

The
WRITING
DESK

RACHEL HAUCK



ZONDERVAN

The Writing Desk

Copyright © 2017 by Rachel Hauck

This title is also available as a Zondervan e-book. Visit www.zondervan.com.

Requests for information should be addressed to:
Zondervan, *Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546*

ISBN: 978-0-310-35127-6 (HC)

ISBN: 978-0-310-34159-8 (TP)

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Any Internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Publisher's Note: This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. All characters are fictional, and any similarity to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

Interior design: Mallory Collins

Printed in the United States of America

17 18 19 20 21 / LSC / 5 4 3 2 1

Dedicated to: My aunt, Carol Hayes.
We dreamed of this, didn't we?

ONE

TENLEY

This should be her night of triumph. To be the queen of her world. An acclaimed, bestselling, award-winning author with the literati bowing at her feet.

But tears snuck along the rims of her eyes, blurring the Manhattan scene slowly passing beyond the limousine's window. Though her Fifth Avenue apartment was only a few blocks from the award venue, her publisher had insisted on sending a luxury ride.

"You're quiet." Holt, her boyfriend of eleven months and eleven days—yes, she counted—leaned to see her face.

"Nervous I guess." She offered a conciliatory smile, holding her clutch against her middle. If her mother texted, she'd want to see it. Not that she expected to hear from Blanche Albright. But tonight was a big night. "I think they'll find out, you know . . . the truth."

"What truth? That you're a great writer?"

"That I'm a hack."

Holt moved against her, pressing her against the limo door. "You're the Gordon Phipps Roth Award winner for Outstanding Debut Novelist. Enjoy it, Tenley." His hard kiss came with a mocking laugh. "Sheesh, you're the envy of every novelist in New York.

A Roth Award?” He fell back to his side of the wide seat, smoothed his tie, and checked his morphed appearance in the tinted window. “You can write your ticket. Literally. Just like all the others.”

“But I’m not like the others, am I?”

She was legacy. Words like *nepotism* and *payoff* had rumbled through the publishing world when the Gordon Phipps Roth Foundation announced Tenley Roth, the great-great-granddaughter of America’s beloved storyteller Gordon Phipps Roth, and daughter of the frequent *New York Times* bestseller Conrad Roth, as this year’s winner.

“Is this how the night’s going to go? You being surly over winning an award founded in your family’s name?”

“I think they gave it to me because of Dad.” She’d said it to Holt a hundred times since they announced her name. Over dinner. While getting ready for bed. Walking down Fifth Avenue after an evening out with friends.

“The foundation uses a select team of judges. They decide. If I were you—”

“Which you’re not.”

“—I’d drink this in until I was loopy with adoration. You’re a descendant of literary geniuses. Me? I hail from greedy bankers, Wall Streeters, and slum lords who robbed the poor to pay the rich.”

The limo slowed for a traffic light.

Yeah, she didn’t have a lot of compassion for Holt. A struggling screenwriter to be sure, he hailed from old New York Knickerbockers. The Van Cliffs. Their fortune was legendary, rivaling the Vanderbilts’ during the Gilded Age.

He pretended to hate money as a way to relate to the starving artists in their circle, but his clothes closet and shoe rack said otherwise.

“Do you think he’d be proud?” Tenley said.

Her father had penned beloved thrillers and mysteries until his untimely death two years ago rocked the publishing world. And destroyed Tenley's.

Black ice. On his way home from a book signing upstate. Tenley had been writing in a coffee shop when she got the call. Holt, only a friend then, sat a few tables away.

"Yes, Tenley, he'd be proud. So would Gordon."

She'd sold over a million copies of *Someone to Love*. Embarked on a national book tour and appeared on talk shows. Even did a quick spot on *The Tonight Show* with Jimmy Fallon.

From her beaded clutch, her phone pinged.

Holt eyed her. "Want to turn off your phone? You're a celebrity tonight. Try to act like it. Give the people what they want."

"It might be Blanche."

"Blanche? Are you serious?" He sighed. "I don't know why you even care what she thinks."

But it wasn't Blanche, it was Alicia. Her best friend from college.

Wish I was there. Go get 'em. Addison May is feeling better. But all my clothes smell like baby puke. Yay me!
Hugs.

The limo glided to a stop, finding a rare vacancy along the curb, the driver announcing through a set of speakers, "Loft and Garden."

This was it. The Manhattan rooftop venue was her introduction to New York's elite literati club. Here, for a few hours, all of New York City would be at her feet.

She'd hobnob with the aristocrats of the publishing world, mingle with the glitterati, the wealthy and famous, smile for photos and selfies.

But tomorrow? Back to reality. To a deadline she knew in her bones she could not meet.

The doorman opened Tenley's door. Before she could step out, Holt leaned across her, handing the man a folded bill.

"Give us a few, please."

"Yes, sir." And the door clapped closed.

Tenley made a face. "Holt, what are you doing?"

"Well, we've been together for a while now." Sweat dotted his high, smooth brow as he fidgeted, slipping his hand in and out of his tuxedo pocket. "I believe we've taken this relationship as far as we can."

Tenley's phone pinged again. She snapped open the clutch, reaching for her phone. Despite her doubts, the Gordon Phipps Roth Award was quite an achievement and Tenley wondered if her estranged mother just might wish her well.

But before she could read the screen, Holt snatched her bag away.

"Turn off your phone, Tenley."

"Just let me see . . ."

"It's not Blanche." He slid across the seat, his brown eyes wide behind his dark, struggling-writer glasses, the slightest hint of a beard on his aristocratic cheeks. "I'm trying to talk to you about us."

"You never want to talk about us." Her phone rang this time, chiming over and over. Couldn't be Blanche then. She only communicated through long, single text messages. "Holt, let me check this." She retrieved her bag. "It might be Wendall or Brené or someone from the foundation."

Wendall Barclay and Brené Queen were her publisher and editor at Barclay Publishing, a small but ancient and esteemed New York house.

They had launched her great-great-grandfather's career, her father's, and now, quiet possibly, hers. If she didn't succumb to—

"Answer your phone." Holt's sigh ended with a growl.

Tenley caught her breath as she peered at her phone. It was actually her mother. Blanche.

"Who is it?"

"Blanche. She called." She never called. She texted. Once or twice a year.

"She can wait. Call her after the evening."

"What if she wants to congratulate me?"

Holt laughed. "I don't know why you care so much about her opinion. She didn't care about yours when she walked out on you."

"She's still my mother." But Tenley felt the sting of truth in Holt's assertion.

Nevertheless, Barclay Publishing had invited Blanche Hastings Roth Williams Albright to Tenley's award ceremony. She was hopeful. Maybe, for once, Blanche would go out of her way to be there for her. Fly up from Florida for the occasion.

But when Barclay's assistant called to confirm Tenley's personal invitations, Blanche was not one of them.

She stuffed her phone back into her bag and turned to him. "You have my attention. What is it you want to say about *us*?"

Holt leaned in, flirting, adjusting his nerdy but sexy glasses, a mass of his dark hair curling over his forehead, an object cupped in his right hand.

"We're both twenty-nine, in the prime of our lives, know what we want, working in our chosen careers."

Where was he going with this? "Do you want to write together? Because I'm barely a novelist, let alone a screenwriter."

"Tenley, for crying out loud, will you marry me?" He held up the blue ring box, slowly raising the lid, revealing a blinding diamond. "I bought it new for you. Not from the family jewels. Tiffany's."

"Y-you want to marry me? Holt, we've never even talked about it."

Her phone rang again and someone hammered on the limo window.

"Tenley? You in there?" Wendall, her publisher. "We've been waiting on you."

She glanced over to see Wendall squinting through the dark window, his voice bouncing off the glass.

"What do you say?" Holt took her hand. "You and me." The cold ring slid down her finger. "Is that a yes?"

"Tenley!" The door opened and Wendall peeked in. "Let's go. You two kids can make out later." The gregarious publisher took her hand. "Your public awaits."

"Tenley?" Holt followed her out of the limo.

"Holt, I, I, wow . . ." She pressed her hands against his face, kissing him. "Can we talk about it later?" She laughed low. "My brain's a bit muddled right now."

"Absolutely. The night is yours."

Outside the limo, a small crowd cheered, applauding. In the lobby, she was greeted by late-arriving guests as well as members of the media, along with the Oscar-winning actress Nicolette Carson.

"I'm a big fan," Nicolette said, stepping into the elevator as the doors slid open. "Ezra Elliot might be my favorite hero of all time." She eyed Tenley's red gown up and down with an approving nod and then, with a gasp, snatched up her hand. "What's this? Oh my stars . . ." Nicolette mimed being blinded by Tenley's diamond. "I think it is *literally* one of the stars. This is amazing."

"We're engaged." Holt leaned between them from the back of the elevator, beaming.

"Engaged?" Wendall's voice could be very loud.

"Tenley, are you engaged?" The reporter from Channel 7

pressed against her. "Can we have details? How did he propose? When are the nuptials?"

Tenley laughed, waving them off with her right hand, tucking her left close to her side. "You'll just have to wait and see. Tonight is about the great Gordon Phipps Roth and the world of literature."

She could crown Holt for this. Just bonk him on the head. Twice. And for a moment, Tenley believed they rode the slowest elevator on the planet.

Nicolette offered her hand to Holt. He all but drooled. "Holt Armstrong, if I'm not mistaken."

"Which you are not." He laughed a bit loudly.

"I recently read a screenplay by you," Nicolette said. "It was hilarious. I loved it. We should talk. Tenley, do tell. He had to be the inspiration for your hero in *Someone to Love*?"

Tenley smiled, the elevator quarters growing tighter, the weight of the diamond on her finger along with the mantle of expectation inspiring a cool sweat down her spine.

"I suppose." She squinted at her boyfriend of eleven months and eleven days, trying to see him through the starlet's eyes. She'd forgotten his appeal, the cut of his jaw, the intellectual glint in his eye behind those dark-rimmed spectacles, and the full plump of his lips.

If he wanted to believe he was Ezra, she'd not disappoint him. But her father was her inspiration. The book poured out of her in the months after his death. The writing, the process, the emotional mining of words proved to be her therapy, her way of commanding grief.

She never imagined that showing the manuscript to her father's literary agent, Charlie McGuire, would lead to a multi-book deal with Barclay Publishing.

But now that grief and pain were in her rearview mirror, Tenley found writing a chore. A strain. Void of creativity and inspiration.

For her July deadline, she'd written approximately zero words. Zero. The very notion washed over her with a suffocating panic.

She inhaled, pushing out when the elevator doors opened, grateful for the pure April breeze rising up from the street.

The Loft and Garden venue, aglow with romantic light, stood as an island among a river of city. Overhead, the stars sat as twinkling members of the audience.

Fans, colleagues, fellow authors, and friends surrounded her, congratulating her.

"So proud of you, Tenley."

"This is your night, girl."

"How do you feel about winning an award set up in your great-great-grandfather's honor?"

Finally the head of the Gordon Phipps Roth Foundation, a distant cousin, Elijah Phipps, rescued her. "We have a seat on the dais for you. Tenley, I can't tell you how proud we are that the board selected you as this year's winner. I know they regret never giving it to your father. We can't wait for your next book. My wife raves about *Someone to Love*."

Tenley took her seat on the dais, her gaze drifting over the guests, esteemed and otherwise, and wondered how she got here.

In her grief she'd stumbled upon this path, writing, as a way to figure out her life. So why, in this auspicious moment, did she feel so unbearably lost?