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Chapter One

George died on a Tuesday. I know it was a Tuesday, because for many Tuesdays after I would count the number of weeks it had been since he died, giving myself permission to carefully recall the events of that day when everything in my life changed color.

This is the time one week ago, when George kissed me goodbye for the last time.

This is the time two weeks ago, when I was in the shower, and George's heart stopped, killing him instantly.

This is the time, three weeks ago, when I received the call from the hospital and drove across the bridge to SF General.

This is the time, four weeks ago, when I leaned over his body, still warm, and held his hand and stroked his hair and cried, asking him what happened.

This is the time, five weeks ago, when I left him at the hospital and carried his belongings to the car, knowing that I would never see him again.

It went on like this for 10 or 12 or 20 weeks, until at some point I lost count. Having a newborn child will do that. But to this day, I am still meticulously examining the details of that Tuesday, as if looking for a clue, a key. As if remembering something new will change everything and bring him back.

On that Tuesday morning, July 22, 2014, it rained. It was strange for us to have rain in July in California, and I remember waking up to it around 3 a.m., an hour after George crawled into bed with me. We had recently purchased turquoise cushions for the Adirondack chairs on the porch off of our bedroom.

"Should we bring them in?" I mumbled, fully expecting him to assume ownership of the

“we”.

“They’re fine,” he replied. But feeling my uncertainty, he rolled out of bed and stepped out into the rain. “I haven’t been able to fall asleep, anyway.”

Satisfied, I fell back to sleep, while he tossed and turned.

At 7 a.m. he got out of bed, showered, and dressed. He had a full day of product strategy and design meetings at a client’s office in San Francisco, which he’d been up late preparing for – one of two remaining business obligations standing between him and paternity leave. Our baby girl, whom we’d already named Nova, was due any time in the next three weeks.

“Give me two more days,” he’d requested of her the day before, his lips brushing my belly. “Then I’ll be ready!”

But on that Tuesday morning, he was tired. He had not slept well. I was half awake as he got dressed, positioning myself on hands and knees to relieve the baby pressure on my back.

“I’m giving the baby hang time,” I said, my head buried in a pillow. I swayed my hips back and forth.

“You look sexy,” he replied. He slipped his Levi’s on.

“Thanks, cutie,” I said.

“I didn’t think about what to wear today,” he said as he began buttoning the blue dress shirt he’d purchased at the pop-up market last spring, the one with the red buttons.

I plopped down into child’s pose and turned my head to look at him. “You look great,” I reassured him.

He did. So handsome.

“Thanks, cutie.” He crawled onto the bed. He kissed me. “I love you so much.”

He kissed my belly and said goodbye to Nova. I wished him luck in his meetings. He thanked me, and left.

That was the last time I saw George Henry Frederick Schnakenberg III alive. The last time I heard his voice, saw his smile, felt his touch.

An hour later, I got up and showered for my 36-week prenatal appointment. I remember picking out my clothes, a long indigo skirt and a white cotton top that tied around the top of my belly. I remember putting them on in front of the full length mirror in our bedroom. I remember hearing my cell phone ring from the bathroom across the hall. I didn't recognize the 415 area code and ordinarily would have let it ring, but something told me to pick up. It was 9:40 a.m.

"Hello?" He knew who I was as soon as I answered the phone.

"Miss Chang, this is Shaw Talley at SF General Hospital," said the voice. It was firm, unemotional. "Your husband George has been in an accident."

"Oh no, what happened?" I asked, walking back into the bedroom.

"He was riding his skateboard, and he ran into a parked car," said Shaw.

"A parked car?" I asked, confused. *Why would he run into a parked car?*

I imagined a minor accident, maybe something had distracted him. Running into a parked car didn't sound serious, and it also didn't sound like something George would do, unprovoked. George was an experienced skater. "Is he okay?"

"He's very sick," Shaw said.

"He's very *sick*?" I asked, becoming alarmed. I imagined him vomiting, perhaps another bout of the stomach bug he'd had a couple weeks ago. *What kind of sick?*

"Is there anyone there who can drive you to the hospital?" he asked, interrupting my thoughts.

"I have a car, I can drive. I'm leaving now."

I put the phone down, heart racing. Not a good time for accidents. I needed George to be

well, to help me through the birth, to help with the baby. *It'll be okay*, I reassured myself. *Whatever happened, we will work it out.*

He's very sick? What does that mean?

I sat on the bed and paused a minute, gathering my thoughts. I couldn't make sense of Shaw's message, but I didn't have time to contemplate it. Death did not enter my mind.

I looked around the room, and things looked different, vivid, slightly altered. It was very quiet. I felt alone, and yet suddenly self-conscious, as if I was being watched, or having an out-of-body experience. I took a deep breath, got to my feet, and went to George's closet to get him a clean pair of shorts and a t-shirt. If he'd been in an accident, he would need a change of clothes. I stuffed them in a canvas bag. I called my OB's office to cancel the appointment, ran out of our Oakland home, and drove across the Bay Bridge to San Francisco General Hospital in George's gray VW Golf.

I did not panic in the car. I did not want to react to what I didn't know. I drove across the bridge feeling hurried but calm. *It's going to be okay. Everything is fine. We can handle this.*

I arrived at the Emergency Room sometime after 10 a.m. George had already been pronounced dead.

The memory is so vivid. Walking into the ER on that sunny day, with a change of clothes for George, I was already in some state of shock, aware that something was wrong, and bracing myself for the news. I told the woman at the front desk that I was there to see my husband. Without asking for my name, she told me to have a seat. Within minutes, Shaw appeared through the double doors.

"Miss Chang," he called. I stood and went to him. "I'm Shaw. I'm the social worker here. Please come with me."

I didn't know then, and perhaps it was better that way, that having a social worker greet you at the ER is a sign of really bad news.

"Is George ok?" I asked.

"The doctor will be in to speak to you about your husband," he said. He showed me to a small, gray, windowless room. "Please wait here."

I sat on the sofa next to a pink plastic pitcher of ice water. It had just been filled. My heart filled with dread. Still, I fidgeted and fought back tears. I did not have a reason to cry yet. I just needed to see George.

Several very long minutes passed, and the door opened. Three men in scrubs walked in, followed by Shaw.

"Hello Miss Chang," the doctor in red scrubs spoke. He introduced himself, then the two men beside him, names I knew I would not remember. "We're all here because we worked on your husband." Red scrubs sat down, facing me. Shaw took a spot next to me on the couch. The two blue scrubs remained standing.

"Hi, is he ok?" I asked, anxious to quell my uncertainty and fear, but completely unprepared for the answer.

"George died."

Bam. Two words. That's all he said.

"No, he didn't," I pleaded, looking straight into his eyes, begging for a different answer. *No. Please. It can't be true. No. Please. You must be mistaken. Please. There is no way that George is dead.*

"Yes. He did." His voice was firm. Unwavering. Stoic.

It's hard to describe the emotion that arises when a complete stranger tells you that the person you love more than anything in the world, is dead. It's hard to *feel* the emotion,

even. It's hard to feel anything. The baby kicked.

My gaze wandered, past the doctor and up towards the ceiling, entering another realm. *Oh my God, it happened. I can't believe it happened.*

"It" was the moment, two years prior, when I decided I wanted to have a child with George. It was a lazy weekend morning, and I laid next to him, watching him sleep. He was so beautiful, so peaceful. My heart was struck by how much love I had for him.

If anything ever happened to him, I would want his child, a piece of him, to be left with me. A vision of us, his child and me, flashed through my mind. It was vivid, almost touchable, and filled with love and certainty. That afternoon I shared my daydream with George, and we began making plans to start a family.

Of course I never thought anything would actually happen to George, or to us. To me it meant, simply, that no matter what happened, having a child with him would bring me joy, and thus there was nothing to fear. That is, until the morning of July 22, 2014, when red scrubs spoke.

Oh my God, it happened. I can't believe it happened. How could this happen? Did I know this was going to happen? Why did I ever think that? Fuck!

"How?" I managed to ask, my face in my hands, middle fingers digging into the corners of my eyes. A part of my brain shut down. I couldn't comprehend this. *This is a nightmare. This cannot be real life.*

Shock took over. I did not cry. Shaw began to list the events of the morning.

Shortly after 9 a.m., George was headed south on 8th street, toward Brannan. He was riding an electric Boosted Board, which he had proudly designed. He was in the bike lane. To the left was traffic, and to the right a row of parked cars. A biker, about 15 feet behind George, saw him veer to the right, hit a parked car, and fall. He tried to get back up, and collapsed. A

medical doctor on his way to UCSF Mission Bay witnessed the accident and ran over. He administered CPR. At 9:04 a.m., Emergency Medical Services was called. They arrived at 9:06. They continued CPR. They shocked him. They intubated him. They rushed him to SFGH at 9:20 a.m. The doctors worked on him.

They never got him back. He was pronounced dead at 9:43 a.m.

Red scrubs pointed to the name on his badge, and said if I had any questions, I could contact him. *I can't believe you're expecting me to remember your name*, I thought, nodding. I had so many questions. A million questions. But I couldn't access them. My mind was numb. The doctors walked out of the waiting room, and I looked over at Shaw. He had tears in his eyes.

I asked to see George. Shaw asked if there was family I could call. My sister was at work, an hour away, so I began to call friends who I knew would be close by. To do this, I had to look up numbers on my phone, and tell them to Shaw so he could punch them into the hospital telephone. The building had no cell coverage.

I called Senay. No answer. I called Victoria. No answer. I called my sister Judy. No answer. I left the hospital phone number on their voicemails and went outside. I sat on the concrete block in front of the entrance and felt like I was in an altered reality. I felt incredibly alone. The life I knew had dissolved in an instant. Nothing about me or the world would ever be the same.

I finally received a text from Eric, George's close friend and business partner, whom he'd been on his way to meet that morning at the client's office. Eric had assumed George's lack of attendance to be baby-related, and wanted to check in. I called Eric back immediately, and he was the first person I told.

“George was in an accident,” I started as soon as he answered.

“Oh no, is he okay?” Eric’s voice was a mix of concern and playful curiosity. George was known to be accident-prone, having endured multiple wounds as a result of his carefree and active lifestyle, but he always survived.

“George died.” The words cut through me a second time. But in contrast to the first, I had now firmly landed in fight-or-flight mode and my adrenaline was high. My brain and heart went numb. “I’m at SF General. You need to come.”

When Victoria called back, I told her the same thing. She cried and said she was on her way. I later wished I could have broken the news to people in a more compassionate and mindful way, but I just did it the way red scrubs did it, forcing the words out in to the world where they could begin to meet reality. When Senay called and I asked her to come to SF General, she said yes, no questions asked. I didn’t tell her. She assumed I was in labor.

Eric was the first to arrive. We hugged. Reality hit. This was no longer my own private nightmare; it was now shared, spreading. With Eric to accompany me, I was granted permission to see my husband. Shaw led us across the hall to a second small windowless room, where George lay on a gurney, covered in white sheets.

I will never forget the experience of seeing George’s dead body in that room. I went to him quickly. His mouth was covered with tape and plastic from the intubation, which was jarring — *Why wouldn’t they have removed that?* — but he otherwise looked exactly like my love. I touched his forehead first, then his hair. I buried my face in his neck. It was still warm. My voice rambled. The tears came.

“What happened, George, what happened? Oh my God...what happened? I can’t believe this. I can’t believe you’re...what happened? George?” The same question, the same words, over and over. It was all I had the mind to say.

I had never touched a dead person before. The thought crossed my mind. But this wasn't a dead person. This was George, the love of my life, the father to my child, the only man I wanted to love. Nothing could have kept me from holding him that day.

I found his hand under the sheet. I wrapped it in mine, still warm, but limp. Lifeless. I kissed it. I held it to my forehead. I wept, dripping tears on the body that no longer held him. I uncovered his chest, and lay my head on it, holding him, feeling his warm body. The same warm body that left my bed that morning, the same warm body that crawled back in to kiss me goodbye. His beautiful body, his beautiful neck and shoulders and chest, everything looking exactly just right, exactly like George, except he was no longer in there. Just a warm empty body. This body that I loved so much, now void of George. George was gone.

At some point, Victoria entered the room. Then Senay, who had only then been informed that I was not in labor. I greeted them, and went back to George, only vaguely aware that we were not alone.

I continued to hold and kiss and uncover his body, carefully taking in each part, so I could remember him. I lifted his eyelids so I could see his eyes. His gorgeous hazel eyes, light brown with specks of green and blue. I traced his eyebrows. I traced the line above his left clavicle, then his right. I followed the midline of his chest, where the hair thickened, to his belly button. I looked at his penis and his testicles and his thighs and his calves and his ankles and his toes. I looked hard and hoped I would remember. I knew it would be the last time I would see him with my eyes, and I wanted his image burned into my memory. Never have I been so present, so focused, at any other moment in my life.

"I love you, George," I spoke aloud, with a keen awareness of his presence. He was no longer in his body, but he was undeniably there with me. "You are my love. You will always be my love. Thank you. I'm so sorry. I love you." There were no other words. Nothing else

mattered.

I'm so sorry you're dead. I'm so sorry this happened. What the fuck happened? Why are you dead? I wanted to scream and kick the walls down, but I just stood there, holding him, tears falling, feeling him with me, knowing that the only thing I needed to do was love him.

A man from the Medical Examiner's office entered the room. He told me they wanted to do an autopsy, and that they would be taking the body soon. He had me sign some papers. The autopsy would be performed in the next two days, and afterwards I would have to arrange for the body to be transported to a funeral home or cremation site. He gave me a card with a number on it. I looked at him like he was a crazy person. I nodded and said thank you.

I lifted George's left hand and removed his wedding ring, a silver band that he had cut and sanded from the handle of a bicycle. "If I lose it, I'll just make another one!" he'd exclaimed proudly when the idea took root. It was on snug, and required effort to negotiate. I slipped it onto my thumb.

A woman on the hospital staff approached me with a pink plastic bag labeled "PERSONAL BELONGINGS". George's things were in it. She held in her hand a checklist of the items, and asked me to go through the bag to make sure everything was there. I stared at her blankly. *You want me to do what? Are you INSANE?* Eric took over. They walked away and inventoried the items so we could leave.

But I wasn't ready to leave. I wasn't ready to leave without George. I felt like I was abandoning him. I had come to the hospital to bring him clean clothes, and I was leaving with a bag of his belongings, but not him. I would never see him again. This did not make sense. I was not supposed to be leaving the hospital without George. I was not supposed to let them take him away and cut him open.

What would that mean, if they cut him open? Would he really be dead then? How could I let them do this?

But there was nothing else to do. I looked back at George, reminding myself that he was no longer there. It was just his body, and his body was dead.

When we walked out of the hospital, the bright sun greeted us. It was a gorgeous San Francisco day, not a cloud in the clear blue sky. It felt like a joke.

Oh, hello! Look at this beautiful sun-shining day! Sorry your husband just died. But look, it's such a pretty day outside!

It was so bright I could not see.

We decided to go to Senay's house in Berkeley. They didn't want me to drive, but I couldn't leave George's car at the hospital. I didn't want to have to return to that place.

I convinced them I could do it. Victoria sat in the passenger seat as I stepped on the clutch and shifted into gear. She had never learned to drive stick. As I peeled out of the parking lot, a strange sensation hit. Here I was, driving, the cadence of *clutch-shift-release* so routine, so normal, and yet nothing was routine or normal. George was behind me now. Somehow, I was still here, still functioning, still driving and shifting and steering. I even stopped for gas at the intersection of Cesar Chavez and 101, and listened to a voicemail from my OB, who had called to make sure George was ok. The nurse had relayed my message to her about the accident. *How nice of her to call*, I thought.

On the bridge, I began to ramble. "I can't believe this. Can you believe this? What just happened? I can't believe this...can you believe this?"

Victoria cut me off. "Not now," she said firmly. "Just drive."

When we pulled up to Senay's, I was relieved to be free of the car and free to fall apart. I envisioned myself falling to the ground, pounding the pavement, screaming at the sky, but none of this happened. Instead, I walked calmly and quietly through their front gate, and into the sound of running water and the smell of star jasmine.

It was a place where George and I had gathered many times over the past two years, an envy-worthy urban oasis in the middle of Berkeley, lush with greenery and blooming flowers, a koi pond home to fish and frogs, an abundant vegetable garden, weeping willows, and total privacy. I walked across the second foot bridge and remembered all the times I had done this before, when George was still here, when everything in the world made sense. The last time had been our baby shower, one month ago. We had photos taken here, I wore a fancy skirt, he wore a big grin.

This time, my footsteps hitting the wooden planks with a familiar yet uneasy cadence, I felt the distance between that life and this one explode into focus, piercing my insides. Everything looked the same, and everything was altered. I felt empty, void of all that defined me, holding only this child now, and the pain of irreconcilable loss. *How can everything appear to be so beautiful, so normal, when there is no such thing?*

This was my initiation into the world of grief.

Thus began the firsts. The first moments in which I would experience familiar places, smells, and sounds post-George, when the stark realization that nothing in my life was what it used to be, what I wanted it to be, reached in and crushed me. Often times I wouldn't be conscious of the event until my body delivered the blow — a merciless punch to the gut — waiting for my mind to catch on.

Ouch! Fuck that hurts, what is that? Oh. Right. George died.

It seemed to go on endlessly.

The first time I stepped into the shower and smelled his soap, and saw his razor, still flecked with little black hairs.

The first time I drove home the back way, the way we took on our first visit to see the house on Prince Street.

The first time I fried an egg sunny-side-up, the way he liked it. (I began scrambling my eggs after that.)

The first time I heard the garage door open, certain for a moment that it was George coming home.

The first time I walked up the steps of City Hall to pick up copies of our marriage certificate for the banks and the lawyers, and realized that the last time I stood on these steps was on our wedding day.

The first time I stepped into our favorite Thai restaurant, or our neighborhood bakery, or a friend's house. My body would instantly tell me when I was experiencing a once-familiar place, post-George, for the first time. These firsts were hiding behind every corner, hidden in my senses, ready to attack and remind me that my life had exploded into a million pieces, while the world around me remained completely intact, unchanged.

Just yesterday, things were normal. Just yesterday, I putzed around the house and cleaned and put away baby things while George worked in his design workshop downstairs. At lunchtime we held hands and walked down the street to Miss Saigon for pho, and the waiter asked when I was due, and announced that his girlfriend was three months pregnant, and we congratulated him.

Just yesterday, we drove to Park Burger for dinner, and on the way there George snapped at me for being a backseat driver and I retreated and felt badly (because he was right), and he

kissed my hand and made it all okay. He ordered a bacon cheeseburger with fries and a milkshake. "Mmm, it'd be nice to have a beer," he'd said, "but I still have work to do tonight. Vanilla milkshake, please."

This was his last meal. A likely choice, if he'd been given one. Except for the beer. He should have ordered that beer.

We sat at a table and discussed the work he still had left to do. It was quite a bit, considering he had a busy day coming up and wanted to get some sleep. But only two more days like this, and he'd be free to take paternity leave.

On the way home, he invited me to hang out with him in his workshop while he worked, and I commented that there wasn't a comfortable place for me to sit down there. "We should get you one of those Jax beanbag chairs, make it cozier down there," I'd said.

Around 9 p.m., we parted ways and he headed downstairs to work in his office. At 11 p.m. I went up to bed, first passing by the basement door, slightly ajar, hearing the click-click-click of his mouse, and making a conscious decision not to say goodnight. Except I always said goodnight. If not to his face, I'd yell down to him, and usually he'd come upstairs to give me a hug and kiss.

But on this night, I didn't want to disturb him, and I didn't want him to feel anxious that I was going to bed, which he sometimes did, wishing that he could be crawling in beside me. On this night, I had so much confidence in our continued existence that I didn't think it mattered.

How must he have felt when he came upstairs to an empty living room and realized I had gone to bed without saying goodnight? Though when he came to bed at 2 a.m., and we exchanged a few words, he didn't seem upset.

"Is it late?" I mumbled.

"Not too late," he replied. I rolled over and looked at the clock.

"Did you finish it?"

"Not all of it, but enough." His voice was soft and gentle. He slipped under the covers.

An hour later, it started raining. Six hours after that, his heart stopped.

Oh why didn't I sit with him while he worked that night? Why was I so selfish? And why oh why didn't I go downstairs to kiss him goodnight?

I don't remember a lot about being at Senay's, but we stayed there all afternoon into the early evening.

I remember walking in the front door, surprised to see Jeffrey, Senay's husband and a good friend of George's, sitting on the couch. He had been working from home. He got up and looked at me with tears in his eyes. That look. Sorrow, and grief, and pity. I would become well-acquainted with that look over the next few months. We hugged.

I remember sitting on the bench at their farmhouse dining table, repeating myself. *I can't believe George died... I can't believe George died... I can't believe George died.* I remember feeling annoyed with myself for repeating these words, as if by the afternoon on the day of his sudden death I should be able to comprehend what had happened. I remember apologizing for sounding like a broken record.

I remember talking on the phone to George's oldest childhood friend Caleb, to whom I also very bluntly and unapologetically broke the news; to his parents who had been vacationing on a boat in Maine; to my mom, and my sister Judy. Judy drove up to Senay's that afternoon. Eric's girlfriend Adrianna also joined us. I even called my OB back, and told her the news. She couldn't believe it. That made two of us.

At some point there was a stranger on the phone asking me if they could take George's eyes. Unable to finalize his death in such a way, I asked them to call back later, which they did, and I

ignored. At some point there was my sister telling me that I should get an induction and an epidural, that I would be crazy to follow through with my natural birth plan after this.

We talked about the memorial service, that it should be the following weekend. Any later, and the baby might come. Jeffrey began making phone calls to spread the news, our community was large and there would be many willing hands to help.

I remember dumping out the contents of the personal belongings bag from the hospital, feeling everyone's eyes on me. The shoulder straps of his backpack had been cut so that they could get to his chest, and in it was a smashed 3D design model he had built to show the client he was meeting that day. I stuffed it back in. A small manila envelope held his wallet, iPhone, and keys. In his wallet, a couple of bucks and a fully charged BART transit card that he had used that morning to get to San Francisco. I looked at his driver's license, his gaze staring back at me. Could he really be dead? It didn't seem possible.

I remember Jeffrey making me an affogato, vanilla ice cream with espresso on top, using the fancy espresso machine a group of us had purchased for him and Senay, for their joint birthdays in November of 2013. George and I had been in Tahoe celebrating with them that weekend, and it was the weekend we conceived Nova. It was also weekend before we got married.

That affogato was so fucking good, I almost forgot that George was dead.