The Last One at the Wedding

The Last One at the Wedding is a domestic thriller by **Jason Rekulak**, published on **October 8, 2024**. The novel follows **Frank Szatowski**, a UPS driver from Pennsylvania, who is surprised when his estranged daughter, **Maggie**, contacts him after three years to invite him to her wedding in New Hampshire. Upon arrival, Frank discovers that Maggie's fiancé, **Aidan Gardner**, is the son of a renowned tech billionaire, and the wedding is set at the family's secluded and opulent estate. As Frank attempts to reconnect with his daughter and understand the Gardner family, he encounters Aidan's evasive behavior and notices the locals' hostility toward the Gardners. Determined to uncover the truth, Frank risks further alienation from Maggie.

The novel delves into themes of family dynamics, class tensions, and the complexities of parental relationships. Critics have praised Rekulak's storytelling, with **Michael Koryta**, a New York Times bestselling author, describing the book as "a marvelous blend of mystery, family drama, class tension, horror, humor, and heart." However, some readers have noted that while the plot is engaging, certain character behaviors may challenge reader sympathies.

Title Page

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Chapter 2

Chapter 2 delves into the complexities of the relationship between the narrator and their daughter, Maggie, as the realities of adulthood and independence take a toll on their bond. After Maggie completes her college education, she moves to Boston, and the narrator, wanting to support her as she navigates the next stage of her life, agrees to co-sign her lease for a basement studio apartment. Along with the lease, the narrator agrees to help cover her rent for the first year, thinking this would give Maggie the financial stability she needs to focus on building a future for herself. Despite this support, however, tension builds between them as Maggie's choices become more difficult to understand. She takes a job at Dr. Cell Phone, a local repair shop owned by a man named Oliver Dingham, who seems to have an interest in her that goes beyond being a mentor. The narrator grows increasingly concerned about Maggie's safety and well-being, especially with the implication of romantic involvement between her and Oliver. Maggie, on the other hand, brushes off her parents' worries, believing that any experience in the tech industry will be beneficial for her future career.

In the midst of all this, Maggie unexpectedly visits home one Saturday morning, confessing that she's been feeling homesick. Having driven all night, she arrives looking exhausted, and the narrator, though relieved to see her, quickly senses that something is not right. She participates in family activities as usual, yet there is an underlying sense of unease in her behavior. After a while, Maggie subtly requests the narrator to lie about the time of her arrival, asking for an alibi to cover her tracks. When confronted about her request, Maggie insists that she's not lying, but merely adjusting the truth in a harmless way. This request starts to raise doubts for the narrator, leading to further mistrust and confusion in their already strained relationship. Tensions escalate during their conversation, and before they can resolve

the issue, Maggie leaves abruptly, driving away in a rush, leaving her parent with more questions than answers.

Following Maggie’s sudden departure, the situation takes an even darker turn when the narrator learns about a fire at Dr. Cell Phone. The news of the fire shakes the narrator, and their worry intensifies when Leonard Summers, an investigator, reaches out to them with unsettling news. Summers reveals that the fire was no accident and raises suspicions about Maggie’s possible involvement in the incident. The narrator is confronted with the difficult possibility that their daughter, whom they have tried so hard to protect, may be involved in something far more serious than they could have ever anticipated. Summers mentions Maggie’s past behaviors and decisions, suggesting that this might not be an isolated incident. The narrator is caught between disbelief and fear, unsure of how to reconcile the Maggie they once knew with the emerging reality that she might be entangled in something dangerous and illegal.

As the chapter progresses, the narrator is forced to confront the stark contrast between their love for Maggie and their growing concerns about the decisions she is making. The emotional burden of protecting a child who is increasingly making questionable choices weighs heavily on the narrator. A parent’s instinct to shield their child from harm battles with the harsh reality that sometimes, protecting them means allowing them to face the consequences of their actions. The narrator is conflicted over whether to lie to shield Maggie from the fallout or to face the truth, which could bring about painful but necessary accountability. These moral and emotional dilemmas leave the narrator in a state of turmoil, realizing that the lies they’ve told themselves in the past might only complicate the healing process moving forward. The chapter closes with a sense of impending conflict, leaving readers anxious to see how the narrator will navigate the difficult path ahead as they deal with both Maggie’s choices and the complex dynamics of their family.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3: The air at Osprey Cove carried an eerie stillness as Maggie stepped onto the shoreline, where a chaotic scene was unfolding. Guests had gathered in hushed murmurs, their eyes locked on the lifeless body of Gwendolyn, floating face-up in the water. Her pale robe billowed gently with the current, creating a haunting image that was both serene and tragic. Security guards waded into the shallows, carefully working to retrieve the body while a few of the wedding attendees, unable to resist their curiosity, whispered among themselves. Some stood frozen in place, while others clutched their phones tightly, struggling with the urge to capture the moment. Khalani, unable to resist, raised her iPhone and began recording, her gaze fixed on the unfolding scene. Before she could continue, Gerry approached, his voice sharp and authoritative, reminding her and the others about the confidentiality agreements they had all signed before the event.

As Hugo knelt beside Gwendolyn’s motionless body, a heavy silence settled over the crowd. His experienced eyes scanned her face, taking in the unsettling expression frozen on her features—her lips slightly parted, eyes wide, and her body unnaturally stiff. The absence of any immediate injuries was puzzling, though the stillness of her frame suggested she had been in the water for some time. Maggie’s mind reeled as she replayed her last encounter with Gwendolyn just hours before. She had seen the young woman standing alone near the docks, a faraway look in her eyes, her posture tense, as though she had been deep in thought. Maggie recalled Aidan’s earlier remark about Gwendolyn’s history of drug use, suggesting that she had likely been under the influence, which only added to the speculation. However, her father, Errol Gardner, took a different approach—his sharp gaze lingered on the body, his expression unreadable as though he were trying to extract meaning from the situation beyond the obvious tragedy.

A sudden movement caught Maggie’s eye as one of the security guards lifted a blanket to cover Gwendolyn’s remains. That was when she noticed something unusual—red marks, deep and distinct, stretching across the woman’s throat. A chill ran down her spine as she stepped closer, her eyes narrowing as she tried to make sense of what she was seeing. Hugo, now aware of the marks as well, bent down for a closer look, his brow furrowed in concern. He turned to the security staff and gave a curt order to clear the area, ensuring that no further contamination of the scene occurred before law enforcement arrived. The weight of the moment was undeniable, and despite the sense of detachment some of the guests displayed, Maggie could feel the ripple of unease passing through the crowd. The medical examiner and local authorities were called immediately, and the looming uncertainty over Gwendolyn’s death deepened.

Determined to make sense of what had happened, Maggie stepped forward, volunteering to inform Aidan of the tragic news. Her offer was met with a mix of sympathy and reluctance, but she remained firm in her decision. If anyone needed to deliver this information to Aidan, it had to be her. She had been close to him, had witnessed firsthand his dynamic with Gwendolyn, and perhaps, deep down, she needed to know how he would react. Would he be shocked? Would he grieve? Or would he already know the truth behind what had happened? The thought sent a wave of unease through her, but she suppressed it, focusing instead on the task at hand.

As the scene slowly dispersed, Maggie found herself walking away with a lingering sense of dread. The day had started as another step toward a grand wedding celebration, but now, the weight of something much darker hung over them all. The discovery of Gwendolyn’s body had set something into motion, an unraveling of secrets and hidden truths that would not be ignored. Deep in her gut, Maggie knew that this was only the beginning of a far more sinister revelation, and she had no choice but to follow the path it would take her down.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 introduces Frank Szatowski, a man who has spent most of his life in the small town of Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, with only a brief interruption for his service in the U.S. Army. Now, Frank is on his way to Boston to visit his daughter, Maggie, who lives in a luxurious high-rise apartment with her fiancé, Aidan Gardner, a young man who seems to come from a wealthy background. As Frank drives toward Boston, he reflects on the simplicity and charm of his hometown, known for its outdoor activities and seasonal festivals. The contrast between the quiet, rustic life he's known and the grandeur of Boston, with its urban landscape, is striking. He is both excited and apprehensive about seeing Maggie in her new life, far removed from the familiar world he's always known.

As he nears his destination, Frank stops at a Super 8 motel in Worcester, seeking an affordable place to rest for the night. He buys flowers and cookies for Maggie, a small but thoughtful gesture that reflects his desire to support her as she embarks on this new chapter of her life. Upon his arrival in Boston, Frank is greeted by a towering structure called Beacon Plaza, which surprises him with its corporate atmosphere rather than a residential one. He's met by Olivia, a receptionist who impresses him by knowing his name—thanks to Maggie's prior arrangements. This simple interaction reveals the extent of Maggie's success in her new life, which is more polished and sophisticated than Frank had imagined.

When Frank finally enters the building, he's whisked up in an elevator without buttons, further deepening his sense of disorientation. Upon arriving at Maggie's apartment, Frank is taken aback by its opulence and the sweeping city views. Maggie, looking radiant and content, greets him warmly, having moved in with Aidan after their engagement. She is dressed stylishly, holding a glass of wine, embodying the life she's now living. The sight of his daughter, so transformed in both appearance and lifestyle,

overwhelms Frank with a flood of nostalgia. He is reminded of the simpler times they once shared, playing games together, and the bond that had once been so strong.

Maggie introduces Frank to Aidan’s artwork, a series of striking portraits that reflect Aidan’s artistic vision. Soon after, Aidan arrives, exuding charm despite the visible signs of a recent mugging. He speaks about the incident with an almost casual demeanor, recounting the harrowing experience without hesitation. The conversation shifts to Aidan’s career as an artist, with his paintings being inspired by the characters he encounters in Boston. As a private chef prepares dinner, Frank takes a moment to absorb the breathtaking view from the apartment, realizing the wealth Maggie has entered through her relationship with Aidan. He is both amazed and somewhat disconcerted by the life she has embraced, which feels so far removed from the one she left behind in Stroudsburg.

As the evening progresses, the discussion turns to the wedding, and Maggie reassures Frank that there are no lingering tensions from the past. She is focused on the future, eager to move forward with Aidan, and hopes to put any past misunderstandings behind them. Frank, however, struggles with a mixture of gratitude and apprehension, uncertain of the life his daughter has chosen but wanting to support her all the same. The chapter captures a beautiful moment of reunion between father and daughter, balancing humor with poignant reflections on family, change, and the complexities of life. This chapter lays the groundwork for the emotional journey that lies ahead, filled with questions about family dynamics and the future of Maggie and Aidan’s relationship.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 begins with the charismatic and physically impressive Errol Gardner making his entrance. With his tall, muscular frame and signature polished style, Errol exudes an air of confidence that is immediately felt by those around him. When he meets Frank Szatowski, he joyously pronounces Frank's last name in a theatrical manner, adding an extra touch of flair to their introduction. Errol then eagerly inquires about Frank’s drive to Osprey Lodge, demonstrating genuine interest in his guest’s journey. Frank, taken aback by the grandeur of the lodge, is soon hurried upstairs by Aidan, Errol’s son. The office where Frank is led is a striking testament to Errol’s refined tastes, filled with exquisite woodwork that not only enhances the space but also gives a clear sense of Errol’s sophisticated personality.

As the conversation settles into a more congenial rhythm, Frank presents Errol with a bottle of bourbon, referencing Errol’s well-known fondness for the drink, which had previously been featured in *New England Living*. The two exchange stories as they enjoy their drinks, with Errol being refreshingly honest about a prior interview he had been a part of, one he hadn’t particularly enjoyed. Despite this, he admits he did appreciate the attention the bourbon received in the publication. The warm, welcoming environment is further enhanced by the appearance of Gerry Levinson, an older friend of Errol’s. As they pour their drinks, Errol raises a toast to the occasion of the wedding and takes a moment to praise Maggie, referring to her as an intelligent and rare talent. This commendation shows the admiration Errol holds for Maggie, setting a positive tone for the gathering.

In the midst of the jovial conversation, Frank finds himself reflecting on the fond memories he shared with his late wife, Colleen. He speaks openly about their early years together while he was serving in the army, allowing the bourbon to ease his nerves and allowing him to delve into more personal matters. This leads to a heartfelt

discussion about Catherine, Errol's wife, who has been suffering from debilitating migraines for quite some time. Frank and Errol both acknowledge the profound impact her condition has had on their lives, with Catherine’s inability to attend the wedding being a poignant reminder of her ongoing struggle. Despite Errol’s hope for her recovery, it becomes clear that her participation in the event would remain out of reach for the time being.

The conversation takes an unexpected turn when the name Dawn Taggart is mentioned, causing an immediate and noticeable shift in the atmosphere. A tense silence falls over the room as Gerry, sensing the unease, inquires about a piece of mail Frank has received. Frank, who has been trying to make sense of everything, pulls out an envelope that sparks an intense discussion. Inside, they find a photo that immediately grabs the group's attention, triggering a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. Aidan’s reaction is swift and alarming as he declares the photo to be a fake, adding a layer of urgency to the conversation. As they begin to discuss the implications of the photo, the group also reflects on Aidan’s past encounters with Dawn, a brief and somewhat awkward meeting that had been clouded by unanswered questions and lingering doubts.

Aidan begins to recount his meeting with Dawn, describing it as a chance encounter after a flat tire left him stranded. Their brief interaction, which consisted of vague and unmemorable references to pop culture, left both parties feeling disconnected. They shared one dinner date, but after that, Aidan and Dawn parted ways, never to cross paths again. Now, as they examine the photo and its potential significance, the group begins to dig deeper into the motives of those involved. Gerry suggests that a financial angle may be at play, drawing comparisons to the O. J. Simpson case and hinting at the possibility of a civil lawsuit. The tension in the room grows as Aidan, who is already under pressure, tries to clarify his position and defend his innocence. This complex situation, involving legal complications and family dynamics, leaves the group on edge, particularly as they try to piece together the connection between Dawn’s disappearance and Aidan’s involvement.

As the chapter unfolds, the narrative continues to intertwine personal struggles with legal uncertainty. The characters' lives are increasingly dominated by these complex, unresolved issues, and the protagonist is left to navigate the murky waters of familial expectations, personal accountability, and the trials of love. What initially seemed like a simple gathering at the wedding soon evolves into a web of intrigue, with each individual harboring secrets that, once revealed, could shake the foundations of their relationships. The mixture of family loyalty, legal threats, and emotional turmoil leaves everyone questioning their place in the family and their connection to the events unfolding. This chapter marks a pivotal moment in the story, as the protagonist begins to realize that the stakes are much higher than they initially believed.

Map of Osprey Cove

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Chapter 3

Chapter 3 opens with the narrator waking up in a hospital room, disoriented and in pain after a car accident that left him with a broken arm and ribs. While he feels relief that no one else was hurt in the incident, he is faced with the crushing reality that his streak of accident-free driving has come to an end. His future at his job as a UPS driver is uncertain, as a union representative offers reassurance, but a corporate representative hints that the ongoing investigation could jeopardize his career. A reporter visits the hospital, suggesting that poor working conditions and management's negligence contributed to the crash. However, the narrator takes responsibility for the accident, acknowledging his mistakes and insisting that his training and sense of duty should have guided him better.

After spending three nights in the hospital, the narrator returns home, only to find that his life has been drastically changed. Left with too much time on his hands, he becomes frustrated and disillusioned with the monotony of daytime television, spiraling into negativity and isolation. The weight of the accident looms over him, particularly when he recalls a strange encounter with a man who resembled Aidan, a friend of his daughter Maggie. This encounter haunts him, and the guilt over his inability to seek clarity or understand the situation further exacerbates his sense of unease. His thoughts constantly return to the event, making it difficult for him to shake off the negativity and isolation that has taken hold of him.

The situation changes when his sister, Tammy, calls and asks him to look after his niece Abigail. Initially, the narrator declines, feeling unfit to care for her due to his injuries. However, when he wakes up to find Abigail already at his house, he reluctantly agrees to take on the responsibility. They spend time together, mostly watching documentaries, with Abigail becoming more present and vocal in his life. As they interact, the narrator notices how much she has changed since their last meeting,

particularly her resilience and maturity. This subtle transformation highlights the passage of time and makes him reflect on the importance of his family, especially with Maggie’s absence.

In the course of their time together, Abigail starts to sift through Maggie's old belongings, including stuffed animals that hold sentimental value. The narrator unexpectedly suggests that Abigail take whatever she wants, realizing the emotional void left by Maggie’s absence. Despite his overwhelming feelings of sadness and despondency, he begins to feel a glimmer of hope. The urge to break free from his dark thoughts and create new memories propels him to take Abigail out for a spontaneous adventure. Together, they visit familiar places from his past, including the site of his accident, where he confronts the painful memories while also seeking closure. Their journey through these personal landmarks offers a mix of nostalgia and the possibility of healing.

As the day progresses, the two of them engage in a bonding experience that brings a momentary reprieve from the narrator’s anxiety. One of the highlights of the day is a memorable trip to a canoeing site along the Delaware River, where they navigate the calm waters together. This experience fosters a connection between them, allowing the narrator to temporarily forget about the accident and the ripple effects it has caused in his life. As summer comes to a close, he realizes how precious these moments are and how much he values the time spent with Abigail. This realization forces him to confront his deeper emotional needs, highlighting the importance of family bonds and the necessity of cherishing the time they have together.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 begins with me waking up at three-thirty in the morning on a quiet Thursday, the weight of past parenting mistakes pressing heavily on my mind. My thoughts were flooded with memories of my fallout with Maggie, and as I lay there, the regrets seemed to pile up. It’s during these still, sleepless hours that I often think about the times when I could have been a better parent. One such memory that lingers is from Maggie’s seventh birthday, when we had planned a trip to Busch Gardens. During the drive, two hours into the journey, Maggie realized she had left her beloved Mr. Panda Pal at a highway rest stop. She was frantic, begging me to turn around and retrieve it. But I, thinking I could easily replace it once we arrived at our destination, insisted that we keep going. Instead of enjoying the trip, Maggie spent the entire weekend consumed by worry over her stuffed animal, and I watched as this moment, meant to be special, slipped away. That decision, which seemed small at the time, has haunted me since, and I can’t help but wonder how different things might have been if I had just turned around.

Despite the pain of these failures, I try to hold on to the positive moments that I’ve shared with Maggie. There are times, though few, when I feel proud of the father I’ve been. I recall how we spent afternoons painting Maggie’s bedroom, choosing colors together and transforming her space. Each coat of paint marked a step in her growth, as her tastes evolved, and she made decisions on her own. These moments were simple, but they were filled with meaning. Another time, I took it upon myself to teach her self-defense techniques, hoping to equip her with the confidence and knowledge she would need as she grew older. I wanted her to feel empowered, especially as she faced the challenges of becoming more independent, and I hoped that these lessons would stay with her. I’ll never forget the day she got her driver’s license on the first try. When she passed, I was filled with pride, not just for her achievement, but for the

role I had played in nurturing her confidence. These moments of connection, though not as frequent as I would have liked, have been some of the brightest points of my parenting.

As my thoughts linger on these memories, I can’t help but think of the times when Maggie has confided in me, when she was vulnerable and open about her life. One morning, Maggie had been unusually withdrawn, and I knew something was bothering her. In an attempt to connect with her, I took her to Waffle House, a place rich with memories since her mother had worked there in the past. We sat together, and despite my attempts to engage her in conversation, she was hesitant to open up. She brushed off my questions initially, but I didn’t push her. After some time, she finally shared that she had gotten her period, and I was caught off guard, though in a strange way, proud. Maggie had navigated this milestone on her own, learning about it from her friends and handling it without asking for my help. I felt a sense of pride mixed with surprise, realizing how much she had grown and how much she was able to manage without me. The moment highlighted her independence, and I had to acknowledge that, in some ways, she no longer needed me to guide her through every challenge.

Trying to be supportive, I offered to pay for the supplies she needed, so she wouldn’t have to spend her allowance. However, when I stumbled over how to discuss "the equipment" involved, I felt awkward. The conversation quickly shifted to discussing the cost of dining out, where I noticed her growing awareness of money, especially when we talked about tipping. I explained that I always made a point to tip generously because it was something her mother valued, hoping she would understand that such small acts of kindness could make a big difference. I mentioned how I believed that these gestures were not just about money but about honoring the values her mother held dear. The conversation turned lighter as we spoke, and soon we were laughing together, with Maggie's pride in her newfound independence shining through. That morning at Waffle House marked a pivotal moment in our relationship—a quiet yet significant reminder of how far Maggie had come and how much she had grown. As I sat across from her, I realized that I didn’t just have to guide her; I had to learn how to let go, to let her step into adulthood with the confidence she had earned.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 opens with Frank Szatowski arriving at Beacon Tower, eager to visit his daughter, Maggie, with hopes for a warm reunion. Packing only an overnight bag, he expects a simple and pleasant stay, but he quickly realizes that his expectations may be misplaced. Upon entering the lobby, Frank is greeted warmly by Olivia, the receptionist, and proceeds to the penthouse where Maggie awaits, looking stunning in a new gown. However, as soon as Frank enters the room, he senses an underlying tension in the atmosphere, noticing the presence of friends like Errol Gardner and Gerry Levinson, who seem to be gathered for a more serious conversation than he had anticipated. This sets the stage for a much more complicated and emotionally charged evening than Frank had originally imagined.

Maggie introduces Frank to her guests, presenting a facade of normalcy despite the palpable undercurrent of tension. Conversations among the group subtly hint at deeper, more unsettling issues related to a map that Frank has brought along. It quickly becomes clear that the map holds significant, hidden secrets that could affect everyone present in the room. As the conversation evolves, Frank’s suspicions about the map are confirmed, revealing that it is connected to Abigail Grimm, a young girl who was the one to first discover the map. The adults in the room begin to express deep concerns about Abigail's safety, acknowledging that the information tied to the map could lead to dangerous consequences. This revelation sets the stage for rising anxieties and a tense atmosphere, as everyone realizes they are all entangled in a shared dilemma that could have life-altering repercussions.

As the tensions escalate, Frank becomes more determined to protect Abigail, insisting on the need to keep her safe from whatever dangers the map may bring. However, he is torn by feelings of inadequacy as a father to Maggie, unable to fully comprehend the gravity of the situation and what his daughter might be involved in. The more the

conversation unfolds, the clearer it becomes that Frank has unwittingly become part of a larger, more dangerous web of complications. Maggie, for her part, seems resigned to the reality of a harsh decision regarding Abigail’s fate, leaving Frank to grapple with his powerlessness in the face of these decisions. He feels the weight of his own failures and regrets about his strained relationship with Maggie, realizing the emotional distance that has grown between them over the years.

In a desperate attempt to protect Abigail from potential harm, Frank reaches out to his sister, Tammy, urging her to evacuate Abigail from their home as quickly as possible. As the situation spirals further out of control, Frank’s emotions become overwhelmed with regret, fear, and confusion. The mounting danger forces him to confront his inability to safeguard his loved ones, and the painful recognition that he has failed in his role as a protector. His mind flashes back to Maggie’s childhood, a time of innocence and closeness that now seems distant and lost. Amid the escalating conflict, Frank seizes a fleeting opportunity to escape, rushing through the stairwell of the building, driven by the chaos that surrounds him.

As Frank escapes the building, he is hit by a wave of overwhelming emotions—fear, confusion, and a sense of helplessness. The sound of sirens and the blur of movement heighten the sense of urgency as he evades capture, unsure of what consequences await him. The chapter culminates with Frank physically separating himself from the tumultuous situation, but emotionally, he feels further removed from his daughter and the family structure he so desperately wants to protect. The unraveling of his relationship with Maggie, along with the danger surrounding Abigail, leaves Frank at a crossroads, both figuratively and literally. The reader is left with a powerful sense of uncertainty, as Frank's actions drive him further from the family he wishes to safeguard, and the complexity of his emotional turmoil remains unresolved.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1: The sunlight streamed through the window, and the protagonist slowly woke up, feeling the deep ache in his body from the previous night's events. His eyes squinted against the brightness, and as he tried to shake off the drowsiness, he noticed a spider resting on his pillow. He absentmindedly brushed it away but noticed another one lingering on the bedpost, which he chose to ignore, too exhausted to deal with it. His mind was clouded, and the hazy memories of the night before felt disconnected from reality. The only thing that stood out clearly was his confrontation with Errol Gardner, which left him with more questions than answers. As he took stock of his physical state—his clothes stained and hair matted with dried blood—panic slowly crept in. The reality of his situation hit him when a wave of nausea overtook him, and he was forced to vomit, adding to the growing confusion and disarray.

The protagonist stumbled into the bathroom, the pain in his head intensifying with each step. Staring at his reflection, he was met with a vision of disarray, his appearance mirroring the chaotic state of his thoughts. Despite the throbbing pain, an overwhelming sense of urgency took over. His daughter, Maggie, needed him, and that thought drove him to quickly adjust the time on his Timex, resetting it to Eastern Standard Time, before hastily packing a suitcase. He ignored the spiders in the closet, focusing instead on the task at hand. There was no time to waste—his instinct told him he had to leave Osprey Cove immediately. The growing dread for Maggie’s safety became all-consuming, and every action felt urgent and necessary.

Before he could leave, a voice message from Vicky interrupted his thoughts, urging him to call her. Her message was filled with concern, warning him about the potential dangers surrounding the Gardners and their hidden secrets. As he processed her words, his sister, Tammy, appeared in the doorway, taking in his disheveled appearance with a look of concern. She had been startled by his state, but he insisted

on leaving immediately. Despite his urgency, Tammy calmly reassured him that Maggie was fine and preparing for her wedding to Aidan Gardner. The calmness in her voice contrasted sharply with the mounting anxiety he felt. It was hard for him to accept this information, knowing the situation with the Gardners was far more complicated than it appeared.

He couldn't hold back anymore. He shared the disturbing details he believed about Catherine Gardner’s involvement in Dawn Taggart’s death, but Tammy seemed hesitant to believe him. She suggested that their involvement in the situation wasn’t their concern and that every family has its secrets. This response only served to further frustrate the protagonist, who was determined to protect Maggie. He pressed on, speaking of Maggie’s troubling relationship with Errol Gardner and the dangerous path he feared she was on. Tammy, ever the pragmatist, argued that Maggie was an adult and capable of making her own decisions, which caused the protagonist to reflect on the decisions they had all made as a family.

As the conversation escalated, the protagonist felt the weight of his concerns while Tammy tried to guide him toward a more balanced view. She encouraged him to clean up and get ready, reminding him that Maggie would soon be there, and they needed to understand the situation, not just react to it. Despite the growing tension, Tammy seemed to be looking for a calm resolution, urging him to focus on the present rather than the turmoil in his mind. The protagonist was left feeling conflicted between the urgency of his suspicions and the stability his sister seemed to offer. As they navigated their contrasting emotions, the complexity of family dynamics and the dangers of inaction weighed heavily on him, leaving him torn between wanting to protect his daughter and maintaining family unity.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9: The rehearsal dinner for Margaret and Aidan’s wedding had a distinct theme: Lobster Night. The atmosphere was lighthearted with checkered red-and-white napkins, and each guest was given a custom-printed bib with the slogan, “MARGARET AND AIDAN’S WEDDING: A CLAWS FOR CELEBRATION!” This small yet amusing detail added an extra layer of charm to the evening, bringing laughter and fun into the celebration. As I took my place at the table, I found myself sitting alongside Tammy, Maggie, Aidan, Errol, and Abigail. The seat next to me was left vacant, reserved for Catherine Gardner, though her attendance was still uncertain, casting an unspoken tension over the gathering.

Aidan, positioned between Maggie and Abigail, took a moment to express his sorrow for Gwendolyn’s passing. He explained how his office had tried, without success, to reach out to Gwendolyn’s family. Unfortunately, they had struggled to find the right contacts, given that Gwendolyn was raised by her late grandmother. As the conversation veered back to the dinner, Maggie, always the one to deflect from sadness, tried to shift the focus onto the food, encouraging everyone to dig in and enjoy the meal. Meanwhile, Tammy, eager to dive into the lobster, didn’t hesitate, while Abigail seemed hesitant, finding the lobsters a bit intimidating. Aidan, sensing her reluctance, took the time to explain the finer points of eating lobster and shared stories about New England’s famous lobster industry, easing Abigail’s fears. With her curiosity piqued, Abigail warmed up to the idea, and Aidan’s gentle approach helped her settle in.

The energy in the room began to lift as the jug band struck up a cheerful tune, creating a lively ambiance. Guests sipped their drinks with more restraint than usual, no doubt remembering the previous evening’s chaotic events. The customary toasts began, with each guest raising their glass to the couple. As Maggie and Aidan kissed,

Abigail’s applause rang through the room, an endearing moment that lightened the mood and added an element of joy to the evening. Despite the festive atmosphere, my mind couldn’t help but drift back to a concern that weighed heavily on me, an unsettling thought I couldn’t shake.

Errol’s speech was brief but impactful. He expressed his sadness at his wife’s absence, citing her health issues, but went on to celebrate Maggie’s qualities and the union she was about to enter with Aidan. His words, though simple, moved the crowd, and my sister responded with a tear-filled standing ovation. It was a touching moment, yet it wasn’t enough to fully quiet the storm of questions brewing in my mind. Not long after, Aidan’s phone buzzed with a text message, momentarily drawing his attention away from the festivities. He quickly brushed it aside, returning to his conversation with Abigail, but the distraction lingered in the back of my mind.

As the evening wore on, I found myself struggling to stay focused on the speeches and toasts. My mind kept returning to a disturbing issue that I couldn’t resolve—what was the truth behind the altered photograph involving Dawn Taggart? Maggie had insisted that the image was manipulated, but I couldn’t shake my confusion about the motivations behind it. Who was involved, and why was it so important? Meanwhile, Gerry and Sierra exchanged tips on maintaining a successful marriage, but Aidan appeared distant, as if his mind was preoccupied with something far more pressing. A key on the table next to him caught my eye, its presence adding to the growing sense of urgency within me. It symbolized something—perhaps the key to unlocking the many unanswered questions I had regarding the Gardners and their hidden secrets. This mysterious object seemed to hold the answers, but it was unclear whether I would ever be able to piece the puzzle together.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10: The wedding reception unfolded on a sprawling lawn, brimming with nearly a hundred guests, each wrapped up in the energy of the evening. The air was filled with the smooth sounds of a jazz trio, playing the timeless tune of “It Had to Be You,” while the music set a warm and sophisticated tone. In the midst of the lively atmosphere, the catering team worked hard to arrange additional tables and a large buffet featuring an array of gourmet dishes: prime rib, crab cakes, corn on the cob, fresh salads, and several cocktail stations. The scene was a whirlwind of activity, but Frank Szatowski, the protagonist, found himself distracted as he noticed a familiar bartender from a previous event, adding a bit of familiarity to the chaos. Despite the celebration around him, Frank could not shake the concerns lingering in his mind—thoughts of his daughter Maggie, her fiancé Aidan, and the troubling conversation he’d had earlier about the disappearance of Dawn Taggart.

As Frank made his way through the crowd, his mind remained preoccupied with the need to speak with Maggie. He had an overwhelming urge to discuss Aidan’s past, especially after hearing about the strange conversation surrounding Dawn Taggart’s mysterious disappearance. Eventually, Frank spotted Maggie, who appeared cheerful and in high spirits, seemingly busy making arrangements for transportation. However, Frank, despite the lively atmosphere, insisted that they find a moment of privacy to talk. They made their way to an elevated table away from the guests, a space where Frank hoped they could talk without being interrupted. As the evening continued, the conversation that ensued would bring to light deeper, more uncomfortable truths between them.

As the discussion between Frank and Maggie began, it quickly turned tense and uncomfortable. Frank probed Maggie about Aidan, specifically questioning the details surrounding Dawn’s disappearance. Maggie revealed that Aidan had told her he was in

her apartment during the weekend of Dawn’s disappearance, which directly contradicted Maggie’s earlier statement that Aidan was nowhere near her. With his suspicions growing, Frank questioned the validity of Aidan’s alibi, but Maggie immediately came to his defense, staunchly insisting that Aidan was innocent and that their relationship was genuine. While Frank pressed her for more clarity, Maggie remained resolute in her belief that Aidan had done nothing wrong. Despite his mounting concerns, Maggie’s unwavering loyalty to Aidan only deepened Frank’s fears that something crucial was being hidden from him.

The tension between father and daughter escalated as Frank revealed that he had spoken with Dawn’s uncle, who had serious doubts about Aidan’s potential involvement in the case. Maggie, dismissing the seriousness of a drunken conversation, waved off her father’s concerns, insisting that her faith in Aidan’s character was not something she could easily abandon. However, Frank’s doubts only intensified, and the more Maggie defended Aidan, the more unsettled he became. As the emotional conflict between them reached its peak, the arrival of Errol Gardner, the wedding host, interrupted their exchange. He offered Maggie a glass of wine in an attempt to ease the tension, giving Frank a moment to step back. Though temporarily distracted, Frank’s mind remained clouded with worry about Aidan and Dawn, knowing deep down that the unresolved questions and suspicions surrounding the situation couldn’t be ignored. As the night wore on, Errol led Maggie away for introductions, and Frank was left alone with his growing unease. His suspicions about Aidan’s involvement in Dawn’s disappearance and the complexities of his relationship with Maggie left him questioning everything he thought he knew about his daughter’s future. The unresolved tension in the family dynamic, combined with the eerie mystery surrounding Dawn, set the stage for even more complications to unfold in the days ahead.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1: In the early morning hours, the protagonist is jolted awake by the unsettling sensation of something crawling on his skin. His eyes snap open to reveal the presence of multiple spiders on his bed, a sight that sends a wave of discomfort through him. Despite the initial shock, he reluctantly switches on the bedside lamp, hoping to identify the creatures. As he observes the spiders on his pillow and bedside table, he methodically squashes them, yet the feeling of unease lingers. The sight of them, combined with his growing sense of dread, only intensifies the restlessness he’s been experiencing. He tries to brush off the discomfort, but his mind refuses to settle, filled with worries that he cannot shake off. Among the myriad of concerns racing through his head, he is most troubled by his daughter Maggie’s recent behavior and the unsettling developments involving her friend Dawn's uncle. Additionally, a troubling photo of Dawn has surfaced, further complicating the situation. These haunting thoughts plague him, creating a whirlwind of anxiety that seems impossible to escape.

The protagonist's mind drifts backward, revisiting memories of past moments that have shaped his relationship with Maggie. He reflects on the times when he placed unnecessary pressure on her, focusing on trivial matters such as her table manners and academic success. Despite his best intentions, he now realizes that these demands may have created more harm than good. One memory that stands out is when Maggie, at seventeen, asked him for help purchasing a vegan suede jacket she had set her sights on. The jacket was an expensive item, priced at $350, and the protagonist initially resisted, believing it to be a wasteful purchase. However, despite his doubts, he eventually relented, swayed by his desire to make his daughter happy and to show her that he cared. Using his credit card, he ordered the jacket, but his skepticism about the purchase remained. He couldn’t shake the feeling that it was more of a gimmick than a true necessity, yet he still wanted to support her decision.

The jacket was supposed to arrive by mail, but when it did, it had mysteriously disappeared from their porch. The protagonist suspects that it was stolen by a porch pirate, an issue he had heard about but never expected to experience himself. He contacted the online retailer immediately, explaining what had happened, and they agreed to send a replacement jacket. When the replacement arrived, Maggie was thrilled. However, weeks later, the protagonist learned that Maggie's friend Priya had bought the extra jacket Maggie had received by mistake. This revelation shocked him to his core, as he realized that Maggie had kept the jacket despite the circumstances. When he confronted her, her lack of remorse and her casual dismissal of the seriousness of the situation added to his disappointment. The conversation quickly escalated into an argument, with Maggie offering a series of excuses to justify her actions. Frustrated, the protagonist threatened to report her to the police, a threat he knew he wouldn't follow through on, but it left a deep emotional wound between them. Eventually, Maggie was made to donate the jacket to Goodwill, an act that left her fuming with resentment. This incident marked a turning point in their relationship, and the protagonist began to see the cracks in the foundation of their bond.

Now, as he lies awake, the protagonist realizes the full impact of his past choices. He understands that his actions, although well-meaning, may have contributed to the rift between him and his daughter. He has spent years trying to control her decisions and behavior, not realizing that his efforts were pushing her further away. The complexities of their relationship have become increasingly apparent, and the protagonist is left grappling with the consequences of his past mistakes. As he reflects on his parenting, he sees the need to approach the situation with more understanding and less pressure. However, the growing tension surrounding Maggie's interactions with Gwendolyn and Brody Taggart complicates matters further. The protagonist is unsure how to move forward but is determined to fix the fractured relationship with his daughter, even though the path is unclear. His mind races, filled with the weight of the unresolved issues, and he lies awake, wondering how he can find a way to heal the growing divide between them. The internal struggle he faces speaks to the complexities of fatherhood, love, and the realization that mistakes made in the past

can have lasting consequences.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5: The scene on the beach was charged with a heavy and mournful atmosphere, a tragic event that lingered in the air, leaving everyone present in a state of shock. EMTs, police officers, and Osprey Cove’s security personnel all worked in a coordinated but somber fashion, their movements efficient yet filled with the weight of the moment. The protagonist stood at a distance, watching as Gwendolyn’s lifeless body was positioned on a stretcher. The medics debated how to move her while considering the delicate nature of the situation. It was clear that the tragic loss had left everyone unsettled, and the protagonist could not help but feel the gravity of the moment, caught in a space of disbelief and sadness.

Errol Gardner, holding a cup of coffee, approached the protagonist, discussing Aidan’s condition and the ongoing confusion surrounding Gwendolyn’s death. With a sigh, Errol spoke about the medical examiner’s delay in providing answers and his frustration with the lack of immediate information. His words seemed almost detached from the tragic reality unfolding, suggesting that they should move forward with the scheduled plans of the day, including a hike to Cormorant Point. This proposal to continue as planned, despite the events, struck the protagonist as odd and out of place, signaling Errol’s preference for maintaining normalcy, no matter the circumstances. The coldness in Errol’s demeanor served as a stark contrast to the emotional gravity of the moment, heightening the protagonist’s internal struggle.

As the protagonist lingered by the beach, he observed Gerry and Hugo in the distance, conversing with officials in a relaxed, almost carefree manner. Their lack of emotional reaction to such a serious situation seemed unsettling, further adding to the atmosphere of dissonance and discomfort that had already been created. At that moment, the protagonist’s phone buzzed, bringing a slight distraction from the heaviness of the situation. It was a text message from Vicky, offering her support for

his upcoming wedding toast. He called her immediately, wanting to share the shocking news about Gwendolyn’s death, but as the conversation unfolded, it revealed more about the complex and troublesome dynamics surrounding Aidan and his family. The protagonist described the peculiar relationships in the Gardner family and the strange events that had occurred, all of which continued to cloud his judgment and understanding of the truth.

Vicky, with her blunt and candid nature, spoke about her own struggles with parental denial and how she once failed to acknowledge the true depth of her daughter Janet’s issues. Her reflections on the tendency of parents to ignore red flags struck a chord with the protagonist. It made him realize how easy it was for him to overlook the troubling behaviors in his own family, especially when it came to Aidan’s involvement in his daughters’ lives. This exchange stirred deep feelings of concern and guilt in the protagonist, as he began to question his own ability to see clearly when it came to his daughter and the toxic elements of Aidan’s life that were creeping in unnoticed.

As the chapter drew to a close, the protagonist found himself overwhelmed with conflicting emotions, yet resolved to push forward and uncover the truth, no matter what it may reveal. He knew that pursuing the answers to what had happened would not be without risks, but the need for clarity outweighed the fear of what might come. This chapter sets a tense and suspenseful tone, as the protagonist struggles with his own moral dilemmas, balancing grief with the drive for justice. It underscores the deeper themes of denial, guilt, and the complicated dynamics of family loyalty, all set against the backdrop of a wedding that is no longer just a celebration, but a catalyst for uncovering buried secrets. The path ahead promises more revelations and emotional confrontations, making the stakes higher than ever.

Chapter 5.

At two o’clock, the wedding party gathered on the beach of Lake Wyndham for a photo shoot, which unexpectedly drew a large crowd of guests. While a bartender mixed cocktails, Maggie and her bridesmaids posed on the dock, guided by a photographer who shouted a series of directions to enhance their looks for the cameras. Despite the joyous atmosphere, the father of the bride felt numb observing his daughter in her expensive wedding dress, which, in his eyes, seemed flimsy.

As guests arrived in light summer attire, he pondered the rumors surrounding Maggie's rapid rise in her company, given her international work travels with the boss. Errol Gardner, accompanied by his wife Catherine, approached him with a familiar guest, Armando Castado, the CEO of UPS. This unexpected encounter shifted the father’s focus away from his previous distress, leading to a toast to the marriage.

However, the celebratory mood soured as Errol grew anxious about the groom, Aidan, who was late for the ceremony. Attempts to contact him proved futile, prompting speculation that he might have become confused. As the clock ticked down to the ceremony, the father worried about Aidan's absence and decided to check on him personally, suspecting he might be at his studio.

Upon arrival at the studio, the father sensed unease as Aidan's voice from below radiated panic. He urged Aidan to abandon the wedding, highlighting the shared guilt between Maggie and him regarding a protective lie about her family. Continuing down the narrow staircase despite his instincts, he found Aidan in a basement-like setting with disturbing items, including a black Colt revolver ominously displayed on a table.

The father tried to convince Aidan to leave, emphasizing support from friends and the repercussions of staying silent. Aidan grappled with the weight of their circumstances, torn between his fear and the lingering influence of Gwendolyn. After deliberation,

Aidan finally resolved to leave, but their plan was interrupted by footsteps above. The atmosphere shifted dramatically when a shot echoed from the basement, abruptly signaling that the wedding—and everything associated with it—was now irrevocably changed.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11: The events unfolded rapidly, with the tension between Aidan and I growing as we moved away from the reception at Osprey Lodge. He led me deeper into the thick, shadowed pine trees, a place that seemed to mirror the confusion I was feeling. It was there that Aidan confronted me about the phone I had taken, a decision I had made out of confusion and desperation. I apologized sincerely, explaining how I felt like I was missing pieces of the puzzle. His expression was serious, and he warned me about "them," a group that he believed posed a dangerous threat. His words were cryptic, and as he continued to share details, I realized just how deep and dark Hugo's involvement was, with connections to human trafficking and a history of criminal actions.

Aidan's paranoia about Hugo’s watchful eye was palpable, his concerns for me growing as he expressed fear about what might happen if we weren’t cautious. Then, he shifted the focus to his mother’s deteriorating mental health, a situation that had spiraled out of control after Dawn Taggart's visit. Aidan made it clear that therapy was no longer enough, warning me that if the situation wasn’t handled delicately, his mother could find herself in legal trouble. I tried to suggest that she needed proper medical treatment, but Aidan dismissed my concerns, unwilling to confront the severity of the situation. It was evident that his perspective was clouded by the turmoil within his family, and it left me questioning how much more I could trust his judgment.

Feeling frustrated and desperate for answers, my thoughts shifted to Maggie, who seemed entangled in a web of lies and secrets surrounding the wedding. Aidan reassured me that she was safe and that she wouldn't reveal the dangerous truths surrounding the events, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something was being hidden from me. I decided that I couldn't rely on vague reassurances and needed to confront Maggie directly. With the map of Osprey Cove that I had kept hidden in my

pocket, I made the decision to find her, hoping that she held the key to understanding the truth. The night had grown darker, and the woods around me seemed more oppressive with each step I took, but I pressed on, feeling a deep sense of urgency.

After what felt like an eternity, I finally reached the Hummingbird cottage, where the faint light spilling from the windows offered a glimmer of hope. But as I stepped inside, I felt an eerie presence that made my heart race, and I instinctively grabbed a nearby wine bottle for protection. When I pushed open the slightly ajar door, I was confronted with a scene that I couldn’t have prepared for: Maggie in a vulnerable state, with Errol Gardner looming over her. My anger surged, and I acted on instinct, attacking him with a force I didn’t know I had.

The struggle was chaotic, and time seemed to stretch as I tried to overpower Errol, my focus solely on protecting Maggie. As I fought, her scream echoed in the room, fueling my determination to stop whatever was happening. Just as I was on the verge of gaining control, a sudden blow to my head sent me into a daze, and the world around me spun out of control. My last conscious thought was of Hugo rushing into the room, his presence adding yet another layer of confusion to an already chaotic situation. In that moment, I realized that Maggie had seen Hugo, but she said nothing, choosing to remain silent. The darkness closed in around me, and I was left powerless, unsure of what had just happened but knowing that everything was about to change.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 begins with Frankie reflecting on the chaos that defines their wedding weekend. The day starts with a chaotic lunch involving Abigail, Frankie's younger sister, who becomes completely immersed in her food, leaving a trail of mess in her wake. Despite the situation, Abigail seems unfazed by the disaster she's causing. Frankie, having anticipated the outcome, feels a mixture of exasperation and concern. This leads to a heated argument with Tammy, who expresses her frustration with Frankie's irritable mood, a sentiment that only intensifies as the lunch spirals into chaos. The scene, though unsettling, is short-lived, as the trio eventually heads upstairs to unpack, hoping to escape the overwhelming tension of the moment and find some much-needed relief.

When Frankie enters their lavish accommodations, they are immediately struck by the luxuriousness of their master suite. The room is spacious, with a king-size bed that promises comfort, a private bathroom for privacy, and a large flat-screen TV for entertainment. The most alluring feature, however, is the balcony that overlooks the serene waters of Lake Wyndham, offering a breathtaking view that calms Frankie's nerves. Tammy is staying in a similarly grand suite next door, while Abigail is delighted by her whimsical room, which is decked out in nautical-themed décor and features a set of bunk beds. Abigail's excitement over her new space contrasts sharply with Frankie's growing anxiety about the events yet to come. As Frankie unpacks, they come across the event schedule for the weekend, a list of activities that includes a welcome dinner, a group hike, and the wedding ceremony itself. The schedule seems both exhilarating and overwhelming, filling Frankie with a sense of trepidation. The added pressure of meeting the Gardners only heightens Frankie's anxiety, leading them to decide against exploring the area and instead focusing on crafting a toast for Maggie, the bride.

Frankie’s attempts to perfect the toast for Maggie prove to be a frustrating challenge. Despite the well-meaning desire to express heartfelt emotions, Frankie struggles to put their thoughts into words, unable to find the right balance between sincerity and avoiding overused phrases. The self-doubt only intensifies as Frankie worries about sounding too cliché or unoriginal. In the midst of this frustration, Frankie turns to Vicky, a supportive friend, for help. Vicky kindly offers to review the toast, promising constructive feedback that helps ease some of Frankie’s pressure. With Vicky’s reassurance, Frankie feels a wave of relief as they send the toast to their friend for review. However, just as they begin to feel a sense of calm, a sudden scream from Abigail breaks the silence, signaling that the chaos of the weekend is far from over. The events, it seems, are only beginning, and the emotional rollercoaster of the wedding weekend is about to take an even more unpredictable turn.

The complexity of Frankie’s emotions during this chapter highlights the struggles of balancing personal insecurities with family dynamics. Despite the luxury and elegance of their surroundings, Frankie is burdened by a deep sense of discomfort, particularly as they try to navigate the various expectations placed upon them. Whether it’s the pressure to deliver a perfect toast or to blend seamlessly into the family, Frankie’s inner turmoil continues to grow. The lavish setting, though beautiful, feels distant and disconnected from the emotional challenges Frankie faces. The wedding, meant to be a joyful celebration, instead becomes a catalyst for reflection on relationships, personal identity, and the struggles of fitting in. Each moment spent trying to connect with family is filled with emotional complexity, leaving Frankie questioning not only their role in the family but also their own sense of self. The chapter continues to explore the tension between outward appearances and inner feelings, capturing the vulnerability that often accompanies family events and celebrations. It’s a delicate balance of trying to fit in while remaining true to oneself, a theme that resonates deeply with anyone who has ever struggled with similar feelings during significant family gatherings.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 unfolds with Frank arriving at Supercuts well past closing hours, determined to speak with Vicky despite knowing the salon has already shut for the day. His Jeep is running on fumes, reflecting the exhaustion and anxiety that have been building inside him. As he parks near the strip mall, he notices a group of kids skateboarding outside, their carefree laughter forming a stark contrast to the urgency pounding in his chest. He strides toward the salon and raps insistently on the locked glass door, hoping Vicky will answer. Initially, she ignores him, unwilling to break the rules for an after-hours visitor. She gestures for him to return in the morning when the shop reopens, but Frank refuses to leave. His desperation leaks into his voice as he insists that it’s about Maggie, that there is something she needs to hear. It’s only when he mentions that he has nowhere else to go that she pauses, considering whether to let him inside.

As the skateboarders glance over curiously, Frank reassures them that there is no need for police involvement, clarifying that his sister and Abigail are safe and staying at a hotel for the night. He retrieves a hard drive from his pocket and holds it up for Vicky to see, promising that its contents will explain everything. This piques her curiosity, softening her initial resistance. With an air of hesitation, she unlocks the door and steps aside, allowing Frank to enter before securing the salon behind them. The shop is dimly lit, its familiar scent of hair products and cleaning solutions filling the air. Frank moves toward the vintage computer at the back of the room, quickly setting up the hard drive as Vicky watches cautiously. The computer is slow, its outdated system lagging as he loads the files. When the screen finally responds, a list of cryptic names appears, leading them to a folder filled with audio recordings. Frank clicks on the first file, and the speakers crackle to life, revealing a conversation between Aidan, Maggie, and others about a structured relationship plan.

At first, the conversation seems casual, but as the recording progresses, a troubling undertone emerges. Vicky’s brows furrow as she processes what she’s hearing, the discussion hinting at something more calculated and hidden than she had expected. As they continue listening, the implications of the conversation become increasingly clear—there are connections between Aidan, Maggie, and others that neither Frank nor Vicky fully understand. Frank watches Vicky’s face, noting the way her expression shifts between disbelief and unease. She demands to know how deep this situation runs and what exactly Maggie has gotten herself involved in. Frank exhales slowly, his mind racing as he tries to find the right words. He explains that what they are hearing is just the tip of the iceberg, that the deeper they dig, the more tangled and unsettling the truth becomes. Vicky presses for details, her patience wearing thin as she senses the weight of Frank’s hesitation.

The tension in the room thickens, each passing second stretching into something heavy and uncertain. Frank runs a hand through his hair, struggling with the enormity of what he’s about to reveal. He knows that once he starts explaining, there will be no turning back. Vicky crosses her arms, her stance rigid, waiting for him to speak. He finally promises to tell her everything, but only if she agrees to help him piece together the full story. The air between them is charged, filled with unspoken questions and the realization that they are standing at the edge of something far more complex than either of them had anticipated. The chapter ends with a sense of mounting anticipation, leaving both Frank and Vicky staring at the screen, knowing that the truth, once uncovered, will change everything. The recordings have set something irreversible into motion, and the choices they make moving forward will determine how deep they fall into the tangled web of secrets that have just begun to surface.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12: The wedding reception was unfolding in full swing, the atmosphere vibrant with energy as the guests interacted with one another, showcasing their unique personalities and relationships. Hugo, an engaging staff member at the event, was quick to strike up a conversation with Gerry, highlighting his significant behind-the-scenes role. Tammy, ever the observant one, found herself captivated by Hugo’s charm, watching him closely. Gerry, sensing this, took the opportunity to provide some background on Hugo, pointing out the intriguing mix of cultural backgrounds present among the guests, which further added to the richness and diversity of the gathering. This sense of cultural diversity, paired with the unfolding social dynamics, set the stage for the evening, allowing the celebration to take on a layered and textured feel.

As the celebration continued, the guests' conversations shifted effortlessly from topic to topic. Tammy and Sierra were engaged in a deep conversation about the couple’s relationship, exchanging thoughts on the compatibility of the pair and their experiences in relationships. The background jazz music was soothing, providing a gentle soundtrack to the evening, but for Frank, the festive atmosphere was in stark contrast to his inner turmoil. His gaze remained fixed on the couple, particularly Maggie and Aidan, focusing on the age gap between them, which stirred a sense of discontent within him. This was not helped by Abigail’s carefree behavior, which contrasted with Frank’s growing anxiety. As Abigail spun around the lawn with a joyous energy, Frank found himself struggling with the tension between her innocence and the mounting worries he carried about the family’s future. The generational gap that separated him from the younger crowd was clear, and the growing unease within him served as a reminder of his concerns about the events that were unfolding.

As the night wore on, Frank’s internal conflict intensified, fueled by a series of unsettling experiences that left him increasingly anxious. One of the most disturbing

was his encounter with Brody Taggart and his cryptic words, which added to the growing sense of foreboding he felt about the whole situation. The privacy document, which was still a point of contention in his mind, and his brief interaction with Gwendolyn, only deepened his suspicions about what lay beneath the surface of the wedding celebration. Perhaps most concerning of all was the absence of Aidan, Maggie's fiancé, a fact that Frank couldn't ignore. His growing suspicions about Aidan's whereabouts added a layer of tension to the evening, prompting Frank to question the sincerity of everyone around him. While Tammy attempted to reassure Frank, dismissing his worries as nothing more than paranoia, her cryptic comments about past relationships only added to his unease. His struggle to connect with Aidan's friends further revealed the generational divide he felt, and the conversations he overheard only served to emphasize the difference in their worldviews. The younger crowd, embodied by figures like Khalani, represented a carefree attitude that Frank found unsettling, especially when she offered him THC gummy bears, a symbol of the casual indulgence that seemed to permeate the party. His discomfort grew as he found himself further alienated by their youthful attitudes, which made him feel out of place and increasingly anxious.

The tension in the air thickened when Frank noticed Catherine Gardner, Aidan's mother, watching him from an upper window. Her presence was enough to raise Frank's suspicions, especially since Catherine had remained so elusive throughout the event. His curiosity about her only deepened as he realized that there was something far more complex at play than he had initially understood. His desire to confront Catherine led him to a startling encounter with Gwendolyn, who warned him of hidden dangers that lurked beneath the surface of the wedding festivities. Gwendolyn's cryptic words sent a chill down Frank's spine, leaving him with more questions than answers. Her warning about Maggie's impending marriage to Aidan and the potential danger in the air made Frank realize just how much was at stake. The chapter ended with Frank feeling a heavy sense of dread, and the reader was left to wonder just how deep the web of secrets and lies went within this seemingly joyful celebration. Gwendolyn's ominous advice set the stage for a tense and thrilling continuation of the

story, hinting at more revelations to come. Frank’s suspicions only grew stronger, and as the night drew on, the tension surrounding the mystery deepened, keeping the reader hooked and eager to learn what would unfold next.



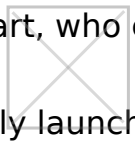
Chapter 4

Chapter 4 opens with Maggie suggesting a twelve-thirty arrival for lunch, but we didn’t reach New Hampshire until closer to eleven, which meant we had to rush to make up for lost time. As we drove through the picturesque lakes region on Interstate 93, the two-lane highway stretched ahead of us, passing small towns with their charming gas stations, roadside produce stands, and sports bars. The quaintness of the towns was further highlighted by the sight of residents selling firewood on the honor system, a testament to the close-knit community where trust and simplicity still thrive. Despite the peaceful surroundings, a nervous knot tightened in my stomach as I realized we were still forty-five minutes from Osprey Cove. The closer we got, the more I thought about meeting Errol and Catherine, who, along with their extensive network of friends, seemed like an intimidating force in this small town.

Tammy noticed the anxiety creeping over me and gently pointed out that I had been biting my nails. I admitted that I felt uneasy, largely due to a news report I had seen earlier that day about a woman who had lost everything in a devastating fire. The report had struck me deeply, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that it was an omen for the day ahead. Tammy, ever the calming presence, reassured me that pre-wedding nerves were normal, and she too was feeling somewhat out of place since she had never been to a summer camp before. As much as I appreciated her comforting words, my main concern was not embarrassing Maggie. This weekend was crucial for both of us, and I didn’t want to ruin our chance for reconciliation or spoil what should have been a joyous occasion for her.

Our journey continued, and as we crested a hill, the magnificent White Mountains came into view, their vibrant blue lake dotted with sailboats, creating a picturesque scene that momentarily distracted me from my worries. We passed through Hopps Ferry, a village that exuded faded charm, and it was there that Tammy urgently

requested a bathroom break. We stopped at a quaint roadside restaurant called Mom and Dad’s, where Tammy and Abigail quickly headed inside. I, however, remained outside, too preoccupied with my mounting anxiety to engage with strangers. My attention was drawn to a bulletin board filled with local flyers, and one in particular caught my eye. It was about a missing woman named Dawn Taggart, who had been missing since November 3rd. As I stood there reading the flyer, a man approached me—Brody Taggart, who claimed to be Dawn’s uncle.



Brody immediately launched into a passionate account of how his niece had disappeared after reaching out to Aidan Gardner for help. His warning about the Gardners immediately raised red flags, and I couldn't help but feel a sense of unease. As Brody spoke, his concerns became more intense, and he warned me about the dark history he believed the Gardner family was hiding. This tense conversation only escalated when a police officer arrived and intervened, attempting to de-escalate the situation. The officer dismissed Brody’s claims, suggesting that he was the town's known troublemaker, and went on to praise the Gardners for their long-standing contributions to the community. Tammy and I exchanged a look, both of us skeptical about Brody’s credibility, but also slightly relieved by the officer’s reassurances.

Still, as we processed the encounter, the strange events weighed heavily on our minds. Tammy reassured Abigail, brushing off Brody’s outburst as nothing more than a product of the town's eccentricities. Yet, I couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t right. Brody’s impassioned warnings about the Gardners lingered, and the more I thought about it, the more the gathering at Osprey Cove began to feel like a complicated web of family secrets and unresolved tensions. It was becoming evident that the dynamics surrounding the Gardners were far from straightforward, and our upcoming family gathering at Osprey Cove promised to be more than just a simple reunion. Everyone in the town seemed to have their own narrative about the Gardners, and I was left questioning who to trust as we continued on our journey into this complicated situation.

Chapter 8

In Chapter 8 of *The Last One at the Wedding*, the protagonist finds themselves reflecting on the uncomfortable atmosphere that pervades the wedding camp. The bedroom, which is supposed to offer a comfortable retreat, lacks basic seating and offers little solace during the unpacking process. As the protagonist goes through the motions, a growing sense of isolation intensifies. The anticipation of meeting their future in-laws, Errol and Catherine, is palpable, but their absence leaves the protagonist feeling unwelcome and disconnected from the event. The situation worsens when other family members begin to leave—Aidan hurriedly departs with a friend, and Maggie heads into town, intentionally or not excluding the protagonist from her plans. These actions serve to emphasize the protagonist's growing realization that they may not be fully accepted into this family.

By mid-afternoon, as the protagonist waits for their daughter, Abigail, to join them, they attempt a brief conversation about games. Though Abigail is eager to play, the protagonist gently persuades her to stay behind, hoping to spend some quiet, bonding time with Maggie. However, just as the protagonist starts to feel somewhat at ease, Maggie calls with distressing news about the wedding. The florist has made mistakes, and the videographer has tested positive for COVID, escalating Maggie's stress. Instead of a relaxing afternoon, the protagonist is confronted with the mounting chaos of the event. They had envisioned family time and bonding, but instead find themselves alone, trying to figure out how to navigate the camp and all its activities. The protagonist’s disappointment deepens as they struggle with the idea of walking around the camp on their own, especially when they had hoped for a shared experience.

After the phone call, the protagonist feels a sense of discomfort as they lie to Abigail, telling her that Maggie is busy, though in truth, Maggie’s stress is overwhelming. The

protagonist steps outside, where they pass rows of empty chairs set up for the upcoming dinner, and notice a deserted beach. The stillness feels eerie as caterers prepare for the evening event, their frantic energy contrasting with the calm that surrounds the protagonist. They are surprised to learn from a carpenter that the dinner preparations are actually for that evening, not for the wedding on Saturday. This realization shakes the protagonist, further heightening their feelings of disorientation. They had expected the focus of the wedding to be on the upcoming ceremony, but the elaborate dinner instead seems to be the main attraction. As the protagonist continues to walk around, they encounter Aidan again, but this time he’s accompanied by a woman named Gwendolyn. Their brief interaction raises more questions, and when they disappear into the woods, the protagonist’s curiosity gets the best of them, prompting them to follow.

The protagonist catches a glimpse of Aidan and Gwendolyn engaged in an intense conversation. Gwendolyn appears frustrated, demanding that Aidan be truthful, while he tries to convince her to avoid interacting with Margaret. The conversation is cryptic and filled with tension, leaving the protagonist on edge as they struggle to make sense of the situation. As they overhear more, it becomes clear that Gwendolyn harbors deep resentment toward Margaret, which complicates the already fragile family dynamics. Aidan later attempts to explain Gwendolyn’s behavior, revealing that she is critical of the wedding camp and its environment. He offers a glimpse into Gwendolyn’s complex personality, one that is shaped by previous experiences and a critical view of the event. The atmosphere is heavy, and the protagonist’s discomfort only deepens as they reflect on the conversations and the unspoken tensions surrounding them.

The underlying themes of family, stress, and unspoken emotions take center stage in this chapter. As the protagonist navigates the social dynamics of the wedding, they begin to question their place within the family and what the future holds for their relationships. The tension between characters is palpable, and the protagonist is left to grapple with the unsettling knowledge they’ve gained. What started as an opportunity for connection and bonding has quickly turned into a web of secrets, lies, and personal conflicts that the protagonist can neither avoid nor ignore. As the chapter unfolds, it’s

clear that the wedding, with all its promises and pitfalls, is only the beginning of deeper emotional revelations. The protagonist finds themselves at the heart of it all, left to process what they've overheard and the implications it may have for the future of the family.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 begins with the narrator, Frank, reflecting on the profound loss of his wife, Colleen, who tragically passed away from a brain aneurysm while working at Michaels. Colleen's sudden death left their ten-year-old daughter, Maggie, to grow up without the guidance and love of her mother. The emotional weight of this event was immense for Frank, who found himself grappling with overwhelming feelings of guilt, often wishing that he could have taken Colleen's place. He believed that she would have been able to raise Maggie better, while he could have continued supporting them through his Teamsters pension, which was a stable source of income. As Frank navigated through the grief, he realized that his shortcomings as a father became more apparent, particularly due to the strained relationship he had with Maggie. This relationship, which had been marked by Maggie's silence for three years, left Frank questioning his ability to connect with his daughter and provide the support she needed after such a tragic loss.

Despite the sorrow and challenges, a new chapter began when Maggie shared surprising news with Frank—she was engaged to Aidan, a man she had met only six months earlier. Frank’s initial reaction to this news was one of hesitation, especially when he learned that Maggie and Aidan were already living together. Although Frank wasn’t completely taken aback by their cohabitation, given the expensive cost of living in Boston, he still felt uneasy about the decision. Maggie’s previous apartment, which she had despised due to the presence of silverfish, seemed like a place she could no longer tolerate. Thus, her decision to move in with Aidan provided her with relief, both from the pest-infested apartment and from the pressures of living alone. Nevertheless, Frank’s protective instincts caused him to worry about the future of their living arrangement, particularly because he wasn’t sure whether Maggie was making this decision for the right reasons or if it was simply a way to escape her old living

situation.

Even with his concerns lingering, Frank wanted to celebrate Maggie’s engagement and offered to take her out for a special dinner at a restaurant. He believed that this would give them an opportunity to bond over her exciting news, away from the stresses of everyday life. However, Maggie deflected his offer, suggesting instead that they hold the celebration at her apartment. This change in plan raised further alarms for Frank, who had heard troubling reports about the safety of the area where Maggie and Aidan lived. Frank couldn’t help but feel anxious about the potential risks of living in a neighborhood that was reportedly unsafe. His desire to protect Maggie from harm weighed heavily on him, even though he tried not to let it show. Despite his concerns, Frank agreed to meet Maggie and Aidan at her apartment, realizing that he had little choice but to respect their wishes. However, the unease he felt about the safety of their environment and the rapid pace of Maggie’s life changes remained in the back of his mind.

The chapter also highlights the growing tension between Frank’s desire to be supportive of Maggie’s decisions and his worries about her well-being. As the narrator prepares to meet Maggie and Aidan, he grapples with his protective instincts and the reality that his daughter’s life has changed in ways that are beyond his control. He wants to ensure that she is making decisions that will truly benefit her in the long run, but he also recognizes that he can’t hold on to her forever. The chapter conveys the complexity of a parent’s role in a child’s life, especially when the child becomes an adult and begins to make choices that might not always align with the parent’s own expectations. Despite Frank’s concerns, he resolves to support Maggie, understanding that his love for her must outweigh his apprehensions about her future. This chapter, filled with a mixture of worry and hope, sets the stage for further emotional exploration as Frank continues to navigate his relationship with Maggie, her new fiancé, and the changing dynamics of their family life.

II. The Arrival

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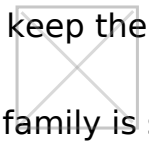
Chapter 5

Chapter 5 begins with Frank, Tammy, and Abigail leaving behind their mundane routines to embark on a journey toward Osprey Cove, where Margaret’s wedding awaits. As they drive through the dense woods, the road grows rough and unmarked, causing a ripple of doubt to settle in. Tammy, however, reassures Frank, drawing from her understanding of the wealthy and their tendency to keep things private and enigmatic. After what feels like an endless journey, they finally spot a gravel driveway adorned only with a bouquet of gold balloons, subtly guiding them deeper into the wooded area, signaling they are close to their destination. The unusual signage only adds to the mystery, but it’s a sign they are on the right track. Frank, still uncertain but now more curious, follows the path without much choice.

Once they arrive at the gate of Osprey Cove, they are greeted warmly by Hugo, the property manager, who immediately recognizes Frank. His welcome, though warm, comes with a touch of eccentricity. Hugo introduces them to the concept of "Gardner Standard Time," a curious idea that requires them to set their watches ahead by fifteen minutes to sync with the schedule of the elite. Though Frank finds the idea strange, he reluctantly complies, especially as Abigail eagerly follows the social expectations set before them. The allure of a lavish weekend filled with luxury and celebration looms ahead, but Frank’s unease only deepens when he’s asked to sign a lengthy privacy agreement that’s filled with dense legal language. This formality, which he doesn’t fully understand, makes him feel uncomfortable and uncertain about the true nature of the weekend ahead.

After passing through the toll booth, a stunning sight unfolds before them: Osprey Lodge, an architectural masterpiece, stands at the end of the driveway, surrounded by a vast and pristine landscape. As they approach the entrance, Maggie excitedly greets them, her warm embrace offering a comforting sense of familiarity. Within moments,

Abigail is ushered into the role of a flower girl, replacing one who has fallen ill with strep throat. This unexpected turn of events brings a moment of joy and excitement for Abigail, who is thrilled to be part of the ceremony in such a special way. However, the underlying tension that Frank feels about the idea of "not compromising" in his interactions with Maggie and the complex dynamics of their blended family become increasingly evident. Aidan, ever the mediator, finds himself navigating these difficult waters, trying to keep the peace as family members adjust to the shifting dynamics.



Once inside, the family is shown to their luxurious accommodations—a beautiful, high-end cottage known as Blackbird, with all the comforts one would expect from such a grand venue. Yet, just as they begin to settle in, Aidan suddenly leaves to attend to a friend, casting a shadow over what was supposed to be a bonding experience for the family. This sudden departure leaves Frank feeling somewhat abandoned, as Maggie, busy with the whirlwind preparations for the wedding, is preoccupied with the details of the event. Frank is left alone with Abigail, and while the lunch spread is plentiful and inviting, a growing sense of discomfort lingers. The underlying tensions regarding the privacy contract, the awkwardness of being in a family that isn’t entirely his, and the overarching stress of the wedding arrangements all combine to make Frank feel more like a visitor than a participant. His longing to be part of something meaningful for his daughter during this important weekend is clouded by the circumstances surrounding him.

The atmosphere of celebration and anticipation surrounding the wedding contrasts sharply with the internal struggles and worries of the family members. While Osprey Cove offers an idyllic setting and the promise of joy, Frank cannot help but feel the weight of the emotional complexities involved. The beauty of the location and the excitement of the event only serve to highlight Frank’s sense of isolation. As he navigates through the weekend, trying to be present for Abigail and Maggie, his growing discomfort with the situation becomes more pronounced. The family dynamics are complicated, and Frank’s hopes for a peaceful, enjoyable weekend are overshadowed by his fears of making a mistake or saying the wrong thing, potentially jeopardizing his relationship with Maggie. The chapter closes with Frank filled with a

mixture of hope and apprehension, unsure of what the weekend will bring, but determined to find a way to make it through without further complicating the situation.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8: The rehearsal for the wedding took place in the Globe, an outdoor theater hidden among the towering pine trees, offering a sense of seclusion and tranquility. However, the atmosphere was anything but serene as it was filled with an unexpected group of guests, each sipping wine and casually nibbling on snacks. What was intended to be an intimate, sacred moment was quickly overtaken by the disjointed nature of the gathering, as people talked loudly and moved around, turning the event into a public display rather than the solemn rehearsal it was meant to be. The couple's much-anticipated moment was overshadowed, and I couldn't help but feel disheartened by how their wedding was being turned into a spectacle rather than a meaningful personal experience.

RJ, a young man with curly hair, eagerly introduced himself as the ceremony's host. Although he worked in human resources, he had obtained his officiant credentials online specifically for the event. He had little experience in leading a wedding but was eager to get involved, and soon he sought out the groom, Aidan. Aidan, looking pale and unwell, was sitting with the groomsmen, his face marked with a rash. Despite trying to keep things together, it was clear that the stress of the event and his nerves were taking a toll on him.

Errol Gardner, Aidan's father, soon arrived, apologizing for his wife's absence due to illness but staying optimistic about her joining the ceremony later. Meanwhile, Tammy and Abigail practiced their flower girl duties, though Abigail's boundless energy caused her to lag behind, proudly declaring herself as "the cousin of the bride." Her enthusiasm, however, irritated me, and I struggled to mask my frustration. Tammy, noticing my irritation, reminded me that Abigail had come from a broken home, and this wedding was an incredibly significant event in her life, one that she was clearly excited about.

I shared my concerns with Tammy, particularly regarding Aidan’s obvious distress. I pointed out his physical symptoms, such as the rash, which made me feel uneasy, but Tammy reassured me that it was just nerves. She then reminded me of how I had been just as anxious before my wedding, suggesting that Aidan’s condition was more of a passing phase than a sign of something serious. This perspective contrasted with my own, as I couldn’t shake the feeling that Aidan might be dealing with something more troubling. Despite this, I tried to calm myself and let the moment proceed as planned, though unease lingered.

The rehearsal officially began, with RJ leading the procession, his nervous energy palpable as he directed the participants. Abigail, adorably tossing flower petals down the aisle, was followed by the bridesmaids and groomsmen, all of whom seemed eager to get through the process. When it came time for me to escort Maggie, the tension between us was evident. Our unresolved issues surfaced as we walked down the aisle, reminding me of the emotional weight that this wedding held, not just for Aidan and Maggie, but for me as well. Despite my personal concerns about Aidan’s well-being, I tried to stay composed, recognizing that the focus should be on the bride and groom, not my anxieties.

As the rehearsal continued, RJ revealed that the "Bible" he was holding was merely a prop, something meant to add weight to the ceremony, though it didn’t provide the genuine comfort that I had hoped for. Maggie and Aidan, still uncertain about the direction of the ceremony, looked to him for reassurance. RJ, ever the optimist, offered a relaxed take on things, suggesting a more contemporary approach, which did little to ease their minds. Tammy, however, confidently practiced her reading from the Bible, and as she recited the words with such sincerity, the entire atmosphere shifted. Her heartfelt delivery filled the space with a reverence and calm that RJ had not anticipated, leading him to question whether they should reconsider the tone of the ceremony. Maggie, with a firm assurance, responded that everything was perfect as it was, which brought a sense of stability and calm to what had been a somewhat chaotic rehearsal.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 takes us through a pivotal evening for Frank as he accompanies his niece, Abigail, to her debut performance in *Beauty and the Beast* at her elementary school. Despite her role as a mere spoon in the production, Abigail is deeply invested in her part, having spent weeks rehearsing with great dedication and focus. Frank, acting as her primary guardian, feels the weight of responsibility to ensure that everything goes smoothly for her on this important night. The family's backstory, including the absence of Abigail's birth mother and the commitment Frank and his sister, Tammy, made to adopt her, adds an emotional layer to the evening. This performance is not just a school event for Frank, but a reflection of the family bonds they are trying to nurture, and it brings into focus the deep care and love Frank has for Abigail.

On the night of the performance, Frank finds himself backstage, eagerly awaiting the success of the show. His involvement goes beyond just being a passive spectator; he has invested significant time and effort into ensuring everything goes well, from memorizing all the songs to helping with set changes behind the scenes. His anxiety about the night's success is palpable, but the performance turns out to be an overwhelming success, with the cast and crew receiving a standing ovation. However, due to his backstage duties, Frank misses the curtain call, a small price to pay for the bigger accomplishment of making sure Abigail's night was perfect. Once the performance ends, the school parking lot fills with excited families and children, all buzzing with excitement as they enjoy homemade treats. Frank shares a lighthearted moment with Abigail while waiting for ice cream, demonstrating his caring and protective nature as her guardian, offering his cone to her after she accidentally drops hers.

The evening takes an unexpected turn when Frank has an interaction with Abigail's school principal, who mistakenly assumes that Frank is her father. This

misunderstanding highlights the complexities of Frank’s role within the family, as he serves as an uncle but has essentially taken on a father figure's responsibilities due to Tammy’s decision to adopt Abigail. Later, the principal shares an essay written by Abigail, titled "The #1 Dad Frank Szatowski." This essay, which highlights Frank's importance in Abigail’s life, serves as a powerful and emotional reminder of the fatherly role he has assumed, even though it’s outside the traditional framework of fatherhood. Frank is visibly touched by the gesture, as it symbolizes the deep emotional connection between him and Abigail, reinforcing the idea that family is built not just through biology but through love, care, and devotion. The essay is not only a symbol of Abigail’s affection but also a recognition of the unconventional but deeply meaningful family bond they share.

As the night draws to a close, Frank reflects on the progress he has made with Abigail, particularly her growth and accomplishments. While he’s proud of her performance, he also finds himself contemplating the future and the delicate conversations that will be necessary to explain their unusual family dynamic. The school principal’s concern about potential confusion for Abigail is addressed, and Frank understands the importance of having open and honest conversations with her about their family structure. They agree that Frank will continue to be open with Abigail, making sure she understands the nature of their relationship and the love that ties them together. This chapter ends on a hopeful note, with Frank recognizing how far they’ve come as a family and the strength of their bond. Frank’s realization of his pivotal role in Abigail’s life, combined with the recognition from others of how important he is to her, marks a moment of profound emotional growth for him. It is a chapter that beautifully captures the complexity of family, the power of love, and the ways in which nontraditional family structures can still create strong, supportive relationships.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of *The Last One at the Wedding* delves deeper into the protagonist's struggle as he attempts to push forward with his job as a UPS driver while carrying the weight of recent personal loss. Despite receiving condolences from his supervisor, he forces himself to continue his shift, believing that staying occupied will help keep his thoughts from spiraling. However, the region is experiencing an extreme heatwave, with record-breaking temperatures prompting officials to issue public health warnings. News reports caution residents against prolonged outdoor activity, advising frequent hydration and rest. Still, the protagonist ignores these advisories, dismissing the growing heat as just another obstacle in his already overwhelming day. Unlike his usual preparation, he neglects to bring extra water or cooling snacks, relying instead on a rushed breakfast and a standard lunch packed without much thought. The sun hangs high in the sky, its unforgiving rays beating down as he steps outside, but he tightens his grip on the day's responsibilities, determined to keep moving.

Arriving at the UPS facility, he notices the unusually somber expressions of his colleagues, many of whom are already sweating before their shifts begin. The lack of air conditioning in the loading area intensifies the discomfort, and management attempts to ease the situation by distributing extra water bottles and sun hats. Even with these precautions, the oppressive heat turns the warehouse into a sweltering oven, draining energy from the workers before they even step into their trucks. When he receives his assigned route, frustration sets in—his list is packed with heavy deliveries, including multiple air conditioners, cases of bottled water, and large bags of dog food, items customers have ordered to combat the relentless summer weather. The irony is not lost on him as he loads the cumbersome packages into his truck, already feeling the strain in his arms and legs. As he starts his route, the heat becomes suffocating, his shirt sticking to his back, and every movement requiring

more effort than usual. With over a hundred stops still ahead of him, he fights off the urge to rest, unwilling to appear weak or incapable.

As the hours drag on, the physical toll of the heat and the weight of his thoughts become unbearable. He finds himself preoccupied with worries about his daughter, Maggie, struggling to imagine how she will navigate life after Aidan’s death. His mind drifts between painful memories and unspoken concerns, making it difficult to focus. This distraction leads him to miss a critical turn, forcing him to double back, adding unnecessary miles to his already exhausting day. His body aches, and his breathing grows labored, the signs of heat exhaustion becoming harder to ignore. The familiar landscape around him begins to blur, the edges of buildings and trees shimmering under the relentless sun. He wipes sweat from his brow and presses forward, telling himself he just needs to get through the next few deliveries. At one point, he pulls into a McDonald’s parking lot, hoping that sitting in the air-conditioned space for a few minutes will be enough to restore his energy, though he knows it’s only a temporary fix.

Back on the road, he feels himself fading, his hands gripping the steering wheel with increasing difficulty. His vision wavers slightly, but he forces himself to concentrate. Up ahead, a vehicle sits idly on the side of the road, its hazard lights flashing. Two figures, Dawn Taggart and Aidan Gardner, are hunched over near a flat tire, their silhouettes hazy in the shimmering heat. Recognition sparks in his mind, but his sluggish thoughts fail to process the moment in time. His focus drifts for a fraction of a second—just long enough to send his truck careening off course. The sudden jolt snaps him back to reality, but it’s too late. The wheels slip over the edge of the pavement, and before he can react, the truck plunges into a steep ravine.

Panic surges through his body as gravity pulls the vehicle downward, packages flying through the cab as he struggles to regain control. His breath catches in his throat, and time seems to slow as the world tilts violently around him. Dust and debris swirl in the air, the violent motion of the crash throwing him against the seatbelt. The sound of metal crunching and glass shattering fills his ears, each impact sending another wave

of force through the vehicle. For a fleeting moment, his thoughts shift to Maggie, to Abigail, to the people he still has left in his life. As the final impact looms, he tightens his grip on the wheel, bracing for whatever comes next, hoping that somehow, he will make it out of this alive.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 begins with the protagonist returning to his bedroom, where the aftermath of the previous night has been erased, leaving a space that is pristine and orderly. The scent of fresh linen lingers in the air, a stark contrast to the disarray he had left behind. It’s clear that a housekeeper has meticulously restored order—his suitcase is neatly unpacked, his bathroom, once cluttered with damp towels and remnants of hasty grooming, is now spotless. Even the cedar closet, where daddy longlegs had once lurked, is now cleared, making the room feel less suffocating. As he moves through the space, he feels a temporary sense of relief, appreciating the illusion of control, however fleeting it may be. His mind, however, is far from at ease, weighed down by the growing unease about the events surrounding the wedding.

Determined to focus on the ceremony ahead, he methodically prepares his attire, extracting his hand-tailored, pearl-gray tuxedo from Italy. The fabric is smooth beneath his fingers, and the craftsmanship is evident in the perfect stitching and structured fit. He unpacks a crisp white dress shirt, pairing it with sleek black onyx studs that gleam under the soft light. There’s a moment of satisfaction as he ties a proper bow tie, refusing to settle for the pre-tied option included in his accessory kit. Yet, as he adjusts his reflection in the mirror, he can’t shake the feeling that his polished appearance masks a deeper discomfort. The tuxedo is flawless, but he feels like an imposter wearing it, standing on the edge of something irreversible.

His phone vibrates on the dresser, breaking his thoughts, and he glances at the screen to see Vicky’s name flashing. She’s concerned, her voice edged with worry, and she doesn’t bother with small talk, instead getting straight to the point—she’s heard about what happened the night before. The conversation takes an uneasy turn as Frank hesitates before responding, carefully choosing his words. He mentions an incident involving a troubled girl and the discovery of drugs in her cottage, though he dances

around the details. There’s also the matter of Dawn Taggart, which he deliberately downplays, dismissing it as a simple misunderstanding. Vicky, unconvinced, questions whether he’s truly alright, her tone betraying the fact that she doesn’t buy into his reassurances.

Frank senses her skepticism, but he isn’t prepared to unravel the tangled web of complications he’s caught in—not over the phone, not now. He deflects, changing the subject to the wedding and emphasizing that the ceremony is about to begin. Vicky presses him to promise he’ll call her once he’s home, and though he agrees, there’s a part of him that doubts whether he actually will. He can tell she’s not satisfied, but the conversation ends with an air of unfinished business. As he sets the phone down, he lets out a breath, wishing for just a moment of peace before stepping into the whirlwind of the wedding day.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulls out a folded sheet of yellow-lined paper, the words of his wedding toast carefully written in neat handwriting. He smooths it against his palm, reading through the lines that he has practiced, the words that are meant to be heartfelt and genuine. But as he stands there, tuxedo perfect, speech prepared, an unsettling truth settles in—he doesn’t believe in what he’s about to say. The praise, the sentiments, the reflections on love and family, all feel empty, forced. He wonders if anyone will notice, if anyone will hear the falsehood laced beneath the carefully curated words. The thought lingers as he places the paper back into his pocket, a weight pressing against his chest, heavier than the tuxedo, heavier than the expectations he is about to fulfill.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13: The lively party atmosphere that had initially been filled with the sounds of a jazz trio shifted drastically into a chaotic electronic dance scene. The pulsating beats of the music now dominated the surroundings, creating a deafening environment where conversations became almost impossible to continue. Frank, feeling increasingly disconnected from the festivities, found himself alone at a dinner table, surrounded by strangers who seemed absorbed in the revelry around them. As he surveyed the lawn, trying to locate Maggie amidst the crowd, his gaze fell upon odd interactions—two men sharing a kiss on a crumbling chair, while women tossed horseshoes aimlessly into the darkness. The chaos of the evening was overwhelming, and Frank could only stand at the edges, feeling more out of place than ever.

Eventually, Tammy appeared, holding a drowsy Abigail in her arms. The little girl, still apologizing for her earlier clumsiness, expressed her discomfort with the overwhelming atmosphere. Tammy casually mentioned that Maggie had been looking for Frank but had left after waiting too long. This only added to Frank's rising unease, as he realized how disconnected Maggie had become from him in the midst of the chaos. Tammy, noticing Abigail’s discomfort, made the decision to remove her from the event. As they walked away, Frank couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt for not being able to shield his sister and niece from the madness surrounding them, reflecting on how much his sister had to manage amidst the turmoil.

After leaving his seat, Frank wandered down to the bonfire on the beach, his protective instincts kicking into high gear. As he walked closer, the sight of young people frolicking around the fire, some engaging in reckless behavior, made him increasingly uneasy about the safety of the gathering. Amidst the laughter and music, Frank finally caught sight of Maggie. She was excitedly urging him to join the swimming party, casually mentioning how some guests were microdosing to enhance the experience.

While Frank felt a slight sense of relief at seeing Aidan absent from the scene, he quickly realized that he still had no idea where Aidan was or what he was doing at such a crucial family gathering.

Their conversation shifted as Frank voiced his concerns about the party's wild and unpredictable nature, questioning the people Maggie was surrounding herself with. Despite his unease, Frank tried to focus on the hope of a quiet canoe trip the next morning, something to help them reconnect after years of tension following the death of Maggie’s mother. Yet, as he talked to Errol and Gerry, the conversation veered toward societal expectations surrounding relationships and parenting, which left Frank questioning his own role as a father and the impact these expectations had on Maggie’s choices. As the conversation grew more complicated, Frank’s inner turmoil deepened, unsure of whether he was doing right by his daughter in this situation.

The chapter concludes with a chilling moment when Frank, still feeling on edge, notices a figure lurking behind a window of the lodge. Despite his weariness, the sight of someone watching him intensifies his unease, amplifying his concerns about Aidan’s absence and the secrecy hanging over the family. The night, once filled with the sounds of celebration, now seemed to carry a heavy air of mystery and dread, leaving Frank with a growing sense that something dark was lurking just beneath the surface of the event. This chapter expertly captures the complexities of Frank’s struggle to balance his role as a concerned father with his own feelings of doubt and confusion. It sets the stage for the deeper mysteries yet to unfold, highlighting Frank’s growing awareness of the precarious situation his family is in.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 unfolds with Frank waking up to the sound of quiet chatter and movement in the living room, where his daughter Abigail is being fitted for her flower girl dress. Tammy and Maggie adjust the fabric, making sure the hem is even, while Abigail beams with excitement, her small hands smoothing out the lace details. The crown of daisies in her hair enhances her innocence, a stark contrast to the weight Frank carries in his chest. As he watches the scene unfold, he feels a fleeting sense of normalcy, but it is quickly overshadowed by the pressing concerns that have plagued him since the night before. Maggie, sensing his unease, diverts her attention from Abigail and turns to her father, asking how he is holding up. Though Frank wants to reassure her, the truth lingers on the tip of his tongue—he is drowning in uncertainty, and the growing tension between them threatens to pull him under.

Realizing that their conversation needs privacy, Maggie leads Frank outside, away from Abigail and Tammy’s watchful eyes. The crisp morning air carries a sense of urgency, as if nature itself is aware of the difficult discussion ahead. Maggie assures Frank that she is ready to be honest with him, but in return, she needs him to listen with an open mind. Her words do little to ease the apprehension settling deep in his bones. He nods in agreement, bracing himself for what is to come. What he does not expect is the confession that follows—Maggie reveals her romantic involvement with Errol Gardner, a man nearly twice her age and very much married. The revelation leaves Frank momentarily speechless, his mind racing to connect the dots. Maggie insists that their relationship, which began as a professional mentorship, gradually evolved into something more, something she willingly pursued.

Frank struggles to process this information, his initial shock giving way to a wave of concern and anger. He presses Maggie for answers, questioning why she would entangle herself in such a precarious situation. Maggie, unwavering in her stance,

explains that Errol made her feel seen, valued in ways she had never experienced before. However, Frank sees through her rationalizations, recognizing the imbalance of power and the inevitable consequences of such an affair. Before he can formulate a response, Maggie continues, revealing an even darker truth—during a weekend trip to Osprey Cove, she and Errol stumbled upon a dead woman at the lodge. The weight of her words hangs between them, heavier than the morning air. Frank is horrified as Maggie describes how they concealed the incident, constructing a carefully curated lie to protect Errol’s wife, Catherine, and her son, Aidan.

The shock of Maggie’s confession is almost too much for Frank to bear. He demands to know why she would willingly involve herself in such a dangerous cover-up, why she did not come to him for help. Maggie, defensive now, insists that she had no choice, that the situation spiraled beyond her control. Frank sees the cracks in her composure, the subtle tremor in her voice, and he realizes she is scared—whether she admits it or not. His disapproval of her impending marriage to Aidan grows tenfold, but Maggie refuses to back down. She argues that her decisions are her own, that she is not a child who needs saving. She believes that her marriage to Aidan will provide her with financial independence, a safety net that Frank cannot comprehend.

Frustration mounts as Frank pleads with Maggie to reconsider, to walk away before it is too late. He warns her of the potential consequences, of the fallout that will surely come if the truth is ever exposed. But Maggie remains firm, her resolve unshaken. She insists that Frank support her, that he stand beside her on her wedding day as her father, regardless of his feelings. Frank, torn between his love for his daughter and the deep sense of dread filling his heart, realizes that his hands are tied. He cannot force Maggie to make the right choice, nor can he shield her from the path she has chosen. As he watches her walk away, he is left grappling with a painful reality—the daughter he raised, the one he tried so hard to protect, is slipping further away, and there is nothing he can do to stop it. The chapter closes with a lingering sense of unease, foreshadowing the inevitable reckoning that awaits them both.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 begins with my arrival home around eight o’clock at night. As I sorted through my mail, which mostly consisted of junk, one white envelope caught my attention. It had no return address, and the name was typed on it with what appeared to be an old manual typewriter, a detail that seemed unusual. The envelope was postmarked from Hopps Ferry, New Hampshire. Inside, I found a photo of Aidan, my future son-in-law, looking about fifteen pounds heavier than I remembered. He was smiling alongside a young woman I didn’t recognize, casually dressed, with her arm around his waist. The photo was accompanied by a handwritten message that read: “WHERE IS DAWN TAGGART???” This sudden, cryptic message stirred immediate concern and confusion in me.

At first, I had questioned Aidan’s character only once or twice, particularly regarding the story behind his black eye. But I had always trusted my daughter Maggie’s judgment, knowing that she was a smart, responsible woman. The image and its message, however, rattled me, particularly because it seemed to implicate Aidan with someone named Dawn Taggart, who I suspected might be the woman in the photo. I needed answers, so I called Maggie right away. She picked up the phone, but her tone revealed that she was distracted, likely due to the upcoming wedding in three days. Still, her demeanor shifted when I told her about the photo and the disturbing note that came with it.

After a long pause, Maggie revealed that Aidan had dated a young woman named Dawn Taggart the previous year, who had gone missing after a hiking trip. Dawn was from Hopps Ferry, and while Aidan had been cleared of any involvement by the police, who had confirmed he was in Boston at the time, Dawn’s mother still blamed him for her disappearance. Maggie advised me to hold onto the photo and envelope, suggesting it was likely sent by Dawn’s mother to harass Aidan’s family, possibly in

hopes of gaining some form of compensation. As the conversation unfolded, doubts about Dawn’s disappearance began to surface, especially after Maggie shared that a private investigator had suggested Dawn might have intentionally disappeared to escape a troubled relationship with her mother.

I felt a wave of unease wash over me as I listened to Maggie’s account, recalling my own past relationships and realizing that perhaps I was overlooking things about Aidan. While Maggie seemed convinced of Aidan’s innocence, I couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t quite right. After our conversation, I searched for more information about Dawn’s disappearance and came across a local news article that confirmed Maggie’s version of events but mentioned that Aidan had been thoroughly investigated and was not involved in any way. Despite the confirmation, my unease lingered, and I wondered if Maggie was truly seeing Aidan for who he was or if she was overlooking aspects of his past that could affect their future.

Reluctantly, I sealed the photo and envelope in a Ziploc bag, knowing I had to take it with me to New Hampshire. I pushed my concerns to the back of my mind, focusing on the wedding and the celebration of Maggie’s future instead. Yet, as the days passed, the more I tried to push aside my worries, the more they crept back in. The excitement of the wedding and the joy of being with family overshadowed my increasing sense that something wasn’t quite right. Despite my efforts to stay focused on the happiness of the occasion, I couldn’t ignore the nagging feeling that the mystery of Dawn Taggart and its implications for Aidan were unresolved, and that it would inevitably affect the family dynamics.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 begins with the narrator making a stop at Men’s Wearhouse in Stroudsburg to return the tuxedo he had worn to a wedding. The employee behind the counter, a young man with pink hair and multiple piercings, greets him warmly and asks how the event went. The narrator responds politely, though his mind is elsewhere, still reeling from the events of the previous night. The exhaustion from the long drive back from New Hampshire with Tammy and Abigail weighs on him, but even more than that, the uncertainty of what had unfolded leaves him restless. Despite Maggie’s reassurances that things would settle down, a persistent worry lingers. He spends the night checking his phone for any updates, but by morning, there is still nothing. The lack of communication gnaws at him, fueling his anxiety about what could happen next.

In an effort to shake off the unease, he turns his attention to household chores, hoping the distraction will help. He strips the sheets off the bed in Maggie’s childhood room and loads them into the washing machine, an act that feels both practical and emotional. Although she had said she wasn’t coming back, he finds himself unwilling to fully accept it, clinging to a small hope that she might change her mind. After returning the tuxedo, he heads to ShopRite, filling his cart with Maggie’s favorite foods, almost as if preparing for a homecoming he knows is unlikely. Each aisle he walks through is punctuated by the habitual glance at his phone, searching for a call or message that has yet to arrive. Hours pass, the sun dipping lower in the sky, before his phone finally rings. Seeing Vicky’s name on the screen, his stomach tightens, knowing that whatever she has to say will only add to the emotional weight he is already carrying.

Vicky wastes no time addressing the elephant in the room, offering her condolences after seeing the shocking news online. A tech mogul’s son had died in a firearms accident right before his wedding, a story that quickly spread across social media and

news outlets. The circumstances surrounding the tragedy have drawn intense public scrutiny, and Vicky naturally wants to know how Maggie is holding up. The narrator hesitates, not wanting to lie but also unable to reveal the full truth. Instead, he settles on a vague response, stating that Maggie is confused, which, while technically accurate, barely scratches the surface of her emotional turmoil. Sensing his reluctance, Vicky suggests meeting up for dinner, offering him a space to talk things through. Though tempted by the idea of support, he instinctively recoils, knowing he isn’t ready for that kind of vulnerability. He dismisses her offer, remarking that she isn’t a therapist, a statement that visibly stings her.

The tension in their conversation lingers, and though Vicky insists she isn’t “just” a hairdresser, he feels overwhelmed and brings the call to an abrupt end. Frustrated with himself and the situation, he takes down her business cards from the refrigerator, debating whether to throw them away. He tells himself that avoiding another haircut for at least a month will give him the space he needs to create some distance. Despite this rationalization, he can’t shake the feeling that pushing people away won’t make his problems disappear. Yet, at this moment, avoidance feels like the only way to maintain control over the chaos unraveling around him. As he stares at his phone, waiting for a message that might never come, the weight of uncertainty settles over him once more, leaving him caught between the past and an unknown future.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 begins with Lucia preparing an elaborate dinner at seven o’clock, which is served with a focus on fresh vegetables, catering to Maggie and Aidan’s vegan diet. The meal consisted of carefully prepared dishes highlighting flavors from mushrooms, eggplants, and roasted squash, each course pleasantly filling me up. I couldn’t help but express my admiration for Lucia’s culinary skills, telling her that if she cooked for me regularly, I might easily transition to a vegan lifestyle. Throughout the meal, Maggie dominated the conversation, her excitement about the engagement evident as she proudly displayed her engagement ring—a beautiful pear-cut diamond that had been passed down as a family heirloom from Aidan’s grandmother. She eagerly shared the details of their wedding plans, describing a rustic, country-style reception that seemed perfectly fitting for their personalities. Aidan, however, remained mostly silent during these discussions, seemingly content to let Maggie take the lead, his reserved demeanor standing in stark contrast to her enthusiastic outpouring of ideas.

As the conversation shifted to their honeymoon plans, Aidan confessed they hadn’t yet decided on a destination, leaving the topic open-ended. I began to share fond memories of my own honeymoon cruise, eager to spark some connection, but quickly realized I had lost Maggie’s attention. She was busy checking her Apple Watch, which kept buzzing with work notifications, indicating her commitment to her career. Maggie excused herself abruptly, needing to take a work-related call, which underscored her dedication to her job, even during family meals. I attempted to continue the conversation with Aidan, asking about his thoughts on their future together, but his brief responses only added to the awkwardness, leaving us in an uncomfortable silence. It seemed as though Aidan wasn’t as keen on sharing much about his life, making me feel like an outsider in their relationship.

When Maggie returned to the table, I tried to break the tension by encouraging her to share some "good news." She hesitated at first, unsure whether to reveal it, but it eventually became clear that her exciting announcement was a significant promotion at her company, Capaciti. Maggie would be taking on the responsibility of leading a new division focused on advancing all-electric air travel, an area I found incredibly fascinating. She shared her excitement about the opportunity to work with high-profile individuals, including Armando Castado from UPS, who had shown interest in the project. Her enthusiasm was palpable, and she spoke with great pride about the promising discussions that had already taken place, hinting at a bright future. Overcome by emotion, I hugged her tightly, still processing the impact of this life-changing news. It was clear that this promotion would not only shape her professional life but would also mark a major turning point in her personal journey.

As the evening began winding down, Maggie offered to box up the leftovers, while I took a moment to excuse myself and visit the bathroom. Upon entering, I was immediately struck by the abundance of luxurious beauty products scattered around the space, a sign of Maggie’s love for high-end personal care. After washing my hands, I heard the unmistakable sound of a running toilet, which seemed out of place, so I decided to investigate. To my surprise, I discovered a black plastic bag taped underneath the toilet lid, something that piqued my curiosity immediately. Just as I was about to examine the contents more closely, Maggie knocked on the door, calling out to check on me. Her unexpected interruption only heightened my intrigue, and I couldn’t help but wonder if there was something more to the bag that she didn’t want me to uncover. The mystery left me with a sense of unease, as I silently resolved to find out what it was when the time was right.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6: Frank Szatowski returned to Blackbird cottage, greeted by the lingering heaviness of the recent tragedy involving the death of Gwendolyn. His sister, Tammy, and niece, Abigail, were gearing up for a hike in an attempt to move on from the events, while Frank found himself caught in the pull of grief. Despite Tammy's insistence that they press on with the wedding-related activities, Frank was overwhelmed by the emotional toll of the situation and opted to stay behind to rest. As they left for their hike, Frank quietly prepared a snack, hoping to avoid further encounters and the emotional strain that accompanied the unfolding events, leaving him with the need for solitude.

While alone in the quiet of the cottage, Frank made the decision to head toward the beach, seeking some space from the crowd. He had heard that Gwendolyn's body had been dragged to shore, and he felt compelled to witness the aftermath firsthand. As he walked along the shore, the previously chaotic and frantic atmosphere had settled into eerie silence, with only faint traces of the tragedy left behind. The sense of grief that had weighed on the area still hung in the air, and Frank's mind was filled with an unsettling quietness as he reached the entrance to the camp.

Upon arrival, Frank encountered Hugo, who seemed unfazed by the events, maintaining an upbeat attitude. Hugo offered to help Frank retrieve his car, though Frank insisted he could handle it himself. Nevertheless, Hugo remained persistent and promised to take care of the Jeep's delivery, maintaining a cheerful disposition, which felt out of place against the somber backdrop of the tragedy. As the two spoke briefly, Hugo casually mentioned his ongoing role in managing the camp, dealing with maintenance tasks throughout the year. This routine glimpse into the workings of the camp seemed to contrast sharply with the chaos surrounding the death and the heightened emotions of the day.

After their conversation, Frank made his way into town with a deep sense of unease. He stopped at a local restaurant, the hum of activity around him only serving to heighten his internal turmoil. As he walked away from the bustling area, he took a wooded path leading to Brody Taggart's home, where he hoped to gain clarity on the details surrounding Gwendolyn's tragic death. Upon arriving, Frank was startled by the barking dog and was taken aback when Brody appeared, holding an AR-15 and pointing it in his direction. The confrontation was tense, and Frank tried to maintain his composure as he explained his urgent need for answers regarding Gwendolyn's death. After a brief, tense silence, Brody's sister, Linda, came outside, offering a more welcoming attitude that helped diffuse the situation.

Linda and Frank quickly found common ground in discussing her daughter, Dawn, and the complexities of her relationship with Aidan Gardner. Linda expressed her concerns about what she called "Gardner Standard Time," a manipulated reality controlled by Aidan and his family. This, she explained, was part of the web of influence Aidan had woven around her daughter, leading to a difficult, often confusing relationship that had no clear boundaries. Linda's revelations about Aidan's manipulative tactics shed light on the dynamics between him and Dawn, making it evident that their relationship was far more complicated than it appeared on the surface.

The conversation soon took an even darker turn when Linda shared unsettling details about Dawn's final days. She revealed that Dawn had found a pregnancy test, which had sparked further anxiety, and that a phone call from her daughter just before her disappearance had raised alarms. Linda voiced her deep mistrust of the police's investigation into Dawn's disappearance, suggesting that crucial evidence had either been overlooked or deliberately ignored. As Linda spoke about the possibility of a cover-up, Frank felt a rising sense of dread. The chapter ended on a note of suspicion and uncertainty, with Frank's growing concerns about the potential dangers facing his own daughter, Maggie. The mysteries surrounding Gwendolyn's death and Aidan's influence on those around him created a web of questions that left Frank feeling trapped in a situation far beyond his control.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 begins with the protagonist’s visit to FCI Corbettsville, a minimum-security prison located in New York, which is primarily designed for nonviolent offenders. This facility, resembling a college dormitory in its structure, offers inmates a variety of opportunities to work and take classes, providing a semblance of normalcy within the confines of their incarceration. On the day of his visit, which coincides with his birthday, the protagonist arrives early, eager to reconnect with his daughter. He has carefully researched the rules and best practices for visiting the facility, determined to make the most of the opportunity to see her. Despite the seemingly simple goal of spending time with his daughter, the protagonist is quickly confronted with the challenges of navigating the prison system’s strict regulations, which sets the stage for the emotional journey that will unfold throughout the chapter.

Upon entering the prison, the protagonist encounters the security measures that are a hallmark of the prison system. These rigid protocols are made clear as he faces an immediate obstacle—his name is not on the visitation list, a crucial step for gaining access to the inmates. The system requires that inmates approve their visitors in advance, which adds another layer of complexity to the process. Although the protagonist has followed all the necessary procedures and has good intentions, he is informed by an officer that his daughter’s mother, Margaret, is the only person who can add him to the list. The officer emphasizes that he must wait until he has her consent, and the protagonist is advised to return during the designated visiting hours after obtaining approval. Though the protagonist feels both frustrated and disappointed, he is understanding of the rules and tries to persuade the officer to make an exception, but his attempts are in vain.

While waiting for an update on his situation, the protagonist observes the emotional dynamics playing out around him. He sees families reuniting with inmates, each

interaction marked by a mix of joy and sorrow. Some visitors embrace their loved ones tearfully, while others navigate the painful reality of being separated by the prison system. This moment of waiting allows the protagonist to reflect on the deep emotional toll incarceration has on families, reinforcing the divide between those inside and outside the prison. Eventually, the officer returns with the news that Margaret has chosen not to see the protagonist, a decision that deepens his feelings of isolation. The protagonist learns that other visitors share similar experiences of being unable to see their loved ones, but the weight of his situation is amplified as he grapples with the personal rejection. The stark contrast between the joy of the reunions around him and his own inability to connect with his daughter is striking, and it heightens the emotional complexity of the moment.

As the visit comes to an end, the protagonist leaves the prison with a heavy heart. He reflects on the stark contrast between his life outside the prison walls and the deep emotional yearning experienced by the families of incarcerated individuals. While he enjoys the love and support of friends and family waiting for him on the outside, the protagonist cannot ignore the absence of his daughter on his birthday. This absence underscores the emotional void that the prison system creates for families, a feeling of loss that cannot be easily filled by the support of others. The chapter poignantly explores the difficulty of maintaining familial bonds within the prison system, particularly the challenges that arise when emotional barriers and bureaucratic obstacles prevent meaningful connection. The protagonist’s sense of isolation is palpable as he leaves, and the reader is left with a vivid understanding of the emotional strain that accompanies a visit to a loved one in prison. The complex interplay of hope, rejection, and the harsh realities of the prison system adds depth to the chapter, making it a powerful exploration of familial love, loss, and the toll of incarceration on relationships.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 begins the evening before my trip to New Hampshire, with a visit to Supercuts for a quick trim, where I meet Vicky, a stylist with whom I've developed a close rapport over the years. Vicky has become more than just my stylist; she’s someone I look forward to seeing during each visit. Her skill with my short hair is matched only by her ability to keep the conversation flowing, making each appointment feel like a pleasant break in my routine. Vicky, though close to my age, has a youthful appearance, with long, dark hair and a radiant smile that immediately lifts the atmosphere in the salon. She is a passionate reader, particularly of historical romance novels, and we often exchange thoughts on the Tudors and Vikings, as she always brings a new book to each appointment. Her enthusiasm for her literary interests adds a refreshing depth to our conversations.

Vicky’s life experiences are evident in the personal touches she has added to her workstation, most notably the photos of her children displayed on the mirror. She has been married and divorced twice, and these photos serve as a testament to her journey as a mother. Her son, Todd, now lives in Brooklyn and works for the Wall Street Journal, while her daughter, Janet, tragically passed away two years ago from a drug overdose. Despite this heartbreaking loss, Vicky keeps Janet’s memory alive by prominently displaying her pictures, celebrating milestones from her life, and reflecting on the deep bond they shared. The presence of Janet in the photos is bittersweet, as Vicky continues to carry her daughter’s memory with her, a reminder of both the love they shared and the pain of losing her far too soon.

In the past few weeks, I’ve found myself confiding in Vicky about my complicated relationship with Maggie, our surprising reconciliation, and the upcoming wedding. Vicky, always attentive and empathetic, listens closely and asks insightful questions, making me reflect on the deeper emotions surrounding the situation. During one of our

conversations, I even considered the idea of inviting her to the wedding, appreciating her support and friendship. However, I quickly dismissed the thought, as our relationship has always been limited to the professional sphere, with no real social connection outside the salon. While the idea felt tempting, I wasn’t sure if it was appropriate or if it would cross the line between our professional and personal boundaries.

Later that evening, Vicky dedicated extra time to my haircut, wanting to ensure everything was perfect before my trip. She even treated me to a hot towel treatment, which was both soothing and indulgent, making me feel completely relaxed. At the end of the appointment, Vicky surprised me by telling me that the service would be free of charge, presenting it as a wedding gift. Her gesture, though simple, felt incredibly generous and kind, leaving me feeling deeply appreciated. As I left the salon, I noticed two teenage girls skateboarding outside a nearby Chipotle, and the thought crossed my mind that it might be fun to invite Vicky to join me in New Hampshire for the weekend. It was a spontaneous idea, driven by the excitement of the trip and the potential for new experiences, which made the notion of inviting her feel like the right thing to do.

The next day, I found myself returning to the salon, unsure of what to expect. To my surprise, Vicky was still there, working with a young boy in her chair. Seeing me come back in, I decided to act on the idea that had come to me the night before and suggested that she accompany me to New Hampshire for the wedding. Vicky’s response was both warm and apologetic, explaining that she had prior commitments and could not leave her colleagues behind during such a busy time at the salon. While her answer was disappointing, she offered to catch up after my trip for lunch, expressing an interest in hearing all about the wedding. She handed me her business card as a friendly reminder, pressing it into my hand with a smile.

Although I already had several of her cards, this gesture felt meaningful and reassuring. It was a simple reminder that our connection extended beyond just the salon. I promised her that I would call once I returned from New Hampshire, grateful

for her kindness and the sense of companionship she had offered during our conversations. As I left the salon, I felt a renewed sense of gratitude for the people in my life who have shown me support and understanding, no matter how big or small the gesture. The exchange with Vicky, though brief, emphasized the importance of building connections, especially in times of uncertainty. It reminded me that sometimes, even the smallest gestures can make a big difference in how we navigate life’s challenges. 

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 opens with the protagonist, filled with a sense of anticipation, finally finding a way to reconnect with his daughter, Maggie, after a prolonged period of silence. He eagerly dials her number, only to be met with repeated busy signals, which indicate that she is trying to call him back. This moment of hope and frustration fills the protagonist with anxiety as he waits in Maggie’s childhood bedroom, a place that holds countless memories of their time together as a family. The room is filled with nostalgic remnants—old posters, trophies, and other cherished items from Maggie's younger years. Each artifact serves as a bittersweet reminder of their once-close relationship, which now seems distant and strained. As he waits for Maggie to return his call, the protagonist becomes engulfed in reflection, grappling with the changes in their connection and the emotional weight of the past. The silence in the room becomes almost unbearable as he longs to bridge the gap that has formed between them.

When Maggie finally calls back, her familiar voice brings a rush of emotions to the protagonist. Despite his initial relief, he quickly expresses concern for her well-being, wanting to ensure that everything is alright in her life. Maggie reassures him that she is fine and that she is now living in her apartment in Boston, but the conversation remains tense. There is an awkward silence between them, as both struggle to navigate the complexities of their relationship and the time that has passed. The protagonist, having thought long and hard about this conversation, feels the weight of unspoken words and the emotional distance between them. He hesitantly asks if Maggie has received the many cards he had sent her, a gesture of love and concern that had been his attempt to reach out. Maggie acknowledges the cards but quickly shifts the conversation, clearly reluctant to delve into the more personal aspects of their family issues. This deflection leaves the protagonist feeling unsure of how to proceed, unsure if their bond can ever return to what it once was.

In an attempt to steer the conversation in a positive direction, the protagonist congratulates Maggie on her three-year anniversary at Capaciti, the tech company where she has worked. He expresses his pride in her achievements, knowing that she played a key role in the company’s growth from a small start-up into a major player in the tech industry. He hopes this topic will allow for a lighter, more comfortable discussion, but the mood quickly shifts when Maggie announces that she is getting married. She casually shares details about her fiancé, Aidan, and their upcoming wedding, which will be hosted by Aidan’s family in New Hampshire. The suddenness of the announcement takes the protagonist by surprise, leaving him overwhelmed and struggling to process the news. Maggie’s engagement feels like a significant shift in her life, and the protagonist is left to reconcile the new reality of her future with the unresolved feelings he has about their strained relationship.

Despite the initial shock of the news, Maggie expresses a desire for her father to be present at her wedding, even with the emotional distance that has existed between them. This revelation marks a turning point in their communication, as it highlights both the separation and the potential for reconnection. Maggie's willingness to invite her father to the wedding shows that, despite the years of tension, she is open to rebuilding their relationship. The protagonist, though still processing the news, recognizes that this moment represents an opportunity for healing and growth. It becomes clear that Maggie is ready to move forward with her new life, and her invitation is a step toward bridging the gap between them. As Maggie embarks on this new chapter with Aidan, the protagonist must confront his own emotions and decide how to navigate their evolving family dynamics. This moment sets the stage for an emotional journey of reconciliation and renewal as both father and daughter face the complexities of their relationship.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 delves deeply into the emotional aftermath of a tragic event, one that shatters what should have been a joyous occasion. The protagonist, reeling from the incident, reflects on the cold reception of the two police officers who took his statement. Their hurriedness and lack of concern for his emotional state further add to his frustration, and he begins to feel more like an item on a checklist than a person in mourning. After the officers leave, he is left with the jarring contrast of the once lively wedding celebration, now replaced with an empty, silent cottage. The festive atmosphere has vanished, and all that remains is the hollow ache of loss. Changing out of his tuxedo, he attempts to prepare for the long journey ahead, still feeling emotionally drained from the day. As he settles into a quieter routine, he stumbles upon a manila envelope containing ten one-hundred-dollar bills, a mysterious gift from Aidan. The bills, old and weathered, bring more questions than answers, fueling his frustration. Despite the seeming gesture of kindness, he wonders what Aidan's intentions were and why he left such a cryptic gift.

Later, as he drives to Osprey Lodge, the tension is palpable, and the atmosphere remains heavy with the emotional residue of the earlier tragedy. Along the way, he encounters the officers, who seem embarrassed as they take leftover food from the reception, further highlighting the awkwardness of the situation. Upon arriving at the lodge, he finds Tammy and Maggie engaged in a conversation, only for it to abruptly stop when he enters. The once-celebratory mood has been replaced by the quiet weight of grief, and the protagonist struggles to make Maggie see the reality of her situation—without the marriage, she has no claim to anything, not even the prenup. The realization hits her hard, and she becomes resistant, refusing to leave the lodge to face the harsh truth. Concerned for her well-being, the protagonist becomes increasingly anxious, especially as Maggie's ties to the Gardner family seem to hold

her in a kind of emotional paralysis. As Maggie insists on staying to discuss matters with Errol, the protagonist realizes how deep her attachment runs, and he worries that her connection to the family might keep her trapped in a web of complicity and unresolved feelings. Despite his own emotional exhaustion, he is unable to ignore the growing need to protect his daughter, Abigail, and that urgency compels him to act.

His focus shifts quickly when he discovers that Abigail has gone missing, and his panic intensifies. Desperately searching for her, he eventually finds Abigail alone at the Globe, a spot where the final traces of the wedding's chaos remain. There, Abigail is seen wearing a daisy crown, the symbol of innocence, yet her somber demeanor betrays the weight of the loss she has just endured. Sitting quietly together, the protagonist feels a mixture of sadness and protectiveness. He knows that, despite the overwhelming grief they both carry, this moment of shared silence provides a rare chance for connection. He reassures Abigail, offering her comfort by suggesting that leaving the site of their sorrow will help them heal. As the day turns to dusk, he encourages her to leave with him, promising that, in time, the pain will lessen. Abigail, though initially hesitant, eventually gives in to his words, and he carries her away from the remnants of the wedding. Their shared journey back to camp symbolizes not just physical movement but also emotional progress, as they navigate their grief together. The bond between father and daughter grows stronger in this moment, offering a glimmer of hope amidst the pain, and they begin to face the future, one step at a time.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 opens with the close of summer, as Tammy suggests that my role in looking after Abigail is no longer necessary. Despite her insistence, I continue to help with various responsibilities, such as making sure Abigail attends her math club meetings, gets her vaccinations on schedule, and sees a dentist for her many cavities. The dentist, alarmed by the extent of her dental issues, referred us to an orthodontist who expressed astonishment at the condition of her teeth, saying, “She’s going to need a lot of braces.” This remark led to an extended battle with Pennsylvania Medicaid, which preferred more cost-effective options, while I stood firm in my decision to prioritize quality care for Abigail. Ultimately, I ended up covering most of the dental costs myself, hoping that the investment would pay off in the long run, even though it left me financially stretched.

By the time October rolled around, our routine had become comfortably ingrained. One afternoon, Tammy called to ask me to pick up Abigail from school due to a work commitment. I drove my Jeep to the school, and when we returned home, I made tacos for dinner while Abigail spread out her homework on the living room floor, diligently working through her assignments. Afterward, I cleaned up the kitchen and we settled down to watch a cooking show on Netflix, which featured a hilarious series of baking failures. It was a lighthearted end to the evening, and after some downtime, I sent Abigail to bed with a half-hour of reading from her favorite fantasy novel about Warrior Cats. The small routine of shared moments like this had become a source of comfort for me.

That night, as I was saying goodnight to Abigail, my eyes were drawn to a peculiar sight in her room. Above her dresser, amidst her usual playful room decorations, hung a map. It was a topographical map of Lake Wyndham, located near Osprey Cove, and marked with a bright red “X” at its deepest point. I asked Abigail about the map, and

she explained that it had been a gift from Aidan, who had given it to her after their trip to New Hampshire. She eagerly told me that it was a treasure map, her excitement filling the room. "One day, I’m going back to Osprey Cove to look for the X. You should come," she said, her eyes wide with anticipation. When I inquired whether she had shown the map to Tammy, she replied no, mentioning that Tammy had warned her not to discuss Osprey Cove because of potential repercussions. This immediately raised my concerns, so I sat down to explain my belief that Abigail had misunderstood the significance of the map, suggesting that Aidan may have meant to give her money instead of a map.

The conversation turned to the possibility of the $1,000 I had hidden in my suitcase being a more likely “treasure” in the equation. This idea sparked an animated discussion between Abigail and me, where we agreed that she could trade the map for cash. With enthusiasm, she took eighty-four dollars, overjoyed by the unexpected windfall. I, however, was left standing there, feeling conflicted and uneasy. Holding the map, I was filled with a sense of disquiet, knowing that its origin and purpose were still unclear. I couldn't shake the feeling that this simple exchange might have profound implications, even if Abigail seemed blissfully unaware of the larger picture. The weight of the map, both physical and metaphorical, hung in the air as I wondered what role it would play in our lives in the future, and what secrets it might hold.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10: In this chapter of *The Last One at the Wedding*, the atmosphere at the reception shifts from lively music to the quiet undertones of family interactions and strained social dynamics. Frank, accompanied by his sister Tammy and her daughter Abigail, finds himself navigating the party with a sense of discomfort. The evening begins with Abigail, full of boundless energy, proudly wearing a furry blue bodysuit to represent ‘Stitch’ from *Lilo and Stitch*. Her cheerful, carefree attitude contrasts sharply with Frank’s more reserved, methodical approach, especially as he tries to maintain order during the buffet dinner. Frank, with his concern for his daughter’s manners, continuously reminds Abigail to practice moderation as she fills her plate with food, but her disinterest in his instructions becomes evident. Amid the adult chatter, Abigail remains focused on her enjoyment, oblivious to the social norms Frank is attempting to instill in her.

As the dinner progresses, Tammy—relaxed with her piña colada—engages in conversations with other guests while Abigail continues to pile food onto her plate. Frank, sensing the growing tension, becomes increasingly frustrated when Abigail’s clumsiness results in a mishap. A piece of chicken piccata falls to the ground, and despite Frank’s attempts to manage the situation, Abigail refuses to pick it up. With no other choice, Frank reluctantly bends down to pick up the food himself, swallowing his frustration and doing his best to salvage the moment. He then moves discreetly to another table, hoping to avoid any further embarrassment and give himself a moment of peace in the bustling event.

The uncomfortable dinner atmosphere deepens as they join Gerry Levinson and his wife Sierra at their table. Gerry, ever the boisterous figure, brags about his young wife’s rising success as a children’s book author. Frank, though, can’t help but notice the significant age difference between the couple, a contrast that leaves him feeling

uneasy and out of place. As the evening continues, Frank feels like an outsider in the conversation. He half-listens to Gerry’s legal work stories and Sierra’s aspirations while trying to stay engaged. All the while, Frank is reminded of the widening emotional distance between him and his daughter, a distance that seems to grow as they both try to navigate their roles in each other’s lives.

While the jazz music continues to set the background mood, Frank’s mind remains preoccupied with the absence of Aidan and Gwendolyn from the event. His worries about Aidan’s involvement in the unfolding events around Dawn Taggart’s disappearance only intensify as he notices Maggie moving through the crowd. Tammy, who is delighted by Abigail’s unexpected trivia skills, challenges her niece with a few questions. To Frank’s surprise, Abigail answers them effortlessly, impressively naming the longest rivers in Europe and Asia with ease. This display of intelligence from Abigail catches everyone’s attention, bringing a fleeting moment of pride to Frank as he watches his daughter shine in an unexpected light.

However, the pleasant diversion doesn’t last long, and Frank’s thoughts quickly return to the disquiet he feels about Aidan and Gwendolyn’s absence. Maggie, sensing her father’s growing tension, brushes off his concerns, emphasizing the fun and excitement of the event. Her carefree attitude, while refreshing for some, only heightens Frank’s anxieties, especially as he recalls the unsettling conversation with Brody Taggart and the mysterious circumstances surrounding Aidan’s alibi. Frank attempts to reassure himself by focusing on a promise he made to Maggie about spending time together, particularly a planned canoe trip the next morning. However, the dark undertones of the evening continue to linger in his mind, and the tension between his desire to protect his daughter and his growing suspicions about those around her weighs heavily on him.

The chapter concludes with an unsettling moment as Frank notices a figure watching him from the window of the lodge. The brief exchange between Frank and this mysterious figure, paired with his growing concern over the people involved in Maggie’s life, leaves him feeling on edge. Despite the festive nature of the gathering,

Frank senses something darker lurking beneath the surface, an undercurrent that will undoubtedly complicate the family dynamics further. The tension surrounding Aidan’s absence, along with Frank’s unease about Maggie’s choices, sets the stage for deeper revelations in the coming chapters, as the complexity of family relationships and the looming mysteries continue to unfold.



Dedication

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Chapter 2

Chapter 2: The morning began at seven-thirty, with the comforting smell of a full breakfast spread filling the kitchen of the cottage. On the counter, an assortment of freshly baked muffins, bagels, pastries, yogurt, and oatmeal was laid out, along with a large urn of coffee. Grateful for the warmth, I poured myself a cup before stepping out onto the porch. There, my sister, Tammy, sat in a robe, sipping tea as she took in the serene sunrise over the calm lake. Our conversation was light and easy, with Tammy expressing her joy after having a conversation with Errol Gardner, an affluent and somewhat intimidating figure she had always known. To her surprise, he turned out to be much more approachable than she had expected. He even offered to teach her foster daughter, Abigail, how to water-ski, which Tammy took as a gesture of genuine generosity amid the often pompous atmosphere of high-society gatherings.

As we enjoyed our breakfast together, I casually mentioned that Errol had also offered to find me a “companion.” Tammy, always quick with a teasing remark, joked that Errol must know some attractive widows. I brushed it off, replying that I was much more interested in spending quality time with my daughter, Maggie, and her family rather than entertaining the idea of a romantic match. It was then that Abigail, still in her mismatched pajamas and scratching away at herself, wandered into the room. Tammy’s quick response to the sight of Abigail’s discomfort was to inspect her closely and confirm that Abigail had lice. The remedy she insisted on using—mayonnaise—filled the air with a strange odor as she worked it into Abigail’s hair. As much as I tried not to show it, I found myself appalled by the smell, but at the same time, I had to focus on the fact that I was already running late for my planned canoe ride with Maggie.

Having to put my discomfort aside, I declined Abigail’s eager request to join us, explaining that I had prioritized time with Maggie and her mother for the day. After

exchanging a few brief words of reassurance with Tammy and Abigail, I promised to take Abigail out later once the lice situation was taken care of. When I finally met Maggie, she handed me a cup of coffee as a surprise. We launched the canoe into the lake, heading toward Cormorant Point, a scenic spot where a group of campers had gathered for lunch. As we paddled, my thoughts kept returning to Aidan, Maggie's fiancé, and the troubling dynamics I had noticed in their relationship. I couldn't help but feel increasingly concerned, especially with my past experiences and the troubling behavior I had witnessed in Aidan's family. Although Abigail had to stay behind due to her lice issue, Maggie assured me that her mother, Catherine, was there to take care of her, offering me some comfort. Still, my worries about Aidan and his influence on Maggie refused to fade.

Despite my growing unease, Maggie continued to brush off my concerns, urging me to focus on the beautiful adventure we were experiencing instead. But as we continued to paddle, the sense of discomfort I felt only intensified. When we returned to Osprey Lodge, the festive mood that had accompanied our trip quickly dissipated. A group of guests was waiting for us near the shore, but something felt off. As we approached, the urgency in the air was palpable. Guards were wading toward us, signaling for us to dock immediately. Something was wrong, and the feeling intensified as we finally docked. The scene that awaited us was unsettling—there, floating lifeless in the water, was a body. The peaceful morning had vanished, and a sense of dread took its place. Maggie and I exchanged worried glances, knowing that this discovery would change everything. The carefree atmosphere we had been enjoying just moments ago was now shattered, replaced by a deep unease that lingered in the air.

IV. The Wedding

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Chapter 1

Chapter 1 opens with the protagonist, Frank, receiving an unexpected call from an UNKNOWN CALLER, a type of call that usually signals a scam or a marketing pitch. Frank’s first reaction is to ignore it, as these types of calls are frequent and always seem to waste his time. However, for reasons he cannot fully explain, he decides to answer this one. To his surprise, it’s his daughter, Maggie, the voice he has missed and yearned to hear for years. The shock of hearing from her causes a surge of excitement and emotion in him, so much so that he knocks over his coffee, spilling it onto his breakfast. But even as he tries to compose himself, he can barely make out her words due to the poor connection. Maggie's voice is faint, distant, and jumbled, which makes communication challenging and frustrates Frank. Despite the difficulty, he’s determined to keep the conversation going, hoping for more clarity.

Realizing the kitchen isn’t offering the best reception, Frank decides to move to another part of the house. He heads to the living room, hoping to improve the signal, but as he walks, he trips over a pile of lumber from an old, unfinished carpentry project. He barely catches himself, the mess in his house serving as a physical reminder of the many unfinished tasks that have piled up over the years. Frank quickly brushes off the minor injury, focusing solely on reconnecting with Maggie. His feet take him toward Maggie’s childhood bedroom, a place he knows offers the best reception in the house, especially near the window overlooking their backyard and the Lackawanna rail lines. As Frank stands there, watching the familiar view, he checks his phone again. Three bars finally appear, and with renewed hope, he tries to call Maggie back. The sound of the ringing tone fills the room, and Frank holds his breath, praying the connection will hold this time.

When Maggie picks up the phone again, her voice is still unclear and broken. Frank struggles to hear her, and the distortion only fuels his anxiety. Despite the static,

Frank remains resolute in his desire to hear her words, desperate for any information about her well-being. He asks if she is okay, his voice thick with concern, but the connection seems to deteriorate further, leaving him feeling helpless. Each time he hears her speak, her words are garbled and fragmented, intensifying the emotional distance that has grown between them. Just as he believes they might have finally established some connection, the phone call cuts off without warning, and the message on the screen reads **CALL FAILED**. Frank is left in stunned silence, holding the phone in his hand, wondering why the call ended so abruptly. The disappointment settles deep inside him as he waits for the phone to ring again, but it doesn't. His mind races with questions: What did Maggie want to say? Why was the call so short? Why had she called in the first place, after all these years?

This brief, interrupted conversation serves as a powerful metaphor for Frank and Maggie’s relationship: close yet out of reach, filled with unspoken emotions but hindered by distance and time. The drop in the call feels like a physical manifestation of the emotional rift between father and daughter. Frank stands in Maggie's old bedroom, surrounded by the remnants of her childhood, yet no closer to understanding the reasons behind her sudden outreach. The room, filled with memories of a time when their bond was unbroken, now feels like a symbol of the unresolved tension and silence that have marked their relationship. His mind races with concerns about Maggie's current life, her well-being, and the years of silence between them. Frank longs for answers, but the call's abrupt ending leaves him with nothing but unanswered questions. The chapter ends on a note of unresolved tension, with Frank’s desire to reconnect with Maggie growing stronger. As he reflects on this missed opportunity to reconnect, he is filled with a sense of urgency, knowing that the time to repair their relationship is slipping away.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4: The day following Gwendolyn’s tragic death was filled with a mix of tension and uneasy calm, especially within the group gathered at Osprey Cove. Tammy, always quick to voice her opinions, wasted no time in expressing her assessment of the situation. “We can all agree she looked like trouble,” Tammy said with a sharp tone, her eyes scanning the room as she recounted the events of the previous evening. She remembered Gwendolyn’s behavior at the buffet—a frail young woman who seemed to barely touch her plate, picking at the green beans, corn, and rice with little interest. Tammy, with her own set of experiences and judgments, immediately concluded that Gwendolyn’s behavior pointed to substance abuse, drawing a parallel between her condition and the history of addiction in her family.

Frankie, however, held a very different view. He had spent time talking to Gwendolyn the previous night, and what he saw was not the picture of an addict that Tammy described. While she had been quiet, introspective even, Frankie hadn’t witnessed any signs of addiction or erratic behavior. Instead, he had seen a young woman who seemed troubled, but not necessarily caught in the throes of substance abuse. As they continued to discuss the implications of Gwendolyn’s death on the wedding, his attention was diverted to Abigail, who had begun to climb the large tree in the center of the yard. Ignoring Frankie’s warnings, she continued to ascend higher, her energy fueled by the excitement of the moment, completely oblivious to the danger she was putting herself in.

Before Frankie could fully protest, Abigail’s fear of being stuck in the tree became apparent. “I think I’m stuck!” she called out, her voice betraying a hint of panic as she realized she had climbed too high. Tammy immediately suggested calling for a ladder, but Frankie, always determined to handle things himself, insisted he could manage the situation. As he moved quickly to help her, disaster struck. In a split second, Abigail’s

grip slipped, and she tumbled downwards, her body heading straight for Frankie. Reacting on instinct, he tried to catch her, but the sudden force of her fall knocked him backward, sending both of them crashing onto the ground.

The impact left Frankie in intense pain, particularly in his back. His body felt heavy and stiff as he lay on the ground, struggling to breathe for a moment. Tammy, ever the caretaker, rushed to check on Abigail, who had managed to avoid serious injury, only suffering a small scratch on her arm. However, she was visibly shaken, and Tammy took the time to soothe her, ensuring she was alright. Frankie, still lying there, winced at the thought of his back injury, but he told Tammy he was fine, not wanting to worry her further. Deep down, however, he feared the worst—if his back injury was more severe, it could threaten his ability to work, and that thought was nearly unbearable. Despite his own pain, Frankie couldn't afford to dwell on it. He had to continue moving forward, especially with so many responsibilities weighing on him.

Tammy, dismissing his concern as overblown, suggested Frankie rest for a moment, but he stubbornly refused. His mind raced with thoughts of the impending wedding and the responsibility he felt for his daughter Maggie. He couldn't afford to stop, even for a moment, because he knew there were larger issues at hand. His mind kept returning to the suspicious circumstances surrounding Gwendolyn's death, Aidan's increasingly erratic behavior, and the strange dynamics between the Gardners. Something didn't sit right, and Frankie could feel it deep in his gut. Even though he was physically hurting, Frankie made a decision—he would push through the pain. With his daughter's wedding on the horizon, he could not let anything stop him. Despite Abigail's near accident, the day carried on, and with each step he took toward the house, Frankie knew that the mysteries surrounding Gwendolyn's death and his daughter's future were far from over.

I. The Invitation

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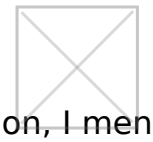
Chapter 7

Chapter 7: After leaving the trailer, Brody noticed my limp and suggested I take the access road to the highway instead of climbing out of the gorge. This longer route meant a delayed arrival at my parents' restaurant, but I appreciated the ease it provided. My arrival didn’t occur until nearly two in the afternoon, and just as I was backing out of the parking lot, I spotted my friend, the bartender, waving at me from the door. I felt a moment of relief, not needing to explain my presence there or the events that had unfolded.

When I finally reached Osprey Cove, the sight of a long line of vehicles greeted me as guests gathered for the wedding. The security team had their hands full, checking IDs, but Hugo recognized me immediately and ushered me through. He mentioned that Margaret had been asking about me, which made me feel a bit guilty for not having brought anything with me. Hugo, being perceptive, seemed to sense my unease, likely aware that I was hiding the truth about my findings in town. When I asked about Gwendolyn, the girl connected to a recent tragic event, Hugo revealed that the police had found xylazine—an animal tranquilizer—among her things. This revelation sent a wave of concern through me, solidifying my suspicions that something far darker was at play.

Amid the festivities, where guests were engaged in casual conversations and merriment, I couldn’t shake the gravity of what had transpired. While walking toward the lodge, I ran into Minh, Maggie’s old college roommate from Babson. This encounter stirred memories of Maggie’s college days, filled with both fondness and turmoil. Minh, ever the optimist, shared her hopes for Maggie’s bright future, but I couldn’t ignore the gnawing feeling that something wasn’t right. It was a reminder that Maggie's future might not be as secure as it seemed, with the complex web of relationships around her growing even more convoluted.

Tammy then shared her afternoon with Errol Gardner, waterskiing, and the surprising news that he had gifted her stock as a wedding present. This news left me puzzled about Errol’s intentions and his involvement in our family’s increasingly complicated dynamics. Just as things began to escalate in my thoughts, I saw Maggie leaving the cottage with lemonade in hand. I immediately asked to speak with her privately, feeling an urgent need to address the mounting concerns that had been plaguing me for days.

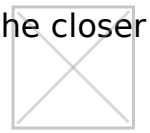


In our conversation, I mentioned meeting Dawn’s family, hoping to gauge Maggie’s reaction. She seemed taken aback, which only fueled my suspicions. I couldn’t shake the feeling that Maggie’s relationship with Aidan was far more complicated and potentially dangerous than she realized. I described the hidden threats I saw around her engagement, urging her to reconsider her situation before it was too late. Despite my warnings, Maggie stood her ground, asserting that everything was fine and that I was overreacting. I pushed further, asking her to trust my instincts, which seemed to be backed up by every piece of information I had.

As the conversation continued, Maggie recalled a photo that had raised questions about Aidan’s involvement. She mentioned how an intern had noticed an anomaly in the picture—Aidan’s thumb appearing on the wrong side, which seemed to suggest something was amiss. This seemingly small detail added weight to my suspicions, further complicating the already strained family dynamics. I was torn between respecting Maggie’s autonomy and protecting her from the dangerous situation she seemed to be walking into.

The conversation between Maggie and I felt like a tipping point. Her willingness to dismiss my concerns about Aidan and the increasing complexity of their relationship made me fear for her future. As the layers of secrecy and manipulation started to unravel, I knew that my role as a father and protector had never been more important. Despite Maggie’s resistance, I couldn’t stand by and watch as she made decisions that would likely lead to harm. The tension was palpable, and the stakes had never felt so high.

In the end, I knew that Maggie would have to make her own decisions, but I couldn't help but feel a deep sense of responsibility to intervene before it was too late. The truth, however painful, needed to come to light, no matter how many walls Maggie put up in the process. I walked away from our conversation, deeply unsettled, but also resolute in my determination to protect my daughter from the dangerous web she was entangled in. With each passing day, it became clear that the deeper I dug, the more I uncovered, and the closer I got to unraveling the tangled mess that was Aidan Gardner and his family.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 begins with me arriving at my sister Tammy’s condo in the morning light at the Preserve at Saddle Brook Crossing, a place she called home with her collection of foster children. I had instructed her to be ready by six, but when I rang the doorbell, I was greeted by a quirky little girl named Abigail Grimm, who had been left in Tammy’s care unexpectedly, without a suitcase. Abigail, with her army-style haircut and a smile that could melt anyone’s heart, cheerfully informed me that we were waiting for Tammy to finish getting ready. Her innocent and unassuming nature instantly brought a sense of calm despite the chaotic start to the day.

Inside the condo, the familiar warmth of Tammy’s personality was reflected in her home’s decor—cluttered yet comforting, filled with sentimental items and the lingering scent of baked goods. We made ourselves comfortable in the living room as the television played the news in the background, reporting on a tragic house fire that had claimed the lives of two brothers. As the somber story unfolded, Abigail, seemingly unaffected by the harsh realities of the world, casually switched off the TV at my request. She then tried to lighten the mood with a joke about pi, revealing her delightful innocence amidst the heavy news. Her lighthearted attempt at humor provided a much-needed contrast to the sadness that surrounded us.

After a short while, Tammy joined us, her cheerful presence filling the room as she entered, dressed in fresh clothes and carrying a tray of homemade muffins for breakfast. Despite the cozy atmosphere, I couldn't shake off my growing frustration with Tammy’s decision to bring Abigail along to Maggie’s wedding without prior notice. From the few things Tammy had mentioned, it was clear that Abigail was dealing with her own set of challenges, including head lice, and the idea of her accompanying us made me uneasy. My mind raced with worries about the complications this could bring, yet Tammy seemed unfazed, her warm demeanor making it difficult to voice my

concerns.

Tammy, as always, stood firm in her defense of the decision. She passionately explained that Abigail was just a sweet girl caught in unfortunate circumstances, and she deserved a chance to be part of something positive. This reasoning reminded me of times when Tammy had been there for me, offering unwavering support during my own struggles. It was hard to argue against her kindness, especially given the sacrifices she had made for others in the past.

In an effort to make her reconsider, I pointed out the potential complications of taking a foster child out of state for a wedding, especially without prior notice. However, Tammy, ever thoughtful, had already arranged the necessary approvals and reassurances to ensure everything was in order. I knew I couldn’t say no to her, as she had always stood by me through thick and thin. After a brief moment of reflection, I relented, recognizing that my objections were rooted more in my own unease than any real issues with Abigail’s presence. With that, I found myself agreeing to the unexpected addition to our journey, understanding that despite the challenges it might present, Tammy’s decision came from a place of love and care.

This moment in the chapter highlights the complexities of familial relationships, especially when navigating unexpected situations and responsibilities. Tammy's ability to act with compassion and make decisions with the best interest of her foster children at heart is something that consistently challenges my own perspective. The dynamic between us reflects a deeper understanding of the way love, responsibility, and personal history shape the decisions we make, even when they push us outside our comfort zones.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 unfolds in the tense aftermath of a wedding that was supposed to be a joyous occasion but instead became the backdrop for tragedy. The reception hall, once filled with laughter, music, and the clinking of glasses, is now a place of quiet urgency as the catering staff swiftly clears tables, removing all signs of celebration. The once-beautiful centerpieces are handed out to guests as parting gifts, an unspoken gesture meant to usher them away and allow the grieving family their privacy. Conversations among the attendees are hushed but pointed, as murmurs about Aidan’s death ripple through the crowd. Many refer to the incident as a "terrible accident," though their lowered voices and stolen glances suggest a mixture of speculation and judgment rather than genuine sympathy. As the final guests trickle out, Frank stands in his tuxedo, observing the scene unfold around him, the reality of what has happened weighing heavily on his chest. Despite their polite expressions, he can see the discomfort in their faces, the avoidance of eye contact, as if proximity to grief is something contagious. For a moment, he wonders if they truly feel sorry or if they are merely relieved that the tragedy was not their own to bear.

Amid the uncomfortable departure, a man named Armando Castado approaches Frank, offering a business card and a quiet assurance that he’s available to talk anytime. Though the gesture appears sincere, Frank feels an internal resistance, unsure if he has the energy or willingness to rehash everything with a stranger. His mind is consumed by one pressing concern—Maggie. She has distanced herself, choosing to grieve in solitude, and Frank is powerless to reach her. He remembers how, just hours earlier, he had found himself in the basement where Aidan’s life had ended so suddenly. The image of Aidan lying lifeless on the cold floor is burned into his memory, a scene so surreal that it feels like something out of a nightmare. His instinct had been to call for help, but before he could do anything, Hugo had stopped him, his grip firm

and unyielding. "Not yet," Hugo had warned, insisting that they had to wait until the right moment before alerting anyone. When Errol and Gerry finally arrived, their reaction was not one of grief or even shock—it was one of cold calculation.

Frank had expected chaos, panic, or at least some emotional response, but instead, he was met with careful deliberation. Errol and Gerry spoke in hushed tones, immediately discussing damage control and the best way to protect themselves. Frank had barely processed what had happened before Gerry laid out the plan: they would tell everyone that Aidan had never arrived at the wedding, that he had been found later, dead from an unfortunate accident. It was a lie, a clean cover-up designed to ensure that no one asked too many questions. Frank found himself questioning how they could be so detached, so quick to erase the truth in favor of convenience. His own sense of morality warred with the reality of what he had become entangled in. He wanted no part in their deception, but his options felt limited.

The weight of the situation only grew heavier when Errol revealed something that left Frank reeling—Aidan was never his biological son. With an air of indifference, Errol admitted that years ago, he had taken a DNA test, confirming that there was no blood relation between them. His voice lacked any trace of sadness, any sign that this revelation had ever caused him pain. Instead, he stated matter-of-factly that he had provided for Aidan financially but had never truly seen him as his own. The words struck Frank harder than expected, not because of the revelation itself, but because of the cold way it was delivered. How could a man so easily sever ties with someone who had looked up to him? How could he dismiss Aidan’s life, his struggles, his existence, with such detachment?

As the night wore on, Frank felt an undeniable shift within himself. Maggie no longer had any connection to this family, and in many ways, neither did he. Aidan had tried to separate himself from them long before his tragic end, and perhaps now it was Frank’s turn to do the same. The events of the wedding, the lies, the betrayals, and the indifference had made one thing clear—Osprey Cove was no longer a place where he belonged. His only priority now was Maggie, ensuring that she did not get trapped in

the same tangled web that had ensnared Aidan. With that thought, he stepped away from the remnants of the night, ready to put distance between himself and everything that had unraveled within those walls.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 begins with me, Frank Szatowski, reflecting on my life at the age of fifty-two. For most of my adult years, I've worked as a package car driver for UPS, a job that has kept me on the road delivering packages all across neighborhoods. These large brown trucks are a constant presence in most areas, delivering everything from online shopping orders to other goods. After serving in the army, I started my career as a UPS driver, and recently, I received the honor of being inducted into the Circle of Honor for driving twenty-five years without an accident. The physically demanding nature of the job, which now includes lifting everything from futons to car tires, has not deterred me, and I've made a comfortable living with a steady income, frequently earning over one hundred thousand dollars when factoring in overtime.

Financially, I've managed to establish a stable life for myself. My Jeep is paid off, and my mortgage is almost settled, with no credit card debt weighing me down. I had been looking forward to an early retirement, believing that a solid pension and healthcare benefits would provide me with a comfortable and peaceful future. However, after my wife passed away, life took an unexpected turn, and complications arose with my daughter, Maggie. The stability I had once enjoyed now seemed fragile, and the changes in our family dynamic have made me reevaluate the future. Despite this, I hold on to the sense of security I had built, even as I navigate these challenges.

Recently, Maggie reached out to share an important update—her wedding, which is set for July 23rd. When she first called, I was caught off guard by the news, as she excitedly spoke about her fiancé, Aidan. They had met just last Halloween at a costume party, where they dressed as characters from *The Office*, and she quickly became infatuated with him. I was surprised by the speed at which their relationship had developed, having only known each other for six months. It wasn't the kind of timeline I had expected for such a significant decision, and I struggled to reconcile the

quick pace with my own cautious nature.

Aidan, to my surprise, turned out to be an artist, not a housepainter as I had initially assumed. Maggie explained that he was working hard to build his reputation as an artist while also teaching at MassArt, which seemed to impress her. While I wanted to be supportive of Maggie's relationship, I found myself feeling uneasy about Aidan's unconventional career choice. I couldn't help but press her for more details about his financial stability, but my questions seemed to create an awkward tension between us. I wasn't sure if I was being too intrusive or just looking for reassurance that Maggie's future was secure with someone who could provide for her.

Maggie, on the other hand, was more open about Aidan's family background, sharing that she had a great relationship with his mother. However, when it came to his father, she seemed hesitant to dive into specifics, offering only vague hints that there might be complications there. My persistence in asking more about Aidan's background seemed to strain the conversation, and it was clear that Maggie was ready to move on to a different subject. She suggested we talk about everything further over dinner at an Irish pub in Boston, giving me the name of the place where we could meet up. Despite her eagerness to change the subject, I agreed to the dinner, hopeful that I might gain more insight into Aidan and their relationship.

As our conversation came to a close, I felt a deep sense of regret for the challenges that had occurred in the past few years. However, before I could fully express my thoughts, Maggie had already hung up the phone. The abrupt end to our conversation left me feeling unsettled and unsure of where I stood in her life. While I was eager to reconnect and be supportive, the increasing complexity of her relationship with Aidan made me question how much I truly understood about their future together. As the wedding day loomed, I couldn't shake the feeling that there were many more questions left unanswered.

Also by Jason Rekulak

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Chapter 3

Chapter 3 opens with a bright and cheerful description of a road trip, setting the tone for an otherwise complex journey. The weather is perfect, the Jeep Wrangler is running smoothly, and Tammy has thoughtfully packed snacks and all the necessary items to make the trip more comfortable. The scene feels like the start of an enjoyable adventure, with everything falling into place. However, the upbeat mood quickly shifts when Abigail, the talkative child in the backseat, enters the conversation. She is energetic, constantly seeking attention and engagement, which quickly shifts the dynamic of the trip. Her incessant questions about Maggie and Aidan’s upcoming wedding reveal a deep curiosity and a desire to understand the event’s importance. In addition to her eagerness to connect, Abigail’s questions reflect her longing for stability and security, stemming from the trauma she’s experienced in her young life. Through her inquisitive nature, she is trying to find her place in a world where she has often felt out of control.

As the conversation unfolds, Abigail begins cross-referencing her questions with Lady Evelyn’s Complete Guide to Wedding Etiquette, an old, dusty book that smells of neglect. She pulls it out with a sense of purpose, flipping through its yellowed pages as she explains traditional wedding customs in minute detail. Among the rules she insists on following is the necessity of walking on the bride’s left side to avoid bad luck, an old superstition passed down through generations. With a mix of seriousness and childish enthusiasm, she urges her traveling companions to abide by these outdated rules, believing they are essential for the success of the wedding. Despite her earnestness, Frank feels a growing discomfort at the idea of adhering to such antiquated advice. Tammy, however, responds with more amusement and curiosity, enjoying Abigail’s dedication to the guide and its peculiarities. While both adults appreciate the moment, they can’t help but question whether this outdated guide is still relevant in the context

of a modern wedding, which reflects the shifting attitudes toward tradition in today's society.

The conversation takes an unexpected turn when the topic shifts to the financial side of the wedding, an area where the disparity between the families becomes evident. Frank reveals that he has contributed eight thousand dollars for alcohol, a disclosure that catches Abigail off guard. She, still in the process of understanding the financial dynamics of the event, expresses surprise at the amount. In response, Tammy patiently explains that Aidan's family has accumulated wealth through education and hard work, setting them apart from the more modest, middle-class lifestyle that she and Frank lead. The contrast between the two families' financial situations begins to emerge as a central theme in the conversation. Abigail's innocent questions about Aidan's family's wealth offer a glimpse into the differences between her life experiences and the lives of the affluent families surrounding the wedding. These differences are heightened by the financial discussions, which subtly underscore the gap in wealth and social status between the various families involved.

The dialogue naturally evolves into discussions about ambition, work ethic, and success, with Tammy encouraging Abigail to dream big. She emphasizes the importance of setting high goals and striving to achieve them, hopeful that Abigail will learn to believe in her own potential. Frank, on the other hand, challenges the notion of self-made success, particularly when it comes to wealthy individuals like Aidan's father. He points out that the narrative of becoming successful through hard work alone may not always align with the realities of inherited wealth and privilege. While Tammy continues to hold an optimistic view about hard work leading to success, Frank becomes more cynical, questioning the sincerity of those who claim to have achieved wealth through pure effort. The contrast between their views on ambition, success, and the realities of wealth adds a layer of complexity to their relationship and sets the tone for the ongoing exploration of social class and personal values throughout the chapter.

As the chapter progresses, the interactions between the characters take on a deeper significance, blending humor with more sobering reflections on wealth, class, and societal expectations. Abigail’s innocent curiosity about money and success provides a lens through which the adults examine their own values and assumptions about what it means to achieve success. At the same time, their discussions about social class provide insight into the dynamics at play within the families involved in the wedding. The chapter skillfully weaves these themes into their dialogue, creating a subtle commentary on the differences between social classes, the expectations placed on individuals based on their wealth, and the complexities of relationships shaped by these factors. As they prepare for the wedding, the characters are forced to confront their own assumptions about class, privilege, and ambition, setting the stage for further exploration of these themes in the coming chapters. The combination of humor, introspection, and social commentary adds depth to the narrative, making it both engaging and thought-provoking for readers.

III. The Rehearsal

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Chapter 10

Chapter 10: As the evening settled in, the Osprey Lodge’s atmosphere transformed, bathed in the soft, golden glow of candlelight. Guests continued to mingle, now grouped into pairs, exchanging stories, laughter, and the kind of casual chatter that filled the space with an air of false cheerfulness. Amidst the noise and celebration, I slipped Aidan's phone into my lap, excusing myself under the guise of needing a restroom break, although my real intention was far more urgent. Gwendolyn’s cryptic comments about Catherine Gardner had been gnawing at me, and I felt compelled to uncover more about the woman who was seemingly central to the unsettling undercurrents surrounding the evening.

The lodge was quieter as I navigated the hallways, passing a long line of women waiting to use the restroom. Once I reached the staircase, I made my way up, feeling the weight of my mission. At the top, I knocked on the master suite’s door, but when no one answered, I used Aidan’s phone to unlock it, entering cautiously into a dimly lit hallway. The air in the room was thick with an overpowering stench, and the chaos of discarded clothing scattered across the floor created an unsettling sense of neglect. It was a jarring contrast to the pristine, perfect image of the Gardners I had once been shown.

I was startled to find Catherine Gardner sitting amidst the disarray, far removed from the poised and controlled image I had seen in photographs. Her attire—a stained bathrobe and smudged makeup—left her looking disheveled and completely detached from the reality of the ongoing wedding festivities. She seemed lost in her own world, watching a game show, and when she noticed me standing in the doorway, her confusion was evident. However, upon hearing my connection to Margaret, she quickly attempted to offer me a semblance of hospitality, even though the surrounding chaos made it hard to feel any warmth in the interaction. Despite the mess, she poured gin

into glasses, trying to engage in conversation, and she slowly began to open up about her life.

Her words began flowing more freely as she talked about Aidan and the complicated situation surrounding him, particularly the rumors about his relationship with Dawn Taggart. Catherine recounted her own perspective on the events, speaking of Dawn's sense of entitlement and her claims about their familial bond. As the conversation deepened, a more disturbing truth emerged: Catherine revealed that her husband, Errol, had a history of extramarital affairs, adding another layer of dysfunction to an already strained family dynamic. It seemed that the family's secrets were buried deep, only surfacing in moments of tension. Catherine then moved the conversation to a dark recollection of her own violent response to Dawn's demands, an incident that had ended tragically on the stairs, compounding the chaos already surrounding them.

While I struggled to absorb all that Catherine had divulged, it was impossible to ignore the weight of what had been said. But before I could probe further, others arrived and interrupted our conversation. With my mind racing and questions piling up, I pushed for more information about Margaret's involvement in this unraveling web, but Catherine's mental state continued to unravel as well, and she became increasingly difficult to understand. Feeling a sense of urgency and confusion, I hastily excused myself, leaving the room with a sense of dread about what I had just learned. The weight of the situation hung heavy as I processed the realization that Maggie's involvement with Aidan and her connection to the lies were far more complicated than I had initially thought, leaving me with a lingering sense of unease and uncertainty.

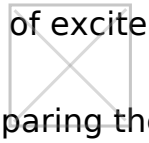
Chapter 8

Chapter 8 begins as the days leading up to the wedding seem to pass in a blur. Maggie and the Gardners were handling most of the wedding preparations, but I still found myself with plenty of tasks to manage. One afternoon, I rummaged through the attic, hoping to find something useful. It was there I stumbled upon my old tuxedo, the same one I had worn on my wedding day twenty-eight years ago. Although it no longer fit, I couldn't help but feel a sense of nostalgia as I sifted through the pockets. In one of them, I found a cocktail napkin stained with my late wife Colleen’s lipstick, a small memento that I decided to keep for good luck. Holding that napkin in my hand, I couldn’t help but reflect on the passage of time, and the memories that still lingered.

As the wedding approached, I made the decision to rent a light-gray summer tuxedo from Men’s Wearhouse, complete with a matching vest and bow tie. The salesman who assisted me was a young man with pink hair and piercings, eager to make the sale. He successfully convinced me to purchase a nine-piece accessory package, which included shoes and cufflinks. I found myself smiling at the enthusiasm he brought to the experience, a stark contrast to my own more reserved nature. While I wasn’t initially planning to buy accessories, his excitement was contagious, and by the end of the transaction, I felt oddly positive about the purchase. The whole process left me with a sense of goodwill, especially as I thought about Maggie’s upcoming wedding and the joy it would bring to our family. I felt a deep sense of pride as I prepared for this special day, even though it was a whirlwind of last-minute arrangements.

One of my main tasks was to prepare a toast for the wedding reception, which was easier said than done. Bridal websites recommend that wedding toasts should be around ninety seconds long, encouraging speakers to speak from the heart. However, as I sat down to write, I quickly realized I had an overwhelming number of thoughts and emotions to convey. What was supposed to be a brief, heartfelt message turned

into eighteen pages of notes, far more than what was necessary for the allotted time. Each writing session only seemed to increase the length of my notes as I struggled to condense my feelings into a short, meaningful speech. The pressure of having to sum up a lifetime of love and pride in just a few moments weighed heavily on me, and I found myself repeatedly editing, knowing that the time was fast approaching. The task became more daunting as the wedding day neared, yet I couldn't help but feel an underlying sense of excitement about standing up and speaking from the heart.



In addition to preparing the toast, I wanted to spend some time with Aidan, my future son-in-law, and strengthen our relationship. I suggested we attend a Red Sox game together, thinking it would be a great bonding experience. However, Maggie informed me that Aidan wasn't particularly fond of sports, which caught me off guard, as I had assumed we would share this interest. I then suggested we visit the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, where Aidan could show me his favorite exhibits, but despite both of us having shared interests, we struggled to find a date that worked for us. Each time we tried to plan, Aidan made excuses, and after several attempts, I began to sense that he wasn't as eager to spend time together as I had hoped. Rather than feeling rejected, I chose not to take it personally, understanding that he likely already had a strong relationship with his own father, and perhaps didn't see the need to forge another connection.

Maggie, too, seemed distant during this time, which was disappointing to me. Despite our recent efforts to reconnect, I found that her busy schedule, filled with wedding planning and work, left little room for meaningful conversations. Our discussions were often short, and I could sense her preoccupation with other responsibilities. However, Maggie reassured me that once we arrived at Osprey Cove for the wedding, we would have more time for each other. She even promised we could relive our past camping trips, like canoeing together, something I looked forward to. As July passed by, I found myself eagerly anticipating the reunion, while vowing to give Maggie the space she needed until the big day arrived. The anticipation for the wedding continued to grow, but so did the desire for deeper connections that seemed to be slipping away as the stress of the event loomed.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7: The silence of the cottage is abruptly shattered by Abigail's terrified screams, reverberating through the house and unsettling everyone inside. Frank and Tammy rush to her room in a panic, only to find the young girl cowering in fear, her wide eyes fixed on something invisible in her surroundings. Her hysteria presents an immediate challenge for Frank, who feels his concern growing, especially given the upcoming wedding and the emotional strain it could impose on Abigail. The sudden outburst creates an air of unease, compelling Frank to question what lies beneath the surface of Abigail’s reaction and whether she’ll be able to handle the emotional complexities of the event ahead.

In an attempt to calm her, Tammy speaks gently to Abigail, trying to soothe her fears. Yet, despite her efforts, the child remains unresponsive, her fear all-consuming. Frank, who has been observing the situation carefully, begins to examine the room, searching for the source of Abigail’s panic. His gaze falls on an unexplored closet door. Hesitant but determined, Frank opens it and is immediately met with an unsettling sight: a large nest of daddy longlegs, the spiders scattering across the darkened space. What initially seemed like an insignificant issue quickly transforms into a nightmare as Frank tries to comprehend the magnitude of what he’s dealing with. The spiders begin to flee, overwhelming him with their unexpected presence, but Frank’s instincts kick in. He quickly slams the door shut, trying to keep the creatures contained while offering reassurances to Abigail, even as she trembles with fear.

Despite his own revulsion, Frank chooses to address the situation himself rather than call for professional help. Armed with nothing but his shoe, he begins the task of eradicating the spiders, the grotesque sounds of squashing bodies filling the air. His mind is filled with conflicting emotions—disgust at the mess, concern for Abigail, and an underlying sense of responsibility to resolve the chaos. As he works to eliminate the

spiders, he can’t help but feel a growing tension within himself. He works feverishly, all while knowing that the deeper issue isn’t just the spiders, but Abigail’s growing fear and his own feelings of inadequacy as a parent. Once the task is completed, Frank tries to reassure Abigail, but her anxiety refuses to subside, and she continues to resist returning to the room, her fears too strong to ignore.

Tammy, witnessing the escalating tension between Frank and Abigail, suggests that they switch rooms to ease Abigail’s distress. Frank, still caught up in his own concerns and frustrations, initially resists, feeling that he has earned the right to stay in the more comfortable room. His internal battle between his own desires and Abigail’s needs becomes apparent, especially as he recalls her troubled past of living in conditions that lacked the stability and comfort he now had. Despite his reluctance, Frank begins to realize that his attachment to the room pales in comparison to Abigail’s well-being. The traumatic experiences Abigail has faced must be taken into account, and the room swap, although uncomfortable for Frank, would be a necessary sacrifice to help her feel safe.

The chapter concludes with Frank coming to terms with the room swap, a decision that highlights his internal conflict and the gradual shift in his perspective. His moment of reluctant acceptance is a turning point, not only in his relationship with Abigail but in his understanding of what it means to be a parent. The chapter offers a poignant exploration of personal sacrifice and the weight of responsibility that comes with caring for loved ones, especially in the face of deep-seated fears and past trauma. As Frank reluctantly gives up his preferred space for Abigail’s comfort, it becomes clear that the chapter represents more than just a change of rooms—it signifies a shift in Frank’s emotional growth and his readiness to prioritize his daughter’s needs above his own.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 begins on a Sunday morning when Frankie returns home to Pennsylvania, only to find an elegant wedding invitation from the Gardners. The invitation invites him to the wedding of Aidan, the Gardners' son, and his daughter Maggie. Just after discovering the invitation, Frankie receives a call from his sister, Tammy, who excitedly sings about the wedding and asks if things have improved between him and Maggie. Tammy is eager to hear about Frankie's recent dinner with Aidan, but Frankie's mind is preoccupied with a mysterious black bag he found in Aidan's toilet tank. He suspects that it might contain cash, adding a layer of intrigue to the day's events. Despite Tammy's enthusiasm, Frankie can't help but feel that something unusual is at play.

As their conversation shifts to Aidan, Frankie shares his doubts about the young man, describing him as polite but somewhat quiet. Despite his reservations, Frankie admits that Aidan's success and the wealth of the Gardners make him feel like an outsider. Tammy, however, insists that Aidan is a good match for Maggie, even comparing him favorably to her past relationships. Frankie feels a deep desire to understand Aidan better but also confesses that he feels intimidated by the world Aidan comes from. He worries that he may never fit into this new world that Maggie is becoming a part of, but Tammy encourages him to trust her judgment and Maggie's decision. This ongoing conversation highlights the divide between Frankie's more humble background and the life Maggie is about to embark on with Aidan.

In a surprising turn, Tammy shares that she asked Maggie about a prenuptial agreement. Maggie revealed that Aidan and she already have one in place, ensuring an equal division of assets if they ever divorce. Frankie is taken aback by this, feeling unprepared for such a serious conversation so soon in their relationship. He had hoped for a more straightforward and romantic union, but the prenuptial agreement suggests

a level of caution that Frankie wasn’t expecting. Tammy insists that Frankie should support Maggie’s decision wholeheartedly, understanding that it was Maggie’s choice to protect herself legally. Though unsettled, Frankie knows deep down that he needs to respect his daughter’s wishes, no matter how it challenges his own comfort level.

Feeling the pressure of wanting to contribute to the wedding, Frankie decides that he will cover the alcohol expenses, estimating the cost to be between $5,600 and $8,000. He knows Maggie might not be thrilled with the idea, especially considering the Gardners’ wealth, but he feels determined to help. When Frankie suggests covering the expenses, Maggie resists, believing that Aidan’s father, Errol Gardner, would likely refuse such help due to Frankie’s financial situation. Despite Maggie’s hesitation, Frankie remains resolute, and he requests Errol’s number, hoping to speak directly with him about the matter. Maggie reluctantly agrees to provide the contact, but she’s clearly uncomfortable with the decision.

When Errol finally calls, Frankie is pleasantly surprised by their immediate connection over their shared love for baseball. The conversation flows easily, and Frankie feels a sense of reassurance as they bond over the sport. This unexpected camaraderie boosts Frankie’s confidence, and as the conversation turns to the wedding, Frankie expresses his desire to cover the bar tab. The two men engage in a lighthearted negotiation, ultimately settling on Frankie’s contribution of $8,000, a gesture that feels both significant and personal. Frankie walks away from the call feeling a sense of pride and accomplishment. This financial gesture, he realizes, is not just about the money—it’s about investing in his daughter’s future and showing her that he supports her choices, even when they take him out of his comfort zone.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 begins with Tammy urging Frankie to dispose of a map that has been found in Abigail's possession, insisting that it could pose a serious risk to their safety. As they sat together at the kitchen table, sipping cups of decaf coffee, they examined the map’s intricate details, noting how its topographical design seemed to shift subtly under their gaze. Tammy’s words were filled with urgency, pressing Frankie to make a decision: destroy the map to erase its connection to the Gardners or hand it over to the FBI, a prospect that Frankie was adamantly against. The tension was palpable, heightened by the unresolved death of Aidan Taggart, which still weighed heavily on Frankie, especially in light of the questions surrounding his daughter Maggie’s involvement and the potential leverage she held over the Gardners. The situation had clearly grown more complex, and Frankie was left grappling with the implications of each decision.

Determined to rid himself of the burden of the map, Frankie set out to burn it in a ritualistic manner, hoping that destroying it would somehow bring closure to the ongoing crisis. He prepared the hibachi grill in his backyard, watching as the coals glowed brightly, casting a warm light into the night. As he hovered over the grill, he contemplated the significance of the decision he was about to make. Should he destroy the last link to the Gardners, severing any ties to the past, or should he keep the map as a safeguard for Maggie, using it as a teaching tool to demonstrate trust and impart the lessons he had learned from his previous mistakes? In a moment of indecision, he chose to keep the map, sensing that its importance might become evident in the future. With the map safely tucked back into his pocket, he tried to call Maggie, reaching her at her apartment. He spoke carefully, framing his words with secrecy, knowing the gravity of the situation but not yet ready to fully reveal the map’s significance.

The conversation between Frankie and Maggie unearthed both parental concerns and a deeper connection between them. Maggie remained blissfully unaware of the map's true implications, responding cheerfully as she listened to Frankie's cryptic words. However, when the topic of Abigail was brought up, Frankie's tone shifted, revealing a hint of seriousness. He explained that Aidan had left Abigail a map that marked Lake Wyndham, suggesting that it held crucial information for their safety. Maggie's curiosity piqued as she began asking more questions about the map's details, including its visibility and the role of social workers in the situation. Tension escalated as Frankie attempted to clarify the situation without fully revealing everything, hesitating before he finally suggested the possibility of giving the map to Maggie when it became necessary for her safety. The weight of the decision pressed on Frankie, as he recognized that the map might hold the key to future events, but he was still reluctant to fully involve Maggie in its mystery.

Things became even more complicated when Maggie revealed her upcoming trip to Madrid, adding a layer of urgency to their already tense situation. Frankie found himself torn between the need to protect the map's secrets and the anxiety of what might happen if he waited for Maggie to return before making a decision. The thought of keeping the map until Maggie's return created a sense of dread, as Frankie couldn't shake the feeling that the map might be needed sooner than expected. He wondered if he was making a mistake by holding onto it, but at the same time, the idea of burning it felt like an act of finality—one that could bring closure, but also potentially erase something crucial. With the uncertainty swirling around him, Frankie remained conflicted, knowing that the map's fate was intertwined with his and Maggie's future. This chapter highlights Frankie's internal struggle between the desire for closure and the anxiety that comes with keeping secrets, setting the stage for further complications and decisions in the story to come.