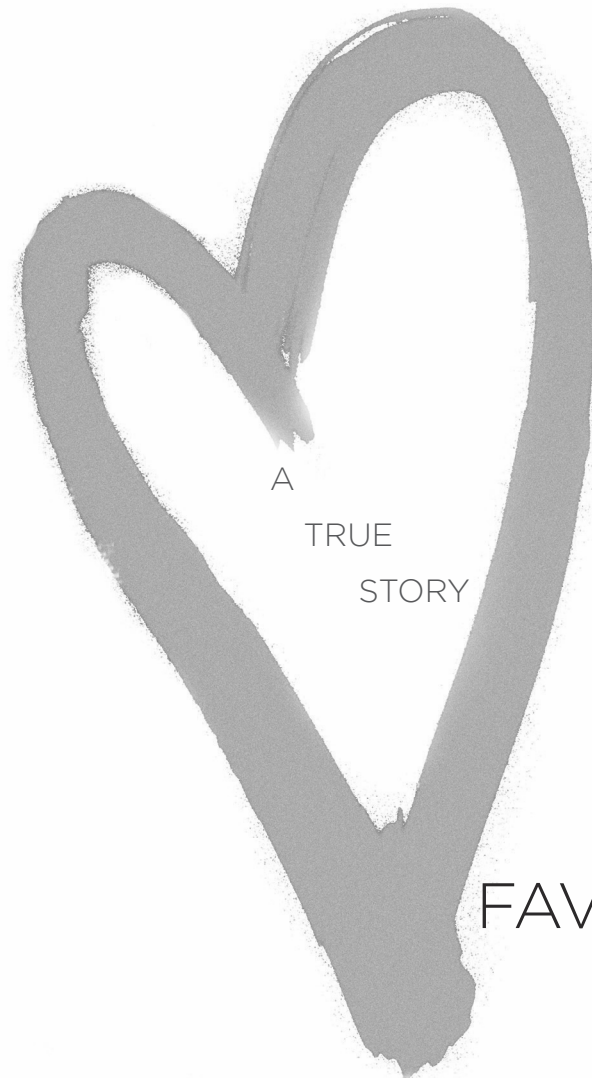


YOU'RE

MY

FAVORITE



YOU'RE

MY

A
TRUE
STORY

FAVORITE

GINNY PRIEM

You're My Favorite

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DISCLAIMER

This work is based on a true story and depicts actual events in the life of the author as truthfully as recollection permits and in some cases may include time compression. Occasionally, dialogue consistent with the character or nature of the person speaking may have been supplemented or recreated. All persons within are actual individuals; there are no composite characters. The names and genders of some individuals have been changed to respect their privacy.

*This book is dedicated to my dad, my all-time favorite.
(Except page 76 - sorry about that, Dad)*



PART
ONE

MEET ME
FOR A
COCKTAIL

I'M GROGGY AND DISORIENTED as the sound of my alarm clock wakes me. My eyes adjust to the darkness in the room as I remember where I am. I'm reminded that I'm in yet another hotel room on another exotic work trip—in Alabama.

I roll out of bed, slide my feet into my slippers so as not to touch my bare feet to the highly-trafficked hotel carpeting, and make my way to the bathroom to get ready for the day. I step out of the shower and brush my teeth while I wait for the steam on the mirror in the poorly ventilated bathroom to dissipate so I can swipe my lids, cheeks, and lips with a touch of color.

After pulling myself together, I walk back into the bedroom to get dressed and gather my belongings for my meeting. I toss my laptop and notebook in my bag before heading downstairs to meet with my customer. I'm on my way to the elevator when

I reach for the call button and feel the vibration from my phone buzzing in my bag. It's Lauren messaging me to check in.

"Hey, what's going on?"

"My travels were pretty rough yesterday. I didn't get to bed until about one a.m. I'm having a hard time getting up and moving," I reply.

Lauren asks, "What time are you getting back today?"

I text back, "I land at 9:37 p.m. What do you have going on today? Anything exciting?"

Lauren doesn't answer my question but responds, "And then you leave again tomorrow?"

"I've got a 6:45 a.m. flight Thursday morning to Seattle for my nephew's wedding," I reply.

After I wrap up my customer meeting and lunch, I go back up to my hotel room to pack my things and change out of my work-appropriate dress and stilettos into some more comfortable travel attire: a long-sleeve black and white striped top, black leggings, a long, black cashmere cardigan sweater, and some black sneakers. I pull my slightly longer than shoulder-length golden hair up into my signature topknot bun. With a touch-up of my lip gloss, I take one final glance over to make sure I look halfway presentable before I head to the lobby for my ride to the airport.

My Uber driver drops me off curbside, and I step inside to ride the escalator up one floor to the security line. At most airports, I can send all of my items straight through the X-ray scanner. Unfortunately, there's no TSA precheck option at this small airport, so I wait in line, observing the less-traveled individuals asking about the 3:1:1 rule. They are confused why they can't bring their thirty-two-ounce aerosol can of Aqua Net in their carry-on.

The older gentleman in front of me makes it through the metal detector with no alarm on the third attempt. *Whew!* I push my plastic bins with my laptop and iPad forward on the belt,

hoping that I don't hear the 'random' selection alert as I walk through the detector. *That would be embarrassing.*

After making it through the metal detector unscathed, I gather my things as they come through on the opposite side. I repack my belongings and wheel my dark tan carry-on bag in one hand (a gift from the airline when I had flown one million miles) while checking emails on my phone in the other. I walk past the other business travelers and families sitting and waiting for their flights at their gate.

As I stroll by the single gift shop and the quick-serve restaurant, I glance down at my watch to check the time. I'm still full from lunch, but I'm planning ahead. *When will my next opportunity be to eat?* I browse the limited snack options; pretzels, candy bars, and cheese puffs. None of these unhealthy choices speak to me, so I opt to wait and start walking toward my gate.

My turn to board the plane approaches, and I'm eager to get home to my family. Of course, I'll miss cooking dinner and helping with homework tonight, but I'll cherish the moment when I can tiptoe into their bedroom to kiss their sweet little sleeping faces when I get home.

Looking out the window while sitting in the all-too-familiar blue leather seat near the front of the aircraft, I get another message from Lauren. The flight attendant is making the final overhead announcements as we're nearly ready to push back from the gate.

Lauren, "Hey, it's me again. I know this is a tall order, but is there any chance you could meet for a drink tonight when you land?"

I know something is going on when she asks me to get together for a cocktail when I land, knowing it will be well past ten p.m.

I responded, "I sure could. Where are you thinking?"

Lauren, being considerate of my travels and the time of day,

suggests, "Let's meet somewhere close to your house." I appreciate this because we live about twenty minutes apart and I'll have had a long day of travel.

This prompts me to ask, "Is everything ok? I'm excited to see you. How about BLVD or Bacio?"

And then I see the dot dot dot dancing across my screen. Knowing she's typing makes me a little anxious. I begin to wonder how she will respond, a million things running through my mind. It seems like she's crafting a lengthy message as I stare at my phone for an uncomfortably long time when she finally responds with, "Everything will be ok. Just need to catch up. Excited to see you, too. Let's do BLVD *Red Heart Emoji*"

I'm certainly not one opposed to getting together for a cocktail or a few, even if it is on a Tuesday (although I'd consider myself to be more of a wine or champagne gal). However, anything past nine p.m. is the middle of the night to me, especially on a Tuesday.

This feels different. Lauren's never asked for something like this from me before, and we've been friends for about seven years. We get together for workouts and coffee but never for drinks.

When she asks me for this "tall order," I immediately know something's going on. She needs me. So I will race to her side and help her through any situation she's facing.



On this wintry November Tuesday, I walk to my car in the parking ramp at the airport. I get in and let out a deep exhale, which gives way to a misty cloud of condensation, and prepare myself for what's to come. I start the car and don't wait for the engine to completely warm up before putting it in gear.

Before backing out of my parking space, I dial Chad. He answers right away, "Hi Babe."

"Hi Babe. Are the kids in bed?" I ask.

"Yep, they've been sleeping for about an hour."

"Oh good. I can't wait to do my morning breakfast routine with them and get them off to school tomorrow. They are the sweetest in the morning."

"They love their mornings with you, too."

"I'm on my way to meet up with Lauren and should be home by 11:15 since the restaurant closes at eleven."

"Sounds good. I hope everything is okay with Lauren. Tell her I say hi and wake me up when you get home. Emilio and I are excited to see you."

Oddly enough, Emilio can't see or hear me when I walk past him. He's been blind and deaf for several years now. Some might find it disruptive, but I find the sound of the snores coming from his squished face soothing, and I love seeing him curled up like a fluff ball on the floor in his plush dog bed.

"Ok, I will. See you soon," I say.

"Love you, Babe."

"I love you, too."

We hang up, and I drive from the airport to meet Lauren, my hands gripping the cold leather of the steering wheel. Despite the temperature, I can tell through the thin material of my gloves that my hands are sweaty and white-knuckled, partly from feeling cold and partly from the anticipation of what I'm about to learn.

I whip the car into a parking space in the sparsely filled lot and briskly walk to the front door of the restaurant near my house—a restaurant I've been frequenting so often that some of us refer to it as my cafeteria.

I swing the door open and step through the entryway onto the tile floor. In the dim lighting, my eyes sweep the room, looking for Lauren. I spot her almost immediately. She is sitting in a booth at the back of the restaurant near the bar, just as she described.

We have less than an hour to debrief. And whatever is going

on with her, I don't want to rush what she has to tell me. I want to be a good friend. I want to be a great friend. It's important that I listen and be here for her.

Lauren is sitting in front of a stack of papers face down on the table next to her nearly finished cocktail. Even with the faint lighting, I can see tears streaming down her face. This is serious. There's something major on her mind.

I conjure up different scenarios in my head.

Is there something wrong with her dad?

Did something happen to her kid?

Is everything okay with her marriage?

An immense amount of possibilities run through my mind.

What could possibly be going on?

Seeing Lauren cry tears of sorrow rather than crying from laughter is another new experience for me. Whatever's going on is massive. She slides out of the booth and stands to greet me with her arms held wide. I walk into her arms, my arms below hers because she has a couple of inches on me, and we embrace in the way you expect close friends to hug during a major crisis—a crisis that I'm eager for her to bring me up to speed on.

Did someone die?

Why wouldn't she give me a glimpse of information about any of these scenarios over the phone?

She orders her second drink—probably her second for the year—and I order a big glass of bold and dry red wine. She orders a vodka soda with a splash of cranberry juice. *Adorable.*

We sit down, and I take my gloves and bulky scarf off to get settled in the booth. Once our drinks arrive, I kick things off by saying with a gentle tone as I reach for her arm across the table, “You have been on my mind all day, and I've been so worried about you. What on earth is going on?”

Lauren trembles and struggles to speak. After taking a few deep breaths, she finally finds the words. She says through quiv-

ering lips, “This doesn't have anything to do with me. It has to do with you.”

I tilt my head in confusion at this curveball.

She continues, “Well, it actually has everything to do with Chad. I received a call today with a substantial amount of information about him, and I want to know if you want to hear it.”

“Yes. Of course I do,” I respond with a lump in my throat.