

ALL WE EVER WANTED

by Emily Giffin

chapter one: *Nina*

It started out as a typical Saturday night. And by typical, I don't mean normal in any mainstream American way. There was no grilling out with the neighbors or going to the movies or doing any of the things I did as a kid. It was simply typical for what we'd become since Kirk sold his software company, and we went from comfortable to wealthy. *Very* wealthy.

Obscene was the description my childhood best friend Julie once used—not about us, but Melanie, another friend—after Melanie bought herself a diamond Rolex for Mother's Day and then offhandedly remarked at one of our dinner parties that homemade pottery from her kids "wasn't going to cut it."

"She could feed a Syrian refugee camp for an entire *year* with that watch," Julie had groused in my kitchen after the other guests had departed. "It's *obscene*."

I nodded noncommittally, hiding my own Cartier under our marble island, as I silently reassured myself with all the ways my watch, and therefore my life, were different from Melanie's. For one, I didn't buy the watch for myself on a whim; Kirk gave it to me for our fifteenth anniversary. For another, I had always *loved* when our son Finch made me presents and cards, and was sad that, at seventeen, those had become a relic of the past.

Most important, I don't think I ever flaunted our wealth. If anything, it embarrassed me.

As a result, Julie didn't hold our money against me. She didn't know our exact worth, but had a general sense of it, especially after she'd gone house hunting with me when Kirk was too busy, helping me find our home on Belle Meade Boulevard where we now lived. She and her husband and girls were regular guests at our lake house and home on Nantucket, just as she happily inherited my gently-used designer hand-me-downs.

Occasionally Julie *would* call Kirk out, though, not for being showy like Melanie, but for having elitist tendencies. A fourth-generation, silver-spoon Nashvillian, my husband grew up ensconced in a private-school, country-club world, so he'd had some practice at being a snob, even back when his money was merely old, and not yet obscene. In other words, Kirk came from a "good family"—that elusive term that nobody ever came out and defined, yet we all knew was code for having old money and a certain well-bred, refined taste.

My maiden name *Silver* held no such status, not even by Bristol standards, the town on the Tennessee-Virginia border where I grew up and Julie still lived. We were no slouches—my dad wrote for the Bristol Herald Courier and my mom was a retired fourth-grade teacher—but we were squarely middle class, and our idea of living large was everyone ordering dessert at a non-chain restaurant. Looking back, that may have explained my mom's fascination with money. It wasn't that she was impressed with it, but she could always tell you who had it and who did not, who was cheap and who was living beyond their means. Then again, my mom could pretty much tell you anything about anyone in Bristol. She wasn't a gossip—at least not a mean-spirited one—she was simply fascinated by other people's business, from their wealth and health to their politics and religion.

Incidentally, my dad was Jewish and my mother Methodist. *Live and let live* was their mantra, an outlook that was passed on to both my brother Max and me, the two of us embracing the more attractive elements of each religion, like Santa Claus and Seders, while punting Jewish guilt and Christian judgment. This was a good thing, especially for Max, who came out during college. My parents didn't miss a beat. If anything, they seemed more uncomfortable with Kirk's money than my brother's sexuality, at least when we first began to date. My mother insisted that she was just sad I wouldn't be getting back together with Teddy, my high school boyfriend whom she adored, but I sometimes sensed a slight inferiority complex, and her worry that the Brownings were somehow looking down on me and my family.

To be fair, a half-Jewish girl from Bristol with a gay brother and no trust fund probably wasn't their first choice for their only child. Hell, I probably wasn't Kirk's first choice on paper, either. But what can I say? He picked me anyway. I'd always told myself that he fell in love with my personality—with *me*—the same way I fell in love with *him*. But in the past couple of years I had begun to wonder about both of us, and what had brought us together in college.

I had to admit that when discussing our relationship, Kirk often referenced my looks. He always had. So I'd be naïve to think that my appearance had nothing to do with why we were together—just as I knew, deep down, that the patina and security of a “good family” had, in part, attracted me to him.

I hated everything about that admission, but it was definitely on my mind that Saturday night as Kirk and I took an Uber to the Hermitage Hotel for about our fifth gala of the year. We had become *that* couple, I remember thinking in the back of that black Lincoln Town Car—the husband and wife in an Armani tux and a Dior gown who were barely speaking. Something was

off in our relationship. Was it the money? Had Kirk become too obsessed with it? Had I somehow lost myself as Finch grew older and I spent less time mothering him and more time in the role of full-time philanthropist?

I thought about one of my dad's recent remarks, asking why my friends and I didn't just skip the galas—and give *all* the money to charity. My mom had chimed in that we might be able to accomplish “more meaningful work in blue jeans than black tie.” I had gotten defensive, reminding them that I did that sort of hands-on work too, such as the hours I spent every month answering calls on Nashville's suicide helpline. Of course I hadn't offered to my parents that Kirk sometimes minimized that kind of volunteering, insisting that I was better off “just writing the check.” In his mind, a donation of dollars always trumped time; the fact that it came with more splash and credit was beside the point. Kirk was a good man, I told myself, as I watched him take a swallow of his bourbon roadie that he'd poured into a red Solo cup. I was being too hard on him. On *both* of us.

“You look fabulous,” he suddenly said, looking over at me, softening me further. “That dress is *incredible*.”

“Thanks, honey,” I said in a low voice.

“I can't wait to take it off you,” he whispered, so the driver wouldn't hear him. He gave me a seductive look, then took another drink.

I smiled, thinking that it had been a while, and resisted the urge to tell him that he might want to slow down on the booze. Kirk didn't have a drinking problem, but it was a rare night that he didn't at least catch a red-wine buzz. Maybe *that* was it, I thought. We definitely both

needed to ease up on our social calendars. Be less distracted. More present. Maybe that would come when Finch went to college in the fall.

“So. Who have you told? About Princeton?” he asked, clearly thinking about Finch, too, and the acceptance letter he’d just received the day before.

“Other than family, only Julie and Melanie,” I said. “What about you?”

“Just the guys in my foursome today,” he said, rattling off the names of his usual golf buddies. “I didn’t want to brag . . . But I couldn’t help myself.”

His expression mirrored the way I felt—a mix of pride and disbelief. Finch was a good student, and had gotten into Vanderbilt and Virginia earlier that winter. But Princeton had been a long shot, and his admittance felt like a culmination and validation of so many parenting decisions, beginning with applying Finch to Windsor Academy, the most rigorous and prestigious private school in Nashville, when he was only six-years-old. Since then, we had always prioritized our son’s education, hiring private tutors when needed, exposing him to the arts, and taking him to virtually every corner of the globe. Over the past three summers, we had sent him on a service trip to Ecuador, a cycling camp in France, and a marine biology course in the Galapagos Islands. I recognized, of course, that we were at a distinct financial advantage over so many other applicants, and something about that (and especially the check we’d written to Princeton’s endowment) made me feel a little guilty. But I told myself that money alone couldn’t gain a kid admission to the Ivy League. Finch had worked hard, and I was so proud of him.

Focus on that, I told myself. Focus on the positive.

Kirk was on his phone again, so I pulled mine out too, checking Instagram. Finch's girlfriend Polly had just posted a photo of the two of them, the caption reading: *We're both Tigers, y'all! Clemson and Princeton, here we come!* I showed the picture to Kirk, then read aloud some of the congratulatory comments from children of our friends who would be in attendance tonight.

"Poor Polly," Kirk said. "They won't last a semester."

I wasn't sure if he meant the distance between South Carolina and New Jersey or the mere reality of young love, but I murmured my agreement, trying not to think of the condom wrapper that I'd found under Finch's bed. The discovery was far from a surprise, but still made me sad, thinking of how much he had grown up and changed. He used to be such a little chatterbox, a precocious only child regaling me with every detail of his day. There was nothing I hadn't known about him, nothing he wouldn't have shared. But with puberty came an onset of surliness that never really cleared, and in recent months, we'd talked very little, some days only communicating via text. Kirk insisted it was normal, all part of a boy's preparation to leave the nest. *You worry too much*, he always told me.

I put my phone back in my bag, sighed, and said, "Are you ready for tonight?"

"Ready for what?" he asked, draining his bourbon as we turned onto Sixth Avenue.

"Our speech?" I said, meaning *his* speech, though I would be standing beside him, offering him moral support.

Kirk gave me a blank stare. "Speech? Remind me? Which gala is this, again?"

"I hope you're kidding?"

"It's hard to keep them all straight--"

I sighed and said, "The *Hope* Gala, honey."

"And we are hoping for *what*, exactly?" he asked with a smirk.

"Suicide awareness and prevention," I said. "We're being honored, remember?"

"For what?" he asked, now starting to annoy me.

"The work we did bringing mental health experts to Nashville," I said, even though we both knew it had much more to do with our fifty-thousand-dollar donation we'd given after a freshman at Windsor took her life last summer. It was too horrible for me to process, even all these months later.

"I'm kidding," Kirk said, reached out to pat my leg. "I'm ready."

I nodded, thinking that Kirk was *always* ready. Always on. The most confident, competent man I'd ever known.

A moment later, we pulled up to the hotel. A young valet swung open my door, issuing a brisk welcome. "Will you be checking in tonight, Madame?" he asked.

I told him no, we were here for the gala. He nodded, offering me his hand, as I gathered the folds of my black lace gown and stepped onto the sidewalk. Ahead of me, I saw Melanie chatting amid a cluster of friends and acquaintances. The usual crowd. She rushed toward me, giving me air kisses and compliments.

"You look amazing, too. Are those new?" I reached up to her face, my fingertips grazing the bottom of the most gorgeous chandelier diamond earrings.

"Newly acquired but vintage," she said. "Latest apology from you know who."

I smiled and glanced around for her husband. "Where is Todd, anyway?"

"Scotland. Boys' golf trip. Remember?" she said, rolling her eyes.

“That’s right,” I said, thinking that it was hard to keep up with Todd’s boondoggles. He was worse than Kirk.

“Will you share this fella with me tonight?” Melanie asked with a shimmy of her shoulders as Kirk rounded the car and joined us.

“I’m sure he has no objections,” I said, smiling.

An accomplished flirt, Kirk nodded, giving Melanie a double-cheek kiss. “You look *stunning*,” he told her.

She smiled and thanked him, then shouted, “Omigod! I heard the *fabulous* news! Princeton! You must be so over-the-moon proud!”

“We are. Thanks, Mel . . . Has Beau made a final decision?” Kirk asked, shifting the attention back to Melanie’s son. His friendship with Finch, going all the way back to the first grade, was really the reason Mel and I had become so close in the first place.

“It’s looking like Kentucky,” Melanie said.

“Full ride?” Kirk asked.

“Half ride,” Melanie said, beaming. Beau was an average student, but an amazing baseball player, and had similar offers from a handful of schools.

“That’s great. Good for him,” Kirk said.

For years I’d had the feeling that Kirk had been jealous of Beau’s baseball career. He often accused Melanie and Todd of being obnoxious, bragging too much about all-star this and that. But now it was easy for Kirk to be gracious; Finch had won, after all. At least that’s how I knew my husband saw it.

As Melanie flitted off to greet another friend, Kirk announced that he was going to find the bar. “Do you want anything?” he asked, always pretty chivalrous at the start of the evening. It was the end of the night that sometimes got iffy.

“Yes. But I’ll go with you,” I said, determined to spend quality time together, even in a crowd. “Can we please not make it a late night?”

“Sure. That’s fine,” Kirk said, slipping his arm around my waist as we walked into the glittering hotel lobby.

The rest of the night followed the usual gala script, beginning with cocktails and the silent auction. There was nothing I really wanted, but reminding myself that all the money was going to a good cause, I bid on a sapphire cocktail ring, hoping to be outbid. Meanwhile, I nursed a glass of Sauvignon Blanc, made small talk, and reminded Kirk not to drink too much.

At some point, the dinner chimes sounded, the lobby bar stopped serving, and we were herded into an expansive ballroom to find our assigned tables. Kirk and I were at a ten-top, front and center, seated with three other couples we knew reasonably well, plus Melanie. As we enjoyed several courses, Melanie kept me more than entertained with a running critique of the décor (the floral arrangements were too high), the cuisine (chicken, again? really?), and the egregious, clashing red and maroon attire of the gala co-chairs (how could they not have thought to coordinate?).

Then, as an army of waiters trotted out our standard chocolate mousse desserts, the gala chairs introduced Kirk and me, heaping praise on us for our commitment to this charity and

so many others. I sat up as straight as I could, feeling a bit nervous as I heard: *So, without further ado . . . Nina and Kirk Browning.*

As the crowd erupted, Kirk and I rose and made our way to the short staircase leading up to the stage. With one hand in his, we ascended the steps, my heart pounding with a rush of adrenaline that came with being in the spotlight. When we reached the podium, Kirk stepped forward to take the microphone while I stood at his side, pressing my shoulder blades together, a smile plastered across my face. When the applause died down, Kirk began to speak, first thanking the co-chairs, their various committees, our fellow patrons, and all the donors. He then got to the reason we were here tonight, his voice growing somber. I stared at his strong profile, thinking how handsome he was.

“My wife Nina and I have a son named Finch,” he said. “Finch, like some of your children, will be graduating from high school in just a couple of months. In the fall, he will be headed off to college.”

I looked past the bright lights into a sea of faces as Kirk continued. “For the last eighteen years, our life has revolved around him. He is the most precious thing in the world to us,” he said, then halted, looked down, and took a few seconds to continue. “And I just can’t imagine the horror of losing him.”

I lowered my gaze, nodding in agreement, feeling a stab of overwhelming grief and compassion for every family devastated by suicide. But as Kirk went on to talk about the organization, my mind guiltily wandered back to *our* life, *our* son. All the opportunity that stretched ahead for him.

I tuned back in to hear my husband say, "So, in closing, Nina and I are so honored to join with you in this important cause . . . This is a fight for *all* of our children. Thank you so much. And good night."

As the crowd applauded once again, and a few of our closest friends actually stood for an ovation, Kirk turned and gave me a wink. He knew he'd nailed it.

"Perfect," I whispered.

Only it was actually very far from perfect.

Because at virtually that very moment, our son was across town, making the worst decision of his life.

chapter two: *Tom*

Call it father's intuition, but I knew something bad was happening to Lyla before I actually *knew*. Though maybe my gut feeling had absolutely nothing to do with intuition, or our close bond, or the fact that I'd been a single parent since she was four years old. Maybe it was simply the skimpy outfit she tried to leave the house in just hours before.

I'd been cleaning the kitchen when she slinked past me wearing a skirt so short that you could see the bottom of her ass—a part of her anatomy that her eight-hundred Instagram followers had come to know well, thanks to countless “artsy” (according to Lyla) bikini shots she'd posted before I instituted my bright-line social media bathing suit ban.

“See ya, Dad,” she said with practiced nonchalance.

“Whoa, whoa,” I said, blocking her path to the door. “Where do you think you're going?”

“To Grace's. She just pulled up.” Lyla pointed over her shoulder and out the front window of our house. “See?”

“What I see,” I said, glancing out the front window and seeing Grace's white Jeep, “is that you're missing the bottom half of your dress.”

She rolled her eyes and hitched an enormous tote bag over one shoulder. I noticed that she wasn't wearing any makeup. *Yet*. I wasn't a gambling man, but I'd bet a hundred bucks that by the time Grace's car was to Five Points, the black shit Lyla put around her eyes would emerge, along with boots to replace her untied sneakers. “It's called fashion, Dad.”

“Did you borrow that *fashion* from Sophie?” I asked, referring to the little girl she regularly babysat. “Although it might even be too short for her.”

“You’re hilarious,” Lyla deadpanned, staring at me with one eye, the other covered with a mane of curly, dark hair. “You should do, like, stand-up.”

“Okay. Look, Lyla. You’re not going out of the house in that.” I tried to keep my voice low and calm, the way a psychologist had advised we speak to our teenagers at a recent lecture at Lyla’s school. *They tune us out when we yell*, the lady had said in her own monotone. I’d glanced around the auditorium, amazed to see so many parents taking notes. Did these people really have time to consult a notebook in the heat of the moment?

“Da-ad,” she whined. “I’m just trying to go study with Grace and a couple other people. . .”

“Studying on a Saturday night? Seriously? What do you take me for, anyway?”

“Our exams are coming up. . . and we have this big group project.” She unzipped her backpack and pulled out a biology textbook, holding it up as proof. “See?”

“And just how many boys are in your study group?”

She fought a smirk and lost.

“Change. Now,” I said, pointing down the hall toward her bedroom, my mind filled with the horrifying possibilities of a real-life biology lesson she could get in that outfit.

“Okay, but every minute I waste debating this with you is, like, a percentage point off my grade.”

“I’ll settle for a C and a longer skirt,” I said, then resumed my cleaning to indicate the conversation was over.

I could feel her staring at me, and out of the corner of my eye, saw her turn and stomp down the hall. A few minutes later, she returned in a potato sack of a dress that only worried

me more, as it confirmed that she'd be changing clothes—right after she spackled on the makeup.

“Remember. Be home by eleven,” I said, even though I had no real way of enforcing her curfew when I wouldn't be back until much later than that. I was a carpenter by trade, but to make a little extra cash, I also drove a few nights a week for Uber and Lyft, and Saturday was my best night.

“I'm sleeping at Grace's. Remember?”

I sighed, because I vaguely recalled giving her permission, though I had forgotten to call Grace's mother to verify the plans. I told myself that I had no reason to distrust Lyla. She could be rebellious on the margins, testing the boundaries the way teenagers do, but for the most part, she was a good kid. She was smart and studied hard, which was why she'd ended up at Windsor Academy after attending public school through the eighth grade. The transition had been difficult for us both. My challenge was around logistics (she could no longer take a bus to school) and economics (tuition was over thirty grand a year, though fortunately, more than eighty-percent of that was covered by financial aid). Her stress had more to do with the intense academics and an even more intense social scene. In short, Lyla had never before been around so many rich kids, and it had been a bit of a struggle to keep pace in their polished, privileged world. But now, nearing the end of her sophomore year, she had made a few friends and seemed happy overall. Her closest friend was Grace, a little sparkplug of a girl whose dad worked in the music industry. “Are her parents home?” I asked.

“Yeah. Well, her mom is, anyway. Her dad might be out of town.”

“And Grace has a curfew?” I asked, feeling sure she did. I’d only met her mother a few times, but she seemed to have a good head on her shoulders, though her decision to give her sixteen-year-old a brand new Jeep was, in my book, suspect.

“Yes. And it’s eleven-*thirty*,” she said, looking smug.

“Eleven-thirty? For a sophomore?”

“Yes, Dad. That’s everyone’s curfew but mine. Or later.”

I didn’t believe this, but gave in with a sigh, having long since learned to pick my battles. Which is why I was now sweeping up hair from the damn dog she begged to adopt and promised to take care of but never did. “Fine. But you have to be back to Grace’s by eleven-thirty *sharp*.”

“Thanks, Dad,” she said, blowing me a kiss on her way out the door, just the way she used to do when she was little.

I caught it in the air and pressed it to my cheek, the second part of our old routine, but she didn’t see me. She was too busy looking down at her phone.

For some reason, it was that air kiss that I thought about as I returned home around one-thirty in the morning, poured a Miller Lite into the frosted mug I kept in the freezer, and heated up a plate of two-day-old chicken tetrazzini. It was the last communication I’d had with Lyla—not a single text or call since. That wasn’t all that unusual, especially on nights I worked late, but it still nagged at me, along with a weird feeling of unease. Nothing catastrophic, just run-of-the-mill, fear-of-her-hooking-up-with-boys kind of doom.

A few minutes later, my phone rang. It was Lyla. I felt simultaneous relief and worry as I answered and said, "Are you okay?"

There was a pause before I heard another girl's voice in my ear. "Um, Mr. Volpe? This is Grace."

"Grace? Where's Lyla? Is she okay?" I asked, panicking as I suddenly pictured my daughter in the back of an ambulance.

"Yeah, yeah. She's right here. With me. At my house."

"Is she hurt?" I asked, unable to think of another reason she wouldn't be calling me herself.

"No. Um. Not like . . . *that*."

"Like *what* then, Grace? Put Lyla on the phone. *Now*."

"Um. I can't do that, Mr. Volpe. . . She can't really . . . talk . . ."

"Why can't she talk?" I said, growing increasingly frantic as I paced around our small kitchen.

"Um, well, " Grace began. "She's kind of out of it . . ."

I stopped pacing long enough to put my shoes back on. "What's going on? Did she take something?"

"No. Lyla doesn't do drugs, Mr. Volpe," Grace said in a steady, firm tone that calmed me just a little.

"Is your Mom there?"

"Um, no, Mr. Volpe. She's out, at a benefit thing . . . but should be back soon." She continued to babble an explanation of her mother's social itinerary, but I cut her off.

“Dammit, Grace! Could you please tell me what the *hell* is going on?”

“Um, well . . . Lyla just drank too much . . . Well actually, she didn’t drink *that* much. She only had a little bit of wine and, like, one vodka drink. . . at this party we went to . . . After we studied . . . But she didn’t really eat dinner. I think that was the problem.”

“Is she . . . conscious?” I asked. My heart raced as I wondered if Grace should hang up with me and call 911.

“Oh, yeah. She’s not passed out. . . She’s just really out of it, and I’m a little worried, and just thought you should know. But honestly, she didn’t do any drugs or even drink that much . . . As far as I know . . . But we were apart for a little while. Not that long—”

“Okay. I’m on my way over,” I said, grabbing my keys as I tried to remember the exact location of Grace’s house. It was somewhere in Belle Meade where most of the Windsor kids lived, but I’d only dropped Lyla off there a few times. “Text me your address. Okay, Grace?”

“Okay, Mr. Volpe. I will,” she said, then resumed her disjointed mix of confessing and downplaying.

“Text me now, Grace,” I said, hanging up on her.

Somewhere between the door and my car, I started to run.

After retrieving a semi-conscious Lyla from Grace’s, Googling “alcohol poisoning,” and talking with Lyla’s on-call pediatrician, I concluded that my daughter wasn’t in any immediate danger. She was just run-of-the-mill-dumb-teenager drunk. So there was nothing for me to do but sit with her on the tile floor of her bathroom while she moaned and cried and repeatedly slurred,

“Dad, I’m so, so sorry.” Occasionally she even referred to me as Daddy—my former name that she’d sadly dropped a few years back.

Of *course* she was wearing the skirt I told her not to wear and her eyes looked like a panda’s, ringed in black. I didn’t bother to lecture, knowing she likely wouldn’t remember anything anyway. I did ask her some questions though, hoping that the booze would act as truth serum, and that I could get enough of the story to be able to effectively cross-examine her in the morning.

The conversation was fairly predictable, going something like this:

Did you do drugs? No.

Did you drink? Yes.

How much? Not that much.

Where were you? At a party.

Whose party? A boy named Beau.

Does he go to Windsor? Yes.

Who else were you with? Grace and some other friends.

What happened? I don’t remember.

And that was it. Either she *really* didn’t remember—or she was just telling me she didn’t remember. Regardless, I was left to fill in the blanks with less than pleasant imagery. Every so often, she’d crawl back to the toilet and puke while I held back her tangled hair. When I felt sure nothing was left in her stomach, I fed her sips of water with a couple Tylenol, helped her brush her teeth and wash her face, then got her into bed, still wearing that dress.

As I sat in the armchair in her room and watched her sleep, I felt waves of all the predictable anger, worry, and disappointment that come with being the father of a teenage girl who had just fucked up. But there was something else nagging at me, too. And as hard as I tried, I couldn't stop myself from thinking of Beatriz, the only other person I'd ever taken care of like this.