He looked down at their mahogany-stained hardwood floor.

“Leaving for what?”

“Nothing, Annabel. I’m just leaving,” he said soberly, lifting his gaze to meet hers.

“You can’t just run off for the night because you’re annoyed that I want you to help out more around here rather than loiter about all day.”

“It’s not just that.” He shook his head. “And it’s not just for the night.”

“Excuse me?” Instantly, she felt like her lungs had been pierced, stifling her ability to take in air.

“You’re a miserable person, and I’ve had enough.”



## Some Women

“*Miserable?* So, what? You want a *divorce?*” The word hung in the stagnant air like a marionette waiting for someone to coax it to life.

He nodded somberly.

“And you’ve packed all your things in the past half hour? You’ve just decided to destroy our life because you didn’t want to make the bed? That’s rich, Henry. Really rich.”

“I’ve had the bag ready for some time.” *Knife. Heart. All manner of blood and guts.*

“*Some time?*” Was her throat closing up? Was this what it felt like to be asphyxiated? “Exactly how long is *some time?*”

“I don’t know, Annabel. Five, maybe six months?”

“Six months! You’ve been thinking about leaving me for *half a year?*” She shook her head frenetically. “We had sex last night!” Fine, so their last romp had probably been around the time he’d packed his divorce bag, but still. She suddenly felt icky. Had he been thinking about alternate accommodations as he’d nibbled on her nipples?

“On some level.”

“This is ridiculous. I’m sorry but this is . . . It’s just ridiculous.” He inched toward the door, and panic set in. “What about the kids?”

“I’ll call you later. We’ll figure everything out.” He was calm. Cool. Collected. He’d thought this through. Henry always thought things through. Important things.

“Wait.” She lunged toward him. She wanted to pin him to the ground with her bare hands. To tell him he had to stay. To tell him that they were a family. And that no family was happy all the time. Marriages are work. Kids are tougher work. But they could

Emily Liebert

work harder. She could work harder for all of them. Perhaps she had been complaining too much lately. It was just that she'd felt so exhausted and alone in her attempt to keep everyone's lives running smoothly. She'd force herself to relax more. Yes, that was it. Forced relaxation. Only none of those thoughts came out. Instead she said, "Are your brown slacks in that bag?"

"What?" He furrowed his brow.

"They've been missing for months. I thought maybe . . ."

"Jesus, Annabel." He shook his head disbelievingly.

"I'm just saying!" She'd searched high and low for those brown slacks. Why didn't he appreciate that?

"I'll be in touch." Henry walked toward the door without so much as a perfunctory kiss good-bye. Before leaving, he turned toward her. He was changing his mind. She knew it. He was going to sink his exhausted body back down into that sofa, put up his feet, and settle into his comfortable life once more. "And, Annabel, please don't try to manage this the way you do everything else. My mind is made up."

His mind was made up? What about her mind? Ten years of marriage and, just like that, he was prepared to toss her in the trash like a used tissue?

That was when it hit her. Beyond a shadow of a doubt. Henry was cheating. Because, honestly, why else would anyone leave someone who'd devoted her entire life to her family? Someone who worked hard every day with the interests of her husband and children at the forefront of her mind.

Suddenly Annabel had never been surer of anything in her life. The only question was, who was he cheating with?