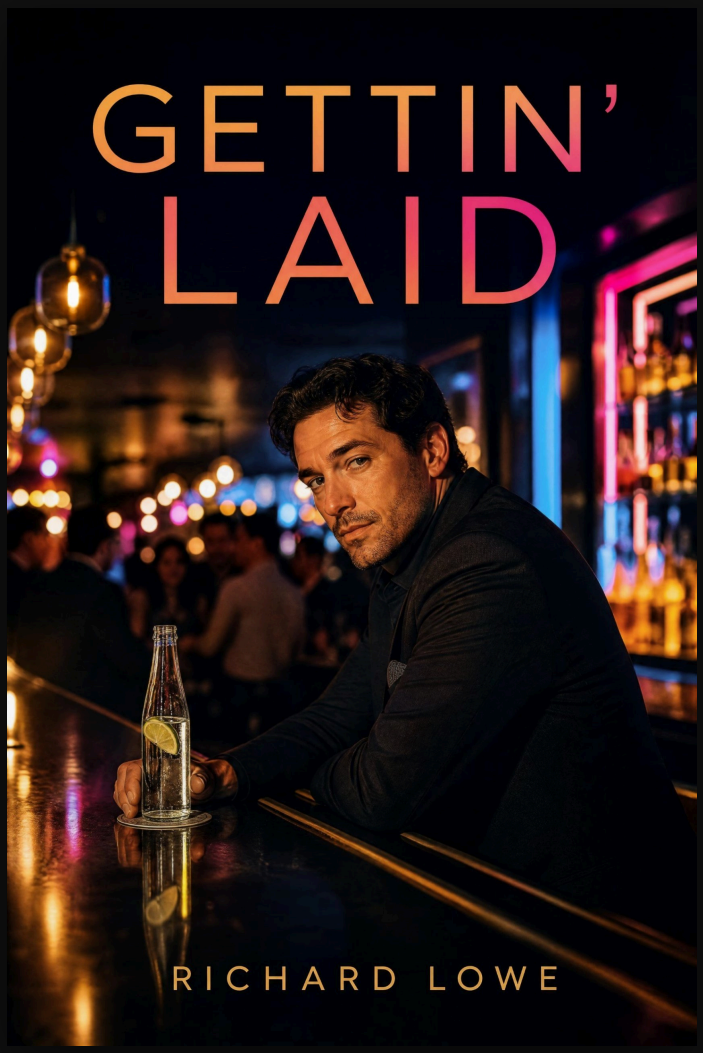
A FREE COMPANION TO GETTIN' LAID

Masking Tape

Two years before Ethan's long year, Danny flies to Dallas with a ham and three rolls of masking tape for a house that has just lost June, and for three days he does not leave.



RICHARD LOWE

Masking Tape

Russ doesn't say anything for the first eleven seconds. I count them. I can hear him breathing, and behind him a television is running a game show, an audience clapping for a woman who has won a car.

I'm on the floor of my apartment with one running shoe on. It's ten past six on a Thursday in March, and nobody calls me at ten past six to tell me good news.

"Russ," I say.

"She's gone."

He says it like a man reading it off a card somebody handed him. I put my other shoe down on the rug, carefully, as if it might go off.

"June," I say, because one of us has to.

"Yesterday. At school. She was doing bus duty and she told Gail Haskell she had the worst headache of her life, and she sat down on the curb." He stops. The audience on his television is still clapping. "Aneurysm. They said she didn't feel any of it after the curb. I keep asking them how they know that."

"Where's Hallie?"

"Driving up from College Station. She wouldn't let me come get her." He breathes. "I don't know why I called you. I'm sorry. I had the phone in my hand and I didn't know who else."

"I'm coming up."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know I don't." I'm already standing. "Turn off the TV, Russ. Go put on a clean shirt. I'll be there by lunch."

* * *

The ten-thirty out of Hobby has seats. They always have seats on a Thursday in March, because nobody wants to go to Dallas in March except people who have to.

I text Margot from the cab. I can't do Friday dinner. Family thing in Dallas.

She comes back inside a minute: Is everyone okay? I tell her an old friend lost his wife.

She sends a heart and then, a minute later, Call me if you want to talk. She means it. That's the trouble with Margot. She always means it.

Teresa calls while I'm in the security line, shoes in a bin, belt in my hand. It's her sister week.

I knew it was coming; it comes every three months like the water bill, and she needs about forty-five minutes. I give her twelve, standing in my socks by the conveyor belt with a TSA agent waving me through, and I tell her I'll call her Sunday and give her the rest.

"You never cut me short," she says.

"I know. I'm sorry. I'll make it up."

"Danny, what's going on?"

"A friend," I say. The agent waves again. I hang up on a good woman in the middle of her sentence, which I have never once done.

* * *

At Love Field I rent the biggest car they have because I'm six-six and every small car in America was designed by somebody who hated me. I drive to a grocery store off Northwest Highway and push a cart through it at the pace of a man who has a list.

I do have a list. I've had it since I was eleven, though I've never written it down.

Coffee, the big can, because the house will drink a pot an hour. Paper plates, the heavy kind that don't fold when somebody puts a slab of lasagna on them. Plastic forks, plastic cups, two boxes of trash bags, the big rolls of paper towels.

Toilet paper, because forty people are going to walk through that house this week and every one of them is going to need the bathroom. A spiral ham, already cooked. Two loaves of bread, mustard, a bag of ice for the chest I'll buy at the front, and a pound of the good coffee for Russ alone, for the mornings after everybody leaves.

Then a pack of black markers and three rolls of masking tape.

The girl at the register looks at the masking tape on top of the ham and the toilet paper. “Moving?” she says.

“Casseroles,” I say. She doesn't understand, and I hope she goes a long time without understanding.

I was eleven the last time I watched a kitchen fill up with other people's dishes. Nobody labeled anything. My mother spent that whole summer driving Pyrex around Beaumont with the windows down, trying to remember whose was whose, knocking on doors to give back a dish to people who would hold her at the door and want to talk about it.

I watched her do it from the passenger seat. I decided then I would never let anybody I loved drive around with a trunk full of glass.

* * *

The house is in Lake Highlands, a brick ranch on a street of brick ranches, with a basketball goal over the garage whose net rotted away years ago. Hallie learned to shoot on that goal. I know this because June sent me a picture every Christmas for nineteen years, and in one of them Hallie is eight and furious, holding a ball bigger than her head.

There are six cars at the curb already. That's how it goes. The news moves through a neighborhood faster than any phone tree. By noon the day after, the women from church and the school and the street have all arrived with a nine-by-thirteen.

The front door is open. I carry in the first four bags without knocking.

The kitchen smells like coffee somebody made too strong and the cinnamon from a coffee cake nobody has cut. A woman I don't know is standing at the counter moving foil-covered dishes around like checkers, trying to make room where there isn't any.

She's in her forties, dark hair pulled back with a clip, reading glasses pushed up on her head. She looks up at me the way people always look up at me, the eyes climbing.

“Oh,” she says. “You must be Danny.”

“I must be.”

“Marisol. Next door.” She holds out a hand and I take it. Her grip is quick and warm. “He said you were coming. He's out back. He hasn't eaten.”

“He'll eat,” I say. “Where does the trash go in this house?”

She laughs, surprised into it, and points at the cabinet under the sink. I like her immediately.

I always like them immediately. That has never once been the problem.

* * *

Russ is in a lawn chair on the back patio in a clean shirt with the price sticker still on the sleeve. He did what I told him. He went and found the newest shirt in the closet, the one June bought him that he never wore.

He gets up when he sees me. He's a foot shorter than I am and always has been, and he walks into me the way he did when we were nineteen and drunk at the end of a good night, straight into the middle of my chest.

I hold on to him. He smells like a man who hasn't showered and the inside of a hospital.

We stand there a long time. Through the kitchen window I can see Marisol pretending not to watch.

"You came," he says into my shirt.

"I said I would."

"You say a lot of things." It's an old joke, from the dorm, and he tries to laugh at it, and the laugh breaks in half on the way out. I keep my hand flat on his back until he's done.

When he steps away I peel the sticker off his sleeve. Thirty-four dollars. I fold it in half and put it in my pocket and he watches me do it.

"She bought me that," he says.

"I know. It's a good shirt."

"It's an ugly shirt."

"It's an ugly shirt," I agree. "Come inside. You're going to eat a ham sandwich and you're not going to argue with me."

He doesn't argue. He eats half of it standing at the counter while Marisol watches him like a nurse. Then he puts it down and goes back outside. I wrap the other half and put it in the fridge, because he'll want it at two in the morning.

* * *

I run the house. That's the job, and I'm good at the job.

The front door is a conveyor belt from one o'clock on. A woman from the school with a chicken spaghetti. Two men from Russ's office at the title company, holding a fruit tray between them like a casket.

June's principal, who cries in the entryway and apologizes for crying, and lets me take her coat. A boy of about ten from down the street, sent alone by his mother with a plate of brownies and a card he made himself, who stands on the porch and won't come in. I crouch down to his height so he isn't looking up at a giant and ask him his name.

Caleb. Mrs. Odom was his teacher last year.

"She let us have the class turtle at our house over Christmas," he says. "His name is Gus."

"That's a good name for a turtle."

"He's not dead," Caleb says, in case I was going to ask. "I checked."

I tell him that was smart. He hands me the brownies and runs.

Every dish that comes in gets a strip of masking tape on the bottom, and on the tape I write the name, the street, and what was in it. Chicken spaghetti, Deborah Fuentes, Ridgecrest. Brownies, Caleb, the blue house, the turtle.

Fruit tray, title company, give the tray back to Ron. I keep a list on the back of a grocery receipt in my jacket. I don't need the list.

I remember names. I've remembered names for a living for twenty-five years, and I remember the ones that don't pay just as well, which is the part nobody believes.

By four the fridge is full. By five the counter is full. By six I have Marisol's husband's old cooler from her garage on the back porch with the overflow packed in ice, and the paper plates are going out the door one heavy plate at a time.

My phone goes in my jacket every twenty minutes. Teresa twice. Margot once, a text, thinking about you.

A woman named Andrea I had a drink with two weeks ago, who wants to know if I'm free Saturday. A rep from the Dallas office who heard I was in town. I check every one, because checking is a habit, and I answer none of them, because answering is a different habit and I can't find it right now.

Marisol catches me looking at the screen in the hall.

"Popular," she says.

"Busy week."

"Mm." She has a dish towel over her shoulder like a bartender. "You don't have to stay out here and do all this. I can do the door. You could sit with him."

"He doesn't want me to sit with him yet."

"How do you know?"

"Because he went back outside after the sandwich," I say. "He'll come in when he's ready to be sat with. Right now he wants to know somebody's handling the door."

She looks at me for a second longer than she has to. Then she smiles, and it's a real smile with interest in it, the kind I've been getting from women in hallways since I was fifteen, and I give her the one I give back, easy and warm, a little extra in the eyes.

It costs me nothing. It never has.

From the staircase behind her, somebody snorts.

* * *

Hallie got in around three. She came through the side door from the garage with a duffel bag and her father's chin, walked straight past forty people and up the stairs, and shut her door.

She's nineteen. She was nineteen days old the first time I held her, at a hospital in Garland, and she threw up on a jacket I'd paid four hundred dollars for and I've never told anybody how happy that made me.

Now she's sitting on the third step from the top in a Texas A&M sweatshirt with the hood up, and she's been sitting there long enough to have watched the whole thing with Marisol.

Marisol takes her dish towel back into the kitchen. I go to the bottom of the stairs.

"Hey, kid."

"Hey, Uncle Danny." She doesn't get up. Her eyes are swollen almost shut. "You're doing the tape thing."

"What tape thing?"

"On the dishes. Mom said you'd do that." She pulls her sleeves down over her hands. "She said if anything ever happened, you'd show up with a ham and a roll of masking tape and run the whole house, and Dad would let you, and it would make him crazy and he'd love you for it."

I put my hand on the banister. The wood is smooth where fifteen years of hands have gone up and down it.

"When did she say that?"

"I don't know. A while ago. We were watching some movie where the guy's wife dies and the neighbors bring food." Hallie wipes her face with the sleeve. "She was right about the ham."

"She was right about most things."

"Do you do that to everybody?"

"Do what?"

“That.” She tilts her head toward the kitchen. “Mrs. Reyes. You made her think you drove up from Houston to stand in her hallway.”

I have an answer for this. I have a dozen of them, smooth and funny and true enough. What comes out is the plain one.

“Mostly,” I say.

Hallie nods like that's what she expected. “Mom said you would. She said you can't help it. She said it nice,” she adds, after a second. “She liked you. She said you were the best person she knew who was never going to let anybody find out.”

“Find out what?”

Hallie looks at me through the hood, nineteen years old and smarter than me, which she gets from her mother.

“I'm going to go lie down,” she says, and goes.

* * *

The last casserole comes in at nine. The last car leaves at ten. I take the trash out to the alley in four trips, the bags heavy with paper plates and coffee grounds. The alley smells like somebody's fireplace and the sour cold that Dallas gets in March that Houston never gets at all.

Russ is still in the lawn chair. I bring two glasses and the bottle of Blanton's I packed between my shirts and sit down in the chair next to his.

There's no wind. The yard is small and dark, and over the back fence somebody's television is on loud enough to hear the news but not the words.

I pour. He takes his glass and holds it without drinking.

“You still drink this,” he says.

“I'm a man of habit.”

“You're a man of one habit.” He looks at the glass. “June hated bourbon. She said it tasted like a church pew. She'd drink it at our wedding to toast you and make that face.”

“I remember the face.”

“Course you do.” He drinks, finally. “You remember everything. You remember the girl by the keg.”

He's been working up to something all day. I could see it on him when he came in for the sandwich, the way he kept starting a sentence and putting it back.

“Brenda Kowalski,” I say. “Pi Phi. From Tyler.”

He laughs, and this time it holds together. “Twenty-six years. Brenda Kowalski from Tyler. You know what June said, the first time she met you after that party? After you introduced us?”

“Tell me.”

“She said, 'That boy talked to me for an hour like I was the only person in the house, and then he walked across the room and did it to a girl by the keg, and he meant it both times.'” Russ turns the glass in his hand. “She said, 'You're the one who stayed in the kitchen.'”

The television over the fence goes to commercial. A truck ad, loud and cheerful.

I was twenty-two. It was a house on a side street off the campus, a party for somebody's birthday, and the girl at the kitchen counter had a laugh that went up at the end like a question. She was reading the label on a bottle of cheap wine out loud in a French accent so bad it was a crime.

We talked for an hour. I liked her the way I like everybody, completely and right away. Then Brenda Kowalski waved at me from the keg, and I went, because there was always the next room and the next person in it.

On my way across the floor I said to Russ, “You should talk to the girl in the kitchen. You'd like her.”

He'd been standing in the doorway for an hour, working up the nerve to go get a beer.

“You gave her to me,” Russ says.

“She wasn't mine to give. I talked to her for an hour.”

“That's what I'm saying.” He drinks the rest of the glass and holds it out, and I fill it. “You talked to her for an hour. I talked to her for twenty-six years.” His voice goes on the last word and he waits for it to come back. “And yesterday I didn't get to say anything. She was sitting on a curb in front of the school with Gail Haskell holding her hand, and I was at a closing on Skillman Street, and I didn't have my phone on.”

“Russ.”

“I had it on silent. For the closing. You don't take calls at a closing.” He puts the glass down on the concrete, hard. “They called me four times.”

I could tell him it wouldn't have mattered. The doctors already told him; she didn't feel anything after the curb, and he couldn't have driven from Skillman Street to that curb in the time it took.

All of that is true. I have a hundred ways to say it, and I know exactly which one would land.

I don't say any of them. I put my hand on the back of his neck the way you'd hold a kid on a plane in turbulence, and I leave it there.

He cries the way men our age cry, with his whole back, without much sound. Over the fence the news comes back on. I keep my hand where it is until the weather.

* * *

Friday is the funeral home.

It's on Garland Road, a white building with columns that are trying too hard, and the director is a man named Haskell, no relation to Gail, which he tells us in the first minute as if we'd asked. He's fifty, soft-spoken, in a gray suit that fits him well enough to cost more than mine. He sits us down in a room with a box of tissues placed at each end of the table, exactly where your hand would go.

Russ sits on one side of me and Hallie on the other. Pam, June's sister, flew in from Phoenix this morning and is in the chair at the end with a legal pad, because Pam is a person who copes with a legal pad.

Haskell opens a binder. I sell stents to cardiologists. I know a binder.

He's good. I want to be fair to him. He doesn't push.

He lays out the options the way a good rep lays them out, the premium first, with a story about the craftsman who made it, so that everything after it feels reasonable. He watches Russ while he talks, because Russ is the decision. He watches for the moment where Russ's hand moves toward the page.

I watch Haskell watch Russ. It's like watching myself in a mirror at a hospital procurement meeting, and I don't love the view.

“This one,” Haskell says, his fingertips resting on a picture of a casket in a cherry finish, “is the one we find a lot of families choose, when they want to say she was...”

“Can I ask you something?” I say.

He looks up. He's been waiting for me; he clocked me in the parking lot as the one who'd talk. “Of course.”

“What did June pick?”

Haskell blinks. Russ turns and looks at me.

“Benefits fair,” I say. “She was a fourth grade teacher for twenty-two years in this district. She was the kind of woman who labeled her birdseed. I'd bet you this binder she filled out a preplanning form at a benefits fair in a school cafeteria somewhere and never told anybody.”

Pam puts down her pen. “Oh,” she says. “Oh, she did. She did do that. She told me at Thanksgiving. She said she didn't want Russ choosing anything when he couldn't think.”

Haskell has the grace to look relieved. He goes to a file cabinet and comes back with a folder with June's handwriting on the tab, and inside it everything is decided. The plain pine one.

The church on Abrams Road. No viewing. Hymns: two, both listed, with the verse numbers.

At the bottom of the form, in the space for additional instructions, June had written: Don't let Russ pay for the premium anything. Danny will know.

Russ reads it and puts his hand over his face.

Hallie leans against my arm and laughs into my sleeve, a terrible, wet, helpless laugh. Pam laughs too. Haskell, to his credit, closes the binder and slides the box of tissues one inch closer to Russ and doesn't say a word.

* * *

Marisol comes back that evening with a second casserole, because the first one, she says, was mostly for show.

It's after eight. Pam has gone to bed in the guest room.

Hallie is upstairs with her door shut and music on low. Russ is in the den with the television off, sitting in his recliner and looking at the dark screen, and I'm in the kitchen washing the dishes that came back from the funeral home lunch, writing names on tape.

Marisol puts the casserole on the counter. She doesn't leave.

“You're very good at this,” she says.

“At dishes?”

“At all of it. The door. The funeral home.” She leans against the counter next to the sink, close enough that I can smell her shampoo over the dish soap. “Pam told me about the binder. She said you walked in and took it apart in two minutes.”

“I sell for a living. It takes one to know one.”

“What do you sell?”

“Stents,” I say. “Little metal tubes. They hold your arteries open so the blood can get through.”

“That's romantic.”

“You'd be surprised.”

She laughs. She's divorced; she told me so yesterday in the second sentence, the way people do when they want you to have the information early. She has two boys, both in high school, and an ex-husband in Plano with a new wife and a boat he doesn't know how to drive. She's funny about him, and she's lonely, and she's lovely in the tired, honest way of a woman at the end of a long week who put on lipstick to walk next door with a casserole.

I know exactly how the next fifteen minutes go. I could run them in my sleep. I'd dry my hands and ask her a question about the boys she didn't expect me to remember. She'd light up, because nobody asks. When she left she'd feel like the most interesting person in Dallas.

She would be, for those fifteen minutes. That's the part that's true. I wouldn't be lying to her.

On Sunday I'd get on a plane. She'd be one more name buzzing in my jacket on a Thursday, and I'd answer warmly and mean it, every third time.

Through the doorway I can see the back of Russ's head over the recliner. He hasn't moved in an hour.

"How's your older one doing at Lake Highlands?" I say. "The one who wants to play ball at Tech."

Her face does what I knew it would. "How did you remember that?"

"You said it on the porch yesterday. He's six-two and his coach won't play him."

"Six-three now," she says. She's glowing, and I let her glow for a minute, because she deserves a minute. Then I turn off the water.

"He'll be all right," I say. "Six-three boys grow into their feet." I dry my hands. "I'm going to go sit with Russ. Thank you for the second one. It's not for show. I'll put your name on the dish."

She looks at me. She's not stupid. She can tell a door being held open from a door being held, and she knows which one this is.

"Good night, Danny," she says. It's kind, and a little disappointed, and she takes it home with her.

I go into the den and sit on the floor next to the recliner with my back against the wall, because the couch is June's, and nobody has sat on it since Wednesday.

"You let her go," Russ says to the dark television.

"She's got two boys at home."

"That never stopped you."

"No," I say. "It never did."

He reaches down without looking and puts his hand on top of my head, the way he used to do in the dorm when I'd come in at three in the morning and fall asleep on our floor. He leaves it there a while. Then he takes it back.

* * *

I can't sleep in the sewing room. That's where they've put me, on a daybed that ends at my shins, with June's sewing machine under a quilted cover and a corkboard over it full of Hallie's report cards from the fourth grade on. Every card says the same thing in different handwriting.

A pleasure to have in class. Talks too much.

Around three I give up and go down for water.

Russ is in the kitchen with the pantry door open and the light on. He's standing in his socks holding the big plastic canister of flour against his chest with both arms, the way you'd hold a baby you were afraid of dropping. On the front of the canister, on a strip of masking tape gone yellow at the edges, it says FLOUR in black marker, in June's tall slanted capitals.

The tape is peeling at one corner. He's pressing it down with his thumb.

It comes up again. He presses it down.

I stand in the doorway. He knows I'm there.

"It's coming off," he says.

"I see that."

"She did these when we moved in. Fifteen years ago. She made Hallie do the bottom shelf when she was four. Look." He shifts the canister to one arm and points.

On the bottom shelf there's a coffee can with a strip of tape that says BIRDSEED in crooked letters, and under it, in June's capitals, NOT FOR HALLIE.

"Hallie tried to eat it," he says. "When she was four. June caught her with a mouthful of millet in the backyard."

I laugh. I can't help it. He laughs too, holding the flour. Then he stops laughing and presses the corner of the tape down with his thumb again.

"When this runs out," he says, "I'm going to have to wash the thing. And it'll come off in the sink."

I set my glass down on the counter. "Where does she keep the clear tape?"

He looks at me. Then he goes to a drawer by the phone and pulls it open, and on the front of the drawer, inside the lip where you'd only see it when it's open, a strip of masking tape says JUNK DRAWER.

He stares at that for a while.

The clear packing tape is in the back of the junk drawer, behind a tangle of birthday candles and rubber bands and a dead garage remote. I find the end with my thumbnail, the way you always have to find the end of packing tape, swearing at it under my breath.

Russ holds the canister. I cut a strip with June's kitchen scissors, which have a strip of masking tape on the handle that says KITCHEN, DO NOT TAKE TO GARAGE, RUSSELL.

I lay the clear tape over her label, flat, smoothing it from the middle out so there are no bubbles. It shines under the pantry light. Her handwriting under glass.

"There," I say.

Russ looks at it. Then he puts the canister back on its shelf, and he takes down the sugar.

We do every label in the pantry. Flour, sugar, brown sugar, rice, rice (brown), oats, the birdseed. The spice rack, all thirty jars, each one labeled on the lid because June didn't trust the manufacturer.

Russ hands them to me one at a time and tells me what each one is for, which recipe, which Thanksgiving. The cumin was for her chili, which won the school cook-off in 2011. The cardamom was a mistake she bought for a recipe she never made, and she kept it on the rack for ten years out of spite.

We do the junk drawer. We do the scissors. We do the masking tape on the inside of the cabinet over the stove that says BEER (RUSS) WINE (ME) BOURBON (DANNY'S, DON'T TOUCH IT).

I didn't know that one was there. I stand on my toes and read it twice.

There's a bottle behind it. Blanton's, the seal still on. She bought it.

I don't know when. Some Christmas I was coming and then didn't come, because there was a woman in Houston. There was always a woman in Houston. I'd call and say next year, June, I promise, and June would say, we'll keep a light on.

"She got that last May," Russ says behind me. "You were supposed to come for Hallie's graduation."

"I sent a card."

"You sent a really nice card." He says it without any blame in it at all, which is worse. "Tape it."

I tape it. We finish at a little after five. The window over the sink is going gray, and the pantry shines like a museum, every label in June's hand sealed under a strip of clear tape, nothing coming off in anybody's sink.

Russ sits down at the kitchen table. He eats the other half of the ham sandwich from the fridge without saying anything, and I make the good coffee, the pound I bought for him, and we drink it while the street outside starts its Saturday.

* * *

The church on Abrams Road is full by ten. Teachers, mostly.

Fourth graders in clip-on ties and church dresses, sitting with their parents, swinging their feet. Caleb in the third row from the back, with his mother, holding a picture of a turtle.

Russ asked me Thursday night if I would say something. I told him I would.

I've talked in front of rooms for twenty-five years; I can sell a cath lab director on a new system in four minutes flat with his chief of cardiology in the room trying to stop him. I stand up at the lectern with a three-by-five card in my hand and four hundred faces turned up at me, and for the first time since I was twenty-three my mouth goes dry.

I look down at the card. I wrote three words on it at the kitchen table at six this morning. Kitchen. Accent. Doorway.

"I'm Danny," I say. "I was Russ's roommate for three years at school, and I was the best man at their wedding, which is the only time in my life anybody has trusted me with a ring."

They laugh. It's a kind room. It wants to laugh, and I let it.

I tell them about the party. I tell them about a girl at a kitchen counter reading the label on a bottle of terrible wine in the worst French accent in the history of Texas.

I tell them about a boy in the doorway who stood there for an hour working up the nerve to go get a beer. I tell them a friend of his finally pushed him into the kitchen. He went in. He never came back out.

I don't say who the friend was. Russ, in the front pew, knows. Hallie, beside him, knows. Pam, with her legal pad on her knee, writes a line on it.

"I've been to a lot of parties since then," I say. "I've talked to a lot of people in a lot of kitchens. June was the only one I ever met who could tell, inside an hour, exactly what kind of man you were and like you anyway." I look at the card. Doorway. "She married the one who stayed. She was right about that, too."

I sit down. Hallie reaches across her father and squeezes my hand once, hard, and lets go.

They sing the two hymns, both verses June listed. I don't know the words. I hold the hymnal open anyway and look at it.

* * *

The house after the funeral is louder than the house before. That's how it goes. The worst of it is over and people are relieved. They're ashamed of being relieved, so they talk louder to cover it. Somebody's uncle tells a joke in the dining room that gets a laugh you can hear from the street.

I work the door. I fill the coffee.

I run the ice chest. I put tape on the bottom of four more dishes and add them to the list on the back of the receipt, which is now two receipts and a Southwest boarding pass.

At six the last car leaves. Pam goes to the airport hotel because her flight is early. Hallie goes upstairs, and this time she leaves her door open. I can hear her on the phone with a friend from school, laughing a little. It's the first time I've heard her laugh at anything that wasn't terrible.

Russ and I sit on the back patio. It's colder tonight. He's wearing a sweatshirt of June's, a gray one with a cartoon apple on it that says WORLD'S OKAYEST TEACHER, and I don't say a word about it.

I pour the bourbon. Not mine. June's bottle, from over the stove.

The seal cracks like a knuckle. Russ watches me pour two glasses. Then I pour a third, a short one, and set it on the arm of the empty lawn chair across from us.

"She'd hate that," Russ says.

"She'd make the face."

"She'd make the face." He drinks.

We sit. The television over the fence is quiet tonight. Somebody down the block is grilling, and the smell of it comes over the yards, charcoal and onions, a Saturday in March like nothing happened.

My phone goes in my jacket. I don't look at it. It goes again.

“You can get that,” Russ says.

“It'll keep.”

“Who is it?”

I take it out and look. Teresa. Under her, Margot. Under Margot, Andrea, Saturday. Under Andrea a woman named Celeste who I met at a conference in San Antonio in January, who I liked, who I've talked to four times since, warmly, and meant it every time.

“Teresa,” I say.

“Which one is she?”

“The one with the sister.”

“Right,” Russ says, as if he knows which one that is, which he doesn't. “June used to keep a list,” he says. “Of your women. On the fridge, under the Christmas card from you every year. She'd add the names you mentioned on the phone. She said it was so she wouldn't embarrass you by asking about the wrong one.”

“There's no list on the fridge.”

“She took it down when it got to two pages.” He drinks. “She said it was getting hard to tell if it was a list or a phone book.”

I laugh, and it hurts a little in the chest, the way a laugh does when you're cold.

Russ puts his glass down. He looks at me. He's had three drinks and no sleep in three days, and he buried his wife this morning. He looks at me with a clear face that I haven't seen on him since we were twenty.

“Who's going to do this for you?” he says.

“Do what?”

“This. The ham. The tape.” He waves his hand at the house, the kitchen, the pantry shining under its strips of clear tape. “Who's going to fly up with a list in their head and run the door for you?”

I give him the grin. It's a good grin. I've had it for thirty years and it has never once failed to change the subject.

It doesn't work on him. It never did. He's looking right through it, like Hallie on the stairs.

“I'll have people,” I say.

“You'll have a lot of people. Two pages of them.” He doesn't say it mean. “That's not what I asked.”

The man down the block flips whatever is on his grill. I can hear the sizzle across three backyards.

I could tell him the truth, which is that I've thought about it. Every man who does what I do thinks about the math, and the ones who say they don't are lying. I've done the math in hotel rooms and on runways and once at three in the morning in a hospital parking lot after a cardiologist I'd known for ten years didn't come back from a procedure.

I know how the numbers come out. I know there's a version where I'm seventy in a nice apartment with a view. The people who come to the funeral don't know each other. They stand in the kitchen being polite to each other over the casseroles, wondering which of them was the one.

I also know what I've had. Twenty-five years of rooms. Women who laughed in the right places because I was there and paying attention, and who went home feeling seen, because they were.

Every one of them got the best hour I had. I don't think that's nothing. I don't think June thought it was nothing, or she wouldn't have bought the bottle.

I decided this a long time ago, at a party, walking across a room toward the keg. I've decided it again every year since.

I'm deciding it now, on a cold patio in Lake Highlands with my best friend's wife's bourbon in my glass, and I know I'm deciding it, which is new. It doesn't change the answer.

"You will," I say. "You'll come down with a ham."

Russ studies me over his glass.

"I'm going to have to," he says. "Nobody else on that list is going to know where you keep the trash bags."

"Under the sink."

"Everybody keeps them under the sink, Danny."

"Then it won't be hard."

He laughs. Then he cries a little, the short kind, and wipes his face on the sleeve of June's sweatshirt with the apple on it. He picks up his glass and touches it to the short glass on the arm of the empty chair.

* * *

Sunday morning I'm up at six. I make the good coffee and leave the bag clipped shut on the counter with a strip of masking tape on it that says RUSS ONLY in my handwriting, which is not as good as hers.

Then I take the list off the back of the two receipts and the boarding pass and copy it out onto a clean sheet of paper. Every dish. Every name. Every street. What was in it, and anything they said at the door that he'll want to put in the note.

Deborah Fuentes, Ridgecrest, chicken spaghetti, her husband had a stent put in last year, ask how he's doing. Caleb, the blue house, brownies, the turtle is named Gus and is not dead.

Two pages. I put it on the fridge under the magnet from the dentist, where the other list used to be.

Then I load eleven clean dishes into the rental car in a laundry basket and drive them around Lake Highlands in the early light before anyone else is awake. I leave each one on its porch, name side up. Nobody has to answer the door. Nobody has to stand there and want to talk about it.

Marisol's goes last, with a note that says the second one wasn't for show, either.

Russ is on the front step in his robe when I come back for my bag.

"You did the dishes," he says.

"I'm a man of habit."

"You're a man of one habit." He stands up. He doesn't come into the middle of my chest this time. He holds out his hand, and when I take it, he holds on.

"Hallie's coming home next weekend," he says. "You could come back. Not to do anything. Just come."

I could say yes. I could mean it about as much as I mean anything I say on a Sunday morning on my way to the airport.

"I'll try," I say.

He knows exactly how much that's worth. He nods anyway, and lets go of my hand, and goes back inside to his coffee.

* * *

At Hobby I turn my phone back on in the jet bridge. It takes a full minute to stop buzzing.

Teresa. Margot. Andrea, Saturday, then Andrea again, hope everything's okay. Celeste, a picture of the River Walk with no words. The rep from the Dallas office. Two hospitals.

One from the kid I met at a conference at the Galleria ten years ago, Ethan, who texts me about once a month to tell me about a close or a woman or both: Drinks Thursday? I've got a story.

I walk to the garage. My truck is where I left it, on the third level, the boat hitch on the back with nothing behind it. I sit in the driver's seat with the engine running and the heat on and I call Teresa.

She picks up on the first ring. “Are you okay?”

“I'm okay,” I say. “I owe you thirty-three minutes. Tell me about your sister.”

She's quiet a second. Then she laughs, a small surprised sound, and she tells me. Her sister has said a thing about their mother's house, and Teresa has said a thing back. Now there's a cousin involved. There's a casserole dish that belonged to their grandmother, and nobody knows whose it is.

I listen to every word. I give her all thirty-three minutes, and then twelve more, sitting in a parking garage at Hobby with the heat running. She feels like the only woman in Houston, because for forty-five minutes she is.

I don't tell her about Dallas. She doesn't ask twice.

* * *

Thursday the kid is already at the place on Richmond when I get there, which is new. Usually he makes a point of walking in second.

“Where were you?” he says. “Your phone was off for two days. Your phone is never off.”

“Dallas.”

“Client?”

“Old friend.” I sit down. The bartender is new; I read her name tag before she gets to us. “Darla, I'll have a Blanton's, neat, and whatever he's pretending not to want.”

Darla smiles at me. She'll remember my name next week; they always do.

“Good trip?” Ethan says.

I think about the pantry at five in the morning, shining under the light. I think about the short glass on the arm of the empty chair.

“Good trip,” I say.

He's already moving on. He's thirty-two and he's met somebody, and he wants to tell me how he opened.

He thinks it's a story about his opener. He'll figure out in a few years that it's a story about her.

My phone buzzes on the bar. Margot. I look at it, and I turn it face-down, and I ask him what she was drinking.

The World of Gettin' Laid

Who is who, when things happen, and where. Everything here comes from the novel, and nothing here gives away how Ethan's year ends.

The Main Characters

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Ethan	The narrator. Thirty-four, sells medical devices to Houston hospitals, grew up in Katy. Lives alone on the fourth floor of a Midtown building with a four-foot amethyst geode from southern Brazil beside the fireplace. Thursday nights are for going out. Sundays are his alone. A thin white scar runs through his left eyebrow, and a slight stutter surfaces when he stops managing himself.
Santos	Ethan's closest friend for eighteen years. Thirty-six, runs programs for a nonprofit that does workforce development in the East End. Tips well, spends his last dollars on other people, keeps no couch and two good bottles of whiskey. People tell him things they never planned to tell anyone.
Danny	Fifty, six-six, silver at the temples. Sells stents to cardiologists. Met Ethan twelve years ago at a medical device conference at a Galleria hotel and taught him to learn the bartender's name inside ten minutes. Drinks Blanton's neat, runs Memorial Park on Wednesday mornings, and keeps a rotation of women he cares for, Margot and Teresa among them.
Lena	An emergency room nurse in the Texas Medical Center, from a Greek family. Has known Morgan since high school. Turns her coffee cup while she thinks, stands near windows, and can see exactly what a man is doing while he does it.
Morgan	Santos's friend and Lena's person since high school. Loud, warm, funny and particular about people. Scans every room for its exits. Turns thirty-two in November and does not believe in small birthday parties.
Ethan's mother	Croatian, from a small town outside Split. Came to Houston at twenty for school. Has opinions about coffee, eggs and knives, writes her recipes in two languages, and calls her son's childhood drawings his little crimes.
Ethan's father	From Auckland, in Texas for thirty-seven years. The largest presence in any room, with a laugh that arrives before the joke is done. Calls Ethan every year on his own birthday.
Aunt Diane and Frank	Ethan's mother's older sister and her husband, married thirty-two years. They live in the family house in Katy. Diane turns sixty in August.
Santos's mother	Seventy-one, lives in the East End, and does not appreciate being worried about.
Greg	The bartender at Provision, who knows Ethan's name and doesn't use it.
Gil Pruett	Ethan's regional manager, who works out of Dallas.
Dr. Hargrove and Dr. Ray	Hargrove works procurement at Methodist and takes six weeks to move. Castellano is managing partner of Bayou City Heart and Vascular, with three cath labs and a decision due

Castellano	by Thanksgiving.
The women of Ethan's year	Claire, who reads about Roman concrete. Jessie, in the Heights. Paige, the divorce attorney. Grace, the architect. Diana, whose basset hound Chairman Meow has his own Instagram. Kate, who studies deep-sea vents. Simone, Priya, Becca and Adriana.

In this story only

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Russ Odom	Danny's college roommate for three years. Works at a title company in Dallas.
June Odom	Russ's wife of twenty-four years. Taught fourth grade for twenty-two years and labeled everything in her kitchen.
Hallie Odom	Their daughter, nineteen, a student in College Station.
Pam	June's sister, who flies in from Phoenix with a legal pad.
Marisol Reyes	The neighbor next door, with two boys in high school.
Caleb	A ten-year-old from the blue house down the street, keeper of the class turtle.

Timeline

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
1989	Ethan's parents meet at a party in Houston, both in their early twenties and far from home.
Ethan at nine	His mother plants roses along the back fence in Katy. They are still there.
Ethan at eleven	His mother teaches him to make sarma, the summer two years after his grandmother died. A photograph of the two of them in the backyard dates from about 2003.
Ethan at fourteen	His parents divorce.
Ethan at sixteen	A bottle at a backyard party in Katy. Santos, eighteen, drives him to the ER in his mother's car. Five stitches.
Ethan at twenty-two	He moves into the city. The first leather notebook begins. He meets Danny at a conference hotel bar in the Galleria.
Six years before the novel	Ethan starts coming to Provision on Thursdays.
Three years before	The geode arrives from Brazil on a pallet. The labradorite comes from a gem and mineral show.

Two years before	This story: Danny's three days in Dallas. Around the same time, Ethan finds a piece of jasper on a trail in Big Bend.
Spring	Petrified wood at Barker Reservoir. A date with Paige.
June and July	Grace, the architect. Diana, who is funnier than Ethan.
August	A Thursday at Provision with Claire. A morning in the Heights with Jessie. Aunt Diane's sixtieth birthday in Katy.
September to mid October	The streak. New accounts, a referral to Ray Castellano, a fourth notebook in brown leather.
November	Morgan's thirty-second birthday party in Montrose, where Ethan meets Lena.
The next August	A storm in the Gulf, and Houston gets ready the way Houston does.

Places

- **Provision.** A bar in Midtown, eleven years on its block, forty steps from the parking lot to the door. Black vinyl booths patched with electrical tape.
- **Ethan's apartment.** Fourth floor in Midtown, in a building standing since 1987. The geode by the fireplace, the rocks on the shelf by the south window, the notebook in the kitchen drawer.
- **Westheimer.** The best paloma in Houston, the leather shop that sells Ethan's notebooks, and a diner open twenty-four hours with laminated menus and a bell on the door.
- **Montrose and the Heights.** Claire's building with too much ceiling, Jessie's bungalow conversion, Lena's apartment full of plants.
- **Katy.** The house where Ethan grew up, now Aunt Diane's, with a live oak in the corner and a gap in the fence slat on the left side.
- **Barker Reservoir.** Trails through bottomland forest on the west side. Past the second marker the ground goes soft over clay, and sometimes there is agate.
- **The bars.** Santos's place on Shepherd, adopted suddenly and permanently. Danny's place on Richmond, with a serious bourbon list.
- **Memorial Park.** Where Danny runs, mornings, when he can get there.
- **Lake Highlands, Dallas.** In this story only: the Odoms' brick ranch, the church on Abrams Road, and the funeral home on Garland Road.

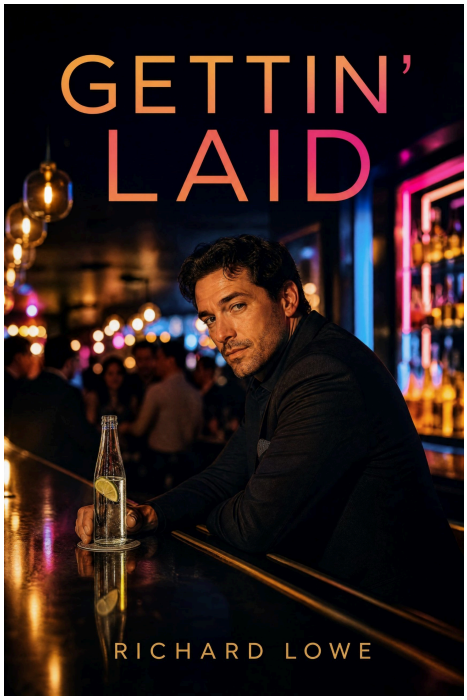
Glossary

- **The system.** Ethan's name for how he meets women: the room read, the gap two stools down, the opener built from one specific detail.
- **The rules.** Six of them. No third dates. Nobody stays past 4 a.m. Never meet the friends. Your place, not hers. Never text first. When someone asks what are we, say I like things as they are.
- **The notebooks.** Leather, thick as a Bible, pages heavy as cardstock. Ethan draws each woman afterward, from memory, as caricature: larger wherever his attention went.

- **Background items.** The one thing, usually one, that turns up behind a woman's shoulder in a drawing without Ethan deciding to put it there.
- **The geode.** Four feet of violet crystal from a riverbed in southern Brazil. Ten million years in the making.
- **Labradorite.** A stone on Ethan's shelf that shows blue-green only when the light catches it at an angle.
- **Grah.** His mother's bean stew with smoked pork hock and Croatian paprika. The simmering is the point.
- **Sarma.** Cabbage rolls, his mother's one thing, made once a year.
- **Lahanodolmades.** The Greek version, which Lena's family makes.
- **Jebote.** A Croatian curse his mother uses.
- **The rotation.** Danny's several women, each of whom gets his full attention while she has it.
- **Charge nurse.** The nurse who runs the floor and decides who goes where when the trauma bay fills.
- **Day three.** In a long emergency, the day the adrenaline starts to feel normal and people stop being careful.

Read the Novel

In Gettin' Laid, Danny is Ethan's proof that the life scales: fifty, six-six, still at it and still fine. Ethan has his rules, his Thursdays and his leather notebooks, all of it running clean, until a woman at a birthday party in Montrose calls him predictable to his face. Read what happens when the system meets someone who can see it.



Gettin' Laid

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