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Short Bio:

Rachel Hodges was born in the Philippines, grew up in New Hampshire and now lives in Florida with her husband and two children. *Gingerly* is her first novel.

Long Bio:

Rachel Hodges was born in the Philippines to missionary parents and has lived most of her life in New Hampshire. In her early twenties, she traveled the world with a small-scale performing arts troupe before settling back in New England. She worked in childcare and with the disabled, until her karate chopping husband stole her heart with ninja-like speed. Now living in northern Florida, Rachel is raising her two children. When she is not writing, she can be found wandering through art museums and humming away at her sewing machine. *Gingerly* is her first novel.

Product Information:

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Author: Rachel Hodges

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Blurb:

Twenty-seven-year-old Caitlyn McIntyre is one year out of a bad marriage, two weeks late on rent for her crappy apartment, and three days from losing her job.

The redhead from Vermont thought she'd gotten past the tragedies in her life when she escaped to beautiful Saint Simons after her divorce. But Caitlyn's curls, piled into a tangled frizz in the oppressive Georgia heat, are as unmanageable as her life as she finds herself facing not only unemployment, but also having to give up the sewing business and life she'd fought hard to establish. Her fears are allayed when Nick, a real estate developer on Saint Simons Island, is in sudden need of a nanny for his autistic son. But the chemistry between Caitlyn and Nick adds to Caitlyn's problems, especially when the rumors of Nick being a womanizer appear to be true. Over the course of two years, Caitlyn takes on an anxious preschooler, a foreign exchange student, the entitlement of the wealthy, and her growing attraction to her boss.

GINGERLY is an uplifting and often humorous novel about the paths women must take to find their identity and build a life they're proud of.

Reviews:

“On the surface, *Gingerly* could be taken as a fun beach-read love story, but scratch the surface and there's wonderful insight into the world of an autistic child that I wish everyone could read.”
—Mimi Gentry, Carrolton, GA. Author of *The Cowboy Way*, Longstreet Press.

“Her characters are very likable and relatable and you find yourself caring deeply for them. By the end of the story, *Gingerly*, I felt as though Caitlyn were a dear friend and I had a hard time saying goodbye.” –Christiana Morris, Jonestown, TX.

“If you want a book that you literally can’t put down from start to finish, you have to pick up your copy of *Gingerly*! Warning: you’ll fall in love with Nick.” –Emily S., Lebanon, NH

Sample Questions and Answers:

When did you realize you wanted to be a writer?

When I was ten years old, I began to write down the stories that filled my mind. They were full of mayhem and gore, and usually involved a brave, beautiful little girl who saved the day. I started a novel when I was fourteen or fifteen and quit a few chapters in. I’d been reading books by Tolstoy, Tolkien and L.M. Montgomery, and thought if I couldn’t write nearly as well as they, why bother trying? The desire to write books never went away, though I tried to stifle it. It wasn’t until I was going stir-crazy as a stay-at-home mom to toddlers that I realized I needed to write.

How long did it take you to write *Gingerly*?

That’s difficult to say. I began work on it four years ago, but was so busy with my young children, taking online college classes, and trying to start a sewing business, I didn’t get much writing done. We also moved from New Hampshire to Massachusetts during that time. I didn’t begin working on it in earnest until about two years ago, and had to stop for a few months while we moved from Massachusetts to Florida to be closer to my husband’s parents. I’ve thought I was done many times in the past year, only to realize it needed more revisions.

What genre is your book?

Women’s Contemporary Fiction, also known as “Chick Lit”. Some authors don’t prefer the latter term because of its sexist connotations. I personally don’t mind, because I grew up in Southern California when “chick” was used as a term of endearment. My babysitter, a sweet valley girl named Martha, used to call my sisters and I “chicks” while painting our fingernails and making us popcorn. We loved it. Despite the genre, there is no reason why men can’t enjoy this book, too.

What has been the most challenging thing about writing *Gingerly*?

I have Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), and that presents difficulties. I’ll start researching something online and get sidetracked. Next thing I know, I’ll be watching a music video and dancing along. As if my brain isn’t enough of a problem, my young children hate to see me typing and do whatever they can to distract me. I have to constantly fight to stay focused. Another challenge was creating a main character on the autism spectrum. Aiden, the little boy, is closely modeled after my own son at four. I was concerned that the story would focus too much on his behaviors and not enough on his personality. I became almost paralyzed with worry that other autistic people might view it as an oversimplified or unfair portrayal of children with special needs. I worried about what my son would think, reading it years later. Would he feel

embarrassed, like he'd been reduced to a long list of symptoms? I had to remind myself that all I could do was my best, and that I could only write what I knew. In the end, I think I managed to capture some of the essence of who he was for others to enjoy.

Why did you set the book in Saint Simons?

My husband grew up not far from Saint Simons, and we visited his family and the island often. When I started the book, we were living in New England, which is lovely in the spring, summer and fall, but cold and desolate in the winter. Saint Simons and Jekyll, with their pristine beaches and friendly atmosphere, are beautiful places to think of during the long winter months. I used to daydream about buying a home on the Golden Isles, and that worked its way into my story.

Are any of the characters based on real people?

Aiden is based on my son at four. The character of Nick is loosely based on my own husband, give or take a few million dollars. Whenever I was at a loss as to what Nick would say, I'd ask him for suggestions. Like Nick, my husband is kind, thoughtful and nurturing. Women sometimes ask me if he has a brother! Then there's Hildegard, the exchange student. She is loosely based on Reinhilde, the Belgian exchange student we had six years ago. Their personalities are similar, but Reinhilde was more mature and much easier to get along with. She's still a big part of her family and we treasure our visits.

There were other characters who were, to an extent, inspired by friends. Nick's mother, Barbara, reminds me of my own. Elaine is a compilation of several catty women I've known over the years who shall remain nameless. I can also truthfully say I've known men who were every bit as misogynistic and entitled as Greg and Matt. Other than that, the rest is pure fiction.

Did anything in the book happen to you in real life?

Our exchange student sometimes Skyped with her cats like Hildegard did in the book. My son used to get upset like Aiden if his special toy car went missing. People have made the same assumptions about my son as they did about Aiden (i.e. refusing to accept his diagnosis, assuming he was "gifted" in some other area to "compensate"), but unlike in the story, most of those people were well-intentioned.

I did visit a plantation that was not unlike the first one Caitlyn toured, and I felt the same way about it.

Why is your book called *Gingerly*?

To do something gingerly is to move carefully, usually to avoid getting hurt. Caitlyn has had more than her fair share of unhealthy relationships, so she is extremely cautious around men. *Gingerly* is also a bit of a pun, because Caitlyn's hair is red, and red-haired people are frequently called "gingers".

What was your favorite part to write, and why?

It's hard to choose a favorite part, but it's probably when Caitlyn, Nick and Aiden go to Paris. I had the pleasure of meeting up with Reinhilde there two years ago. I imagined how my children would react to some of the things I was seeing, and wrote that into the story. I could have stayed for months, but couldn't leave my young children for more than a few days. In writing about Paris, I got to visit again in my imagination, and spend as much time as I wanted. I also enjoyed

writing about sewing. Sewing is my second favorite pastime. If I couldn't sew as much while focusing on the book, at least I could write about it.

What was your least favorite part to write, and why?

It was harder than I expected to write about Caitlyn's PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). I know a thing or two about that. I would empathize with her so, I would find my chest tightening and remember things I hadn't thought about in years. I'd thought it might be cathartic to write about someone else going through it, but it wasn't. I would have to get a hug from my husband or go for a long walk to begin to feel okay again.

Is Gingerly appropriate reading material for a young teen or my conservative grandmother?

Probably. At last count, there were four instances of relatively mild swearing. There aren't any sex scenes—my family is going to read this! While there is some violence, it isn't gratuitous. The characters have flaws and don't always make the wisest choices. Overall, the book is uplifting without being too precious. If Gingerly was a movie, it would be rated PG; maybe PG-13. If in doubt, read it first.

What are some of the novel's themes?

A recurring theme is remaining true to your standards, regardless of how others react. Another theme is how the past shapes the way we view the present. A violent past can make a safe harbor seem fraught with danger. We might romanticize a shameful history in order to feel better about where we are today. And sometimes, past betrayals leave us unlikely to ever trust again.

Are you writing anything else?

Yes. I'm well into a rough draft about a tech-savvy young woman who is coming to terms with her drug-addicted mother, a vivacious hiker who has been missing for two years, and a handsome Italian car salesman who aches for the daughter who was never really his. I'm not sure if it's a mystery, a romance, a thriller, or all three. It's set in Cornish, New Hampshire and Amherst, Massachusetts, places I've lived near and loved visiting.

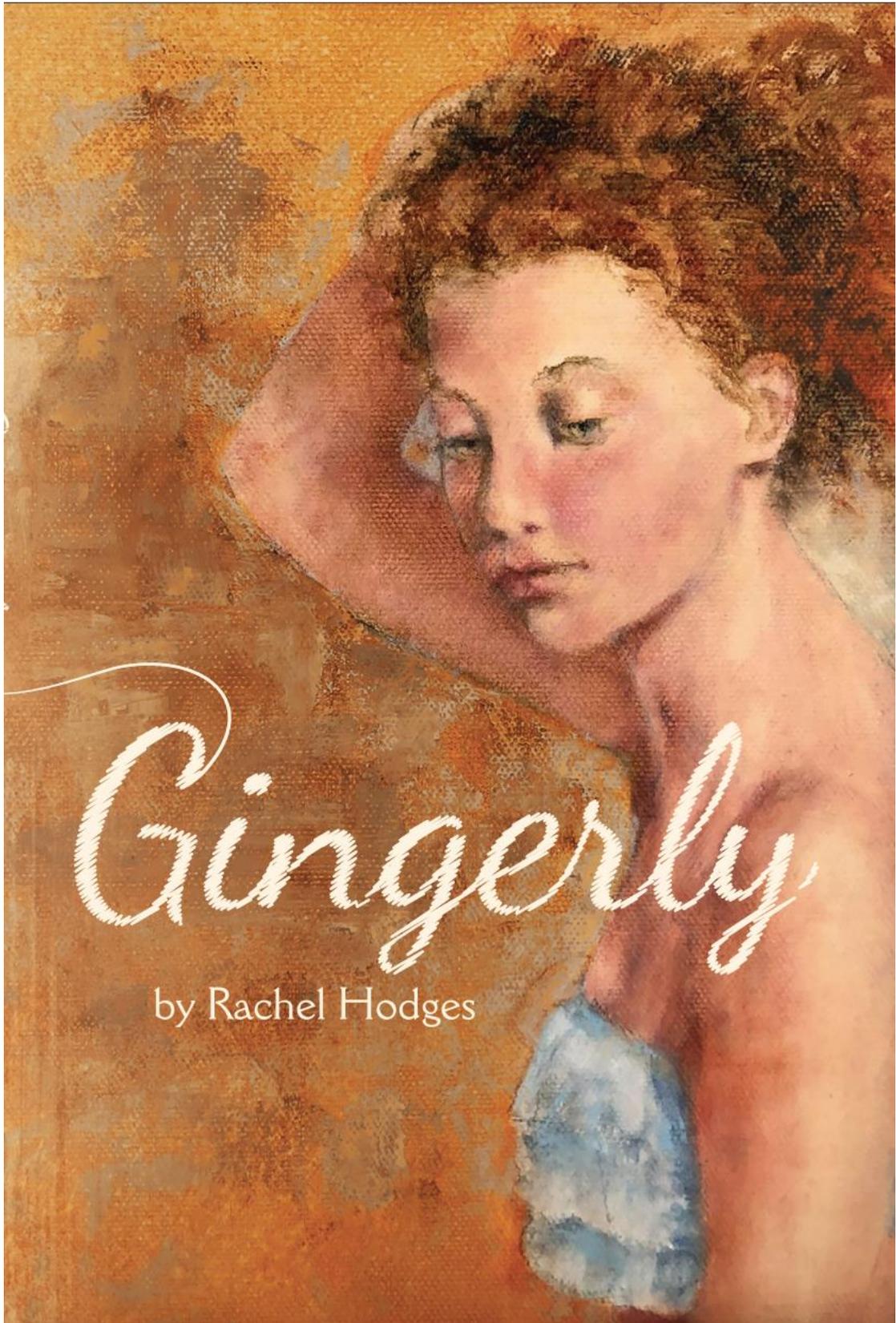
What do you do when you get writers block?

I usually tootle around and start a sewing project I may or may not finish. When I'm having what I call "a good adulting day", I overcome writer's block by jotting down details about the characters: what motivates them, what annoys them, their middle names, favorite colors, childhood fears, etc. Most of that never makes it into the book, but it reacquaints me with my characters and gets the creative juices flowing.

What advice would you give to writers out there?

Your book is not your baby. The less you view it as an extension of yourself, the more clearly you can see what it needs. If you can't separate your identity from your work, even the most helpful criticism will seem like a personal insult. Don't let someone's opinion of your writing define you.

First Chapter:



Gingerly

by Rachel Hodges

CHAPTER 1

Unfortunately, Catelynn, we won't need your services next year after all. We wish you the best of luck in your next position and apologize again for any inconvenience we may have caused.

Caitlyn McIntyre reread the last two lines of the email she'd received an hour ago until she had them memorized. *We won't need your services next year after all.* She was so screwed. Her life, her plans for the future, everything, all obliterated by one passive-aggressive email that hadn't even spelled her name right. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

There were only four days left before Dunbar Creek Preschool closed for the year, and then Caitlyn would be out of a job. Her apartment's lease was about to expire, and, a few weeks ago, when her job prospects were bright and shining, she had been persuaded to host an exchange student from Belgium for the upcoming school year. She and her future exchange student, a seventeen-year-old senior named Hildegarde, had already exchanged emails and introduced themselves via video chat. Hildegarde was extremely excited, and Caitlyn was very much dreading their video chat that evening, during which she would have to admit she couldn't afford to host her after all. The exchange student program would be unable to find another host family for her on such short notice. She would be too old for the program next year.

I should never have agreed to take her on, she thought, tugging anxiously at her tangled red curls. *If I hadn't, she would be safely placed with a nice, stable family, perhaps with teenaged children of their own.* Caitlyn sunk down in her threadbare armchair and bit her fingernails. Only yesterday, she'd had a good job to look forward to as soon as this one ended.

She'd all but signed the contract to work as an assistant to a special needs child in an upper crust private school on Sea Island. The pay would have been significantly more than she was making at her current job, and she could have afforded a much nicer apartment than the cramped one she was currently inhabiting—and paying too much for—over Ms. Jillian's garage. Granted, her tiny, unattractive apartment *was* on Saint Simons Island in southern Georgia. Saint Simons, though small, was about as close to her idea of heaven on earth as a place could be. It had been a safe harbor after her shipwreck of a marriage. The wind rippling over the vast expanse of salt marshes never failed to smooth her ruffled emotions. When she took time to sit on the beach, listening to the laughing gulls and watching the sandpipers scurry, her painful memories ebbed away with the tide.

In her anxiety over the email, she forgot to do anything with her hair before hopping on her bike and pedaling the three miles to work. It billowed about her head in unprecedented heights, grazing low-hanging tree branches festooned with Spanish moss. A breeze cooled her hot cheeks while offering her salty whiffs of the ocean mingled with ladylike jasmine from neighbors' yards. Roses peeped at her through wrought-iron fences as she pedaled by well-manicured lawns. Retirees out working in their gardens raised friendly hands and called out "G'mornin'!" whether they knew her or not, and joggers smiled and nodded. Even the birds in the trees seemed to chirp cheerfully at her. This morning, she barely noticed.

She parked her bike, walked into the classroom, and greeted the head teacher, Mrs. Hastings. The bright sunshine sluiced through the shuttered windows, highlighting a bit of Spanish moss that clung to her curls.

"Let me get that for you, dear," said Mrs. Hastings, pulling it out with a maternal gesture.

“Mm, thanks,” Caitlyn murmured, distractedly. She mechanically prepared the day’s craft projects, cataloging every place she could think of that might have job openings.

Caitlyn continued to worry even as the children arrived. Most of them, not endowed with more perception than the average four-year-old, paid no attention to the wrinkle developing between her eyebrows, and ran to the toy boxes for a few moments of unstructured play. One tiny boy, however, with large, almond-shaped blue eyes, looked up at her. “Miss McIntyre is sad,” he stated flatly. “Miss McIntyre is sad.”

“No, I’m not sad, Aiden,” she replied, manufacturing a smile. “I’m fine. Go play with the fire engines.”

The round-faced little fellow looked sternly at her. “Miss McIntyre is sad,” he insisted.

“Well, maybe I am a little worried,” she admitted. “That’s different than sad. I’ll be okay, though.” It was no use trying to deceive Aiden. He had autism, which manifested itself by hampering his ability to communicate easily, but his ability to sense others’ feelings was very sharp indeed.

Aiden’s face crumpled. “Don’t be a sad Miss McIntyre!” he pleaded. He was like a sponge. If people were happy around him, he reveled in their joy. If his companions were sad or anxious, he quickly managed to become more so than they. Caitlyn often worried about the little guy. His empathy levels were off the charts.

“I won’t be sad.” She wrapped her arms around the boy. “If you give me a hug, I’ll be a glad Miss McIntyre.” Aiden giggled and gave her a squeeze. She breathed in the sweet smell of shampoo that clung to his short blonde curls. “Oooh!” she squealed, hugging him tight. “I love your hugs! Your magic hugs are making me happy again!”

Aiden squirmed away, overwhelmed by having made her laugh. His fingers splayed out and vibrated back and forth in pure joy, like he was sprinkling glitter from the tips. Caitlyn privately called them his “jazz hands”. She smiled after him. The motherless little boy held a special place in her heart. She wanted to scoop him up and cover him with kisses every time he looked at her. She didn’t, of course, because it wouldn’t exactly have been professional behavior, even at a preschool. The few things he said made it clear he had an active imagination and tender heart. He rarely made eye contact with others, but when he did, they felt as though they had been paid a high compliment. It was surprising how much the other children liked him, given that he hardly spoke to anyone. When Aiden looked at her, she felt as though she’d inhaled some bracing mountain air. When he smiled, it was like watching a beautiful flower unfold. Caitlyn had worked with children most of her adult life, having nannied for two families and served as a paraprofessional at two elementary schools. She’d loved many children before, but none quite so much as this mysterious little boy with the enormous blue eyes. She was going to miss him terribly when the school year ended.

She went through her day, trying not to worry about her looming unemployment and upcoming conversation with Hildegard. Would she manage to find a decent job on time to get a new apartment? Would she be able to talk her current landlord into letting her stay a few more weeks if she didn’t find a new job on time? Caitlyn wasn’t so sure about that. She was already a little behind on this month’s rent, thanks to car troubles. She could afford up to two more months of rent without a paycheck, if she lived off ramen noodles, she reasoned. If she failed to find employment, she could pile her belongings into her less than reliable 1999 Chevrolet, drive back to Vermont, and throw herself on the mercy of friends and family. She had many connections in her hometown and would likely find a job in short order. However, her ex-husband still lived

there. Caitlyn had her reasons to avoid him. A pale pink scar below her left eyebrow testified to that. She could almost hear his voice in her head, saying “I knew you’d never make it on your own,” followed by that mocking laugh of his that used to make her shrivel inside. No, she could never return in defeat.

Moreover, she had already put down roots in Saint Simons and hoped to grow even more acquainted with it than she had in the past year. Even though she kept busy with work and sewing for her side business, she still managed to find time every week to go biking on the palmetto-lined trails or go walking along the shores at sunset. Everything seemed gentler here. The cries of the gulls were more muted than on Northern coastlines, and the sunlight was softly diffused through Spanish moss instead of glaring directly at the people below. Even the sea itself was politer here than in most other places. It smelled of salt with just a hint of brine, reminding Caitlyn of saltwater taffy. Here, low waves gently kissed the shore. Children could play in them without being knocked over. True, there were dangerous riptides to look out for, but they respectfully made their presence known. They were easy to spot, like long shimmering lesions, usually a good way off from the shore. And pristine Jekyll Island, just a quick drive over the concourse, had a driftwood-covered beach she loved to daydream on and marshes she hadn’t yet kayaked through. Just one year didn’t seem nearly enough to devote to the Golden Isles. She sighed, and then noticed Aiden looking at her with concern.

She forced herself to be cheerful and focus on the tasks at hand. She wiped slimy noses, set up easels, washed sticky little hands, hung dripping paintings to dry, swept up sequins, and reminded Zoë to cough into her elbow, for the tenth time. She helped children glue dried beans on pieces of construction paper, then oohed and ahed over their artistic abilities. She hustled little Cole to the bathroom in the nick of time. Lydia did not make it to the bathroom on time and

needed consolation after soiling herself. Caitlyn patiently answered Aiden's question of "What kind of car do you drive?" half a dozen times. She waited with the children on the playground for their parents or nannies to pick them up.

She was about to grab her things and go talk to the principal about the possibility for staff openings next year when Mrs. Hastings stopped her.

"I know you're ready to leave, but could you watch Aiden until his ride gets here?"

"Well, I..."

"I have a meeting about staff cutbacks," she said. "Apparently the district is looking to downsize all 'unnecessary' positions. You're lucky you're secure somewhere else. I swear, this administration doesn't understand the value of aides."

Caitlyn swallowed hard. So much for talking to the principal. "Sure. I can stay with him."

"Thank you, dear. Nick said he'd just be a few minutes late."

"Oh?" said Caitlyn, acutely conscious of the way her pulse picked up speed at the mention of Aiden's father. Usually Aiden was picked up by his nanny, Amy, a pretty and energetic young woman whom she liked but instinctively felt was too flighty to be entrusted with such a sensitive child.

"It's no problem, Mrs. Hastings. I love getting to spend a little extra time with Aiden."

Mrs. Hastings smiled knowingly. "And I don't know any woman who minds an impromptu chat with Aiden's single father."

Caitlyn blushed and waved her off as she went to push Aiden on the swings. She had thought her coworkers had forgotten all about their little flirtation at the beginning of the school year. Apparently, they hadn't.

Romance had been the furthest thing from Caitlyn's mind when she started working at Dunbar Creek, but all that changed the day Nick Dawson dropped Aiden off at preschool, two weeks into the school year. When he walked in, tall and broad-shouldered next to his tiny son, she had a strange feeling in her chest and couldn't seem to draw a deep enough breath. Aiden led his father over to introduce him to "my Miss McIntyre", and Nick's grey-green eyes had lit up with undeniable interest. She'd felt flattered and alarmed at the same time. Her divorce wasn't yet finalized. Ryan had been dragging his feet to rack up the attorney fees, which he could afford and she couldn't. She had only started to recover from the nightmare that had been her marriage—only begun to feel her confidence and sense of self return—and she still felt fragile. Why should she trust this man, even if he had a smile that went straight to her heart like his son did? She told herself to be careful and focus on putting herself back together.

Nick was not easily deterred. For the next few weeks, he relieved his nanny of drop off duty, and even volunteered in the classroom a few mornings. He maneuvered to speak with Caitlyn every chance he could, which wasn't difficult because Aiden was constantly clinging to her hand. He was thoughtful and witty and Caitlyn found herself falling despite herself.

"You've got some glitter on your face," Nick told her one crisp October morning. He had been helping her set out a picnic for the preschoolers beneath the oak trees of Massengale Park. The sweet smell of graham crackers and apple juice filled the space between them. He ran a tissue across her cheek as though she were one of the children, and her legs went wobbly. His eyes held hers as his fingers gently swept away a piece of glitter he claimed was on her lower lip. "Got it," he whispered, moving closer. He brushed against her and all the tiny hairs on her arm stood to attention. She tried to say something, but nothing would come out. Nick was bending his head and leaning in. He smelled like oranges and clove buds. She felt her chin lifting and—good

Lord, what was she doing? She jerked away and ran blindly to the public bathrooms, leaving a bewildered Nick to set up the picnic by himself.

She sank down on the cold concrete and put her head between her knees. Her heart was beating so wildly, it hurt. She had to calm down; had to think. Deep breaths. This felt like it was happening too fast, but was it really? She was unable to deny she was drawn to him like a magnet. Her divorce would be finalized soon. Maybe she wasn't ready, but was anyone ever fully ready for a relationship? Nick had such kind eyes and was clearly a loving father. She felt he would be careful with her.

The kids would be arriving for their picnic at any moment. She forced herself to walk out of the bathroom. It took her eyes a moment to adjust to the bright sunlight, and when they did, she spotted Nick leaning against a tall oak tree. He straightened up when he saw her and smiled apologetically. "You okay? I didn't mean to make you feel rushed. I just like you is all."

"I know." A smile spread across her face as she walked with him toward the children who were running to the picnic tables. As long as Nick was willing to take things slow, why shouldn't she open her heart again?

A snippet of conversation the following morning caused it to snap firmly closed. Caitlyn had slipped behind the auditorium's stage curtain in search of a child's missing sneaker when she overheard the janitors speaking.

"Have you seen the tail on the new preschool aide? I'd like a piece of that."

Caitlyn froze, flushing angrily. She recognized the voice of Tripp, a gangly young man prone to arrogance and ogling.

"Good luck," said the other, a man in his fifties named Jim. "I hear Caitlyn's a good girl. She goes to my sister's church."

Tripp jangled his keys. “Hmm. I’d like to get her on her knees.”

“Stand in line. Nick Dawson has his sights set on her.”

Tripp swore. “I wish I was rich instead of good-looking. I don’t stand a chance.”

“I wouldn’t worry. You know how his type goes through women. She’s the flavor of the month. Someone else will come along and distract him, and she’ll be tossed aside. She’ll feel so badly after that, she might even go out with a loser like you!”

“Don’t count on it, gentlemen.” Caitlyn stepped out from behind the curtain, smiling as the men’s faces turned a dull red. Head held high, she sauntered from the room. Once out of their sight, she clenched her fists. She would be nobody’s “flavor of the month”. If Nick was the type to be easily distracted by other women, who needed him? When he asked her to join him for ice cream at afternoon pick-up, she turned him down without hesitating. Hurt and confusion spread across his face, but he responded graciously and hurried away with his son. Aiden’s nanny went back to picking him up most days and she saw much less of Nick.

She had a little trouble stifling her attraction to him on the days he did pick up his son, but at least she was in good company. Nick’s handsome features attracted every female with a pulse. The other single aides frequently giggled over him in the break room, which Caitlyn found grating. She kept conversation with him light and friendly, and as long as she didn’t look at him too long or think about him too often, she was fine.