

Prologue

She could feel the damp evening winds coming in through the cracks around the windowpanes. Only a few years earlier, an incoming draft in this room—her childhood bedroom—would have been unthinkable. Her mother had a discerning eye for detail that would have twitched at the slightest imperfection in a home, especially if it affected the comfort of someone sleeping under her roof. And her father had been the best realtor on the Cape, the kind who had become an expert handyman over the years as an added service to his clients. But it wasn't only the seams around the windowsills that had cracked lately in the Eldredge family.

Eager to find sleep, Melissa stepped from the bed into her slippers and scuttled over to the window, not wanting to wake the rest of the house. After pulling the drapes closed, she took an extra blanket from the top of the closet, spread it over the bed, and then entered a reminder in her cell phone to have a handyman give the entire house a once-over before she returned to New York, just in case she could ever convince her mother to sell it.

She was returning her phone to the nightstand when she got a new text message. *Are you still awake?*

She smiled to herself, appreciating the fact that Charlie had stayed in constant contact with her in the four days she had been here. *Barely*, she replied.

As much as they both traveled for work, he always checked in with her when he awoke in the morning and before going to bed at night. *Any other ruffled feathers today?*

He was referring to the previous day's "silly sibling dustup," as her mother had called it dismissively. Given the seasonal nature of her brother Mike's work, this was the first time he had been able to come back to the States since the funeral, and Melissa had driven up to the Cape to make it a family homecoming. *All smiles and good behavior today. We visited the grave together.*

The historic cemetery down the road from Our Lady of the Cape Church was the setting of the country graveyard scene in the painting that hung over the piano in the living room, one of the numerous works of art that covered the home's mellow, creamy walls. When her mother had painted that haunting row of headstones more than forty years earlier, the idea of someday burying her husband there must have seemed unimaginable.

She paused, recalling Mike holding first their mother's hand and then hers, as they stood at the foot of their father's grave that afternoon. They were still family, no matter what. *Family is family*, Melissa added. She never used to utter a negative word about them until she started grief counseling. Every time the subject matter of the Eldredges arose—and what had happened in their past—she found herself growing quiet, but she was told that talking about your childhood was an essential part of therapy. Nevertheless, she felt guilty sometimes, wondering if she spoke too frequently during counseling about the small hiccups in the family to the exclusion of everything else that had been good. Today, at the grave, she had forgotten all about the occasional tensions and had been grateful once again for the wonderful life her parents had made possible for her.

She saw dots on the screen, indicating that Charlie was typing a new text. *Speaking of family, have I told you lately I can't wait for you to be my wife? Only two more months.*

He had proposed to Melissa only two weeks ago, and she had immediately said yes. It had been her mother's idea for them to get married on the one-year anniversary of her father's passing, even though it meant a very short engagement. The ceremony would be smaller than small—just the bride and groom, immediate family, and a few friends.

She found herself smiling as she typed a reply, as she always did when she thought about her future with him. *I was going to wait until tomorrow to tell you, but I passed the cutest little winery today. I know we said the courthouse, but maybe . . . ?* She hit Send and then attached the photographs she had taken when they stopped on the way home from the cemetery to share a toast to her father.

Only seconds later, her phone rang in her hand. An incoming FaceTime call from Charlie. “Well, hello there!” she chirped as his face appeared on the screen. He had close-cropped dark hair and clear blue eyes. And today, he sported a few days of facial hair across his square jaw.

“Too much texting,” he said. “If we’re talking wedding details, I at least want to see my fiancée.”

“You got the pictures I sent of the winery?”

“I did, and it’s absolutely perfect. That view is unbelievable!”

“But we already said we’d keep things simple and go to the courthouse.”

“*You* were the one who was adamant about that.”

Not long ago, Melissa had believed that she would have a big, formal wedding with a reception at an iconic New York City venue—perhaps the Loeb Boathouse in Central Park or the Rainbow Room overlooking Rockefeller Center. But when she had those dreams, she had imagined her father walking her down the aisle—and a man other than Charlie waiting for her at the altar. It didn’t seem right to transfer her previous bridal fantasies onto a different relationship. Still, though, there might be something in between a fairy-tale wed-

ding and the city courthouse. A small outdoor event at the winery on the Cape felt like a good match for Charlie and her.

“But we already gave everyone the date. And told them it would be in the city.”

He flashed that perfect smile of his. “*Everyone?* Everyone in this case is like . . . six people—all of whom adore you and would go to the moon if necessary to be there on your special day. *Our* special day.”

At the mention of six guests, Melissa hoped that perhaps he was counting his sister, but Rachel Miller most definitely did not count as someone who “adored” Melissa. She had grudgingly agreed to meet Melissa, but only twice, and was reportedly furious when Charlie told her about his proposal, insisting that her brother was jumping into a new relationship too quickly. “Maybe Rachel will come around by then,” Melissa said.

“Maybe so, or maybe not. We are getting married either way, and we are going to do it at this beautiful place you found for us. Consider it done. Let’s book it.”

“Really?”

“Promise. Text me the name of the place, and I’ll call them first thing tomorrow for the details.” And she knew immediately that the decision was, in fact, made. One of the thousands of things she adored about Charlie was the way he kept the trains running, always willing to take jobs off her plate so she could move on to other tasks. “Oh, someone wants to say hi.”

The camera on Charlie’s phone shifted lower until she saw a chubby-cheeked face gazing up toward her. Riley’s fine blonde hair was tousled in every direction in a look that could only be described as bedhead. In the background, Melissa could see cardboard boxes stacked on the kitchen floor. They had just begun the process of slowly packing up his Upper West Side apartment since he and Riley would be moving in with Melissa.

“HI, MISSA!” It sounded almost like *Missy*, her nickname until she suddenly announced in the first grade that she wanted to be called Melissa. Riley was smiling so hard, her eyes were nearly closed. “We miss you!!!” Behind the phone camera and out of view, Charlie told Riley to blow a kiss. Her pudgy hand found her pink heart-shaped lips and pressed. Pretty close for a not-quite-three-year-old.

“I miss you, too, sweetie. I’ll be coming back to New York in two days.”

Her future stepdaughter held her fingers up in a vee. “Two! Like me!”

“Except only two days, not two years.”

“I know.” She turned away from the camera and began toddling away.

“Tough crowd,” Melissa said once Charlie returned to the screen.

“It’s almost as if she has the attention span of a two-year-old,” he said, shaking his head and chuckling. “Not to mention you’re competing with the new Peppa Pig playhouse.”

“How did she con you into letting her stay up this late?”

“She went to bed right after dinner but trotted out a while ago saying she heard noises. Figured I’d let her play while I finished up some work.”

“Talk to you tomorrow?”

“Always,” he said. “And all the other tomorrows after that.”

After they ended the FaceTime call, she forced herself to respond to three emails from a persistent attorney who didn’t seem to understand the meaning of an out-of-office message before she finally turned off the nightstand lamp. When she closed her eyes, she pictured herself standing next to Charlie. She’s wearing the white ankle-length silk halter dress she selected from Bloomingdale’s last week for the occasion. He’s wearing the tan linen suit she already told him would be perfect for a summer wedding, even at the courthouse. They’re sharing the I-now-pronounce-you-husband-and-wife

kiss under a teak pergola wrapped in sparkling white lights. Riley runs toward them, roses braided in her hair, layers of pink tulle bouncing with every step.

She finds a swing set on the winery lawn and climbs into the seat, careful not to let her dress get caught in the chains. “Push me high!” She’s giggling and squealing, her nose wrinkling from her toothy grin. “Higher, Missa, higher!” She swings so high that she might fly right into the sky, where she’d blend in with the pink-white clouds. Her cries of joy subside as the swing’s pace begins to slow. “Please, Missa—don’t stop pushing.” But three more futile kicks and the swing is nearly still. As she turns her head to search for another boost, a sharp pinch seems to sting the back of little Riley’s hand. She looks down toward the pain and sees a red mitten holding the chain of the swing, the image of a smiling kitten face sewn on the back. Why is she wearing mittens in summer? Her weight slumps forward before she can answer her own question, her body—so small, but suddenly so heavy—caught by someone. Someone.

In her dream, she wakes to the sound of a zipper. It’s her own jacket being unzipped. Her nostrils are filled with the stench of baby powder and sweat. She feels the uncomfortable tug of her turtleneck being pulled clumsily over her neck, her undershirt moving with it. She stirs and starts to blink her eyes. “Mommy, Mommy . . .”

When Melissa finally roused, she was in her high school bed, uncertain whether the scream she felt lingering in her throat and echoing in her ears was real or just another part of the nightmare. The house was silent except for the sound of the crash of ocean waves in the distance. Her neck was damp from perspiration, and, for just one second, she thought she detected the faint smell of talcum.

The girl on the swing wasn’t Riley. It had been three-year-old Missy, and this was the most vivid dream yet. After forty years, after all of her efforts, all of her progress toward having a happy, future-focused life, Melissa was finally starting to remember. No, she prayed

silently to herself. *Make it stop. I don't want to know. I don't want that to be me.*

She jolted upright in a cold sweat. The bedside clock told her it was 2:30 in the morning. It was happening again. The dreams. They were getting worse.

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Two months later

Nancy came down the stairs, securing the back of the gold-and-pearl drop earrings she'd selected as the final touch to her ensemble. Her dress was a modest, but not matronly, silk shift. The bright royal blue was what Ray had always called her "signature color," bringing out the blue in her eyes. The subtle shimmer from the metallic embroidery around the neckline made it a bit more celebratory than her usual understated fare.

On the first floor, Melissa sat at the kitchen table in a fluffy white robe, sipping coffee, Velcro rollers the size of soda cans in her hair with a still-sleepy Riley on her lap. She was in the chair closest to the window, the same spot she had inexplicably declared to be her "favorite" once she outgrew eating in a high chair. She put down her mug and sucked in an exaggerated gasp of approval. "Look at you! I don't know how I feel about this. The mother of the bride is not supposed to be the hottest woman in the room."

Nancy wrinkled her nose and shook her head. "Stop teasing me. And you shouldn't talk that way in front of this little angel anyway." Nancy leaned over and dropped a kiss on Riley's head, which she found warm and smelling of baby shampoo.

Riley looked up at her with sleepy eyes and grinned. "Hi, Grand-Nan. You look pretty." Nancy hoped that Riley's name for her—Grand-Nan—would never change.

She means you're hot, Melissa mouthed silently while Riley wasn't looking.

Nancy noticed that Melissa was also looking especially beautiful today, and it wasn't only because of the full face of makeup she had already expertly applied. She was almost glowing with happiness. "You were able to sleep last night?" When she'd noticed how tired Melissa had seemed during both of her last visits to the Cape, her daughter had explained she'd been having trouble sleeping. Sometimes she worried that her ambitious little girl simply worked too hard for one person to handle.

"Like a baby. Thanks."

After all these years, Nancy was finally able to confine most of her thoughts to the here and now. Forty years ago, she would still lose herself in remembering. But she had tried so hard to live each day in the present . . . not look back or try to predict the future. And eventually it worked, at least for the most part. She was seventy-two years old, and more than half of her lifetime had been as fortunate and blessed as any person could dare to hope for. When dark memories from the past did resurface, they tended to hit her either completely randomly, or—like today—at moments that paralleled her own life.

A wedding. Her daughter's wedding. A new son-in-law who adored Melissa, and an adorable little girl for Melissa to love and help raise. It was a time to celebrate. And yet . . .

The past never leaves. A wedding. Her mind fell not to Melissa's big day, nor even to her own marriage to her beloved Ray, but to that other wedding that altered her life forever. Nancy rarely felt like an elderly woman, and yet the fact that she had a first marriage that began at the age of eighteen, when she was a college freshman, seemed nearly impossible now—not to mention the nightmare that followed. She had been determined to wear white for that wedding, so rushed after she lost her cherished mother. Nancy had owned only one white dress—a wool knit. It would do given the simplicity

of their wedding plans, but then she saw the unexplained grease stain on the sleeve. If only she had connected the dots right then and there to her mother's car accident, there would have been no wedding to Carl Harmon and therefore no Peter and Lisa for her to mourn, even now, after all these years.

Her thoughts were broken by the sound of footsteps thundering down the stairs. She turned to see her son, Mike, in a perfectly tailored navy suit, his silk tie spotted with sailboats, looking proud of his athletic sprint downstairs. "Like riding a bike!" he declared, holding up both arms like a gymnast who had stuck the perfect landing.

This house was an authentic old Cape with steps so steep they were nearly vertical. Ray used to say that the old settlers must have descended from mountain goats the way they built their staircases.

"Whoa, Mom, you look like a million bucks."

"You aren't too shabby yourself."

"You do look spiffy," Melissa chimed in. "But really, you didn't need to splurge on a new suit. Weddings shouldn't be work for other people."

"I own a suit, little sis. Two of them, in fact. I'm a boat captain, not a cretin."

Forty years ago, she had been so certain that she already knew her children to their core. Michael, always so organized, was the boy who not only followed instructions to the tee within seconds, but also told other children that they should fall in line as well. His baby sister, Missy, was the one who always managed to come home with a tear in her pants, bemoaning the loss of whichever treasured stuffed animal she had carried off on her latest pursuit of adventure.

In retrospect, Nancy could not believe how wrong she had been. Her rebellious little ragamuffin Missy was now Melissa, a star law student who became a prosecutor and was now an outspoken advocate for what she called a common-sense criminal justice system. Just the previous night, they had made a toast not only to the happy

couple, but also to the news that Melissa's podcast had hit the top 100 list on iTunes. Meanwhile, the previously earnest and somber Michael had lasted only three semesters in college before heading to the Caribbean for a "couple of years off." Now he was a boat captain on St. Maarten, where everyone called him either Mike or Mikey.

Mike and Melissa even looked different now. Mike was tanned and sinewy compared to his sister with her alabaster skin and dimpled cheeks. While Mike's formerly blond hair became darker as he entered his tweens, Melissa still maintained the same strawberry blonde curls she'd had as a child—a reflection of Nancy's hair color until she relocated to the Cape and changed both her name and appearance. These days, Nancy was neither a redhead nor a brunette. Her perfectly groomed silver bob looked "regal," according to her hairdresser.

Mike pulled a phone from his front pants pocket and snapped a photo as Melissa held up a protective hand as if warding off the paparazzi.

"Nooo. I look ridiculous!"

"The last photo of you as a single lady. And the curlers are cute," he said, turning the screen so she could see the picture. "You should post this for your thousands of fawning social media followers. They'll love it."

Nancy braced herself for another round of sibling bickering. Would Melissa construe her brother's comment as backhanded criticism of her increasingly prominent public profile? Was that in fact Mike's intent? Nancy didn't want to take sides and wished they would just adore each other the way they had as children.

"You know what?" Melissa said, slipping Riley off her lap. "I just might do that! Thanks. But first, I've got a dress I need to get into. Someone's getting married today!"

"You and Daddy," Riley added with a giggle. "He's in the bucky-ord. Can I go?" In the language they affectionately called Ril-ese, she added an extra syllable to the word—not backyard, but *bucky-ord*.

Charlie had spent the previous two nights not literally in the backyard, but in the guest house so as not to see the bride right before the wedding. Ray and Nancy had built the addition to the property when Melissa was in college. They imagined they would need the extra room once the kids got married and began to have their own children. Now that was finally happening—at least for Melissa.

“Of course,” Melissa said. She stood up and gave her soon-to-be stepdaughter a quick hug before pushing open the back door for her. “Let your dad know I’m counting down the minutes.”

“I wish Mommy was here. I miss her.”

Nancy could see her daughter’s face briefly fall, the way it always did whenever Riley mentioned her mother. Charlie’s first wife, Linda, had died in a fatal drowning accident in Europe while they were on their first and only vacation after the baby was born. Riley was simply too young to understand the connection between her mother’s death and the new role that Melissa now played in her life.

She watched as Melissa placed a gentle hand on top of Riley’s head. “I know, sweetie. We all wish she was here with you.”

“I asked, but she can’t.”

Once Riley slipped outside, Melissa explained, “Neil assures us it’s completely normal for children to imagine communicating with their parents who have passed. It might even be in her dreams. It’s a way to keep remembering them.”

Neil Keeney was one of the neighborhood kids Mike and Melissa had stayed close friends with over the years. He was now a highly regarded psychiatrist in New York City. If he said there was nothing to worry about, Nancy believed him. Still, she could see how much Melissa wished she could take some of the child’s pain away.

“Well, the person who *should* be here today for your husband is his sister,” Nancy said pointedly. Melissa had reached out to Rachel personally, pleading with her to be here to support her brother and niece, if not to bless their marriage.

Melissa waved a hand in the air as she walked toward the staircase. “Don’t get me started on that one. I’m going to be a part of her family for a very long time, and she’ll come around eventually. We’re determined not to let her decision ruin the day.”

Nancy’s eyes remained glued on Riley until she reached the sliding glass door of the guest house. She suspected that as long as she lived, she would never be able to be in the presence of children without watching them as vigilantly as a member of the Secret Service. She smiled to herself as Charlie, in the middle of knotting his tie, slid open the door to greet his daughter. He threw a wave in Nancy’s direction before scooping Riley up to his hip. He was a good man—kind, understanding, loyal. Like her husband, Ray.

As Melissa padded up the stairs and Mike flipped on ESPN in the living room, Nancy took a moment to breathe in the feeling of having her entire family—including two new additions—in this house. She could still remember the feeling of peace and welcome this place had given her when she’d first seen it, only in her mid-twenties, searching for a place to start over again. Ray had been the realtor to help her find a rental. “The Cape is a good place to come when you want to be by yourself,” he had said. “You can’t be lonesome walking on the beach or watching the sunset or just looking out the window in the morning.”

The moment Ray had brought her to this house, she knew that she would stay. The combination family and dining room had been fashioned from the old keeping room that had once been the heart of the house. She loved the rocking chair in front of the fireplace and the way the table was in front of the windows so that it was possible to eat and look down over the harbor and the bay. And then after they had married, Ray arranged for them to purchase the house, because he knew that she loved everything about it.

It had now been a year to the day since she had woken up to find him cold beside her. Their physician said that Ray probably didn’t

feel a thing. His last words to her had been “I love you so much” as he’d crawled into bed with her on what they had no way of knowing would be their last night together. The memories they had made in this house belonged to both of them.

By the time she spoke aloud to her beloved home, there was no one around to hear her. “Oh, how I’m going to miss you, old girl.”

Maybe Riley wasn’t the only one who spoke to ghosts.