

Rules of Love and Grammar

Chapter One

*A noun is a person, place, or thing.
Bad luck comes in threes.*

The sound of hammering on the roof wakes me, and for a moment I don't remember where I am. I glance at the white coverlet, the pink rosebuds on the wallpaper, the jar of sea glass on the dresser, and I remember I'm not in my apartment in Manhattan. I'm in my old room, in Dorset, Connecticut, in the house where I grew up, in a bed with a mattress that feels much too hard.

It's Thursday, and if it were a normal Thursday, I'd be getting up and going to work. But my job of four years is gone, eliminated in last Friday's corporate reorganization. If it were a normal Thursday, I'd be looking forward to spending the weekend with Scott, maybe in the Hamptons. But Scott's gone, too. He's fallen out of love with me and in love with a paralegal in his office—another reorganization. I should be back in my apartment, grieving over my losses, licking my wounds, but I can't even do that. Yesterday, a chunk of my ceiling collapsed from a water leak and I had to evacuate, probably for three weeks. So, here I am—jobless, homeless, and single. All I want to do is sleep through the rest of my life. And somebody is banging on the roof.

I head down the back stairs and into the kitchen, where the copper pots hang over the island like a constellation and my mother's collection of blue and white Staffordshire china gleams in the corner cabinet. Through the bank of windows, I see the long stretch of lawn that slopes gently toward the rocks and sedges. The waters of Long Island Sound flash and sparkle in the sun, and a salty breeze sings through the window screens. A lone kayaker skims by, his oar dipping in and out of the water.

"Anybody home?"

The house is empty.

I look at the wooden countertop, at the usual clutter of papers and magazines and unopened mail. Leaning against the toaster is a note from Mom, written in her wide, slanted architect's lettering. *GRACE, GONE TO DEAL WITH THE FLOWERS AND THE CAKE. SEE YOU AFER WORK.* The flowers and cake are for my father's sixty-fifth birthday party, which takes place here in two weeks and to which my mother has invited a hundred and thirty people.

The hammering continues, driving me down the hall, toward the front door, the old pine floorboards creaking under my feet. A small pile of books rests on the bottom of the staircase banister, where the mahogany ends in a swirl. Wallace Stevens, W. H. Auden, e. e. cummings, Emily Dickinson. Dad must be teaching his modern poetry master class this summer.

Each year he swears it's going to be his last year teaching, but then he lets the university talk him into doing it *one more time*. I don't think they'll ever really let him go. It was even a huge deal five years ago when he said he wanted to step down as head of the English Department, give up his administrative responsibilities, and return to just being a professor. From their shocked reactions, you'd think he'd told them he was going to open a strip club.

Outside, the June morning is warm. The dew on the grass dampens the soles of my feet as I step onto the lawn. The air smells dank, like seaweed and oysters and mussels, a very New England smell.

Two men are on the roof, tool belts slung low on their hips. "Excuse me!" I yell. They peer down at me, and I realize I haven't even brushed my hair. I give a little wave.

"Hey," the shorter man says, waving back and then scratching his beard.

I tighten the belt on my robe. "What are you doing? Putting on a new roof?"

The shorter man drops his pile of shingles. "Yeah, you got it. I'm surprised this one lasted as long as it did."

I glance at my watch. "Do know it's only eight twenty-five? Isn't that a little early?"

The men look at each other. "Uh, well, we always start at eight," the taller man says, tucking in his green Down's Auto Body T-shirt where it's popped out in the back.

Maybe in a perfect world, one in which I still had my job and my boyfriend, not to mention my ceiling, this wouldn't seem so outrageous. But today it does. Today I just want to sleep.

"Sorry if we woke you up," Auto Body says. He stares at the legs of my pajamas and grins. "What are those, anyway? Dogs?"

I look down. "No, actually, they're reindeer. And Santas." I stuff my hands in the pockets of my robe. "I like to keep the Christmas spirit going all year." I'm not about to explain how I ran out of my apartment with barely the clothes on my back and how I'm lucky I had these here.

"Ah," he says. "Good idea."

"So, is this going to take long?" I ask, wondering how many mornings my sleep will be curtailed.

The bearded man glances at the roof. “A couple of weeks, maybe longer, depending on the weather.”

I make a mental note to pick up a pair of earplugs. “I’d better leave you to your work, then.”

Back in the kitchen, I furiously sort through the mail, throwing out the junk and making piles of what’s left—invitations, bills, magazines and catalogs. There’s something so comforting about order. The counter already looks neater, giving me a small sense of accomplishment and relief. I gather up the scraps of paper—receipts from the dry cleaner’s, stickies with phone numbers on them, and an envelope on which my father has scrawled a line, probably part of a poem. *She leaves them in her wake.*

I turn to a little stack of photographs. The picture on top is of an old barn, its wood weathered to a soft chestnut. Another photo shows the interior, where a ladder leads to a second-floor loft. There’s a drawing of the barn next to the photos—a little rendering Mom has done. Someone must have hired her to refurbish the space into an artist’s studio. She’s added a number of windows, allowing light to stream in and illuminate a whimsical figure she’s drawn by an easel. This little touch, so typical of Mom, makes me smile.

Most of the second-floor of the barn is gone in Mom’s sketch. What remains looks just the right size for a sleeping loft or a reading nook. My mother has added a window up there and has replaced the ladder with a staircase. I can’t help but wonder if this little loft is really a shrine for my sister, Renny, who always loved to curl up in a cozy space with a book.

The doorbell rings, and I set my mother’s drawing aside. I can see Cluny’s red Jeep through the front door sidelights as I head down the hall. My best friend since our first day of school at Smithridge Elementary, she still lives in Dorset, with her husband, their two young daughters, and five adopted animals—two dogs, two cats, and a canary.

“Grace!” She greets me with a big smile. A breeze ruffles the hem of her long skirt and lifts her hair, and her auburn curls float behind her willowy frame as if they have a life of their own.

I pull her into the front hall and give her a hug. “It’s great to see you. I wasn’t expecting you until later.”

“I know, but my meeting at the printer’s got switched to this afternoon. We’re running proofs on some new cards.”

Cluny has her own line of greeting cards, featuring drawings she creates with pen and ink and watercolors. She places dogs and cats and other animals in human situations, doing things like blowing

out candles on a birthday cake, sailing a sloop in a race, drinking cocktails at a party, and relaxing in beach chairs by the ocean. I'm so proud of how successful she's been, with her cards in gift shops all over the country now.

"I figured while I had the time this morning, I'd see if you were up," she says.

I lean against the Chippendale chest. "Oh, I'm up, all right. The roofers woke me. They've got nail guns that sound like AK-47s. And they'll be here for at least two weeks."

"Don't worry," she says, casually flicking her hand. "We've got plenty of things to do. You'll be out of the house every day."

"But I don't want to be out of the house. I don't want to see anybody. I want to stay in and sleep."

"What? Not when you're finally going to be here for more than a day! How many years has it been since you've had a real visit, Grace? I can't even remember." She brushes a strand of hair away from my face and softens her voice. "The point is, you're here now, and you can't lock yourself away like some kind of depressed person."

"But I *am* some kind of depressed person."

"No, you're not. You're just going through a rough patch."

"This is a lot more than a rough patch. I lose my job, and then Scott dumps me. And then my ceiling comes crashing down." I can feel my eyes getting prickly. "I just want to hibernate." I walk down the hall, toward the kitchen.

"Grace, you'll find another proofreading job. And you'll—"

"It wasn't proofreading," I say as I stop. "I was reviewing translations done by computers and correcting the mistakes. It's much more complicated than proofreading."

She puts her hand on my arm and gives me an apologetic look. "I'm sorry. I know I always get that wrong."

"It's okay. Everybody does."

"Anyway, I know you'll find another job."

I wish I could be that optimistic. I don't even know where to start. "It's hard thinking about a job when I'm so upset about Scott. How could he do this to me? We were about to celebrate our one-year anniversary. We had plans to go to Italy this fall. *Italy*. And then he tells me about Elena, the paralegal from Structured Finance."

Cluny gives me her concerned-mother look as we walk into the kitchen. “It just means he wasn’t the right guy for you, Grace.”

“I guess not.” I look away and dab my eyes. “Oh God, I just want to go back to bed.”

She sits down at the table. “No. You can’t go back to bed. You can’t spend your whole time here in your...” She waves her hand, and her eyes go to my legs. “Your Christmas pajamas.”

“I can find some other pajamas.”

She gives me an exasperated look. “That’s not the point.”

I pick up the coffee carafe. A cup or two is still left. “Do you want some of this?”

“That much,” she tells me, making a narrow gap between her thumb and index finger.

I fill a mug halfway for her and another for me, and then I open the freezer and inspect the ice cream containers lined up like silos. Chocolate chip, mint chocolate chip, cookie crunch, banana swirl, strawberry cheesecake.

“Got enough ice cream in there?” Cluny begins to count the containers.

“Excuse me, but did you know that *desserts* is *stressed* spelled backward?”

“Is it really?” She moves her finger as if she’s writing the letters in the air. Then she smiles. “You’re right.”

I grab the cookie crunch and take a seat across from her at the table. “*All natural*,” I say, reading the words on the label and savoring the first spoonful. “You would like this.” When I turn the container around, however, I notice that someone has left out the comma between *Madison* and *Wisconsin* in the company’s address. Sometimes I hate myself.

“I have something that will cheer you up,” Cluny says as I put another spoonful of ice cream in my mouth. “Are you listening to me?” Her green eyes dance.

“Yeah, I’m listening.”

“You’re not going to believe whose picture is on the front page of the *Review*.” She pulls a piece of folded newspaper from her handbag. “Guess,” she says, keeping the paper concealed with her hand.

“I’m thinking.” I scoop up another spoonful of ice cream. “Teddy McRandell?” Teddy went to Smithridge Elementary with us and was always getting into trouble. I heard he recently moved back to town. Apparently he’s in real estate development and he bought the old Lawrence estate.

Cluny laughs. “No, it’s not him. Try again.”

I put my spoon on the table and sit up straight. “Just tell me. I hate how you always do this.”

“Do what?” She guards the newspaper.

“Make me guess.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You’ve done it ever since we were kids, back in our Nancy Drew days, when we wanted to be detectives. Whenever you found a clue, you’d make me guess what it was.”

“Spies.”

“What?”

“We wanted to be spies, not detectives.”

“No, I wanted to be a detective, you wanted to be a spy. Now show me what you have to show me.”

She opens the folded paper, revealing the front page of the *Dorset Review*. “Read this.” She points to a caption underneath a photo: former resident returns to direct movie.

Peter Brooks, 33, director of three hit romantic comedies, including *Paris Love Letter*, has returned to Dorset after seventeen years to film scenes for a new movie. Brooks will be in town for the next two weeks.

I stare at the man in the photo, with his wavy, brown hair, blue eyes, and smile that almost jumps off the page, and my heart stops. It’s Peter, all right. I pick up the paper for a closer look, and instantly I’m back in my emerald-green dress. I’m at the Dorset Yacht Club, and it’s May of our sophomore year of high school, seventeen years ago. As the band plays a cover of the Shania Twain–Bryan White song “From This Moment On,” Peter and I are slow dancing. His arm is around my back, his breath warm on my neck. I close my eyes and lean against his chest, and it doesn’t seem real. This isn’t the same Peter who has thought of me only as a friend for the last three years, while I’ve imagined so much more. This is a different Peter, who finally, today, has begun to look at me with new eyes. And here we are. And it’s magical.

I glance up.

Cluny is smiling. “Your old high school sweetheart, a big-time Hollywood director, back in town. What do you think?”

"I think we had one incredible night, Cluny. One dance, one kiss. But it was a short romance."

"Maybe, but you had a long friendship before that. And they always say a romance that grows out of friendship is the best kind."

I study the photo, Peter's eyes, warm and friendly, gazing back at me. "Hmm. Is that what they say?"

"You know the romance part would have lasted a lot longer if things hadn't happened...the way they did." She swallows the last few words, her voice becoming quiet, and I know what she's thinking. *If things hadn't happened the way they did the next day. With Renny.*

"Hey," she says, steering the conversation in a lighter direction. "You've seen all of his movies, right?"

"Yeah, I've seen all three."

"Me too," she says. "I liked *Paris Love Letter* the best." She grabs my mug of coffee. "I'll heat these up." She walks to the microwave, and I watch the cups revolve on the platter. "He was always such a movie nut. Like you. Remember how he used to sneak us into the Dorset Playhouse? He'd buy a ticket and go in, and then we'd knock on the side door and he'd open it?" She hands me my coffee and sits down. "God, he was cute."

The memory makes me laugh. "I can't believe we never got caught." When the playhouse closed a few years ago, I couldn't help but wonder if they'd gone broke from kids like us sneaking in over the years, but I know that's absurd.

Cluny leans back in the chair, crosses her arms, and gives me a self-satisfied glance. "It's more than a coincidence, you know."

"What's more than a coincidence?"

She gestures at the newspaper. "Peter, back in town. You back in town. At the same time."

"So we're both in town at the same time. Don't give me any cosmic mumbo jumbo, Cluny. There's nothing so strange about that."

She sits up straight. "Are you kidding? The odds against it must be a billion to one. It's happened for a reason. You were crazy about him. He was crazy about you. You need to see him. It beats sitting around here by yourself, eating pints of ice cream." She looks at the ice cream container as though she might try to confiscate it.

I grab the container and pull it to my side of the table. "That's ridiculous. I wouldn't even know what to say. Too much water under the bridge. That was a long time ago." I pick up the spoon.

“Oh, come on,” she says. “Time has no meaning when it comes to love.” She puts her hand over her heart.

“Where did you get that? From one of your Louise Hay books?”

“No, you always used to say it. Back in high school. Remember?”

I point my spoon at her. “Well, you shouldn’t listen to everything I say. Besides, I don’t think it would be a good idea to see Peter. It might be uncomfortable. You know, because of the way things ended.”

Cluny is about to protest, but I cut her off. “Look, my apartment won’t be fixed for three weeks. So while I’m stuck here, my plan is to sleep, eat junk food, read trashy novels, go to my dad’s party, and try to forget for just a little while that right now my life is a total mess.”

“Grace, come on, this is *Peter* we’re talking about. We used to bribe Renny to drive us around town looking for him. That’s how crazy you were about him, remember?”

I remember. Of course I remember.

“By the way,” she adds, “today that would be considered stalking. And we’d probably be arrested.”

“Yeah, they’ve ruined everything fun.”

I gaze out the kitchen window, onto the swath of grass that pushes the land toward the sound. A small sailboat whizzes by in a puff of wind. I look at the wooden table, at the scratches and cracks that have collected over the years. They look like the lines a fortune-teller might read to predict the future. I wonder what they would say about mine.

Cluny leans closer. “And this will be a good distraction. Something to help take your mind off Scott and your job and your apartment. Plus, I’d love to see Peter again. Get the details on what he’s been doing all this time. It’s so exciting that he’s back in town.” I can feel her staring at me. “Don’t tell me you haven’t thought about him.” She sounds a bit smug.

She’s smug because she’s right. Of course I’ve thought about Peter. Long before I began to see his name appear in magazines and entertainment blogs, there were things that reminded me of him, things that made me wonder where he was and what he was doing. *Twister* would come on TV, and I’d think about the night we went to the Dorset Playhouse and watched it from our favorite seats in the balcony. Or I’d be in a luncheonette and hear someone order a coffee milk shake, and I’d remember the afternoon at the Sugar Bowl when we drank so many coffee milk shakes we were both awake all night, jittery, talking to each other on the phone. Or I’d hear “Claire de Lune” on the radio, and I’d think

about the day I heard Peter playing it on the piano in the empty high school auditorium.

Cluny looks at me. "Yeah. I thought so."

I shake my head. "No, it's not like that. Of course I've thought about him, Cluny. But I got over him a long time ago. I had to. You know that."

"We should go see him," she says. "We'll find out where he's staying. It'll be like solving a mystery. Just like when we were kids."

"Are you going to dig out your detective handbag?"

She sighs. "I wish I still had it. Remember all the great stuff we put in those things? Tweezers? Handkerchiefs?"

"Those big magnifying glasses we got at the stationery store?"

"From that salesman who always had the horrible dandruff."

"Remember how we bought those little black notebooks?" I say. "For jotting down clues?"

"God, everything was a clue. What about that time in fifth grade when you thought the man and woman who lived at the end of your street were bank robbers hiding from the police?"

"Well, they looked suspicious," I say, feeling the need even now to defend myself. "Come on, the wife, with all those weird hats and the sunglasses. She was *always* wearing sunglasses."

"She had an ocular disease."

"Even so." I give a dismissive wave. "And what about the husband? He always seemed so wary of everyone."

"Grace, they were retired schoolteachers in their eighties."

"Oh, so retired schoolteachers in their eighties can't also be criminals?"

She gives me a skeptical look. "Besides, the husband was in a wheelchair."

"Yeah, but he was fast in that thing."

She taps a few crystals of sugar into her coffee. "I'll tell you what I also remember." A sly smile crosses her face. "How you rang their doorbell and told them you were collecting for the Red Cross."

I'd forgotten that. "Oh my God, yes. So I could peek inside for stolen money. I thought they might have a safe."

“And they believed you. They actually gave you ten dollars.” Her voice is full of awe, even now.

I raise my hand as though I’m taking an oath. “Which, I might add, I immediately turned over to the real Red Cross.”

“Yes, you did...after you dusted it for prints.”

“Well,” I say, “a detective’s gotta do what she’s gotta do.”

Outside, the wind chimes jingle, and a breeze sends a branch of hydrangea tapping against the screens. I feel a little wistful for the old days, a little sad to have lost that time in my life when the tiniest burst of imagination could power an entire summer day.

“I think we were great detectives,” Cluny says. She’s silent for a moment. Then she adds, “We could resurrect our skills and find Peter.”

I try to think of a way to convince her, once and for all, that I’m not interested, because I can sense what she’s going to say next. “Cluny, he’s married. I read that a long time ago. And he probably has two gorgeous children.” Everybody else does. Why not Peter?

“He was married,” she says. “But he isn’t anymore. He’s divorced.”

“He’s divorced?”

Cluny’s eyes light up as she perceives a spark of interest. “Yesssss,” she whispers.

“Oh, forget it!” I catch myself. “I’m not doing it. Besides, I just want to stay home.”

She sighs. “I know. In your pajamas.”

“Yes.” I hitch up my Santa bottoms.

“Eating ice cream.”

“And why not?”

“Whatever you say, Grace. But, just so you know, cookie crunch is like a gateway drug. It leads to coffee toffee and chocolate-chunk chip and all those varieties that are much more dangerous. It’s a slippery slope.”

“Okay, just tell me this.” I pick up the newspaper article and point to the photo. “How do you know for sure he’s divorced?”

She winks. “Google, baby. How else?” She moves her fingers as though she’s typing. “And, yes, I cross-checked the information on several different sites. All very reliable.” She raises an eyebrow. “By

the way, do you have any idea how many results come up when you Google Peter Brooks movie director?"

I take a sip of coffee. "Five hundred and twelve thousand, something like that."

Cluny tilts her head and gives me a long, hard stare. "Oh, so you do know."

Damn it, she should have been a spy.

She narrows her eyes. "Good guess, Einstein. I'll pick you up tomorrow at ten. Dust off your detective handbag."