

LOVE
with
ANYONE
but
YOU

Love With Anyone But You

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Seeker Publishing 2018

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First Printing: 2018

ISBN: 978-0-578-20189-4

Seeker Publishing

O'Fallon, MO

Chapter 1

It was a bright, clear September day—unusual for Atlanta—but she didn't notice. As she walked down the sidewalk, returning from her doctor's appointment, all Kate could think about was what he had told her. "I'm truly surprised," the doctor said. "I really thought the treatment would work, but it hasn't." *You're surprised?* Kate thought to herself. *I'm thirty-nine years old, unmarried, no kids, and the Grim Reaper just popped his head in to tell me it's time to go already! Surprised doesn't even begin to cover this!*

Kate had done her best to act bravely while she sat in his office, and he told her to prepare for her life to end. Only six months ago she'd gone in for some extensive tests after experiencing unusual pains that she could no longer explain away. Earlier in the year she thought it was gas—at the worst maybe an ulcer. But as the pains grew worse, she decided she needed a good checkup. Little did she realize that it would reveal advanced liver cancer that was showing signs of spreading to other parts of her body, and nothing seemed to be able to stop it. She had tried some experimental drugs in the last seven weeks, but she had displayed no improvement. Her options diminished before her eyes, with every word from her doctor's mouth. She had weeks—weeks to enjoy

the fortieth year of her life. She would never live to celebrate its completion. What was she supposed to do with that?

“Kate, I’m sorry. There’s nothing we can do.” The doctor’s words kept playing over and over on a loop in her mind. Dr. Kent had been terrific all the way through this voyage of discovery. He was a rock of strength and a bank full of knowledge on her disease. Oh! There it was again, “There’s nothing we can do.” The phrase slapped her in the face once again. *Was it real? Did it really happen? Could I please wake up and find out I don’t have to go through this? I don’t want to die! I don’t want to let go! I’m just not ready!*

It was baffling to her that she could become this ill at such a young age. Kate had always been extremely careful about what she ate. She exercised every day. She had given up fast food years ago. To say she was a health food fanatic would hardly begin to describe her. She carefully scrutinized everything she ate for fat content, calories, additives, and—most importantly—cleanliness. Germs, bacteria, illness, infection—these were all opportunities available to the one who ingested the wrong morsel. It was a constant battle, but one she waged constantly and consistently to protect herself from becoming the victim of these merciless, invisible, and silent killers. But it was not only her diet that Kate expected to be pristine. There was a certain order, consistency, and sanitization that encompassed her entire life. She expected everything to be the way she wanted it and when she wanted it. Being diagnosed with terminal cancer had not only declared her defeat, but it had really thrown a wrench into her extremely organized plan.

She thought back to Dr. Kent again. He had really been kind to her. Of course he had! He wasn’t the one dying! She pictured him asking her, “Kate, now is the time to think about what you want to do most with your life. What’s on your bucket list? You need to think about your loved ones and making peace.” He had become more than just a doctor. He was her friend—her confidant and counselor.

As a result of holding a strict criterion for everything and everyone in which she came into contact, Kate had very few friends. People were afraid to get too close to her for fear of feeling like a disappointment. Kate really didn’t mind though. She was perfectly content without casual friendships. She didn’t see much use in them. Her life flowed with the consistency of perfectly strained broth and delivered just as much excitement. Excitement wasn’t for Kate. She didn’t like surprises, drama,

or emotional rollercoasters. She was happy with a modest, programmed, and hygienic life. And she shared this life with a steady boyfriend who was—in her eyes—more seamless than she was—Tom.

Tom was tall, dark, and devastatingly handsome. He wasn't the body-builder type, but he was in great physical shape. He had thick, dark hair and icy blue eyes that made her tremble the first time she saw him. In fact, she was quite amazed when she found out that he was attracted to her. While Kate was not ugly, she was very plain. She rarely wore any makeup and she kept her hair in an easily maintained pageboy style for convenience. She couldn't imagine why Tom would want to date her, when he could surely have his pick of any woman in Atlanta—probably the whole state of Georgia. Nevertheless, they had stayed together for seven years in an uncomplicated, uncommitted, homogenous relationship without a single argument or breakup.

Kate felt little beads of sweat break out along her forehead as the words “bucket list” and “make peace” passed through her brain. She looked up at the sun streaming down through the tree branches above. Fortunately there were so many trees downtown to give some respite from the intense heat. As usual, she was wearing black, which only made it worse. She hoped she could make it back to the air conditioning before she had become sweaty.

She crossed the street and walked into the building where she worked. Her fellow employees were just coming back after their lunch breaks. She looked around at them engaging in chit-chat and joking about needing a nap. She listened to them with resentment in her thoughts. She'd never cared about any of them as long as she had worked there, but today she wished she could be any one of them instead of herself. She wanted to be laughing and giggling and have nothing more on her mind than going home tonight to her boyfriend.

Tom! What was she going to tell Tom? The thought hit her like a downtown bus. She didn't want him to worry about her. She could do enough worrying for both of them. She'd kept her doctor visits a secret until she was sure it was nothing. Now, it was something. The time for shielding him had come to an end. She had to find a way to tell him.

She would go home tonight and probably find Tom cooking some dinner for them both. He loved to cook, so he would let himself into her house after work and whip up some incredible dish that put restaurants to shame. She hated to cook and was happy to have him do it.

Understanding how flavors went together to make a meal was not one of her skills, and she despised handling raw meat. The thought of all that bacteria in her kitchen and on her hands was too much to bear. It was much easier to let Tom handle it and not think about it. Besides she was always there with the cleanup, sanitizing the countertops and appliances with her antibacterial cleaners in tow. Together, they made a great team. Yes, she and Tom fit together like cleansers and rubber gloves.

In all this time Tom had never once suggested that they move in together, but he was at her house most of the time. He maintained a very nice apartment downtown, which gave him a chance to give them both some space when necessary. Not that they had ever required any space from each other. They were very much in sync when it came to their likes and dislikes. First of all Tom was very neat and understood Kate's need for cleanliness. They also both adored alternative jazz but despised any kind of sports. The main reason Tom kept the separate quarters was his job. He worked in real estate, and sometimes that meant crazy hours. Tom was much more social than Kate was. There were a lot of networking gatherings he attended without her—thankfully. Having the apartment allowed him to come and go without disturbing her sleep routine. Kate appreciated his thoughtfulness and the respect he held for her needs.

She pictured Tom standing at the stove when she came through the door that night, and she wondered how she was going to find the words necessary to tell him her news. She walked into her office and fell into her chair. She leaned back and closed her eyes imagining him standing in front of her. She saw herself saying it in different ways, but none of them seemed like the right way to tell someone she was dying. She was contemplating how to use Google for ideas on how to have such a conversation, when she was startled by her office phone buzzing.

She pressed the button and said hello. Her boss was on the line. "Kate, got a second?"

"Sure," she answered. "I'm on my way." She picked up her appointment book and headed to her boss's office. Kate was a sales rep for a fragrance manufacturer. She'd been with the company for eight years and really enjoyed what she did. It was a small company—only twenty-three people. She liked it that way. Not because it gave her a warm, fuzzy, family feeling. She really didn't care anything about her fellow coworkers, but she liked the fact that there were very few people

for her to deal with on a daily basis. It meant that the restrooms were cleaner, because they had little traffic. It meant fewer names that she needed to remember. It was just another phase of her life that fit into her need for complete control of her environment.

Kate was not friendless or completely cut off from her fellow employees. For the most part, she coexisted quite nicely with everyone in her office, which made operations run smoothly. There was only one person on staff whom she could not stand, and oddly enough, he was Tom's best friend. In fact, he had been the one who actually introduced her to Tom seven years ago. For the life of her, though, she could never understand how the two of them would be friends. Ben was crude, obnoxious, overweight, immature, and basically a repulsive human being in the eyes of Kate. But she would forever be grateful that Ben had brought Tom into their offices all those years ago, or they might never have met. Consequently, she endured Ben's childish, comedic stunts and disgusting behavior out of agonizing obligation.

She stepped into her boss' office. Hank was not the kind of man you would envision running a fragrance company. He was entering his eighties. His short, white hair usually looked as though he'd just dragged his fingers through it while in heavy thought, which was most likely the case. He still wore dark, plastic-framed glasses from the 1960's, which gave him a sort of Spencer Tracy appeal. And although he was a little rough around the edges, he still always wore a shirt and necktie every day to work. He looked more like an editor of a newspaper than a maker of aromatherapy, but she adored him. Kate's parents had been killed in a car wreck when she was in college, so Hank was the closest thing she had to a father. Now she was going to have to find a way to tell him her news, too. It would have to wait though. She still needed time for it to sink into her own mind before she began telling anyone else. She sat down in front of his desk and said, "So what's up, boss?"

Hank sighed heavily. Uh-oh, she thought. He looked up at her with wide eyes and a forced smile, and said, "Good news. I've got a potential client out in Marina Del Rey. He's shopping around for a new supplier and he's very interested in us. I want you to fly out there and talk to him. Sell him on working with us. He'll like you."

"Sure," said Kate. Why did she feel like there was more to this request? Going to see potential new clients was something she did every day. "When do you want me there?" she asked.

“I need you there first thing on the tenth,” Hank answered.

“That’s Monday,” she said.

“That’s right. You’ll fly out on Sunday afternoon, spend the entire day with him, give him the full treatment, then fly back Tuesday morning,” said Hank.

“Okay, boss,” she said as she penciled it into her book. Kate started to pull herself up out of her chair, when she heard the other shoe drop.

“Just one more thing...I’m sending Ben with you,” Hank said without looking directly at her. He knew she wouldn’t take it well.

She sunk back into her chair and observed him. He looked like a dog who knew he’d misbehaved, holding his head low as to avoid a beating. “Ben?” she asked with her face twisted as if she’d just smelled something foul. “Really? Why?” She nervously tucked her hair behind her ears—a habit she’d retained since childhood.

“Yeah, Ben’s our best customer service rep. He knows our factory inside out. I’m not saying you don’t know what you’re doing. You’re great. You represent the company very well, but Ben has the facts you need to back up any questions this guy has. Ben knows what this factory is capable of doing and what it can’t. I know this guy. He’s going to push for everything he can get for his money. Ben will ensure we close the deal.”

“Then why not just send Ben?” she asked with a little attitude. Her feelings were just a bit hurt, and she couldn’t help but let it show. Besides, the thought of spending travel time with Ben just made her nauseous. Or was it her medication? No, it was Ben.

“Because Ben...well...you know. Just look at him. Would you buy anything that guy was selling?” Hank shook his head. “Come on. I really need you and him both for this. You’ll make a great team.”

Kate quietly nodded her head in the affirmative. She couldn’t argue with anything Hank had to say. He was right about all of it. Besides, it was just a couple of days. “Okay, boss. You got it. We’ll be on the plane Sunday afternoon.” She got up and proceeded to walk out the door.

“Pick up your tickets at the airport. Sally’s already ordered them. And for God’s sake, get some sun while you’re out there,” he yelled at her from his chair. “You look white as a ghost and it’s the end of summer!”

Kate smiled at his fatherly advice, but tears came to her eyes at the same time. If you only knew, Hank, she thought to herself...if you only knew. She headed back down the hallway to her office.

“Kate!” she heard Ben call from his cubicle. Reluctantly she turned around and popped her head around the corner.

“Yeah?” she said, doing nothing to hide her disappointment.

“So...Marina Del Rey Sunday...that should be cool, huh?” Ben asked smoothly as he rocked back and forth on his heels.

Kate looked at him seriously and said, “Sounds like it could be a very big client. Try not to mess it up.” She turned around and headed down the hall.

“I’m looking forward to it, too!” he shouted at her as she walked back to her desk

Chapter 2

On Sunday Tom drove both Kate and Ben to the airport. The white, cloudy, overcast sky accurately reflected Kate's demeanor. Kate sat in the front seat, remaining silent, while Tom and Ben conversed for the entire ride. She still could not understand how Tom could endure Ben's immature approach to humor and his obvious disdain for cleanliness. She had drowned out their conversation soon after they had left Ben's apartment. But now she was becoming aware that in place of not listening to them, she had simply wound herself tightly into a wiry ball of anger. She sat there in her seat, twisted and hunched over. The muscles of her face contorted—one eyebrow up slightly higher than the other and the corners of her mouth drawn down so far they almost reached her bony chin. Tom reached his hand over and placed it on hers, which brought her out of her hypnotic state and made her mindful of her clenched jaw. She quickly glanced over at him to see him smiling gently at her, and her scowl evaporated. "Calm down, Kate," she could hear Tom thinking.

At the terminal, Tom kissed her glum face goodbye and said, "Have a good time and try not to look so disappointed. It's just for a couple of

days.” She could tell that Tom was waiting for her to put a smile on her face. Kate had made it quite clear to him over their years together that she disliked Ben. No, it was more than dislike. She *abhorred* Ben. Abhorred—now there was a word that she could sink her teeth into and chew on for a while! With that happy thought, her mouth pulled out all the stops for a beautiful, toothy grin for Tom. Pleased with her expression, Tom kissed her again and said, “Call me tonight. I’ll miss you.”

Kate held onto her smile and her hatred. “I’ll miss you too,” she said. As she looked him directly in the eyes, her hatred melted into sadness. She hadn’t the courage to tell Tom anything all weekend, which made this goodbye even harder. With every intention of breaking it to him gently Friday night, she came home to discover he had made reservations at their favorite restaurant. While dining, she became so nervous she could barely eat. Tom kept asking her if something was wrong, but she denied it, and continued to pick at her food. The usual Friday night love-making session make it impossible for her to bring up her cancer after dinner.

Tom worked most of the day on Saturday, and at that point, she knew she wasn’t going to tell him. How could she dump that kind of information on her boyfriend and then leave town? No, she had to wait for the right moment and she had to find the right words. *And just what were the right words to tell someone that you’re dying?* It was such a depressing conversation to have. *Should she make it humorous?* She pictured herself making up a silly poem, but when she tried to find something that rhymed with *kick the bucket* all she could come up with was...well...something she didn’t usually say— although it appropriately expressed her current feelings. It was just such a hard thing for her to wrap her mind around. Saying it out loud made it incredibly real. Secretly she hoped that if she didn’t talk about it, then it might just go away. Now she had a few more days to think about it.

She boarded the plane with Ben right alongside her. Kate hated to fly. She wasn’t so much afraid of it, as horribly annoyed. Although being suspended in mid-air in a heavy piece of metal didn’t meet with her knowledge of science, it was more the concept of public transit that bothered her. Germs thrived in these environments! She didn’t like the idea of being locked up with a hundred bacteria-laden humans in a container filled with God-knows-how-many strains of still undiscovered

viruses left from the last flight. She tried not to touch any handrails, door handles, or doors as she made her way to her seat. Once seated, she pulled out her anti-bacterial wipes from her purse and wiped down the back of the seat in front of her, the chair arms, and the wall around the window.

Ben watched as she performed her little cleaning ritual. Kate asked as she pulled out a fresh wipe and held it out for him, “Did you want one?”

“No thanks,” said Ben. He held out his hands in front of him, palms up. He spit into each palm and then rubbed the saliva into each of his chair arms while he looked straight at her with a smirk on his face. “All done,” he said. Then he ran his fingers through the front of his hair and leaned back with a very satisfied, smug look.

Kate watched him in disgust. She pulled out her iPod and stuck the ear buds in her ears all the while not breaking eye contact with him. She leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes. The Xanax she took at home was kicking in. She would do her best to forget that Ben was sitting right next to her.

The flight landed safely in Los Angeles without a hitch. Kate had dozed off listening to her music, but the descent of the plane had brought her back to reality. She glanced over to her left to see Ben looking at her with his usual horrific grin on his face.

“Did you know that you snore?” he asked, still smiling slightly.

Kate wrinkled her brow, moved her seat back to the upright position, and stared straight ahead.

“It’s kind of cute, though,” he continued. “It’s peculiar to hear that kind of noise emanating from your tiny person.”

She looked back over at him. “Are you saying I was loud?” she asked quietly, suddenly embarrassed.

“No, not so much loud as...” he struggled for a comparison. “Did you ever see *The Exorcist*?”

Fortunately, the flight attendant made an announcement at that moment for passengers to gather their belongings and make ready to exit the plane. Kate turned her face—which now carried a troubled expression—away from Ben as she scrambled to put her iPod away into her purse. It still baffled her as to why this odd excuse for an adult was traveling with her. She really wondered what her boss was thinking when he sent them on this trip together. Kate breathed a heavy sigh to clear her

head, knowing there was no use trying to understand. She would just merely have to accept it and keep going for another twenty-four hours.

On the taxi ride to their hotel, Ben continued to make idle chit-chat, but Kate refused to engage. She just kept thinking about taking a warm bath and falling into a cozy bed. Thoughts like that kept her smiling all the way to their destination.

As they stepped out of the hotel elevator, Ben asked, “Hey, you want to grab a bite to eat? It’s still early here, and there’s a great view of the...”

“No,” said Kate as she unlocked her door. “I’m not hungry.” Without looking back she stepped into her room and slammed the door shut.

Once inside her room, she opened up her suitcase and hung her suit in the closet. She took her antibacterial wipes into the bathroom and gave everything a good scouring, including the inside of the tub and shower. She ran a bath and ordered a pot of tea to be sent up. While the bath water was running, she called Tom to let him know that she had arrived safely.

“Hey baby,” Tom said as he answered. “Everything go smoothly?”

“Yes, despite the fact that Ben was with me.”

Tom laughed. “Oh, come on. Give him a break. He’s a good guy.”

Kate closed her eyes. The guilty feelings were coming back for not having told him yet about her health. “Tom,” she said.

“Yes baby,” said Tom.

“I can’t wait to see you on Tuesday,” she said, frustrated with her lack of intestinal fortitude.

“Me too, baby,” replied Tom. “Have a good night. It will be over before you know it.”

“Goodnight,” she said and hung up the phone.

After her bath, Kate pulled back the sheets on her bed. She reached into her suitcase and pulled out her personal set of sheets she always carried with her on trips. She carefully placed one sheet over the bed and then added the second to use as a barrier between her and the blanket. She threw the hotel pillows on the floor and replaced them with one she had in her suitcase. *You can never be too careful*, she thought to herself as she climbed into bed. She poured herself a cup of tea and switched on the television. Just then a sharp pain ran through her that made her double up. Fortunately she’d been able to fill her prescription for pain

meds before she left. She reached over for the bottle on her night table and swallowed it with a gulp of tea. She leaned back on her pillow and closed her eyes. Her mind raced with questions about how she would tell Tom and Hank her news. But all that came to her was a slap of cold hard reality. Like a lightning bolt, the truth flashed before her eyes. She was going to die. *Could this really be happening to me?*