

THE ART
of
LOSING
YOURSELF

A NOVEL

KATIE
GANSHERT

Author of *A Broken Kind of Beautiful*

Praise for
The Art of Losing Yourself

“Once again Ganshert holds us spellbound in a beautiful story of endurance and hope—offering no easy answers but the irresistible light of Christ to guide us. And what characters! Real, heartbroken, warm, and seeking. Within them we meet our friends, our family, ourselves. I thoroughly enjoyed this and, as always, eagerly await her next.”

—KATHERINE REAY, author of *Lizzy and Jane* and *Dear Mr. Knightley*

“*The Art of Losing Yourself* highlights Katie Ganshert’s vivid prose as it brims with reality that will challenge and change you with every turn of the page. Ganshert is not afraid to write raw, to wrestle with the things that test our faith and, if we are willing, draw us closer to God.”

—BETH K. VOGT, author of *Somebody Like You*, one of the *Publisher’s Weekly* Best Books of 2014

“Katie Ganshert’s poignant novel hits deep emotional chords as the characters battle to a place of healing through a haze of pain. As someone who has experienced the deep pain of miscarriage, I could so easily relate to Carmen’s journey. Carmen’s story emphasizes what I learned: the pain and broken relationships can be healed. While plumbing deep waters, this is a story of resounding hope and discovery. I highly recommend it!”

—CARA PUTMAN, award-winning author of *Shadowed by Grace* and *Where Treetops Glisten*

“This book will have readers lost in its pages for hours, journeying along with two sisters in a rich, emotionally-charged tale of second chances, restoration, and finding hope—and love—when it seems perpetually out of sight.”

—BETSY ST. AMANT, author of *All’s Fair in Love and Cupcakes*

“Sitting down with a Katie Ganshert novel is like talking with a trusted friend. It’s something to look forward to, knowing the conversation won’t disappoint and you’ll be the better for it at the end. *The Art of Losing Yourself* is a poignant tale of estrangement, loss, and grief, and the joy that comes in discovering you are indeed loved. In her classic tell-it-like-is style, Ganshert’s complex characters step off the page and invite you in. Their journeys are difficult but relatable, and we’re sucked along for the ride, rooting for them the whole

way. And when the last page is turned, we are left with a smile and the contented sigh that comes at the conclusion of every wonderful read.”

—CATHERINE WEST, award-winning author of *Yesterday’s Tomorrow*

“Katie Ganshert will sweep you into another world in *The Art of Losing Yourself*. I loved this book! The journey Katie’s characters take is raw, beautiful, and honest, and the prose is lovely.”

—CINDY WOODSMALL, author of *A Love Undone*

“In *The Art of Losing Yourself*, Katie Ganshert has woven a sensitive story of hope and healing for our modern world. The empathy with which Ganshert explores the complexity of the human heart is so authentic and the depth of emotion so real, I was brought to tears more than once. Sisters, daughters, and mothers alike will find themselves moved by this book.”

—KRISTY CAMBRON, author of *The Butterfly and the Violin*
and *A Sparrow in Terezin*

“Wounded, heart-tugging characters. Beautiful prose. An emotional journey that holds the reader captive. Katie Ganshert has such a way of tapping into those raw, vulnerable places with her characters, and *The Art of Losing Yourself* is no exception. I love the thread of hope and unabashed honesty weaving through this story of loss and letting go.”

—MELISSA TAGG, author of *From the Start*

“With a keen attention to detail and a unique voice, Katie Ganshert has woven a poignant and powerful story in *The Art of Losing Yourself*. Universal themes, charged and realistic emotions, and characters readers will easily relate to make this story a standout.”

—COURTNEY WALSH, author of *Paper Hearts* and the *New York Times* e-book bestseller *A Sweethaven Summer*

“*The Art of Losing Yourself* took my breath away with its ability to portray the complex facets of human relationships in such a realistic yet tender way. Ganshert’s writing creates a prism of perspectives into the lives of characters as deeply flawed as they are endearing. Carmen’s and Gracie’s stories made me laugh, made me cry, and made me *think*—and that’s my definition of a perfect novel.”

—DEBORAH RANEY, author of *The Face of the Earth* and the Chicory Inn Novels series

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BOOKS BY KATIE GANSHERT

Wildflowers from Winter

Wishing on Willows

A Broken Kind of Beautiful

THE ART
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LOSING
YOURSELF

A NOVEL

KATIE
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*For Salima, my brave, brave, brave little girl.
Being your mother is one of the greatest honors I will ever
be blessed with on this side of eternity. Come what may,
God's writing a grand story for your life.*

The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”

—EZEKIEL 37:1-3

Prologue

CARMEN

The nurse rolled me down a hallway and through a door where my husband waited on a chair pushed into one corner of the small recovery room. He stood as soon as we entered.

“She’s pretty groggy, but she’s awake. She has to be up and walking before y’all can go.”

“Is she in any pain?” Ben asked.

I closed my eyes, feigning sleep.

“She shouldn’t be.”

The door closed.

Ben came to my bedside and wrapped my cold, lifeless hand in his strong grip, as if the tighter he held, the closer I’d stay. But it was too late. I was already gone.

When the nurse returned, Ben stepped back. She gently shook my shoulder, encouraged me to sit, then stand, then walk across the room. And just like that, they released me—as if getting up and walking meant I was all better now.

Ben hovered as we made our way outside, his stare heating the side of my face more intensely than the Florida sun. He hadn’t stopped looking at me since the nurse rolled me into that room. I had yet to look at him. He opened my car door. I eased inside, pulled the seat belt across my chest, and stared straight ahead with dry eyes and an empty heart. As soon as he turned the key in the ignition, Christian music filled the car.

Like a viper, my hand struck the power button.

We drove in silence.

Unable to get warm, I wrapped my arms around my middle and watched the palm trees whiz past the window in streaks of vibrant green. Ben white-knuckled the steering wheel, darting glances at me every time we hit a red light. When he pulled into the driveway of our home, neither of us moved. We sat in the screaming silence while I drifted further and further away—out into a sea of drowning hopes.

“Carmen.” An entire army of emotions marched inside the confines of my name, desperation leading the way.

A better wife might have met her husband halfway, might have even offered him some reassurances—a glance, a hand squeeze, some sign that all would be well. I could do nothing but gaze at the pink blossoms on the crepe myrtle in our front lawn. New life.

How ironic.

Ben reached across the console and set his hand on my knee. “Tell me what to do. Tell me how to make this better.”

Something feral clawed its way up my throat. A baby would make this better. Give me a *baby*.

Ben and I did everything right. We did things God’s way. So why wasn’t this happening? Why did this continue to happen? But I swallowed the wild thing down and moved my leg.

His hand slid onto the seat—bereft and alone.



GRACIE

When you grew up in a small town like New Hope, Texas, obscurity was a luxury that didn't exist. I was the daughter of Evelyn Fisher, a woman known for two things: making frequent visits to the corner liquor store and baptizing herself in the creek every other Sunday.

My little-girl self would sit on the tire swing beneath our oak tree, my big toe tracing circles in the dirt, and watch as my mother crossed herself in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost before walking out into the water that bordered our backyard. I remembered being more puzzled by the crossing than the actual baptizing. Back then, we went to a Baptist church where folks didn't do that sort of thing.

"You can take the girl out of the Catholic, but you can't take the Catholic out of the girl," she'd say.

"I don't know what that means."

"It means old habits die hard, Gracie-bug."

That, I understood. Because as often as she emptied her bottles into the sink and dunked herself in that creek, the liquor cabinet never remained empty for long. Needless to say, we were odd ducks in New Hope, and the oddest ducks of all at our church. Not so much because Mama carried a rosary in her purse, or cried during the sermons, or crossed herself during the benediction, but because she drank, and according to our pastor, drinking was the same as dancing with the devil.

One Sunday, as she headed toward our small house, soaking wet from head to toe, I stopped my tire spinning and squinted at her through the afternoon brightness. "Why do you dunk yourself into the creek like that?"

She paused, as if noticing me for the first time. That happened a lot—her forgetting I was around. Usually I had to go and get into some real trouble in order to remind her. Mama brought her hand up to her forehead like a visor. "To be made new, baby girl."

Eventually, she gave up on the baptizing and decided on rehab instead. I

was at the end of fourth grade when she dropped me off at my father's for three months. When she finally picked me up, all of our belongings were crammed into the back of our rusty station wagon. We left New Hope behind and drove east to the town of Apalachicola, Florida. My mother got a job as a waitress and I went to school at Franklin High. No more church. No more creek-dunking. The one thing that hadn't changed? Mama's dance with the devil.



At the sound of my alarm, I experienced a wave of two diametrically opposed emotions. Relief, because this was my final year of high school at Franklin. And dread, because this was only the first day.

I slapped my phone into silence and picked up the mood ring on my nightstand; its stone was the color of stormy sky. I didn't actually believe it could read my mood, but I found it beneath a Laffy Taffy wrapper in one of the many roadside ditches I delittered over the summer. It was actually a nice ring, made with legit silver—not like those cheesy five-dollar ones you find at chintzy stores like Claire's. Plus, it fit. So I cleaned it off and stuck it in my pocket. My single, solitary treasure from a summer filled with trash.

Muffled conversation filtered through the sliver of space between the worn carpet and my bedroom door—a female-male exchange about a water main breaking in downtown Tallahassee. Mom was either (a) already awake watching the news or (b) passed out on the couch from the night before with the TV still on. If I had any money to bet, I'd put it all on option b.

I pressed my thumb over the mood ring's stone and pictured violet—a color that meant happy, relaxed, free. I knew because last spring I'd found this behemoth paperback titled *The Meaning of Color* at Downtown Books and read it in a single day. I removed my thumb from the stone and took a peek. The amber color of a cat's eye stared back at me—mixed emotions.

Maybe the ring worked after all.

With a resigned sigh, I kicked off the tangle of sheets covering my legs and poked my head outside the door. The TV cast a celestial glow on my mother, who lay sprawled on the couch, one arm flung over her head. Dead to the world.

One hundred eighty days . . . one hundred eighty days . . . one hundred eighty days . . .

This became my mantra as I brushed my teeth, rinsed my face, lined my eyes with liquid liner, and dressed in a simple tee, frayed jeans, and a pair of combat boots I had purchased at a consignment shop back when I still had money. Thanks to Chris Nanning and my bad decision and the fat judge with a chronic scowl, my bank account had been wiped clean. I checked my reflection one last time.

The faded postcard I kept wedged in the corner of my dresser mirror had come loose. I pulled it all the way out and flipped it over. The invitation on the back was equally faded but sharp and clear in my mind. It was the only place where my company wasn't just tolerated but requested. Desired, even. If the evidence wasn't there, staring me in the face, I'd probably chalk the memories up to a serious case of wishful thinking.

I wedged the card back into place and tucked a strand of coal-colored hair behind my ear. It didn't stay. Two days ago, in a moment of impulsivity, I chopped off my hair and dyed it black. At the time, the change had felt bold, symbolic even, like a thumbing of my nose at the student body, which would undoubtedly be whispering behind my back extra loud on the first day of school. The new do was my message to them that I didn't care what anyone said or thought.

If only that were true.

In the kitchen, an empty bottle of wine stood at attention on the counter; another lay tipped on its side in the basin of the sink. I grabbed a strawberry Pop-Tart from one of the cupboards and glanced at the clock. Seven forty-five.

"Mom!" I turned on the faucet and slurped in a drink from the running water, then snagged my school bag from the back of a chair in the dining room. "It's time to go."

She mumbled something incoherent.

I picked up the remote from the coffee table and shut off the female news anchor. "You need to get ready."

She wiped at a string of drool and rolled over. Even with the smudged mascara, the tangled mat of hair, and the angry red crease running the length of her cheek, she managed to pull off beautiful. Too bad for me, I took after my father.

"I'm gonna be late for school. And you're gonna be late for work."

"Too tired," she croaked.

More like too hung over.

Heat stirred in my chest. I took a deep breath and exhaled. I had no idea how many more times she could be late before she got the ax, but my mother's tardiness wasn't my problem. It would only become my problem if I stayed here. Her boss might extend some grace; Principal Best (a name too ironic for words), on the other hand, would not. I dug inside her purse and grabbed her keys.

One hundred eighty days . . . one hundred eighty days . . . one hundred eighty days . . .



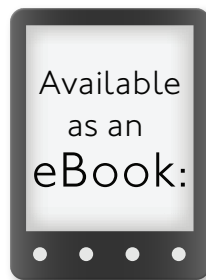
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