

Chapter 1: Man Down

Back from dropping Kate off at the airport, David took one step into the apartment that was now his and his alone, and stopped.

In a corner across the small living room stood a stack of moving boxes, all packed and taped shut. On the top and sides of each box Kate had written her name.

As his car keys slipped from his hand, David walked to the middle of the room.

“Oh my God,” he murmured. “What have I done?”

He turned a slow circle, taking in everything around him.

Kate’s boxes.

The behemoth of a ’60s-era television he and Kate had come across on a curb with a FREE sign taped to it, which, after wheeling it home, they found still worked pretty well if they wiggled its dials, slapped it just right, and then held their breath as they tiptoed back to their couch. (Kate had named the thing Lucy, because, she said, “It looks just like a TV Lucy and Ricky would have owned—and then I guess just watched *themselves* on.”)

The stereo that, on the day they set out to finally buy a real bed (so they would no longer have to sleep on the blankets they rolled out onto their bedroom floor every night), they had suddenly agreed they needed so much more than even a bed.

The door to their bedroom.

The wall furnace that, on the rare Southern California mornings cold enough to require its services, made loud cracking sounds on its way to becoming hot enough to emit the comforting smell that he and Kate both loved, which they called Eau de’ Burning Dust.

The pine dining table they’d bought at Sears to christen their new home, in the center of which Kate always took such pleasure in keeping a vase of fresh flowers, or a bowl of fruit.

Their couch, an extravaganza of royal blue velvet they’d found at a thrift store, where they had tried to imagine who would buy it (“The interior decorator for the Munsters?” David guessed. “A seriously backsliding furniture molester?”)—right up until they themselves sat down on it.

The wall, entirely blank now save for random nail holes and the evenly spaced picture hooks that had so recently held framed photographs taken by Kate, each one of which, as far as David was concerned, proved her a genius.

And then her boxes again.

"No, no, no," David said. "This cannot be happening. It can't be. It can't be."

But it was, and because it was his legs gave out beneath him. He fell to his knees.

He covered his face with his hands.

"Did I *do* this?" he wailed, rocking back and forth, repeating the question over and over again.

Having no choice in the matter, he surrendered to the shock and grief that coiled itself into a great fist and rhythmically and steadily pounded his midsection.

When that storm finally subsided, he was left curled up on the green shag carpet, perfectly still.

After a long while he rolled over onto his back.

He again covered his face with his hands. Into the infinite black vacuum, he screamed, "What have I done?"

But, strictly speaking, it was a superfluous question.

For he knew perfectly well what he had done.

One week before, standing right where he was now lying, he had told Kate that he wanted to end their relationship, that it was over between them.

And so she had packed her things and flown back to San Francisco, there to resume the rich and rewarding artist's life she had been living before joining forces with him, which she had done because, as she had once put it to him while they were walking on the beach together, "I never dreamed anyone like you actually existed."

His asking "What have I done?" was like a man on a boat who points a cannon straight down, fires it, and then can't understand why he's drowning.

The question to which David needed an answer was not what he had done.

It was why he had done it.